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Thomas Pynchon and Aleatory Space
Pierre-Yves Petillon*

Translated by Margaret S. Langford with Clifford Mead

29. Looking back upon 19th century work in American fiction, closing accounts on it, on that cabalistic summa, obsessed with the Letter, completely caught up with glossing it, with exploding it into a rainbow of multi-colored fragments, deciphers, as does Moby Dick, in one compact hieroglyphic sign the great encyclopedic wheel [whale/wheel] of documents and fables of the times. Its Aleph is the open triangle, the clandestine V sign of the dark years, a shortwave Morse code signal, scrambled by interference, four signals, three dots and a dash, that people whistled as if by accident, the muffled rhythm of a finger knocking at the door, a clock stopped at five minutes after eleven, graffiti on a wall, the furtive gesture made by a woman as she passed by--childhood, they say, but I was just a snot-nosed kid. Here, we no longer have that scarlet letter, that old original first letter when, in the

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We take a very real pleasure in presenting to our readers Margaret S. Langford's translation of Pierre-Yves Petillon's review essay, which appeared after Gravity's Rainbow was published in French. Petillon, the author of numerous articles and a book on American literature, is a major French Americanist. His essay was published in Critique, a prestigious and long-established journal which functions as a cross between The New York Review of Books and Diacritics: reviews in it are more than the usual combination of paraphrase and brief explication or commentary. Rather, they are independent essays written as a panoptic response to a textual phenomenon. Many of our readers, we suspect, are not receptive to the critical idiom that dominates much of French scholarship, in which puns, images, metaphors, allusions, playfulness are wed to a demanding inclination to theory. We feel that this style has its rewards: the suggestiveness of Petillon's piece is undeniable; half a dozen essays could be written to work out the possibilities his prose throws off in its wake.

There are small problems. No matter how exceptional, this is still a review in one sense: an occasional piece. Clearly,
beginning, everything spelled "America;" it points to the eschaton being created on Baltic shores in the dunes of the Peenemünde peninsula under the watchful eyes of rabbits and red squirrels hidden in the thickets. The parabolic trajectory of the V2 from its launch point to the point where, tearing through the London skies, it collapses in the gravitational pull, contains within its span that text--continent--both global [whale/whole] fiction which encloses us [whale/wall] and the breach which the quick explosive flash of the whale (there are breaches!) makes in the wall. Explosion of a nova reddening over the white cliffs of Kent, one Advent evening, the enervating vibration of the captive balloon moorings, down to the split second, $\Delta t \rightarrow 0$, where the cry [whale/wall] breaks through the whiteness of the screen, but the impact has already happened, and, when the sound finally follows, a fraction of a second later, a split second whisked out of time, there is no one left to hear it in a devastated, Petillon did not reread the whole of Pynchon's work before he wrote it; under the same circumstances and deadlines, few scholars would or could. As a result, there are a number of slips, which we have not corrected -- this is a translation, not an edited version of Petillon's text. Even a relatively inexperienced reader of Pynchon will catch some of the slips. For example, there is not a portrait of Jay Gould over Pierce's desk, but rather a bust of him over the bed. The bus in San Francisco is a city bus, not a Greyhound, etc. These are small matters. Elsewhere, as in the reference to Slothrop and a woman sleeping snout to snout, memory has conflated two scenes separated by a couple of pages.

What is really important is that Petillon's rich essay weaves Gravity's Rainbow into a theory -- or, if you prefer -- a vision of the proper relation between literature and criticism. This vision differs from ours, challenges and complements it. It proposes that not explication per se, but writing in response to literature is the proper reading of literature. In a sense, Gravity's Rainbow engenders this essay upon a French critical and theoretical mind steeped in American literature. Its special value is that it can teach us, simultaneously, something about American literature and about French thought.

--The Editors
vanished world. The huge shadow of Henry Adams, orphan of the century, registering between 1893 and 1900 the "cataclysm" his world would founder in and probing his bewilderment before the sudden irruption of aleatory chaos in the square field formed by his grammar, henceforth torn asunder, hovers over this vast, glacial romancero, a document recording the persistence in American fiction, the disturbing lineage which goes back, by way of T. S. Eliot, Henry Adams, Henry James, Melville and Hawthorne, to the first Puritans.

28. The nth, last?, version of pastoral, Ishmael seeing the Sunday crowd on the Manhattan wharfs scanning, the Midrash for shore people, the sea's edge: "Are the green fields gone?" Lieutenant Slothrop, whose wanderings this picaresque novel follows, is descended from a long line of conquering Puritan ancestors, and descended he has, to the very depths of failure. His ancestor William came from Essex to the New World during the great migration of 1630 as ship's cook on board the Arbella, Governor Winthrop's ship. Slothrop has behind him three centuries of Yankees from the Berkshire swamps and hills: the first West, the 17th and 18th century Frontier. He, of course, belongs to a wild, backslidden, almost ruined branch of that famous family, but through his genealogy we see the great Calvinist Frontier and its untamed lands unfold. A scorched earth policy: forests are cut down, soil depleted, the Redskins deported and exterminated; then, when everything has been cleared, and when the surrounding land, blue hills where wild fennel once grew, are nothing but a worn-out wasteland of dust and ash, they go further, towards the West and virgin lands, all along the road that they hack out violently, raping lands, leaving nothing where before there was that wilderness whose flamboyant diversity they wasted. The Slothrop family forgot somewhere along the road that once it had been devoted to green living things [the living green] and that it made its fortune pil-laging the woods to transform them into paper, betray-ing the living green for the white death and its writings. The same assault which Pynchon traces throughout successive waves beginning with the Dutch Puritan Franz Van der Groov's extermination of the dodos on Mauritius Island in the 17th century, through the Vernichtungsbefehl [extermination order] issued by
the German General von Trotha against the Herero people of South West Africa in 1904, carries us back to Europe of 1944-45 when the Calvinists return to the Old World whence it came, the white "Kingdom of Death." Next step, the Moon? From the lowlands, and the sandy wastes of the former Cape Canaveral.

27. From Hawthorne to Faulkner the original sin has always been the winning of an inheritance: the grabbing of a piece of American soil, clearing and enclosing so as to bequeath, from beyond the grave, precisely what cannot be bequeathed: America as shifting, open space. In The House of the Seven Gables [Hawthorne, 1851] Colonel Pyncheon covets the few acres of land that Matthew Maule has cleared, along a cow path, in front of his cottage. A soldier and judge and iron-handed man of law, stubborn Puritan, Colonel Pyncheon claims that land not because he had lived on it in the past, but because he can claim a property title in the King's name, an inclusion of the lot in the land survey. A nobody, but stubborn in his own way, Matthew Maule, the "squatter" (but in "America" these rights have more weight than a lord's grant), holds out until the day he is accused of witchcraft. The clan of the "Elect" in the colony is unleashed against him, and in the pack of notables none cries louder than Colonel Pyncheon that the land must be purged of the brood of familiars of the occult. Excluded from the orthodox community, Matthew Maule is hanged. Judges and clerks form a ring around the gallows raised on the square, at the crossroads. Colonel Pyncheon plows this bit of cursed land and takes possession of it. He wants to found a dynasty, and to erect, as does Colonel Sutpen [Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, 1936] later, a house which will stand as a solid bulwark against shifting space and eroding time. As obsessed as Hawthorne was by his weighty ancestry, Thomas Pynchon is one of those who, like Ike McCaslin [Faulkner, "The Bear," 1942], renounces his heritage. He is an unfrocked inheritor who wants to atone for the original sin by taking the part of the dispossessed and lowly, the "Preterite" whom America, bound and determined to win salvation through the conquest of space (Max Weber), failed, in Preterition, to write in its register, renouncing, in Slothrop's case, the exercise of all prerogative willed by his father, allowing himself to be dispossessed.
rather than be possessed. For, so the legend goes, only when the earth falls into abeyance, back to the time before there was any claim on it, will "America" be saved.

26. This Puritan survey acts as a protective barrier against the terrors of wilderness and savagery. We must impose a phantom topography on the country, project a Baedeker grid onto it, to protect against the savage without and to exorcise the savage within. Here Pynchon rereads the master of the Beat generation, William Carlos Williams [In the American Grain, 1925], underlining the price to be paid so that the Child's History of America could vaunt those two examples of success, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin: for Washington, the taming of his anarchic passion by enclosing his animal spirits and their violence in the sanctity of this garden; for Franklin, the foreclosure on savagery with his program for exterminating the Red Man through rum and his obsession for saving: "Money is like a bell that keeps the dance from terrifying, as it would if it were silent and we could hear the grunt--thud--swish." (W.C.W.) The Puritan ecclesiastic Cotton Mather institutes a reign of terror in the land, and that terror makes people blind to the many-colored spectacle of America's lands, makes them deaf to their polychromatic song. Enclosed by the settlement stockade, watching the forest's edge through slits and loopholes, the Puritans want to tear themselves away from the land and its pull, to conquer space and survey it--and as they do, "America" deserts them, straw men, hollow men: exterminate them all, Kurtz says in an abridged version of that story as he lies dying in the white heart of the African darkness. We must rummage in the American past to find roots other than that withered stock--let America escape the Puritan tyranny (that was written in the '20's, during the presidency of Calvin Coolidge, the austere Calvin from Northampton, Mass., "A Puritan in Babylon," Silent Cal, "Keep Cool with Coolidge," "Coolidge or Chaos") by unearthing buried manuscripts, by returning to the lost fork in the road to take routes not taken, such as Thomas Morton's, as he danced around the maypole: come here, come here, lasses in beaver skins, you will be welcome day and night; the route proposed by Daniel Boone crossing the Cumberland Gap to go live among the
Indians: for there must be a new wedding, and if we
are to possess this country, we can only do so by going
native. The alternatives Williams outlines between
weld and wed, between the technological violence used
by the Puritan line (Mather, Davy Crockett, Ahab)
grafting itself on the earth with steel and rail [weld]
and the voluptuous wedding [wed] with the Indian lands,
still sweep the field where Pynchon's fiction is
inscribed.

25. By building a settlement-enclosure in space,
we exorcise more than grimacing masks; we exorcise
another terror also, as the empty lands unfurl
right to the enclosure's very edge. Slothrop's Puritan
legacy is also able to be alive to, bones and nerves
secretly on the alert, to the emptiness of things while
the languorous melody of a sax plays through the ciga-
rette smoke on a spring night on the terrace of a
Massachusetts yacht club, Cape Cod in the thirties,
tufts of sea-grass on the dunes, snatches of the tango
carried by the wind, mixed with the smell of dried
algae and those traces of lipstick on the broad lapels
of white blazers. He experiences this vertigo again in
the spring of 1945, in that Reformation country, in
Zwingli's city ("What better place than Zürich to find
vanity again?") where at twilight, when day moves
imperceptibly to its close, he wanders among the acres
of deserted streets that a Harvard quad bell tower
dominates in the half-light. Harvard, whose old boys
spent the war in the same town plotting and deciphering
coded information for Allen Dulles' O.S.S. Filled with
worldly vanity, the "vanitas" that his Calvinist ances-
tors knew, Slothrop then feels tempted to let himself
slide towards the gripping terror of "the nameless
hour." In the Odeon Cafe, where Trotsky, Joyce and
Einstein used to meet, he meets Squalidozzi and his
motley crew of anarchist gauchos. In remembrance of
Martín Fierro, the Twilight cowboy, they've come to
find in a Europe torn apart and in ruins the lost
opportunity squandered in the Argentine Pampas. We
too, they tell Slothrop, we tried to exterminate the
Indians. We wanted "the closed, white version" of
reality. But that also is nothing but vanity and
chasing the wind: in smoky labyrinths such as Borges
scribbles in his pages, the country doesn't let itself
be forgotten, doesn't let either its vastness or its
emptiness be forgotten. Thistles in a wasteland, we spin under a turning sky in a world without sea or landmarks. Then, to anchor us to the lands, we proliferate checkerboard squares and labyrinths; we put enclosures everywhere, for who can abide this great vastness for long? Nevertheless, under the checkerboard of streets which remember when they were once country, under the rectangular, America, in her heart of hearts, wants to go back to the wide open spaces void of works or scribblings [wordless and unscribbled]. In the ruins of defeated Germany, the Gauchos from the Pampas want to rediscover the wide-open spaces of the plains, fences and walls fallen into ruins.

24. American fictions, vacillating between two kinds of risks, 071:

0. Unsheltered by any enclosure, without the grid of an ordinance map, without the possibility of my being ensconced in the heart of a labyrinth filled with quietude, the mental locus my private grammar has mapped for me now, I run the risk of being invaded by the white, empty space which surrounds and lays siege to me on all sides and whose corrosive glare blinds me, of being torn apart by the chaos of scattered impressions, unfurling wave from which no dam or dike protects me.

1. From the enclosure I have constructed for myself, at the same time a grammar to decode (or more properly, to encode) the chaotic and savage world, and a grid that I project on the blank screen of space so that I can take my bearings through a system of coordinates, I am the captive, trapped, nagged suddenly by the paranoid suspicion that there has been a conspiracy [plot] to shut me up in this fiction, a plot which surrounds me and to which "someone" has the clue. Especially since, in this enclave, my world, through entropy lapses down to steady state, zero information, and there is once again emptiness and chaos, but in my heart of hearts, this time, inside my private stand.

23. To write, then, means to project fictions on the blank screen, but to escape from each before it takes and sticks, to call forth with fear-taunted delight a merry-go-round of fables and masks, to place a painted umbrella, an opera house ceiling between the empty earth and the blank sky—and that the swift fugue of stories, their endless drift through shifting images
and words might hold, albeit for a split second (but already I can hear the count-down, time closing in), the instant when the rainbow will collapse and fade out, rubbing out down to the "ultra-white," the flimsy, shaky architecture of our world. It's like writing Moby Dick, a white handkerchief embroidered with flags and pavilions from around the world, archipelago of systems and codes each one self-contained. For Ahab, the white whale he chases is the exploded prehistoric center of this archipelago; as he captures him, he finally remembers his world. But for Ishmael, the fleeing monster only marks the line of flight, the illusory zero point of the stories. He catches her flash as she passes but knows that she is not to be captured; he threads his way through the islands in the encyclopedia, exploring the sporadic eruption of stories, marking the boundaries of each, surviving (to be the only one to tell the story) in the interstices between the small islands and solitudes because he suspects (or, to the edge of the maelstrom, desperately wants to believe) that the interstices, $\Delta \rightarrow 0$, will not close and that there will still be that infinitesimal gap, that breach through which the shifting world, instead of being nailed tight, will keep on flowing (leakage) from under the grids and charts of the written word.

22. "Woe unto them who join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!"  

---Isaiah, 5:8

As early as The Crying of Lot 49 (Thomas Pynchon, 1964-66), we found the pastoral theme of barbed-wire fences stopping the world's shift.drift, the obsession with enclosures halting all that roving across the lands, being taken up again, via Ahab, through information theory. Against a background of time-worn skeletons, the empire of Pierce, building tycoon in the tradition of the giants of conquering capitalism in the 19th century (the icon above his desk: A portrait of Jay Gould, the railroad financier) took us back to the desolate country where we followed the trail of the hunters and conquerors of the West, Davy Crockett leading off: carcasses of whales foundered on the
beaches, meat from skinned buffaloes rotting on the Great Plains strewn with bones bleaching in the sun. But, zooming away from that grand vista, we detected death in the very heart of that enclosure, Pierce's domain which he bequeathed from beyond the grave to Oedipa Maas, who was his lover for a short time. Travelling through the space which, she discovered, belonged entirely to Pierce, Oedipa saw extending as far as the eye could see the network of California freeways and the evenly-divided checkerboard of subdivision lots and neighborhoods like a printed circuit reproducing itself ad infinitum and continually repeating the same message. She wondered then, "How had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?" Like a mirror, all this reflects the image of Pierce the conqueror. San Narciso is the name of the industrial perimeter overlooked by the watchtowers. Echo Courts is the name of the motel where Oedipa spends one night. Slowly, this world sinks into its own reflection as Ahab was swallowed up by that "space without world" (M. Blanchot) into which the fascination by a single image drew him. The high road is no longer an opening that leads to open new lands, and there are no longer any gaps closing between fictions and the space they strive to cover and hold fast. All breaches are stopped, the conquest of space is complete, the world is as tightly enclosed as a casemate. The homogenization of possibilities: Whatever play randomness still allows has disappeared from this ossifying survey, a sclerosis for which the bones bleaching in the sun are only the emblem. The obsession with decline and fall, which we can follow throughout American fiction from Cotton Mather's "declension" to the entropy of language in T. S. Eliot, evoking "the years of l'entre-deux-guerres," that lost and wasted time, and describing writing as "a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment always deteriorating," is here turned against the Puritans, thanks to Norbert Wiener's pointing out, right in the age of suspicion, when the Puritan madness of the "conspiracy" returned with Joe McCarthy and the witch hunt (Thomas Pynchon's adolescent years), that the more we stop the breaches of the Maginot Line to protect secret information, the more information gets lost in this dark, enclosed field sliding [lapses] towards isotropy. From this, there
stems in Pynchon that lyrical delight in the aleatory, which, as it topples over into a fascination with cataclysm, leads him back to the Puritan fold.

21. Since the 1840's, the obsession with the line has run through fiction as it has through the American landscape, a path that the iron rail traces across space, seen as either a violent clearing of a new track through the lands, or a ghost survey map, floating above them, or both, as the case may be. Tracking the White Whale across the ocean prairies, Captain Ahab keeps his eye on the furrow his ship leaves; the waves swell to obliterate its traces [tracks], "but first he passes;" the wheel of his soul, grooved to run, grooved with a furrow which holds him to his path, he speeds along, he pushes ahead on his rails, fist clenched and shaken at his one objective, to force the Whale "without obstacle or angle," unerringly rushing, like a train steaming through a gap, "through the rifled heart of mountains." On the sea chart he plots the lines, gridding [Pynchon's linear grid] the blank spaces to locate and capture the whale with the harpoon "line" whose slipknot causes the hunter's death in the end. Pynchon plays out all the possibilities of this line, which along with the cogs and wheels and the heat of the forge proves to be one of the three major tropes in this 19th century pastoral. The novel's first werewolf is Dr. Pointsman [pointman], the Pavlovian scholar who is looking for the secret of Slothrop's mental processes and who channels his observations according to the binary mode 0/1, puzzled to the point of fear ("No links? Is it the end of history?") when he sees the statistician Mexico disrupt the linear linking of cause and effect. Then, strangely enough, Leibnitz also makes his appearance among the werewolves because he cut the curve of the parabola into linear segments, surveying and fixing what had been pure thrust, stifling the aria that that lyrical flight, a Rossini tarantella, would cause nevertheless to burst forth on a morning filled with meadowlarks' song. Linearity imposes a territoriality which stifles the polyphony of the lands, dries up the vocal outburst, breaks up the total language: thus Beethoven and his music "to invade Poland by" are strangely opposed here to Rossini's bel canto and Wagner's total opera. Pynchon, a reader of McLuhan, finds the linear paradigm
of our times in the alphabet and linear perspective that, given the atrophying of our other senses, the alignment of the letters on the printed page imposes on our eye. Instead of ligneous lands, lined paper: here we discover again the agrarian theme of American populism in the version the Southerners of the twenties of I'll Take My Stand (1929) and Eliot-Pound give it--McLuhan's sometimes half-forgotten background. At the beginning of the Stalin era, Tchitcherine is garrisoned in the Kirghiz and Kazakh Steppes of Central Asia, splendid episode mirroring the entire novel, "Clouds [... ] sail in armadas toward the Asian arctic, above the sweeping dessiatinas of grasses, of mullein stalks, rippling out of sight, green and gray in the wind," riders bivouacking in a scene recalling the rodeo version of the West. He wanders on horseback, moving away from the iron track; as he crosses the Steppes, he sees white and black stars explode and, in the center of each of these novae, a stark circle white and void: this is the coming of the Kirghiz light, and the natives shake their heads at noon by the side of the road. Tchitcherine's mission is to instill the rudiments of the alphabet in these faraway tribes who only know speech, gesture and touch, and will sit round-eyed as they see slates with signs scribbled on them with chalk. Thanks to the alphabet and to the diacritical marks that he manages to perfect, Tchitcherine takes down stenographically a wandering singer's rhapsody about the Kirghiz Light, and he knows that that stenographic recording also means the end of the song. The tentacle that the bureaucratic octopus of the great cartel which the state forms, another populist theme, reaches out to enslave the faraway Steppes; the linear alphabet replaces the illuminations of the Book of Hours formed by oral splinters, smashes the icon, the global sign. But then the suspicion grows that here, as in McLuhan (or in Eliot) the territorial is opposed not so much to the extraterritorial, the continual movement and opening of American space, as to pre-Newtonian Thomist Catholicism ("May God us keep/ From Single vision and Newton's sleep") and the second Fall into the sleep of linear vision.
20. "God's finger lifts me up . . ."

-- Agrippa d'Aubigne, Tragiques, VI

Descended from a long line of Puritans, Slothrop, like them, eagerly scans the Heavens, awaiting the critical moment when they will burst open with a tremendous cracking sound, doomcrack, and through that crack will burst the apocalyptic cry which will at last reveal the secret meaning of the Scriptures. On the eroded stone of the old slate tomb where, in a small Massachusetts cemetery, one of Slothrop's ancestors, Constant, who died March 4, 1766 in the 29th year of his age, is buried, we see the forefinger of God parting the cloud screen, pointing out across the void the true meaning of the scattered, opaque indices, skins and husks, Qlippoth, the scoriae our world is strewn with: perhaps the time has come to restore the Text to its original clarity. This cracking sound was revived in the imagination of an entire generation (Updike, Coover, Pynchon, and yet others) by the big Crash of 1929, when the bottom fell out, and, memories of early childhood, by the flash on the newswires announcing the raid by Japanese Zeros on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, at 7:02 a.m. local time. Slothrop is the child who was awakened during the night and taken, bundled in a blanket, eyes puffy with sleep, to watch an aurora borealis in the winter sky. On another night during the winter of 1931, the sound of feet thundered through the house; the sirens of Lenox and Pittsfield were heard wailing: the Aspinwall Hotel is in flames, and sparks fall far and wide like a rain of meteors on the Berkshire countryside. The same outbreak through the twilight, the same aurora borealis as when on an autumn evening, in London, a scream rips apart the sky, and at 18:00 hours 43 minutes 16 seconds local time, September 8, 1944, the first V2 falls on the borough of Chiswick. They will keep falling day after day until March 27, 1945, when at 16:00 hours 45 minutes the 1115th and last V2 crashes near Orpington in Kent ("Hill Report," London Gazette, 19 October 1948). That winter Slothrop keeps an accounting of his prowlings and trolling expeditions in that city on the alert and, to pinpoint each instant of bliss, puts on a wall-map of the city the exact place, date and time of each of his orgasms: oh the beautiful tracings, the scattering of multicolored stars, all the colors of the
rainbow, reds, blues, the constellation Gladys, Katharine and Alice, then a violet-colored constellation around Covent Garden, with the tail of a nebula going towards Mayfair and Soho which trails off towards Wembley and goes back up by Hampstead Heath in a pulsating trail of intermittent occultations and flashes—Caroline, Maria, Anne, Susan, Elizabeth. In Slothrop's world, people were always very sensitive about things coming from the heavens: Slothrop's "star" map and the map the statistician Mexico keeps showing the V2 strikes on the City of London have a strictly isomorphic distribution, as if Slothrop intuited what was happening up there, his sorcerer's rod dowsing the still empty sky to decipher, beforehand, sap rising, tree reaching up to the clouds, the as yet secret text written there. The world is God's palimpsest; the secret text is written in invisible ink, the kryptosam which only semen will reveal. This is Slothrop's riddle: through each crack, each hole, go not n blades of grass but n strikes. To track down the derivation of that crack, we will turn to the cabalist Updike: in that fissure [crack] which is at the same time catastrophe, the abrupt edge of the cliff where the world ends [cliff's edge] and the crevass [cleft], where I lodge myself and tenaciously sink my roots, that is where the key [clew] to the cryptogram is found; and then, in a cataclysm which is, dies irae, a celebration (don't wait for me tonight, the night will be white and red), the veil [whale/veil/wail] is rent, and a scream bursts through the screen.

19. Hanging from Slothrop's family tree are a whole bunch of Puritans--crazy about the Word, obsessed with deciphering it, roaming the blue Berkshire hills and carrying in their packs Bibles from which they could quote chapter and verse by heart. Each New World happening was, if correctly deciphered, no more than the phantom, transferred type of an episode recounted in the Scriptures. Image and shadow of the writ divine, America was interpreted as a text, and, from Mather on to Edwards through Emerson, the mastery of America came about through an exegesis of the landscape so as to detect the hidden pattern within that space. It is Puritan reflex, so Slothrop says, to search for an order hidden behind the visible world. As he
gradually works his way deeper into the chaos of a Europe in ruins, he feels himself closer to his ances-
tors "who heard God clamoring to them in every turn of
a leaf or cow loose among apple orchards in autumn."
With God now far away in his withdrawal, and the Puri-
tans still living under his henceforth enigmatic eye,
the original text that everyday hermeneutics attempts
to elucidate, the American genesis, continues to elude
the interpreter's grasp. Thus, in Lot 49, Oedipa Maas,
thinking she sees in an Elizabethan verse heard in a
theater, and that despite the distortion produced by
the fake Old Vic accent of the Middle Western actors,
the clue that will put her on the track, attempts to
determine the right version, the original text of this
verse which will, so she thinks, if she deciphers it,
give her the key to the riddle which holds her prisoner
in spite of herself. Yet the further along she gets in
her research, the more lost she becomes in a forest of
reproductions, torn and marked photocopies, apocryphal
versions with lacunae, mutilated or forged, obscene
parodies, variants, distortions, alterations and
various corruptions of the original text which eludes
her even as she thinks she's getting nearer to it.
Again, the sign theory can be used here to reread the
Puritan tradition. In the rime the children sing while
they play hopscotch on the sidewalks of San Francisco,
she hears, or thinks she's hearing again, the echo--
garbled, confused, transformed by chance--of the key
text that she's spent her time hunting for. Is there
a plot which, by continually garbling the text, tries
to hide the key to the enigma from her? Are we dealing
with the entropic erosion of information all along the
channel where aleatory noise makes the message progres-
sively more undecipherable? Or is there another plot,
which, through the Finneganswakian distortion of the
text, might try to transmit a forbidden message,
obliquely, clandestinely, over the official airwaves,
and would we then have to change the way we are lis-
tening to it and see it, not any longer as an alteration
and an entropic erosion of information, but as a cypher
that she hadn't been able to decipher up to now?

18. Following in the footsteps of Sam Spade and
Philip Marlowe, who rummaged around in the same Cali-
ifornia landscape before her, Oedipa Maas investigates
the will of the tycoon Pierce, using techniques appro-
priate to a private detective, the private eye, suddenly faced with a whirl of scattered clues that she begins to think will lead her to the center of a labyrinth where all the loose ends are tied up. She shudders in excitement as she senses a revelation hovering nearby, just beyond the threshold of her understanding. That eye seeing just the edge of the puzzle, overwhelmed with a confusing mass of enigmatic data that must be sorted through, by Oedipa acting like a small Maxwell's demon, and evidence marshalled into order so as to chart the unknown landscape which extends, both alluring and terrifying, beyond the known frontier. We recognize the plan used in James' novels and their strategy of the "bewildered" eye. Like Maisie, Maas finds that in spite of herself, innocently, she gradually begins to see an "other" world, a disquieting, wild jungle [wild] where her old geometry [settlement/wilderness] is shattered, and the novel follows her expanding field of consciousness. But the missing piece in the middle of the puzzle remains, Kirghiz bedazzlement in the midst of the nova exploding on the steppes, and the eye must stay blind if it doesn't want to see the tiger in his burning glory suddenly jumping into its field of vision or the shadows where the primal, original act is buried, blotting it out. However, in going over the edge we have the feeling that in the center everything comes together, everything is attached to everything else [hold]. This is the definition Thomas Pynchon gives of that key concept in American fiction, paranoia: the feeling of being on "the leading edge of the discovery that everything is connected," but being systematically held back [held at the edge]--Marlow on the fringes of the African continent, seeing only snatches and glimmers of light through the interstices of the boundaries where, if one were to cross that threshold, one would find the growing suspicion that everything holds together, but that burst of blinding light would be so intense that it would obliterate the world.

17. Thus the sinister blossoming of signs pointing to the Tristero system begins for Oedipa Maas: she weaves into the Tristero weft [maaswork] all the clues, signs and graffiti, fragments of texts, children's rhymes and coded documents that she has collected on the way, and she discovers (or builds up) the story of
Tristero y Calavera, where all these separate pieces fit together, match up [hold together]. The story begins at the end of the 16th century when the Netherlands were fighting to throw off the yoke of Spanish Catholicism. In 1615, the title of grandmaster of the Postal System had been bestowed by Emperor Mathias as a hereditary imperial fief on the Thurn and Taxis family. When William of Orange came to Brussels at the time of the Beggars' Rebellion, he drove out all the Holy Roman Imperial dignitaries, including Leonard, first Baron of Taxis, grandmaster of the Postal System. Then a madman, rebel, or crook, hard to tell which, comes into the picture: a certain Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera proclaims himself the legitimate heir to the postal monopoly. When the Duke of Alba retakes Brussels, Tristero takes to the hills and clandestinely sets up his own system for delivering the mail. Presenting himself as the desheredado, the dis-inherited, the man who moves in the shadows and at night, he chooses as his emblem the post horn used by the Thurn and Taxis couriers, but this post horn has a mute signifying the imposed censorship and silence, the buried and forbidden voices. A guerrilla war of skirmishes and obstructive actions then begins to be waged against the couriers in the imperial network. A parasite network secretly living off of the official network, the Tristero System also constitutes a conspiracy attempting to subvert it. However, in the 19th century, as States appearing on the map of Europe claim each in turn their right to control the movement of mail within their "national" boundaries, they impinge on the imperial demesne of the Thurn and Taxis men until finally, in Frankfort, on June 28, 1867, the Prince of Thurn and Taxis is forced to hand over to Bismarck's Prussia the remnants of his imperial privileges. Excluded bit by bit in its turn from its shrinking territory, reduced to occupying the interstices between the state boundaries and quadrilaterals, the Thurn and Taxis postal system would have had to, in order to survive, route the mail for all sorts of rebels and anarchists, and would have allied itself then with its enemy and clandestine double, the Tristero System. A subversive ferment, the network surfaces each time there is an uprising, a riot, a revolution somewhere: just as the sorceress V periodically made the historical
crust rise with her volcanic eruptions, just as the V2 calls forth a latent eruption under the city as it falls. After the failure of the revolutionary outbreaks of 1848 in Europe, the network emigrates to America just when the U.S. Mail begins to establish a monopoly on postal traffic through a series of federal decrees. We find its messengers, masquerading as Indians, speaking the various Indian languages, blending into the scenery, harassing Wells Fargo and Pony Express couriers. Did they stir up dissidence in the South? In the course of its shadowy, clandestine existence, the Tristero System survives until summer, 1964, when Oedipa discovers its existence in California, where it organized a phantom postal system, W.A.S.T.E., whose mailboxes are trash cans (waste) placed along the highways.

16. As an analyst of the great McCarthy nightmares, the historian Richard Hofstadter traced throughout the course of American history a persistent thread of "paranoia." America is in the clutches of a vast conspiracy which lurks in the shadows and secretly conspires to bring about its destruction. The Reds have infiltrated Washington security jobs; they must be uncovered before disaster strikes. Already during the 1890's, this was the leitmotiv of the populist rantings against "the Gold Cartel" fomenting to cause the ruin of Western farmers; the Greenbackers who hoped to find in inflation a way of lessening their debts to Eastern bankers used it. At that time, the agrarian theme of the decadence of a world corrupted by "usury" was grafted on to it (Adams, then Eliot and Pound, readers of Spengler). Before that time, there had been the terrible fear of the Masonic plot, the rumor that Metternich had infiltrated the country by using black-robed Jesuit commandos, the Jacobin conspiracy, the Illuminati conspiracy: amateur of conspiracies that he is, having grown up at the time when paranoia gripped the States, quite familiar also with Californian hallucinatory sects. Thomas Pynchon takes their inventory. And in the same fashion he must go back to Salem, where "An Horrible Plot against the Country by WITCHCRAFT" was discovered just in the nick of time (Cotton Mather, 1692). The conspiracy is the last bastion for bewildered Puritans, the bulwark against chaos in the eclipse of God who is the key to all
things. American fiction oscillates between these two polarities: integration: everything is connected; and disintegration: everything falls apart [hold/shift,drift].

15. In this literature of conspiracy, the Whore of Babylon sending her lustful sbirri, thighs moist under the heavy cloth of their cassocks, to seduce young Vermont girls through the grilles of the confessional or in the convent alcoves, plays an important role: this, so Hofstadter says, is the Puritan's pornography. Even in Pynchon's work, the Church (Roman and Catholic) remains--along with Baedeker's guide, the German conspiracy to plot the world out in grids--the paradigm of the Conspiracy: the key to the Tristero System is buried in the Vatican Library. The Church is the first multinational Cartel: by dint of investigation, Slothrop ends up by discovering that "everything is connected," and that the history of the Western world since the twenties (IG Farben was founded in 1925) is completely explained by the secret manipulations of a metacartel with a hand in everybody's life, especially Slothrop's. A masterpiece of integration, the metacartel whose birth Slothrop follows in the politics of Walter Rathenau during the Great War, then during the Weimar Republic, and whose complex overlapping he explores (IG Farben, Stinnes, Siemens, Krupp, Thyssen) also "integrates" Slothrop by locating in him, implanting in him, a "dead point" Pavlovian version of the voodoo practice of sticking pins in dolls. If Slothrop exhibits that curious seismographic sensibility to what's afoot up there, it's because his father, working hand-in-glove with the Cartel and its stooges, sold him at some time in the past "like a side of beef," and for a mess of pottage (he understands now how, although coming from a ruined family, he nevertheless studied at Harvard). IG Farben and the diabolical Dr. Lazlo Jamf made a guinea pig of him by implanting in him when he was a child the conditioned reflex that causes him to react today to the arrival of the V2's and the disturbing aroma of Impolox-G that precedes them. That erection is implanted in him like an "outpost" of "Their white Metropolis far away," a deadly harpoon. Since his childhood, he has been watched by the Cartel, a surveillance system transferred in London to the equally diabolical Dr.
Pointsman. Because of his erection, "everything is connected;" because of his erection, They keep their hold on him. Now he explains to himself this "sentiment d'emprise" he senses, Tom Thumb handed over by his father to the Cartel Ogre: in Pynchon's work there is something that resembles an elegiac lament for little children lost and betrayed by the terrifying specter of a Father who violated their trust, a lament which echoes Hawthorne. But, adolescent though he was in the McCarthy era, Thomas Pynchon also belongs to the Sixties, the time of the great "children's" crusade [the kids: term designating the militants in the movement at that time, even if they were honorary kids] off to exorcise the Pentagon. Don't get it up, get it down. Been down so long it looks like up to me. Renouncing his paternal inheritance, breaking away from his background, Slothrop will run away, like a mole traveling underground, to listen to the growing clamor of the counter-conspiracy of betrayed children.

14. Hidden graffiti put Oedipa in Lot 49 on the trail of Trystero, an underground communication network, the hub where everything comes together. The first time she spots the hieroglyphic sign depicting a muted posthorn, it's hidden among obscenities scrawled on the walls of public toilets; it's accompanied by a message: get in touch through WASTE. Next, a man absent-mindedly doodles the same design on the corner of an old envelope. It's engraved on the signet-ring that old Mr. Thoth's grandfather had once torn from the finger of a so-called Indian who had attacked the Pony Express. She finds it in the watermark on a three-cent stamp issued in 1940 for the centennial celebration of the Pony Express. Then the initials begin to appear everywhere, a geometric expansion—Brassai in the streets of Pigalle, Restif de la Bretonne finding the inscriptions at night on damp docks, she sees it, this very abbreviation, on a badge a passer-by wears on his back. In a Chinatown herb- list's display window she thinks she sees it in the half-light among the ideograms. It's the same design children draw on the sidewalk to play hopscotch while singing their tune, "Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three./ Turning taxi from across the sea ..." where we still hear, confused by time and distortion, the echo of the
same old story, just as we hear the story of the Fall reverberate in Finnegans Wake. It is drawn on a 1904 issue of the Mexican anarcho-syndicalist newspaper Regeneración. She deciphers it among the messages posted at the laundromat. It's the sign someone carved with a knife on a bench in the square; it's the sign that a little girl traces with her nail in the mist forming on a Greyhound bus window. It's embroidered in gold thread on the shirts the motorcycle freaks wear. Last of all, she finds it appearing, as a tattoo in blue ink that the drizzling rain washes off, on the arm of a sailor sprawled in a doorway near the Embarcadero. Now her eyes detect everywhere this previously invisible sign.

13. She thinks she's getting information and working her way into the center of the labyrinth where the secret surrounding Trystero lies. The further she penetrates into the dark plot, the more the clues become part of the great Tristero story, the very essence of the clandestine postal system WASTE. Soon everything refers to Trystero. The probability that the initials would appear on a section of wall, on the bark of a tree, in the pattern a seagull traces in the sky, increases with each passing minute; and, inversely, the information the sign gives diminishes, lessens [waste]. The increase of entropy caused by her perception is greater than the decrease in entropy she creates in sorting over the clues she finds (Brillouin). The more information she acquires, the greater the chaos becomes. The information tends to move towards zero, each sign referring to another identical sign, an infinite drift of signs, a closed circle, without even once, in the tautological duplication of signs, the investigator ever being able to get near the secret she's trying to track down. Her perception of a plot where everything is connected and which holds and ties together the scattered clues is no more than the symptom of her own withdrawal into her solitude, into the entropic silence of her own private language. Suddenly the initials W.A.S.T.E. aren't the crux of a plot anymore. They simply point out here and there, everywhere, in the city a small island of solitude; they represent the last signal still sent out on illegal frequencies by those who in the city, an archipelago of self-enclosed "I's," have sunk below into
silence, a signal which says everything and nothing at the same time, the "I" encompassing nothing now but an empty (w)hole. It's the signal that a man about to commit suicide sends into the night when he begins to dial telephone numbers haphazardly [at random], in hopes that he'll stumble on other anonymous voices and will make contact with, somewhere in the central relay system, the "cry" which will abolish the night. For if I lapse into aphasia, trapped in my private idiom, cut off from the daytime plot which structures patterns, space and language, then there must be somewhere, buried in the night, still hidden, another plot, a phantom network I can tap into, listening to a silence impregnated with still unborn voices.

12. This reversal turns round the two fold reading that American fiction has always given the word "waste"

1. Waste--the wasteland, dismembered carcasses. An empty lot strewn with shaving chips and debris, the white-hot sun beating on the corrugated iron of abandoned hangars tumbling down among the scrub-grass and weeds, a pile of metal rusting in a demolition yard at the edge of town, a desert full of rubble, a crust of cooled lava, a dull stretch of asphalt looking mournful in the moonlight, a world of disjointed fragments which has deteriorated to the point of being below the embankments, no more than a no man's land of scoriae and bones, an ashy, devastated land.

0. Waste--the vague and empty land before the fencing of space, a space open to vagrancy, empty lands, pasturelands on the fringes of the enclosure, vast moving space which hasn't yet been stabilized, shifting like the sands, vaga arena, shifting sands, on the edge of the cleared grounds this still fallow steppe, chaotic moor filled with brambles and brush where we can still wander in the dusk, wander and roam.

As for the leprous and delapidated zone which stretches to the edges of the city, for Pynchon it represents the two faces of the wasteland, a space appearing as it was both before and after the fences went up.
11. Escaping after a night's wandering from the fascination of San Narciso, Oedipa Maas opens a breach [neerl]: Maas: the interstice between the warp and woof and discovers in the "zone," along the highway, the vast kingdom of Waste, the fringes where the squatters, their claim on the land shaky, still semi-nomadic, the losers, the outcasts, the American pariahs, camp. Lot 49, which takes place during the summer of 1964 at the time of Goldwater's electoral campaign, was written when Michael Harrington's book, The Other America (1962-1963), a report on the "invisible" country peopled with misery and dereliction, had just come out. After the drowsiness and rigidity of the years of Republican respectability, the Eisenhower-Nixon era, a whole generation discovered what only the Beats had gone on seeing during the fifties, that is, that the America of the Depression years lived on, but in clandestine enclaves that Society carefully sought to keep hidden. This was no longer Cotton Mather's "invisible world," but the fourth world excluded by the land survey's binary coding, relegated to darkness and oblivion. Uprooted country people sheltered temporarily in tarpaper shacks or in abandoned cars, hillbillies who had wandered far from the hills of Appalachia to the wastelands of the Chicago suburbs, Okies who had come to California during the great "Grapes of Wrath" migration and who had never managed to gain a foothold, Mexican agricultural workers migrating from the San Joaquin Valley vineyards to the Nebraska cornfields, wrecks from a vagabond flotilla cast adrift haunting Times Square at dawn or picking up butts in the Greyhound bus station waiting room, the Harlem jobless, barefoot drifters up from the Deep South, bums getting drunk on Sterno on the Bowery sidewalks. Pictures from Kerouac crossing "the line" [across the tracks] right down to the hobo camp, the thirties' dream, the campfire made by burning old crates down behind the freight yards. Oedipa Maas also walks along the line, tripping over ties and cinderbed; Pietà of the lost, she sees beside the tracks a people of the shadows: an old Pullman car abandoned right in the middle of the countryside, right in the cultivated fields, with wash hanging on the line and smoke coming out of pieces of stove pipe stuck
together; squatters living in tents pitched behind big billboards along the highway which hide them from people crossing the country; "squatters" hunkering in junkyards or nesting in tents left by linemen at the tops of telephone poles; exiles coming from an "invisible land," wandering at night by the side of the road, quickly moving in and out of the headlights, going nowhere. They are the gray dead souls of the "Preterite," that the Elect, as they grabbed America and plotted to take hold of the land, have "passed over," and who, off the official map, sleep, long-forgotten, the silent sleep of the waste land.

10. In Calvinist theology, the "Preterite" are distinguished from the Damned in that God never even intended to save them in the first place. Here, rising with the night wind, these people from the catacombs listen on the lower frequencies of the clandestine network to the sound of "a different drummer" (Thoreau), like the deaf and dumb who dance to the sound of a bossa-nova which only they hear. At the other end of the spectrum, in the ultra-sound frequency, the shrill cry which will abolish the night is about to be raised. Shadowy phantasma, Trystero is, for this great army of the dispossessed, the still-hidden conductor, the charismatic leader who will rise out of the confusion to lead them, as once did Peter the Hermit, to reconquer the Holy City. Somewhere they have a secret rendezvous [tryst] with this silent herald, Trystero, who represents both silence and terror. Saudade of a solo by Stan Getz heard on the outskirts of town, on the outskirts of the gypsy section where the great plain begins: the nocturnal world revolves around the black sun of that very sadness, but soon the Prince of the ruined tower [Thurn and Taxis] will appear, and the world will be "turned upside down," the black sun replacing the wan sun of the "white death." Thomas Pynchon tilts from silence to revolt, moving back and forth between the silent generation of the Eisenhower years and the tumultuous Sixties. The stamp of chiliast schemes upon the hippie movement has already been noted (J. Le Gott). Heirs who have thrown their heritage to the winds disregard all social conventions (this is the last indelible mark of their social origin--to not notice it) in order to set against the Establish-
ment's pentagonal fortress a vast, loose, and ill-defined movement of outcasts and disinherited who, as narodniki in the "zone," will be called upon to speak out and whose Jacquerie they will lead off to conquer the lost Kingdom. Waste is therefore to be read as We Await Silent Trystero's Empire, Trystero the crook, the impostor, the pseudo-Frederick, Emperor of the Last Days, who will cause the shout to swell from the silence. Aroused by a handful of disenchanted country squires and clerics, the "people" await the surge of violence, the spasm which, exacerbating chaos to create a tabula rasa, will hasten the coming of the kingdom, and "from the ruins of the old order will spring the new order" (Alfred Rosenberg, Munich, 1933). It's no accident that, in Gravity's Rainbow, the great trek of the wandering Hereros starts in Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains. There, after the bombing of Peenemünde, was buried the Mittelwerk V2 factory where the slave laborers from the Dora concentration camp worked in the bowels of the earth. But it was nearby also that, like Rip van Winkle whose legend he inspired, the Emperor Frederick "slept"; and also nearby, in the village of Stolberg, Thomas Münzer, prophet of the Peasants' War, was born (cf. Ernst Bloch, Norman Cohn).

9. If we trace Slothrop's ancestry, we find at its inception a fork, a sharp deviation from the Puritan norm: the first Slothrop failed to play the game of conquest and exclusion, and, until the end of the 18th century, the Slothrop's still kept alive the memory of this ancestral dissidence; for example, when they sided with the poor farmers during Shays' Rebellion, that Peasants' War, against Governor Bowdoin of Massachusetts (in 1786), they wore sprigs of hemlock in their hats as identification, as they patrolled the hills, while the governor's militia wore slips of paper. Only later in the 19th century did the Slothrop family betray its past by destroying forests. Arriving in America during the great founders' crossing of 1630, William Slothrop, tiring very quickly of Winthrop's authority and his circle of worthies, convinced besides that he could preach the Scriptures as well as anyone ordained by the Hierarchy, seceded and took off, his Bible in his
pack, for the Berkshire hills where he settled down with his son John to raise pigs. When he had fattened a small herd of them, he would set out at dawn for Boston to sell them at market. After they had galloped up hill and down, the poor beasts didn't weigh in very heavy, but Slothrop loved neither the profit nor the good fortune that would have been the manifest sign of his Election: he loved the trip, the "mobility," the chance meetings with Indians, women on the way. He came back with his pockets empty, but this time he had heard the grunts on the highway, and, I imagine, on the sunken roads, by the wayside, "the thud" and "the swish." As for Henderson [Saul Bellow, 1959], the aristocrat whose father knew Henry Adams and Henry James and who wrote a book on the Cathars, raising pigs is here a wonderful way to thumb your nose at the Puritans, blasphemy to their writings and ethics. Winthrop/Slothrop, opposing tropisms, win/sloth: challenging the urge to conquer and compete represented by Winthrop, Slothrop, a drop-out before the word was coined, opts for what was, in the Puritan catalogue of vices, the worst of the deadly sins, sloth: that kind of lethargy, of Oblomov torpor which gets you into the rut of sleeping instead of staying wide awake to earn salvation and paradise by winning it the hard way, through secular success. Slothropic degradation: the ancestor William stays buried in the hills among his pot-bellied, paunchy animals, wallowing under the noonday sun, in the mud of sunken roads, with his companions in lechery, ribaldry, revelry, and this gross animal pleasure, this snout that burrows in the earth, this gluttony, this grunting. Instead of standing defiantly erect under the empty heavens, the voluptuous collapse in the depths of the earth; having written a theological opuscule about Preterition to plead the case for those whom Election has excluded from salvation, William Slothrop barely escaped the gallows, and his book was burned in the Boston marketplace. He then went back to die in England, far from the gaunt Don Quixotes of Boston and Salem, amid memories of his blue hills: the cornfields, the parleys with the Indians in the smoke of tobacco and hemp, the girls in petticoats in the hay lofts, the clatter of horses' hooves against the planks, the drunks carousing all
night long, the departure as dawn was breaking, the rain on the Connecticut River and the return, dead tired, one evening as the sun set in the tall, still warm grass. Here we find the "singular point" where America jumped off the track, the fork where America, by ostracizing Slothrop, took the wrong road. Buried in the past is this cusp point which we can find, perhaps, by retracing our steps, when "A screaming comes across the sky" and when the catastrophe (the film where the piercing scream surges forth only after the impact has occurred, so we should remember, backwards) unreels back to the lost fork.

8. Between the 1 of the linear structure that the rigidity of a land survey may impose and the 0 of emptiness where everything comes apart extends the interspace which is the domain of the statistician Mexico, so named in honor of a country able to survive although it borders the gigantic gringo empire on the other side of the Rio Grande. For Mexico it's Calvinist madness to want to decipher in the trajectories across heaven the univocal voice of the Lord. He contents himself with marking the points of impact on the map, clusters, masses of stars that no chain of cause and effect links together. He wants to strike off at some other angle. For him the whole interstitial gamut 0.37 which is seemingly excluded by the binary choice: he outlines the new geometry of the "multiverse" whose emergence disoriented Henry Adams. He camps temporarily in a space between two worlds, into which he slipped incognito. He lives with Jessica, whom he met one night on the street when both were out roaming about in spite of the curfew, and this is the only love story in this sinister book--'Jessica and Mexico, Jessica and Lorenzo on a Venice night, an evacuated house in the forbidden zone to the south of London just under the barrage balloons. In the garage, Mexico raises chickens; Jessica brought her old doll, some sea shells, her grandmother's lace in a wicker grip. Privately, they said their farewell to arms, fuck the war, make love, outlaws for a season, for an escapade, to last as long as the war does. The war that suspends the normal flow of time and fleetingly opens up a vista of summer holidays is home for Mexico, and he knows that henceforth his days and Jessica's are numbered,
as are the war days—in spite of von Rundstedt's surprise counter-offensive in the Ardennes (December, 1944). There's nothing but time left now: galloping by, I hear hard on my heels the tick, second by second, of the backward count, countdown. He knows that when the war ends he must lose Jessica, fresh as the hedges and hay, smelling sweetly like a pony when the sea-wind blows over the snow-covered English countryside. In the meantime, Mexico charts the score of indeterminate space, and like John Cage he hears the music of the stars.

7. As for space, surveyors cover it all, squaring it off into lots without leaving any gaps. So the only chance we can hope for is to find again the shifting margin, the brief interlude as one grid breaks apart and fades out while the next one has not yet settled down, those brief in-between-time days when the evacuated world is like a freight yard waiting empty under the moon. The countdown, at moving imperceptibly towards zero, began for Slothrop in 1840, when his family began its decline. During that same period in Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson wrote that no fall is abrupt and that the slow slipping away is the law governing collapse ["slipping is crash's law"]. Ever since, curled up in the heart of the hills, in this straw-colored country where everything turns to dust, Slothrop's lineage, whose inertia has never-stopped pulling it downwards, slips towards extinction along a curve of extinction long since asymptotic, from which now only a last-chance gap, a snag in time between almost zero and zero, separates it. From Henry Adams to John Updike, the Puritan tradition has run through all the declensions of the modalities of this world exhaustion [dwindling towards zero], coming to nothing: erosion of time which erases all to chaotic nothingness, the ground failing under the horseman's hooves, over-exposure which whitens the landscape to nothing. Hence the hold on the imagination of the great Crash of 1929, when the stock market crashed in panic and when the spiral, the maelstrom, started whirling down. As a child, Slothrop grew up in the midst of desolation and failures. In the Berkshires, the hedges and fences were falling into ruins around the great abandoned estates where the Harrimans, the Whitneys, the
great New England families, no longer came. In the fall, no more foxtrots in the distance, no more lanterns over the steps, only crickets, the odor of rotten apples, then the October wind, a world lapping back to the wilderness, at one and the same time dead lands covered with dry straw and lands gone wild again, where the green of old comes alive again among the brambles. Each fall must have its tempo: in Berlin, to give more dramatic intensity to the moon-shot [die Frau im Mond, 1928] Fritz Lang had just invented the countdown, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0, Fire.

6. The "Zone" is, for a summer, the Summer of 1945, this world in abeyance, all fences down, as in the "deep yesteryear" of the great migrations, the moving theater of a gigantic Völkerwanderung not seen since the 5th century and the barbarian invasions. After the collapse of the Third Reich, long lines of fugitives, exiles, deported people move across the gray and green earth, across a world out-of-joint, evacuated hordes of vagabonds, camps in the morning breezes, fragments of failing history for a brief season drifting off into the open. This summer everyone is on the roads, unrestricted wanderings where American hoboes from Josiah Flint to Vachel Lindsay to Jim Tully to Harry Kemp to Clancy Sigal to Woody Guthrie and down to Slothrop (who follows their trail here temporarily) rediscover the lost space of the Oregon Trail: a whole people has taken to the road as if it had returned to the nomadic state: the German folk crossing back over the Oder chased by the Poles going towards Rostock along the Baltic coast; Poles fleeing the Lublin regime meeting people who, on the contrary, are returning home; Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians trekking northward, packs on their shoulders, shoes in tatters, humming enigmatic songs; Sudetens, East Prussians, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Macedonians, Magyars, Brownian movement of nationalities on the surface of the "imperial cauldron" reviving underneath the ruined Prussian ordinance map the ever present ghost of the Empire and its loose desmesne. Gypsy wagons whose axles break are abandoned on the roadside near carcasses of horses: someone else will spend the night there tomorrow. White Russians going towards the West, former prisoners of War going to the East, Wehrmacht
veterans in ragged uniforms, agricultural workers who are supposedly going to Hanover to pick potatoes, a whole crowd on the march, on the move, on the immense Mecklenburg plain hauling behind them the debris and remnants of a Europe that they don't yet know is destroyed forever. The old paths suddenly obsolete, for a time outside of ordinary time all roads are the same in a multi-dimensional space where each road is a crossroad. But this is only a hiatus, the brief interlude between a defunct Herrschaft and another one already looming ahead of us. In the chaos of the defeated Germany a new cartel which will impose its own map is in the process of being born: the V2 cartel. On May 5, the Russians occupied Peenemünde, where they found only rubble. They get ready to occupy the Harz and Nordhausen, which fall in their zone. On October 30, 1947, a V2 will be launched from Kazakhstan. Everyone roams and madly runs about as long as there aren't "zones" yet, but just the Zone. Operation Paperclip: Americans hunt the V2 scientists and technicians; Wernher von Braun rides his bike down from his mountain refuge to surrender to them; he will be at White Sands on March 15, 1946, to see his V2 rise in the New Mexico skies, and the hardening frost of the Cold War is already there; on July 16, 1969, he will be in the thistle-covered wastes of Cape Canaveral for the great moon launching—in some ways the true, though unacknowledged topic of this book. Then the cartel will have regained its hold, and the Calvinist assault against the Frontier will have taken on new momentum, beyond the zero. Meanwhile, there is this wasteland in ruins where, with all the systems temporarily halted [in abeyance] from distress and disarray (Max Weber), in the infintesimal instant at the interface between collapse and sclerosis, the charismatic lightning might leap forth, the lightning which will arouse us from the lethargy old maps have lulled us into, and open, for this is the age of Prophets, through the breach like a flash from elsewhere. From Stralsund Slothrop looks at the lowlands bordering the shore: this morning must be like the one the astonished Vikings saw when they debarked wide-eyed and found, as the Dutch sailors did later as they landed on Manhattan island, the immense plain, waves of grass like a sea driven
before wind, where you could sail without boundaries or borders as far as Byzantium and the promise of a second coming. By the bank, plates of camouflaged armor rise above the late dandelions whose round heads wave back and forth waiting for the wind to disperse their spores to disseminate them across the nomadic steppes, a chance, in the bewilderment of aleatory space, for a new germination and a new branching off.

5. On this fragmented chessboard, at last in their proper space, the characters move across the continent, each mirroring the other, just as has always been the case in American fictions ever since Sleepy Hollow: 1) the schlemiel drifting from catastrophe to catastrophe, wandering aimlessly [at random] towards a nowhere which sometimes turns out to be an elsewhere, in a moving world carrying him in its drift, a cork bobbing along the highway— that's Slothrop; 2) the shifty confidence man of fables and bedtime stories, hustling and living by his wits, prospering and flourishing in shaky times, both virtuosos of mobility and metamorphosis—the confidence man, Gerhardt von Göll. The intimate and equal, before the war, of Pabst, Lang and Lubitsch, the scenario-writer von Göll works during the war for various allied secret service agencies. He's the one who hatches the scheme which consists of having the Germans find a film, apocryphal and made in Kent, proving the presence of the Blacks, the Schwarzkommando, in the ranks of the SS—all this in order to demoralize the people by bringing back the old twenties terror (die Schand am Rhein: the Senegalese units occupying the Rhineland). However, it happens that the Schwarzkommando composed of Herero soldiers really exists: the story invented by von Göll has, so he thinks, become a reality, and during the summer of 1945, he travels through the Zone, traveling day and night, here one day, someplace else the next day, sleeping in his truck, everywhere and nowhere, taking advantage of his wandering to organize a vast black market network in order to sow other stories and pictures, seeds which will grow hard facts in time. He has no fixed destination or itinerary. He advances by leaps and bounds. His pseudonym: der Springer: the tumbler, the knight. The Queen, the King, the fools are no
more than magnificent invalids. The pawns can only creep about a two-dimensional space; the rook does not move vertically. Only der Springer, the knight, wonderful Luftmensch that he is, knows how to fly [flight]. He has been here, he will (perhaps) be there; he rides through the Zone pursued by the other wandering character, Slothrop, who doesn't have a definite name or home, or perhaps his home is the American locus par excellence, the floating white square called nowhere.

4. Sent on a mission to the continent to locate the V2 sites, Slothrop, his clothes stolen and his papers burned, deserter without credentials or past, escapes his master's surveillance to wander about using one disguise after another and various aliases. This happens in May, 1945, amid crashed Stukas and burned-out tanks. If God grants one hundred more days of sun, the harvest will be good. At the crack of dawn he lands in Nordhausen in the Harz region. Barefoot (someone stole his shoes while he was asleep), he had crossed Bavaria in a boxcar. The person who stole his shoes left a tulip between his toes. Trains in the night, ghosts wailing as they cross through deserted cities, ragged lost souls moaning, their cracked lips singing the Ballad of the Displaced Persons. From Nordhausen, Slothrop, in a bright yellow and red silk balloon (a flame from a G.I. Zippo lighter, and he flies off, all moorings loosed) flies over the Thuringian prairies and the Harz mountains, a holy place for legends as are the Berkshire Hills in America. The sun sets. Floating about in its luminous halo without landmarks to guide it, the balloon still captures the sun's last rays, and Slothrop watches as the line of demarcation between night and day rushes across the fields: at this latitude, the earth's shadow crosses Germany at 650 miles per hour. The further south we go, the faster the shadow moves, breaking the sound barrier somewhere above the South of France, in the very region where Slothrop himself broke the sound barrier to find himself on the other side, hovering very high on the Zone's vertical. But unlike the rider, der Springer, who flies off, Slothrop, in the Brownian movement of his meanderings through the Zone, if he has his ups and downs, is only losing altitude, like
a yoyo that goes up and down and then goes up again, but whose kinetic capital dwindles to inertia. The same inertia that makes Slothrop—the schlemiel fortune has made its plaything—run will slow him down to a standstill, deep into the earth. Here he is in the moonlight celebrating with a quartet of goblins and spirits in a Berlin in ruins with every bridge blown up. He ambles about the ghostly studios of the U.F.A., crosses no man's land, spends the night in a shaky wooden house with its roof blown off, and at midnight he hears some Russian soldiers singing in their barracks against a background of wailing accordion music. On Saint John the Baptist's day, fern seed fell in his shoe. He wanders among rubble and barbed wire; Berlin like an American scrap-iron works, a world gone back to wreck. The early morning drizzle finds him in the slums near the Jacobistrasse. He walks along the tow path, travels by barge along the canal from the Spree to the Oder. Along the way, the Russian demolition crews are blowing up wrecks with T.N.T. On the Oder, there are Chinese lanterns, a happy garland, and the accordion again; a Fellinian yacht, a traveling village which has sailed all summer in sight of the lowlands with the last bunch of fascist survivors aboard. The rain patters, Saint Elmo's fire in the mast, and Slothrop on his ghostly vessel wends his way along the Oder towards the North. The ship radio picks up the sputterings of Russian broadcasts. Radio interference comes like gusts of rain. The yacht passes the silent ruins of Stettin. He can see the ruined derricks, the burnt warehouses in the rain. Then there's the Baltic, Swinemünde, Peenemünde finally; a light fog over the devastated site, shell craters full of blue water, Messerschmitt carcasses like beached whales on the shore. Then he rounds Rügen, fragments of islands with chalk cliffs. At Stralsund, Slothrop debarks, striding like a longshoreman down the wharf where grey horses look for bits of grass between the cobbled stones. Then he walks alone along the coast. He's trying to get to Cuxhaven, where the British are going to reconstruct a V2. In the evenings he stops at abandoned farms, sleeps in the hay, and, when there happens to be a mattress, in a bed. Birds sing on the thatched roofs. Slothrop walks across the fields humming a Fred
Astaire tune. Arriving one evening in a small town near Weimar, he sees a procession of children carrying lanterns and singing Laterne, Laterne, Sonne, Mund und Sterne, round moons in the evening light. The feast of the pig is being celebrated in memory of the legendary Plechazunga, the giant pig who in the 10th century stopped the Viking invasion single-handedly. The shoemaker who usually plays the role of the pig was mobilized in the Volksgrenadier and didn't come back from the war. Slothrop is persuaded to don the plush costume padded with straw and painted with garish expressionist colors. The logic of metamorphosis dictates that the occasion bloom into carnival. When the celebration ends, Slothrop, still in his costume, leaves with a girl across the fields of tall white daisies, and in a farmyard and with the wind in the pylons and sails of a creaking windmill, they sleep together snout to snout. His sinking into burlesque gravity is also for Slothrop the anamnesis which brings him back, as he digs, deeper into the earth, to his ancestor William, the first of the American Slothrop's.

3. There is, in every trajectory, a passage that serves no purpose [through emptiness] that stops the heartbeat and tears asunder [quarters] time.

-- Julien Gracq, Paris at Dawn

In the uncertain, dangerous hour before morning, Oedipa finds herself near the embarcadero: Alcatraz is still no more than a faint outline in the fog. Soon the city will wake up, and people, grabbing their tools, will get back into the familiar groove of their habits and trips: rush hour, retracing under their feet the survey-map of streets and lines; but at daybreak, for a very brief space of time, the ploughshare jumps the furrow, the phonograph needle leaps its furrow [groove], and its harsh grating sears the eardrums. A momentary tear in the thread of time, a rip, a dead beat, a momentary discontinuity in the curve. On a porch overlooking a slum, Oedipa finds a drunk and delirious sailor who talks to her about the other world, the clandestine world of W.A.S.T.E. His old carcass trembles in Oedipa's arms as she rocks him tenderly; she recognizes the symp-
trms: delirium tremens, D.T.'s. But for the decoder who tries vainly to project another world, d.t. is also the last gap to span when $\Delta t$ tends towards zero and you can no longer square the parabola, breaking it up into surfaces and tail-planes, nor hide the upward thrust in a rate of acceleration. The fractions of time become shorter and shorter; we're getting closer, count-down, to the point where the catastrophe must be faced, discontinuity suddenly breaking out, $\Delta t \to 0$ merging here with the image of the singular point. The Polish undertaker who rows alone in his boat and who passes in front of the ghostly yacht in the middle of the Baltic one stormy night wanders in these waters in hopes of finally being struck by lightning. Most people have highs and lows in their lives, but most often all this forms is a sinusoidal curve with first derivatives at every point. These people will never be struck by lightning. For that there must be a discontinuity in the curve, a cusp point. A moment of risk which is at the very same time the spasm of the epileptic cry, the irruption of another world through the breach, and the fading away to white. The indices and signs that Oedipa spent the night spotting are like the signals warning the epileptic that his attack is coming on. After the fact he remembers these signals, but they are no longer anything more than scoriae and dross that memory stores away. The convulsive brilliance of the cry is too dazzling to permit memory to register it—explosion which destroys the film impression of its own image, lightning bolt which leaves, when we return from the high light of that spasm to this lowly world, no more traces on the Agfa film taken Sunday afternoon than the white blankness of an overexposed negative. Yet it is only in this critical spasm that $\Delta t \to 0$ and that the gap is ended, an ever-postponed closure between the Scriptures and the "naked word" snatched from the glosses, the "unscoribbled" cry that the writings can't grasp, and from which, as they bring us closer, they exile us. The old pallet where the old drunk sleeps off his wine at dawn is like the palimpsest of his life: traces of vomit, sperm, urine, tears, sweat and blood. As she goes away, Oedipa imagines that this mattress stuffed with memories is burning, a
Viking funeral for all those years coded and stored away in a memory that a conflagration erases. Once again, the world white without imprints, the cold dead lands of Newfoundland where, after returning from Africa, Henderson [Bellow, 1959] dances with his lion in the icy silence; the chalky plateau where the centaur [Updike, 1963] gallops, blinded by the dazzling sun on the gravel and the snow near the edge of the cliff where the world vanishes. Everything is erased [erasure of data] amid the piercing cries of the seagulls, and with $\Delta t$ moving towards zero, the infinitesimal breach affords access to "spectra beyond the known sun" to a "music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright." Discovery of a new world to the West, these empty lands. But also, what is death if not this passage to "ultra-white"?

2. Scattered in the wasteland of the Zone, broken up space whose fragments, drifting towards red [redshift], flee at infinitely high speed the infra-historical center where the original explosion took place, the survivors of the Herero people, seeds scattered in exile, try to reintegrate the dense, compact original point [the Borges-Friedman Aleph] from which this universe is expanded. These are the Hereros that survived the extermination order given by von Trotha in January 1904, and then the great trek Northward led by Samuel Maherero to seek refuge in British Betchuanaland. Many are descended from the Ovatjimba tribe, so poor that they found their food by rooting in the earth, and whose animal-totem was the aardvark [Erdschwein]. During the war, inducted into the Schwarzkommando; they lived in the bowels of the earth working on the construction of the V2 in the subterranean Harz factory. Following the German surrender, they begin to wander around the Zone; no one really knows who these Blacks wearing tattered SS uniforms are; they are allowed to move on. They dream of the kraal of their childhood and cattle pens in the veld as Flaubert's Celts used to think of three rough rocks under a rainy sky at the far end of a gulf full of islets. Their leader, Enzian, has a "vision"; like a Brigham Young leading his Mormons to Utah, he wants to march to the North, his march towards the star, after having gathered up the fragments of a V2 in order to have a ghost launch,
a rocket cabalist trying to find in the ruins of Europe the fragments of the original text, the Key which will allow them to find their roots [root/shift] and, taking them out of their unhappy history, will give them back that dead calm point [still point], omphalos of their lost tribal enclosure. Among the Herero, one sect wishes, on the contrary, to bring the cycle of Herero history to a close, to finish what began in 1904 in South West Africa, the Hereros letting themselves die behind barbed-wire [where the Germans who put them there sadly watch this phenomenon, which was as puzzling to them as elephant cemeteries], through total extinction, the final zero when there will no longer be in the archives any traces or memories of what was once the Herero people. But in the eschatological scheme in which this story is caught, final zero and still point are almost one and the same; both are outside of time and its curve. Clandestinely, in the Zone, the Herero commandos organize, communicating with one another on low frequencies in their cryptic language, and the great trek to the North begins, from Nordhausen towards the coast. The Herero intone a mantra: mba-kayere, I am forgotten and ignored [passed-over]. Preterition, according to an already classic trope, reverses itself [passover] to open up to survivors of the massacre the route leading to the promised land of the frozen North. The film of the Diaspora also runs backwards to the gravitational collapse which, on the other side of the world, will cause the origin to gush forth in a shower of stars.

1. "Thy joy is far above the kingdom, and we scarcely comprehend its riches; like the pure night of the vernal equinox you rise and separate day from day."

---R. M. Rilke, To the Angel

Heading North: when the Barbarians saw amid the piercing cries of the seagulls, the high cliffs of Kent rise in the mists, they knew they had arrived at the end of the world, at the edge of the kingdom of death. Towards this travel Enzian and his people, arctic expedition beyond the icy promontories and the blue sea, a washday blue sea where the icebergs float towards the North whose inhabitants preserve a culture, a language and an
ancient history that an external silence cuts from the rest of the world; Tsalal island where Pym lands as he drifts towards the South Pole [tsal-ma-veth: the shadow of death]. The Master of this hallucinatory North is Lord Blicero, whom we knew in V. by the name of Lieutenant Weissmann in the Süd-West in 1922 when he deciphered the message which gave the go-ahead for the massacres: die Welt is alles was der Fall ist. Formerly in Röhm's S. A., then Himmler's SS, he now presides over the Harz Mittelwerk, where the V2 is being built, at Nordhausen, dwellings in the North, and at Bleicheröde, where echoes the bleached vacancy [bleicht, bleach] of uninhabited "waste" [öde: öd & leer das Meer, T. S. Eliot]. Blicker, "latinized" here as "Blicero," was the name the ancient Germans gave death: the other world glimpsed in the blink of an eye. For the Schwarzkommando, the white Ogre: in the colonial cloaca of the Süd-West, far from Europe, from its white cathedrals and its Virgin Mary, where everything was permitted, he raped children at night. American obsession with anal rape (Mailer, Coover, Pynchon); Blicero gets ready to launch his lover Gottfried crucified in the nose of the phantom V2 00000 into sidereal space. Golgotha: at the vernal equinox, the green point of cusp, we drank to summer which transforms the aquatic sleep [wasser sleep] into a fiery awakening [firewaking]. At Bleicheröde, Wernher von Braun, his broken arm in a cast (a car accident), gets ready to celebrate, hosanna in the highest, his 33rd birthday. But on that Golgotha he isn't the one who is going to die: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation." (W. von Braun, sentence quoted as an exergue of G.R.) In one quick legerdemain, the Archangel will be at White Sands, New Mexico, then on July 16, 1969, in the desolate Florida dunes where the flight 00000 (which in this book remains a ghost flight) will take place, the flight on the 0° heading which will actually take the V2 out of the earth's gravitational field. In the dawn excitement, as in the hours before landing on an atoll, like a prison yard on the morning of an execution day, Norman Mailer watches the launch towers which look like prehistoric monoliths beached on the desert-like moors where once the Indians sang
to the moon. Then, like a Leviathan in the fog, the rocket climbs, blazing like a "new sun," the new sun that Ahab, tracking the whale from equinox to equinox, saw himself bringing to the world. For Norman Mailer is the one who first, in the great book of the 1969 sublunary summer, Of a Fire on the Moon (of which Pynchon's novel is, in certain respects, an outgrowth), placed Wernher von Braun, now an American, in the lineage of Puritan conquerors which extends from Mather to Ahab, then to Kurtz in Heart of Darkness. The Schuss ins Weltall is right in the spirit of the trails blazed towards the empty lands and unfenced spaces. Escape out of this low world which is always world and never a "nowhere without anything." (Rilke: Nirgends ohne Nicht. In the desert crushed by the Kalahari sun, Lieutenant Weissmann had in his officer's kit a copy of the Elegies Rilke wrote on the Duino Cliffs.) The project of being loosed, all anchors cut, finally thrust alone in space [los im Raum], tilts over into the obsession of sweeping clean the inhabited world, making it a tabula rasa: exterminate them all, Kurtz's programmatic cry that, four years later, von Trotha will carry out to the letter. The Puritan adventure: tear out the roots, wrench ourselves away from the soil and its stench, so we will no longer smell the corruption of this place where we are born, inter faesces & urinam. To no longer live on this provisional, decrepit, depraved earth, but following "the gigantic cry which rises from the earth," fly away towards "a space without a world," away from gravity and the risk of falling. The Ahab of the book, Lord Blicero, sings the white rhapsody, the Cathar's song of the tearing away from the shadows of the flesh and the gravity of the history we are buried in [grave]. The trajectory of the V2 00000 is a steel erection, an entire system won from, torn from the darkness of the feminine continent ["won away from the feminine darkness," and Pynchon stresses won: Winthrop], a project held up in order to snatch a form from entropic chaos and dispersion [scatterbrained Nature]. I want, says one of Blicero's henchmen, to make a breach and escape from this cycle of pestilence and death. Flight which is supposed to snatch Lord Blicero from death. Saved in
extremis from the pregnant earth which he has made into a wasteland of ossuaries and charnel houses. 7

"father Time & mother Species"
-- Finnegans Wake

O. The farther he goes into the shifting space of the Zone, the more lost Slothrop the vagabond becomes. Mondaugen's Law stipulates that the density of the ego [ego, egg, Ei, I] is a direct function of temporal bandwidth. If the band extends far into the past and the future, the Ego is firmly in place, but if $\Delta t$ approaches zero, the Ego, shriveling as it nears the singular point of Hić & Nunc, is, in the end, swallowed up and disappears, whisked away from the woof of time. Two readings for the point which we near as $\Delta t \to 0$: for Blicerō, it's the breach through which he is escaping, far from the world of surveyed lands, by taking off for external space [outer space]; for Slothrop, Ishmael to this Ahab, as $\Delta t$ approaches zero, we are approaching another singular point, the dead still point, the fixed point around which the world whirls, and the silent heart around which the fictional carousel swirls, with its painted fictions, the multi-colored whirlwind, the central point "where the dance is" (T. S. Eliot). It's the point that the double integration localizes—the double integration which allows us to detect, though hidden in the secret place, the center of gravity, or to calculate, given the acceleration, the point of the trajectory where the Brennschluss will occur, which will deliver the V2 to the forces of gravity—and for an infinitesimal moment, the V2 will be neither thrust upward nor pulled down by gravity, but will appear as if suspended outside of time. While Blicerō tears himself away from gravity to go off to deflower the vacant sky, the entropic Slothrop slowly falls inside himself. Penetrating the pre-pubescent Bianca, he suddenly feels that he is no longer blazing a trail in another space, but, like a dwarf, he lives in that space and is ensconced there as if in a roomy burrow. He shrinks, collapses on himself, implodes towards an inner space [Innenraum], Slothrop slipping [slip, lapse] off to sleep [sleep, slip from slaeapan], Slothrop in free fall then crosses another singular point where local gravity moves towards infinity.
Gravitational collapse: while Blicero escapes through a white hole, Slothrop escapes into a black hole [whale/wall/whole/hole]. The world whirls around this silent point from which no more signals come. The eye of the master, which has watched Slothrop since his childhood, no longer detects him; no radio picks him up any longer. He's escaped the plot. Burrowing deeply, he has left the weft of fiction which has held him captive until now. Incognito, unknown and unrecognized, he walks along the Baltic coast towards Cuxhaven. On a farm to the south of Rostock, on a sultry summer day with a flight of cranes passing overhead, he takes refuge in the hollow of a valley near the river. It rains; Slothrop goes to sleep in a rocking chair on the porch. When he wakes up, he looks at the sun coming out of the clouds to gild the damp fields and the haystacks. In the distance, the cows that someone has forgotten to milk low sadly. Others come to get drunk on fermented forage. Following riverrun, the course of the river, he picks up again the harmonica he left soaking between two stones in a pool. Water slides over the square holes of the old Hohner like a visual blues melody that the clear water plays. Lapse of riverrun: the streams are full of musicians playing raucous blues laments; cante jondo of the forgotten. The orphan of Puritan times now becomes the Orpheus of the forsaken earth. Cut off from space, he blows into his harmonica, and his breath enlarges a space born from him (Rilke). Having skipped out of time, his $\Delta t$ approaching zero, he "spaces" himself and now begins his dismemberment in scattered fragments [scatter]. Coiled in his arborescent phallus, renouncing the great rut, he is nothing now but one tree, whose ancestors laid waste to the earth, one tree among the many trees in the forest where the girls in flowered scarves come looking for mushrooms, where squirrels leap in the beech trees. With the shipwreck, the drift, riverrun: zu der stillen Erde sag, Ich rinne. Slothrop's dismemberment as he is expropriated, scattered until he becomes the polytopical site open to a variety of spaces, is at the same time a remembering of forgotten lands. Unknotting himself, he recreates the alliance and celebrates his wedding with the miscellaneous species of flora and fauna. Scatter-pater: he has
escaped "the plot in which our penises were caught." Everything hung together; now everything is falling apart, and Slothrop gets lost in the general stampede of this broken-up space, the Zone in the summer of 1945. He's let his beard and hair grow. He spends his days naked in the valley with the ants climbing all over his legs, butterflies landing on his shoulders. He makes friends with the magpie, the grouse, the badger, the marmot. "Teach us to sit still" (T.S. Eliot): Slothrop doesn't feel like moving any more; his swift run through space has slowed down to a standstill as he slumps into sloth. He no longer has a roof or umbrella over his head: the world is going to take him over, but before that defeat he will be the Ishmael who gives back to the world that leeway which Ahab had denied. One afternoon, in the full sun, somewhere in the moors to the south of Cuxhaven, at the gates of one of the ancient cities that the plague once ravaged, Slothrop, the descendant of a long line of Puritan conquerors, becomes a crossroad. "Be, in this immeasurable night, the magic power at your senses' crossroads" [die Zauberkraft am Kreuzweg deiner Sinne] (Rilke). It was at the meeting of the ways, before the fork, that America once took the wrong path. There the judges placed the gallows of a criminal who was to hang at noon. But who could this criminal be but Matthew Maule? And who is this person with her tucked-up petticoats, this fat gnädige Frau, death prowling about? A splendid crimson erection, and just as the neck of the hanged man breaks, a jet of burning sperm, which finally falls right in the middle of the cross, where, during the night, it changes into a mandrake root. The wizard of Salem has become once again the wizard of dark and hidden strata. The sterile lands of the Puritan enclosure become impregnated again for a new germination. Later, after a rain storm, Slothrop, having become a crossroads in the zone, sees, as does Ursula Brangwen [D. H. Lawrence, The Rainbow, 1915], a rainbow: a stray meadowlark rises from the earth towards the foam of the rainy sky, and it's the sign of a new covenant such as the Puritan tradition has never ceased to perceive in the ruins of a devastated world. Slothrop's rainbow no longer tears itself away from gravity like the trajectory of the V2 00000;
on the contrary, as it leaves the pubis of the clouds, it buries itself in the moist green earth. Slothrop, who "spaces out" more and more, has this last vision, then fades away. Passerby, look for him among the buried and forgotten souls and, failing to find him there, under your foot-soles.

"and a babbled of green fields"
--Shakespeare (death of Falstaff)

Fire. William Slothrop, ancestor of the family, must now hear the chimes ringing "in the frames of the dark belfry." Babbling the hour of Babel [0 Plurabelle] night and day. As the catastrophe \( \Delta t \to 0 \) nears, something in us must shrivel with fright, or else "leap and sing," for in this novel, to this date and without doubt the only one to have emerged from the Wake's obscure matrix without falling under its shadow, the crossing of the singular point brings us back before the fork, before the multiple splitting off that made languages into so many little islands, to the Aleph of an infinity--gravity. As Pym, approaching the white lands of the Pole, fell into a black hole and discovered, beyond the falling through, the language before Genesis, the chaotic babel, here, when a nova explodes and implodes at the same time, there gushes forth on the other side the jubilation of buried voices, the cry [sperm-wail] of spermatikos logos. Flowering of tongues of flame in pentecostal promiscuity. The screen of the little Los Angeles movie house stays empty, but from the depths of entropic soup rises a swelling rumor, William Slothrop's forgotten hymn ("till the riders sleep by ev'ry Road"). In a great many-voiced din, a scream surging from the maelstrom comes across the screen, and the sinister romancero closes as it fades away. Still, Jessica my love, we have seen fireflies at night in the London sky.

Notes

1 Born on May 8, which wasn't V-E Day then, in 1937 in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York, Thomas Pynchon, descended from a family of 17th century Puritans, studied physics at Cornell, where he also took courses from Vladimir Nabokov, before working briefly as a technical writer for the Boeing Company in Seattle. Since 1959 ("The Small Rain," The Cornell Writer, March 1959), he has
published various works: "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" (Epoch, Spring 1959); "Low-lands" (New World Writing, 1960); "Entropy" (Kenyon Review, 1960) and a report on the summer 1965 riots in Watts, the Black section of Los Angeles, as well as three novels published in translation in France by Plon: V. (1963; French translation by Minnie Danzas, 1967), The Crying of Lot 49 (1966; French translation by Michel Doury in 1976 as San Francisco Cry) and Gravity's Rainbow (1973; French translation by Michel Doury in 1975 as Rainbow).


3 All this plays out in the intimate family circle of prehistoric days, and then of the first days of Puritan America. Among the men who met again at Cambridge University during the month of August 1629 (the daffodil season had passed, the winter winds were not yet blowing, unimpeded by any obstacles after the Urals, over the lowlands of Denmark, then over the marshes and ponds of the fenland where Vermuyden and his Dutchmen had not yet constructed dikes, ditches, to the chilly reaches of the cloisters--"in Grandchester, had they already run out of honey for tea?") to sign the agreement to emigrate together "in seven month's time" to New England were Thomas Dudley, Simon Bradstreet (who had married Dudley's daughter Anne), Thomas Leverett, Boston magistrate in Lincolnshire, whose Puritan pastor John Cotton, the grandfather of Cotton Mather, was the former Dean of Emmanuel College, Sir Richard Saltonstall, and Theophilus Eaton, London merchants, as well as William Pynchon, "Squire" of Springfield in Essex, and a forty-year-old lawyer, John Winthrop. The expedition, led by Winthrop, would arrive in America on June 12, 1630. Among the immigrants, William Hathorne, twenty-three years of age, ancestor of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Until his death in 1649 (as in the twelfth chapter of The Scarlet Letter), John Winthrop served several terms as governor of the colony. As for William Pynchon and his son John, as in this instance William Slothrop and his son John, they were among the first, after 1634-35, to make contact with the Mohawk Indians and to open the fur trade routes towards the Merrimack River, then further to the west as far as the Connecticut, where in 1636 William founded the city of Springfield, so named in memory of his far-off Essex. Past the Connecticut River are the Berkshire Hills. In 1650, while his son was in charge of the beaver trade, William, who had taken part in the witch trial of Hugh and Mary Parsons, had a bone to pick with the notables and clerics when he published a theological opuscule that year on The Meritorious Price of our
Redemption, which was judged heretical and condemned to be burned in the Boston marketplace. He went back to Essex to die (cf. Samuel Eliot Morison, Builders of the Bay Colony, and Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion).

4 This reversal from fall to flight when the countdown reaches zero occurs at the novel's center of gravity. To my knowledge, Willy Ley was the first to recall that Fritz Lang was the inventor of the countdown classic. Rockets, Missiles and Space Travel, Note 1 of the 1961 edition published by Viking Press; this press also publishes Pynchon, who appears to have used this book extensively.

5 Halleluia, I'm a Bum!; Jack London, The Road (1907); Vachel Lindsay, A Handy Guide for Beggars (1916); Harry Kemp, Tramping on Life (1922); Jim Tully, Beggars on Life (1924); Woody Guthrie, Bound for Glory.

6 Poem that we can dedicate posthumously to the "striped specters" of Camp Dora, cf. Michel Jean, Dora (Editions Lattes, 1975, in collaboration with Louis Nucera); reading it allows us, among other things, to extrapolate the whole story from the Calvinist legend that I'm doing my best to follow in Pynchon's work.

7 His eye riveted on space away from the perfume of the old lands: the night before his last hunt, Ahab experiences his Gethsemane. He has, so he says, deserted the peaceful land for forty years of solitude on the ocean. He is like a city protected behind its ramparts, a fortress whose captain, guarding his solitude jealously, allows peasants to enter from the outside, from the green countryside, only on rare occasions. Starbuck, who senses the flaw, tries to make him turn back and get on the route to Nantucket again. The wind that blows smells as sweet as if it had blown over a meadow; somewhere on the slopes of the Andes they've been haying. Starbuck and the reapers sleep. "Sleep, yes, and not amidst the green" where last year's sickles rust beside the stubble. But Ahab continues propelled by his great rut. For a long time he has been a dead man [gifted with high perception, I lack the low enjoying power]. He blazes like dry straw.
Pynchon in China
Terry Caesar

Any number of provocative considerations suggest themselves when we consider the peculiar position of American literature in China--not to say modern American writers, and certainly not to say so contemporay a writer as Thomas Pynchon. The institutional commitment on the part of the Chinese to American literature is quite extensive, and would require a separate essay in itself. American literature has never been more popular in China than it is at present. Most teachers at university level have at least a nodding acquaintance with the nineteenth-century classic writers (especially Twain), and most students will manage something flattering about "your Hemingway," if no one else in this century. It comes as no surprise that Jack London has canonical status, though he often seemed to me more honored than read. It comes as no more of a surprise that black American writers (Ellison is possibly no less venerable in China than in this country) are a particular source of interest, or that Bellow (a staunch realist to the Chinese and of course a vigorous critic of American values) is far better known than Mailer. What does come as somewhat more of a surprise is that "American literature" has been deemed to include Malamud, Oates, and even Vonnegut. The Chinese agenda for American fiction since, say, World War II is by no means complete, nor even quite respectable by American standards; for example, as yet, there exists no translation of All the King's Men. But it is quite searching and ambitious in its own terms, and it includes, most surprising of all to me, Pynchon. No other writer among those who are included in the discourse that would constitute American literature in China quite so interestingly illustrates the problems of that discourse, because Pynchon himself, so in contrast to the tremendous interest professionally focused around him in this country, is merely an illustration in China. Pynchon does have an existence there, but none of his novels have been translated. Therefore, his existence represents a rather special instance of the question of what sort of function a writer can have in a society
for whom he is not, and probably will not be, translated.

The question can be rather simply answered: the writer will be appropriated. So wholly true is this in Pynchon's case that his existence to the Chinese is essentially limited to one passage, the following one from V.:

(Profane would see some of them under the street. Others you could meet at any rural crossroads in America. As Profane had: come to a new road, right-angles to his progress, smelled the Diesel exhaust of a truck long gone--like walking through a ghost--and seen there like a milestone one of them. Whose limp might mean a brocade or bas-relief of scar tissue down one leg--how many women had looked and shied?--; whose cicatrix on the throat would be hidden modestly like a gaudy war decoration; whose tongue, protruding through a hole in the cheek, would never speak secret words with any extra mouth.)

This passage--from the chapter "In Which Esther Gets a Nose Job"--participates in the plastic surgeon Schoenmaker's rapt, chill fascination with the terrible disfiguration of the young aviator injured in World War I, Evan Godolphin; "they" are the "generation of freaks and pariahs" who somehow abide after the war, with or without surgery. What interests the Chinese here is not any of the things which Americans (especially readers familiar with our own institutional investment in Pynchon) would expect: the sudden interpolation from Profane's point of view, for example, or the immediate, harsh, deliquescent poetry the narrator proceeds to make of a secret order. Let Professor Chen Kun of Beijing University speak for what I understand are any number of comments on this passage, which has a sort of notoriety in China by now: "In his [Pynchon's] humor there appear madness, absurdity, despair, and extreme cruelty. It contains nihilism." I am unable to report any more specific consideration, though I believe such matters as the comparison of the scar-tissue to a bas-relief or the suggestion of sexual fascination are especially infamous. But it should be clear that no specific consideration is really necessary. As Professor Chen's comment makes quite clear,
the passage is an example of something. A catalogue of what the passage exemplifies follows—as if the horror cannot quite be named, or perhaps can only be renamed.

I am unable to say precisely why so much attention has been focused on this particular passage (that there are so many unquoted juicier ones in later chapters suggests the few Chinese who either have or can get copies of V. may not have read much further). But it is clearly taken as an example of black humor; Pynchon in China is a black humorist. Though any number of horrors may be summoned to cluster around this term as it is employed in China, the Chinese mean something quite definable by this term—no matter how charmed, almost nostalgic, an American might feel to hear it invoked as the Latest Thing. Or rather it might be more accurate to say that "black humor" to the Chinese functions as a contested term, one of the ways the institution of American literary studies in China strives both to perpetuate and to consolidate itself. As such, black humor does not have to be so much defined as located. If it is difficult to say what it is, then it is less difficult to say what it is not, and what it is not is the positive of the negative values Professor Chen cites. It exists in such a passage as the one above from V., which is so "obviously" bizarre and disgusting that, whatever else can be said, the words had better be addressed to that.

I see little point in countering that to us black humor was never what it is to the Chinese, who can be quite surprised to learn that black humor came out of a whole complex in American society—ranging from sick jokes to Lenny Bruce to Bruce J. Friedman—which ended well over a decade ago. Nor do I see much point in maintaining that what they take to be sponsored by the name of "Pynchon" is far more complex, and, arguably (for the argument is our own way of using "Pynchon" as a contested term), far less "black." To each institution its own paradigm; black humor is the one the Chinese have chosen because they need it in order to discuss obliquely (their method of displacing a too-direct social implication is very ancient) the values of literature in their own society, as well as the kind of literature their own writers should be expected to
produce. "There are many obscene passages in Pynchon's writing," declares Professor Wang Wen-bin. "In Gravity's Rainbow Slothrop's clothes were stolen by someone. He wrapped his naked body with a blanket and ran after the thief on the roof. A careless step and he fell off the roof and landed naked right in the middle of ladies. Most of such scenes are silly vulgarity for amusement." Should China's own writers aim to write such scenes, and pander them to their readers? More, should literature itself be written only to "amuse"? These are the sorts of questions Chinese intellectuals take as their concern.

We might think it rather smug merely to smile at them. Our own paradigm is quite different, sophisticated (if it is a deconstructive one) to the limits of intelligibility, self-aware to the point of reflexivity--and grounded in "metaphysical exigencies" perhaps already complicit with their own mystification. For example, Paul de Man writes, "to read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat--that is to say, the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their own demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn. No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words."5 We read this sort of pronouncement, and then we may read others, such as that given in a foreword by Wu Fuheng, a member of the Standing Committee of the China Association for the Study of American Literature, to a collection of translations and essays on recent American literature: "We must sufficiently understand that our system is unlike American society; our cultures and traditions differ. Therefore, we must not introduce those things which are either not beneficial or even harmful; moreover, we must criticize them. We must emphasize the value of investigating the works of those serious and upright American authors who expose and criticize their own country and society."6 We pause. Pynchon? An "upright" author! Pynchon? And yet, if we pause again: Pynchon? Merely an "apostrophized" instance? Mad, but mad only in words? The Chinese, of course, are concerned with Pynchon insofar as they are concerned with the content of madness. If we look again at the incident from Gravity's Rainbow (alas, another tellingly
early one) cited by Professor Wang above, do we not find that its fundamental purpose is to elicit the "silly vulgarity" he finds? No discourse, however "totalizing," is total. The Chinese appropriation of Pynchon—and, through him, black humor—illustrates in part that we have abandoned certain questions which a sinicized, severely truncated Pynchon returns to us all over again.

Pynchon has been enlisted with two other American authors—Heller and Vonnegut (especially the Vonnegut of Slaughterhouse Five)—to form a canon. Lately of course canons have been making their way back into our own theoretical discourse—possibly disclosing that this discourse seems to have abandoned, ultimately, any concern with evaluation at all. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes in the recent special issue of Critical Inquiry devoted to the subject: "Any evaluation ... is 'cognitively substantial' in the sense of being potentially informative about something." I think what the Chinese want with their present canon of American black humorists is precisely what we want, or assume, with any canon: the potential for "information" rather than the fact of it. These foreign authors express degrees and kinds of "blackness" which Chinese authors may not yet express, but which are already present, actually as well as potentially, in Chinese society. At least to an American considering the phenomenon, it is symbolically right that the most infamous passage from V. concludes with "secret words" which are felt but which are impossible to voice. Though it is not possible for me to say so with complete certainty, I sense that Pynchon, much more than Heller or Vonnegut, himself best gives voice to such secret, horror-ravaged emotions. For ten years during the "cultural revolution," the whole of Chinese society lived them, sometimes as a result of quite literal wars among political factions fought everywhere in China. It can be no accident that the interest in black humor surfaced almost immediately after 1978, and that texts labeled "black humor" continue to this day to provide "information" of a kind which present political policies have to permit (so the "cultural revolution" is officially characterized as a massive, wholesale disaster) and yet curtail (so the "four modernizations" require no pointless looking back). Is there something uniquely
Pynchonesque which is suitable for such a state of affairs, some impossibly jaunty and grim equivocation of tone or value? It would not be a Chinese way with literature to entertain such a question, as such. Instead, the evaluative framework is tightly held, and so--to give a last representative sample--the result is the "inactivity and pessimism" which Professor Cai Bao-zhen finds as characteristic of black humor. He continues: "the conclusion is always like this: absurdity is eternal. The destructive, apocalyptic doom of humanity is inevitable. In addition to this, Pynchon believes that there is a kind of mysterious force independent of man's will which determines the absurdity and evil of humanity. This force is 'entropy.'

... The theory of heat death was criticized by Engels long ago. Now it manifests itself strongly in literature. Such psychology merits our attention." The move here is quite typical: a scandal is set down, developed a bit, located securely within Marxist standards, and then finally converted into a "psychology" which has its own clinical interest nevertheless. Whatever one thinks of the move, I think it inevitable that the move be to Pynchon, who brings out for the Chinese a scale of what is associated with writers akin to him that makes him finally quite unique, if not more important than the rest.

If my supposition is correct, then Pynchon in China emerges at last curiously like Pynchon in America, despite the immeasurably different "discursive forces" that have produced Pynchon's otherwise very different existence in each respective country. Bluntly stated, Pynchon is the consummate poet of apocalypse, though "poet" is presumably a term Professor Cai would not choose to use; though we might choose to shudder more rapturously at the prospect of sheer, imperious doom, I do not see how their object of attention is fundamentally different from ours. The difference lies in the two societies, which doubles the irony because, as I have tried to make clear from the outset, there is in the most literal--that is, textual--sense no Pynchon in China at all; just enough of Pynchon exists, and that may be quite enough.

Yet, once again, what appears to be the case is not quite so. Chinese writers have begun to write their
very own versions of black humor. One of the most famous contemporary authors, for example, is Wang Meng. A volume of his stories, The Butterfly and Other Stories, was issued early this year in a "Panda Books" English translation. Though the volume does not contain Wang's later exercises in a black humor vein, these stories have been published (with no small amount of controversy among Chinese intellectuals), and enough of the sensibility that eventually unfolded to produce them may be seen in the early work. Has Wang Meng ever read Pynchon? How much is his writing informed by the discourse upon black humor? Does he need to be familiar with either of these things, since, as he remarks in a preface to The Butterfly, "absurd laughter" has its own endurance in life itself, as well as its own expression in Lu Xun's "The Story of Ah Q" (possibly the central text for Chinese fiction in this century)? The charter of Chinese civilization has its own imperatives. On the question of what may be considered deviant in terms of what is normative, the charter of the civilization may not be so different (it is not easily separable) from that of the Communist Party. Presently, black humor consorts with deviance, yet the institutional body of American literary study is already licensed by much official interest in the subject, and clearly not all of it functions to expel the foreign phenomenon. A fairer question might be this: how many of the Chinese professors I've cited would privately concede that in fact what they refer to as "black humor" is no more foreign than Lu Xun? In a brilliant meditation upon insides and outsides, Jean Starobinski writes, "No inside is conceivable... without the complicity of an outside on which it relies." These Chinese recognize the outside, but only because they implicitly acknowledge that it is an outside already complicitous with an inside. Black humor is already inside China because it has been inside since at least Lu Xun, who was translating Gogol at the time of his death.

And what of Pynchon? If I am right in surmising that his work is perceived as expressing the outermost limit of what could be considered normative in the realm of the deviant, what of his curious, textless, merely citational, very doubtfully exegetical existence "in" China? I have been content merely to suggest that there are worthwhile—if not exactly salutary—considerations
we cannot easily dispel with reference to our own para-
digm when we view it in the light of the Chinese one.
I have deliberately not tried to explore how appropriate
for Pynchon the unrelenting Chinese insistence upon the
text as an object of power over—as well as derivation
from—life might be. What is knowledge good for? This
is one thing the Chinese must know. "Irreducible
figurality" and other such answers from our own paradigm
aside, we have not easily expelled the question of what
knowledge is good for ourselves, because in part,
inssofar as we are readers of Pynchon, this question
seems to be at the center of Pynchon's own authority
as the preeminent example of exegetical license granted
by academics to contemporary American authors. Yet our
considerations will finally not be theirs, any more
than theirs will be ours. Should we conclude that
Pynchon will never be studied in China—or allowed to
create his own context, as must be the case with any
canonical writer?

I would like to quote Starobinski once again on this
concluding point. He has been speaking of what happens
historically during even the most recondite explorations
of the foreign, and he states: "For if the notion of
interiority makes sense, it must be conceived not as a
receptacle of treasures, of monsters or of mysterious
traces, but as a process—what we become by virtue of
our ever changing relationships with the other, of our
relationship with the outside, with that which we have
never been, or with that which we have ceased to be."11
The Chinese appropriation of Pynchon is, I think, no
different. That is, even as an appropriation, it is
still a process, and the Chinese will not be quite so
wholly themselves as long as it continues. How long
it will continue has to do with a great number of
factors which have, strictly, nothing to do with Pynchon
at all. At present, "Pynchon"—by which I mean now the
miniature discourse enacted through Pynchon in China,
small as it is, and in which his texts themselves are
almost completely submerged—remains one name in China
for the absurd, the deviant, the foreign, the outside,
though with the significant addition that pressures from
the inside have generated the presence. Even as an
absence, comparable to a suddenly missing surface,
Pynchon is available to measure what the landscape of
Chinese literary studies either could never have been or could cease to be.

--Clarion University

Notes

1 The best place to begin would be the "Research Report," The State of American History and Literature Studies in the People's Republic of China, a 172-page booklet published by the International Communication Agency in 1982 and drawn up by Professor John J. Deeney of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Professor Deeney is an authoritative guide through such matters as the overall rationale for American studies in China, the organization (taken from the Russians) of specialized institutes, the centrality of Shandong University, and the current disposition of research priorities.


3 I owe the translation from this source, as well as the other two quotations from Chinese sources subsequently given, to my colleague at Zhengzhou University, Wu Qing Yun. Without her generous assistance, as well as her intelligence about the general interest in China having to do with black humor, this article would not have been possible.

4 See Max F. Schulz, Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1973). Schulz, as his title indicates, clearly demarcates his subject historically: "More limiting, certainly, but more useful in the long run is to recognize that Black Humor is a phenomenon of the 1960's, comprising a group of writers who share a viewpoint and an aesthetics for pacing off the boundaries of a nuclear-technological world intrinsically without confinement. Equally useful is to discriminate Black Humor from the oral techniques of sick humor and from the dramatic conventions of the theatre of the absurd, even though it shares with these modes of expression some of the same assumptions about our century" (5-6). Schulz has several references to Pynchon's first two novels and two brief discussions of V. in particular. Especially telling is how his book is informed by a statement he makes in his opening chapter: "Black Humor differs also from current existentialist views of man in refusing to treat his isolation as an ethical situation" (9). Such a difference is of course completely in contrast to the Chinese appropriation, in which the sole interest is precisely the ethical situation—even if, from a Schulzian point of view, this interest is in turn dictated from a felt awareness of the lack of such a situation in American writers.

Quoted in Deeney, "Research Report," 104. Wu begins his introduction by quoting Lenin and (far more illuminatingly, if no less predictably) Mao: "We must continually consider ourselves heirs to all the superior literatures and arts, critically absorbing those that are beneficial. . . . We must never refuse to inherit or borrow from the past or from foreigners even if they include things from feudal or capitalist society" (103). The implicit formula here is the one developed at the end of the last century as one strategy to deal with the massive incursions of The Foreign: "Chinese learning for substance; foreign learning for use." No matter how criticized, this formula seems to me more securely and pervasively in place in China today than it has ever been before, and its many problems seem to have to be continually repressed by each new generation of Chinese intellectuals.


Seldom more rapturously than in Neil Schmitz, "Describing the Demon: The Appeal of Thomas Pynchon," Partisan Review, 42, no. 1 (1975), 112-25. This stimulating presentation, hard upon the publication of Gravity's Rainbow and almost equal parts paean and denunciation, became, I think, something of a scandal in Pynchon circles. It has not often been referred to since. "Yet out of all the burlesque and parody, the caricature and the comic routines," Schmitz writes, "Pynchon strives to retrieve, or at least reinvent, the value of evil. . . . The ethic Pynchon finally renders in Gravity's Rainbow is the ethic of the desperado, not the ethic of the survivor enclosing himself in cool ironies" (124). One could say that, much in contrast to Schmitz, the direction of Pynchon studies recently has been to see his project as the reinvention of comedy, which might be one way of transforming the desperado into a humanist after all, or at least someone desperately trying to "retrieve" the possibility of goodness. It strikes me also that Schmitz's Pynchon (suitably toned down, of course) might be one most engaging to the Chinese—and certainly Schmitz's quotation from Lenin, of all people, is quite appropriate, as well as quite suggestive of another dimension of the Chinese response to Pynchon: "To organize the whole national economy on the lines of the postal service, so that the technicians, foremen, bookkeepers, as well as all officials, shall receive salaries no higher than a 'workmen's wage,' all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat—this is our immediate aim!" (117). Certainly intellectual Chinese at least, having lived under precisely such an organization for thirty-five years, could be expected to see
a far grimmer irony in such a far more rapturous proposal, and to see the scale of its critique in Pynchon, for whom, as Schmitz states, the "unholy dialectic of history" (117) is dreamt as the death of history.

9 One later Wang Meng story, "Anecdotes of Minister Maimaiti"—which often bears rather startling resemblances to the Vonnegut of Cat's Cradle especially (the other Vonnegut novel that has some currency in China)—has been translated by Wu Qing Yun, and I am at present about to circulate it for publication in this country.


11 Starobinski, 335.
Merging Orders:  
The Shaping Influence of Science on "Entropy"

Joseph Tafari

At Cornell University, where Thomas Pynchon first submitted "Entropy" to an undergraduate writing class, one of his teachers can recall trying to get Pynchon to change the title to something that didn't sound so scientific. Pynchon was quietly adamant, and when his story appeared a year later in The Kenyon Review, "Entropy" it was. And rightly so, for the story certainly explores a world constructed from the scientific metaphor, and in retrospect the title seems even more appropriate, a sign of how much the idea of entropy was to inform Pynchon's later fictions. Yet the single objection of Pynchon's teacher was not altogether without foresight, for it has proven all too easy in many discussions of Pynchon to overlook elements of his narrative skill because of a preoccupation with the entropy theme. Thus, whereas nearly all of Pynchon's critics, recognizing the importance of ideas from science and the history of science in his work, have commented on the relation of entropy to Pynchon's thought, comparatively slight attention has been paid to the manner in which the narrative itself is structured by his scientific metaphors. In "Entropy" Pynchon is not simply using ideas from science for thematic effect; the more pervasive application is to be found implicit in the form of the narrative.

In his introduction to Slow Learner, the collection of Pynchon short stories brought out recently by Little, Brown and Company, Pynchon himself plays down the thematic aspects of science in "Entropy": "I happened to read Norbert Wiener's The Human Use of Human Beings (a rewrite for the interested layman of his more technical Cybernetics) at about the same time as The Education of Henry Adams, and the 'theme' of the story is mostly derivative of what these two men had to say." The juxtaposition of these two works, however, was not wholly fortuitous. Both Wiener and Adams are writing about the implications for modern life of shifts in nineteenth-century scientific thought. Wiener summarizes the matter nicely:
Newtonian physics, which had ruled from the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth with scarcely an opposing voice, described a universe in which everything happened precisely according to law, a compact, tightly organized universe. This is now no longer the dominating attitude of physics, and the men who contributed most to its downfall were Boltzmann in Germany and Gibbs in the United States.\textsuperscript{4}

The overwhelming authority of classical physics was to a large extent derived from the ability of its theories to account precisely and elegantly for the events we are familiar with in our common experience, and the success of these theories encouraged both scientists and writers to consider the classical Newtonian picture as an image in miniature of a "compact, tightly organized universe." But this move from an empirically successful model to an absolute image for all of nature implicitly assumed that Newton's laws could be extended beyond experimental verification. That which was unknown was held to be knowable fully in terms of Newton's laws of physics. Boltzmann and Gibbs were among the first to take an opposed view, and to postulate an element of intrinsic uncertainty in our knowledge of natural events.

The work of these two men went more or less unnoticed until a series of discoveries in science around the turn of the century forced the implicit assumption of the Newtonian view into the open. At this point Adams was able to perceive that

\ldots man's mind had behaved like a young pearl oyster, secreting its universe to suit its conditions until it had built up a shell of nacre that embodied all its notions of the perfect. Man knew it was perfect because he made it, and loved it for the same reason.\textsuperscript{5}

An increasing manifestation of random processes in nature had begun to upset this reductive unity. In 1900, for example, Ernest Rutherford concluded that radioactivity was grounded in the statistical decay of atoms, and the newly developed kinetic theory asserted that the random collisions of molecules determined the
behaviour of a gas. In the terms of Newtonian science, such startling hints of a chaotic nature "could be known only as unknowable" (EHA, 454).

While discussing writers at early stages of life, Pynchon drops a remark that could apply equally well to the physicists of the early twentieth century: "... we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance. Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person's mental map. It has contours and coherence, and for all I know rules of operation as well" (SL, 15-16). The very fact that Newton's laws failed to explain contingent elements that had become manifest in the texture of reality was for Adams an "admission of ignorance; the mere fact of multiplicity baffling science" (EHA, 456). After admitting their ignorance, however, scientists still had a recourse available in the prior work of Gibbs and Boltzmann, whose statistical laws promised to reveal the rules of operation governing chance and uncertainty. Wiener, speaking with the reticence his assertion demands, calls this incomplete determinism "almost an irrationality in the world" (HU, 19), while Adams emphatically locates the modern situation in the chaotic midst of a "supersensual multiverse" (EHA, 461).

The scientific metaphors in "Entropy" work along lines of opposition between the compact, isolated universe of the nineteenth century and the indeterminate one of the new physics, and the most important manifestation of this opposition is in the story's binary structure. ("Entropy" alternates between lyrical passages set in the hermetically sealed apartment upstairs and picaresque scenes of the party below, where revellers arrive at random from outside.) The character Callisto alerts us to the opposition as he defines entropy. He had known all along how "The theorem of Clausius," the classical formulation of the second law of thermodynamics, predicts for a heat engine or any other closed physical system a one-way, irreversible tendency to disorder. Dismal as this prospect might seem, it is not until he is faced with Gibbs's statistical interpretation of it that Callisto finds in entropy a comprehensive metaphor to apply to all sorts of cultural situations: "... only then did he realize that the isolated system--galaxy, engine, human being, culture, whatever--must evolve
spontaneously toward the Condition of the More Probable" (SL, 87).

Gibbs's idea was to postulate a universe in which not one, but several possible worlds might be consistent answers to a limited set of questions. In the methods of statistical mechanics, such "worlds" are known formally as "states," and are often associated with the distribution of speed and position characterizing the atoms or molecules in a system. In efficient systems, each available state will correspond in an orderly fashion to a distinct energy level, and the exchange of heat between levels will result in productive work. As the system succumbs to entropy, however, the number of states associated with one particular heat-energy level proliferates, this energy becomes increasingly more probable, and the system therefore becomes less able to encompass different energy levels in relationship to one another. Without this crucial difference, any transfer of heat between levels becomes impossible. This ultimate degradation of the system's usefulness is what Callisto calls the "Condition of the More Probable"--a situation where ordered differentiation resolves into a single, undifferentiated level. Pynchon constructs such a situation in the story by holding the temperature outside at a constant 37 degrees Fahrenheit "despite the changeful weather" (SL, 85).

Callisto takes the analogy further, and envisions the "states" of society--the conditions of culture, human beings, American consumerism in the late fifties, "whatever"--all moving towards a uniform intellectual level. "A pose I found congenial in those days," Pynchon writes in Slow Learner, "... was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline" (SL, 13). Such a pose is adopted--albeit with more somberness than glee--by Callisto in the story. "Leery at omens of apocalypse" (SL, 85), Callisto fears that the current three-day cold spell signifies the imminence of a cultural heat-death, "in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred... and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease" (SL, 88-89). Yet this very obsession with cultural entropy forces Callisto to take part himself in a sort of entropic decline.
towards sameness. He feels he must re-evaluate "all the cities and seasons and casual passions of his days" in the "new and elusive light" of his conception of entropy (SL, 87). And though he is "aware of the dangers of the reductive fallacy" (SL, 87), he does not escape them: Callisto's endless fund of literary and musical allusions and his rich remembrances of personal experience all merely give him more and more ways to sound the single, overwhelming theme of his obsession.

Callisto's thoughts of "cities and seasons and casual passions of his days" echo an earlier passage describing the season of "false spring" (SL, 82) in Washington, D.C. Though it is frequently overlooked by Pynchon's critics, this passage is crucial to understanding his attitude toward the metaphor his character constructs. In it, Pynchon presents the wind as a mediator between order and contingency:

... as every good Romantic knows, the soul (spiritus, ruach, pneuma) is nothing, substantially, but air; it is only natural that warpings in the atmosphere should be recapitulated in those who breathe it. So that over and above the public components--holidays, tourist attractions--there are private meanderings, linked to the climate as if this spell were a stretto passage in the year's fugue: haphazard weather, aimless loves, unpredicted commitments: months one can easily spend in fugue, because oddly enough, later on, winds, rains, passions of February and March are never remembered in that city, it is as if they had never been. (SL, 83)

A "stretto" is a tightened section of a fugue where component themes come together rapidly to reinforce each other, so that the music seems to generate a new energy from within itself. By introducing the figure from music, Pynchon suggests that the chance elements of the outside world and the vagaries of private experience--"haphazard weather, aimless loves, unpredicted commitments"--shall be gathered and shaped to form new meaning in their superimposition. And yet if such imaginative music is shaped in this false spring in Washington, it is not heard by those whose
"private meanderings" make up a component strain: the "winds, rains, passions of February and March" are not present in an imaginative order of music, for they "are never remembered." The season is instead "spent" (wasted?) in a different kind of fugue, that which Webster's defines as a "state of psychological amnesia during which a patient seems to behave in a conscious and rational way, although upon return to normal consciousness he cannot remember the period of time nor what he did during it." "Fugue" in this second sense can be applied to Callisto, because by ordering the diverse "cities and seasons and casual passions of his days" into a too restrictive unity, Callisto has lost whatever alternative meanings these component memories and passions can have held for him; their distinctions blurred because of their inclusion in the closed structure of his entropy metaphor, "it is as if they had never been."

The figure of the fugue, in the first sense, represents an imaginative order in music that is sustained not in continual conflict with the world of chance, but in a continual weaving of its haphazard elements. The fugue thus represents a possibility of using art to merge in the bewildering "supersensual multiverse" imagined by Adams a shaping of the random and accidental connections of the modern world into music. This possibility of merging orders might seem hopelessly abstract were it not actualized in the prose itself, where Pynchon picks up a chance connection in a pun to compose here a fugue of his own, setting in rapid alternation the ideas of fugue as (counter-entropic) music and fugue as (entropic) forgetting. But this is only one instance of an underlying musical structure that apparently shapes the binary, contrapuntal development of the story, where thematic statement and counter-statement are voiced on the upper and lower "registers" of the apartment-house, imparting a tension that carries the story steadily forward. Thus the fundamental dichotomy between compact, rationalist unities and a threatening multiverse is mediated even as the story's structure blends the "improvised discords" of Meatball's lease-breaking party with the "arabesques of order" (SL, 92) that Callisto and his lover Aubade struggle to sustain upstairs.
This dichotomy is more closely defined in the lyrical passage describing the isolated "hothouse jungle" upstairs: "Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos" (SL, 83). Callisto attempts to detach himself from the decline towards death that surrounds him by withdrawing into a physically contained order—an "enclave of regularity" that corresponds to his solipsistic frame of mind. The word "enclave" comes from Wiener, who uses it to describe islands of decreasing entropy, but stresses that such islands only come into being by drawing on the ocean of chance that surrounds them. This notion of "non-isolated islands" (HU, 52) returns us to a situation where order and vital possibilities obtain only in communication with the world of increasing entropy outside. Callisto's enclave of regularity is contrived, artificial: it is no doubt a highly organized island in the midst of chaos, but whereas real enclaves of life come into being only through constant contact and exchange with the outside world of chance and accident, Callisto's (physical and mental) enclave is withdrawn from its surroundings.

Callisto and Aubade occasionally take from, but they never give anything back to their environment ("What they needed from outside was delivered. They did not go out"[SL, 84]), and this one-way flow only speeds up the overall decline of energy. As the isolated and forgotten months of February and March constitute a false spring, so too is Callisto's isolated hothouse a false enclave.

In counterpoint to the falsely coherent world upstairs is the party downstairs, which draws its life through doors and windows that are open to the disordered world outside. There is in the field of communication theory a complement to the entropy of thermodynamics—its details are analogous to those of the first kind, but informational entropy describes an inevitable increase of noise and randomness in communication—a mixing up of initially unmixed messages that destroys information.

In accordance with informational entropy, Pynchon makes Meatball's party the scene of countless false signals and instances of communication breakdown. The most serious case of failed communication is that of
the disaffected computer engineer, Saul. His marriage has just fallen apart because of "a kind of leakage" in the communicative circuit between him and Miriam, his wife of late:

"Tell a girl: 'I love you.' No trouble with two-thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, that's the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit." (SL, 90-91)

The closed circuit is perhaps the earliest of Pynchon's major scientific figures--earlier even than entropy. In "The Small Rain" (which appeared in the March, 1959 issue of The Cornell Writer), the character Levine describes a failure of perception which is

"something like a closed circuit. Everybody on the same frequency. And after a while you forget about the rest of the spectrum and start believing that this is the only frequency that counts or is real. While outside, all up and down the land, there are these wonderful colors and x-rays and ultraviolets going on." (SL, 42)

The closed circuit is like the fugue, in the second, psychological sense discussed earlier, another image of a forgetting, or a decline into terminal sameness. The epigraph of "Entropy" from Henry Miller again expresses this drab mental landscape: "Not the slightest indication of a change anywhere. . . . We must get in step, a lockstep, toward the prison of death. There is no escape. The weather will not change" (SL, B1; Pynchon's ellipsis). This intrinsic connection between the closed circuit and death militates against Saul's valorization. Life and communication in a closed circuit, with everybody a whole self and no noisy love passing in between, is never a favored alternative in Pynchon. Though this condition may seem to offer safety or exemption from the anarchy of the world outside, it in fact only deadens perceptions to a whole range of imaginative and vital possibilities.
But Pynchon is not suggesting we move exclusively in a world of chance and chaos—there can be no communication or life in a sea of static, either. Pynchon has incorporated the two extremes, enclosed, artificial unity and random multiplicity, into his early stories as antithetical poles of a recurrent symbolic axis, and his characters engage in a continual project of reconciliation or mediation. Both Meatball and Saul thus recognize the need to forge some workable basis of compromise between the two extremes, and the scenes from downstairs never quite come to a stable conclusion. We last see Meatball working to keep things "from deteriorating into total chaos" as the party trembles "on the threshold of its third day" (SL, 97).

Upstairs, the dichotomy finds its point of dynamic but unstable equilibrium in the character Aubade, who strives to reconcile Callisto's hothouse coherence with the haphazard intruding strains from outside. Aubade, like the musical fugue at the start of the story, creates her changing order from randomness, but since she is constrained to reconcile all random intrusions into the pre-set harmony of her isolated world, the exchange is nowhere near as easy: "The architectonic purity of her world was constantly threatened by such hints of anarchy: gaps and excrescences and skew lines, and a shifting or tilting of planes to which she had continually to readjust lest the whole structure shiver into a disarray of discrete and meaningless signals" (SL, 88).

The architectural image catches attention, and implies that Aubade's order is essentially and foremost a structure of the mind, wholly unified but developing through additions and extensions to that which already exists. Those "hints of anarchy" which cannot be made to conform with the unchanging whole structure constantly threaten its predisposed stability. In its ceaseless exertion to exist in this order of its own creation, Aubade's architectonic unity derives from the same process that Adams describes:

... the mind had thus far adjusted itself by an infinite series of infinitely delicate adjustments forced on it by the infinite motion of an infinite chaos of motion; dragged at one
moment into the unknowable and unthinkable, then trying to scramble back within its senses and to bar the chaos out, but always assimilating bits of it, until at last, in 1900, a new avalanche of unknown forces had fallen on it, which required new mental powers to control. If this view was correct, the mind could gain nothing by flight or by fight; it must merge in its supersensual multiverse, or succumb to it. (EHA, 460-61) 

The order that Aubade constructs does not shape and recapitulate the motions of the atmosphere: unlike the fugue which merges winds and passions from inside and outside into the same gathering movement, or the enclaves of life which merge with the outer world of increasing entropy, Aubade and Callisto exhaust their creative energies in trying to preserve the delicate balance and self-enclosure of their isolated world.

Pynchon as a writer, however, incorporates these motifs of merging orders into the structure of his narrative, and in so doing avoids the kinds of static and enclosed perception that Adams so thoroughly criticises. Pynchon at the outset was working to create an imaginative order in art that could engage randomness and indeterminacy in modern life and in the changing physical world. The project would continue to occupy him throughout his novels.

--Massey College
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Notes


2 Pynchon submitted both "Entropy" and "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" to Epoch in 1959. Professor James McConkey and the rest of the staff at Epoch decided to publish "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" (the earlier story), and "Entropy" appeared in The Kenyon Review, 22 (1960).

3 Thomas Pynchon, Slow Learner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 13. Subsequent references to Slow Learner will be noted parenthetically in the text as (SL, page).


6. Robert Redfield and Peter L. Hays, in their very useful essay, "Fugue as a Structure in Pynchon's 'Entropy'" (Pacific Coast Philology, 12 (1977), 50-55), suggest that this passage be applied to the protagonists of the tale, and David Seed was the first to do so in his comprehensive essay on "Order in Thomas Pynchon's 'Entropy'" (Journal of Narrative Technique, 11, no. 2 (1981), 135-53).

7. The wind imagery in "Entropy" is something like the imaginative linkage between inner passions and outer winds that the Romantic poets embraced in their recurrent figures of the wind harp and the correspondent breeze. Pynchon took a course with M. H. Abrams the year his essay, "The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor," came out in The Kenyon Review (19, [1957], 113-30). Although Professor Abrams does not recall teaching that essay in the course Pynchon attended (the subject was the 18th century), it can be presumed that Pynchon was familiar with the review he was later to submit material to, and that he was eager to check out what his teacher was publishing.

For a further discussion of Pynchon's use of the Romantic metaphor, see my piece "Pynchon's 'Entropy'" in The Explicator, 43, no. 1 (1984), 61-63.

8. This and the previous quotations from Adams' Education are taken from the chapter called "The Grammar of Science." For a discussion of the importance to "Entropy" of an earlier chapter, "The Dynamo and the Virgin," see Seed, 140-42.
A Possible Source for the Title of "The Small Rain"

Richard Darabaner

Thomas Pynchon's short story "The Small Rain" appeared in The Cornell Writer in March 1959. To date, hypotheses as to the source of the title and its relation to the story have been unsatisfactory. This essay is concerned with an aspect of the story which Pynchon, writing in the introduction to Slow Learner: Early Stories, now feels detracts from the work: "Apparently I felt I had to put on a whole extra overlay of rain images..."1 Whatever the implications of this self-criticism, the allusion of the title and its ramifications for the story nevertheless require correct identification.

In Deuteronomy, Chapter 31, the Lord tells Moses that he is going to die. He also foretells that, after the people of Israel come into the Promised Land, they will break their covenant with God and worship idols. He says that He will then hide His face from them and requite them with retribution. God accordingly tells Moses to write down a rule of life which will be a witness against the people of Israel during calamity and which will confront them as a record of God's forewarning, not to be forgotten by their descendants. Moses' song opens Deuteronomy, Chapter 32:

Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak;
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.
My doctrine shall drop as the rain,
My speech shall distil as the dew,
As the small rain upon the tender herb,
And as the showers upon the grass.

(Deut. 32:1-2)

God's forewarning is communicated by ironic understatement. The doctrine is mild and evanescent, and God is long-suffering in maintaining His law, until His anger is unleashed in retribution. The foreknowledge that the mildness will be transformed into its opposite makes the statement the core of an irony of dramatic reversal.

Moses' song at its climax is an unmitigated prophecy of doom:
For a fire is kindled in mine anger,  
And shall burn unto the lowest hell,  
And shall consume the earth with her increase,  
And set on fire the foundations of the mountains.  
I will heap mischiefs upon them;  
I will spend mine arrows upon them.  
They shall be burnt with hunger,  
And devoured with burning heat,  
And with bitter destruction;  
I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them,  
With the poison of serpents of the dust.  
The sword without, and the terror within,  
Shall destroy both the young man and the virgin,  
The suckling also with the man of gray hairs.  
I said, "I would scatter them into corners,  
I would make the remembrance of them to cease from among men."

(Deut. 32:22-26)

The gentle persuasion of the doctrine which is spoken like the small rain ironically contains its own transformation.

Applying the ramifications of the allusion to Pynchon's story, we find that images of Old Testament vengeance abound in "The Small Rain": "The sun . . . scorches me and I wither away" (SL, 39) recalls the retributive denial of rain for the sustenance of crops and for refuge from the heat of the desert. The multitude of corpses in the Pynchon story recalls the many vengeful slaughterings of the people of Israel unprotected from their enemies: "The oil company tugs would bring in a bunch of corpses. . . . decay hung in the air" (SL, 44). The particularly cruel desecration of corpses in the Old Testament also finds its way into "The Small Rain": "They cruised around looking for dead. . . . They took them off roofs, out of trees, they found them floating or tangled in the debris of houses" (SL, 47).

Allusions to the Biblical context of Moses' song are plentiful in "The Small Rain." The "thousands of frogs" (SL, 49) serve as a reminder of the plague of frogs brought on the Egyptians forty years before Moses' song was composed. Picnic refers to the coeds as "quail" (SL, 49). When the Israelites complained about the lack of meat, having only manna for food, God punished them
by sending an overabundance of quail, telling them they should eat it, "even a whole month, until it come out at your nostrils, and it be loathsome unto you" (Num.11:20). Picnic's euphemism suggests a similar sensual craving which will sicken with oversatiation. The Israelites' clamor to return to slavery in Egypt is faintly alluded to when Rizzo chides Levine: "'What are you, homesick or what'" (SL, 42). The landscape of desolation in "The Small Rain" is total; even the thought of return to slavery cannot alleviate the suffering of all-consuming merciless retribution. The entrance into the Holy Land, which is to follow shortly after Moses' song, bringing to an end forty years of wandering in the desert, is also suggested: "He was also starting . . . to anticipate some radical change, perhaps, after three years of sand . . . ." (SL, 43).

We now realize that the understatement of the title has dramatically foreshadowed the unremitting retribution which was promised to the defiant people. The patient and gentle persuasion of a forgiving Father has opened onto the landscape of wrath, which wholly encompasses the story. The unobtrusiveness of the warning given in the title "The Small Rain" has come to signify by the end of the story the full fury it foretold: "'In the midst of great death . . . the little death. . . . We are in death. Oh god!'" (SL, 50).

We find that the rain imagery of the title functions as a type of the Flood. The light drizzle transforms into the death-unleashing cataclysm of the hurricane: "'Rain is pretty weird that way. . . . It can stir dull roots; it can rip them up, wash them away'" (SL, 51).

The hurricane, described in terms that have been used to evoke future or past cataclysms, from the Bible to T. S. Eliot, is more than retribution; it is a taunt to those who are potentially rebellious. It bares their helplessness and crushes their impulse to seek to escape their predicament: "He watched the windshield wipers pushing the rain away, listened to the rain slashing on the roof. After a while he fell-asleep" (SL, 51). The impossibility of escape throws Pynchon's characters onto the mercy of the relentless, impersonal sky.

--City University of New York
Notes

A Comic Source of Gravity's Rainbow
Mathew Winston

Among the cultural trivia which fascinate Thomas Pynchon are comic books. They appear from time to time in his works, whether generically, as in "the outer-space comics" and "marines-in-action comics" in "The Secret Integration" (Slow Learner, Little, Brown, 142, 161), or more specifically, like the "American Bugs Bunny comic book" read by an anonymous corporal in Gravity's Rainbow (Viking, 592). References to comic-book characters are scattered liberally and sometimes thickly in Gravity's Rainbow: three paragraphs on pages 751-52 invoke the names of Submariner, Plasticman, Superman, Jimmy [Olsen, Superman's sidekick], and the Daily Planet, the newspaper for which both Jimmy and Superman work (the latter disguised as Clark Kent).

Pynchon's knowledge of comic books is secure enough so that he can play with them in different ways. He can invoke the obscure, like "Hap Harrigan comics" in The Crying of Lot 49 (Bantam, 53), whose protagonist becomes "Hop Harrigan" in Gravity's Rainbow (117). And he can allude obscurely: readers of Gravity's Rainbow unfamiliar with German popular culture may not recognize that the Max and Moritz who launch Blicero's rocket (757-58) are the creations of Wilhelm Busch, who in the nineteenth century wrote comic poems for children which he illustrated with cartoons. Anyone who does not know that Batman's other identity is Bruce Wayne will miss the pun early in the novel, when Pirate Prentice is chauffeured by "his batman, a Corporal Wayne" (11). Pynchon even invents his own comic-book heroes, as when Slothrop helps to complete the "Floundering Four"--a parody of "the Fantastic Four"--otherwise consisting of "Myrtle Miraculous [who] specializes in performing miracles" and is herself a friend of Mary Marvel and Wonder Woman, Maximilian, "a Negro in a pearl-gray zoot," and "Marcel, a mechanical chessplayer dating back to the Second Empire" (675).

Comics occupy a less significant place in Pynchon's mythology than do movies, and a number of characters who exist in comic-book form appear in their cinematic
incarnations, as is the case in Gravity’s Rainbow with "Donald Duck cinema cartoons" (146) and with Mickey Mouse, who is characterized by his voice (392-93). This is also true of Pynchon’s favorite comic character, Porky Pig. In The Crying of Lot 49, old Mr. Thoth tells Oedipa a dream about his grandfather:

"It was all mixed in with a Porky Pig cartoon. [...] Did you ever see the one about Porky Pig and the anarchist? [...] It dates from the 1930’s. Porky Pig is a little boy. The children told me that he has a nephew now, Cicero. Do you remember, during the war, when Porky worked in a defense plant? He and Bugs Bunny. That was a good one too." (66)

The cartoon in Thoth’s dream—actually an animated cartoon called "The Blow-Out," which was released by Warner Brothers in 1936—enters Gravity’s Rainbow when Pirate Prentice offers Katje Borgejüüs a ball of taffy, "boobish as young Porky Pig holding out the anarchist’s ticking bomb to him" (545), and later several characters appear with Porky Pig tattoos on their stomachs (638, 711). Porky may be part of the inspiration for all the swine in Gravity’s Rainbow, from those driven to market in the seventeenth century by William Slothrop, to "Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero" (567), whose costume is worn by Slothrop, and later, with less fortunate results, by Major Marvy. Porky may be ultimately responsible for the stutter which marks the narrative. And certainly he provided the inspiration for the name of Dr. Porkyevitch, the Pavlovian trainer of octopus Grigori. Earlier in Pynchon’s career, in V., the name of Porky Pig is echoed even more clearly in that of Vladimir Porçeptic, the avant-garde composer of "L’Enlèvement des Vierges Chinoises--Rape of the Chinese Virgins" (Bantam, 371), during a performance of which Mélanie l’Heuremaudit is impaled.

In an essay on "The Quest for Pynchon" (in Twentieth Century Literature 21, no. 3 and in Mindful Pleasures), I indicated that Pynchon’s interest in the German rockets known as Vergeltungswaffen might have begun with a 1954 exhibition in a museum near his home on Long Island. Now I want to add that his notion of inserting a human cargo into such a rocket may have had its origin in a comic-book story by Stan Lee entitled
"If This Be Treason" in the Marvel Tales of Suspense, #70 and #71 (October and November 1965). In this story, Dr. Cedric Rawlings, an American scientist, has been led by the Nazi Major Uberhart to betray his country and to entrap Captain America and his sidekick Bucky Barnes. The Nazi also holds Rawlings' sister. On page 10 of #70, the major tells the beaten scientist, "And now, our three prisoners shall go for a little ride . . . straight to the heart of London!!" The horrified Rawlings responds, "You mean . . . the V-2???! No! You can't! Not my sister . . . not her!!" The major then sarcastically consoles Rawlings, "But think how glorious her end will be! She will be in such famous company!! And her name will be remembered always . . . For she will be in the rocket which blows up London when it lands at 10 Downing Street where Churchill lives!"

Page two of #71, following the full-page illustration whose text summarizes the previous issue, shows the rocket and bears the caption: "Within seconds, the narrow steel door of the awesome V-2 slides open, ready to receive its helpless passengers . . ." Rawlings, kept back by a Nazi guard, cries out, "No! You can't do it . . . You mustn't! I've worked for you . . . betrayed my own nation for you . . . you can't send my sister to her doom!" Major Uberhart, monocled and with his arms across his chest, replies icily, "On the contrary, Rawlings . . . we can do it . . . and we shall!! She attempted to save our enemies . . . and to a Nazi, that is an unforgiveable crime!" In the same panel, Rawlings' sister, who is being led to the open door of the rocket, behind the unconscious heroes, turns to her brother and says, "Cedric . . . I beg of you . . . stop your useless pleading! We cannot think of ourselves with all of London in danger! At least let us meet our fate with dignity!"

Needless to say, unlike Rocket 00000, the missile bearing Captain America does not destroy any of its intended victims, and the rest of the comic book is irrelevant to Gravity's Rainbow.

I have not found references in Pynchon's work to Captain America or to any other characters in the comic book, and unquestionably Pynchon could have invented Blicero's monstrous launching of Gottfried
without having read Tales of Suspense. Nevertheless, given Pynchon's demonstrated knowledge and use of comic books, the parallels are suggestive.

--University of Alabama
A Short Note on Pynchon's Sources for "The Firm"

Hanjo Berressem

As a backdrop to the multiple conspiracies in Gravity's Rainbow, "The Firm" is a silent presence on almost every page of the book. A world-spanning net of political and financial power, it has been recognized as Pynchon's metaphor for the political and technocratic apparatus of our time. My presentation of a text which Pynchon might well have used as a source for his concept of "the Firm" will only confirm this interpretation, providing some more clues as to Pynchon's intentions for the use of the concept.

In a book that is of importance, not only for Pynchon, but for a lot of modern fiction in general, Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West, we find in a chapter dealing with "state and history" the following footnote:

R. Walpole, the organizer of the Whig party (since 1714) used to call himself and his secretary-of-state Townsend "the Firm," which reigned with a number of different proprietors with absolute power until 1760.1

Spengler gives as his source Hatschek's book Englische Verfassungsgeschichte,2 in which Hatschek interprets the rise of Walpole's Whig party as the birth of the predominance of the party-organization over the different party-programs. The survival of "the Party" becomes the most important factor in its politics, an aim to which the individual party-members, as well as the different programs, have to submit totally. "The party preserves itself by nature of its gravity" (Hatschek, 590, my emphasis). Spengler sees a similar tendency towards the self-perpetuation of the Party or other structures:

The will to power is stronger than all theory. In the beginning, the leadership and the apparatus (of the party) come into existence because of the program; then they are defended by the proprietors because of the power and of the booty, as is generally the case today, when in
all countries thousands of people are living from the party and the offices and business-deals it gives out, and in the end the program fades from memory, and the organization works solely for itself. (Spengler, 1126)

For Pynchon, this is of course prime material for a metaphor. In GR, he expands this concept of "the Firm" to world-spanning magnitude. He stresses its anonymity and its inhumanity. All of GR's cast are in some way or other connected to this power, be it as employees, as V-men, or as victims (often more than one of these).

In Part Four of the novel, Pynchon sets a Quixotian army, the Counterculture, against "the Firm's" sphere of influence and power. The Counterculture, which attracts most of the "good" characters in the novel, tries to disrupt, in imagery recalling many of the political "poeticized" provocations of the 60's, the "They-system" of "the Firm" with its own "We-system," which runs on the idea of "creative paranoia."

Pynchon's personal attitudes come out in one of the passages in the book in which one can hear, almost without distortion, without mediator and without the usual detachment, Pynchon's own voice:

"They have lied to us. They can't keep us from dying, so They lie to us about death. A cooperative structure of lies. What have They ever given us in return for the trust, the love--They actually say 'love'--we're supposed to owe Them? [. . .] Before the Rocket we went on believing, because we wanted to. But the Rocket can penetrate, from the sky, at any given point. Nowhere is safe. We can't believe Them any more. Not if we are still sane, and love the truth."3

His hopes, which are of course always hopes voiced against better odds, he has put into song, a song that might still be sung today at many peace demonstrations, if only it were better known:

Once you cuddled 'em and kissed 'em,
But we're bringin' down Their system,
And it isn't a resistance, it's a war. . . .

(GR, 640)

--Brown University
Notes


A Note on "Convergence"

J. O. Tate

MCLUHAN CENTER SAYS A-BOMB MAY BE GOOD screamed a headline in The New York Times on Sunday, February 12, 1984, page 20. The article--by Douglas Martin--elicited predictable comments. As an item of news, as distinct from an idea, the proposition that the headline blared was bound to prompt patellar reflexes; which says more about the Times than it does about Douglas Martin or the designated heirs of Marshall McLuhan.

Inspecting the text of that item of reportage, one finds an oddly familiar pattern. The article is a kaleidoscope of the déjà vu.

"I'm absolutely delighted that the bomb is there," Derrick de Kerckhove, acting director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, said. "It's about time we had something to bring us together."

The essential thought appears to be that the bomb has become a modern myth, holding a power over the culture's thinking previously held by religion. Further, that myth has become a physical part of everyone's brain and is now acting as a strong unifying force.

... [T]he nuclear bomb is the ultimate information medium, an idea that Mr. McLuhan had only begun to toy with. Just as Mr. McLuhan shocked intellectuals by suggesting that television was a good thing, his followers are beginning to say the same thing about the bomb.

Indeed, Mr. de Kerckhove, a Belgian, argues that the more bombs, the better. He favors deployment of Pershing 2 and Cruise missiles in Europe, and says he is sorry that warheads are not widely distributed in public places, such as markets.

When asked directly, he swears he is not crazy. "I've done my homework," he said.
His theory is that atomic weapons represent a new universal myth, inescapable for all but the completely ignorant. "You can't do what you want with the bomb," he said. "The bomb does what it wants with you."

The bomb thus binds people together in a way they have not been linked since the Middle Ages, albeit on the brink of collective suicide.

... The idea is that the shared myth of imminent destruction has physically changed the manner in which the billions of synapses connect in people's brains.

Neurologists basically agree that changes in thought and perception physically affect the brain.

"The brain can re-wire itself and can re-organize under environmental influences," said W. G. Tatton, the director of the University of Toronto's Playfair Neuroscience Unit, who is beginning to work with the McLuhan program. "If you've got massive trauma laid on a culture, there are similar modifications."

Mr. de Kerckhove says these changes will create a new attitude that will insure that the bomb will not be used. He is so confident of this that he is against disarmament, not just because he considers it unattainable. He says the certainty of continuing to hang on the precipice is necessary for the new attitude to emerge.

His only qualm is the growing talk about the efficacy of limited nuclear warfare by military strategists.

How to react to such propositions in 1984? Thomas Pynchon's readers will not be unduly ruffled by a complex of ideas elaborated in Gravity's Rainbow (1973). "The Bomb" rides on a missile which is the direct descendant of that Nazi terror-weapon, the V-2; and there is nothing that Derrick de Kerckhove says about the nuclear bomb that was not shown, implied, parodied, or iterated in the text of Gravity's Rainbow, which is about a terror-weapon that now seems quaint. Indeed,
Mr. de Kerckhove's name, as well as his job, seem to be, though they are not, Pynchonisms.

Those "at home" in Pynchon's alienating world are familiar with Henry Adams' centrifugal vision of the displacing and dislocating Dynamo; familiar with the perplexities of communication theory; familiar with the fusion of terror and sexuality, behaviorism and conspiracy, all focused in Gravity's Rainbow on the central image of what was The Bomb of its day, the V-2, a god, a power, a mandala, a reorganizing principle and charismatic object. Pynchon's "historical novel," being neither historical nor a novel, was never "about" the V-2, but used it to interpret us to ourselves in a distanced mode. Pynchon's subtext was always "the balance of terror" that the public has known since Hiroshima and the Cold War. That's why Mr. de Kerckhove's suggestions seem so familiar. Art has anticipated Nature--and History--once again.

Such reflections may suggest to others as they do to me that disciples of the late Marshall McLuhan either have read their Gravity's Rainbow, in which case they should cite Pynchon; or they have not, in which case they should emulate their master, who seemed to have read everything, and who wouldn't have neglected a text that so powerfully embodies his ideas about media and messages.

--Dowling College
Derrick de Kerckhove Replies to J. O. Tate

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond to the views expressed by Mr. Tate about an item concerning my work, which appeared in the Sunday New York Times of February 12th. Though I feel that I am doing a favour to Mr. Tate by taking him up on his criticisms, I am loath to refuse an argument even when it verges on the "ad hominem" category.

The first thing I would like to point out is that when one would criticize another person's ideas, it might be more to the point to address that person in his own write, so to speak. I am therefore forwarding a full paper ["On Nuclear Communication"] which was published in the [Summer 1984] issue of Diacritics.

Regarding Pynchon, I am afraid that I have absolutely ignored his existence until the time your letter informed me about him. I was, after all, brought up in Europe for most of my formative years and I am quite sure no one would fault Mr. Tate for not having seen all the plays of Jean Anouilh or Jean Giraudoux, or read all the witty and prophetic novels of Jules Romains. I am indeed very grateful to Mr. Tate for bringing Gravity's Rainbow to my attention and I certainly intend to search this book out but for my own benefit only, not for the dubious pleasure of refuting the arguments of Mr. Tate.

Finally I am surprised at the indignant tone of Mr. Tate's review. I had no idea that by expressing opinions about what I consider the most serious problem our culture has ever faced in history I would offend anybody. And, honestly if it all comes down to the suspicion that Pynchon has not been given due regard for the similarity of my views with the ones he expressed in a novel I haven't read, all I have to add is that Mr. Tate's response strikes me as frivolous. . . .

--The McLuhan Program
University of Toronto
"The World is at Fault"

Steven Moore

Seven months before Cavalier ran an excerpt from The Crying of Lot 49, the same magazine published an essay on Pynchon and other black humorists that has gone unnoticed by Pynchon's bibliographers. Written by his Cornell friend Jules Siegel, "The Dark Triumvirate"—on Friedman, Pynchon, and Heller—appeared in the August 1965 issue of Cavalier (vol. 15, pp. 14-16, 90-91) and is remarkable for a long quotation from one of Pynchon's letters. Since Cavalier is held by very few libraries, the quotation is reprinted below, along with Siegel's introductory paragraph. The context concerns the meaninglessness of the world:

Pynchon, hiding out from the world in Mexico City, wrote on blue-line graph paper to a suicidal writer friend:

"When Marilyn Monroe got out of the game, I wrote something like, 'Southern California's special horror notwithstanding, if the world offered nothing, nowhere to support or make bearable whatever her private grief was, then it is that world, and not she, that is at fault.'

"I wrote that in the first few shook-up minutes after hearing the bulletin sandwiched in between Don and Phil Everly and surrounded by all manner of whoops and whistles coming out of an audio signal generator, like you are apt to hear on the provincial radio these days. But I don't think I'd take those words back.

"The world is at fault, not because it is inherently good or bad or anything but what it is, but because it doesn't prepare us in anything but body to get along with.

"Our souls it leaves to whatever obsolescences, bigotries, theories of education workable and un, parental wisdom or lack of it, happen to get in its way in its more or less Brownian (your phrase) pilgrimage between the cord-cutting ceremony and the time they slide you down the chute into the oven, while the guy on the Wurlitzer plays Aba Daba Honeymoon because you had once told somebody
it was the nadir of all American expression; only they didn't know what nadir meant but it must be good because of the vehemence with which you expressed yourself." (16)

--Rutgers University
Confronting Mystery with Method
William W. Stowe


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.

--The Crying of Lot 49

Like the Thin Man, the Shadow, and optimistic Oedipal, the literary critic confronts mystery with method. Like Raymond Chandler, both Oedipal and the literary critic are seeking "not for a specific criminal, but for a raison d'être, a meaning in character and relationship, what the hell went on, rather than who done it." Unlike the radio detectives, or Oedipal, or Chandler, however, the critic does not usually aim to solve a mystery once and for all, but rather to illuminate one aspect of a text, a genre, or some other literary phenomenon, to suggest one way of understanding the subject, but certainly not to eliminate all other ways. The critic who aims for more is bound "sooner or later [ ... ] to get beat up on."

There is no need to beat up on Stefano Tani. The Doomed Detective is an intelligent, engaging, and appropriately modest book, a fine example of the very important kind of work that Thomas Kuhn (whom Tani quotes) calls normal science. By combining a convincing argument with a number of sensitive readings of familiar and unfamiliar works, it contributes to our understanding of both of its subjects, the detective novel genre and the postmodern mode of writing, without claiming to revolutionize our views on either.
In his opening chapter, Tani presents a brief history of the detective story in English and in Italian, and then suggests that postmodern writers have chosen to plunder this tradition rather than develop it, to "use the form as a scrapyard [. . . ]; the detective novel clichés are like the spare parts of an old car that cannot run any more but, if sold as parts, can still be worth something" (34). Drawing on the work of Jurij Tynjanov, Tani argues that postmodern "anti-detective" writers make parodic use of certain elements of detective fiction in their efforts to construct a new sensibility and a new mode of writing. These writers take, for example, a mystery or puzzle, a detective-figure, and/or a process of deduction, and combine them with the promise of a solution and the suspenseful delay of that solution. Such a combination allows them to take advantage of the expectations these devices arouse in the reader, whom they can then disappoint in interesting and significant ways.

Tani classifies the ways in which this is done as either "innovative," "deconstructive," or "meta-fictional." The innovative anti-detective novel makes use of the detective novel conventions for its own purposes without subverting them completely; it provides a solution to the mystery, but this solution is for some reason unsatisfactory. Tani's discussions under this heading of John Gardner's The Sunlight Dialogues and especially of Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose are too brief (six pages on Gardner; six-and-one-half on Eco) to provide more than a few aperçus about those texts. His somewhat longer treatment of Leonardo Sciascia's marvelous little novel A ciascuno il suo (A Man's Blessing) is more satisfying in its textual analysis and its examination of the way Sciascia uses the detective novel form for social commentary and metaphysical meditation. In Tani's convincing reading, the novel exposes the social and moral effects of the Sicilian "conspiracy of silence" (61), the traditional omertà which allows violent crime to go unpunished and fosters the activities of the mafia. Its investigator's mistake is to believe that finding out who is responsible for a certain double murder will somehow purge the community of guilt and reestablish social order. What he doesn't realize is that most of the community know who is guilty already,
and are too wise to say anything about it. Instead of furthering the cause of justice, the investigator's efforts only bring about another murder, this time his own.

Tani's chapter on the deconstructive anti-detective novel is of special interest to Pynchon readers, since it contains analyses not only of Sciascia's Todo modo (One Way or Another) and William Hjortsberg's Falling Angel, but also of The Crying of Lot 49. Tani writes that this branch of anti-detective fiction frustrates readers by pretending to follow the conventions of the classic genre, but then refusing to provide the solution they lead us to expect. Whereas innovative anti-detective novels use the closed form of the classic version but question the value of the closing solution, deconstructive anti-detective novels remain open and deny the reader the satisfaction of any solution at all.

The application of this formula to The Crying of Lot 49 is clear enough; it has, in fact, become a commonplace of Pynchon criticism to point out the parallels between this novel and detective fiction. Tani's reading of the novel contributes more to the credibility of his own overall thesis than it does to the wide world of Pynchon studies. It is concise and practically unexceptionable; my only quibble is with the unexplained personification of Tristero, the suggestion that as "the fictional, mysterious 'author'" "he" is "almost the same person" as "Thomas Pynchon (the real, mysterious author)" (98). Apart from this curious contention, Tani's treatment of the novel does provide original insight into the tantalizing effect of its "overrichness of clues" (96) and the doubleness of an ending that embodies "structural nonsolution (the open-endedness) and an emotional solution (Oedipus's growth to maturity and compassion)" (95). His pages on Pynchon are worth looking at, but unlikely to provide any revelations for the Pynchon scholar.

The section on the meta-fictional detective novel is the most sustained in the book. Tani's analysis of Calvino's If On a Winter's Night a Traveler is an invaluable guide to that novel, whose levels of discourse and narration it lays out most clearly, and whose language it explains in a lucid way, even for
readers with no Italian. His reading of Nabokov's Pale Fire is equally impressive, though his suggestion that Kinbote actually arranged John Shade's murder (142-44) strikes me as unconvincing and, in the end, unnecessary.

In his Introduction, Tani suggests that two of the hallmarks of postmodernism are that it is "de-structuring and asymbolic" (xii) and that it is therefore the formal obverse of the highly structured detective novel, whose every detail is at least potentially imbued with meaning. Tani has chosen his terms carefully, but only one of them works for Pynchon and, I think, for postmodern writing in general. Pynchon's texts are certainly not unstructured. They may be understood as de-structuring in Tani's sense of the term. To say that they are asymbolic strikes me as not quite right and as too limiting a definition for postmodern literary art in general. Merce Cunningham has been making asymbolic dances for years, and a whole generation has followed his example; non-objective, symbolic art was old news long before V. was even a gleam in Pynchon's eye. Asymbolic literary art, however, is hard to find, and even harder to read (see, for example, the texts of Phillipe Sollers). Postmodern literature certainly problematizes the relation between the signifier and the signified, but it does not abandon signification or the symbol altogether. It is not surprising, therefore, that Tani focuses more on structure than on symbol. This is a wise choice, and it helps define both the value of his book, and its limitations. As a study of literary evolution, the history of a genre and the structure of postmodern narrative, The Doomed Detective is most valuable. It is not, however, nor does it pretend to be, a definitive analysis of postmodern textuality. Such an analysis would have to rely on a more sophisticated understanding of symbolization than is evident here.

--Wesleyan University

Notes


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.

NEW PYNCHON:


CRITICISM AND COMMENT:


Bloom, Harold. "War Within the Walls." Rev. of In the Freud Archives, by Janet Malcolm. New York Times Book Review, 27 May 1984, 3, 15. Mentions Pynchon and V. To judge by the number of such references (some rather forced) of late, Pynchon has clearly invaded Bloom's imagination.
Brief remarks on Kermode on Lot 49 in relation to "paranoid codes."


Calls GR "the war book to end them all," though Burgess may have read only Fussell and not GR itself.


Mentions Pynchon and V.


Prefers Pynchon to Joyce. Discusses Lot 49 and GR.
"Pynchon comes close to writing the Great American Novel, only
to fail because in many respects [GR] is not American enough; it avoids the pain of confronting felt social and psychological contradictions in the manner of The Crying of Lot 49. . . . Even so, he remains the greatest living English novelist. His books are in themselves historical events."


---------. "Included Middles and the Trope of the Absent Insight." Rev. of Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon Notes, 14 (1984), 75-81.


Geeslin, Campbell. Rev. of Slow Learner. People, 14 May 1984, 11.


Brief remarks on the novels and a quotation from "Entropy."


Entries on Pynchon and each of the three novels.


"... that magnum opus of science and imagination, technology and myth, gone paranoiac: Gravity's Rainbow."


"... Pynchon grasps the full implications of the field concept, including both its promise of a reality that is a harmonious, dynamic whole and the problem it poses of how to represent that reality in the fragmented medium of language. Pynchon's response to this dilemma is to create a text that at once invites and resists our attempts to organize it into a unified field of meaning... The patterns of Gravity's Rainbow tend toward self-obliteration because the focus for the text's anxiety is precisely the cognitive thought that seeks to organize diverse data into coherent patterns. The source of the tension, in other words, lies in the nature of human consciousness itself."


Holmes, John R. "'A Hand to Turn the Time': History as Film in Gravity's Rainbow." Cithara, 23, No. 1 (1983), 5-16.


"Pynchon challenges us to make what we can of his material. He and other modernists tear down our comfortable bourgeois fixities and set up situations in which there are no answers or a plethora of answers."


Lot 49 is "an archetypal structuralist text which ironically attempts to limit the reader's freedom to operate within the tight system that is the novel."

Kitman, Marvin. "NBC's Fall Lineup Rates a 'V.'" Newsday, 14 May 1984, II, 32.

"V. was such an important work of literature back in the '60s. And now all you hear about is 'V' the TV show. Was V. the book a figment of the American literary imagination?"


Pynchon (like Barth) "is more the parodist than innovator ... Chimera and Gravity's Rainbow are ultimately dramas of the signified rather than self-referential performances of the signifier, for each depends upon a pass-through to certain represented objects."


Comparing Cosmic Trigger to GR as an "encyclopedic" work.

Quotes from Pynchon's introduction to Slow Learner and from Stark.


Comparing V. to Pym.


The work of Thomas Pynchon is the best and richest place to track Hemingway's ghost.

Mentions the 1974 Pulitzer flap over GR.


Discusses GR, especially the "Colonel's Haircut" and "Byron the Bulb" chapter, and Pointsman and Mexico.


"Causality is the villain of post-modern melodrama... To strike off at another angle, the post-modern fabulator is confronted with the task of scattering the overpowering presence of causality at all levels of the graphic structure, from particles of speech to segments of narrative."


In GR, "the function of the Negro... suggests a revitalization for the white community not substantially different from that seen in Southern stories... [the] Schwarzkommando seem to offer the renewing alternative to a continuation of the emotional barrenness of white Europeans and Americans... Yet there is not undue hope about the Negro's role."


Listings and brief references: writers like Pynchon "dramatize the sham of historical sequence and the self-hypnosis of individual sensibilities with unsentimental insouciance."


Uses GR as a "case example." GR "can be seen at least implicitly confronting realism and the basic premises of the sociocultural context of which it is part, particularly atomism. The framing and reframing by which the reality of events are altered and disqualified confronts the inadequacy of atomism and the necessity of the theory of logical types."


See page 84 above.


Smith, Thomas S. "Performing in the Zone: The Presentation of Historical Crisis in Gravity's Rainbow." Clio, 12, No. 3 (1983), 245-60.


Brief remark about Lot 49.


See pages 86-90 above.


Thomas, Brook. "Not a Reading of, but the Act of Reading Ulysses." James Joyce Quarterly, 16, Nos. 1 & 2 (1978-79), 81-93. (82, 91)

Brief comparison with GR.


Pynchon is "of a sepulchral cast of mind," "a tombstone humorist."


Wills, David and Alec McHoul. '"Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist' (Wittgenstein, Weissmann, Pynchon) /'Le signe est toujours le signe de la chute' (Derrida)." Southern Review, 16, No.2 (1983), 274-91.

Woodward, Kathleen. "Cybernetic Modeling in Recent American Writing: A Critique." North Dakota Quarterly, 51, No. 1 (1983), 57-73. (62-65, 69, 70, 72) "To think the cybernetic model is 'better' than the older mechanical model is woefully sentimental or hopelessly mystical. The Crying of Lot 49 testifies to the absurdity of such a posture. . . .[I]n Pynchon's world there is no transcendent meaning, although there is certainly more than only the earth: there are grids upon grids of man-made readings." But Pynchon "falls prey to the stock response that technology is monolithic."

Contributors

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