Mindful Pleasure

Bruno Arich-Gerz

"[C]ritics after [Susan] Strehle and [John] Johnston will go on to map further cultural migrations of literature into science and technology, not only in such evident heirs to Pynchon as Vollmann, Wallace and Powers, but also in narratives further afield that, with no obvious thematic reference to science, nonetheless illustrate its rippling cultural effects" (Joseph Tabbi, "The Medial Turn," *Pynchon Notes* 42–43 [1998]: 317). Four years later, Joseph Tabbi's own intellectually challenging, very stimulating *Cognitive Fictions* provides evidence of what its author had presaged in *Pynchon Notes*. The investigation into how "print narrative might . . . recognize itself, at the moment when it is forced to consider its own technological obsolescence, as a figuration of mind within the new medial ecology" (CF xi) dedicates extensive chapters to Pynchon and Powers. Another chapter presents a superb analysis of the "fictional observations" of Paul Auster, and yet another offers a series of critical considerations of the considerations and, subsequently, the re-considerations of David Markson's writer figure Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, who re-enters "her life-narrative, so that what she had once presented (to no one in particular) as a writer, she can now revisit as a reader" (109).

To begin here with what Tabbi had once presented (to those he elsewhere names the Pyndustry in particular) as a writer and what he can now revisit as a reader is presumably more than an eccentric reviewer's idea. It may be helpful to demonstrate, on the platform of *Pynchon Notes* as a continuum of critical text(s), the processing of a system in which agents on various levels (writers, readers, fictional characters, critics) participate. As the title of Tabbi's study suggests, the system, moreover, includes elements such as cognition, communication, consciousness and "hardware"—medial hardware or "the gray matter of the mind" (97)—which are distinctly not reducible to each other: "One cannot, however, map consciousness onto cognition, or derive communications from hardware," Tabbi admonishes (120). "Only minds can think, and only communications can communicate, and neither activity can happen until their respective

materialities are in place, and kept separate and distinct from thought and consciousness per se" (97).

Now, if my cognition allows for my conscious realization of the connection between Tabbi's 1998 desideratum and his 2002 study, *Cognitive Fictions*, as an answer to that desideratum, and if, as here, this realization is expressed in print form on this very page (generating therewith, perhaps, further communication[s] within the Pyndustry), it marks a re-consideration of a previous observation—Tabbi's original one, emerged from his conscious mind—by another observer whose own observation now obviously distinguishes, when producing a review, between Tabbi's desideratum statement and his fulfillment of it. Precisely this (sub)sequence of observations warrants a system, its stability and autopoetic status according with constructivist models such as Niklas Luhmann's systems theory:

> Re-entry means that once a certain level of complexity is reached, it becomes possible to observe the starting observation, which "re-enters" the distinction founded upon it. It is possible to distinguish the starting distinction from the distinction one is using, to see it as the same and simultaneously as different, provided that a construction [or, as here, a study: *Cognitive Fictions*] has been generated from it. (Elena Esposito, qtd. in CF 95)

Quite obviously, neither Tabbi nor I figure as sovereign and distinct individuals who are conscious and self-assured about the boundaries that separate them from their respective environments. By the same token, I am not so much a reading subject who becomes an author in the act of citing what he has read, who masters and oversees things from an Archimedean vantage point and who intertextually refers to another such author-ity. Instead, my contribution is part of a larger systemic setup—the mini social-system of the Pyndustry—in which my own conscious formulation is merely a momentary input, perhaps capable of irritating the system but unlikely to destabilize it thoroughly. (Actually, it is merely the result of structural couplings of other systems within myself, such as the nervous system, or of self-reflective processes such as those on my reader status.) The purpose of my own or, for that matter, Tabbi's observation is to maintain and further the process of critical discussion, not to arrive at a once-for-all mapping of "some encompassing, fully conscious, and fully fictional 'larger Mind'" (35) that *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, seems to suggest.

In fact, Tabbi turns to *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular, as well as to *Mason & Dixon* and *Vineland*, "to argue that the fictive representation of cognitive operations is our time's literary defamiliarization par

excellence," and to demonstrate that "such works ultimately imply more significance, more context, and more connectivity than any single mind could ever hold in experience or present on a page" (xv). While this has for a decade and a half been a truism with regard to the connectivity of Pynchon's prose and new-medial phenomena such as hypertextuality, Tabbi strikes an innovative new note when he grafts the novels onto both "the mind and the medial ecology," thus widening the scope by invoking the "similarly communicating agents, modules, and distributed neural networks *in us*" (x). Pynchon's narratives are cognitive fictions in that their complex structures resemble the raw material of the mind—if, for instance, one "imagine[s *Gravity's Rainbow*'s] zone of postarmistice Europe, 1945, as a structural equivalent of the human mind before consciousness" (40), or "consider[s] the medial ecology in *Vineland* as yet another figuration of the human mind" (51). And Pynchon's novels pose a challenge to the human minds within and without the narratives, when, for example, "the entire network of linked 'ideas of the opposite' on the surface of (*Gravity's Rainbow*] dramatize[s] a condition in which all connections and all oppositions might be *brought to consciousness*, a cognitive no less than a narrative impossibility" (35). What becomes obvious, in other words, is the futility or impossibility of the bird's-eye or Archimedean perspective—likewise, of course, a truism of Pynchon studies.

Tabbi's great achievement is to emphasize the cognitive aspects of, and reenforce a constructivist perspective on, Pynchon's prose. He is up to date on more recent discourses within the Pyndustry, from the eighteenth-century technique of lamination in the preparation of croissants as well as printed texts, which he ingeniously links with Deleuzean theories of the fold (29), to "a 'neo-materialist' strain or 'medial turn' in Pynchon criticism" (36). The characteristic quality of Pynchon's texts themselves—whose "totality is only knowable by going 'up one level at least'" (34), which is in turn constantly impossibilized— is probably what prevents Tabbi's analysis of Pynchon from appearing (at least to me) as catchy and insightful as his analysis of Auster's prose:

> What happens in this set of remarkable novels, which I group together, after Auster, under the term "solitary invention," is that a notation system reaches a level of complexity that can no longer be sustained by the narrator, and so the narrator jumps (not necessarily "up") to a different conceptual level, a leap out of the hall of mirrors and an invention out of solipsism. In recognizing the absolute closure of the system they've

created, these narrators create a new distinction, which then enters into the system it describes and alters it. (xxii)

Auster's prose, unlike Pynchon's, allows for the demonstration of how a re-entry can be accomplished, which is essential in constructivist theories such as systems theory—and all the more so for an analytic method derived from that theory.

This is why I would prefer to have reviewed *Cognitive Fictions* for *Auster Notes*. Tabbi's method bears more effectively and, for the analyzer of cognitive fiction, more rewardingly on works such as *New York Trilogy*. In Pynchon's case, Tabbi must finally take refuge in speculations about the novelist's self-chosen withdrawal from the public—speculations that interpret isolation as opening up:

> Authorial absence need not be reclusive, countercultural, or noncommunicative. Neither is it the stance of a belated American aristocrat descended from colonial Pyncheons. . . . Indeed, Pynchon's privacy could well be—like consciousness in its self-containment—a way of . . . expanding oneself out into cultural areas not yet represented—not yet fixed, commodified, and made exchangeable in a controlled economy. (53)

Cognitive Fictions certainly poses more exciting questions than this, and certainly paves the way for more studies in its vein and wake. So on again re-entering the system by observing Tabbi's original observation—or part of it—anew, one may indeed imagine cognitive "narratives further afield that, with no obvious thematic reference to science, nonetheless illustrate its rippling cultural effects." In Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852), Westervelt prophecies the mind-to-mind "closeness" of a "mutually conscious brotherhood," though that state is rendered impossible by the several involved minds —the narrator Coverdale's in the first place—that are utterly incompatible. This might be one such narrative further afield.

—Technical University of Darmstadt