

Recent American Fiction <sup>1</sup>  
Terry Caesar

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

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

Where can that society best be known? I want to suggest that it provides the best account of itself in its literature, especially its fiction, always the most social of literary forms. There, for example, a student might be surprised to learn that the common criticism of Americans as "too materialistic" is actually both a commonplace among them and a statement of the deeper conviction that they are not materialistic enough. America is a nation founded upon a religious idea of itself, and it has felt inadequate to this idea since its origins. Hence, the recurrent notion of the "American dream," which in more recent writing becomes increasingly a nightmare. To be tempted by the dream--as who is not who uses its material products--without knowing that it contains within itself its own nightmare is actually equivalent to giving up the consciousness that the dream inspires. American fiction of the last fifty years is that consciousness. It is both a wide-ranging criticism

of American values and, never more than when it is a criticism, a distinctively American representation of those values.

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

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

So I mention this example, but it is too futile, too hopelessly personal to counter years of films and journalistic accounts--of an entire discourse of conventions about Americans which is, in its way, as spurious and insidious as that which obtains about Arabs in America. The conventions of this discourse don't include the acknowledgment that there is by now a considerable body of American fiction about small towns--themselves an enduring source of nostalgia and

fantasy even for millions more of urban Americans who will never experience their rhythms and their rituals. To how many Saudis would a reading of, for example, John Updike's Of the Farm come as a shock? It is a short, lyrical novel rich with the surfaces of family harmony and domestic fulfillment--values likely to be those of any Arab reader, and therefore an occasion for real cultural contact.

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

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

It will not be, nor is it already, only an affair of corn flakes, Buicks, hamburgers, and calculators. One of the things American fiction of recent years is especially about is plots which get out of hand, pat-

terms which have larger structures than anyone can foresee, conspiracies which extend into all areas of life even as their very existence is only dimly realized.

## II

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

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

This is a state of affairs, for one thing, which Pynchon himself is likely to regard with some amusement. The man himself is distinguished by his absence. There have been no publicly available pictures of him since that in his college yearbook; a comedian appeared

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

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

hensive frameworks, within which they can be understood, nevertheless, as common objects of historical reification.

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

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

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

We are all of us bound together at a deeper level than politics and, it may be, even culture. There are at least texts already written in which each of us, Saudis and Americans, exists. We don't always get to see who wrote them, and we can't read them all. One

of the major concerns of recent American fiction--and Pynchon's most urgently--is of routes not taken: personal, cultural, historical. Sometimes all that can be done is to indicate a recognition lost, or a sequence no longer possible to reproduce, or an illumination only barely perceptible on the edge of sense. I have tried to write of recent American fiction in precisely this sense. It is one route to more fundamental affinities. If not yet "available" in the Kingdom, it still abides elsewhere--like a quiet street in Chicago, the fast lane in the supermarket, the latest idiom in Los Angeles, powdered snow in Pennsylvania, a vulgar burst of energy, industrial waste almost anywhere, and local shocks of hitherto alien truths everywhere.

Clarion State College

Note

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