

DEATH WAS NO ENEMY: A NOTE ON THOMAS PYNCHON,
WILFRED OWEN, AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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In his discussion of Gravity's Rainbow, Michael Seidel suggests that Pynchon uses the "interface" between the First and Second World Wars to demonstrate the radical shift in the world to "a new order that conspires to annihilate permanently what remains of humanity in the race" (204). In particular, Seidel, like Paul Fussell, points to Brigadier Pudding as Pynchon's prime exemplar of a decaying world order (Seidel 205-07; Fussell 328-34). I would like to note another way that Pynchon emphasizes the differences between the wars--especially how the Second World War represents the beginning of the bureaucratized and cartelized state. In discussing the differences between the wars, Pynchon makes an allusion to the sonnet "The Next War" by Wilfred Owen--perhaps the archetypal heroic poet of the First World War--and employs it to help show what has happened to heroism, human bonding, and love in the contemporary world.

At the end of Part III of Gravity's Rainbow, we see Clive Mossmoon and Sir Marcus Scammony, representatives of the new postwar corporate mentality, sitting in their club discussing Polyvinyl Chloride Raincoats, homosexuality, Pointsman, and Slothrop. In response to Mossmoon's fear of a national crisis over Slothrop, Scammony reassures him:

"Dear chap," smiling angelically, "there isn't going to be any crisis. Labour wants the American found as much as we do. We sent him out to destroy the blacks, and it's obvious now he won't do the job. What harm can he cause, roaming around Germany? For all we know he's taken ship for South America and all those adorable little mustachios. Let it be for a while. We've got the Army, when the time is right. Slothrop was a good try at a moderate solution, but in the end it's always the Army, isn't it?" (615)

To Mossmoon's further question--"Are we going to fail?"--Scammony replies, "'We're all going to fail,' Sir Marcus primping his curls, 'but the Operation won't'" (616). The "Operation" thus takes precedence over human beings, and by letting oneself be subsumed by the "Operation," one abandons human feeling and fear and assumes an "authoritarian personality":

Yes. Clive Mossmoon feels himself rising, as from a bog of trivial frustrations, political fears, money problems: delivered onto the sober shore of the Operation, where all is firm underfoot, where the self is a petty indulgent animal that once cried in its

mired darkness. But here there is no whining, here inside the Operation. There is no lower self. The issues are too momentous for the lower self to interfere. Even in the chastisement room at Sir Marcus's estate, "The Birches," the foreplay is a game about who has the real power, who's had it all along, chained and corseted though he be, outside these shackled walls. The humiliations of pretty "Angelique" are calibrated against their degree of fantasy. No joy, no real surrender. Only the demands of the Operation. Each of us has his place, and the tenants come and go, but the places remain. . . . (616)

In the section's final paragraph, however, Pynchon indulges in some romanticizing of the past, particularly of the trench world of the First World War. Just how ironic Pynchon's valorization of trench warfare may be is unclear; but compared to the bureaucratic war state that developed after the First World War and especially during and after the Second, some vestige of humanity did remain under the horrific conditions of the Great War. As Pynchon writes:

It wasn't always so. In the trenches of the First World War, English men came to love one another decently, without shame or make-believe, under the easy likelihoods of their sudden deaths, and to find in the faces of other young men evidence of otherworldly visits, some poor hope that may have helped redeem even mud, shit, the decaying pieces of human meat. . . . (616)

Pynchon does suggest that a new world was then in the making-- "It was the end of the world, it was total revolution. [. . .] an English class was being decimated, the ones who'd volunteered were dying for those who'd known something and hadn't" (616)-- but he nevertheless suggests that some form of human bonding remained: "[. . .] despite it all, despite knowing, some of them, of the betrayal, while Europe died meanly in its own wastes, men loved" (616). Unfortunately, in the Second War-- and particularly in men like Mossmoon and Scammony--such human responses have all but disappeared or scattered:

But the life-cry of that love has long since hissed away into no more than this idle and bitchy faggotry. In this latest War, death was no enemy, but a collaborator. Homosexuality in high places is just a carnal afterthought now, and the real and only fucking is done on paper. . . . (616, my emphasis)

This last passage contains a brief yet significant allusion to Wilfred Owen's "The Next War":

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;
 Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,--
 Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
 We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,--
 Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
 He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
 Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft;
 We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
 We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
 No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
 We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
 And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags
 He wars on Death--for lives; not men--for flags.
 (86, my emphasis)

In this sonnet, Owen humanizes Death, making it a part of the trench world camaraderie. He emphasizes everyday activities--eating and shaving--and juxtaposes them with the absolutely immediate threat of Death. Owen even foresees other wars in which Death will no longer be so chummy and when war itself will lose the personal dimension still found in the trenches. By way of his allusion, Pynchon calls to mind many of Owen's other poems--like "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and "Greater Love"--in which homo-erotic references emphasize not only youthful male bonding but also, as Fussell points out, the irony of prewar Edwardian sentimentalism (330). In "Greater Love," for example, Owen writes:

Red lips are not so red

As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
 Kindness of wooed and wooer
 Seems shame to their love pure.
 O Love, your eyes lose lure

When I behold eyes blinded in my stead! (41)

Such sentiments contrast with the "bitchy faggotry" of Mossmoon and Scammony and highlight once again the difference for Pynchon between the First and Second World Wars. The Second, Pynchon implies, would have been no place for a Wilfred Owen. The ironically romantic Owen, who was killed during the last week of the war, was at least spared Brigadier Pudding's humiliating attempts to reenter the world of the First War. And as Pynchon tells us, in the Second World War, "the real and only fucking was done on paper."

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Works Cited

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