

## Pynchon's Anti-Quests

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The quest pattern is one of the most venerable literary paradigms of human development, both psychological and social. All three of Pynchon's novels make overt use of the quest pattern, generally depicting the inadequacy of the traditional pattern to abet or develop a consciousness capable of restoring the individual and his world to productive harmony. In effect, Pynchon has played a major role in establishing a fictional pattern I will call the Anti-Quest.\*

Traditionally, the quest has involved three phases: separation and departure of the quester from his "normal" life (and therefore from his previous selfhood as well as his social context); initiation of the quester into mysteries governing social and psychological being (including the difficulty of differentiating good and evil, of understanding manifestations of the spiritual world and man's relation to them, and of reconciling conflicting forces within the individual's psyche, often dramatized in confrontations with a father figure or alter ego); and the return of the quester with his awards of personal growth and social salvation (the restitution of harmony). Stencil, Profane, Oedipa, Slothrop, and other Pynchon characters all assume the standard posture of questers at the starting gate. All of these characters evoke expectations that their fictions will involve personal growth and social salvation. All of these questers, in one way or another, imitate the behavior of traditional, successful questers encountering initiatory situations, yet none of them "succeed," that is, return

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\* A more detailed explanation of this concept, its sources, variations, and appearance in contemporary literature and film, will appear in my book-in-progress, The Anti-Quest: American Narrative in the Seventies. There I argue that the anti-quest is one of the major fictional paradigms of narrative art in the 1970's.

home with even the decidedly bitter fruits of those quests. While I have often argued that, for Pynchon, the act of questing is itself the affirmation of human existence, Pynchon nowhere suggests that any particular quest which would accomplish the traditional task of personal and social reintegration even can be found. The quests of his heroes or anti-heroes are really anti-quests, movements away from rather than toward reunification of the quester and his society. Furthermore, fulfillment of these quests--could they be fulfilled--would not justify the original quest but would negate the true meaning of the tasks for the questers. Finally, it is not clear that these characters achieve much growth in self-knowledge, especially on the conscious level. They affirm their existences but gain little information or power that can be put to constructive use.

In V., Profane and Stencil are rather obvious models of two basic types of quest heroes. Profane, like Tom Jones, Moll Flanders, and other picaresque figures, isn't even aware that he is on a quest. While the growth of Tom Jones occurs primarily on a subconscious, experiential level, he does return home knowing he is better equipped to assume his social duties and personal responsibilities. Profane fails to find a home, in any of the emotional or metaphysical or social senses, and is last seen running "through the abruptly absolute night, momentum alone carrying [him] toward the edge of Malta. . . ." Of his "fabulous experiences" he reports, "offhand I'd say I haven't learned a god-damn thing." Certainly Profane has ridden the road of trials, and his in many ways repetitious experiential "lessons" would normally be the dramatization of the quester's growth. Many critics have noted that the negation of Profane's quest stems from his failure to recognize the "sacred" in his "profane" environment. Events in a quest are often important because they serve as operative symbols for spiritual energies (on the level of either plot or theme), and Profane, in his dealings with SHOCK and SHROUD for instance, prefers to interpret these apparently important manifestations merely as horrible nightmares. On the other hand, Pynchon himself, in all his work, may be indicating that the basic requirements for a successful

quest have been denied modern man: how can one maintain faith when it proves again and again to be gullibility? how can one recognize the true from the false paths with the ambiguity of contemporary road signs? finally, what if there simply are no answers, no roads home? In any event, Profane fails to fulfill his quest either because his instincts fail him, or because the individual is impotent to overcome the real hardships of the quest and the evils that beset society. I tend toward the latter conclusion because Pynchon's other characters, while often sympathetic, never do succeed. It can be argued that Stencil's failure results in the first place from his manufacturing a fraudulent quest for himself to fulfill his need for a quest. However, Stencil has no other options for personal fulfillment (as far as we know), no other way of coming to grips with his unfulfilled need for a home and a sense of identity. Only through the act of questing can he affirm his existence. While Stencil's futile quest may not seem to make his life worthwhile, and may, in fact, be seen to be a denial of historical and political reality as those are usually conceived, his sense of his quest seems undeniably necessary for his psychological balance. Like many questers, he seeks atonement with his father, that is, both his biological and his historical progenitors; but, as for all Pynchon's anti-questers, the goal of "home" is necessary but illusory, and any gains Stencil has made are not constructive towards achieving the traditional end of the quest.

At first, Oedipa in The Crying of Lot 49 is on the apparently traditional quest for self-knowledge and restitution of her meaningful place in society. Since she engages our sympathy, is extremely adaptable and open to experience at the start of the novel, is filled with dissatisfaction and determination, and seems to have a conscious recognition of her aims, her failure to make much headway by the end of the novel seems rather damning to the notion that any quest can be successful. Edward Mendelson and I (and a few other critics) have taken exception to the common opinion that Pynchon is ridiculing the notion of questing, because Oedipa remains a sympathetic

character throughout the novel, because she's easily preferable to any of the alternative characters who ridicule her quest, and because the quest itself has not so much failed as evolved into something else, into what I've called the anti-quest. It's not likely that she'll unravel the legacy of her father figure, Pierce Inverarity, nor find a home worth returning to (Mucho has cracked up), but she has learned that she needs to affirm human life. This is described in particular in her epiphany with the sailor and his DTs, where she confronted "change . . . for what it was, . . . where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick." She knows the value of each individual's life--not much, but all there is. For Oedipa, there are no solutions to this paradox, and while she achieves a degree of knowledge about herself and her place in the universe, it is not certain or even helpful knowledge but only an infinite series of irreducible probabilities that leads her not home but further and further away from her origins. Therefore there can be no return, but only an unending anti-quest.

Gravity's Rainbow presents a series of characters on various quests. Slothrop is questing for his personal identity and, coincidentally, the identity of our age. Like Profane's, his failure may be due to his own inadequacies, but again we see that he is confronted by natural and historical forces that turn him away from the quest, that deny the possibility of its fulfillment. In the end, his disintegration may be interpreted as a final reintegration with the forces of the physical universe, but the very harmony thus achieved negates any chance for psychological or social reunification. Furthermore, his giving up his quest in this way marks his departure from life as we know it; the continuous trial of the anti-quest, the task of affirmation, has been too much for him. Enzian and Tchtcherine are questing for the OOOOO, and coincidentally for their personal identities. The Hereros have no home, and their myth of return, once cyclical, like all quest patterns, now seems to dead end or lead infinitely toward death. This final escape from rather than reintegration with society is another anti-quest. Blicero sees all cyclical patterns, including

quest patterns, as impossible to achieve on a physical level because the world's natural course has been disrupted. As "the father you never quite managed to kill," he is just one of a number of apparently insurmountable obstacles incorporated within the psyche of the quester that prevent the quester from achieving his traditional goal of reunification.

Stories of the completed quest give their readers a sense of satisfaction. The quest validates the sense of unity of experience and values and seems to be a psychological necessity for human beings who must face a daily life. Furthermore, the traditional quest pattern explains the relationship of the individual's present to his past and future, anchoring him comfortably if superficially. Pynchon's writing career so far has exemplified the anguish caused by the contemporary sense of fragmentation of experience and values, the confusion and futility of attempting to understand the connections of past-to-present-to-future by traditional means. Only the process of questing, the reflex of the self in search of itself, provides hope and makes life bearable. The anti-quest is the fictional pattern that acknowledges our present fragmentation as well as our eternal need.

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In turning down the Pynchon session, the MLA has provided a reminder of the importance of critical exchange in such a context as Pynchon Notes. We hope to receive and to present many short articles and responses and hope that most of the responses will not be homegrown, as is that which follows.

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