

A Note on Pynchon's Naming

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Why do Pynchon's characters have the names that they do? The names are provocative, clever, funny, appropriate, bizarre, and multifarious, everyone seems to agree, but virtually no critic has inquired into the distinctive logic by which Pynchon impacts the significances he wants to reveal into the names he gives his characters.

The usual procedure is to pick off a symbolic possibility from a character's name, and work it into the interpretive scheme of whatever it is that the critic happens to be discussing. Thus William Plater, in his commentary on the fruitless "tour" of Oedipa Maas, emphasizes her passive isolation by noting that "Oedipa's own name suggests Newton's second law of motion in which mass is the term denoting a quantity of inertia."¹ Other critics have been quick to convert the obvious lure of Oedipa's first name into meaning of a more active sort (for her). No one, so far as I know, has sensed the pun--especially on the oedipal resonance of her first name--when both names are pronounced: "Maas" can be voiced to sound like "my ass"; this Oedipa is no Oedipus, or only one at the earnest reader's peril.

It is a peril, I think, few critics of Pynchon have been mindful of, because they simply assume that Pynchon chooses symbolic names for his characters in the way that most authors do. The names are meant to disclose some essential facet of character which it is the burden of the narrative to enact and clarify: so the major characters' names in the novels, from Profane and Stencil to Slothrop, Pointsman, and Blicero, have been explicated. The deliberateness of the naming is seldom conceded its joking, ironic, tear-away dimension, much less the sense in which a name such as Oedipa Maas seems to provide an overload of significance, and almost more information than can be pressed into a determinate "meaning." Pig Bodine's question at a party in V., "What do you think of Sartre's thesis that we are all impersonating an identity?"² is an idle one, but the thesis deeply

informs Pynchon's characterization, by which characters are often discontinuous with their names. They are who they are, and it is appropriate--that is to say, revealing--that they are named "who" they are; what we usually experience, as with Oedipa Maas, is less an identity than a name where an identity ought to be. Pynchon names his characters as he does in part because he wants to confer on them an identity or identities they are only partially able to embody. Their names are roles which they impersonate with varying degrees of success, but never completely. Their names always elude them, persisting almost as titles which they never fully lay claim to; there is always the sometimes comic, consistently ironic Profane who longs for transcendence, or Pointsman, who suffers the nightmares of a meagre personal existence, or Oedipa, who never kills her father and never suffers the recognition.

The most important thing to stress about Pynchon's naming is that it is his. It is something he "performs" upon his characters, whom we therefore never cease to view as "characters." How else can we regard a macho stud named Duke Wedge or a functionary who "absorbs" information named Stanley Kotecks? Gravity's Rainbow alone is filled with over a hundred minor characters, all (as we say) "aptly" named, every one of them so utterly "in" the name as to make each seem a role, an artificial creation, or a pun, and little more. We respond continually to the irony of the gap between the name and the impersonation (especially when the latter is not apposite or runs counter to the former); only here, since the characters are minor, we seldom get to see a Thunder Prodd or a Webley Silvernail act out the absence. There is only a name--a joke--where we would expect to find a human presence, a "god fried" where a Gottfried is.

Richard Poirier especially has written eloquently of Pynchon's deep suspicion of literature and his impatience with "literary" versions of experience. In-scribing caricatural functions in names, and embedding otherwise imperceptible significances in them, are both means to expose the illusions of fiction-making which aspire to present the reader with "real" characters who have an independent existence apart from

the design of the world they inhabit, and from the creator who gives them a local habitation and a name. But the crude, outlandish, or just plain silly nature of Pynchon's naming also enables him to ground the whole enterprise of writing in something more rough, grating, lavish, energetic, and, perhaps above all, mindless than the very connotations of the word "enterprise" allow, much less the conventions and the refinements of "literature." To name a character Diocletian Blobb is to mock the very act of naming. The pleasure one takes in such a name is a mindless pleasure--even as one remains mindful that Pynchon needs such naming in order to counterbalance and renew his severe, powerful intellectual energies that could easily threaten to take full possession of the fiction.

Of course the sheer range, if not quite the force, of Pynchon's mind finds expression in his naming as well. A name such as Fergus Mixolydian is a resource of a name, a creation compounded out of literary and musical lore. Many of Pynchon's names are repositories of his knowledge, like this one. The effort to discern their aptness, in terms of both the character and the novel in question, seems to me to be one of extraction. Portmanteau constructions such as Pierce Inverarity are often clear enough ("inverse" and "rarity") and often allusions (to Moriarity, in this case) but understanding the principle will not easily yield up the multiple puns and arcane allusiveness of Vaslav Tchitcherine or even Blodgett Waxwing. Regarding the latter, for example, according to what logic are we to rule out the waxwing in the first line of the poem in Pale Fire? Pynchon encourages as much as discourages, I believe, the sort of higher nonsense he knows was openly elicited by Joyce, and this is one reason to stress the affinity in Pynchon of the higher with the lower sort. Whatever the ingenuity and the care which conceived these names, they never lose their ironic character and their irony is never very far from the frivolous.

Frivolous, it needs to be said, because the act of naming is so serious. We are told the act is crucial twice in Gravity's Rainbow, the novel which most fully explores the insidious consequences of names of any sort. Insofar as we are speaking of the naming of

characters, Edward Mendelson has already stipulated what I take to be the most vital rationale Pynchon wants: "In his books, character is less important than the network of relations existing either between characters, or between characters and social and historical patterns of meaning."⁴ Pynchon's naming enforces this aim by incorporating vast amounts of what might be called lore, or, more clinically, data: not only social and historical, but also scientific, linguistic, filmic; there seems to be no type of cultural discourse he does not draw from, no type of discourse he would have us not immerse ourselves in in turn. His characters have the names they do because they are not merely their personal histories. They are the products of more "networks" than they can possibly know, and so names must be devised to make them known. What the Pynchon name discloses is less the human identity than the constituent elements of that identity, which does not reside in what is most personal, nor even in what is most "human," about that character. Where does it reside instead? It depends on the character, of course, but generally we must attend to the social or historical patterns of meaning Mendelson writes of, Or we must attend, in a word, elsewhere. The Pynchon name is actually a pastiche of familiar and recondite data. The name--any name--is but a chance distillation, which it is the burden of the fiction to assemble, configure, and connect.

This is why Pynchon's naming must be frivolous. To recall the passage about naming in Gravity's Rainbow: "There may be no gods, but there is a pattern: names by themselves may have no magic, but the act of naming, the physical utterance, obeys the pattern."⁵ Pynchon's names finally amount to a demystification of naming itself. Taken by themselves, each separately, they have no magic--they are too silly, too extravagant, or too self-consciously "clever" to be that--but there is magic in them: the magic of a pattern. Pynchon does not so much desire to impose the pattern as to reveal it, disclose it, inscribe it. Therefore the names are ultimately codes--the process by which they are conceived is a coding--which need to be seen in relation to other codes, semantic and otherwise, which the whole narrative of each novel weaves, disperses, and authenticates. The name of each char-

acter only partially signifies that character. It also signifies pattern, function, energy, information-- and the impure, free-spirited play of signification itself.

One of the most chilling moments in Gravity's Rainbow is when Slothrop discovers the initials "T.S." in Jamf's codebook: "Well, holy cow, Slothrop reckons, that must be me, huh. Barring the outside possibility of Tough Shit." (286) What is so chilling is Slothrop's realization (and ours) that he has been determined. He realizes that all his life until this moment he has been imprisoned in a name which was Theirs. The "T.S." which confronts him reveals a business transaction coincident with his very identity and suggests the control inscribed in his very desires. "Jesus Christ," Slothrop thinks, "I've been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef," (286) and a feared smell thickens in his memory until he becomes aware that it now has a name as well as a history: Impiplex G. The sense in which this name acts in turn to usurp his own name is confirmed to him by his recent dream of long ago reading "JAMF" in an old German dictionary: "The definition would read: I." (287) "Jamf" is of course yet another name which converts into him and he into it; Slothrop feels lost, dispersed, and nameless amid the power of Their own nomination.

The disclosure of this pattern to one of his characters has not existed before in Pynchon's fiction, and much of the sheer excess of Gravity's Rainbow is, I feel, explained by it. The exacerbated, lurid, prankish, and pitiless assault of idioms, perspectives, and structures that overwhelms the reader is configured, for a moment, in the consciousness of one of the characters, who feels the stark truth of his own bewildering personal history with almost visceral force. The experience is an experience of subjection, and its simple poignance here indicates Pynchon's own felt subjection everywhere to the sheer authority of naming-- not only the naming of characters, but, it may be, the naming of anything, or of language itself. Certainly in this novel to name is to have the power to do so, and, insofar as characters are concerned, to name is to inflict that power on another, as They do to Slothrop, or as Blicero to Enzian. Much as he wants to depose this power, Pynchon cannot help but be impli-

cated in it. All he can hope to do is turn names against themselves, keep the energy of their authority circulating, and load the principal character of his last novel with so many names that by the last time we glimpse him he seems to have eluded them all, and to be passing out of the text nameless.

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Notes

¹ William M. Plater, The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 82.

² Thomas Pynchon, V. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1963), 130.

³ In The New York Times Book Review of July 17, 1966 (22, 24), Pynchon has the following reply to Romain Gary, who charged that the name, "Genghis Cohen," found its way into The Crying of Lot 49 from his own novel:

I took the name Genghis Cohen from the name of Genghis Khan (1162-1227), the well-known Mongol warrior and statesman. If Mr. Gary really believes himself to be the only writer at present able to arrive at a play on words this trivial, that is another problem entirely, perhaps more psychiatric than literary, and I certainly hope he works it out.

What is especially interesting here is how willing Pynchon is to concede the triviality. He makes no statement of any great or distinctive purpose. He was merely being sportive, nothing more.

⁴ Edward Mendelson, "Introduction," in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978), 5.

⁵ Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 322. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.