From Cabals to Post-Structural Kabbalah

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Thomas Pynchon. By Tony Tanner. London and New York: Methuen, 1982. 96 pp. $3.95.

The justly famous "Caries and Cabals" chapter of Tony Tanner's City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970 (Harper & Row, 1971) championed Thomas Pynchon as a major writer when many critics had not yet gotten around to reading V., let alone The Crying of Lot 49. Tanner followed this astute discussion of Pynchon's first two novels with a less perceptive but still valuable review of Gravity's Rainbow in London Magazine (1974). Both chapter and review were reprinted together as "V. and V-2" in Edward Mendelson's collection of essays on Pynchon (Prentice-Hall, 1978). As nearly as I can tell, Tanner has reworked and expanded those earlier pieces, added a standard interpretation of Pynchon's short fiction, and appended enough biographical data to bring the total to 96 pages. Gracefully written, as we should expect, Tanner's reflections in book form are best described as a sort of appreciation. Measured against mature Pynchon criticism, the monograph seems not so much dated as quaintly cautious, as if Tanner still felt that he had to persuade the establishment that Pynchon is worth its attention.

In some ways, of course, this approach is ideal for the diffident reader dismayed by the attacks of a Gore Vidal or a John Gardner (who do seem to be the establishment) or, more likely, who is simply bewildered by the proliferating scholarship. Somewhere in the Zone of Pynchon criticism, little states are beginning to form, and to judge from surveys of the field by Schaub (PN 7) and by Fuoroli and Clark (in Richard Pearce's Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon [G.K. Hall, 1981]), the bureaucracies are fairly advanced. The range of criticism these days stretches from the interpretations of "amateur readers" (in Richard Poirier's condescending phrase), who delight in trying to solve the riddles of The Crying of Lot 49 or to identify, say, every hallucinogen mentioned in Gravity's Rainbow, to

the ruminations of the mandarins, who dutifully measure valences between reader and author. At their best, the amateurs track the many allusions to their origins while the mandarins sketch the resonant lines of force in Pynchon's narratives; at their worst, the amateurs can succumb to Stencil-like pursuits of clues while the mandarins can warp their obsessions into Jamf-like arrogance.

Tanner avoids the extremes of both types, although he shades toward the mandarin position. Mandarins almost always quote the passage from Gravity's Rainbow that ends: "Is the baby smiling, or is it just gas? Which do you want it to be?" in order to conclude--triumphantly--that the reader can discover ambiguity here. At this point, the amateur reader, like Lyle Bland's son Buddy, may understandably elect to go see The Bride of Frankenstein. Tanner quotes the passage, not at all smugly, but manages to include a few fashionable remarks, some of them extremely pertinent, on codes and texts. Gravity's Rainbow, he says, "is only one text but it contains a multiplicity of surfaces; modes of discourse are constantly turning into objects of discourse with no one stable discourse holding them together" (77).

Reading texts is of course crucial to understanding Pynchon's purposes, and there is something sweet about the assumptions that Tanner brings to the task. He begins his book with a chapter called "Thomas Pynchon and the Death of the Author," taking his title from Roland Barthes's 1968 essay (translated in Image/Music/Text) in which the French critic asserts, among other things, that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." Given Pynchon's celebrated passion for personal invisibility and his apparent determination to be publicly separated from his texts, Tanner finds the aphorism especially appropriate to the American recluse. While some of Barthes's text does illuminate Pynchon's, this particular assertion strikes me as a species of what a colleague with a fine talent for ethnic slur calls "frogthink," after the French propensity for calling a spade a signifier. Fascinated by text, Gallic critics lay out elaborately rational tables of signs and syntax, then, unable to tolerate their own systems,

subvert them by factoring in anachronisms like the morbidity of the artist. Although Tanner's chapter title might enchant the undergraduate (who can thus the more easily accept Pynchon as a great writer who courts literary suicide) and please some critics (who like to think that Pynchon is morbidly fixated on death), Pynchon himself resists this kind of romanticism. For example, in his self-loathing and megalomaniacal hysteria, the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow may resemble the destructive V. and Blicero as they hurl themselves at interfaces of life and death, but Pynchon himself is not to be confused with his narrator or his characters. Moreover, to deny one's self a public identity is one thing; to abdicate the office of author, to shift the burden of interpretation to the reader, is quite another.

The point would not be worth making, perhaps, were it not that latent romanticism leads Tanner consistently to undervalue the significance of science and especially of technology in the novels. For Pynchon, language is man's primal technology. For him, the writer as manipulator of language is as much a technologist as the synthesizer of a polymer or the ballistics expert on a rocket-team, and like them, he bears responsibility for his creations. Tanner certainly knows how much sheer inventiveness and technical skill go into Pynchon's narratives, for few critics are more enthused about the "mixed writings" (another gleaning from Barthes) of the fiction, yet his comments on the technology of writing take the form of special pleading for the author, who, Tanner seems to suggest, disappears from his text untainted by his labors.

"There is a good deal of well-informed technological reference in [Gravity's Rainbow]," says Tanner, "inserted not gratuitously but to demonstrate how technology has created its own kind of people (servants) with their own kind of consciousness (or lack of it)" (74). To believe that bit of conventional wisdom is to ignore the book's explicit associations between language and technology and to patronize Pynchon himself, who knows that the web of discourse is no less artifice than any inventor's fabrication, that the world as construed by the writer is no less unreal

than any scientist's conception of it, and that the artist's motives are no less morally ambivalent than any engineer's. If it is true that literature operates as something more than the mechanical encoding and decoding of texts, it is also true that any technology--even one twisted by perversity--operates as something more than the transformation of intimidated humans into still duller objects. Acknowledging that fact--insisting that it is the romantic longing for transcendence that perverts--is ultimately Pynchon's chief claim to stature as a writer.

Romantic assumptions also predispose Tanner to overvalue V. If his treatment of Pynchon's first novel, with the nicely pointed critical oppositions between hothouse and street, communion and tourism, is still a splendid one, his argument that the book is underrated falters on Tanner's fondness for the fin de siècle theme of romantic decadence. That V. is concerned with such decadence is undeniable; that Pynchon himself finds the theme simplistic is also evident from the complex changes he rings on the theme in his later work.

Tanner's preference would be forgivable were it not for his apparent conviction that the shallow use to which Pynchon puts the metaphor of entropy in V. remains a constant in The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow. In V., entropy is equated almost solely with cultural decline, an equation that even Henry Adams toward the end of his life would dismiss as sophomoric. (I hope that Tanner will read Daniel Simberloff's "Entropy, Information, and Life: Biophysics in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon," Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, 21, 4 [1978], easily the best discussion to date of Pynchon's superlative post-V. handling of entropy as metaphor and theme.) It is hard to imagine a more impressive first novel than V., but it has nowhere near the brilliance of Pynchon's subsequent work.

Tanner does not lavish the same degree of analysis on The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow. In the case of CL 49 that is perhaps just as well, for he makes a half-hearted attempt to explain the title with reference to the Gold Rush of '49. Taken far

enough, the strained linkage would suffice to enroll Tanner among the amateurs. Nonetheless, in his final two chapters, especially that on Gravity's Rainbow, Tanner's critical acumen and his reading of the structuralists prove most rewarding. From Lacan, Levi-Strauss, and Henry Lefebvre he borrows insights of precise relevance to Pynchon's fiction. Pynchon's characters, Tanner says, suffer from an "overabundance of signifier." Too much to read, too much information to interpret, too many signals to decode: it is a plight peculiarly modern, and Pynchon's genius lies in his ability to make us share in a bewilderment that is ultimately our own. Tanner's is a succinct explanation for the many languages, modes of discourse, types of behavior, and mixed writings that the texts contain. My only complaint here is that the discussion is too brief, considering the provocative ideas raised. When Tanner seizes on "frames," for example, a term he picks up from Poirier, he seems to be referring less to the word's cinematic sense than to the kind of "frame analysis" that Erving Goffman attributes to "the organization of experience." I should very much like to see Tanner dwell on his conception at extended length.

Tanner's wide learning and capacious intelligence, however, should have contributed more to this modest book. Ninety-six pages offer too limited a forum for a critic of Tanner's caliber. On the other hand, the volume's brevity will probably ensure its success as a popular introduction to Pynchon. And, despite my quarrels with the critic here, I think it will be successful: Thomas Pynchon is an eminently readable text.

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