

Schaub's Pynchon

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Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity. By Thomas H. Schaub. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1981. 165 pp. \$13.50.

Pynchon studies were born in 1963 with the first reviews of V. Eighteen years later they have arrived at their full maturity with the publication of this admirable volume by Thomas H. Schaub. Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity is not only the finest work available on its subject, it is also a distinguished and wide-ranging study whose implications should be felt in many other fields. Schaub's book is one of the most sophisticated and original examples of recent criticism that focuses on the reader's response to literature; what distinguishes Schaub from other practitioners of this method is his commitment to the author as well as to the reader. He demonstrates what many critics have already suggested in more tentative ways--that Pynchon is unique among contemporary writers in the way his work specifically implicates the reader, both in the act of reading itself and, far more significantly, in the effect his books can have on the way a reader thinks, feels, and acts.

Schaub's book is a model of how literary studies ought to be written. It is wise, lucid, well-informed, intellectually ambitious while modest in style and manner, untempted by irrelevance or obsession, and continually illuminating. Schaub approaches all of Pynchon's work from a single perspective, which he neatly identifies in his subtitle. That is, he reads the novels and stories in terms of their increasingly direct, but also increasingly ambiguous, address to the reader, an address that requires the reader to choose for himself the terms and tendencies of his interpretation. Schaub's commitment to the author prevents him from supposing that these readerly choices are made in terms provided by the reader alone, or that interpretation is a matter of free play or cultivated misreading. Instead, Schaub details the ways Pynchon demands specific choices with general implications. In a critic of lesser gifts, a single critical perspective might lead to narrowness. In Schaub, the result is a brilliantly successful demon-

stration of Pynchon's range and coherence--those two qualities that, combined, characterize all great writers of every age.

This is a short book, but its brevity is deceptive. In fewer than 150 pages of text Schaub touches on virtually every aspect of Pynchon's work that readers have found significant, and points toward aspects that no one else seems to have noticed. What makes it possible for Schaub to accomplish so much without ever turning breathless or hasty is the centrality of his approach; one finishes the book with a sense that fewer loose ends are left trailing from the novel than are left by other critics. Schaub identifies the ways in which Pynchon's special "Orphic voice" (as he calls it in his chapters on Gravity's Rainbow) is unlike the more traditional intrusive narrator who provides a fixed source of knowledge, and also unlike the self-enclosing voice of Modernism which replaces a lost continuity in the world with an imposed continuity of form. Pynchon's voice, "which fills the world it describes instead of attempting to speak to us from a Jamesian vantage outside the world," is deliberately unstable, deliberately a source of fragments of meaning that we are free to connect if we wish, and free to leave disassembled if we prefer openness and disarray. (Like many critics of recent literature, Schaub somewhat overstates the differences between the ambiguities of his own author and the fixities of earlier ones--for example, Stephen Dedalus can not be said to find a home, as Schaub says he does--but this in no way invalidates his basic argument.) Pynchon's voice offers no final answers, not even the aesthetic or joking answers of late Modernism: "Value, for Pynchon, always lies at the interface among systems, where choices continue to be made, where there is uncertainty, and where if we value anything at all, it is the way we want it to be." The force of this sentence may be best understood by placing a slight emphasis on the word always.

Schaub's approach might be described as a uniquely powerful algorithm for solving critical and interpretive problems. He is able to use it as effectively in solving local difficulties as he is in clarifying large questions of substance and style, or to explain the changes in Pynchon's work from one book to the next. He elucidates Pynchon's "development from a

silent presence behind V. to the 'audible' song of Gravity's Rainbow," and shows how that development parallels "a decreasing dependence on any semblance of sequential plot." As the author does less of the work of linking various elements in his books, the reader is quite literally called upon to make the connections instead. Schaub himself, to some extent, also eschews a traditional critical plot. He devotes little space to V. and sets his main discussion of it near the middle of his study, because Pynchon's first novel tends to require fewer and simpler choices than do the later ones. Schaub begins his analysis (after a crisply lucid introduction) with a chapter on The Crying of Lot 49, a book in which the one-or-zero choices are easily defined but enormously complex in their significance. After the chapter on Lot 49, the remainder of the book is devoted mostly to tracing the significance of these and similar choices in Gravity's Rainbow.

Schaub's account of Lot 49 is as illuminating as it is compact. As he moves from subject to subject--from entropy to information to revelation to the final mystery of the Tristero--he traces the precise shifts in Oedipa's, and our own, understanding of the data she perceives. "As the world around her takes on more and more the character of information, Oedipa's evidence seems less like truth than clue to something beyond it." He suggests that the book "may be read as a tragic account of the difficulty of human action in a world whose meanings are always either our own or just beyond our reach." Yet even as Schaub writes this, he recognizes that the word "tragic" tells only half the ambiguous story. It is the very ambiguity of Oedipa's quest that keeps it from ending as a decisive tragedy, and that opens other possibilities instead:

If hope exists at all, it is the ability to withstand the terrible ambiguity threatening Oedipa. . . . Her position is isolated and filled with a paranoia more protective than psychotic. Yet with Oedipa we experience a broadening of consciousness, and a sense of the possibility for meanings which inhere in the world and in language. Those meanings . . . depend for their vitality on the suspension in which they are caught

--and that suspension "echoes the experience beyond our reading." Throughout this chapter, as throughout his book, Schaub maintains an unrivalled sensitivity to Pynchon's tone, and he consistently acknowledges details that complicate easy answers. Schaub's conclusions on the degree of affirmation present in The Crying of Lot 49 differ greatly from the less ambiguous conclusions I published on the same subject some years ago; I think Schaub's conclusions are the right ones.

The major test of anyone who writes about Pynchon is his ability to keep his balance in the rough seas and buffeting gales of Gravity's Rainbow. Schaub always keeps his head above water. He opens his account of the novel with the basic epistemological issue of the world-as-image, especially the new "false images that move" in film. From this he moves outward to the book's psychological tensions between "a continuity which is real but inaccessible and the [bureaucratic or paranoid] continuities which are accessible and false"--a tension made manifest in the ambiguous status of such archetypal patterns as the mandala. (Schaub provides a valuable mandala-diagram combining all the various cruciform and circular patterns of the book, and its various directional indicators, in one clearly laid-out page.) From these structures in space he turns to the extended structures in time described by Max Weber, structures that tend to stabilize and rationalize the energies of ambiguity and hope. But Schaub then counters this tendency by discussing the islands of possibility and freedom that occur in conscious choice and deliberate variety, the islands signposted by the insistent question, "Which do you want it to be?" And he concludes the chapter with the culminating ambiguity of Slothrop's disintegration and the disintegration of the novel's plot--a scattering that also may initiate a spiritual resurrection in the Orpheus Theatre in the final pages. This whole discussion is a tour de force of coherence and inclusiveness. Schaub links the ambiguity of psychological integration, where the integrated self is thereby divided from other types of continuity, with the ambiguity of social organization that simultaneously stifles and connects, and links these ambiguities to that of Pynchon's style, which deliberately burdens a character like Slothrop with meanings he is never quite able to carry.

Schaub makes it look easy to be lucid about ambiguity--although anyone who has tried it knows how difficult this task really is. He pointedly shows how Gravity's Rainbow itself "undermines the temptation to read the book as a Manichean allegory" in which all the ambiguities sort themselves out at last. He manages to find the unity hidden in the "apparent contradiction between ideas and drama" that pervades Pynchon's style. He understands that Pynchon's historical fictions are serious play, that they depend on the recognition that "the histories men write are a linguistic membrane between us and what really happened, but a tissue without which there would be no connection at all." He sees the purpose of Pynchon's notoriously mixed style, a style that discovers "in the most ludicrous that which is most important." And he emphasizes repeatedly the one argument that links all these matters together, the argument that "meaning in Pynchon is always a medium, not an answer," a medium through which to understand the world made by our choices.

Schaub's final chapter demonstrates that he is as perceptive a critic of other writers as he is of Pynchon. He deftly outlines what he calls "Pynchon's company," that group of writers who share Pynchon's seriousness of aim and his common manner, and who share his specifically political "affirmation of variety." These writers include Richard Fariña, M. F. Beal, Tom Robbins, Peter Matthiessen, and Ishmael Reed. I wish he hadn't included William S. Burroughs, but I understand why he did. (He might have added Don DeLillo instead.) While acknowledging Pynchon as the best of these, Schaub also honors their variety by naming their individual virtues, just as he identifies the compelling immediacy of their common concerns.

Throughout his six chapters Schaub is simultaneously alert to the dark disintegrating aspects of Pynchon's work and sensitive to its summons to integration and communion. This summons is more complex and important a matter even than the literary unity of Pynchon's books themselves or of their unity with an American tradition. It is a matter that Schaub points to when he writes, "The real world of the reader is a part of Pynchon's fiction; the two, which at first seem so far apart, become inseparable in the act of informed

reading." To connect the book and the world, in such a way that neither dominates the other, is the most compelling and difficult task of literary criticism, of "informed reading." And the criticism Schaub provides for Pynchon is as informed and sympathetic as an author can hope to receive. As Schaub says in another context, this informed reading that brings book and world together "is the benign aspect of our study and participates not so much in the 'routinization' of Pynchon's writing as in the community conjured by his song." This sentence may stand as an accurate and eloquent description of Schaub's accomplishment.

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