

Full-Length Portrait in a Post-Soviet Frame

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Thomas Pynchon and His America: Enigmas, Parallels, Cultural Contexts (in Russian), by Alexei Lalo. Minsk: RIVSH-BGU, 2001. 268 pp. 110 rubles.

Alexei Lalo's *Thomas Pynchon and His America* is the first book-length study of Pynchon in post-Soviet American Studies. The fact that it is the first one determines much of the character of the research. The volume of Pynchon criticism in Western academia is huge, while in the former Soviet Union Pynchon's work has not been widely available for long (the first Russian translations of his early novels appeared in 2000), nor has it been studied in depth. Thus, any Russian-language scholar of Pynchon undertaking solid research in the field inevitably falls between these two extremes of accessibility and depth, and risks losing his or her independent position while representing other critics' interpretations. Lalo's study exemplifies this problem, for it serves more as a useful guide to secondary sources on Pynchon than as an intriguing investigation of truly new aspects of his work.

This pioneering monograph contains five chapters, three of which examine Pynchon's novels (and a dozen of his short works as well) in chronological order. At the start, Lalo refers to Pynchon's precursors (Edwards, Emerson, Melville), mapping out the basic motifs in the American intellectual tradition. In the final chapter, Lalo compares Pynchon with a number of Russian writers and judges him in terms of his applicability to the experience of Russian history and culture (this part is the most individual one in his study). The title indicates that Lalo does not confine himself to developing one central theme throughout the study, but rather strives to encompass and elucidate all Pynchon's significant subjects and motifs. Therefore, the body of the book consists mostly of random cataloguing of seemingly innumerable topics, plots, motifs, symbols, characters, intertextual allusions, possible contexts of interpretation (technology, thermodynamics, information theory, psychology, poststructuralism, art, movies, racism, etc.), temperamental polemics against Soviet academicians (whose naïve and outdated misunderstanding of Pynchon Lalo takes to heart too seriously) and references to a number of authoritative Western critics (Josephine Hendin, Edward Mendelson, Ursula K. Heise, Joseph W. Slade, Thomas Schaub, David Porush, etc.). Lalo sometimes seems

more conscious of the quantity of his (and others') findings than of their quality. Nevertheless, such an extremely informed study can certainly be excused by the absence of any other in (post-)Soviet academia. And most of Lalo's ideas are valuable and useful in comprehending Pynchon's work. For example, Lalo penetratingly traces Pynchon's debt to Emerson and Melville throughout all his novels. For Lalo, the motif of artistic and intellectual succession serves as a unifying principle in the overall textual analysis of Pynchon's works. He argues that most of Pynchon's protagonists perpetually strive to gain the state of "invisible mobility" (or "mobile invisibility") in some imaginary "interregnum" to resist the totalizing control of power (official and impersonal). And Pynchon himself achieves this mysterious state of "transcendental freedom" only by embodying it in his literary practice. Pynchon thus is introduced to Russian readers as a charismatic and paradoxical optimist.

Lalo also addresses early debates about the label "black humor," arguing that Pynchon's work cannot be narrowed to the criteria of this rather unclearly defined stylistic device. He proposes instead another rhetorical frame, "a negative (or nihilistic) poetics," to encompass historical, cultural, mythological and stylistic aspects of Pynchon's texts. Lalo does not dwell too long on such issues as form, genre and poetics, but often discusses them in the light of and in relation to the general thematic and problematic context of Pynchon's novels. Narrative technique and philosophical issues are two sides of Pynchon's artistic methodology; his central concept of freedom is most explicitly manifested by the nonlinear narrative structure of his texts. Similarly, Lalo characterizes the genre of Pynchon's novels as Menippean satire in terms of Pynchon's poststructuralist vision of history. In his fourth chapter, devoted to the analysis of *Mason & Dixon*, Lalo refers to that novel's high degree of genre-self-reflexivity, and defines it as a "Menippea on Menippea," that is, Pynchon's sarcastic and self-critical reevaluation of his own previous work.

The idea of Pynchon's negative poetics allows Lalo to detect similar motifs in avant-garde prose of several Russian writers (Bely, Mamleyev, Sorokin, Galkovsky). This part is the most moving, ambitious and polemical. The chosen Russian writers are compared with Pynchon on the basis of the highly critical attitude they share toward the official sociocultural environment which violently annihilates everything animate and unique in the individual's personality. However, Lalo admits that none of these Russian writers has a talent comparable with Pynchon's powerful gift. Each of them separately represents a certain side of Pynchon's encyclopedic universe: Bely—a mythological anatomy of history and culture; Mamleyev—a gloomy psychopathological satire

of society; Sorokin—a narrative virtuosity and black humor; and Galkovsky—a deep philosophical analysis of cultural traditions. I refrain from any critical comments on such a brave attempt at comparative analysis, since Lalo himself repeats that his arguments are quite hypothetical and should be taken as an invitation to discussion.

At the end, Lalo asserts that his research is “as experimental within conventional literary studies as Pynchon’s work itself [is] within the tradition of American literature.” An explorer’s positioning himself to mirror his subject of analysis is not the best strategy for a literary scholar to whom the conventionality of academic tradition means first of all a grammar of comprehensible academic writing. Lalo’s provocative denial of such rules can be perceived as only a trivial excuse for his too free essayistic style. No doubt other (and better) Russian-language books on Pynchon are on their way, but Alexei Lalo has broken the ice, and in so doing he has helped to establish Pynchon’s position within post-Soviet American Studies.

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