

Pynchon Enters the Zone, or:  
Almost Lost in Translation?

Louisa Fleischman  
and  
Burt Weinshanker

Ordnung und Entropie. Zum Romanwerk von Thomas Pynchon (Order and Entropy in the Work of Thomas Pynchon). Edited by Heinz Ickstadt. Reinbek near Hamburg, FRG: Rowohlt, 1981. 330 pp. DM 25 (ca. \$10).

Ordnung und Entropie. Zum Romanwerk von Thomas Pynchon, a collection of critical essays dealing with Pynchon's fiction, was released in November after a three year moratorium. Completed in 1978, the book was planned as a companion text to the translation of Gravity's Rainbow, which was originally scheduled for print in the same year. But due to the problems inherent in the translation of such an extremely complicated text (and to avoid the necessity of editorial remarks similar to "unfortunately the German translation does not follow the original text here," found in an article on V.), the final version of the translation by Thomas Piltz was not sent to press (thankfully) until late last year. Though the bibliography was up-dated, the articles were not, and this may explain the absence of reference to more recent Pynchon criticism. All three of Pynchon's novels are now available in German translation. (The Rowohlt Publishing House now has the rights to all of Pynchon's translated work, carrying on a tradition of translating American literature--Hemingway, Wolfe, H. Miller, Nabokov, Barth, Jong, and others--begun prior to the second world war.) V. was translated in 1968, The Crying of Lot 49 (as Die Versteigerung von No. 49) in 1973. In contrast to the marked absence of a splash made by its forerunners, Gravity's Rainbow (translated as Die Enden der Parabel) was promptly placed upon the "Bestenliste des SWF," representing the opinion of Germany's most prominent literary critics. Thomas Pynchon has long been accepted in Germany by the members of a literary elite. One of the goals of Ordnung und Entropie is to help acquaint a larger, more general public with Pynchon's fiction, though whether it will succeed is questionable, given the density of some of the essays.

As Heinz Ickstadt, Professor of American Studies at the Kennedy Institute of the Freie Universität Berlin, points out in the "Introduction," there are definite affinities between Pynchon and Germany. The former is seemingly fascinated, "if not obsessed by Germany and its more recent history. An admirer he certainly is not." Though the names of many figures in his fiction will doubtless be appreciated by the German reader, it is less certain that various historical events referred to will evoke the same sense of familiarity, or that the response to them will always be appreciative. However, portrayals of such events as the slaughter of the Hereros in V. need not be taken too personally by German readers, as German history is often used by Pynchon to show a more general western decline, a more general decadence. As the title of Ickstadt's collection suggests, the reader will become intimate with the concept of entropy.

The collection includes translations of articles which have become "classics" of Pynchon criticism, as well as lesser-known scholarship (primarily German) from the past several years. Because Tony Tanner is seen as the actual father of Pynchon criticism, his two articles, "Caries and Cabals" and "Games American Writers Play," occupy the positions of honor at the beginning and end of this volume; between them, ten other essays are bound. At least five of these latter will also be familiar to American readers of Pynchon criticism: W. T. Lhamon's "Pentecost, Promiscuity and Pynchon's V.," David Leverenz's "On Trying to Read Gravity's Rainbow," Lance W. Ozier's "The Calculus of Transformation: More Mathematical Imagery in Gravity's Rainbow," Lawrence C. Wolfley's "Repression's Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon's Big Novel," and Mathew Winston's "The Quest for Pynchon." The remaining five articles are briefly discussed below.

Manfred Pütz's "Thomas Pynchons V.: Geschichtserfahrung und narrativer Diskurs" (1978) considers V. within the framework of the genre of the historical novel. Focusing on Stencil's attempts to track down V., Pütz stresses that the concept of fiction (what Eigenvalue calls "Stencilizing") plays an increasingly larger role in Stencil's strategy, a "surrogate" for the lack of historical coherency he finds. What

Stencil and other characters in V. show is their need for what Frank Kermode has termed "concord-fictions," that would enable them to cast a light on the world which would make it correspond to a recognizable reality. In V., Pütz maintains, Pynchon does not so much question the legitimacy of this necessity as he doubts its efficacy with respect both to historical understanding, and to the ability of the individual to cope. For the "paranoia" that is intimately connected to the need for order also undermines the latter, in that it gives birth to the suspicion that all recognizable order is but mere construct, that there exists no possibility of escaping individual subjectivity. At best, the result is rampant self doubt; at worst, loss of self (Stencil has no "I"). Fausto Majstral writes, "So we do sell our souls: paying them away to history in little installments." The history-creating consciousness is another manifestation of decadence. As it becomes clearer that hazard is in fact the dominant catalyst in history, the attempts to "narrate" history, i.e., to bring history and the recounting of history into harmony, find their parallels on another textual level: the problem of narrative becomes the object of a narrative. By breaching the realms of the "metafictional," Pynchon metamorphoses a type of historical novel into a novel concerned with the "conditions for the possibility of a historical novel." Finally, because that consciousness which attempts to deny historical entropy ultimately becomes one which produces entropy, Pütz reads V. as a testimony to the impossibility of the historical novel.

Heinz Ickstadt's "Thomas Pynchon, Die Versteigerung von No. 49" (1975) is a dense, original article dealing primarily with Pynchon's second novel. Oedipa Maas, connoisseur of civilized frustration, is seen as trying to cope with a new version of Profane's existential "angst" through a form of Stencil's speculation. The scene in which Metzger and Oedipa bet on the outcome of the melodrama Cashiered prefigures the denial of plot which is the theme and structure of Lot 49. Due to a mix-up in the reels, Oedipa must essay to decipher the true interrelation between the fragments of a projected reality. The lack of coherency in the film with which Oedipa is confronted, the actual denial of plot, reflects the theme and structure of the novel. The basic structural elements (analogy, pun

and metaphor) are used by Pynchon not only to suggest links between incongruous elements, but at the same time to cast these links into doubt. The authorial "as if," both explicit and implicit, serves not only to reveal, but also to cache meaning. Choosing to reject the question of whether or not Tristero in fact exists in favor of the assumption that it could and must exist, Oedipa accepts the possibility that she may be weaving her own tapestry of the world (like the girls in Remedios Varo's "Bordando el Manto Terrestre"). Citing the often quoted, "The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost," Ickstadt maintains that this is where both Oedipa and Pynchon are at the end of the novel--on the verge of a revelation, the recognition of which is threatened by paranoia. Pynchon's novels themselves constitute a sort of "interface," suggesting that there is a plane of "complementarity," while at the same time suggesting that the notion of such is pure artifice, fiction-making in the face of chaos. Tristero could be either what Jesús Arrabal would call an "anarchist miracle" (as could be the mystical feeling of community Oedipa senses during the dance of the deaf-mutes), or the silence of perfect communication, or the silence of total alienation. In a realm somewhere between those two silences, Pynchon tries to make verbal a lost reality of non-rational experience through a fictional strategy directed against fiction. The multi-dimensional open structures of his novels are Pynchon's own attempts to fend off entropy, but in the same vein, they become his own "waste," entrapping him in a system he has recognized as irreversible.

Complementing Tony Tanner's stimulating essay, "Games American Writers Play," Dietmar Claas' "'Ein abgekartetes Spiel?' Handlungsspiele in Die Versteigerung von No. 49 und die innovative Leistung des Lesers" (1978) seeks to view literary games in the light of a European perspective. The central theme of Pynchon's literary experiment, the attempt to make manifest the mythic history of the United States in the midst of apocalyptic foreboding, arises within the context of historical exhaustion and disillusionment. Reflecting in many ways a game of hide and seek, theater metaphor in Lot 49 functions at various levels on the "stage of

'San Narciso'" in Oedipa's allegorical quest for America. Reading Pynchon's comment on 17th century audiences, designated as "so pre-apocalyptic, death wishful, sensually fatigued, unprepared . . .", the reader gains insight into Pynchon's game strategy--self reflection. Though Oedipa fails to decipher the Inverarity machine, her attempts reveal fragments of America's mythical history. These attempts deal obliquely not just with the historical, but also with the way in which history is written and read; the reader is drawn into the game of plotting, with its inherent and continually new deviations and permutations. Much like the protagonist, the reader often succumbs to the overdeterminism of the "plot," only to find himself in a stalemate. Oedipa's frustration in her attempt to unravel the Inverarity legacy, her suspicion that she is the victim of "some grandiose practical joke," is mirrored in the reader's quest for meaning within the text. Offered an abundance of signals, the reader is maneuvered into recognizing the function of "San Narciso" as dramatic metaphor in general, and his own assigned role as reflective participant in particular. The reader is constantly made aware of the fact that the possible means of decoding the myths are fictions, but that they are nevertheless useful as such, and are perhaps the only feasible resource available. Pynchon's final casting of Oedipa in the role of rebel is the final appeal to the reader, in whose critical consciousness the boundaries between fact and fiction have broken down.

Klaus Poenicke's "Senex, Puer, Pikaro und Pynchons Enden der Parabel" (1978) offers an interesting variant within the polyvalence of Pynchon's critical reception. Placing Gravity's Rainbow within the scope of American post-modernism and focusing on characterization, Poenicke reads Rainbow in the context of post-Jungian archetypal psychology. James Hillman's revision of Jungian psychology, his endeavor to replace the monotheistic psychology, with its emphasis on a unitary self, with a polytheistic psychology, allowing for a multiplicity of selves in general, and his essay "Senex and Puer: An Aspect of the Historical and Psychological Present" (1967) in particular, provide Poenicke with an innovative frame of reference. Concentrating on the investigation of the post-modern

mutation of the picaro (i.e., the increasing abandonment of unitary personality and singular identity), and working within the phenomenology of the senex-puer archetype, Poenicke proposes to reveal the direction of the "identity diffusion" (Erikson) within post-modern literature. Burroughs' Lee and Pynchon's Slothrop serve as "fixed" objects of observation. The senex-puer constellation demonstrates a model of consciousness defined by a potential for polarity. The poles are latent in the archetype but activated via ego-consciousness. The inherent oppositions split, manifesting two contrary patterns--individual, as well as social-behavioral--combating one another for power. Senex, tending toward a rigid dominance of the world (mythologically affixed to Chronos and Saturn), manifests itself in repressive totalitarianism; Puer, yearning for escape from all limitations (mythologically affixed to Hermes and Mercury), manifests itself in anarchic revolution. The senex configuration within Rainbow, to which such characters as Weissmann, Pöckler, Margherita Erdmann, and Pointsman are assigned, designates an omnipotent, established order. Pynchon stages this order in its most oppressive and aggressive mode; its ultimate aim is the destruction of any creative aspect of sexuality, whose powers of usurpation it fears. And yet, adhering to a dialectic of polarities, the senex consciousness unintentionally, but inevitably, creates its own underground of latent adversaries. Puer consciousness centers on the revolt against the tyranny of the father. Creative transgression, symbolized not least in the rocket's breaking away from gravity, defines the field of action for the puer constellation. Foremost candidate for puer-representative is the neo-picaro, Slothrop. The foremost trait of this post-modern picaro, and that which distinguishes him from his classical forerunner, is his "absence of ego." Manifesting the strategies of "identity diffusion," the puer-picaro Slothrop remains amorphous, multiple and collective, thereby evading, if not transgressing, the fixity of established form and order. Yet Poenicke is wary of announcing Slothrop as a new culture-hero deserving veneration. For just as senex succumbs to delusions of grandeur, so is puer a victim susceptible to regressive reality loss.

Charles Russell's "Signs, Systems and Subversion"  
(translated as "Aporien der Postmoderne: Thomas

Pynchon und die Schwerkraft der Systeme" (1978) is concerned with the system of language as a model for reality within Gravity's Rainbow. Russell contends that the process of rigorous self-reflection and critical analysis, which Pynchon advocates as the only means of revealing the limitations of language and logic, underlies the decisive structural and thematic elements of the novel. Since all systems depend on signs and derive from logic, i.e., logical discourse, they all threaten to falsify the experience they define. As Stencil, Enzian and Slothrop come to realize, the system or context of experience is actually irrelevant; fear, hope, and disillusionment remain constant. It is the potential of the spoken word to become autonomous and generate a new system that underlies the total development of the novel. The interaction of reality and language--naming, differentiation and reconstruction--is comprised in the speech act, and is in fact the basis at once for power and for suffering within human existence. The implied antithesis between the realizations of Blobadjian and Tchitcherine recurs in each system presented in Rainbow. Blobadjian advocates a redemption of words from the mortal stream of speech; Tchitcherine fears alienation through written language which increasingly separates the speaker from the spoken. Pynchon repeatedly emphasizes these two fundamental and complementary mechanisms which underlie all processes of knowledge. The dilemma with which Pynchon confronts all his characters rests in the fact that every possible alternative to a particular, contingent system in turn generates a new system with its own ominous autonomy. The work, questioning the power of language, aims at confronting its own linguistic boundaries.

University of Munich