

A Couple-Three Bonzos: "Introduction," *Slow Learner* and 1984

Terry Reilly

In 1984, teachers, critics and other Pynchon enthusiasts, myself included, greeted Little, Brown's publication of *Slow Learner* with unbridled joy. No longer would we have to scrounge for these hard-to-find stories in back issues of *Cornell Writer* and *New World Writing*, and then burn up copy machines making enough bootleg copies for students and ourselves. Further, *Slow Learner* included a wonderful introduction in which the enigmatic Mr. Pynchon finally came forth to comment on his own life and work, as we had all hoped he would someday. The first reading of the introduction provided a sense of comfort and *gemütlichkeit* rarely experienced by critics or professors. Pynchon had surfaced, and we were there. With the publication of *Slow Learner*, we had the stories (excluding, as many have noted, "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna"); moreover, the introduction provided answers to many vexing questions about them: To what extent did Pynchon's stint in the navy influence his writing? How much of "Under the Rose" (or *V.*, for that matter) was derived from Baedeker? And, perhaps most important of all, how much did Pynchon *really* know about entropy?

Many reviewers warmly greeted the "disarming and candid Introduction" (as the jacket flap of the Little, Brown edition describes it). Jonathan Raban, for example, observed that Pynchon "breaks cover for the first time with a remarkably openhanded portrait of the writer as a young man. . . . [T]here is the sustained pleasure of watching a clever and talented young man struggling to find a style of his own. . . . From such a reticent man [*Slow Learner*] is a weirdly generous book." Richard Poirier, however, wrote that Pynchon's "jaunty complaints in the Introduction that the stories in *Slow Learner* fail to provide full, lifelike characters are . . . so curious and irrelevant as to suggest either that he is kidding—and I'm afraid he isn't—or that he is tired" (18). These comments all call attention to what was arguably the most powerful effect of the introduction on an initial reading. The weirdly generous tone and mood, at once confessional, contrite, apologetic and nostalgic, combined with the simple, halting style, evoked (and for many confirmed) images of a tired, burned-out Pynchon, a victim of excesses both imagined and reconstructed from the lives of his characters and contemporaries. Such a narrative voice accounted for

his silence since the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973. This was the Timothy Leary, Muhammad Ali, Richard Pryor Pynchon; Pig Bodine, Dennis Flange, or Tyrone Slothrop in his declining years; aging, Parkinsonian, perhaps a touch Alzheimerish.

The introduction implies that the title *Slow Learner* refers, of course, to Pynchon's growth as a literary figure, a trajectory bounded by the personae of young apprentice writer and aging, self-deprecating (perhaps institutionalized), canonical author. Poirier concludes that "Pynchon does not want anyone to think that this volume in any way sufficiently represents him. Instead he suggests again and again, even by means of the title, that he has since learned to do things in an importantly different way" (18). With a litany of mea culpas, Pynchon in the introduction catalogs a list of "error[s]," "specific problem[s]" and "mistake[s]" (SL 5) he made as a naive writer and "unpolitical '50's student" (SL 6). Poirier is taken in, gently chiding Pynchon several times for misreading his own stories. Along with Poirier, we appreciate Pynchon's candor; we thank him for sharing with us; we forgive him in his declining years for the transgressions of his youth; we lament that he has, in a way, outlived himself. Yet even on a first reading, there is something wrong, something phony, something very disturbing about the introduction.

In the chapter "Almost but not quite me . . ." of *Writing Pynchon*, Alec McHoul and David Wills first questioned the believability of conventional approaches to the introduction in *Slow Learner*. Using a conflated Freudian-Derridean-Lacanian approach centered around issues of transference and difference (elaborate and baroque although nonetheless convincing), they warn that "tempting as it may be, we ought perhaps to resist reading the 'Introduction' as the key to the stories which follow it" (134–35). The way to "fend off" such a reading, they argue, is through "the heuristic of calling the 'Introduction' itself a story in the collection" (135).

Here, I follow up on McHoul and Wills's argument, but I pursue it from the combined perspectives of genre and literary and social history rather than that of theory. I argue that Pynchon took the title *Slow Learner* from Orwell's *1984* and that the narrative voice of "Introduction" is a reshaping of the voices of Ronald Reagan and the reformed Winston Smith. Read not as a traditional introduction but rather as a short story or metafictional short story, "Introduction" emerges as an experiment in narrative, shaped in Pynchon's version of Newspeak. The language is not simply a revision (or re-vision) of Orwell's 1949 version of Newspeak, but rather a caricature or parodic miniature of confessional language in America in 1984—Reaganspeak or Reaganese. "Introduction" is a piece of subversive nostalgia, and in

Slow Learner, Pynchon challenges and critiques traditional narrative forms.

Pynchon's interest in history, literature, paranoia, and relations between individuals and the state makes his interest in 1984 and Orwell's *1984* understandable. *Vineland*, for example, although published in 1990, takes place in 1984, a fact Pynchon underscores in the novel's first sentence: "Later than usual one summer morning in 1984 . . ." (3). Further, if we believe Stig's description of Vineland in *Mason & Dixon* (633–34), the idyllic mythic past of Vineland and the bleak apocalyptic future of Orwell's *1984* come together as a conflation of time and space in the present, 1984, of *Vineland*. Moreover, the moment in *Mason & Dixon* when the Wolf of Jesus realizes Zhang speaks Spanish recapitulates in double consciousness in *1984* the moment Winston Smith realizes O'Brien has betrayed him:

Zhang watches him remember, one by one, the many Utterances he has felt free to make, in the Chinaman's hearing. The traditional next Step is simply to have Zhang dropp'd off the Roof during one of the night Drills,—the usual Tragedy. But then the Spaniard may see an opportunity to remove certain memories, and substitute others,—thus controlling the very Stuff of History.

To any mind at all Inquisitorial, an appealing turn of Fate,—yet the Spaniard is disappointed, soon bitterly so, at Zhang's willingness cheerfully to forget all he may have heard, to recite whatever catechism of the Past the Spaniard prefers. (530)

Given such examples, it seems logical (even inevitable) that Pynchon would have had something to say about *1984* and 1984 in 1984.

In Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith's job at the Ministry of Truth is that of revisionist historian: to rewrite past entries in the *Times* according to current Party ideology. In effect, in his public role as historian, Smith is a fiction writer, one who fictionalizes history, a practitioner of "Reality control" aka "doublethink." Conversely, in his private life, he keeps a diary in which he historicizes fiction, and it is this attempt at truth telling that produces his new understanding of the Party slogan "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (35).

After Smith's diary is discovered, he is brought to room 101 in the Ministry of Love and is tortured. O'Brien produces the photograph of Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford, drops it into the "memory hole," and asserts that it never existed. As Smith reflects on the memory of the photograph and on O'Brien's act, he thinks:

That was doublethink. He had a feeling of deadly helplessness. If he could have been certain that O'Brien was lying, it would not have seemed to matter. But it was perfectly possible that O'Brien had really forgotten the photograph. And if so, then already he would have forgotten his denial of remembering it, and forgotten the act of forgetting. How could one be sure that it was simple trickery? Perhaps that lunatic dislocation in the mind could really happen: that was the thought that defeated him. (251)

O'Brien asks, "Is it your opinion, Winston, that the past has real existence?" As Smith weighs which answer will save him from more pain, O'Brien says:

"[Y]ou are no metaphysician, Winston. . . . Until this moment you had never considered what is meant by existence. I will put it more precisely. Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?" (251)

Finally, O'Brien asks Smith to reinterpret what he wrote in his diary—in effect, to revise his own autobiographical writings to bring them into line with Party language and ideology. At first Smith refuses, but O'Brien increases the level of the electric shock "therapy" until he gets Smith to say, among other things, that two plus two equals five. O'Brien then says, "You are a slow learner, Winston" (254). After this moment, of course, Smith agrees with anything O'Brien says.

If Pynchon took the title *Slow Learner* from 1984, and if "Introduction" is a confession or revisionist autobiography, its logic is characterized by the post-torture forgetfulness, non sequiturs and other logical fallacies Winston Smith experiences and learns not to question. In the second stage of his "reintegration" (264), for example, Smith learns that "the earth is flat" and that "ice is heavier than water," and he has no problem, he thinks, "disposing of" such fallacies (281). Similarly, in "Introduction"—what we might call Pynchon's secret reintegration—Pynchon makes some rather startling comments about his writing which, on close reading, are either questionable or very doubtful. Of "Entropy" he says, "Because the story has been anthologized a couple-three times, people think I know more about the subject of entropy than I really do" (12). Such cause-and-effect logic suggests that the more the story is anthologized, the more people will think Pynchon knows about entropy, and conversely, the less the story is anthologized, the less people will think Pynchon knows about entropy. This self-deprecating statement not only parodies Tony Tanner's remark about *The Crying of Lot 49*—"The more we *think* we know, the less we *know* we know" (56)—but also becomes itself an

entropic formula reconfigured—more or less—as proportional relations concerned with anthologization, population, information and knowledge.

Discussing “Under the Rose,” Pynchon says that the “name Moldweorp is Old Teutonic for ‘mole,’” and that he “lifted” the name Porpentine, “an early form of ‘porcupine,’” “from *Hamlet*, I, v.” He concludes, “I thought it would be a cute idea for people named after two amiable fuzzy critters to be duking it out over the fate of Europe” (19). While this bizarre comment may be characteristic of the bland, watered-down explanations offered in “Introduction,” the deception is multi-levelled. The passage from *Hamlet* Pynchon refers to occurs when the Ghost—the “old mole,” as Hamlet calls him (1.5.162)—tells Hamlet about the horrors of Hell:

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand an end,
Like quills upon the fearful porpentine. (1.5.15–20)

The crux here is whether the porpentine is frightened or frightening, but in any case, the “fearful porpentine” serves as a metaphor for horripilation—the bristling or gooseflesh caused by sheer, hair-raising terror—and words like “amiable” and “fuzzy” are not normally associated with this particular Shakespearean scene.

Or again, writing about “Low-Lands,” Pynchon says, “Modern readers will be, at least, put off by an unacceptable level of racist, sexist and proto-Fascist talk throughout this story” (11). The statement presumes that an acceptable level of racist, sexist and proto-Fascist talk exists, and raises the question of what that level is.

Euphemisms and buzz phrases like “unacceptable level,” “level of clarity” (3), “forms of wrong procedure” (17), “‘derive’” in lieu of “steal” (18), etc. abound in “Introduction,” and they both echo and curiously prefigure the language Messrs. North, Poindexter, McFarland and others used during the Iran-Contra hearings to justify the arms-for-hostages plan. North’s description of the Iran-Contra arms deal as a “neat idea” uncomfortably echoes Pynchon’s “cute idea” of “amiable fuzzy critters . . . duking it out over the fate of Europe.” And while North, Poindexter and McFarland repeatedly referred to Iran-Contra as “the business” or as “embarked on a certain phase of the enterprise,” Pynchon notes that “By the time I wrote ‘The Secret Integration’ I was embarked on this phase of the business” (22).

But the most pervasive, most identifiable and most humorous voice in "Introduction" takes shape from the language (and perhaps persona) Ronald Reagan used to distance himself from involvement in Iran-Contra. Pynchon the Reaganesque narrator is forgetful, from the opening line—"As nearly as I can remember" (3)—to the end of the penultimate paragraph, where he describes "'The Crying of Lot 49'" as a "story . . . marketed as a 'novel' . . . in which I seem to have forgotten most of what I thought I'd learned up till then" (22). In between, Pynchon tells us he was "an unpolitical '50's student," although in an almost characteristic knee-jerk disclaimer, he says immediately afterward, "I was unaware of [the question of class loyalty] at the time" (6). Writing about Nerissa and the conclusion of "Lowlands," he says, "I can't remember for sure, but it looks like I wanted some ambiguity here about whether or not she was only a creature of [Flange's] fantasies" (10). He tells us that while he is still ignorant about entropy—"the qualities and quantities will not come together to form a unified notion in my head" (14)—"I was more concerned with committing on paper a variety of abuses, such as overwriting" (15). Citing "The Secret Integration," he warns, "I was to get even worse at [surrealistic juxtaposition]" (20).

Pynchon attributes much of his ignorance and misunderstanding, like Reagan, to his "Bad Ear" (4), awkwardly noting, "My mistake being to try to show off my ear before I had one" (5). Elsewhere he cautions us, "do not underestimate the shallowness of my understanding" (13), and "contrary evidence was all around me, though I chose to ignore it" (21). Curiously, like the Great Communicator, Pynchon both claims responsibility and subsequently absolves himself of it by repeatedly calling attention to his own ignorance and incompetence. Or, to put it another way, Ignorance is Truth and Truth Ignorance.

Much of Pynchon's narrative experimentation, from the psycho-journalistic style of "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" to the character in *Gravity's Rainbow* who can see footnotes to the day and hear quotation marks in speech, has been well documented. In "Introduction," however, Pynchon toys with his readers using yet another narrative trap. Without directly (and futilely) addressing the question of intentionality, I think it is safe to say that Pynchon's style and form here have something to do with Reaganspeak as a type of quasi-unitary language (in the Bakhtinian sense) of the mid-1980s, and with the Public Confession (aka Kiss and Tell) as the epistemological form most closely associated with "truth" during that decade.

Confession as a genre has historically included actual and/or simulated autobiographical events. The confessions written by Augustine, Rousseau and Tolstoy may contain more actual than

simulated autobiography, while the reverse may be said of those by DeQuincey (*Confessions of an English Opium Eater*) and Mann (*Confessions of Felix Krull: Confidence Man*). Certain conventions and expectations inform the genre of confessional writing; over time, these come to include a sense of narcissistic decadence, as evidenced in the murderous art of confessional poets such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. In post-Watergate America, almost every public servant of any note writes some sort of Kiss-and-Tell book (such as those by or about John Dean, H. R. Haldeman, Donald Regan, Oliver North and William Casey, to name just a few). And the public perception is that the more prurient, the better. In this way, the genre itself has evolved into one that is dialogic rather than merely reflective or referential; different confessional versions of events compete for a sense of authenticity, and perhaps truth, through the combined pop-politics notions of inside scoop and “let’s set the record straight.”

While some of these recent confessional narratives may have been generated by altruistic concerns, many are driven by the prospect of enormous economic gain from book contracts. In either case, it is safe to say that the confession, however styled and shaped, is voluntary. But the resonance of and allusions to *1984* in “Introduction” suggest that Pynchon’s text takes shape from what may be described as coerced, imaginary or intentionally false confessions. Rather than providing the traditional generic emphasis on True Confessions, allusions to *1984* mediate the distance between Pynchon the writer and “Pynchon” the narrator of (and character in) “Introduction” by insisting that the confession may be both coerced and false. On one level, Pynchon’s rationale here may be as simple as “I’ll tell you anything you want to hear if you promise to leave me alone” (reminiscent of the coda from the National Lampoon *Radio Hour*: “I confess I killed Papa Doc with my voodoo. Don’t hit me again”). On another level, he has produced a remarkable self-critiquing narrative which paradoxically calls attention both to its authenticity and to its artificiality. One way to describe such a critique is to coopt Poirier’s comparison of Pynchon as narrator in “Introduction” to Mucho Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*: “he is . . . best thought of as a parodist of structure and of structuring, including his own” (18). Or, to put it slightly differently: Pynchon, like Winston Smith, does not know extinction; all he knows is transformation.

The Reaganspeak which gives shape to “Introduction” resonates beyond the narrative to implicate the publisher as well. The jacket notes on the Little, Brown edition comment:

“. . . I now pretend to have reached a level of clarity about the young writer I was back then,” Pynchon writes in a disarming and candid Introduction. Indeed, as he proceeds to describe the genesis of the stories, evoke the cultural idiosyncrasies that attended them, and take stock of each one’s strengths and frailties, he reveals more about himself as a writer—young and old—than his decoders would have dared hope.

The word to be emphasized here is “pretend,” because much of “Introduction” seeks to blur the interface between reality and fiction, and between truth and falsehood, much as Orwell’s concept of doublethink does in *1984*. Pynchon—or “Pynchon”—tells us he is pretending; the publisher asserts that Pynchon is being truthful and is revealing more about himself as a writer. Is there complicity, or is it plausible deniability? Is it live, or is it Memorex?

In a clear example of this Orwellian/Reaganesque doublethink, Pynchon says, “Somewhere I had come up with the notion that one’s personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite” (21). Such a link between fiction and autobiography characterizes “Introduction” as a literary hybrid akin to the phony letters, prefaces, introductions, certificates of authenticity, and so on that appear in many eighteenth-century novels, like *Gulliver’s Travels* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and, of course, *Mason & Dixon*. Such superstructures often distance the author from the text, asserting the anonymity of the author or using the “papers found in the attic” ploy. In “Introduction,” Pynchon provides us with a parodic simulacrum of himself, an image of what we might imagine him to be, saying what we think he might say about himself and his writings, delivered while wearing the narrative equivalent of a latex Ronald Reagan mask. His conflated literary/political impersonation produces in narrative the image of a mechanical talking Pynchon one might find on display in a Pynchon Pavilion at Epcot or the Magic Kingdom.

While literary precursors like eighteenth-century novels and *1984* help illuminate some features of *Slow Learner*, pop culture, as usual, also contributes to the multi-layered allusions and languages of the text. If we take Pynchon’s advice to “corroborate one’s data, in particular those acquired casually, such as through hearsay or off the backs of record albums” (16), we need look back no further than the early 1970s, when a rock group named The Bonzo Dog Band released an album called *Introduction*. The album spoofs the habit groups had then of introducing their members to the accompaniment of some background riffs. The entire album *Introduction* consists of introductions, of hundreds of real and fictitious people and characters, including not only the band members but, among others, “Roy Rogers

on Silver and Adolf Hitler on vibes." The band, some say, took its name from the name of a monkey named Bonzo, who starred in the movie *Bedtime for Bonzo*, which co-starred, of course, Ronald Reagan.

—University of Alaska Fairbanks

Works Cited

- McHoul, Alec and David Wills. *Writing Pynchon: Strategies In Fictional Analysis*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990.
- Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Harcourt, 1949.
- Poirier, Richard. "Humans." Rev. of *Slow Learner*. *London Review of Books* 24 Jan. 1985: 18–20.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Mason & Dixon*. New York: Holt, 1997.
- . *Slow Learner*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1984.
- . *Vineland*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1990.
- Raban, Jonathan. "Try, Try and Try Again." Rev. of *Slow Learner*. *Sunday Times* [London] 20 Jan. 1985: 44G.
- Tanner, Tony. *Thomas Pynchon*. London: Methuen, 1982.