

An Elated Eye: Scandinavian Perspectives

Zofia Kolbuszewska

Blissful Bewilderment: Studies in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon, by Anne Mangen and Rolf Gaasland, eds. Oslo: Novus, 2002. 228 pp. 29 EUR.

In *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel draws our attention to an (apparently) obvious fact: "Books declare themselves through their titles, their authors, their places in a catalogue or on a bookshelf, the illustrations on their jackets." He announces with gusto, "I judge a book by its cover; I judge a book by its shape" (125). Indeed, the cover of *Blissful Bewilderment* is intriguing and elicits an immediate flash of recognition from a reader of Pynchon. A warm, deep-sepia background identifiable as a segment of an old map of North America sets off a cold, bluish-gray iris, part of which is a clock face. The clockwork eye subtly emphasizes the connection between the book, whose editors and nearly all its contributors are Scandinavians, and a Scandinavian motif in Pynchon's oeuvre. After all, the last trace of V.'s clockwork artificial eye leads Stencil to Stockholm. On the other hand, the cover image of the eye may well be seen as the reader's guide to the tenor of the essays collected in *Blissful Bewilderment*.

The eye is far from an Emersonian transparent eyeball. On the contrary, this is a Pynchonian eye, in which "a nearly imperceptible line between an eye that reflects and an eye that receives" (V 94) seems to be represented by slant lines that also look like the exhaust vapor from a soaring rocket. In this hieroglyphically condensed image the trajectory of the deadly weapon featured in *Gravity's Rainbow* represents the line the crossing of which means death, although, as Tony Tanner observes, V. "shows innumerable ways in which that line is crossed while the body is still technically alive" (*City of Words* 159). Yet the eye is also reminiscent of the "'giant Eye'" in *Mason & Dixon* (695), the target used in determining the exact course of a meridian line. The cover may thus declare the book's concern with Pynchon's fiction as a whole, from his first novel to his last. It also gives a foretaste of one fundamental feature of Pynchon criticism: the deconstructionist eye for the ambivalence of blurred and porous borders, which in being erected are constantly dissolved, and across which continues a chiasmic exchange of terms in such binary oppositions as animate-inanimate, war-peace, human-inhuman, reality-

representation, male-female, street-hothouse, Them-Counterforce and many others.

Therefore it does not come as a surprise that even the arrangement of essays in *Blissful Bewilderment* is not unproblematic. Because Pynchon's short stories (except for "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna") were published in book form as *Slow Learner* in 1984, the essay on his earliest fiction—his fiction in bud—appears late in the collection. Its placement disrupts a neat chronological ordering, and discussing the stories after *Gravity's Rainbow* resembles Pynchon's own employment of the rhetorical figure *hysteron proteron*. On the other hand, even if convinced that the best strategy of arranging the works is in order of book-publication, the reader will still be faced with the question of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna." Tongue in cheek, one might observe that in an interesting and perhaps even illuminating way—whether or not altogether intentionally—the Pynchonian spirit of subverting closures and totalizations by introducing an alien and floating element into a system has influenced the arrangement of these critical interpretations of his works.

The cover of *Blissful Bewilderment* also alludes to the subversion of hierarchy by the introduction of what Molly Hite has designated the "democracy of detail" (*Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* 134). The word NADA in the upper left-hand corner (the stub of the word CANADA on the map forming the cover's background) will be immediately associated by every reader of Hemingway and Pynchon with a preterite and profane democracy of waste, refuse and rejection. So a mere scrutiny of the cover prepares the reader for a bewildered navigation among the richness of critical theories, approaches and methods, for links and associations, and for a "[m]apping on to different [critical] coordinate systems" (GR 159).

The essays collected here are contributions by Scandinavian scholars (and Canadian scholars Dana Medoro and Robert Holton—another subversion of neat generalizations) to what the editors call (following Joseph Tabbi) the "Pyndustry" (7). Drawing on review essays by Khachig Tölölyan and Bernard Duyfhuizen, the editors sketch the phases (if not in all their complex diachronic and synchronic overlappings) of previous Pynchon criticism, noting "that the Nordic branch of the Pyndustry is still somewhat thin" (8). Although *Blissful Bewilderment* itself does not, perhaps, constitute a radical breakthrough or the onset of a completely new phase of critical practice in Pynchon studies, the essays collected in it do form a complex wave pattern, and some of them provide interesting new insights.

The authors approach Pynchon's fiction (as has been the case previously, an interest in *Gravity's Rainbow* predominates) from within

a variety of theoretical frameworks, ranging from rhetorical-formalist (Rolf Gaasland) to feminist and gynocritical (Medoro) to new–new-historicist (Inger Dalsgaard) to deconstructive (Tiina Käkälä-Puumala, Preben Jordal), poststructuralist (Heikki Raudaskoski, Mark Troy) and post-poststructuralist (David Dickson) to cyber-scientific (Anne Mangen) and to deconstructive cultural critique (Holton). They discuss the texts on different levels of generality and use different methods of interpretation. Their awareness of and openness to cross-fertilizing interdisciplinary influences are admirable. Moreover, their invocation of figures whose critical thought is forming new points of reference in the Pynconomy should be noted, especially the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, concerned with classical and Christian traditions, anthropology and the philosophy of politics (Medoro, Jordal), and the late French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Holton). Varied as their approaches are, several authors manifest interest in reader response. Gaasland, Dalsgaard, Raudaskoski, Mangen, Dickson and Troy construct their readings in a kind of imaginary dialogue with those of a hypothetical, more or less sophisticated reader of Pynchon.

Most of the authors here demonstrate an understanding of Pynchon's ambiguity not as a balance of structure and antistructure but rather as an exchange across dissolving boundaries (Käkälä-Puumala, Gaasland, Medoro, Dalsgaard, Jordal, Raudaskoski). As a result, they see the antistructure not so much as offsetting the structure but rather as its double. The antistructure is, or transforms into, the structure, and vice-versa. Troy, for example, shows in his essay, ". . . ever in a Ubiquity of Flow, before a ceaseless Spectacle of Transition," that only in *Mason & Dixon* does Pynchon appear to seize on an ever more protean, polymorphous vision of the relation between structure and antistructure. In this relation the stress is placed not so much on the excluded middle that becomes included as on an altogether new possibility that emerges.

In "'But What's a Human, After All?': Dehumanization in *V.*," Tiina Käkälä-Puumala recasts the often-discussed problem of the animate vs. the inanimate in terms of another opposition, human vs. dehumanized. She demonstrates that Pynchon's blurring of the lines between the living and the dead and his ambiguous attitude toward the possibilities of "post-carbon life"—which, she agrees, are "critical commonplace[s]" since *Gravity's Rainbow* (17)—have their roots in his first novel. She observes that the discussion of dehumanization implies a "pretextual, cultural conception of humanity as something with an absolutely positive value and, inversely, the negativity or non-value of anything non-human" (16). On the other hand, she points out that "Pynchon blurs these culturally absolute boundaries in a way that makes any

simple moral positioning very difficult, and moreover, radically problematizes the contingent ways of understanding and defining the ‘human’ as something cut off from the rest of the world, be it organic or inorganic” (16–17). She concludes with an aptly formulated thesis: “Dehumanization, therefore, is a theme about borders” (33), a statement that would probably be more vibrant if it introduced her essay.

What is worth highlighting in Käkälä-Puumala’s text is her astute and elegant analysis of V.’s transformation into an inanimate object in “a threefold process: it consists of her mechanization through the extended use of prostheses, her fetishization through the narrative emphasis on her bodily appearances, and, finally, her textualization, i.e. her transformation from a character to a purely discursive construction” (22). Käkälä-Puumala emphasizes, however, that this transformation into “an inanimate object of desire” (V 411) is precisely what resists interpretation and labeling and weakens the reader’s control over V. This conclusion offers another valuable insight.

In “The Barbaric Rhetoric of Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*,” Rolf Gaasland investigates what ancient rhetoricians would have considered linguistic faults in Pynchon’s *elocutio*, eloquence. These “faults,” barbarisms and solecisms, functioned to call attention to important aspects of texts by breaking rhetorical rules and were therefore associated with provocation, renewal, transgression and upheaval. Although these offenses appear in classical rhetoric on the level of words (barbarisms) and groups of words (solecisms), Gaasland transfers the notion of barbarisms and solecisms to the level of texts and ponders whether this notion might help us grasp the essentials of Pynchon’s literary rhetoric in *V.* In answering this question he discusses four categories of these rhetorical offenses: erroneous or inappropriate addition, where he is concerned with repetition in Pynchon’s text; erroneous or inappropriate omission, where he speaks of Wolfgang Iser’s blanks and the Barthesian writerliness of Pynchon’s novel; erroneous or inappropriate redistribution, where he considers the possibly modernist spatial organization of Pynchon’s text; and erroneous or inappropriate choice of images, where he invokes Menippean satire and Pynchon’s use of low-comic elements, which in the end are “vehicles leading directly to the serious and even metaphysical themes” (50).

To illustrate this, Gaasland mentions two tautological moments, the “existential advice” (50) by which Dahoud saves Ploy’s life, and the message Mondaugen receives from outer space. He moves confidently among a plethora of theoretical approaches, and seems to address the whole history of rhetoric and literary criticism. He enlists arguments of critics belonging to all kinds of schools to support his statements:

repetition and permutation are "literature's way of conducting laboratory experiments" (43); *V.* "clearly makes use of blanks 'in order to confront the reader with his own projections'" (45); "if writerly texts ever existed, Thomas Pynchon's *V.* must be one of them. . . . [I]t also thematizes writerliness as a process in the form of Stencil's eternal quest" (46); "The spatial form of *V.* may be inscrutable, but it is still spatial form in Joseph Frank's sense of the word" (49); and "Pynchon's serio-comical practice leads in the end to the annihilation of the serious and the comical as clear-cut and separate categories" (52).

Readers could expect to find in Gaasland's concluding remarks a more general answer to the question he poses at the beginning of the essay; and general it is:

Pynchon's literary rhetoric is highly idiosyncratic, but also, as my analysis of textual barbarisms and solecisms in *V.* has shown, in many ways typical of the rhetoric found in many major modernist and postmodernist novels. The pleonastic, elliptic, anastrophic and metaphoric barbarisms all point to qualities often highlighted in discussions of major modernist novels like for instance Joyce's *Ulysses*—respectively Nietzschean repetition, writerliness, spatial form and the ambiguous blending of high and low, serious and comic. Quintilian, then, seems to have been right in claiming that "in poets such peculiarities are pardonable or even praiseworthy." (52)

Readers will probably be a little confused because, in employing his amazing and enviable erudition, Gaasland arrives at conclusions which, although valid in themselves, do not seem to help answer the question he poses. What is more, by his critical practice he seems to enact one of the rhetorical gestures he ascribes to Pynchon, and the message he elicits appears to be as tautological as the communication Mondaugen receives: "Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist" (*V.* 278).

Also a feat of erudition, Dana Medoro's "Menstruation and Melancholy: *The Crying of Lot 49*" is subtly and meticulously argued. Medoro blazes a new trail of gynocriticism in Pynchon studies and vindicates the writer by proving void the accusations of sexism and misogyny leveled against him. Observing that "Pynchon's novel appears to unhinge the negative assumptions that enclose menstruation and menstrual blood" (65), she argues "that Oedipa's sadness or melancholy becomes a mystical condition intimately associated with the 'menstrual pains' she experiences on her quest toward the meaning of the Tristero" (56). Like Mucho Maas, a DJ at radio station KCUF who can hear everything in reverse, Medoro reads the name of the mysterious organization Tristero from right to left, which yields the

Italian phrase *Ero triste*, “I was sad.” This linguistic operation sheds light on Pynchon’s possible identification of sadness with Oedipa’s quest. Medoro argues that puns and images in Pynchon’s text embody “an intricate symbolic system or code” (57) of menstruation “with its intimations of waste, death, and cyclical regeneration” (56).

Pressing even further, Medoro suggests a new relation between an interpreted text and interpretive tools. She contends that Pynchon’s novel provides a basis for a new theory of menstruation: “Oedipa Maas’s quest gives rise to a theory of menstruation as an experience involving both melancholic wisdom and the self’s relationship to the sacred” (57). Agamben, on whose *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* Medoro draws extensively, observes that the experience of melancholia “permits a glimpse into . . . an ‘intermediate epiphanic space.’” This space of knowledge, mysterious wisdom, the “‘unreal object of melancholy’” (58), is both possessed and lost at the same time; it is simultaneously invoked and negated. Medoro ingeniously links Pynchon’s site of “excluded middles” with Agamben’s melancholic space, which emerges, as it were, from the bar between signifier and signified. Furthermore, moving along a chain of associations triggered by the pun *tear* (rip/crying), she connects the pacific, “the hole left by the moon’s tearing-free” (CL 55), with the tidal effect and cyclic movement of the moon and thus with the cyclic nature of menstruation.

Mr Thoth, who appears as “an allegorical caricature of the Egyptian messenger-god” (59), also heralds the multiplicity of discourses. But, drawing on Jacques Derrida’s *Dissemination*, Medoro emphasizes that Thoth is also god of the pharmakon, a liquid that can both remedy and poison, heal and kill. She observes that *The Crying of Lot 49* is saturated with references to liquids, remedies and toxins which “create a pharmacopoeic link between life and death” (60). As Derrida points out, Thoth, “an ancillary deity . . . god of the moon,” both “counts out the days of life” and “weighs the souls of the dead” (61). Appositely, Medoro further invokes Mircea Eliade’s view that lunar symbolism clarifies the reconciliation of contraries. Moreover, she points out, “this symbolism is closely linked with the menstrual cycle” (62). She emphasizes yet again the significance of menstruation: “In this novel about language and subjectivity, menstruation emerges as a code or narrative drug; it provides an alternative route through the tower/void opposition and the male/mail system, through which Oedipa experiences ‘all manner of revelations’” (62). Menstrual blood thus becomes “the pharmacopoeic bar between the signifier and signified, between the Word and the world of profane signs” (64).

Throughout her essay Medoro stresses that it is in her body that Oedipa can look for the answers to the riddles she encounters (63, 65-66). In thus showing how the epistemological crisis leads to the ontological crisis, she follows Brian McHale's view of how the epistemological dominant gives way to the ontological dominant in postmodern poetics. McHale also stresses that the epistemological question pushed to the extreme turns into the ontological question, and vice versa. Thus, following Medoro's train of thought, one may conclude that Oedipa's melancholy and menstrual crisis also open a site for the cyclical renewal of poetics.

What Medoro calls the "menstrual economy of images" also organizes linguistic puns. She emphasizes that the "periods" within the acronym W.A.S.T.E. are pointed out to Oedipa by the aptly named Stanley Koteks, and that "[i]t makes perfect sense that Oedipa first notices the 'waste' symbol in a 'ladies' john.' . . . The periods permit the apprehension of an in-between state" (65). She speculates that the "'bad shit' of excluded middles" might be "associated with the significance of the 'periods' between letters," and concludes that "[w]aste, shit, and menstrual blood . . . acting as a kind of pharmakon, [are] involved in the novel's repudiation of an either/or logic of one definitive truth" (67). It thus comes as no surprise that Oedipa's state is dual: she both menstruates and feels pregnant. Her attainment is also dual, according to Medoro: her quest is both a success and a failure.

Contrary to the constations about entropy in the criticism of *The Crying of Lot 49*, the cyclical self-renewal of "[t]he image of the menstruating womb . . . proposes a kind of language or vision which resists the entropic decay involved in a closed system" (68). Medoro's reading is indeed pharmacopoeic. It places her in the tide of those critical interpretations which construe Oedipa's character as possibly resisting and offsetting entropy.

Medoro's conclusion invokes yet again the paradoxical wisdom according to which only what is ungraspable can truly be grasped. In discussing the significance of Oedipa's name, Medoro draws on Jean-Joseph Goux's *Oedipus, Philosopher*. Goux claims that Oedipus fails to recognize in the sphinx a being whose body is in part "'mired in the animal materiality from which it originated'" (71): a menstruating female, Medoro adds. By solving the sphinx's riddle with the word "man," Oedipus eradicates monstrosity and places "man"—and thereby "cogito"—at the center. However, Medoro points out, by thus solving the riddle "Oedipus vanquishes not only the monstrous but also the feminine." Only after having been "symbolically bled or emptied out" is Oedipus able to ask at Colonus, "'so when I am nothing—then am I a man?'" (72). Medoro observes that only in a threshold condition can

Oedipa, as both Oedipus and the sphinx, emanate from her menstruating body a vision of cyclical regeneration, which embodies the promise of America.

With Inger Hunnerup Dalsgaard's "*Gravity's Rainbow: 'An Historical Novel of a Whole New Sort,'*" we move from gynocriticism to new–new-historicism and reader-oriented criticism. Dalsgaard's main concern is a "trajectory of 'creative reading,'" "a trajectory between the imbedded 'passive' historical knowledge of Pynchon and the applied 'active' historical knowledge of the reader" (99). She explores how Pynchon's characters and readers navigate between history and fiction, and emphasizes the peculiar relation between what is historical, that is, "real," and what is "invented." Dalsgaard contends that this relation depends to a great extent on the reader's authority. However, the relation is far from simple:

Pynchon's writing and the knowledge and inclination of the reader on the one hand and the fictional or real identity of characters on the other hand may combine in different ways with each personal reading, while characters can also build up an incidental personal history within the novel, regardless of whether they had a life outside. (82)

When considering the names Pynchon gives his characters, Dalsgaard discusses Heinz Rippenstoss, whose generic German first name and last name echoing that of a German general invest him with the air of historicity. Such is the force of this mutual influence—or should one say interpenetration—of fiction and history in Pynchon that the general's name gets assimilated in the essay with that of the fictional character, and unless it is just a typographical error, Joachim von Ribbentrop becomes Joachim von Rippentrop.

In investigating both fictional characters created by Pynchon and historical characters that appear in his fictional universe, Dalsgaard also scrutinizes the ways fiction illuminates and even revises history, but also how easy it is to fictionalize history by carefully selecting and editing events represented later as historical "truth." Focusing on the historical character of Wernher von Braun, who also appears in *Gravity's Rainbow*, she aims "to uncover the ability of such a character to move within and outside literary worlds (with the help of the reader) in order to become real." She is interested in "not just how but why [*Gravity's Rainbow*] achieves such dynamic life for its historical-fictional characters" (82), and she poses "the fundamental questions of whether *Gravity's Rainbow* really is fiction and whether Wernher von Braun is historical" (86). It is here that Dalsgaard's pursuit reaches beyond new-historicism and becomes new–new-historicist.

One of Pynchon's aims, Dalsgaard points out, is to alienate the reader from what he or she may believe a single truth by means of "microstrategies" which employ historical events. "So," she observes, "while *Gravity's Rainbow* is saturated with historical detail and facts the latter are not always prioritized in ways readers might have chosen" (90). By letting von Braun have the first words of his novel (in the epigraph to part 1), Pynchon encourages "the reader to suspect that [von Braun], and/or what he says, is important and may (mis)guide their reading" (95). Indeed it appears to be of paramount importance because, Dalsgaard stresses, whereas "[m]ost of Pynchon's references to von Braun seem objective expressions of a stable past," the most conspicuous one, the epigraph, "leads us straight into the fictional heart of the man himself" (96): a man who deliberately screened out his Nazi past and managed to become a leading figure in the American space project, who pontificated on how ethics would decide the application of atomic energy, and who consciously invoked the authority of Benjamin Franklin to appropriate the air of a righteous inventor, space expert and benefactor of humankind. Dalsgaard concludes that von Braun "would thus gain immortality through history if he could fix in people's mind the idea that his conduct deserved it, and keep them on that track." *Gravity's Rainbow* may subvert von Braun's sanitized and sanctified image, but, Dalsgaard observes, it may also, paradoxically, "allow [people] to keep it if they insist" (98).

Aptly, Dalsgaard ends her essay with a warning against directional and manipulative reading of Pynchon's fiction as repetitive of Blicero's and von Braun's gesture:

Whereas we let our historical knowledge and directional reading in Pynchon's fiction determine [history and literature's] importance and route through the book, because that is the way we tend to navigate, the course we steer is akin to the rigidity with which Blicero and von Braun thought they could manipulate and even fix history into a terminal, a-historical immortality. (99)

Captain Blicero, the fictional counterpart of Wernher von Braun, and his taste for Rilke's poetry are investigated in Preben Jordal's "Savage Flower—Reading Pynchon Reading Rilke." Jordal sets out to determine to what extent the rhetorical strategies in *Gravity's Rainbow* stem from Pynchon's reading of Rilke, whose intertextual presence in the novel is conspicuous. Although the relation between Rilke and Pynchon's novel has been studied in detail on a conceptual level, the similarity in Rilke's and Pynchon's strategies of poetic figuration has hardly been addressed in depth so far. Jordal lucidly, succinctly and elegantly presents

Pynchon's strategy but also shows erudition and subtlety as a Rilke scholar.

Jordal examines how Pynchon portrays Blicero's character as determined by the captain's reading of Rilke, and investigates whether "Pynchon displaces the representation of psychological depth by making it a question pertaining to rhetorical figuration rather than to representation" in order "to determine what part in this process of displacement is played by [Rilke's poetry]" (104). He discusses in detail the episode in which Blicero names Enzian in Südwestafrika and briefly comments on the transformation of Tyrone Slothrop into an Orphic singer moments before his disintegration as a character. He refers to Paul de Man's analysis of Rilke's employment of chiasmic figuration "because certain of his insights resonate with how Pynchon is reading Rilke" (108); nevertheless, in discussing the scene of naming, Jordal finds Hölderlin's idea of a caesura more congenial for explicating both Rilke's figuration strategy and Pynchon's in this episode.

Jordal demonstrates that "a peculiar epiphanic character" (111) of this scene of naming parallels Rilke's *Umschlag* in the Ninth Elegy: a turn from lament to praise at the moment the name Enzian appears. He draws on de Man's view that the chiasmus ("the ground-figure in Rilke's *New Poems* [1907]"), "a trope that performs the structural reversal of polar qualities in the pattern of a crossing," "'can only come into being as the result of a void, of a lack that allows for the rotating motion of the polarities'" (112). The subjective experiences also must contain a void or lack to be converted into poetic figures. The figure of the Wanderer who brings from the mountain only a word, the name Enzian, rather than the flower itself, suggests such a negative experience. However, Jordal argues that in order to fully understand the significance of this poetic figure, the word "Enzian" should be regarded as a caesura in the Hölderlinian sense:

the experience of a lack or void that withdraws from the sphere of representation. The exact point where it reaches its apogee of expression, its fullest meaning—is the exact point where the description withdraws from being semantically meaningful, and this is what causes representation to appear as representation. (114)

Thus Jordal claims that by re-naming the boy, Blicero seems to approach "the very borderline between that which because of its extreme emotional character is ineffable—and language as such" (115–16). Giving the Herero boy the name Enzian has sinister connotations, which is why it is a Hölderlinian caesura. What is more, it constitutes "the irreversible event in Blicero's life" because, from having been an

avid young reader of poetry, "profoundly moved by Rilke's unfathomable figurative language" (116), he has turned into a "Nazi powerlord." Jordal ascribes this change to Blicero's "having a marked propensity for language," which trait exemplifies Pynchon's theme of "the violence inherent in all forms and uses of language" (117).

However, Jordal also invokes Pynchon's "subtly ambiguous" attitude toward language. Perhaps language must also "be regarded as the only remaining means of redemption." At the threshold of disintegration, Slothrop is transformed into an Orphic figure by a narratorial voice who "lets on that he has been reading Rilke" (117). In pointing out that "[t]he lyrical subject of Rilke's sonnet speaks through Slothrop like water flowing through the harp" (118), Jordal links not only two polar qualities but also two texts, Rilke's and Pynchon's. This strategy brings out the *Umschlag* characteristic of Pynchon's text: the lament turns into praise, into a song. However, Jordal warns, "every reading of Pynchon will at some point have to arrive at the question whether song is at all possible within the range of his fiction," and concludes, "it is only by listening to this distinctly elegiac tone in Pynchon's writing that we might become able to hear how closely his writing resembles that of Rilke" (118-19). But while in Rilke the Hölderlinian caesura entails the foregrounding of representation, in Pynchon it foregrounds the suspension between representation and its impossibility:

So although in Thomas Pynchon's case only negative experiences prove to be poetically useful, this pseudo-knowledge has nevertheless resulted in a novel where an attempt is made to preserve this abyss, this forgetfulness, by sketching its outline, filling in what otherwise would have remained blank, unwritten. (119)

After Jordal's close reading of two episodes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Heikki Raudaskoski's "Pynchon, Melville, and the Fulcrum of America" offers a dizzying bird's-eye view of the vortex of the novel's textual strategies, a perspective that both places the novel in the American literary tradition and brings out its uniqueness. Raudaskoski juxtaposes *Gravity's Rainbow* with *Moby-Dick*, as these two novels are most often compared on account of the sublime and (quasi-)transcendental object each is constructed around. Using Roland Barthes's famous opposition, he asks whether their kinship can be unequivocally described as either readerly or writerly. Raudaskoski observes, however, that Barthesian boundless textuality and play of signifiers, and Baudrillardian simulacra alike totalize the writerly text. "Of course," he stresses, "the Barthesian writerly is an elitist, voluntary sanctuary for the European avant-garde,

whereas Baudrillard reserves his simulations primarily for profane, zombie-like Americans. All the same, no questions are needed or possible anymore once you have got into these spheres" (133).

Raudaskoski spurns "the French *jouissance*" for having "no secrets to it," whereas "Melville's Pacific remains mysterious" and "may even hide an old-fashioned, readerly Meaning" (128). Neither is *Gravity's Rainbow* a purely writerly text in "French fashion," because "[q]uestioning never ends in it" and the text "contains a plenitude of writerly and readerly possibilities" (133). What distinguishes Melville's and Pynchon's novels for Raudaskoski from other American quest romances is "the vastness of the tension between the 'howling infinite' of unbound space on one hand, and the teleological, apocalyptic rush of narrative time on the other" (129), a tension that never eases off in Pynchon's novel. Like the ship, which can be seen as a readerly pocket in the midst of the writerly ocean, Ishmael's narration can be construed as carrying the "universalist Enlightenment tradition." Thus *Moby-Dick*, a "vehicle for readerliness," will not break "the dualism between the (pseudo)rational, contemplative Ishmael, and irrational, romantic Ahab" (130) until the end, whereas "to enter *Gravity's Rainbow* is something different—you get into the mercurial motion between deterritorialization and reterritorialization right away" (131).

Raudaskoski cites Charles Olson, who observes in *Call Me Ishmael* that the Pacific is a repetition and extension of the plains, and that "[t]he fulcrum of America is the Plains, half sea half land" (126). No fulcrum can be located in the half-land-half-sea plains called the Zone in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the "spatiality [is] even more awkward" because "it is not a fifty-fifty situation." Oppositions are never symmetrical in the novel: "Tensions between external and internal, public and private, real and fictive, and world and self will not ease off, while, to be sure, borders between these kinds of binary oppositions prove porous" (131). The Zone is "an intense and competitive arena of diverse, centripetally readerly and centrifugally writerly forces" (134).

Compellingly, Raudaskoski's essay is placed almost, but not quite, in the middle of *Blissful Bewilderment*, which makes conspicuous its Pynchonesquely central and off-center position of a non-fulcrum, a position that typifies Pynchon's poetic strategies.

Anne Mangen's essay, "Thomas Pynchon's Writing Space: *Gravity's Rainbow* as a Pseudo-Hypertext," points to the limits imposed by the printed character of Pynchon's novel on its seeming textual and intertextual boundlessness as heralded by advocates of the view that hypertext fulfills postmodern theory. Mangen traces the similarities between the novel and hypertext, and concludes that *Gravity's Rainbow* can be described as a flattened-out pseudo-hypertext. Well

versed in both postmodern critical theory and the theory of hypertext, she agrees with Espen Aarseth that the claim that hypertext fulfills postmodern theory is based on the confusion of different levels, that of the aesthetic object, a construction in the reader's mind, and that of the real, physical object. Nevertheless, having ventured to characterize hypertext for the sake of comparison, Mangen seems to lose sight of her own initial assumptions and claims, and suggests that the democracy of detail in Pynchon's novel incites the reader to create links like those in a hypertext, whereas what she is speaking of at this point clearly belongs to the sphere of the reader's thought and intention rather than to that of what is on the printed page. Fortunately, time and again she returns to her initial assertion that reading the novel is similar rather than identical to reading a hypertext, and she emphasizes the fact that Pynchon's novel is not so much a genuine hypertext as a reflection on the mechanisms of reading a decentered, digressive and ahierarchically constructed text.

Early in her essay, Mangen states her intention to show "how *Gravity's Rainbow* has several compositional and structural features [which make] it adequate to describe it as a pseudo-hypertext flattened out." She goes on, however, to devote perhaps a little too much room to discussing hypertext rather than explaining in detail the consequences of its being "'flattened out to fit the printed page'" (141). This imbalance is redeemed by her awareness that turning the novel into a literal, electronic hypertext would ruin the "essential, Pynchonesque, reading experience." Finally, Mangen emphasizes Pynchon's percipience in foreshadowing the changed understanding of fiction and storytelling "years before concepts like digitalization, hypertext, and the www entered the field of humanities" (156).

In turn, Robert Holton's rich and lucid "Lines of Enclosure and Escape in Pynchon's Early Short Fiction" shifts the reader back in time to investigate the "embryonic form" of Pynchon's "abiding concern with the drawing of lines" (163) that throw into relief the boundaries of subjectivity and all kinds of cultural, social and historical differences. Holton provides deconstructive sociocultural readings of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" and the stories collected in *Slow Learner*, examined against the backdrop of their late-1950s and early-1960s context, with frequent reference to Bourdieu. In "The Small Rain" and "Low-lands," Pynchon acknowledges and explores "the lines of tension dividing social groups" and seeks ways of transcending them by crossing over to "zones of exclusion and marginalization" (163, 165) often presided over by the figure of an African-American. This figure relates to repressed aspects of the white male, a white-collar breadwinner who rejects his middle-class life and crosses over to find fulfillment in an

alternative community. Holton points out that “Pynchon locates in [a] dump a social structure which . . . prefigures the search for a counterforce in Pynchon’s later work” (169). Paradoxically, while it was a critical reaction to the conformism of 1950s American culture, the escape across the lines dividing society did not challenge the existence of those lines or investigate whom they served, but rather “was a strategy that left those lines unquestioned and intact—a strategy that in fact depended on the existence of those very lines for its success” (169).

In the “transitional stories” “Entropy,” “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” and “Under the Rose,” the lines of enclosure earlier interpreted as creating a “closed circuit” of conformism now “short-circuit” and cause characters alienated by the conformist culture to explode or implode. The lines “converge and blow the fuses rather than leading to a space of freedom” (169). The escape routes accessible to the characters in earlier stories are blocked. Holton emphasizes that this change constitutes “an important turn for Pynchon, as it makes possible the meditations on the very nature of these delineations which form the subject matter of so much of his mature work” (173). In these later stories Pynchon goes “beyond the standard theme of the white male in rebellion against conformist domesticity”; he begins to historicize discourses that impose lines of division in a more complex way, which allows him to interrogate those delineations as “cultural constructs needing to be understood rather than as frontiers opening up to a realm of freedom” (174).

Holton sees “The Secret Integration,” the final story in *Slow Learner*, as showing “a deeper understanding of the ontology of the lines of force structuring American community, ‘the social magic’ which, as Bourdieu puts it in a Pynchonesque observation, ‘always manages to produce discontinuity out of continuity’” (175). He emphasizes that the story was written at a highly-charged moment of the civil rights era and that the lines contested in the story are lines of racial prejudice. At first, a group of youngsters tries to cross the racial line by “emulat[ing] the available images of lower class African-American culture.” Then, “determined to challenge the constraints they confront . . . [the boys] move toward more general forms of resistance” (175). In doing so they gain insight into the “ultimately arbitrary, ideological, and thus changeable, nature of social boundaries” (177). Nevertheless, the power of those lines is great enough to prevent the boys from crossing them and to prevent the Barringtons, a black couple, from accepting the boys’ gesture. And although “[b]y this point, it seems that the lines have unmistakably become barriers that divide and enclose, and no sense remains of any frontier of possibility,”

the images of division, “bisection, captivity and cataclysm are not presented with the force of inevitability in this story. The bars, the lines, are close and clearly marked perhaps, but some freedom remains a possibility” (178).

Holton refers here to the explanation of integration, the mathematical operation, that one of the boys offers using the metaphor of a jail cell. If the lines on a graph were bars, they would never become a solid wall, so if “‘whoever was behind [the bars] could make himself any size he wanted to be, he could always make himself skinny enough to get free. No matter how close together the bars were’” (178). Incidentally—and Holton does not appear to note it—the boy’s comparison also shows in embryo Pynchon’s strategy of using scientific metaphors for social, historical and spiritual phenomena, a strategy which is also of paramount importance in his mature fiction.

What is more astounding is Holton’s neglect of the fact that the white boys have an imaginary black friend, a boy they pretend is the Barringtons’ son. Neither does Holton appear to think much of the Gothic space in the story—the decaying mansion on King Yrjö’s estate. Perhaps this neglect can be explained by Holton’s choice of sociocultural approaches. However, in Pynchon’s novels—his mature works—the historical and the social interpenetrate freely with the fantastic, and therefore one might assume that the appearance of the Gothic space in “The Secret Integration” is an important comment on the likelihood of transcending the lines of racial division. After all, the Gothic is the space of the uncanny, something that is both familiar and alien, something that has come to the surface although it should have stayed suppressed. The reality of racial divisions is such an uncanny secret. And it is to this Gothic space of the mansion that the imaginary black friend is consigned when the boys’ attempt to communicate with the Barringtons fails.

Moreover, the story traces a process of initiation similar to that which transforms Huck Finn from a member of Tom Sawyer’s gang of pseudo-rebels—romantic make-believe highwaymen—into a conscious witness and contestor of racial boundaries. The Gothic space in Pynchon’s story is emblematic of this growth of awareness. King Yrjö’s estate changes its status during the story from a place which “was the only real connection the kids had with whatever the cataclysmic thing was that had happened” (SL 161) to the uncanny space to which one can consign the secret of racial prejudice. It changes from the space housing a fantastic menace to the space inhabited by a real social, historical and cultural trauma.

David Dickson’s aim in the dense, insightful and provocative “Reading Innovation in Pynchon’s *Vineland*” is to “read the novel as an

intensified exploration of the postmodern experience in which an active disruption of meaning potentially serves the creation of new life-affirming knowledge" (182). Dickson focuses on the novel's own discussion, as a matter of theme and structure, of innovation. Like Raudaskoski, he demonstrates the insufficiency and reductiveness of purely poststructuralist readings of Pynchon. Interestingly, he chooses the theme of Brock Vond's cultural conservatism as his point of departure. Dickson observes that Vond's misoneism, or hatred of the new, is inherent in the thinking and actions of "American revolutionists and conservatives alike" and "breaks up any neat left-right construction of politics" in *Vineland*. This establishes a pattern of questioning both received values and "received humanistic norms for historical innovation," but ultimately "contributes to the setting of an agenda for a 21st-century discussion on innovation and historical and political responsibility" (183).

Frenesi Gates's relation to her daughter contributes to the thematization of innovation in that, by refusing responsibility for and contact with her child, Frenesi succeeds in moving outside the misoneism that underlies both her own parents' radicalism and Vond's reactionary plotting. According to Dickson, by rejecting Prairie, Frenesi refuses to hand on the hatred of the new to her daughter. "Frenesi's desertion of the child turns her, as mother, into the undefined and open-ended target of exploration and illumination." Thus:

[Frenesi] has succeeded—whether that was her intention or not—in creating openings for her offspring to . . . the onto-poetic sources of her life. These are sources antipathetic to the misoneism that locks her up from two directions, and . . . Prairie is now given the opportunity both to discover the already plotted historical designs and to create her own means of access to sources of selfhood outside these designs. (193)

More diverse sources of enquiry open up to Prairie, thanks to her mother's decision, and she has more freedom in shaping her identity than would otherwise have been available to her.

Pynchon's narrative strategies in *Vineland* parallel and express the characters' struggles to escape the strictures imposed by ideological designs. Dickson shows that Pynchon employs a double strategy of narration owing to which the novel's self-referentiality—continuous embedding, or "nesting" (McHale), of narratives—can be seen as a reality and an experience rather than as leading to Barthesian "infinite deferment of the signified." The "free play of signifiers" in the novel depends on the mode of free indirect discourse, or focalization of the narratorial voice through characters. However, Dickson observes:

What makes *Vineland*'s narrative structure deeply interesting . . . is not its mere affirmation of poststructuralist self-referentiality. For even as it undoubtedly complicates "the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction," the novel provides the attentive reader with a limited number of clues which define the main narrator's perspective. The significance of this double strategy on the narrator's part could easily be underestimated. (198)

The free play of signifiers, which poststructuralists translate into epistemological paralysis or the impossibility of knowing, becomes "an experience to be dealt with and discussed as an existential as well as epistemological problem" (198). In Dickson's reading, the "narrator's stepping forward does signal a termination of what would otherwise have been a strategy of endless narrative embedding," but he realizes that the tentative status of the narrator's privileged position signals a hesitation concerning the restoration of traditional narrative. Rather, "the narrator's strong reliance on strategies of deferral, and his tentative termination of them" point to a "more complex effort to find ways of representing the need to be at home in the world as combined with the experience of knowledge as something impossible" (200). And this, he believes, is the accomplishment of the novel. *Vineland* is an attempt to discuss new practices that would enable the truthful transmission of life-affirming knowledge "between generations without eschewing the experience of meaning's emptiness" (201).

Mark Troy's illuminating and "purposefully dither[ing]" (207) essay, ". . . ever in a Ubiquity of Flow, before a ceaseless Spectacle of Transition," traces the narrative movement in *Mason & Dixon*: "plasmic or rhizomic" narrative strategies that encourage and enable a "non-fascist way of perceiving" (206). Troy acknowledges the danger that if a novel employs the same discourse it sets out to interrogate, it may participate in the violence it speaks up against. He believes, however, that it "is more innovatively fruitful" to explore what he refers to as "the narrative strangenesses [that might] allow a serious alternative to appropriative knowing." He seeks to extend to *Mason & Dixon* Jeffrey T. Nealon's constation about interpretations of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "'a fractured unreadability coupled with the imperative to read differently,'" and sees the novel as "an example of Serres's 'logic of the excluded third'" (207).

Troy demonstrates that Pynchon's narrative strategies bring into question "originary concepts of voice, or focalizer, and audience" (210), and that the very conventions that should place the narrative serve to displace it in space and time. "[S]hifts in placement of voice" (212) sometimes violate the novel's apparent genre horizons. Characters respond to a narrator's remarks, seem to have access to the chief

narrator's private journals and metaleptically cross the boundaries of stories embedded in one another—not to mention their comments on the texts placed as chapter epigraphs. Troy concludes that violations of genre conventions and linear boundaries construct a “novel of character and event” “consistently focused . . . by negotiated emotional, imaginative or intellectual needs.” Structuring narrative “by dialogic emotional interaction, rather than the demands of linear plot, is a major aspect of . . . a non-fascist means of perceiving.” Like Dickson in the essay on *Vineland*, Troy emphasizes that “the narrative move is an ideological one” (214).

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Troy draws our attention not only to “the transmigration . . . of genres” but also to the metamorphoses of individuals that subvert the idea “of biological and psychic discreteness”—that is, “to the novel's widespread engagement with the metamorphic or ‘were’ factor” (219). These transmogrifications carnivalize the question of agency and probe the boundaries of identity, thus contributing to “the destabilizing, questing strategy” (220) of the narrative. Moreover, these metamorphoses throw into relief the strategy not so much of providing a hitherto excluded middle as of proposing an altogether new, seemingly random possibility. Captain Zhang metamorphoses into his enemy, the Wolf of Jesus, or possibly he *is* the Wolf of Jesus, or . . . just a fictitious Spaniard (M&D 629). The protean narrative strategies employed in *Mason & Dixon* bring out the possibilities inherent in the nascent United States, “us[ing] the moment before solidification to survey the possibility of negotiating unorthodox, odd, ghostly views of the past in the present—and vice versa” (215).

Blissful Bewilderment is stimulating and sometimes pleasurable. It provides food for thought by offering new insights into Pynchon's oeuvre and its complexities, and encourages the reader to venture further into unmapped territories in Pynchon studies. This encouragement is a genuine success of the book's editors and contributors.

—Catholic University of Lublin