

Some Remarks on Professor Mark Siegel's
"Pynchon's Anti-Quests"

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I think Professor Siegel is writing about a real phenomenon. The anti-quest, in various guises, is to be found in much of our literary and filmic fictions of the past two decades. I do have some questions and qualifications.

(1) Professor Siegel writes in a vein of moral pragmatism, by no means unique to him, that I have always found unsettling; it leads one to peculiar assumptions about character. He tells us that the anti-quest is characterized by the denial of growth and self-knowledge to the characters, who can affirm "their existences but gain little information or power that can be put to constructive use."

A phrase like "constructive use" marks what I call moral pragmatism, which is dominated by the assumption that characters are, somehow, like people, have experiences, learn from them, grow, and become constructive members of the textual community. I don't mean to accuse Professor Siegel of naiveté; he knows as well as I that characters are not people, or even--at least in Pynchon's work--realistic imitations of people. Yet he writes as though he has forgotten the essential use to which a writer puts his characters: they do not suffer for themselves, but for us, the readers, and in so far as our instruction is concerned, their failures are every bit as relevant as their successes might be, say in classic comedy or in cheerful bildungsromans. Even in some of the most traditional and moralizing fictions of the nineteenth century, which demanded the doling out of reward and punishment to the characters at fiction's end, few good novelists made the mistake of supposing that what happened in a novel happened to or for the characters: it happened to the readers, if it happened at all. Trollope's Can You Forgive Her? is as cravenly bourgeois a novel as a great novelist can produce, with reward and punishment duly apportioned according to the dictates of mid-Victorian morality. But even that novel ends, as the title suggests, with an invitation

to the reader to consider his or her own judgment of the female protagonist's behavior, and thus to enact the implied contract between author and reader, to acknowledge the fact that the book has been for the reader all along. In a similar vein, Thackeray's introductory remarks to Vanity Fair disturb readers even now, not because they are old-fashioned but precisely because they make explicit the subservience of character, which there is a tendency--indeed a guilty desire--to forget, as it seems to me Professor Siegel has done.

Let me try to anticipate the objection that I am quibbling. The character who fulfills a quest and returns home, say in the nostos that closes the Odyssey, is made to do so by an author who believes that such a completion will best serve not just the traditional, inherited Greek tales, but also his purpose, which is oriented towards making a structure that will generate the meanings he intends--among other meanings, over which he will have no control. Of course, a closure such as the Odyssean nostos tends to serve comedies best, and to seem less fitting for tragedies. The Iliad, where Western literature's tragic sense of life is first developed, is also about the impossibility of returning "home". Not only will Achilles not go back to the land of the Akhaians, but he cannot even move back into the encampment of the Greek warriors in a way that will satisfy. The Iliad is the first narrative that "tells" us that we can't go home again, especially when "home" is thought of not just geographically, but also as that Utopian place where innocence is only improved by experience, where learning and wisdom are accretive and not alienating. There is no returning to the pre-lapsarian world after the quest of the Odyssey, either--it is too sly and ironic a text for that. Ithaka, like Pynchon's Malta, is there as geography but not quite as a place of satisfaction and permanent restfulness. The Odyssey stands in relation to the Iliad as V. stands vis-a-vis Gravity's Rainbow, in this as in so many other matters.

Quests, then, like anti-quests and failed quests, have always served to involve the reader, to get him

or her to think about the frustrations of fulfillment. When Lazarillo de Tormes, of the eponymous picaresque, finds a home of sorts after his wanderings, he has experienced much but learned little--alternatively, it can be argued that in order to achieve stillness, he has repressed all he has learned, as Profane may be doing. Be that as it may, we the readers have acquired, by sharing the complicity of narrative tone with the author, a corrosively ironic stance towards the possibilities that the novel depicts. The completion of a successful quest is here limited to the most mundane level of plot, which is undercut by our perception of its meaning.

The opposite is also possible. Joyce's Ulysses ends with husband and wife uncoupled, asleep head-to-toe, "Odysseus" having failed to attach "Telemachus" to his household or to guard his conjugal rights. Yet the "yes" at the end is not merely an affirmation of Molly's life--she has none, she is black marks on white. It is an affirmation all the same, one that Joyce hopes we will endorse, of the value of Leopold Bloom's wanderings through the geographic labyrinth of Dublin and through the symbolically, allusively evoked labyrinth of Western culture. This is even more apparent in Finnegans Wake, where the nostos is verbal, not geographical, and where the last sentence requires for its completion a return to the first page of the book. Wakes are not ordinarily vehicles for quest journeys; they seem to cry out for anti-quests down Lethe, if they invite any mobility at all. By splitting his final sentence as he does, Joyce's guided tour through a cosmos of his own devising underscores once again the reader-oriented nature of quests: only the reader can end the quest, satisfactorily or otherwise, and, for Joyce at least, all reading is a quest.

I am suggesting, then, that Professor Siegel's move from quest to anti-quest is too abrupt, and is dictated by the too-narrow way in which he defines the possibilities of the quest. There are comic and tragic quests, and the latter have been with us almost as long as the former. In both kinds of quests we find heroes who do not find what they seek--or

heroines, like Oedipa. They do not find what they seek for Self or for Society. Or they find it too late, and can only respond by blindness or a form of suicide. Or they find it, and cannot bring it back to help any other character or society in the narrative. But always, they fail--as they succeed--for us, the readers.

(2) I want to take exception to that remark in which Professor Siegel attributes a special ambiguity to "contemporary road signs". Great quest narratives have always been more tricky and less easily meaningful than he credits them with being. For example, an allegorical narrative like The Faerie Queene can be interpreted woodenly, by the assignment of one-to-one correspondences to its signifiers, but a generation of scholarship has shown how reductive that is. If the anti-quest exists and is more popular today than ever before, as Professor Siegel claims, it is not because meaning is harder to find and more ambivalent today than ever before, or the mysteries more mysterious. Ask Oedipus; he made the same mistake Professor Siegel does, I think. He thought he'd plumbed the riddle of the Sphinx the first time around.

(3) I mentioned, as does Professor Siegel, that much of Pynchon's fiction is concerned with the "you can't go home again" motif. I just want to add here that Pynchon owes more to the formulation of this in German poetry and philosophy than we have yet recognized. Unheimlich is a term that has been important at least since Hölderlin, and has been of special significance to Rilke and Heidegger. It means "not-at-home-ness," not belonging in a context and therefore, by a simple extension, "uncanny." The Herero can't go back to the Sudwest, nor Slothrop to the Berkshires; the not-at-homeness is global in Gravity's Rainbow; it has been planetized, and the symbol of that globalization is the V-2. A camera mounted on one of its successors gave us the photograph of the cool blue sphere that has become the emblem of ecologists everywhere, while the ICBMs which are also descendants of the V-2 have tentacled the same globe with the possibility of a nuclear death which the end of Gravity's Rainbow rehearses. In such a world,

no one is at home, and every place is a theater of war.

(4) Finally, I want to acknowledge the importance that Professor Siegel imparts to the notion of fatherhood in Pynchon's work. It is not only Stencil, I would add, who has doubts about his father. Of course, his story leaves us with no doubts that he is his century's child, yet father-child bonds are hard to find and even harder to maintain--both for the characters in Pynchon's novels, and for the reader-detectives who peruse them for genealogy. It is no easier to go home to earthly fathers, in Pynchon's fiction, than to the Heavenly father. There are copulations aplenty, and occasional motherly women, but fathers are as scarce as Home. These two absences are central to Pynchon's work, and they are parallel to each other--indeed, they are the tracks along which the narrative moves, occasionally switching to a spur, like Skippy's train. In such a situation, when the world is our only home, the more parochial homes to which the quester would return are not possible--indeed, were it possible to find such parochial homes, characters and especially readers would be able to resist Pynchon's claim that there is only one global home. Similarly, parent-child bonds are evanescent in Pynchon's fiction precisely because he wants us to attend to a harder truth, namely, that like Slothrop we are all the children of a society, a technocracy, a power-structure whose influence in shaping us is disproportionately larger than that of our biological progenitors. For Oedipa, as Professor Siegel says, Pierce is the founding father--and for that reason, I would add, he cannot be found, like all the objects of Pynchonian quests.

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