

Pynchon's Names: Some Further Considerations

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In PN 5 Terry Caesar points quite rightly to the discontinuity between names and the characters they identify in Pynchon's fiction. One clear example of this discontinuity could be found in the early story "Under the Rose," where the protagonist, a British intelligence agent, is called Porpentine. This name is a specifically (but not uniquely) Shakespearean form of the more normal "porcupine" and is used in both Hamlet and Troilus and Cressida to denote a prickly and aggressive manner. It is heavily ironic in Porpentine's case because he is too thoughtful and too inept to be aggressive. Accordingly, his name becomes as detached from his real self as does his professional status. The name is not identical with Porpentine's role, as Terry Caesar suggests for many of Pynchon's characters, but reflects the latter's separation from his true self. Porpentine realizes, with wry helplessness, that his private antagonism towards his German opposite number, Moldweorp, is anachronistic in view of the impersonal efficiency of modern espionage, and this is probably why Pynchon chose two old-fashioned names. Both are almost certainly taken from Shakespeare (as are Goodfellow in the same story and Bolingbroke in "Lowlands"), "Moldwarp" appearing in Henry IV Pt. I as an alternative form of "mole," which has of course become a standard item in the vocabulary of modern spy-fiction (in John Le Carré's novels, for instance).

Many of these names in Pynchon's early works either are facetious or are labels, whether appropriate or not. Stencil is clearly a function rather than a name since he only exists in so far as he has a quest. Oedipa Maas could possibly be so named because she confronts a metaphorical sphinx in the bewildering ramifications of the Trystero. In Gravity's Rainbow, however, some of the names perform a different, more complex function. Take the example of Enzian, Tchitcherine's half-brother: Pynchon tells us that he was named after Rilke's gentian from the ninth Duino Elegy and even quotes the relevant lines. Rilke is referred

to several times in Gravity's Rainbow, usually to indicate a Germanic yearning for transcendental absolutes. The gentian appears in Rilke's poem as a beautiful but limited object within this general yearning. Remembering Enzian's origins in South-West Africa, we could see this naming as an extension of German imperialism in the sense that he is drawn into the general thrust of German idealism and has to function as a messianic leader for his Schwarzkommando. What Pynchon does not tell us is that Enzian was also the name of a ground-to-air anti-aircraft rocket which Messerschmidt were working on during 1944. Since the Schwarzkommando's aims focus on an ultimate rocket, the name adds yet another dimension to Pynchon's general interplay between the animate and inanimate, and his stress on the death-wish inherent in German idealism. The origins of his name help to explain Enzian's feeling that "his decisions are not his own at all, but the flummeries of an actor impersonating a leader." This is rather different from Porpentine's ironic detachment, since there is a personal urgency, a more potent fear lurking under the surface, which even the accumulation of magic around his name does not smother.

Needless to say, Enzian is only dimly conscious of a small proportion of this, but his fear of losing his autonomy would link him to another of the main characters--Tyrone Slothrop. The latter's surname could possibly link him with the allegorical personifications of Puritan writing. "Sloth" would be appropriate in the sense that he receives experiences rather than initiating them, and from a very early stage in the novel Pynchon indicates that he has an inherited Puritan sensibility. As the novel progresses, more and more information emerges about Slothrop's immediate family and ancestors; in other words, the Puritan element embedded in him becomes all the more important. W. T. Lhamon has suggested alternatively that Slothrop could be drawn from the second law of thermodynamics, which is both ingenious and perfectly plausible if we remember Pynchon's scientific interests. Either origin would interpret his name to be pushing Slothrop towards a role--whether as Puritan or as physical process--which would directly threaten his individuality, and in that respect his name would relate to one of the main themes of the novel, namely, how to

avoid programming and systems in general. Names such as Enzian, Slothrop and Weissmann have a textually richer role to play than the earlier ones, since they are not just given, but weave the character into networks of themes and linkages running throughout the novel. Weissmann takes as his SS name Blicero (with a possible pun on Blitz), a Latinized form of "Blicker," an old German nickname for death. The choice is both ironic and appropriate since white (Weissmann = "white man") is linked symbolically with the north, idealism, and ultimate death, so that Weissmann's two names suggest alternative aspects of a role he is performing. These would all be examples of what Pynchon calls "this sinister cryptography of naming." In a novel where everything seems to be determined, it is appropriate that names should have multiple connotations, and that they should play an important part in the actual rhetoric of Gravity's Rainbow. It would make sense to talk of a poetry of names in this novel.

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