HIEROGLYPHS OF REVELATION: THOMAS BROWNE AND THOMAS PYNCHON

Mark T. Irwin

> The sun itself is but the dark simulacrum,
> and light but the shadow of God.
> -- The Garden of Cyrus

In Sir Thomas Browne, asserts F. L. Huntley, "one finds three great nourishers of the mind and heart of man: religion, poetry, and science. They met in the seventeenth century and may be coming together again in this mid-term of the twentieth" (Browne vii). In Thomas Pynchon, who began his studies at Cornell in engineering physics, we find an exploration of these same three themes, begun in his first novel, V. (1963), and continued in The Crying of Lot 49 (1966) and Gravity's Rainbow (1973). Like Browne, Pynchon is interested in the poetic expression of the "twin themes of scientific research and religious exploration" (Green 7).[1] Paul Ricoeur (among others) has shown that the dialectic which arises out of such a dual interest is the same which characterizes the history of Western religions. The poles of this tension are found in the appearances of the sacred and the interpretation of the Word (Ricoeur 13). The "hermeneutic of proclamation" first gained ascendancy over the "phenomenology of the sacred" in Judaism, and this pattern was subsequently embraced by Christianity and Islam. Within the dialectic the revelation of the Word is concretized with "the support and renewing power of the sacred cosmos and the sacredness of vital nature" (Ricoeur 35). Four important similarities, each arising from this problematic, link the work of Browne and Pynchon.

The primary affinity between Browne and Pynchon is found at the nexus of the scientific and the religious lebenswelt, in the ambience of accident and design, or coincidence. A second similarity, operating within the realm of coincidence, is found in the attention of each author to the correspondence of microcosm and macrocosm. This correspondence works not only within the text but in the "death of the author" as well. A third and fourth contiguity lie in the use of the hieroglyph, in its basis in mathematics and in its use as revelatory vehicle. I wish to explore this chain of ideas by reference to a single text characteristic of each author: for Browne, Hydriotaphia and The Garden of Cyrus (parts of a single whole; see Huntley, "Relationship"); and for Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49. The informing a priori of both writers is the idea that, in the words of Hans Georg Gadamer, "it is possible to be led up from the sensible to the divine" (66). In his discussion of symbol Gadamer neatly delineates the interrelationship of coincidence, correspondence, and hieroglyphic I wish to explore in Browne and Pynchon:

> The only reason that the word "symbol" can be raised from its original application as a document, sign or pass, to the philosophical idea of a mysterious sign, and thus become similar to a hieroglyph which can be interpreted only by an initiate, is that the symbol is not a random choice or creation of a sign, but presupposes a metaphysical connection of visible and invisible. The inseparability of visible appearance and invisible significance, this "coincidence" of two spheres, lies at the basis of all forms of religious cult. (66)

I

When scientific and religious paradigms of the world are placed in competition, it is inevitable that the ambiguity of accident and design, or coincidence, should become heightened. A single event may be seen as proceeding either from the natural course of events or from supernatural activity. When literature functions on both levels simultaneously, as is the case in Browne and Pynchon, the text may begin to function hieroglyphically. Hence _Hydriotaphia_ (or _Urn Burial_) is, on one level, a discourse on burial urns; _The Garden of Cyrus_ is, superficially, a horticultural handbook; and _Lot 49_ may be read as a detective story concerned with a woman's discovery of an underground communications network. But beneath the surface each text suggests that nature may be infused with the numinous.

Browne breaks up the dialectic of coincidence, choosing to deal with accident in _Urn Burial_ and design in _The Garden_. The questions raised in _Urn Burial_ are frequently unanswerable. Uncertainty, conjecture, and even a tentative agnosticism color the work. In writing of the urns Browne comments that "nothing [is] of more uncertainty" than the "time of these urns deposited, or precise antiquity of these relics" (103). From this concrete observation he speculates that "the certainty of death is attended with uncertainties, in time, manner, and places" (113). In _The Garden_, however, the process of knowing is certain, and even obscure particulars lead to universal truths. In fact, knowledge and the "numerical character" of reality blossom in _The Garden_ with such proliferation that Browne falls exhausted at the last, suggesting that his reader make further inquiries:

> If any shall further query . . . he shall not fall on trite or trivial disquisitions.
>
> And these we invent and propose unto acuter enquirers, nauseating crambe verities and questions overqueried. Flat and flexible truths are beat out by every hammer, but Vulcan and his whole forge sweat to work out Achilles his armour. (188-89)

Browne's harmonious equilibrium of accident and design is replaced with disequilibrium in _Lot 49_. Pynchon asks the reader

to answer the riddle of coincidence for himself, and in this respect Lot 49 resembles Urn Burial more than The Garden. Concerned with "these dead bones," Urn Burial's subject is entropic--temporal, immediate, fading, and nameless. In Lot 49 the bones of Second World War soldiers are exhumed from an Italian lake and sunk again in a California resort lake. They are also used to make cigarette filters. But it is the reader who must decide whether the bones contain significance or not: ". . . the bones of the GI's at the bottom of Lake Inverarity were there either for a reason that mattered to the world, or for skin divers and cigarette smokers" (181-82). The problem of coincidence, writes Tony Tanner, is "a dominant one in Pynchon, where figures like Stencil in V. and Oedipa Maas in Lot 49 have to try to work out whether they are really discovering clues, finding codes and seeing signs, or whether they are projecting or hallucinating in a plotless, clueless world" (23). This tension, operative for the reader reading the text as well as for the events inscribed within the text, is readily displayed in a scene between Oedipa and her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius:

> "I came," she said, "hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy."
> "Cherish it!" cried Hilarius, fiercely. "What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don't let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you . . . begin to cease to be." (138)

Oedipa's "fantasy" is linked by Hilarius to being itself. If this "whatever it is" is read as the possibility of belief in a sacral universe, then the question of correspondences should become crucial, as indeed it does for both Browne and Pynchon.

II

In the sacred universe the logic of meaning is a logic of correspondences, wherein the cosmos continually signifies something other than itself; for example, the marriage of man and woman corresponds to the hierogamy of earth and sky, and so forth (Ricoeur 20ff.). This correspondence is in most cases one between the microcosm and the macrocosm, a correspondence Browne and Pynchon heavily rely on.

In Religio Medici Browne writes, "the world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of mine own frame that I cast mine eye on; for the other, I use it but like my globe, and turn it round sometimes for my recreation" (79). Browne would say that, rather than reflecting the macrocosm, he becomes it:

> I was born in the eighth climate, but seem for to be framed and constellated unto all; I am no plant that will not prosper out of a garden; all places, all airs make unto me one country--I am in England everywhere

> and under any meridian. I have been shipwracked, yet am not enemy with sea or winds; I can study, play, or sleep in a tempest. (63)

Browne's assumption of the macrocosm seems particularly relevant to the homogeneous, media-saturated culture of the late twentieth century. One must quickly learn "to be framed and constellated unto all" climates to survive the exponential growth of technology and its changing demands on culture. For the artist such an operation may entail the "death" of the self.

"The death of the author," which received so much attention a few years ago, means no less than "the necessary disconnection of the author and his life from whatever texts bear his name," notes Tanner (11). Knowing the world--taking on the macrocosm--is at least partially what is at stake here. In an attempt to describe the shift of emphasis from author to reader, Roland Barthes writes, "the reader is the face on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination . . . the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (149). The author's text becomes a macrocosm in which each reader must find his own microcosm. Browne hands the reader a macrocosm fully glossed--"the world that I regard is myself"--proclaiming a complete coincidence of author with world, microcosm with macrocosm. But Pynchon, as invisible author, offers no such explanations of the world. His "death" means that he practices abstention rather than identification, so that the work of projecting a world is transferred from author to reader.

The logic of correspondence is worked out concretely for both Browne and Pynchon in an image of "womb-generation-birth-death." In Urn Burial Browne uses the circle and the circular shape of the burial urn as a hieroglyph for the womb, birth, and spiritual rebirth into the afterlife. He builds his metaphor within the dialectic of correspondence, so that mortal birth is to mortal life what mortal death is to life beyond the grave, "making our last bed like our first; not much unlike the urns of our nativity" (108). Near the end of Urn Burial a dialogue occurs "between two infants in the womb concerning the state of this world" (124), suggesting that the text be seen within the image of the womb, a microcosm within the macrocosm.

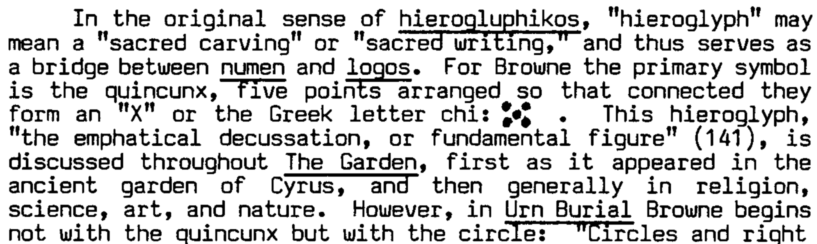
In Lot 49 Pynchon employs the image of "womb-generation-birth-death" in the scatological names of the men who surround Oedipa: Boyd Beaver, Stanley Koteks, and Mike Fallopian, as well as radio station KCUF (where Oedipa's husband, Mucho, works). Oedipa must lose all of these men in the death of her relationships to them before she can find the mysterious life offered in the Trystero. As she tells herself:

> [T]hey are stripping away, one by one, my men. My shrink, pursued by Israelis, has gone mad; my husband,

> on LSD, gropes like a child further and further into the rooms . . . of the elaborate candy house of himself and away, hopelessly away, from what has passed, I was hoping forever, for love; my one extra-marital fella has eloped with a depraved 15-year-old; my best guide back to the Trystero has taken a Brody. Where am I? (153)

The mysterious Trystero is the subject of *The Courier's Tragedy*, a play within the novel which Pynchon *uses both to parody* seventeenth-century drama and to reflect in miniature the thematic macrocosm of the larger text. Through the play Pynchon also underscores his question to the reader regarding coincidence: is there design in the text or merely accident? Has Oedipa stumbled on this play by accident, or was she intended to do so by the unknown Trystero? Does the play hold some secret information regarding the nature of reality? These questions raise an identical set of questions regarding the reader's relation to the text of *Lot 49*, and hence the reader's understanding of his environment *generally*: is there design at work, or not? Pynchon may tip his hand, and Browne certainly does, in their use of what Browne calls the "mystical mathematics of the City of Heaven" (190), the hieroglyph.

III



In the original sense of *hieroglyphikos*, "hieroglyph" may mean a "sacred carving" or "*sacred writing*," and thus serves as a bridge between *numen* and *logos*. For Browne the primary symbol is the quincunx, *five points arranged* so that connected they form an "X" or the Greek letter chi: ⁙ . This hieroglyph, "the emphatical decussation, or fundamental figure" (141), is discussed throughout *The Garden*, first as it appeared in the ancient garden of *Cyrus, and* then generally in religion, science, art, and nature. However, in *Urn Burial* Browne begins not with the quincunx but with the *circle*: "Circles and right

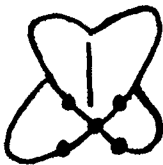


fig. 1

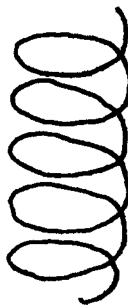
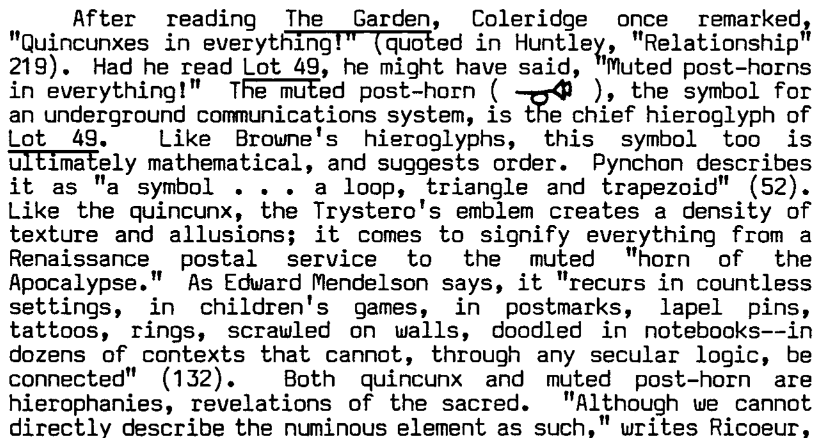


fig. 2

lines limit and close all bodies, and the mortal right-lined circle must conclude and shut up all" (128). Browne's "mortal right-lined circle" is an allusion to the Greek letter theta, Θ, the first letter of *thanatos*, "death." Browne expands this hieroglyph until, by the end of chapter four of *The Garden*, it has become a double circle, one horizontal, one vertical, together forming a quincunx as well as the letter theta and the number five (see fig. 1). Thus expanded, the hieroglyph becomes one basis for the unity of *Urn Burial* and *The Garden* in the many meanings the twin circles suggest: perfection, life, death, God (see Huntley, "Relationship" 206). "All things are seen quincunically" for Browne, from bones recently turned up to the quincuncial arrangement of the Garden of Eden (181). The dynamism of this kaleidoscopic hieroglyph opens up innumerable vistas for exploration, and by concentrating on it, as Peter Green says, "Browne paradoxically releases the reader's mind into an infinite number of associative levels of awareness, without any preconceptions" (21).

There are two quincunxes in the final chapter of *Lot 49*, and the central point or "decussation" of each is Oedipa Maas. In the first one, Oedipa realizes that her psychiatrist, her husband, her lover, and her "best guide" to the Trystero--the four men who formerly supported her--have been taken away from her (153). This quincunx of external support is paralleled a few pages later by an internal, ontic quincunx. In an attempt to organize her world, Oedipa posits the possibility of four alternative "realities": 1) a kind of Tillichean "authentic being"; 2) a hallucination; 3) an elaborate, labyrinthine plot against her; or 4) a fantasy conjured up by mental illness. "Those, now that she was looking at them, she saw to be the alternatives. Those symmetrical four" (171). But the vehicle for Oedipa's choices appears in another hieroglyph, one which dominates the novel.



After reading *The Garden*, Coleridge once remarked, "Quincunxes in everything!" (quoted in Huntley, "Relationship" 219). Had he read *Lot 49*, he might have said, "Muted post-horns in everything!" The muted post-horn ( ), the symbol for an underground communications system, is the chief hieroglyph of *Lot 49*. Like Browne's hieroglyphs, this symbol too is ultimately mathematical, and suggests order. Pynchon describes it as "a symbol . . . a loop, triangle and trapezoid" (52). Like the quincunx, the Trystero's emblem creates a density of texture and allusions; it comes to signify everything from a Renaissance postal service to the muted "horn of the Apocalypse." As Edward Mendelson says, it "recurs in countless settings, in children's games, in postmarks, lapel pins, tattoos, rings, scrawled on walls, doodled in notebooks--in dozens of contexts that cannot, through any secular logic, be connected" (132). Both quincunx and muted post-horn are hierophanies, revelations of the sacred. "Although we cannot directly describe the numinous element as such," writes Ricoeur,

"we can at least describe how it manifests itself" (14). In its broadest definition, the hieroglyph may thus serve to spatialize the sacred through a non-linguistic form.

Unlike Browne, Pynchon does not make elaborate use of the "mystical mathematics" of order. But he does hint that there is a connection between mathematics, order, and revelation when he writes of "revelations which now seemed to come crowding in exponentially," and when he describes one locale as "the usual hieratic geometry . . . shimmying for the sand roads, down in a helix" (81, 56). "Hieratic" and "helix" in combination "attest to an inscription of the sacred in a level of experience beneath that of language" (Ricoeur 15). "Hieratic" may refer to the ancient cursive form of Egyptian writing, which only the priests working in the temples knew, or it may signify priestly functions. A "helix" (a three-dimensional curve which obliquely crosses its right sections at a constant angle [see fig. 2]) suggests in its curve a connection with the cursive hieratic script, as well as suggesting mathematic precision, hence order and design. (Coincidentally, it is also a kind of three-dimensional theta, recalling Browne's hieroglyph.) Ricoeur writes that "innumerable figures, such as the circle, the square, the labyrinth, and the mandala, have the same spatializing power with regard to the sacred, thanks to the relations these figures establish between the center and its dimensions, horizons, intersections, etc." (15). Browne moves from doubt to certitude in his use of such figures, while Pynchon allows the reader to see them and decide for himself. For Browne the hieroglyph reinforces the proclamation of orthodox Christianity, while for Pynchon the hieroglyph functions to denote the primal sense of the sacral as overwhelming, awesome, and very likely malevolent towards humanity (see Ricoeur 14). But whether it functions neoplatonically (Browne) or gnostically (Pynchon), the hieroglyph for both authors is a potential vehicle for revelation.[2]

IV

Early in Religio Medici Browne writes:

> I am now content to understand a mystery without a rigid definition, in an easy and Platonic description. . . . Where I cannot satisfy my reason, I love to humour my fancy. . . . Where there is an obscurity too deep for our reason, 'tis good to sit down with a description, periphrasis, or adumbration. (10-11)

Later in The Garden he says, "The greatest mystery of religion is expressed by adumbration," by an indistinct foreshadowing, which illumines the tension between accident and design (181). Quoting "the Greek expression concerning Christ in the Canticles" (Song of Solomon 2:9), Browne makes one of his most mystical statements regarding the role of Christian revelation:

"'He looketh forth at the windows, showing himself through the latice'--that is, partly seen and unseen, according to the visible and invisible side of his nature" (148). Design, for Browne, is something which can be seen only through faith.

The hermetic definition of God as a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere is an apt one to Browne, who pokes and prods the paradoxical patterns of coincidence, and concludes by saying that "God hath not made a creature that can comprehend him" (12). Such a definition applies equally well to Pynchon's Trystero, which, as Oedipa comes to realize, might also be found "anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways," or nowhere (179). Browne revels in the paradox and then presents his conclusions for the reader's inspection, while Pynchon demands that his reader work through the problematic of coincidence for himself. Browne leads the reader from one discovery to the next, but Pynchon leaves his reader to discover for himself: "Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth" (181). Both authors are open to the possibility of revelation in the hieroglyph. Pynchon makes this apparent in the opening pages of Lot 49:

> Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her . . .; so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. . . . she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. (24)

Just behind the scrim of radios, circuit boards, and Southern Californians lurks the hint of revelation. But ultimately, for Oedipa, this possibility rests in the Trystero.

The Trystero's manifestations are always accompanied by sacral language, and, as Mendelson points out, the word "God" (which occurs some twenty times in the book) is always hovering near Oedipa's discoveries (117, 126). The religious language of the text suggests that Oedipa's quest is nothing less than "a quest for the Word, the Logos that is the immanence of divine reason in all things," as David Cowart writes (107). Oedipa's quest is likened to Job's when Pynchon says of Oedipa's "religious instant" that it was "[a]s if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. She thought of Mucho, her husband, trying to believe in his job" (24-25). Asking for the Word, both Job and Oedipa receive the enigmatic voice out of the whirlwind.

Perhaps the fact that Oedipa's initials, "O.M.," form the word of divine quest for Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism is no coincidence. This hieroglyph (ॐ), the greatest of all the *mantras* or phrases of mystical potency, is uttered at the beginning and end of prayers and chants and during meditation (Noss 161, 177, 191, 194, 197). Pynchon's Oedipa is thus similar to Browne's "Oedipus," since, as Browne writes: "I perceive every man's own reason is his best Oedipus, and will, upon a reasonable truce, find a way to loose those bonds wherewith the subtleties of error have enchained our more flexible and tender judgements" (7).

For Browne and Pynchon the dialectic of the sacred and the logos manifests itself hieroglyphically, secretly, in objects of the natural world. Through the logic of correspondences, the microcosm and the macrocosm in *Urn Burial*, *The Garden*, and *Lot 49* have sacral as well as secular explanations. In the movement from the rational examination of the urn to the supra-rational exploration of the quincunx, Browne moves from mutability to mysticism. Pynchon, unlike Browne, leaves the reader to determine for himself whether the sacred is operative within the natural.

Like Browne, Pynchon loves to lose himself in a mystery and "pursue . . . reason to an *O altitudo*" (Browne 9; Romans 11:33). In both men's quests the mind is exhausted before the mystery, and in the "adumbration," the guarded disclosure, the reader is left to make his decision. The closing lines of Browne's work leave the reader in "Night . . . the daughter of Chaos" (190), slumbering. Being assured of order in all things, the reader is left to "conjecture" the possibility of the resurrection. In the closing lines of Pynchon's work we read that "Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49" (183)--to await the auction of a stamp collection which may contain within its physicality the metaphysical answers she requires. Browne and (more especially) Pynchon leave the reader with an unresolved chord of expectation, a caesura marking the possibility of revelation.

--University of Virginia

Notes

[1] On each writer's interest in science, see Green 27 and Mendelson 191. A bridge between Browne and Pynchon is Jorge Luis Borges, mentioned in *Gravity's Rainbow*. *Inquisiciones*, Borges's first volume of essays, includes an essay on Browne. Mendelson argues that Borges's story "The Approach to al-Mu-'tasim" (in *Ficciones*) is the "concealed and unacknowledged source" behind *Lot 49* (145-46).

[2] I must reserve treatment of Pynchon's gnostic worldview for the future. Let it suffice to note here

that the nature of the sacred in Pynchon is at antipodes from Browne's understanding.

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