

FACING UP TO THE READING DILEMMA: A REVIEW AND
CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF PYNCHON STUDIES

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The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon. By David Seed.
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The title of David Seed's recent book and the description on the jacket flap may lead readers to expect an Ariadne--or at least some guiding thread--to help them find their way out of the disturbing complexities of Pynchon's fiction:

The possible meanings and allusions in Thomas Pynchon's work are almost infinite. His rich, polyvocal texts and his personal ability to remain virtually invisible pose a number of questions to readers and scholars alike: How do we read these encyclopedic fictions? What is the effect of all the tonal shifts? Where--if anywhere--is Pynchon's own voice, and how do we begin to interpret it?

Despite these leading questions, the reader soon discovers that in Seed's view there is no exit from the labyrinths of Pynchon's fiction: characters and readers alike are trapped. Stencil will never find his way out of the maze of V.-references, and neither will we: "This image of being trapped in a labyrinth constantly 'chasing dead ends' could stand as a representation of one possible reading of the novel" (109)--in fact, the only reading Seed gives. In The Crying of Lot 49, Pynchon "denies both Oedipa and the reader the time to sort out the information. . . . The chronological sequence of events proves to explain nothing, partly because it includes a proportion of sheer chance and partly because the texture of the events is so complex. Pynchon indicates the complexity by using recurrent images of networks or labyrinths" (125-26). Finally, Seed describes "Pynchon's literary strategies" in Gravity's Rainbow as "embed[ding] the reader in the text and deny[ing] him an over-view." And this embedding and denial are emphatically negative, entrapping, disempowering: "Pointsman, for instance, proves to be as much in a maze as his own rats and the maze supplies a metaphor of the novel's own labyrinthine structure" (205).

It has been some time now since Pynchon criticism took such an unreservedly bleak view of Pynchon's fiction as Seed does here. Indeed, when Seed does mention other critics, it is often to disagree strongly with their affirmative readings. Seed argues that "One drawback in Slade's approach [to "Low-lands"] is that he tends to moralize the story and to look for signs of affirmation which simply do not exist" (33). Similarly, Seed argues about "Entropy" that, "Plater and other critics

notwithstanding, the story affirms nothing" (52). Even critics who find some reason for hope in Pynchon's uncertain structures, some definite possibility of optimism in Pynchon's indefinite labyrinths, are represented as taking a negative view. Through highly selective quotation, Seed reverses Molly Hite's emphasis on decentering as potential openness and plurality of structure, making it into a notion of total failure: "Hite has recently explained the absent Centre as a crucial ordering device in all of Pynchon's fiction, particularly Gravity's Rainbow, which demonstrates a 'plenitude of failed revelations'" (188). Perhaps most tellingly, Seed enlists Thomas Schaub against Edward Mendelson in an argument against the "positive value" of the "religious and transcendental references" in The Crying of Lot 49: "In contrast Schaub has pointed out the important element of doubt and uncertainty in Pynchon's sacred terminology which teasingly gestures towards another realm without categorically asserting its reality" (130). Here, unlike with Hite, Seed appears to capture perfectly Schaub's sense of the potentially positive nature of Pynchon's ambiguity, but in Seed's view Schaub does not go far enough toward seeing labyrinth as trap, uncertainty as deflation, doubt as the demise of possibility: "We could take Schaub's argument a step further by suggesting that the religious allusions in Lot 49 are either parodic or paired with a profane meaning which constantly deflates the possibility of the spiritual" (130). But is this really the direction Schaub was going? Should the reader follow Seed in taking this last, decisive step?

In exploring these questions, we will take a closer look at the history of Pynchon criticism. First, however, we should note the qualities and features which recommend Seed's book in spite of its tendency to reduce Pynchon's fictional labyrinths to inexorably closing traps. Seed, a lecturer in English at the University of Liverpool, has written numerous articles on Pynchon (some of which have appeared in Pynchon Notes), and he is well versed in Pynchon criticism; his book shows none of the simple errors often made by those just getting their feet wet in Pynchon studies. Seed's prose is jaunty and unburdened by jargon, much like that of another British critic of Pynchon he often quotes admiringly, Tony Tanner. Indeed, Seed's discussion is rather like a series of free-wheeling lectures, moving spiritedly through Pynchon's works in chronological order, pointing out what seems of most interest to him in any given place. What the book lacks in depth and in close-knit argumentation (Seed rarely pauses to tie his points together), it partly regains in sharp local observations and intelligent liveliness.

Particularly good are Seed's comments on Pynchon's short stories and nonfiction. In an enlightening turn of phrase, he describes Callisto and Aubade from "Entropy" as "melodramatists of form" (40). About the use of second-person address in "Watts," Seed succinctly points out that "the 'you' draws the reader imaginatively into the dramatic predicament of the

blacks. This is certainly the main polemical thrust of the article" (152). In another elegantly revealing formulation, Seed comments on Pynchon's depiction in "Watts" of the whites as colonialists: "This is why he refers to the police as 'white forces' and the welfare offices as 'the outposts of the establishment.' Watts is an area under siege, 'a siege of persuasion' to conform to white images which is not entirely metaphorical because it is supported by arms" (154).

Although it is rather hard to find justification for the book jacket's claim that "Seed reinterprets Pynchon's texts from an original perspective" (neither the jacket nor the introduction makes any explicit mention of just what is original about the book), still Seed does seem to pay special and important attention throughout to the theme of capitalism's turning characters into passive consumers, the media's colonization of the unconscious. Here is Seed's apt description of Oedipa's attempt to resist commodification: "Oedipa demonstrates a humanizing impulse in her desire to see the life these images conceal and to probe behind the Fangoso Lagoons complex, for instance, to see how and why it was created. Her curiosity cuts across Inverarity's implied mercenary treatment of lots of land as mere commodity to be bought and sold" (148).

Finally, Seed's book has some added attractions that Pynchon readers may find interesting and useful. The last chapter, although it does not exactly place "Pynchon in Context" because very few connections with Pynchon are drawn, does give plot summaries and some critical discussion of the books for which Pynchon has written advertising blurbs over the past twenty-two years. An appendix prints the whole text of the letter Pynchon wrote to Thomas F. Hirsch in 1969 about Pynchon's research on the Hereros. The book also contains a good reproduction of Bordando el Manto Terrestre by Remedios Varo.

We have seen how Seed draws a sustained parallel between Pynchon's readers and his characters, between the labyrinths of and in Pynchon's fictions. Indeed, writers on Pynchon frequently begin their essays by noting that most of Pynchon's characters are themselves readers. What is less often observed is how many of Pynchon's critics succumb to the same reader temptation that besets his characters. There are, in fact, two kinds of reader temptation to which critics and characters regularly fall prey. The first and most obvious involves coming to a premature conclusion about the meaning of events, fixing on one of several possible interpretations, whether optimistic or despairing, as the definitive statement of the truth. The second temptation, more insidious, is to decide on ambiguity, to determine that the meaning of Pynchon's fiction is indeterminable and that this undecidability implies a certain openness on Pynchon's part to the possibility of positive change. The critics and characters in this second group fix on

uncertainty as a guarantee that more than one (the negative) interpretation is still possible, that a saving plurality of options still exists.

I would like to suggest that, as readers of Pynchon, we ought to try to resist the temptations that assail the readers in Pynchon, to move beyond repeating these characters' too-easy assumption that their readings, whether definite or definitively indefinite, are necessarily warranted. Let us get past the critical repetition of characters' compulsions in order to examine what is behind their fears and desires (as well as ours) as readers, in order to understand what drives them to succumb to reader temptation.¹ As I read it, Pynchon's fiction is about this very subject of reader temptation: the self-defensive tendency on the part of readers in and out of fiction to reduce what I shall call the ambiguity of ambiguity. While our first group of readers reduces an unsettling ambiguity to a single definite interpretation, our second group reduces the ambiguity of ambiguity to a positive ambiguity--that is, to a certain and optimistic ambiguity of open possibilities that defends against the one possibility that must be closed off: that there may really be only one authorized interpretation of events and that this interpretation may be entirely negative. This second group of readers wants to believe in a positive ambiguity as reassurance from the author of the wor(l)d that these readers still have a (positive) choice among still possible meanings, that the wor(l)d's end has not already been (negatively) predetermined beyond their control. What both groups of readers consistently refuse to accept--and what, as I shall argue, Pynchon keeps raising before them (and us) as a possibility--is this unthinkable ambiguity of ambiguity. Critics and characters alike can be observed defending against this radical undecidability, the possibility that meaning may be neither comfortably definite nor encouragingly ambiguous, but disturbingly unreadable--a meaning that thwarts the reader's desire for security of any kind, even the minimal assurance of positive uncertainty.

The most obvious defense against the possibility of such ambiguity-to-the-second-degree is, of course, that adopted by our first group of readers: to reduce it all the way down to zero, to absolute certainty. Douglas Fowler is probably the most conspicuous among this group defending reader certainty. As he argues, "One cannot oversimplify Pynchon's only story: it is the oldest fairytale of all."² In Fowler's reading, the meaning of Pynchon's fiction is spatially and temporally determinate. One can distinguish the "life"-affirming good side from the "mysterious" yet still identifiably "murderous" bad side, and one can know that the good side will be "unsuccessful": "Pynchon's real story always presents an isolated partisan of life unsuccessfully defending Our Kingdom against a mysterious and murderous antagonist from somewhere else" (123). The assertiveness of Fowler's diction ("One cannot oversimplify," "Pynchon's only story," "Pynchon's real story

always") gives evidence of how strongly he feels the need to defend against even a hint of ambiguity. When Fowler insists that "we should not lose sight of the fact that [Pynchon's] fiction is fantastic" (10), the asseveration in "fact" and the underlining of "fantastic" seem to betray some anxiety that we (or he himself?) may indeed "lose sight" of the "only" "real" interpretation of Pynchon's work.

In reading Pynchon, Fowler seems to give in to the same temptation that besets the characters reading in Pynchon. In The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa tries to read the signs in order to discover the meaning of the "Tristero." Some of the signs seem to point toward the Tristero's being an underground network offering hope to those barred from the official channels of communication, but other signs would indicate that the Tristero is either an evil organization murdering social outcasts or a figment of Oedipa's own paranoid imagination, a symptom of her mental illness. Throughout the novel, Oedipa is continually tempted to fix on one of these interpretations as the truth about the Tristero, but even at the very end she resists giving in to her fear of or desire for a conclusive reading, whether this be optimistic or despairing. Instead, she continues in expectation of further evidence: "Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49."⁵

But the critic succumbs where the character resists. Whereas Oedipa continues to hope that her negative interpretation of events is only one of several possible readings, Fowler says:

we realize the poignance of her hoping to find herself only "mentally ill, that that's all it was." . . . We know that that is not all. There is very little real paranoia in Pynchon's fiction, for the paranoid sees design and danger in excess of the facts; Pynchon's protagonists always begin by accusing themselves of paranoia but end up wishing their terrible recognitions were merely paranoia. The facts they discover are worse than any fantasy. (16-17)

"We should not lose sight of the fact that [Pynchon's] fiction is fantastic"; "the facts [Pynchon's protagonists] discover are worse than any fantasy": the "fact" that Fowler sees about Pynchon's fiction is equivalent to the "facts" within the fiction that the characters could see if only they would give up their fruitless hope for a saving uncertainty and recognize the "only" "real" reading of the wor(l)d: that the other is evil and that the self is doomed.

Not surprisingly, Fowler is more approving of the characters in Pynchon whose reading of the "facts" within the novels seems to correspond more closely to Fowler's reading of this "fact" about the novels. When Fowler turns to another reader in Pynchon, Herbert Stencil in V., the critic seems to

find in the character a congenial form of negative certainty. Stencil is trying to read the "V."-signs in order to discover the truth about history: is the world entropically running down, or is there still some hope that history's course may yet be open to positive change? Does V. represent the entropic principle ruling the world or something else, something perhaps less dire and deterministic? Now Stencil may very well incline more toward a negative interpretation of events than does Oedipa, but even he refuses to accept any reading of the world as absolutely certain. V. may be read as a sign pointing unequivocally to the world's inevitable disintegration, but Stencil resists this negatively certain interpretation throughout the novel. Even at the end, Stencil avoids settling for any one reading: he leaves Malta just as the secret of V. seems about to be revealed (was V. the woman or force that killed his father, Sidney Stencil?). Herbert insists on retaining the "sense of animateness" his lively search for V. has brought him: "To sustain [this animateness] he had to hunt V.; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid" (V 55).

But Fowler reduces Stencil's complex attraction-repulsion concerning the mystery of V. to a dead certainty:

In [V.] Stencil files is our guide to the history beneath history, and he speculates (and we are of course to realize he's correct) that our world has contracted a "disease" sometime between 1859 and 1919 "which no one ever took the trouble to diagnose because the symptoms were too subtle--blending in with the events of history, no different one by one but altogether--fatal." (123)

Yet, in the context from which Fowler has excerpted this quotation, Stencil's words are indeed "speculat[ion]." It is Stencil pere (Sidney, not Herbert) who is speaking, and his words begin with "'But then: suppose,'" and form part of a dialogue in which several different interpretations of events are considered. "'Why say a disease?'" is one of the responses to Sidney's fearful imaginings (V 461). But Fowler "realize[s]" the Stencils' worst fears as a matter "of course"; the critic reads pere as files, dialogue as monologue, speculation as truth. Why should a critic so readily agree to such a "fatal" interpretation as the only "correct" reading when even the characters themselves seem to try to avoid it? The temptation here to which Fowler succumbs is that of negative certainty: for some of Pynchon's critics and characters, believing they know the worst seems to be at least a fraction better than total uncertainty about the meaning of events. (For an example of such a negatively certain character, recall Callisto in "Entropy," who reads the signs of his environment as clearly pointing toward the entropic dissolution of the world: "[in

his obsession [. . .] that constant 37 [degrees Fahrenheit] was now decisive" [SL 98].)

Fowler is joined by other critics in this nihilistically certain reading group. In what follows, I have selected a representative sampling of dead-sure critical statements, and I have broadened the range of focus to include discussion of Gravity's Rainbow. Like Oedipa, Slothrop has difficulty deciding whether his fears have a basis in fact or are merely the symptoms of his own paranoia. Like Stencil, Slothrop is uncertain whether or not human sympathy can reverse the world's entropic decline or counter its movement toward a fiery apocalypse. But the following critics are certain--of disaster:

[Gravity's Rainbow] is not about the paranoid vision, but is one.⁴

Pynchon's law of human entropy orchestrates the life of the nation, the couple, the family, the individual into a symphony of death centuries in the unrolling.⁵

One can only wonder if in some odd way Pynchon has not taken the concept of entropy too seriously, allowing an idea from physics, which has validity as a psychological delusion, to dominate his own view of human life.⁶

[The rocket in Gravity's Rainbow] is falling in absolute silence, and we know that it will demolish the old theatre--the old theatre of what is left of our civilization.⁷

In Gravity's Rainbow the possibility of boldly confronting the world and one's fellow human beings with true sympathy is totally corrupted by the prevalence of hierarchically structured human relationships and only when these patterns are momentarily subverted, more often by accident than otherwise, does sympathy emerge as a true alternative. It offers, however, no way out of the apocalyptic predicament.⁸

These critics may take different attitudes toward Pynchon's work, but all agree on what that work means: the drift in and of Pynchon's fiction is undeniably entropic. In each case the fearful uncertainty of Pynchon's characters is reduced to critical certainty that fear is warranted, that Pynchon has authorized his characters' fearful visions: "Pynchon's law of human entropy"; "Pynchon has . . . taken the concept of entropy too seriously"; "[Pynchon's work] is not about the paranoid vision, but is one." Symptomatically, critical knowledge seems to be as absolute as the object of knowledge is negative: "we know that it will demolish"; "the possibility . . . is totally corrupted"; "no way out of the apocalyptic predicament." What

Josephine Hendin says of Pynchon is more probably true of herself and these other dead-sure critics:

And in his myth of himself as death incarnate, Pynchon transcends his limitations, puts himself beyond the pale of human pain and cruelty. He allies himself with the ultimate aggressor, the impersonal force of the entropy god. In the throes of his pessimism, by force of his pessimism, Pynchon still pursues his own invulnerability. (50)

It is Pynchon's critics who, taking the same epistemological bait laid for his characters, have settled for a pessimistic reading in order to convert a knowledge of powerlessness into a power of knowledge.

But Pynchon's characters have far more difficulty than his critics in finding a dead-certain resting place. Although it might be some small consolation to know that one's "paranoid" suspicions are in fact confirmed by solid evidence, that the plot connections one fearfully infers are indeed a cruel network inescapably closing on the self, the ambiguous plot in and of Gravity's Rainbow, for example, does not ensure such awful certainty. As Slothrop is forced to realize:

If there is something comforting--religious, if you want--about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long. Well right now Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle, feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is, and only pasteboard images now of the Listening Enemy left between him and the wet sky.

Either They have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that reason. . . . (GR 434)

Slothrop might be surprised to read that certain critics have provided him with just such a (terrible) raison d'etre, that they at least are sure that he lives only to be killed by a real enemy with a definite plot centered squarely on him. These positively despairing critics, in trying to give Slothrop the pathetic consolation of negative certainty, deny him what little hope he has of a saving ambiguity--the possibility that the network of plots is not yet determining, that he is not necessarily the target's dead center. But Slothrop would still like to believe that the wor(1)d can "sustain many other plots besides those polarized upon himself [. . .] this network of all plots may yet carry him to freedom" (GR 603).

Which brings us to the critics who would like to see Slothrop's hopes of a saving ambiguity turned into a sure thing. There is one more kind of critic among our first group of

readers: unlike the deadly certain interpreters above, this type claims a positive certitude. Here is one such critic disagreeing with Fowler's negative reading of Pynchon's text while implicitly agreeing with Fowler's assumption that Pynchon's meaning can be determined:

In seeing Pynchon's ghosts as entirely supernatural and malignant, Fowler repeats the very mistake made by so many of Pynchon's characters: he fails to see the physical connection between the dead and the living, the spirits' affirmation of the interdependence of all things in this world.

This is my own statement from an essay in a previous Pynchon Notes,⁹ where I too succumb to the temptation of a desire for fixed meaning. The other critic's (and characters') failure becomes my "success" as I reverse Fowler's authorization of characters' fears into a validation of hope: "These ghosts are not malignant, but only appear so"; "Pynchon's ghosts represent a warning to the human race"; "there is yet time for those still living to learn to understand" (84, 84, 94). This battery of declarations shows me confidently penetrating beyond appearance to reality, explaining the reason for others' confusion of the two, and reassuring them that they still have time to learn what I know.

Happily, I am not alone in this essentially unqualified optimism; Edward Mendelson also falls into this group of positively determined readers. In his extremely influential discussion of The Crying of Lot 49, Mendelson distinguishes between the book's "ostensible subject" and its secret subtext, but both are quite positive in import--especially the second:

The ostensible subject . . . is one woman's discovery of a system of communication, but the system refers to something far larger than itself: it fosters variety and surprise, and offers a potential access to "transcendent meaning" and "a reason that mattered to the world."¹⁰

One "discovery" "fosters" another revelation; a working "system of communication" among people in the secular world increases the "potential" for communication with the "transcendent" beyond. By the end of Mendelson's essay, this "potential" has become a firm reality:

This "promise of hierophany," of a manifestation of the sacred, is eventually fulfilled, and [Oedipa's] "sense of concealed meaning" yields to her recognition of patterns that had potentially been accessible to her all along, but which only now had revealed themselves. In the prose sense, what Oedipa discovers is the Trystero, "a network by which X number of American[s] are truly communicating whilst reserving

their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty"--that is, everything profane--"for the official government delivery system." (119)

"Fulfilled," "revealed," "recogni[zes]," "discovers"--but these positives are Mendelson's, not Oedipa's or Pynchon's. A look at the general context from which Mendelson has excerpted these particular quotations shows that Mendelson's knowledge is both more certain and certainly more joyful than Oedipa's: as she worries to herself,

Either you have stumbled indeed [. . .] onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating[. . .]. Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you[. . .]. Or you are fantasying some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull. (CL 170-71)

As I did with Pynchon's ghosts, Mendelson seems to have reduced the disconcerting ambiguity of the signs surrounding Oedipa to a wonderful certainty.

Interestingly, the more disturbing elements in this same passage from The Crying of Lot 49 rise to the surface sixteen pages later in Mendelson's essay like a return of the repressed, but the critic will admit them only in distorted form. Mendelson's compromise-formation retains his own optimistic certainty about the meaning of the Trystero (it is positively sacred) while conceding that Oedipa may still be unsure. What it seems she must do now is, as Mendelson has done, overcome her doubting-Thomas side and make a leap of faith:

This is why the novel ends with Oedipa waiting, with the "true" nature of the Trystero never established: a manifestation of the sacred can only be believed in; it can never be proved beyond doubt. There will always be a mocking voice, internal or external, saying "they are filled with the new wine"--or, as Oedipa fears, "you are hallucinating it . . . you are fantasying some plot." [. . .] Her choice now is either to affirm the existence of the Trystero--through which continuity survives, renews, reintegrates itself over vast expanses of space and time--or to be entirely separated, isolated, an "alien . . . assumed full circle into some paranoia." (135-36; my emphasis marks the return of the repressed.)

From Mendelson's perspective, Oedipa has a clear choice between positive and negative alternatives: "either" "affirm[ative]" faith in a community-saving Trystero "or" "mocking," "isolat[ing]" doubt. Mendelson's belief that he has a clear view of the problem and is in sight of the solution makes him a perfect example of the second kind of critic in our first group: the positively determined reader.

Thomas Schaub's "Open Letter"¹¹ and Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity¹² are famous for qualifying Mendelson's optimistic certainty and maintaining the ambiguity of Pynchon's fiction. Schaub thus falls into our second group of readers: those who insist that one simply cannot get to any "stable meaning" in or of Pynchon's work. In his discussion of The Crying of Lot 49, Schaub argues that "Neither [Oedipa] nor the reader is allowed by Pynchon to ascertain the stable meaning of the blossoming pattern; without this certainty her usefulness in preserving order against a declining culture remains painfully ambiguous" (Ambiguity 30-31). Notice how certain Schaub is about Oedipa's (and our) lack of certainty, how definite he is about Pynchon's ambiguity: "Neither . . . is allowed by Pynchon to ascertain the stable meaning."

But Oedipa is not so certain of her uncertainty; she is very much afraid that she may already know the immutably stable meaning of the pattern and that this meaning may in fact be the confirmation of her worst nightmares. As more and more of the people she loves disappear or die, Oedipa begins to fear that she does indeed detect a sinisterly stable pattern: "They are stripping from me, she said subvocally--feeling like a fluttering curtain in a very high window, moving up to then out over the abyss--they are stripping away, one by one, my men" (CL 152-53). Like Slothrop, Oedipa becomes afraid that, instead of facing a reassuringly ambiguous field of open possibilities, she confronts a decidedly evil plot centered on herself: what if she is not free to choose, but already chosen as a victim? Because of her fear that her future is unambiguous, that the (terrible) truth will be revealed to her, Oedipa hesitates to follow her assumptions about the meaning of the Tristero so that it will not assume her: "Having begun to feel reluctant about following up anything[, . . . Oedipa] left it alone, anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point. Lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself" (CL 166). Thus, while Schaub's assertion is an important counter to Mendelson's reduction of Pynchon's ambiguity, Schaub has himself reduced the ambiguity of ambiguity in Pynchon's work: the possibility readers in Pynchon face that there may be no ambiguity, that the very option of opting among more than one possibility may already have been closed off.

Schaub's positive insistence on ambiguity is what allows him to read ambiguity as something persistently positive. It is not long in his reading before the instability of meaning which he had earlier described as "painfully ambiguous" becomes much more optimistically undecidable: "with Oedipa we experience a broadening of consciousness, and a sense of the possibility for meanings which inhere in the world and in language. Those meanings, most skillfully in The Crying of Lot 49, depend for their vitality on the suspension in which they are caught" (Ambiguity 41). The meaning in and of the book is more "vital" because of its "suspension," more "broadening" because it cannot be closed off by any authorized interpretation. For Schaub,

Pynchon's ambiguity is a form of affirmation, indirect but necessarily so; it indicates that one need not feel bound by any existing structure of meaning, that one can always establish a new "relationship" with the wor(l)d and thus discover in it new meanings:

For Pynchon to affirm directly that Oedipa's experience is mystical or religious, or that Tristero exists literally, would be to change the entire nature of the book and reduce the importance of her adventures. Such an affirmation would mean only that she had found a secret enclave, instead of an exact and rigorous relationship between her culture and her understanding of it. (Ambiguity 107)

In the end, Schaub seems as confirmed and affirmative about Pynchon's ambiguity as Mendelson is about Pynchon's determinably literal and religious meanings. Like Mendelson's, Schaub's reading can be read as a defense against Pynchon's radical ambiguity. In a compromise-formation even subtler than Mendelson's, Schaub lets a certain amount of ambiguity in only so as to feel he has mastered it all. Schaub is ready to renounce the certainty of "mere facts" and "answers" only if he can be certain that the consequent ambiguity is "order[ed]" in such a way that it is "luminous" and "animating": "Pynchon's stylistic balancing orders the ideas and visions of his fiction so that they remain . . . strict and luminous possibilities rather than mere facts, animating clues instead of answers" (Ambiguity 4).

It is probably fair to say that the majority of Pynchon critics writing today may be placed with Schaub in this second group of positively ambiguous readers. Of course, as we have seen with Seed, there are also some negatively ambiguous critics, decisive about the undecidability of Pynchon's fiction and equally certain that this unascertainability is a negative thing: "We could take Schaub's argument a step further by suggesting that the religious allusions in Lot 49 are either parodic or paired with a profane meaning which constantly deflates the possibility of the spiritual." But, as we have seen, Schaub's qualification of Mendelson's relatively positive certainty was headed in the direction of a positive ambiguity, not, as Seed seems to believe, toward a negative ambiguity. This last is Seed's own position, evidenced, for example, by the following:

[In Gravity's Rainbow there is] a certain lexical set which revolves around the concept of conditioning. The main terms are; 'reflex', 'mosaic' . . . 'maze' . . . and 'labyrinth', the latter three functioning as reflexive metaphors of the novel's own assembly. Pointsman may be forgotten but reflexes never are. Slothrop after all comically reminds the reader of the sexual reflex. The notion of conditioning reinforces

the determining nature of psycho-cultural patterns in the characters' behavior. (177-78)

Once again we note that for Seed Pynchon's "labyrinths" are inescapable. Characters and readers alike are caught in a negatively "determining" "maze," an imprisoning self-reflexivity that is entirely determined by a disempowering word: "Pynchon's vision of human action is bleak indeed" (168).

But most Pynchon critics today seem to favor Schaub's position over Seed's,¹³ reading Pynchon's fictional labyrinths as positively ambiguous, optimistically undecidable. The length of the following list testifies to the popularity of the Schaubian position (Note that all of these statements are by authors of entire books--not just essays--devoted to Pynchon):

Tristero both urges and denies interpretation, thereby preserving its inward mystery and supplying the sense-making structure necessary to connect the world with meaning. . . . the reader's active engagement with the text . . . becomes a creative act that transforms and renews. One's willingness to interpret while accepting the limitations of interpretation [acts as] a defense against creative exhaustion.¹⁴

[Pynchon's] main characters learn to live without planned futures, without livelihood, without stable identity. . . . Even broken and imperfect patterns are capable of evoking the feelings that accompany our finding a sense of meaning. . . . [Reading] can help us assimilate an experience of "meaningfulness," whether or not we are able to express the latter in a coherent statement.¹⁵

[Pynchon's] own fictional worlds . . . are pluralistic--governed not by a rigid, absolute, and universal Idea of Order but by multiple partial, overlapping, and often conflicting ideas of order. . . . Precisely because the present lacks unity, it leaves room for unanticipated developments. As long as burgeoning meanings do not converge at a Holy Center, further meanings are possible. The absence of a definitive synthetic unity is finally a condition for freedom.¹⁶

The very atmosphere of uncertainty so peculiar to Pynchon's work suggests that possibilities remain open even if unrealized.¹⁷

Despite its frequent grimness, [Gravity's Rainbow] is not a novel of despair, but one of possibility. . . . each critical view has tended to isolate one of the relative points of view in the novel as an objective conception of Pynchon's point of view, while actually

each point of view is really a part of an entire spectrum which is the "rainbow" of possibilities encompassed by Pynchon's vision.¹⁸

[About the end of Gravity's Rainbow:] Is it a third world war, a nuclear catastrophe? Or is it the leading edge of a radiant hour of enlightenment for mankind, of liberation from the cycle of entropy that we have been imprisoned in?

The author does not tell us, for the future is yet to be shaped by us all.¹⁹

The critical consensus here seems oddly--and tellingly--in inverse proportion to the complexity and controversiality of Pynchon's fiction. Each of the above readings argues that, for critics and characters, Pynchon's meaning is positively ambiguous: its "mystery," "imperfect patterns," "absence of definitive unity," "atmosphere of uncertainty," "'rainbow' of possibilities," and wide-open questions all leave room for optimism--hope and free choice--on the reader's part.

It is true that Pynchon's novels, especially Gravity's Rainbow, contain scenes of promising uncertainty and hopeful doubt. Characters keep asking optimistic questions about whether or not impromptu action on their part might counter the plots formed to split them up: "Could it be there's something about ad hoc arrangements [. . .] that must bring you in touch with the people you need to be with? that more formal adventures tend, by their nature, to separation, to loneliness?" (GR 620). Always there is the hope that somewhere in the interstices of the plot's cruel structure it may still be possible to extemporize a bit of freedom, to evade determinism and find some "second chance" (GR 336): "There is the moment, and its possibilities" (GR 159). One of these key moments occurs when Slothrop, in the middle of his journey, has a vision of positive ambiguity, a "feeling" that he may yet escape the cause-and-effect of predetermined plot and reroute the course originally laid out for him:

Just for the knife-edge, here in the Rue Rossini, there comes to Slothrop the best feeling dusk in a foreign city can bring: just where the sky's light balances the electric lamplight in the street, just before the first star, some promise of events without cause, surprises, a direction at right angles to every direction his life has been able to find up till now. (GR 253)

These instances of promising uncertainty are important and do deserve to be singled out, as they have been by the critics quoted above. The problem arises when such critics read this optimistic ambiguity as definitive, when they speak of "The absence of a definitive synthetic unity" as "finally a condition for freedom"; of "mystery" as enabling "a creative act"; of

"uncertainty" as indicating "open if unrealized" "possibilities." Such summary statements about Pynchon's meaning reduce his radical ambiguity to something positive; they leave out of account equally important scenes where ambiguity itself seems in doubt, where readers are forced to face the possibility that all possibility of hope may be gone: the terrible truth is in sight.

To take what is perhaps the most compelling example, consider the last page of Gravity's Rainbow. Just as Slothrop, mid-way through his journey, stood at "dusk in a foreign city," waiting for the "first star" and hoping that his wish to escape their plot would come true, so Gravity's Rainbow ends with what "may have been a human figure, dreaming of an early evening in each great capital luminous enough to tell him he will never die, coming outside to wish on the first star." But this positive ambiguity is then made disturbingly radical, achieving for a moment a terrible clarity: "But it was not a star, it was falling, a bright angel of death" (GR 760). "It is hard to find much optimism or uncertainty in this sentence. Could it be that the deepest uncertainty concerns whether readers have any hope left of evading destruction, any real possibility of acting to avert catastrophe? At the end of Gravity's Rainbow, a rocket bomb seems set on its predetermined course, just about to fall on characters and critics alike, on sky-readers all. A positive ambiguity--"Just for the knife-edge, [. . .] just before the first star, some promise of events without cause, surprises"--is counterbalanced by a negative that seems not really ambiguous enough:

And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, [. . .] reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t.

There is time, if you need the comfort, to touch the person next to you, or to reach between your own cold legs . . . (GR 760)

Even the song that readers are then encouraged to sing ("Now everybody--"), though it seems to contain some ambiguous hope ("There is a Hand to turn [back?] the time, / Though thy [hour?] Glass today be run"), is nevertheless included in the list of all-too-certainly cold comforts like touching a stranger or masturbating: "or, if song must find you, here's one" (GR 760).

Optimistically ambiguous readings, because they do not take into account the strong negative tendency of scenes like this, effectively prevent us from seeing important aspects of Pynchon's meaning. Such readings will not admit that Pynchon seems to see destruction from nuclear bombs--descendants of the V-2--as a near-inevitability. The description of the "Rocket" as "reach[ing] its last unmeasurable gap" above our world may hold out some very small hope, but its tendency is certainly

downward. Furthermore, by suggesting that Pynchon sees escape from the fearful plots of those in power as a definite possibility, these readings seriously underestimate Pynchon's concern about the strength of the military-industrial complex and its near-deterministic control over future events. In his Introduction to Slow Learner, Pynchon writes:

Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it ["The Bomb"], most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. (SL 18-19)

This passage is remarkably unambiguous about the terrible strength of those in power and about a corresponding tendency on everyone else's part toward increasing "helplessness and terror." Similarly, numerous passages in Pynchon's fiction join the end of Gravity's Rainbow in suggesting a decidedly downward turn to the plot that characters and critics would rather not face:

But it is a curve each of them feels, unmistakably. It is the parabola [of the Rocket's flight and fall]. They must have guessed, once or twice--guessed and refused to believe--that everything, always, collectively, had been moving toward that purified shape latent in the sky, that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return. (GR 209)

What I would like to suggest is that in reading Pynchon we should give due weight to this ambiguity of ambiguity--the ever-present possibility that, whether readers want to admit it or not, uncertainty is not necessarily positive. Doubt may be merely a defense against fearful knowledge. The wor(l)d's meaning, the (negative) tendency of its one correct interpretation, may already have been decided beyond the reader's control. Pynchon's characters read the signs of their world in order to gain the clear understanding necessary for effective action, but they are also reluctant for understanding to clarify in case it should reveal that no effective action is possible, that the world's destruction is a foregone conclusion. One half of the reading dilemma facing Pynchon's characters is thus the problem of disambiguating the mysterious signs around them, gaining knowledge so as to claim some power; the other half involves the fear that knowledge, once attained, will prove disempowering, a death sentence that cannot be suspended.

The same year (1984) Pynchon wrote of the widening gap between the power of the military-industrial complex and the

escalating helplessness and terror of everyone else, he also wrote that there

seems to be a growing consensus that knowledge really is power, that there is a pretty straightforward conversion between money and information, and that somehow, if logistics can be worked out, miracles may yet be possible. . . . [I]t may be that the deepest . . . hope of miracle has now come to reside in the computer's ability to get the right data to those whom the data will do the most good. With the proper deployment of budget and computer time, we will . . . save ourselves from nuclear extinction.²⁰

This statement--from the essay "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?"--perfectly describes the hope shared by so many of Pynchon's characters that, if they could get to real knowledge, they might have some effective power, maybe even enough to work a miracle, to avert the near-inevitability of nuclear destruction. In this essay Pynchon still speaks of the military-industrial complex as "completely" dominant over the rest of the population, but he seems to join in his characters' hope that knowledge and hence power may yet be attainable:

The word "Luddite" [originally attributed to those who smashed machinery in the early days of the industrial revolution] continues to be applied with contempt to anyone with doubts about technology, especially the nuclear kind. Luddites today are no longer faced with human factory owners and vulnerable machines. . . . [T]here is now a permanent power establishment of admirals, generals and corporate CEO's, up against whom us average poor bastards are completely outclassed. . . . We are all supposed to keep tranquil and allow it to go on, even though, because of the data revolution, it becomes every day less possible to fool any of the people any of the time. (Luddite 41; emphasis added)

Pynchon's novels are filled with characters who would like to believe that their only reading problem involves getting to the truth, resolving the ambiguities devised by the power establishment to fool them, to keep them ignorant and impotent.

But there is also that other side to the reading dilemma, the fear that resolution means dissolution, certainty certain destruction. It might be better not to know if knowledge must prove incapacitating, confirming the loss of power one had hoped to find. Perhaps the prime embodiment of all Pynchon's characters' fears in this regard is Byron the Bulb, whose dream of informed action turns into a nightmare of confirmed futility. Byron investigates the power establishment, disambiguating their signs until the true pattern begins to emerge, but this reading

only reveals the undeniable extent of their power, the unbeatable force he is up against:

Byron [. . .] sees more and more of this pattern. [. . .] The pattern gathers in his soul [. . .], and the grander and clearer it grows, the more desperate Byron gets. Someday he will know everything, and still be as impotent as before. His youthful dreams of organizing all the bulbs in the world seem impossible now--the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are more than enough traitors out on the line. (GR 654-55)

It is the horror of ending up like Byron, "knowing the truth and powerless to change anything" (GR 655), that traps the readers in Pynchon between fear and desire, between a need for knowledge to ensure power and a fear of knowledge confirming impotence. Like Byron, these readers want to see reading as a prelude to resistance: the right information must be gathered so that the rebellion can be organized, effective action against a known enemy. But reading may reveal that the enemy has already taken every position that matters, already co-opted enough of the potential resistance to make revolution impossible. This is the reading dilemma presented to readers in and of Pynchon's fiction.

Facing up to this reading dilemma means not taking that "step further" toward the negatively ambiguous reading advocated by Seed, but it also means refusing to succumb to the hopeful open-endedness of a positive ambiguity (Schaub's interpretation). We cannot feel the full disturbance of the radically ambiguous reading dilemma confronted by Pynchon's characters if we as critics reduce that deep uncertainty to a negative--or a positive--ambiguity. Pynchon's fictional depiction of the reading dilemma we face in confronting the world is both more complex and more accurate than has often been realized.

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Notes

¹ On the matter of critics' susceptibility to the same repetition compulsion as that which afflicts the characters, see Shoshana Felman, Writing and Madness: (Literature / Philosophy / Psychoanalysis), trans. Martha Noel Evans and Shoshana Felman (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), particularly "An Uncanny Reading Effect," 142-49; and Barbara Johnson, The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), especially "Three Readings of Reading," 97-102.

² Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980) 11.

³ Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 ([1966] New York: Perennial, 1986) 183. Other Pynchon works cited include, respectively: V. ([1963] New York: Perennial, 1986); Slow Learner (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984); and Gravity's Rainbow ([1973] New York: Penguin, 1987).

⁴ Richard Schickel, "Paranoia at Full Cry," World 2.8 (10 April 1973): 43-44.

⁵ Josephine Hendin, "What is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us? V. and Gravity's Rainbow." Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. Richard Pearce (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981) 46.

⁶ Speer Morgan, "Gravity's Rainbow: What's the Big Idea?" Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. Richard Pearce (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981) 97.

⁷ Tony Tanner, Thomas Pynchon (New York: Methuen, 1982) 90.

⁸ Charles Hohmann, Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow: A Study of Its Conceptual Structure and of Rilke's Influence (New York: Peter Lang, 1986) 123.

⁹ Douglas Keeseey, "Nature and the Supernatural: Pynchon's Ecological Ghost Stories," Pynchon Notes 18-19 (1986): 84.

¹⁰ Edward Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49," Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978) 113.

¹¹ Thomas H. Schaub, "Open Letter in Response to Edward Mendelson's 'The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49,'" Boundary 2 5 (1976): 93-101.

¹² Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981).

¹³ Of course Seed is not alone in reading Pynchon's fiction as negatively ambiguous. Thomas S. Smith, for example, provides this classic formulation of the view:

What we are left with, once the attempt to understand Pynchon is taken very far, is an array of fragmented information, ambiguous, self-destructive conspiracies, and

unfulfilled transformations that leave the reader, like Slothrop, foundering in the Zone. ("Performing in the Zone: The Presentation of Historical Crisis in Gravity's Rainbow," Clio 12.3 [1983]: 253.)

14 Robert D. Newman, Understanding Thomas Pynchon (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1986) 82, 63.

15 Kathryn Hume, Pynchon's Mythography: An Approach to Gravity's Rainbow (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987) 180, 202, 193.

16 Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 10, 21.

17 Peter L. Cooper, Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 73.

18 Mark Richard Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978) 4, 16.

19 Douglas A. Mackey, The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo, 1980) 56.

20 Pynchon, "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" New York Times Book Review (28 Oct. 1984): 41.