Pynchon in China

Terry Caesar

Any number of provocative considerations suggest themselves when we consider the peculiar position of American literature in China--not to say modern American writers, and certainly not to say so contemporary a writer as Thomas Pynchon. The institutional commitment on the part of the Chinese to American literature is quite extensive, and would require a separate essay in itself.[1] American literature has never been more popular in China than it is at present. Most teachers at university level have at least a nodding acquaintance with the nineteenth-century classic writers (especially Twain), and most students will manage something flattering about "your Hemingway," if no one else in this century. It comes as no surprise that Jack London has canonical status, though he often seemed to me more honored than read. It comes as no more of a surprise that black American writers (Ellison is possibly no less venerable in China than in this country) are a particular source of interest, or that Bellow (a staunch realist to the Chinese and of course a vigorous critic of American values) is far better known than Mailer. What does come as somewhat more of a surprise is that "American literature" has been deemed to include Malamud, Oates, and even Vonnegut. The Chinese agenda for American fiction since, say, World War II is by no means complete, nor even quite respectable by American standards; for example, as yet, there exists no translation of All the King's Men. But it is quite searching and ambitious in its own terms, and it includes, most surprising of all to me, Pynchon. No other writer among those who are included in the discourse that would constitute American literature in China quite so interestingly illustrates the problems of that discourse, because Pynchon himself, so in contrast to the tremendous interest professionally focused around him in this country, is merely an illustration in China. Pynchon does have an existence there, but none of his novels have been translated. Therefore, his existence represents a rather special instance of the question of what sort of function a writer can have in a society

for whom he is not, and probably will not be, translated.

The question can be rather simply answered: the writer will be appropriated. So wholly true is this in Pynchon's case that his existence to the Chinese is essentially limited to one passage, the following one from V.:

> (Profane would see some of them under the street. Others you could meet at any rural crossroads in America. As Profane had: come to a new road, right-angles to his progress, smelled the Diesel exhaust of a truck long gone--like walking through a ghost--and seen there like a milestone one of them. Whose limp might mean a brocade or bas-relief of scar tissue down one leg--how many women had looked and shied?--; whose cicatrix on the throat would be hidden modestly like a gaudy war decoration; whose tongue, protruding through a hole in the cheek, would never speak secret words with any extra mouth.)[2]

This passage--from the chapter "In Which Esther Gets a Nose Job"--participates in the plastic surgeon Schoenmaker's rapt, chill fascination with the terrible disfiguration of the young aviator injured in World War I, Evan Godolphin; "they" are the "generation of freaks and pariahs" who somehow abide after the war, with or without surgery. What interests the Chinese here is not any of the things which Americans (especially readers familiar with our own institutional investment in Pynchon) would expect: the sudden interpolation from Profane's point of view, for example, or the immediate, harsh, deliquescent poetry the narrator proceeds to make of a secret order. Let Professor Chen Kun of Beijing University speak for what I understand are any number of comments on this passage, which has a sort of notoriety in China by now: "In his [Pynchon's] humor there appear madness, absurdity, despair, and extreme cruelty. It contains nihilism."[3] I am unable to report any more specific consideration, though I believe such matters as the comparison of the scar-tissue to a bas-relief or the suggestion of sexual fascination are especially infamous. But it should be clear that no specific consideration is really necessary. As Professor Chen's comment makes quite clear,

the passage is an example of something. A catalogue of what the passage exemplifies follows--as if the horror cannot quite be named, or perhaps can only be renamed.

I am unable to say precisely why so much attention has been focused on this particular passage (that there are so many unquoted juicier ones in later chapters suggests the few Chinese who either have or can get copies of V. may not have read much further). But it is clearly taken as an example of black humor; Pynchon in China is a black humorist. Though any number of horrors may be summoned to cluster around this term as it is employed in China, the Chinese mean something quite definable by this term--no matter how charmed, almost nostalgic, an American might feel to hear it invoked as the Latest Thing. Or rather it might be more accurate to say that "black humor" to the Chinese functions as a contested term, one of the ways the institution of American literary studies in China strives both to perpetuate and to consolidate itself. As such, black humor does not have to be so much defined as located. If it is difficult to say what it is, then it is less difficult to say what it is not, and what it is not is the positive of the negative values Professor Chen cites. It exists in such a passage as the one above from V., which is so "obviously" bizarre and disgusting that, whatever else can be said, the words had better be addressed to that.

I see little point in countering that to us black humor was never what it is to the Chinese, who can be quite surprised to learn that black humor came out of a whole complex in American society--ranging from sick jokes to Lenny Bruce to Bruce J. Friedman--which ended well over a decade ago.[4] Nor do I see much point in maintaining that what they take to be sponsored by the name of "Pynchon" is far more complex, and, arguably (for the argument is our own way of using "Pynchon" as a contested term), far less "black." To each institution its own paradigm; black humor is the one the Chinese have chosen because they need it in order to discuss obliquely (their method of displacing a too-direct social implication is very ancient) the values of literature in their own society, as well as the kind of literature their own writers should be expected to

produce. "There are many obscene passages in Pynchon's writing," declares Professor Wang Wen-bin. "In Gravity's Rainbow Slothrop's clothes were stolen by soemone. He wrapped his naked body with a blanket and ran after the thief on the roof. A careless step and he fell off the roof and landed naked right in the middle of ladies. Most of such scenes are silly vulgarity for amusement." Should China's own writers aim to write such scenes, and pander them to their readers? More, should literature itself be written only to "amuse"? These are the sorts of questions Chinese intellectuals take as their concern.

We might think it rather smug merely to smile at them. Our own paradigm is quite different, sophisticated (if it is a deconstructive one) to the limits of intelligibility, self-aware to the point of reflexivity--and grounded in "metaphysical exigencies" perhaps already complicit with their own mystification. For example, Paul de Man writes, "to read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface,to repeat--that is to say, the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their own demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn. No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words."[5] We read this sort of pronunciamento, and then we may read others, such as that given in a foreword by Wu Fuheng, a member of the Standing Committee of the China Association for the Study of American Literature, to a collection of translations and essays on recent American literature: "We must sufficiently understand that our system is unlike American society; our cultures and traditions differ. . . . Therefore, we must not introduce those things which are either not beneficial or even harmful; moreover, we must criticize them. We must emphasize the value of investigating the works of those serious and upright American authors who expose and criticize their own country and society."[6] We pause. Pynchon? An "upright" author! Pynchon? And yet, if we pause again: Pynchon? Merely an "apostrophized" instance? Mad, but mad only in words? The Chinese, of course, are concerned with Pynchon insofar as they are concerned with the content of madness. If we look again at the incident from Gravity's Rainbow (alas, another tellingly

early one) cited by Professor Wang above, do we not find that its fundamental purpose is to elicit the "silly vulgarity" he finds? No discourse, however "totalizing," is total. The Chinese appropriation of Pynchon--and, through him, black humor--illustrates in part that we have abandoned certain questions which a sinicized, severely truncated Pynchon returns to us all over again.

Pynchon has been enlisted with two other American authors--Heller and Vonnegut (especially the Vonnegut of Slaughterhouse Five)--to form a canon. Lately of course canons have been making their way back into our own theoretical discourse--possibly disclosing that this discourse seems to have abandoned, ultimately, any concern with evaluation at all. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes in the recent special issue of Critical Inquiry devoted to the subject: "Any evaluation . . . is 'cognitively substantial' in the sense of being potentially informative about something"[7] I think what the Chinese want with their present canon of American black humorists is precisely what we want, or assume, with any canon: the potential for "information" rather than the fact of it. These foreign authors express degrees and kinds of "blackness" which Chinese authors may not yet express, but which are already present, actually as well as potentially, in Chinese society. At least to an American considering the phenomenon, it is symbolically right that the most infamous passage from V. concludes with "secret words" which are felt but which are impossible to voice. Though it is not possible for me to say so with complete certainty, I sense that Pynchon, much more than Heller or Vonnegut, himself best gives voice to such secret, horror-ravaged emotions. For ten years during the "cultural revolution," the whole of Chinese society lived them, sometimes as a result of quite literal wars among political factions fought everywhere in China. It can be no accident that the interest in black humor surfaced almost immediately after 1978, and that texts labeled "black humor" continue to this day to provide "information" of a kind which present political policies have to permit (so the "cultural revolution" is officially characterized as a massive, wholesale disaster) and yet curtail (so the "four modernizations" require no pointless looking back). Is there something uniquely

Pynchonesque which is suitable for such a state of affairs, some impossibly jaunty and grim equivocation of tone or value? It would not be a Chinese way with literature to entertain such a question, as such. Instead, the evaluative framework is tightly held, and so--to give a last representative sample--the result is the "inactivity and pessimism" which Professor Cai Bao-zhen finds as characteristic of black humor. He continues: "the conclusion is always like this: absurdity is eternal. The destructive, apocalyptic doom of humanity is inevitable. In addition to this, Pynchon believes that there is a kind of mysterious force independent of man's will which determines the absurdity and evil of humanity. This force is 'entropy.' . . . The theory of heat death was criticized by Engels long ago. Now it manifests itself strongly in literature. Such psychology merits our attention." The move here is quite typical: a scandal is set down, developed a bit, located securely within Marxist standards, and then finally converted into a "psychology" which has its own clinical interest nevertheless. Whatever one thinks of the move, I think it inevitable that the move be to Pynchon, who brings out for the Chinese a scale of what is associated with writers akin to him that makes him finally quite unique, if not more important than the rest.

If my supposition is correct, then Pynchon in China emerges at last curiously like Pynchon in America, despite the immeasurably different "discursive forces" that have produced Pynchon's otherwise very different existence in each respective country. Bluntly stated, Pynchon is the consummate poet of apocalypse, though "poet" is presumably a term Professor Cai would not choose to use; though we might choose to shudder more rapturously at the prospect of sheer, imperious doom,[8] I do not see how their object of attention is fundamentally different from ours. The difference lies in the two societies, which doubles the irony because, as I have tried to make clear from the outset, there is in the most literal--that is, textual--sense no Pynchon in China at all; just enough of Pynchon exists, and that may be quite enough.

Yet, once again, what appears to be the case is not quite so. Chinese writers have begun to write their

very own versions of black humor. One of the most famous contemporary authors, for example, is Wang Meng. A volume of his stories, The Butterfly and Other Stories, was issued early this year in a "Panda Books" English translation. Though the volume does not contain Wang's later exercises in a black humor vein, these stories have been published (with no small amount of controversy among Chinese intellectuals), and enough of the sensibility that eventually unfolded to produce them may be seen in the early work.[9] Has Wang Meng ever read Pynchon? How much is his writing informed by the discourse upon black humor? Does he need to be familiar with either of these things, since, as he remarks in a preface to The Butterfly, "absurd laughter" has its own endurance in life itself, as well as its own expression in Lu Xun's "The Story of Ah Q" (possibly the central text for Chinese fiction in this century)? The charter of Chinese civilization has its own imperatives. On the question of what may be considered deviant in terms of what is normative, the charter of the civilization may not be so different (it is not easily separable) from that of the Communist Party. Presently, black humor consorts with deviance, yet the institutional body of American literary study is already licensed by much official interest in the subject, and clearly not all of it functions to expel the foreign phenomenon. A fairer question might be this: how many of the Chinese professors I've cited would privately concede that in fact what they refer to as "black humor" is no more foreign than Lu Xun? In a brilliant meditation upon insides and outsides, Jean Starobinski writes, "No inside is conceivable . . . without the complicity of an outside on which it relies."[10] These Chinese recognize the outside, but only because they implicitly acknowledge that it is an outside already complicitous with an inside. Black humor is already inside China because it has been inside since at least Lu Xun, who was translating Gogol at the time of his death.

And what of Pynchon? If I am right in surmising that his work is perceived as expressing the outermost limit of what could be considered normative in the realm of the deviant, what of his curious, textless, merely citational, very doubtfully exegetical existence "in" China? I have been content merely to suggest that there are worthwhile--if not exactly salutary--considerations

we cannot easily dispel with reference to our own paradigm when we view it in the light of the Chinese one. I have deliberately not tried to explore how appropriate for Pynchon the unrelenting Chinese insistence upon the text as an object of power over--as well as derivation from--life might be. What is knowledge good for? This is one thing the Chinese must know. "Irreducible figurality" and other such answers from our own paradigm aside, we have not easily expelled the question of what knowledge is good for ourselves, because in part, insofar as we are readers of Pynchon, this question seems to be at the center of Pynchon's own authority as the preeminent example of exegetical license granted by academics to contemporary American authors. Yet our considerations will finally not be theirs, any more than theirs will be ours. Should we conclude that Pynchon will never be studied in China--or allowed to create his own context, as must be the case with any canonical writer?

I would like to quote Starobinski once again on this concluding point. He has been speaking of what happens historically during even the most recondite explorations of the foreign, and he states: "For if the notion of interiority makes sense, it must be conceived not as a receptacle of treasures, of monsters or of mysterious traces, but as a process--what we become by virtue of our ever changing relationships with the other, of our relationship with the outside, with that which we have never been, or with that which we have ceased to be."[11] The Chinese appropriation of Pynchon is, I think, no different. That is, even as an appropriation, it is still a process, and the Chinese will not be quite so wholly themselves as long as it continues. How long it will continue has to do with a great number of factors which have, strictly, nothing to do with Pynchon at all. At present, "Pynchon"--by which I mean now the miniature discourse enacted through Pynchon in China, small as it is, and in which his texts themselves are almost completely submerged--remains one name in China for the absurd, the deviant, the foreign, the outside, though with the significant addition that pressures from the inside have generated the presence. Even as an absence, comparable to a suddenly missing surface, Pynchon is available to measure what the landscape of

Chinese literary studies either could never have been or could cease to be.

--Clarion University

Notes

[1] The best place to begin would be the "Research Report," The State of American History and Literature Studies in the People's Republic of China, a 172-page booklet published by the International Communication Agency in 1982 and drawn up by Professor John J. Deeney of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Professor Deeney is an authoritative guide through such matters as the overall rationale for American studies in China, the organization (taken from the Russians) of specialized institutes, the centrality of Shandong University, and the current disposition of research priorities.

[2] Thomas Pynchon, V. (Rpt. New York: Bantam, 1964), 87.

[3] I owe the translation from this source, as well as the other two quotations from Chinese sources subsequently given, to my colleague at Zhengzhou University, Wu Qing Yun. Without her generous assistance, as well as her intelligence about the general interest in China having to do with black humor, this article would not have been possible.

[4] See Max F. Schulz, Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1973). Schulz, as his title indicates, clearly demarcates his subject historically: "More limiting, certainly, but more useful in the long run is to recognize that Black Humor is a phenomenon of the 1960's, comprising a group of writers who share a viewpoint and an aesthetics for pacing off the boundaries of a nuclear-technological world intrinsically without confinement. Equally useful is to discriminate Black Humor from the oral techniques of sick humor and from the dramatic conventions of the theatre of the absurd, even though it shares with these modes of expression some of the same assumptions about our century" (5-6). Schulz has several references to Pynchon's first two novels and two brief discussions of V. in particular. Especially telling is how his book is informed by a statement he makes in his opening chapter: "Black Humor differs also from current existentialist views of man in refusing to treat his isolation as an ethical situation" (9). Such a difference is of course completely in contrast to the Chinese appropriation, in which the sole interest is precisely the ethical situation--even if, from a Schulzian point of view, this interest is in turn dictated from a felt awareness of the lack of such a situation in American writers.

[5] Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured," in Deconstruction and Criticism, Ed. Harold Bloom, et. al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 68.

[6] Quoted in Deeney, "Research Report," 104. Wu begins his introduction by quoting Lenin and (far more illuminatingly, if no less predictably) Mao: "We must continually consider ourselves heirs to all the superior literatures and arts, critically absorbing those that are beneficial. . . . We must never refuse to inherit or borrow from the past or from foreigners even if they include things from feudal or capitalist society" (103). The implicit formula here is the one developed at the end of the last century as one strategy to deal with the massive incursions of The Foreign: "Chinese learning for substance;foreign learning for use." No matter how criticized, this formula seems to me more securely and pervasively in place in China today than it has ever been before, and its many problems seem to have to be continually repressed by each new generation of Chinese intellectuals.

[7] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," Critical Inquiry, 10, no. 1 (1983), 20.

[8] Seldom more rapturously than in Neil Schmitz, "Describing the Demon: The Appeal of Thomas Pynchon," Partisan Review, 42, no. 1 (1975), 112-25. This stimulating presentation, hard upon the publication of Gravity's Rainbow and almost equal parts paean and denunciation, became, I think, something of a scandal in Pynchon circles. It has not often been referred to since. "Yet out of all the burlesque and parody, the caricature and the comic routines," Schmitz writes, "Pynchon strives to retrieve, or at least reinvent, the value of evil. . . . The ethic Pynchon finally renders in Gravity's Rainbow is the ethic of the desperado, not the ethic of the survivor enclosing himself in cool ironies" (124). One could say that, much in contrast to Schmitz, the direction of Pynchon studies recently has been to see his project as the reinvention of comedy, which might be one way of transforming the desperado into a humanist after all, or at least someone desperately trying to "retrieve" the possibility of goodness. It strikes me also that Schmitz's Pynchon (suitably toned down, of course) might be one most engaging to the Chinese--and certainly Schmitz's quotation from Lenin, of all people, is quite appropriate, as well as quite suggestive of another dimension of the Chinese response to Pynchon: "'To organize the whole national economy on the lines of the postal service, so that the technicians, foremen, bookkeepers, as well as all officials, shall receive salaries no higher than a 'workmen's wage,' all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat--this is our immediate aim'" (117). Certainly intellectual Chinese at least, having lived under precisely such an organization for thirty-five years, could be expected to see

a far grimmer irony in such a far more rapturous proposal, and to see the scale of its critique in Pynchon, for whom, as Schmitz states, the "unholy dialectic of history" (117) is dreamt as the death of history.

[9] One later Wang Meng story, "Anecdotes of Minister Maimaiti"--which often bears rather startling resemblances to the Vonnegut of Cat's Cradle especially (the other Vonnegut novel that has some currency in China)--has been translated by Wu Qing Yun, and I am at present about to circulate it for publication in this country.

[10] Jean Starobinski, "The Inside and the Outside," Hudson Review, 28, no. 3 (1975), 342.

[11] Starobinski, 335.