Pynchon at the MLA Convention

Robert J. Cullen

To a certain extent, the four papers presented at the MLA session on "The Impact of Science and Technology on Language, Style, and Structure in the Work of Thomas Pynchon"[1] told us what we already knew: Science is not the answer either. More remarkable is the number of very different ways in which science enriches Pynchon's work even as it explodes answers.

The papers shared an appreciation of the doubleness, the recursiveness, even the duplicity of Pynchon's use of science and technology, yet each speaker approached Pynchon's work from a different perspective, at different levels. Dwight Eddins spoke primarily about details of language, showing how Gravity's Rainbow not only destroys the myth of the objectivity of scientific language, but also regenerates or "redeems" this very language. N. Katherine Hayles, proposing modern cosmology as a subtext for Gravity's Rainbow, stressed the doubleness and therefore openness of several basic concepts which inform the novel. Centrifugal scatterings (personal and galactic) are balanced by centripetal re-unions; black holes by white holes, annihilation by possibilities for cyclical rebirth; most important, there exist singularities--"charismatic disruptions of business as usual," when functions cease to behave in predicted ways.

Molly Hite argued for keeping the text open in another way, with the Gödelian observation that Gravity's Rainbow is about explanatory systems failing. This approach, of course, is not new, but Hite showed how system-crashes permeate the novel, on linguistic and stylistic levels as well as in structure. Signifiers signify not truth, or reality, but other signifiers, in complex chains that double back on each other like Kekulé's Serpent. Richard Pearce concluded the session by connecting Pynchon's three novels to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Bohr's concept of complementarity, field theory, and calculus--all in thirteen minutes. Recognizing shifts of perspective at the end of each novel, Pearce believes Pynchon is

pushing the reader into an unfamiliar time and space, the "last unmeasurable gap . . . the last delta-t" (GR, 760) in which a choice like Pökler's is made, in which the self is defined.

Pearce's views are the most provocative. He claims that the Epilogue to V. is a parody of an Epilogue, citing Sidney Stencil's implausible death and the "preposterous" reunion of characters. Pearce may be right, and if the Epilogue isn't exactly a parody, it should be. Certainly it isn't a traditional Epilogue. On the other hand, Pearce's reading, twenty years after V.'s publication, seems to force a "backward symmetry" (GR, 301) in which we calculate a value for V. by studying Gravity's Rainbow. And of course the novel teems with far-fetched coincidences.

The "shift" in The Crying of Lot 49, as Pearce admits, rests on a single use of the second person pronoun, which purportedly draws the reader into Oedipa's dilemma. Oedipa acts on "the courage you find you have when there is nothing more to lose" (Lot 49, 137). Unfortunately for this reading, Pynchon shifts to the second person pronoun throughout the book, in descriptions of Mucho (Lot 49, 4-5), of constellations (Lot 49, 59), of metaphors (Lot 49, 95), and of drifters (Lot 49, 135). Pynchon also shifts to "you" in at least three short stories and in the article on Watts.[2] We are trapped with Oedipa at novel's end, but we've been trapped with her since the first paragraph.

In the case of Gravity's Rainbow, however, Pearce's argument is sound. Pynchon ushers "you" into Richard M. Zhlubb's black Volkswagen, and you do become in some sense "victim and accomplice," participant as well as spectator: "Your guts in a spasm, you reach for the knob of the AM radio" (GR, 757) as the sound of the Rocket envelops you. Such endings promise the new knowledge of a fresh perspective, but in Pynchon's work they undermine and distort as much as they inform; thus they echo Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which proves that we cannot pin down both the location and the velocity of an electron.

Like all good discussions, the Pynchon session was too short. There was little time for questions, and

Professor Pearce in particular had to sketch arguments without much development. Presumably his new book will fill in some of the gaps. Considering the title of the session, surprisingly little attention was paid to language and style, the emphasis falling clearly on structure and theme. Professor Eddins was the only speaker to consistently examine Pynchon's scientific language closely, and he could not do justice in the short time to the pervasiveness of such language or to the development of this element of Pynchon's style. On the whole, though, the papers provided an apt appreciation of Pynchon's skill and a spur to more thorough study of the questions they raised.

University of California,
Los Angeles

Notes

[1] The papers are as follows: "Paradigms Reclaimed: The Language of Science in Gravity's Rainbow" by Dwight Eddins, "Cosmology and the Point of (No) Return in Gravity's Rainbow" by N. Katherine Hayles, "Pynchon's Center of Gravity" by Molly Hite, and "Pynchon's Fields of Force: Continuities, Discontinuities, and Closures" by Richard Pearce. Abstracts of three of the papers appear in Pynchon Notes 10; I presume copies of the papers are still available for $1 from Dr. Joseph Slade at Long Island University. [Editors' Note: All but Pearce's will, in fact, be published in the Markham Review, edited by Professor Slade.]

[2] The stories: "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," "Entropy," and "Low-lands."