Where Have We Been, Where Are We Headed?: A Retrospective Review of Pynchon Criticism

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Reading in Pynchon criticism to date is a good lesson in how irrelevant thematic studies can be to literary scholarship if they are not argued from within an understanding of the fiction, instead of being merely grafted onto it. Writing governs and defines its themes, and the critic must always have the process of the writing securely in mind before proposing to say what the writing means. This is particularly true of Pynchon's writing, which enacts the uncertainties of meaning. Because his books are in many respects about the interpretation of meaning, they resist efforts to impose a consistent pattern upon them. This is especially evident in those efforts which are entirely thematic and which attempt to discern the "message" of Pynchon's work without attending to its medium.

These comments should not be taken as a rejection of the importance of discerning ideas and themes in an author's work. Even though I agree with the spirit behind David Cowart's reminder that we do not read literature to learn about "bleak cosmic truths,"[1] achieving an aesthetic sympathy with or proximity to such truths is one of the impulses for our reading. But such "truth" as an author offers will be distorted unless the reader attends to how ideas appear in the writing. Not to do so results in mistaking a writer's literary use of ideas for other contexts in which those ideas have prominence (philosophy, history, science).

I

Many of the reviews and articles which followed the appearance of Gravity's Rainbow noted the indeterminacies of Pynchon's texts and cautioned against placing too much confidence in any particular idea in them. Though sporadic and undeveloped, these comments were useful and provided leads one expected to be followed in subsequent and lengthier studies. Everywhere in this first round of response one finds important recognitions: how difficult it is to find a consistent moral point of view ("It is almost impossible to

locate the narrator" George Levine writes)[2]; how "dizzying and resistant" his style is (writes Richard Poirier in "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon," MP, 16); how the narrator treats elements of his story as "both comic and sinister" (Joseph Slade)[3]; how "the affliction of his characters is the condition of his form" (Tony Tanner, MP, 55); and how in The Crying of Lot 49, "Oedipa is poised on the slash between meaning and unmeaning" (Frank Kermode).[4] Such comments as these provide the stymied reader with company and confidence, but too often they remain undeveloped, and the articles pursue a thematic point of view in spite of the stylistic instabilities they have noted. At the time of writing his piece for the Mindful Pleasures collection, Levine had already seen this failing of Pynchon criticism: "critics almost invariably respond to the novels with thematic readings that reduce variety to a fairly conventional coherence" and yet Levine's own essay ("Risking the Moment") succumbs to such a reading, endorsing as it does Leni Pökler's idea of penetrating "the moment" (MP, 126).

It must be granted that the profusion and pressure of ideas in Pynchon's novels are nearly impossible to withstand. In particular, "amateur readers" (in Poirier's phrase) are apt to assume they are reading battles of ideas, and have only to locate the survivors to arrive at Pynchon's "message." This assumption misses the fact that ideas in the imaginative worlds of Pynchon's fiction are as much objects and forces in that world as they are possible explanations of it. Accordingly, our attention has to be upon the interplay of idea, character and action, the bewildering relations and intersections of Pynchon's writing. In his review of Gravity's Rainbow, Richard Poirier noted that "speculative writing abounds in the book, brilliantly bringing together technological and much earlier analytical methods that combine to the eventual distortion of lives" (P, 174). Criticism has tended to research the "technology" rather than unravel the "bringing together." It is this tangle his writing enacts; there we find Pynchon's thematic orientation; and there we may attend to the brilliance of his writing.

In addition to hinting at the problems posed by Pynchon's style, these early pieces mapped a possible

line of inquiry for Pynchon critics. One finds in them the outline of differences of opinion over Pynchon's characterization, the division between those who read Pynchon's work as "Manichaean fantasy" (David Leverenz, MP, 242) and those who insist "at the heart of Pynchon's imagination lies . . . a sense of mystery, a vision of fantasy, that expresses itself in dualisms" (Robert Sklar, P, 91), and the issue of Pynchon's "realism," questions of genre and mode.

There seem to be two tendencies afoot in the efforts to understand Pynchon's narrative mode. One views Pynchon's writing as entirely new and innovative, rejecting positivism, realism and naturalism. The other places Pynchon in a tradition and shows his writing to be a contemporary expression of narrative modes with respectable lineages, generally versions of romance and satire. Perhaps assuming Pynchon's departures from convention to be self-evident, representatives of the former tendency often neglect to argue their position, and confuse the charismatic surface of Pynchon's world with those underlying characteristics which define mode. The latter tendency often implies that Pynchon's motley texts fail to meet the requirements of inherited forms.

Edward Mendelson's "magisterial"(the word is Khachig Tölölyan's) essay, "Gravity's Encyclopedia" captures the best of both tendencies by situating Gravity's Rainbow in a tradition he has newly defined.[5] Mendelson's piece is so successful among Pynchon readers that the genre of "encyclopedic narrative" apparently has been adopted unanimously, for one finds "encyclopedic" used everywhere to describe Pynchon's big book, as if the word, like "Kleenex," had lost its patent. Mendelson's essay exhibits much of what Pynchon criticism needs: a more thorough sense of Pynchon's literary environment (both contemporary and historical); discussion of underlying sources and demonstration of their use; and further prolonged attention to the processes of Pynchon's writing.

Mendelson also marshals the most favorable and articulate understanding, thus far, of Pynchon's characterization. However, he is not alone in noting "Pynchon's characters live in their work and in their relations to large social and economic systems" (MP, 179). Levine states "Pynchon creates character by

imagining it as participating in the energies of the world created around it" (MP, 124); and Michael Seidel argues that Slothrop's character is the result of the narrative mode in which he finds himself: "satiric heroes are victims; they are disallowed the luxury of human choice or even self-determined motive" (P, 201).

Roger Henkle articulates the contrary view, holding Pynchon to the requirements of psychological realism: "Oedipa, in fact, illustrates the failure of Pynchon's characters to carry the heavy themes of his novels" (P, 106). This will seem especially so to those readers for whom Pynchon's style is not the effective bearer of Oedipa's experience, rather than the "heavy themes" she juggles. While Henkle feels that Oedipa fails to "dramatize her own supposed compulsions and needs," Poirier considers "The Crying of Lot 49 an astonishing accomplishment and the most dramatically powerful of Pynchon's works because of its focus on a single figure" (MP, 18).

The issue of character eventually bears upon the issue of genre and mode, for the nature of characters, their experiences and conditions help define the kind of narrative in which they move. For example, Pynchon's handling of Slothrop has been used to demonstrate Pynchon's affinities with romanticism, satire, fantasy, and the gothic novel, as well as a return to the conventions of nineteenth century fiction, albeit "built on an attention to realities ignored by the fiction that we have come to accept as 'realistic'" (Mendelson, P, 5).

II

In the lengthier studies which have followed the articles I have been drawing upon, one is disturbed to find that these central issues have been not so much ignored as assumed.[6] We have yet to receive a convincing discussion showing that Pynchon is "rejecting the realist tradition" (Levine, MP, 123), or that he "seems to reject positivism" (CP, 23), and--above all--that he abandons naturalism for "postmodernism." Without careful, extended argument there is no advance. Nor is it idiosyncratic to suggest that character and genre are interesting and essential elements in our understanding of Pynchon's narratives.

Given the need for furthering that understanding, Mark Siegel's Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow is especially disappointing. Siegel's thesis zigzags around both the areas of characterization and genre, but never establishes a firm point of view which is argued persuasively. Moreover, Siegel's book is not really about "creative paranoia." The phrase is cited and the thesis smuggled in on pages 18 and 19, but is never defined or pursued. The recurring assertions that ought to have formed the backbone to this book all concern another implicit thesis of his discussion: the coherence of Gravity's Rainbow derives from its narrative voice, and this voice belongs to the primary "character" of the novel. This character is a creative paranoid trying to piece together his world (21, 110 and elsewhere). Despite this claim, Siegel also asserts that this narrative voice is "omniscient" (21), which means, one supposes, that he knows everything he knows, which isn't everything.

Siegel may have been led to the idea of narrator-as-character by a desire to defend Pynchon's characterization (he cites Henkle's article, mentioned above), for he can then argue that at least this central character has a very deep psychology: "seen from this vantage point, the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow is a complete psychological portrait of a modern creative personality" (40). The other characters are "isolated aspects of the narrator himself" (41, also 52 and elsewhere). This psychology is never analyzed (such analysis would unpack the implications of "creative paranoia"), and the thesis has the weakness of tacitly admitting that the other characters (all 365 of them--the count varies) are as insubstantial as Henkle says they are.

A lurking corollary of this thesis places Gravity's Rainbow in the category of self-conscious fiction that does not refer to any world beyond its own: "the narrator . . . has no other illumination beyond the paranoiac structure of his novel"(106). Moreover, this "omniscient" narrator "makes us aware of the fictionalizing process itself" (21). For support of this view Siegel cites the question asked in "War's evensong" during Advent: "Which do you want it to be?"[7] But the self-consciousness of Pynchon's narrator is always directed outward; Pynchon isn't Robert Coover asking us to compose "The Babysitter"

story we like best. Pynchon's question echoes Jessica's sentimentality two pages earlier and is directed at our appetite for the maudlin and our ability to find hope anywhere but in our own responsibilities. Siegel agrees with those who view Pynchon's work as a rejection of naturalism: "Pynchon seems to reject positivism" and therefore "positivistic naturalism" as well (23); here the importance of questions of genre becomes evident, for at stake are the ties between literature and experience which naturalism insists upon. Siegel's view narrows Pynchon's "public function" (Mendelson, P, 5). Gravity's Rainbow, Mendelson writes, "challenges its readers to choose their relation to experience. Either, like the romantics and Modernists, they will project their private aesthetic order onto what they perceive as the malleable or ultimately inaccessible objects of the world, or else they will accept responsibility for and to the order which exists already in the world of which they are an active part" (P, 8).

An enclave of romantic readers is comprised by those for whom Gravity's Rainbow persistently points to a world beyond, which is neither our world, nor the world of the "fallen" text. Following the early rash of MLA mysticism there have appeared the more closely argued positions of Lance Ozier's "Rilkean Transcendence," Joseph Slade's "Escaping Rationalization," and Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölölyan's "chronometric Now."[8] These positions require a "meta-existence"[9] not subject to the tragic limitations implicit in naturalist writing. By extension, words themselves participate in this naturalist bondage, so that "freedom" itself is but another bar in the "prison-house" of language (from which Pynchon "frees" Slothrop by dissolving his existence-in-words, much as Walter Lantz used to erase Woody Woodpecker).

Mendelson's dichotomy was bridged by Levine in his review of Gravity's Rainbow when he suggested that in the world of this novel "naturalism becomes spiritualism" (P, 182). Levine may have felt he was yoking contraries, but it seems entirely possible to argue that the effect he describes is the result of an intensification of naturalist premises (objectivity, frankness, an amoral attitude toward its material, a philosophy of determinism, a bias toward pessimism,

man as victim of biology and society).[10] Pirate Prentice's psychic life, for example, may seem a bizarre event in a naturalistic world. But, though Pynchon's use of the Adenoid may seem to be a comic-book detail, its role in Pirate's life conforms to the naturalistic structure of determinism. This incongruity between the mode of surface detail (sometimes burlesque and always faithful to the popular culture of the period) and the mode of the underlying structure (the implications of these details and their roles in plot and characterization) accounts in some measure for the widespread diversity of opinion on Pynchon's narrative genre. Reviewers quickly recognized the hybrid nature of Pynchon's fiction. Poirier and Sklar both commented upon this; and, of course, hybridization is one characteristic of Mendelson's "encyclopedic narrative."

Clearly Pynchon's work is such a mixture, and attending to the overlays and juxtapositions of modes that comprise this mix is one of the essential tasks of Pynchon criticism. At the same time, the fidelity of Gravity's Rainbow to our environment of information and power is too specific and accurate to justify dispensing with the pertinent aspects of the realist and naturalist categories. Even if we were to argue that (for Pynchon) naturalism is a literary convention with philosophical premises denied by Gravity's Rainbow, we should have to say at the same time that the imaginative relevance to our lives of that convention is representative of the price we pay for psychological and social coherence, and that Slothrop's fate is appealing to us only insofar as it is a literary fate with which we have imaginative sympathy.

One source of the anti-naturalist assumption is the narrator's apparent disdain for cause and effect. Slade early distinguished Pynchon's "view of history" as "an unfolding of continuity and connection rather than . . . a train of cause and effect" (TP, 212). Slade's characterization is true, but deceptive, for cause and effect predicates some kind of connectedness. Moreover, the narrator's disdain has more to do with the stance toward the world implied in the cause-and-effect view (the moral and social ramifications of determining causes as a way of being in the world)

than with any philosophical objection to the a priori status of that view. In Gravity's Rainbow, there are causes with human intention behind them, and there are causes without such intent. Similarly, there are effects which proceed variously from the absence of intent, from intent, and in spite of intent. Accordingly, there are degrees and versions of determinism. All of these distinctions and others are present in Pynchon's use of cause and effect, but few readers appear to be interested in discussing this concept as it is informed by his writing. The resulting collapse makes Pynchon's work both deceptively simple and unnecessarily mysterious.

Therefore, Pynchon criticism needs to pay further attention to matters of presentation and form, the ways the materials are handled. This necessity exists even in our reading of his earliest fiction. Joseph Slade's chapter on Pynchon's stories, included in Mendelson's collection, remains the most accessible source of comment on the early fiction, though analysis of specific stories has begun to appear. In particular, Slade's discussion of "Entropy" should be complemented by Robert Redfield and Peter L. Hays's "Fugue as a Structure in Pynchon's 'Entropy.'"[11] The virtue of the Redfield-Hays article is its demonstration of Pynchon's early ability to elaborate story and theme with exquisite technical ease, lacing overt plot with covert formal structures that have a significant bearing upon meaning.

A similar formal accomplishment underlies "Low-lands." Slade argues "the story is essentially static; at the end Flange returns full circle to the fetal state, and the plot does not advance" (P, 76). This view misunderstands the movement of the story and Pynchon's intentions. It would be difficult to argue that Flange grows or changes in any appreciable degree, but the story itself changes considerably. Pynchon has given "Low-lands" an intricate formal structure which is not only a linear descent, but a movement in words that imitates the shape of an hourglass, so that the two halves of the story mirror one another as the story slips through the neck of time into its own (and Flange's) Doppelgänger. The end of the story is an inverted version of its opening: the sea-nymph with child and Flange's entry into her sea-world reverse his earlier ejection from the childless

home. Nerissa's home is described as an underworld counterpart of the cliffhouse. Between the two houses lies the floor of the dump, corresponding to the "low-lands" of the sea. The dump is at once the zero point of the story's geography and the dead center of the story, coming "exactly" midway in its 22-plus pages. This mid-point, in Bolingbroke's shack, is a reprise of the radio shack of Flange's past; and this point is the "neck" of memory through which the story and Flange slip into the apparition of reality, the "other" and earlier self. That is, once below the dump floor, both Flange and the story modulate into a dead-pan articulation of dream, the sea-source of metaphor that has captured Flange's heart. Here Flange regains that younger sea-going self for whom the sea is a woman. Flange's reticence to tell a sea-story (a story about his girl), moreover, is a clever ruse, for the story of the story he refuses to tell is Pynchon's sea-story, "Low-lands." Buried within this fanciful tale of Dennis Flange is the story of Pynchon's early commitment to the reality of fiction. Here, again, attention only to the overt themes of the story misses the ways in which those themes are qualified by the implications of form.

Perhaps because Pynchon's handling of his materials often frustrates the effort to interpret them, critics appear hesitant to pursue the consequences of their own recognition of that handling. Siegel notes Pynchon's "ironic detachment from the literary devices he employs" (CP, 73); Slade suggests "Low-lands" is "an explicit parody of The Wasteland" (P,73); and David Cowart writes: "by the writing of V., Pynchon had come to regard the Eliot influence with a certain irony" (AA, 10-11). For the most part, however, these and other critics proceed in their discussions as if this stylistic irony--like the refracting medium of water--did not alter everything that passes through it.

This hesitancy results in the reliance upon thematic readings mentioned at the beginning of this essay, and neglects the sensibility conveyed by Pynchon's ironic distortions. Pynchon's independence from the ideas he uses is explicit even in his collegiate story, "The Small Rain."[12] The title, borrowed from A Farewell to Arms, is only the first allusion to the modernist

period that serves as the insufficient intellectual inheritance of the cerebral Levine, the story's major character. On the last page, he is addressed by another character, "'You and Hemingway . . . Funny, ain't it. T. S. Eliot likes rain.'"

The story is less about the waste land than about a post-World War II sensibility which has inherited the persistence of wasteland conditions, while the armature of modernist alienation which first gave those conditions expression retains no force. This fact recurs in Pynchon's stories and in V.. Thus the light-headed Siegel, of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," begins to perceive "Deeper Human Significance" in the stories he is told, and Callisto, in "Entropy," realizes "undergraduate cant had been oracle after all."

The irony in which Callisto is trapped is characteristic. These early figures in Pynchon's fiction are all caught in situations which may be described in terms of the modernist vocabulary they inherit. The insufficiency of this inheritance is a difficulty not only for them, but for their author as well, because the received formulations have gone stale while remaining true. Both his early characters and writing struggle within this dissonance, seeking an authentic, original expression. This struggle is the obligation of every artist, but it is magnified by an inherited alienation. That is, because the inheritance provides a set of words (the "wasteland," "the lost generation" and their texts) that has become part of our experience (instead of liberating understandings of it), this legacy has led to contortions in the relations of language and experience. Pynchon's stylistic twisting pursues an ironic strategy in which point of view--like an oscillating wave--exists in the tension between experience and words.

For example, in Profane's last appearance he tells Brenda Wigglesworth he hasn't learned a "goddamn thing" from his experiences. For Profane, words and experience have lost all relation. Stencil is at the other extreme, where words overwhelm mere experience. But these two vectors of experience and words comprise the "wings" of the book's mythic figure, and when they meet on Malta in V.'s penultimate chapter, Pynchon is making available to his readers a unified point of view engendered by their dramatic proximity. Simply,

the reader's perceptions outstrip Profane's and Stencil's limitations. Because the dramatic structure of the book is so visible, V. is a good example of how misleading ideas embedded in one of the book's contending elements can be, unless understood in their dramatic context.

Though confined by strict adherence to the idea of the closed system, William Plater's The Grim Phoenix is a very intelligent book, full of information about Pynchon biography and careful research into the factuality behind the metaphors of "entropy" and "tourism." Above all, it is a well-written book, clearly and coherently organized, providing interested readers with a consistent and thorough point of view.

According to Plater's controlling thesis, Pynchon's imaginative world is defined and bounded by the metaphor of entropy. With reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus, this view is consistently argued, so that both language and the self are closed systems. Having read this far into Plater's "Preliminaries," the reader would suppose (correctly) that Plater's view of Pynchon's world is pretty grim. Many readers of Pynchon surely have been dismayed by this opening gambit, for reflection upon the characters of Dennis Flange ("enslaved" by metaphor) and Callisto (who was "aware of the dangers of the reductive fallacy," but who nevertheless "found in entropy . . . an adequate metaphor") tells us that entropy is not a boundary of Pynchon's fiction but an active idea within it. Plater's entire book is subject to this early Wittgensteinian reflex to align the boundaries of meaning intended by Pynchon's writing with the metaphors within the writing.

Despite Plater's dependence upon Wittgenstein, his initial focus upon the language of Pynchon's fiction is promising: "If Pynchon's fictional world is a closed system, then it must be subject to entropy; and yet fiction is nothing more than language" (GP, 10). This statement leads us to expect a discussion of events in the fiction as the result of the decay of language, but no such tack is pursued. This is but one example of the ways in which his early pages suggest a subtlety of understanding which Plater felt compelled to omit in order to retain his grip on Pynchon's complexity.

As Tölölyan has written, the best chapter in this book is "Baedeker Land."[13] Plater unravels Pynchon's metaphor of the "tour" as a description of the deterioration of experience in the twentieth century; in addition he shows how tourism finds its reincarnation in the quests and films of Pynchon's next two books. This is a line of analysis with a logical relation to the thesis of the previous chapter (both world and fiction are closed systems), for the tour--like language--is also a closed system which follows a guide to "landscape" rather than explores the "land." This is an extension of the proposition in his first chapter (and an example of the book's masterful consistency): "The identity of V. . . . is a model of the world as it is seen rather than as it exists" (GP, 21).

In that proposition, Plater inclines toward an extreme view which collapses representations of reality (in Pynchon's writing) and reality. In "Baedeker Land" this is made explicit: "In Pynchon's hands . . . this power of Baedeker stands as a symbol of man's knowledge of the world, a world known only by its representation" (GP, 66). This view allies Plater with those for whom the world is "ultimately inaccessible" (Mendelson, P, 8), and leads him to assume untenable positions. Oedipa's quest, he argues, only replaces her Kinneret Baedeker with a tourism of the mind (GP, 87). Her "initial perception of her existence in an isolated system is not finally altered by her tour" (GP, 82). But this view lingers in the same equivocation trapping Oedipa, for the isolation outside she experiences at the novel's end is a far "cry" from her isolation inside at its beginning. Despite the persistent ambiguity surrounding the reality and meaning of Tristero, this Tristero has enabled Oedipa's communion with the world of waste Kinneret had hidden.

A similar tendency to push his views to their extreme statement mars David Cowart's otherwise useful and scholarly Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion. Cowart's book is an analysis of Pynchon's allusions to painting, film, music and literature, and is not about the "art" of allusion. This book is judicious in its scope and brings to Pynchon's writing detailed research and interpretation. The Art of Allusion is

compelling reading because we are persuaded by Cowart's learning and the insights his learning permits. Cowart's book shows that Pynchon's work rewards close reading and contains enough coherence and artistry to deserve such scholarship.

Cowart's interpretation of V.'s third chapter, "She Hangs on the Western Wall," is convincing precisely because of his detailed understanding of Pynchon's allusions to Venus. His commentary is not a mere unpacking of references, but often leads to conclusions about entire sections of Pynchon's writing and their place in the larger scheme of the novel. For example, his analysis here reveals Chapter 3 to be a record of Victoria Wren's further incorporation of "V-ness": "the birth of V-ness is conceived as a travesty of Botticelli's Birth of Venus" (AA, 19); and he thus shows how an attention to allusion uncovers some of the integumental logic determining V.'s composition. (Another striking example of such insight is Michael Seidel's interpretation of Slothrop's debasement at the Casino Hermann Goering: "Slothrop descendent is Slothrop regressive, a naked ape in regal robes. He plunges into the midst of a croquet game, a satiric hero, in effect, having interrupted a novel of manners. And there he stands: disturbed at love, displaced, naked under a royal toga, the king-beast Kong of the epigraph to this section of the book" (P, 202).

As in his chapter on painting, Cowart's discussion of film is thorough and illuminating. What is less compelling is a tendency--reminiscent of Plater--to use his information to generate broad statements Pynchon's fiction doesn't support. For example, Cowart asserts "Pynchon uses film as a critique of life, insisting that the one is not more or less real than the other" (AA, 32), which echoes Plater's cryptic comment, "film demonstrates, in a way that everyone recognizes, that life and illusion are both a matter of form" (GP, 124)--a comment which seems at odds with Plater's later remark, "reality necessarily involves illusion because it has no form of its own" (GP, 132). Cowart's and Plater's extreme views are possibly the result of Pynchon's thoroughness in demonstrating (in his fiction) the power of film to infiltrate the world in which film is shown, so that,

as in dreams, what is mere image or idea may become incarnate. Correcting for the distortions of Gravity's Rainbow (as Mendelson suggests), this is simply to say that reality can be and is "made." Fiction may serve as the motive or pre-text or blueprint of what comes to occupy space, time, and power (as has the rocket). But nowhere in Pynchon's writing do I see the reverse implication, that reality is illusion. On the contrary, reality "accumulates" and grows like Prentice's Giant Adenoid (taking the shape of our "very worst, se-cret fears?").

Cowart's chapter on musical allusions contains one of the best analyses of "Under the Rose" I have read. His knowledge of Manon Lescaut--its music and musical history--is impressive, as is his use of that knowledge to clarify this short story and its relations to Chapter 3 of V.. But again Cowart's discussion is held together by an unconvincing thesis: "Music, in these books, seems always to hint at the extra dimensions of experience that one misses because of the narrow range of frequencies--physical or spiritual--to which one is attuned" (AA, 81). Enforcing this pattern leads Cowart to read the electronic music of the Scope Bar as a prelude to Oedipa's enlightenment, rather than as cultural satire. Allusions to Stockhausen do presage her blossoming insight, but not in the salutary and unproblematic way that Cowart suggests. That is, the music alluded to is not always endorsed merely because it enlarges our imaginations; nor does it always do so. The musical allusions of "Entropy," for example, pursue an entropic progression from chorded music to music without chords to music entirely imagined; this is a musical variation on the subject of entropy, not the theme of "expanded perceptual horizons" (AA, 85).

None of this should gainsay the abundance of particular and specific information provided by The Art of Allusion. Readers will be delighted with the additional biographical facts Cowart has culled from correspondence with former teachers and friends. Moreover, the style of this book is lucid and often entertaining, as in the description of Oedipa's mind as "the ganglion of Tristero's apparently endless reticulation" (AA, 23).

On the other hand, I cannot agree with Cowart's generous review of Douglas Fowler's A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow.[14] The book does not compare at all favorably with Stuart Gilbert's guide to Ulysses, and largely for reasons that inhere in Pynchon's novel. Gravity's Rainbow resists the concept of a "guide." Gilbert had Joyce's assistance; moreover, Ulysses permits and invites guiding. Of course, there are ways in which readers may be instructed in their reading of Gravity's Rainbow. All the criticism reviewed here (and more) will serve as a collective guide. But a guide ought at least to begin by telling us of those areas which have been mapped, rather than merely adding to speculation. Watching Fowler divide Gravity's Rainbow into a battle between "our world of logic and rationality and the five senses and a nightmare world that has begun to penetrate it and threaten it" (RG, 10) takes one back to the naive beginnings of readers' responses. Moreover, Fowler appears to contradict himself, for a few pages later the word "rational" is now attributed to the Other Kingdom, though this kingdom no longer seems to be part of the "magical" world intruding upon ours, but includes, one gathers, parts of our world: "the Christian North, 'death's region,' the land of technology, repression, rationalized destruction" (RG, 19).

This apparent confusion is rendered inexcusable by the lofty tone Fowler has adopted. Writing of Pynchon's use of Herero, he says "one can more or less accept that vocabulary as more or less correct" (RG, 116). This is not a guide which inspires confidence, and given the repeated demonstration of his faulty, uncertain and partial knowledge, Fowler's cavalier tone is difficult to accept. Cowart pays attention to Fowler's efforts to describe Pynchon as a gothic writer, but those efforts proceed without definition or argument (compare the competence of Mendelson's "encyclopedic narrative," Smith and Tölölyan's "jeremiad," and Seidel's "satire"), and skim along on mere opinion: "It seems to me that it is as gothic sensationalists that both Eliot and Pynchon should be read"(RG, 32); "For whatever it's worth I think I sense this sort of impulse in Pynchon" (RG, 41-42). Fowler's annotations are uneven, often no more than glib admissions of ignorance. Further, as any reader who has accumulated such information

knows, annotations by themselves do very little to reduce perplexity. A list of them cannot be called a guide.

By any measure, Pynchon criticism is in its early stages. Several of the books reviewed here have appeared within a two-year period, so that their authors could not benefit from one another, as will other critics in the future. Despite its inconsistencies and simplifications, Pynchon criticism provides readers of Pynchon with much reliable information. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that this essay has dealt primarily with that criticism which has found its way into book form; there is a great deal of commentary I have not addressed. Each issue of Pynchon Notes informs us of a growing bibliography. Also, I have been at pains to underline a recurring neglect, and so have no doubt neglected much that is valuable. By insisting upon greater attention to the literary properties of Pynchon's writing, I am not urging more "hermetic self-referentiality" (Mendelson, P, 15), for Pynchon's writing implicates its readers and turns them toward the world. How it does this, the literary art which gives the fiction life, point and relevant complexity, is an aspect of Pynchon's writing that deserves further scholarship.

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Notes

[1] Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1980), 3. Subsequent references to this text will be enclosed in parentheses (AA).

[2] Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 119. Hereafter referred to within my text as MP.

[3] Thomas Pynchon (New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974), 177. Hereafter TP.

[4] Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1978), 164. Hereafter P.

[5] Mendelson's discussion of "encyclopedic narrative" and its implications is furthered in his introduction to his edition of Pynchon essays.

[6] These include Mark Richard Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978), hereafter CP; William M. Plater, The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), hereafter GP; Cowart, Note 1, above; and Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980), hereafter RG. I am in agreement with John Krafft's view (PN, 4) of John Stark's Pynchon's Fictions and see no point in duplicating it.

[7] Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 131.

[8] See Lance W. Ozier, "The Calculus of Transformation: More Mathematical Imagery in Gravity's Rainbow," Twentieth Century Literature, 21, No. 2 (1975), 193-210; Slade, "Escaping Rationalization: Options for the Self in Gravity's Rainbow," Critique, 18, No. 3 (1977), 27-38; and Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölölyan, "The New Jeremiad: Gravity's Rainbow," in Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. Richard Pearce (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 169-186.

[9] One (Christian) example of meta-existence that comes to mind is "Heaven."

[10] I have drawn this list from V. L. Parrington's third volume of Main Currents in American Thought (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930), 323-27.

[11] Pacific Coast Philology, 12 (1977), 50-55.

[12] The Cornell Writer, 6, No. 2 (1959), 14-32.

[13] "Prodigious Pynchon and His Progeny," Studies in the Novel, 11, No. 2 (1979), 224-34.

[14] "Baedeker to Pynchon," Pynchon Notes, 5 (1981), 20-27.