Thomas Pynchon and the Science Fiction Controversy

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Since the publication of Gravity's Rainbow in 1973, Pynchon's "place" in American literature has been a matter of sweaty debate. He has been labeled an encyclopedist, an expressionist, a satirist, and a fabulist. Of course, the contemporary writer crosses currents in the literary mainstream like an undisciplined trout, and the critics, fastidious pigeonholers that we may be, are bound and determined to find the one deep well that can rightly be called his home, the better to seize him there. So far, the results with Pynchon are more mixed than this metaphor.

One lure frequently cast in Pynchon's supposed direction is the label SCIENCE FICTION WRITER. This may come as a shock or an insult to mainstreamers who don't read SF or SF criticism, or may, to the same people who see that current in literature as shallow and unproductive, seem unimportant. However, SF criticism is no longer in its infancy, and has, in fact, engendered a fairly sophisticated debate on genre poetics. (Robert Scholes's Structural Fabulation is one such work, and Darko Suvin's Metamorphoses of Science Fiction is a more complex and detailed analysis of the qualities of SF.) When important mainstream critics like Scholes begin to make claims that SF writer Ursula LeGuin may be America's greatest contemporary author, it is time for literary purists to cast off their snobbery and take a good look in the direction of this dark bank.

Some SF writers have counted Pynchon among their number for some time, and have even castigated him for his failure to live up to the full potential of the genre. While Geoffrey Cocks has called Gravity's Rainbow "a science-fiction masterpiece on the order of Paradise Lost,"[1] noted SF writer John Brunner has assessed both the strong points of the novel and its failure to clearly state its message for the future.[2] Both of the major scholarly journals in the SF field, Extrapolation[3] and Science-Fiction Studies,[4] have published articles on Pynchon, attempting to evaluate his achievements in light of the genre's concerns and aesthetics.

On the other hand, some SF critics and a great many SF readers probably would deny that there is much to say about Pynchon as an SF writer. What is and is not SF is a matter of the definitional debate that will probably always rage among the genre's scholars. What is surprising is the absence of consideration of this primary matter of definition in most of the published discussions about Pynchon as an SF writer.

Definitions of science fiction abound, but tend to be divisible into two major categories: (1) SF involves the extrapolation from our current knowledge about the cosmos to suggest possible implications for the past or future; or (2) SF is primarily the metaphorical treatment of contemporary concerns. A further distinction is often drawn between science fiction and fantasy, according to which SF attempts to maintain some relation of verisimilitude to the known laws of physical reality, whereas fantasy violates these same laws not just unabashedly but intentionally. It is not obvious, however, that Pynchon fits any of these categorical definitions.

From the 1920s, when SF began to be defined as a literary genre, until about 1970, extrapolative definitions of SF predominated--in fact, were almost unchallenged. The most famous was SF editor John W. Campbell's definition: "To be science fiction, . . . an honest effort at prophetic extrapolation of the known must be made."[5] This definition has evolved somewhat in its application to the works Campbell actually published by writers like Isaac Asimov. L. David Allen recreates a modern version of this definition: "science fiction is a literary subgenre which postulates a change (for human beings) from conditions as we know them and follows the implications of these changes to a conclusion."[6] James Gunn offers a further sophistication: "Science fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger."[7]

None of Pynchon's works fits these definitions very well because the main focus of his concern is our con-

temporary reality, not the future and not distant worlds. Certainly Pynchon is interested in the "effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past;" certainly he concerns himself with scientific and technological change; and certainly his works may be seen to concern the fate of "civilization or the race itself." But Pynchon's historical concerns are always aimed at penetrating the confusion of the present, and he almost never envisions the future except by implication. To interpret Gunn's definition in a sense extreme enough to encompass V., The Crying of Lot 49, or Gravity's Rainbow is to open the definition as well to any serious historical novel, thus demolishing the entire concept of genre. While political or historical reconstruction may be found in SF, it is also found in the works of Shakespeare and The Report of the Warren Commission.

In the 1970s, Suvin and Scholes attempted to redefine SF as "the literature of cognitive dissonance" or "cognitive estrangement"--that is, as a literature that, by imaginatively making the ordinary appear extraordinary, restores a freshness of vision to the jaded observer of contemporary events and suggests new perspectives on our reality.[8] This redefinition of the genre paralleled a radical shift in its development during the previous decade in the hands of SF writers who came to be called "the New Wave." It was lent further credibility by the critical commentary of the writer many scholars consider to be the best in the genre, Ursula LeGuin: "Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive. . . . All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life--science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and historical outlook, among them."[9]

These definitions of SF, at least superficially, come closer to describing Pynchon's fiction in a useful way. Pynchon's work clearly is described by LeGuin's definition. However, LeGuin does not bother to differentiate SF from much contemporary fiction, such as Mailer's Of a Fire on the Moon, or--since the definition does not require that any SF work be concerned with all these dominants--the fiction of

Beckett, Barth, Brautigan, Barthelme, the poetry of Wallace Stevens, or from the works of many others over the last several decades. When Scholes and Suvin do differentiate the genre, it is again in a way that would seem to exclude Pynchon. As Scholes says, "Fabulation is fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way."[10] The worlds of Pynchon's fictions are not clearly discontinuous from the ones we know, but rather are most importantly continuations of these worlds, albeit from radical perspectives. Malta, New York City, and even war-torn Europe have more in common with Kansas than with Oz--these places are, as far as we can prove (and as far as fiction ever does prove anything) the known world.

Finally, Pynchon has been considered a fantasist by at least one critic,[11] but here again definitions have been stretched far beyond their useful applicability. Fantasy literature, as it is differentiated from SF, is the fictional "realization of what never could have been, what cannot be, and what never will be within the social, cultural, and intellectual milieu of its creation."[12] Pynchon's point is, at least some of the time, that his fantastical and paranoid flights might very well be accurate descriptions of our reality.

Isolated episodes in Gravity's Rainbow might be considered SF ("Heart-to-Heart, Man-to-Man") or fantasy ("The Story of Byron the Bulb), but these don't make the novel SF any more than Melville's employment of the cosmic newspaper at the beginning of Moby Dick makes that novel SF. Certainly Pynchon's concerns with the effects of scientific and technological advancement on human beings, with relativistic and historical outlooks, with the fate of the human species, and, perhaps stylistically, his emphatic concern with ideas rather than detailed characterization, parallel basic concerns of science fiction writers. However, there seems to be little justification for including his works on lists of science fiction. Perhaps the most reasonable assessment of Pynchon's position vis-a-vis science fiction is that of Richard Alan Schwartz, who concludes (for the wrong reasons) that Pynchon may prove to be a mediating figure in the current literary evolution that seems to

be reuniting SF and mainstream fiction.[13] Because Pynchon incorporates elements included in all the definitions of SF and fantasy suggested above, while fulfilling none of them completely, it seems to me that Pynchon is at least an exemplary token of a reunification that is taking place.

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Notes

[1] Geoffrey Cocks, "War, Man, and Gravity: Thomas Pynchon and Science Fiction," Extrapolation, 20, No. 4 (1979), 368.

[2] John Brunner, "Coming Events: An Assessment of Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow," Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction, 10 (1976), 20-27.

[3] Cocks, 368-77.

[4] Richard Alan Schwartz, "Thomas Pynchon and the Evolution of Fiction," Science-Fiction Studies, 24 (1981), 165-72.

[5] Quoted by Isaac Asimov, The History of Science Fiction from 1938 to the Present (Film), Univ. of Kansas, 1973.

[6] L. David Allen, Science Fiction: An Introduction (Lincoln, NE: Cliff Notes, 1973), 121.

[7] James Gunn, The Road to Science Fiction #2 (New York: New American Library, 1979), 1-2.

[8] See Robert Scholes, Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975), and Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1979).

[9] Ursula LeGuin, "Introduction," The Left Hand of Darkness (New York: Ace Books, 1976), iv, viii.

[10] Scholes, 29.

[11] Beverly Lyon Clark, "The Mirror Worlds of Carroll, Nabokov, and Pynchon: Fantasy in the 1860s and 1960s." Diss. Brown Univ. 1979.

[12] Roger Schlobin, "A Brief Guide to the Teaching of Fantasy," self-published pamphlet, 1-2.

[13] Schwartz, 171.