

# Text is a Text is a Text

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*Pynchon's Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text*, by Hanjo Berressem. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993. 273 pp. \$34.95; pb \$15.95.

Interpreting postmodern literary texts increasingly means entering into the current conversation of critical theory: the debate over the nature and status of postmodernism itself and over the status of the subject, of master narratives and, finally, of language as well. The critic generally interrogates the author's critique of the practice of privileging traditional binary oppositions that serve as institutional and linguistic loci of power and control. But an inherent trap awaits any postmodernist reading of a postmodernist text: certain foundationalist assumptions inform all applied theory. As Kurt Gödel proved in mathematics, theory is bound to the internal limits of its logic, even when the theory itself acknowledges its own limits and espouses contingency. The application of contemporary theory must then involve leaving out information to be consistent or leaving out information to be complete. Brilliant as a critic's examination of a literary text may be, the question remains: is it possible to read texts in some shorthand form and still manage to maintain the same information content as the texts being read? Both Gödel's theorem, which Pynchon alludes to in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the concept of algorithmic transcomputability, the idea that some information cannot be compressed into shorthand form, suggest not.

In *Pynchon's Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text*, Hanjo Berressem faces this quandary, staking his claim with the argument that "The creation of a 'poststructuralist Pynchon' is long overdue." To this end, he proposes to tackle questions central to postmodern theory in Pynchon's novels, works that reflect the "linguistic turn" or "paradigm shift." Berressem maintains that Pynchon's novels all deconstruct the utopian dream of pure presence, replace hegemonic discourses with the contingent text, and present a decentered subject. Rather than approach subjectivity in terms of the radical emancipation of the signifier, however, Berressem sees in Pynchon's world a tragic and inevitable complicity between the signifier and the signified. Fully textualized, the subject does not originate meaning, but rather has been inaugurated by discourse. Exploring Pynchon's "deconstruction of

selfhood," Berressem has a twofold focus: the relation of subject and language, and the Lacanian desire of the text to terminate itself, since both the subject in the text and the subject of the text are "constantly displaced, always co-opted, and always confined to the symbolic rather than the real."

The first section of the study explicates theories of the subject: Lacan's linkage of psychoanalysis and modern linguistics, which defines the text of the subject; Derrida's concept of *différance*, which defines the subject of the text; and Baudrillard's analysis of socioeconomic issues, which defines the subject in the text. Berressem's plan is to juxtapose these complementary notions of subjectivity for a reading of Pynchon that avoids a structuralist or humanist approach. Acknowledging his own inevitable "misreading" and his choice to valorize Lacan because of the ontological nature of his study, Berressem clearly understands the predicament endemic to a poststructuralist reading.

The second section treats Pynchon's novels chronologically, focusing on their rendering of the dismal position of the subject in a fully textualized world and on the inability of the texts themselves to escape the trap of endless signification.

The chapter on *V.*, centered on the episode "V. in Love," argues persuasively that Pynchon deconstructs Freudian psychoanalysis and its "specific assumptions concerning the subject." Using Lacan's notion of fetishism and "a woman's own desire for her position as fetish," Berressem traces the movement in *Mélanie l'Heuremaudit's* relations to her father, to *V.* and to herself from subject to "inanimate fetish object." Exploring *Mélanie* and *V.'s* affair, Berressem employs both Lacan's discussion of the mirror stage and Baudrillard's "endlessly reflected vision" to articulate Pynchon's separation of virtual and real fetish. Seeing Pynchon's treatment as post-Lacanian, he also notes that *Mélanie* does not long for the phallus, but rather has become the embodiment of the phallic dream, its *fétiche*. Exposing this shift, Pynchon can then disrupt the concept of fetishism on various levels: undermining Freud's relation of the fetish to the fear of castration, blurring Freud's subject/object binarism, and imploding the subject's becoming an object in totality. Berressem's argument that Pynchon works within psychoanalytic structure to deconstruct it is well-worked out and quite convincing. His most provocative analysis, however, is that Pynchon implicates the complicity of language and fetishism: "the text itself stages this invasion on the field of signifier, the ultimate fetish and ultimate (Derridean and Lacanian) 'machine.'" From this perspective, the novel is apocalyptic, both in form and content, since "through the fetishistic aspect of the text, the *real* machines in the text

are aligned with *symbolic* machines of the text . . . in fateful and tragic complicity . . . as V. and V.—writing and the written about—finally merge.” This merging marks the beginning of a world of pure simulation, a “dreamless machine” in which fetishization is inescapable.

In his chapter on *The Crying of Lot 49*, Berressem uses the Lacanian phallic interpretation of the real, one Oedipa’s first name clearly invites, to argue that the heroine’s mourning the loss of a “phantom limb” is a mourning for the phallus. Compelling as this reading is, Berressem’s most trenchant analysis centers on the parallel between Pynchon and Baudrillard. Baudrillard insists that the ultimate impact of media simulation on the body is to make the “real” body obsolete, since the media’s models of events “precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal and logical order of the real and its reproduction.” Ultimately, the novel offers “no way out, only the desire to escape.” Oedipa’s desire is for the either/or: transcendence or nothing at all, *revelation* or *death*. At the end of the novel, Oedipa still awaits revelations that, as always in Pynchon, are imminent and endlessly “deferred by language.”

So much has been written on *Gravity’s Rainbow* that breaking new ground, even with the long-overdue poststructuralist Pynchon, is not easy. Berressem’s application of Lacan does provide a new filter for some already established readings: Pynchon’s insistence on the impossibility of return, the significance of Slothrop’s disintegration, the text’s deconstruction of those institutions that write from above, the nature of language and of the text itself. Acknowledging the difficulty of articulating “a general poetics” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which he calls a “true polylogue,” Berressem devotes two chapters to *GR*, one to the familiar themes he has identified in each of the novels and the other to the connection of film to both subject and text. Generally, he notes the effect of the multiple viewpoints and voices, the radical disruptions of the text, and the multiple approaches to questions of language.

In one approach to these questions, Berressem offers a reading of the Kirghiz Light episode. He sets the stage by exploring Pynchon’s use of chemical synthesis, control, and addiction to introduce a world of simulation which extends beyond the material into language, to what Baudrillard calls a “universal semiotic.” The “ultimate passage is toward a completely simulated universe expressed in a completely digital code,” a “purely rational simulation machine,” which, as *Gravity’s Rainbow* says, is stored in every subject’s EEG. Harking back to prehistory, the Kirghiz Light episode evokes a utopia which for Tchitcherine, as for other characters in the novel, constitutes a lost origin that Berressem maintains cannot be achieved within language. Despite any character’s desire to escape the movement into simulation,

reclaiming a lost origin requires moving outside language and thus sacrificing the self and ego. Like the subject's desire, "the desire of the text" remains trapped between "the will to terminate and the will to express this very termination."

Love, the one possible key to a way out of the world of simulation, this "death-in-life," is "always already ironized." Existing in a utopian space, Berressem claims, love can never be realized. However, Berressem limits his reading to only one aspect of love—"special relations" love, which he calls "togetherness," and which he examines in terms of the novel's content. On that level, he is right: as "togetherness," love within the text provides no hope. But love need not be limited to togetherness nor confined to the book's content. The kind of love which does not depend on togetherness and which embraces alterity involves risk and vulnerability. On a structural level, Pynchon's text does not ironize this kind of love at all. Placing readers in a position of risk, vulnerability, and respect for its radical otherness, the text exposes the reader to the very conditions inherently required for what *Vineland* calls "doing the world's work."

Chapter 7 discusses the relation of film to simulation, digitality, and control in regard to both the subject in the text and the subject of the text. Berressem argues that Pynchon uses film thematically and structurally to critique subjectivity and to present the text's own double bind in desiring both to terminate itself and to express its termination. Berressem connects film to the Lacanian imaginary (the locus of desire) and to the symbolic, since the seemingly analog character of filmic images is undermined by the fact that these images remain "embedded in a digital discontinuous structure that defines the succession in which they simulate continuous movement." Further, he calls attention to the parallel between film and the text itself, a parallel that implicates the text's "desire to simulate reality and its desire to persist as a text." Using this logic, Berressem offers an account of Pynchon's characterization of war as "always already a media event."

Inextricably bound up with both war and cinema, Slothrop becomes a "grammatical category," whose scattering parallels the auto-destruction of the entire narration itself. Like Slothrop, the readers, who may approach the real, finally remain "forever suspended" within signification. Unity can be no more than a tease, one immediately balanced by the presence of death. In his essay "*Gravity's Rainbow* and the Economy of Preterition," Louis Mackey also notes the parallels between Slothrop's dissolution and the text's. However, unlike Berressem, who appears to link unity with redemption, Mackey sees redemption as the willingness to live without absolutes. To him, the preterite text "goes to pieces just as Slothrop does. Welcoming its fate

. . . *GR* pays with its preterition the price of its redemption." Berressem's complex Lacanian declension leads him to the conclusion he reaches about all Pynchon's texts: the tragic inescapability of endless signification.

Like most critics, Berressem sees in *Vineland* a "darker universe," an irretrievably fallen world of "operational simulation." As in *Gravity's Rainbow*, no subject stands apart from complicity with power, but now "the discourse of knowledge has taken full control over other discourses." Here, Pynchon more mercilessly deconstructs the naivete of nostalgia. Every hope of innocence falls victim to each subject's complicity with power. The connection between language and subjectivity remains the pivot around which Berressem structures his argument about the simultaneous promise and denial which ends *Vineland*, a condition he identifies in each of Pynchon's novels. Characters like Zoyd Wheeler are subjects for whom, in "both real and symbolic space," home cannot be attained, only approached.

Berressem demonstrates a deep understanding of theory, and many of his detailed readings of Pynchon's work are compelling. Yet three problems plague his study. The first is the predicament facing any poststructuralist critic: creating a poststructuralist Pynchon without writing from above by relying on a theoretical construct, regardless of its nod to contingency. The second is almost more bothersome: the book is overladen with theory. Since Pynchon's work is ostensibly the focus, the theory should inform and vitalize Berressem's analysis without intruding on and thus impeding what are, when he does close textual reading, important and astute insights. For a study of Pynchon's poetics, Berressem should have radically condensed the section on theory, especially the intricate detailing of Lacan. For readers who already know Lacan's rethinking of Freud, such intricacies are not necessary; for those unfamiliar with the intricacies of Lacan, Berressem's analysis is a tease, at once too abbreviated and too dense. The third problem is Berressem's omission of the incisive criticism of Lacan's phallogentrism by critics like Deleuze-Guattari and Irigaray, whose arguments seem more in keeping with Pynchon's post-Lacanian, anti-phallogentric poetics. For all that, *Pynchon's Poetics* is both sophisticated and provocative, making many of Berressem's close readings of the novels well worth the effort.

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