

Tadeusz Pióro and Marek Paryż, eds. *Thomas Pynchon*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. 2018, 256 pages.

The significance of Thomas Pynchon for American post-WWII literature is undisputed, therefore, for the Polish reader, the volume edited by Tadeusz Pióro and Marek Paryż comes with much anticipation, as do the successive translations of Pynchon's novels. But as Tadeusz Pióro points out in his closing article, Pynchon takes time. This entails not only the long process of writing, which, as Pióro shows, often spans over a number of decades but also the time that is necessary for the translators to overcome the many challenges that the author throws at them. It is difficult to imagine a casual reader of Pynchon, someone who simply picks up one of his novels, reads through from the first sentence to last and puts it away never to return to it again. I would rather think of a Pynchon reader as of a connoisseur, someone who not only reads the novels themselves multiple times, but also engages in lengthy discussions with other Pynchon readers, explores the enormity of detail that characterizes the author's work, as someone who tries to understand the principles of advanced physics and information technology, who reads lengthy books on American and global political history to be able to tell real events from those that Pynchon invented for our painful amusement.¹ Marcin Rychter writes about the Internet communities devoted to studying and discussing his work, much in the spirit of Pynchon's fiction itself, ridden with a variety of closed societies and almost obsessed with technology.

My belief that there are almost no casual readers of Pynchon is confirmed by the authors of the chapters in this volume, not in the sense that they openly share this belief (although I suspect they might), but in the sense that in my eyes they are members of the community of Pynchon readers. It seems to me that any of the authors in the volume could have written their chapter on any of Pynchon's novels, and possibly the decision to assign the material to the respective scholars was taken by drawing cards. I am writing this half-seriously to emphasize the number of connections between the various novels (and not only) that the authors were able to make.

It is true that some themes, references to particular essays appear more than once in the volume, but we must keep in mind that the book, in spite of its logical and chronological order, is itself a collection of essays that can, if need be, read individually, not that, as I have suggested, this is a likely situation. When read as a whole, the book presents Pynchon as a methodical and consistent author, who was not, however, immune to significant change. The best example of this is the clear division between his early and his late work put forward by Zuzanna Ładyga. It is an important differentiation because it helps to free Pynchon from the label of the iconic postmodern writer. It is true that to many theorists of postmodernism, such as the often-quoted Brian McHale, Pynchon has provided a fertile ground for literary analysis, but with postmodernism's dawn two decades ago, the label hardly does him any favors. Such a liberating approach seems to a manifestation of an implicit credo of the entire series, which, it seems to me, is to battle intellectual sloth that haunts the age of fake news.

1 As we learn from Mikołaj Wiśniewski's article, a simple rule of plausibility does not do the job: in Pynchon's fiction the historical is often equally absurd as the fictional.

The introduction to the volume features a very decent biographical backdrop, which in the case of an author almost defined by his absence from public life,² is not easy to present. This is important because it draws our attention to the moral aspect of Pynchon's work, which can perhaps be tied to the reasons for his hiding. It seems that the moral dimension of contemporary literature has been relegated to a variety of minority discourses and feminist literature, whereas more "mainstream" authors have rarely been presented as moral thinkers in critical accounts. This aspect of Pynchon's writing is covered quite extensively in the book, I am happy to report. Tadeusz Pióro's introduction also signals two other themes that run through Pynchon's *oeuvre*, and both of them revolve around the ethos of the Enlightenment that saturates our natural-science-dominated world: our understanding of history and technology, and these are extensively developed upon in the successive essays.

In his analysis of Pynchon's debut novel *V*, Marek Paryż picks up the baton and shows how a set of beliefs formulated over two centuries ago still affects the logic of post-WWII America, and how the Enlightenment desire for certainty has given way to the emergence of totalitarian states on the global scale. In Paryż's view, Pynchon's taste for the irrational can be understood as a reaction to totalitarianism, which is a well-grounded argument, indeed. The scholar is quick to pick up on the sexuality in *V*, and by extent, also in Pynchon's later novels (especially *Gravity's Rainbow* is a case in point). From the very outset, sex for Pynchon is characterized by obsession and absurdity, both of which metonymically define the human condition. The article does an excellent job of explaining the ways in which Pynchon uses a variety of popular literary genres to means greater than exposing the grasp popular culture has over contemporary society. The argument showing how the form of the novel is instrumental to the exploration of its possible meanings reveals that from the very beginning we are dealing with a writer of great complexity and finesse, suggesting that the readers should always be on their toes lest we should jump to hasty conclusions or gross simplifications.

Jagoda Dolińska's chapter introduces to the readers of the volume the notion of entropy, a concept that resurfaces in almost every book-length analysis of Pynchon's prose, and references the very popular distinction between modernism and postmodernism that made Brian McHale a celebrity in the literary theory circles. What makes the essay truly noteworthy is her discussion of apophatic theology, as it sheds much light on the author's metaphysics. Metaphysics indeed seems to be a fruitful path to discuss Pynchon's discontent with the ethos of the Age of Reason. The aesthetics of chaos needs not to be grim, as it turns out, it can be almost cheerful, which is not to say that Dolińska omits the darker side of the human condition. Its duality is reflected well by a reference to the category of sublimity, discussed both in the most ancient and the most recent understanding. Perhaps I am splitting hairs at this stage, but I would be very interested to read what Dolińska would say about Burke's writing on the sublime, Burke being an early critic of the Enlightenment³.

Jan Balbierz continues the reflection on the relationship between science and mysticism in his essay on *Gravity's Rainbow* associating the West with the regime

2 In an episode of *The Simpsons* Pynchon was shown with a paper bag over his head.

3 Some Polish historians of philosophy classify Burke as an Enlightenment thinker, but most often he is rather seen as a transitory figure.

of science and the East with spirituality. This common connection is revived and re-validated by exploring the historical fracture in human learning that took place around the nineteenth century. The reference to Bakhtin seems almost necessary to be made in the context of Pynchon's best-known novel, an excellent manifestation of the carnivalesque, but also as Balbierz notices, a novel that "disintegrates novelistic patterns" (63). *Gravity's Rainbow* is perhaps nowadays the most quoted example of an encyclopedic narrative, but as the scholar points out, Pynchon's novel attains this status by standing in relation with prior encyclopedic narratives, such as those by Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Goethe, Melville, and Joyce.⁴ The essay is also sensitive to the significance of human corporeality, a prominent theme in Pynchon's fiction, which in the context of *Gravity's Rainbow* is discussed in connection with Pavlov's psychological experimentation. The combination of hard science with questioned causal relationships produces a disturbing effect that permeates the atmosphere of Pynchon's famous work.

Arkadiusz Misztal's reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* expands Jan Balbierz's reflection on the novel's relationship with other crucial encyclopedic narratives by focusing on Melville's *Moby-Dick*. It is worth noting that Melville's *opus magnum* is not the most obvious of connections to be made, yet Misztal's position is well-grounded, especially by the way in which the scholar discusses the opening sentences of both novels. Looking at *Gravity's Rainbow* from the perspective of *Moby-Dick* allows us to appreciate the way in which Pynchon renegotiates the status of his own work. Misztal's careful discussion of the book's plot in connection to its formal structure would serve as an excellent introduction to the novel, should a new Polish edition be published. Those who are well-acquainted with *Gravity's Rainbow* will, without a doubt, appreciate Misztal's insight into the cinematic quality of Pynchon's narration. The argument stands firmly on two pillars: the author's unorthodox treatment of time and his taste for randomness. Historically, the development of the cinema is clearly connected with our perception of wars, the scholar observes, and so, indirectly, film has affected the way in which we write about the war.

Zofia Kolbuszewska contributes two articles to the volume, both outstanding, even in this collection, in terms of readability, to the extent that I would call them entertaining. The first one is devoted to *Slow Learner* and links Pynchon with Washington Irving's famous "Rip Van Winkle," a connection surprising, to say the least, but as it turns out, fully justified from the perspective Kolbuszewska offers, after all, in *Slow Learner* Pynchon experiences a literary encounter with himself twenty years junior. The scholar immediately exposes Pynchon's jester-like strategy of self-presentation and presents the author's attitude to his early short fiction as complex and ambiguous. From this standpoint, we can quickly recognize the significance of *Slow Learner* for understanding Pynchon's transformation over the many years of his literary career. The article provides a solid depiction of the historical backdrop for a more in-depth insight into the author's early output and helps to appreciate the prominence of certain themes in his later work, such as Pynchon's peculiar theory of garbage. The chapter beautifully comes together at the end and provides a smooth transition into Kolbuszewska's reading of *Vineland*.

4 Significant mentions of the last two are made in other places of the volume as well.

The long-anticipated novel, as the scholar observes, was met with “a benevolent disappointment” (115) and, as it is implied, the initial reception was perhaps somewhat hasty. Kolbuszewska explores the possible reasons for this state of affairs as she consistently shows the unobvious qualities of the novel. The category of cryptomimesis, the focal point of the article, opens up the discussion of *Vineland* in a variety of directions: morality, history, aesthetics of the media, all of the above being consistent with other articles in the volume. Kolbuszewska also studies the novel in the context of nostalgia, both understood traditionally, and in its revised version, which suits well Pynchon’s description of contemporary America.

Mikołaj Wiśniewski opens his article on *Mason & Dixon* with a reference to Captain John Smith, whose colorful, but to a large extent, fictional depiction of historical events well reflects the atmosphere of Pynchon’s novel. History, even if recorded by an eye-witness, as it is made apparent, has a limited claim on the truth in the Enlightenment understanding of the word, and it is indeed the looming ghost of Enlightenment thinking that the writer seeks to exorcize in *Mason & Dixon*. As many articles in the volume show, a careful study of the historical context is instrumental when reading Pynchon, and nowhere is it more evident than in the case of this novel. Wiśniewski clearly shows that the most outlandish historical details in the novel can prove to be historically accurate, but they are often concealed amongst the author’s amusing confabulations. Wiśniewski does a good job of exposing *Mason & Dixon*’s moral center of gravity. The birth of tourism is depicted in relation to colonial cruelty, consumer culture is built on suffering, all in the spirit of a failed understanding of progress. Here too we have a reference to nostalgia, which precedes the question of whether Pynchon is escapist or ironic in regards to the fantastic world he has created. It is very likely, it seems to me, that the writer is ironic in the most subversive of ways, and in this sense, Wiśniewski is right to expose the critical function of Pynchon’s fiction.

Throughout the volume, as I have suggested, we develop a sense of dynamics that characterizes Pynchon’s *oeuvre* as a whole, and Marcin Rychter’s essay on *Against the Day* only reinforces this impression; after all, we are speaking about the author’s first novel of the new millennium. It is quite natural, therefore, that Rychter begins his argument by referring to the network structure of the narrative, a structure which immediately brings to mind the developments in information technology. Just like Mikołaj Wiśniewski, Marcin Rychter is sensitive to the peculiar interpenetration of temporal planes in Pynchon’s work, and here it is conceptually linked to the impact that the findings of quantum mechanics had on the collective metaphysics of the turn of the centuries. The possibility of parallel universes validated by scientific research way beyond the comprehension of a common consumer of culture has contributed to filling the religious void that opened up sometime towards the nineteenth century. The span of roughly one hundred years is where Pynchon’s novel dwells as it moves back and forth to examine what is often referred to as The American Century. Reading *Against the Day* from a Dionysian perspective puts forward the idea of a collective permanent intoxication, which brilliantly captures the quirky logic of this, and many other novels by Thomas Pynchon. The Apollonian sense of order, which since the 1800s has been reduced to a fig leaf for the post-capitalist West, gives way to intellectual frivolity.

Rychter is quite specific about the fact that Pynchon is not a nihilist, on the contrary, the scholar makes a strong case for the presence of Christian thinking in his prose, and even his use of the typically postmodernist metafictional devices could be tied to moral ends. Living in the digital age we have learned that our hopes for a free and innocent exchange of information have been childishly naïve and we have found ourselves bound between the freedom and criminality of the Dark Web, and the relatively safe oppression of the social media. The dichotomy of dangerous freedom and safe oppression can also be extended to the political plane, the problem of terrorism, to be precise, which in the novel is introduced by an allusion to 9/11, by many seen as the symbolic beginning of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, one is tempted to suspect that Pynchon's anti-establishment sympathies would make him side with the terrorists, but as Rychter points out, it is clearly not the case, for the author, an acute political mind fully realizes that terrorism actually contributes to the enforcement of oppressive authority. In this light, the introduced elements of Christian morality come in handy, but we must keep in mind that Pynchon is always far from being a typical moralist.

Zuzanna Ładyga's article is an unobvious continuation of Marcin Rychter's reading of *Against the Day*. Her analysis of *Inherent Vice* daringly takes on some of the negative reviews of Pynchon's 2009 novel to elaborate on the transformation the author's body of work underwent as a consequence of the gradual dawn of postmodernism. Ładyga sees the novel as the author's critical self-reflection, which helps to understand his departure from some of his trademark features. It is not a sign of Pynchon losing his touch, but rather a hint regarding his pursuit of other goals. Reading *Inherent Vice* with certain expectations formed by the merits of his earlier prose is a doomed enterprise, for it is set on a foundation of intellectual complacency, which a writer like Pynchon simply cannot tolerate. *Inherent Vice* turns out to be an interesting move on the author's part, and his direction seems to have much in common with the likes of David Foster Wallace, who himself was heavily influenced by Pynchon's early work.

Alicja Piechucka's chapter also seems to carry a distant echo of Wallace, as it brings together themes of entertainment and boredom, two seminal topics of Wallace's great novels, *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, respectively. The focus here is on the female perspective, an interesting arch between *Bleeding Edge* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. A feminist take on Pynchon's work seems rather fresh, and at the same time obviously appropriate, after all, Oedipa Maas is one of the most recognizable characters in American postmodern prose. Piechucka presents Pynchon as a man quite familiar with the popular culture marketed for women, fashion and accessories, all of which are neatly inscribed in a discussion of the recent developments in the entertainment business. The play of contradictions consistently executed by Pynchon brings to mind associations with the superhero culture (an attractive woman with a seemingly boring job turns out to lead a life of danger and adventure, much like Clark Kent, taking off his nerdy glasses to rescue humanity). Piechucka is easily able to make the connection between chic-lit and consumerism, in the meantime discussing such interesting topics as the relationship between gender and politics (along the lines of the two major political parties in the United States), and the link between womanhood and 9/11. It is especially worthwhile to reflect on the role of the family in the context

of the fallen Twin Towers, the scholar demonstrates. Piechucka finishes her argument comparing Pynchon's image of America at the beginning of the twenty-first century with F. Scott Fitzgerald's America from a hundred years prior, again encouraging the discussion of what The American Century was like.

The final two articles in the collection look back on the entirety of Pynchon's literary output from two different, but not disconnected perspectives. Paweł Stachura's pondering of the encyclopedic quality in Pynchon's novels opens the author's work for fresh interpretative possibilities and sheds new light on the reflections that have been developing throughout the volume. Stachura clearly opposes flattened, simplistic approaches to an iconic author, a frequent problem with literati of such a status. A link to Derrida which leads through Joyce's *Ulysses* is convincing especially that Pynchon, as the scholar shows, processes and even parodies Derrida's work. An inquiry into the way postmodern writers have subverted the relationship between literature and its theory seems almost essential when writing about someone like Thomas Pynchon. Multiple references to the ancient tradition and classical devices of philology depict the author as a literary erudite, which helps to appreciate the depth and complexity of his prose.

The final essay in the collection studies the way in which Pynchon constructs his storylines. By making yet another link with Melville's *opus magnum*, Tadeusz Pióro is able to display an unobvious narrative strategy that Pynchon often resorts to: diminishing narrative tension. Such a procedure, in the scholar's eyes, serves an intricate purpose, it helps the author avoid the cynicism attributed at times to late-postmodern writers. This argument ties in well with the point Alicja Piechucka made earlier on; Pynchon appears to reach far beyond the literary tradition that made him its icon. It is true that a narrow reading of Pynchon's most famous novel could easily lead to the conclusion that *Gravity's Rainbow* ends in a cynical way, but a careful study of the narrative techniques employed points to the contrary. By deconstructing what we know as a happy ending, Tadeusz Pióro shows, Pynchon reveals disguised levels of irony throughout the novel. *Gravity's Rainbow* ends with what the scholar calls a "simulacrum of a moral" (255), which together with the formal complexity and amount of detail is impossible to trivialize. It appears, therefore, that Pynchon has found a way out of the impasse that brought postmodernism to its end, even before that end came to be.

The volume as a whole has much to offer to the Pynchon aficionado. It presents us with a richness of interpretative possibilities while still revolving around some of the main themes in Pynchon studies. It helps to understand the significant transformations the author's body of work underwent outlining a possible trajectory of his future novels, should they ever see print. Considering that Thomas Pynchon was born in 1937, the volume might, though I heartily hope it will not, cover the entirety of his *oeuvre*. From the thirteen essays on 256 pages, the writer emerges as an eternal literary rebel and avant-gardist, constantly eager to push his prose to its limits taking on formal, theoretical and philosophical restrictions. The recently departed Philip Roth would habitually express the opinion that the novel as a form of cultural expression is finished, Don DeLillo in his *Mao II* has voiced a view that in this day and age, the novelist will be replaced by the terrorist in the business of shaping our cultural

awareness, whereas Pynchon has continued, and hopefully continues, to relentlessly fight in its defense.

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Francesca De Lucia. *Italian American Cultural Fictions: From Diaspora to Globalization*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2017. 180 pages.

In the introduction to his *Buried Caesars*, Robert Viscusi maintains that one of the biggest problems for Italian Americans has been and continues to be Italy itself. According to Viscusi, Italy's cultural and economic policy has relied heavily on diaspora communities to promote the penetration of goods and the exposure of the national heritage in the US. In return, descendants of Italian immigrants have received very little recognition. This neglect applies also to the academy, where Italian-American studies, despite of having attracted a small but devoted following, are still absent from major scholarly conversation. It is therefore important to register a new addition to the still meagre canon of works on Italian Americans authored by scholars from the fatherland. Francesca De Lucia, with her *Italian American Cultural Fictions*, follows in the footsteps of, among others, Martino Marazzi, Marcella Bencivenni and Simone Cinotto, who are contributing in spreading Italian-American studies in Italy.

Italian American Cultural Fictions is very ambitious in scope, aiming to provide a survey on Italian-American cultural production mainly, but not exclusively, in literature, from the "classic age" of the first part of the twentieth century to the present. De Lucia's intent, however, is not to give a detailed chronicle of a century of cultural production, but in particular to focus her account on the transition from an earlier mode of representation, labelled "emblematic ethnicity," to a more recent one, the "latent ethnicity." According to De Lucia, "emblematic" ethnicity focused on "the ways in which immigrants and their children struggled to overcome discrimination and elaborated a new identity borne out of the interaction of Italian and mainstream American elements" (27). Gradually, "emblematic" ethnicity has been replaced by a different mode, defined "latent"; the latter is the product of a "second diaspora"—from city ghettos to the suburbs—and of progressive cultural integration into the mainstream: the latent mode, therefore, is a way of representing ethnicity which sheds oppositional elements of the culture and reinvents identity by relying on neutralized and sanitized symbols.

Central to this study is the concept of "cultural fiction," a label broadly including representations of a specific culture produced in different forms—from novels to films and newspaper articles—by both insiders and outsiders of a specific group. The author's effort goes in the direction of finding common ground by intersecting viewpoints and media and thus identifying the narrative representation of the group as discourse, where insider views and visions from the mainstream are understood in continuous and dialectic relationship. However, fiction takes the lion's share of De Lucia's effort, and her forays into cinema, however insightful, fail to do justice to the extremely complex interaction between Italian Americans and the big screen.