

Øverland describes are also often inaccurately labeled 'Anglos' and 'WASPs.' Through his ambiguous use of terminology and his apparent acceptance of the ethnic spokesmen's understanding, Øverland misses an opportunity to explore an important aspect of American assimilation. Our natural concentration on the exclusion of the 'other' should not blind us to the other side of the story, the remarkable speed of inclusion into American society.

The homemaking myths may have addressed a mythical audience – one that ethnic spokesmen mistakenly saw as an Anglo monolith. Øverland maintains that the purpose of homemaking narratives was to convince Anglo-Americans that the new groups deserved an equal place in American life. However, as he shows, 'these arguments were hardly noticed' by Anglo-Americans (21). That reinforces the sense that ethnic spokesmen misunderstood their audience and the dominant culture. If so, there is something sad about the story, echoing Oscar Handlin's poignant depiction of the marginal second and third generations.

Øverland has written a lively account that makes intriguing use of a variety of materials, many often overlooked, such as postage stamps. It joins sixteen other volumes in the University of Illinois Press' important Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Centennial Series. *Immigrant Minds, American Identities* is a useful addition to the explorations of memory and identity that have enriched our understanding of ethnicity in America over the last two decades.

Bruce Leslie

SUNY Brockport

Luc Herman (guest editor), *Approach and Avoid: Essays on 'Gravity's Rainbow.'* Papers from the International Pynchon Week, Antwerp, 1998. Special issue, *Pynchon Notes* 42-43, Spring – Fall 1998.

Poly-modal, genre-hybrid and apparently unclassifiable, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow's* (1973; hereafter *GR*) stubborn resistance to any totalizing and simplifying reading that ends all readings continues to be its main, and perhaps only, common denominator. As such, the very lack of unifying approaches frequently provides a – perhaps somewhat fragile – framework for just about any collection of essays on this most complex masterpiece of post-modern literature. The novel itself may resist convention, but the task of sorting critical approaches according to some kind of contextual frame surely does not. In this respect, editor Luc Herman's introduction is but an echo of a number of its predecessors in stating that 'if anything connects these new essays, it is an awareness that *GR's* mass and complexity make the book impossible to read and interpret in a conventional way.' Conventional as it may be, Herman's tentative classification *in spite* is indeed required, faced as he is with the challenge of finding some framing introduction for the 18 extraordinarily diverse essays in this collection. The essays were first written for Part One

of International Pynchon Week, 'Gravity's Rainbow: The First 25 years,' a two day conference held at the University of Antwerp in June 1998. This explains – and, if required, excuses – the striking variety in scope, ranging from an explanation of the source text for the novel's epigraph from Wernher von Braun to an exploration of Pynchon's use of angel imagery.

The history of Pynchon criticism (a.k.a. the Pyndustry) is often described according to more or less distinct phases, each to some degree influenced by the prevailing theoretical climate. Major Pyndustry contributors, and also editors of the acclaimed scholarly journal *Pynchon Notes*, Bernhard Duyfhuizen and Khachig Tölölyan describe three distinct phases, beginning with a few quite diverse monographs and essay collections in the 1970s, including the by-now classic *Mindless Pleasures* (1976; ed. George Levine and David Leverenz) and Edward Mendelson's equally influential and long-standing *Pynchon – A Collection of Critical Essays* (1978). Nevertheless, Tölölyan accuses scholars in this phase of being 'overly concerned with narrow readings of 'entropy' and 'paranoia' as distinct themes rather than integrated features in a full textual matrix.'<sup>3</sup> Without necessarily agreeing with this, my overall impression of many of the critical works of this first phase is a far too general scope and an intention to cover too many aspects of Pynchon's works, making the readings and analyses in turn rather shallow and lacking distinct perspectives.

The beginning of the 1980s marks a new phase of Pynchon criticism, a phase bearing some signs of the awakening of deconstructive theory and practice. Compared to the preceding decade, the criticism of the 1980s is more preoccupied with discourse, language, and relations between Pynchon's works and contemporary critical theory (i.e., Foucault, Derrida, Barthes). A common conclusion among scholars of this period is how Pynchon's array of narrative strategies blur the fixity of meaning and the stability of reference, thus making the act of criticism a search for a meaning, or rather, meanings, that are never fixed but ambiguous and in constant flux. Molly Hite's excellent *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (1983) still stands out as one of the best readings of Pynchon. This decade also saw the coming of the first annotations and reader's guides to *GR*, namely Douglas Fowler's *A Reader's Guide to 'Gravity's Rainbow'* (1980), and Steven Weisenburger's tour de force, *A 'Gravity's Rainbow' Companion* (1988). The next decade, the 1990s, is conspicuously colored by the deconstruction paradigm, most flamboyantly shown in the inimitable McHoul and Wills's *Writing Pynchon* (1990), as well as in Hanjo Berressem's *Pynchon's Poetics* (1993). Worth mentioning is also Deborah L. Madsen (another of the contributors to the collection reviewed here) – since she draws extensively upon post-structuralist theory (primarily Derrida and de Man) in *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon* (1991).

3. Bernhard Duyfhuizen, 'Taking Stock: 26 Years Since V. (Over 26 Books on Pynchon!),' *Novel*, 23, 1 (Fall, 1990).

In searching for ways to identify some main theme or focus in *Approach and Avoid*, history does to some degree present itself as an adequate starting point. This is not surprising, considering that 'historical novel,' *mutatis mutandis*, might be the most applicable genre label for *GR*.

Weisenburger has convincingly shown his expertise in tracking down historical sources and contexts for Pynchon's novel, of which his essay 'Haunted History and *Gravity's Rainbow*' is yet another example. He rereads the *GR* epigraph ('Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death') in light of von Braun's 'Why I Believe in Immortality,' the text from which Pynchon cites. Weisenburger projects some of *GR*'s most notably fantastic scenes – those including 'myriads of ghosts, wraiths, séance visitants, spooks, angels, qliphoth, specters, revenants and haints' – through the lens of the citation from von Braun. Drawing on poststructuralist theories from Derrida and De Certeau, Weisenburger reads these scenes as 'participating in a historiographical project whose subjects are the almost-erased multitudes, the Others of white, technocratic society.' The next essay also deals with the historical pretexts of *GR*. Deborah L. Madsen explores how *GR*'s Puritan William Slothrop relates to Thomas Pynchon's colonial ancestor William Pynchon. Pointing to *GR*'s concern with issues like colonialism, empire and the historical construction of nation states, Madsen illustrates how William Slothrop can be said to be a 'partial representation of William Pynchon, whose activities as a statesman, entrepreneur, frontiersman and politician illuminate elements of *GR* not usually associated with that character.' Tracing William Pynchon's biography as colonist, pioneer, founder, politician, magistrate, merchant, entrepreneur, judge and heretic, Madsen shows how the Pynchons have a history of uneasy relations with the colonial authorities, as well as a sensitivity to the presence of native peoples – both prominent themes in *GR*. *Pynchon Notes*-editor Bernhard Duyfhuizen also takes on a (film-)historical perspective, exploring how *GR* relates to the 1965 film *Operation Crossbow*, the film seemingly inspiring James McGovern's *Crossbow and Overcast*, long acknowledged as a source text for rocket information in *GR*. The time of the writing of *GR* possibly coincides with, or is at the very least influenced by, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and the associated Cold War led to a rhetoric of containment. These are issues that are easily found in *GR*, most apparently in the pervading 'Counterforce.' Duyfhuizen points to a number of similarities between *Operation Crossbow* and *GR*, concluding that *GR*, with its celebration of 'waste,' draws into question any possibility of a desirable outcome that would confirm the dominant discourse of containment.

In 'The Environmental Pynchon: *Gravity's Rainbow* and the Ecological Context,' Thomas Schaub explores the influence of ecological discourse in the 1960s on *GR*, coming up with some interesting observations and shedding light on aspects of *GR* not previously paid much attention. Schaub shows the novel's environmental disposition and detailed accounts of the waste and degradation of human technology, as well as the discursive (ecological) context within which the novel emerged, claiming the environmentalist frame to be one of the most explicit openings through which we can see *GR* as a text from a specific historical

period. The issue of gender is also represented in the collection, most notably in Christophe Den Tandt's essay, 'Management and Chaos: Masculinity and the Corporate World From Naturalism to *Gravity's Rainbow*.' His focus is *GR*'s construction of a gendered economics, and Pynchon's mapping of the post-Second World War era as if it were a manual of industrial psychology. According to Den Tandt, *GR* maps the economy of the military-industrial complex by means of a gendered discourse, and focuses on a military-corporate universe whose main issues are articulated mostly through masculine voices (through the experience of men caught up in military or business hierarchies). Inger H. Dalsgaard addresses *GR*'s technological aspects, outlining three varieties of traditionally positive technological creation myths apparent in *GR*. By exposing the dangers inherent in faith in technological heroes and ideas, Pynchon turns each of these myths into technological warning myths, thus emphasizing their inherently oppressive and destructive aspects. According to Dalsgaard, Pynchon addresses questions such as whether technology runs us, or we technology, and whether technology is the frightening predicament of isolation and loss of both identity and democracy, or just an epistemological system, a metanarrative.

Several essays provide, albeit in very different ways, fairly original readings of aspects of *GR* barely noticed in the critical discourse: Zofia Kolbuszewska ('It Has to Be More Than the Simple Conditioning of a Child, Once Upon a Time': The Use of the Child in *Gravity's Rainbow*') studies the images of children and childhood in *GR* in light of C.G. Jung's concept of the child archetype. Heikki Raudaskoski's essay, 'Something's Stalking Through the City of Smoke': Tracing the Ins and Outs of *Gravity's Rainbow*'s London,' departs from the illegal love nest of the (semi-)illicit relationship between Jessica Swanlake and Roger Mexico, arguably 'the only romantically passionate liaison between a man and a woman in the whole Pynchon oeuvre.' Raudaskoski shows how London is depicted in terms of obscurity, and further, how all kinds of separating borders are consistently questioned in *GR*, such as those between inside and outside, self and other, private and public, subject and object, actual and imaginary. In environments such as these the characters themselves remain constantly on the edge. Vaska Tumir's topic in 'The City, The Labyrinth and the Terror Beyond: Delineating a Site of the Possible in *Gravity's Rainbow*' is the notion of the city as a construct of ideational or physically realized design for rationalizing experience, and the tendency of such constructs to exclude the thoughts and experiences which the construct does not subsume as valid.

Some of the essays focus in different ways on Pynchon's narration, discourse, and style, and the reading process of *GR*. These include Graham Benton's 'Riding the Interface: An Anarchist Reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*,' Fran Mason's 'Just a Bunch of Stuff That Happened': Narratives of Resistance in *Gravity's Rainbow*,' and Friedrich Arich's 'Dogscical Reading: *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Reversals and Reader Response Criticism.' Politics and *GR*'s critique of colonialism and Western Civilization is another frequent issue to be addressed in this collection. Denis Crowley ('Before the Oven': Aesthetics and Politics in *Gravity's Rainbow*') discusses the importance of the role the idea of the state plays in *GR*, in light of Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Schiller's theories of aesthetics. In '*Gravity's Rainbow*: Pynchon's Holocaust Allegory,' Richard Crownshaw draws upon the concept of

allegory to show how it serves as an interpretive strategy for the characters in *GR*, enabling them to rationalize reality and history. In a somewhat similar fashion, Hanjo Berressem ('Tristes Traumatiques: Trauma in the Zone') explores the poetics of *GR* according to the logic of trauma, in which the primary event is 'erased and the effect causes only returns to secondary causes (the triggers that represent the traumacore, and that lead to renewed, secondary repressions),' making the future precede the past and the effect precede the cause. According to Berressem, the ultimate 'traumacore' in Pynchon's poetics is 'the fall into language, subjectivity and culture, a fall that entails the realization of death, not face to face but rather in the face of the letter.' Jim Neighbors' essay, 'Kant, Terror and Aporetics in *Gravity's Rainbow*,' addresses Pynchon's ethics from a Kantian perspective, showing how Kant and Pynchon share a distinction between the world of experience and a realm beyond experience, and a gap between form and thing. Thus, *GR* can be read as '760 pages of the putting into question of translation – the contradictory interstitial and impossibly time-less [...] zone of 'the act of naming.'"

The specter of French post-structuralism and (esp. Derridaean) deconstruction still haunts the Pyndustry, like the ghostly presence of a rhetoric that threatens to make impossible any attempt at legibility in favor of an ever-so-fashionable rhetorical (oops – sorry; post-rhetorical) discourse that adds little to our understanding and appreciation of the work being analyzed, but rather serves as a celebration of its own impenetrable terminology. This is most strikingly manifest in Laurent Milesi's 'Postmodern Ana-Apocalypitics: Pynchon's V-Effect and the End (of Our Century).' In true Derridaean spirit, Milesi seems obsessed with Greek etymology and playing with prefixes and typography:

Not now, pre ana-apo-; not yet | yet always already, from a naïve 'doxic' conception of apocalypse as supposedly 'terminal' or final revelation to the paradox of a trembling cataclysm '*inherent* in every sign.' [...] No, Apocalypse has not [yet] taken place – Now – it will [not] have [yet] taken place as the book turns back to/on itself; no apocalypse, but rather a [pre/post] ana-apocalypse, a necessarily constant rehearsal, repetition and working through of revelation between 'to die' and 'to be reborn' – the couple *apothn'eskein/anabioskesthai* in Plato's *Phaedo* [especially § 71] – in the interstices between fiction and fact, poetics and politics, aesthetics and etics.

To make matters clearer, the essay is fraught with annotations. When just about every other sentence is provided with footnotes, many of which are very long, and intent on comprising all relevant material to a topic already immensely complex, the task of reading and eventually arriving at an understanding of the critical essay becomes a challenge indeed. There is something disproportionate about a fourteen page article having more than ten pages of footnotes, not including a six page reference list.

The last essay in the collection is Brian McHale's 'Gravity's Angels in America, or, Pynchon's Angelology Revisited.' Whereas other critics have claimed Pynchon's angelology to be exclusively prestigious, high-culture and – if parodic at all, then serious tendentious parodies, McHale claims that '[b]y an irony of cultural history, Pynchon's serious-minded

angelology has been engulfed by pop-culture fashion; his sublime Rilkean angels have been reduced post factum to fellowship with John Travolta and Victoria's Secret catalogue models.' This can be read as yet another example of postmodernism's general tendency to erase or at least blur the hierarchical distinctions between high and low culture, and a tendency to embrace all presumably, or formerly, low- or mass-cultural phenomena. Pynchon is already 'poised on the threshold of pop-culture recognition,' but according to McHale it takes an agent of pop-culture domestication to fully assimilate Pynchon's sublime, high-art angels into the contemporary mass-market cult of angels. Pynchon's agent in this respect is Laurie Anderson (the song 'Gravity's Angel' on the album *Mister Heartbreak* [1984]), 'the avant-garde's emissary to mass culture.'

In his review essay 'A Pynchon for the Nineties,' Donald Brown provides a survey of a handful of the last decade's critical works on Thomas Pynchon, concluding with the observation that

[a]t this moment, within the cultural dominant of postmodernism, one can only surmise that we will one day see the premiere of 'Pynchon Criticism: The Next Generation' in which, perhaps, the historical conditions for 'writing-as-art,' 'Pynchon-as-writing,' 'theory-as-writing' and 'the subject-as-writing' can be assessed in McHoul and Wills's 'cybernetic or post-humanist terms' [...] from the brig of a new century's Starship by a 'do-it-yourself hypertextualist' [...] cruising, one supposes, the heterotopia of computer hyperspace, interfacing with 'the hacker we call God' [...] via the electronic clairvoyance of mythical ones and zeroes that will 'get the right data to those whom the data will do the most good' [...]. As Prairie might say, 'Yeah, rilly.'

Is this collection of essays an indication of the next generation? To be honest, I hope not. As much as the collection as a whole does bring about a number of new, insightful and ambitious readings of *Gravity's Rainbow*, some essays (viz. Milesi, Berressem, Neighbors) seem more preoccupied with their own pretentious rhetorical discourses than with *GR*. This collection shows that parts of Pynchon criticism, although possibly insightful and original in scope and accomplishment, still suffer from an unnecessary difficult terminology and an inclination toward the post-structuralist vogue of theorizing and rhetorizing miles above both plausible levels of accessibility and understanding, and – what is worse – miles away from the text they set out to analyze in the first place. *GR* itself disappears, drowns in the impenetrable complexities of rhetorical theory-making and showing-off of difficult but seemingly impressive neologisms and a wannabe-terminology. It might be a coincidence, but it is nevertheless interesting, that the essay written by one of, if not *the* most merited of the contributors, namely Brian McHale, is the among the most easily accessible – and interesting. It is written in a language that one is apt to understand without having to resort to a relatively advanced encyclopedia at every other sentence.

As varied (both in scope and quality) as it is, this collection of essays is, if nothing else, a proof that Pynchon's epic will continue to spin off numerous works and efforts at coming to terms with this exemplum of an inexhaustible text. It is indeed fascinating how *GR* con-

tinues to provide the most ample and illustrative quotes and citations for apparently any reading, however peculiar or irrelevant it may appear. The major merits, then, of *Approach and Avoid: Essays on 'Gravity's Rainbow'* turn out to be – somewhat paradoxically – its very lack of consistency and of a common denominator, however broadly defined. With a few notable exceptions, this collection illustrates the immense richness and seemingly inexhaustible arsenal of possible, plausible, pleasant, and provocative, ponderings on Pynchon's masterpiece. Judging from the first 25 years of *GR* criticism, it will be interesting to be around for the next 25 years. As Herman points out, and as this collection of essays shows (for better or for worse), 'Pynchon fits late twentieth-century research interests like a fashionable glove.' However, it is my sincere hope that one doesn't have to be a dedicated Derridaean deconstructivist to be on the future Pyndustry catwalk.

Anne Mangen

Volda College, Norway

Michael West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. xvii + 518 pp., ill.; ISBN 0-8214-1324-4; cloth, \$59.95.

European observers have often been puzzled by American culture's bizarre preoccupation with correct spelling, a feature most obviously exemplified by the peculiar institution of the spelling bee competition. The spelling bee, in which players attempt to spell aloud words assigned to them by an impartial judge, is an old custom that was revived in schools in the nineteenth century in the United States, where it enjoyed a great vogue, and where local, regional, and national competitions continue to be held annually. Yet this obsession with orthography, Michael West argues in *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature*, is only part of the story about America's complex relationship with language. Indeed, the dialectical antithesis of the spelling bee phenomenon is an equally time-honored American fascination with puns, anagrams, word-plays, quibbles and all other varieties of verbal wit.

In the first part of this voluminous study, West sets about explaining how punning became both a popular pastime and serious literary endeavor in nineteenth-century America. The initial impetus, he suggests along rather traditional literary-historical lines, came from Europe, where Romanticism had spawned a new and philosophically oriented interest in language and linguistic origins. West is particularly interested in the science (or pseudo-science) which he labels 'Romantic etymology,' and by which he understands different, highly speculative attempts to understand linguistic origins, evoke transcendent meanings and possibly arrive at a universal 'language of nature.' Imported into America, Friederich Schlegel's brand of 'Romantic irony' and S. T. Coleridge's strategy of 'desynonymization' necessarily underwent a number of sea-changes, as these methods were adapted to local historical conditions and inscribed with contemporary concerns. In this part of the book, West demonstrates an impressive familiarity with a relatively obscure group of American antebellum schoolmasters, grammarians and language-theorists including William