

Anne Mangen and Rolf Gaasland (eds.), *Blissful Bewilderment: Studies in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon*. Oslo: Novus, 2002; 226 pages; ISBN 82-7099-352-2; 30.50, NOK 226, paper.

The Preface to *Blissful Bewilderment*, a Nordic contribution to Thomas Pynchon studies, makes a useful overview of the field's development so far, describing the critical Pynchon industry (alias Pyndustry) as a rather dynamic and contested branch within contemporary literary research. The Pyndustry has evolved over some dark periods during which scholars were getting hot on either academic paranoia (up to the mid 1980s) or self-congratulatory manifestos (McHoul and Wills in *Writing Pynchon* at the beginning of the 1990s).<sup>11</sup> In 1990, however, the publication of *Vineland* showed that Pynchon himself had cooled down considerably. Following the phantom leader, the Pyndustrialists managed to revise their critical fever just in time for his next novel *Mason & Dixon* (1997). The latter contained almost no trace of the paranoia-and-entropy thematics, and was schizophrenic rather than paranoiac.

This then is the post-1990s period which has produced *Blissful Bewilderment*. The book presents some cool articles and a heterology of approaches that cover Pynchon's work in a non-totalizing and non-paranoid fashion. Most symptomatic in this respect is Dana Medoro's discussion of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Medoro replaces the critical cliché of a fascistizing and masculine paranoia with a more fragile and feminine disorder: melancholy, coupled with menstruation (the women's very own W.A.S.T.E. system). These two provide the female protagonist with a distinctly corporeal way of 'answering' the plot's riddles posed by the Tristero – Pynchon's urban legend of a mysterious and conspiratorial postal service. According to Medoro, the *Lot 49* heroine would do (and often does do) better by crying and bleeding than by following a logocentric *cogito*-driven path in her Quest for Truth. Arguing against the male critics' paranoia-and-entropy stance, Medoro asserts that 'the image of the menstruating womb...resists entropic decay [since it] both cyclically self-renews and resonates with frequencies from other, outside sources' (68).

The outside, in a sense, is also what four of the remaining nine articles focus on. The reader's response as the 'outer' dimension of a text, the exhibitionist 'spectacle'-like performativity of a narrative, and the extrovert communicative bond between speaker and audience, are all points that interest the critics, especially when they deal with Pynchon's two mammoth novels: *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*. Thus Mark Troy finds that the narratological anomalies in *Mason & Dixon* are due both to the eccentric speaker Reverend Cherrycoke, who often 'edits' himself out of his 'historick' eye-witness tale of the Line, and to the listeners – a heterogeneous domestic company in a voracious Christmastide mood – who like to inscribe themselves into the narrative and detour it whimsically. It's as if *Mason & Dixon* doesn't exist for the sake of the Line's progress but for the sake of Cherrycoke & Listening Company's

11. Alec McHoul and David Wills, *Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1990).

'dialogic emotional interaction' (214). The narrative is only ever there as a pretext for speaker and audience to start teasing each other. So Troy need no longer brood on the title's ampersand: the *included* third between *Mason* and *Dixon* is nothing other than the communicative situation which in turn contains an ampersand between speaker & listener. It's a whole *mise-en-abyeme* of and-per-se-and's. Such abysses and 'vertigo[s],' Troy argues, guarantee a non-paranoid and 'non-fascist' reading experience. A similarly liberating potential springs, according to Anne Mangen, from *Gravity's Rainbow's* readiness to leave the page and unflatten itself into a hypertext for the reader, who then navigates it by using the novel's recurrent trivia (the bulb, the chess knight, etc) as orienting 'nodes.' The nodes, insignificant as they appear, teach the reader that a text can operate not only through neat hierarchies but also through digression, wanton inclusiveness, and inconclusiveness.

A much bleaker (and therefore more interesting) concept of the reading experience is suggested by Preben Jordal and Inger Dalsgaard. Jordal explores the question of how Blicero, the rocket priest from *Gravity's Rainbow*, reads Rilke and how this, instead of liberating him, prefigures his downfall as a manic Nazi. Pynchon's reader discovers no messianic message in Rilke's pure word – only a poetically maddening void as a result of the 'semantic withdrawal' (116).

Inger Dalsgaard, for her part, deals with one of Blicero's associates: the historical figure Wernher von Braun who makes a cameo appearance in *Gravity's Rainbow*. She thinks that for various reasons Pynchon constructed von Braun in a way that scarcely differs from the way von Braun constructed himself in the post-war United States – which means in a selective and manipulative fashion. So it is not the author's but the reader's vocation to 'see through every layer of fictional subtlety [and construction]' (97). Yet this could be a precarious process for, as Dalsgaard echoes Pynchon, the insightful reading is not a happy Autobahn ride. Dalsgaard's reservation concerning the readership is consonant with Heikki Raudaskoski's ambiguity about the texts themselves. In his idiosyncratic essay on 'Pynchon, Melville, and the Fulcrum of America,' Raudaskoski observes that Barthesian readers of *Moby Dick* and *Gravity's Rainbow* may well expect to be drifting away into Pacific-like/Zone-like writerly vastness. But in truth such American novels always hide a readerly fulcrum that anchors the narrative.

The articles by Raudaskoski, Dalsgaard and Jordal imply that there is a dark side to the Reader's Experience in/of Pynchon. Whereas before the 1990s critics impotently described the reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a 'Please beat me again, Thomas' agony, they have now largely switched to the contrary belief that Pynchon's nomadologic poetics induces in the reader something like a trans-individual and meta-ideological emancipatory delirium (whoa!). Three of *Blissful Bewilderment's* contributors, however, might be bewildered by such unconditional critical enthusiasm. In any case they provide a wise counterpoint to the recent dictum of fluidity/nonlinearity and its corollary – the concept of a liberating reading experience.



Critical ambiguity becomes most prominent in David Dickson's article – the coolest in the volume, though it treats a topic that usually counts as hot: innovation. The innovation Dickson discovers in *Vineland* has nothing to do with revolutions or related fevers. For Dickson, Pynchon's left is just as discredited as the right since a hatred of the new and a stasis underlie them both. *Vineland* therefore opts for a strategy of political errancy between the two poles which Dickson calls its 'oblique manner' (187). And there is more of this obliqueness in *Vineland*: its 'obliquely identifiable narrator' (199) likewise proceeds between detachment and personal involvement with the story. Perhaps, *the oblique*, which for Dickson is *Vineland's* true innovation, offers a way of conceptualizing Pynchon's whole oeuvre. His texts do move transversally between Modernist verticality (symbolic paradigms, elitist allusions, atavistic mythopoesis) and PostModern horizontality (the collapse of high and low culture onto a single plane). Our 'Pynchon' may well be a diagonal vector between Icarian elevations like the rocket arch and Telluric extensions like the Mason-Dixon line. Perhaps, this is what the suggestive cover of *Blissful Bewilderment* illustrates: with the three oblique slashes cutting across its surface.

The rest of the volume explores Pynchon's early writings and the motif of transgression – be it transgression of lines or, as in Rolf Gaasland's analysis, of norms. Gaasland picks up various violations of the classical rhetorical norm such as pleonasm or ellipsis and through them interprets – not the style but the overall structure and content of *V*. To unearth rhetoric is a bold move in the Pynchon field, considering the weight of McHoul and Wills's post-rhetorical stance. Since in Gaasland the talk is about violation and *transgression*, why not invent a *transrhetorical* against the old post-rhetorical (just as theorists now substitute Transmodernism for PostModernism)? Unfortunately, Gaasland's article is among the shortest in the collection – so there is no space for a critical questioning of rhetoric, which anyway doesn't appear to be his real interest.

Tiina Käkälä-Puumala's piece on *V*, by contrast, is a detailed exploration of the awkward line with which logocentrism separates man from non-man. The segregation affects both the subhuMan (women, blacks, robots) and the superhuMan (divinities, science, Death). Käkälä-Puumala is particularly astute when she reads *V's* transgressive practice of replacing animate with inanimate not from a Derridean dangerous-supplement perspective but through a (Baudrillardesque?) concept of absolute exchange. Käkälä-Puumala's '*V*' emerges as 'nothing else but the *replacement* itself': '*V*' is 'not an entity but a gesture, an act' (22) and (to use Käkälä-Puumala's argument for *V's* textualization) not a noun – but a verb. '*V*' 'stands for' a pure becoming-replaced regardless of its consequences.

What remains is Robert Holton's take on *Slow Learner*. Holton usefully classifies Pynchon's short stories according to their valorization or else disillusionment with the possibility of transgressing social boundaries. The early stories represent a brave and mindless crossing of lines. But those that follow grow more concerned with the lines themselves and the conditions of their drawing. Holton thus discovers a kind of

organic and gradual development in Pynchon's apprenticeship years that already points forward to the magnum opus.

Finally, there's this curious thing about the volume and its relation to theory. On the one hand, two interesting articles – Medoro's and Jordal's – succeed in spinning a complex web of Agamben/Eliade/Feminism and de Man/Hölderlin/Benjamin respectively. On the other hand, the two most illuminating contributions – Dalsgaard's and Dickson's – don't seem to make much of hardcore theory. In a way this adds to their coolness. They show that even nowadays high-quality Pynchon criticism manages without overt references to trendy theory. Perhaps theory is on the way to becoming smoothly immanent. Which is okay as long as the cool doesn't backslide into a cold turkey attitude.

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Axel Nissen, *Bret Harte: Prince and Pauper*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. xxiii + 326 pages, 26 black and white illustrations, index; ISBN 1-57806-253-3; cloth \$ 28.00.

Bret Harte (1836-1902) was once a well-known figure in American literature all over the world.<sup>12</sup> He left the East Coast for California at the age of 18 and worked there as, for example, a schoolteacher, drug-store clerk and typesetter. In 1868, *The Overland Monthly* was established with aspirations to becoming 'the *Atlantic Monthly* of the West,' and Harte was appointed its first editor. *The Overland Monthly* made his stories popular in the United States. In 1878, Harte left his home country for good and worked as a consul: first in Crefeld in Germany, and soon afterwards in Glasgow, Scotland. He finally settled in London. During most of the time he lived in Europe he was separated from his family members, who remained in America.

Harte is widely recognized as one of masters of the American short story. According to Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, Harte

who had traveled to the goldfields and mining camps of California, published the stories of *The Luck of Roaring Camp* in 1870, ... won acceptance for an entire new realm of discourse by bringing into literature a world of drunks, rogues and vagabonds, described with an emotional and vernacular freedom that challenged the moral strictures of the Gilded Age and prepared the way for the greatest master of the entire genre, Mark Twain, who followed it to worldwide popularity.<sup>13</sup>

12. For example, some of Harte's short stories, such as 'Miggles,' 'The Luck of Roaring Camp,' and 'Notes by Flood and Field' were translated into Finnish as early as 1874 (*Tarinoita Kalifornian kultamaalta*). *Thankful Blossom: beraettelse från amerikanska frihetskriget år 1779* appeared in Stockholm in 1877 and *Tvillingerne fra Table Mountain og andre Fortællinger* in Copenhagen in 1879.

13. Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 192.