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### Plater, The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon; Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in "Gravity's Rainbow"; Cowart, Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion

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REVIEWS

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William M. Plater. *The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon*. Bloomington Ind.: U. of Indiana Press, 1978. 268 pp. \$12.95.

Mark Richard Siegel. *Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in "Gravity's Rainbow"*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1978. 136 pp. \$10.95.

David Cowart. *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois U. Press, 1980. 154 pp. \$10.95.

Thomas Pynchon's works pose special problems for critics. As William M. Plater observes in *The Grim Phoenix*, "Pynchon lures his readers into exotic regions, dazzles them with chimeras of possibilities, but he never strays from fundamental conditions and ordinary themes, however elaborately they may be embellished." The critical difficulty in confronting *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and especially *Gravity's Rainbow* is to provide the information necessary for traversing the exotic regions without pursuing chimeras into regions removed from "ordinary" human experience. Plater, Mark Richard Siegel, and David Cowart all comprehend the significance of this difficulty. As a result, they have created a remarkably sane base for future Pynchon criticism, defining many of the major issues and clearly establishing the sides of what promises to be a stimulating debate.

Reading Thomas Pynchon forces several basic questions on readers and critics. The first question concerns whether Pynchon sees a world dominated by entropy or a world charged with wider possibilities. Plater emphasizes the entropic elements while Siegel and Cowart concentrate on the possibilities. The second question is whether the scientific or the artistic disciplines provide Pynchon's primary points of reference. On this question, Plater and Siegel share a scientific (and philosophical) emphasis while Cowart argues that "science is the junior partner in Pynchon's fiction-making enterprise," insisting that his primary sources are artistic. Although each of the writers admits the theoretical need to recognize the full diversity of Pynchon's work, each occasionally limits his vision with a type of tunnel vision dictated by his premises. A tendency remains, perhaps a legacy of the modernist criticism represented by Stuart Gilbert's chart of "corre-

spondences" in *Ulysses*, to assume that the discovery of a few crucial ideas or structures will suddenly illuminate the dark corners of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The tendency to consider Pynchon in terms of mediating concepts occasionally mars Plater's *The Grim Phoenix*. Considering Pynchon as a "closed system" writer, Plater represents the earliest thrust of criticism of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Emphasizing the importance of the ideas of Wittgenstein, Heisenberg, Wiener and Moles in Pynchon's novels, Plater argues that Pynchon's world is a "closed system" which, in accord with the second law of thermodynamics, will eventually reach maximum entropy, a bleak, lifeless state from which Plater sees no escape. Rather than simply dwelling on the nihilistic implications of this vision, however, Plater analyzes its effects on Pynchon's characters. He concentrates first on the concept of the "tour." Pynchon's characters, both tourists and natives, shape their experience on the basis of preconceptions, turning the "land" into a mediated "landscape." Plater then examines the characters' struggles for transcendence (as exemplified by the Rilkean concept of "death transfigured") and for communication, however abstracted and ultimately doomed it may be.

Plater structures *The Grim Phoenix* by examining the development of these ideas from the early stories through *Gravity's Rainbow*. Occasionally, he must strain to establish the continuity. His idea of the tour as a trivialized modern substitute for the quest illuminates *V.* (the most clearly entropic of Pynchon's works) very well. It does not, however, cast light on *Gravity's Rainbow* which, as both Siegal and Cowart note, is filled with quest images, not all of which can be dismissed as ironic. Similarly, Plater's emphasis on Slothrop as the dominant figure of *Gravity's Rainbow* (equivalent to Stencil or Oedipa) leads him to the conclusion that "there can be no more fundamentally pessimistic view" than Pynchon's. By thus elevating Slothrop, only one of the several crucial characters, Plater denies the validity of several options portrayed in the novel. In effect, Plater occasionally turns the "land" of *Gravity's Rainbow* into a "landscape" shaped by the tour guides of the earlier works. Nonetheless, Plater recognizes the Heisenbergian uncertainty of any observation of Pynchon and he analyzes specific passages brilliantly. *The Grim Phoenix*, although flawed, will remain a standard expression of the entropic approach to Pynchon.

Siegel's *Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in "Gravity's Rainbow"* contrasts sharply with *The Grim Phoenix*. At once the most energetic and the most uneven of the three studies, Siegel's book presents *Gravity's Rainbow* as a radical departure from the nihilism of *V.* and emphasizes Pynchon's search for alternatives to the increasingly constricted sense of modern life. Cautioning against the over-extension of Pynchon's metaphors, Siegel clearly grasps Pynchon's presentation of alternative views of reality. Siegel views *Gravity's Rainbow* as a reflection of the overarching consciousness of an implied narrator determined to express the full complexity of himself and the world. Siegel's belief that "every important character in the novel represents a complex of thoughts and feelings that originally belongs to the narrator" mitigates against overvaluing any single character. Proceeding largely on the basis of ideas derived from C. G. Jung and Martin Buber, Siegel attempts to transmit a strong sense of the nature of Pynchon's narrative persona.

Unfortunately, Siegel's frequent reversion to unsupported generalities undercuts his argument. To say, as he does, for example, that romanticism, symbolism, realism and naturalism "are all metaphoric — that is, they implicitly hold that the interpretive structures of the mind . . . are adequate modes for grasping reality" demands detailed explanation and qualification which Siegel does not provide. In his enthusiasm for Pynchon, Siegel sometimes (though certainly unintentionally) implies that previous literary figures have been either simplistic or shallow. On occasion, he entangles his argument in contradictions. At one point, Siegel accuses entropic critics of perceiving irony where none is intended (p. 14); he later accuses them of failing to see the irony in a passage where irony is needed to support his own view (p. 45). The result of these problems is an open system book which, however intriguing its argument, is not nearly as pointed or as convincing as Plater's closed system book.

Cowart's *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* also emphasizes the possibilities in Pynchon but proceeds in a much more systematic manner than Siegel's book. Cowart first examines the importance of painting and film in Pynchon's work, concluding that allusions to the pictorial art forms serve as "emblems of insubstantiality," as reminders of the ultimate Void. He then analyzes musical and literary allusions which Pynchon uses as reminders of the "nearly mystical" possibilities which complement the bleaker aspect of his vision. Inas-

much as he recognizes both entropy and possibility, Cowart provides a balance between Siegal and Plater. His hierarchical view of art as "more important" than science to Pynchon, however, at times leads him into difficulties.

While Cowart observes in his introduction that both science and art contribute to Pynchon's vision, he remains committed to a vision of Pynchon as a neo-modernist who sees the artist as "the God of his own creation." At times this insistence, or perhaps more correctly his avoidance of scientific frames of reference, results in problems of interpretation which Cowart could easily have avoided. When discussing the relationship between the Schwarzkommando and the director vonGöll's propaganda film, Cowart argues that Pynchon endorses the idea that "art . . . precedes life." Even a brief consideration of the application of relativity and uncertainty principles in *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, indicates that Pynchon does not endorse precedence for either the cinematic or the realistic phenomenon. The scientific principle provides a needed corrective to the artistic assertion.

An aspect of Cowart's hierarchic impulse which generates difficulties is his insistence that Pynchon's artistic allusions focus on "classical" (Cowart uses the term "serious") rather than "popular" art forms. While this insistence does nothing to damage Cowart's analysis of allusions to Euro-American orchestral music (in fact, some of the most brilliant analysis in the book concerns Pynchon's use of Webern in *Gravity's Rainbow*), it does lead him to observe incorrectly that there is a lack of music in the *The Crying of Lot 49*, a work jammed with references to rock. It also leads him to see the musical center of V. in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* while it can be easily argued that the center lies much closer to the jazzman McClintic Sphere. Again, both elements are necessary to a convincing view.

Ultimately Cowart fails to establish his thesis that Pynchon relies more on artistic than on scientific allusions. No major critical statement has ever denied the importance of artistic allusions in *Gravity's Rainbow* (even Plater grants major importance to Rilke and Henry Adams) and Cowart makes no attempt to refute the claims made by those who have demonstrated the importance of science. Nonetheless, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* is an important book filled with valuable comments on the areas it does explore.

Reading all three of these studies provides a strong sense of the

possible choices concerning Thomas Pynchon. Perhaps this is nowhere as clear as in the decisions Plater, Siegel and Cowart make concerning the "important" characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*. All three agree that Slothrop is important. From that point on, however, their paths diverge sharply. Plater spends a great deal of time analyzing in generally approving terms the attempted transcendence of Blicero/Weissman, who Cowart refers to as "the novel's most viciously sadistic character." Cowart concentrates on vonGöll whose insistence on the priority of imagination implies the "literature as game" orientation of Borges and Barth. Siegel, whose orientation if not argument I find most convincing, inverts this egotistic emphasis and focuses on the collective Counterforce consisting of such diverse characters as Roger Mexico, Pig Bodine and Enzian. Perhaps this diversity constitutes the strength of this phase of Thomas Pynchon criticism. To read these three books is to confront three highly individual sensibilities. This confrontation in turn sends the reader back to the original texts on one hand and to the source of his/her own preconceptions on the other. These studies indicate that an intriguing and enriching critical community (God save us from an industry) is being born.

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