

Francisco Collado Rodríguez 2004: *El orden del caos: literatura, política y posthumanidad en la narrativa de Thomas Pynchon*. Valencia: Universitat de Valencia. 228 pp.

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In all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order, in all caprice a fixed law, for everything that works is grounded on its opposite. (Carl Jung, "The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious.")

In *El orden del caos: literatura, política y posthumanidad en la narrativa de Thomas Pynchon*, Francisco Collado engages the difficult task of finding an underlying order behind the apparent chaos and paranoia of Pynchon's literary universe. Regardless of the fact that, as a militant postmodernist, Pynchon himself might find such a mission objectionable, Collado's study overtly sets out on a literary-critical quest: a search for what the critic terms "una comprensión totalizadora del universo literario de Thomas Pynchon" (22). If the paranoid quest for elusive meaning is a central motif in most of Pynchon's works—and has even engulfed the author himself inasmuch as the little known facts of his life have merited the appellation of "the invisible author"—Collado's volume reads as one more quest, albeit a literary-critical and fully successful one. Despite the inherent difficulty of any attempt to search for wholeness and meaning in the writings of an author celebrated for championing unchecked undecidability, Collado explicitly posits the thesis that Pynchon's works present a chaotic universe which hides a "subterranean" order. Similar explorations have been undertaken for particular works of Pynchon, like Molly Hite's (1983) search for the order behind *Gravity's Rainbow*; other analyses approach the author from rather limited perspectives, such as Theodore Kharpetian's (1990) totalizing view of Pynchon's works as Menippean satires. Collado's perspective is more comprehensive in that he approaches Pynchon from multiple angles, from the fields of anthropology and science, and from a diversity of critical perspectives like narratology and feminism. To substantiate his thesis, the author analyzes the pervading presence of three basic aspects in Pynchon's narratives: (a) the author's debt to literary history, as it manifests itself in his use of intertextuality and parody; (b) his textualization of scientific discourse; and, most cogently, (c) the resulting literary construction of a complex, posthuman universe where the past is nostalgically looked upon, while the present is simultaneously subverted (16).

As a comprehensive analysis of major motifs in Pynchon's volume of short stories and five novels, Collado's study is compelling and convincing throughout. The critic manages to construct a literary-historical and scientific-philosophical context in which the endeavors of Herbert Stencil, Oedipa Maas and their likes are rendered more accessible to those uninitiated into the complexities and subtleties of Pynchon's narratives. "Mi objetivo principal," Collado proposes, "es llegar a situar la obra pynchoniana en el contexto de la novela contemporánea como medio para poder estudiar los aspectos tanto ideológicos como literarios más notables" (16). However, Collado partially contradicts himself, since he ends up placing Pynchon's novels in relation to a much wider spectrum, namely the rationalistic project of the Western Enlightenment, the modernist nightmare, and writings of the postmodern scene. This broad focus accounts for the fact that other postmodern American writers are only occasionally dealt with, as Collado's framework veers towards

the anthropological works of Sir James Frazer, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, and recurrently references modernist writers like T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, and historians like Henry Adams. Thus, Collado avoids the notorious trap of reading Pynchon's work simply as an anticipation of later developments in Postmodern fiction and theory.

However, what represents the central motif in Collado's analysis of Pynchon's narrative is the double play of "energy" and "entropy," both in the discourses of the different historical periods Pynchon's works address, and in Pynchon's literary project itself. The scientific and cultural context of the late 19th century witnessed the advent of the notion of entropy. Originating in the field of thermodynamics, this second law somehow came to contradict the first law of thermodynamics, which stated that the total quantity of energy in a particular closed system remains always constant. In contrast, the second law proposed that there is a steady loss of energy, or rather, that the amount of energy available for reuse in closed systems gradually diminishes. The irreversible increase of this nondisposable energy in the universe is measured by the abstract dimension that Rudolph Clausius in 1865 called entropy (from the Greek *entropē*, change). Inasmuch as the available energy in the universe is continuously decreasing under the advance of entropy, entropic theories are inevitably pessimistic, predicting extinction and disorder. By the beginning of the twentieth century, energy and entropy had entered the discourses of both the physical sciences and the human sciences. If the whole universe is energy, whether religious and spiritual (Venus or Virgin), informational (signal and noise), cabalistic (in between magic and science), scientific (thermodynamic and cosmic), literary (parody and intertextuality), political (central or marginal), entropy poses a constant threat to those systems; it represents disorder, loss, disjunction and chaos. The American historian Henry Adams had already dramatized the search for energy (whether as Virgin or Dynamo) in a universe threatened by entropy; in the second half of the twentieth century Thomas Pynchon follows Adam's quest in a parodic, utterly playful and postmodern vein. This search becomes Pynchon's pervasive literary motif, as Collado forcefully proves in *El orden del caos*.

Collado structures his detailed study into six chapters, chronologically tracing the evolution of Pynchon's writings. Chapter 1, "A la busca de un autor original o de una repetición textual: el lento aprendizaje," centers on the analysis of Pynchon's first work, his volume of short stories, *Slow Learner*. The chapter's deliberate punning on Pynchon's title proves utterly appropriate, since Collado sketches the early stages in Pynchon's literary career as a slow apprenticeship that would take the author from a modernist context into a full-blown postmodernist world (25). Even before Collado focuses on the analysis of Pynchon's short stories, a brief overview of the few established facts in the life of the so-called "invisible author" already acts as a sort of prelude to Pynchon's literary-historical project and to Collado's literary-critical quest. "No es sorprendente," Collado argues commenting on the author's invisible public life, "que el significante Thomas Pynchon decidiese desaparecer de la escena pública a poco de comenzar a degustar las mieles del éxito literario" (19). Blurring the frontiers between the fictional and the real, Pynchon becomes a signifier that has to be deciphered as the "V." of his own novel. Pynchon as signifier reminds us of Daniel Quinn, the protagonist of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, in that he disappears as soon as his writing is over.

Most of the chapter centers on the analysis of the textual labyrinth Pynchon experiments with in his short narrative. *Slow Learner* presents a particular reading of

Eliotian theories regarding tradition and impersonality, chaos and order. His first stories are set in what Collado terms “un contexto todavía típicamente modernista, decadente y eliotiano” (25), and are traversed with a series of elements peculiar to Pynchon’s ideology and personality, thus contradicting Eliot’s option for an escape from personality. In “Low-Lands,” Collado already sees the intervention of postmodern parody, as Pynchon takes elements from Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and complicates them to make interpretation almost impossible. Reality in “Low-lands” already appears very complex, even blurred. The previously neat binaries are now beginning to converge, as becomes graphically visible in the V., that ultimate signifier in Pynchon’s work which is already present in “Low-lands.” The Eliotian intertexts change in “Entropy,” Pynchon’s best known story, as historian Henry Adams becomes the new referent. Henry Adams is here parodied, under the name of Callisto, in his obsession for imposing order in an otherwise chaotic universe. However, Pynchon’s story already veers towards that entropic reconciliation of opposites, again represented by the convergence of the V.

In chapter 2, Collado sets out to counter the traditional reading of *V.* as a cynically absurd tale, a view that he ascribes to critics who fail to see Pynchon’s irony in the novel. In Collado’s assessment, the novel pokes fun at man’s insistence on categorizing everything, including his own apprehension of life. Collado sees the novel as working on many different levels, beyond the detective qualities of the protagonist and his attempt to find meaning in European history through the elusive legacy of Lady V. As promised in the volume’s introduction, the chapter tries to identify different levels of meaning behind the apparent absurdity of the novel. In order to do so, Collado reviews, albeit somewhat too briefly, some of the theories and discoveries which support the scaffolding of the novel, namely chaos theory, quantum physics, relativity theory and cybernetics. These theories allow Collado to come to a better understanding of the novel’s view of the human: “Pynchon desarrolla una irónica visión del ser como un ente ya camino de la posthumanidad tanto física como ideológica, inmerso en un mar de significantes cuyos significados nunca se hacen visibles, en un lenguaje que induce a la categorización, plagado de senderos borgianos que se bifurcan sin cesar” (50).

In the end, Collado reads *V.* as a complex quest for knowledge. Stencil is the new Henry Adams, seeking to translate the new rays of science and physics into the lost faith, as Adams had done in his celebrated “The Dynamo and the Virgin.” In that essay, Adams contended that “the historian’s business was to follow the tracks of the energy” that is originally represented in the Virgin and is reappropriated by the Dynamo, among other new inventions. Adam’s failure to trace that genealogy precludes Stencil’s similar failure (59). Collado distances his interpretation of *V.* from other critics like Malcolm Bradbury, for whom “*V.* tells the story of a quest for history in a chaotic, synchronic, cybernetic universe” (1997: 71). For Collado, if indeed such quest for history is present in the struggles of Benny Profane, the inanimate modern man, and Herbert Stencil, the child of Henry Adam’s modern “multiverse,” the novel also incorporates a theme which appeared obsessively among the modernist writers parodied in *V.*: the search for the meaning of life through effective communication. Thus, *V.* turns on and around the parody of that artistic effort to find the ultimate truth in the logos (73). If, as in *Absalom, Absalom!* William Faulkner had connected his obsessive repetition of the same story over and over with the expectation that the truth of history would finally be revealed through such retelling, for Pynchon’s *V.* truth will always remain elusive.

In chapter 3, Collado explores the continuation of the historical and epistemological themes of *V.* in Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. Though criticism has generally noticed the continuity between *V.* and other novels like *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*, leaving *The Crying of Lot 49* as a strange interlude (Tanner 1982), Collado convincingly traces recurrent echoes of *V.* in the shorter novel, whether in terms of modernist influences, postmodernist parody, or epistemological suspension. While most critics consider Oedipa Maas a female version of the detectivesque Stencil, Collado goes further to declare her a representation of the female principle, following the archetypal theories of Carl Jung as well as the mythological studies of Joseph Campbell. She becomes the incarnation of a female energy trapped in modern, capitalist, consumerist society. "Esta fuerza femenina," Collado argues, "debe volver a fluir para revitalizar el sistema pero para que ello ocurra su representante actual, Mrs Oedipa Maas, deberá iniciar una paródica *quest of the hero(ine)*, una aventura mítica donde los sexos se han cambiado y, consecuentemente, la percepción de la aventura" (87). Obviously, the heroine is out on a monomythical quest for the hidden meaning behind the pervading chaos of reality and mass media simulation. In this universe, her search for the Tristero, the clandestine organization whose entropic mission was to hinder official communication, is particularly significant. However, in a final twist, *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to aptly dramatize what Thomas Schaub acutely termed "the diametrically opposed meanings" of entropy (1981: 21) for, as Collado argues, the very "noise" of the novel, its undecidability and excess of information, become the ultimate sources for the multiplicity of its interpretations (108).

Chapter 4 undertakes the analysis of what is probably Pynchon's most complex novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*. Despite its complexity, Collado is convinced that this novel is "un aparente caos literario en el que existe un orden oculto" (121), since order and chaos finally partake of the same nature, just as the male organizing principle is not utterly different from the female energy which it strives to formalize. Both masculine and feminine principles are joined in that appropriate image, derived from the fusion of myth and science, which gives the novel its title: gravity's rainbow (122). Just like *Gravity's Rainbow* retakes the motif, already present in *V.*, of women and/as the sources of energy, Collado centers again on the importance of myth and its revision, following the postulates of anthropologists like Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, James Frazer and Mircea Eliade. For Collado, *Gravity's Rainbow* overtly parodies the mythical aspirations of transcendence present in modernist master narratives of myth. The modernist return to myth, or to notions like the collective unconscious and the eternal return, signaled a desire for transcendence, and the wish to fill up the gap left by an absent God. In the parodic, mythical universe of the novel, says Collado, the reader is reduced to the position of the novel's protagonist, Slothrop: we are all in search of information which, however, fails to appear as ordered and coherent, as in realist literature. Like many others of Pynchon's protagonists, Slothrop is on a quest for meaning, for continuity, for his anima; a quest that will end unsuccessfully since, by the end of the novel, the protagonist will simply start "to thin, to scatter" (*Gravity's* 509). This textual "stripping" of the protagonist has been variously interpreted, as a reaction against the power structures (by refusing to occupy any identity any more), as an indication of the destiny of literary modernism, or as the threat of the substitution of paper by the new electronic repositories of information. Collado opts for a most interesting anthropological view of the hero as unable to gather together his

fragments in the end, linking back to the image of the God as martyr dying so that the earth is made fertile with His fragments.

In chapter 5, Collado places Pynchon's *Vineland* within the context of Reagan's politics in the 1980s. Just like the American 1950s offered the rejection of the ideological changes of the 1930s, Reagan's 1980s would strive to undo the ideological changes of the progressive 1960s. The era of *Reaganomics*, states Collado, is rendered as a period of reaction against the social advances of the 1960s. However, Pynchon does not give in to a nostalgia for the previous decades, as some critics thought, for, Collado asserts, such nostalgia is nothing but another element parodied by the narrative. In his search for the order behind apparent chaos, Collado's analysis of *Vineland* conscientiously centers on a cluster of elements that make the narrative achieve final coherence: doubles and contrasts, the labyrinth of dreams and shadows, fantasy, power, and the role of the family. Over all these elements, Baudrillard's shadow looms large, inasmuch as the notion of the simulacrum and the subject's inability to distinguish between the real and its constructed simulacra pervades the narrative. Oedipa Maas's failure to distinguish between reality and the simulacrum in Pynchon's 1966 novel is taken to an extreme in *Vineland*. The simulacrum, which for Pynchon's early novels already represented a distinctive disease of modern, industrial society, even before Baudrillard's theories were published, becomes a rampant epidemic in *Vineland*. All characters are subjected to mass media simulation.

Together with this reading of simulation, Collado's analysis of duplicity and doubles in the novel is particularly arresting. It is in the recurrent play with doubles (double play?) where Collado finds one of the basic strategies for the construction of a hidden order in Pynchon's narrative world (178). The play with doubles transcends the mere presentation of twins or other couples, in order to encompass parallel internal conflicts and to question the existence of two kinds of worlds, the presumably real and the incurably magic or fantastic (178). In a final twist, Collado reads *Vineland*, the mythical land of the Vikings, as the unrealized dream of present-day USA, where visible and invisible forces continue to be in perpetual conflict (182).

Finally, in chapter 6, Collado centers on the analysis of Pynchon's latest novel, *Mason & Dixon*. This narrative was also his first sustained incursion into the universe of the historic novel, though with the intention, as any experienced reader of Pynchon's fiction would readily imagine, of parodying it. The novel was soon characterized as "a picaresque journey through colonial American history and postcolonial pop fodder" (Pelovitz 1997). Indeed Collado centers his analysis of the novel on the simultaneous workings of different temporalities (from the 18th century colonial, to the post-1766 postcolonial and into the late 20th century "posthuman"), and on the evolution of the American dream from one sub-myth to the next. It may come as a surprise to those familiar with Collado's writings on American postmodernist fiction that his analysis of a pseudohistorical novel like Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* deals so slightly with notions of historiographic metafiction. Collado does mention the novel's incorporation of noted historiographic metafictional motifs, but soon opens his focus to point out the novel's questioning of the whole project of the Enlightenment: "lo indicativo, lo perceptible por los sentidos, lo racional que caracterizó el experimento de la Ilustración —del que la misma creación de los Estados Unidos es fruto en parte— y, en el terreno literario, el realismo de la novela burguesa, son factores que quedan así atrapados por lo subjuntivo y potencial, lo invisible e imaginario" (189). Even though he does not mention reputed border theorists such as J. D. Saldívar, G.

Anzaldúa and M. L. Pratt, Collado's analysis becomes particularly arresting in his reading of the "line," symbolized in the novel by the Mason and Dixon line, as the ultimate instrument of the Enlightenment, with its rationalistic attempt at imposing limits, categories, frontiers, and dualism. In this context, Collado sees Pynchon's recurrent use of doubles as the author's ironic deconstruction of the linearity of the line. Other numberless fantastic and irrational motifs blur and mar the cartographic project of Mason and Dixon from the very beginning, making it subvert logic and reason (204). The failure of the cartographic dream of mapping the world, and mapping knowledge, is paralleled, Collado contends, by the failure of the American dream itself. The novel parodies the whole period where both the nation and its dream were being created, and finds in the excesses of Old-world Enlightenment and in its results (colonialism, slavery, male chauvinism) the bitter seeds of its own failure.

As *Mason & Dixon* exemplifies, the magic "energy" represented by Venus, the Virgin, or simply V., was already under siege in the 18th century at the hands of enlightened scientists. Thus, the American dream of democracy and happiness, as postulated in the Declaration of Independence, was born with the mark of its own entropic impossibility. If Pynchon's latest novel ends on a hopeful note, as the reader is asked to await a new, presumably feminine, revelation, Collado's quest for Thomas Pynchon draws to a fully satisfactory close, after a revelatory journey through Pynchon's textual labyrinths. By the end of the volume the reader still feels, with Henry Adams, that "Chaos is the law of nature, Order is the dream of man," and that Collado's search for order in Pynchon's world has only produced a provisional, even if fully reasoned and credible one. If the entropic loss of information is deemed inevitable in any complex writing—and Pynchon's certainly is—Collado's volume manages to keep such loss to a minimum. In *El orden del caos* Collado has given us a particularly clear and comprehensive study which approaches Pynchon's work in a very systematic manner, employing a whole range of perspectives in its search for the hidden order. Moreover, what I consider the particular achievement of the volume is the fact that the study does nowhere oversimplify or play down Pynchon's rich postmodern complexity. *El orden del caos* stands, without doubt, as a most valuable survey of Pynchon's narrative strategies both for the initiated few as well as for the many of us who still struggle to follow in the footsteps of Pynchon's questing heroes.

Works Cited

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