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## Review

**How to Cite:** Chetwynd, A, Bugno-Narecka, D, Kipouridou, R, Abe, K, Vanicek, V, Brondino, A and Ryckx, M 2021 Book Reviews, Special Pynchon-Scholarship-in-Languages-Other-than-English Edition, 2020. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 9(1): 1, 1–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.3404>

**Published:** 15 January 2021

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## REVIEW

# Book Reviews, Special Pynchon-Scholarship-in-Languages-Other-than-English Edition, 2020

[a note from the Book Reviews Editor: if you're interested in reviewing a book on any aspect of unconventional post-1945 US literature, please send an email proposing a review to [reviews@pynchon.net](mailto:reviews@pynchon.net)]

Ali Chetwynd, Dominika Bugno-Narecka, Romina Kipouridou, Kodai Abe, Vit Vanicek, Andrea Brondino and Michel Ryckx

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Book Reviews, of:

Pióro & Paryż (eds) – *Thomas Pynchon*  
[Polish]

Aliaga (ed) – *Thomas Pynchon*  
[Spanish]

Nagano – トマス・ピンチョン——帝国、戦争、システム、そして選びに与れぬ者の生  
[Japanese – *Thomas Pynchon: Empire, War, System, and the Lives of Preterites*]

Oleha – *Perspektivy Konce: Thomas Pynchon a Americký Román po 11. Zari*  
[Czech – *Perspectives of the End: Thomas Pynchon and the American Novel after 9/11*]

Episcopo – *L'Eredità Della Fine: Gravity's Rainbow di Thomas Pynchon e Horcynus Orca di Stefano D'Arrigo*  
[Italian – *The Inheritance of the End: Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon and Horcynus Orca by Stefano D'Arrigo*]

Plus:

An interview on non-English-language Pynchon scholarship with [vheissu.net](http://vheissu.net) bibliographer Michel Ryckx.

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## An Editorial Preface

We're usually content to let *Orbit's* book reviews speak for themselves. Even our recent inauguration of longer multi-book review essays didn't require a preface. But the present special batch of reviews is worth a little editorial framing.

*Orbit* hasn't been solely dedicated to studies of Thomas Pynchon since 2016: more than half the young journal's life. But we try to keep going where *Pynchon Notes* left off, and that journal was especially notable for its timely reviews of international and small-press scholarship on Pynchon. That there's so much of this is perhaps unsurprising, given the international span of his longest novels: as Tore Rye Andersen has argued in *Orbit*, Pynchon is one of the "leading novelists of globalization," belying the Nobel complaint that US writers tend to take US borders as the perimeter of human interest. And this is reflected in the scholarly community around Pynchon's work: the last three *International Pynchon Weeks*—academic conferences of about 40–50 papers each—have had 15, 15, and 14 nationalities represented among presenters, for a total of 21 across the three events: US, UK, Ireland, Australia – of course; from Europe (where the conferences have been held), France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Greece, Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Serbia, Poland; and then China, Taiwan, UAE, Iran, Argentina from further afield. A globe-wide array of scholars presenting and discussing their Pynchonwork in English. What, though, of the scholarship happening in those countries and more, but in their own languages?

There's a lot of it, and even our most comprehensive bibliographical dredge-net—Michel Ryckx's vast compilation of work on Pynchon, based in the Netherlands, hosted at [vheissu.net](http://vheissu.net), and searchable by the language each source was written in—can't catch up everything. As Michel told me, in the interview that postscripts the present set of reviews, the hardest holes to plug are linguistic: for example, items in East Asian languages are, for a non-native speaker unfamiliar with the logography, hard to search for, and hard once found to corroborate by cross-reference processes that rely on being able to easily *recognize* matching publication data. English-language work in unusual venues might initially escape the sweep, but search engines

will eventually find almost everything with relevant enough keywords. Anything in the roman alphabet will likely refer to enough stably spelt names or concepts to show up when someone's searching with a target. But work in languages in other alphabets can go completely undiscovered. Academia's anglocentricity means that research presented in other tongues finds a smaller initial audience, and the pervasive, well-documented Matthew-effects for influence, citation, and reputation then exacerbate the situation. The present special set of reviews might at least remove that first hurdle.

I think there are three good reasons to make a particular effort. Firstly, it just seems right to find this work a larger audience given the larger amount of exertion involved in creating it, from language training and translation work to researching unfamiliar cultural references. Secondly, from the research community's perspective, the more ideas from the wider array of perspectives our field as a whole is able to weigh against each other, the better our cumulative understanding has the potential to be. This scholarship embodies a great deal of thought, often distinctive because of its different underlying cultural assumptions, but language barriers stop much of this potentially mind-changing argument reaching the minds it might change. As we'll see, from every one of the books under review our reviewers are able to pick out new insights that go beyond the existing anglophone canon of scholarship. And finally, a lot of native-language writing about authors like Pynchon takes place in volumes that look beyond academia to communicate with a popular audience: likely to be reading Pynchon in translation, and often more likely to consult extra-textual guides than is common in anglophone culture. These books are thus of interest from the quasi-sociological perspective of understanding how an author like Pynchon reaches audiences outside his own language community, and what kinds of conversations he then prompts in their local contexts.

Each of the reviews here thus serves at least a double purpose. Assessing the books under review both by their own standards and in terms of what academic insight they can contribute beyond the anglophone bibliography, the reviews not only evaluate quality, salience, value for future study, but also provide an English-language

platform for the books' most original and significant claims. At once, then, a re-view, and a first and only viewing opportunity for arguments that would otherwise remain inaccessible to culpable monoglots like me.

We hope that the ideas thus brought to light will be of interest, will be followed up on, will take their place in the evolving scholarly record and critical debate. Consider this a gesture against one of Pynchon's global preoccupations: Balkanization. Though hopefully our efforts at transglobal intelligibility will have less sinister upshots than the global conglomerations he writes about.

I further hope that this special edition won't be a one-off. For one thing, it doesn't fully catch us up on the category at hand: we're still actively seeking reviewers for already-published Pynchon-studies in Serbian, Chinese, French, and German. Given the bibliographical access complexities Michel Ryckx discusses in our interview, there are surely other studies out there that we have yet to hear of, and for which we await alerts from speakers of Akkadian, Kirghiz, Lemurian...

At any rate, here on the review pages we're anxious to hear from multilingualists who can help bring to our English-speaking audience assessments of other-language scholarship not only on Pynchon but on any unconventional US fiction after 1945. Get in touch ([reviews@pynchon.net](mailto:reviews@pynchon.net)) and help us keep up the work that this special batch of reviews begins.

– Ali Chetwynd, Book Reviews Editor

**Tadeusz Pióro & Marek Paryż (eds), *Thomas Pynchon*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2018: 256 pp.**

Dominika Bugno-Narecka  
John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, PL  
[dominika.bugno-narecka@kul.pl](mailto:dominika.bugno-narecka@kul.pl)

In 1985, *Literatura na świecie* (an esteemed Polish periodical on world literature) published a thematic volume containing a complete Polish translation of *The Crying of Lot 49*, fragments of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and four academic papers: Polish translations

of articles by Anne Mangel and Scott Sanders, and original articles by Marcin Cieński (on rituals in Pynchon's prose) and by Piotr Dzedzic (on reconstructing Pynchon or controlled paranoia). More than three decades on, that book-length Polish-language volume finally has a successor in *Thomas Pynchon*, edited by Tadeusz Pióro and Marek Paryż, and published as the 9th volume of the *Mistrzowie Literatury Amerykańskiej* [Masters of American Literature] series. This series of companions—covering Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy and Ernest Hemingway among others so far—aims at familiarizing both academic and non-academic readers in Poland (who might not be able to read in English) with prominent American authors, their literary works, and general phenomena in modern American literature influenced by history and culture in the broadest sense. Pynchon is frequently studied in Poland, treated as a classic example of a postmodernist writer and a useful test-case for literary-theoretical speculation: consequently, Polish academics have long contributed—though not as significantly as perhaps they could—to Pynchon Studies in English.<sup>1</sup> Pióro and Paryż' book, hence, is the first book-length collection of entirely original writing on Pynchon *in Polish*: a landmark academic achievement for local Pynchon scholarship, and an important bridge between Pynchon's English-speaking readers in Polish universities and his potentially wider Polish-speaking audience.

The volume starts with a concise biography of Pynchon, and the little that is known about his private life, and then discusses all his novels from *V.* to *Bleeding Edge* in chronological order. The material also includes a chapter on the stories collected in *Slow Learner*, while Pynchon's non-fiction contributions to *The New York Times*—"Is It OK to Be a Luddite?" "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" and "The Deadly Sins/Sloth; Nearer, My Couch, to Thee"—are addressed in passing in several chapters. *Gravity's Rainbow*, due to its especially significant impact and response, is the only novel granted two chapters. Two broader papers close the volume: one concerning

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most notably, Zofia Kolbuszewska organized and hosted the 2010 iteration of *International Pynchon Week* in Lublin (an event I myself helped to run), papers from which were published in *Thomas Pynchon and the (de)vices of global (post)modernity* (2012): English-language and international in its contributions, but edited and published in Poland.

the encyclopedic/skeuomorphic style of Pynchon's 21st century novels, and the other containing general observations on his plots. The chapters can be read selectively and out of order, as each, written by a different author, constitutes an individual paper – a separate whole.

For someone unfamiliar with Pynchon, the study accurately provides basic information and the most common interpretative contexts for analysing his works, placing him within the broader framework of American literature and making justified comparisons to Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth or Donald Barthelme. Consequently, a Polish reader learns about Pynchon's Puritan roots and Catholic upbringing, about the influence of military background on his work, especially his disappointment with the social and military order, and about entropy, conspiracy and paranoia, which are recurring features of his writings. Much attention is paid to the meanings of proper names, titles and acronyms, which determine the interpretation and the tone of Pynchon's works, and typify his language games. The study also provides the readers with rather conventional overall readings of Pynchon's novels, including, for instance, the process of dehumanising the female protagonist in *V.* presented by Marek Paryż, the encyclopedic form of *Gravity's Rainbow* discussed by Jan Balbierz, or the interplay between historical and fantastic/magical elements in *Mason and Dixon* outlined by Mikołaj Wiśniewski. Authors of individual chapters attempt to summarise the plot of each discussed novel and to put a label on the work, trying to categorise it as an example of particular genre or convention. In almost all cases, the scholars indicate the complexity of the structure and the difficulty of categorising Pynchon within just one genre or convention. For instance, Paryż notices that *V.* shares the features of absurdist fiction and dark humour, as well as postmodernist fiction, detective novel, historical writing, or Gothic. All authors emphasise Pynchon's never-ending play with language, writing style, science/technology, history, culture and conventions, which might be encouraging for more demanding readers to reach for Pynchon's works, but, at the same time, might discourage those seeking an easy read.

What Marcin Rychter rightly observes of his own discussion of *Against the Day* (loosely translated: "the aim of this paper is to demonstrate and *try* to interpret *some*

of the literary strategies used by Pynchon in the novel” 164, emphasis mine) can be extended to describe the whole volume: the range of problems and literary strategies mentioned is necessarily partial. Still, even an experienced Pynchon reader can find some fresh ideas among the widely discussed themes and problems presented here. For instance, in her comparison of Pynchon's male and female detectives, Doc Sportello and Oedipa Maas, Zuzanna Ładyga observes a change in Pynchon's later work(s) and a gradual departure from the already declining postmodernism. While *The Crying of Lot 49* plays with the conventions of a crime story, *Inherent Vice* for Ładyga goes a step further, being a pastiche of a parody of detective fiction. In contrast with Oedipa who is determined and hopeful to solve the mystery, Doc's peculiar lifestyle and detective methods are the extreme caricatures of coincidence and a manifestation of scattered incoherent narrative and of the disappearance of charisma, which make the novel Pynchon's critical self-reflection. Ładyga's skillful use of one novel to explain and understand another shares a wide vision with Paweł Stachura's crafty discussion of Pynchon's skeuomorphic style (i.e. when the elements and style of later novels imitate those of the earlier ones and hence the former absorb or enfold the universe of the latter); they each open a new, more subtle and non-discriminatory direction for the comparative study of Pynchon's works.

Zofia Kolbuszewska contributes two articles, each worth bringing to the attention of English-speaking scholars. The first compares the author of *Slow Learner* looking retrospectively at his early work to Rip Van Winkle, and swiftly applies Michael Thompson's "rubbish theory" to the short stories, providing insight into Pynchon's change of attitude toward how to break the vicious circle of social and political inertia. Investigation into the implicit category of "rubbish" allows us to observe how society controls values and manipulates the individuals in Pynchon's short stories: Kolbuszewska finally suggests that rubbish theory can be further used to reevaluate the behaviour and the situation of characters in Pynchon's novels too.

Her second paper draws on Brian McHale's lens of "genre-poaching" (developed in relation to *Against the Day*) to discuss nostalgia and the return of the subdued alternative versions of 20<sup>th</sup> century American history in *Vineland*. Pynchon's reworking of styles and genres typical of the period described in the novel reveals repressed



ideological overtones and problematises formal experiments and mimetic realism, which lead to the latter's substitution with what Kolbuszewska calls "cryptomimesis." I find particularly interesting her remark about *Vineland's* structure imitating a television program (i.e. division into episodes, preceded by retrospection and linked by changes in camera angle). It thematically links up with Arkadiusz Misztal's presentation of cinematographic techniques (e.g. framing, close-ups, cuts, parallel montage, image fading) in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and points to the great potential of Pynchon's literary output as material for intermedia studies.

Finally, on genre again, Alicja Piechucka discusses the elements of chick lit in *Bleeding Edge* and how the novel departs from that genre. Although Maxine, her social background, friendships with women, relationships with men, problems, and adventures can be qualified as typical of the genre, the representation of excessive consumerism and over-consumption lead the genre-allusions toward the criticism of capitalism. With this narrow focus, however, Piechucka perhaps underestimates Pynchon's last novel: her feminist reading, analysing it in terms of strong female protagonists and weak, flat male characters, might be fresh but doesn't connect these observations to the novel's widest concerns, letting the chick-lit angle overshadow serious sociopolitical issues related to the events of 9/11 or the transformation of the world by virtual reality and the Internet.

On the whole, *Thomas Pynchon* is a decent introduction to and a summary of Pynchon's work for a non-expert, and a good starting point for further, more complex and thorough research for a scholar intending to explore Pynchon's prose. It is an interesting read for the Pynchon-savvy, because common interpretations are put together in a coherent and entertaining way, still offering occasional new perspectives or ideas. The book also provides the reader with valuable bibliographic sources in Polish and in English.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, the study can,

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<sup>2</sup> These include both older and more recent research on Pynchon's work, as well as theoretical studies that provide broad cultural context in which Pynchon's novels are discussed (e.g. Fredric Jameson's or Brian McHale's studies on postmodernism, Jacques Derrida's *Acts of Literature*, or Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*).

for even experienced scholarly readers, inspire further research into issues briefly mentioned or insufficiently explored in the volume, like the use of skeuomorphs, the mise-en-abyme character of ekphrastic descriptions (not named directly but clearly implied), the representation of different media and senses, and various other questions of history, culture, science and politics, as well as of poetics or aesthetics.

The general impression that emerges from *Thomas Pynchon* is of Pynchon as a writer of simulation and imitation, who takes various elements of contemporary culture, different styles, techniques or strategies, and uses them to represent and explore nostalgia and escapism as the possible forms of resistance against the ubiquitous technopolitical system. The use of concepts such as simulacrum, skeuomorph or cryptomimesis to analyse Pynchon's prose brings to my mind Schroedinger's cat which at some point of the experiment is both dead and alive. By analogy, Pynchon's works reflect accurately the complexity of our world and reveal its absurdity, but at the same time they do not. Careful reading reveals that there is always some crucial element or function missing in the mutual simulation of form and content. Hence, Pynchon's works cannot be considered as exact copies or clones of our world, but rather as artificial, deliberately skewed constructs of an outstanding mind. In a similar vein, as Pióro and Paryż's volume's preoccupation with genre conveys, Pynchon's novels represent particular genres and conventions but only so as to go beyond imitation for a variety of purposes.

All in all, *Thomas Pynchon* is a study to be appreciated in the academic circles in Poland not only because it is the first Polish-language work entirely devoted to Pynchon since 1985, but also for its bold attempt to narrow down the challenging vastness and complexity of Pynchon's fiction and to indicate its major themes and problems in a language foreign to the writer in question. Only *V.* and *Against the Day* remain to be translated into Polish, so this study's general picture of Pynchon's work to date is a helpful guide for Polish readers who can use it to get more fully into the whole range of his fiction.

**David Aliaga (ed), *Thomas Pynchon*. Barcelona: Editorial Base, 2016: 224 pp.**

Romina Kipouridou

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, GR

kromina@itl.auth.gr

The title of David Aliaga's edited collection suggests nothing but that it simply is a book about *Thomas Pynchon*, not even hinting that it is written in the Spanish language. Despite occasional monographs—most notably Francisco Collado-Rodríguez' 2004 book on chaos and paranoia, and an extended burlesque essay (2011) by Rubén Martín Giráldez—there is a scarcity of Spanish-language academic criticism on Pynchon's work, although he has been published in Spanish translation for decades. Aliaga's collection, which emphasizes the mystery of Pynchon as an author-figure, has a much more varied approach than scholarship alone, offering new arguments, translations of published scholarship, speculative biography, comical fanfiction, and more: such variety, indeed, that exactly who the intended audience is remains unclear. Altogether, it offers Spanish speaking readers everything from a general introduction, to an approximation of Pynchon's own tone, to some original insights. Specific readers will have to decide for themselves which elements they find most useful.

Aliaga starts his editorial introduction by directing our attention to Thomas Pynchon, "Si existe" (If he exists), going on to characterize this dubiously existent author's work as a delicatessen. This reflects the whole collection's preoccupation with Pynchon as a nexus for unrestrained speculation, the delicatessen of fiction often discussed not for its own sake but in order to cast light on this elusive author-figure. The title of the first article, Paula Lapido's "Thomas Pynchon no existe," establishes the freedom given to readers by a negative response to Aliaga's "Si." Lapido's article can be considered an interesting addition to the existing bibliography, as unlike many introductions to Pynchon that summarize what little we do know about his life, she summarizes the *unverified* information and conspiracies on Pynchon's identity. A reader yet unfamiliar with the author's life and background is provided at

the outset with a detailed overview of only the rumors: from the widely known (for example, that Pynchon and JD Salinger were the same writer), to the more obscure, as well as dubious sources and questionable events like the time *Time* sent a reporter to interview Pynchon in Mexico only for him to up sticks and move across the desert to the other side of the country just to get out of the obligation.

Aliaga himself then addresses the tropes of counterculture and identity. These have of course been widely discussed in English language criticism, but Aliaga's close connection of the two in the light of the perplexities about Pynchon's own identity and biography allows him to examine the agony of Pynchon's protagonists through some original and interesting parallelisms to Pynchon's own figure. His focus on *Bleeding Edge*, meanwhile, allows for more new things to be said on these familiar themes, and his use of Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* as a framework might align the chapter with some of Joanna Freer's more recent work from a similar perspective.<sup>3</sup>

Philosopher Antoni Mora provides a useful insight into the reality of the female characters of Oedipa and Maxine and how this reality is revealed to them. His chapter develops a comparison between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Bleeding Edge* in terms of their respective narrative techniques, emphasizing the themes of chaos and control. Oedipa/Maxine comparisons have become a frequent approach to *Bleeding Edge*, but Mora further uses this approach to successfully demonstrate the importance of waste—not only W.A.S.T.E.—to the quest for the truth and the revelation of reality through the theme of how evidence “decomposes” in each novel. The Deep Web is an “endless junkyard”, a “dump, with structure.” It is like the city garbage collected every night, then dumped where no-one looks, to pretend that the city remains unchanged and clean: a process Mora connects to Pynchon's examination of whether and when America as a whole was ever clean. The truth doesn't only emerge from the eternal and the universal, but also from what is thrown away and re-enters social and biological processes for the circle to be maintained or, in a more personal aspect, to keep the individual moving on.

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<sup>3</sup> See Freer, “Pynchon, Gender, and Relational Ethics”

The contribution from Giráldez—as mentioned above, one of the significant previous contributors to Spanish-language Pynchon study—ostensibly addresses the humor in *Mason & Dixon*, though it roams to other novels and subjects. His “personal” approach—closer to a journal on Pynchon’s writing and his jokes than a strictly academic reading—takes him into intermittent—and occasionally plain unnecessary—extensive descriptions and quotations, and even goes as far as a short story within the article. Starting with a rather long disquisition comparing Mason and Dixon to the comedians and entertainers Andy Kaufman and Bob Zmuda, Giráldez then elaborates on some humoristic incidents of the novel. Considering the structure and themes of Pynchon’s jokes, Giráldez builds up to what he calls a joke compendium: a four-page short story that summarizes and includes all the elements of a Pynchonian joke. He also provides a few pages of the notes taken while reading the novel, interacting with Pynchon by making comments or asking questions, and concluding, humorously, that it is a book that he would only recommend to his enemies as a result of its difficulty and complexity. Drawing on the parallels between the Pynchon/Giráldez relationship he has dramatized and the attitude set out in a(nother long) quotation from the writer Ben Marcus analyzing his own novel *Notable American Women*, Giráldez eventually concludes that writers like Pynchon demand a mental effort similar to the one required in order to learn a new language.

The Pynchonian fog and the supernatural are the themes of Jon Bilbao’s contribution. For Bilbao, Pynchon is a great classical narrator imprisoned in postmodern precepts, using stories within stories and techniques that disorient the readers. Bilbao focuses only briefly on the imagery of literal fog, but enumerates the main characteristics of the formal fog—essentially nothing more than postmodern narrative techniques—that Pynchon creates to surround his protagonists. This, says Bilbao, is not aimless, but motivates readers to navigate within it and reach clarity and truth. The second part of the chapter moves on to address the theme of the supernatural. Bilbao recognizes and identifies *Gravity’s Rainbow* as Pynchon’s most supernatural novel, but doesn’t develop this reading, moving on to survey the role of the supernatural in the other novels up until *Against the Day*.

Fran G. Matute's article develops the trope of music and its role in Pynchon's writing. Literature and music are not on good terms and, more precisely, writers are generally not interested in pop music. Pynchon, however, writes about every music genre and, as Matute claims, there is always a purpose every Pynchonian music reference, each aiming at different rhetorical goals. He provides a few examples, without either engaging in deep textual analysis or covering the full breadth of Pynchon's musical reference.<sup>4</sup>

The next two contributions take advantage of *Orbit's* open-access publishing (though they don't make this very explicit) to offer Spanish translations of articles originally published in English in this journal by Anahita Rouyan and Simon Rowberry.<sup>5</sup> Taking very different approaches, it's not clear why these two in particular fit into the collection, but their translations each present interesting material to Spanish readers.

Rouyan develops a rereading of the German fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" via allusions to it in *Gravity's Rainbow*, expanding existing critical analyses of dominance, victimization, and bad parenting in the novel by connecting them to the psychoanalytical reading of "Hansel and Gretel" in Julius Heuscher's 1974 *Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales*. Rouyan suggests that the allusions to the tale, in this light, develop the novel's attitude to the possibility of freedom within the framework of Teutonic mythology. Rowberry, meanwhile, looks outside the texts to reevaluate the significance of the online wiki for *Gravity's Rainbow*. He analyzes the way the various contributors work, their motivation, and the important downstream impact that contributions to an open wiki can have in the academic literary criticism. Though he notes that for various reasons the *Against the Day* wiki has always been the busiest, most complete, and most "popular," Rowberry takes the *Gravity's Rainbow* wiki as

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<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive playlist and catalog of 927 identified historical musicians and works of music referred to in Pynchon (assembled after the publication of Matute's chapter), see Christian Hänggi's 2018 *Orbit* article – <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.487>

<sup>5</sup> See the originals: Rouyan here – <https://doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v2.1.46> – and Rowberry here – <https://doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v1.1.24>

his test case because it allows him to compare it to a number of more traditionally published companions and so to examine the two approaches' respective advantages and disadvantages. This allows him, finally, to suggest some concrete improvements for the Pynchon wikis and for literary wiki-sources in general.

The book's final chapter returns to original work, in this case a fictive essay—really an amusing short story—by Albert Fernández, in which we find Doc Sportello living in 2012, working as a detective and looking for Thomas Pynchon. He seems to have been transported from the 1969 psychedelia to another one, and things have not changed much. I believe that it can be read as a message to Pynchon's readers to simply enjoy the journey without being paranoid, a great idea for the final reading of this book that tells us—or at least tells unfamiliar readers—what to do with the impression—and the collection's frequent assertion—that Pynchon is a difficult and incomprehensible or, at least puzzling, writer.

This is perhaps my main reservation about the collection: I can't understand the purpose of these numerous references and reminders about Pynchon's being a difficult and almost unreadable author. Such insistences won't be of much use to readers who are already Pynchon's enthusiasts, and may serve to put off newer or prospective readers looking for help. It could also be considered a downside—for readers seeking a general introduction to Pynchon—that the individual articles tend to focus quite narrowly on one text, mostly on those that already have an extended bibliography, without offering many *overall* accounts of Pynchon. And for a book with these kinds of narrow focuses, an index at the end would be a useful and positive addition. Once again, then, the question arises of who exactly this book is for. Any reader, of any level of Pynchon familiarity, will find something useful here, but very few will find the whole thing pitched for their level.

In conclusion, this is a valuable book for the Spanish-speaking readers of Pynchon as it is the only one of its kind, covering a wide range of novels and major topics. In terms of its contributions to international Pynchon study, some chapters mainly survey material already covered in English, while some are more

thoroughly original. Nonetheless, the Spanish-speaking readers could be benefited by what this book has to offer, both enthusiasts who have recently started their journey in his literature and even students and academics with no direct access to the existing bibliography because of the language barrier. However, as previously mentioned and as it is clear from the chapters discussed, the book does not seem to target a specific audience. For academic scholars, familiar with Pynchon and with access to the whole critical bibliography, I find Mora's and Bilbao's to be the most potentially contributing of the original scholarly pieces. But such is the variety of approaches here that there is something for every Spanish-speaking reader.

**Yoshihiro Nagano, トマス・ピンチョン——帝国、戦争、システム、そして選  
びに与れぬ者の生 (Japanese lang – *Thomas Pynchon: Empire, War, System, and  
the Lives of Preterites*). Tokyo: Sanshū-sha, 2019: 276 pp.**

Kodai Abe

Binghamton University, NY

kabe4@binghamton.edu

Since Takashi Aso's 2001 review in *Pynchon Notes* introduced the first Japanese Pynchon monograph to the English-speaking audience,<sup>6</sup> Japan has witnessed, especially in the past decade, a phenomenal improvement in the landscape for those who are interested, academically or otherwise, in Thomas Pynchon. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. Undoubtedly, the central contribution to this upsurge would be "Thomas Pynchon Complete Collection," a highly readable and coolly group-designed set of the Pynchon novels, translated by reliable literary scholars, published by Shinchō-sha since 2010, and soon to be completed with the edition of *Bleeding Edge*. Not only does it succeed at inviting in public audiences

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<sup>6</sup> See Aso, "Breaking Through Pynchon Studies in Japan"



seeking Pynchonesque extravaganza, but several volumes also come with detailed, informative, but nonetheless pop “afterwords”—many authored by the collection’s chief editor Yoshiaki Sato—which are helpful in better appreciating these complicated narratives. From here, any Japanese will be able to glide effortlessly toward *Thomas Pynchon* (Sairyū-sha, 2014), an introductory anthology edited by Aso and Yoshihiko Kihara, combining Pynchon’s own nonfiction writings, synopses of his novels and of selected academic scholarship on them, and a dozen accessible new essays. Two more specialized books contributed early momentum to this boom: Keita Hatooka’s *Pynchon’s Menagerie* [*Pynchon no doubutsuen*], a monograph in the Eco-criticism Collection by Suisei-sha in 2011; and *Reading Against the Day* [*Gyakkō wo yomu*] (Sekai Shisō-sha, 2011), an enjoyable book-length annotation by the titular novel’s translator – Kihara.

Onto Japanese Pynchonians well prepared by this 2010s boom, Yoshihiro Nagano now drops *Thomas Pynchon: Empire, War, System, and the Lives of Preterites*. This is the second volume of the *Encounters with American Literature* series from Sanshū-sha, whose chief editor Koichi Suwabe has already published its first volume, on Vonnegut. His suggestion is that the series is typically aimed at undergraduate students working on a graduation thesis on the featured novelist: not only Pynchon and Vonnegut, but McCarthy, Bukowski, O’Brien, Auster, Le Guin, and Baldwin have been announced so far.<sup>7</sup> But that the *Gravity’s Rainbow* chapter of Nagano’s book is a revised version of an article previously published in English in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* suggests that it can appeal across the wide readerly spectrum from undergraduate-level “students” in the broadest sense to professional academics in Japan and beyond.

As the subtitle *Empire, War, System, and the Lives of Preterites* might indicate, this is a dauntlessly straightforward approach to a primal undercurrent that pervades this canonical author’s whole oeuvre, i.e., the dynamic interplay between the forces of global power and the “genealogy of the preterite” (my translation, 23). Though

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<sup>7</sup> Suwabe’s interview (11/23/2019) by *Tosho-shimbun* is available online (ID is required): [http://www.toshoshimbun.com/books\\_newspaper/week\\_description.php?shinbunno=3424&syosekino=13103](http://www.toshoshimbun.com/books_newspaper/week_description.php?shinbunno=3424&syosekino=13103)

Nagano himself does not explicitly cite it, this Marxist framework would surely remind us of Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), a renowned tome that formulates the condition of the contemporary world as the conflict between Empire versus the multitude across the globe. Nagano's book is overall a sociopolitical study that traces the chronological development of the Empire-multitude conflict captured in Pynchon's novels. To an English-speaking audience it would make sense read in conjunction with Sascha Pöhlmann's *Pynchon's Postnational Imagination* (2010), Pedro García-Caro's *After the Nation* (2014), and (drawing most on Hardt and Negri) Sean Carswell's *Occupy Pynchon* (2017), all of which share in a similar examination of Pynchon's treatment of historical shifts in cultural emphasis from the national to the global. The distinctive value of Nagano's book lies in calling attention to the persisting relevance of the *national* in Pynchon's vision of the age of globalization. Its six chapters follow the axis of this developing Empire-preterite interrelation: (1) *V.*, (2) *The Crying of Lot 49*, (3) *Gravity's Rainbow*, (4) *Mason & Dixon*, (5) *Against the Day*, and (6) the more recent American novels: *Vineland*, *Inherent Vice*, and *Bleeding Edge*.

Chapter One locates the fundamental structure of *V.* as a response to the recognition that "the national organism," as defined by Pheng Cheah, has been lost since the end of World War II. According to Nagano, the novel's contemporary and historical chapters share a nostalgia toward the lost organicity, or the "specter" thereof. Here, the menace is represented by the idea of entropy that renders everything inanimate, whose dominance was precipitated by Hiroshima and the Holocaust. Within this grim world, *V.* envisions the mythic topos of Vheissu, a putatively radical but overall romantic space invested with the dream of the negentropic "premodern," whose variation is to be developed throughout Pynchon's career.

In Chapter Two, drawing on American Studies scholarship by the likes of Donald Pease and Ali Behdad, Nagano views Oedipa Maas as a symptomatic figure of the ambiguous quality of the *Immigration and Nationality Act* in its transitional period between 1952 and 65, when it embodied a vacillating attitude between hospitality and hostility toward aliens. Accordingly, Oedipa's pursuing of Tristero—a salient example of undesirable aliens—is interpreted as a potentially radical attempt at

introducing noise into the US nationalist discourse, thereby imagining an alternative America. Reading the novella as a kind of Bildungsroman, Nagano positively concludes that Oedipa “will live on as an alien in the US” (my translation, 101). The impurity of any workable model of the national goes on to become a leitmotif throughout this study.

Chapter Three’s main point is aptly captured by its title: “Remembering Home in Foreign Lands”—also its English title when published in *Critique*.<sup>8</sup> In Europe during World War II, protagonist Tyrone Slothrop’s anamnesis of American history and colonized subjects’ mythic imagination of their origin both challenge Euro-American imperialism, cultivating a radical solidarity within the most famous anarchic site ever imagined by Pynchon: the Zone. Noteworthy here is a kind of paradoxical mechanism Nagano portrays, in which imperial history is critiqued by the way that seemingly nationalist desire turns out to be saturated with colonial violence. Through the process of envisioning an alternative course that America might and should have followed, Slothrop comes to align with the preterite, forming the “Counterforce.” Their insurgency, however, is to be assimilated by the endlessly swelling global power, “They,” a limitation that the next chapter further pursues.

Chapter Four examines the 18<sup>th</sup>-century setting of *Mason & Dixon* with recourse to Robert Young’s concept “colonial desire,” focusing on the colonizer’s ambivalence between (sexualized) desire toward the colony and their repulsion toward miscegenation. Nagano extracts from the novel the cognizance that “the nullification of the racial boundary in the body engenders not only the possibility of liberation but also novel technologies of suppression and control” (my translation, 158). In this chapter, it is the racialized body/blood that functions as the radical locale. In Chapter Five on *Against the Day*—taking us into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—the genealogy of the preterite is succeeded by anarchists. Deploying Judith Butler’s popular idea of grievability, Nagano compares the state-sanctioned violence concretized as war and the criminalized violence—terrorism—conducted by anarchists.

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<sup>8</sup> (Editor’s note) It’s available, behind an un-*Orbit*-like paywall, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2016.1149797>.

Chapter Six puts together three later novels set in the US—*Vineland*, *Inherent Vice*, and *Bleeding Edge*—and interrogates how it is impossible for the characters to go back to “America”: “Even if they are living in America, their homeland is far from what it has to be” (my translation, 196). Thus the chapter again addresses the national in the age of globalization. Situating each “space” from each novel—*Vineland*, *Golden Fang*, and *DeepArcher*—along with such as *Vheissu* and *the Zone*, Nagano views *Bleeding Edge* and its protagonist Maxine Tarnow as the ultimate culmination of Pynchon’s politico-philosophical thoughts. He contends not only that she “pursues both the national and individual ideal,” which were accomplished by neither Profane, Oedipa, nor Slothrop, while “preserving a sense of justice grounded upon her firm will and belief,” but also that she “pursues social justice and ethics” that *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* failed to fulfill (my translation, 227).

One might have caught a teleological timbre in this optimistic ending to Nagano’s explanatory trajectory (it is interesting to think how his observations might be modified should Pynchon publish another novel). In my capacity as a scholar astride the Pacific like Nagano, I would like here to refer to a Japanese tradition, i.e., a consensus still accepted by a certain strand of scholars: that literary criticism should be practiced as an amalgamation of academic conversation and of the pseudo-biographical narrativization of an author’s whole career. Hence Nagano’s endeavor to chart the *Bildung* of Pynchon, the series editor’s gesture toward “undergrads,” and a Japanese abundance of monographs (whether published by academic, trade, or popular presses) with a single author’s name in the title. This endemic atmosphere accommodating the hybridity of academic and public perhaps underlies Nagano’s efforts to deal extensively with *all* Pynchon’s published novels and to do so by positing the consistent development of a single, primal, career-long thematic concern. While it shares concerns with much English-language Pynchon scholarship, few critics have ever undertaken such a comprehensive attempt to define his career in terms of a single idea. Whether you are persuaded or not, this belief in the possibility of making such a complex career comprehensible to a broad audience inside and outside the academy would supply a refreshing momentum for many of us.

While acknowledging the merits mentioned above, however, I must also point out some more properly academic stylistic weaknesses of Nagano's study. First of all, I found myself stumbling over unelaborated sentences and phrasings throughout the book. Second, its own principal argument is not very directly conveyed; profuse with expressions such as "pay attention to" or "with reference to," the book impresses one as a merely descriptive, rather than a clearly argumentative study, which results, third, in the obscurity of the book's interventional relationship with and novel contribution to the wider world of recent sociopolitical Pynchon scholarship. Nagano covers turf shared with studies mentioned above, as well as Stefan Mattessich's *Lines of Flight* (2002), Samuel Thomas's *Pynchon and the Political* (2007), Joanna Freer's *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (2014); and also, beyond literature alone, with the New Americanists, above all Amy Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire* (2002). It could be critically and meaningfully constellated among all of these, which Nagano does not do himself. To be sure, it might be the author's benevolent intention to open the discussion to the public audience that delimited the full exertion of his academic competence; yet precisely because of the pedagogical merit the book/series is intended to assume, these drawbacks do not seem trivial to me.

These essentially stylistic limitations notwithstanding, Nagano's *Thomas Pynchon* will certainly mark a solid reference point for the future Pynchon Studies in Japan. With its theoretically informed analytical frameworks and the expertise of close reading applied to each text bringing forth countless inspiring observations, each chapter not only offers valuable interpretations of the novels but also serves as a model of single-work oriented academic essay for both Japanese students and scholars. To the international audience, perhaps its contribution lies in offering the historical genealogy of the Empire-preterite conflict, captured by Pynchon as it expanded from the 1960s to the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Also, I hope Nagano's ambition shall stimulate more Pynchon scholars to reconsider the possible radicality in blurring—as Pynchon always does—the boundary between academic and public, by way of literary criticism.

**Richard Olehla, *Perspektivy konce: Thomas Pynchon a americký román po 11. září* (Czech lang – *Perspectives of the End: Thomas Pynchon and the American Novel after 9/11*). Prague: Karolinum, 2014: 128 pp.**

Vit Vanicek

University of Illinois at Chicago, US

vanicek@uic.edu

The title of Richard Olehla's study may be slightly misleading, for much can hinge on an "a" or an "and." Rather than a sustained study of Thomas Pynchon's relationship to the genre of the US 9/11 novel, it centrally concerns that "*konec*" or "End"; the primary focus is the recent literary manifestations of apocalypse in Pynchon and (separately) in the 9/11 novel genre. Nor does *Bleeding Edge* offer a bridge between the sections, as Olehla's book went to press before Pynchon's novel arrived. The book as a whole offers a broad-strokes theoretical overview of both Pynchon's and his contemporaries' treatment of apocalypse, and while some parts struggle to get beyond their bibliography, the Pynchon section is overall the strongest, offering fresh precision on the hoary topic of Pynchonian apocalypse, as well as some intriguing speculative asides.

This short volume has three chapters: a survey of the "Theory of apocalypse," as it evolved from Christian concept into US cultural guises; an analysis of "Apocalyptic aspects in selected Pynchon-works" (the selection being his first three novels); and a survey of how apocalypse frameworks apply in a variety of works responding to "September 11, 2001." Olehla has few forerunners in Czech-language study of Pynchon besides the translators of his novels or the faculty at Czech universities whose publications tend to be in English, but his choice of texts reflects a growing public interest in postmodern and contemporary US authors who have only recently been translated into Czech: of the three early Pynchon novels he studies, *The Crying of Lot 49* was translated in 2004, *Gravity's Rainbow* in 2006, with *V.* still not having been translated into Czech at all (*Vineland* was translated in 1997, *Slow Learner* in 1999, and *Bleeding Edge* in 2017). While he occasionally draws on Czech

scholarship (like a pair of articles on apocalypse, American Culture, and postmodernism by Martin Procházka), his survey of apocalyptic thinking, which spans biblical scholarship and American Studies, reflects the overall wide, international grounding of Olehla's approach.

That survey contains less original argument of its own than the two more literature-focused chapters; Olehla argues that apocalypse is both relevant and revelatory as a critical prism to readers who may be unaccustomed to a Christian-based reading of postmodern novelists, and so his goal here is to provide a concise but substantially-evidenced walk-through of the development of apocalyptic thought throughout Western history, from its Christian origins to its more secular saturation of US culture, so that we can understand its permutations in recent literature. Drawing on primary texts of apocalyptic religiosity and on classical biblical scholarship, he explains apocalypse's Christian origins, then maps how the Christian church's flexibility about the date of biblical apocalypse—at first designated, then postponed, and finally deemed a clerical mystery for which common believers were not fit—led to the culture of apocalypse escaping the bounds of religious authority. It's here that Olehla turns to Pynchon, situating his fiction within an account of apocalyptic US culture that draws heavily on scholars like Frank Kermode (on cultural conceptions of time) and Sacvan Bercovitch (on American millenarianism). Both are familiar lenses on Pynchon, and throughout this chapter Olehla is deferential to his sources, not attempting to argue beyond their accounts of apocalypse, but only to build foundations for his subsequent analysis of apocalyptic elements in the literature. The vision of Pynchon's America this leaves us with is full of apocalypse, in all its traces as a cultural edifice construed on strictly Puritan principles, then absorbed and diffused by the growing populace first as a vague Christian multi-denomination, then eventually just as the surviving sense of Puritan—and by extension American—exceptionalism, as God's Chosen people, always on the threshold of revelation. While there is not much new in this chapter (Olehla leans throughout on the critical thinkers influential well before 9/11), it is useful to have such a survey in one place, and Olehla's successful establishment of

a bridge from the earliest conceptions of apocalypse to Pynchon's present shows how his historical approach can firmly anchor studies of even countercultural authors within what may still be considered a Western cultural and ideological heritage.

Having so diligently warranted his framework, Olehla's subsequent analyses of Pynchon build very precisely upon it, though are perhaps too quick to insist that, for any given passage, the apocalyptic reading is the Occam's-Razor reading. For Olehla, Pynchon represents a world in which the distorted survival of the apocalyptic tradition of thought finds itself at odds with what lived—and imagined—reality offers: his characters can neither find nor live what they seek as salvation/damnation. Their private dissolutions resonate with the worldly disasters around them, and the preterite in their personal failures wilfully take their cue from the debacles of the mighty. Apocalypse is that-which-is-always-imminent, yet never quite achieved. Olehla claims that apocalypse—as “revelation” or “unveiling of truth”—does manifest itself in tantalizingly ungraspable form (as paranoia, or as encounters with angels) to individuals throughout the novels, but that the protagonists who *seek* for it cannot attain such a revelation. This is because of the impossibility of God's message ever being precise or clear to mortals: it is always “communicated as a metaphor,” the meaning of which is thereby “distorted,” imbued with “inherent ambiguity.” Such lack of clarity bends the light of revelation and results in the frustration manifested as doubt in faith, or, on a cognitive plane, as paranoia. And Pynchon elevates this paranoia, when his characters understand it, to a creative principle that can be reflexively wielded. Again, much of this general vision will be loosely familiar from previous scholarship on Pynchon and apocalypse, but Olehla's precision about the exact place the vision holds in the evolving history of apocalyptic thought allows for a more definite explanation of why characters experience the frustrations of revelation in the specific way that they do.

In a somewhat frustrating turn, however, this time drawing on conventionally postmodern readings of Pynchon, Olehla suggests that even if Pynchon's characters could achieve revelation, the revelation is empty—there is no ultimate



truth about the reality they are trying to (re)construct. His overall interpretations of the novels emphasize this kind of deconstructivist suspension. In *Lot 49*, for example, he builds on Procházka to portray the novel's suspensive ending as analogous to Derrida's (1984) deconstructive reading of the Christian apocalypse as an eternal postponement. In *V*, Olehla finds apocalypse, by its very nature in the novel, to be a sardonic comment on the unfulfilled promise of death or an end of an era. This is paramount in a war effort that never leads to a victory, only to a measure of destruction. The only promise that a mysterious truth will be revealed in some undisclosed future is embodied in the character V, and even there only as a substitution of signification, likening the malleable nature of V to the A in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (38). This reinforces the author's earlier claim that the ambiguity of revelation breeds paranoia, and thus he can—unsurprisingly—comment that if Pynchon were to reveal Tristero's true motives or aims, the conspiracy would fall apart. And for *Gravity's Rainbow* Olehla draws on Derrida again to draw a comparison between the suspensive sublimity of Derrida's "nuclear referent" which deconstructs the temporality of nuclear war and the way that Pynchon's Rocket hangs in a Zeno's paradox of ever-suspended limbo in the very last  $\Delta t$ .

Some of these Derridean takes on Pynchon have been offered elsewhere, and the newer insights in Olehla's reading of Pynchon tend to come in his treatment of smaller details, often in moments where Olehla himself enters into Pynchon criticism's own long tradition of paranoid pattern-mania. For example, the intriguing parts of the above analyses come in their close-reading justifications. It may seem whimsical for Olehla to bring the Czech word for "war", *válka*, into the inexorable equivocation of character-V and the V-initial, but it does fit neatly within his overall argument. And there's an ambitious synthesis in his identification of the  $\Delta t$  as the ultimate Pynchonian metaphor, since the Greek letter may be, in fact, an upside-down V, and the *t* may signify Tristero, resulting in a shift from physics to rhetorics in a gesture that paranoidly aligns the three novels, when V is squared and becomes V-2, the Rocket itself. Olehla is an entertaining exponent of this kind of hyper-paranoid

Pynchon reading, and by exposure to this approach, and to Olehla's self-consciousness about its cultural heritage, the reader is reminded that paranoia is the American socio-cultural prism of choice, as it seeks both for ever-unknowable purpose and ever-unreachable enemies (here Olehla invokes Lacan).

A more sustained set of fresh insights comes in Olehla's treatment of Pynchon's angels. He gives a fuller account of the theological heritage of the angel-concept than previous angel-focused critics (like Brian McHale, who he draws on) have offered, and hence clarifies their role in specific relation to apocalypse and revelation. God's revelation can only ever be ambiguous because humans cannot comprehend its perfection. Hence the need for it to come through angels, messengers that combine a *demiurg* and a servant. Olehla finds angels and their inherent dualism in *V.* not only in the names of characters (Angelo, Benny Profane, and V), but also in the V-concept's delocalization across multiple possible places (Venice, Vesuvio, Valletta), only to arrive at Vheissu as a self-contained myth of both origin and destination of the paranoid, and invoking but one angel—the Angel of Death. Oedipa Maas, meanwhile, takes on a reimagined form of the Marian myth, and Olehla finds metaphors in her character as it is construed through the names of Pierce Inverarity and her awaiting of the second angelic enlightenment. In both novels, Olehla demonstrates that the angels' function relies on an understanding of the wider apocalyptic framework. Most distinctively, he argues that, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon employs angels in a more biblical sense, without building a distance from them through metaphor. Pynchon invokes angels as they are portrayed in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: creatures "unreachable, incomprehensible, and unapproachable." Underlining angels' consequent inhuman, detached attitude toward human suffering in the novel (like the one reportedly seen during the Allied bombardment of Lübeck), he makes another cross-theme connection when he likens these angels to a "Them behind Them," the entity behind the Firm. Emphasizing the diabolic aspects of the angel-concept's history, this suggests that Pynchon associates divine forces with the worst of hidden human forces, bringing together earthly suspicion and the kind of deeply theological paranoia his intellectual history traced to apocalypticism. Thus here at least his framework not only

explains individual moments, but makes cumulative sense of what might seem like disparate threads in the novel.

His final section—on literature as a symptom of how a disruptive event like 9/11 can act as a nexus for the apocalyptic impulses within U.S. political and popular culture and history—is less revelatory, because the chapter's brief series of overviews, shuffling through DeLillo, Foer, Kalfus, Auster, and Updike for between two and five pages apiece, doesn't allow for enough extended analysis of any one to fully justify a reading. From the demonstration that 9/11 quickly attained the status and form of apocalypse in the American cultural and literary canon, Olehla emphasizes how fiction's uneasy treatment of 9/11 as untouchable and unrepresentable relates to the impossible revelation from God in apocalyptic texts. Here he does enough to show that apocalypse takes on different forms, and that Pynchon's use of it as potential revelation may not be shared universally among his literary peers. If DeLillo's Keith Neudecker in *Falling Man* is lucky enough to escape the WTC building, his life's descent into gambling brings no revelation: its juxtaposition with Hammad's death in the attack insinuates a question of life fulfillment. The apocalypse is thus only personal and unshareable (much as for Pynchon's characters), like the pain of loss Foer's Oscar feels for his father in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, or his grandfather's survival of the Allied bombing of Dresden that dissolves communication in Oscar's family. Olehla invites the reader to inquire about further such connections, but even the more promising of the short analyses here are only that: scholars might be able to pick up and develop these starting characterizations, but Olehla does not develop any one of them enough to fully revise current understanding.

It's in this section, of course, that a reader today will miss mention of *Bleeding Edge*. With its September-11<sup>th</sup> plot, its navigation between data explosion and physical explosions, its negotiation of new technologies in which conspiracy can unfold, and new ways in which paranoia and revelation can be "stenciled" onto the fabric of perceived reality, the book seems amenable to Olehla's framework, making the near miss of publication dates a pity. It's less obvious why Pynchon's

other more recent fiction was given a strangely wide berth: a study of US apocalypse could surely draw on and illuminate the ultimately American identity-myth of *Mason & Dixon* or the onrushing apocalypse in *Against the Day*. *Mason & Dixon* outlines what cultural apocalypse America faces when it embarks on its division between the free and the slave: it suggests the ethical horrors awaiting a people that cannot help but colonize land into territories, and enslave humans into labor. Among the stargazers and strange mechanics in the novel, prophecies of angelic proportions abound that would further Olehla's claims of apocalypse as a personal revelation amid inhuman forces. In *Against the Day*, the world teeters on the precipice of enthusiastic self-destruction, and though its characters, both real and fictional(ized), struggle against the delineating forces, the world falls into the trap of power-mongering that ushers in innumerable Angels of Death. That none of the novel's successful resistance or alternative world-making ultimately unfolds in our reality, where global destruction instead looms imminent, would only emphasize Olehla's argument for an apocalypse that fuels the paranoia bred by a forever-postponed revelation.

Olehla, then, presents a well-designed, if selective, application of apocalypse as a theme. The framework, though not distinctively original, is extensively developed and often convincingly applied. A reader of this volume may find some new insights on Pynchon: especially in a very precise explanation of the relationship between a specific cultural structure of apocalypse and the specific experiences of the characters who live within it, but also in some more speculative pattern-revelations. The analyses could plausibly have been expanded to further Pynchon novels, and the 9/11 novels would have benefitted from more sustained individual engagement. Olehla's reader will, overall, be rewarded by a sweeping take on the apocalypse in the American postmodern—and post 9/11—novel, from the critical perspective offered to an Eastern European readership in the early second decade of the 2000s. The years since his book have seen an increasing amount of work in English on post-modern US fiction's religious, postsecular, or theological dimensions: his ideas can contribute across the geographic and language gaps to the ongoing development of this field.

**Giuseppe Episcopo, *L'eredità della fine: Gravity's Rainbow di Thomas Pynchon e Horcynus Orca di Stefano D'Arrigo* (Italian lang – *The Inheritance of the End: Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon and Horcynus Orca by Stefano D'Arrigo*). Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2016: 205 pp.**

Andrea Brondino

University of Warwick, UK

A.Brondino@warwick.ac.uk

Episcopo tackles two literary *monstra*: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Horcynus Orca* by Stefano D'Arrigo. A few words about the latter (regrettably not yet translated into English): published in 1975, this lengthy Italian novel (more than a thousand pages) focuses on eight days in the life of a Sicilian sailor dismissed by the army after the armistice of September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1943. Highly experimental, the novel creates its own unique language through a mixture of neologisms, Sicilian dialect, and literary references. The estrangement effect is further strengthened by a plot whose flow mirrors, in sounds and rhythm, the movement of the sea, as well as by the relentless fluctuation of a multitude of characters that often appear just once or twice. Needless to say, *Horcynus Orca* is no summer read. As may be clear already, a well-justified “family resemblance” connects D'Arrigo's and Pynchon's books: Episcopo admirably succeeds in reuniting this lost pair of twins of the 70s.

The aim of Episcopo's text is to analyze a literary knight's move (to quote Šklovskij) at work in the two novels: on the one hand, they represent the past as an end, and, consequently, the present as the time of an inherited Apocalypse (a thesis not bereft of Adornian echoes); on the other hand, there's the unconventional tension between the narrated temporality of the World War II setting—present tense, as if it were live—and its past historical collocation for readers. *L'eredità della fine*, however, is not simply the umpteenth work about postmodernism's breaking of temporal continuity and linearity. More interestingly, it addresses how that breakage relates to both historical and cultural conditions. Historical, for in both the Italian and the North-American 1970s contexts war is an unavoidably distortive factor in the

subjective and collective experience of time. Cultural, because the Apocalyptic philosophical and literary milieu of postmodernism is where the post-war re-elaboration of the question of historical inheritance and the existence of a future is more significantly discussed. Within this perspective, *L'eredità della fine's* underlying question is: what happens to narrative when the future itself does not exist, that is, when the future is a precluded horizon (14)?

The book is divided into three sections. The first outlines a theoretical framework which encompasses the German Group '47 (Episcopo takes a cue from Günter Grass's *Das Treffen in Telgte*), Ernst Bloch's key notion of the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous, and the concept of nostalgia for the present as theorized by Friedrich Jameson.<sup>9</sup> The author then discusses the "gravitational attraction" exerted by the present (my translation, 33), which both novels' *in medias res* beginnings frame as already suspended and eternal. This is followed by a dense and heterogeneous reconnaissance of the relations between literature and historiography since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Through a multidisciplinary and multi-national perspective, Episcopo rewrites this genealogy by bringing together Herder and Foscolo, Chateaubriand and Manzoni, Benjamin and Dos Passos, Scott and Joyce. He succeeds in showing how the relations of force between literature and history (as well as literature and historiography) produce the classic 19<sup>th</sup> century historical novel, but also haunt following generations of writers and thinkers beyond that literary sub-genre's traditional boundaries ("History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake", famously says Stephan Dedalus). For this reason, the historical novel expands and invades ulterior genres and cultural fields, to the extent that it becomes the philosophically privileged genre for, for instance, literary reformulations of the relationship between reality and fiction *tout court*.

This framing investigation is highly original and as well as setting up the analysis of Pynchon and D'Arrigo provides a fresh angle on what may seem an already

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<sup>9</sup> In this company, Derrida's hauntology seems a surprising absence, but Episcopo's thesis works without having to draw on it.

heavily researched field. However, Episcopo is perhaps too keen to draw multiple connections between a plurality of geographical contexts without recognizing inevitable differences between them: for instance, the Italian historical novel bears from its start a political connotation (i.e. the Manzonian model in which historical recreation must be understood in relation to the unification of the country) which has no direct equivalent in the coeval Anglo-Saxon panorama (where historical novels arguably were, until Modernism, little more than divertissements). The end point of Episcopo's survey is postmodernism: here the historiographical becomes inextricably intertwined with the metafictional, but that does not mean that history vanishes from the page. Quite the opposite: history haunts the literary form to the extent that it forces it to rethink its relation with the diachronic, causing a literary re-elaboration of temporality. As Episcopo describes it, this particularly prioritizes the synchronic, through the rediscovery of myth as an extra-temporal form of understanding, as intended in Levi-Strauss's notion of the "savage mind".

Both levels of representation are addressed in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Horcynus Orca*. The second section of Episcopo's book addresses how history emerges from the small details of Pynchon and D'Arrigo's narratives; for instance, in the scene in which Slothrop finds a doll, whose burnt hair and previous ownership by a Jewish child introduce the Holocaust into the apparent peace of the dollhouse (see *Gravity's Rainbow* 282). Small later details are similarly freighted with history in Pynchon's representation of the Herero, and German colonialism in Africa more generally. Thus the postmodernist historical narrative has something in common with Ginzburg's microhistory, in which the gap between raw historical data and their narrativization as *history* turns into a gnoseological challenge that can be re-elaborated through deliberately self-aware narrative. However, neither Slothrop nor 'Ndrija, the protagonist of *Horcynus Orca*, are reliable witnesses of their own experiences. The obscurity of their perspectival vicissitudes can be partially dispelled by superceding their focalization toward the interpretive level suggested by the numerous mythological references in the two novels. In a well written chapter dedicated to myth and folklore (67–79), Episcopo shows how myth provides, in both novels, a way out of the

deadlock of a crisis of experience (in a Benjaminian sense) created by war trauma and technology. Slothrop's journey on the Anubis is then read as a katabasis into the realm of the dead (and its literary incarnations, such as Goethe's *Faust*). After all, the mythological aspirations of the texts are already apparent in their use of epic form, even though the postmodernist epic often takes the form of encyclopedic narration (a development identified by Franco Moretti's *The Modern Epic*). This mythological level of imagination is, furthermore, often reshaped and parodied through pop culture and lowbrow references, as the description of Orpheus/Slothrop's desk at the beginning of the novel shows with the effect of *mise en abyme* (GR 18). Books such as *Pynchon's Mythography* by Kathryn Hume provide a more detailed analysis of the mythological character of *Gravity's Rainbow*; *L'eredità della fine's* originality is in reading Pynchon's reuse of mythological material as a literary response to the broader question of the crisis of experience. In the final part of the second section, Episcopo analyzes the relation between Pynchon's way of representing the war and cinematic techniques, which further blur and mythologize the war events.

The third section of the book is dedicated to the two allegories of mystery in the novels, the missile for Pynchon and the orca for d'Arrigo. Here Episcopo investigates in detail, with enviable conjectural intelligence, and through a constant comparison with literary and cinematic sources such as *Apocalypse Now*, the possibility (originally postulated by Joseph Slade) that *Gravity's Rainbow* is actually the hallucinatory account of a Vietnam War veteran. He finds a superimposition of two conflicts: the Second World War and Vietnam; Pynchon's novel would thus insist on the eternal nature of war, as well as the pervasiveness of a boundless present. Episcopo reflects on the scientific theories and suggestions (like those of Riemann and Heisenberg) that inform Pynchon's novel's form. These influences are not dismissed, but rather relativized by Episcopo, who argues that the plot ultimately translates the characters' subjective experience of time. In the slightly obscure final chapter, he uses Lacan, Freud, and Ernst Robert Curtius to reflect on the relation between (respectively) the Real, the uncanny, and the subversion of *locus amoenus* in *locus horridus*. The stories of Slothrop and 'Ndrija develop inside a textual universe that weaves together (and



eventually dismantles) a variety of improbable connections between distantly related events and figures. On a metatextual level, this epistemological paranoia accustoms the reader to the unexpected return of peripheral characters, some having appeared at the beginning, in later sections of the novel. Episcopo highlights that this does not happen with the protagonists, who suddenly exit the narrative and vanish, as if handed back to the silence of the Real, where language and texts cannot intervene.

Episcopo's essay is a relevant work for anyone interested in the morphological connections between Italian and North-American postmodernism. In Italy, it has been praised by Massimiliano Pecora, who highlighted its original reading of history as a key factor in the novels' creation of a discontinuous temporality. For Pynchonians, meanwhile, the main quality of the book clearly lies in the subtle and precise interpretations of small details and scenes whose implications might otherwise be hidden amid the rushing flow of *Gravity's Rainbow* (for instance: Slothrop's desk, read as a metafictional assortment of the pop culture/mythological allusions that innervate Pynchon's masterwork). *L'eredità della fine* certainly provides a thorough comparative analysis of the novels, but it is also itself an encyclopedic essay which brings together a plethora of philosophical and intermedial references, as evidenced by its rich bibliography. It is true that the heterogeneity of the sources can sometimes confuse the reader and overshadow the primary object of Episcopo's book (the elaboration of temporality in two novels arisen from a futureless cultural milieu). Nevertheless, the broad scope is also a specific strength. By showing the breadth of the literary and extra-literary connections created by the novels, Episcopo suggests the necessity of a perspective that interprets postmodernist literary artifacts in close connection to specific times and wide cultural contexts. The relation between history and postmodernism has been at the center of critical attention since famous and still-influential debates between Lyotard, Jameson, and Hutcheon in the late 1980s. Yet, the extent to which specific historical and traumatic events actually influenced postmodernist literature, especially in its structures and formal features, still needs to be fully assessed. *L'eredità della fine* certainly contributes to addressing this.

## **Bibliographizing non-English-language Pynchon Scholarship: A Short Interview**

Michel Ryckx

Independent scholar and bibliographer

stencil@vheissu.net

In the process of assembling the present special batch of reviews and talking to our reviewers about the canon of Pynchon scholarship in their respective languages, I found myself increasingly recurring to and cross-checking with the vast (though inevitably incomplete) translingual bibliography of Pynchon Studies at <https://www.vheissu.net/biblio/>, which has since the 1990s been compiled, edited, and maintained by just one man: Belgian bibliographer and Pynchonian Michel Ryckx. A multilingualist himself, Michel struck me as probably the one person best acquainted with the whole range of what's out there on Pynchon in other languages. And so I asked him some questions.

– Ali Chetwynd, Book Reviews Editor

**AC: I was just flicking through Vheissu and noticed for the first time that the bibliography can be searched and filtered by origin language – how long has that been a feature?**

MR: In the Summer of 2019 I kind of developed a home-brewn system of classifying items in a more systemic way (I am grateful for the suggestions made at the time by John Krafft); hence I updated everything so that it could be categorized into separate downloadable bibliography documents (eg, A for Books, then subdivided into A1 monographs, A2 Studies, and so on...).

This required a new set-up for presenting the items and implied also that I had to create a new menu system, to which I added the language option – I had always registered the language but had never done anything with it. Hopefully this search menu will be useful.

**AC: Are non-English-language sources the hardest to find? What makes them so, if so? What other categories of source are hardest to track down?**

MR: When I have an affinity with the language (German) or I know the language (French), it is rather easy to track down items. On top of that and due to being present during several *International Pynchon Weeks*, I can contact several scholars for updates or more information (those who speak Polish, Hungarian, Danish...).

An important source for me is the bibliography *within* studies and articles – I tend to check the works-cited for each and every (Pynchon-related) item. In some instances, again in “European” languages, I just ask for a pdf or picture of the Table of Contents.

I am a regular user of, in order of importance: JSTOR, WorldCat, Google Scholar, Google Books, academia.edu. Before using information from those sites I tend to corroborate it with another before updating the database with a new item.

Other categories that are hard to track down include: doctoral dissertations, in any language, as these are certainly scholarly, but reading them and even discovering most of them requires access to specific local databases.

I plan, if ever I will have the energy, to check the official university-hosted academic pages of scholars as these are usually up to date (unlike, especially, academia.edu)

Most difficult to trace, of the languages I've been able to trace, are items written in Chinese, Japanese and especially Korean. When I have an item identified in those languages, the other bibliographical sites hardly ever offer an English version of the information, and if they do, in most cases it is very partial and cannot be used for conclusive corroboration.

**AC: What language might people be surprised to find a lot of Pynchon scholarship in?**

MR: Without a doubt: Japanese; I have now listed over 100 items. The earliest article I know of is from 1979, in the journal *Yuriika*, which is remarkable as Pynchon scholarship was then not yet widely available, even in English. Several conferences have been held there, resulting in conference papers. I thought at first that the research

was centered around just two universities (Tokyo and Kyoto) but this is no longer the case: research papers are published in journals across Japan.

It is not without reason that *Pynchon Notes* contains 2 bibliographies of Japanese items: an early one by Yoshiaki Sato (1982) and one by Frank Osterhaus (1999) which gives in its introduction a general overview of the climate for Pynchon scholarship in Japan. Similar comments can be found in the final paragraphs of Takashi Aso's review of 2 Japanese studies in the same journal.<sup>10</sup> So Kodai Abe's review in this current document brings an old *Pynchon Notes* tradition to *Orbit*.

**AC: That is indeed much more Japanese Pynchon-work than I'd expected. We don't see so many Japanese scholars at *International Pynchon Week*, whereas at the Melville Conference I've been attending in recent years the Japanese are a huge presence (and arguments published in Japanese have some influence on the English-language scholarship because multiple conference-attenders get to reference them to the English-speaking audience). It'd be great if *Pynchon Week* could match that: next one's in Vancouver so it's only a quick hop across the Pacific... Anyhow, next question(s): what proportion of non-English-language Pynchon scholarship would you estimate that you're able to cover, how much would you guess is out there still unknown to you, and what would be the best way to find more of it?**

MR: It depends on the language. I think that for the purely academic items, I have covered most items in European languages, with a tendency of fewer covered items going East (from where I live in the Netherlands), until we get to Asia and Asian languages, where my coverage is almost certainly way below what exists.

An additional issue is the correct categorization and qualification of items in those other languages. In other words: are items of an academic standard or not (I gave up keeping track of reviews in papers, magazines, and online, but it's hard to tell with a new document in an unfamiliar language whether it is academic or "popular" like this).

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<sup>10</sup> See Aso, "Breaking Through Pynchon Studies in Japan".

There is also a geographical issue: I am utterly clueless when it comes to items from Africa – I know of one item in Afrikaans, and I expect because of the Herero plots in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* that there are publications in Namibia, but none identified. I have also a major data gap when it comes to South America, Russia...

The best way of getting accurate information is through human beings. It would be ideal were I to have more contacts than I have today for several languages/regions.

**AC: Well, hopefully publishing this interview will help bring you some new contacts from around the world (contact Michel, readers). Is it harder to discover things in foreign languages with distinct alphabets than those that use our roman alphabet, or are they much the same?**

MR: I can read Greek pretty well so it is not a question of roman-nonroman alphabet. It is more a question of my linguistic and cultural affinities. The issue starts with Cyrillic alphabets, where the sounds and structures are comparable, and gets harder to work with as we go (Eastward again) on to Asian languages with their different logographical character systems and grammar-sign relations.

**AC: Have you observed substantial differences in concern or approach between the kinds of scholarship produced in different languages?**

MR: As far as I can judge this: across languages, many articles not in English are often meant to *introduce* Pynchon to a public or scholarly public who don't speak English to a native level, and so they tend to be more generalistic. As for differences *between* the focus or theoretical frameworks used most commonly in different languages, I don't have hard numbers.

**AC: What are some arguments made in the non-English Pynchon scholarship that you think the field would most benefit from if they were more widely known among English-speaking scholars?**

MR: I am afraid I don't have an answer to that.

**AC: Maybe that's something for readers to contribute and discuss – seems like a fine topic for *Orbit's* letters-and-notes section. So of everything you've**

**encountered in the process of compiling and maintaining the Vheissu bibliography, what's your favourite non-English-language Pynchon document?**

MR: If I can select two:

First, *Cyclocosmia*, a short-lived French literary magazine, extremely beautifully edited with original artwork. Its very first issue (September 2008) was mostly about Pynchon. Only 500 copies were printed and all copies slightly differ.

Second, since it's close to home for me, the Belgian (Dutch-language) literary magazine *Yang*. The first issue of Volume 28, 1992, was edited by Luc Herman and was exclusively about Thomas Pynchon. It contains original Dutch research (from both Belgium and the Netherlands) and articles by Bernard Duijffhuizen and Hanjo Berressem.

**AC: Intriguing, and from the pictures available online the *Cyclocosmia* looks lovely. I hadn't heard of either issue, despite recognizing lots of the contributors: shows you how much is out there to be found. Finally, then: how can people contact you if they discover a new non-English Pynchon-scholarship source, and what kind of documentation do they need to provide to make it verifiable enough to add to the bibliography?**

MR: Here's a short check list for all items, not only non-English ones:

- For articles in journals: ISSN, e-ISSN; for books EAN; for PhD the registration ID if possible
- Publisher/Publishing organization
- Persons tied to a publication: journal editor(s), book series editor(s), author(s), book/guest editor(s)
- Title and subtitle
- Year, Volume, Issue
- For academic things published exclusively online, the url (or DOI if applicable)
- Subject(s) – which one (or more) of Pynchon's works the source addresses
- Keywords (a feature that will be integrated later in the vheissu bibliography)

For any relevant document you find, send this information to stencil [at] vheissu [dot] net. As of the end of October 2020 a form will be available [here](#).

**AC: Thanks Michel. A keyword-searchable Vheissu sounds amazing. Let's hope some of the people reading this will be able to expand your bibliography with previously undiscovered non-English-language material. Some of which *Orbit* can then hopefully review in the future...**

MR: Let's hope.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Chetwynd, A, Bugno-Narecka, D, Kipouridou, R, Abe, K, Vanicek, V, Brondino, A and Ryckx, M 2021 Book Reviews, Special Pynchon-Scholarship-in-Languages-Other-than-English Edition, 2020. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 9(1): 1, 1–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.3404>

**Published:** 15 January 2021

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