



ISSN: 2044-4095

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Title: Review of Evans Lansing Smith, *Thomas Pynchon and the Postmodern Mythology of the Underworld*, *Modern American Literature: New Approaches*, vol. 62 (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).  
Date: 2015  
Volume: 1  
Issue: 1  
URL: <https://www.pynchon.net/owap/article/view/129>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v3.1.129>

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Evans Lansing Smith comes to this project with several prior books to establish his authority on modernist and postmodernist uses of myth and specifically the myth of descent and return. That five of Thomas Pynchon's novels alone should supply enough material for a three-hundred-plus-page book on that narrow subject comes as a surprise, but Smith makes his case with stubborn thoroughness. That very thoroughness will be extremely helpful to Pynchon scholars, and the weight of his material suggests that future projects may well develop from this intriguing and vast collection of data. Because Smith himself specializes in mythological studies, he offers no literary interpretation of what this dense texture of allusions may mean. Carl Jung or Joseph Campbell would have done more to tie the patterns to the development of the individual or hero, but in Pynchon's case, all of his rather underdeveloped characters undergo many repetitions of the pattern, so we basically have myth but little or no psychology, and no answer as to *why* this trope should saturate Pynchon's worlds. Smith simply states that "The single most important of these [tropes], however—whether modernist or postmodernist—is the *nekyia*, a Homeric term for the descent to the underworld. The variations on the myth are staggering: there is not a single major figure of the 20th century who does not at some point refer to the myth in one or more major works" (Smith 1). According to his rules, Pynchon invokes it literally hundreds of times.

The basic pattern consists of crossing the threshold, descent into a land of the dead or of other threatening forces, and eventual return. To this, Smith appends a variety of what he calls necrotypes, associated images found in various mythologies. These may be fluvian (as in crossing the Styx); oreographic (entering a cave in a mountain range); liminal (crossing various thresholds); divestiture and investiture (stripping the protagonist of clothes

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or weapons and supplying different gear that makes him or her into a different person or gives different powers); catoptric (involving mirrors or reflections); divine (Hades and Persephone equivalents); insectomorphic (the presence of butterflies and bees in particular); ornithological (carrion birds, but others too); ocular (images of eyes, often blazing or shooting out beams of light); astronomical (involving planets, constellations, signs of the zodiac); erotic; oneiric; geometrical; architectural (very often labyrinthine); and textual. He discusses these in his useful introduction. He draws on the symbolisms attached to such descents from versions found in the mythologies of classical Greece, Christianity and Christian authors such as Dante, the Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Orphism, shamanism, ancient Egypt, Buddhist Tibet, Northern Germanic countries, Assyria, Babylonia, South-West Africa, Central America, and just about any other mythic tradition with any connection to any location mentioned in Pynchon's fiction. He also links this descent and return to the Arthurian story and the Apocalypse.

Once a character has entered this reality beyond surface reality, the experience takes one of four forms. The underworld may be a crypt, that is, a place where one meets and talks with the dead or at least with spirits (whose bodies may be alive somewhere). Webb Traverse's sons meet his ghost in *Against the Day* and Mason encounters his wife's ghost. Slothrop encounters traces of people he knows if not their ghosts when he goes down the Roseland toilet. Or the netherworld may be an inferno of torments viewed by the protagonist (South Africa in the eyes of Mason and Dixon). It may be a holy place at which the protagonist receives revelation or is translocated; Kit Traverse experiences such mystic light and sound at the Kara Tagh (Shipton's Arch), and translocates (or awakens from delirium) from somewhere in Central Europe or Asia to Paris (*ATD* 1080-81). Finally, the experience may be that of cornucopia—not common in Pynchon, and more often a version of temenos, with its spiritual splendors rather than any sort of material abundance.

This is the system by which Smith maps the actions of Pynchon's novels up to and including *Against the Day* (though making no more than passing reference to *Vineland*). It may seem a bit programmatic and forced. Let me illustrate with a single example (Smith 125-8). Slothrop is looking for Säure in post-war Berlin. "As in so many other episodes, this one is structured by the full circle of the nekylia: departure and return." Slothrop leaves Margherita Erdmann at dawn, and sees a "steel eyeglass frame, dog collar (eyes at the edges of the twisting trail watching for sign, for blazing" and "the black and amber eye from stuffed animal" (ocular necrotypes) (*GR* 441-2, Penguin edn).

Slothrop finds in Säure's cellar the white knight chessman sculpted to look like a horse's skull. Slothrop ventures into a labyrinth of slum streets. He passes through "the first archway" and sees his shadow stretching toward more such arches "parabolic, but more like an open mouth and gullet, joints of cartilage receding, waiting, waiting to swallow. . . above the mouth two squared eyes, organdy whites, irises pitch black, stare him down" (GR 444). Smith links these to medieval hell-mouths and the ocular necrotype. Instead of getting his money for the drugs Slothrop is carrying, he gets an encapsulated history of music from early to modern, the latter being when "music's polymorphous perversity [makes] all notes ... truly equal" (GR 448). He escapes a drug raid and returns to Margherita, only to be dragged down into her psychic inferno in an oeneric nekyia, where his father's spirit tells him "the president died three months ago" (451). This colloquy with the distant or dead finishes with references to a heron, a skeletal building, and a river, all identified as necrotypes. Just about every episode in Pynchon can be similarly mapped and labeled.

The question, then, is what does it mean? Here Smith gives us essentially no clue. Of *Gravity's Rainbow*, he says that the novel "is fundamentally then, and most urgently, a novel about the quest for meaning, and the role the myth of the nekyia plays in that quest" (Smith 168). He admits that in the ending of *Against the Day* "the nekyia yields definitively to that of Celestial Ascent" (Smith 326). Those are his only interpretive gestures. What we are to make of all this data is up to us.

I might start with a fundamental question. Joseph Campbell's hero monomythic cycle is cast in terms of descent and return, and he characterizes the special world into which the hero enters as the belly of the whale, a world related to the land of the dead. The pattern echoes that of initiation ritual (see Mircea Eliade) where boys die as children and are reborn as men, so during their training, they remain in a state equivalent to the world of the dead. Campbell does not insist so pointedly on the literal deadness of this land, but sees it as symbolic, as a shorthand way of indicating trials and terrors that must be survived for the hero to return. The point, I suggest, is that the hero must deal with problems. Were he simply to rise to celestial heights, he would have to come down again to earth, and that would be a very different story trajectory, a rocket parabola ending in annihilation or a tragedy ending depressingly in a world that would be impoverished-seeming by comparison with the glory. Most humans have little experience of celestial raptures, or indeed of any pleasures but transitory ones. Hence, for a story to advance, something unpleasant must happen and the hero must cope. In a sense, that

pattern defines virtually all literary action. The situation is X at the beginning. Something happens and the protagonist does something. The situation as a result changes to Y at the end, and the happening is usually bad since ravishingly wonderful things rarely befall us. Most stories and anecdotes fit that frame. Is Pynchon's writing different from that? Yes and no. The density of Smith's necrotypes does suggest that Pynchon may be as obsessively knowledgeable as Smith himself about descent myths (as he is of many other realms of lore), or that he is spiritually attuned to archetypes and that archetypes are real—something a non-Jungian would argue against. Since Pynchon refers directly to Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Orphism, and Christianity, as well as Egyptian and Tibetan books of the dead, he would seem to have read extensively in mythological materials. I wonder, though, whether his use of eyes in the passage above comes from knowing necrotypes, or from his own mental map of reality. His reality includes mile-high angels who watch us, for instance, in *Gravity's Rainbow*. A critic with a more literary bent might comb Smith's data for references to eyes and produce a useful and rather different reading of Pynchon's symbolism, something more linked to his paranoid mindset than to entering the realm of the dead. The same goes for other necrotypes.

I am grateful to Smith for two observations in particular. His handling of Iceland spar in *Against the Day* finally makes sense of that for me, helping me to see that by doubling images, it suggests the existence of "a lateral world, set only infinitesimally to the side of the one we think we know" (*ATD* 230; such lateral worlds are referred to on 355 and elsewhere in *ATD*). I have groped for a way of conceptualizing Pynchon's levels or layers of mythic worlds, and have always been bothered by the sense that levels implied hierarchy and increasing distance from the material world. Lateral worlds is a good term for such nearly-overlapping realities, and Smith makes it plain that these are what Iceland spar reveals. That does not prevent Pynchon from thinking in vertical terms, as he frequently does (for example, in *Bleeding Edge* and the deep web), but it recognizes a mode of thinking in *Mason & Dixon* (whose horizontality was first noted by Brian McHale) and in *Against the Day*. Vertical worlds can also be a form of near-doubling, and as overlapping realities, they need not be layered. The other is Smith's emphasis on the ludic element in postmodern use of myth. That makes a nice contrast to the Yeats- and Eliot-style of modernist use, and certainly describes some of Pynchon's more grotesque and literally ludic-rous scenes.

For a book costing nearly one hundred dollars, one would expect a better job of proof reading. I made no systematic list of typos, but will list some to

give a sense of the sloppiness: insectopmorphic (3) for insectomorphic; Von Göllerei's for Von Göll's (124); avalance for avalanche (235); is for his (249); their for there (251); vaparetto for vaporetto (268) and in the same quotation from Pynchon, *salso* should be *also*; Key Kesey should be Ken Kesey (290). A different sort of error creeps in when, on p. 122, Smith takes Pökler's incest with Ilse literally. She had asked "may I sleep next to you tonight?" and that leads to violent incest fantasies, but Pynchon then undercuts this possible reality with "No. What Pökler did was choose to believe she wanted comfort that night, wanted not to be alone." The "No" in context denies the actualization of the fantasized sex.

This book offers us no sense of why Pynchon should be so fixated upon descents into various underworlds. If we believe Smith, the novels consist of practically nothing but reiterations of this pattern. If you grant the weight of the evidence that he presents, then we need analysis of the data. If Smith, like a scientist, just asks "how?" others will have to look for the logic of "why?" Even those who disagree with Smith's Jungian approach can be thankful for his accumulated topical quotations. Those should lead to new critical readings and interesting analyses.

## References

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