orbit.

Benea, D 2022 'Review of Albert Rolls, *Thomas Pynchon: The Demon in the Text*. Brighton: Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2019. 156 pp.' *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 9(1): 5, pp. 1–8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.4810

Open Library of Humanities

Review of Albert Rolls, *Thomas Pynchon: The Demon in the Text*. Brighton: Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2019. 156 pp.

Diana Benea, University of Bucharest, Romania, diana.benea@lls.unibuc.ro

Review of Albert Rolls, *Thomas Pynchon: The Demon in the Text* (Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2019), 156 pp.

Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur? How can we discuss the figure of the author and the relationship between life and work today, especially in light of the past six decades of cultural theory, which have witnessed the death and subsequent return of the author, as well as the emergence of new regimes of authorship afforded by the digital age and its new media ecologies? What modes of biography are still available today, more than three decades after Pierre Bourdieu laid bare "the illusion" at the core of the genre? What types of sources can contemporary biographical approaches draw from and what are the larger theoretical implications of such choices for an understanding of the genre? Responding to these epistemological and methodological challenges, in addition to the inherent difficulties posed by Thomas Pynchon's idiosyncratic presence qua absence on the literary scene, Albert Rolls' *Thomas Pynchon: The Demon in the Text* (2019) engages in a multi-layered undertaking operating at the intersection of three levels of critical discourse. Combining new biographical details drawn mainly from letters held in various collections with an analysis of Pynchon's paratextual self-construction across different media and close readings of a selection of primary works in light of these sources, Rolls offers not only an unusual and highly original biography, but also the first book-length argument about Pynchon's performance of authorship and, importantly, its possible values for a reading of his fiction.

In the opening pages, Rolls briefly gestures toward the constructedness of his biography—and of any work in this genre, for that matter—as a process of "*project[ing] a world*" (3), to borrow Oedipa Maas' phrase, and "giv[ing] shape" (16) to the available details, as scarce as they might be in this particular case. Yet, as he clarifies from the very beginning, his interest as a biographer, or rather "critic-biographer" (24), lies not so much in Pynchon the private man, or "Tom," in his designation, but in "the idea of Thomas Pynchon," namely "the public figure Pynchon has simultaneously become and avoided being" (8), particularly how this implied author—and his "implied biography" (24)—might inform and, in turn, be informed by our understanding of the fiction. The "Tom/Thomas" division constitutes the major articulation of the critical argument, which is then pursued in its various ramifications throughout the study. That this is no simple equation is elucidated early in the book through a perceptive comparative discussion of the US and German promotional campaigns for *Bleeding Edge*, which provide, in Rolls' view, a meta-commentary on the ways in which supposed sites of authorial revelation are in fact always already contaminated by their fictional quality (12–13). The first chapter then proceeds to show how the latter of these terms, the Pynchon persona, has been produced at the intersection of a complex web of facts, anecdotes, rumors, and conjectures, on the one hand, and Pynchon's own self-conscious, quirky strategies of fashioning an authorial figure, on the other, as gleaned

from personal letters toying with humorously fake autobiographies as well as his occasional self-representation in television shows such as *The Simpsons* or *The John Larroquette Show*. Adding another facet to the entanglements of the "Tom/Thomas" dynamics, the final section of the chapter moves from the "fictional autobiographies" constructed by Pynchon in some of his letters to his "autobiographical fictions," thus illustrating the book's overall *modus operandi* of hybridizing biographical and textual material. To substantiate this argument, Rolls brings to the fore some more or less covert autobiographical connections, whose function resembles that of Roland Barthes' "biographemes"—"a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections" through which the "disseminated" author resurfaces in the text (Barthes 9). The emphasis, however, is not placed on the interpretive potential of such details, but rather on the elusiveness and untranslatability of private experience into public discourse, suggested through an analogy with the Barthesian distinction between *punctum* and *studium* (18–19).

Rejecting any simplistic mirroring relationship between the life and the work, the second chapter is organized around "certain points of convergence" (24) or meeting grounds between the two, with a focus on the 1960s, the "hinge decade" (Cowart 24) of the Pynchon canon, as refracted through the fiction, non-fiction, and personal correspondence. While Pynchon's engagement with the 1960s has been extensively discussed in criticism, this prismatic reading allows Rolls to map similar threads of disenchantment with the waning of the countercultural ethos and its incorporation into the mainstream, charting affinities between the ways in which each of these sources negotiates the state of liminality/exitlessness associated with the betrayal of that decade's promise. The final section of the chapter offers close readings of the California novels, probing again into the ambivalence of the decade and its mythology, this time by tracing a shift from a concern with mechanisms of escape in *The Crying of Lot 49* to a thrust toward liberation in *Inherent Vice* as the ultimate aims of the questers. While the novels certainly lend themselves to this reading, the brief parallel discussion of Oedipa, Takeshi, and Doc, respectively, as authorial figurations sharing connections with stages in Pynchon's "development" (a move which seems to emplot the author's life onto a narrative line) does not necessarily contribute to the argument about the narrative functions of this trifecta as revelators, "karmic adjusters," or liberators facilitating other characters' access to alternative scenarios and, fundamentally, to a heightened understanding of their social worlds.

The third chapter gravitates around representations of "enclaves" or communities of more or less private resistance in Pynchon's marginal and previously underexplored works. Zooming in on "Minstrel Island," the never-finished and unpublished musical-cum-science fiction dystopia co-written with Kirkpatrick Sale in 1958, the first section

shows how love functions as a "subversive force" in the face of the oppressive effects of technology and standardization (79). As a side note, this segment also briefly engages with genetic criticism, pointing to similarities and differences between Sale and Pynchon's drafts and what they reveal about the devising process as well as the co-authors' interest in social commentary and symbolic patterning, respectively (124–129). Although relegated to the endnotes, such insights into the composition of the musical serve to further construct the authorial image otherwise pursued in this study. The second part of the chapter is devoted to Pynchon's juvenilia, namely the Hamster High epistolary sequence published pseudonymously in the Oyster Bay High School newspaper *Purple and Gold* in 1952–1953, the pieces of which interestingly conflate the student rebellion in the fictional world with the "real-world" opposition at Pynchon's school, the latter ostensibly inspired by the former. Moving from fictional to real letters, the chapter also tackles the status of Pynchon's correspondence and its possible uses as "a metonym for biography" (86); as such, some letters offer valuable glimpses into the composition of *V.*, while others serve as practice for narrative techniques—and even phrases—to be later employed in the fiction. Some methodological observations on the practice and perhaps ethics of using personal letters would have been a welcome addition in this context; Rolls, however, addresses this matter in his contribution for *Thomas Pynchon in Context*, where he suggests that "Pynchon was comfortable with the publication of some private communication" (16).

What connects the three chapters of the monograph, with their distinctive focal points, is a concern with Pynchon's performance of authorship, particularly its shifting modes throughout his career, or what we might call, in Bourdieusian terms, authorial trajectory. While the book is primarily geared toward connoisseurs of Pynchon's works, its exploration of strategies of authorial figuration might be of interest to scholars in the field of authorship studies as well, offering opportunities to expand current investigations into authorial self-staging beyond the usual suspects or the more mediatized case studies. Working within a (post-)Bourdieusian paradigm, recent contributions have proposed reevaluations of authorship qua "posture" (Meizoz) to describe the ways in which individual writers negotiate their position within the larger field of cultural production through differential strategies of authorial construction. Unsurprisingly, within the frame of a contemporary literary culture in which agents have had to adapt to new business models and publishing processes, as well as new media and new modes of consuming, distributing, and assessing books, authorial images have undergone radical transformations as well, consequently constituting themselves from the interplay of a plethora of transmedial techniques. This changing media-saturated environment has led scholars to develop theories of "media authorship"

(Harris), which are arguably more productive in studies of writers who are actively involved in the creation of their personae and for whom substantial media visibility is inextricable from their literary projects and, not insignificantly, their market value—in other words, from both symbolic and economic capital.

Contra such examples of hyper-mediatized writers like Michel Houellebecq, Rolls demonstrates that, beyond the misleading mythos of the invisible author, Pynchon's trajectory can be understood, in a similarly productive fashion, as a journey into authorial posturing—in one of the least expected, because least conventionally visible, yet all the more compelling sites. Pynchon's rejection of the trappings of celebrity culture and the publicity game of interviews, book tours, social media interventions, and other technological ramifications of the author function, is still a posture, a *sui generis* position-taking to be necessarily situated within and against the larger field. Thus, a particularly compelling red thread of this monograph alerts us to several instances of such posturing, showing the unexpected range of "possibilities [Pynchon's] approach to publicity offered" (6). In this reading, the author's notorious "reclusiveness"—*horribile dictu*—or his "peripatetic" lifestyle through the 1970s emerge, at least to some degree, as "something of an artifice" of his "self-presentation" (45), hence as effective strategies in the creation of the public persona. Pynchon's objections to being censored by the *New York Times Book Review* and his refusal to remove the word "badass" from "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" are indicative of another facet of his positioning in the literary field of the mid-1980s (51). Later in the book, drawing on Pynchon's personal letters from the late 1950s as well as his retrospective comments in the Introduction to *Slow Learner* allows Rolls to highlight yet another piece of the puzzle of authorial scenography, namely Pynchon's ambivalent stance toward "adopting Beat postures and props" in his formative years (71). As for the development of Pynchon's craft, the discussion of letters regarding the preparation of *V.* for publication captures the postures of an emerging author responding to feedback from his editor, friends, and reviewers, while glimpsing into his stance on the process of writing, construed as "a trial from which to gain insight, or something to use to test possibilities" (91). Far from the myth of the self-sufficient genius insulated in his ivory tower, these exchanges reveal an author with a deep understanding not only of the value of dialogue and criticism but also of the dynamics of the social space of literary production. Finally, almost half a century from the epistolary exchanges on *V.*, Pynchon's cameo appearances in TV shows and promotional campaigns evince the ways in which his posture has adjusted to a radically different environment, one in which the primacy of the text has been decentered and even the most "reclusive" authors now manipulate their self-construction across a range of media platforms. While Pynchon is obviously playing with his own authorial

mythology through such performances, these traces of media presence might indicate an interest in expanding his persona-building strategies for the digital age.

Such elements configure, indeed, a persuasive albeit fragmentary account of Pynchon's authorial figuration through the decades, yet Rolls' discussion is by no means exhaustive. For instance, future research could look more thoroughly into the aforementioned Introduction, a text whose ambiguous status between candid autobiographical account and self-conscious/mocking (meta-)posturing remains insufficiently addressed in the field, as does Pynchon's positioning in this piece (as author or perhaps narrator/character providing just another "almost, but not quite me," as he refers to the narrator of his first published story in the very same text). The Introduction is even more significant for Rolls' purposes as it arguably traces, in Pynchon's words, a shift from an "unkind impatience" with autobiographical fiction to a more generous stance acknowledging the value of reading and writing works rooted in the "deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live" (17). Furthermore, most of Pynchon's non-fiction, from "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts" to his introduction to the Centennial Edition of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, could be productively read through the lens of posturing, revealing an explicit engagement with the political crises of the time, be it through questions of social/spatial justice in the former essay or the unofficial war against civil liberties legitimized by the War on Terror in the latter. Pynchon's calls for artistic autonomy in his public interventions in support of Salman Rushdie and Ian McEwan, respectively, are other sites of authorial self-presentation worth investigating.

Overall, Rolls' book is among the most comprehensive studies to draw on biographical data, building upon earlier research while excavating and corroborating new material, especially letters held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Brandeis University, Columbia University Libraries, or the Library of Congress, many of which had not been considered in Pynchon criticism before. Beyond the strictly biographical component, the most innovative aspect of the book is to be found, however, in the puzzle-like, non-chronological argument about authorial self-fashioning, refracted through the perspectives of different types of sources. Moving in and out of and thus blurring the boundaries between texts and paratexts, biography and criticism, extrinsic and intrinsic approaches, this particular thread of the study assembles an insightful account of Pynchon's trajectory, consolidating the ground for future explorations in at least two related directions. Firstly, although not framed as such from a theoretical perspective, Rolls' approach gestures toward the vistas opened up by a (post-)Bourdieusian engagement with notions of authorship, habitus, trajectory, field etc., a conceptual lens which might contribute to more thoroughly

situating Pynchon as an agent within the fluid contours of the US literary field of the past six decades. While such an objective lends itself to a different critical toolkit, a more relational analysis referencing "the collection of other agents engaged in the same field and facing the same realm of possibilities" (Bourdieu 215) would certainly enhance and refine our understanding of Pynchon's own evolving position. This critical vocabulary, which has only been marginally employed in the field of Pynchon studies (Herman and Vervaeck, 2011 and 2016; Cissell, 2016), may indeed yield some productive readings and reframings. Secondly, in his epilogue, Rolls argues that Pynchon's persona has functioned as a "centropic force" (100) bringing together a community of readers whose multiplicity of author constructs as well as hermeneutic approaches to the works annihilates any homogenizing, entropic forces. This comment points to another worthwhile direction in the study of posturing, shifting the focus from its authorial elaboration to the readers' role in the co-production of such representations. If Rolls' biography-cum-critical study focuses on authorial self-fashioning and textual elements, future research might supplement this angle by investigating "how readers' fiction-making impulses influence their construction of the notion of both the private and the public Pynchon" (99), thus capturing the complex interactions of author, text, and readers in the shaping of the *Autorbildkonstruktion*.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Barthes, Roland. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. 1971. Translated by Richard Miller, U of California P, 1989.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Biographical Illusion (1986)." Translated by Yves Winkin and Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz. *Biography in Theory*, edited by Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 210–216. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110516678-036

Cissell, Matthew. *Arc of the Absent Author: Thomas Pynchon's Trajectory from Entropy to Grace*. 2016. Universidad del País Vasco, Ph.D. dissertation.

Cowart, David. *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*. U of Georgia P, 2011.

Harris, Ashley. "On the Return of the (Media) Author: Michel Houellebecq, *Écrivain Médiatique*." *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, Feb. 2020, pp. 32–45. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155819893582

Herman, Luc, and **Bart Vervaeck.** "The Implied Author: A Secular Excommunication." *Style*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2011, pp. 11–28.

---. "Negotiating the Paranoia Narrative: The Critical Reception of *Bleeding Edge* (2013) by Thomas Pynchon." *Anglia*, vol. 134, no. 1, 2016, pp. 88–112. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2016-0005

Meizoz, Jérôme. *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*. Genève: Slatkine, 2007.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Slow Learner*. Little, Brown and Company, 1984.

Rolls, Albert. "Letters and Juvenilia." *Thomas Pynchon in Context*, edited by Inger H. Dalsgaard, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 15–22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108683784.003

---. *Thomas Pynchon: The Demon in the Text*. Brighton: Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2019.