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WHO DID WHAT TO WHOM AND IF SO, WHY? (If at all) John Brantley

Each of Thomas Pynchon's first three novels is steeped, one way or another in the architecture and purpose of detective fiction. Although true, it is a bit of a dodge.

In "V." his first novel we early encounter Young Stencil who is on the trail of his father, a former member of the British Foreign Office, who left a cryptic note concerning "Who or what is V." Clues abound: women--Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, Veronica Manganese and places--The V-Note, Vheissu, Valletta. In short, any person, place, or thing beginning with that letter, if it can be related in any way by real evidence or in young Stencil's imagination to his father, is pursued as the means to accomplish his purpose of locating or at least learning about his father. Complications arise from the disjuncture in time. Stencil's father dates from the late Nineteenth Century to 1919 when he, already an old man, died of being aboard a small xebec destroyed by a water spout. Young Stencil is a Time traveler of the imagination, from the Boer campaigns against the Hereros in South Africa to America in the 1950's and back to Malta in 1919, following the clues, looking for V., looking for his father. The artistry here is that while the trail of the clues and the connections between them and the elder Stencil exists often entirely in the imagination of Young Stencil, the reader is drawn into the magic of it, trying to keep a geographic and time fix, following the torturous path of connections between the imagined places, objects, people, and events. While he detects, we detect; and we have been had. We are left with the sodden Benny Profane stranded in Malta while young Stencil has gone off in search of a Mme. Viola in Stockholm, still finding and pursuing clues.

"The Crying of Lot 49," Pynchon's second novel, provides similar structure. Oedipa Maas is named co-executor of the will of her very wealthy former lover. Her first job is to learn the extent of the man's estate, and here, as in "V." one clue leads to another including a vast corporation Yoyodyne Galactronics, an ancient courier service called the Trystero, Clerk Maxwell's Demon, cigarettes made with bone filters, and many others that send her up and down California, usually in a state of high dudgeon. She is a woman of the 1960's being bounced back and forth in time, chasing clues that are mostly no more than tangential to the estate she needs to understand. In the end, it is the Trystero and the W.A.S.T.E. postal network that absorbs her attention. And again we have been had, trying to keep track of her clues to see how or if one of them actually leads to another so that at the end when she goes to the stamp auction we are there with her awaiting the crying of Lot 49.

"Gravity's Rainbow" uses the same structure, though with greater complexity because there are more detectives, each looking for a different thing. The location is primarily provided by World War II with focus on England and Germany, although there are back flashes to the nineteen thirties and back to Southwest Africa and the Hereros. At the end we are in post-war California, waiting for the next rocket to fall. Against this

broad swath of time and place, the central character is an American, Lt. Tyrone Slothrop who, it has been discovered, seems to have an erotic connection to the places where German V-2 rockets have landed. Made aware of the fact, Pointsman, an English scientist working for British Intelligence begins close observation and manipulations of Slothrop's assigned duties to see if he can find the Pavlovian cause-and-effect between the locations of the rocket hits and Slothrop's successful conquests. Also there are Enzian, an Herero who with a few of the other survivors of the attempted extinction by the Germans has been brought to Germany as personal servant to an officer now directing the rocket firing. In the post war period, Enzian and his men are searching for the basic parts of a specially designed V-2 in which they plan to launch Gottfried, their boss Blicero's love slave. Another great searcher is the Russian Tchitcherine who is chasing clues as to the location of his half-brother (he thinks), Enzian.

Of these, only Enzian completes his quest. Slothrop, realizing that he is being used as a lab animal, goes to Germany to trace the plastic Imipolix-G which was used in the rocket, and to find what it has to do with him. His search in Germany, highly reminiscent of a rat in a maze, gradually fades as does Slothrop. Indeed, Pynchon invokes Clerk Maxwell's law to explain the gradual dissolution of Slothrop so that to friends and acquaintances he is only something of a general concept. Pointsman, desperate for solid evidence of Slothrop's link to the rocket, sends men to bring back the Lieutenant's testicles, but they mistakenly bring back the testicles of Major Marvy Duane, and Pointsman never gets his proof and ends in professional defeat. Tchitcherine is another victim of the chaos in the Zone, having once encountered Enzian on the road without knowing it was the man he sought. Pynchon provides him the comfort of his girl, a would-be witch named Geli Tripping. And if the reader took out a great roll of butcher paper and made diagrams and notes to follow just these, he would, again, be had by the persuasiveness of the author's loving attention to all the insignificant and delusional details.

Each of the novels, then, is a set piece showing the chaos against which individuals make their lives and their exhaustive efforts to find or force some order in or on it.

As the detective confronts the chaos of a crime and, using the clues he finds, builds his case, he is in fact imposing an order on the confusion of lives and events, within which the crime occurred. In a good detective story we know by the last page who did what to whom and why. Pynchon's people find clues endlessly and pursue them with vigor, but at the end none ever answers the questions, never make his case.

In his look at the last years of European imperialism in "V"

It is the State which ruthlessly destroys those which Pynchon dubs the "Preterit"—those who are passed over.

In "The Crying of Lot 49" the antagonist is a corporation, and in that novel we see the first sign of a preterit agonist in the form of a modern version of the Thurn and Taxis which provides an alternative mail service for those who wish to withdraw from the power structures that so control their lives. In "Gravity's Rainbow" the agents of the State abound, but they are not the control. Working through and behind the traditional lever pullers are the international corporations such as I. G. Farbin,

Shell Oil, and many others. In the end, the members of the preterit finally conclude that it is necessary to work positively as a chaotic “We” group to oppose the ordered and controlled “They” force. In the end, the reader learns what Slothrop was told,

There is a plot, it’s just not the one you thought.”

Author's Note:

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