

MARTIN PAUL EVE, *Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 229 pp.

LUC HERMAN AND STEVEN WEISENBURGER, *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination and Freedom* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2013), 258 pp.

As if already prematurely preparing for the slowly approaching semi-centennial anniversary of the publication of Thomas Pynchon's epochal *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)<sup>1</sup>, the so-called Pynchon-industry has produced two important studies that re-engage with one of the most important authors of twentieth century American, if not world literature—although some critics would debate his standing in the twenty-first century, given his latest publications.

Notably, with Martin Eve's *Pynchon and Philosophy* and Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger's *Gravity's Rainbow, Freedom, and Domination*, one gets a glimpse of what could be termed first and second generation Pynchon criticism: Weisenburger's seminal work *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* from 1988 is still an incomparable help to for first-time readers of Pynchon's novel before the community went online and launched its *Pynchonwiki*,<sup>2</sup> while Herman co-edited, amongst other things, the *Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*; Eve is the co-founder of the open access online journal *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon*, launched in 2012. Despite the fact that the two studies indeed assume entirely different approaches to Pynchon's texts, both monographs highlight the cultural importance of Thomas Pynchon and thereby indeed show that any such separations are highly constructed, or, as *Gravity's Rainbow* has it: both books rather mark a scholarly interface "[w]here ideas of the opposite have come together, and lost their oppositeness" (50).

At least on a superficial orthographical level, Martin Paul Eve's *Pynchon and Philosophy* singles up all lines with recent Pynchon

scholarship. This is because in echoing Pynchon's penchant for patterns, for "Kute Korrespondences," as *Gravity's Rainbow* aptly puts it (600), Eve's monograph closes ranks with other recent related studies that also play with the allusive possibilities that Pynchon's surname elicits: besides Hanjo Berressem's *Pynchon's Poetics* (1993), Samuel Thomas's *Pynchon and the Political* (2007), or Sascha Pöhlmann's *Pynchon's Postnational Imagination* (2010),<sup>3</sup> Eve's book evokes yet another alliterative field that, arguably, seems doubly questionable in the context of Pynchon studies.

On the one hand, Pynchon's texts display an implicit and explicit incredulity towards any systematic thought such as philosophy. While Eve is aware of this methodological friction, this obviously does not mean that one cannot attempt such an endeavor, or as he himself puts it: "we need not be overly worried about critically dominating Pynchon's work; his texts are more than capable of fighting back" (130). On the other hand, it also begs the question whether a literary study in the twenty-first century that deals with Pynchon and *philosophy* might not be a bit outdated. American Studies, in particular, has recently often contemplated whether the import of what Jeremy Green in *Late Postmodernism* polemically calls the "latest neo-Nietzschean mills flown from France" (19) is something to be desired.<sup>4</sup> While I agree with Eve about the importance of philosophy/theory for literary analyses, it at first surprised me that his notion of philosophy (which he unfortunately never explicates in detail at all) is represented by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, and Theodor Adorno. Hence, Eve decidedly rejects what in the context of Pynchon might seem a more obvious theoretical interaction which Berressem has expounded in his book by evoking a "poststructuralist Pynchon" (1) with interfaces to Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Jean Baudrillard. Nevertheless, or especially because of this counter-intuitive

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Steven Weisenburger, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988). Inger Dalsgard, Luc Herman and Brian McHale, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Hanjo Berressem, *Pynchon's Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993). Samuel Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2007). Sascha Pöhlmann, *Pynchon's Postnational Imagination*. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism. American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

approach, the author aims to fill a research gap in Pynchon studies by critically engaging Pynchon's *oeuvre* (all eight novels as well as his essays) with the philosophies of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno, which for the author "results in an ethical, politicised [sic] reading of Pynchon alongside a demonstration of a nuanced comparative methodology for philosophico-literary intersections" (5). Indeed, the emphasis lies on the plural, since, as Eve rightly observes, "no single philosophical standpoint has yet to resonate completely with even one of his [Pynchon's] novels" (5). As the first systematic approach to tackle Pynchon's texts in the framework of these philosophical systems (albeit there have already been shorter inquiries into these areas, especially, but not exclusively, in German Pynchon research), one has to applaud Eve for offering convincing close-analyses (arguably the only way of tackling Pynchon's hyper-dense texts) not only of Pynchon's work in the light of these philosophers but also *vice versa*. It is here worth pointing out that the book's methodology distances itself from a biographical approach, often to be found in earlier Pynchon studies and which speculate on the historical contact between Pynchon and various philosophical writings (an approach that guides, for instance, Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger's book). Similarly, Eve refrains from simply 'applying' theory on Pynchon's works like a blueprint that merely focuses on the overlapping areas. Rather, he describes his methodological approach in an apt image: "the tangential line of philosophy must be approached at the point of intersection with its literary curve" (6), which, importantly, also does not fail to acknowledge when "the fit is far from perfect" (173). Instead of having a comprehensive theoretical part, each chapter begins with a brief overview of the key concepts of Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Adorno, without losing sight of the literary interaction with these ideas. The book's focus on philosophy thus becomes apparent in its structuration, which does not chronologically follow Pynchon's publications (or aligns them according to their diegetic setting, as Thomas's study was the first to do) but admits that "philosophy forms the structuring device" (8). With the exception of the part on Adorno, each chapter is further separated according to early and late stages of each philosopher's career.

Particularly the early Wittgenstein is thus revealed in Pynchon as an intellectual forbearer, indeed providing the philosophical soil for Nazi totalitarianism. In a persuasive close-reading, Eve shows that Pynchon's first novel *V.* (1963) references the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* (1921-22) in order to launch a critique of this logical purism. Eve argues that the early Wittgenstein's rigid adherence to analytical philosophy was paving the way for the cruelties of the Holocaust, a line of argument that Adorno equally proposes. However, Eve also interconnects his reading of Pynchon with Wittgenstein and *vice versa* to one of the most common critiques of Pynchon's texts: the one-dimensionality of their characters. In this, the reference to the *Tractatus* by one of *V.*'s characters, Weissmann, is not merely happenstance, but bears, according to Eve, also a narratological function. Like Wittgenstein's formal logic that emphasizes the *relation* between propositional constituents, Eve argues that characters in Pynchon are also defined by their relation, in this case Weissmann's relation to Wittgenstein. In the vein of Pynchon's systematic critique of *a priori* ideas of subjecthood, this relational approach makes the textual presence of Wittgenstein on a narratological dimension productive instead of merely searching for readings on the level of the *sujet*. Throughout, Eve indeed refrains from simply pointing to the references of Wittgenstein in the novel as a metonymical intertext that ostensibly evokes the signifier 'Wittgenstein' but perpetually situates these references in their diegetic and discursive surroundings rather than extricating these phrases from their narrative emplotment. In following the orthodox interpretations of Wittgenstein, Eve also separates the philosopher's *oeuvre* into an early and late phase and consequently shows how the *Philosophical Investigations*' (1953) reflections on private language, proper names, and idealism are very fertile tools to analyze Pynchon's conception of language and ontology. Notably, Eve interweaves this reading with the guiding theme of his book, namely the issue of ethics. In this sense, he admits that Wittgenstein does not provide a cogent framework to analyze the ethical and political momentum in Pynchon, while his reading nevertheless reveals the "complicated and multi-faceted relationship between" the two thinkers (71).

Whereas the dialogue between Wittgenstein and Pynchon seems already evident

because of the former's textual presence in the latter, reading Pynchon under the lens of Michel Foucault's writings also seems appropriate, even though Foucault is never explicitly alluded to in any of Pynchon's works. In fact, Eve is eager to point out that Pynchon's consistent reflections on modernity have usually been read in terms of Max Weber's ideas (who implicitly finds his way into Pynchon's work), even though, as Eve insists, Foucault's ideas on the Enlightenment prove even more illuminating. As with Wittgenstein, Eve distinguishes between an early and late phase of Foucault's writings, what he terms a "historicised [sic] approach to philosophy" (82) and again focuses on specific concepts of his thinking; especially his critical reflections on the Enlightenment. The philological and philosophical aspirations of *Pynchon and Philosophy* become particularly manifest in this second chapter, which gives a sophisticated account of the various reflections on the Enlightenment as they shift, or rather oscillate, in Foucault's thinking. For instance, Eve thus inquires into Foucault's argument, as expounded in his 1978 essay on the Enlightenment, of its cultural and temporal specificity. However, the book shows that Pynchon undermines this argument and rather interrogates the trans-national dimensions of the Enlightenment *episteme* (in Germany, France and America) as well as trans-temporal continuities of this ateleological trajectory, which are again highlighted by laudable close-readings and investigations of form.

In the last part, Eve tackles Theodor Adorno's philosophy, which proves to him to be the most compatible with Pynchon's work. While Adorno, who can be seen as the book's gold standard (he has repeatedly come to the aid as some kind of *deus ex machina* in the previous chapters), provides philosophical concepts that particularly reverberate in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Eve also shows that Pynchon's fusion of high and low brow culture is opposed to the Frankfurt School's cultural pessimism, especially Adorno's famous thoughts on jazz (163ff.). Nevertheless, the book insists that Pynchon and Adorno's "writings share much in common" (128), while it does "not attempt to put a literary-critical system of negative dialectics into play itself, but rather to examine the degree to which Pynchon's works project a world-view sympathetic to aspects of Adorno's thought" (129). The author thus concludes that "[o]ver the course of eight novels,

Pynchon has presented a coherent vision that can largely be said to exist within an Adornian frame" (172). Although *Pynchon and Philosophy's* analyses indeed suggest a close proximity between Adorno and Pynchon in their reflections on modernity, totalitarianism, or utopia, this phrasing raises the question whether this contradicts the initial emphasis on the plurality of theoretical approaches that Pynchon seems to necessitate. To some extent, one has the impression that the parts on Wittgenstein and Foucault, although persuasive and coherent in themselves, only serve the purpose of strengthening the overarching 'Adornian frame.'

Although one sometimes wishes for more reader-friendly segues and summaries—at times one gets lost in following the book's arguments among quite jargon-heavy passages and infrequent digressions—and one keeps looking for an overarching thread that holds the book together besides the nebulous and underdefined catch-all term 'philosophy', Eve provides an important study that critically engages with three seminal philosophers in their dialogue with one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. While the book certainly aims for a highly specialized audience that is familiar with Pynchon's texts and offers valuable re-readings of Pynchon's politics and ethics, it also takes stock of each philosopher's position in the research and helpfully provides a brief introduction to their concepts. I am convinced that researchers both interested in Pynchon's work as well as in inter-disciplinary (philosophico-theoretical) literary studies do well in tackling this challenging monograph that sheds light on these four thinkers' crucial reflections on modernity.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Herman and Weisenburger's study is a *tour de force*, and one did not really expect anything less from two of the most important experts on Pynchon's novel(s). Hardly any other team of scholars is able to navigate Pynchon's most intricate and complex novel with such erudition and loftiness that makes the novel's notorious penchant for frustrating any reader (well-trained or not) seem an overstatement. Indeed, *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination and Freedom's* main achievement, I would argue, is that it targets two audiences at the same time. On the one hand, it obviously addresses the Pynchon community. On the other, and I think this is a crucial benefit of this mono-

graph, it also attunes to the various problems of first time readers.

Herman and Weisenburger contribute to prior research on Pynchon and particularly *Gravity's Rainbow* by firmly contextualizing the novel in its time of production. Unlike other studies, which tend to lose sight of the historical materialities of the book's genesis, the authors argue that the novel's key topics, domination and freedom, which cannot be separated, can only be grasped by considering the cultural history of the "Long Sixties" (4). Although this temporal period that has spawned a mass of research only serves as the diegetic setting of Pynchon's California trilogy, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Vineland* (1990), and *Inherent Vice* (2009), Herman and Weisenburger insist that it is *Gravity's Rainbow* (set in 1944-45 Europe), whose reflections on modes of oppression and resistance have to be situated in the theoretical and counter-cultural context of the 1960s. The first part of the book thus digs in the "Neo-Freudian Library" (24) and convincingly brings into play three thinkers that have, so far, only cursorily been seen as having an impact on Pynchon's writing: Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Norman O. Brown. While each of the first three chapters of this part begins by briefly introducing these Neo-Freudians and their importance for the cultural history of counter-cultural and Leftist movements in the 60s, each chapter then focuses on various concepts of these thinkers that make sense of a variety of contexts and narrative plots in Pynchon's novel. Fromm, who provides a "psychological analysis of Protestantism, capitalism, and the rise of Nazism, was surely," the authors insist, "more important" (25) than Max Weber's work for Pynchon's writing (see Eve's use of Foucault that equally seeks to dethrone Weber as the key context for Pynchon's writing about the Enlightenment). Although Fromm is certainly a source that Herman and Weisenburger would like Pynchon to have read, some readers might be skeptical about such an approach. One may indeed wonder whether this reading contributes anything in particular to the discussion of these themes in the novel (and which the novel might not formulate by itself) other than having found a cultural critic who engages in similar concerns and thus having traced a possible biographical influence.

Building upon Molly Hite's research on the Marcusean impact on Pynchon, specifically his *Eros and Civilization* (1955), the subsequent

chapter elucidates in how far Marcuse's pessimism about the potential for freedom in Western capitalism aligns itself with Pynchon's bleak outlook on these matters. Besides showing the resonances between Marcuse's and Pynchon's takes on the repressive undercurrents of modern society, Herman and Weisenburger also explore the intellectual history of the 60s, particularly the relationship between Fromm, Marcuse and Brown in their varying approaches to the potentials for resistance. In this, the book also presents a historical account of this period's intellectual and political movements, focusing in chapter 3 on the New Left and countercultural Left groupings. The book places *Gravity's Rainbow* in this environment not only because of its obvious thematic reflections on what Gilles Deleuze would call a society of control, but the authors also consider the novel's place in the cultural field and assess to what extent the novel as novel engages in modes of domination and liberation. In other words, what Herman and Weisenburger are after is the question of how resistance (and what kind) is possible. Their answer from the broad readings of this period's critical, fictional and popular cultural texts, is rather pessimistic.

In the subsequent chapter, which I think is one of the most interesting ones of the book, the authors further stabilize their argument about the cultural beliefs and reflections about domination and freedom in investigating an archive that has been omitted from readings of Pynchon's texts so far. By giving a comprehensive overview of the countercultural underground press in America, this chapter contemplates various magazines, such as Paul Krassner's *Realist*, Ed Sanders' *Fuck You: A Magazine* as well as leftist manifestoes, such as those by UP AGAINST THE WALL MOTHERFUCKER or the Youth International Party, in their active fight against "governmental dominion over speech" (52). This historical account is not only highly readable and investigates sources that are seminal for an understanding of the Long Sixties, but it also delineates the legal history of free speech rights, without which Pynchon's novel would simply not have been published the way it was. Indeed, this background is crucial to keep in mind, for it contextualizes the possibilities of publication and elucidates how various political activist feats made it into *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's tip of the hat and homage to these movements. However, while the novel

is firmly settled in this cultural discourse, for Herman and Weisenburger, Pynchon shows that any of the various modes of resisting the culture of domination is, in the end, in vain.

While Gravity's Rainbow, *Domination and Freedom* reads the novel as painting a "deep, dark pessimism" (66) about these matters, it nevertheless shows to what extent Pynchon evolved out of and participated in critical politics that mobilized the break of various taboos, especially linguistic obscenity and sexual transgressions. However, even though *Gravity's Rainbow* literary-historically stands in a long tradition of works that tried to shock puritanical and bourgeois values, Pynchon goes beyond such works as Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), with its famous masturbation scene, since the novel commits these attacks on all levels of its diegesis (even the omniscient narrator begins to cuss). Through one of various highly convincing analyses of the novel's formal presentation, Herman and Weisenburger go beyond the mere interpretation of the transgressive  *sujet* and show that Pynchon's persistent riffing on traditional narratological concepts, such as focalization, make it difficult to ascribe the "alternative sexualities" (76), including pedophilia, sado-masochism, or coprophagia, to mere fantasizing of repressed desires.

The last two parts of Gravity's Rainbow, *Domination and Freedom* then are dedicated to the book's eponymic themes: domination and freedom. Based on the theoretical and cultural historical insights of Fromm, Marcuse, Brown, as well as the underground presses, the second part goes on to further elaborate on the variety of mechanisms of domination, with extensive close-readings of the novel. Particularly in this part, which delineates to what extent Slothrop is being controlled (chapter 6), how the cartelization of late capitalism sustains its apparatus of domination (chapter 7), how various characters are subsumed under Nazism (chapter 8), and how the novel deals with the Holocaust (chapter 9), more advanced Pynchon scholars might find the extensive plot summaries rather redundant. Yet I think this third part is specifically important in the book's architecture, since it not only again addresses narrative threads and characters that are inexorably interconnected to issues of domination (and freedom), and have been swept aside in the criticism so far, but Herman and Weisenburger here also craft a comprehensive and well-written help for first time readers of Pynchon's complex

novel. Thus they explain a multitude of important passages under the lens of their particular methodological approach and also add some very impressive formal analyses and intertextual contexts that help to understand the novel's intricate narrative summersaults.

Since the authors do not read *Gravity's Rainbow* as a hopeful narrative in respect of comprehensive apparatuses of control, one should not infer from the book's title a climactic progression: from domination to freedom. Nevertheless, their larger argument that in *Gravity's Rainbow* as well as in the cultural period of late capitalism "[d]eath rules" (150), the final part "Freedom" still seeks in its analyses of divinatory practices "chances of freedom" (154). Chapter 10, entitled "Liberating Narration," thus inquires into the divinatory practices of the novel and presents a comprehensive investigation of Pynchon's formal experiments in relation to their critique of paradigms of domination. The impressive interrogation of the novel's use of *hysteron proteron* (building upon Weisenburger's earlier research on this), or its experimentation with narrative voice exceeds the at times content-based analyses of Pynchon's works without failing to connect it to the book's major concerns. After chapter 11 inquires into how music could be another form of how liberation is expressed in the novel (the infamous Rossini-Beethoven debate), the authors also make profound observations about Pynchon's take on race relations, concluding that the representation of Africans and African-Americans in the novel make them "wary of those who want to make a strong case for a committed antiracist and in general a more politically active Pynchon" (196). This last diagnosis indeed shows that, despite their extensive immersion in Pynchon's worlds, they nevertheless still obtain a critical distance to Pynchon's politics and do not simply paint the picture of the author as a leftist saint.

Even though the book concludes with the symptomatic, but pessimistic realization that it is 'too late,' a phrase that runs through Pynchon's entire novel and Herman and Weisenburger's book, the penultimate chapter "Tyrone Slothrop's 'Fuck You!'" discerns a miniscule moment of hope for the novel's protagonist in his attempts to counter the forces of control that already have conditioned him when still a toddler. By following up on Pynchon's elaboration on the deadly sin of Sloth, his *New York Times Book Review* essay



“Nearer my Couch to Thee” from 1993 where he evokes Melville’s Bartleby as a figure of passive resistance, Herman and Weisenburger compare Bartleby’s famous “I would prefer not to” to Slothrop’s “Fuck you!” Again placing this phrase in the “vigorous and compelling historical backdrop of social, political, and legal struggle—of resistances to and evasions of a massive and invasive sovereign power” (205), Slothrop’s disappearance from the book, which is probably one of the most discussed incidents of the novel in the criticism, constitutes an active decision to leave behind not only the dominating diegetic setting, but also the formal constraints that the novel puts forth. Since “[t]he novel’s narrative practices mimic the surveillance apparatuses in the cartelized, global state that Pynchon represents as emerging after 1945” (210), Slothrop’s escape is certainly problematic, since it is only an individual act of liberation, but nevertheless proves successful within the book’s political and aesthetic endeavor.

Gravity’s Rainbow, *Domination and Freedom* is a seminal study of Pynchon’s most influential text, which not only situates the novel in the wider cultural milieu of its time of production and thereby elucidates its narrative and political subtexts, but it also helps Pynchon novices to navigate this moloch—one can indeed feel the authors’ longtime experience with teaching the novel and therefore not ending up in constructing a narrow cave that only allows experts in. Throughout, the book never loses its reader, particularly because the highly complex content is never paralleled by overly difficult language, which makes it less “difficult to perceive just what the fuck is happening here” (GR 512). To me, the crucial goal that Herman and Weisenburger achieve with their book and what, arguably, any good study is all about, is that one immediately wants to (re-)read *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “Now everybody—“ (GR 776).

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