

INARTICULATE PLOTS: PYNCHON

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As opposed to the more recent tendencies of some of the American writers such as Saul Bellow who depicts the inarticulateness of their heroes as an expression of the chaos created by their minds — via analytic analysis, there are writers such as John Barth, and Vladimir Nabokov who create mental order, not out of the chaos but through a design of imagination. These writers very often cut the traditional link between silence and the colloquial just in order to see the world as a puzzle.

But the link between tradition is still persistent within the new forms, and it is specially so in the case of Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon is the writer who deals the problem of communication, language and its messages, or »leakage« in messages.

The message and communicational system is given in the detective story *The Crying of Lot 49*, actually the message is carried via major heroes in the story. The negative alternative status of Pynchon's vision has been pointed at, the vision of disinherited masses, oucast in society, and it has been indicated that this wasn't exclusively Pynchon's message, but that of other American writers such as Thoreau, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner.

Finally one can conclude that silent, nameless world of masses really works de-moralizing, but the question undoubtedly remains, and that is the question of positive message and a definitive trying effort in establishing communication even though it might be contained within negative effirmation, the inarticulate one.

One of the important countermovements to romantic inarticulateness which has developed in the recent years in the image of the artistic labyrinth of mind. Instead of the mind being the ominous, destructive centre of chaos that it is in *Herzog*, the mind's machinations, its »problem solving« abilities and interests become a positive force. The heroes of works by men like John Barth or Vladimir Nabokov joyfully go forth to discover order in the world. They do not make order out of chaos, as Miss Lonelyhearts tries to do. Rather, they design a mental order: discover that the world is a fabulons plot, a machine, an invention, an inormous act of imagination. They consciously create interconnectedness and correspondencne. They see the world as a puzzle: they solve it through a mental design of lines that connect the disparate dots of experi-

ence. And often primary experience is seen not as tactile reality, but as art and language: as myth, the literature of the past, scientific formulas, hystory books. Everything — the quotidian world, thought, feeling, speech, art — is seen as an artificial construct, imitative of the structure of the mind. Parody, hystorical research, and imitation become primary forms of reativity, and the artist literary his own God.

Thus often in their works, they destroy or parody the traditional link between silence and the colloquial, and the sincerity and transcendent, moral reality. The mind takes precedence over the heart (feeling, at the extreme, being simply another construction built from a bivalve system of fleshly mechanics), and language becomes the ultimate expression of man.

But the old traditions persist even within the new forms, most notably and successfully, I think, in the works of Thomas Pynchon. Pynchon is directly concerned with the problems of communication — what it means, how it can occur. In an early story, »Entropy«, two characters talk about communication theory. One is upset because language is an imperfect communication system next to the total mechanical purity of a computer. Language, he says, has a built in »leakage« problem; there is too much »noise«.¹

But in the argument, Pynchon suggest that there is always the chance that a perfect system might not communicate anything since the substance of communication is the human source, which is necessarily imperfect and full of leakage and noise. When forced into a perfect system, expression disappears because the imperfection and diversity are the meaningful humanity men have to offer.

This is the same idea that motivates Dos Passos' adoration of the words of the immigrant, and his fear of the conglomerate. In Pynchon, the idea creates a more complex quest for his protagonists: a search through the litter, wastes, »noise« and »mistakes« of society to discover the inarticulate message embodied in the lives of social outcasts. The search includes Dos Passos' »disinherited« masses, whom Pynchon still envisions living in the Hoovervilles of the 1930's, and also includes the songs, slang, and puns of the popular, mass culture which Dos Passos found so evocative.

But Pynchon reaches farther in his intellectual and metaphorical speculations than Dos Passos. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, a powerful metaphysical detective story in which the search for the meaning of an inheritance is directly equated with the quest for

¹ »Entropy«, *Kenyon Review*, 22 (1960), 285.

the American dream, the disinherited masses have (possibly) their own system of communication, Tristero. Tristero is a system of opposition. It seeks to destroy the normal channels of communication by deliberate subversion. Its agents come by night, dressed in black; they convert institutional commands into countercultural ones. They imprint »mistakes« of formal correspondence. Tristero's insignia is the *muted* horn; it aims at the anarchic destruction of accepted institutions of communication, whether they be romantic love, marriage, the postal system, government, literature, or language. The name is spoken with »ritual reluctance«, and its coded W. A. S. T. E. postal system has connections with other lifedenying organizations which are opposed to all organizational forms: D, E. A. T. H., and Inamirato Anonymous, a group committed to the destruction of intimate, personal relationships.

Tristero is the inarticulate alternative to the dead language of the social order. But Tristero might also be a corresponding, affirmative system of communication between people. As such, it is haphazard, and its messages are coded into the derelict edges of civilization: doodles on notepaper, scrawls on latrine walls, chalk markings on sidewalks and buses, letters dropped into wastebaskets, a variant reading of a line in a Jacobean drama. If an imprint of humanity remains in our standardized, binary, either/or civilization, the book argues, it can be found only in the refuse of our society, the disordered, anguished, inarticulate meaning people impose on materials by using and misusing them according to their human needs. Pynchon achieves a poetic brilliance talking about the human refuse of used cars, for example, and the human significance of the homeless outcasts littering the conglomerate countryside.

Pynchon is ambiguous about whether this inarticulate alternative represents a viable form of communication, but it at least offers an expression of humanity, from which all meaningful contact must come. Love, a linking and binding of atoms by the transfer of energy from one thing — one — person — to another, offers the only possible way out of the entropic, uncommunicative, closed system of American civilization. As one character says in talking about language, the meaning of a text is in its spirit, not in its words: the motivating impulse to expression, however abortive the results. The mind and soul give life to words: »I'm the projector at the planetarium, all, the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also.«² Words are signs, sound impulses moving from one person to another; they have meaning only when the listener or reader creates it. One must learn to hear words

² *The Crying of Lot 49* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), p. 46.

correctly — not for what they pretend to be expressing in terms of dictionary definitions, but what real voice of human energy and force lies beneath their formal logic, and what voice is aroused in one's response. At the end of the novel, the heroine sits quietly, entombed at an auction amid old men, awaiting the »calling« of her »lot«, hoping desperately that a commercial sale will have a human significance.

The negative, alternative status of Pynchon's vision of the silent, disinherited masses is consistent with the beliefs and strategies we have seen displayed in the works of so many American writers, as in his insistence that their frustrated attempts at communication, however inarticulate they may be, express the meaningful spirit of the human soul and national conscience and dream. I can find no more appropriate image with which to end this study than one he supplies in *The Crying Lot 49*.

Oedipa Mass, an artistic seeker searching for patterns and order, wanders the streets of San Francisco alone. She hallucinates Tristero insignias and makes random contact with fellow outcasts who seem to know about the muted horn. Each person has his own private story of anguish to tell, each his own version of what the horn represents. One, Jesus Arrabal, an exiled Mexican anarchist, tells her about miracles:

»A miracle is ... another world's intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there's cataclysm ... anarchists also believe in another world. Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself ... If any of it should ever really happen that perfectly, I would also have to cry miracle. An anarchist miracle ...³

Arrabal's miracle is another version of Thoreau's inarticulate conversations — transcendent, spontaneous, a connection of words and of souls. Oedipa wants to believe in the possibility of this silent communion among men in action, but — and Pynchon intends his puns as Thoreau does — she is both the hope-for-mass of the nation and a personal mess. She is lost in her search for meaning and finally, frustrated and exhausted, she returns in her hotel in Berkeley. To her surprise and dismay, she finds an inarticulate order awaiting her. There is a dance going on for the delegates to the California Chapter American Deaf-Mute Assembly. They drag her along to their drunken party. They dance as Thoreau would say, to the beat of a different drummer:

³ Pynchon, p. 120.

She tried to struggle out of the silent, gesturing swarm, but was too weak. Her legs ached, her mouth tasted horrible ... a handsome young man in a Harris tweed coat ... waltzed (her) round and round, through the rustling, shuffling hush, and a great unlit chandelier. Each couple on the floor danced whatever was in the fellow's head: tango, two-step, bossa nova, slop. But how long Oedipa thought, could it go on before collisions became a serious hindrance? There would have to be collisions. The only alternative was some unthinkable world of music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which marched easy, predestined. Something they all heard with an extra sense atrophied in herself. She followed waiting for the collisions to begin. But none came. She danced for half an hour before, by mysterious consensus, everybody took a break, without having felt any touch but the touch of her partner. Jesus Arrabal would have called it an anarchist miracle. Oedipa, with no name for it, was only demoralized.⁴

The characteristics Pynchon associates with this comic miracle are hauntingly similar to those one finds throughout American literature. Amids the deathly, frightening silence of the room, Oedipa is unnerved into an appreciation of the relationship between her language and her limited sensibility. Thoreau's »music of the spheres« has a modern tempo, but it is still transcendent and »mysterious«. The mutes, following this »unthinkable« order by an »extra sense« which is a product of their silence and »atrophied« in Oedipa because of her speech, dance to the ideal of music in their minds, like Thoreau and Gatsby and Dilsey. Their sentient and imaginative powers create a perfect system of »timeless« rhythms which allow them to be spontaneous while representing an ideal conception for us. The nameless, soundless order does, indeed, »de-moralize« our logical expectations, leaving us with the potential affirmation offered by verbal negation.

Sonja Valčić: NEARTIKULIRANI SADRŽAJ: PYNCHON

Sažetak

Suprotno nekim novijim tendencijama pisaca američke književnosti kao što su Saul Bellow koji prikazuje neartikuliranost svojih junaka kao odraz destruktivnog kaosa što ga stvaraju njihovi mozgovi — analitička razmišljanja, postoje i pisci — John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov koji stvaraju mentalni red, ne iz kaosa već putem inventivne imaginacije. Ti pisci u svojim tendencijama da prikažu svijet kao zagonetku često ruše tradicionalnu vezu između svijeta tišine i svijeta kolokvijalnog izraza.

Na veza s tradicijom da se naslutiti čak i u okviru novih formi, posebice je to uočljivo kod Thomasa Pynchona. Pynchon je pisac koji se bavi problemom komunikacije, jezičnog izražaja te njegovih poruka ili »curki« u porukama.

Prikazana je poruka i sistem komunikacije u noveli *The Crying of Lot 49*, noveli detektivskog žanra i poruke koje se naslućuju preko glavnih aktera radnje u toj noveli. Prikazan je negativni alternativni status Pynchove vizije tihe, razbaštinjene mase otpadnika iz društva, što je zapravo ne samo isključivo Pynchova vizija, već i drugih američkih pisaca, od Thoreaua — transcendentalista do Hemingwaya, Fitzgeralda, Faulknera.

Taj tihi, bezimni svijet doista demoralizira, ali ostaje otvoreno pitanje pozitivne poruke i pokušaja komunikacije sadržane u neartikuliranoj afirmaciji.