
Thomas Pynchon, Wit, and the Work of the Supernatural

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“The Universe is a Plot of God.”
—Edgar Allan Poe, *Eureka*

“blue Seas, as Oceanick Depths, call’d
into Being by Mathesis alone.”
—Thomas Pynchon, *Mason and Dixon*

Entropy, title of Thomas Pynchon’s earliest published story and subject of anxiety for both characters in and critics of *The Crying of Lot 49*, is in thermodynamics the random but irreversible tendency of systems to lose energy, eventually to run down. Because of Pynchon’s frequent but randomized references, readers of *Lot 49* see this entropy everywhere: in the sprawling, computer-chip Los Angeles that sends characters spiralling off into unknown but surely lost destinies, in the progression of Mucho Maas’ insanity as he loses himself to the individual sounds of music, in Oedipa Maas’ free-associative wandering through one long, city night, not seeking but finding everywhere — randomly — the post-horn hieroglyphic, seeming symbol of the 600-year-old Tristero postal service, itself having dwindled by this time to a lost and underground few. Pynchon’s best graphic instance of this entropy occurs during a night of booze, tv, and sex, Oedipa’s first night with Metzger, one of whose many endings comes crashing down with a can of hairspray that, in a fit of malevolence, has taken flight, crashing to and fro, up and down, all inside a closed bathroom until it finally runs out of pressure in mid-air — a perfect atomic model come to its predestined, entropic end.

Entropy belongs to that set of malicious laws of Pynchon’s malicious, Puritan God, a God that designs not the best but the worst plots for (or against) his Pret-

erite. Pynchon's interest in this Puritan God is of a piece, of course, with the paranoia about entropy that makes up the fabric of his novels.¹ Predetermination by Divine Hand produces and is produced by the paranoia Pynchon's characters experience — a matter of reading the world and the Word such that, according to Deborah Madsen, “paranoia is the neurosis most akin to a figural hermeneutic” (23). Such paranoia of reading is indeed the “logical outcome of the Puritan mentality,” as Ralph Schroeder puts it (70). Often, Pynchon's paranoia is merely grim, producing characters in the last stages of entropy, passively and randomly acting through, not upon, the vast and inhuman systems they inhabit. Indeed, even these characters' names suggest they are less than free-willed humans — Stanley Koteks, Mike Fallopian, Manny DiPresso, and Oedipa herself are less characters than labels or brand names. They are the Puritan Preterite, lost, inhuman, without grace but still subject to a species of supernatural if not divine plotting.²

At the same time as these characters are selected out of grace, the systems they inhabit offer another kind of magic, a possibility for a life-generating alternative to entropy. This other motion toward grace originates in the dozens of puns in Pynchon's novels, puns that perform not only to mark the accidental homonymic relationships among sounds, but more actively to create entire plots to take the place of the malevolent God's plots, thereby generating a complete ontological system originating in The Word. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the pun produces energy against entropy in its ability to multiply meanings, to proliferate “output” from a single source, a word, or an image. The pun, even more efficiently than Maxwell's Demon, defies the second law of thermodynamics (not to mention the first law): it actually creates realities, causing a word to do the work of several with minimal energy. With such linguistic generativity, these puns reinscribe the sacred into the secular world, visiting a supernatural effect upon the world of physical laws, and in so doing, they work a typological anti-causality against a perceived Calvinistic, predetermined linear end-direction. Puns in Pynchon's novels transfigure the natural landscape, therefore, and not by virtue of demonic presences that hide in the history of postage stamps or in Nazi armies; instead, this supernatural effect comes from the will of language itself, language made palpable through visible and readable signs.

The activity of puns and their place among the supernatural marks of grace proceed from a generally eschatological and specifically Puritan obsession in Pynchon's novels. Himself a descendant of the Puritans, Pynchon has developed a full-bodied doctrine of Preterition alongside a typological historiography which constitutes two very different types of possible “design” with two competing models of genesis. The Preterites, the lost souls of *Lot 49* and Pynchon's other

novels, operate within a God-determined universe, or at least a universe ruled within a theological model wherein a Grand Controller creates or causes the universe of possibilities for its inhabitants. In this model, causation flows in one direction only: characters may choose which possibilities to follow — for instance, Oedipa may choose to read WASTE as signalling a trash can or she may read it as W.A.S.T.E., acronymic marker for the Tristero postal underground — but characters cannot do more than act as players in an already scripted drama. On the other hand, Pynchon's novel suggests a Puritan-style typological historiography, a hermeneutical model allowing for, and in fact inviting a circular, non-causal model of time. In short, Pynchon's own Puritan typology supports the generative possibility of spontaneously occurring linguistic reality, a reality "uncaused," literally unmotivated by a controlling hand of linear causality, in contradiction to the God-engendered, end-directed model of Calvinist Election.

His own Puritan ancestry, best documented by Lance Schachterle and Michael Vella, haunts Pynchon's novels in the broadest sense through a pervasively typological rendering of history. A more exact resurrection of Pynchon's past would be the subtext of William Pynchon, first American ancestor, who came from England with Governor Winthrop in 1630 to work as patentee and treasurer of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Like the fictional "first American ancestor" of Tyrone Slothrop (*Gravity's Rainbow*), William Slothrop, William Pynchon is remembered most for his antinomian theological tract, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* (1650), which radically argued that Christ atoned for human sin by obedience, not suffering.³ Thomas Pynchon's Puritan roots would be less important if his novels did not so visibly inscribe a Puritan history onto the landscape of twentieth-century America. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, especially, paranoia is brought on by Calvinistically operated Election, seemingly still in operation during the novel's World War II. *Gravity's Rainbow* ends with the invocation, as the V-2 may or may not finally drop, of William Slothrop's hymn to the Preterite, reinforcing a doctrine of Election by the very exclusion of the lost:

There is a Hand to turn the time,
Though thy Glass today be run,
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low
Find the last poor Pret'rite one.... (760)

Of course, in Pynchon's design, everyone is lost; the narrative voice ending *Gravity's Rainbow* invites us all to sing along: "Now everybody —" (760).

The doctrine of Election, the most basic tenet of New England Puritanism, as evidenced by the foundational Cambridge Synod of 1646, seeps up from the background of *Lot 49* as well. Here, a landscape of ubiquitous patterning is suspected

by more than one character as being controlled by an omniscient, God-like force, be it Pierce Inverarity or Dr. Hilarius' vengeful Holocaust survivors or the Tristero underground itself. Possibilities in this novel are teasingly designed by a now-invisible hand through a supernatural visitation upon the natural world. The clear-cut candidate for the God-figure of *Lot 49* is Pierce who, as Jesús Arrabal remarks, is the perfect incarnation of a miracle: "another world's intrusion into this one" (88).⁴

As Maureen Quilligan points out, even Oedipa — more sensitive to the movements of matter than Maxwell's Demon might allow — suspects Pierce's authorship of the design she through happenstance occupies. One of the four hermeneutical possibilities Oedipa suggests for her experience (a Calvinist "fourfold interpretation" perhaps) implies such Godlike design:

Or a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate, involving items like the forging of stamps and ancient books, constant surveillance of your movements, planting of post horn images ... and Pierce Inverarity only knows what-all besides ... so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. (128)

Likewise, Oedipa's reading confirms a conceptual isomorphy of Calvinist election and quantum mechanics. Madsen illuminates the connection thus:

From the mid-nineteenth century, the religious implications of the laws of thermodynamics have been debated and entropy, specifically, has been mythologized as a version of the Fall into history and linguistic difference.... the prediction of a heat-death for the universe was translated into the Christian concept of perdition, within the context of the Bible's promise of eternal life rather than infinite temporal progress. So the Second Law of Thermodynamics was seen as posing a basic choice to man: Christian redemption or annihilation. (18)

As the sacred world, under the Puritan order, is set into motion toward a predestined end, so too does the thermodynamic model of entropy involve an uncontrollable movement toward an inevitable heat-death. Sacred or secular, history speeds (as Henry Adams would have it as well) in a direct line toward its end. Even the Preterite, as Oedipa suspects and as the fictional William Slothrop argues, are predetermined, selected out of Grace, purposefully, rather than merely forgotten,⁵ as Oedipa knows only because she can sense but a fraction of meaning through the patterns of post-horns and W.A.S.T.E. symbols though she cannot grasp any "transcendent meaning" in the "hieroglyphic streets" (136).⁶

As the coincidental patterns of Oedipa's quest seem to have an omniscient creator, their logic bears a causal patterning, a linear "history" of determined beginnings and predetermined endings. Such causality of beginnings, argues Donna

Haraway, always suggests an ending, usually apocalyptic but in any case always embedded into the genesis of events: an original, mythological “unity” at the beginning of life always entails “a dialectic of apocalypse.” In this model, to be an originating “author” of events is “to be God” (589). Frank Kermode illustrates this “sense of an ending” in his omnibus study of Western literature, arguing that Judeo-Christian mythology embeds a narratology of endings, organizing a pattern of causality toward an ending that “gives each moment its fullness” (6); we “in the midst made considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle” (17). The pervasive Puritan hermeneutic of *Lot 49*, then, demands an entropic end to all systems, whether physically or supernaturally controlled, just as Josephine Hendin theorizes of *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “Death’s hate, Death’s grimace, the tragic mask of the heavens pulled down forever in one inviolable affirmation of depression” (207). Through the motions of causal, linear history, even the hand of God points to an inevitable end.

In all of its suggestions toward a God-authored universe, *The Crying of Lot 49* offers up a unitary and Puritan design, a type of historiography that, like the thermodynamic model, posits inevitable heat-death. At the same time, however, the linguistic generativity of puns — their creative power to perform the “magic” that Pynchon names in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as that which “centuries past exhaustion still find[s] new molecular pieces” (590), creates matter and energy *against* the seeming inevitability of entropy — this habit of punning language works in opposition to the model of Puritan Election, for the order of puns, which bears no transcendent authorship, likewise carries no predestined end. Punning language does in this novel operate supernaturally, interjecting as it works a design onto Oedipa’s possible plots via a mechanism outside of human, “natural,” control. Contrary to the entropic force of Election, puns participate in an interpretive design equally Puritan but less apocalyptic. The multiple, proliferate significations of puns function from within a typologically ordered history wherein the inscription of the past onto the present reduces the causal links of linear history. The possibilities raised by a typological history counter the predetermined, God-engendered nature of Election, thereby producing both matter and meaning out of the void. “Pentecostal revelation, the direct understanding of the Word through an act of linguistic grace, the inscription of meaning by divine illumination, is not subject to the distorting effects of time and entropy,” as Madsen explains (74).

The puns themselves, though, are the most visible signs of this anti-entropic linguistic force. The controlling pun of *Lot 49* would be, of course, W.A.S.T.E., first noticed as a harmless sign on what appear to be garbage cans around L.A.

What catches Oedipa's eye, though, are the periods between the letters, signalling another kind of sign, an acronym, which *should* cancel out WASTE's original meaning. Oedipa at this point has begun her search for Tristero, to her mind possibly a randomly occurring name — appearing in *The Courier's Tragedy* and in the theories of several unrelated and possibly lunatic acquaintances. Possibly random. But as Oedipa knows, Tristero could also possibly exist: it could name a postal system of much longer and deeper history than the official US mail. Tristero itself could also be more than a postal system; it might name a group so underground and so potentially violent in its competitive practices that it goes, for the most part, unnamed — or named only at great risk, like Yahweh himself.

Oedipa has already begun to suspect correspondences beyond the random when she happens upon a trash bin labelled W.A.S.T.E. Realizing perfectly well her own paranoia, Oedipa fights against this pun, hoping it is a mere typographical error on a grand scale (much like the ubiquitous post-horn symbol). She fears the alternative: if W.A.S.T.E. means, among other possibilities, We Await Silent Tristero's Empire, if it actually contains the mail of a potentially large underground whose use of the system would signal both an alternative post office and an alternative ideology — if her suspicions are true, that is, then the first problem is that she has been blind to a good half of reality her entire life.

More than that, it is the punning itself that disturbs Oedipa's safe, tupperware-party existence, because WASTE works perfectly well for a garbage can at the same time it signifies the Tristero underground.⁷ The obligatory groan that follows a pun acknowledges just this upsetting fact about language: what should be merely a "similarity of form" without a similarity of meaning breaks the rules. The pun flaunts, in fact, what we have taken these past two centuries to be the arbitrary nature of the sign; Saussure has taught us well, has at least recorded what a post-Johnsonian age sees as the nature of language, so that the basic "rule" holds a single utterance to a single meaning or, if not a single meaning, then at least one meaning per context. Whether one is linguistically educated or not, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a word — "ajar," for instance — is tethered to a referent sitting in back of the word, or it ought to be. The word is designed to utter the thing. The accidental homonymy between "sorry" and "sari," an especially bad pun in *Mason and Dixon*, should not bear usage in the same conversation (479); certainly, "canard" (French "duck") and "canard" (English "false rumor") should, if language would behave itself, obey the rules of one or the other language (*Mason and Dixon* 374).

"To groan at puns," Jonathan Culler tells us, "is viscerally to reaffirm a distinction between essence and accident, between meaningful relations and coincidence"

(5). Indeed, emmanent physician Benjamin Rush declaimed in his 1799 *Six Introductory Lectures [on] The Institutes and Practices of Medicine* (published 1801) that

wit of all kinds, and more especially that species of it which is called punning, has a tendency to weaken the understanding by unduly exercising the imagination. . . . I well recollect the late Dr. Wetherspoon used often to say, "that he would correct a child almost as soon for being witty, as for telling a lye." An opinion equally degrading of this talent was held by the Areaopagus of Athens, and hence we read of a member of that council who resented in an open court, a detail of his public conduct in which he was said to have played upon a word. (115)

The pun-induced groan reveals more than distaste; it signals outright fear for our foundations. For if a term *can* connect conceptually at the same time it is related homonymically, then language is doing something our linguistics does not account for: it is creating its own connections, performing its own actions that are not random. I do not suggest here a Derridean argument that there is nothing between the word and the thing: on the contrary, while Derrida offers the arbitrary *play* of signifiers, I would see in the pun's action a type of *work* among signifiers. True, the relation of words to things may *not* originate in the things — the "direction" of meaning may not flow from an object or act to its name. But that does not suggest arbitrariness; the pun works to direct meaning from the linguistic condensation "backward," so that the things themselves — objects, actions, entire event sequences (that is, real or fictional plots) — come to be born after the linguistic fact, not unlike the Biblical generative action that begins with "the Word." The pun, therefore, makes something real in the world of things that was not real before, uncaused by human design but once let loose active within time nevertheless. As Katherine Hayles explains in connection to Pynchon's fiction,

Puns have traditionally been considered "low" because they play on trivial or accidental correspondences. But what if the belief that these correspondences are trivial stems from an ideology that wishes to deny the correspondences that puns reveal? In that case puns, far from being exercises in bad taste, become instruments of revelation, exposing what "they" want to keep hidden. (117)

Oedipa's terror in the face of WASTE can respond to what seems unnatural in this punning language. If the sign carried only the underground postal system as its referent, it would merely be another sign or metaphor. But WASTE *does* work for a garbage can as well, and as a pun WASTE retains its "original" garbage-can meaning at the same time it suggests an entire other plot, for it is also the case that, whether or not the can contains letters and garbage, the Tristero postal system *has* entropied, has been held together only by a wasted, disintegrated lot. As

do all systems, W.A.S.T.E. is falling apart. The mere coincidence of terms, then, appears not to be a coincidence, as the values of the one invade and define the values of the other. In thus violating the natural order of language, WASTE also violates the laws of physics, for it seems to be a fact — a plot of the novel if not an actuality of Oedipa's universe — that WASTE and W.A.S.T.E. not only coexist but determine one another's existence, while even the attributes of the Tristero take on a similar non-coincidental punning behavior, given the accidental and purposeful appearances of the post-horns and the sometimes fake and sometimes real stamps.

While WASTE is the controlling pun of the novel, the pun that sets plots in motion by virtue of an accidentally sighted word, Pynchon comments more locally on the generative activity of puns late in Oedipa's long night of searching, as she randomly meets an ancient sailor in a flop house, post-horn tattooed on his arm, who asks her to post a letter to his 26-years-absent wife via, of course, the W.A.S.T.E. system. Unaccountably, Oedipa takes him to his room, sees in his mattress an equally ancient history of suffering and foresees in the same mattress its predestined end in flames, takes him in her arms and feels he has DTs. "Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare" (95). The metaphor Oedipa can tolerate. She loses control, though, when she considers this metaphor's possibilities, when she realizes that DT means doubly: "God help this tattooed old man," she thinks, dt

meant also time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself as something innocuous like an average rate ... where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked on at its most quick. (95-96)

DTs, then, prefigure the entropic end no matter which definition you take — the alcoholic one or the time differential one.

Just another metaphor perhaps, but Oedipa glimpses a more-than-coincidental coupling of DTs as she suspects the old man's role as "messenger" from a supernatural reality, a role gained through his DTs:

The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth *all act in the same special relevance to the word*, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. (95; emphasis added)

At this point, Oedipa is in both places at once: inside, in the comfort of grace, she senses the truth of puns, their propensity to create reality; outside, lost, she is merely paranoid. “Oedipa did not know where she was” (95), but the narrative voice takes up, if not the plots of the possible DTs, at least the theory behind the pun and its possibilities, and here suggests “there was that high magic to low puns, because DT’s must give access to dt’s of spectra beyond the known sun” (96), spectra of meaning generated out of the coincidence of words that take on lives of their own — a universe in which the “unnatural” and noncausal use of language establishes a supernatural bond of connectedness. Here, no less than in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the words themselves call the shots,⁸ keep the plots going and keep the bombs suspended in air long enough, at least, to create something that was not there before. This kind of language works hard to combat the entropy prefiguring the eventual end of the novel’s systems.

With his puns, Pynchon teases all of us paranoids, making possible a more-than-metaphorical causal process at work in his characters’ universe. Yet this pun-activated reality runs parallel to “natural” causality, looking suspiciously familiar, therefore. This mechanistic, naturally caused system has in back of it a ghost-in-the-machine God — the one bodied forth, in one instance, in Pierce Inverarity, invisible, cruel-humored, untouchable but fully in control. Naturally, the God-figure sets events in motion, watches each sparrow fall, while the human characters on this stage merely glimpse the hand that turns the wheel via its effects.⁹ Characters like Oedipa Maas, within this system, do not act as agents; rather, their function is to perceive the springs of action and to believe the truth is out there — or to succumb to the conspiracy theory. Such supernatural agency gets expressed in “natural,” mimetic language, language that represents the truths of its God no less than do the characters. We know Pierce, for instance, only through the commandments of his written will.

Allowing no real agency, this supernatural complex offers only positions of Preterition or Grace. From either perspective, the entropy of systems — the inevitable burning of the old sailor’s mattress, for example — is absolute. As Frederick Ahl explains, such an ontology includes its own linguistic insistence:

Our quest for structure and unity is justified not only at our universities, but at almost every level of our social conditioning. We take monistic reasoning for granted. Truthfulness is equated with simplicity, not complexity. Ours is a world of Marxist monism, of Islamic and Judaeo-Christian monism, of one god or no god, not of god or gods. (21)

It is the monism behind this linguistic theory and the Puritan doctrine of Election that comforts, although it also produces the despair of entropy. Mimetic lan-

guage must represent something, a reality somewhere, even if that reality tends to let physical systems run out of steam.

Oedipa's terror, her vertigo in a sense, is not of *what* is represented, but at the alternative, non-mimetic linguistic system, also God-like in its effects, for Pynchon's universe offers an equal and opposite action of a universe based on puns, one quite as supernatural as the "naturalized" universe directed by Divine agency. At the linguistic level, puns offer an expansion from monistic meaning, a rude, disruptive insistence on corresponding accidents. More pervasively, these puns do not remain sitting at the site of linguistic utterance: they spread out beyond the term itself to create, not to reflect, Pynchon's universe, effecting an alternative causality. Peter Freese makes the point that "the one negentropic" activity of *Lot 49* is the power to connect disparate meanings, that punning "is the only weapon against the inevitable running down of the universe" (174). Agency in this realm of causality is ultimately linguistic, as mysterious as deistic causality and, in its effects, equally supernatural.

Working in opposition to the Calvinistic Grace of monistic, linear movement through time toward entropy, the "magic" of puns — their ability to generate realities — participates in a type of hermeneutic as Puritan as the doctrine of Election but without the entropic inevitability. Historical events rendered typologically operate in the same manner as puns: as typology reads both historical events and personages as prefigurations or fulfillments of other (past or present) events and persons, its history is not linear but isomorphically layered and repetitious. As a result, typology allows for an anti-entropic re-creation of events and characters. Like the action of puns, typology allows for multiple meanings to a single unit; further, the repetitions of a typological time-line are known only linguistically, through stories or histories. Through stories of the past, later times — including present-time — are known to be repetitions. Thus, the plots of typological history do not have final closure nor do they signal the entropic end of Calvinist Election.

New England Puritans did not invent typological exegesis: it had been one of Augustine's (among others) modes of scriptural interpretation. However, its methodology gained in popularity during the Reformation as a result of Martin Luther's and John Calvin's insistence upon literal interpretation of the Bible.¹⁰ This conservative doctrine read earlier events as prefiguring and embodying later and present events: Old Testament events and characters prefigured, for instance, the life of Christ, the anti-type. Even more, the New England Congregationalists viewed their own "errand into the wilderness" as one fulfillment of the lives of Moses and Christ. The "fundamental assumption," as Mason Lowance articulates

it, “was that the Old Testament could not be explained as a separate document by itself; rather, it contains a series of providentially inspired, prophetic adumbrations of the ultimate revelation, the ‘antitype’” (140).

Insisting upon repetition through as well as continuity over time, typology reads historical actuality for each event and character at the same time it views them as repetitions, which collapses differing time frames (Old and New Testament, for instance) into one another. Thus, a typological history adds historical meaning to figures — Moses is both Moses and Christ — and at the same time suggests an unending sequence of types.¹¹ Fulfillment of earlier plots is not to be understood as closure to a narrative design; while Christ would be the “ultimate revelation,” reiterations of events and persons would not stop with the life of Christ. It is the unending nature of typology that suggests an ontology of generation, as do puns, so as to offer an alternative to both Divinely designed eschatology and the one-word, one-meaning design of “ordinary” language.

Pynchon’s use of typological history is evidenced in the startling coincidences of *Lot 49*’s plotting. Not only do coincidences appear during a single time-frame, as in the post-horn symbol scrawled, it seems, all over the California of the present, but the parallel plots likewise reappear over widely spaced historical periods. The historically recurring story of bones at the bottom of a lake strikes Oedipa as too coincidental, and it is this story that prompts her entrance into the detective quest of *Lot 49*. She hears first of Pierce’s investment in Beaconsfield cigarettes, ostensibly a mere investment in bone charcoal, but in fact a purchase of the bones of U.S. soldiers found at the bottom of Lago di Pietà. A portion of the bones Pierce had used for research and development of Beaconsfields; others have been deposited at the bottom of the lake at Fangoso Lagoons, an artificial lake in Pierce’s artificial community, “to decorate the bottom for the Scuba nuts” (41).

Sunken bones are to reappear twice in *Lot 49*, in *The Courier’s Tragedy*, set in Jacobean England and in a story about the Pony Express told to Oedipa by Mr. Thoth at the Vesperhaven House retirement home. But more than the recurrence of bones themselves, the context, the story, of the bones strikes Oedipa as too coincidentally similar in at least two of these instances for the comfort of ordinary history. The bones of U.S. soldiers came to be at the bottom of Lago di Pietà during World War II: having lost communication with other U.S. forces, a small brigade remained at lakeside, not engaged in battle but dying one by one of exposure. *The Courier’s Tragedy* reveals a story of the Lost Guard of Faggio as having met a similar fate, these soldiers murdered by the evil Angelo and thrown into a lake. Mr. Thoth’s story of his cruel grandfather’s Pony Express days only suggests the bones of a “lost brigade”; in his confused dream about Porky Pig, Bugs Bunny, the anar-

chist, and his grandfather, he tells Oedipa that the “false Indians” his grandfather fought “were supposed to burn bones” to blacken their feathers (67). Oedipa, “sensitized” by now, makes the connection and asks, “Did he ever have to fight off desperados?” (66).

Such repetitions through 400 years of history amount to more than mere anachronism. For Oedipa, increasingly conscious of a design to history, the repeated story suggests the Tristero, although in only two stories does the Tristero lurk. These coincidences of historical patterning suggest a typological fulfillment of type and anti-type, appearance and reappearance, not only of plots but also of the vehicle for plots, the stories told in order to “reveal” the design of coincidental history. Typological structure of this sort goes against the grain of “storied,” end-directed history in its alarming rupture of “intuitive” causality. Ordinary, narrative history in the “grand *récit*” style of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries posits a monistic linearity fully consonant with a Calvinistic doctrine of Election that directs events toward their endings. Yet, paranoid under any circumstances, Pynchon’s characters respond to such totalizing causality with suspicions not unlike those directed at the disruptive repetitions of typological ordering. “All talk of cause and effect is secular history,” offers Herr Rathenau in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, that is, history as constructed by humans to deflect “real history”: “secular history is a diversionary tactic” (167).

Any design to history brings out the paranoia for these characters, for as Richard Hofstadter explains,

the distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a “vast” or “gigantic” conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power.... the paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms — he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. (29)

Oedipa Maas is from time to time amenable to such paranoia, for the design of “storied” history places her “outside” of the script in her ignorance, signalling her Preterition. A typological history, however, is likewise alarming: recall that it is the repetitious peculiarity of the “bones” story that both intrigues and frightens Oedipa. But possible historiographies, to the paranoid, imply a design. Yet the seeming design of typological history — like a paranoid reading of puns as ordered by a controlling force — does not proceed from a Calvinistic God. As Kharperian notes of the puns and other rhetorical forms of play in Pynchon’s novels, the “sterile uniformity” of mainstream America, a uniformity cut of the

same cloth as both Calvinistic Election and end-directed history, is countered by the “fertilizing possibilities” of “metaphor . . . and a communicative plenitude represented as anarchy” (85). In their multiple meanings, typological history and punning language do not breed apocalypse, but instead “create” possibilities.

Anarchic, yes: communication theory holds that multiplied meanings in the transfer of information amount to less communication, to noise, as John Nefastis, maker of the Maxwell’s Demon, points out. Indeed, the formula for information disorder looks exactly like the thermodynamic equation for entropy, John Nefastis explains to Oedipa. On the other hand, to understand all of the typological layerings of repetitive history and to understand a pun at all is not to perceive noise or confusion: it is to add, “magically,” to the limited natural phenomena of immediate experience. Linked to the generative function of puns, typology enacts a design of “plenitude,” an anti-entropic force indeed.

While WASTE acts as the controlling pun of *Lot 49*’s plot, entropy itself provides the springs of action upon which the puns are wound. And entropy, too, is a pun, as Nefastis makes clear. Both energy loss and information transfer, Nefastis holds that “It was a coincidence. The two fields were entirely unconnected, except at one point: Maxwell’s Demon” (77), the machine that uses information to combat the energy drain. Nefastis, “a true believer,” describes the machine’s effect as being observable “at the secular level,” implying a sacred side of the coin, though he does explain that Maxwell’s Demon works with both kinds of entropy, making “the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true” (78, 77).

His explanations leave Oedipa merely in despair, but his impulse to connect the two meanings in objective fact approach the novel’s actual use of the pun. The connection Nefastis makes, via the machine, still resides in the world of physical causality, however. What he does not conclude would equally sustain a second non-coincidental reading of the two types of entropy, also with supernatural effect though not created of supernatural design. The entropy of information theory measures the probability of communicating — transferring information — which decreases as the number of messages increases (many voices of many messages in a single term, for instance, or simply the noise of many voices).¹² Or conversely, as Derek Attridge tells us, “the more predictable a given item in a message, the less information it carries; the totally predictable word conveys . . . absolutely nothing” (142). The point of entropy in information theory, then, is the point at which a “message” is full enough to become difficult. Puns, then, perform at the point where entropy has been achieved, decreasing the probability of communicating, but insisting on a fullness of meaning. A discourse textured of puns offers information entropy to negate the other, thermodynamic entropy by asserting increas-

ing messages against decreasing energy. To be sure, the “noise” of information at its entropy point causes confusion, but the possibility of understanding — of getting the pun — does exist. As revelation, these puns work through the noise to be heard by an Elect, if not of a supernatural God, at least of those attentive to the Word (perhaps like Mucho Maas, who hears all sounds, distinctly, at once). The Preterite, like Oedipa, suspect their instruments, and glimpse, at best, this other order of things, an order in which one kind of entropy can work to negate the other kind.

If puns can sustain a type of supernatural ontology, one in which saying does make a thing so, Pynchon’s plots assert this type of supernatural activity against the causation of a God-engendered universe. In doing so, an entropy of multiplied meaning takes the place of physical entropy, the entropy of the natural world. However unnatural this generative linguistic move may seem, it would be well to remember that our sense of “natural” language is relatively new. Margreta De Grazia assigns “the exclusion of puns from ordinary language” to Samuel Johnson’s efforts in the mid-eighteenth century to fix language with his Dictionary, and she reminds us that the word pun itself appeared only in the mid-seventeenth century (149-50). “It is only once the lexical laws were laid down that puns appeared unruly and transgressive” (150); clearly, punning was less unnatural for Shakespeare and his forebears.¹³

The pun, in much so-called postmodern writing, from Pynchon to Borges to Nabokov, and the punning behavior of language that supports an alternative ontology, may suggest not a new sensibility but rather an end to a two-hundred year hiatus from a more free-associative understanding of language and its relation to the world. “All in all,” Zygmunt Bauman pronounces, “postmodernism can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a *re-enchantment* of the world that modernity tried hard to *disenchant*” (x). Indeed, the Johnsonian model may have been a mere glitch in linguistic history, which now returns, with writers like Pynchon, to a linguistics of generation, one which creates worlds from words. ✨

Notes

¹ “God is the original conspiracy theory,” Scott Sanders writes. If a Divine Hand is seen “behind floods, deaths in the family, the sprouting of seeds or splatter of rain, behind every heartbeat and thought of man himself,” then paranoia “substitutes for the divine plan a demonic one. Viewed in this perspective, paranoia is the last retreat of the Puritan imagination” (139-40).

² See Tanner 153-180 for an early and full discussion of Pynchon's obsession with plotting, divine and human, along with Pynchon's predisposition to make the springs and pulleys of his plots evident at the surface of his narratives.

³ *Meritorious Price* was burned in Boston's marketplace. See the introductory essays in Vella, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, Facsimilie Edition.

⁴ Miraculous intrusion into secularity comes, in Pynchon's fiction, by way of language to be read: a lumberjack informs Dixon in *Mason and Dixon*, for instance, that "This 'New World' was ever a secret Body of Knowledge, meant to be studied with the same dedication as the Hebrew Kabbala would demand. Forms of the Land, the flow of water, the occurrence of what us'd to be call'd Miracles, all are Text, — to be attended to, manipulated, read, remember'd" (487), while Mason declares a short time later, "it is Text, — and we are its readers, and its Pages are the Days turning. Unscrolling, as a Pilgrim's Itinerary map in ancient Days. And this is the Chapter call'd 'The Subterranean Cathedral, or, The Lesson Grasp'd'" (497-98).

⁵ *Gravity's Rainbow* asks the question of Slothrop, "Is he drifting, or being led?" (77); more specifically to the point, "Is that a choosing, or is it a passing-over?" (110). The fictional William Slothrop of this novel, in his Meritorious-Price-like heretical document, suggests that the Preterite are as necessary to Divine Plan as the Elect, for without the one, the other would cease to be Elect.

⁶ *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests how the purposefully forgotten must negotiate space, finding patterns and only guessing as to their meaning: "The rest of us, not chosen for enlightenment, left on the outside of Earth, at the mercy of a Gravity we have only begun to learn how to detect and measure, must go on blundering inside our front-brain faith in Kute Korrespondences, hoping that for each psi-synthetic taken from Earth's soul there is a molecule, secular, more or less ordinary and named, over here — kicking endlessly among the plastic trivia, finding in each Deeper Significance and trying to string them all together like terms of a power series hoping to zero in on the tremendous and secret Function whose name, like the permuted names of God, cannot be spoken" (590).

⁷ To proliferate the signifying power of WASTE even further, Ron Jenkins suggests that the Preterite *are* waste, that society's "leftovers" peopling *Lot 49* "are those who are denied, or passed over, and expelled from the system, and so become its waste" (102).

⁸ Or as R.A. Shoaf puts it ("The Play of Puns in Late Middle English Poetry: Concerning Juxtology," in Culler), puns raise fear and suspicion "for puns are about power.... language is 'in charge'" (44-45).

⁹ Kharpertian discusses this side of Pynchon's supernaturalism. *Mason and Dixon* offers the following object-lesson in the interpretation of Deity by way of visible signs: "The Telescope, the Fluxions, the invention of Logarithms and the frenzy of multiplication, often for its own sake [have been] all steps of an unarguable approach to God, a growing clarity, — Gravity, the Pulse of Time, the finite speed of Light present

themselves to him as aspects of God's character" (220). Edgar Allan Poe's decryption of the universe in *Eureka* supports the same point.

¹⁰ The clearest description of New England Puritan typology is Thomas Davis' "The Traditions of Puritan Typology" (in Bercovitch, *Typology*).

¹¹ The fullest example of typological historiography from Puritan New England is Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana; or the Ecclesiastical History of New England* (1702). Historians had used the method earlier, but Mather synthesized three generations of American clergymen. As Sacvan Bercovitch argues, these first generations of Puritans, including John Winthrop in his "A Model of Christian Charity" sermon aboard the *Arabella*, "united the visible and the spiritual" while "actualiz[ing] the metaphors of visible sainthood (for the individual) and national election (for the community)" (*Puritan* 90).

¹² For discursive applications of information theory, see Gregory Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology*, and Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader*.

¹³ Ahl supports this view of punning language as well, noting that "numerous ancient writers preceded Borges in treating the alphabet as the element of language which could be rearranged, just as the natural elements which make up substances can be rearranged, to form a new being. The letters are the building blocks of much ancient linguistic reality" (27).

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