

*THOMAS PYNCHON: THE ENCYCLOPAEDIC NOVEL*

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*Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse two of the Thomas Pynchon's novels, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966) and Inherent Vice (2009) in terms of "hysterical realism"/"recherché postmodernism". A very famous author, well known both for his postmodernist novels, with a remarkable density of information, in which the prevalent theme is that of paranoia, and his life lived away from the public eye (he is notorious for the silence on matters of self-reference and publicity), Pynchon continues to elicit the attention of the literary world.*

*Key words: postmodernism, paranoia, encyclopaedic narrative, hysterical realism, maximalism*

According to most of the theorists and critics, Postmodernism in literature could not be contrived without reference to Thomas Pynchon's literary works. As *The Literary Encyclopedia* mentions, "Thomas Pynchon is one of the most important postmodern writers, and his *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) is – arguably – the essential postmodern novel."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the author has been canonized in the 1980s as "the iconic author of American postmodernism" for producing "at least two masterpieces, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*."<sup>2</sup>

His style, his cleverness and, equally, his encyclopaedic knowledge (Pynchon's vast background in engineering physics, mathematics, and sciences, alongside with English literature must not be overlooked), his humour, and his craftsmanship make him a beloved writer of his generation. Some critics compared Pynchon's works to those of [Rabelais](#), [Cervantes](#), [Laurence Sterne](#), [Edgar Allan Poe](#), [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#), [Herman Melville](#), [Charles Dickens](#), [Joseph Conrad](#), [Thomas Mann](#), [William S. Burroughs](#), [Ralph Ellison](#), [Patrick White](#), and [Toni Morrison](#). For them, he is a brilliant writer, "an indisputably, uniquely gifted genius".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sascha Pöhlmann, Stefan Nico, *The Literary Encyclopedia*, <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=3673>>.

<sup>2</sup> Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, Brian McHale (eds.), Introduction to *Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Anderson, "Incoherent Vice. My Thomas Pynchon Problem", *New York Magazine*, online, August 2, 2009, <<http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/58182/index1.html>>.

Others consider that he falls under the modernist literary tradition of James Joyce, E. M. Forster, or John Dos Passos. To James Wood, Pynchon's works are classified as pertaining to hysterical realism, alongside with Zadie Smith's, Salman Rushdie's, Don DeLillo's, David Foster Wallace's and others'. In one of his published articles, the critic reminds the main features of the mode:

By "hysterical realism" I have meant a zany overexcitement, a fear of silence and of stillness, a tendency toward self-conscious riffs, easy ironies, puerility, and above all the exaggeration of the vitality of fictional characters into cartoonishness. The dilemma could be put dialectically: the writer, fearful that her characters are not "alive" enough, overdoes the liveliness and goes on a vitality spree; suddenly aware that she has overdone it, she tries to solve the problem by drawing self-conscious attention to the exaggeration.<sup>4</sup>

When reviewing postmodern writers, framed under the two main contemporary modes which he named "hysterical realism" and "informational realism", respectively, James Wood always expresses his opinions towards the craftsmanship of writing plausible fiction and the requirements for not falling under the "hyperliteralism of the novel": to cease exaggerating, to avoid telling us about the culture or about how we live, to give up filling the pages with all sorts of information from all kind of domains, the more so, as there are other forms of literature besides novel which aptly lend themselves to the avalanche of nowadays knowledge (journalism, cultural analysis, theory, nonfiction narrative, film), but above all, he insists upon creating human characters with an inner life, which interrelate one each other and whose inner lives connect to "the inner life of the culture"<sup>5</sup>.

As concerns Pynchon's characters, most of the critics agree upon the fact that his novels abound in the unreal, unconvincing, merely sketchy characters, or, even worse, illusive impossible ones, and that Pynchonian characters do not compare to autonomous, rounded characters to be found in any other classic or romanticist author:

They have been referred to as 'figures', 'interchangeable ciphers' or even 'cartoon characters' – a fitting description, as one of Pynchon's key influences is the comic strip. Their names immediately suggest their status as ciphers: some comically evoke the 1960s drug-addled counter-culture, like Zoyd Wheeler or Weed Atman (*Vineland*), some are Dickensian

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<sup>4</sup> James Wood, "A Reply to the Editors", *n+1 Magazine*, Issue 3, Reality principle, Fall 2005, <<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-3/essays/a-reply-to-the-editors/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Idem

emblematic names, like Tyrone Slothrop and Pirate Prentice (*Gravity's Rainbow*) or Herbert Stencil (*V.*) and some are outright parodies, such as the psychiatrist Dr. Hilario (*The Crying of Lot 49*).<sup>6</sup>

Pynchon prefers his fictional universe to be inhabited by characters which differ from the norm – he is an admirer of the lower, lost causes, recondite persons, kestrels, tough men, mean, offensive women, and dropouts. Therefore, Pynchon's social world is complex and disturbed, but, as Millard remarks, "it involves an underlying sense of perspective and context: compared with what large systems consistently do to people, what most people do to each other pales in comparison." Pynchon's works are as intriguing as difficult to follow as concerns the plot because of their complicated twists and turns and their hermetic subject matter. In fact, his novels are an amalgam of plots and subplots, seeming with a ball of yarn with too many tags. All the events, incidents, happenings can be perceived through characters' actions and reactions, but even so, not everybody is granted the full access into the elaborate universe of the writer. Generally, readers must finish the novel by themselves, as if they have got a task, but it is the way Pynchon challenges the intellect of those who dare into the thicket of his fiction. Moreover, in order to better understand it, one must resort to scientific, historic, political support for a better grasp.

Such is the case with two of his novels we considered for analysing, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice* (2009), which, together with *Vineland* (1990) are considered to be a trilogy – all the novels are set in Southern California, in the late 1960s.

*The Crying of Lot 49* is the shortest one, but nonetheless a typical Pynchonian novel, having "a 'double movement' – whereby the frustrated quest for narrative certainty depicted within the pages of a novel is paralleled by the reader's attempt to interpret it."<sup>7</sup>

It is a novel about the craziness, the extravagance, the anarchy and the mysticism of the 1960s, a novel about the people still searching for a balance after the World War II in a fragmented society, a novel about a pervasive sense of social and cultural chaos, a novel about communication, a novel which seems to want to fight against Maxwell's Demon, the proprietor of information, and as such, the master of the order of the system. It is a novel about communication, although the characters in the novel do not quite communicate, and when they do it, because of the drugs and drinking, they do it wrongly, transmitting meaningless or

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<sup>6</sup> Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009, electronic edition, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, p. 94.

distorted messages. Religion, language, sciences, all of the communication agents do not correctly function in the novel: the main symbol of order in the novel, Maxwell's Demon, cannot be operated because it requires a certain level of communication, which cannot be attained but by the "sensitives", the people having special mental abilities, (i.e. the ability to communicate):

"Communication is the key," cried Nefastis. "The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind. [...] "Entropy is a figure of speech, then," sighed Nefastis, "a metaphor. It connects the world of thermo-dynamics to the world of information flow. The Machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true."<sup>8</sup>

The importance of communication is rendered in terms of encyclopaedism, of science and technology. Pynchon insists that human interaction is based upon the same principles that govern physics. Entropy or the tendency of closed energy systems to move towards disorder, is a quantity that, in its two contexts, thermodynamics and information theory, characterizes not only all the forms of life in the universe, but all language, information and written material ever produced anywhere. In Edward Mendelson's words, entropy is defined as a thermodynamics principle, as a measure of stagnation, but also as a structural metaphor, its effect being the gradual loss of energy, as in the information theory, entropy is the measure of the "uncertainty in a system"<sup>9</sup>:

The book's central metaphor is the thermodynamic concept of entropy, which for the moment may be defined loosely as the slowing down of a system, the calcifying decay of life and available energy on a scale that may be minute or global. Entropy is the principle within irreversible processes, the principle that, in Freud's words, opposes the undoing of what has already occurred.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, it pertains to communication, or better said in this case, with the lack of communication. Moreover, it is said that metaphors stand at the very beginning of the human world – the entire human experience of thought, action and language is patterned and organized in a metaphorical way.

Pynchon has the merit of building, with a remarkable humour, such a complex social situation so that it absorbs you within it and forces you to experience it. Also, he potentiates

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Harper Perennial, electronic edition, 1966, p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane and *The Crying of Lot 49*", Harold Bloom (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, p. 12.

his characters with some incredulous, hilarious names, all based upon a closer or a remote reality. For instance, the name Oedipa suggests that this novel, too, belongs to the genre of detective story; also, it is a reference to Oedipus, the Sophoclean hero who, similarly, is in search for a solution to a problem involving a dead person, and possibly to the Freudian theory of Oedipal complex. Pierce Inverarity's name, like most of the Pynchonian names, bears a suggestion too. Inverarity alludes to the latin *veritas*, "truth", but, due to the prefix *in-*, it denotes quite the contrary, the evasiveness of truth. Actually, all characters' names are symbols or ironic references to the epoch's realities, or just satires addressing the American government.

Pynchon's choice for names is, obviously, a part of the intricate canvas of his novels, adding to the mystery and, at the same time, to the irony and humour of his works; symbols and allusions are to be met at every turning, such is the case with the most prevalent in the novel: the post horn, which stands for free communication. On the contrary, the muted horn stands for the impediment of communication, for the organisational secrecy, for silencing, as is the case with all types of gatherings around an ideal, a principle, an interest, be it brotherhoods, guilds, associations, organisations or cults. But communication helps humankind create an ordered space in the universe, whereas the lack of communication accelerates the process of the isolation, of alienation.

The novel is a kind of a detective story, although a reversed one – the murder occurs in the end, whereas the investigation starts at the very beginning. The heroine ventures, or better said, is sent on a quest for knowledge – in fact, she has to execute the legacy of her now dead ex-lover, Pierce Inverarity, a Californian millionaire real estate developer. Oedipa decides to do her duty and goes to San Narciso, her ex-lover's hometown, where she meets the other characters and gets into the whole Tristero mystery, with all its symbols, which may as well be nothing but a huge, complex joke played on her by her ex-lover. During her quest, she begins to acutely feel a sense of isolation – the world around her seems to be a world perpetually on drugs, maniac and full of conspiracies and illusions. The novel ends as Oedipa, who is alone and alienated from that society, having lost connections with the life she had before trying to uncover the mystery of the Tristero, sits in the auction room waiting for the crying of Lot 49, which consists of Inverarity's stamps that have a muted post horn in their watermark, when she may discover the identity of the mystery bidder. Or she may not. As Bran Nicol puts it,

Oedipa begins to wonder if she is going mad, and realizes towards the end of the novel that there are four alternatives for making sense of what is happening to her: (1) she has really

discovered a secret network; (2) this discovery is simply a delusion; (3) a vast conspiracy has been mounted to fool her into *thinking* she has discovered a secret network; or (4) she's imagining such a conspiracy. She is unable to determine which one is the truth.<sup>11</sup>

With the Tristero conspiracy Oedipa vainly tries to solve, it is asserted that there is no standard ending at all, and within the larger structures of language and style, there can be no final answer, no true ending. Pynchon heightens fictions in order to create order and make sense of the world, but to tell how true such fictions are, or what their ultimate meaning is proves to be an impossibility.

If read in allegorical key, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a political novel. According to Charles Hollander,<sup>12</sup> due to the political and social context of the mid-sixties – “the paranoid climate of the times”, Pynchon, deliberately, chose allegory to tell his Menippean satire.

Similarly, James Wood points to an allegory, commencing by saying, “Thomas Pynchon is the most allegorical American writer since Melville, and, for better or worse, the clear inheritor of Melville's broken estate.”<sup>13</sup> And continues to judge the author for his novels which “behave like allegories that refuse to allegorize”, novels that add piles of meanings he denies, allegory being the principle of Pynchon's fiction, which “elaborates an allegorical politics.” Quoting from the novel, “The only alternative was some unthinkable order of music, many rhythms, all keys at once . . .” Wood wonders what the vehicle of a “plotlessness” novel is, adding that Pynchon opposes a musical novel, with “many plots or tunes” to a government's plot, since the writer believes in the importance of plurality of voices, which, the critic underlines ironically, offers people (readers included) many choices and that passes as pluralism. Although Pynchonian fiction is construed always upon a binary: “Either utopia or dystopia; either governance or dream; either too much meaning or not enough meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the end of *The Crying of Lot 49* poses a dual choice: exile or madness, the illusive organisation, Tristero, really exists or it is only Oedipa's hallucination.

And Wood concludes in his unmistakable style:

Pynchon uses allegory to hide truth, and in so doing expands allegory into a fetish of itself. [...] But what is left when allegory does not believe in the possibility of truth is not

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<sup>11</sup> Bran Nicol, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Hollander, “Pynchon, JFK and the CIA: Magic Eye Views of *The Crying of Lot 49*” — *Pynchon Notes* 40-41 (1997): 61–106, <<http://www.ottosell.de/pynchon/magiceye.htm>>.

<sup>13</sup> James Wood, “Thomas Pynchon and the Problem of Allegory”, *The Broken Estate. Essays on Literature and Belief*, Pimlico 2000, electronic edition.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*.

allegory but merely *the allegorical*; or a dogmatic faith in the allegorical. What is left are novels that draw attention to their own significations, which hang without reference, pointing like a severed arm to nowhere in particular.<sup>15</sup>

Thomas Pynchon's seventh novel, *Inherent Vice* (2009), is another detective story. It is his third novel of the above mentioned trilogy, whose action is set in Southern California, in 1970. Reviewing the book in 2009, Michiko Kakutani opines:

*Inherent Vice* is a simple shaggy-dog detective story that pits likable dopers against the Los Angeles Police Department and its "countersubversive" agents, a novel in which paranoia is less a political or metaphysical state than a byproduct of smoking too much weed.<sup>16</sup>

*Inherent Vice* abounds in particular spatial and cultural references, as Pynchon does not contradict his encyclopaedic style: San Pedro, the Manson Family killings, Robert Moses, the architect, films: *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster* (1964), musicians: Fapardokly, The Beach Boys, The Rolling Stones, the Archies, and the epigraph, "*Under the paving stones, the beach!*" referring to the events of May 1968 in France, in short, a revolutionary movement and the beginning of the direct democracy, and for the characters in the novel, an invitation to dare.

The paving stones stand for the changes, for the human interference in the natural preordained arrangement and that was one of the discontents, among others, of the revolutionaries from France, *les soixante-huitards*. Likewise, Golden Fang, the "Indochinese heroin cartel" stands for the global capital and opposes to the idyllic Lemuria, the fantastic place longed for by people under the influence of psychedelic drugs.

The protagonist, Larry Sportello (Doc) is a private investigator, who indulges in drinking and pot smoking. Contrary to the typical hard-boiled private eye, Doc is a countercultural type. He wears his hair in a "fairly presentable foot-and-a-half-diameter white-guy Afro" and is the opposite of tall and imposing, but, apparently determined: "What I lack in *al-titude*," Doc explained for the million or so-th time in his career, "I make up for in *at-titude*."<sup>17</sup> He investigates and is investigated, in his turn.

Again, Pynchon proves highly imaginative as concerns characters' names, choosing bizarre, yet humorous combinations, being ironic especially when it comes to policemen's and

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<sup>15</sup> Idem.

<sup>16</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "Another Doorway to the Paranoid Pynchon Dimension", *The New York Times* online, August 3, 2009, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/04/books/04kaku.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/04/books/04kaku.html?_r=0)>.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, Penguin Press, New York, 2009, p. 17.

federal agents' names: Bigfoot Bjornsen, agent Borderline (suggesting an emotionally unstable personality as the noun is part of the name of a psychiatric condition, Borderline personality disorder), agent Flatweed (suggesting a novice, an unimportant person, someone who could be eaten alive, as the plant is edible). In fact, all the names are very sonorous and funny, and, maybe a befitted characterization: Petunia Leeway (leeway means "a degree of freedom of action or thought"), Scott Oof (*oof* is an exclamation expressing discomfort), Sledge Potet (again, an oxymoron, combining the French word *petite* with the noun "sledge", a large and heavy hammer), etc. Yet, many critics maintain that like all Pynchon's characters, these too are only sketched. As Kakutani puts it:

The characters in this novel, however, are decidedly less three-dimensional. With the exception of Doc, who has a vague, poignant charm, they bear less of a resemblance to the fully human heroes of *Mason & Dixon* than to the flimsy paper dolls who populated much of his earlier fiction: collections of funny Pynchonian names, bizarre tics, weird occupations and weirder sexual predilections. Many seem to exist for no reason other than that Mr. Pynchon dreamed them up and inserted them into the story, to fill up space or to act as vague red herrings in Doc's quest to find Shasta and ensure her safety.<sup>18</sup>

Three-dimensional or not, the federal agents, doctors, officers, vice dolls, stoners, surfers, musicians, draft dodgers, all the characters in the novel gather and disband, all connecting and intersecting, loving or hating each other, designing a story, a multi-branched plot. But as Kakutani remarks, "Mr. Pynchon's picaresque plots, of course, are Christmas trees on which he can hang all sorts of ornaments, tinsel, garlands and flashing lights, and the plot of *Inherent Vice* is no exception."<sup>19</sup>

Like all Pynchon's novels, *Inherent Vice* is a mixture of real and unreal, possible and impossible, seriousness and humour, and like all the three novels set in Southern California. Similarly, Pynchon's Southern Californians are those typical inhabitants of the zone and of that particular time, young and adults, dopers, boozers, hippies, jazz fans, sex attracted, who "embody and even exaggerate, where exaggeration is possible, the anything-goes, we're-all-bozos-on-this-bus, no-hobbyhorse-too-lame-to-ride spirit that non-Californians often attribute, stereotypically if not always inaccurately, to the residents of that state."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, everybody

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<sup>18</sup> Michiko Kakutani, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>20</sup> *Idem.*



seems to be connected to everybody as if they form a network, and a complicated system of information circulates among them all.

Yet, in spite of setting the plot in a precise American geography and creating Californian-like characters, *Inherent Vice* maintains one strand of continuity with the imaginary realms found in previous Pynchon works. Real(ism) do not exclude the unreal, but the solution to it is found in the occasional hallucinations induced to Doc by the consumption of drugs. The states induced could offer information, at least about the gist of his mind and permit the introduction of surreal, uncanny parts without breaking the (realistic) conventions of the detective story genre.

Pynchon uses the concept of inherent vice as an extended metaphor in an attempt to demonstrate once more that individuals are subjects to the complex system of the world with its social, economic, historic, cultural components, and the system cannot be reduced to the desires, concerns, fears or beliefs of all humans, and, like in the case of the inherent vice of the goods, people cannot be held liable for their inherent faults (original sin included). And there is always hope. The last lines of the novel show the protagonist driving through fog and meditating upon the future:

For whatever would happen. For a forgotten joint to materialize in his pocket. For the CHP to come by and choose not to hassle him. For a restless blonde in a Stingray to stop and offer him a ride. For the fog to burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead.<sup>21</sup>

From a penmanship point of view, the end not only justifies the means, but the form, too. That is, on the impetuous background of the American society at the beginning of the seventies, hysterical realism is a justified choice. Besides, as long as the aim is to render the idea that the original sin or the inherent guilt are not always the root of all evils and even bad persons deserve sympathy, mercy, a second chance.

As Millard concludes:

What Pynchon may in fact have constructed is a novel of ideas in potboiler disguise, frankly if subterraneanly didactic, motivated more by the urgency of disseminating the core idea—the inherent tragedy and potential for disaster associated with certain forms of humanly built space and social organization—than by the aesthetic criteria of humanistic realism.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, op. cit., p. 356.

<sup>22</sup> Bill Millard, *op. cit.*

That is why Thomas Pynchon, one of the major figures of the postmodern American literature, “despite (or because of) his formidable difficulty, polymathic range of references, personal elusiveness and reputation for outrage and obscenity”<sup>23</sup>, is considered the master of the paranoid fiction. The paranoid novels emerged in USA in the 1960s, amidst the Vietnam War and the Cold War. Besides, in that decade the whole world witnessed the assassination of John F. Kennedy and of Martin Luther King, the changes brought by Civil Rights movement, women rights movement, or the events of May 1968 in France, all these milestones leaving their hallmarks upon the entire humankind and creating a state of anxiety, inducing a conspiracy-thinking. People began to think that their minds were somehow manipulated. Under the circumstances, postmodern writers acted accordingly by telling stories of manipulation and taking-over. As Bran Nicol maintains, “we might suggest that Lyotard’s diagnosis of a decline in the belief in ‘metanarratives’ is paralleled by a rise in conspiracy narratives, alternative metanarratives in which disparate and apparently unconnected events can be linked together.”<sup>24</sup>

As such, it is not surprising that Pynchon’s fiction abounds in conspiracy narratives. His are encyclopaedic novels, very dense, with many plots and subplots, with tens of characters forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels, with hundreds of pages on which there is information from engineering physics, thermodynamics, mathematics, history, and what not, in the form of detective stories, which can be read in different keys – as political allegories, for instance, in which case, Nicol says, we are dealing with “too much meaning”.<sup>25</sup> In his maximalist writings, the plots of fully imagined fiction are entwined with plots of history or science, reason why the critic James Wood labelled Pynchon’s writing as pertaining to hysterical realism.

As Wood maintains,

At present, contemporary novelists are increasingly eager to “tell us about the culture,” to fill their books with the latest report on “how we live now.” Information is the new character; we are constantly being told that we should be impressed by how much writers know. *What* they should know, and *how* they came to know it, seems less important, alas, than that they simply know it. The idea that what one knows might—to use Nietzsche’s phrase—“come out of one’s own burning” rather than free and flameless from Google, seems at present alien. The

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<sup>23</sup> Inger H. Dalsgaard *et al.* (eds.), *op. cit.*, Introduction, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Bran Nicol, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*, p. 98.

danger is that the American fondness for realism combines with this will-to-information to produce a hyperliteralism of the novel.<sup>26</sup>

The critic reproaches the contemporary authors their penchant for informational novels (or novels of ideas), as they fill hundreds of pages with all their knowledge from different domains of science and technology instead of offering only “life.” Wood’s guiding principle is “lifeness” and when a writer over-imbues his or her prose with facts and data, in the detriment of the life on the page, when the characters in these novels are not really alive, not fully human, the outcome is anything but realism. He coined the phrase “hysterical realism” in order to describe novels that are characterized by chronic length, manic characters, frenzied action, and frequent digressions on topics secondary to the story. And such is the case with Thomas Pynchon, who he put under the same umbrella with Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie and other postmodern novelists.

In his turn, Dale Peck, although admits that Pynchon is a very gifted writer, saying that “Pynchon should have been what Melville was”<sup>27</sup>, sees only the zaniness, the slapstick, and “the same one-dimensional commentary on contemporary society” in Pynchon’s novels. “These, in fact, are the parts of Pynchon that recent writers *have* imitated, but both Peck *and* contemporary novelists seem oblivious to the deeper, darker aspects of Pynchon’s works, the hallucinatory grandeur of his vision”, as Eric Ketzan insists. And he adds: “Pynchon, however, aims to capture a larger picture: history, war, sex, and death as they affect society and the human psyche in general. In the process, Pynchon loses focus on the people, the believable characters, that interest Peck the most.”<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, there are those critics who disagree with Wood and Peck, saying that they use nineteenth century criteria to judge contemporary literature, without taking into consideration reality: “These are hysterical times”<sup>29</sup>, Zadie Smith maintains, consequently, twenty-first century realism cannot be of the same kind with the nineteenth century realism, and as such, the mode is appropriate for the period of time spanning from the 1960s up to the present. The complex world with its turbulent existence is adequately rendered in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*. On their pages, through the amalgam of the multi-plotted detective

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<sup>26</sup> James Wood, “A Reply to the Editors”, *op.cit.*

<sup>27</sup> James Atlas, “The Take Down Artist”, *The New York Times* online, October 26, 2003, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/magazine/26PECK.html>>.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Ketzan, “In Defense of Joyce and Pynchon. A Response to Dale Peck’s Hatchet Jobs”, August 27, 2005, <[http://www.themodernword.com/columns/slightly\\_foxed\\_003.html](http://www.themodernword.com/columns/slightly_foxed_003.html)>.

<sup>29</sup> Zadie Smith, “This is how it feels to me”, *The Guardian* online, Saturday, October 13, 2001 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/13/fiction.afghanistan>>.

story presence, numerous characters, hallucinatory events and actions, dense information and the rest of ingredients, readers may perceive cultural, social and political aspects of the USA in the 1960s with all the problems, but as fictionalized as it is, nonetheless a fresco.

Irrespective of the approaches in analysing his writings and of critics' views on his style, Thomas Pynchon remains one of the most prominent contemporary writers and his encyclopaedic novels the well deserved place within the canon.

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