

Entropy and the Fantastic in Pynchon's Narratives

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### Recommended Citation

Burillo Gadea, María Rosa. "Entropy and the Fantastic in Pynchon's Narratives." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.4 (2008): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1395>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1395)

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**Volume 10 Issue 4 (December 2008) Article 6**  
**María Rosa Burillo Gadea,**  
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/6>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.4 (2008)**  
**Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature***  
**Edited by Asunción López-Varela**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Entropy and the Fantastic in Pynchon's Narratives" María Rosa Burillo Gadea postulates that dealing with Pynchon's fiction one is not sure if paranoia is presented as an alternative way of grasping other possible spheres, a more comprehensive vision of the world, or merely a joke. Pynchon's stories try to reproduce reality in different fictional grounds. He uses the notion of entropy, the level of molecular disorder of a thermodynamic system when heated as a metaphor for a disorderly and chaotic universe, necessary, however, in order to avoid the fatality of system exhaustion or death. A kind of disenchantment with the world is presented, together with a challenge to rules, norms, and ingredients of nostalgia, sorrow, and humor. The use of the fantastic in Pynchon is a way to escape, to apprehend different realities, and to fight against canonical stagnation.

**María Rosa BURILLO GADEA**

### **Entropy and the Fantastic in Pynchon's Narratives**

In this article I analyze the concept and use of entropy in Thomas Pynchon's narratives. Pynchon employs scientific arguments such as the second law of thermodynamics where closed systems move towards fatal uniformity and open systems thus suggesting that although exposed to a certain entropic disorder which continuously enters the system, this alters the world and produces change. The key to managing the level of disorder is selection. The metaphor of "Maxwell's demon," a little creature who selects which molecules are allowed in and out of the open system offers an alternative via to complete uniformity and therefore system exhaustion and death on the one hand and total chaos on the other. Postmodern texts such as Pynchon's develop these apparently incongruous patterns which, beginning with uncertainty and moving on, progressively, into the anxiety of never knowing if characters' experiences are to be trusted, for they may be just the natural evolution of hallucination or paranoia.

In Pynchon, the quests that his protagonists undertake are driven back to the reader who will have to find out themselves whether the desolate landscape, the metallic atmosphere at night, or the world of shadows, are just delusion of lunacy, or, on the contrary, the perception of true sensibilities. Patricia Waugh suggests that Pynchon's work is an effort to escape fatality with the "vast proliferation of counter-systems and counter-games suggests one way of eluding the apparent predetermination of the structures of the everyday world" (39). Conspiracy has always been traditionally an effective device used by media for the understanding of history and society (see Goldberg). Pynchon's characters move obsessively pursuing unspeakable conspiracies further suggesting disorder and paranoia. Tony Tanner also sets Pynchon's work "in that line of dazzlingly daring" (91) and rejecting "allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretation" (Todorov 33). His narratives resemble night fantasies such as those written by Edgar Allan Poe or Henry James, although, simultaneously, they appear to cry out for a kind of spiritual fulfilment at a time when industrialized society demands standardization and order. In Pynchon, the metaphor of entropy signifies multiplicity and change: "the pull towards entropy signifies the tendency of an organism to move towards stability, where the organic merges with the inorganic and where separate units fuse together" (Jackson 80). Ambition and desire precipitate this acceleration into disorder and chaos, which lie under the appearance of unity and equilibrium: "in American consumerism discovered a similar tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos. He ... envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease" ("Entropy" 88-89).

One may also think of genetically manipulated products, apparently perfect but all alike. Pynchon fears what is already evident: homogenization, globalization; scientifically explained as bodies with the same temperature, not able to exchange energy any more; a world of paralysis, lacking newness and fantasy, and leading to cultural exhaustion and death: "She had sensed his obsession long ago, realized somehow that that constant 37 was now decisive. Suddenly then, as if seeing the single and unavoidable conclusion ... turned to face the man on the bed and wait with him until the moment of equilibrium was reached, when 37 degrees Fahrenheit should prevail both outside and inside, and forever, and the hovering curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion" (98). The metaphor of Maxwell's demon, who selects the molecules exchanged between two closed systems (containers) at the same temperature, ensures that systems do not become extinct or dead once all their chemical activity is over; this process guarantees a path towards differentiation so that life can be restored. Pynchon focuses on the scientific debate on Maxwell's metaphor and plays with the possibility that things might not be embedded in logical principles after all. He seems to suggest that desire may be mistakenly taken for hope and that the end of

Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* might only be the lunatic, ardent wish of paranoia since, as Allen Thither indicates "science is almost always involved in any depiction of madness" (265).

In Pynchon's narratives there always remains the suspicion that inevitability and fatal doom could have been somehow prevented, and this is the game, the fantasy, the illusion, the playful joke. Emily Apter suggests that Pynchon's fiction "coincides with an American paradigm of oneworldedness hatched in the 1960s at the zenith of Cold War paranoia" (387). The strength of human desire, feverishly pursuing quests to the point of delusion, as in *Don Quixote*, is all that may be, again paradoxically, certain. Possibilities are all we have and, whether entropy drowns the most sensitive characters into its abyss, or whether they survive and keep trying to make sense of the world, this remains a puzzle for the reading audience, also engaged in making sense of the story. This is the key to understanding Pynchon and something that authors interested in metaphysical arguments typically share: a rebellion to commonness and non-existence and a plea for individuality, creativity and fantasy. The *non sequitur* in the linguistic chain becomes the necessary means for wrapping farce in its proper material and result in an elusive playful, imaginative, unambitious, unpretentious, and almost dismayed hope-game.

Intertextuality is another interesting aspect of Pynchon's narratives, where he warns about the danger of believing excessively in tales, history, and the confusion of living the lives that others have led before, that is, becoming too immersed in the stories of the past. Confusion, in the form of entropy is found everywhere in *The Crying of Lot 49*. The workers at Inverarity's industrial empire appear as if drugged, in a world of complacent smiles, nice songs, uniformity, and pretended happiness. The complacency we find in offices and among average men at work is parodied in the hymn that they placidly sing, assuming a servile attitude, lack of personality and a lifeless existence. In fact, they appear to show faithfulness, the feature that has permeated the character of the U.S. since the early times of the Puritans. These images of artificially domesticated happiness may suggest the farcical assumption that people have deviated from their course of existence and given up the honest search for transcendence, "a million bureaucrats are diligently plotting death and some of them even know it" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 111) but also, perhaps, humanity's unconscious choices to escape loneliness. The dominant feature in Pynchon's narratives seems to be fact that entropic disorder may derive from these servile and non-differentiated attitudes. Thus, uncertainty, always a quality of the fantastic, grows: "A fantastic mode, structured upon contradiction, upon 'impossibility', becomes a disturbingly appropriate medium in Pynchon's texts to represent the fullness and emptiness of secularized culture" (Jackson 170). Grounded on a general disenchantment and under the assumption that no one can be as foolish as to assume the responsibility of playing God and add yet another catechism to the tales and stories corrupting humanity, Pynchon places all answers on his readers' interpretations.

Another device to provide uncertainty is the use of unreliable protagonists and narrators, a device used variously from Cervantes to Swift, in Ford Madox Ford's criticism of the World War I in *The Good Soldier*, or moving towards the fantastic and the gothic as in Edgar Allan Poe's stories. Poe's horror relies frequently on the confessional tone adopted by murderers who make their readers participants in the stories, and therefore, in the criminal acts within. Similarly, Pynchon uses the topic of conspiracy but, instead of horror, he injects it with parody and fun, thus providing a means of escaping the underlying disenchantment. Married to Mucho Maas, a discjockey who plays alternative tunes and therefore not pleasurable for the general public, the unreliability of Oedipa Maas lies in her stubborn desire, as her name suggests. This text, formerly published in *Esquire* as a short story, where Oedipa was termed "The Flesh," fits as a signifier of preclosure to understand the wholeness or "storyness" (Lohafer 3) of the longer narrative. What Oedipa considers her only purpose in life, her determination to exert the legacy of Pierce Inverarity, turns to be the delusion of paranoia and yet another dilemma between truth and untruth. Her experience of delusive freedom while driving her car at night and listening to the radio takes place early in the novel, so that the reader already begins to doubt her judgement. The delusive presence of media occurs also in Joyce Carol Oates's story "Where Are You

Going, Where Have You Been?" and in John Cheever's "The Enormous Radio." All events that encircle Oedipa's quest have to do, or are essentially connected with media either playing a vindictive role or being a reminder of the tradition and the past, but also perhaps a further mockery connected to the farce. The night at the motel, Metzger, her current lover, is trying to uncover Oedipa's disguises, undressing the multiple clothes she is wearing in a playful and yet, non-committal game. The television in Oedipa's room is showing images of *Justine*, a submarine exploring the depths of the ocean and Pynchon plays with these media images in order to show the reader the ambiguous nature of values such as love, justice, soldiers' honour, etc., manipulated on the screen. The broadcasted scenes on justice forecast the injustice of what is to be found at Fangoso Lagoon, property of Pierce Inverarity, the place that Oedipa, Metzger, and the Paranoids visit the following morning. Under the waters of the Lagoon lie the bones of soldiers who fought in World War II as if demanding some sort of hidden justice. It is a desolate place, and the description follows the general tone of the book, inconclusive and apparently loose. It is as if all the symptoms of rightness have been silenced conveniently and the loosened syntax reinforces this feeling. Traces of apparent death suggesting again decadence and non-differentiation coexist within a system, which disentangles itself from the norm in an attempt to exert its right to difference and existence. As with Oedipa, there seems to be an urgent need to go on pursuing alternative clues, and thus, we learn that the bones come from *Lago di Pietá* in Italy. All the hints of what has traditionally been considered valuable are either shown as comic strips on television, hidden under the ocean, or concealed, and secretly lured, as the rightful heir of the dukedom in the play *The Courier's Tragedy*, a play embedded in the narrative.

The only consistency is for erotic desire, and regarding the dispassionate way of looking at it, one recalls John Irving's distorted protagonists, and the parody of lives played against tradition. We are inclined to give credit to John Nefastis, a scientist obsessed with perpetual motion. He has tried to invent a type of Maxwell's Demon. Oedipa visits him to see the machine after learning about him from another character in the story. He shows her the machine but causes her to run away when he propositions sexual intercourse, thus contradicting his very seriousness. The reader gets puzzled in further doubt the more when his theory and its consequences are the red line of the novel itself. The traditional concept of love, as it has perpetuated itself in the form of myth, is mocked at implicitly. The argument was already evident in "Entropy" and it assumes the general knowledge that in a world where disorder prevails, love is just another distorted memory, and no more: "Tell a girl: 'I love you.' No trouble with two-thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, that's the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 90-91). And yet, the dialectal argument of the novel is arranged around these two main polarities, homogenization by free enterprising absolute demands for uniformity versus singularity. The narrative remains playfully unconcerned, delusive, an excursion into desolate and forlorn places where characters appear like ghosts and cease to be present where television and *The Courier's Tragedy* seem to be very much the heart of the matter. Oedipa watches the play for it seems to have to do with the vindication of the legacy she seeks. It is about the claims to the legal inheritance of a dukedom and the idea brings back echoes of usurpers everywhere, pushing honest citizens into anonymity and fraud. Following the traditional revenge patterns of good and evil in a comical manner, the play reviews the way in which the legal heir to the dukedom is saved from death.

The play also includes the classic items of the legend and the legendary. There are the conventionally good characters, Tristero and his faithful men, the legitimate heir to the dukedom, and the usurper Duke. The scenes are depicted in a crazy way, distorting the very essence of the legend which had been framed conventionally in realistic patterns pursuing verisimilitude for didacticism. The episode with the goat suggests further mockery and fun and it is certainly a goat that has saved the legitimate duke from dying, preserving his rightful claims to honour and power, values that if we remember the strips on television and the anecdotes at the Fangoso Lagoon, are very much under the water, as it

were. The goat points to ritualistic sacrifices as old as the Bible, branching in ancient Greece into the orgiastic and carnivalesque images of Dionysus. *The Courier's Tragedy* deals with the farcical memory of Moses' salvation, and the implications of the theme within puritan US-America are made comically and farcically visible. Again, as in many of Pynchon's stories, the process of the play suggests the pattern of the traditional detective story, imitating mockingly the ritual of fiction, the assumption of lies and later delusion. However, Pynchon seems to imply that legend and fantasy are the natural grounds for veritable judgement, notwithstanding the possible danger to assume only one option as absolute truth. The play, a microcosm of the dialectal arguments of the novel, underlies the essence of the structural domain of fiction which might set a further lie while it also brings to mind all the stories that we have believed in, the myths that we have been told and retold, and the literary intertextual catechisms we should avoid. The reminiscence of values is so strong that thoughts and mementos move our sensibility, as when Oedipa is told "you could waste your life that way and never touch the truth" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 80) and a little later, "the true Pacific stayed inviolate ... into some more general truth" (55), or when the dead are recalled in a dismayed plea for eternity and justice, "As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine" (99). No wonder that the actual Waste is perceived by Oedipa in her delusion as standing for WASTE. And it seems that the protagonist, imbued with the ideas of *The Courier's Tragedy*, is mistakenly interpreting the letters for what her mind thinks they mean: "We Await Silently Prospero's Empire."

Damien Broderick has suggested that unreality may help to comprehend the world as we know it, for by dreaming magical solutions to our woes and limitations, sometimes we work out how to fix them in reality (14). Be that as it may, it seems safe to say that at least, in the middle of disorder, there lays the right to play with inexistent dreams and the illusion that they might be true, or rather, they might have been true. Thus, Oedipa's discovery of the *true* meaning of WASTE urges her into disentangling the mystery of the world, and perhaps the enigma of Trystero's presence in the actual world of reality. And it is at this point that both realities coexist enlightening the detective argument with further confusion. Hallucinatory practices have to do with the non-differentiation between fantasy, as set in the play, and reality. Oedipa's task is for an alternative way to communication and there seem to be signs of it everywhere. She had already learned from the *The Courier's Tragedy* that there used to be two postal services, the regular Thurn and Taxis and that of Trystero's, whose symbol stands as a muted post-horn. The reference to silence as trustworthy communication had already been present in some details in "Entropy." The story recalls a concert of instruments without sound, and the novel deals with silence in the form of stamps, pointing to other times and places. The vision has to do with the structure, and its disregard of traditional *tempo*. At the end, we learn that these stamps are the very material of lot 49 and what it is made of. Silenced communication is assumed as the realm of desire, corresponding exclusively to the very sensitive; "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" (24). At the climax of the narrative, it turns out to be what Trystero and his army of knights are looking for: "isolate meetings would destroy the whole point of it" (113).

US-America's legacy points to different places and times, remaining a wish adorned in a ceremony of purchase, parodying consumption. The silent presence of the knights, their outraged dignity, their victimization over the years, demands a serious treatment, but the reader is deluded by the hallucinatory dreams of the protagonist, pushed into deceit. Michael Bérubé has noted that the reading is experienced "partially as exhilaration and partially as terror, because playing games without established rules is alternately fun and appalling, and culture abhors the vacuum consequent upon the author's disappearance" (305). It is in this lack of purpose where the narrative best fits into the fantastic, for "the purely fantastic ... has little purposive transformation. Changes *are*, without meaning" (Jackson 85). If the reader, as Oedipa in the novel, is no longer able to distinguish between reality and fiction, taking as real what it is presented under the manipulating images of media, differentiation is a lost battle and people can turn into automatons: "computers acting like people ... you can just as well turn

that around, and talk about human behavior like a program fed into an IBM machine" ("Entropy" 90). The development of *The Crying of 49* confirms what was already evident in the concepts posed in the short story. Fantasy permeates contemporary culture, and has been received enthusiastically by both reading public and the academe.

Christine Brooke-Rose suggests that metafiction is not only literary and that it is beginning to be equally extensive to criticism. Similar to Jack Zipes, she considers this as a transgressive symptom of the disenchantment of the times. In implicating the reader, the narrative seeks to share responsibility and authority (authorship): "The story of narratology became as self-reflective as a postmodern novel" (Brooke-Rose 291), or in Randy Schroeder's words: "residual semantic modes" (96), seeking to move readers into action via entropy. Thus, John Barth's "Life Story," one of the tales included in *Lost in the Funhouse*, is narrated by another stymied author who reflects on the seeming impossibility of producing new fiction in late-twentieth century, lamenting that he can offer only another story about a writer writing a story and implicating repeatedly the readers and even rebuking them for their excessive patience. In *Chimera*, Barth also evidences chaos and disorder, the impossibility of communication and, thus, of love: "Oh it is killing me the way they walk down the street together, laughing and talking, those men and women. Pushing the pram too, whether the man is doing it, or the woman is doing it. Normal life. And a fine October chill in the air. It is unbearable, this consensus, this damned felicity. When I see a couple fighting I give them a dollar, because fighting is interesting. Thank God for fighting" (66-67).

Nature is no longer a saving device in postmodern narratives. In a world dominated by media technologies, the only escape is, paradoxically, a parallel virtual universe of paranoia and fantasy. For example, in Donald Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising" in his *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* Comanches conquer a modern city and people try to defend by setting ash-trays and other objects in an imaginary battle. Like Pynchon, these writers do not offer any hope for certainty or resolution. Desire, suspicion and sometimes despair are the psychological grounds of fantasy, a kind of Freudian return to the repressed, the child within us, seeking to escape from a world one can no longer control and therefore predict. In a world of machines, manipulated media messages, and massive global corporations, what does it remain of the individual? Perplexity takes over, even if flavoured with fun. But even this *jouissance* could be yet another delusion.

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