

Anita Desai is not a writer of epics—indeed, few women are. Instead, she works within a narrow range, showing the impact of forces on one individual. In *Cry, the Peacock* she deals with a narrow aspect of Indian culture, setting, etc. Were it not for the fact that Maya accompanies Gautama's visiting relatives on a shopping trip to Delhi, we would not even know where she lives. Though for practical purposes she lives in a house, not a city—and indeed, in the most basic sense she lives not in a house, but in her own mind. Still, although the author has disposed of many of the "essentials" of plot, setting, and characters, this does not mean that *Cry, the Peacock* lacks Indianness. Maya is an Indian, and her thoughts have an Indianness about them, despite their disturbed state. She reflects on Indian weather, Indian flora and fauna, Indian religious and mythical figures (especially Shiva and the dance of death), and traditional folk/religious elements (as personified by the astrologer). She takes for granted a pampered way of life, but she seems not to view it as related to modernity or to the West, even though the amenities have been provided by her father and her husband, both lawyers and therefore men who travel in highly Westernized circles. If we take Maya's attitude toward the cabaret-goers as emblematic of her more general perception of the West, she is not much impressed or influenced by it.

Desai's language is more than uniquely Indian; it is uniquely her own. She uses the normal Indian English vocabulary for weather, food, clothing, etc., but she heightens it by inventing interesting, even shocking, combinations of words. Unusual juxtapositions and arresting metaphors constantly assault the senses of readers, almost demanding that they feel the way Maya herself feels. In no other way could the inner life of such a woman be described or conveyed.

Anita Desai is in the vanguard of a new generation of Indian writers who are experimenting with themes of inner consciousness. She makes significant contributions to Indian literature, and to world literature in English; at the same time, she gives her readers valuable insights into the feminine consciousness through her memorable protagonists.⁵

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Explaining Thomas Pynchon

With the publication in 1973 of his third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon became that enigmatic object in American letters, a "major" author. He had, of course, established a sound reputation among the literary elite, the well-informed, and those looking for cultural heroes, but after *Gravity's Rainbow* (its very size seemed to deem it so), he ascended to that Olympian realm inhabited by, for example, Mann, Joyce, and Nabokov, with whom he is now often mentioned. The popularity and importance of *Gravity's Rainbow* initiated a deluge of reviews, critical articles, bibliographies, and, recently, full-length studies of Pynchon's work. To Joseph Slade's early and perceptive book on Pynchon's first two novels have been added, to my knowledge, two more books on Pynchon and two collections of critical essays, as well as a plethora of

information published in the scholarly journals. There promises to be much more, and it is time to begin to assess the growing effort to explain our most difficult and elusive, perhaps our most significant contemporary novelist.

William Plater's *The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) is an important critique of Pynchon's fiction, if for no other reason than the fact that it is the first general analysis of Pynchon's work including *Gravity's Rainbow*; all future studies of Pynchon will have to take Plater's book into account. Plater's ostensible purpose is to "reconstruct" Pynchon's work by describing his use of metaphors as "a system of transformation—a form of aesthetic seduction favoring imagination rather than reason—in which the limits of language are exploited as revelation" (xiii). For Plater, Pynchon's metaphors, collated together and translated into basic themes, can be seen as systematized into a series of "paired opposites," entropy and a closed system vs. freedom, reality vs. illusion, life vs. death—these form the rough outlines of Pynchon's world view. While seeing Pynchon's fictional realm as a series of dualities and the critical enterprise as one which attempts to discover or reconstruct a system of oppositions buried within the language of the novels, Plater fails to clearly define or defend his approach to Pynchon for what it is—a structuralist critique of Pynchon's work. This lack of theoretical clarity does much harm to Plater's book, for while it takes into account many of the difficulties encountered by Pynchon's readers and explicates some important themes, it fails to set forth a general thesis, either Plater's or Pynchon's own, concerning how we are to understand the body of Pynchon's fiction.

The lack of thesis stands sharply in contrast to Plater's thorough knowledge of Pynchon's sources, Henry Adams, Wittgenstein, and Norman Wiener among them, and his often helpful references to psychology, philosophy, mythology, and physics used to explain a troublesome point. Indeed, in the first chapter of his book, "All That is the Case," Plater succeeds somewhat in exploring Pynchon's murky closed world of "entropy," a concept Plater explains within scientific, linguistic, temporal, and historical contexts, showing well how pervasive is Pynchon's notion that the world is a closed system which can either run down or regenerate itself. But Plater's grasp on the concept is not always clear, and the uncertainty in regard to theory becomes stylistic vagueness when Plater makes such statements as this one: "Despite Norman Wiener's contention that the human body is not an isolated system, there is a sense in which the self, for which the body is a container, is closed within its projection of a world. The world as it is and as it is created come together in the self, in the 'I' and the eye of the observer" (p. 19). Even in context, the statement is philosophically indefensible and does not seem to have much to do with Pynchon's anti-empiricist fiction, nor with the structuralist activity of reconstructing it.

Doubtless the best and most original part of Plater's book comes in the second chapter, where Plater describes Pynchon's "Baedeker Land." In keeping with his notion that Pynchon's fiction contains dualities, Plater shows how Pynchon's concept of the land or untouched Nature is countered by the human need for order, artistry, or "landscape." For Pynchon, we are all tourists in this world, demanding countless guidebooks from the scientific to the religious in order to explore it (this explains Pynchon's notorious eclecticism), and his fictions portray "how a tour-consciousness functions at every level from the scholarly to the profane, including the bureaucratic" (p. 81). The tour "is a form of ritualized observation" (p. 101), a way of comprehending and organizing the chaos of Nature; thus, a journey through Pynchon's world reveals a series of

artful metaphors—the rainbow, the tree of knowledge, the serpent—an iconography of journeying having origins in the Adamic myth, and portraying the human need for a comprehension of the land which has been lost while wandering through the landscape of exile. Plater sees the necessity for guidebooks and landscapes as Pynchon's hesitant assertion of hope in a bleak world: for the human ability to organize and make familiar a hostile realm, while it is an illusion and a fiction, is at least a constructive gesture, even while our explorations into the kingdom of science may eventually destroy the land as well as the landscape.

The remainder of Plater's study is less satisfactory. In the third chapter, "Death Transfigured," Plater attempts to deal with, perhaps, the major opposition in Pynchon's fiction, that between life and death. Using Rilke's Ninth of the *Duino Elegies*, Plater asserts that Pynchon is concerned, particularly in *Gravity's Rainbow*, to show the continuity between life and death, and to explore the notion that out of entropy, separation, and death come those elements that, paradoxically, constitute life. Thus, Oedipa's role as a kind of sorting demon in *The Crying of Lot 49* as she processes a glut of information is, ultimately, an act of love and an assertion of life, even though this activity reveals the closed, entropic Tristero system. Similarly, Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* attempts to comprehend the plot behind the 00000 rocket while, simultaneously, being subsumed by it; he acts in opposition to the omnipotent power of the rocket, and though he acts in vain, the deed itself, Plater seems to say, is all that we have or can hope for. Thus death begets life, as the title of Plater's study suggests, and the rocket of *Gravity's Rainbow* is only one symbol which synthesizes the opposition between life and death, as it both destroys life, and signifies life in its ascent and power. The difficulty with Plater's insights about this crucial theme is that their philosophical underpinnings, particularly in Freud and Nietzsche, are not adequately explained, though they are mentioned. Plater tends to make mystical that which Freud went a long way to demystify, and Pynchon's difficult, sophisticated approach to the life/death polarity deserves more discussion.

In the final chapter of the book, Plater accounts for some diverse themes in Pynchon's work, such as paranoia and the concept of counterforce, which he feels need further exploration. Perhaps this final chapter most clearly defines both the weakness and importance of Plater's study: his knowledge of sources and themes in Pynchon's work is impressive, but as the catchall structure of this chapter suggests, he is unable to provide a coherent, unified approach to Pynchon. Thus, Plater's work will serve most usefully as a handbook to Pynchon's fiction, certainly the first of its kind, and will survive as an important guidebook to the tours others will take in Pynchon's realm.

Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, edited by George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1976) is a collection of twelve essays and a bibliography which cover several important aspects of Pynchon's fiction: seven of these have been published previously, many in a special Pynchon issue of *Twentieth Century Literature*; five are original essays. The collection is a significant one, providing essays on "Pynchon in General" and several written specifically upon *Gravity's Rainbow*, uniting a variety of perspectives upon Pynchon's fiction ranging from Anne Mangel's scientific appraisal of entropy in *The Crying of Lot 49* to Catharine R. Stimpson's feminist assessment of *V* and *The Crying of Lot 49* to Edward Mendelson's generic approach to *Gravity's Rainbow* as encyclopedia. The editors do not insist upon an overriding philosophy in their selection of the essays, asserting that the "very idea of a collection of essays about Pynchon violates the terms on which he

presents himself to us" (p. 3). Given Pynchon's predilection for disorder, this view is justified, and the editors have succeeded in giving us a generous compendium of useful approaches to Pynchon's fiction.

Certainly among the outstanding essays are those by Richard Poirier and Scott Sanders. Poirier's "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon" is a cautious introduction to Pynchon's work, somewhat elitist in approach, and of major significance in establishing Pynchon as part of the American literary tradition of skepticism. Poirier writes that Pynchon, like Melville, Hawthorne, and Emerson, searches for the randomness and naivety of the "true self," pursued by "every bookish aspect of life," and thus fears authority and tradition, or the world's "plots." Paradoxically, Pynchon fears freedom: the plot, the book, the tradition is ultimately the only means of self-definition, so that he is caught up in the quandaries of a "distinctly American vision" (p. 29). Poirier shows how Pynchon is a major proponent of that vision. Similarly, Scott Sanders in "Pynchon's Paranoid History" places Pynchon within the Puritan intellectual tradition, demonstrating that Pynchon's paranoia is "the last retreat of the Puritan imagination" (p. 140). Gravity, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is a kind of perverse, paranoid God, a "power at the center of his cosmic conspiracy," which, like the Puritan God, elects the chosen and wreaks havoc upon the "depraved," fallen cosmos of the world's preterite (p. 150). Sanders shows explicitly how the elements of *Gravity's Rainbow* conform to those of Calvinist theology, save that the former are seen as existing in a world bereft of grace and vision. Like Poirier, Sanders describes Pynchon working within a definable tradition, confirming the notion that Pynchon is central to the development of the American vision, and not a product of mere faddishness.

There has been surprisingly little written on Pynchon's style, and two essays in this collection by Tony Tanner and George Levine show the need for a larger discussion of this aspect of Pynchon's work, as well as providing excellent introductory analyses of it. Tanner's "Caries and Cabals" is an abridgement of his larger chapter on Pynchon in *City of Words*. This abbreviation, however, destroys the effectiveness of the original. Though much of the essay is concerned with the idea of "plot" in Pynchon's fiction and the human need to create plots as well as to avoid them, Tanner's insight about Pynchon's style as essentially "stencilized," a parodic evocation of previous writers from Melville to Dashell Hammett, pointing out the fact that "there is no one writable 'truth' about history and experience, only a series of versions," is invaluable (p. 66). Levine's analysis of style in "Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction" discusses the problem of the reader, who desires to surrender himself to the epiphany-like, Pynchonian "moment," to the anarchy and brutality of his evocative, prosaic style, but who also feels the critical need to order and understand what is being experienced. Both essays show how Pynchon's style goes hand in hand with his thematic concerns, his obsession with the concepts of plot and conspiracy, and his quest for freedom.

Anne Mangel's "Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*" is required reading for anyone who wishes to understand how both physics and information theory have contributed to Pynchon's crucial use of the concept of entropy. Edward Mendelson, in "Gravity's Encyclopedia," the lengthiest and best essay of the collection, relates the structure of *Gravity's Rainbow* to the structures of encyclopedic narratives, from Dante's *Commedia* to Joyce's *Ulysses*, and succeeds, by describing the novel generically, in explaining many of its arcane difficulties. For example, Mendelson defines the oblique Kirghiz Light episode of *Gravity's Rainbow* as the encyclopedic attempt to discuss the history of language, analogous to Joyce's "Oxen of the Sun" in *Ulysses* or Melville's

etymological introduction to *Moby-Dick*. Much of what Mendelson says not only illuminates *Gravity's Rainbow*, but defines the entire genre of encyclopedic narrative, and Mendelson concludes his tour-de-force by showing how *Gravity's Rainbow* is a self-conscious encyclopedic narrative, placing it as the latest development in the history of the genre.

Perhaps the most original essay in this collection is Mathew Winston's "The Quest for Pynchon," an attempt to provide an introductory biography to this most secretive personality. Winston has brought together a great deal of information about his subject, Pynchon's efforts to the contrary, some of which will be essential to later studies of Pynchon's life and work. Other essays in the collection by Catharine R. Stimpson on Pynchon's early fiction, W. T. Lhamon, Jr. on *V*, William Vesterman on Pynchon's poetry, and Marjorie Kaufman and David Leverenz on *Gravity's Rainbow*, cannot be fully discussed here, but they furnish additional, informative views of Pynchon's work. All of the essays in this book are worth reading for anyone seriously interested in the explanation of Thomas Pynchon.

Taken together, these two books on Pynchon might be defined as exploratory. While neither displays the coherent view of Pynchon's work that remains to be written, both show the scope of his fiction as well as the acumen and insight any future critic of his work will have to possess in order to explain him adequately. It is quite possible that, as both books consciously or unconsciously imply, there can be no "coherent" view of Pynchon, no explaining him within any traditional critical boundaries. But the human need for order, of which Pynchon so eloquently speaks, will prevail, the attempts to explain Pynchon will be made, and those who wish to describe the order of Pynchon's world will need to do so with caution and sophistication: they will, doubtless, need these books at the starting point of their tour through Pynchon's landscape.

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Despair, Madness, and Political Tyranny in *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*

This new book, translated and edited by Dr. Saad El-Gabalawy (Fredericton, N.B.: York Press, 1979), reveals the richness and subtlety of recent Egyptian fiction. The three novels in this collection—*From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus* by Saad Elkhadem, *al-Karnak* by Najib Mahfouz, and *Hommos Akhdar* by Ismail Waly al-Din—represent a flourishing literature; they are deeply rooted in Egyptian culture, its history, and its recent political situations, yet each touches universal concerns. Obviously, political matters press for consideration in a country like Egypt, but each author is careful to present his analysis of Egypt's political fortunes and misfortunes in compelling stories. The novels derive their energy from interesting narrative and arresting characters; they acquire their resonance from complex form and symbolic logic. Not only do these novels