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A Deleuzian Reading of Thomas Pynchon's

Slow Learner

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Abstract

The present study seeks to investigate Thomas Pynchon's *Slaw Learner* in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of schizoids. The schizoids create a world of randomness or fortuitous oscillations in which possibility resides everywhere. The characters of the stories appear to be in search of such freedom. This chaotic body, which has lost all its organs, is able to demolish whatever happens to be on its way; nevertheless it is capable of fabricating any new machine by its connection to other machines accessible. The major objective of this dissertation is, in the first place, to examine the way each individual loses its individuality by becoming-machine and to introduce the main dangers of one constant machinic connection, resulting in entropic dullness. Secondly, the researcher wishes to have a more analytical view on the process of any of the subjectivations produced in each becoming-machine by emphasizing the operation of its three syntheses. Finally, Pynchon's short stories are examined to conclude how practical it is for the machines to be in chaos with the acceptance of death, disconnection and anti-production as a prerequisite for creation of life and further becomings.

Keywords

Body without organs, deterritorialization, becoming, machine, chaos, identity, three syntheses of subjectivation, anti-production.

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Chapter One: Introductory Remarks

1.1 General Background

In this dissertation, the researcher explores Thomas Pynchon's (1937-) short stories which were published in a collection in 1984 called *The Slow Learner* with Pynchon's own introduction. The five stories published in this collection include: "The Small Rain", a tale about Nathan Levin, an army specialist, who has to join the rescuers when a hurricane smashes Creole, a village. In "Low-Lands" we see a lawyer, Dennis Flange, who flees his house and wife. The third story, "Entropy", pictures two different modes of life in an apartment in Washington D.C. In the lower flat Meatball Mulligan is holding a party and above lives Callisto and his partner Aubade in a kind of hothouse, which at the end gets crushed when Aubade breaks its windows. In "Under the Rose" the setting is not the United States but Egypt 1898 concerning the struggles between two opponent spies, Porpentine, and Moldweorp. Finally, in the last story of the collection, "The Secret Integration", some children become the main characters, as a kind of foil to the world of adults who are presumably strict racists.

Thomas Pynchon's selected stories will be concentrated on, under the spotlight of the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze's (1925-95) elaborated theories of desire, difference, chaos and becoming. It is known that Deleuze and his co-writer friend, Pierre-Felix Guattari (1930-92) revolutionized psychoanalysis by rejecting most of the theories implanted by Freud and Lacan, especially Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. They preferred calling their studies Schizoanalysis in favor of schizophrenic flows through which desire helps the schizoid to experiment the other and therefore to be proliferated. It is through this freedom and mobility —which desire leads us into— that the individual becomes a schizophrenic about whom Deleuze and Guattari had theorized.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In this thesis, an analytical view is spotted 'not' on Thomas Pynchon's famous novels but on his mostly overlooked early short stories. This analysis borrows the theories of Gilles Deleuze in order to find out to what extent his ideas are pertinent to a postmodern writer such as Pynchon. The main argument of this thesis is to trace "lines of becoming" in Pynchon's text; how the characters and the events experience becoming and how this experience becomes possible through chaos. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which Deleuze co-authored with Felix Guattary, it is stated that "a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination ... A line of becoming has only a middle ... A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get it by the middle" (293). Short story can be regarded as the best genre for providing the reader to get only obsessed with the middle (often starting in medias-res and presenting open endings). Through these short stories the reader is neither preoccupied with the ground, nor anxious about the end; just a practice of becoming suffices.

In a short story the reader is obsessed with the "swarm of appearances" and flows of events and thoughts, and for Deleuze this current and flow is life itself, nothing needs to be added or removed. In Pynchon's stories, the reader can ascertain that the characters are never in an inflexible state of existence since existence is a flow; it never stops and our existence is never different from the flows of life. This view of Deleuze is instigated from his rejection of the individual as the unit of perception in the world; for him rather than the individual, the world is constituted of 'machines'. This is not a pessimistic idea; on the contrary machines make life a fluid of possible connections, mutations and productivities. This study wants to see if in Pynchon's stories a web of "producing-machines" can be found through which proliferation, productivity and multiplicity

ensues. Therefore, rather than identity difference is to be traced, rather than codes decodes, and instead of territorialization deterritorializations.

Because lines of becoming provide the possibility of change in essence and being, they blow the stability of ego apart. The transitions of one to another are revolutionary, thus, the lines of becoming are destructive at the same time that they are productive. The space that allows such evolution and variableness is afforded through chaos. The notion of chaos, echoes a body of possibilities, that Deleuze calls the body without organs, through which things get formed and deformed, put together and taken apart, in other words on the body without organs birth and death become one. Similarly this study aims to discover if in Pynchon's stories death gets such unification with birth or not; does it follow stillness or it halts it. The ambiguity provided by the stories makes the reader's lines of thought chaotic and uncertain: is it true that stability is death, but death is not stability?

1.3 Objectives and Significance of the Study

1.3.1 Hypothesis

This study aims to perform an inquiry in the process that desire works. Since desire is a machine: "Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 26), and because it avails the conception of other machines, it performs as a sparkling engine of all machinic connections. According to Deleuze and Guattari, every person's desiring-machine is not fully accomplished unless undergoing the three syntheses: 1) the connective synthesis of production, 2) the disjunctive synthesis of recording and 3) the conjunctive synthesis of consumption-consummation. In the first synthesis the machinic partial-objects get connected, in the second one the former connection is disengaged in order for other part-objects to get linked, and in the last, the interaction of the previous two lets a new subjectivity to be created¹. This is the main hypothesis of this research since the main objective is to analyze the function of each of these phases and how the inescapability of life and death of machinic assemblages leads to a mutual communication through the connections and disconnections.

1.3.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of the problem, in this study, lies in the notion of the problem itself, since for Deleuze everything starts with the 'problem', each problem opens up the horizon to new problems. Deleuze's philosophy begins by 'creating' problems, such as rejecting capitalism and humanism, since it is through these problems that the power of philosophy itself is revealed. "A problem is a way of creating a future...A problem is

¹ For detailed information see Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* 68-112.

life's way of responding to or questioning what is not itself" (Colebrook 21). In this reading of Pynchon's stories, problems make us, as the readers, to think; thus to 'exist' and 'become' through the process of thinking. The questions asked in the previous section—as the problems of the text that need to be reflected on—are in themselves the reader's response and reaction to life in general, that by thinking and 'problem-making' the reader's mind can be part of the flux of becoming.

For postmodernists experiencing something as "foundation of knowledge" is impossible; for Deleuze in particular this impossibility is something liberating; that is, it gives us the chance to "invent, create and experiment" (ibid. p. 2). With applying Deleuze on Pynchon's stories, the readers—along with the characters—have the chance of experiencing the process of proliferating into something different, whether animate or inanimate through the medium of literature. Through literature we understand that there is not just one actual world, rather there are many potential worlds that all can be touched. "In the Deleuzian perspective, literature begins with intensities of affect. More than that, it need presume no prior set of variables, no 'givens'; it provides ever-renewable resources for the creation of new affects, new diversities of becomings." (Bryden 105)

Finally, a Deleuzian study is a very optimistic view of the stories of Thomas Pynchon. His obsession with the apocalypse, chaos, death and his characters' escape from power and society all can be regarded as lines of becoming and difference. While within the chaotic wastelands of his stories death exists in the background, it bears the responsibility of facilitating and generating possibilities of difference, deterritorialization and freedom.

1.3.3 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to suggest the idea in which the binaries turn into an interactive system of changing, and how the innate difference of each component can assist the credibility of the other. This movement and energy flows in Pynchon's stories; this movement is desire, the desire for life. What is important is the way in which Pynchon's stories represent this desire through the systematicity of binaries. In other words, Pynchon seeks "lines of flight" in the very limitation of systematic binaries. This study aims to represent how this system gets jumbled through the chaotic flow of life because as Guattari and Deleuze infer in *What is Philosophy?* "This is not a movement from one determination to the other but, on the contrary, the impossibility of a connection between them, since one does not appear without the other having already disappeared, and one appears as disappearance when the other disappears as outline" (42). Thus, the disorganization of the system of binaries brings chaos, because it breaks down the order of a binary by destroying one component in one second, and by creating it the other second.

1.3.4 Research Questions

Based on Deleuze's ideas then, the researcher had posed some questions upon the text in order to be pondered on in the subsequent chapters. The questions follow as listed down:

1. How are desire, life, and death depicted? Is their existence inevitable in each line of becoming?
2. Can the characters' desiring-machine reach "difference" through the three syntheses?

3. How production takes place through schizophrenia or paranoia? What is the role of anti-production in a line of becoming?
4. How are the concepts of identity and representation dealt with? Do they exist in reality or are illusory? Can we find flows of differences hidden underneath?
5. What is the significance of chaos in the rhizome of becoming?
6. How can the Deleuzian concepts of "repetition" and "difference" be traced in these short stories? In what ways are the characters and events repeated and simultaneously different?

1.4 Review of Literature

Mark D. Hawthorne in his essay "Homoerotic Bonding as Escape from Heterosexual Responsibility in Pynchon's *Slow Learner*" depicts the male characters' breakout from the society as a symptom of their wish to deconstruct their socially expected roles —the heterosexual man— in favor of an illusory homoerotic relationship which creates "worlds of escape that deny their own foundations and thereby remain threatened by the real world that wants to collapse them" (ibid 512). Pynchon represents a world in which the differentiation between homosexual, homoerotic and homosocial gets complicated and not distinguishable; while the male characters consider women as intruders of their homosocial safety, the integration of these terms goes further to the shifting of masculinity and femininity.

According to Hawthorne, Pynchon's male characters are in a space where "males talk much about women but keep them at arm's length so that they can indulge in their imaginations" (ibid 518). In "The Small Rain", this space is shown as military; Levine feels safe inside the barracks while he keeps reading "whore books". His real life sex with Little Buttercup is not pictured as erotic indicating Levine's fear of the heterosexual world, finally, at the end of the story, he feels secure again by returning to the barracks. This space between the sexes results in shifting of responsibilities of sexes; in other words, Hawthorne believes that in Pynchon's stories, the male characters become feminized, while the females get masculinized. In "The Small Rain", for instance, Levine secures himself in the barracks and reads "pornographic novels", while Little Buttercup takes the job of selling coffee and sandwiches to the rescuing forces.

In "Law-Lands", once more, resisting the heterosexual role is possible through the military. Pig Bodine a friend of Dennis Flange from the Navy breaks to their house; he is the one who seven years ago when Dennis and his wife Cindy were just wedded

"acted as the cause for breaking up the Flanges' honeymoon by carrying Dennis off for a two-week bachelor's party" (Hawthorne, "Homoerotic Bonding" 520). When he returns, Cindy orders them out of the house, because "Pig is the homosocial power that she cannot overcome" (ibid 519). The sex role shifting in "Law-Lands" is more interesting, Cindy, Flange's wife is that part of masculinity that her husband wishes to escape; she represents rationality and responsibility of the masculine world. But Flange is seeking to have a return to the mother sea, and gain the feeling of security in its womblike fantasy.

In the third story of the collection, "Entropy", the male characters' detachment from women is shown by regarding women as objects:

While his apartment deteriorates into chaos, Meatball carries "an empty magnum [...] as if it were a teddy bear" (81). The sexual ambiguity this image suggests ... allows Meatball to control a space that identifies itself through a male-bonding that uses women as objects whether they are the "coeds", Saul's estranged wife whom the men cannot understand, or the nonexistent prostitutes whom the enlisted men are seeking. (ibid. p. 521)

Meatball's neighbour, Callisto, treats women as objects too; his partner Aubade is a woman who conforms to whatever Callisto orders in a mechanical way. She writes down Callisto's memoirs that are being dictated to her; she does not talk on behalf of herself and just answers to Callisto's biddings. At the end of the story when Aubade reacts to the situation, by breaking the windows, Hawthorne believes she is masculinized, while Callisto has failed to be feminized. On the other hand, Meatball prefers obtaining a feminine role in trying to give order to the party instead of hiding himself in the closet.

In all these stories, males masculinize or objectify women to preserve supremacy, especially after they have themselves become feminized through the implicit homosexualization of their bonding. Such feminized males displace the internalized threat of being effeminate by reducing women to still more inferior positions. For these males, it is as if the (gender) threat of being feminine were greater than the (sexual) fear of being perceived as homosexual. (Hawthorne, "Homoerotic Bonding" 522)

In "Under the Rose", Pynchon "establishes a contrast between public masculinity and private femininity". The two spies, Porpentine and Goodfellow, both play a public role: the latter the role of a "womanizer" and the first of a "stereotypic buffoon". But, as we read on, their private femininity is unveiled to us; Porpentine finds out about his friend's being sexually impotent when he tried to make love with his girlfriend Victoria; and Porpentine himself confesses that most of his wisdom and "intuition" in his job has been based on his "womanly nature". Recognition of Goodfellow's problem happens through Victoria and this is an example of her "threat" for the male characters; this threat can be her masculinity when she "speaks to Porpentine with 'a mustache of foam on her upper lip'" (ibid 525). It also can be her influence on men because "when sexually mature women evoke the homosexual panic inherent in the space to which the males have fled, such women force the males back to socially accepted spaces" (ibid 525), and it is through her influence that Porpetine goes to the Sphinx at the end of the story, where he gets killed.

In "The Secret Integration" the problem gets doubled, not only we see a space between male and female, but also between children and adults. The homosocial bonding of male characters is represented through a gang of boys, whose immature world is contrasted to the heterosexual world of parents. In the world of the children's fantasy, racist jokes are not played, but gradually they feel it in the adult's world of

reality as they become more conscious of the existing differentiation. This duality of the binaries baffles the boys, because they have an imaginary black friend with whom they easily communicate, and when talking to Carl MacAfee a black man who asked help from Alcoholics Anonymous, his skin color is not an obstacle as much as his adulthood is.

Furthermore, Hawthorne argues that one of the ways through which the male characters try to resist the responsibilities of their sex in society is by 'hiding' themselves somewhere or by wearing masks. For example in "Entropy", Meatball Mulligan is doubtful whether to hide himself in the closet, while he is hosting a party, or to take the responsibility of sorting out the chaotic situation. Hawthorn calls this yearning privacy, "the homosexual's closet" which "provides protection from a hostile heterosexual world that partly defines sexuality in terms of social responsibility" (Hawthorne, "Homoerotic Bonding" 517). Hawthorn theorizes that in Pynchon's stories, unlike the "homosexual's closet", hiding is something positive, because it "provides escape and relief from outside tyranny". In "The Secret Integration" the boys make a homosocial bonding in Mr. MacAfee's apartment as if they are safe from the outside world. Also at the end of the story when the boys get disillusioned by angry Mrs. Barrington, they send their imaginary friend, Carl, to "a closet hidden deep in a ruined mansion" (ibid. p. 517).

In his radical essay titled "A Flaw Not Only in Him", Douglas Keesey defends Callisto against the critics who accuse him for being at fault, in a context divided to good and evil. For Keesey it is the context to be blamed; it is not just the characters who construct the form, but also the forms that reconstruct the characters. For Keesey, the problem with these critics is that they had taken for granted many of Pynchon's fiction's fundamental style and taste, for instance in "Entropy", the author's use of different

allusions is an indication of Pynchon's preference of intersection of variable contexts in his story: "scientific, social, sexual, and literary" (Keeseey 217). Pynchon's story, therefore, wishes to dismiss the beliefs about good and evil; since one can experience both if he or she wishes to be called "human". "To be "human," as Pynchon understands it, is to be required to form one's character within certain contexts, to see the world through particular perspectives" (ibid. p. 234).

This essay also provides a different interpretation of the story's ending; Callisto's struggles with chaos and his desire to gain/ power over entropy, is accompanied by Aubade's smashing of the windows of their "Hermetically sealed" room, exposing it to the "city's chaos". Callisto believes in the entropy's power and that survival cannot be offered, nonetheless, "pessimism is his only hope; the certainty of his total estrangement from both the other and the future is the closest he can get to grasping them" (ibid. p. 219). However, for Keeseey, Callisto's resignation at the end is his last technique to compete entropy, in other words, by self-destruction and committing suicide he intends to prevail over death.

Dwight Eddins offers an existential gnostic study of Pynchon's stories in the essay "Probing the Nihil: Existential Gnosticism in Pynchon's Stories": Gnostics believed in a distinction between a world of spirituality and light represented by a divine being and a world of matter and darkness represented by a kind of demiurge. The natural cosmos is taken as anti-human since nature follows its own flux and fluctuations which can be harmful for human consciousness and intelligence, therefore, this gnostic belief is highlighted in existential gnosticism.

In "The Small Rain", rain turns to a "gnostic paradox" (Bloom 172), in both "The Small Rain" and T. S. Eliot's alluded poem "The Waste Land" the "malaise" is infertility and sterility in heat, therefore, rain can be a sign of bless. But the paradigm further

claims that the excess of either in cosmos could head toward humanity's annihilation, while at the same time, in order to have "fruition", both are essential in a controlled, equilibrant state. This is because "beneficence" and "destruction" are from the same "elementals" and each may substitute the other. This volatile polarization "echoes . . . the moral confusion of the gnostic dialectics" (Bloom173) and it is amid such hostile, uncertain world that Levin discerns himself in. Hence, "[u]nable to find a definitive locus of value, Levine is a displaced person in the gnostic sense", nothing but a "Wandering Jew".

In "Low-Lands" the earth becomes a shelter and for Eddins this is "a sign that he [Pynchon] is already searching for a way to found a norm in natural process" (ibid. p. 181). The low-lands that Eddins lists in his essay: his Long Island House, the sea, the junkyard, and ultimately the underground tunnels are all a kind of protection for Flange who seeks refuge from the tedium and rationality of the earth's surface. Also Eddins finds it antignostic for Pynchon to symbolize, the earth and the sea to a kind of "womb" which preserves life and originality, instead of a demiurgic "wasteland". Pynchon's description of the sea as "an assurance of perfect, passionless uniformity" persuades the essayist that this world like the world of existential gnosticism is "neutral" and hence cannot provide a "spiritual quest". However, Flange finds this void constructive. In the next low-land, that is the junkyard, again "Pynchon projects value from gnostic negations of value" (ibid. p. 184), here within the past (the sea stories), and the rubbish (the dump). Finally Flange finds the underground tunnels where Nerissa inhabits who begs Flange to live there. Her habit of embracing her rat Hyacinth, invokes a notion of "grotesque motherhood" and that her abode is not the womb that Flange was seeking since it lacks fertility.