

## The (De)Constructive Power of Humour. Textual Interaction and Renewal in T. Pynchon's *Parasites*

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Elaine B. Safer has suggested that the basic structure in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* is in-formed by "the myths and legends" in which "*V.*'s movement from farce to the grotesque is evident" (83). Such a statement is probably –and aimlessly– bringing up one of the most revealing characteristics of humorous writing in general, and of postmodern writing in particular. We would hesitate at the assertion that Pynchon's texts are built around any such mythical "basic structure," though the mythical element is not alien to them. This would seem to assume the existence of a central organising textual principle around which his narratives are arranged. This possibility in his texts for "*in-forming* myths and legends" would render the grotesque a marginal element whose existence would ultimately depend on the *in-formation* power of the supposedly central myth. We could consider these grotesque elements to be parasitic, in the sense that they would be included in the text as mere adornments, superfluous aggregates to a supposedly central text, which they cannibalise. We would certainly have to accept the existence and interaction of both the mythical and the grotesque elements in Thomas Pynchon's writing, but to determine which would inform its central structure would be a more complicated task.

John Dugdale has noticed both a horizontal and a vertical level in Pynchon's writing. The horizontal level stands for "the forward movement" (7) of plot development, whatever provides the text with certain unity, all those elements that somehow contribute to textual coherence—in case such coherence could be found. On the contrary, the vertical level serves as a *distraction* from the horizontal one, what Dugdale calls the "second story" (13), which adds complexity to the horizontal level. He perceives certain parallelism between the crossing of perpendicular texts and "the simultaneous presence of many themes, voices or levels in polyphony" (6). However, such perception is not other than the director's. Each player within the orchestra is only concerned with her/his own instrument in a horizontal dimension, which becomes vertical from the director's perspective. Assuming that such a perspective were possible would be to step

back from the text, which is an activity quite different from reading, if intimately related to it. If Pynchon wanted us to take that perspective, he would have organised his narrative much more horizontally than vertically. But such is not the case. What the readers of Pynchon's texts find is some notes from one of the different instruments. As the listeners of a polyphonic piece of music, they can only focus on one of the instruments or vertical levels, which becomes automatically horizontal at the moment of its perception. The way each instrument interacts with the rest continuously changes, depending on which instrument they are focusing at that time. Therefore, in the act of reading, the perception of a horizontal level is a pretty unstable one due to the distortions that the continuous intrusions of the vertical level produce in it.

Humorous scenes in Pynchon's narratives interrupt vertically the horizontal development of the "manifest" (Dugdale, 7) structure of the texts. In trying to accommodate or *harmonise* scenes such as "the dumb-mute dance" in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and the I.D. or milkmaid episodes in *Mason & Dixon*, the reader overcomes interpretative difficulties (in terms of coherence), and leads to conclusions which push the limits of verisimilitude too far.

The stylistic technique by which "(t)he novel orchestrates all its themes" (1998, 263) is developed by Bakhtin into the idea of *heteroglosia*:

Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglosia [raznorezie] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships [...] is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (1998, 263)

However, Pynchon's multiplicity of diverse speeches or compositional unities, resists organisation, their interrelationships remaining forever the puzzle and object of the novel's quest. The different parts being turned against themselves as a means for self determination, produces in these texts some sense of inversion that is familiar to the carnivalesque. It is strange that it should be Bakhtin himself the one who provides a counter-argument against his conception of heteroglosia as the organisation of polyphonic texts into a structured and complete textual body. Bakhtin attributes nowadays perception of the human body as a closed and coherent structure to the birth of a new canon in the 16th century, which broke with the idea of the ancestral body as a multiple one always subject to change and transformation:

The new bodily canon, in all its historical variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable facade. (1984, 320)

A conception of the coherent textual organisation of heteroglosic polyphony would imply a similar elimination or moderation of all those

protuberances or orifices which blur the boundaries of the text's impenetrable facade. Such perception of the text certainly silences many of the voices that might be "latent"<sup>1</sup> in it. Opposite to this idea of what he calls the "new canon," Bakhtin develops that of the grotesque body, which is characterised by the exaggeration of its organs.

The grotesque [. . .] is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines. [. . .] [T]he essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body. (1984, 316-7)

Essential to the idea of exaggeration is the one of typification, since the details which are exaggerated in the grotesque body are usually those typical of the characteristics commonly attributed to the exaggerated member. The different organs that undergo exaggeration gain an identity and function of their own. They seem to be independent from the rest of the body: "they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can't even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body as something secondary" (1984, 317). The grotesque textual body would therefore exaggerate its many *voices* so that they are perceived as disconnected from the rest of the text. Their exaggerated protuberances displace the readers' focus of attention towards themselves, and relegate the textual body to a secondary role. The result is a pastiche of discourses that are typified to the extent of grotesque exaggeration, which most of the times merges with parody, though not necessarily. In any case, grotesque discourses within a text force the continuous re-consideration of the essence of such text. They can only be conceived in progress, in the act of regenerating themselves from new perspectives, of becoming something else. Just the same as "[t]he grotesque body [. . .] is never finished, never completed, it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (1984, 317), the grotesque text is always in transition, inexhaustibly renewed.

These grotesque features that might appear within a novel –and which are certainly present in Pynchon's narratives– can be thought as overgrown parasites feasting upon a host. Such host has been displaced to a secondary level of importance, and the parasites, feverish on procreation, deform their host to the extent at which it must be thought as a new body, a body constantly at change: "The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection.

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1 Dugdale makes a distinction between the *manifest* and *latent* structure in Pynchon's texts, which he compares to Freud's distinction between *manifest* dreams and "*latent dream-thoughts*" (Freud, 198): "The same division of manifest and latent structure occurs in Pynchon's texts, with *allusions*, as in Freud, providing the link between the two. Elements of the manifest text have undergone the same processes of transvaluation as the manifest dream –condensation, fragmentation, disguise, displacement, de-centering. In Freud's image, the manifest dream is an 'edition' of the dream-thoughts, and Pynchon seems to take up and develop the figure [. . .] (Dugdale, 7). However, Dugdale fails to make the connection between dreams and jokes that Freud himself made in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (197-205).

One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image" (*Rabelais and His World*, 322). It is in this sense that we could get to the opposite conclusion (and yet, it is still the same) to Safer's in arguing that, what we find to be the basis of Pynchon's texts is that inversion of myths, or reversion of the legends against themselves, which invariably result in the farcical, and even the grotesque. It is not that these texts should be defined exclusively as humorous in essence, but rather always "in process" of self assertion, in a continuous renewal within the realm of uncertainty since they do never really finish to define themselves. The basis of their structure is therefore that movement toward meaning that is never completed, and never better achieved, rather than in the ambiguous realm of humour.

This particular search for meaning in the ineffable, or of representation of meaning as ineffable, has already been noticed by Maureen Quilligan to be achieved by use of what she calls the "anomalies of writing," which she exemplifies in Pynchon's case as "puns, silly or otherwise" (122). By approaching textual construction from the marginal, from the protuberances and orifices that render the linguistic machinery imperfect (unfinished), Pynchon offers us –though lateral and imperfect– a glimpse of a new body, reshaping both the essence of its meaning as such, and the means for its representation. Unfinished representation of a created (as it is, and cannot but always be discursive) reality, becomes the only possible way of approaching perfection and precision in expression. The uttering of such incompleteness is, at the same time, a cynical acceptance of the existence of the unutterable by somehow fabulating it. The basest pun, the meanest of jokes, the absurd and ridiculous repetitions that stubbornly refuse to openly contribute either to plot or character development, abound in Pynchon's work.

Critical terminology itself has traditionally seen what we here call the *parasitic* as central by, for instance, calling any text a parody, or a mock-text. In terming them as such, they accept the parasitic element (the oddity that demolishes canonical texts by rendering them absurd or ridiculous) to be central to the canonical or *host* text. This blurring of the dividing line between host and parasite leaves a space located in some *nowhere*, which is precisely at the core of the text, which makes its essence, and is central to its textual classification, and which is the site of the grotesque.

Parasitations such as pastiche, historicism, or parody are common phenomena in postmodern writing. As the de-centralisation of the postmodern text is not the synthetic result of a simple binary opposition between a previously central discourse and the newly added parasitic one, but the inconclusion of the tensions between the many marginal discourses in all their possible combinations, there comes the moment when there is no central discourse to parasite on. What remains is only the merely mechanical compulsion for parasitation. Parasitation thus opens up a different textual gap for the grotesque to fill, as much as different forms of consumerist reading pleasure.

Let us take for instance the organisational structure of *Mason & Dixon*. It could certainly be argued that the novel is built around the quest plot. However, how much of the real amount of pages are really dedicated to that topic? Could

anyone determine what is it that Mason and Dixon are looking for? Do they finally get it by the end of the novel? We can easily perceive a great concern—not only in this novel, but in most of Pynchon's work—for the question of an essential meaning, an organising power that confers logic to human life in general, and to each occurrence in everyday life in particular. Yet, anyone could easily sense that Pynchon's quests are not so much for meaning, as they are for the possibility of existence of such meaning.

In the particular case of *Mason & Dixon*, we find a 773-page thick book organised into 103 chapters, each of them telling a part of the story that is (nearly) completely disconnected from the rest. If it were not for little coincidences, which are strongly impressive for their scarcity, each chapter could be read as a totally independent short story, most of the times absolutely irrelevant to plot development. The book is organised in sketches that would perfectly work in a self-sufficient way, each aiming at its own exposition as chapter. Each of them fights in relevance against the rest, striving for the orchestration of the text's polyphony in terms of "revelation," and disappointing the expectations raised in previous or later chapters. We could see each chapter as a grotesque textual portrait with its own hiperbolisations, exaggerated deformities either protruding from the text or opening orifices—entrances—into it. As a novel, (in the most traditional sense of the *genre*) it could be said that *Mason & Dixon* is a very long text full of parasites. However, we could rather think this novel in a wider context, as a literary parasite itself, which depends on a previous literary host tradition that it feeds and reproduces on. What we find in this novel and in most postmodern texts is not just parody that aims at the mocking destruction of (a) particular text(s) or a literary genre, but an inclusion of those texts in a wider compound<sup>2</sup> where such texts are already infected with the odd alien element which is its parasite. The result is therefore a pastiche of parasites organised in different layers of infection.

This undecidability, the incompleteness of a text open to the reader's penetration exhausts canonical texts by compression of their mass while producing large amounts of possibilities for the readers to feast on. It is not the carnival *in* literature, but the carnival *of* literature what we find in Pynchon's texts. If we could complete an interpretation, if we could exhaust the possibilities, drink all their liquors, eat all of their meats, fully understand or apprehend them, we would be able to claim for a determining interpretation of these novels, close them, make their surface smooth and impenetrable.

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2 Linda Hutcheon has also found the term "parody" as widely understood to be inadequate to account for the way postmodern texts work in relation to other texts: "what I mean by 'parody' here—as elsewhere in this study—is not the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical difference at the very heart of similarity. In historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity: the Greek prefix *para* can mean both 'counter' or 'against' and 'near' or 'beside.'" (1988, 26).

However, the possibility of a metanarrative on these texts is the only one that is not offered by Pynchon: his texts are closed to conclusion. Thus, readers are left in the vague space that leads from one reference to another within –and out of– decentered and schizophrenic texts. Unable to follow the organising power that provides these texts with a holistic or *historical* vision, the reader loses temporal perspective (past and future) of the text and, to put it in Lacanian terms, is condemned to live perpetual presents or a succession of parasitic scenes apparently disconnected between themselves. There could even be sensed certain allegorical reflection upon the very linear process of reading, but such an allusion would still remain within the scope of the speculative. The parasitic text, just the same as the schizophrenic subject, lacks its own identity as it both depends on and is perfectly differentiated from the host text. It is not only a fragmentary narrative refusing to belong to some continuity, but also *fragmentary*, because it disrupts the flow of the text it parasites on. The jokes inserted in the main plot of *Mason & Dixon*, in case we could detect such a plot, break narrative wholeness into isolated, disconnected signifiers which do not interact with a coherent sequence. They break the historical tempo of the main narrative into a call to the present burst of laughter, justified only by its performative move, yet depending on a larger structure they voraciously consume.

The disruptive and regenerative power of the parasite in humorous texts contributes both to deconstruct and renew the mythical and canonical role of their hosts. The parasite supposes a new vision of literature in particular and of culture in general whose power resides precisely in its unattainability and always changing character. It works for the principle of a voracious interaction, both including and excluding its host at the same time.

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