



FACULTY OF ARTS  
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY  
IN PRAGUE



---

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Charles University in Prague  
Faculty of Arts  
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures  
Philology  
American Literature and Studies

David L. Robbins, Ph. D., Dissertation Opponent  
Vit Vanicek

Territory and Deterritorialization in Works of Thomas Pynchon: Space in the Post-Modern Novel

Doctoral Dissertation

Advisor – Erik S. Roraback, Ph.D.

2012

Before saying anything else, let me say that this is an excellent dissertation written by a scholar of quality, ability, enthusiasm, and conscientiousness.

This dissertation takes Thomas Pynchon's work as a whole (*oeuvre*) in an interpretive literary analysis, arguing that there is a unifying pattern of the *use of space* in the narratives. This pattern is attested to by the development of tropes, motifs, and themes vested in literary space, literary space as a world of the characters, and spatial discourses informing the characters' epistemology. The dissertation claims that there is a recognizable common denominator in Pynchon's use of space: the authorial message emphasizing the growing urgency with which the ethical aspect of human being in the world is constitutive to social reality.

The methodology of the dissertation combines interpretive reading based on reader's cooperation with the text and the use of terms from selected philosophical readings. The cooperation with the text is vested in restitutive (or open) interpretation that is delineated by what a text can and does support (Umberto Eco's concept of the text as a "lazy machine") and the concept of the "small world" of narrative (Lubomír Doležel). The philosophical inspiration relies on the tenet that human epistemology of being in the world is contingent on the physical existence in space (Maurice Merleau-Ponty). The work then negotiates Martin Heidegger's concept of Dasein that cares for its existence and for the world. The ramifications of Dasein's care are then explored on the level of living with others (Jean-Luc Nancy). Finally, the dissertation continues the discussion on a societal level following the argumentation of space appropriation and mechanisms of control (Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari). The State as a type of societal organization is

understood in terms of dynamic systems based on the principles of self-organization (Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela), with entropy as the principle determining mechanisms of self-perpetuation (Rudolf Arnheim, Geert Hofstede).

In his dissertation, Mr. Vanicek argues that throughout Pynchon's work, the reader witnesses a development of characters and literary space: and to grasp this development, Mr. Vanicek uses the concept of *visceral investment* in space. Pynchon's characters, he maintains, gradually acquire a more particularized expression in the narrative, the dichotomy between spatial discourses is clarified, and his message on the topic of the other becomes more urgent. To emphasize the ethical aspect of human being in the world and to explore the opposition of the synchronic becoming-through-other and the diachronic being-toward-death, Pynchon modifies the space and its use in the narrative.

According to Mr. Vanicek, to achieve the paradigmatic shift from the diachronic to the synchronic, Pynchon explores the dichotomy between real and imagined space, and the discourses that are applied in human epistemology to "make sense" of the two concepts. In order to grasp how power affects these discourses, the dissertation employs the concepts of *striated space* (product of territorialization) and *smooth space* (preceding territorialization or produced by deterritorialization). Mr. Vanicek identifies the development in Pynchon's oeuvre's of *real sites or imagined concepts* produced by the systemic mechanisms of self-organization in striated space on the one hand, and *imagined locales* produced by resistance to control in smooth space on the other. He then proceeds with an analysis of the change in the characters' epistemology and the use of space in individual novels, concluding that the growing intensity in the use of the respective "types" of produced space parallels the increasing emphasis on the ethical aspect of individual being in the world, resulting in a call for ethical responsibility.

In his dissertation, Mr. Vanicek thus suggests that to read and critique Thomas Pynchon's text(s), it is crucial to follow the observed development. Not only is it highly productive in terms of interpretation but it successfully avoids an imposition of meaning that would be particularized only on the basis of a single narrative, and contextualized with exterior aspects that may be read into the text but are not necessarily supported by it.

In these ambitious and far-ranging excursions, Mr. Vanicek is successful on a very impressive proportion of occasions. His familiarity with Pynchon's oeuvre and with the philosophical texts that are deployed to analyze and unfold it is exceptional, and his consistently uses his erudition in ways calculated to help his readers grapple with the important interpretive and methodological assertions that he (Mr. Vanicek) is making about that oeuvre. Mr. Vanicek's dissertation is knowledgeable and well-grounded in all of the disciplines on which he draws; the currency and comprehension of the bibliography are exemplary; the analysis is consistently original, insightful, and revealing; and the suggested synthetic insights are of the highest order.

While, as is normal among scholars, I have certain nuanced disagreements with a few of Mr. Vanicek's emphases, exemplary choices, and interpretations, I must say that, within my area of particular research competence, his premises and background are sound and consistent with (as well as in productive tension with) current scholarly consensus, and

his conclusions based on them often point in significant and important new directions not at all incompatible with the current trajectory of exploratory scholarship.

All of that said, I have certain concerns and questions that I think need to be addressed, especially if work on this dissertation is going to be carried forward (as it very much deserves to be) toward publication:

Among these concerns are:

The proofreading of the dissertation is, in general, not overly precise. A number of grammar and syntax errors have come through unscathed. They need to be eliminated.

There is more than a proofreading problem regarding the writer's use of definite and indefinite articles. The result is that the writing appears clearly that of a non-native-speaker—which is not necessarily a bad thing, but it really detracts from the fluency of the text for the reader, making it unnecessarily difficult and uncomfortable to assimilate. In general, as well, the sentences are too long and overloaded for accepted English-language style. This frequently makes the writing turgid and the reading very laborious. A text this good deserves a better presentation. A good native-speaker editor could help greatly with this. The content of the dissertation is of such quality that I would happily volunteer for this task, since I think making the material in the dissertation more easily accessible would be a very good thing.

The writing in the dissertation is, very often, too expansive, overexplained, and even repetitious (especially from sub-section to sub-section). The writer needs to remember for whom he is writing. This dissertation too often reads like an undergraduate text in modernism and postmodernism, not a scholarly monograph written for an expert audience who can be assumed to know basic terminology and concepts of these and other subject areas in literature and philosophy – although for publication (perhaps AS an undergraduate text in modernism and post modernism, these materials might be retained. As it is, they clearly illustrate the dissertation writer's knowledgeability in the relevant subject matters (which is not a bad thing), but they are, basically, misplaced.

The enthusiasm of the writer--almost never a bad thing, since it leads to constant efforts to improve mastery of subject matter and to polish rhetoric and discourse constructing and presenting it--has, in this case, led the writer to go on a great length, and repeatedly, regarding the subjects on which he is writing, and about which his audience (at least in the case of this examining board, already knows. This on more than a few occasions makes the presentation rather overextended and even at times tedious. (Again, this is not a criticism that would necessarily apply if the book be considered as an undergraduate text.)

The entire text, in its effort to sound "scientific," has been packed with far too much unnecessary jargon. While specialized professional terminology is necessary and useful (and insisted upon in postmodern/poststructuralist cultural and literary studies to a potentially disproportionate extent), one can have, and use, too much of a good thing.

That is certainly the case here. The jargon gets in the way both of stylistic grace and of assimilability. Two passages, of far more than I could count, that exemplify this difficulty are the following:

1) It [distance] is polyvalent and creates a polysemy which obviates any clear-cut, one-directional elucidation of the mechanisms of such appropriation. (p. 58)

2) It is only through faith that one can accept and understand this distantiation which involves the dissymmetrical exchange between God and the believer, and the present brief, simplified sketch cannot do the relationship any justice. (p. 77)

Some particularly good examples of Mr. Vanicek's explication and writing (such as many other passages, when appropriately edited and modified, should turn out to be) are to be found, for example, as follows:

pp. 129-30 on paranoia, ethical engagement, space, Cold War double-bind; and

pp. 158-59 on state and individual as autopoietic systems, exo-colonialism and endo-colonialism, striated vs. smooth space.

Among the questions raised for me by and in the text—on which I would be grateful if the candidate would comment—are:

Mr. Vanicek makes a strong argument for the importance of intertextuality in interpreting and unfolding Pynchon's work (p. 41). I would like to see and hear more about his criteria for choosing which works, and which aspects of which works, to emphasize within Pynchon's oeuvre.

Mr. Vanicek adheres to the position that metaphor provides a bridge between the known and the unknown and between the I and the not-I. Is this formulation (p. 54) meant to suggest (as it seems to be, that the I is the "known" and the not-I is the "unknown"? Also, I would like to see and hear Mr. Vanicek connect these assertions about metaphor to his suggestion (p. 66) are metaphors and what, if that be the case, are the "known" and the "unknown" that are being bridged by the act of mapping.

Mr. Vanicek subscribes (p. 59) to the position that "The establishment of an autopoietic system cannot be a gradual process; either a system is an autopoietic system or it is not." On p. 74, he seems to extend this conclusion to deterritorialization, arguing that it is "immediate." How does Mr. Vanicek envision the process by which this happens, especially when he acknowledges (p. 74) that it is not possible to identify the moment of transformation in individuals in a society. Under these circumstances, how can one know that the change is "immediate," or even that it has taken place at all within any given individual (and, based on the cumulation of individual results, in the society at large)?

Mr. Vanicek rightly emphasizes subjunctivity as a core element in Pynchon's sensibility and oeuvre (e.g. pp. 144, 154, 192, 198, and *passim*). It would be useful, however, if he could clarify whether he regards the term "subjunctivity" as he (Mr. Vanicek) uses it as referring primarily to missed opportunities (and thus nostalgic and elegiac) or to opportunities not yet taken advantage of (and thus prospective, hopeful)?

Does the reader's experience have to be "pleasurable" (p. 83) for communication to take place or to "make sense"?

On p. 92, Mr. Vanicek maintains that the emphasis in Pynchon's work is "spatial, therefore synchronic." Is this a necessary linkage (that is, could emphasis conceivably be spatial and *diachronic*) or simply the identification of a linkage that exists in the particular case under discussion?

Mr. Vanicek's discussion of the role of Paranoia in Pynchon's epistemology and ontology (pp. 129-32) constitutes some of the best thinking and writing in the dissertation. I would like to hear him discuss (in the dissertation and/or elsewhere) the relation of Pynchon's concept of Anti-Paranoia and its role with Paranoia and its role.

Mr. Vanicek maintains (p. 143) that the "entropic horror" of uniformitization and standardization is systemic in Mason & Dixon, that no individual character in the work embraces it *per se*. I would like to hear his thoughts, then, on the "Wolf of Jesus," advocate of "Ortholatry...-- that deprav'd worship of right Lines, intersecting at right Angles" (*M&D*, p. 522); on Shelby the Surveyor, who is so obsessed with "Quadrilaterals" and "Goniology or the Worship of Angles" (*M&D*, pp. 586-87); on Colonel Bouquet, with his "Scheme is to tessellate across the Plains a system of identical units, each containing five Squares in the shape of a Greek Cross, with each central square controlling the four radiating from it....A Prison...Settlers moving West into instant Control" (*M&D*, p. 617); and even on the Duck, with its "simple, immoderate Desire for the Orthogonal." (*M&D*, p. 667)

Mr. Vanicek in several places (e.g. p. 152) suggest that Luddism is Pynchon's proffered antidote to commodification and its attendant afflictions. Why *Luddite*? Is Pynchon only a nostalgic reactionary who looks back to a doomed resistance to the principal forces of modernization, or is there more subtlety, nuance, flexibility, and relevance to his suggested and implied counter-strategies?

Pynchon's attitude toward capitalism may be "neo-Weberian" ("disenchantment of the world," p. 130), not Marxian; but does his approach to/theory of imperialism/colonialism, as Mr. Vanicek describes it (p. 157), not owe much to Hobson and Lenin?

It might be useful for Mr. Vanicek to compare his observations (e.g., p. 175) about the devastation of territorialized, striated spaces that is necessary to enable/empower deterritorialization, with Emerson's much-misunderstood assertion in 1836 that "Man is a god in ruins." (that is, a creator with particular agency *among* ruins).

I would like to hear more, both in the dissertation and from Mr. Vanicek, regarding his suggestive introduction (p. 203) of the issue of the impact of reading about characters – both in the "small world" of *Against the Day* (specifically the Chums of Chance) and in literature generally. (203)

Mr. Vanicek seems to suggest on p. 203 that we can have, and benefit from, a "choice of epistemology [and ontology?]" I would like to hear more from him about this "choice,"

the nature and range of freedom he envisions as available to us in making it, and the criteria (if any) that might be deployed in choosing.

Mr. Vanicek suggests (p. 206) that Pynchon, in *Against the Day*, centrally regards the American Civil War as a war of the dispossessed against plutocracy. I would like to see and hear more nuancing and explanation of this characterization, both in the dissertation and in Mr. Vanicek's comments.

All of that said—constructively, I hope—Mr. Vanicek's dissertation provides an extremely promising précis for programs of future work to be carried out in numerous directions. In itself, it is a *tour de force*, an exemplary combination of research, analysis, and synthesis. It is a work of the highest intelligence, competence, and professionalism.

Dissertation evaluation: The dissertation fully satisfies the relevant requirement(s) for the PhDr. degree.

Prof. David L. Robbms, Ph.D.

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

March 26, 2012.

If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at [dobbins22@netzero.net](mailto:dobbins22@netzero.net).