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ENCYCLOPEDIA NARRATIVE: FROM DANTE TO PYNCHON

EDWARD MENDELSON

I want to use the term *encyclopedic narrative* to identify a genre that is of central importance in western literature, but one that has not yet fully been recognized. The genre of encyclopedic narrative has caught the attention of neither historical nor formalist criticism, partly because it can only be identified in terms that are *both* historical and formal. Encyclopedic narratives occupy a special and definable place in their national cultures, but also fulfill a unique set of formal and thematic conditions. Before I try to define these cultural and formal requirements, it would be best to make clear the importance of the genre by naming its members. I know of only seven: Dante's *Commedia*, Rabelais' five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and now, I believe, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. No doubt there are others (Camões' *Os Lusíadas*, for example), occupying comparable positions in national literatures of which I know far too little to say anything. But these seven are more than enough to permit a definition of the genre and some indication as well of the special problems that it raises for criticism today.

We ordinarily recognize genres by intrinsic formal qualities shared by their exponents, but the principles of selection by which we—authors and critics—choose the qualities that are significant and must be constant, and those that are generically insignificant and may be altered or omitted, are partly extrinsic, based on the interpretive expectations of readers as well as on the formal imagination of authors. By identifying the genre of encyclopedic narrative both in formally intrinsic terms and in terms of extrinsic matters of reception and expectation, I hope to call attention to the degree to which cultures and individual readers provide external order for literary experience. At the moment, Pynchon has made it somewhat easier to recognize this, for Pynchon's encyclopedic narrative predicts its own reception and cultural assimilation.

Encyclopedic narratives occupy a special historical position in their cultures, a fulcrum, often, between periods that later readers

consider national pre-history and national history. Each major national culture in the west, as it becomes aware of itself as a separate entity, produces an *encyclopedic author*, one whose work attends to the whole social and linguistic range of his nation, who makes use of all the literary styles and conventions known to his countrymen, whose dialect often becomes established as the national language, who takes his place as national poet or national classic, and who becomes the focus of a large and persistent exegetic and textual industry comparable to the industry founded upon the Bible. It has been difficult to identify the encyclopedic genre partly because encyclopedic authors never deliberately set out to write an encyclopedic narrative, in the way that a pastoral poet might set out to imitate an ancient pastoral, or a tragedian a recent tragedy. For the most part, encyclopedic authors set out to imitate epics, but, unlike epic poets, they write about the ordinary present-day world around them instead of the heroic past. The encyclopedic works they produce take on, after publication, a status their authors could not have anticipated. Only after an encyclopedic narrative has taken its place as a literary monument, surrounded by curators and guides, can it be recognized as a member of its small and exclusive genre.

The reception of encyclopedic narratives is similar to the reception of encyclopedic authors who do not produce a single gigantic narrative. In England the encyclopedic role falls mostly on Shakespeare, in Russia mostly on Pushkin, who both produced a cluster of relatively small masterpieces rather than a single dominating masterwork. In England and Russia the absence of a single monumental work that can serve as a cultural focus tends to produce, in compensation, a series of mock-encyclopedias like *Gulliver's Travels*, whose encyclopedic energy is expended on societies that do not exist, or *Tristram Shandy*, which, like the "Tristra-Paedia" it contains, collapses under the weight of data too numerous and disparate for its organizing structures to bear—or near-encyclopedias like *Middlemarch*, *Dead Souls* or *War and Peace*, which fail to occupy a crucial and originating role in their cultures. It is possible that the recurrence of encyclopedic authors who are not "national authors" in France and America, Balzac or Dos Passos for example, in part results from the problematic positions of Rabelais and Melville.¹

¹ In speaking of encyclopedic authors and narratives I must point out that Northrop Frye does have a few pages on encyclopedic forms, but they refer to anatomies

Before exploring the critical implications of encyclopedic narrative, it will be useful to have a sketch of a general theory of the genre and the outlines of a preliminary formal model. Encyclopedic narratives all attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge. Because they are products of an era in which the world's knowledge is vastly greater than any one person can encompass, they necessarily make extensive use of synecdoche. No encyclopedic narrative can describe the whole range of physical science, so examples from one or two sciences serve to represent the whole scientific sector of human knowledge. One of many points of distinction between epic and encyclopedias is the epic writer's unconcern over fields of knowledge outside his experience. In the ancient epic no such fields exist, or none of any importance; while in the modern epic (as contrasted with encyclopedic narrative), which is interiorized or miniature like Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the only knowledge that matters is the knowledge through which a mind creates itself.

Encyclopedic narrative evolves out of epic and often uses epic structure as its organizing skeleton, but the subjects of epic have become increasingly vestigial to the encyclopedic form. Epics treat of the immediate culture in which they are written only allusively or analogically. Epic action takes place in a legendary past, and although that action may comment forcefully on the writer's present—as does the *Aeneid*—the action takes few of its events from ordinary “present” experience. Encyclopedic narratives, in contrast, are set *near* the immediate present, although not in it. The main action of most of them occurs some twenty years before the time of writing, allowing the book to maintain a mimetic or satiric relation to the world of its readers, while at the same time permitting its characters to make accurate prophecies of events that occur between the time of the action and the time of writing. Thus Dante begins writing around 1307 of events that are supposed to have occurred around Easter 1300, and can easily prophesy the death of Pope Boniface VIII in 1303. Cervantes lets Don Quixote prophesy

and Menippean satires, not narratives. Frye's cyclical and universal schemata make it impossible for him to recognize encyclopedic narratives which appear at unique and unrepeatable points in the linear history of historical cultures.

the writing of his own history, and Joyce prophesies the authorship of Stephen Dedalus, and the creation of the Irish national epic that is *Ulysses*. Pynchon sets the action of *Gravity's Rainbow* at the moment which he proposes as the originating moment of contemporary history, a gestative nine months around the end of the second World War. Encyclopedic narrative achieves the double function of prophecy and satire: it predicts events that are, in reference to the book's action, in the unpredictable future, yet the action itself is close enough to the moment of publication to allow the book to refer to the immediate conditions of its readers' lives.

The prophetic quality of encyclopedic narrative—its openness in time—is echoed by its peculiar indeterminacy of form. Generic analysis of encyclopedic narratives yields far more diffuse results than may be achieved with other varieties of fiction. An encyclopedic narrative is, among other things, an encyclopedia of narrative, incorporating, but never limited to, the conventions of heroic epic, quest romance, symbolist poem, *Bildungsroman*, psychomachia, bourgeois novel, lyric interlude, drama, eclogue and catalogue. Most encyclopedic works include characters who try unsuccessfully to live according to the conventions of another genre—characters, that is, who try to turn the book into a romance (Don Quixote, Faust's son Euphorion), or a farce (Stubbs), or a novel (Gretchen's friend Marthe, Gerty MacDowell, Molly Bloom, Roger Mexico).² Their failure to deflect the immensity of encyclopedia into the channels of familiar convention points to the intolerance of encyclopedic form for the small claims of personal expectation and perspective.

Encyclopedic narrative identifies itself not by a single plot or structure, but by encompassing a broad set of qualities. All include a full account of a technology or science. A complete medieval astronomy may be constructed out of Dante, a full account of Renaissance medicine out of Rabelais. Don Quixote is an adept at the science of arms. *Faust* expounds opposing geological theories, and anticipates evolutionary biology. *Moby-Dick* is an encyclopedia of cetology, and there is a detailed account of embryology embedded in the "Oxen of the Sun" chapter of *Ulysses*. *Gravity's Rainbow* is expert in ballistics, chemistry and some very advanced mathematics. Encyclopedic narratives also offer an account of an art outside the

² I am indebted to my colleague Michael Seidel for this observation.

realm of written fiction: the carved bas-reliefs in the *Purgatorio*, the puppetry of *Don Quixote*, the Greek tragedy in *Faust*, the whale-paintings in *Moby-Dick*, the musical echoes in *Ulysses'* "Sirens," film and opera in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

All encyclopedias attend to the complexities of statecraft, and, like the New Testament which in many ways they imitate, they proclaim a new dispensation on earth: Dante's universal monarchy, the Abbey of Thélème, Sancho Panza's governorship and its laws, the striving community that Faust hopes to build before he dies, the avenging community that Ahab creates in "The Quarter-Deck," the New Bloomusalem, and the *Raketen-Stadt* of the later chapters of *Gravity's Rainbow*. As these works identify the City, so do they identify the range of roles and actions that the City provides: all encyclopedic narratives name vast numbers of jobs and professions, all the varieties of work and labor.

Each encyclopedic narrative is an encyclopedia of literary styles, ranging from the most primitive and anonymous levels of proverb-lore to the most esoteric heights of euphuism. All encyclopedias provide an image of their own scale by including giants or gigantism: the giants who guard the pit of hell in Dante, the eponymous heroes of Rabelais, the windmills that Don Quixote takes for giants, the mighty men whom Faust sends into battle, *Moby-Dick* himself, the stylistic gigantism of Joyce's "Cyclops," and, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the titans under the earth and the angel over Lübeck whose eyes go "towering for miles."

One problem raised by calling *Gravity's Rainbow* an encyclopedic narrative is the question of which national culture it identifies. Melville already occupies the American seat in the encyclopedic pantheon, and Pynchon, whose book ranges over England and Germany as well as America (and Russia and Japan and South-West Africa besides), has no wish to supplant him.³ Pynchon's international scope, his attention to cartels and communications-networks that ignore national boundaries, suggest that he may be the encyclopedist of that newly-forming international culture

³ Encyclopedic authors can, however, be supplanted, if only rarely. Chaucer occupied the encyclopedic role in England until a peaceful revolution in the eighteenth century unseated him in favor of Shakespeare. A mostly academic party of Chaucerian jacobites still sighs for the old order, but their numbers diminish and their exile lengthens. The new *Variorum Chaucer* is to be edited in Norman, Oklahoma.

whose character his book explicitly labors to identify. *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests that the contemporary era has developed the first common international culture since medieval Latin Europe separated into the national cultures of Renaissance. The distinguishing character of Pynchon's new internationalism is its introduction of an order based on information, of data, instead of the old order built on money and commercial goods. Someone asks in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in reference to the political upheaval the book records, "Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?"

Pynchon's implied claims for himself are enormous, and, in any sober reader, they should inspire a healthy skepticism. But the book's ambition is essential to its design. No one could suppose that any encyclopedic narrative is an attractive or comfortable work. Like the giants whose histories they include, all encyclopedias are monstrous. (They are *monstra* in the oldest Latin sense as well: omens of dire change.) None of their narratives culminates in a completed relation of sexual love. Dante's flesh cannot merge with Beatrice's soul; Panurge never gets around to marrying; Dulcinea either does not exist at all, or she does exist but Don Quixote has never seen her; Faust loses Gretchen a third of the way through the book, then marries and loses the bodiless Helen of Troy; Ahab's wife waits on shore for widowhood; Bloom and Molly do not resume the sexual relations they ended a decade ago; and, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Tyrone Slothrop, for all his sexual exuberance, disintegrates lovelessly, while the love of Roger Mexico and Jessica ends with the war. The encyclopedic impulse is both analytic and synthetic: in its analytic and archetypally masculine mode, it separates a culture into its disparate elements, while its synthetic, archetypally feminine mode merges them in the common texture of a single book. But it is evidently a law of encyclopedic form that its synthetic mode cannot be localized in a single sexual relation whose blinding emotional energy would focus all our attention on the enclosed garden of Odysseus' bed. Compared with other works by the same authors, encyclopedic narratives find it exceptionally difficult to integrate their women characters at any level more quotidian or humane than the levels of archetype and myth. These are imperial works, and they assert the claims of a grander imperium than love or the family—just as their publication (or more accurately, their reception) asserts the national imperium of their cultures.

Encyclopedic narrative strains outward from the brief moments

of personal love toward the wider expanses of national and mythical history, and also toward the history of its own medium. All encyclopedias are polyglot books that provide a history of language. Dante identifies the dialects of Italy and France and the degenerate language of the giant Nimrod, and in the *Paradiso* Adam offers a religious history of language. Panurge begs bread from Pantagruel in thirteen languages, three of them invented for the occasion, before he gets around to French. Don Quixote is expert in etymology, especially the effect of Arabic on Castilian. Faust educates Helen out of Greek hexameters into the rhymed stanzas of Romance and Germanic languages. Melville introduces the whale through its etymological ancestry. Joyce puns in at least seven languages. And Pynchon uses French, German, Italian, Spanish, Middle Dutch, Latin, Japanese, Kirghiz, Russian, the African Herero language, and various English and American dialects.

Joyce provides a history of language in terms of an historical embryology of style in his "Oxen of the Sun" chapter of *Ulysses*. His vision of linguistic history is deterministic and pessimistic, treating the development of language as unconscious and unchosen. Pynchon provides a *political* history of language, an account of the deliberate introduction by Soviet authorities of a written alphabet for the Kirghiz language in central Asia, a language which had earlier only been spoken. The Kirghiz alphabet has political ends and political consequences, all of them deliberately chosen at one level or another of the book's world.

It is not only Pynchon's political conception of language, but his whole political vision, with its indecorous insistence on issues that Joyce (and modernism in general) sweetens or ignores, that raises disturbing questions for his critics, and for all critics. Much of *Gravity's Rainbow* concerns the eruption, in the midst of political and social chaos, of charismatic leaders and saviors, some fraudulent, some parodic, some almost authentic. After the book's charismatic centers die or disappear, bureaucratic structures organize around their traces, ostensibly to commemorate and celebrate their charismatic origins. The original charismatic figure, the lost focus of the new structure, is always illegal or extra-legal, someone outside the structures of government or convention whose energy rests in him alone and cannot be transferred. But the bureaucracy that grows up after he is gone is always legal, comfortable, self-perpetuating, and economically prosperous.

Pynchon of course found the classic account of these matters in

Max Weber, who named the process in which charisma is replaced by bureaucracy as the “routinization of charisma”—a phrase Pynchon quotes more than once in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This process is part of Pynchon’s plot, but is also part of his book’s reception, for it is precisely this process of routinization of charisma (I apologize for the ugly phrase) through which encyclopedic narratives generate their critical industries. Like the charismatic figures whom Weber and Pynchon set at the transitional moments of history, encyclopedic narratives usually enter their cultures from a position of exile or illegality. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, makes clear the pervasive intrinsic illegality of Rabelais’ vision—and Rabelais himself fell under the (extrinsic) interdict of the Sorbonne—but all encyclopedic narratives, to a greater or lesser degree, originate in opposition to the cultures they later come to symbolize. Dante writes the *Commedia* in exile from Florence; Cervantes calls *Don Quixote* “just what might be begotten in a prison,” where he may, in fact, have begun to write it; Goethe hides Part II of *Faust* from the public until after his death; *Moby-Dick* receives its early recognition only in England; the last words of Joyce’s encyclopedia of Dublin are “Trieste-Zürich-Paris.” Pynchon’s anonymity, his refusal of all official honors or awards, his straining at the now very wide limits of literary decorum, are his own vehicles of self-imposed exile from a culture that is too tolerant ever to expel him. To an extent unknown among other works that have become cultural monuments, and meal-tickets for academics, encyclopedic narratives begin their career in a charismatic illegality which generates, sometimes long after publication, official and continuing bureaucracies of editors, annotators, bibliographers, biographers, interpreters, lexicographers and archivists. The bureaucratically organized critical industries built upon the exile, obscurity or illegality of Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Melville and Joyce now provide food and shelter for many hundreds of scholars and critics, and will doubtless continue to do so, no matter how stormy the economic climate becomes.

A comparable industry is already beginning to develop around Thomas Pynchon. Uniquely, however, among encyclopedic authors, Pynchon calls attention to just this kind of critical industry in the course of his own work.⁴ Unlike Joyce who—outside *Ulysses*, in

⁴ Don Quixote tries to prophesy the reception of his own heroic history, but with conspicuous success.

letters and over café-tables—welcomed and encouraged the creation of a Joycean cartel, Pynchon *warns* of the rise of bureaucracies and of their social and economic roles. His warning is timely. Recent criticism almost entirely ignores its own economic and political motives. Although most critics surely write out of love for their subject, most critics also hope to gain some sort of profit, some sort of place for themselves, as by-products of their works of love. But how many critics can bring themselves, *in their criticism*, to acknowledge this? The early Renaissance painter could, without embarrassment, portray a donor kneeling in the side panel of a Nativity. The baroque poet was glad to proclaim a florid dedication to the noble patron who might be moved to pay the poet's bills. But the romantic tradition that establishes the decorum and assumptions of even the most skeptical of contemporary criticism almost entirely excludes any acknowledgement of a critic's economic motive or social expectation. Pynchon has now rendered this tradition of silence slightly more difficult to maintain.

This is not the only extraliterary matter to which Pynchon helps call attention. The evident desire that cultures feel for an encyclopedic author or narrative with which to identify themselves, is in part an aspect of romantic nationalism and its search for ancestors. The status of Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes and Shakespeare depends in part on romantic hindsight.⁵ This was, of course, recognized before Pynchon arrived on the scene, but Pynchon has now written, for the first time, an encyclopedic narrative that emphatically calls attention not only to its own structure but also to the social and psychological processes that give books like his their cultural position. What remains is the question whether criticism will bother to listen—whether it will perhaps become more aware of its own position and purpose—or whether the rapidly-forming Pynchon industry will pursue the same undoubtedly useful but often innocently unselfconscious purposes that the Joyce, Goethe and Shakespeare industries have pursued before it, so extensively, so profitably.

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⁵ The parallel example of Bach in the history of German music is instructive. Bach spent almost half his life in constant disputes with the Leipzig authorities, who, with evident relief, chose Bach's successor two days before Bach himself was buried. A century later, after the romantic generation of composers and critics called Bach the "father of German music," Leipzig erected a heroic statue of him, and the *Bach-Gesellschaft* made its bureaucratic appearance. One might compare Dante's Florentine rehabilitation through early editions and later monuments.