"The Truth of a True Lie": Reading Against the Grain in Thomas Pynchon's "Low-Lands"

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Introduction

Thomas Pynchon's early short story, "Low-Lands"—originally published in *New World Writing* in 1960—has garnered substantial critical attention over the decades, second only perhaps to the more widely-anthologized, and hence more well-known, "Entropy." While "Low-Lands" does not explicitly revolve around a central metaphor—like entropy in its sibling-story story—it nonetheless resembles it in that its seemingly teleological structure and densely intertextual narrative fabric activate interpretive patterns that have given rise to a profusion of critical readings. These readings, however, often concentrate on features in the text that appear deliberately placed—almost too readily available—raising the question of whether the story solicits interpretation or sets a trap for it.

For this reason, the present study does not seek to offer yet another interpretation of "Low-Lands," and it focuses instead on the story's dynamic relationship with its critical reception—a relationship marked by resistance as well as a paradoxical and subversive absorption of interpretive frameworks. I argue that the critical discourse surrounding "Low-Lands," despite its diverse theoretical frameworks, is largely governed by interpretive reflexes that the story itself appears to anticipate and parody. Through a meta-critical analysis of the story's putative intertextual allusions, interpretive traps, and authorial performances, the article explores how "Low-Lands" functions as a narrative that not only invites but also performs—and ultimately resists—its own hermeneutic enterprise.

The discussion begins with an analysis of the story's symbolic architecture, focusing on the motif of descent and its readiness to accommodate interpretive projection. It then turns to a critical genealogy of scholarly responses to "Low-Lands," showing how readings grounded in intertextuality often reproduce rhetorical patterns that bear little (if any) causal relation to the story itself, but adequately serve the purpose of grounding and maintaining the critics' interpretive authority. This leads to a consideration of the figure of the author—not as origin but as function—through close engagement with Pynchon's own ironic self-positioning in the introduction to his early stories collected in *Slow Learner* (1984). The final section explores the paradoxes of interpretive agency encoded in the

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text itself, arguing that "Low-Lands" operates as a (self-)reflexive system in which every critical move seems to be already implicated—moreover, pre-empted and undermined. In this light, interpretation becomes less a method of revealing the "truth" ("meaning") of the text than a performance in which truthfulness becomes bracketed and ultimately rendered impossible to attain.

"Low-Lands": An Intertextual Labyrinth

The protagonist of "Low-Lands" is Dennis Flange, a successful lawyer, living in a classy house perched on a cliff over the Long Island Sound, with his estranged wife, Cindy. Possibly plagued by afflictions of midlife crisis, Flange no longer finds satisfaction in his work, so one day he calls in sick to his office and, much to Cindy's indignation, spends the day drinking muscatel and listening to Vivaldi with Rocco Squarcione, the garbage man. The last straw for Cindy is the unexpected arrival of Pig Bodine, a shady character who has gone AWOL from the navy so that he can pay a visit to Flange, his former ranking officer. Since Pig was responsible for dragging Flange off to a two-week drinking-spree on his wedding night, Cindy is outraged by the arrival of Pig, and finds the reunion reason enough to expel Flange from home as well as from her life for good. Driven out by Cindy, the three men mount Rocco's garbage truck and descend from Flange's place to the local dump, presided over by a man named Bolingbroke. At the dump-site, they spiral further down in the truck and find shelter in Bolingbroke's shack, which they reach after walking through tortuous mazes and "ravines" of garbage piles. The men continue drinking and entertain each other with sea-stories. Later, Bolingbroke reluctantly informs them that a group of "gypsies" have also made the dump their home, and during the night, Flange is indeed woken up by a young girl, called Nerissa, who leads him even further down through maze-like ducts to her own subterranean shelter, which she shares with her pet-rat, Hyacinth. The story's conclusion is ambiguous as it is never revealed whether Flange is awake or just dreaming this last episode, but in any case there is at least a vague hint that Flange will find love with Nerissa at the lowermost point of the dump.

Besides the manifestly displayed motif of downward procession, the story is teeming with neatly-placed dichotomies upon which interpreters may readily pounce. Some of the most salient examples: the house vs. the dump, where the former symbolizes the rule of rationality (representing Cindy's dominance) with its internal design characterized by angular shapes and transparent spaces as opposed to the latter's irrational dream-world of sinuous and oblique labyrinths; the privileged vs. the underprivileged – the former represented by the Flanges' lifestyle perched high on the cliff, the latter by Rocco and Bolingbroke living in the

subterranean microcosm of the dump; submission vs. control – Nerissa's childlike stature and behavior hints at a desire to be dominated by the white Anglo-Saxon Flange (whom she wants to marry and actually calls "Anglo") as opposed to the unimpressionable and disenchanted Cindy, who clearly presides over Flange's life in the world above.

The fact that most of these dichotomies are organized within a pattern of spatial symbols lends a semblance of structural coherence to the story. The most patent spatial symbol is that of descent—a prominent motif in Western mythology. Accordingly, Flange's character may be interpreted as taking up the role of mythical figures such as Orpheus, Heracles, Aeneas, Odysseus, or Theseus. Most of these characters descend to the underworld to rescue a loved one, and likewise, in Pynchon's alleged version of the myth, Flange's descent may be seen as an attempt to rescue a young girl (Nerissa) and, thereby, redeem himself. Yet instead of salvation, he finds himself trapped in a patriarchal fantasy, imagining himself as a "young and randy" Jolly Jack Tar, "thews and chin taut against a sixty-knot gale with a well-broken in briar clenched in the bright defiant teeth" ("Low-Lands" 60). In this vision, redemption can only be conceived through the domination of an infantile and submissive Nerissa, who is portrayed as young and fragile enough to be his child.

The motif of descent can also be explicated as the germ of a recurring trope in Pynchon's textual universe, since in the triad of his seminal early novels, *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot* 49 (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the protagonists Benny Profane, Oedipa Maas, and Tyrone Slothrop all have to descend either to a literal or symbolic underworld to find their own versions of the truth that stays hidden under the surface. Benny Profane's underworld is the sewer system of New York City, Oedipa's the mysterious world of the underground movement called Trystero, and Slothrop's is "the Zone," that is, post-World War II Germany.[1]

Joseph W. Slade (in 1974) and Tony Tanner (in 1982) were among the first critics to devote specific attention to the story.[2] Both of these were included in their comprehensive monographs on Pynchon's fiction (incidentally, both titled *Thomas Pynchon*), so they do not advance a specific hypothesis, concept, or argument,

1 Evans Lansing Smith has devoted a book-length study to this motif in Pynchon's work, titled *Thomas Pynchon and the Postmodern Mythology of the Underworld* (2012). Smith analyzes Pynchon's novels published between 1963 (*V.*) and 2006 (*Against the Day*)—with the exception of *Vineland* (1990)—but not the short stories.

2 Slade and Tanner were not the only ones who reflected on the story in the 1970s and early 1980s. Lois Parkinson Zamora, in 1980, devoted a study to the science and eschatology in Pynchon's works, in which he "identified Nerissa as the acronym for the robot that can find its way out of a maze [in this case, the dump]" (Seed "Fantasy" 64).

but seek to offer instead a "generic" reading of the story. More specifically, their interpretations are less concerned with conceptual coherence than with literary affinity, and the authority of their readings often stems from the authority of the texts they reference. Slade and Tanner both touch upon the most salient aspects delineated above such as the symbolism of Flange's descent, social inequalities, the symbolism of the dump, etc., but what lends real substance to their interpretations is their minute attention to what they read as intertextual references. They both spot motifs taken from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (Slade 27-29; Tanner 30), but it is Slade who makes it the central theme of his interpretation: she identifies Nerissa (based on her rat's name) with the hyacinth girl from "The Burial of the Dead" section (Slade 30), Violetta, and the old woman with an eye-patch who predicted that she will marry a "tall Anglo" ("Low-Lands 76) with Madame Sosostris "who tells the fortune of Eliot's protagonist" (Slade 31). Tanner, on the other hand, compiles an impressive list of intertextual affinities: Shakespeare's *The Tempest, Henry IV* (the latter being the possible source of Bolingbroke's name)[3], *The Merchant of Venice* (Nerissa's name is the same as that of Portia's maid in the play); *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Flange entering the mazes of the dump's netherworld)*;* Keats's *Endymion* (the "brain-sick" dreamer Endymion falling in love with an Indian maiden), and Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (sleep vs. wakefulness) (Tanner 31).

These early commentaries on "Low-Lands" have become integral to the hermeneutic history of the text, constituting ineluctable points of reference that subsequent readings of the story are compelled to acknowledge.[4] In this respect, the identification of the intertextual elements carries a special authoritative weight mainly for two reasons: first, because associating the story with time-honored works of the Western literary canon (somewhat flatteringly) lends a semblance of respectability and authority to Pynchon's text; second, the ability to spot these literary affinities testifies to the critics' professional expertise and interpretive finesse to be admired and surpassed by future generations of commentators and literary

3 The first one to have spotted this reference was actually Joseph Slade in his "'Entropy' and Other Calamities," published in *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1979), edited by Edward Mendelson. The more elaborate discussion of the waste-land imagery comes from his earlier book, *Thomas Pynchon* (1974).

4 Slade is credited for his discovery of Eliot- and Shakespeare-references in the following articles and books: David Seed: "Fantasy and Dream in Thomas Pynchon's 'Low-Lands'" (65) and *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* (31-35); David Cowart: *Thomas Pynchon: the Art of Allusion* (10; 98); Carole Holdsworth: "Cervantine Echoes in Early Pynchon" (47-51); Deborah L. Madsen: *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon* (21); Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck: "Race and Unreliable Narration in 'Low-Lands" (237-38).

students. The early critics' diligent efforts to dig up[5] possible literary influences on Pynchon can easily breed an "anxiety of influence" felt by their successors, some of whom still seem to be alert to intertextual connections. David Seed's reading of the story serves as a case in point, which, having duly acknowledged the elders, claims to recognize "Esmeralda's room in [Victor] Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*" as a prefiguration of Nerissa's room, where "Gringoire is brought to the Court of Miracles, the enclave of beggars in the heart of medieval Paris" ("Fantasy" 64). A similar example is provided by Carole Holdsworth, who devotes a whole study to what she deems "Cervantine echoes" in "Low-lands." Much in the same vein, Mark D. Hawthorne finds analogies between Flange's meandering through the dump and "Theseus's being guided by Ariadne through the maze" ("Labyrinths" 80-81).

Despite the apparently similar approach, however, these interpretations differ considerably in terms of critical outlook and rhetoric. Slade and Tanner do not seem to feel obliged to substantiate their interpretive claims either by providing philological evidence or by subsuming their intertextual findings into a conceptually unified interpretation. Consider the following passage by Slade as an example:

The girl's name is Nerissa, which may also derive from Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice*), or Pynchon may be playing on "Nereids," the nymphs of the sea. Who she *really is* becomes apparent when she introduces Flange to her pet rat . . . The rat's name is Hyacinth and Nerissa is *clearly* the hyacinth girl of "The Burial of the Dead" section of *The Waste Land.* Nerissa wants Flange to be her husband; she had been told by a fortune teller named Violetta—*Eliot's Madame Sosostris*—that she would wed an Anglo like him. (30; emphasis added)

The initial conjectures (Nerissa's name "*may* derive from Shakespeare"; "Pynchon *may be* playing on 'Nereids'") quickly give way to apodictic statements (Nerissa is *clearly* the hyacinth girl, and Violetta, Madame Sosostris), as though Slade had indeed stumbled upon a hidden truth that only needed to be revealed. Tanner dispenses even with the arrangement of his findings into a causal sequence; instead, he provides a lading list of possible interrelations, then he adds:

In all this mixing of writings and rewritings, Pynchon is not simply amusing himself or winking at learned readers. We should see this activity more as a sifting (or "burrowing" back) through not exactly the "rubbish" and "waste" of our literary past but through its accumulations to see what can be re-used (recycled, perhaps) to depict his particular fictional world. (31)

5 The metaphor of "digging" is not entirely arbitrary. The phrasing of David Cowart's acknowledgement of Slade's significant findings in the subject of "Pynchon's literary debts" is telling in this respect: "Joseph Slade has turned more earth in this critical garden than anyone else" (98).

Tanner's statements sound less apodictic than those in Slade's commentary, yet the act of listing possible references still hints at a revelatory intent. In both cases, the rhetoric suggests a strong sense of conviction on the critics' part, which helps consolidate their position as reliable interpreters of the text. The validity of the interpretation, however, is not necessarily grounded in the expertise or interpretive skills of the individual critics, but rather in the authority of the canon they reference.

By contrast, Carole Holdsworth moves beyond simply citing possible literary influences, and anchors her analysis in both biographical context and philological inquiry. She hypothesizes that Pynchon was significantly influenced by Cervantes's *Don Quixote* when writing "Low-Lands," which he might have studied in some detail in Vladimir Nabokov's classes at Cornell University. Holdsworth herself admits, however, that although Nabokov had delivered a series of lectures on *Don Quixote* at Harvard in 1951-52, there is no evidence of him giving the same lectures at Cornell (47). The question of evidence aside, Holdsworth does indeed find some compelling affinities, which include those between Flange and Don Quixote: both live in a fantasy world, both are fascinated by fictions (chivalric novels and sea-stories respectively); both run away from the controlling rationality of a woman (Don Quixote from his housekeeper, Flange from Cindy); both cut a tall and noble figure; in the end both come to realize the deceptive nature of fictions. Holdsworth also draws a comparison between Sancho Panza and Pig Bodine: both are lower-class companions, serving men of higher social standing (a nobleman and a naval officer respectively); Sancho is dismissed by Don Quixote's housekeeper just as Pig is scorned by Cindy; and while Don Quixote and Sancho first encounter the sea in Barcelona, Pig Bodine's sea-story is likewise set in the same city (Holdsworth 47). She sees in Nerissa both an incarnation of Dulcinea (whose "emerald-green eyes" become the "submarine green of her [Nerissa's] heart" in the closing sentence of "Low-Lands" [52]), and the female protagonist of another story by Cervantes from his *Exemplary Novels*, "La Gitanella" ("The Little Gypsy Girl") (52). However, finding Nerissa's "amorality" (begging a married man to stay with her) incompatible with "Cervantes's chaste, golden-haired heroine," Holdsworth declares her the "antitype" of the fair maiden (52-53).

The analogies Holdsworth identifies are clever and, at times, even persuasive, yet a comparative reading like this often lacks a clear articulation of its underlying concepts and objectives. What, after all, is proven or demonstrated by drawing parallelisms between two texts so distantly separated in time? That Nabokov may or may not have lectured the young Pynchon on *Don Quixote*? (It is not clear why this information is relevant to the story.) That Pynchon has read Cervantes's masterpiece? (Very likely, but so have many other people.) That the work influenced Pynchon when writing "Low-Lands?" (Possible, but this remains a speculative

assumption, which contributes little to our understanding of the story.) That Pynchon came up with a *Don Quixote*-like story all by himself *à la* Borges's author-character, Pierre Menard? (It would be an even more far-fetched speculation.) Holdsworth's motives may become clearer, if we examine the concluding sentences of her essay: "For Nabokov, Shakespeare and Cervantes are equals in 'the matter of influence, of spiritual irrigation.' The eternal waters of Cervantes's writings may well have irrigated Thomas Pynchon's early story 'Low-lands'" (53). The metaphor of "spiritual irrigation" suggests that *Don Quixote* (or Cervantes himself) is a life-giving force both in a physical and intellectual sense, without which/whom Pynchon's story could not have come into existence (at least not in this particular form). Thus, the purpose and function of Holdsworth's study may become more clear: it is not meant so much to be an elucidation of "Low-Lands" through *Don Quixote* as a laudation of *Don Quixote* through "Low-Lands," a reverential nod to the great master, Cervantes—putatively the father of all novels—and through Cervantes, to the authority of the Western literary canon.

While David Seed ostensibly challenges earlier approaches to "Low-Lands," he nevertheless remains committed to the same underlying drive to identify intertextual connections. After dutifully cataloguing Slade's references to Eliot and Shakespeare, he proceeds to critique his predecessor's approach and conclusions. "One drawback of Slade's approach," he reflects, "is that he tends to moralize the story and to look for signs of affirmation that simply do not exist" ("Fantasy" 65). He particularly finds Slade's interpretation of Flange as a "miserable messiah" all too flat: "Of course he is [a miserable messiah]; in fact, he is not a messiah at all. Pynchon dismisses that possibility when discussing Flange's attitude to the sea (Diaz [his unreliable psychotherapist] dismisses his fantasy of walking on its surface as a 'messiah complex')" (65). After essentially reiterating Slade's interpretation of Nerissa as an incarnation of Shakespeare's "Nereis" and Eliot's hyacinth girl, Seed goes on to question the exclusive relevance of these canonical literary references: "While Pynchon borrows details from *The Waste Land* this does not mean that he is trying to follow up all the motifs in that poem. The seascape is not 'waste' in Eliot's sense; Bolingbroke [from *Henry IV*] is king of the dump but has no quasimythical role; the fortune-teller [Violetta/Madame Sosostris] is an incidental detail; and Flange does not trace out the footsteps of Eliot's protagonist" (66).

There is a common pattern that seems to emerge across these readings: besides privileging intertextual identification, they often adopt a rhetoric of revelation, moving from speculation to certainty, and thereby reinforcing the critic's own authority. This tendency is evident in the apodictic tones used by Slade or the associative logic deployed by Tanner. Yet such interpretive strategies, far from breaking new ground, seem to follow paths laid down by the text itself. The story's

abundant symbolic architecture almost prescribes the terms of its exegesis. This raises the question: what is the critic doing when interpreting a story like "Low-Lands"? Is interpretation an act of discovery, or merely of execution? Tony Tanner himself gestures toward this issue when discussing Pynchon's "Entropy," suggesting that Pynchon leaves his "philosophic tracks" exposed, almost daring critics to follow them (*City* 153). In such a context, the critic becomes less a meaning-maker than a "meaning-follower," less a theorist than an annotator.

What Is An (Erudite) Author?

This tension becomes especially acute when placed in the context of theoretical debates about authorship and interpretation. In his famous essay, "What Is an Author" (1969), Michel Foucault describes (and debunks) the traditional image of the author as that of "the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations," adding that "[w]e are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, proliferate indefinitely" (221). According to Foucault, the "author-function" serves a diametrically opposed purpose: to limit the proliferation of meaning, impeding "the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (221). The argument is plausible inasmuch as the postulation of an all-powerful, all-knowing author, who is in full control of all significations in his/her text, requires a total submission to the authority of this God-like creator on the part of the reader or critic. Even though the notion that omniscient authority emanates from the biographical author's charisma has been deconstructed—most powerfully by Foucault and Roland Barthes[6]—it still feels counterintuitive to dissociate the "knowledge" that a text conveys from some form of authorial agency. It is especially true of literary works in which the effect of omniscience comes off as a function of the text's "erudition," which often immediately gets imputed to the biographical or the implied author.

In this regard, few works in the American literary canon display such a wealth of manifold knowledge as those of Pynchon. The famously reclusive author has

6 In his equally famous essay, "The Death of the Author," Barthes writes in a similar vein about the dissolution of the metaphysically privileged status of the author: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146). The "Author-God" is an effect generated by those writings "bending and clashing."

indeed earned himself the reputation of being the paradigm case of the "erudite author." Even in his early days as an up-and-coming young writer, as well as in his more mature years, commentators marveled at his apparent knowledgeability in fields as diverse as the natural sciences, history, philosophy, music, and the fine arts. Since knowledge of any kind is not a free-floating entity, the most convenient way of accounting for it is to attribute it to the superior mind of the author. As one might expect, this commonly occurs in Pynchon-criticism. For example, experiencing the high-powered intellectual virtuosity of Pynchon's texts leads John O. Stark to make the following remark:

One needs to mention the tremendous erudition with which Pynchon develops his themes. One's arms may tire of holding *Gravity's Rainbow* long enough to read it, but the malady is nothing compared to the aching legs a tracker of his allusions will get or to the vertigo caused by trying to fit those allusions together into a pattern . . . Pynchon apparently has read everything. This vast knowledge distances in emotional terms a reader from Pynchon's fiction because it increases one's intellectual response to his work and decreases their emotional response. (24)

The intellectualism Stark describes arguably makes Pynchon more of a "critics' author" rather than a "readers' author." Commentators may indeed revel in exploring his scientific metaphors, artistic allusions, philosophical meditations at least in part because it affords them excellent opportunities to flex their interpretive muscles, perhaps even to showcase that their erudition is on a par with the author's own. Lay readers, however, may justly feel awed and overwhelmed by Pynchon's cerebral fictions and his characteristically verbose style, which at times might read as though they were academic treatises themselves.

Stark takes on Pynchon's intellectual challenges head-on and seems to fully embrace the vertiginous textual intricacies. He sets out to explore what he refers to as "Pynchon's fictions," by which he means elaborate discursive constructions that he (Stark) organizes into meaningful patterns pertaining to various disciplines and discourses represented in Pynchon's novels and stories, namely, science and technology, psychology, history, film, and literature. Stark's analyses are founded on the premise that Pynchon's texts deliberately frustrate the ordinary causal patterns of our thinking, so instead of causal/linear explications, he elects to arrange recurrent themes in clusters relegated to the disciplines and discourses listed above. The assumption behind this approach is that despite the loosely-knit causality and occasional surrealism of Pynchon's plots, his works offer coherent narratives at a higher level of interpretive comprehension. In order to reach this level of understanding one needs to recognize how "discrete bits of information" (39) can be seen to converge into meaningful and coherent patterns within the text. A case in point for the kind of interpretation Stark envisages is his explanation of the

significance of the motif of circularity in *Gravity's Rainbow*: "The Herero villages are circular, the benzene ring is circular, the mandala is circular," he contends, then goes on to identify three disciplines pertaining to these three dissident pieces of information: history (which can account for the shape of the villages), chemistry (vis-à-vis August Kekulé's discovery of the circularity of the benzene ring), and psychology (via Jung's explanation of the circularity of the mandala as the symbol of a fully developed personality). Then, he continues as follows:

"Thus, three nonliterary disciplines make meaningful something that had before been merely intelligible. Next, one can try to subsume all three facts within one discipline by arguing that the yearning for fullness represented by the mandala caused the Hereros to build circular villages and caused Kekulé to envision the benzene ring's shape". (40)

Although he does concede that "these cause-and-effect relations probably cannot be proved," he proceeds to argue that Pynchon, by taking "another step,"

clarifies the operation of the three disciplines, showing how they explain things. The villages, the benzene ring, and the mandalas become part of his circle imagery, which helps to unify the novel, and enriches its meaning by relating previously separate phenomena to each other . . . At the same time, by tying together these circle images, Pynchon reveals himself, the presiding force in the book, at work. (40)

Although Stark on the previous page criticizes an unnamed reviewer of *V.* for falling victim to the intentional fallacy (39), he seems to unequivocally espouse the traditional view of intentionalism that Foucault and Barthes have sought to demystify. Elevating the author to the position of "the presiding force" over his/her work hints at a firm belief in a metaphysically-conceived order of ultimate meaning. Moreover, he does not make it clear what (or who) exactly he means by "Pynchon": the biographical or the implied author. Due to Pynchon's renowned reclusiveness, hence assuming a lack of reliable biographical information on the critic's part, it seems plausible to argue that the figure of "Pynchon" as the omniscient, erudite, hyper-conscious mastermind behind a carefully designed universe of coherent meanings is entirely Stark's construction, that is, *his* inferred version of the implied author.

The biographical Pynchon's revelation of "himself at work," however, falls very far from Stark's image of him. Four years after the publication of Stark's book, the famously reclusive Pynchon surprised his readers by offering a low-key, casually-toned, and devastatingly self-deprecating account of his early work in his introduction to the collection of his early stories, *Slow Learner*. He starts by reflecting that his first reaction, "rereading these stories, was *oh my God*, accompanied by physical symptoms we shouldn't dwell upon" (3), and goes on to reflect on each of

the four stories in the collection with utter self-contempt. He rebukes his younger self for "operating under the motto 'Make it literary'" (by alluding to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* in "The Small Rain"), which he deems "a piece of bad advice I made up all by myself and then took" (4). He also chastises himself for "the case of Bad Ear to be found marring much of the dialogue" (4) in the same story. He downplays his scientific knowledge, ever so often celebrated by commentators, by stating that "my grasp [of his signature-motif of entropy] becomes less sure the more I read" (14). Moreover, he reflects that due to his heavy-handed tackling of the central metaphor in "Entropy" made the characters "come off as synthetic, insufficiently alive" (12). The "lesson is sad," he reflects, "get too conceptual, too cute and remote, and your characters die on the page" (13). Before he concludes the introduction, he does not fail briefly to lash out at his highly-acclaimed early masterpiece, *The Crying of Lot 49*, which he refers to as a "story" marketed as a "novel," in which "I seem to have forgotten most of what I thought I'd learned up till then" (22).

These self-effacing prefatory remarks arguably undermine Stark's conception of Pynchon: the voice speaking here hardly seems to belong to an almost God-like author who controls every minute nuance of his text to subsume them into a "pan-semiotic" metanarrative. How can we ascertain, however, that the Pynchon of *Slow Learner*'s introduction carries more authority over his work (i.e., that he is the "real" Pynchon, speaking in his own voice, being truthful, etc.) than the implied author envisaged by Stark? Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck have devoted an insightful study to the investigation of the introduction to *Slow Learner*, in which they patently question the reliability of Pynchon's autobiographical narrative: "With an I-narrator looking back on his old self," they contend, "Pynchon's introduction has all the trappings of autobiographical fiction. Considered as such it is prone to all the hazards of homodiegetic narration, including its manifold possibilities for unreliability as mapped by [James] Phelan and [Mary] Martin" (231). Herman and Vervaeck focus specifically on Pynchon's retrospective disclaimer of his own (in his words) "racist, sexist and proto-Fascist talk" (11) in "Low-Lands," and reflect that "[o]ne way to look at this self-accusation is to see it as part of a moral high-road strategy developed by Pynchon to endear himself with the audience of his remarkable introduction" (229). Although Pynchon could resort to a cop-out by imputing the questionable views to the character of Pig Bodine, who voices them in the story, he confesses: "Sad to say, [the voice] was also my own at the time" (11). Herman and Vervaeck argue that if the narrator of "Low-Lands" was a recognizable product of his own time, that is, the 1950s, then he can be seen as more reliable within the diegetic framework of the story than the "liberal-minded" explicator of the story, *post hoc*, in the 1980s (233-34).

Wayne C. Booth deems it necessary to introduce the notion of the implied author in his seminal *The Rhetoric of Fiction* because of "the intricate relationship of the so-called real author with his various official versions of himself" (71). He goes on to add: "We must say various versions, for regardless of how sincere an author may try to be, his different works will imply different versions, different ideal combinations of norms" (71). In his introduction to Slow Learner, Pynchon simultaneously constructs three versions of himself: (1) the "racist, sexist and proto-Fascist" narrator of "Low-lands;" (2) the enlightened, mature writer of 1984; (3) the "slow-learning" implied author he envisages as he rereads his own stories twenty-odd years after they were written. The multiplicity of authorial personae that Pynchon assumes—whether as erudite polymath, fallible young writer, or retrospective debunker—ultimately complicates any stable notion of authorial control or intention. What emerges is not a single, authoritative Pynchon but an elusive author-function: one that both generates interpretive authority and satirizes it by cultivating the image of intellectual prestige and then debunking it. As Herman and Vervaeck suggest, even Pynchon's self-critique may function rhetorically, staging a performance of humility that subtly reinforces his mystique. In this light, Stark's vision of the author as a presiding force organizing allusions into meaningful coherence becomes not merely reductive, but symptomatic of a critical desire for mastery that Pynchon's own discourse repeatedly undermines. The erudite author, then, cannot be posited as a stable figure but rather as a shifting effect—a projection of the very interpretive frameworks it appears to authorize.

The Truth of a True Lie: Observation, Interpretation, and Quantum Fictions

As the previous two sections have demonstrated, most commentators on "Low-Lands" appeal to some form of authority (canonical or authorial) to anchor their interpretations in a firm foundation of "evidence." At the same time, the story not only accommodates, but appears to anticipate a wide range of critical responses—intertextual, mythological, psychoanalytical—offering them up as though they were already embedded in its structure. What emerges is a narrative that seems to program its own interpretation, simultaneously enabling and neutralizing critical agency. In this light, the critics' apparent yearning for firm foundations may be seen as an attempt to neutralize the very instabilities the text puts into play. Their interpretations tend to obscure the fact that "Low-Lands" is not simply a literary object awaiting explication, but a self-reflexive system that stages—and subtly subverts—the assumptions of interpretation itself.

The most salient example is the way the story implicates, and "neutralizes," as it were, psychoanalytic interpretations, to which the texts most readily lends itself.

In this reading, the house on Long Island represents the superego, with Cindy as its policing figure: a woman so committed to social order that she even repurposes an abandoned police booth as a garden shed. Her world is one of rationality, discipline, and domestic propriety—conditions fundamentally incompatible with the presence of a garbage man or the instinct-driven intrusions of Pig Bodine. Within this framework, Flange's descent into the dump signifies a plunge into the unconscious, where Nerissa embodies his repressed desires and fantasies of male dominance. The reading is further reinforced—or even ironically undercut—by the story's explicit references to psychoanalysis at the diegetic level. We learn that Flange has been undergoing therapy, attempting to construe his recurring fantasies, including a fascination with the sea. This is interpreted by his analyst, Geronimo Diaz, in stereotypically Freudian terms: as a yearning for maternal love, grounded in the primordial association between seawater and the origins of life. According to Geronimo,

since all life had started from protozoa who lived in the sea, and since, as life forms had grown more complicated, sea water had begun to serve the function of blood until eventually corpuscles and a lot of other junk were added to produce the red stuff we know today; since this was true, the sea was quite literally in our blood, and more important, the sea—rather than, as is popularly held, the earth— is the true mother image for us all. (59)

A passage like this demonstrates that while the narrative may invite a classically psychoanalytic reading, the story simultaneously undermines such interpretations by parodying psychoanalysis itself. The framework is not only referenced but also rendered ineffectual through caricature. Flange is described as "a legitimate child of his generation," for whom "Freud [was] mother's milk" (57), and thus gains nothing new from the sessions with his analyst. The analyst, Geronimo, is depicted as a "crazed and boozy wetback" (57) who is "clearly insane" (58), believing himself to be Paganini, claiming to have sold his soul to the devil, and often ignoring his patient entirely while reading aloud from random-number tables or the Ebbinghaus nonsense-syllable lists. The absurdity of these details, paired with Diaz's pseudo-Freudian monologue—"the sea was quite literally in our blood, and more important, the sea . . . is the true mother image for us all"—suggests not just a critique of the method's explanatory power but a deliberate exposure of its rhetorical excesses. Psychoanalysis, here, is not disqualified by logical refutation but absorbed into the text's repertoire of satirical targets. Yet even the insight that "Low-Lands" resists psychoanalytic interpretation remains contingent upon the text's willingness to accommodate that resistance. The very idea that such a reading can be "undone" by the text suggests that interpretive strategies—whether affirmed or negated—are already inscribed within the narrative. This observation points

toward a broader tendency in the story: its apparent readiness to offer up symbolic material for interpretation while simultaneously ironizing or disrupting that same process.

This uneasy boundary between interpretation and meta-interpretation—between being inside the story's hermeneutic design and stepping outside it—collapses most forcefully in a key narrative moment. When Pig Bodine expects Flange to follow his sea story with one of his own, Flange declines: "I would have, only I couldn't think of any offhand." The narrator immediately intervenes to offer the "real reason":

If you are Dennis Flange and if the sea's tides are the same that not only wash along your veins but also billow through your fantasies then it is all right to listen to but not to tell stories about that sea, because you and the truth of a true lie were thrown sometime way back into a curious contiguity and as long as you are passive you can remain aware of the truth's extent but the minute you become active you are somehow, if not violating a convention outright, at least screwing up the perspective of things, much as anyone observing subatomic particles changes the works, data and odds, by the act of observing. (69)

This remarkable passage, which clearly draws upon Werner Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, foregrounds "truth" as inherently paradoxical: simultaneously apodictic, yet inaccessible; epistemologically firm, yet fluid and elusive. The sea, both symbolic and material, circulates within Flange's body and imagination; it becomes the metonymic ground for a kind of truth that is both inside and outside, but in either case it resists articulation. The oxymoronic phrase "the truth of a true lie" suggests that truth of this sort ceases to be metaphysical essence, and rather becomes contingent proximity—what pragmatists like William James or Richard Rorty would call a *truth for us*, rather than a truth *in itself*. In this framework, truth is not something to be *possessed* but rather something made temporarily useful by context, community, or convention. Nietzsche's notion of truth as "a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms" (117) also resonates here, along with his claim in the same essay that all language falsifies by equating what is inherently unequal. If the truth of sea stories rests on a "curious contiguity" rather than correspondence, then any attempt to "tell" or interpret such truths inevitably distorts them. Interpretation becomes fabrication, and every reading—no matter how self-aware—risks becoming just another well-formed lie.

This applies not only to literal storytelling but to critical reading itself. To interpret is to "tell a story" about the story—to move from passive awareness to active intervention. But as the passage analogizes through quantum theory, observation alters the system. The interpreter cannot remain neutral: like the physicist in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the critic can measure one

dimension (e.g. narrative coherence) only at the cost of obscuring another (e.g., textual multiplicity). Interpretation thus functions not as disclosure but as interference. The more conscious and self-reflexive the interpretive act, the more it reveals its own entanglement in the system it aims to analyze. Even meta-interpretation, which claims an epistemological "outside," is drawn back in. The narrator who explains Flange's silence occupies a meta-level within the text—but is still part of the story's architecture. Likewise, the critic who seeks critical distance from both the narrative and the tradition of its interpretation may find that such distance is already anticipated and encoded. What appears to be transcendence becomes metastability—a shifting threshold that reveals the impossibility of fully stepping outside the system. The truth of interpretation, then, is not a matter of alignment with textual essence, but of rhetorical legitimacy within the interpretive community that sanctions "true lies."

CONCLUSION

What "Low-Lands" seems to demand of its critics is not only interpretation but also self-interpretation. The story appears to mirror the critic's own assumptions, desires, and interpretive reflexes—not to validate them, but to expose their constructed nature. It is not simply that the text resists definitive meaning; it performs that resistance by showcasing the critic's role as both necessary and always already riddled with a sense of charlatanry (i.e., casting the critic in the role of the maker of "true lies"). What looks like a hermeneutic treasure trove may easily turn out to be an interpretive trap; what may seem like insightful commentary could be merely compliance with the story's own pre-scripted cues. The critic becomes part of the apparatus, woven into a system that simulates revelation while withholding revelation. Pynchon's text certainly does not abolish interpretation but renders it contingent, ironic, and unstable. In this regard, "Low-Lands" becomes less a story to be decoded than a site where literature and criticism meet, each interpreting, and misinterpreting, the other in turn.

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