profession—will be the most highly rewarded.

This makes sense for the chemistry major, who is likely to go on to medical school, and the physics major, who is likely to become an engineer or a research scientist. The English major, though, is likely to go to law school or business school, to get into publishing or journalism, to become a social worker or a civil servant—to do almost anything, in short, except enroll in graduate school and become an English professor. What is the point of training such a student to be a proto-specialist in some academic field? It's certainly not practical, and it's hard to see that it's the most intellectually enriching way to learn about literature, either.

It is sometimes argued that learning a discipline is a good in itself: it teaches the virtues of undertaking a thorough course of study, of really learning something, no matter what the subject matter. But this rationale contradicts the original purpose of modern university education; for it is a version of the doctrine of "mental discipline" that was used in the early nineteenth century to explain why students ought to spend four years engaged in translating Cicero into Greek and similar exercises. The theory of "mental discipline" is the theory of education that the modern university was supposed to make obsolete.

So long as undergraduate education continues to be divided up by disciplines, and so long as the disciplines undergraduates confront continue to be introductory versions of the disciplines that graduate students confront, liberal arts education will remain hostage to the research interests of the professionals. Since the earliest days of the modern university, people have complained about this problem, and have proposed to solve it by severing the connection—by making "teaching" a separate area of professional endeavor and achievement from "research." The idea is to encourage effective teaching by rewarding it professionally—for teaching has never been a serious component in the evaluation of a professor's performance. No one is hired, tenured, or promoted at a research institution for his teaching ability.

The trouble is that teaching suffers from the same disability that criticism once suffered from: it is impossible to evaluate reliably. Some professors draw large enrollments because they present difficult material clearly; some draw large enrollments because they artificially sweeten the material. And some professors believe that the best evidence of effective teaching is a *small* enrollment made up of highly motivated students, and make an effort to discourage the attendance of supernumeraries. There is no institutional consensus on these matters because there is no institutional imperative for finding one. The only model, again, is the model of the sciences: undergraduate teaching is effective if it produces competitive candidates for admission to graduate school.

By and large, talking about reforming the modern university is like talking about reforming a skyscraper. There's not much point in tinkering: you can knock the whole thing down, or you can go live somewhere else. There is one quality that seems essential if we are to have a valuable criticism, and that is independence of mind. It ought to be one of the goals of higher education to encourage independence of mind among students, too. It seemed for a time as though this generation of academics was committed to independent thought. New theoretical winds—poststructuralism, feminism, the new historicism—upset a lot of intellectual applecarts during the last decade or so, and that has been a great thing. For intellectual applecarts ought to be upset regularly, and the academy had accumulated a lot of pieties. No one should be sorry to see them go.

What is distressing, though, is how quickly all these new theories have set up for business peddling pieties of their own. Distressing, but not surprising. For until the academy frees itself from the grip of the professionals, it will continue to turn every new idea into an industry for pedants. The day university administrators start looking for new faculty who *don't* meet the requirements of the profession will be the day the university becomes a place where real criticism is produced. •

Levity's Rainbow

BY EDWARD MENDELSON

Vineland
by Thomas Pynchon

(Little, Brown, 385 pp., $19.95)

To find another novel that is as tedious, as tendentious, and as exhilarating as Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* you have to search far back through literary history, perhaps as far as *War and Peace*. The tedious part of *Vineland* is its plot, in which radicals and potheads of the 1960s replay in the 1980s their Manichaean struggles against authority. The tendentious part of the book is its historical myth, which explains the repressive 1970s and 1980s as a fulfillment of the secret wishes of the radical 1960s. The exhilarating part is its vision. *Vineland* sees American life of the last two decades in terms of a laconic American Indian legend of a period when no one dies, a legend that the book transforms into a vision of an era when the processes of life and death are suspended, when time stands still. The vision culminates in the moment when that era ends, death resumes, and life triumphs.

To reach the vision, though, you must work your way through the plot. In itself the plot is an unsalvageable tangle of improbabilities, but Pynchon almost rescues it through the intellectual and imaginative energy that he brings to the landscape, the culture, and the language that are the setting of each improbable incident. *Vineland*'s plot is often both programmatic and perfunctory, but its world is richer and more various than the world of almost any American novel in recent memory.

As in most visionary tales, the story begins in a comfortably familiar setting. A few chapters later, when the vision kicks in, this setting, like every ordinary-looking place in Pynchon's universe, proves to be a crossing point on the border between the everyday world and the realm of the mysterious and the miraculous. The book opens on the morning when Zoyd Wheeler is scheduled to perform the annual act of public craziness that assures the continued arrival of his mental-disability checks. It is 1984. Wheeler, the latest of Pynchon's passive and bewildered representatives, is an ex-rock musician around forty who lives a hand-to-mouth existence in the California redwood country with his teenage daughter. Except for his well-planned annual leap through the window of a friend's bar, nothing in his thoughts or actions qualifies him for mental disability payments. The worst that can be said of

him is that he seems slow to recognize that the 1960s are really over. But the opening morning of the novel brings him "several rude updates." The loggers' bars have been remodeled and gentrified. The local TV station has taken it upon itself to choose on Wheeler's behalf the site of his public lunacy. And the drug enforcement agent who made his life miserable in the pot-smoking 1960s reappears with news of Wheeler's ex-wife, last seen a dozen years before.

These early chapters are vintage Pynchon, with all the comic extravagance that makes his books so uncomfortable to read while dressed in a stuffed shirt. Here again are the silly names, the dialogue marked by ungrammatical commas to indicate pauses and breathing patterns, the exact ear for elevated and demotic speech. Here also are dozens of interpolated lyrics, some tossed off by otherwise unmusical characters in the course of the action, others crafted by artistic sensibilities who share Pynchon's own indecorous high spirits. One such lyric is the advertising jingle for a lawn-and-tree service called The Marquis de Sod. It is sung to the tune of the "Marseillaise":

> A lawn savant, who'll lop a tree-ee-uh,
> Nobody beats Mar-
> Quis de Sod!

Also present, as always in Pynchon, is a breathtakingly sustained democratic lyricism. No other American writer moves so smoothly and swiftly between the extremes of high and low style, or accommodates so generously the shrill patois of the valley girl and the rotundities of Emerson. Pynchon even breathes life into that exhausted set piece, the poetry of the road. Zoyd Wheeler watches a punk band's van disappear with his daughter up a "thin, cloudpressed lane." Later, a car sweeps through Los Angeles

> among Olympic visitors from everywhere who teemed all over the freeway system in midday densities till far into the night, shined-up, screaming black motorcades that could have carried any of several office seekers, cruisers heading for treed and more gently roaring boulevards, huge double and triple trailer rigs that loved to find Volkswagens laboring up grades and go sashaying around them gracefully and at gnat's-ass tolerances, plus flirters, deserters, wimps and pimps, speeding like bullets, grinning like chimps, above the heads of TV watchers, lovers under the overpasses, movies at malls letting out, bright gas-station oases in pure fluorescent spill, canopied beneath the palm trees, soon wrapped, down the corridors of the surface streets, in nocturnal smog, the adobe air, the smell of distant fireworks, the spilled, the broken world.

Even at its most lyrical, the style of *Vineland* is less flashy than the style of

Gravity's Rainbow, a book in which Pynchon created the illusion of switching from English to French to German in the course of a few pages written entirely in English. But *Vineland*'s style is more densely integrated with its emotions and less hesitant to speak in the voices of feeling. What is new in the style and the story of *Vineland* is a deliberately gawky tenderness for the ordinary. Pynchon writes with quiet affection about a modern backwoods America where building supplies are exchanged at swap meets and tow-truck drivers recall lessons from group therapy.

A similar affection informs Pynchon's account of Zoyd Wheeler's love for his daughter, whose name, Prairie, is a discordant 1960s artifact among the shopping malls of the 1980s. (Prairie's punk-geared boyfriend, named Isaiah Two-Four by his '60s parents after the biblical verse about swords and ploughshares, has devised a characteristically 1980s scheme for "violence centers" modeled on theme-based amusement parks.) The novel treats the relation between father and daughter partly as a détente between the language of two generations, and the complex harmonies of style established here extend back through two more generations before the novel ends.

When Pynchon reprinted his early stories in *Slow Learner* (1984), he wrote an introduction that all but explicitly renounced his first three novels, *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and offered a prospectus for his next one. He recalled that his younger self had "come up with the notion that one's personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite." His early work had ignored what he already knew, that the fiction "that moved and pleased me then as now was precisely that which had been made luminous, undeniably authentic by having been found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper and more shared levels of the life we all really live."

The main plot of *Vineland* is built around a diagrammatic story of personal and political obsession that has little to do with lives that anyone has ever lived. But the relations between parents and children in the book, relations often tangential to the main plot, intermittently make *Vineland* "luminous, undeniably authentic," and give it a warmth that the intellectual exoticism of his earlier work excluded.

Zoyd Wheeler and his daughter Prairie turn out to be little more than observers of the main plot, which unfolds as Prairie seeks the secrets of her mother's past. The story centers on the mutual sexual obsession between Frenesi Gates, once a radical filmmaker at Berkeley, later Wheeler's wife and Prairie's mother, and Brock Vond, an anti-radical federal prosecutor who got his start in Nixon's Justice Department.

THOMAS PYNCHON BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Pynchon performs much fancy footwork to avoid falling into the holes of this plot, but he never bothers to fill the holes because he has little interest in Brock Vond or Frenesi Gates as people. Vond is for Pynchon a local embodiment of impersonal and collective power, deluded by the belief that his acts are the product of his own choice rather than of larger historical energies. Frenesi, more subtly, is an embodiment of the impersonal collective wishes of much of her generation. The actions of both serve mostly to dramatize a single historical and political idea, the idea that the conflict in the 1960s between the radicals and the authorities concealed their shameful longings for each other.

Everything that happens in the story of Frenesi Gates and Brock Vond is designed to confirm Vond's intuition that the rebellions of that era were "not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it," that the revolution of youth against "parents of all kinds" expressed a "need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family." Frenesi needs little persuasion from Vond to become first his lover, then his means of spreading distrust and violence among the leaders of a campus rebellion, and finally, under the federal witness-protection program, an agent in sting operations. Through all this, Pynchon is less concerned with her motives or feelings than he is in treating her as an allegory of the willing transformation of the rebellious self-righteous 1960s into the sullen acquisitive decades that followed.

Vineland's account of the past quarter century depends on the imaginative force of its historical myth, not on the analytic power of historical argument. Whether or not a reader believes the myth is probably irrelevant. What matters is whether or not the myth has sufficient resonance to make a reader willing to suspend disbelief for the duration of the novel. Pynchon's mythmaking succeeds, but only after the plot repeatedly brings it close to disaster.

Mythical history, as Pynchon practices it, is not a record of power and domination, it is a record of longings and fulfillments that occur on a vast archetypal scale. Figures like Frenesi Gates and Brock Vond can personify those longings, but they merely act out a struggle much larger than anything they can understand. In *Vineland*, the whole culture of the 1970s and 1980s is the fruit of desires felt in the 1960s for an eternity without change—for a permanent his-

torical love-death like the endless union sought by Tristan and Isolde. Rebellious youth yearned for the conviction that they "were never going to die" (a ubiquitous refrain among the young in this book). Authoritarian age yearned for unchanging certainties that would calm their fears of death. To escape from time and change, the young cried for a parental discipline that would preserve them in eternal youth, and the old were grateful to oblige. The result, in Pynchon's myth, was a brief historical interregnum outside both the sufferings and satisfactions of human time. At the end of *Vineland* this era ends, not with an apocalyptic upheaval, which would mark the end of time, but in a refusal of apocalypse, when human time renews itself, and death and life regain their dominion.

Historical mythmaking is a risky enterprise for a novelist, especially when the myth refuses to point a reassuring and accusatory finger at political groups that the novelist's audience dislikes. Even more risky is the way Pynchon's overtly feminist novel covertly adopts mythical archetypes: the young rebels are portrayed as archetypally feminine, the authority that they yearn for as archetypally masculine. But the historical myth of *Vineland* is cautiously disguised by the tone of the book, a glowingly nostalgic tone that suggests that the spontaneities of the 1960s were unambiguously admirable. The disguise is so effective that the whole myth seems to have eluded many readers who would certainly have censured it if they had noticed it.

The contrast between the achingly nostalgic tone of the story and the harsh judgment of its content is *Vineland*'s most calculatedly unsettling quality. The effect is designed to educate the reader away from the nostalgia that the book itself evokes. *Vineland* adopts the nostalgic wish of its early chapters precisely in order to expose the delusion and fantasy of those wishes later. As Frenesi Gates's story gradually emerges, it becomes clear that *Vineland* is nostalgic only about the events and situations of the 1960s, and that it maintains its nostalgia only as long as it neglects to look at the personalities that figured in those events. The 1960s wedding of Zoyd Wheeler and Frenesi Gates, recalled through Zoyd's memories early in the book, is an image of the peaceable kingdom. Pynchon waits a few chapters before pointing out, almost parenthetically, that the bride married the groom mostly because he knew nothing about her and her past, that she was on the run from multiple acts of sexual and political betrayal and from her direct moral responsibility for the murder of one of her lovers.

Pynchon portrays Frenesi Gates with the same unsettling contrast of tone and substance that he applies to the 1960s ethos that she represents. Virtually everyone in the book spends most of his time passively adoring her or actively seeking her. Her ex-husband Zoyd Wheeler tries to visit her in his dreams. Her ex-lover Brock Vond leads a private army in search of her when her file disappears from a federal computer. Someone else wants to make her the center of a film about the whole adventure of the 1960s. A reader can scarcely avoid getting caught up in the universal mood of admiration, a mood that persists long after it becomes clear that Frenesi's only redeeming virtues are a pair of legs that look arresting in a miniskirt, her "notorious blue eyes," and her ability to affect "the wide invincible gaze practiced by many sixties children, meaning nearly anything at all, useful in a lot of situations, including ignorance." Summarized in a review, this contrast between tone and substance seems stark and obvious. In *Vineland* itself, the process of moral discovery that Pynchon generates from this contrast seems as subtle and nuanced as the patient moral revelations in the late novels of Henry James.

Unlike James, Pynchon brings his most nuanced moral arguments to bear at precisely the points where his narrative seems most garish and unsubtle. The more the melodramatic language of *Vineland* casts Brock Vond as a sadistic villain, the more the logic of the action casts him as a partner in a dance of mutual courtship. Some readers, taking the tone for the substance, have complained that Brock and the other Justice Department heavies in *Vineland* seem disappointingly tame when compared with the real heavies who occupied the department under Nixon and Reagan. But like all literature that tries to make a moral argument, *Vineland* sees little point in placing blame on those who are unlikely ever to read it. It tries to discomfort its readers, first by agreeing with their self-satisfied sense that their unhappiness is the result of others' actions, then by quietly demonstrating that the actions that most afflict them are their own. The 1960s radicals (and the peaceful apolitical potsmokers whom Pynchon treats with sentimental affection) do not even have the satisfaction of defeating Brock Vond, who is defeated by his own side. Ronald Reagan, like a half-conscious deus ex machina, wakes from a dream and, by cutting Vond's budget, interrupts him in midvillainy.

Vineland's moral argument makes it a far more coherent book than the jumbled catalog of effects suggested by the reviews. But it is not nearly as coherent as Pynchon's earlier novels. One subplot reads as if it scarcely belongs to the rest of the book and probably dates back to a much earlier point of Pynchon's career. Shortly after *Gravity's Rainbow* appeared in 1973, reports circulated that Pynchon planned to complete two novels, referred to in his contract as "The Mason-Dixon Line" and "The Japanese Insurance Adjuster." *Vineland* is neither of these books, but the Japanese insurance adjuster—his name is Takeshi Fumimota—strayed into it anyway. He seems a bit lost. Some of his episodes, notably one in which he investigates a Japanese electronics plant apparently leveled by the foot of a gigantic reptile, are written in a science-fiction style that resembles parts of *Gravity's Rainbow* and nothing else in *Vineland*. The episodes in which he appears are given over to technological fantasies of the kind that the rest of the book disdains, and are void of moral or emotional intelligence. I won't bother you with details of the Ninjette retreat in California where Takeshi Fumimota recovers from the Ninja Death Touch inflicted on him in a Tokyo brothel by his American partner, a female martial arts specialist named DL Chastain, when she mistakes him for Brock Vond.

In its final pages *Vineland* breaks free from its miscellaneous plots and liberates its vision. Throughout the book Pynchon has glanced toward "another order of things," the same visionary realm that in *The Crying of Lot 49* he called "another mode of meaning behind the obvious." At the end of the book this manifests itself in a splendor both comic and profound.

Pynchon's vision is sacramental but not otherworldly. Instead of looking away from this world to one somewhere else, he looks for the hidden order and significance of the world he lives in. *Vineland*'s sacramental geography is a vision of a sacred place, the fictional Vineland County in northern California, the place that Zoyd Wheeler comes to recognize as a harbor of refuge, "Vineland the Good." This visionary Vineland occupies the real geography of the California coast from Crescent City to Eureka and the redwood forests nearby. But its name hints that it is an epiphany of that thousand-year-old alternate America founded by Norse sailors, who, unlike the sailors who founded the America we live in, never conquered the land or usurped its indigenous people.

The people indigenous to the real geography of Vineland are the Yurok, a

tribe that figures in classic anthropological studies, including a psychoanalytic account by Erik Erikson. Pynchon pauses in the middle of the novel to remember the Yurok and to look through their eyes toward the visionary past—the time of the *woge*, the creatures who, in Yurok legend, walked the earth before the arrival of humanity. In a ravishing passage a few pages from the end of the novel, Pynchon retells a Yurok legend that reads like a visionary distillation of the whole book. Brock Vond, after a desperate failed attempt to seize Frenesi Gates's daughter, is being driven away by the tow-truck drivers Vato and Blood from his stalled car (which, to his puzzlement, had been a helicopter a few moments before). Vato and Blood are the only two characters in the book who remember the Yurok heritage:

> As he drove, Vato told an old Yurok story about a man from Turip, about five miles up the Klamath from the sea, who lost the young woman he loved and pursued her into the country of death. When he found the boat of Illa'a, the one who ferried the dead across the last river, he pulled it out of the water and smashed out the bottom with a stone. And for ten years no one in the world died, because there was no boat to take them across.
>
> "Did he get her back?" Brock wanted to know. No, uh-uh. But he returned to his life in Turip, where everyone thought he'd died. . . . He was always careful to warn against the Ghosts' Trail leading to Tsorrek, the land of death, traveled by so many that it was already chest-deep. Once down in the earth, there would be no way to return. As he stared out the window, Brock realized that around them all this time had been rising a wall of earth on each side of the narrowing road. . . . And soon, ahead, came the sound of the river, echoing, harsh, ceaseless, and beyond it the drumming, the voices, not chanting together but remembering, speculating, arguing, telling tales, uttering curses, singing songs, all the things voices do, but without ever allowing the briefest breath of silence. All these voices, forever.

Although *Vineland* satirizes television so obsessively that some reviewers concluded that Pynchon no longer notices anything deeper than "Gilligan's Island," in fact the dust of the library rests on this as on all his books. Often it is in so fine a form as to defy casual notice. Pynchon found the story of the man from Turip in A. L. Kroeber's massive collection *Yurok Myths* (1976), where it appears as a raw unpromising fragment told by an unskilled informant. *Vineland* transforms it partly into the story of Brock Vond's failed pursuit of Frenesi Gates, partly into his historical myth of an era when America sought to live "safe in some

time-free zone," exempt from death and excluded from life. The song of triumph that sounds through the prose of the final chapters of the book celebrates the end of that era and prophesies a return to the pains and joys of human time.

Pynchon gives a local habitation to the "time-free zone" by creating a skittishly comic group of persons called Thanatoids, who exist in a state between life and death. They are not as embarrassing as their name makes them sound. Pynchon writes about them with a deadpan Gilbert-and-Sullivan logic that accepts the impossible premise of their existence and proceeds to draw the inevitable consequences. His Thanatoids are not ghosts or ghouls, but ordinary men and women who happen to encounter considerable trouble with banks and credit bureaus because their heirs have a legal claim on their property. A large population of them lives in a place called Shade Creek, where they watch television and eat fatty foods because they can't think of any reason not to. In the Yurok story, no one died for ten years. Near the end of *Vineland*, the Thanatoids hold their tenth annual reunion.

Around the time of that reunion, in one of Pynchon's characteristic passages that take matters seriously by treating them as extravagant fantasy, the Thanatoids experience an exceptional night. For the first time, instead of staying up with the Tube, they sleep. And in the morning they all simultaneously wake to a promise of renewed life. They wake to

> a piping, chiming music, synchronized, coming out of wristwatches, timers, and personal computers, engraved long ago, as if for this moment, on sound chips dumped once in an obscure skirmish of the silicon market wars, expedited in fact by Takeshi Fumimota, as part of a settlement with the ever-questionable tracing company of Tokkata & Fuji, all playing together now, and in four-part harmony, the opening of Bach's "Wachet Auf."

To this music, "able to make the bluest Thanatoid believe, however briefly, in resurrection, they woke, the Thanatoids woke."

In these final chapters all the book's generations of the living gather for another reunion, one that joins the families of Frenesi Gates's grandparents. The older members of these two families are Wobblies and Hollywood left-wingers, bearers of a heritage of an alternate and unofficial America. Pynchon treats this alternate tradition as a matriarchal one: the novel traces the ancestry of all its women characters while treating the men as if they sprang directly from the earth. Frenesi's hatred for her newborn daughter, and voluntary separation from her soon afterward, violates that matriarchal line, just as her murderous entanglement with Brock Vond is a sign of what the book's historical myth regards as the betrayal of the true alternate America by the 1960s left.

After so thorough a betrayal no return or recovery can ever be complete. Zoyd Wheeler at last meets Frenesi Gates again—she is remarried with a second child—but her reappearance is a deliberate anticlimax. The book has other futures to pursue than theirs. The final sentence, which focuses on their daughter Prairie, traces a comic variety of matriarchal lineage, this one extending from the grandmother of Prairie's dog down to the dog itself, who has abruptly returned to the scene after his flight from Brock Vond's minions. The sentence looks like a cloyingly sentimental celebration of continuity, home, and love, until you notice that one of its subordinate clauses makes clear that its vision of renewal includes sudden violent death. *Et in arcadia ego*, says the ancient tombstone—death also is in Arcadia. And death makes possible the renewal of life in arcadian Vineland. The fugal interweaving of life and death in these final pages approaches the richness of Shakespearean comedy.

All of Pynchon's books are permeated by one or two central ideas: entropy in *V.*, the manifestation of the sacred in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and the bureaucratization of charisma, as described by Max Weber, in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In *Vineland* the central idea is less abstract than in the earlier books. A fall into an era without life or death, followed by a return to human time, is less a concept than a parable of personal experience. It describes in visionary terms a phase that can occur in anyone's life when all significant relations and events seem bafflingly distant and inaccessible.

What makes this vision luminous (to use Pynchon's word of praise) in *Vineland* is not the tendentious historical myth that attaches to it, but its intensely personal quality. Zoyd Wheeler's years of separation from his wife are his years in a realm without time, when he dreams of an impossible return. But he comes to recognize those same years as the ones in which he learned to value his daughter and their shared harbor in Vineland. This part of the narrative, lightly sketched in the margins of the brightly colored central plot, reads like an allegory of a lived experience of loss and renewal.

For all its silliness and longueurs, *Vineland* is the most troubling and exuberant work of American fiction to appear in many years. It is also the most personal work of an author who relied in the past on an almost anonymous impersonality. Pynchon still refuses to make his personality into a commodity available for packaging and distribution by a publicity machine, and still prefers his readers to attend to his books rather than to himself. Yet *Vineland* says more about its author than anyone could hope to learn from the photograph that is omitted, with honorable reticence, from the dust jacket.

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Drool Britannia

BY ALAN RYAN

Blood, Class, and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies by Christopher Hitchens

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 398 pp., $22.95)

Winston Churchill—one of the tragic heroes of Christopher Hitchens's tale—dismissed a dessert from the dinner table with the curt command, "Remove this pudding, it has no theme." Hitchens is too lively and opinionated to produce a pudding, but he is an author in need of a theme. His brief history of the cooperative and competitive imperialisms of Britain and the United States over the past hundred years or so is a nice entertainment. It skips agreeably from the ghastly piety with which "Masterpiece Theatre" surrounds perfectly ordinary imports from