

## No Mean Accomplishment

John L. Simons

*Christian Allusions in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, by Victoria H. Price. New York: Peter Lang, 1989. 264 pp. \$37.95.

*Christian Allusions in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* is a useful addition to Peter Lang's series American University Studies. Professor Price, noting both the American college student's staggering ignorance of the Bible and the widening popularity of Pynchon's fiction in college literature classes, has constructed a well-organized guide to the Christian allusions which occur throughout Pynchon's work, concentrating on those in his first sustained fiction, *V.* (Nearly four-fifths of Price's book is devoted to *V.*; a coda of about twenty pages is given over to *Gravity's Rainbow*; *The Crying of Lot 49* is conspicuously omitted.) In addition to detailing Christian references in *V.*, Price attempts to relate those references to what she calls, after the film-editing theories of Sergei Eisenstein, Pynchon's "giant montage of the ailing twentieth century." In this latter respect she offers little that is new to Pynchon scholars. By her own admission her primary function is to annotate, to elucidate and connect the vast network of Christian allusions in *V.* Thus Price's book is at its best when providing information which enables the reader to make more learned judgments about the significance of the multiple patterns of Christian references in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. This is not to say that Price avoids interpreting the allusions she has skillfully uncovered, only that her interpretations are rarely as illuminating as the scholarly biblical findings she makes available to the reader. This is no mean accomplishment, especially with a book like *V.*, the central symbol of which is the Lady *V.* herself, an appallingly mechanized, inanimate re-imagination in a Godless, materialistic age of the traditional symbol of maternity, love and order represented by the biblical figure of Mary, the virgin mother of Christ.

Price is fully aware that neither Pynchon--unlike Milton--nor his readers can "accept the Bible as a final authority that can 'justify the ways of God to man.'" In fact, it is not clear just what Pynchon believes, what his own convictions, let alone his theology, might be. In regard to the latter, we do know that Pynchon's fiction at least is often obsessed with the Calvinist God's arbitrary dispensing of either

eternal Grace (through Election), outright damnation, or preterition (passing over)--all for equally mystifying reasons. By constantly juxtaposing, through montage, sacred and profane representations and allusions, each kind often ironically commenting upon and destabilizing the other, Pynchon keeps the reader in a state of constant doubt what grounds for interpretation he/she might construct.

But although his method is to obsessively deconstruct any possibility of stable meaning, Pynchon has never been the darling of the deconstructionists or the postmodernists. And this is because his fiction, as Price acknowledges, harbors a deeply felt if disturbingly unrealized religious impulse, a desire for the transcendent twinned with a concomitant and all-too-real "longing for the inanimate," typified by the feckless questers (Herbert Stencil) and anti-questers (Benny Profane, et al.) in *V.*<sup>1</sup> That Pynchon refuses to capitulate to either side contributes further to the feeling of unease his fiction engenders in its readers.

Price's impressive scholarly achievement should, then, make students of *V.* even more aware of that novel's prodigious if perverse indebtedness to the Bible. Her rather plodding progress through all the chapters of *V.* may make for at times tedious reading, but her thoroughness and her attention to making connections among the allusions are immensely valuable for any close reading of this difficult novel. In addition, Price follows the chapter-by-chapter discussion of *V.* with a brief exegesis of several central symbols, such as the motif of "the Street," of the crucial importance of Malta, and of the relation between Christian patterns of allusion and key characters Rachel Owlglass and Hugh and Evan Godolphin.

Few students--or professors--will be likely to read this book straight through, since its annotative strengths far outweigh its critical ones. It is nevertheless an important volume, and teachers or critics of *V.* would be wise to keep this valuable resource at hand.

--The Colorado College

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> In "Pynchon's Romantic Sublime," Marc W. Redfield attempts a tenuous truce between the two opposing impulses in Pynchon's fiction, but he cannot get beyond what he calls Pynchon's "double gesture of illusion and demystification" (*PMLA* 104.2 [1989]: 159).