

Between Hammerfall and Hammerstroke

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In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age, by Joseph Dewey. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 1990. 255 pp. \$27.50.

While using the figure to good effect, Joseph Dewey restrains his controlling critical metaphor, "a dark time," in this study of six contemporary novelists. The dark time of Dewey's title describes both a set of fictional responses and the particular American cultural drives behind them. Furthermore, the dark-time metaphor epitomizes the postmodern reader's considerable need for "a strategy for living without being offered the alternatives of waiting for the hammerfall or anticipating the hammerstrokes of a new earth being constructed" (14). Dewey stalks this false literary and cultural dilemma in Colonial and Puritan writing, through the American Romantics and Moderns, finally to specific novels by Kurt Vonnegut (*Cat's Cradle*), Robert Coover (*The Origin of the Brunists*), Walker Percy (*Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*), Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow*), William Gaddis (*Carpenter's Gothic*) and Don DeLillo (*White Noise*).

Dewey bases the dark-time metaphor on three principles: the "millennialist spirit," the "cataclysmic imagination" and the "apocalyptic temper" (12). Initially, in the millennialist camp, Dewey locates Puritan essayists and sermonizers of the Mather-Edwards ilk. Next he examines the cataclysmic imagination behind Melville's cosmic nay-saying. Then, by contrasting the millennialist and cataclysmic principles, Dewey reaches the postmodern, inclusive response to natural and human-created ends. He believes that Vonnegut, Pynchon, and the rest of the company of the apocalyptic temper represent both millennialist expectancy and cataclysmic dread. In novels of the apocalyptic temper, *In a Dark Time* maintains, expectancy and dread mingle with acceptance, understanding, and an unshakable belief in individual worth. The company of the apocalyptic temper thus creates characters who live (not exist merely) and plots that transpire, to reuse Dewey's durable imagery, between the millennial hammerfall and the cataclysmic hammerstroke.

Dewey's handling of *Gravity's Rainbow* is doctrinaire without being routine. According to his dark-time thesis, most denizens of Pynchon's

mosaic embody a "choice between vulnerability and structure—between living and accepting death" (150). Jessica Swanlake and Roger Mexico vacillate between artificial, Hollywood passions for each other and allegiance to nonhuman systems, but they are unable to thwart the shadowy purposes of organizations like the Firm or to discover genuine love. Tyrone Slothrop seems similarly helpless, conditioned to confuse lust with love. Dewey calls Enzian, the Herero survivor, "Pynchon's bravest resister" (176) against totalitarian systems like fascist colonialism precisely because Enzian does cultivate and cling to love. Dewey essentially argues that, because of characters like Enzian, Pynchon is a true apocalyptic visionary and not an artistic end-of-the-worlder.

However readers may debate Dewey's concept of the apocalyptic temper or disagree with his individual readings, almost any reader should find compelling his excellent rundown on the artistic conundrum of the Reagan era. In this section of *In a Dark Time* (180–91), Dewey works through the eighties' confluence of American life and apocalyptic art, noting the effects of a newly belligerent military build-up, an upsurge in right-wing religiosity, and other such Reagan-era phenomena on the national psyche. Can art imitate life in any uplifting sense when the very tremulous existence of life is controlled by atom-age warlords who, on the one hand, disregard the real possibility of general annihilation and, on the other hand, plan for it as a part of foreign and domestic policy? For his part, Dewey hears a basic answer resound in these contemporary American works: The apocalyptic temper, elastic in its essential humanity, not only accepts nuclear brinkmanship, holocaust-precipitating militarism, and other psychoses in the public world, but also transforms such horrors into transcendently disturbing literature. With fairness and cogency, *In a Dark Time* identifies both the disturbing and the transcendent.

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