

Talking to Themselves

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Thomas Pynchon's Narratives: Subjectivity and Problems of Knowing, by Alan W. Brownlie. New York: Peter Lang, 2000. 164 pp. \$50.95.

Mason & Dixon & Pynchon, by Charles Clerc. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2000. 249 pp. \$26.50.

Beyond their focus on Pynchon's fiction, Alan W. Brownlie's *Thomas Pynchon's Narratives* and Charles Clerc's *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon* have little in common: they address different novels; they take different approaches; they seem to have different purposes. But in reading them, I found myself pondering the same issue: the idea of audience. When we, the community of Pynchonians, write, for whom, exactly, are we writing? The easy answer, of course, is each other—scholars who have chosen to devote a good part of their professional activity to studying, interpreting and teaching Pynchon's work. This audience is pretty well represented, I imagine, by the regular readers of this journal. A second audience is students, those studying Pynchon in hopes of joining the above-mentioned community and those studying him, perhaps, but not always, with less enthusiasm, for a graduate or undergraduate course while on their way to other professional goals. After that, the idea of audience gets a little murky. We might imagine an audience of nonacademic readers, but the many Pynchon enthusiasts I know who are not professional scholars have little interest in (if not outright contempt for) academic writing. We might imagine an audience of readers we can initiate into Pynchon fandom. (When I was writing my dissertation on *Gravity's Rainbow*, my director suggested I write about my subject in such a way that my readers would want to run out and buy the book.) This is a noble idea, and I have often heard conference papers on books I hadn't read that inspired me to get them; but practically speaking, I doubt the ranks of new readers are especially swollen because of books by academic specialists.

This meditation on readership is not merely academic; it has a practical side. Historically, the mission of university presses has been to disseminate scholarship in the disciplines, but in recent years university presses (like most other institutions) have come under pressure to show profits. Many UPs have responded to this pressure by

looking for books that might appeal to a general audience (the UPs' white whale) and, consequently, by showing much less interest in academically specialized books, like books on a single postmodern author—like books on Pynchon. To confirm this trend, just check out how many books on Pynchon were published in the nineties compared with the slew published in the eighties. And if the accounting powers-that-be are going to apply (inappropriately, I think) commercial-marketplace standards to UPs, who can blame the presses for being cool toward books that have a potential buying audience of a couple of hundred libraries and specialists? Until academic publishing goes completely electronic (which seems inevitable), and as long as academic publication is necessary for our professional survival, how do we as scholarly writers address the UPs' changing sense of their audience?

Another manifestation of this change in the sense of audience is a diminished emphasis on scholarly references. Presumably because endnotes and bibliographies are turn-offs to the mythical general reader, university-press books seem less rigorous about scholarly apparatus than they used to be. Maybe my experience is unusual, but in discussing a project with a UP editor, I was actively discouraged from including notes of any kind. I have recently read UP-published books with minimal—indeed, one without any—references or bibliographic material. In the wake of *Infinite Jest* and *House of Leaves*, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that one finds more extensive notes in fiction these days than in scholarly writing about fiction.

This trend, combined with the priorities of the Age of Cultural Studies, in which theory always trumps criticism, has resulted, I think (unless I'm suffering from mid-career crankiness), in many scholars' thinking it less important to acknowledge or connect with previous work on their subject. I have always thought of criticism as an ongoing conversation among scholars and of the new book or article as obliged to demonstrate its understanding of the conversation to that point so as to show how it is contributing something new. This idea of conversation overlaps with my sense of audience. Books and articles that don't (or only partially) acknowledge the critical conversation eschew the idea of audience and end up talking more or less to themselves. Casting the idea of audience into irrelevance is not a solution to the broader problem; it only complicates it. That is, if we are not writing in conversation with other Pynchon specialists and are not writing for a so-called general audience, then for whom are we writing?

Thomas Pynchon's Narratives calls to mind many of these audience-related issues. Brownlie asserts that Pynchon's first three novels can be seen as developing a single big-picture argument. They reveal the

subjective, relative nature of truth and propose that what social bodies take for objective, universal truths are agreed-upon fictions. These agreements are maintained and reproduced via power, power that also marginalizes and dismisses alternative claims to truth. But there is hope, Brownlie claims: “these novels present the possibility that power can be redistributed. If we recognize the contingency of the social controls which determine truth and falsehood, we may find within the weaknesses of the social order possibilities for such redistribution” (1).

In his first chapter Brownlie discusses *V.*, arguing that its main theme is the inability to know. He links Benny Profane and the Whole Sick Crew in their shared desire to live in the moment, ahistorically. Living unreflectively, they experience the world without interpreting it; thus they are unable to act in the world or to know it. Manifestations of the century’s movement toward inanimateness, they are perfect subjects for the operations of power. Stencil’s historical reconstructions, acknowledged as creative acts, offer the opportunity, not pursued by Stencil, to construct new epistemological models that resist inanimateness. Chapter 2 shows that the America of *The Crying of Lot 49* has not resisted the century’s movement toward the nonhuman: Americans are no longer human beings but consumers and/or products. But *Lot 49* goes further in suggesting the possibilities of subversive political intervention in the country’s dominant power systems. Curiously, Brownlie argues that Pynchon buries his political themes under layers of symbols to avoid censorship. Maxwell’s Demon is the novel’s most obvious manifestation of the power elite’s technique of maintaining power by defining reality in terms of binary oppositions. The failure of the Demon in Nefastis’s machine hints at the weakness of a political system based on binaries, a weakness that the many groups marginalized and disenfranchised by American power, groups represented by Tristero, may be able to take advantage of. Oedipa fails in her quest to break through the ideological status quo both because she focuses her search on one word—*Tristero*—and what she imagines is the ultimate truth it points to, and because she cannot get beyond thinking in binaries.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus on *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where the idea of power is given some complicating twists. Here, as in the other novels, the controlling Elect seeks to impose a binary-based, mechanistic knowledge-system on the world to maintain its own power. But here, the Second World War has provided the conditions in which the Elect’s control apparatus is exposed. Brownlie shows that the science-based determinism of Pointsman, for example, is undercut by passages such as the one describing the history of Pirate Prentice’s roof garden that demonstrate nature’s resistance to control. Further, the effort to control

by means of sorting into binaries, as seen in *Lot 49*'s Nefastis machine, is in effect an effort to deny nature's indeterminacy, contingency and chaos, an effort to reverse entropy and thus to reverse time. This effort reveals the contradictory desire—seen best, probably, in Blicero—to escape the system of control that seems fundamental to the system's own logic. The war and, in particular, the Zone offer the chance to escape the Elect's control through moments of chaos. Slothrop and, later, the Counterforce fail in their attempts to escape, but even in failure, they subvert the Elect's certainty and inspire others, presumably the readers, to find their own potential moments of resistance and escape.

The broad strokes of Brownlie's argument offer little to argue with; indeed, that may be the problem. Much of his discussion of epistemology, power and resistance is very familiar, and although Brownlie cites a great deal of Pynchon scholarship to support specific claims, he does not seem to be as engaged with these sources' more general interpretive arguments. Although one hates to criticize a project for what it decided not to do, the choice to focus exclusively on the first three novels seems arbitrary and, in the end, unsatisfying. I kept wishing Brownlie had extended his arguments to *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, in which Pynchon continues to explore ideas of power and resistance (especially in the former) and knowledge and power (especially in the latter). Brownlie could have contributed much more to the developing discussions of Pynchon's oeuvre in light of the more recent novels.

Similarly, while Brownlie brings in philosophical analogues in his chapter 5, including discussions of *Gravity's Rainbow* in the context of and in engagement with Leibniz, Nietzsche and quantum mechanics, I wish he had made some obvious theoretical connections. His argument that *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Elect is a regulative ideal constructed and enforced through religious, scientific and economic systems (85–87) could be much more productively discussed via Althusser than a dubious comparison with *Catch-22*. More vitally, Brownlie's arguments about epistemology and power cry out to be couched in Foucauldian contexts. Not that Brownlie (or any critic) is required to pay homage to the reigning theoretical gods, but making these connections—which beg to be made—not only would link his arguments to broader conversations going on in the profession but also would make his arguments richer.

My earlier musings on audience, implicit in some of these concerns about Brownlie's overall argument, become more explicit when we look at his specific analyses. Most problematic, especially in chapters 1 and 2, Brownlie goes very heavy on plot summary, including four pages

recounting *The Courier's Tragedy* (48–51). Granted, many plot points in Pynchon are not unambiguous, and it can be useful to state exactly what we think happens before pursuing our interpretations; but surely in a project like this, the author should assume readers are familiar with the novels. In a similar vein, when bringing in contextual information or ideas to support his readings, Brownlie tends to get caught up in digressions, providing much more than he needs to make his point. For example, to support his assertion that *Lot 49* masks Pynchon's political messages out of fear of censorship, Brownlie trots out familiar information about America's cold-war, national-security paranoia, including explanations of COINTELPRO and J. Edgar Hoover's security index (40–43). To support his argument that Tristero is historically a response to growing Protestant power, Brownlie connects Thurn und Taxis to Protestantism and Masonry, and then offers an overview of the history of the Masons (52–54). And so on, with sometimes lengthy digressions on Pavlov (77–81), the development of LSD (96–98), Liebig, Kekulé, and the dye industry (105–09), etc. Information on any of these subjects can be useful in interpreting the fiction, but Brownlie has not put enough thought into what the reader is likely to know already and into distinguishing between information relevant to the argument and just information.

Brownlie also makes a number of mistakes. Contrary to his claims, the exploitation of coal tars did not lead to the creation of fuels for the V-2 (4); Oedipa does not submit to Dr. Hilarius's LSD experiments (44); Blicero, Katje and Gottfried do not act out their oven game in Peenemünde (66); Blicero places Gottfried in the base, not the nose of the 00000 rocket (67, 68); Tantivy's *Times* obit is written by Teddy Bloat, not Hilary Bounce (95). These errors are more annoying than harmful, but Brownlie hurts his argument when he claims that the Scurvhamite version of *The Courier's Tragedy* deletes rather than inserts the word *Tristero* (52).

Easier to understand is Brownlie's trouble with a problem we all face when writing about Pynchon's fiction: how to present a logical, clearly reasoned argument about texts that challenge and subvert rationality. Although marking binary thinking as fundamental to the working of power in Pynchon's novels, Brownlie bases much of his analysis of *Gravity's Rainbow* on the distinction between Elect and Preterite. Similarly, his main exemplar of the failure of science to control nature is Pavlov, but he makes extensive use of Pavlov's phases in his analysis of Slothrop's character (81) without acknowledging the interpretive contradiction. Again, these are problems we all struggle with, but in other places Brownlie's analysis becomes unnecessarily linear and rigorously mathematical (let image x for each appearance of

x = meaning y, etc.), as in his broad discussion of Tristero in opposition to Protestantism (52–56) and his take on the mandrake root that grows on the spot where Slothrop becomes a crossroads (122). This kind of analysis seems to overlook the ambiguity and richness of possible meanings in Pynchon's imagery and narration, and seeks to make determinate the deliberate indeterminateness of the texts.

Recently in these pages Jeffrey S. Baker argued that hardly anyone or anything—certainly not the author or the discipline—is served by the publication of essentially unrevised doctoral dissertations, since, among other reasons, a study that exists to complete degree requirements and satisfy the various members of a committee is unlikely to be valuable outside that particular writing situation. Brownlie's book appears to be his dissertation. Brownlie and the community of Pynchon scholars, his potential audience, would have been better served by his reimagining this project in terms of a new writing situation.

If the idea of audience for Brownlie's book is problematic, for Clerc's *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon*, it is enigmatic. Editor of the valuable *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow* (1983), Clerc offers us here something midway between *Cliffs Notes* and a Twayne study as an introduction to Pynchon's latest novel. The result might better be titled *Mason & Dixon for Dummies*.

Critical introductions or companions to difficult novels—like Gilbert Stuart's *James Joyce's Ulysses* and, of course, Steven Weisenburger's *Gravity's Rainbow Companion*—can be helpful, especially to first-time readers. But Clerc's book, despite a couple of useful sections, seems too general and superficial to help anyone. The generally brief chapters cover Pynchon's life and career (five pages), reviews of the novel, the basic biographical and historical background of the novel, how historical fact affects the structure of the novel, aspects of the novel that are historically verifiable, the fictional treatment of the history, the novel's big themes, the fantastic fictional elements, the novel's style, application of different theoretical perspectives to the novel, and a ranking of the novel in the body of Pynchon's work and among twentieth-century American novels. The last eighty pages of the book reprint excerpts from Mason's journal of his and Dixon's time in America.

The journal excerpts are probably the most useful thing in this book, though the 1969 American Philosophical Society reprint of the complete journal is not hard to find in libraries. Still, the decision to include the excerpts here—to the tune of a third of the book—is peculiar. Finding correspondences between the journal and Pynchon's novel is interesting, but it is not especially enlightening or necessary for a novice reader. Much of the journal consists of weather, distance and

astronomical observations; these may contain riches for reading the novel, but if so, they elude me. A second useful part of Clerc's book is his summary and categorization (rave, mixed, bad) of the bulk of the reviews the novel received. The work done here will save other researchers a lot of time, and the patterns of critical response imply many interesting conclusions about the state and practice of popular literary reviewing.

As for the rest of the book . . . well, the very way Clerc has approached his project militates against its success. If the point is to provide an introduction and guide to a very complex novel, then the simplification—indeed, oversimplification—of the novel, its historical background and possible interpretive strategies ends up distorting the technical and intellectual complexities that would inspire one to seek out such an introduction and guide.

In discussing *Mason & Dixon* itself, Clerc tends to simplify and literalize. For him, the novel has a "traditional structure" (124), a frame narrative within which is presented a reasonably linear narrative, "an identifiable picaresque plot containing traceable cause and effect" (91). To say this is to ignore many problems or challenges in the text: its structure's reliance on embedded narratives, its indifference to specific chronology within the larger chronological sweep of seasons and years, the cause-and-effect-denying gaps between episodes. Similarly, Clerc's take on the narration—an omniscient narrator for the LeSpark-home frame and Cherrycoke as narrator of the rest—ignores both the problem (foregrounded in the novel) of Cherrycoke's narrating events he did not witness and the twentieth-century narrative voice which introduces contemporary references and jokes into an eighteenth-century narration. In other words, Clerc overlooks those aspects of the novel that suggest Pynchon is purposefully evoking, then complicating and subverting conventional narrative structures. Clerc sees just the conventional narrative structures.

Historical background information is likewise oversimplified and skimpy. I tried using this book while preparing to teach *Mason & Dixon*, hoping to bone up quickly on historical figures and events I knew little about; but the two- or three-sentence descriptions here told me too little to help. The bulk of this historical information is correct, though there are a couple of errors. Contrary to the information here (47), the historical Dixon was elected to membership in the Royal Society. In a different kind of error, Clerc lists the story of R.C. swallowing the perpetually ticking watch with the products of Pynchon's fantastic imagination (112), but this episode is based on a local legend. As long as we're on the topic of mistakes, I think Clerc is wrong in saying that the narration lasts "from Advent to Epiphany" (89); it takes place

impossibly in one long night. And in his outline list of fantastic elements, C to Z (110-19), where are A and B? Or am I being too insistent on the linear?

Finally, Clerc's oversimplification extends to his interpretive guidance. He surveys what he sees as the novel's big themes, helpfully italicizing them for us (*intricacies of human behavior, vagaries of friendship, commitment to work, restlessness, dreams, time*, etc. [95-96]), but without some kind of detailed discussion of their treatment and development, these are vague ideas that could be found in many novels. Similarly, in his penultimate chapter, Clerc assures us that multiple theoretical approaches can be taken to the novel—deconstruction, psychoanalytic criticism, feminism, postcolonial criticism, new historicism, reader-response criticism. But without an explanation of these theories or a detailed use of them to fuel interpretations, what is the point? If readers already know about the theories, they don't need Clerc's assurance that the theories can inform our interpretations; if readers don't know about the theories, Clerc's assurances won't mean anything.

And this leads back to my concern about audience. I don't see how this book would help readers facing *Mason & Dixon* for the first time, and people who have already read the novel won't find much here they don't already know. I wonder if one of the lessons Pynchon scholars can learn from Brownlie's and Clerc's books is to think more carefully about why we write and for whom when we write about Pynchon. With whom do we want to enter into conversation, and what is the best way to do so?

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