A Historicist Approach to Pynchon

Ian J. Rankin

"'Words You Never Wanted to Hear': Fiction, History and Narratology in The Crying of Lot 49." By C. E. Nicholson and R. W. Stevenson. In Tropic Crucible: Self and Theory in Language and Literature, ed. C. E. Nicholson and R. Chatterjee. Singapore: Singapore Univ. Press, 1984, pp. 297-315.

At the start of their essay, Nicholson and Stevenson state that their aim is to show that Lot 49's purpose is the "'deconditioning' of conventional assumptions about the relation between fiction and the wider world in which it is written and read" (298). This they achieve, and along the way they manage also to raise some difficulties attached to Edward Mendelson's reading of Lot 49,[1] to offer a new theory concerning the importance of the title of Pynchon's novel, and, perhaps most importantly, to offer historical criticism as a necessary corrective to the proliferating interpretations cast upon Lot 49 and Pynchon's other works by the literary critics.

For Nicholson and Stevenson, a full reading of Lot 49--indeed, a correct reading--must include a large amount of historical research on the part of the reader (they have certainly done their research), and a full reading of the novel therefore comes to constitute an analogy with Oedipa's quest. The authors find, in their historical burrowing, many ingenious and persuasive arguments as to the meaning of Pynchon's book: "European refugees from the revolutionary ferment of 1848 begin to arrive in America in 1849" (304), and Lot 49 "unravels the lot of those who drifted westwards to reach California, charting the subsequent corruption of the original forty-niners by the very urge which took them there in the first place" (305). Nicholson and Stevenson find the book to be, therefore, "an examination of how America came into being" (305), and they replace Mendelson's sacred-profane tension with an anarchism-order one, the novel itself coming down on the side of Information Theory entropy (a

positive notion) over order, order, in Pynchon's novel, constituting the very death-knell of communication.

The reader, in all of this, ends up "uncertain whether he is safely contained within an artefact created partly for the sense of order it brings . . . or 'outside,' reading a novel which directly reflects the threatening and unsatisfactory processes of American history" (312). In conclusion, the authors say that a proper reading of Lot 49 should engage the reader in historical reality in a way that modernist texts never did or do.

What Nicholson and Stevenson do not explore is the dichotomy set up between the novel's historical expansiveness and the growing (ultimately chilling and overwhelming) claustrophobia of Oedipa's situation within the novel. Also, their use of "narratology" in the title of their paper is misleading, since they do not discuss narratology (in the manner of Propp, Todorov, et al.) at all. What the authors do, however, is to offer a new and valuable way into Pynchon's fiction, a historicist approach at odds with many current readings of his works. If their analysis proves correct (and the case they make is strong), then, as readers, we have a lot of work still to do in coming to terms with Thomas Pynchon.

--Fife, Scotland

Note

[1] Edward Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49," in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 112-46.