Taking Liberties

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Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology, by Cyrus R. K. Patell. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001. 239 pp. $54.95; pb $18.95.

Many avid Pynchon readers probably identify with Herbert Stencil's, Oedipa Maas's, Tyrone Slothrop's, Prairie Wheeler's, and Mason and Dixon's cruel quests, wherein these characters search through ridiculous quantities of seemingly arbitrary details to find clues, Kute Korrespondences, that could (but probably won't) help them understand their world and, more important, their place in it. Likewise, with the cabalist's laser-like intensity fixed on the most random detail, Pynchophiles rifle thousands of pages of text, gleefully taking lessons from the above characters in "how to build your own conspiracy theory." Those who love such detail—the more the better—might find Cyrus Patell's *Negative Liberties* somewhat wanting as Pynchon criticism. To be sure, the study is well conceived, well researched and well executed. Patell contributes substantially to the mass of criticism that links Pynchon's works with real-world political/philosophical critique, joining the jeremiadic critical tradition which finds that the promise of American exceptionalism—or, in this case, American individualism—falls considerably short of its idealization in American myth and culture. (Patell's engagement with this tradition is not surprising, since Sacvan Bercovitch, his former professor, is cited as the primary inspiration for the work and is the person to whom the book is dedicated.) Yet, when it comes down to an examination of Pynchon's (and Morrison's) texts, Pynchophiles are (perhaps unreasonably) more demanding than the average cabalist.

Patell begins his preface with the very Deweyan argument "that literature's ability to dramatize philosophical situations enables it to be persuasive about the benefits and costs of particular philosophical arrangements in a way that philosophy cannot be" (xv). He then rather conveniently suggests that "[t]o take Pynchon and Morrison seriously as political novelists requires us to understand the ways in which their works engage the official narrative generated by Emersonian liberalism," concluding on more solid ground that, while philosophers like Emerson, John Rawls and George Kateb craft great arguments about the potential

for individualism to serve as the foundation for a democratic culture, Pynchon and Morrison demonstrate conversely and convincingly that "this potential has yet to be realized in American culture, let alone elsewhere in the world" (xviii).

Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical basis for Patell's examination of Pynchon's and Morrison's texts, devoting considerable ink to defining "negative liberty" and "positive liberty." As Patell cogently puts it, these terms are best defined

> by the difference between the modifying prepositions frequently used to describe them. Negative liberty is "freedom *from*"—freedom from restraint or coercion, from the incursions of authority, from the intrusion of one's neighbors. . . . Positive liberty, in contrast, is "freedom *to*"—freedom to achieve self-expression, self-realization, and self-mastery as well as freedom to participate in government and political life. (14)

Then, through a well-positioned example from the writings of Benjamin Franklin, Patell establishes that "the story that U.S. culture tends to tell about the nature of freedom is that negative liberty and positive liberty are not competing but rather complementary and symbiotic conceptions" (15). After unraveling Locke's, (philosopher) Charles Taylor's, Rousseau's and, most especially, Jefferson's conceptions of individualism in the context of negative and positive liberties, Patell concludes the chapter by demonstrating that the American "national narrative—idealistic, universalistic, and utopian on its surface—turns out to contain some nasty subtexts that contradict its universalism" (22).

Chapter 2 begins a closer examination of the problems with Emersonian liberalism (better defining those "nasty subtexts"). In an insightful examination of Emerson's rhetoric (in the famous essays "History" and "Circles"), Patell observes that, whenever Emerson seems to be confronted with material facts that might compromise his vision of the sacred American Self as an autonomous individual, he simply "raise[s] the level of abstraction" as a way of glossing over whatever uncomfortable realities arise to compromise his sweeping vision. "Raise it high enough," Patell writes, "and individual differences disappear into an abstract vision of the individual that can serve as a common denominator for all human beings, a universal formulation that promotes philosophical idealism" (50–51). Patell identifies similar problems with Rawls's twentieth-century conception of individualism—that it is too abstract to be useful—and also criticizes Michael Sandel's "unencumbered self" as it might be represented by American fictional heroes such as "Natty Bumppo, Shane, Philip Marlowe, or Indiana

Jones" (71), arguing that "[t]he rugged individualist is a cultural fantasy that compensates for some of the self-imposed limits of . . . everyday individualism." He then quotes Morris Dickstein's assertion that the Dirty Harry kind of hero "'survives only in popular culture'" (72) and cannot possibly offer viable examples that might represent individualism in contemporary American culture.

Chapter 3's fundamental assertion is that Pynchon's and Morrison's novels "dramatize . . . the fact that, in too many areas of modern life, Enlightenment principles have led, not to humanism, but to dehumanization" (82). Schoolteacher, for example, in *Beloved*, is "an Enlightenment figure" who embodies the Enlightenment's "'twin, born at the same time, the Age of Scientific Racism'" (Morrison, qtd. in Patell 84). In one of the more brilliant readings of Pynchon in *Negative Liberties*, Patell analyzes "Mondaugen's Story" and the character McClintic Sphere from *V.*, along with Oedipa Maas from *The Crying of Lot 49*, arguing that all three characters' stories bespeak "a modern culture of possessive individualism [that tends] to view human lives metonymically, as if they were embodied and encompassed by the things that they possess" (95). Patell sees a similar disregard for individual personhood in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where neither They nor the Counterforce "respects the individuality of Slothrop or any other person" (97).

In another strong moment here, Patell sees in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* echoes of "Locke's view of the origin of value in human societies. Locke describes labor as the mechanism through which value is created and argues that . . . it was labor that '*gave a Right of Property*'" (101). This commodification of labor and, by extension, of the human beings who must sell that labor is reflected in the story of Macon Dead, where "it encourages those who can afford to buy the labor of others to objectify those who must sell their labor, to regard laborers themselves (and, by extension, all who are poor) as things to be bought and sold" (102)—an apt description of the patriarchal-figure manqué in *Song of Solomon*. By thus identifying the metonymic reduction of human beings in Pynchon's and Morrison's work, Patell makes a clear case for both writers' critique of the limitations of Enlightenment notions about individualism and progress.

He takes this critique an effective step further by demonstrating how *The Crying of Lot 49* shows the very "concept of truth itself [as] under siege" (111). Patell writes: "In telling the story of Oedipa's obsession with determining whether the Tristero actually exists, Pynchon burlesques not only the genre of the detective story but also the idea of Emersonian self-reliance by dismantling the conceptual framework upon which both rely" (112), thus substituting "radical

ambiguity for truth" and "transmut[ing] individualism and self-reliance into narcissism, solipsism, and paranoia" (116).

Chapter 4 moves into Patell's limited prescription for the social and political ills examined in his first three chapters. In a discussion of Morrison's *Sula*, Patell concludes that "[t]he novel suggests that a complete individual must be a synthesis of Nell, who seeks her identity within the bonds of community, and Sula, who seeks it within herself—a synthesis, in other words, of what communitarian theorists refer to as *unencumbered* and *situated* selves" (165). Patell sees an analogous possibility for solving "the problem of liberal ideology" in *Vineland*, which offers "a more optimistic communitarian critique that accounts for the novel's stylistic differences from its predecessors" (168), concluding that, in his 1990 novel,

> Pynchon suggests that the transformation of the "America coded in Pierce's testament" [in *The Crying of Lot 49*] into "Vineland the Good" will begin only when we find a way to develop a communitarianism that will foster respect for individuality, autonomy, and self-expression, the ideals that the national narrative of individualism has always held up but has yet to uphold. (173)

Patell sees this kind of transformation in both Morrison's novel *Jazz* and Pynchon's character McClintic Sphere: "In thus privileging jazz as a model of cultural interaction, [the novelists are] revising the official narrative of U.S. individualism, with its shift from negative to positive liberty, by emphasizing that community is viable only if it is based in respect for individuality" (180). Patell's conclusion, inevitably, is that

> U.S. culture has not yet achieved . . . individualism. What we learn from reading Morrison and Pynchon is that such an individualism may not be possible, and, even if it is, it will never be achieved until U.S. culture faces up to the flaws that exist both within its conception of freedom and within its institutionalization of that conception. (187)

We must, of course, agree with this overall assessment, yet can we be blamed if we end up wanting more? Even Patell's well-crafted textual analyses of the novelists' work are centered around his concerns with positive and negative liberties rather than with an abiding concern for the fiction itself. This ideological preoccupation tends to give short shrift to the fiction, drawing conclusions from Pynchon's and Morrison's work that ought to be better justified by the texts themselves. And this preoccupation is all the more frustrating because ample, but untapped, textual support is available for all of Patell's

arguments. For example, he argues in his conclusion that although Pynchon and Morrison "demonstrate how deep the human desire is for what Pynchon calls 'the miraculous[,' i]n their novels, reason fails more often than it succeeds, and as a result, the worlds that they portray are worlds that are characterized by conflict and violence" (191). Yet his study makes only a very cursory mention of *Mason & Dixon*. Philosophical and ideological critique takes center stage in this reading of Pynchon and Morrison, and, on those terms, Patell's study succeeds brilliantly. But those seeking a substantive reading of either Pynchon's or Morrison's fiction need to seek elsewhere for the kind of close reading and paranoiacally obsessive attention to detail that Pynchon's work and much of the criticism it has engendered have led us to expect.

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