National Fantasies

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Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America, by Timothy Melley. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000. 239 pp. $45; pb $17.95.

Readers of Thomas Pynchon know that well before Foucault's ground-breaking work on the intersections of power and knowledge, surveillance and the mechanisms of social control, these issues had already provided much inspiration for American writers of fiction. Still, interest in all things conspiratorial has perhaps never been higher than now. A number of books in the last few years, aimed at both popular and academic markets, discuss the emergence of this peculiar cultural phenomenon. Oscillating between anxiety and giddiness at one level, fanatical devotion and scoffing disbelief at another, our responses to it suggest that we are nevertheless unable to get our fill of conspiracy theory. A casual search of Amazon.com's books database yields almost 1500 hits for "conspiracy" and "conspiracies," and the profusion of conspiracy sites on the internet is so great that there is no point in trying to estimate how many there are. We may never know Who is behind this flood of conspiracy theories, and we may never know why They want to dizzy us with these ideas—perhaps to distract us from what is Really going on—but there is no doubt that They have been successful in this. After all, if They can get us asking the wrong questions, as Pynchon once pointed out, They don't have to worry about answers.

In *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, though, Timothy Melley asks good questions. Deftly bringing together concerns about subjectivity and social control that proliferated in the 1950s and that have continued through to the present, Melley surveys diverse manifestations of this phenomenon. The book begins by discussing such postwar classics as Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders*, which revealed—or claimed to reveal—the means by which consumers were being manipulated by cunning and unscrupulous marketing strategies, and J. Edgar Hoover's *Masters of Deceit*, which revealed—or claimed to reveal—the means by which ordinary Americans could fall prey to the cunning and ruthless manipulations of communist propagandists and brainwashers. In general, however, Melley's subject matter is more literary and less sensationalistic than

these pop-cultural references might indicate—although his juxtaposition of the popular and the literary is effective in demonstrating the degree to which a paranoid sensibility has come to pervade American culture at all levels. His first chapter focuses on a number of highly influential sociological texts from the postwar period, and subsequent chapters deal with work by Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Margaret Atwood, William Burroughs and numerous others. Throughout the book, Melley provides detailed and insightful discussions, smoothly drawing together social theory, psychological theory and literary analysis.

While Melley's title contains eye-catching words such as conspiracy and paranoia, his preface more accurately indicates his central concerns by introducing his key term *agency panic*: "Agency panic is an intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else or that one has been 'constructed' by powerful, external agents" (vii). A crucial belief on which the very possibility of agency panic is predicated, as Melley explains, is in the prior existence of that autonomy which is now felt to be threatened by various potentially hostile and manipulative forces: "The importance of agency panic . . . lies in its troubled defense of an old but increasingly beleaguered concept of personhood—the idea that the individual is a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories" (viii). The distinction here between Melley's approach and that of most other discussions of conspiracy theory is important: it shifts the emphasis away from whether a conspiracy actually exists in any real sense and focuses instead on the experience of those who, for whatever reason, feel their autonomy as individuals jeopardized. This panic may be thought to arise in response to the intentional manipulations of some covert force—the classic conspiracy scenario. Or it may arise in response to a sense of disjunction between the dominant (but impossible) ideology of individual autonomy and the realization that one is simply not the self-present, self-knowing, self-determining individual agent this ideology idealizes.

The autonomy of the individual has been in dispute, of course, for some time, at least since the rise of theories of subjectivity influenced by structuralist, psychoanalytic and Marxist concepts of the self undermined the ideology of the sovereign individual which had long animated images of American identity. Added to this, the last century was profoundly influenced by the more interventionist theories and techniques of behaviorism and conditioned response. As Melley persuasively argues, the postwar period in America saw both an unprecedented investment in this ideology—particularly in relation to images of masculinity—and a simultaneous unprecedented panic over various perceived threats to that manly independence. (The book is by

no means focussed exclusively on masculinity, however: one of its most interesting extended analyses concerns the anxiety articulated by Atwood, Diane Johnson and others.) This tension, then, whether manifested from a male or a female perspective, has often resulted in the "attempt to defend the integrity of the self against the social order" (10)—an attempt which appears somewhat quixotic if the integrity of the self is understood in the first place as "a long-standing national fantasy" (15).

In some cases, such as the examination of David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*, Melley's actual framework is more effective than his title might suggest. The experience of a loss of agency Riesman discusses has little to do with conspiracies and paranoia and much to do with a shift Riesman posits in the sense of subjectivity in response to large-scale social and historical conditions. To account for these quite different but nonetheless related positions, Melley makes a useful distinction between those forms of control issuing from an identifiable intentionality—Them—and those attributable to "institutions, mores, economic structures, and discourses" (16). Ironically, as Melley points out, the attribution of specific forms of intentionality to the mechanisms of control—however paranoid—constitutes an implicit "defense of . . . liberal individualism" in retaining "the liberal notion that *intentions* are the supreme cause of events in the world" (25). It might seem comforting to think that there are people, more or less like us, who are pulling the strings: if They can be identified and Their strategies revealed, perhaps They can be counteracted and some version of liberal humanism protected. Our subjective intentionality can be recuperated to counter Theirs. If, on the other hand, we accept that subjectivity is constructed largely by discourse or some other effect beyond our control, we must contemplate the no man's land of posthumanism and its consequent abandonment of the traditional American ideology (or national fantasy) of the self-possessed individual.

Melley's exploration of these issues is well suited to an analysis of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and his chapter on that novel is consistently interesting and insightful. While many conspiracy theories posit control mechanisms aimed at the mind, Pynchon is at least as interested in those forms of conditioning that target the body, and male sexuality is a major area of exploration both in his novel and in Melley's study. A fundamental problem is posed, for example, in the otherwise humorous lyrics focalized through Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, whose loss of virile agency (and Tyrone Slothrop's as well) is registered in the lament for "The Penis He Thought Was His Own" (GR 216), and Melley investigates the novel's implication of the body in the control grids of modernity. The *Gravity's Rainbow* chapter begins with the early scene

in which Pirate Prentice gets his mail and realizes that a sexual fantasy he had thought was utterly personal and absolutely private is in fact neither. His penis, it seems, is not his own. But if it is not, who controls it? And how? And to what end? The questions arising with Prentice's ejaculatory bewilderment extend as well to the mysterious pattern of Slothrop's sexuality and the V-2 rocket strikes with which it appears to coincide, and in pursuing these issues, Melley moves easily among references to Norbert Wiener, Jacques Lacan, Gregory Bateson, Michel Foucault and others—never burying the discussion in obscure or tangential debates, but using these discussions effectively to illuminate the complex problems of agency and control raised in Pynchon's text. Those problems arise at two levels. First, following the recognition that diverse forms of bodily and mental control are indeed operative, what degree of individual autonomy—if any—can be thought to remain, and how is it ever possible to be sure? And second, who—if anyone—is in control of the strategies and mechanisms of control, and what motivates Them (if there is a Them)? If there is no Them, then what are the ordering principles at work?

Overall, Melley's book explores the territory that opens up when the implications of posthumanist concepts of subjectivity come into contact with residual and threatened humanist concepts of freedom. This "debate about personhood" (185) is crucial to any understanding of postwar American culture, and whether Melley is looking into Burroughs's anxieties about control or Atwood's representations of gender and power, his discussion is consistently interesting. Blending insightful literary analysis with skillful theoretical reflection, *Empire of Conspiracy* is both an important contribution to American studies and an enjoyable read.

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