

Approach and Avoid:

Douglas A. Mackey's The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon

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The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon. By Douglas A. Mackey. San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1980. 65 pp. \$8.95

One phenomenon which Pynchon enthusiasts within academia are surely aware of, and even participate in, but which has not received much written consideration, is Pynchon's popular appeal. Pynchon enjoys a special status shared by only a few other writers, yet it is a contradictory status: too ribald, anarchic and steeped in popular culture to be acceptable to many traditional literary academics, he is also too complex, dense and steeped in esoterica and western intellectual history to be easily lumped with other popular but more accessible writers, such as Kurt Vonnegut or Tom Robbins. Nonetheless, Pynchon remains a source of fascination to academics and non-academics both, and there is a need for criticism which will address the needs of both audiences.

Douglas A. Mackey's The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon seems to have been commissioned to satisfy such needs. The book is number 28 in the Milford Series, "Popular Writers of Today," which includes works on a number of science-fiction authors, and other popular writers such as John D. MacDonald and Alistair MacLean, as well as some mainstream authors with affinities for popular culture, such as Anthony Burgess and John Hawkes. I am not familiar with these other volumes and so can offer no comparison, but taken on its own, Mackey's book is likely to disappoint both the professional and the amateur reader of Pynchon.

By far the greatest flaw in the book is its brevity. Mackey attempts to cover all of Pynchon's works, from the short stories on, in a mere sixty-five pages. Such length might be acceptable for a monograph on one part of Pynchon's career or one aspect of his works, but in its present length it cannot do justice to any of the works or themes. Even as the most basic kind of introduction to Pynchon,

the book falls short. Mackey's summaries of the short stories are competent, but he ignores the sub-plot of "The Secret Integration" and omits any mention of "The Small Rain" or "Under the Rose"; more importantly, he does not significantly link the stories, either historically, by tracing Pynchon's development as a writer, or thematically, by showing how the stories are related through such important but barely introduced topics as entropy and paranoia. In explicating the narratives of the three novels, Mackey is also competent enough, yet the beginning reader of V. is likely to find Mackey's account confusing, since it deals with V.'s adventures in chronological order, without reference to the order of the chapters involved. Again, though, failure to make and develop connections is the important flaw. It is not clear whether Mackey is intent only on explication or if he has some larger purpose in mind. He jumps from plot summaries to considerations of various elements in the novels, but with no particular reason given for stressing those aspects of the novels over others. Though his bibliography does list many of the most important works on Pynchon, it is unclear exactly how deeply Mackey is indebted to them; for example, his book does tend to cover much of the same ground as Joseph Slade's Thomas Pynchon.

One may also disagree with a number of Mackey's interpretations and readings. He does not explain character relationships in V. well, notably ignoring Rachel Owlglass's passage toward humanity and away from mechanization under the influence of Paola. His reference to Oedipa's seeing the Tristero post horn everywhere does not place it in the context of her dark night of the soul during her wanderings through San Francisco, and his suggestion that the post horn is symbolic of Gabriel's trumpet ignores the fact that it is muted. His discussion of the rocket limericks attributes them only to American G.I.'s and does not note that they are sung by engineers sent to work on the rocket.

These are fairly minor flaws, though, and would stand out less sharply in a longer book, but they are not balanced by whatever else Mackey has to offer. This is a pity, because Mackey seems to be an intelligent reader. He brings some fresh references to his discussions of the novels, and some are potentially

quite exciting. He invokes Erich Neumann's The Great Mother in discussing the archetypal values of the lady V., and cites Marc Edmund Jones's The Profane Mysteries as a way of dealing with the ritual elements of the Tristero in The Crying of Lot 49. His discussion of these sources, though, is--again--much too short to be convincing; either of these works has the potential for a full-length article in it, but Mackey gives each only a few paragraphs. In fact, Mackey's critical strategy seems to copy Stencil's policy of "approach and avoid." Just as he latches on to an interesting source or idea, he lets it go in order to move on.

This "strategy" is also evident in Mackey's discussion of Gravity's Rainbow. He has a number of interesting, if not necessarily new, things to say about the book's structure, the narrative voice, and the use of film, but again fails to develop any of these notions in a meaningful manner. He approaches a discussion of the relationship of Gravity's Rainbow with the reader--perhaps the most important consideration in dealing with that novel--yet at the last minute avoids a concrete definition of how that relationship works, except to say that it makes us "re-examine the whole structure of our experiencing apparatus" (38). The question left begging is what the form and purpose of that re-examination might be. Similarly, though he reads the book--correctly, I think--as ultimately affirmative, he avoids the hard questions the book poses. In stating that there is "no innately evil adversary but our own ignorance of the innate universal basis of all existence" (52), Mackey states a basic truth but avoids the concrete political and metaphysical context in which Pynchon sets this message. The identification of European society as death-oriented, the placement of humanity as "God's spoilers," and the characterization of activities on the "Other Side" of life show Mackey's formulation to be too simplistic. Finally, to return to the reader, Mackey does not deal forcefully with how Gravity's Rainbow should change our lives.

Potentially, much of the material in Mackey's book could be expanded and thus lead to some fresh and exciting discussions, but this present volume cannot do so. The text is more than an introduction, and so cannot be the kind of basic tool needed by the beginner,

but it is also less than a full discussion of Pynchon, and so cannot be of much use to the advanced or academic reader of Pynchon. It is the latter project to which Mackey seems most drawn, but the length of his book frustrates such efforts. The project of development, linkage, and definition should be approached and completed, or be avoided altogether.

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