PARTIALLY UNDERSTANDING PYNCHON

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Understanding Thomas Pynchon. By Robert D. Newman. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1986. 155 pp. $19.95; pb $9.95

Understanding Thomas Pynchon is one in a series, Understanding Contemporary American Literature, being published by the University of South Carolina Press and directed towards students and "good non-academic readers." The stated aim of the series, which so far has also covered Randall Jarrell, James Dickey, Bernard Malamud, and John Hawkes, is to provide "instruction in how to read certain contemporary writers--identifying and explicating their material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism, and responses to experience." "Understanding" Thomas Pynchon is, of course, a significant challenge, and if Robert Newman does not exactly give "instruction in how to read" Pynchon, he can help beginning readers to meet that challenge. However, Understanding Thomas Pynchon also has serious flaws which make it far less helpful than it should be for its intended audience.

Newman covers most of Pynchon's major works and begins by identifying several persistent themes: the act of naming; the creation of characters as extremes (reflecting, for instance, the dual metaphors of the hothouse and the street); reaction to the cultural heritage of Calvinism; and the main characters' descents into the underworld of modern culture. The identification of these themes is not new, and Newman does not systematically trace them through all of Pynchon's writing, but he does offer helpful and interesting comments on some of them when dealing with each of Pynchon's individual books. Some of Newman's individual readings are quite good, especially his explications of "Low-Lands" and "Entropy" and portions of V. and The Crying of Lot 49. He correctly assesses "Low-lands" as a better story than given credit by Joseph Slade or Pynchon himself, and his discussion of the paradoxical nature of entropy is perceptive and concise. Although Newman leans heavily on the work of previous critics, his remarks on the self-referentiality of Gravity's Rainbow, noting that "The text of the novel coalesces around its refusal to coalesce" (132), are likely to be especially provocative to readers coming fresh to that novel. An annotated bibliography of major sources is included.

Unfortunately, these strengths are undercut by several major weaknesses. The first problem is organizational. Since Newman deals with Pynchon book by book, his thematic discussions lack a consistent pattern of organization. While he avoids a simplistic lockstep listing and explication of themes in each work, Newman also avoids analysis of some themes in works that seem to demand

it. For example, the act of naming is dealt with explicitly only in his discussion of Gravity's Rainbow, though naming is central to all of Pynchon's novels and most of his shorter works, beginning with "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," a story to which Newman gives just one brief mention.

The strengths of a book-by-book treatment ought to include the ability to provide a tracing of the author's stylistic and thematic development and a clear outline of each novel's action. Such considerations, though, are lacking in Newman's discussions. Pynchon's increasing politicization from "The Secret Integration" on and the sudden outbursts of lyricism which mark Gravity's Rainbow are pretty much ignored. Although Newman's treatment of the self-referentiality of Gravity's Rainbow implies artistic growth, he seems to assume that such reflexivity is a constant in Pynchon's work. Such an argument could be made, but only with clearer explication and support than Newman gives it. One thing a beginning reader of Gravity's Rainbow is likely to need is a clear outline of the novel's organization, difficult as that may be to provide. But Newman gives only some indications of relationships among different sections of the novel, and his own lack of transitions between topics in the chapter on Gravity's Rainbow seems to parody his assertions about the novel's deliberate lack of coherence.

The most puzzling organizational choice is the discussion of Pynchon's short stories only as collected in Slow Learner. Thus, Newman gives no consideration to "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" (or to "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," either). The one advantage which discussing Slow Learner as a whole would seem to offer is a chance to evaluate and respond to Pynchon's own assessment of his stories in the Introduction, yet Newman offers only a few remarks on some of Pynchon's comments. In fact, the discussion of Slow Learner seems to have been written in haste, simply in order to include this relatively recently-published work among the books to be considered. Haste seems especially apparent in Newman's treatments of "Under the Rose" and "The Secret Integration," which offer little more than plot synopses. The metaphor of integration itself in the latter work is not analyzed in any detail, and Newman's treatment of the story also contains some egregious errors: the Hogan Slothrop of "The Secret Integration" is identified as Tyrone's brother (he is actually Hogan, Junior, Tyrone's nephew), and Newman claims that Pynchon was raised in the Berkshires, when in the introduction to Slow Learner, Pynchon admits that he has never even visited the region.

There are other minor factual errors in Understanding Thomas Pynchon, and one could quibble with some of Newman's interpretations. His treatment of Gravity's Rainbow, for instance, scants the chances for redemption suggested by Pynchon, ignoring the one lemming who is saved, the duality of the Herero phrase "Mba-kayere" ("I am passed over") which implies a sparing from destruction as much as an exile to preterition, and the moral growth of Leni Pökler (similar to that of Rachel Owlglass in V.). Moreover, the implications of the narrative reflexivity

of Gravity's Rainbow are sometimes more complicated than Newman implies. For example, he perpetuates one common critical mistake, responding to Mexico's (the narrator's?) question, "Is the baby smiling, or is it just gas?" with the assertion that "Beliefs then are situational responses within the vast realm of uncertainty" (112). Yet the context of the quotation (the Christ child being given offerings by representatives of the cartels) and the sentence which follows it--"Which do you want it to be?"--make it clear that the choice being offered is a political and moral one.

Newman's own background as a Joyce scholar might also present problems for the beginning reader of Pynchon. While he takes care to explain and define a number of the more obscure references and symbols in Pynchon, Newman introduces others related to Joyce that are equally likely to be puzzling: the Hermetic tradition, the major arcana of the tarot, and Joyce's "Uncle Charles" principle go undefined though they are probably not familiar to many intended readers. At least once, the Joyce connection leads Newman astray in an interpretation: he cites Joyce and Flaubert as influences on the last section of Chapter 3 of V. but ignores that section's more direct debt to Robbe-Grillet.

The most irritating flaw of Understanding Thomas Pynchon, though, is stylistic. Misused words and clumsy, vague sentences occur throughout the book. Paradoxically, these become most exasperating beginning in the chapter on The Crying of Lot 49, where communication is a major theme. Some examples: "A morass of technological conveniences for disseminating information pervades the novel" (76); "Pynchon incorporates the preponderance of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in twentieth-century physics to sound the death knell of epistemological certainty" (78); "As things fall apart and the center ceases to hold, to quote W. B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming,' the Old Testament sign of God's covenant with man now traces the flight of the V-2 rocket and, by implication, the other technological rough beasts that are its insidious heirs as they fall toward man's self-inflicted apocalypse" (91-92). I could go on, but I don't wish to belabor the point. Such verbal sloppiness should have been caught and corrected in proofreading or editing. It is annoying (when not comical) and seriously undermines the book's credibility.

To summarize, the strengths of Understanding Thomas Pynchon are seriously undercut by its organizational and stylistic defects. More time, thought, and careful editing could have made it a useful book. As it stands, though, readers of Pynchon seeking an introduction to his works are better off being directed to some of the sources listed in Newman's bibliography, especially Joseph Slade and Thomas Schaub and the collections by Mendelson, Levine and Leverenz, and Clerc.

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