

## Where Has All the Theory Gone?

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*The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel*, by Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner and Larry McCaffery, eds. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1994. 191 pp. \$29.95; pb \$14.95.

“‘[T]o extract the grain of determinacy.’ . . . Where does this desire come from?” Alec McHoul poses this question at the end of his quite superior review of *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49*, “How to Write an Essay on Thomas Pynchon” (*Pynchon Notes* 28–29). It is a good question, and not an easy one to answer. Derrida tackles it. In fact, almost all of recent theory does. Certainly Lacan would have had something to say about it, but unfortunately, in McHoul’s review Lacan is what a good Lacanian would immediately identify as the repressed signifier.

One item of McHoul’s “advice” for the Pynchon critic—item B, to be precise—is to get one or several theorists and map the theory or theories neatly onto the literary text. If *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel* is any clue, however, McHoul is in for a rude updating. At least in this collection, which brings together twelve essays on *Vineland*, nobody seems to have listened to him. Not only have these critics not mixed theorists; they have not even used one. Does this mean that theory is out? In *The Vineland Papers*, and this is probably the most surprising thing about the collection, theory is conspicuously lacking. There is the occasional reference to deconstruction, always in a decidedly un-Derridean manner, and once in rather unflattering company, when Joseph W. Slade says that the “most committed deconstructionists in both novels are fascists” (72–73). Lyotard gets an honorable mention for his *petits récits*, Foucault sulks in a sub-clause, and a rather superficial Baudrillard is glimpsed driving through *America*. Deleuze and Guattari make a guest appearance, but presumably only because Pynchon put them on stage in the first place. Feminist theory is a modest presence, and that’s it. McHoul can stop worrying about people using the term deconstruction sloppily, because most of the time they don’t use it at all. Instead, there is:

—A renewed interest in historicism. David Cowart’s essay sets the tone by saying that, although Pynchon “tends to deconstruct the myths

he invokes, they complicate the rendering of an otherwise comprehensively ahistorical contemporaneity" (3). The result is "a fiction devoted less to indeterminate postmodernist 'play' than to totalizing modernist 'purpose'" (4). This purpose, as almost all the other essays will argue as well, is a decidedly political one. In fact, the favorite buzzword in the collection is "cooptation." Everybody agrees that Pynchon has written, not a postmodern *Slothrops Wake*, but a modern book about the sleep of reason that awakens monsters. Molly Hite shares these historiographic and political concerns in her reading of what she calls Pynchon's "retrospective analysis" and "most irreducibly political novel" (136). Relating Pynchon's politics specifically to questions of race and gender, she centers her account on the relation between Frenesi and Vond, in particular on the "deeply problematic" (141) idea of their inescapable complicity and, yes, cooptation. Maybe there is a Derridean echo in her statement that "originary purity was always a delusion" (147-48). In a similarly political and historical vein, N. Katherine Hayles charts Frenesi's "slippage" from the family, a kinship system, to the government network, a "snitch system." Like Hite, she stresses the "interpenetration" (23) of these seemingly oppositional sides, and, like Hite, she might be echoing Derrida when she says that "the purity of the past was always already interpenetrated with what it fought against" (27). Compared to *Gravity's Rainbow*, Hayles concludes, *Vineland* is, in its ambivalence toward either side, "the wiser book, although not the more accomplished" (28). Joseph Tabbi is positively "dissatisfied" (90) with Pynchon's politics. He detects "an acceptance of a ready-made audience that frees [Pynchon] from the responsibility of creating the sensibility by which he will be understood" (90). In Tabbi's account, Pynchon's ambivalence turns into something rather more negative: a "hybrid fiction" (93). After comparing *Vineland* with William Gibson's cyberpunk, Tabbi comes to mourn *Vineland's* "indeterminate ending" (97), and concludes that "the America [Pynchon] returns to in the book remains a land of simulation—better observed and more fully experienced than in Jean Baudrillard's *America*, but no more engaging for that" (98-99). What Tabbi wants from Pynchon is "a new style of resistance to the simulation culture that *Vineland* documents" (99). Unfortunately, he leaves the reader in the dark about what this resistance might look like.

—The traditional thematic approach. According to David Porush, "Pynchon's machinery of narrative excites and entices us by sending us 'purring . . . into transcendence'" (31). This is a familiar argument. Pynchon sees "technology and technique . . . to be potential means to transcendence" (39), yet this transcendental realm which "lies beyond

both epistemology and ontology as they dissolve into each other" (43) is, as always in Pynchon, a promise not kept: "a transcendental realm that Pynchon occasionally salutes, and at which he asks us to laugh" (43). Susan Strehle traces the motif of doubles, in particular Vond and Takeshi, Frenesi and DL, all of whom are "bifurcating" (102) in their responses to the wrongs done. Although her vocabulary suggests that she sometimes draws on chaos theory, these references are fleeting. Stacey Olster traces the motif of filmmaking, setting Frenesi's detachment against the politics of feminist filmmakers, and relating Pynchon's "realistic narrative" (127) in form and political aim to what Annette Kuhn calls "deconstructive" cinema (127). Elaine B. Safer tells us that *Vineland* is funny, and most of her essay is a retelling of jokes. I counted 12 instances of Safer saying Pynchon's humor is absurd and grim, and seven instances of her saying "we laugh."

—The search for sources. The most interesting and elaborate is Slade's. After reviewing the general themes in *Vineland*, Slade traces the novel's allusions to Evariste Galois, the inventor of Group Theory, who may have served as a model for Weed Atman. Eric Solomon deals with the image of the '30s in the novel—the "gloried past of struggle and idealism" (163)—and the way "the novel is enriched by its own belatedness" (162). William E. Grim argues that Pynchon's satire is "postmodern" (154) in that it no longer differentiates between satire and reality because reality has long become a satire in itself: "Pynchon utilizes actual facts that at first glance appear to be so outlandish that we automatically assume a satirical intention. But Pynchon realizes that the era in which we live is self-satirizing" (160). This approach, however, functions mainly as a cover-up for a quest for the "original" of DL's temporary hideaway in Columbus, Ohio.

All in all, then, *The Vineland Papers* provides some good specimens of rather traditional criticism. Maybe it even manifests a nostalgia for some kind of soft-focus, pre-theoretical age in which one could do without intricate and playful deconstructive word games and without deep and convoluted psychoanalytical probings into the textual unconscious. If deconstruction and psychoanalysis are not part of the critical spectrum, that is a curious enough lack, but it might be explained by a general demise of poststructuralism. Another lack is less excusable: a collection that foregrounds the political and yet, over long stretches, does without any extended socio-political references is surely missing something. This, in fact, is for me the main weakness of *The Vineland Papers*. Although the collection provides an overview of the main topics of *Vineland* and of what research has already been done on Pynchon, readers would do well to consult Clifford Mead's very useful 1989—pre-*Vineland*—bibliography for a broader

perspective. Another, admittedly small drawback is the constant reference to the collection's other essays in the footnotes, which, at least to my mind, creates a kind of critical claustrophobia.

As it is, *The Vineland Papers* is very informative, and it provides a good first encounter with *Vineland*, although this encounter is not always as close as one might wish and not brilliant. Whether the traditional air of the collection is only the first phase in the attempt to come to terms with a "new" Pynchon or the result of a general shift in critical politics, I will not venture to say.

The desire for determinacy is perhaps most visible in the collection's *pièce de résistance*, which I have kept back for the end. It is what Porush calls "a poor critic's tantalizing reverie" (38) come true and almost as good as Pynchon on himself: Andrew Gordon's tale of his meeting with the author. Like a rich dessert, this account brings out the worst in us, but we cannot help loving it. Pynchon had "wasted" (172), "tired eyes like Robert Mitchum's" (173), and did not "bogart his joints" (175). What else could we want?

So a grain of determinacy has been extracted from *Vineland*, for better or worse. What finally disappoints is that, not only are we left still not knowing where the desire for this determinacy comes from, but, worse still, nobody seems the least bit interested in the question.

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