

A Point Beyond Degree Zero: A Rebuttal to
Khachig Tölölyan's "Remarks" in Pynchon Notes 3

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A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before--so what's one more time?

With the varieties of stances and perspectives available to literary critics, someone can disagree with virtually anything said about a work of literature. The value of the disagreement lies not so much in terms of who's right or wrong, since this is often a matter of perspective, but in whether or not anyone learns anything about the work being debated.

Therefore, I would have expected some critical screaming from people anxious to emphasize different aspects of Pynchon's writing, for instance his "post-modernist" qualities. (I take this to mean the ways in which his writing seems to be a reaction against the kind of literature practiced by Eliot, Pound, Faulkner, and other "modernists.") I'm not sure if Pynchon's first section title in Gravity's Rainbow, "Beyond the Zero," is a conscious reference to his going beyond Roland Barthes' description of post-modernist fiction's program of style-as-content in Writing Degree Zero. In any case, it might be very constructive to argue about the degree to which Pynchon does or does not display postmodernist tendencies. My own strategy, chosen largely because it seems simpler, is to emphasize the ways in which Pynchon is like the more familiar modernist writers (many of whom employed the quest pattern) before discussing ways in which he is different from them (by employing the anti-quest pattern, for instance). But any critical approach is valuable if it helps to illuminate the work and discussion of the work.

What bothers me about Professor Tölölyan's remarks is that they seem to arise from misreading my article, and seem to involve more posturing than real position.

In his "Remarks" on my brief piece "Pynchon's Anti-Quests" (both appearing in PN 3), Professor Tölölyan accuses me of practicing "moral pragmatism." Since I'm an American Jew, this is likely true. But he

argues that my simple observations were written "as though [I had] forgotten the essential use to which a writer puts his characters: they do not suffer for themselves, but for us, the readers, and in so far as our instruction is concerned, their failures are every bit as relevant as their successes might be. . . ." Well, I don't see how this statement involves less "moral pragmatism" than my own thesis, since it is still talking about the concept of "constructive use." And while a postmodernist might disagree that the characters suffer for the reader, I certainly have never maintained that they don't." The last paragraph of my mini-article is devoted to this notion, and I would have thought that the statement I have quoted above would be perfectly obvious, in the context of my article, to anyone sophisticated enough to read Pynchon (an assumption I made about the readers of Pynchon Notes).

It seems to me that Pynchon provides a third, intermediary level of character-appreciation; as I argued in Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow, I believe the construction of that novel implies a narrative consciousness that is overtly manipulating and interpreting the characters and their actions in order to make sense out of our modern world. I'm not sure that Pynchon believes in the efficacy of "moral pragmatism," but it seems to me that his narrator's attempt to discover meaning in the patterns of action in the novel is but one of a number of signs that he is at least considering the viability of moral pragmatism as an approach to life. (Again, the postmodernist might claim he is exposing the bankruptcy of that posture. There's no space now to argue that point, but I'd like to take it up in the future.) Pynchon's narrator often seems to be playing chess with himself throughout the novel, and as the players drop off the board one by one, he scrambles for a stalemate with the few white pawns left. As I said before, Pynchon, far more than most writers, uses his characters and his narrative voice to insist on the highly symbolic nature of his characters and the strongly ritualistic nature of their actions.

Under his (2), Professor Tölölyan accuses me of underestimating the difficulty and complexity of

meaning in the greatest quest narratives of the past. I don't and haven't. The sentence to which he refers, "Pynchon . . . may be indicating that the basic requirements for a successful quest have been denied modern man . . .", says nothing at all about other works of literature, or about other authors, or about other historical periods. It is, quite simply, a remark about Pynchon's perception of our contemporary situation.

The reason my "moves" from character to reader and from quest to anti-quest are so abrupt is that I condensed forty pages into five to suit the format of PN. Obviously this entailed a good deal of oversimplification on nearly every point I had to make, and Professor Tölölyan was well aware of this when he wrote his response. (I don't mind being shot at, but by my own men? . . .)

It is not too late, I hope, though it may be insignificant, to clarify these points. If I really have confused anyone, I'm truly sorry, since I honestly meant to help. If anyone wishes to offer further arguments or clarifications, publicly or privately, I'm always grateful for constructive advice.

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