New Pathways Through Pynchon

Erik S. Roraback

American Postmodernity: Essays on the Recent Fiction of Thomas Pynchon, by Ian D. Copestake, ed. Bern: Peter Lang, 2003. 223 pp. $44.95.

In his introduction to *American Postmodernity*, Ian D. Copestake succinctly delineates the principal strategies and contents of the collection: "Of the nine essays which follow five look closely at *Mason & Dixon*, and these first cut their teeth as papers presented at King's College, London between 10 and 13 June 1998. . . . The remaining four offer connecting perspectives with Pynchon's previous work through contexts which aid our understanding of his fiction in relation to evolving notions of American postmodernism." Copestake himself writes compellingly of Pynchon's status as a postmodern writer-recluse: "The work itself, reflecting Pynchon's reclusive detachment from any conventional identification of himself with authorship and fame, is free from any obligations laid down by such definitions" (10). This is precisely the strategy Pynchon enacts in his own biographical choices and their relation to the literary apparatuses of the lecture circuit, the interview, the literary banquet and so on. Some may read this desire for anonymity as humility, and others may read it as something even gruesome. But for Pynchon it is, at least ostensibly, a conscious decision to avoid those apparatuses of subjectivation that would entrap one in some dominant position in relation to the various institutional powers with which literature all too easily ends up conniving.

David Seed's "Media Systems in *The Crying of Lot 49*" maps some works by Marshall McLuhan onto Pynchon. Commenting on Charles Hollander's article on "*The Crying of Lot 49* as 'encrypted meditation' . . . on the Kennedy assassination," Seed argues that

> there is some justification for this view from Pynchon himself who in 1964 wrote to his then agent Candida Donadio that the shootings of Kennedy and Oswald filled him with gloom about "language as a medium for improving things." If these events had such a linguistic impact on Pynchon, this might help explain his projection of language as a manipulable medium operating within systems of control and surveillance. (29–30)

This reading may seem rather too psychobiographical, but upon further reflection one may appreciate its plausibility and elucidatory force. Seed also argues:

> Throughout *Understanding Media* . . . McLuhan stresses how the media have *extended*—his key word—the human consciousness into the environment. Pynchon too in *The Crying of Lot 49* describes motor cars as "motorized, metal extensions" . . . of their owners. McLuhan's new emphasis comes with his insistence that the media are means above all of information transfer. Predictably this conviction leads McLuhan to privilege information in human life: "Under electric technology the entire business of man becomes learning and knowing." . . . This proposition helps to explain why, as several critics have noted, Pynchon draws on the detective genre in *The Crying of Lot 49* since this is a literary mode which revolves around the gathering and processing of information. (17)

However rich this analogical argument may be, it is worth noting that in the end Oedipa is not a detective as classically conceived, for she finds out how un-codifiable reality is compared with what one may find in a de-codifiable historical-aesthetic modernist world. Stylistically, Seed's penchant for using the politically charged and textually awkward "s/he" seems unnecessary; rather, alternating the use of he and she or sticking to one only would be a much lighter approach to the question of gender-pronoun politics.

David Dickson's "Pynchon's *Vineland* and 'That Fundamental Agreement in What is Good and Proper': What Happens When We Need to Change It?" discusses *Vineland* with the critical lens of Gadamer in hand and makes a case that "*Vineland* strongly suggests that the individual act can be instrumental in changing not only the course of history, but specifically the agreements and designs by which history and people's lives are shaped" (46). By moving us into the territory of a positive task and of a positive aesthetics for the fragmentary subject, Dickson offers a glimmer of hope for a contemporary self yet to be begun.

Probably the most memorable part of David Thoreen's splendid "In which 'Acts Have Consequences': Ideas of Moral Order in the Qualified Postmodernism of Pynchon's Recent Fiction" comes, if truth be told, from a quotation from Pynchon's "Nearer, My Couch, to Thee":

> In this century we have come to think of Sloth as primarily political, a failure of public will allowing the introduction of evil policies and the rise of evil regimes, the worldwide fascist ascendancy of the 1920's and 30's

> being perhaps Sloth's finest hour, though the Vietnam era and the Reagan-Bush years are not far behind. (qtd. in Copestake 68)

Certainly the degree of scrupulosity and care of the American electorate will again and again pave the way for its historical-empirical political leadership. Pynchon's emphasis, then, on the self's elections, selections and so true collaborative or subversive power in everyday life is nicely expressed in this citation.

Francisco Collado Rodríguez sketches the contours of his "*Mason & Dixon*, Historiographic Metafiction and the Unstable Reconciliation of Opposites" as a concentration "on the unreliable character of the narrative voices, and on the overcoming of clear-cut discursive and ideological limits . . . symbolized in . . . the crossing of narrative boundaries, the use of doubles and impersonators, the intertextual winks to the reader, and the unstable characters of the two protagonists" (72). Toward the end of his essay, Collado Rodríguez argues:

> *Mason & Dixon* is above all a novel characterized by the decontextualization of its narrative. The book abounds in references to the poststructuralist interpretation of life as a Text, and frequently enhances the human activity of Representation, also insisting on that favorite metaphor of Michel Foucault: the mapping of reality. . . . [T]he activity of the surveyors is basically one of mapping reality but it also combines with that other celebrated Pynchonian motif, the human need for transcendence. (79)

This passage succinctly pinpoints how representation signifies occidental culture's inherent desire for transcendence, and Collado Rodríguez undergirds the argument with cogent examples from Pynchon's latest fat novel.

William B. Millard's "Delineations of Madness and Science: *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchonian Space and the Snovian Disjunction" cites Rick Moody on the subject of literary influence:

> Robert Coover . . . once remarked that apprentices of his generation found themselves (in the 1950s) grappling with two very different models of what the novel might be. . . . Saul Bellow's realistic if picaresque *Adventures of Augie March* . . . [and] William Gaddis's encyclopedic *Recognitions*. Writers my age (mid-thirties), however, don't have the luxury of a choice. Our problem is how to confront the influence of a single novelist: Thomas Pynchon. (qtd. in Copestake 84)

This subject would be a fascinating one to explore in detail in regard to lettered American culture of the past two decades; for the notion of the Pynchon effect, and how Pynchon's writing has affected, moved or toppled the edifice of American fiction has not yet been adequately explored in a wide field of comparison. Post-Freudian, post-Lacanian, post-Deleuzoguattarian or post-Luhmannian approaches to such a topic would seem fruitful possibilities. Millard also observes that "*Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's most ambitious leap through the deceptive convolutions of history, presents an exceptionally strong challenge, one that may or may not ever be adequately answered in the languages of literary critical theory" (84), which seems a fail-safe thing to say given how first-rate writing always exceeds the attempts of historical, linguistic, literary, philosophical, psychoanalytic and social theories to apprehend and to appropriate it.

Millard argues too for Pynchon's being, among novelists writing in English today, the most attuned to scientific culture. In addition:

> In a perhaps deliberate fictive counterpart of Derridean critical strategies, Pynchon tends to give some compensating emphasis to the less privileged member of a binary pair on any level, not simply reversing the polarity but re-balancing it and forcing a reconsideration of the precision of its dividing line. Then in turning attention back to the dichotomy of scientific and non-scientific thinking, we find that the narrative intermingles them to the point where one may question the value of separating them in *any* context. (104–05)

If we believe and endorse this assertion, we see once again that Pynchon manages to keep up with the historical-philosophical by absorbing in his writing the latest developments in occidental thought. Millard continues: "Pynchon's works present a recurrent historical concept, which I would term 'Pynchonian space' or 'the Pynchonian moment,' whereby political, socio-economic, and intellectual vectors intersect to create a temporary realm of augmented personal autonomy, political anarchy, epistemologic uncertainty, and narrative possibilities both comic and tragic" (105–06). Millard's subsequent discussion does not develop, for example, a Blanchotian or Mallarméan conception of literary space, but rather argues, interestingly:

> Pynchon has used language to project a world where *everyone* talks to God, and to each other. Across the distances outlined by history, disciplines, and ideologies, this language cannot help but imply the following: that in our own world, some closer listening to the fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks, whose inclusive motto might

> well be *omnia in verba*, would foster more skepticism toward Lines, and less toward whatever lies on either side of them. (108)

Millard illuminates Pynchon's incontestable gift for spawning a healthy skepticism toward boundaries.

Martin Saar and Christian Skirke begin "'The Realm of Velocity and Spleen': Reading Hybrid Life in *Mason & Dixon*" with the remark that

> Pynchon's novel is dominated by its historical disposition, an eighteenth century meticulously researched and wildly transformed. The usual abundance of distractions and sub-plots, however, makes it virtually impossible to extract anything close to a unifying leitmotif. . . . The compass of our approach will be the figure of the "mechanickal Duck" which appears as an uninvited companion of the line and its crew. (129)

Immediately highlighted here is the kind of ontological play, profundity and puzzlement one may experience in *Mason & Dixon*. Saar and Skirke movingly argue in closing that in *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon attempts to obtain

> a warped and prismatic perspective on our time by recovering technology from its genuinely modern alliance with destruction and annihilation. Perhaps for merely anamnetic purposes, to save and to relive this brief moment in history where the powerful dualism between reason and its other has not yet been dissolved in favor of one of its poles. Rather a time where, sometimes, even the rational turns back on itself and mutates into something foreign. That is when mechanical Ducks start to speak and get horny. As the Learnèd English Dog asserts in a grandiose gesture of ironic self-negation:
>
> > 'Tis the Age of Reason, rrrf? There is ever an Explanation at hand and no such thing as a Talking Dog,—Talking Dogs belong with Dragons and Unicorns. What there are, however, are Provisions for Survival in a World less fantastick. (144–45)

This capacity to re-ontologize the ontological even while re-rationalizing the rational shows Pynchon's interest in recovering the remains of Enlightenment reason and ontology for a new good rationality and a good ontology for the twenty-first century. Ontological and rational responsibility are called for here in a reconcatenation of the debris of being and of human reason.

In "Surveying the Punch Line: Jokes and their Relation to the American Racial Unconscious/Conscience in *Mason & Dixon* and the Liner Notes to *Spiked!*," John Heon observes that Spike Jones's "entire

oeuvre can be seen as an extended Freudian 'hostile tendentious joke' against high culture snobbery and low culture stupidity, both of which, of course, he saw in himself"; and Heon suggests that Pynchon "harbor[s] this same basic conflict and profit[s] artistically from its 'useful energy'" (153). Thus:

> Washington is once again shown to be a tyrant and bigot despite his gentility and "nobility," and Mason is revealed as the desecrator of Native American lands. Everyone gets their just deserts via the comic spirit of the Revolution and the Mobility. But elsewhere Pynchon does show us how this "revolutionary" comedy can be much more problematic and how masking jokers are not always so benign. (165)

Nor is this all. Heon makes the case "that the Line is indeed a joke—played on Mason and Dixon and the emerging country" (168). Here the riotous quality of Pynchon's zestful imagination comes to the fore for critical discussion.

In "Surveying, Mapmaking and Representation in *Mason & Dixon*," Robert L. McLaughlin cites Denis Wood's argument "that maps are as much about the mapmaker as they are about the world" (179). So one could argue by extension that we may richly read *Mason & Dixon* not as fiction but as geography. McLaughlin argues in regard to the material sources of the book:

> The form and purpose of the novel itself seem to be the subject when the characters in the Cherrycoke frame argue about truth and fiction. Ethelmer asserts that multiple stories are to be preferred to one story that claims to be the absolute and only truth. . . . Ives LeSpark rejects this theory because, as he says, "No one has time, for more than one Version of the Truth" . . . and because fiction threatens the distinction between "fact and fancy." . . . Its own form, then, suggests that, while the novel is about the drawing of a Line that promulgates the ideology of control, it is also about the erasing of lines, the blurring of distinctions, the proliferation of possibilities that offer a challenge to this ideology. (190–91)

So Pynchon's book would seem to both complete and incomplete the logic of control in its very shape and structure by dissolving canonical criteria for what constitutes lines of control and power in favor of other criteria for good lines: for example, perhaps more supple lines that dialectically deconstruct oppositional logic and, in so doing, approximate the reality of things with their own particular historical-social coordinates.

The last essay in the volume, Copestake's own "'Off the Deep End Again': Sea-Consciousness and Insanity in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Mason & Dixon*," seeks "to draw a line of connection between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Mason & Dixon* by noting the particular use the author makes of references to madness and the sea . . . [and] to place Pynchon's concern with these elements in relation to a specifically American literary and historical tradition" (193). Copestake contextualizes this literary lineage thus:

> What is so often at stake for American writers and their fictional characters when they confront the sea or water . . . is the repeated need to find an answer to the question of whether a conception of America is necessary for it to exist, or whether a society is possible outside the delusions or ideals which historically have determined its identity.
>
> Oedipa Maas confronts this question at the end of her personal quest for answers, and finds avenues towards different forms of insanity awaiting her. . . .
>
> The supposedly enlightened age which the drama of *Mason & Dixon* illuminates is one in which madness abounds. Mason suffers from hyperthrenia, or excess in mourning . . . casting him under the shadow of a deep melancholia. Cherrycoke . . . is not unacquainted with mania, having avoided imprisonment for his crimes by allowing himself to be declared insane. (204)

This seems Pynchon's way of reminding us again of how so-called madness was to be found everywhere in a rather reductively posited and named Age of Reason. Copestake lists a plethora of other examples of insanities, and also offers examples of the sea "as the metaphoric realm of the mad" (205). He makes the forceful argument too that insanity

> offers a means of escape from hegemonic forces and social control, and provides the narrator of *Mason & Dixon* with a passport to a new form of selfhood. What Pynchon recognises in *Mason & Dixon* is the need to acknowledge the validity of the delusions of others, to recognise the legitimacy of values and beliefs which by their very existence contradict conventional assumptions and beliefs. (209)

From this interpretive vantage point at least, Pynchon seems on the side of those illusions that give structure and meaning to our existences, and of how they make possible the creation of a particular existence itself.

The conclusion to Copestake's essay is equally fertile as a conclusion to the entire volume:

> In *Mason & Dixon* the motif which is promoted in the light of the threat both to insanity and the sea as embodiments of escape or redress is the value of fiction-making itself. As in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the act of metaphor is still very much "a thrust at truth and a lie" . . . reflecting as it does in *Mason & Dixon* the capacity for the authorities of the Enlightenment to believe in the fictions they inherit, and so impose their beliefs through the etching of dividing lines across the globe. . . . By not rejecting the form and order which beliefs and ideals give to a society we are all responsible for the injustices which result, but by recognizing that fact and the provisionality of the ideals and values which define and legitimise them, independent ethical action remains possible. To recognise and accept the inevitability of delusion is the key, and it is this which turns Pynchon's celebration of the imagination in his novel into a stance of ethical resistance as he populates his novel with creations of the human imagination which do not insist on being seen as anything other than unreal and fantastical. (213)

The act of fiction-making itself, then, as a way of organizing experience, counteracts many of the disorienting dangers of the black pit of hopelessness, loss and other immobilizing configurations of negativity that might otherwise prove unnegotiable for the ethically interested self.

One aesthetic weakness of this otherwise nicely published book is its use of footnotes rather than endnotes: they are a source of distraction. Endnotes would have made for a more seamless and fluid reading experience. What is more, some of the footnotes are so lengthy that they would seem to merit inclusion in the body of the text, assuming they are integral to the authors' arguments. A second caveat regards the liberal use of "which" in some of the essays where "that" would be preferable. Perhaps this is niggling, but I let the point stand.

Over all, *American Postmodernity* is aesthetically pleasing and critically illuminating. Yet the essays would have benefited from engagement with Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, with the Strasbourg School of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, with Julia Kristeva or Deleuze and Guattari, or even with Leo Bersani's "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature." The valency and usefulness such thinkers have for much of the most interesting current Pynchon research may be seen in Stefan Mattessich's *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon*. Drawing on models that make for a wider angle of view (neither Bersani

nor the continental theorists are specialists in American letters or in Pynchon) might have made some of the work here even more rigorous, enthralling and adventurous. Or perhaps taking up the positive aesthetics of Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit in their *Arts of Impoverishment* (where they claim in the introduction that they could have analyzed Pynchon's fiction had they opted to) could have made for another radicalization of Pynchon studies. Be that as it may, this perceptive book of essays is a welcome contribution to Pynchon studies, and to the study of contemporary U.S. literature and culture.

—*Charles University*