A Practical Duplicity

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Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World. By Peter L. Cooper. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983. 238 pp. $19.95.

Peter Cooper's book is a thorough, although somewhat redundant, treatment of familiar critical themes both announced by and implicit in Pynchon's works: entropy, inanimacy, mechanization, paranoia, waste, science, epistemology and so forth. These themes are not simple, and Cooper's renewed examination of them (through some six chapters) is not altogether wasteful. However, I believe the real, and inadvertent, contribution of Signs and Symptoms to literary discussions on Pynchon's works lies not in these chapters, but rather in the prologue to these chapters, i.e. in Cooper's initial comments on "Pynchon's Literary Context." Through its assumptions, this section crystallizes the manner in which Pynchon criticism regularly succumbs to a practical duplicity--talking about how Pynchon's works implicitly unfix interpretive authority while covertly advancing fixed interpretive viewpoints. The idée fixe of Cooper's study is "realism." From a perception of realism that depends on recalling and reconstituting--in my opinion, erroneously--an earlier epoch of American literature as clear and accessible, Cooper celebrates the ambiguity, uncertainty and apocalyptic messages of Pynchon's works. This is a "practical" duplicity because it allows criticism to comment--at great length--on the erosion of meaning in Pynchon's texts while standing within a safe framework of meaning, untouched, it seems, by the ruptures it notices.

In his prologue (pages 1-44), Cooper divides contemporary American authors into two groups: the "neorealists" and the "counterrealists." This division is made with Pynchon's "permission"--his sanction of "imperfect, but necessary, interpretive systems" (S&S, 1). "Neorealists," like Bellow and Updike, are those who "inherit, extend, or modify traditions of realism and naturalism" (S&S, 1). "Counterrealists," like

Vonnegut, Burroughs and Pynchon, "consciously react against [these] traditions" (S&S, 1). According to Cooper, neorealists "show their characters as trying to reach a tenable mode of being with themselves, with others, and with their civilization" (S&S, 2). Counterrealists, on the other hand, portray human beings as "flat, insubstantial figure[s] adrift in an alien world" (S&S, 3). Pynchon's creation of alien worlds, and alienated characters, explains for Cooper the apparent "insignificance of the individual," the "preexisting forces" that shape reality (S&S, 3), and the "malevolent" plots that threaten humanity (S&S, 3) in Pynchon's works. Cooper later comments that "the mass and gravity of Pynchon's plots . . . add to the reader's sense of uncertainty in an alien world" (S&S, 178). And, at the end of the book, Cooper concludes that "in place of revelation, Pynchon gives the Ellipses of Uncertainty" (S&S, 222). The sense in which flat characters, massive plots, uncertainty and the lack of revelation dovetail in Cooper's "counter-realist" interpretive system is not surprising--indeed, we have seen this same configuration emerging in Pynchon criticism many times before. Predictably, Cooper's argument is that the critic is haunted by the same uncertainty that plagues Pynchon's characters, and that this uncertainty itself reflects the contemporary problem of knowing, finding meaning, and defining reality. "It is only fitting," Cooper claims, "that the reader should come to mimic the characters in this novel [Gravity's Rainbow] about the problems of reading signs, imperfect metaphors, and dubious texts" (S&S, 176).

Most critics would agree with the intent, and possibly the substance, of Cooper's distinction between neorealism and counterrealism. And yet I think we should be suspicious of any distinction that produces phrases like "Ellipses of Uncertainty"--conclusive inconclusions. (I wonder, also, what we are meant to understand by the capitalization of "Ellipses" and "Uncertainty.") While, in a certain sense, Cooper might be said to be mimicking not Pynchon's characters, but Pynchon himself by arriving at such "models of the world" (S&S, 1), I think most of Signs and Symptoms is a theoretical flirtation with Pynchon's works that

relies on very tenuous adversarial positions such as "fleshy" and "flat," "clear" and "ambiguous," "real" and "fictional." The function of these positions is to protect Cooper from having to offer, finally, any interpretation of the peculiar events in Pynchon's works.

My overall impression is that Cooper is a "neo-realist" caught in a "counterrealist" world, that is, a world where "realism" is in serious question as a literary concept. He seems to believe, for example, that criticism deserves revelation as a reward for careful reading. And, when revelation is withheld, it is characteristic of this critical position to connect the resulting textual ambiguity with the imminence of social apocalypse. This latter tendency is especially interesting. Cooper discusses in his third chapter on "Pynchon's Solutions" the possibilities for a "counterforce" to apocalypse. He touches briefly on the essay "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts" as an example of how the people of Watts fail to win a long-term solution to the violence that surrounds them--as Cooper says: "the rioting changed little and resolved nothing" (S&S, 96). In fact, Pynchon seems to propose an extremely interesting solution to violence in this essay. The black inhabitants of Watts begin to see the riot "less as chaos and more as art" (New York Times Magazine [12 June 1966], 84). In other words, these inhabitants recast social violence as a "renaissance" of culture. This is more than the "self-expression or therapeutic release" (S&S, 96) that Cooper calls it. It is an effective, and political, counterforce via the act of interpretation. It is precisely these subtle chances for interpretation offered by Pynchon's characters that Cooper seems to miss, or eclipse by his own certainty that Pynchon's books are about a generalized "incomprehensibility" of the modern world. Had he taken his comment about "mimicry" seriously, Cooper may not have settled the question of Pynchon's "solutions" so easily.

I sympathize with Cooper's theoretical impulses. I even sympathize, to a degree, with the need to differentiate Pynchon from other contemporary American authors. But I am rather appalled by the lack of risk Cooper takes in Signs and Symptoms. I am not sure,

after reading it, whether Cooper avoids giving us, for example, an account of Slothrop's sodium amytal dream ("scanning the criticism," Cooper states wearily, "one finds a wide assortment of loosely related assertions as to why Tyrone Slothrop was given sodium amytal" [S&S, 177]) because to do so is to risk an "insubstantiality" that is an occupational hazard of criticism, or because he really believes there is no point in this kind of reading. In the former case, I see the large problem of making Pynchon characters "figures" for the reader without taking them at all seriously. In the latter case, I see Cooper proposing an approach to Pynchon that is doomed to reiterate fallacious, and dead-end, theoretical positions.

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