

In the Matrix

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Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon, by Michael Bérubé. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992. 353 pp. \$43.50; pb \$14.95.

Tolson and Pynchon, between them . . . allow us to examine how canonicity is produced and theorized by writers and critics, and how, accordingly, academic critics regard their roles as agents of the cultural center. . . . I want to examine the rhetoric of cultural marginality and the uses to which it is put by disparately positioned writers and critics. And the purpose of mapping this rhetoric, in turn, is to make visible the microphenomena of reception and neglect in individual case histories. (5)

Our most recent “crisis in criticism” has three causes: 1) Deconstruction has run its course as a hot critical idea. Its commodification (to use one of Michael Bérubé’s favorite terms) has exhausted itself among its fans, and its enemies have set up a Great Western Books Wall that trendy critics—always the most cowardly—lack the energy, wit or inclination to scale. 2) Deconstruction and other poststructuralisms lost much of their moral authority (something they disdained as anathema but from which they made money nevertheless) when Paul de Man was unveiled as a formerly historicist critic with an unfortunate (particularly for his adherents) fascination for fascism. 3) Fiscal cutbacks and demands for fundamentals education at all state universities as well as most private colleges and universities have severely limited the expansion of graduate programs in “non-traditional” critical ideas and the hiring of faculty who would teach those ideas.

Amid such dissolution, as we scramble desperately for next year’s critical clothes, it is rare to find a work by a junior professor that truly penetrates to new and core issues, and sets a standard in an as yet unnamed and uncoded school of critical thought. But *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon, and the Politics of the Canon* is just such a rare work. Bérubé explicates what other critics, for the most part, have not had the interest, brains or guts to confront.

Marxist critics have been virtually alone heretofore in properly examining the role of power in the cultural/critical matrix, but their

examinations were so politically myopic that anyone above twelfth-grade level could barely stand to read more than the abstract. Not that their politics were bad, merely what they called criticism. Lawrence Hogue, not a Marxist, in *Discourse and the Other* (1989), did do a great deal to explicate the role of power in the manufacture and dissemination of the thoughts in books we read. But alas (and this relates directly to Bérubé's study), Hogue is an African-American, and given the criticism matrix in this country, an African-American critic—unless he is Henry Gates—may as well be a Martian critic for all the promotion from the critical/publishing conduit he or she is likely to get, regardless of the novelty of the thesis or the clarity of the idea. Nevertheless, Hogue pointed out that the criticisms we know, black and white, are emanations of the production mechanisms of the hegemonic alliance among critics, publishers, reviewers and academics in this country. Thus, for example, the contrast between Tolson's critical reception and Pynchon's.

The critical elision of Tolson and the canonization of Pynchon are excruciatingly ironic given what each desired from his writing. Bérubé presents a

comparative analysis of how canonization works, or fails to work, for writers in the age of institutional criticism. But I have not carried out this project merely to argue that Tolson has been unfairly overlooked; certainly he has, but there are larger issues at stake here as well. On one hand, we are confronted with the nearly complete neglect of the poet who first sought to bring African-American poetry into the academy; on the other, we are faced with the nearly immediate canonization of the novelist who won't appear, give interviews, accept prizes, write about his reception, or allow his publisher to print books about his work. A marginal figure who wanted nothing more than to be central; a newly central figure who apparently would like nothing better than marginality. (3)

Marginality defines the careers and reception of these two writers, and the force of marginality is the point man for the culture that defines margins: one may be placed through deconstruction at the margins of what is deemed high literature and thus negatively defined that way; or the culture may use marginality to embrace and promote the avant-garde to the center simply because the culture has the power to do so under its critical constructs. The fact that Tolson was black and Pynchon is (critics assume) white is the point, but there is also another point Bérubé, to my knowledge, is the first white critic to adequately address: if marginality is the product of the powers of a culture, then what happens to the notion of merit when it is seen for

what it is? That is, if through the deconstruction of canonization we can admit that something is deemed marginal or meritorious based only on which cultural critics are in power at the time and whose views they represent, then the notion that Tolson was elided from academia because his poetry was not meritorious enough becomes an obvious lie and a critical and historical embarrassment. Equally, seen through Bérubé's critical lens, Pynchon's immediate canonization has to be seen for an arbitrary power decision based on nothing but a need to appropriate the correct writer with the correct style for the critical ideas prominent at the time of his work's admission into the canon.

If I were a representative of Tolson's estate, I would hire Bérubé to insert Tolson into the canon using the critical connections and acolytes the anti-Tolson critics used to relegate him to obscurity even though, as Bérubé brilliantly points out, his poetry met all the criteria of academic poetry and should have been used to excite or bore students in the same courses in which Dylan Thomas's work excited or bored them. If I were Pynchon, and if I gave a damn about structuring my own reputation, I would use Bérubé's book as the basis to sue all those critics who misappropriated my talent through their biased appraisals of a writer who best fit their own needs at the time. Additionally, I would write Bérubé a thank-you note for vindicating my decision some thirty years earlier to have nothing to do with such a dishonest crew as critics.

Some reviewers feel they must balance their overall perception of a book by pointing out flaws. If I respected such dishonest writing practices, this would be the place to point out some minor flaw of Bérubé's book to lend credibility to my effusive comments by being "balanced." Bérubé's study has no flaws. But there is something about the book that hurts its flow, but which, ironically, further proves Bérubé's point about the power of institutionalized criticism and its relation to the publishing/writing/promotion matrix. The book is far too long, but I am sure Bérubé earned more respect from the unthinking by stretching out his very good thesis too far for any stylistic good. Perhaps I would never have been asked to review this book had it been its ideal comprehensive and forceful length (probably around 180 pages); such a short work would have been marginalized solely because of its length: less length implies less merit, does it not? Of course it does in the current power matrix of institutionalized criticism, and such inanity is simply one more critical wall I hope Bérubé's next book tears down.

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