

Pynchon in Watts

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In 1966 Pynchon made his one excursion into journalism by producing an article on Watts in the aftermath of the August 1965 riots. He wrote the piece partly at the invitation of J. Kirkpatrick Sale, who was then editor of the New York Times Magazine, and partly, in the words of the current culture editor, "from his concern for Watts."¹ Pynchon had known Sale during their Cornell days, when the latter was editor of the Daily Sun.² Pynchon's article, "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts" appeared in the NYT Magazine for June 12, 1966 and was illustrated with photographs showing police cars cruising the area, street scenes, a domino parlour, etc.³ This article has received comparatively little attention in discussions of Pynchon's fiction, rarely getting more than a passing mention. The only two critics who have examined it in some detail--Joseph Slade and William Plater--both agree that it develops themes that are important in the fiction. Slade remains rather uncertain about its journalistic value, describing it on the same page as "a skillful piece of journalism" and "unremarkable."⁴

The article begins with a straightforward factual account of how a negro named Leonard Deadwyler was chased by the police and shot. It is a strategic opening because this event resembles the arrest of Marquette Frye for drunken driving which triggered the 1965 riots.⁵ All the way through the piece Pynchon is raising the possibility of recurrence and so resists any suggestion that the situation has improved. Secondly, the Deadwyler killing introduces one of the main themes of the article--the enormous gap between black and white attitudes. White officialdom dismisses it as an accident, whereas the blacks of Watts cling to the possibility that it was murder. The Deadwyler incident is really the only part of the article which could be described as straight journalism. From that point onwards, Pynchon gives a broad overview of the situation in Watts and uses a number of literary strategies towards this end.

Firstly, there is the question of perspective. Intermittent details in the Deadwyler narrative suggest that Pynchon is locating his point of view among the blacks; the coroner's verdict of accidental death comes "to no one's surprise."⁶ This is confirmed when the individual confrontations between police and blacks take place:

. . . how very often the cop does approach you with his revolver ready, so that nothing he does with it can then really be accidental;
 . . . how, especially at night, everything can suddenly reduce to a matter of reflexes: your life trembling in the crook of a cop's finger because it is dark. (35)

On one level the "you" applies to any black out on the streets. Pynchon sees no point in trying to individualize events, since they fit into a stereotyped pattern. But also the "you" draws the reader imaginatively into the dramatic predicament of the blacks. This is certainly the main polemical thrust of the article. Writing for the NYT Magazine Pynchon must have had a primarily white readership in mind, and therefore throughout his piece, he exploits perspective to force some kind of awareness of Watts on to the reader. Here the awareness focuses on the immediate threat of shooting. Later Pynchon takes us through the visit an average black youth would make to a welfare office and his search for a job on an average day. The simple device of the pronoun "you" plays a large part in inviting the reader to participate imaginatively in these experiences so as to understand black frustration. Although the article begins predictably with the police, Pynchon moves on to the welfare services and "the white faces of personnel men" with their "uniform glaze of suspicion" (80). Here he inverts a racist perspective (they all look alike) and puns ironically on their uniformity and the fact that they represent the forces of law and order. By contrast with the police, the white middle-class ("the little man") exerts a more sinister threat to the blacks in the sense that opposition to black self-expression might be masked by smiles or smothered by well-meaning attitudes.

Pynchon is concerned above all in this article with stereotyped attitudes; he only glances briefly at particular political faults before he begins to indicate how both sides are locked into patterns of behaviour. The exchanges between police and blacks form a kind of tense ritual which may or may not lead to a shooting. The welfare workers are burdened with an anachronistic faith in social improvement, which is complicated by reflex reactions to nonconformity, violence, etc. In fact the gloomiest and shrewdest insight of Pynchon's article is that both sides react to situations automatically. Behaviour becomes a matter of physical process ("for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction" [82]), so deeply ingrained or dictated by the situation that it scarcely seems available to rational scrutiny. Even the welfare workers are presented as naively urging the young blacks to conform to an essentially white image. This is nothing new in Pynchon's writings. In V, Esther has cosmetic surgery on her nose in order to conform to an advertising stereotype of beauty. It is presented ironically as a pleasingly sexual act of violence against her self, basically an individual act which links Esther to the other self-obsessed members of the Whole Sick Crew. In "A Journey" Pynchon's attention has broadened socially in that he recognizes the political and communal consequences of such stereotyping. At its worst it can cause murder; at the very least it creates an atmosphere of threat.

Pynchon expresses the gap between the blacks and whites as a contrast between reality and illusion. Once again this is a tactic with a political purpose since it de-mystifies Watts--Pynchon is careful to point out that everything there is out in the open--and it introduces two of the most important analogies in the article. As William Plater points out, "A Journey" develops Pynchon's interest in the tour and in colonialism. Partly this involves him in adopting the stance of a guide: "Pynchon deliberately builds his fictional world from the facts and artifacts of his readers' experience. In part, he fulfills the tour guide's responsibility for familiarity, but he also demonstrates the confluence of illusion and reality in form."⁷ The very title of the article confirms the analogy with a tour. Watts becomes

Raceriotland just as Egypt, Italy, etc. become collectively Baedekerland in V. The difference here is that Pynchon tries to undermine the tourist's detachment by his use of perspective and by insisting on the constant presence of violence. The average white view of Watts is "panoramic" (i.e., again touristic) because it is gained from above, from the Harbor Freeway, and Pynchon invites the reader to make a different kind of actual and imaginative journey, down from the freeway into the streets of Watts. In The Crying of Lot 49 Oedipa Maas makes exactly this kind of journey down from the California freeways and out of the insulation of her car. The fact that she travels by bus and that she now looks under the freeway and not down from it gives her access to the poor and disinherited of San Francisco. Plater is surely wrong to suggest that the inhabitants of Watts see the police as tourists.⁸ Tourism in Pynchon's works regularly shades over into colonialism. This is why he refers to the police as "white forces" (78) and the welfare offices as "the outposts of the establishment" (81). Watts is an area under siege, "a siege of persuasion" (84) which is not entirely metaphorical because it is supported by arms and demands conformity to white images.

Pynchon contrasts one mentality with another and one landscape with another; the two merge, obviously (hence the title). He emphasizes how ordinary, even in a sense how familiar Watts is, with its disused railroad tracks and two storey houses. He uses Watts as a vantage-point from where he can criticize white California, specifically Los Angeles. This place he defamiliarizes as the creation of mass media images:

It is basically a white Scene, and illusion is everywhere in it, from the giant aerospace firms that flourish or retrench at the whims of Robert McNamara, to the "action" everybody mills along the Strip on weekends looking for, unaware that they, and their search which will end, usually, unfulfilled, are the only action in town. (78)

Pynchon does not have the space to develop this suggestion that white California is in the grips of a collective self-mystification. That is taken up and developed in Lot 49, particularly in the sections dealing

with Yoyodyne and the drug scene. The repeated use in "A Journey" of terms like "conditional," "psychosis," "reflex" and "unreality" builds up a cumulative sense that the outside white world is insubstantial, somehow not solid. By contrast, Pynchon insists on the debris of Watts, the bottles which can break and cut a child's foot. As a landscape Watts has all the actuality that Los Angeles lacks, and this impression is created novelistically by a constant stress on things-- on rubbish, houses, railroad tracks and so on.

The objects which culminate the references to rubbish are the Watts towers, built by Simon Rodia. As Joseph Slade points out, they are a metaphor of the wasted lives in the black ghetto.⁹ At first Pynchon seems to dismiss the towers as a private dream or fantasy of their creator. They might be a landmark, but they are juxtaposed with the nearby railroad tracks where children break more and more bottles: ". . . Simon Rodia is dead, and now the junk just accumulates" (78). Junk and rubbish form an important theme in Pynchon's fiction whether as an index of dehumanization or, as here, of simple human waste.¹⁰ In an early story, "Low-Lands," a Long Island rubbish dump figures prominently as a fascinating alternative to the monotonous suburbia that surrounds it. In that story Pynchon's treatment of junk is light and playful. In the article's conclusion, however, he returns to junk to examine what possibilities of self-expression it offers to the blacks. So, when he describes an Easter festival held in memory of Simon Rodia, he dismisses the "theatrical and symphonic events" in favor of a kind of art of salvage--the objects left behind from the rioting. These Pynchon describes as "fine, honest rebirths," and he concludes, again novelistically, with an image:

In one corner was this old, busted, hollow TV set with a rabbit-ears antenna on top; inside, where its picture tube should have been, gazing out with scorched wiring threaded like electronic ivy among its crevices and sockets, was a human skull. The name of the piece was "The Late, Late, Late Show." (84)

This image fits Pynchon's purposes so exactly that one wonders whether it ever existed. But that doesn't really matter because, as I have been arguing, his article works basically through rhetoric, and the image is plausible as a conclusion. The object makes an artistic gesture of defiance against one of the instruments of power in the white establishment--television. It both embodies the debris of Watts and at the same time transforms it into a kind of emblem of the time running out. Unlike the art of the mass media, it keeps a firm hold on the reality of things and of death.

Concluding his comments on this article, Plater fleetingly wonders how Pynchon avoided the white fantasy which seems so endemic to California.¹¹ A journalistic answer to this would be that he found and presented new information, but the only particular event Pynchon describes was over two months old when his article appeared in print. The answer to Plater's question really lies in the article's literary strategies. Pynchon builds up a narrative authority from the plausibility of his rhetoric; it is the cumulative effect of his exploitation of perspective, his use of contrasts, analogies and images. These strategies develop themes introduced in V. and, in their increased social concern, elaborated in Lot 49.

In conclusion, Pynchon's article suffered from a publishing irony which must have struck him when it appeared. Several of its sections jostle advertisements for luggage, wine ("known only to connoisseurs") and an obviously expensive Long Island inn. It is pointedly ironic that a piece of polemic against the white establishment should be placed side by side with expensive products of that establishment. The luggage advertisement invites the buyer to push it ("our compact Airsuter") under his seat, whereas two columns across the page the jets hang shining over Watts, "only the ghosts, or possibilities, of airplanes" (78).

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Notes

¹ Letter from Gerald Walker, August 27, 1981.

² Pynchon's friendship with Sale is described by Baxter Hathaway in "Hathaway Recalls Cornell Writers of the '50s," The Cornell Daily Sun (May 5, 1978), 31, 38.

³ The article was illustrated by a freelance photographer named Bill Bridges.

⁴ Joseph W. Slade, Thomas Pynchon (New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974), 45.

⁵ Benjamin Muse, The American Negro Revolution (New York: Citadel Press, 1970), 206.

⁶ Thomas Pynchon, "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts," The New York Times Magazine (June 12, 1966), 34. Page references subsequently in parentheses.

⁷ William M. Plater, The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), 104.

⁸ Plater, 106.

⁹ Slade, 45.

¹⁰ Cf. Richard F. Patteson, "Architecture and Junk in Pynchon's Short Fiction," Illinois Quarterly, 42, No. 2 (1979), 38-47.

¹¹ Plater, 109.