

Essaying Pynchon's Politics

Douglas Keeseey

Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins, by Niran Abbas, ed. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP / London: Associated UP, 2003. 256 pp. \$43.50.

This anthology prints twelve papers from a Pynchon conference held in London in June 1998. Taken together, the papers represent a turn toward the "more overtly political readings" that have characterized Pynchon criticism "[s]ince the early 1990s," a trend identified by John M. Krafft in the volume's Forward (10). Indeed, what these essays have in common is an emphasis on gender, race, class, sexuality and nation in Pynchon's works; hence the subtitle, *Reading from the Margins*, which calls attention to these critics' writings about Pynchon's writings about groups marginalized in white male heterosexual ruling-class America. The book is organized into two sections of six essays each, a fairly rough division between "the body" and "the body politic" as these are represented in Pynchon. The editor, Niran Abbas, has provided an Introduction with a capsule summary of each essay, which can help guide readers to the particular subjects of most interest to them. This is a smart and stimulating group of essays, and in what follows I will try to give some sense of the arguments they broached and the questions they provoked in me. I take it as one sign of a book's success that its ideas are intriguing enough to incite a response from the reader.

In "'Closed Circuit': The White Male Predicament in Pynchon's Early Stories," Robert Holton analyzes "The Small Rain," "Lowlands" and "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" for the ways their lead characters find a model for potently rebellious masculinity in identifying with working-class and nonwhite males, and for the way this masculinity is defined against a clinging, conformist-minded femininity. Holton is astute in seeing these early stories as evidence of Pynchon's not yet fully developed political consciousness: while they were "an important response to the conformity crisis, the attempt to expand the cultural bandwidth by transgressing rather than challenging the existence of the social lines that divide and alienate was a strategy that left those lines unquestioned and intact" (46). It would be interesting to have a study that marks the major turning points in Pynchon's political understanding as it grows throughout his novelistic career, as well as a study that

considers whether the early stories might be read as more deconstructive of class, race and gender boundaries than Holton believes them to be.

Diana York Blaine's "Death and *The Crying of Lot 49*" places the novel within the history of American attitudes toward death, particularly the loss of belief in stable narratives that once allowed a comprehension (understanding and containment) of mortality. Blaine draws together a number of formerly death-defying strategies—such as marrying, embroidering, wills, sexual abstinence, belief in an afterlife—and describes how the novel shows Oedipa confronting the failure of each one. This approach proves revealing in its historical correspondences and its unifying theme, but some questions remain. Note Blaine's wording in her argument that a "paucity of stable metanarratives makes enacting a denial of death quite difficult, thanks to the modern and postmodern loss of belief in the religious, political, and psychic phenomena that once permitted us to cope effectively with our anxiety about mortality" (51). But are strategies for coping with death anxiety the same as a denial of death? Also, are all these strategies equal in their wrong-headedness and their futility? Blaine herself notes tantalizingly that, when it comes to belief in an afterlife, "Pynchon seems to mock this metaphysic, as he does all others, but not as much as his merciless skewering of most modern belief systems in the novel would lead us to expect" (64). Related to this question is the ultimate one about what the failure of all these death-defying strategies amounts to. It is somewhat curious that Blaine leaves this question open in the end, since it seems to be the point to which her entire essay (like Pynchon's novel?) has been leading.

In "Menstruation and Melancholy: *The Crying of Lot 49*," Dana Medoro brings extraordinary erudition to bear in support of her contention that "Oedipa Maas's quest gives rise to a theory of menstruation as an experience involving both melancholic wisdom and the self's relationship to the sacred" (73). Medoro's is the most extensive and original argument in some time for the importance of noting the femaleness (Oedipæ) of this novel's hero. Her essay is filled with insights both large and local, both thematic and linguistic, and she is not afraid of making bold connections:

In this novel replete with puns and images of liquidity, the "periods" within an acronym correlate with the text's menstrual economy of images. . . . It makes perfect sense that Oedipa first notices the "waste" symbol in "a ladies' john" . . . and that a character named Stanley Koteks points out the periods' significance to her: "It's W.A.S.T.E., lady . . . an acronym, not 'waste.'" (80)

In the end, though, I was prompted to wonder whether Pynchon really had the belief in the sacredness of menstruation that Medoro credits him with, or whether his understanding and depiction of menstruation were not more conflicted and ambivalent than she indicates.

In “The Clockwork Eye: Technology, Woman, and the Decay of the Modern in Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*,” Kathleen Fitzpatrick draws interesting and important connections among a variety of fears about obsolescence—that of the novel, of individual selfhood (humanity) and of maleness. She perceptively notes that it is a woman, *V.*, whose “self-technologization is repeatedly linked to the rise of the masses in political life and the falling-away of the high-cultural” (95). Yes, but *what* is the link? Is *V.*’s inanimation the cause or the result of those other bad changes? Another problematic aspect of the argument is that, despite acknowledging that all our views of *V.* are filtered through Stencil, Fitzpatrick tends to equate Stencil’s misogyny with Pynchon’s. Maybe so, but why then does Pynchon make such a point of the Stencilization of *V.*? This Stencilization probably needs to be looked at more closely for what it has to say about Pynchon’s gender politics. Indeed, Fitzpatrick seems to make a similar point in a footnote about the development of Pynchon’s social conscience:

In the sense that a continuum can be discerned between the often embarrassingly racist and sexist politics of the early fiction [Fitzpatrick has just cited Holton’s essay] and the more sensitive representations of the other that Dana Medoro convincingly argues begin with *The Crying of Lot 49*, *V.* clearly aligns itself with the earlier work in both its hip alienation and its casual misogyny, though it also shows signs of beginning to question these structures. (106n8)

This charting of Pynchon’s political progress seems at least potentially contradicted by the next essay in the collection, “Black and White Rainbows and Blurry Lines: Sexual Deviance/Diversity in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*.” In this piece, Julie Christine Sears makes a compelling argument that, even as late as *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “Pynchon almost exclusively presents non-normative sexual behavior . . . as indicative of a death wish,” and that it is not until *Mason & Dixon* that “Pynchon’s attitude towards sexual diversity seems to have evolved from a ‘black and white,’ apparently moralistic, reading of sexuality” (108) to “a greater degree of sensitivity towards sexual diversity” (113). Sears cites the relation between Blicero and Gottfried as evidence of the perversion = death equation, and cites that between Mason and Dixon as evidence of Pynchon’s growing acceptance of love between men. Perhaps the seeming dispute over the

extent of Pynchon's social sensitivity can be resolved by seeing his attitude as having evolved in stages, with a consciousness of homophobia having come only after an understanding of racism and sexism, much as the gay rights movement is often seen as having gained widespread influence only in the wake of the civil rights and feminist movements. I wonder, though, whether the issue is not more complex. For example, the sadomasochistic homosexuality between Blicero and Gottfried is in part a rebellion against officialdom, a rebellion which, in its parodic imitation of the enemy, is also coopted by what it defies. Is there really *no* difference between their perverse sexuality and death, between the acts of Blicero and Gottfried and those of officialdom? How is perverse sexuality related to defiance, and to cooptation? How do Pynchon's changing attitudes toward nonnormative sexual behavior relate to his changing(?) attitudes toward defiance and toward cooptation? Much, it seems to me, remains to be explored in the relation between sexuality and politics in Pynchon.

Madeline Ostrander sees Pynchon as having achieved, by the time of *Vineland*, the mature political sensibility of an ecofeminist. In "Awakening to the Physical World: Ideological Collapse and Ecofeminist Resistance in *Vineland*," she argues that the novel "problematizes all ideologies based on binary thought," promoting instead an ecofeminist "attempt to integrate the rational and spiritual with the natural" (122). Ostrander's is a subtle and detailed analysis, making such interesting claims as that "the hippies' project and similar systems of resistance fail because they are framed in the same Platonic structure as the systems the hippies protest. . . . The movement's precarious dependence on a single leader and an unattainable ideal allow it to be toppled like a house of cards under governmental manipulation and violence" (129). However, as Ostrander moves on to describe the alternative to such Platonic protests and binary thinking, her argument becomes increasingly problematic. After praising DL's "'radical conclusion that her body belonged to herself'" and her consequent "'asskicking'" defiance of those who would abuse her (131), Ostrander shows concern over DL's binarism and materialism: "Were DL's materialism to remain a construction purely in opposition to Platonic ideologies, Pynchon would be guilty of setting up another dualism, as precarious as those deconstructed elsewhere in the novel." As an alternative to DL, Ostrander turns to Prairie, who "unites the spiritual realm of Forms with the Material and combines contextualized knowledge with idealized knowledge. Prairie is both fascinated by the transcendent and rooted in the real" (132). But, as Ostrander admits, Prairie's fascination with the transcendent includes a desire for the fascistic Brock Vond to descend upon her in his helicopter and to "take" her with him into the sky. Also,

in the matter of Prairie's resistance to oppression, it is not clear how this resistance is any less materialist or binarist than DL's; in fact, Ostrander's essay concludes by praising DL's body-centered rebelliousness. In the end, it remains unclear just how integrating the material with the spiritual will make for a more effective resistance to oppression.

Thomas Schaub's "Influence and Incest: Relations Between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *The Great Gatsby*" is a searching consideration of the extent to which Pynchon's novel repeats or differs from Fitzgerald's and, related to this, the extent to which Oedipa is or is not repeatedly trapped by narcissism. Schaub's careful argument leads to the conclusion that "Oedipa's investment in Tristero is not a narcissistic investment with an Oedipal love object, with the other as a mirror of one's own dreams, but is instead a giving over of the self to saturation by the Other" (151). The contrast Schaub draws between Fitzgerald's and Pynchon's novels—"The Crying of Lot 49 responds to Fitzgerald's eloquent nostalgia with an activist heroine whose attachment shifts from romantic liaison to a citizen's responsibilities to the nation, from the personal to the public" (152)—is illuminating, but it risks making Pynchon's novel out to be both more resolutely activist and less politically troubled than it is. After all, the novel ends, "Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49." Yes, the metaphor can be variously interpreted, but how politically active here can Oedipa reasonably be understood to be? Schaub argues that "isolation as construed in Oedipa's story is not narcissism but the basis of her communion with the Other America" (153n23), but how will political activism grow from isolation? What will be its impetus, its form and its effectiveness? Finally, isn't Pynchon troubled by the cooptation that activist resistance can lead to, and isn't that one reason the idea of activism is such a problematic one for him?

Carolyn Brown's linguistically adventurous "Waste, Death, and Destiny: Heterotopic Scenarios in *The Crying of Lot 49*" demonstrates the "high magic" in the novel's "low puns." Brown reads Pynchon's puns as connecting "political critique and alternate universes" (156), as in the community of isolates implied by "fag joint":

the doubling of "fags" as cigarettes and "male homosexuals"—and . . . "joints" as a particularly hallucinogenic additive to tobacco but also "joint" as a locale, a place. It is into the space of Sodom, or by going "The Greek Way," that Oedipa must drift to see, to go (not very boldly) beyond the world which has constructed her. (158)

One advantage to Brown's approach is that it can deal specifically with the operation of Pynchon's metaphors. One disadvantage is that, in following the implications of puns, it can lead anywhere or nowhere and thus tends to duplicate—rather than elucidate—the equivocation of Oedipa's quest, as well as reinforcing doubts about her political stance and efficacy.

In "Pynchonian Pastiche," Gary Thompson argues that *Mason & Dixon* is a historiographic metafiction "juxtapos[ing] what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources . . .) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge" (169). Pynchon does not give us "a 'correct' interpretation" of history, but instead "an account of the processes of knowing, so that readers will understand the necessity of forming critical interpretations of our own" (165). This seems to be a strong understanding of what *Mason & Dixon* is up to, but it begs some questions. If all historical knowledge is potentially suspect, how can we decide on what to rely in forming our own interpretations? And does Pynchon really relativize all historical knowledge, or is some of this knowledge more suspect than the rest? Thompson concludes with a revealing list of the devices Pynchon uses to call attention to his history's fictionality, such as anachronisms, comic improbabilities and narrative intrusions. It would be interesting to have Thompson speculate as to the historical point and political import of each use of such defamiliarizing devices.

In one of the truly outstanding contributions to the volume, "Serving Interests Invisible': *Mason & Dixon*, British Spy Fiction, and the Specters of Imperialism," Kyle Smith takes something we all think we know—yes, Pynchon read the spy fiction of John Buchan et al.—and turns it into a wide-ranging and consistently illuminating argument. Discussing both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, Smith says that Pynchon uses "the spy genre's uncertainties to reveal the imperial Self as the true enemy, and to show how the imperial Self constructs the various Others using its own fears and fantasies" (187). Drawing on ideas from Whiteness studies, Smith argues that "one of the strategies [Pynchon uses] to oppose whiteness is to make it visible both by bringing attention to the way it structures reality and making visible the Others it ignores" (191). Smith concludes with an impressive insight into the reasons for the less apocalyptic urgency of Pynchon's latest novel—an insight of great importance to anyone interested in the development of Pynchon's political views:

One knows that the "apocalypse" that will befall 1760s America is that it will become 1990s America. That cannot be stopped even if the novel asks

what might have been or, even more importantly, what people at the time hoped might be. . . . Articulating Whiteness as a negative force is clearer than ever, but . . . the sense of “red alert” is more subdued. The great horror of *Mason & Dixon* is a pre-Cold War one, but also a post-Cold War fear. It is not that Whiteness will destroy everything, as much as the effect of the continuity of Whiteness’s power in the everyday world. *Mason & Dixon* does not end on the edge of the abyss, with the choice of change or destruction. It leaves the reader with the third option, where life continues as it is, in the direction it continues today: profitable for a minority, bearable for a visible majority, and in the background, the ghosts piling up. (190, 195)

In “Pynchon’s Postcoloniality,” Michael Harris joins Smith in praising Pynchon for his antiimperialist commitment. Harris considers Pynchon’s representation of colonialism to be remarkable in his specific delineation of particular groups of colonized peoples; in his questioning of the forces behind the inception, continuation and results of colonialism; and in his metaphorical connections between colonialism and other issues such as disease, pollution and the will to power. One problem with Harris’s argument suggests an area of exploration for future postcolonial studies of Pynchon. At some points, Harris argues that “Pynchon avoids romanticizing the colonized: . . . the Six Nations [in *Mason & Dixon*] were fighting each other, just as the Herero and Hottentots in *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (205–06). However, at other times, Harris seems to identify just such an idealization of the oppressed other: “Whereas the whites’ boundary is a line of *division*—‘a conduit for Evil’ . . . —based on the question of human enslavement, the Native Americans’ line is a meeting-ground, a functional path on which various groups grant one another immunity and practice tolerance” (207). The extent to which other beliefs and cultures do or do not offer a viable alternative to the Establishment is a crucial question for our understanding of Pynchon’s politics.

In the volume’s concluding essay, “The Fourth Amendment and Other Modern Inconveniences: Undeclared War, Organized Labor, and the Abrogation of Civil Rights in *Vineland*,” David Thoreen shows what can be discovered if Pynchon’s politics are taken seriously in their specificity. As others have done with *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Thoreen demonstrates that, in *Vineland* too, “what first appears as parody turns out to be not only thematic, but factual” (220). Perhaps the most disturbing example is Rex-84 Bravo, which Thoreen’s amply footnoted investigation reveals to be “not a paranoid fantasy of Thomas Pynchon” (219), but a real plan under the Reagan administration for the imposition of martial law and the summary arrest and mass detention

of those deemed, merely on the word of law-enforcement agents, to be threats to civil order. In Thoreen's reading, Pynchon's novel takes on a chilling prescience in its dramatization of how, "[s]ince the end of the Cold War, we have seen . . . international terrorism cited as justification for new national security measures" (225) which have led to increasing encroachments on civil rights. Thoreen's reading of Pynchon's fiction raises a number of interesting questions. If, as Thoreen argues, *Vineland's* historical depth and political warnings seem to have gone largely unrecognized, does this point to a widespread failure on the part of Pynchon's readers and reviewers? Or is there something self-defeating in Pynchon's parodic presentation of his political points? Or—and this is the avenue of inquiry I would like to see explored—is the complexity of Pynchon's style justified as his way of thinking through thorny political issues, such as those involving identity and difference, resistance and cooptation, knowledge and action?

—California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo