# *Vineland* in the Mainstream Press: A Reception Study

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More than any other Pynchon novel, *Vineland* was a phenomenal popular success, holding its own on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for a surprising total of thirteen weeks (January 21–April 15, 1990). Not all book reviewers, however, were as enthusiastic as the book-buying public. A March 1990 letter to the *London Review of Books* claimed to have spotted a trend, noting the "general critical denunciation of the new book" and calculating the "current ratio" as about "three-to-one against" (Walker). While this negative press may characterize *Vineland*'s reception in Britain (London *Times*, London *Observer*, *London Review of Books*), my informal estimate of the American reviews is three-to-two *in favor*. Many of this country's major publications gave *Vineland* positive notices (*Time*, *Newsweek*) and, in some important cases, glowing reviews (*New York Times Book Review*, *New Yorker*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*).

But, whatever an individual reviewer's opinion of the book, the mainstream press tended to squeeze *Vineland*'s new wine into old wineskins. Almost all major critics drastically reduced the book to the same small number of predictable themes and effects, differing only in the attitude each adopted toward their common "fiction." Of course space and time constraints compel a certain reductiveness in book reviews, but the tendency of the mainstream critics to reduce *Vineland* in *strikingly similar ways* says more about the current literary and political climate in the United States than it does about universal human limitations. Other-than-mainstream readings of *Vineland were* possible, as shown by the remarkably different reviews that appeared in "alternative" publications (*LA Weekly*, *Village Voice*, *Dissent*) and by the challenging readings which, though printed in major outlets, were written by academics or creative writers (Frank McConnell, Salman Rushdie).

By far the most common comment made by mainstream critics concerned Pynchon's new status as truly "popular" author: *Vineland* was said to be "the clearest novel Thomas Pynchon has written" (Rafferty) or, in pop language drawn from the book itself, "Pynchon's most user-friendly novel" (Walker). The Book-of-the-Month Club,

which designated *Vineland* a Main Selection, picked up on this pop theme as a selling point, thrice promising apparently skittish readers that the new Pynchon was "eminently scrutable, richly accessible, enormously readable" (Lukas). This overwhelming attention to the new book's accessibility is probably the best explanation for what would otherwise remain a great mystery: why were there so few unfavorable comparisons between *Vineland* and *Gravity's Rainbow* in the mainstream press? Well, because "Nothing in *Vineland* is as frustrating, as punishing, as *Gravity's Rainbow* or the denser passages of its predecessors" (Leader). The admiration reviewers felt for *Gravity's Rainbow* was always shot through with aggravation. Luckily, *Vineland* is "more manageable" (McManus).

Secure in their common belief that the new Pynchon is more readable, mainstream critics then proceeded either to identify Pynchon's "message" as politically radical and denounce it as destructive of his art, or to ignore the radical message and praise the art. (Only non-mainstream reviewers—underground critics, academics, creative writers—consistently praised both the politics and the art.) In the praise-and-ignore school, the *Wall Street Journal* reviewer found a way to like *Vineland* by declaring the novel's explicitly radical politics to be mere background, and by delighting in the book's deliciously apolitical complexity and obscurity:

> although the narrative is suffused with a heavily political atmosphere, the book is not at its heart about politics at all. As in all of Mr. Pynchon's novels, the background details of "Vineland" exist only to help him maneuver his characters into an elaborate sequence of conspiracy and betrayal. . . . With "Vineland," Mr. Pynchon proves once again to be the master of what might be called the highbrow conspiracy thriller, in which the novel serves as a structure for a complex, often obscure kind of intellectual game-playing. (Rifkind)

While a number of reviewers took the high road exemplified by this Thomas-Pynchon-is-really-Robert-Ludlum strategy, others took a more sentimental route, replacing political specificity, not with vague plots and mental thrills, but with deep feeling and universal human interest:

> the American artists [*Vineland*] brings to mind are Disney and Spielberg. Like them it hints that growing up is hard to do, and probably not worth the pain. And, like them, it enlists a battery of special effects and a breath-stopping technical wizardry to wipe away the tears of the infant in us all. (Tonkin)

The Book-of-the-Month Club, judging that potential readers might prefer to ignore *Vineland*'s radical politics just as many of its reviewers had done, began its pitch with an aren't-these-radicals-crazy-but-fun comparison between Pynchon and Hunter Thompson, who "gave us a manic, gonzo, paranoid ride on the wild side of that frenzied decade [the '60s]" (Lukas). Then, lest even this be construed as too wildly political, the emphasis changed toward the more safely literary: "the great appeal of this book is less in the madcap than in the hypnotic, even narcotic pull of Pynchon's language, its biker anarchy, the lurch and crash of its acid rock rhythms." And, if this has not served to render the rebellious '60s aesthetically palatable, the final pitch is the ultimate in depoliticization: "Moreover, the book is wildly, laugh-out-loud, roll-on-the-floor funny." Indeed, this focus on the novel as hysterically funny turns out to be the most popular strategy among those who would praise the book's polish while ignoring its politics: "At times, the novel is quite funny" (Lehmann-Haupt); "But it's also very funny" (Jones); "Is 'Vineland' worth reading? Certainly, if only for the Celtic and Laker jokes, and for numerous others as well" (McManus).

Mainstream reviewers who took the book's radical politics seriously were less inclined to laugh at its outrageous puns and cartoonish characters. Perhaps the most interesting thing about these negative reviews is how many of them seem to assume that literary quality is simply incompatible with radical politics. A reader quoted in the *Washington Post* says:

> "The Pynchon I like best is very highly wrought, multi-layered, embedded with puns and metaphors. Everything has more than one possible meaning, which is where the paranoia comes from. But "Vineland" seems lacking in that ambiguity and wit, with too much of his hepcat attitudinizing." (Streitfeld)

True art is ambiguous about the source of threat; bad art names names.

As so often in Pynchon, the word "paranoia" is crucial: some readers seemed to prefer the "ambiguous" paranoia of *Gravity's Rainbow* to the more politically precise use of the term in *Vineland*. Frank Kermode gives the fullest explanation of this attitude:

> It will be remembered that the paranoia of the earlier books always sought sign-systems, not only interesting in their extraordinary complexity and extent but also menacing, in that behind them there was an implacably

> hostile force: America, or what man has made of America, and more specifically, what the US government and its agencies have made of it. Its civilization is represented as having declined into a condition to which paranoia is the only sane response, the only way, that is, of making sense of its world. Some of one's disappointment with this new book is due to the re-emergence of these themes in a manner even more bitter but also less guarded by irony, less cogent.

When Kermode goes on to speak of the "almost sentimental rhetoric" with which Pynchon describes the "hippie generation," it becomes clear that, for Kermode, Pynchon's great literary mistakes (sentimentality, lack of irony) are in fact concomitant with political ones: siding too completely with the hippie radicals and against the establishment. Given Kermode's ultimately specific identification of Pynchon's theme as "what the US government and its agencies have made of" America, one wonders why he will not accept as great art anything more politically precise than "sign systems" of "extraordinary complexity and extent." Doesn't Pynchon's newly explicit political activism have a certain cogency? The key to Kermode's attitude may lie in his equivocation over the nature and location of the enemy: "America, or what man has made of America, and more specifically, what the US government and its agencies have made of it." Unlike Kermode, Pynchon in *Vineland* is not given to such equivocation.

In addition to charging *Vineland* with "sentimentality" and with a lack of "cogency," "irony," and "complexity," conservative critics also employed a whole battery of other pejorative literary terms that make their essentially political objections to the book appear more objective. Why is one not surprised when, soon after he has deplored the absence in *Vineland* of *Gravity's Rainbow*'s "density of weave" and "structural audacity," the *Chicago Tribune* reviewer goes on to describe the book's "politics" as less than "persuasive" (McManus)? Because single-mindedly and traditionally radical political fiction has always failed to "persuade" the mainstream. The *New York Review of Books* critic adds superficiality to the charge of unpersuasiveness:

> there is little "behind" all the clatter of *Vineland*, nothing transcendently spiritual or beautiful or numinous—or even overarchingly malignant, unless one is prepared to take seriously its (surely satirical?) suggestion that Reagan and his cronies were only a step or two removed from committing Ceaucescu-like pogroms against their own people. *Vineland* lacks the huge, desolating disillusion of, say, Beckett; the abyss that it contemplates is, simply, not very deep. (Leithauser)

Beckett wrote about the tragedy of the human condition; Pynchon is merely concerned with our suffering in the here and now. The only depth Pynchon achieves is false—an obviously absurd fantasy about the US government's being out to get its own people. Beckett was never so silly as to give his version of the "overarchingly malignant" a local habitation or a name.

Most of all, though, the conservative mainstream found the book "trite"—coincidentally, just like that annoying '60s radicalism, long since discredited but inexplicably back in the form of this novel. *Vineland* was deemed "stale," "dated," and "clichéd" by these disinterested arbiters of literary taste, but such terms really exemplify conservative reviewers' wishful thinking when it comes to certain radical political ideas: "Most of it, particularly the sending-up of California, feels a little stale" (Leithauser); "as social criticism, the book seems dated" (Wolcott); "three generations of left-wing clichés are trotted out in an endless procession" (Tate). If only Pynchon had written a book with the originality, density, and rich poignancy (read: the safely distanced fantasy, obscurity, and universal human tragedy) of his earlier fiction, then these reviewers might have hailed it as great art, but in *Vineland*, the "invention, complexity and dark poetry of 'V' and 'Gravity' are replaced by the easy and already well-thrashed targets of Reaganism, malls, So. Cal., Yuppies, Valspeak, etc." (Evans).

This dismissive catalogue of "already well-thrashed targets" links up nicely with that other catalogue of hilariously overage radicals and their endearingly paranoid sense of government villainy:

> There are hippie survivors, ghosts in the government's witness protection program, nefarious law enforcement agents, a female Ninja warrior and a raft of other nifty eccentrics. There are also silly song lyrics, dopers' pipe dreams, sex fantasies, a paranoid's sense of history and other customary touches by the reclusive author. (Hiltbrand)

In the end, there is very little difference between the praise-and-ignore school with its hilarious aestheticization of politics ("nifty eccentrics," "customary touches") and the identify-and-denounce school with its attack on radical politics in the name of great art ("The fantasy isn't fantastic, and the history is insistently ideological" [Tate]; "How delightful it is as one's joint-passing youth is now revealed to be no mere idyll but—wow! neat!—the stuff of great art" [Leithauser]).

Is there anything in *Vineland* besides wacky politics or an apolitical wackiness? One had to turn to *non*-mainstream reviewers to find out. Salman Rushdie wrote that "What is interesting" about the new Pynchon "is the willingness with which he addresses, directly, the

political development of the United States, and the slow (but not total) steamrollering of a radical tradition"; and Rushdie called *Vineland* "a major political novel." John Powers was one of the few reviewers to describe Pynchon's politics with any accuracy or respect: "He makes sure we know about George Bush's connection to drug dealing, Reagan's plans to subvert the Constitution." And, of regular mainstream critics, only Terrence Rafferty dared to suggest a positive connection between radical politics and great art, arguing that in *Vineland* Pynchon:

> has simplified his means so we won't be able to mistake what he's saying. This novel is as funny, as smart, as lyrical, and as subversive as any American fiction of the past decade, but the most remarkable thing about it is the purity of its desire to get through to us.

For anything other than apolitical celebrations or conservative denunciations of *Vineland*'s radical art, readers had and will have to turn to such "alternative" reviews—or make up their own minds based on the novel itself.

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