

“But Who, They?”: Pynchon’s Political Allegory

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The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon, by Deborah L. Madsen.
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While many books on Pynchon appeal to conceptual paradigms to make their points, *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon* depends on organizing principles to govern it. This, Deborah Madsen says, is among her reasons for using the context of the allegorical tradition—that it provides a stable set of terms with which to investigate Pynchon’s postmodernism (2). The book formulates an intelligent argument that is largely coherent and unflagging in language and focus. It succeeds in articulating what is sure to become a standard interpretation of Pynchon’s work. But having raised such large topics as postmodernism, allegory, and narrative, and having engaged to discuss all of Pynchon’s fiction, the book chews more than it can digest in 134 pages. It may be that all ambitious books fail to some extent in this way, and must gesture towards topics beyond their reach; Madsen’s book courts this charge because it ignores a few relevant theoretical and literary contexts (while unfurling to some length the banner of theoretical/contextual engagement), and because it generalizes where it should work more with the text.

Pynchon’s works are all sustained allegories, as Madsen sees them: they do not merely contain references to a transcendent (and therefore removed) frame of reference, but articulate it as the governing subtext of their own narratives. Allegory invokes a “pretext,” a discourse that “transforms the nature of reality by reinterpreting the value structure upon which its nature [the nature of reality] is based” (50). This transformative function is then manifest in the text through a “*figura*,” a sign that “points to the semantic unification of experience offered by the pretext” (30)—that is, a sign that assumes a unifying cultural discourse which the pretext generates. In Pynchon’s texts, *V.* and *The Rocket*, for example, are such *figurae*.

In traditional allegory, the pretext is seen to be a Divine truth which, once acknowledged, transvalues our all-too human values. This faithful foundationalism gives way in the postmodern condition: if there is a pretext, it is there because a powerful interest put it there, or rather, put our sense that it is there there. The pretext helps the power

elite determine cultural values favorable to its interests. Postmodernist allegory differs from the genre at large because it can represent “the mechanisms of ideological repression”—the discursive systems generated by the elite—without pretending to be immune to them (5), and because it severs the “logocentric relationship between signs and an ultimate meaning” implied by the metaphysics of significant absence which it is the business of traditional allegory to express (9). So the genealogy of the allegorical quest represented in Pynchon’s novels goes something like this: a powerful elite produces a pretext which determines the cultural values of a society; these values are signalled by mastering *figurae* like V. or the Rocket; we people (and Pynchon’s questing characters) in search of cultural truth then have our search itself—which includes our idea of the search—determined and controlled by the pretexts beyond which we would wish to look. Postmodern allegory represents this genealogy of repression while acknowledging that it too is inscribed within this discursive system.

One of the book’s strengths, then, is that its allegorical frame combines the generic invocation of a transcendent level of interpretation with an act of cultural engagement:

Allegory generically focuses upon interpretation as an activity that mediates between the individual consciousness and culture. But allegory is one of those metaphoric discourses about reality which collectively go by the name of ‘culture’. Consequently, individual allegoric texts are able to present a self-conscious account of the way cultural discourses seek social validation and also the way in which these cultural discourses authorize certain configurations of cultural power. (3)

For Pynchon, the allegorical frame is at once metaphysical and political: the Other narrative which oversees (or overlooks) the Pynchonian subject is a cultural force. Accordingly, Madsen says, Pynchon’s narratives are interested, not so much in the truth which the characters seek, but in the idea of truth, in “the values and interests supported by these discourses of truth” (3). And since Pynchon’s argument with an absent system of meaning is an argument against a cultural elite, “They,” a panoptical cultural power that is both summoned and resisted by Pynchon’s novels, it is not surprising to find Madsen herself call us to arms against “the enemy within” (129) at the end of her work:

Brad Leithauser, in his review of *Vineland* for *The New York Review of Books*, ridicules the idea that we should ‘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'. Where has Leithauser been?

To take just one of many possible examples, did the National Guard not fire upon student demonstrators at Kent State University? (128-29)

Pynchon's analysis in his novels of the suppression of dissent, she says, is aimed at those who cannot fully comprehend the oppressiveness of all government.

Madsen takes this apparatus through its paces in her readings of Pynchon's fictions. In *V.* (the title is consistently reproduced in the book without its period—a particular annoyance in the discussion of the title in chapter 2), *V.*'s different historical appearances suggest that she is a trans-historical *figura*: the "V-metaphysic" which she presents is the "Kingdom of Death" invoked in the Paris episode, and as such projects a governing or "mastering" discourse, "the dominant value structure of modern [Western] history" (49). *V.* is the object of a search which is determined culturally by *V.* herself, and so in a way she is both subject and object of the search; hence "no significant discovery concerning the nature of culture can be made." *V.* is both *figura* and allegoric pretext, and so "prevents the totalization of meaning" because she only represents parts of "a total pretextual discourse" (52). The postmodern *figura* is at any rate an unstable psycho-social construct based on corrupting linguistic conditions (40), and there is no one pretext in postmodern allegory (63); so while the *figura* invokes a totalizing power, it does not allow for a stable construction of meaning.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Madsen finds the same operation as in *V.*, with Oedipa taking Stencil's place as the quester who is underwritten by the cultural power of her object. In a culture where the difference between waste and value is a construct that serves the interests of political powers (55), the waste becomes an alternative allegorical pretext, and therefore the object of Oedipa's search. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Tristero represents that waste, all the left-over, "that which does not fit," and consequently becomes an alternative *figura*, "a pretextual alternative to Oedipa's orthodox interpretation of her world" (56). As with *V.*, who as a *figura* operates in a realm of corrupt language, "Tristero" has no ultimate signified; like Stencil, Oedipa "finds herself in the realm of *écriture*, of ungrounded discourse" (57). Madsen claims that, by reading the waste, Oedipa can see "the strategies of cultural repression that have determined her subjectivity" (59); but while this is an interesting claim, she does not show or explain it in convincing detail. How wise is Oedipa to her situatedness? There is a larger problem with Madsen's claim to break into the

hermeneutical circle of cultural determination: how can the characters in Pynchon's novels see beyond their cultural inscriptions? The logic of this argument suggests that any vision, including one that exposes pernicious pretexts, is in fact underwritten by and supports the cultural power whose ends cultural discourse serves. Adorno has argued similarly that oppositional institutional practice in fact buttresses the institution. It is not enough to say that "An openness to belief structures other than those of cultural orthodoxy,[sic] saves the self from the tyranny of the socially determined signifier" (70).

These readings are consistent and variable too—V. is the figura and the pretext; the Tristero is an alternative pretext that turns out, alas, to be just as totalizing as the establishment's. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the figura is the Rocket (97). Here "the common element of all aspects of Slothrop's quest is the self that is manipulated through cultural and family history" (much as the different V.s conjure a trans-historical V.); the novel "reveals the malevolent design that works to sustain the exploitative power of a single social class" (83). In *Vineland*, the process of unmasking comes to its fruition when the concepts of control implicit in other novels are presented as explicit and are seen to be normal aspects of daily life (126). In the '80s, state control is its own justification; the '80s are the end, the argument implies, if not of history, then of allegory.

Despite these variations, there are no surprises. With some exceptions, Madsen does not give us the kind of detailed contextual readings that such a political claim demands. Instead of substantiating its political claims more fully, the book reiterates its main line of argument over and over again. An elite, They, produce the pretexts in Pynchon's works to enforce Their political interests: "corrupt cultural forces . . . use the quest after absolute meaning to extend the domain of their ideological hegemony" (23); Fausto in V. discovers, when he confronts V., "the deterministic ideological pressures that are applied to his self by the culture in which he lives" (37); the V. metaphysic is "a 'mastering' cultural discourse that determines individual subjectivity on a mass scale" (43); social meaning is also constructed by "Those economic and political interests that underlie the ideological determination of cultural reality" (67); "The failure of the quest for 'deep' meaning to reveal anything beyond the cultural determination of subjectivity and the ideological inscription of meaning leads the postmodernist allegoric heroine to realize how the expectation of a transcendental source of meaning obscures the real nature of her world" (76); "They" co-opt the conscious self into "a pattern of pretextual determinations" (85); the questers are compromised because

their quest for the Other is bound up in Their discourse of the Same (96).

The book might have engaged more fully the political and cultural determination of these matters in Pynchon's work. Another road not taken might have led it to consider literary contexts for this discussion. Who are the "They" we hear about throughout the book, for instance? "They" represent "the cultural determination of subjectivity" (78), but Madsen only refers to the allegorical or generic framework for this determination, whereas the concept has many family relations. It would seem that Madsen's "They" are like the "They" who control the light switches in Grusa's *The Questionnaire*; or like the "they" in *Invisible Man*: "They? Why, the same *they* we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances—the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more"; or possibly like the they in *Catch-22*: "They're trying to kill me. . . . Who's they?" What about the they of whom Richard Aldington speaks when he says that Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis "Both have told me most impressively of the persecution they suffered from 'them.' I have never found out who 'they' were"? One could multiply the examples of course, but then there are many shades of they. What relation are they to the many they in Beckett? For example, in *The Unnamable*: "They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking"; "But who, they?" "No saying what it all is they somehow say" (*Worstward Ho*). And are the they that Ford Madox Ford speaks of also relations? "I am a little boy who will be either 'spoken to' or spanked by a mysterious *They*." (Could Foucault be far behind?)

Yet another road might have led Madsen to theoretical contexts relevant to her argument. Madsen explains that postmodern allegory exposes a "repressive centre" that "masks itself with the appearance of ineffability" (25). Here Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation would have been much to the point. Baudrillard would have helped again when we hear that the "American dream" in fact obscures traces of reality (60), and that "Frenesi takes televised reality to be authentic" (131). Madsen uses this kind of argument often: she argues that "'The Firm' seeks to control and manipulate reality by constructing a perfect overlay of ideologically determined metaphor" (85), and that "They" resurrect nature "in 'Their' image" (90). Her critique of the politics of culture (e.g., 20) might have benefitted from theories of cultural exchange (Bourdieu?), and her discussion of allegory neglects, for some reason, Fish's relevant discussion of the self-consuming nature of the genre. Madsen's controlling notion that the V. metaphysic is "a

'mastering' cultural discourse that determines individual subjectivity on a mass scale" requires more reference to Foucault, who is more central to the book than the three mentions of him indicate. Also, though Madsen often discusses operations in Pynchon's works as narrative operations (e.g., 33), she uses the word "narrative" loosely; she does not examine the operations of the narrative specifically as such (as D. A. Miller might, for example, in the context of the political action of narrative). Here is a representative example:

The narrative's effort to interpret the significance of the present by bringing contemporary reality into relationship with the past discovers the extent to which history is constrained to a single pattern of meaning by the operations of powerful cultural discourses; the narrative's interpretation of its own pretextual discourses reveals the difficulty of registering authentic experience when subjectivity is entirely the product of cultural ideology. (44)

The passage refers to *V.*, but might well serve for any other text. What is an example of the narrative's effort to interpret experience, as opposed to a character's effort in the text (in this case, Mondaugen's characterization of *V.* and Profane's sense of an inanimate future represented by SHOCK and SHROUD)? The point itself is well-taken, but how is it an operation of *the narrative*?

Madsen is surely right that there is in Pynchon a "sense of something absent as crucially important," and that this is "heightened by the narrative's relentless focus on the politics of nostalgia" (41). Here as elsewhere Madsen's strength is that she connects nothing with something, articulating a present politics of absence. Her weakness is that she does it too often. Critics have often had to apologize, as Dwight Eddins says, "for imposing integrating structures" on Pynchon's work; if Pynchon's characteristic gesture is to take away, then he must also somehow be giving in the process. This is also, as Madsen sees, a characteristically postmodern move, for the postmodern finds in its denials of foundationalism substitutes that, through the acts of rejection, do just as well. Madsen has found in her articulation of postmodern allegory a structure that accounts for Pynchon's double move, but one which requires no apology; for, like Pynchon's work, it gives by taking away.

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