

## PLAYING SOCCER IN LEFT FIELD

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Beyond and Beneath the Mantle: On Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49. By Georgiana M. M. Colville. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988. 119 pp. pb. \$39.95.

One of the unfortunate but perhaps significant tendencies in Pynchon criticism is for explication to replicate the writer's sense of a reality dense with multiple meanings that are often contradictory and almost always elusive. Pynchon criticism too often reads with nearly the same labyrinthine complexity as his texts, and what might have aided in exegesis ends in confusion. This tendency is unfortunate because Pynchon has his detractors, and critics who succumb to this tendency do not do much to counter them. In fact, criticism that too much mimics Pynchon's world may contribute to his reputation, in the view of some, as something of a cult writer, adding fuel to the anti-Pynchon fires. This same tendency is significant, however, because if critics often replicate his polysemous worlds, then it is symptomatic of how these critics share with Pynchon the postmodernist loss of epistemological boundaries. Such a loss is one of Pynchon's major themes, and he would not be exploring it if it were not a general condition of our times, characterizing critics as much as physicists, philosophers, and the man in the street.

One example of such epistemological shifting of boundaries in contemporary criticism is the deconstructionists' radical rupturing of signifier and signified, and any fall into epistemological anomie on the part of criticism is part of much larger and more general contemporary developments in the foundations of knowledge which Pynchon's writing in large measure expresses and explores. But these are weighty matters, and here I want only to touch on them as they impinge on Georgiana M. M. Colville's Beyond and Beneath the Mantle: On Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49.

Colville's book exemplifies fundamental epistemological problems that Pynchon explores and that characterize recent developments in theory. When Colville remarks, as many have done before her, that reading The Crying of Lot 49 engages one in a search much like that of Oedipa Maas only to arrive at no certainties, she could be describing her own book. "The reader, like Oedipa Maas, accumulates more and more information, facts, figures and connecting signs, which, instead of leading him/her anywhere specific, merely confuse him/her further" (11). While interpretation need not attempt to attain certainty, and indeed may be better off for not posturing as doing so, Colville's book is filled with assertions about her object of inquiry that run counter to her ostensible theoretical point of departure.

Reading a critic like Colville, or an author like Pynchon, with an acute sense of epistemological problematics merits closer attention than is permitted here, but suffice it to say that Colville is caught on the horns of the current dilemma of doing interpretation while adhering to an epistemological position that undermines more archaic interpretive gestures. That is, Colville follows her impulse to interpret her text by finding its referents and correlations in the world, while at the same time adhering to a view that disavows much epistemological coherence between such signs as texts and such signifieds as the world.

A central concern of Colville's is the relation between Pynchon's Crying of Lot 49 and a series of quasi-surrealistic paintings by Remedios Varo. Potentially, this is an interesting parallel to draw, for in V., for example, numerous allusions and details point to Pynchon's being influenced by surrealism as an art movement. In Slow Learner he is explicit about his indebtedness to the aesthetic of surrealism as well. But such concrete (dare I say positivistic?) connections are not in Colville's purview when she treats Pynchon and Varo together, and what emerges is rather a case of parallel analysis--Pynchon's novel on one side, Varo's paintings on the other--because Colville's method doesn't push her toward making such connections. Her dual analyses have their brilliant moments, but like parallel lines they seem never quite to connect. Varo, formally married to Benjamin Peret, herself a participant in French surrealism until she emigrated to Mexico City in 1942, an accomplished artist in her own right, draws Colville's attention in regard to Pynchon, but Colville reduces what might have been a source of insight to the following: "Remedios Varo and her work seem strangely related to Pynchon's world. They appear to be linked by a kind of objective chance" (47). Since Pynchon was familiar with the French surrealists who emigrated during the Occupation, not pursuing the literary historical connections impoverishes our understanding of the Varo-Pynchon connection. Colville has not set herself this kind of research, but perhaps it is the metier of both the critic and the literary historian to explore such "objective chance."

Of the many examples of how Colville's dilemma leads to confusion, none are more troubling than her flip connections between Pynchon's novel and American society. Of San Narciso, for example, Colville writes that it is "an invented suburb of the real L.A. (Los Angeles)" (14), and remarks offhandedly that San Narciso "alludes to narcotics" (35). "Narco," which evidently she sees as a root in "San Narciso," "alludes" not only to narcotics, but to all the cognates built upon it. Yet Colville explores no such linguistic connections. I am thinking of narcolepsy, for example, the disease of sleep; and so, San Narciso is a sleepy suburb as much as a drug-abusing extension of Los Angeles. In the same passage Colville does nothing with Saint Narcissus, other than to assert that he is the patron saint of the suburb, and makes no mention of narcissism, which presumably has its place in any California suburb as much as

drugs and sleepiness. The problem here is deeper than it might seem, and this is not to quibble over etymology, but to see that these offhand and quite often reductive interpretive gestures run counter to Colville's desired deconstructivist complexity. They run against the epistemological underpinnings of her method as well. There is a disturbing lack of rigor here that has less to do with Colville and more to do with a faulty methodology wielded imprecisely.

Colville makes many such connections between text and culture where her critical method tends to belie her interpretive manipulations. To cite a few examples: when Dedipa has a sexual encounter in a closet, Colville writes that it "proves to be symptomatic of a decline of sexuality in the novel and in postmodern America in general" (16); or, when Dr. Hilarius's favorite put-on face turns out to be that of Fu Manchu, Colville remarks that it is "an obvious reference to Vietnam" (63). In the latter case, Colville is even quick to expand, arguing that the weird Doctor's face-making represents an American penchant for Behaviorism: "The anti-semitic implications are obvious and form part of the satirical parallel Pynchon is constantly drawing in the background of his novel between Nazi Germany and postwar America" (63). The point here, aside from Colville's jejune understanding of both Pynchon and American civilization, is that if the Word's capacity for referential meaning is as attenuated as other remarks of Colville's lead us to believe it is, she is unfitted to make these kinds of correlations, no matter how off the mark they might be, between text and culture. Her doing so is like playing soccer in left field.

How, for example, does allusiveness attain in texts where the Word is so attenuated? For Colville, Pynchon is a deconstructionist. "[H]e heralds the death of the referent" (17), we are told, only to learn that "A postmodern novel may be about communication and postal systems and yet deliver no message" (17). In this vein Colville writes that "Pynchon attacks 'the Word,' although he cannot replace it, partly because it is too limited, an intellectual ivory tower" (19). And yet, and yet, "The Word is also one of the numerous intertextual elements in *CL 49*" (19). The root of many of the stylistic ticks, equivocations, even hesitations before many of Colville's interpretive gestures lies, I think, in her sense of an attenuated Word that nevertheless she wills to interpretation. We read such equivocations as "The plot or story," "This ignorance/innocence," "Then the narrator and/or implicit author," "The reader who is trying to follow the story (plot)," until at times the wavering itself waffles and flip-flops, and "plot/story" becomes "plot/Plot" (14). Careful revision and editorial attention might have eliminated much of this equivocation, which aspires to nuance but falls short of it, yet it is symptomatic of larger methodological problems that afflict Pynchon criticism and postmodernist discourse at its weakest in general.

Colville's book is not without its perceptions into Pynchon; in fact, if anything, it is fraught with them. At the end of Chapter IV, for example, the discussion of metaphor and postmodernism verges on more coherence than it attains. But then a sudden shift occurs from contemporary theory (Derrida, Blanchot, Barthes, the requisite appellations are here; Beckett has "nothing to say") to psychological theory, and after a discussion of perversion the book's language takes a perverse turn:

It seems to me that Trystero could be disseminated into Tryst (with) Ero(s) and Tristero into Trist(e) Ero(s) (in a Triste era), which, like the paradoxical entropy metaphor applied to information, alludes to the huge tide of sexual exhibition and pornography leading to the sadness and/or death of Eros, reducing the phallus to a muted horn and the writer's pen to silence. (45)

Perhaps Helene Cixous' advice to female writers, quoted by Colville in her study of Pynchon, should have been heeded. We are reminded that female writers need to "break away from traditional binary patterns like the signifier and the signified." Cixous says, and Colville quotes, "'Amie, garde-toi du signifiant qui veut te reconduire à l'autorité d'un signifié! . . . Romps les cercles; ne reste pas dans la clôture psychanalytique: fais un tour, et traverse' ['Friend, keep away from the signified that wants to lead you back under a signifier's authority. . . . Break out of the circle; do not stay in the psychoanalytic fence: do a turn and go through it']" (89; my translation).

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