Critical Cornucopia

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Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon. Ed. Richard Pearce. "Critical Essays on American Literature." Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981. 258 pp. $25.

If my tally is complete, there are now a dozen books in print about Pynchon: volumes by Cowart, Fowler, Mackey, Plater, Schaub, Siegel, Slade, and Stark, and collections edited by Levine and Leverenz (Mindful Pleasures), Mendelson (Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays), and Ickstadt (Ordnung und Entropie), besides the one reviewed here. Later this year, Methuen will publish a study of Pynchon by Tony Tanner, Ohio State University Press will bring out Charles Clerc's collection of essays on Gravity's Rainbow, and a second periodical, Pynchon Studies, will join Pynchon Notes.

Essays about Pynchon, in an amazing variety of contexts, are proliferating almost beyond count, and so we must be thankful to Richard Pearce for gathering thirteen previously-published essays and a new one by Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölölyan in Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon. Perhaps Pearce's greatest service has been to include in addition a critical review by Beverly Lyon Clark and Caryn Fuoroli of a diversity of the "best conceived" and most influential studies not in this volume. I can, of course, cavil about some of their choices; I miss Richard Poirier's "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon," I find no representative of deconstructive or post-structuralist criticism, and I suspect that only the feminism of the reviewers led them to include both Marjorie Kaufman's and Catharine Stimpson's interpretations. More important, however, the reviewers do provide an excellent introduction to Pynchon criticism, and they move well beyond summary to discuss, extend, and argue with the criticism in a fashion that rewards reading even by someone who is familiar with it.

Most of the essays Clark and Fuoroli survey have already been included in Mindful Pleasures or in Mendelson's anthology of criticism, and so their review becomes an integral part of Richard Pearce's generous

acknowledgment of the necessary incompleteness of the collection. His book cannot fulfill the aim of the series "to collect the most important previously published criticism"; it supplements the earlier collections but does not replace them.

Both Pearce as editor and Clark and Fuoroli as reviewers could have added substantially to the utility of the book had they connected the essays they include with each other and with relevant essays that have not been reprinted. It would have been quite helpful, for example, had they directed the reader of Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz's "Science as Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon and Gravity's Rainbow," a worthy exploration which I am glad to see reprinted here, to other treatments of Pynchon's science, such as the essays of Lance Ozier. But Pearce's introduction does not attempt even to discuss the essays he has assembled, much less to interrelate them. Consequently, as the reader moves among Pearce's selections, which deal with all three novels and range from an essay published in 1968 to one making its first appearance here, he shares the experience of the hapless electron making a "quantum jump," which is defined by Pearce as "the discontinuous movement of an electron from one ring of an atom to another, or the discontinuous transformation of an electron from one level of energy to another."

Readers of Pynchon are relatively comfortable with such discontinuity, but that does not necessarily mean that we encourage it in criticism. Although I applaud Pearce's industry in locating and reprinting several essays that do not deal exclusively with Pynchon, I regret the needless fragmentation that results when he edits them as though they did. John W. Hunt's "Comic Escape and Anti-Vision," for example, originally treated Catch-22 as well as V. and The Crying of Lot 49 (and found Heller a better novelist than Pynchon), but only passing references at either end indicate to the reader that Hunt's discussion of Pynchon has been taken out of context. Richard Wasson's "Notes on a New Sensibility" is as much about Robbe-Grillet, Murdoch, and Barth as it is about Pynchon, though only his presentation of the last is included here, and Elaine B. Safer's essay on "The Allusive Mode and Black Humor" in Gravity's Rainbow was equally concerned with Giles Goat-Boy when it first appeared.

One can sympathize with Pearce's need to conserve space, but his editorial decisions remove Pynchon's work from some important contemporary contexts.

In an analogously unfortunate move, Pearce has reprinted Josephine Hendin's "What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?" as Hendin first published it and not in the reworked version she incorporated in her Vulnerable People. Admittedly, the book version is longer, but it is also better and less sensational. Contrast the sentence that ends the first paragraph of the anthologized magazine article--"He [Pynchon] is the American Goya whose dazzling canvases are lit from hell, whose message is: Death Rules"--with the book version: "He is the American El Greco whose canvases seem lit from another world." If cutting was necessary in Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, then Pearce should have taken his editorial scalpel to some of the early critical assumptions about Pynchon that now appear rather naive, and especially to the summarizing of plots and identifying of characters that soon become repetitive and are no longer needed in any case.

Two of the "essays" in Pearce's collection are actually pieces of longer studies. Thomas Schaub's "'A Gentle Chill, An Ambiguity': The Crying of Lot 49" is the second chapter of his Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity, an excellent book that was reviewed in the last issue of Pynchon Notes. The chapter stands well by itself, but it becomes much richer when read in the context of Schaub's introductory chapter, and I hope that the sample included here will entice people to read the rest of the book. The same holds true for Maureen Quilligan's piece on Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow, which is carefully stitched together from dispersed sections of her The Language of Allegory, a fascinating book which argues that allegory is found "when language itself becomes the focus of . . . attention rather than the action language describes."

The two essays mentioned above are both concerned with how to read Pynchon, with the process involved, as are Richard Patteson's "What Stencil Knew: Structure and Certitude in Pynchon's V." and Richard Pearce's contribution to the volume, to which I shall return. For most of the essays, however, one may appropriate the words that Lawrence Wolfley applies to

his own essay tracing Pynchon's debt to "psychoanalytic culture criticism"; like "Repression's Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon's Big Novel," which most readers probably know from PMLA, they are "concerned primarily with thematic structure, rather than with esthetic surface, where the moment-to-moment reading experience lies." So it is that Speer Morgan relates Gravity's Rainbow to the literary anatomy and to Menippean satire (via Northrop Frye), Scott Simmon looks at "Gravity's Rainbow as Film," Steven Weisenburger explores Pynchon's use of history in the same novel, and Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölölyan together place it in the tradition of the American jeremiad.

Each of these essays leaves me ambivalent. On the one hand, I appreciate the new perspectives they reveal and the esoteric information they provide. Simmon's essay, for instance, shows how the techniques of film have opened up narrative possibilities for Pynchon, and Simmon is one of the very few who can explain the "obscure joke" of the "Bengt Ekerot/Maria Casarès Film Festival" sponsored in Gravity's Rainbow by Richard M. Zhlubb: "Ekerot played Death in The Seventh Seal (1956), Casarès Death in Cocteau's Orphée (1950)." And who but Weisenburger could gloss the reference to Herr Halliger's inn on Greifswalder Oie? Like most Pynchon aficionados, I delight in the way his novels lead me to inquire about Maltese history, J. Clerk Maxwell, or V-2 rockets, and so I welcome this sharing of goodies.

On the other hand . . . well, the other hand rises in dismay when I encounter someone who is trying to carry Pynchon off to his own critical niche and claim that is where he belongs, when, to cite one case, Simmon asserts that "Gravity's Rainbow is more accessible to moviegoers than literary critics because of its reliance on the conventions of the American genre film." At this point I begin to have nightmares in which a communal endeavor to interpret Pynchon becomes critical imperialism and critics align themselves in factions which make the committees devising an alphabet for the Kirghiz look in comparison like models of efficiency, cooperation, and panache.

Smith and Tölölyan do not exhibit this sort of territorial imperative in their treatment of Gravity's Rainbow as "The New Jeremiad." They claim that "the controlling idea of GR is that the world's present predicament--the system of global terror dominated by ICBMs--threatens to fulfill in historical time the apocalyptic and millennial visions which prevailed in the Puritan culture of colonial New England." Their reading of the novel focuses on the hope Pynchon holds out, despite the failures of history and of his own characters, that if one is willing to live in the present rather than in the past or the future and rather than attempt to transcend time, then one may be able to accept "the fleeting possibilities of shaping a fragment of Self or a minute part of History." The interpretation works very well, particularly when they relate it to the central significance of the word "now" and to Pynchon's "relentless commitment to the present tense."

Their essay makes a convincing argument that Pynchon consciously uses characteristics of the American jeremiad, but there are some problems when they discuss the tradition. As they acknowledge, the jeremiad changed its emphasis at different times, and our understanding of the form has also shifted from the explanations of Perry Miller to those set forth in 1970 by Sacvan Bercovitch in his Horologicals to Chronometricals (which they connect usefully, if at the cost of some terminological confusion, with Frank Kermode's The Sense of an Ending). Has Pynchon derived his understanding of the jeremiad from Bercovitch, or has he discerned the identical features independently and then employed them? The latter seems unlikely. And unless Smith and Tölölyan mean to imply the former, which I doubt, then there is no reason for not having drawn on Bercovitch's more recent treatment of the same theme in The American Jeremiad (1978), which extends his discussion and even contains a footnote, in keeping with their thesis, about "the tenacity of belief (however wistfully or laconically expressed) in twentieth-century American writing--for example, in our major novels from Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby through Dos Passos's USA and Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow."

Smith and Tölölyan demonstrate that Gravity's Rainbow has features of the jeremiad, and their essay is exciting when they use the conventions of that form to cast light on the novel. But Gravity's Rainbow can be related to so many genres and to such various traditions that "jeremiad," like any other label, proves more restricting than liberating. Ultimately we are thrown back on Edward Mendelson's description of the novel as "encyclopedic" and on Jorge Luis Borges' observation in "Kafka and His Precursors" that "every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future."

Pearce's contribution, "Thomas Pynchon and the American Novel in Motion," presents Pynchon as breaking away from his predecessors. It becomes most interesting if we notice that Pearce has surreptitiously turned his introduction to the book into a prologue to his essay. The introduction summarizes Henry Adams on how civilization's source of energy changed from the Virgin to the Dynamo, and it then traces another shift via the disconcerting notion of entropy and Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy. The essay shows a corresponding concern with "America's unchecked energy," which has its locus classicus in Whitman. In what Pearce calls "the novel of movement," illustrated by Gatsby and The Day of the Locust, the reader can follow the direction and pattern of the author's and the characters' energy from point to point. In contrast, Pynchon writes "the novel in motion." V., which Pearce oversimplifies by insisting on the stability and omniscience of the narrative perspective, gives way to The Crying of Lot 49, with its "overloading . . . of information into a simple linear plotline" and culminates, for now, in Gravity's Rainbow, "which abrogates direction, which focuses on the field of forces that governs contemporary life," and which is about "speed and energy, undergoing constant and inexplicable transformation."

Pearce's treatment of Pynchon possesses the energy he writes about. His categories are useful up to a point, but they would be much richer if he recognized the extent to which they overlap the more familiar ones of modernist and post-modern or contemporary

fiction. Perhaps his book-in-progress, of which his essay (and introduction?) will form a part, will complete the process he has begun here.

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