

A Postmodernist Challenge to Imperialism

Inchan Park

A Study on Thomas Pynchon: Empire and the Postmodern [in Korean], by Eunjung Park. Seoul: Daesun, 2000. 309 pp. 10,000 won.

Eunjung Park's *Study on Thomas Pynchon: Empire and the Postmodern*, the first critical book on Pynchon published in Korean, is remarkable for its systematic and comprehensive approach to Pynchon's postmodernist critique of imperialism. According to the author, Pynchon's concern with imperialism consistently pervades his novels. *A Study on Thomas Pynchon* begins with the paradoxical premise that America both denies and inherits European imperialism. With her keen criticism, Park explores how Pynchon's novels suggest that America reproduces and reinforces an ideology of imperialism in various forms rather than continuing to carry out what the founding fathers and their nineteenth-century heirs proclaimed against the evil force of British empire. What Pynchon points out through this paradox is relatively self-conscious: America itself has become an empire that increases entropy more and more.

A Study on Thomas Pynchon traces the various aspects of the critical insight into American imperialism that Pynchon embodies in each of his novels. In his encyclopedic mixture of historical, cultural and political discourses, Pynchon grasps the multifarious forms and subtle operations of imperialist power. In her Acknowledgement, Park says, "I, as a third-world critic, love Pynchon so much because he is one of the greatest American writers who have utopian aspirations for American national power but transcend them toward the global society by embracing the multiple voices of diverse races, ethnicities, genders and nations" (v).

In her Introduction, Park explains why it is necessary to analyze and criticize imperial eyes. After reviewing previous Pynchon criticism, she undertakes to add one more, unique critical perspective on Pynchon's imperial discourse, which has never properly been attended to by U.S. critics. She says, "my criticism on Pynchon may well come from the third world, and the purpose of this book is to explicate as well as delimit Pynchon's historical consciousness of American imperial identity and its ideology in order to meet both the first- and third-world critical perspectives on Pynchon" (84–85).

In chapter 2, "The Historical Consciousness of Herbert Stencil," Park explores Pynchon's complicities that straddle European imperialism and American liberalism by exploring Stencil's search for origin. Her point is that Stencil's quest for V. is allegorically paralleled with a search for his mother, a parallel which symbolizes an archeological quest for the roots of American liberalism and turns out to be the tracking of the British Empire as well. Furthermore, in drawing this parallel, Park relates Michel Foucault and Herbert Stencil. As Foucault traces the genealogy of discourse to know how power constructs truth-producing systems, Stencil tracks down the ways the archaeological quest for American liberalism constitutes the ideology of European imperialism.

Pynchon's critique of American imperialism becomes more specific and thorough in *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which America reveals itself as a male-centered empire of self-love that imprisons its subjects in a collective system of uniformity. As Oedipa seeks information about the Tristero system, a counter-discourse to dominant power, she realizes that her information quest identifies her as a victim of male sexuality. At the end of the novel, she is mentally pregnant, which symbolizes the potentiality to solve the puzzle of Tristero, but she waits in suspense forever. Park parallels Oedipa's quest for Tristero with the tracing of sexual abuse.

In a chapter on *Gravity's Rainbow*, Park shows how Pynchon's representation of the stage of imperialism goes beyond America. Through Slothrop's search for Nazi rockets, Pynchon presents a dark vision of how a system obsessed with war and science can threaten the fate of the whole human and natural world. Slothrop's sexual desire is involved in the plots to make and use Rockets 00000 and 00001, which symbolizes that the individual subject is not unfettered from the social system or the ideology it imposes. Park ties Pynchon's paranoid vision that "everything is connected" to an ecological vision that human life is just a part of an interrelated, organic eco-system.

Returning to American imperialism in the chapter "*Vineland: Mass Media and Fascism*," Park focuses on how American ideals were corrupted in the fascist culture of the Reaganite 1980s, when mass media were appropriated for political purposes. Here, the author astutely claims, Pynchon depicts how mass media do not televise the true social phenomena, such as the Civil Rights movement, and how a fascist agent, Brock Vond, sexually and mentally abuses a liberal female idealist, Frenesi Gates. Park explains that Ronald Reagan's ideological infusion of the mass media for the sake of his own political power deployed a fascistic vision behind its political mask. Like fascism, consumerist fashion and the mass media are so powerful as to impose

ideology on individuals. Capitalism and politics use mass media to manipulate human subjects.

In mapping out the veins of imperialistic operations in each of Pynchon's novels, Park adroitly applies various interrelated theories, such as new historicism, feminism, literary ecology, cultural studies and postcolonial studies. More important, she also attends to the positive aspect of Pynchon's postmodernist critique of imperialism. While Pynchon's vision foregrounds in detail the complicated network of imperialism throughout global society, that vision is not entirely bleak. Instead, Pynchon continually deconstructs the hierarchical relation between the dominant and the dominated and seeks the possibility of marginalized power. Park explores how this explains Pynchon's (post) humanistic vision and commitment to ideals that human beings strive to preserve against the destructive reality of the contemporary world. In this sense, Pynchon's postmodernist approach to imperialism can be regarded as a discourse of entropy, an attempt to stand against the entropy of empire. Eunjung Park's *Study on Thomas Pynchon* makes a significant contribution to Pynchon studies in illuminating the achievement of Pynchon's postmodernist challenges to the problematics of imperialism.

—Sookmyung Women's University