

Metahistoricizing Pynchon: A Case for Dr. Smith(?)

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Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon, by Shawn Smith. New York: Routledge, 2005. 248 pp. \$75.

Shawn Smith's purpose in *Pynchon and History* is to show "that Pynchon's approach to fiction, his postmodern narrative techniques and his complex use of language, reveals a direct relationship between the form and content of his narratives and his perspective on the historical facts and contexts they contain" (1). All in all, Smith is fairly successful. This judgment may seem surprising, because, given the various problems with the study, one could also come to quite a different conclusion. The first of these problems is, albeit not exclusively, structural. In his introduction, "Pynchon and History: An Overview" (1–17), Smith talks a bit about Pynchon and a bit about history, but he does not give an adequate overview of what other Pynchon scholars have written about the subject. Instead of providing such a detailed survey, which could have served to contextualize and justify his subsequent endeavors, he discusses Lukacs, Marx, Jameson, V. and *Gravity's Rainbow*, appends some sketchy notes (183–84) and hastens to draw all sorts of conclusions better presented in the relevant chapters or at the monograph's end but certainly not at its beginning.¹

"An Overview" also introduces Smith's use of the theoretical reflections of Hayden White. This brings us to the second problem with *Pynchon and History*. Smith explains that "White's work provides this study with its methodology, which I use to demonstrate the connection between Pynchon's formal strategies and his interpretations of historical reality" (12). Although White does unite historiography and literary criticism in the broader context of narrative and cultural understanding, and although White's inquiry into the ideology of narrative forms and his use of tropology do extend to virtually all forms of narrative, Smith should have acknowledged the fact that White's main subject is the representation of historical events as narrative historiography, not the contemporary historical novel. Had Smith looked for a more appropriate methodological approach to analyze such works of literature, he could have made more than passing mention of Linda Hutcheon's concept of

historiographic metafiction. Encompassing both the intriguing intricacies and the specific subtleties of postmodern historical fiction, this concept would have helped Smith present a more convincing interpretation of Pynchon's view of history.

Two strengths of Smith's book are his engagement in a frequently fruitful dialogue with international scholarship and the remarkable scope of his intertextual references. The only fault to be found here is his neglect of some significant secondary sources. One of them is the special Pynchon issue, 24.3, of the *Oklahoma City University Law Review* (1999). There Smith would have found relevant essays such as Robert J. Hansen's "Law, History, and the Subversion of Postwar America in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*" (589–608), David R. Sherman's "Case Study in Legal Deconstruction: History, Community and Authority in *The Crying of Lot 49*" (641–63), Terry Reilly's "*Gravity's Rainbow*, the Anabaptist Rebellions in Germany, 1525–35, and *The Unfortunate Traveller*" (705–26) and Norman Fischer's "Civic Republican Political/Legal Ethics and Echoes of the Classical Historical Novel in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*" (557–88).² Especially the first two of these essays are so well informed that they might even have moved Smith to include a chapter on the dystopian *Crying of Lot 49* in his monograph. Another publication from which Smith's study would surely have profited is Zofia Kolbuszewska's *Poetics of Chronotope in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (2000). From this lucid and well-researched book Smith could have gleaned valuable insights into Pynchon's literary imagination and his fictional representation of space, time and the constant presence of apocalypse in history.

Apocalypse, not historical but textual, appears imminent with regard to Smith's writing. His book contains so many typographical errors and factual mistakes that reading it can become an arduous task. This problem may be divided into four categories. Category 1: Smith's unconventional spelling. When he means "Organicist," he writes "Organacist" (13); "Father Fairing's" is "Father's Fairing's" (36); a "siege party" is a "seige party" (38); when he wants to say that an "episode's . . . distortions support," he writes that an "episode's . . . distortions supports" (46); "fetishization" is "feteshization" (49); "assault" is "assualt" (136); "category" is "catagory" (203n41); "achieved" is "acheived" (203n42); "bandwidth" is "bandwith" (204n46); etc. Category 2: Smith's reluctance to consult a foreign-language dictionary. He renders the Nazi propaganda slogan *Blut und Boden* as "'Blut und Bloden,'" and then incorrectly translates it as "'Blood and Iron'" (74); the German term *Lebensraum* becomes "*Liebensraum*" (88); etc. Category 3: Smith's inventiveness with

respect to proper names. He transforms Vera Meroving into “Vera Moroving” (20), Karl Baedeker into “Karl Baedecker” (26), Mondaugen into “Mondaugan” (34), Mattessich into “Mettesich” (34), Schoenmaker into “Shoenmaker” (52), Khachig Tölölyan into “Kachig” —and even “Kochig”—“Tololyan” (61, 238), Impoplex G into “Imopolex G” (70), Vaslav Tchitcherine into “Vaslov Tchitcherine” (76), Remagen into “Remagan” (77), Duane Marvy into “Dwayne Marvy” (78), Rathenau into “Rathanau” (79), Nietzsche into “Nietzche” (86), Riefenstahl into “Reifenstahl” (101), etc. All of this may seem strange, but it can also be very funny, as when Dr. Smith goes so far as to perform a posthumous sex-change operation by which the historian of religion and man of letters Mircea Eliade is transformed to be from now on the certainly much nicer “Marcia Eliade” (99). Category 4: Smith’s creativity with regard to secondary sources. Smith maintains that “Craig Hanson Werner” (184n10)—who is, in reality, the critic Craig Hansen Werner, but never mind—published an essay in Edward Mendelson’s *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood [Smith spells it “Eaglewood,” but O.K., I’ll stop this now] Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978). At least in my copy of Mendelson’s book, there are a number of interesting essays, but no contribution by any Werner.³ As all these examples amply demonstrate, more thorough research, more professional editing and more careful proofreading would have improved the quality of Smith’s work.

Why, after all these cavils, do I still think Smith is fairly successful in doing what he wants to do? First, he indeed shows the relation between the form and the content of Pynchon’s narratives, shows how Pynchon’s “abused textual ‘bodies’ are apt containers for his abused and abusing characters” (10). In addition, many of Smith’s critical discussions—as when he explores the representation of Gothic sensibility in *V.* (33ff.), when he analyzes the phenomena of fragmentation and formal explanation in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (69ff.) and when he talks about the meaning of families and other communal relations in *Vineland* (128ff.)—are rather convincing interpretations of particular aspects of Pynchon’s works. Moreover, Smith has to be lauded for avoiding any form of jargon-filled hermeticism and for his, by and large, very readable prose. Despite its many flaws and other shortcomings, Smith’s book makes clear that its author understands the essentials of Pynchon’s fictional representation of historical events. This is why I can finally agree with Smith’s passionate conclusion that “Pynchon’s figural language powerfully represents the abstract forces of history, immense and diffuse, that so terrify and hurt the characters we meet,” and that, as a consequence, “[w]e should not forget, or ignore, how Pynchon deploys all of his dazzling historical erudition, all

of his linguistic virtuosity, to increase our sensitivity to the suffering that people throughout history have been forced to endure" (182).

—Paderborn

Notes

¹One example of such a rash conclusion: "In short, the public and the private dimensions of historical events and processes are the dialectic through which Pynchon constructs a coherent historiographic vision, a vision which unites his body of fiction thematically from a metahistorical perspective" (5). Correct as this statement may be, it sounds like a result of rather than a preliminary to Smith's work.

²These texts are easily accessible via the internet at <<http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/lpop/etext/okla/>>.

³The Werner piece in question, first published as part of his *Paradoxical Resolutions: American Fiction Since James Joyce* (1982), was excerpted as "Recognizing Reality, Realizing Responsibility" for publication in two collections on Pynchon edited by Harold Bloom for Chelsea House in 1986.