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LETTERS AND NOTES

Postmodern Sublime in Context

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Joseph Tabbi, who has a chapter of his own in the volume, *Pynchon in Context* (Cambridge 2018), corrects two citational errors in this same volume. Both mischaracterize, by reading out of context a sentence in Tabbi's 1995 monograph, *Postmodern Sublime* (Cornell University Press). Because Tabbi's arguments are thought (wrongly) to support an "old argument" in Pynchon criticism, Tabbi brings this misreading to the attention of contemporary literature scholars, before the wrong impression becomes general knowledge.

Dear Editors,

As one of about 50 contributors to *Pynchon in Context*, the latest (May 2019) publication on Pynchon from Cambridge University Press, I wanted to let you and your readers know about two citational errors that I noticed there. The respective chapter authors each reference the same passage on page 92 of my book, *Postmodern Sublime* (1995), and both chapters mischaracterize what I'm saying. I would let it pass, if it was simply a misunderstanding of one moment in my own argument. But since my comments are thought (wrongly) to support an "old argument" in Pynchon criticism (and also used "to attack DeLillo and others"), I thought I should bring this misreading to the attention of contemporary lit scholars, before the wrong impression becomes general knowledge.

Here they are, the two citations I would like to correct:

Joseph Tabbi suggests that Pynchon's encyclopedic books, with "controlling structures analogous" in scale to those he critiques, may end up mimicking "the capitalist totality they supposedly resist."

Jeffrey Severs, Chapter 24, "Capitalism and Class" (page 196)

As Joseph Tabbi asks, are Pynchon's novels "any less overwhelming than the capitalist totality they supposedly resist?" This old argument, also used to attack Don DeLillo and others, continues to overlook the narrative design and its distinct differences from and undermining of "actual" conspiracies.

Samuel Chase Coale, Chapter 26, "Conspiracy and Paranoia" (page 215)

The words cited are mine, but neither author notes that I advance this argument in the form of a *rhetorical question*. Here's the full cite from *Postmodern Sublime*, page 92, which is set up with a reference to *Vineland* (page 379): "the drumming, the voices not chanting together but remembering, speculating, arguing, telling tales, uttering curses, singing songs, all the things voices do."

Although Paul Maltby [in *Dissident Postmodernists* (1991), page 182] rightly identifies these voices as originating in the mythic and indigenous Yurok

people and so suggesting “the enduring vitality of precapitalist narratives” in America, he must ignore the voices’ menacing aspect. In never “allowing the briefest breath of silence,” are they any less overwhelming than the capitalist totality they supposedly resist?

Postmodern Sublime (page 92)

So, yes, I do “ask” this question but then I go on in the next paragraph to argue *against* the “old argument” that Samuel Chase Coale cites:

...we need not entertain the suspicion, with Leo Bersani in an extraordinary essay, that Pynchon as an author might be “one of Them.”

Postmodern Sublime (page 92)

And from there, I go on to articulate precisely “the narrative design and its distinct differences” that Coale is asking for:

It may be impossible, it is true, to separate the restrictive forms within the technology of control from Pynchon’s own activity as a form-maker in fiction; but this does not lessen the power of Pynchon’s resistance, at least not in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Pynchon is doubtless aware of the limits to all merely formal arrangements, but he *depends on* the existence of such limits in order to create a sense of freedom at the point where they break down or, better yet, at the point where two or more separate rational systems come into conflict with each other, creating the spiritual equivalent of worlds intersecting. So far from representing an awareness of his own rational systems, Pynchon accentuates their limits in order to extend their signifying power beyond themselves, into a noumenal world “between” powers, and perhaps even beyond the precincts of the controlling imagination.

Postmodern Sublime (page 92; emphasis in the original)

My own sense, re-reading this chapter, is that I actually anticipated some of the current, compelling arguments in the Cambridge collection, for example: Gilles

Chamerois's observation that "science and technology ...are key structural elements" (224) in several Pynchon works; while his mastery and "use of these fields is guided at least as much by their metaphorical possibilities" (225). My formulation of "worlds intersecting" jibes, I think, with Sascha Pöhlmann's "palimpsest in which different narratives overlap, coexist, and compete with each other" (Chapter 8, "Geographies and Mapping" page 68). And I'm down with Samuel Chase Coale (that one decontextualized cite notwithstanding), when he characterizes Pynchon's "slippery and shifting world with which consciousness must grapple, each in effect constituting the other." (215) Although I don't begin to approach religion with the care and consistency of Richard Moss, my reference to a potential, "spiritual equivalent of worlds intersecting" (*Postmodern Sublime*, page 92) might be extended to a "theological patchwork that informs political discourses within the texts," and "a heterodoxy of religious forms, all informing the 'projected worlds' of the texts" (Chapter 32, "Religion and Spirituality" pages 254).

So if my critical writing from 1995 is going to be filed away under "old arguments," let it be with the "early scholarship" identified by *Orbit* editor Martin Eve, that finds in Pynchon "a textual resistance to single narratives, to synthesis." (Chapter 31, "Philosophy," page 250) That's a long-running position I recognize, and worked through in my early writing on Pynchon. As for that other, "old argument" that Pynchon (or DeLillo, or postmodernist fiction generally) can only reproduce the capitalist system it represents? It's a position I was already questioning in 1995.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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