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Abstract:

Review of David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011

Review of David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History*

Xavier Marcó del Pont

With this volume Professor David Cowart becomes the first scholar to have published two book-length studies on the work of Thomas Pynchon, which is no small feat. Cowart thus returns to the subject of his very first monograph, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion*, published in 1980 (an *annus mirabilis* for Pynchon criticism, which also saw the publication of studies by Douglas Fowler, Douglas Mackey, and John O. Stark). Although he requires no introduction, it is worth mentioning that David Cowart is Louise Fry Scudder Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of South Carolina. He has published books on subjects that range from history and the contemporary novel, literary symbiosis, and immigrant fiction, to the work of John Gardner, and that of Don DeLillo.

In its preface, Cowart describes *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History* as "a modest vade mecum" (xiii). A useful companion to keep close at hand for consultation this book most certainly is, though it is in no way a modest one. The book opens with a brief biographical note on Pynchon (no other kind being as of yet possible) and a detailed synopsis of each of his works. The volume is then structured chronologically according to the publication of the texts studied, with some unavoidable exceptions in the form of thematic chapters that focus on the California novels and what Cowart terms Pynchon's "German phase." In addition to this, the text offers as a coda Pynchon's writerly genealogy, also included in slightly altered form in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2012).

Instead of a single unified hypothesis, this volume reveals a strong common thread in the form of the author's longstanding concern with historical issues – and the very representation of history – in Thomas Pynchon's *oeuvre*. Almost no criticism can be levelled at this study that its author has not declared at the book's opening. Its structural methodology, to which Cowart refers as "a kind of intellectual diary" (xiv), prevents him from fully engaging with vast amounts of Pynchon criticism, whilst at the same time offering the reader a unified vision of the subject at hand. This methodological approach makes endnotes austere, but informative, and means that the text is unencumbered by digressive footnotes.

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The Dark Passages of History does offer a challenging and critical overview of Pynchon's entire body of work, covering nearly all of the dominant themes in Pynchon scholarship thus far, even challenging in its opening chapter the preponderant emphasis on scientific allusions in critiques of "Entropy," focussing instead on its somewhat neglected artistic ones. Furthermore, in turning his attention to *Against the Day* (2006) and *Inherent Vice* (2009), Cowart makes a welcome contribution to the growing body of work on Pynchon's late fiction.

An admirable feature of this study is the extent to which Cowart consistently contextualises each of Pynchon's novels within the author's *oeuvre* as a whole, offering comparative readings at every stage, never seeing any of the texts as an island. However, the book's aim of encompassing readings of all of Pynchon's works – other than his juvenilia – is both its greatest virtue and its greatest flaw. One can only commend Cowart's panoramic and comparative approach. Nevertheless, over the course of such a relatively slim volume – barely over 200 pages – the reader will at times yearn for those moments in which Cowart turns his keen critical eye to specific passages in single works.

Reading *The Dark Passages of History* is a pleasurable experience, as Cowart is an exceptionally good writer: his prose is elegant, his rhythm fluid, his ideas clear. Over the course of my reading, I was struck by three conspicuous themes in Cowart's analyses, namely, the titular history, the tension between Modernism and Postmodernism, and Pynchon's canonicity. Cowart argues that Pynchon's postmodern narratives repeatedly engage with history and the past, going as far as asserting that he "merits recognition as America's greatest historical novelist" (24). Throughout, he counters the Jamesonian notion that "postmodern depthlessness precludes engagement with history" (23), disproving the accusations of relentless presentism that the postmodern novel must so often face.

Cowart's reading of Pynchon's treatment of history is in line with Hayden White's seminal notion of metahistory, although he goes to great lengths to highlight the manner in which Pynchon's *V.* was one of the "most important harbingers" (56) of postmodern historiography and even postcolonial studies, prefiguring in many ways the work of White, Edward Said, and others. For those who would criticise the lack of theory in this volume, Cowart has a very convincing retort: he aligns Pynchon with authors such as Borges, by stating that one may learn just as much about philosophy through Pynchon's fictions as from any work of theory. Thus, rather than being subsumed under a single theoretical framework, *The Dark Passages of History* employs theory judiciously. A prime example of this is Cowart's use of Foucault's concepts of genealogy and archaeology. He characterises, for instance, *Against the Day* "as a kind of fugal recapitulation" (166), suggesting it represents an "archaeology," in a strictly Foucauldian sense, "of his historical moment" (167).

One of the most striking sections of this volume is also its longest: Chapter 4, entitled "Pynchon and the Sixties: The California Novels." In it Cowart examines the spatio-temporal setting to which Pynchon returns time and again. Focussing primarily on *Vineland* (1990) and *Inherent Vice*, the reader is offered an acute analysis of the ways in which the Sixties have been evaluated and reevaluated throughout Pynchon's *oeuvre*, showing the early part of the decade as verging on the Prelapsarian, followed by the Fall, encapsulated in the Manson Murders, Nixon, Reagan, and so forth. Through the latter part of this chapter, Cowart provides welcome critical analysis of Pynchon's most recent novel, *Inherent Vice*, establishing such themes as doubling and dentistry, as well as hinting at an interpretation of the novel's foggy ending, reading it in parallel to the final section of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005).

Through placing emphasis on what may at first seem to be Pynchon's least historical novels – concerning, as they do, America's very recent past – Cowart teases out a defining element of Pynchon's role as a historical novelist. He reads, for instance, *Vineland's* shallowness as a moral comment in itself, asserting that through it Pynchon makes "a devastating statement about the shortness of the American cultural memory" (116), thus elevating this much maligned novel and proposing Pynchon as a uniquely idiosyncratic historical novelist. It is in Pynchon's attention to the most contemporary of American history that Cowart sees the writer's "moral dimension" (116), setting him apart from the Gardnerian definition of postmodern fiction as morally neutral, or even inherently nihilistic.

The moments in which Cowart begins to sketch the tension between Modernism and Postmodernism within Pynchon's work are among the most illuminating in the text. One of the many notions that recur throughout this collection is the idea that Pynchon "combines modernist concerns and postmodernist techniques" (111), an idea that Cowart does not fully put to the test – that is, after all, not the official remit of this tome –, but nevertheless one to which he returns in most chapters, if not all. A captivating example of this duality is drawn from "Entropy," where Cowart suggests that Callisto represents the exhaustion of Modernism, whilst Meatball Mulligan encapsulates the eclecticism and energy of Postmodernism. The text suggests and supports the idea that Pynchon's fictions are very much an alloy that results from the amalgamation of both Modernism and Postmodernism.

In the final section of *The Dark Passages of History*, Cowart lays out both Pynchon's antecedents and his progeny, the latter forming what Cowart christens "The Tribe of Pyn." In my opinion, the absence of Pynchon's writerly siblings, his postmodernist contemporaries (Barth, Barthelme, Coover, DeLillo, and so on), is all too conspicuous in this chapter. Cowart's attempts to read Pynchon's works against each other would have perhaps benefited from further moments of contextualisation, locating his work within a shared literary zeitgeist. Cowart, nonetheless, provides a compelling argument

in support of Pynchon's position within the Western Canon, outlining what he sees as the two standards by which such a position is assessed: the aesthetic and the moral. Throughout the course of the volume, he proves that Pynchon merits canonicity on both counts.

For Pynchon scholars some parts of this study may not, at first, seem groundbreaking. However, we must bear in mind that this work presents the culmination of over 30 years of scholarship. If all too many of the ideas contained herein appear familiar, it is because segments from seven out of eight sections have been previously published, the earliest of which in 1978. Hence, the experienced reader would have certainly come across Cowart's influential voice before, and there is a sense of academic progression, of the span of an eminent scholar's career and his dedication to a subject. For neophytes this volume stands as an excellent introduction to the work of Thomas Pynchon; for specialists this is an opportunity to reacquaint themselves with one of the most lucid voices in Pynchon criticism.

Overall, Professor Cowart makes a compelling case for the importance of the interplay between history, myth and narrative in Thomas Pynchon's writing and (along with Kathryn Hume, Amy J. Elias, Shawn Smith, and others) seeks to map out the convoluted meshwork of these themes which, in Pynchon's work, always remains "not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into" (*GR*, 3).

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