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Coviello, Peter. *Vineland Re-Read*. Columbia University Press, 2020

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Vineland has been having a moment (defined relative to the glacial pace of scholarly publication). Not long after the book emerged in 1990, the trajectory of its critical reception, both popular and academic, had become so familiar as to pass without saying among Pynchon's appreciators: fevered anticipation for the follow-up to *Gravity's Rainbow* transformed into a polarized critical reception upon arrival—evident from the get-go in early scholarly work like *The Vineland Papers* (1994)—which then resolved fairly quickly into a broad consensus that the book had failed, culminating in a fear, at least until *Mason & Dixon* appeared seven years later, that Pynchon might be Finished. Perhaps *Vineland's* greatest ignominy was the years-long critical silence about it after its weightier and more familiarly Pynchonian successor appeared, as the world breathed a sigh of relief that the author had returned to form, and the Pynchon-critical complex hummed along, politely coughing and looking away whenever *Vineland* might have the temerity to appear as if it had something to say.

But in the past decade, give or take, the twenty-year silent consensus has at least fissured, if not crumbled entirely. It's hard to explain comprehensively the reasons for why this reappraisal emerged when it did, though the simplest explanation is that after *Against the Day* (2006) and *Inherent Vice* (2009) followed *Mason & Dixon*, it was obvious as it hadn't been at the turn of the century that *Vineland* launched a full-fledged new phase of the author's career, and one that produced some fairly solid novels at that. Maybe, then, more was going on in that book than many readers had at first seen. Whatever the historical impetus for *Vineland's* reappraisal, the reappraisal's content stands out for its unusually corrective tone. A half dozen or so prominent articles and book chapters have argued that the prior critical conversation did not just miss the novel's salient strengths; in many respects, the new critical picture of the novel directly contradicts the major claims of the old consensus. *Vineland* is politically astute rather than amnesiac, by turns enraged and mournful rather than nostalgic, rooted as much in love for the workaday as in fandom for late capitalist mass culture.

As it undergoes such a messy negotiation of its literary legacy, then, *Vineland* makes a fine candidate for Columbia University Press's "Rereadings" series, which asks critics to "revisit[] a favorite post-1970 novel from the vantage point of the now" and "aims to display the full range of the possibilities of criticism, with books that experiment with form, voice, and method."¹ In *Vineland Reread*, Peter Coviello, a nineteenth century Americanist who wears his deep personal attachments to Pynchon's fiction on his sleeve, has risen to both challenges.

¹ <https://cup.columbia.edu/series/rereadings>.

Admitting from the outset that “*Vineland* is no one’s most beloved Pynchon novel” (3) Coviello also suggests that it may be Pynchon’s most...well what exact quality it most exemplifies within Pynchon’s oeuvre isn’t easily definable, as Coviello would probably be first to admit. But he nonetheless insists persistently that some *je ne sais quoi* gives it a different sort of hold on him than anything else among Pynchon’s canon. The work that follows this admission dances in more-or-less equal measure between, one, registering Coviello’s biographical experience of the novel’s unique and elusive appeal, and two, trying to define and analyze that experience so resistant to definition and analysis. The resultant study reads as an apologia of Coviello’s tastes as much as it does an attempt to persuade others to adopt those tastes, as much a search for the engine of his fascination as it is a schematic of how that engine works. The end product is more engaging than the prior sentence perhaps suggests, partly because Coviello openly embraces his directive to experiment with the boundaries of literary criticism, and especially because that experimental self-interrogation seems to try, and largely succeed, to resonate with many of the dialectical tensions that Pynchon wove into *Vineland*’s thematic fabric: nostalgic love for 1960s student movements against rage and sorrow at their coming-short, infatuation with pop culture against moral and political commitment to the quotidian lives of ordinary people, and love for the novelistic form’s representational possibilities against disdain for its hegemonizing tendencies.

Concluding that “what you hear [in] [...] Pynchon’s thrown-off lark of a novel, his minor comic interlude between epics [...] is the effort to sustain in their tension something like captivation and outrage, joyousness and horror, in a way that backs away from the power of neither,” which he calls “a feat of conceptual alchemy we might find ourselves particularly energized by, just now” (122), Coviello ultimately suggests that this fractious, conflicted, and messy novel might be all of those things not because it cannot find what it wants to say about our contemporary moment, as was often suggested upon publication. Rather *Vineland* might be saying that our contemporary moment is itself fractious, conflicted, and messy, in ways that Pynchon had the foresight to anatomize in 1990 but that many of the rest of us had difficulty recognizing until more lately (and unfortunately much too late).

Coviello arrives at this robust claim for the novel’s political and aesthetic merits after an almost sheepish opening defense through a biographically organized argument, where each chapter represents a period of his life in which he re-read the book. Each of these chapters fuses memoir-adjacent writing with an argument for a unique merit of the novel, positioning the critical insight as a discovery upon Coviello’s re-reading in that period. In this way, the study’s structure mimes a lifelong meditative process that mirrors the trajectory of the novel’s critical repute; *Vineland* first appears in Coviello’s

life as a vexed-yet-charming quandary and then stubbornly reemerges several times over the next few decades, each time presenting some elusive quality that speaks to its moment, before finally, in this past decade, standing out in relief as a prescient book that may have been hard to apprehend for so long because it was so far ahead of its time. It is worth noting that much of this argumentative structure is subterranean; Coviello relegates a lot of the critical back-and-forth to the endnotes, and purposefully avoids what he aptly describes as “that obscuring cloud of unjoyous, exalting, ‘serious’ appraisal—call it, for short, *male*—that has gathered around Pynchon” (5), of which any student of Pynchon is wearily aware, unless, one supposes, they are a practitioner of it. The call for “a Pynchon who might speak to us at other registers and in other, more companionable idioms” (5) falls on highly receptive ears in this reader’s case. If the call feels less welcome to anyone reading this review, know that the study still resounds with sentences such as this: “[The answers on offer in this book] will turn again and again toward the processes by which our agitated responsiveness to an object gets translated into language and that language gets itself mixed up in turn with other people” (7). Even straight-shooting readers of Pynchon can perhaps only discuss him to a certain threshold of directness, which may after all be a sign of Pynchon’s effect on the mind or of the minds drawn to Pynchon.

As to the specific arguments for *Vineland*’s merit, the first two and most substantial tackle the two most common criticisms of the novel in the years after its release: one, that it peddles vague hippie nostalgia as political analysis, and two, that its uneven tone shifts incoherently between pop culture ephemera and more serious subjects. To advance the first argument, Coviello observes that the typically Pynchonian complexity of the novel’s chronology—published in 1990, its main action is set in 1984 but contains lengthy flashbacks to the 1960s, which contain brief embedded flashbacks to the 1930s and 40s—effectively dramatizes a history of leftist revolt and state suppression across the American twentieth century. Throughout the study, he refers to the suppressive ideology under Pynchon’s microscope as “neoliberalism,” while usually appending the caveat that the word is often at best hazily-defined in intellectual discourse. Indeed, several clarifyingly concrete definitions of “neoliberalism” emerge as a welcome benefit of Coviello’s study as he zeroes in on the historical-political vision behind *Vineland*’s “prescient inquiry into the political atmospherics of a long, long season of solidifying reaction: an era—swiftly concretizing in ’68, in full flower by ’84, and continuing to flourish in 1990 and beyond—in which the forces of the state would assemble themselves more and more entirely on the model of never-ending war, a ceaseless carceral counterinsurgency” (9).

To defend *Vineland* against the long-standing criticism of its tone-deaf frivolity, Coviello does not disavow the “antic and maybe a shade cartoonish” (17) mood shot through the book (how could he?), but instead argues for this mood as a constitutive element of a style that “performs the ongoing wedding of the elegant to the profane, James to Twain, high gentility to the vigorously anti-genteel” (24). Some contemporary tastes may find this irreverent pastiche inadequate for the gravity of the novel’s political and historical subject matter, but Coviello reminds us that this tonal mode harkens back to the chaotic polyphony of the eighteenth-century novels that Pynchon clearly loves deeply and whose reputations for intellectual or artistic seriousness have not suffered for all their formal anarchy. To this end, he repurposes previously published material on *Mason & Dixon* showing that Pynchon’s affinities for high/low fusion consistently manifest in his work and arguably reflect a political project where the novelist grapples simultaneously with his love for the artform and with his consciousness of its exhaustively-theorized hegemonizing potentialities.

Both of these arguments—for *Vineland*’s political acuity and in defense of its madcap pop cultural fixation—already circulate elsewhere in the secondary literature. The former has been the centerpiece of the novel’s critical reassessment in the past decade, and Coviello does diligently cite some of these pieces, a few in the end notes and a few engaged at some length in the main body of text. The latter also appears in some of those pieces, but of course it also resonates with critical works dating back to the earliest wave of Pynchon criticism, which bridged the novelist’s work to Bakhtinian formal experiments and early modern traditions of Menippean satire (not that these repetitions are a mark against Coviello; he repeats the argument because it bears repeating in the face of odd but persistent criticisms of *Vineland* for doing what Pynchon generally does).

While these arguments deftly and eloquently retread some worn ground, the other two major arguments that emerge from Coviello’s subsequent rereadings make unique contributions to discourse around *Vineland*. One badly-needed contribution is an argument for just how deeply humane Pynchon’s work is, in *Vineland* and elsewhere. If the novel swings wildly between the zany and the weighty, its “antic fabulations manage also never to disrupt its patient and painstakingly humane regard for the ways people struggle—the ways they create zones of refuge, give themselves and others comfort, and instigate their own forms of contact with the fragments of [...] even a world as broken [...] as this one” (57). When rendering scenes of parental love, of commitment between Movement comrades, and of the small triumph and constant pressures of a hardscrabble life on the margins, *Vineland* takes a serious, even lyrical, tone commensurate to the subject matter, producing an affect that Coviello argues

should move readers with the force of the most highly-regarded social realism. That argument invaluablely contributes to Pynchon criticism because the culture of male-coded “unjoyous, exalting, ‘serious’ appraisal” that boosted the author to canonicity deploys analytical methods grounded in intellectual history and technical expertise, too often at the expense of such affective concerns and sometimes with the gendered implications of a division between intellection and history against affect and the domestic. One could suspect that longstanding charges of *Vineland*’s unserious sentimentality may be products of such a critical bias, which presents a particular problem for Pynchon’s literary fortunes, as contemporary critical trends lean heavier toward modes more like Coviello’s than to explication of the technical complexity of postmodernism’s baggy monsters.

The book’s other major thread of original argument rests in the final two re-readings, one at the cusp of the Bush–Obama transition and one in our own present day. Without citing them, Coviello tackles some of the longstanding critical antipathies to *Vineland* when he suggests, essentially, that the novel’s social and political criticisms were too prescient to be understood in their time. Against the prevailing sense of the novel’s politics as surface without depth, *Vineland Reread* opens with an argument for its fairly sophisticated representation of rising neoliberal hegemony. Of course, representing a historical process leaves political analysis half-finished at best if it does not bring that representation to bear on the present moment. As to the second half of that equation, Coviello zeroes in on how the novel represents the 1960s through a framing device that formally mediates that representation through the eyes of teenage punk rocker Prairie Wheeler, and so “the novel suggests rather more direly that the scene of ‘liberation,’ the ‘faith that anything was possible’—even the overthrow of the imperial United States, even as undertaken by people willing to contest the state’s monopoly on violence—had become phenomena for which the available reservoirs for comprehension had, by the high summer of 1984, dried up almost entirely” (90). Put another way: if the novel seems confused about what models of leftist resistance might succeed in the 1990s, that opacity might in fact be the point.

Coviello’s earlier re-readings have already laid out specific definitions of “neoliberalism” according to *Vineland*, which constitute a three-pronged assault: there is, first, under the guise of the War on Drugs, a containment of the anti-war and black liberation struggles against “capitalist ultrahegemony” (9) by a growing carceral state bolstered by an increasingly paramilitarized police force; second, a prolonged privatizing assault on unions and public institutions that includes among its many casualties a *Bowling Alone* style of social atomization; third, consolidation of all mass media among an ever-decreasing number of corporate interests. The study’s

post 2008 re-readings suggest that much of *Vineland*'s political work constitutes an act of mourning for how these individual assaults, each dramatized in the novel, have so totally fenced in the traditional institutions of leftist resistance that old models of revolution have become almost literally unimaginable to a youthful generation, who will have to find new models of resistance or not resist at all. Coviello suggests with as little bite as possible that academics and critics in the 1990s, whether aging Movement types or barely-grown punk rockers, were unlikely to accept that message amid an era whose affective modes postured so much toward the revolutionary. But after 30 years of nearly untrammelled right-wing advance and the flaming out of multiple microeras of ineffective organized resistance, what once looked like apolitically nostalgic complacency might now seem more like sober prediction.

Coviello finally indicates that this prescience may be what drives *Vineland*'s contemporary season of reevaluation—it is certainly why he continues to return to the book. In a time of desperate rearguard struggle against a nihilistic will-to-power bubbling up from every rotting appendage of the global liberal order, there is value in a humanist project that in equal measure mourns the defeats of radical movements past and hopes for new sites of resistance in the future, that laughs at our small everyday pleasures and rages at our ongoing subjection to exploitative market power, and that refuses to resolve any fissures between these impulses in order to avoid creating an organic aesthetic totality that, in light of the fractious and chaotic nature of contemporary experience, would ultimately be a lie. But this lack of political didacticism does not ultimately mean that the novel has no political intent, contrary to some long-held views. If novels may not be political acts themselves, Coviello says, they may inspire political acts: “they make nothing happen, as you know—though they may foment certain kinds of solidarity, make others conceivable, give heft to imaginings that strain at the seams of the possible” (123). There is some question of whether a person who needs convincing on this point with respect to *Vineland* would pick up a booklength memoir-criticism hybrid about re-reading the novel several times over thirty years. While I thus suspect many of Coviello's readers will approach his study already primed to believe what he's arguing, that argument unfolds with often dazzling prose that pleases merely by the incisive cleverness with which it reiterates established perspectives, which I take to be a conscious part of the book's *raison d'être*. Sometimes we read a thing to see observations that we have already accepted flattered by expression in a fresh and stimulating voice. Combining this fresh voice with a few new points in apology for *Vineland* certainly provides ample tools for anyone who finds themselves in the position of wanting to justify the ongoing importance of Pynchon's fourth novel.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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