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Late Pynchon Theorized: A Review of

Diana Benea, *The Political Imagination of Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels*. Bucharest: Ars Docendi, 2017. (L25:00 pb). Pp 247. ISBN: 9735589936.

and

Sean Carswell, *Occupy Pynchon: Politics After Gravity's Rainbow*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017. (\$59:95 hb, \$26:95 pb). Pp 214. ISBN: 978-0820350882.

For Diana Benea, the “canonical version of [Thomas] Pynchon no longer tells the whole story of his later novels, which are clearly permeated by a different sensibility” (223-4). Pynchon criticism increasingly takes this for granted, but even Ian Copestake’s edited book of *Essays on the Recent Fiction of Thomas Pynchon* (2003) was composed almost entirely of single-work analysis. Until recently only David Thoreen (in Copestake’s book) and myself (2014) had made the Late-Pynchon case by examining the later novels as a group. 2017 monographs by Benea and Sean Carswell (now supplemented by Joanna Freer’s edited *The New Pynchon Studies* (2019)), finally address this task at the necessary scale. Benea and Carswell’s books – incubated continents apart without any reference to each other – have plenty in common: the claim that Pynchon’s post-*Vineland* novels are distinguished first and foremost by a new politics; the claim that this takes him beyond “postmodernism”; a one-book-per-chapter chronological structure; fidelity to extra-literary theorists in the “continental” mode. Taken together, they significantly clarify the case for a distinct Later Pynchon, but some shared limitations raise the questions of whether the now-dominant rubric of “politics” and the rigid “application” of theoretical templates might have reached the point of obstructing rather than facilitating a precise understanding of Pynchon’s work.

Both tracing the “Late Pynchon” distinction to a newly overt politics, Carswell and Benea differ in their theoretical framing. Carswell is

the more determinate: his argument that the “post-Gravity’s Rainbow novels in many ways predict Occupy” (3) turns out in practice to be a claim that those novels exemplify (almost without deviation) the ideas of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* trilogy of political theory treatises. The fundamental *Empire* idea is the reframing of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless (in Pynchonian old money the Elect and Preterite) to take account of the internal non-uniformity of each. Carswell convincingly shows that Hardt and Negri’s diagnosis of the destructive hierarchical inflexibility at the heart of the 1960s counterculture corresponds to Pynchon’s own framing, from *Vineland* onward, of that generation’s failings. The approach allows for some insightful extrapolations too. Carswell demonstrates a covalent growth in Pynchon’s protagonists’ ability to see the structure of their enemy, and in the novels’ increasing basic optimism, for example: a fundamental shift that previous critics have never articulated so simply and so well. But his own unquestioning faith in his theoretical framework ironically leads him to avoid a plausible and interesting upshot of his approach, which is that Hardt and Negri’s (many) limitations may also, as I’ll discuss later, be limitations of the political Pynchon.

Benea begins with a usefully thorough report on how often Pynchon’s recent fiction “continues to be perceived through the lens of these early thematizations of the postmodern cultural condition in terms of entropy and paranoia” (10). She instead maps an evolution from early fictions that focused on articulating “limited margins of freedom and resistance,” to newer ones that “reconceptualiz[e] the status of individuals – of their possibilities of ethical and political agency, and their opportunities to develop forms of commonality” (13/14). She thus locates the shift at the level of ethical fundamentals: Late Pynchon is about “[t]he intricacies arising from the working-out of the self’s relationship to the Other, and the extent of agency available to the individual self” (228). The consistent suggestion that the political supervenes on the ethical makes it surprising that one change the book underwent between its dissertation and published versions was to cut the words “Ethical and” from its title. Each chapter draws on a different theoretical framework (though Benea’s claim to be working across “contemporary political theory” is belied by a

roster of the usual continental-critical-literary suspects: Butler, Derrida, Foucault, and co). Her goal of maintaining points of continuity even as she offers “a new critical idiom” leads her to work through a roster of keywords, as each chapter’s title sees Pynchon *re-verbing*: rethinking, reconstructing, reconfiguring, and so on (228). She’s not as explicit as she could be about how directly this corresponds to linguistic patterns in the fiction, but it’s effective and warranted: a more flexible approach than Carswell’s, significantly more responsive to the distinctiveness of the individual novels.

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The two books begin with similarly argued chapters about *Vineland* – Hardt and Negri provide Benea’s theoretical framework here – and then diverge. Both foreground the connection between *Vineland*’s interest in sustainable communities and its depiction of specifically *generational* grievances. Carswell aims to map *Vineland*’s characters onto allegiance with either Empire or Multitude, with particularly useful investigations of how Pynchon theorizes complicity and commodity, while Benea makes a variety of more distinct claims about where *Vineland* breaks with earlier Pynchon: families shift from being victims of forces to genuine alternatives to them, private resistance becomes less valued than communal structure, there’s a greater faith in causality as the ground for action, and so on. Both books make *Vineland*’s distinctions from *Gravity’s Rainbow* the paradigm for their subsequent examinations of how the other Late novels are new.

On *Mason & Dixon* Carswell looks for Pynchon’s diagnosis of the historical beginnings of Empire, while Benea examines how the ethics of the novel’s central relationship struggle to apply in the protagonists’ relationship to the new world. On *Against the Day*, Benea yokes the novel’s scepticism about the category of “terrorism” to its interest in hospitality as a ground for communal structures, while Carswell focuses on the Chums of Chance narrative in examining how the relationship between complicity and escapism structures the novel’s ideas about resistance. Benea on *Inherent Vice* again attempts to bring two seemingly disparate concerns – in this case Urban spatiality theory and late Foucauldian *Parrhesia* – together in an analysis of how Doc Sportello –

“perhaps the most straightforwardly ethical figure of Pynchon’s works” (189) – makes his Other-direction “[a] characterological site of reimagining communal life” (193). Carswell, similarly, finds Doc “a living example of an economic system based on the commons” (123), examining how he provides a “revolutionary alternative” (123, 124) to the souring hippy dream. Benea sees *Bleeding Edge* as a novel of two halves, the first a “self-conscious vintage Pynchon” of conspiracies and private irony (212), the second a domestic search for communal values. For Carswell, it’s an up-to-date diagnosis of how economic conditions of precarity require the assemblage of multitude ever more urgently. While Benea ends here, Carswell adds a useful synthetic chapter on how ukuleles, mentioned in each Late Pynchon novel, figure as an avatar for the kind of community Pynchon envisages.

For all these studies share, their deepest underlying difference is in their take on how Late Pynchon subordinates the relationship between politics and ethics. For Carswell, political situations drive ethical phenomena; for Benea, ethical fundamentals explicitly *ground* wider political phenomena, as “relation to the Other” becomes “a foundation for the reconstruction of the post-9/11 world” (134-5) or Pynchon “raise[s]” an “ethics of hospitality ... to the status of a governing principle for the community” (150). This difference is a microcosm of the studies’ relative merits: Benea is generally more precise about the internal logic of the ideas she identifies in Pynchon, and more responsive to distinctions among the novels; Carswell is more systematic and more attentive to what the novels have in common. Benea’s local observations about the implications of single moments in Pynchon tend to be more surprising and persuasive on their own terms; Carswell more fully integrates local analyses into an overarching argument.

Overall, Benea’s book is well worth the effort of tracking down (published in Romania, it’s not widely available elsewhere). In addition to its contribution to the Late-Pynchon idea, it’s full of persuasive local insights about each novel. A lightly revised 2013 doctoral dissertation, it retains that genre’s characteristic blockiness of organization (a chunk of theory followed by a chunk of analysis, not much synthetic work across separate chapters), and engages only very sporadically with critical work

published since, leading to some redundancy. Perhaps its major distinction is the one its title-change obscures: the consistent identification of ethical orientations subtending political structures makes this perhaps the fullest articulation we yet have of a *humanistic* Pynchon. With only a little reframing effort on a reader's part, the book becomes a compelling alternative to other recent approaches to Pynchon that, even as they consciously move beyond "postmodernism," retain that framework's aversion to matters of practical moral normativity.

The strengths and weaknesses of Carswell's book are more thoroughgoing. Among its merits are its precision in noting how tightly all Pynchon's recent work starts from questions of complicity: Carswell makes much, for example, of how *Mason & Dixon*'s embedded narrator Reverend Cherrycoke is maintained by inheritance through "Charter'd Companies" (50), binding him just tightly into problematic moral and corporate economies as the heroes he narrates. But while *Occupy Pynchon* makes a compelling, consistent, focused case that Pynchon is interested in many of the same contemporary questions as Hardt, Negri and the Occupy movement, it's less convincing when it comes to showing that his answers match theirs. In part this is a consequence of the high degree of fidelity Carswell seeks: a book less preoccupied with showing Exact parallels might have contributed just as much illumination.

At the most basic levels of language, Carswell has a tendency to blur claims from first-person association to given truth. "Seem"ing is his primary tool, though the most characteristic locution is that something in Pynchon "calls to mind" (72/77/131) something in Hardt and Negri: we're missing a possessive noun in front of "mind." Another avoidable tic morphs the fact that authors or critics address a question into a presumption that the question has now been solved out in our world: *Vineland*'s ending "resurrects the American left" (14), for example; once we stir *Empire* and *Mason & Dixon* into the same cauldron "the subjunctive becomes real" (75); "Pynchon heals this separation [between Old and New Left]" (42). This tendency to blur together effectual achievements, rhetorical suggestions, and mere representations eventually suggests that doing one entails the others, which is one of the very things Pynchon's focus on the failures of the counterculture seems to question.

Basically, there's a mismatch: Carswell analyses suggestively, but then propounds categorically, so that *Occupy Pynchon* struggles even at the language level to address unbelievers. This makes the book more objectionable – in the literal sense, claim by claim – than it needs to be. Its significant contribution to our understanding of Pynchon is probably harmed more than helped by its tone of exclusionary enthusiasm.

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Two such similar projects having emerged independently so far apart suggests that their ideas are more than whimsical. Taking them together, though, reveals some shared limitations characteristic of their field. Three particular issues leap out: first, slipperiness about what's truly new, in Pynchon's work or the studies themselves; second, the dubious value of "applying" theoretical models to literary texts; and third, an unaddressed discrepancy between Pynchon's political diagnoses and political suggestions.

Neither book acknowledges other identifications of a "Late" Pynchon thoroughly enough to make explicit what's distinctive in their own contributions to the topic. Benea's dropping of the "ethical" frame actually downplays her most distinctive elements, while when it comes to politics, she acknowledges Sam Thomas' *Pynchon and the Political* (2007) as an important forerunner without addressing that Thomas made the case for a *career-long* political Pynchon, which would undermine the Benea-Carswell claim that politicalness distinguishes *Late* Pynchon. Similarly, Carswell attributes the uniquely "participatory" nature of the politics Pynchon develops from *Vineland* onwards to events of post-*Gravity's Rainbow* history. But Jeff Baker, in one of the earliest calls (1993) for a political reading of Pynchon, had identified participatoriness as a key concern throughout Pynchon's career, through the pre-Hardt/Negri lens of John Dewey's aesthetics. By the time Carswell identifies *Bleeding Edge*'s "basic questions about ideology" as "Should we offer up the art of architecture to the altar of neoliberal capitalism? Should we support a culture that privileges accumulation – hoarding, really – over the basic needs of everyone?" (155), there's a growing sense of misdirected energy. These are not open questions in Pynchon, and never have been: it's not a matter of *whether* he's an anti-capitalist but

how, as much criticism from Baker onwards has acknowledged. The lack of systematic engagement with prior criticism thus leads both Carswell and Benea into occasional redundancy, blurring the truly new and the recapitulatory together, with a consequently diminished ability to prioritize attention to the new and interesting. When there's as much criticism on an author as there is on Pynchon, studies like these would benefit from a more deliberate identification of – and sustained engagement with – patterns and trends, in order to better frame their own novelties. As it stands, digging the many genuinely new ideas out of both books is harder than it needs to be.

Carswell's tendency to move on to the next question as soon as he identifies a discrepancy between his theoretical and literary texts raises my second issue: the implications of "applying" extra-literary theory as a methodology. Carswell's narrow reliance on one paradigm leaves no room for either the individual novels or the reader to resist or exceed it. The natural limitations of this approach are compounded by his failure to acknowledge the voluminous literature of criticism and objection that Hardt and Negri themselves have prompted, among which are challenges that could usefully be applied to Pynchon, like the discrepancy between precise criticism of the present and underdeveloped imaginings of the future. Less obvious than Carswell's fatiguing fidelity, problems emerge from Benea's own hesitation to make an argument about Pynchon without reaching for the sanction of extra-literary authority. While she offers some early boilerplate about how "there cannot be a complete overlap between text and theory" (27), in practice she rarely observes Pynchon doing anything not previously limned by one of her sources. These sources often – as has been well noted in some of their cases (for example Derrida and Foucault) – directly contradict each other, but by quarantining them in separate chapters Benea avoids testing how Pynchon might develop the faultlines. Occasionally the theorists help her articulate something unusually specific in Pynchon: her work on *Mason & Dixon* is among the most enlightening applications of (late) Derrida to (late-)postmodern fiction. But more often they seem to push in the opposite direction, pulling both studies back from uncharted territory.

In a telling late moment Benea frets that “Pynchon’s texts are so complex and elusive that fitting them into a particular methodology of analysis is an almost impossible exercise” (224). Carswell too gives an active value to theory-matching: at one point he valorizes the second term when noting that “there is a difference between telling a story that adheres to the characteristics of a theory and actually subscribing to the ideology” (74). This seeming wish for “fitting” and “subscribing” matches both critics’ self-description as “applying” theory to text. This seems an unlikely way of generating insight. When a fully articulated theory already exists, and an artwork already exists, then I take it that an interpretation of the artwork by the theory already exists out in logical space. Someone taking the time to put it on paper leaves the boundaries of that space unexpanded, as it does the mind of a single reader who already understands the theory and has already read the book. If the theoretical sources exhaust the range of the literary texts’ insight, this raises the obvious question of what Pynchon’s unique interest could be for a politically informed reader. The strongest parts of both books come in the moments when Pynchon is allowed to do things without theoretical sanction or even, heretically, to reveal the limitations of a theory.

These more methodological quibbles lead to a shared gap in the case for a Political Pynchon. That question of Pynchon’s *distinctive* interest as a political thinker isn’t one either book really faces head on. Both “apply” theories to ensure that nothing in Pynchon can escape the “political” designation, without addressing how much more work squeezing some things under that umbrella requires than others. Nor, more crucially, do they make sense of the categories of “political” that Pynchon leaves loose. Both acknowledge Pynchon’s reticence about details of a future world: for Benea, that alternatives are “only briefly sketched” (59) is no obstacle to defining Late Pynchon in relation to his commitment to *some* alternative, while for Carswell the fact that “Pynchon does not provide a single clear proposal for a more just world. He does not even provide a few clear proposals from which the reader can choose” (15) is legitimated by the way the Occupy movement “theorized the need to resist demands” (2). But to put it simply, Pynchon’s basic anti-capitalist, anti-corporatist objections are entirely commonplace. If he’s not the kind of

author to dramatize the quotidian workings of alternatives – the drafting of a constitution or the deliberations of a delegation – why should we find *his* imagination compelling in relation to a future politics?

Both books skirt this question in a rush for optimism. Carswell's borderline messianism leads him hastily from "a day spent in Zuccotti Park" to faith in "sustainable" "revolutionary alternatives." But the politics of a day are different from those of a long-range world-building. So too with Benea: it's not a given that terms of interpersonal ethics generalize to organize wider communities whose relationships may contradict and compete with each other. From Carswell, we hear that "protesting sugar is too specific... Instead of creating a direct substitute for sugar while leaving Empire intact, perhaps a more effective approach would be to tell stories of a better world existing independent of Empire's exploitation" (69). But why would specificity harm? Surely "more effective" could only be judged in terms of a precise causal connection between those new "stories" and the coming of a world more independent of Empire. Benea's Rortyan identification of a "turn *away* from the self-sufficient, private vocabularies of his early ironists, and *towards* a public vocabulary predicated on an enhanced responsibility towards the Other" (208) makes a lot of sense, but leaves a conspicuous gap when it comes to the specifically lexical elements of that "vocabulary" shift, or of particular Political forms for this "responsibility" to take outside the ethical relationship between single selves and very local Others.

The problems with glossing over the question of whether attention to starting-points and pre-conditions is "political" in the same sense as representation of institution-building and conflict-resolution become more conspicuous as the books insist ever more strenuously, on the basis of ever less textual evidence, that Pynchon develops "sustainable" "alternatives." I don't think either critic is missing something in Pynchon here. At a certain point in Pynchon's political imagination detail does fall away, and neither Carswell nor Benea give us resources to understand why. Neither is thus able to escape, or to save Pynchon from, Sean McCann and Michael Szalay's objection that the authors who draw their allegiances from the late sixties offer a version of "the political" that exempts itself from having to imagine procedures or institutions, as if

nothing could ever arise within multitudinous post-capitalism that would ever need institutional adjudication, or cultivation, or defence. Future studies less dedicated merely to identifying Pynchon *as* political will hopefully do more to identify what in his politics is only magical thinking, and what is compelling as a model, or at least a ground, for earthly hope.

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Carswell early on tells us that “[a]s a general rule of literary scholarship, we should probably re-examine any idea that becomes too accepted” (5). More than a decade after *Pynchon and the Political*, “political Pynchon” has become such an accepted idea. Dwelling on it now stops Benea, Carswell, and others from directly addressing more precise open questions for which their work can be foundational. Benea asks how to break down and internally subordinate “ethico-political”: we might ask the same of politics’ relation in Pynchon to any of the other overarching worldview categories – epistemology, ontology, normativity, rhetoric, identity. Now that we can all agree that Pynchon has a motivating politics, we need not only to know what it is and isn’t but also where and how it fits into the evolving constellation of his elements, early and late.

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