

Ian D. Copestake, ed.

American Postmodernity: Essays on the Recent Fiction of Thomas Pynchon

New York: Peter Lang, 2003. Pp. 223. \$44.95

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

Considering that the size of his oeuvre is relatively small, an awful lot has been written about the American novelist Thomas Pynchon. Ian D. Copestake has added another book to the Pynchon shelves with a collection of nine essays by American and European critics. The recent fiction referred to in the book's subtitle comprises Pynchon's novels of the 1990s, *Vineland* and especially *Mason and Dixon*. In addition to shedding light on the individual novels and their intellectual backgrounds, the essays also attempt to position Pynchon, one of the most influential American novelists in the second half of the twentieth century, within the philosophical movement generally referred to as postmodernism.

The first essay prepares the ground for the rest of the book by analyzing Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) in the context of Marshall McLuhan's discussion of the importance of electronic mass media for modernity. According to critic David Seed, both authors make the reader pay more attention to the means of information transfer than to the information itself, thus exemplifying the emphasis on form so characteristic of postmodern discourse.

Vineland causes two authors to reflect on the novel's character as a book concerned to a large extent with history and historiography. David Dixon suggests that "*Vineland* begins a rethinking of the hermeneutic view of history [and] ... suggests that the individual act can be instrumental in changing not only the course of history but, more specifically, the designs by which cultures shape people's lives" (35). Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic theory—particularly with regard to the role that language plays in understanding and interpreting reality—appears as the ideal model for describing the workings of history and transmission in the novel. David Thoreen illustrates how the explicitly political novel *Vineland*—focusing on "the movement in the United States in recent years away from democracy and toward dictatorship" (67)—updates Washington Irving "Rip Van Winkle," which is concerned with the opposite development.

History is a central focus also in Pynchon's 1997 novel, *Mason and Dixon*. Consequently, several authors concern themselves with addressing various aspects of this novel that can easily be identified as a prime example of historiographic metafiction. Each picks a very different aspect, suggesting that in its Rabelaisian multifacetedness the novel lends itself to a large variety of interpretations. William P. Millard even suggests that "Pynchon's ultimate project may be to restore a sense that written language is adequate, or more than adequate, to the challenge and scope of modern history" (107).

Some essays concentrate on the means Pynchon uses to evoke the impression of an ungraspable past. Hybridization emerges as a central characteristic of an era that attempts to create order in reality through the legendary Mason-Dixon line. Attempting to draw the exact border between Maryland and Pennsylvania is as easy as it is difficult to actually do it (an essay focusing on mapmaking and representation demonstrates that it can never be an easy task) and to comprehend the world in which this enterprise takes place. The either/or of Mason and Dixon's project is counteracted by the hybridity that several authors identify as underlying the whole narrative. Be it the curious mechanical creatures that combine mechanical bodies and human character traits or the multi-layered humor Pynchon applies, nothing is ever as clearly defined as the characters pretend or as traditional historiography suggests.

The contributors agree that the novelist combines in his works the central concerns that postmodern thought has raised. Ian D. Copestake summarizes Pynchon's place in American intellectual development by suggesting that the author makes a contribution to the ongoing intellectual debate about "the repeated need to find an answer to the question of whether a conception of America is necessary for it to exist, or whether a society is possible outside the delusions of ideals which historically have determined its identity" (204).

The essays in *American Postmodernity* vary considerably in both concern and quality, but all ask pointed questions in an attempt to highlight Thomas Pynchon's position as one of the most insightful and intellectually gifted postmodern American novelists.

Peter Kafer

Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Pp. 272 \$39.95
Reviewed by Eric Daffron

Peter Kafer's *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic* seeks to answer one central question: What forces conspired to give rise to Brown's gothic novel *Wieland* in the new American Republic, a world that promoted democracy over arbitrary rule and enlightened debate over dark irrationality? Kafer begins to answer this question in his introduction. Instead of making the customary link between Brown's novel and the so-called Godwinian novel, Kafer points to Thomas Jefferson, to whom Brown sent a copy of *Wieland*, provocatively suggesting that the author of the Declaration of Independence had a dark side and that this division within the Republican leader provides a clue to the birth of the American gothic on otherwise ungothic soil. Kafer unravels part of the mystery behind the first American gothic novel in his prologue, which records the history of the apparently false arrest and brief exile of several Philadelphia men, most of whom were Quakers, by the Continental Congress's