

Pynchon's Way:

A Note on Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief*

By Edward Mendelson

Amy Hungerford's elegant and exemplary essay renders most commentary superfluous. She clarifies in a thoroughly convincing way the dialogue between practice and belief in two very different kinds of novel, and she has the large-minded critic's gift of writing sympathetically about books that she could never read for pleasure. Her chapter seems to me to say almost everything worth saying about its subjects; probably the most useful response, therefore, is one prompted by the suggestive possibilities of the terms in which she frames her argument. What follows are a few notes, suggested by Amy Hungerford's terminology, about another kind of American religious fiction, one in which the relation between belief and practice is dynamic and unresolvable, so that belief remains always potential, never actual, and practice is something that is always urgent, but always remains to be decided. This kind of religious vision informs all of Thomas Pynchon's novels and stories, and the book that affirms it most explicitly is his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*.

One of the most common errors of recent criticism (not Amy Hungerford's) is its assumption that whatever can be labeled postmodern is therefore anomic or amoral. Samuel Beckett, one of the most intense and clear-minded moralists of the modern age, is thus taken to be the voice of meaninglessness and futility. Thomas Pynchon, arguably the most profoundly religious-minded writer of his era, is taken to be either a voice of the absurd or a builder of enclosed linguistic playgrounds. But *The Crying of Lot 49* is insistently about the possibility of religious

meaning, and the effect of that possibility on both private and public action. These are the same issues that give shape and force to Pynchon's later books, especially to *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland*, and *Mason & Dixon*, but they provide the central theme and organizing principle for *The Crying of Lot 49*.

This novel, published in 1966, describes the passage of its heroine, Oedipa Maas, from an absence of meaning to an overwhelming, threatening, and finally promising possibility of meaning. The events of the story occur in the course of a few weeks in cities and suburbs along the California coast, but those events are shaped by a history that extends hundreds of years across the religious crises of Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe and the Americas. At the start of the book, Oedipa Maas is cocooned, not unhappily, in a meaningless suburban life, and in a marriage which had "passed, [she] was hoping forever, for love." By the end, she has discovered that she cannot avoid choosing between two ways of thinking and acting, one that merely confirms the emptiness in which she began, in which all meaning is illusory and nothing ultimately matters, another in which all her thoughts and actions matter because she lives in a universe that is saturated by the significance and value of everything within it.

For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless.

What Oedipa discovers through her travels in geography and history is not a set of beliefs, but a set of possible connections among things and among events, the kinds of connections that Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* pointed toward when she wrote of "the moral relations of things." If these moral connections are real—and they can never be proved to be real, because

they are not falsifiable by experiment—then words like “justice” and “injustice” refer to real connections between events, not to private fantasies of resentment and revenge. And if these connections are real, then some, perhaps all, events occur (in Pynchon’s phrase) “for a reason that mattered to the world,” not in a world in which ultimately nothing matters for any reason at all. By seeing these connections, she does not become a better person, and the world does not become a better place—instead she finds depths of violence and hatred that she had avoided until now—but she becomes someone for whom private dignity and public justice are things that matter to the world.

Here is how Oedipa imagines the ones and zeroes of the binary choice that she can no longer avoid making:

Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth. In the songs Miles, Dean, Serge and Leonard sang was either some fraction of the truth’s numinous beauty (as Mucho now believed) or only a power spectrum. Tremaine the Swastika Salesman’s reprieve from holocaust [when a fire destroyed the shop next door] was either an injustice, or the absence of a wind; the bones of the GI’s at the bottom of Lake Inverarity were there either for a reason that mattered to the world, or for skin divers and cigarette smokers. Ones and zeroes. So did the couples arrange themselves. At Vesperhaven House either an accommodation reached, in some kind of dignity, with the Angel of Death, or only death and the daily, tedious preparations for it. Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none.

A “mode of meaning” is not something one can believe or disbelieve in the way that one believes or disbelieves in the existence of God; nor is it something that one can practice in any of

the myriad ways in which one practices a religion. It is a way of perceiving the connections of things to each other and to oneself, and a way of perceiving those connections to be universal and true—and thus entirely unlike the private and local relations with deities, symbols, and real or imaginary beings that are among the modes of religion described and celebrated by (for example) Robert Orsi in the works that Amy Hungerford cites in her chapter.

Equally, a “mode of meaning” is not something that can be represented directly in fiction. It can only be presented as a possibility—a specific possibility, with specific corollaries, as in Pynchon’s catalogue of example, not merely a vague sense that some belief is better than none. The writers analyzed in Amy Hungerford’s chapter portray characters who in different ways integrate belief and practice, and in doing so they offer models and examples for readers to follow or reject. (I think this is implicit in Amy Hungerford’s suggestive conclusion about the way in which these writer’s books present themselves as literary rituals.) And by offering such models, no matter how subtly, these characters ask you to change your life so that it conforms to one model rather than another. They have that illusory and longed-for treasure—an answer—while Pynchon’s characters perceive something different from an answer, something more like an imperative or a commandment.

Religion in Pynchon’s novels is neither belief nor truth nor practice, but a *way*—a way of understanding that leads to a way of acting. A *way*, in his books, can never be a place of rest nor a ritual that can safely be repeated. In much the same way that Virginia Woolf invented for the first time a fictional language that portrays feelings as they change from one moment to the next and veer between the extremes of love and hate, so Thomas Pynchon invented a fictional language that portrays both in-

ward and outward religion as something dynamic, uncertain, shifting, moving always toward a certainty that recedes as one approaches—perhaps something like the most deeply-felt and strongly acted-upon versions of religion in the real world.