Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History by David Cowart (review)

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opportunity: in “Sea Fiction Beyond the Seas,” Cohen explains how Herman Melville, Victor Hugo, and Joseph Conrad “reworked sea adventure fiction to dramatize skilled work in other Edge zones that...were qualitatively different: situated at the level of language and the human psyche, rather than the physical world” (180). Here Cohen also discusses the work of Jules Verne, who similarly “mobilized sea fiction’s poetics to explore other Edge zones of modernity” (213). Finally, Cohen explores how turn-of-the-century detective and spy fiction uses the problem-solving of craft to navigate a new frontier of information.

The Novel and the Sea is a magisterial work that reconfigures the origins of one of modernity’s most successful forms of writing. I have a few small quibbles here and there—e.g., the profusion of headers and sub-headers can sometimes be distracting, and some chapters feel overloaded—but these are minor concerns given the potential of this book to galvanize a sea-change in how scholars approach the European and American novel. Indeed, as Cohen suggests, perhaps our “hydrophasia is starting to ebb” (14), and we are finally able to see the sea again.

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The year 2013 is a propitious time to be reviewing the career of Thomas Pynchon, whom David Cowart, the Louise Fry Scudder Professor of Humanities at the University of South Carolina, calls “America’s greatest historical novelist” (24). It’s the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Pynchon’s first novel V. in 1963, a work that fell like a meteorite onto the steppes of American literature, and the fortieth anniversary of the publication of what remains his greatest achievement, Gravity’s Rainbow. What’s more, it’s 120 years since the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, whose White City burns to the ground near the start of Against the Day (2006); and it’s been 250 years since Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon began the survey of their eponymous Line in 1763. These anniversaries were justly celebrated at the International Pynchon Week conference in Durham, England in August.

Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History is Cowart’s second book devoted to that author. Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (1980) was his first book, and among the earliest of book-length treatments of Pynchon, so Cowart has brought more than thirty years of close attention to Pynchon’s oeuvre to the present volume. He remarks at the start, in “Calibrating Clio,” the muse of History, that Pynchon “stands out as a near-mythic figure of literary virtù” (1) for his equal appeal to popular and academic readers, a fact to which the online denizens of the “Pynchon Wiki” will attest. Perhaps for that reason, Dark Passages provides an inviting and relatively jargon-free introduction to all of Pynchon’s works, from the early short stories such as “Entropy” collected in Slow Learner (1984) to the recent “California novel,” Inherent Vice (2009), for the nonspecialist reader. Cowart reprises and revises some essays, including a 1978 piece on the Third Reich in Gravity’s Rainbow and his recent contribution on literary history in The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon (2012). While the editing process occasionally allows for some overlapping commentary (if you’ve been paying attention closely), Dark Passages sustains more elaborated readings for Pynchon scholars that many introductory retrospective studies do not.
As Cowart’s title suggests, he gathers his thoughts on Pynchon through the problematic of history—the subterranean, recondite, and subversive versions that are threaded through the eight volumes included in this study—not the orthodox and often uncontested story that They would have us believe. So we are told near the close of *Against the Day* that the narrative has borne witness to “the other side of the tapestry—a ragged, practical version of the grander spectacle out there” (1026). It’s the knotting into and the loose threads that we only find when we look behind the arras that reveal the true machinations of power, not the representations in golden brocade of coronations, military campaigns, and royal hunting parties. Because Pynchon is a self-proclaimed Luddite, we should recall that the followers of King Ludd were textile craftsmen who opposed the introduction of the industrial looms that concentrated wealth in the hands of the factory owners and oppressed the working class.

These dark passages of history are best approached by circumvention. Cowart’s treatment of the novels calls forth the heterodox historiography that we find, for example, in *V.*, with the procession of its sigil character through the Fashoda crisis in Egypt in 1898, Paris in 1913, southwest Africa in 1922, and Malta during World War II. Cowart appropriately invokes Hayden White’s conceptualization of postmodern historiography in *MetaHistory* (1973), such that all historical events are subjected to narrative interpretation. “Historians shape their material: the writing of history, like the writing of fiction, involves selection, subjectivity, ‘emplotment’” (45). As a postmodern writer, Pynchon not only appreciates the inherent subjectivity of historiography but he also casts a skeptical eye on an historiographer’s selection of facts, which is made to comply with the narrative of power.

Discussing the unreliability of *Mason & Dixon*’s (1997) narrator, the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, and his representations of colonial America, Cowart contends that “one must recognize as fictional the boundaries between fiction itself and the reality or history naively taken to occupy a separate epistemological category….Historical fiction…seeks always to remind its readers that the semantic distinction between the words *story* and *history* will not stand scrutiny” (153). Through the linguistic process of aphaeresis, in which the initial syllable drops off, “*history* became *story*—but without the original form’s disappearing” (153).

In addition to the narratological conundrum, there’s the matter of what sort of “emplotment” in history you favor or lend credence to. Pynchon’s fictions teeter on the dialectic of history as either pure contingency, in which any other course of events is not only possible but equally plausible, or as vast conspiracy, in which unseen and powerful forces shape events to Their advantage. Mostly it’s the latter, as Pynchon “continues to create dark, intricate labyrinths in which the spores of paranoia thrive and grow into religion-like theories of conspiracy. Paranoia is, in fact, the conviction that mighty conspiracies exist, that all things are connected” (5). Still, his protagonists are soberly aware of the “anti-paranoid” polarity in which “nothing is connected to anything” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 434) and disorder reigns. Herbert Stencil, Oedipa Maas, Zoyd Wheeler, and “Doc” Sportello are all private investigators of a history that either won’t give up its secrets or has no secrets to give up. Pynchon’s readers also have to be willing to play along, regarding his novels as “grand demonstration[s] of humanity’s enormous need to rationalize the past, the need that forces the historian…into dubious acts of emplotment. Perhaps, too, they see humanity’s conceptual crucifixion between history as concatenation of aimless accident and history as coherent narrative (one option impossible to live with, the other false)” (51).

Pynchon’s historical fictions give the lie to Fredric Jameson’s assertion in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that postmodernism “emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived
possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (21). Postmodern fiction, or what Linda Hutcheon terms “historiographic metafiction,” is not the death rattle of historicity but a redirection in what sort of history is now necessary. Cowart deftly counters that, in all his novels,

Pynchon insists on writing the history of the marginalized or, as he calls them, the preterite—those on whose backs an older idea of history unfolded. Like Foucault or the Guy Debord of Society of the Spectacle, Pynchon understands instinctively that a different history emerges if the investigator asks different questions—questions regarding just where and how power reveals itself in institutional structures, in socially conditioned habits of thought and speech, and in the rhetoric of science, politics, and the penal code. (165)

*Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* not only provides the Pynchonite with a stylish, accessible introduction to all of his writing but also teaches readers of postmodern literature that there is an alternative and possibly darker history than the one we’ve received, if we’re willing to search it out.

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*Harriet Martineau: Authorship, Society and Empire*, edited by Ella Dzelzainis and Cora Kaplan, is an eminently useful collection that manages both breadth and depth. Originating from a one-day conference on Martineau, the fifteen chapters are relatively short, but they make sophisticated arguments about Martineau’s always complex, often contradictory positions on privacy, authorship, disability, labor unions, women, poverty, education, race, and empire, just to name a few. The broad range of topics and easily digestible length of the chapters make it an accessible introduction to this lesser-known Victorian thinker; it would be an invaluable companion to a course on Martineau, British economics, or the empire in the mid-nineteenth century. It also offers profitable reading to scholars investigating the nuances of Martineau’s work. As a testament to the editors’ good work, this book is readable cover-to-cover with a natural progression of interrelated topics that produces remarkable cohesion for an edited collection.

The book is divided into three parts: “Authorship and identity” (six chapters), “Political economy, technology and society” (four chapters), and “Empire, race, nation” (five chapters). Though the scope widens from the self to the empire, certain aspects of Martineau’s beliefs—freedom of expression, trade, and self-governance—reoccur and link to form a relatively complete, though certainly complex, understanding of Martineau’s writings. The introduction sets the stage for this understanding, not by providing a simple biographical overview, but by contextualizing Martineau’s place in the academy. Dzelzainis and Kaplan address the paucity of scholarly attention until relatively recently when interest in Martineau’s work on sociology, feminism, liberalism, and imperialism has converged to bring her contributions to light. Dzelzainis and Kaplan make the rather usual claim that to study an individual figure is to illuminate the issues of the era, but the subsequent chapters more than justify their assertion that