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Review of James Gourley, *Terrorism and Temporality in the Works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013)

Martin Paul Eve

Although we are a mere decade into the new millennium, it is already clear that certain thematic areas are in a favoured critical period of "ascent", as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* might have it. Taking Peter Boxall's recent *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* as a canonising authority that inscribes its "archaeologies of the future" while also avoiding a purely descriptivist approach, we can clearly outline a literary focus in the past decade on, among others: altered modes of metafiction; extreme forms of posthumanism; a re-prioritisation of the embodied, material subject; an engagement with global democracy and its discontents; and new forms of temporality.[1] It is to this last phenomenon, in the wake of 9/11, that James Gourley devotes his recent volume, *Terrorism and Temporality in the Works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo*.

In this work Gourley sets himself a difficult initial target: to demonstrate that Pynchon's and DeLillo's respective "conceptualization[s] of time" (2) change after the terrorist attacks in New York of 2001. While this might be obviously expected in DeLillo's progression towards sparse Beckettian minimalism – seen in *The Body Artist*, *Falling Man* and *Point Omega*, the latter of which is clearly pre-occupied with manipulating time in its depiction of the Gordon installation – readers of Pynchon might be harder pressed to see how his post-9/11 novels, and particularly *Against the Day*, deviate from this prior trajectory. After all, as Pynchon reads it in his essay on the sin of Sloth, "Nearer my Couch to Thee", at a certain historical moment:

> Sloth was no longer so much a Sin against God or spiritual good as against a particular sort of time, uniform, one-way, in general not reversible – that is, against clock time, which got everybody early to bed and early to rise.[2]

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In other words, clock time has long been the deified force against which Pynchon's (counter-)entities have striven to fight, be it in their mad time-searches, their anachronistic histories or their proleptic transatlantic ICBMs. Gourley's challenge is difficult because to suggest a radical “reconsideration of time” (4) in Pynchon's already radically temporally warped structures seems a tall order.

In order to address this phenomenon Gourley structures his work into two distinct sections with the initial four chapters devoted to DeLillo (on *Mao II*, *Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man* and *Point Omega*) and the final four on Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow*, *Against the Day* and *Inherent Vice*).[3] This has the distinct advantage of affording each novelist his own protracted segment for analysis but also tends to segregate the writers more than might be justified. For instance, although Gourley ultimately argues that “[t]hese two novelists, so consistently linked […] have diverged in the past decade” (178), there are overlaps that are here ignored in order to make this point. As just one example, during the otherwise convincing and innovative discussion of Beckett, Proust and *Falling Man*, Gourley writes on Alzheimer's disease and different types of memory failure in the wake of terror (65-70) but does not link this to a discussion of *Against the Day*, where Pynchon writes of his allegorical post-9/11 populous as an “embittered and amnesiac race”.[4]

This initial criticism is indicative of a more general trend throughout this work, namely that the readings of DeLillo's novels more plausible than those of Pynchon's. Indeed, at its high-points, *Terrorism and Temporality* has much to offer, with one of its triumphs lying in the redemption of *Cosmopolis*, a novel that has been poorly received, as Gourley rightly notes. Taking, in the chapter devoted to this novel, a preparatory note for the work that was eventually integrated into DeLillo's post-9/11 essay “In the Ruins of the Future”, Gourley positions *Cosmopolis* as a text that simultaneously straddles two different modes of temporality: prochronism and parachronism. This is a viable reading and the focus within the chapter on the novel's spycam is well integrated with a theoretical backdrop that draws strongly on Paul Virolio's concept of dromoscopy.

When Gourley turns his attention to Pynchon, however, the result is less palatable. After a nine-page reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* in which the complex overlay of voices is elided to simply brand the text as “without doubt a sentimental novel” (102), a more serious structural flaw in the book emerges pertaining to the sequence of causality that it attributes to terrorism. Although “September 11, 2001” is described as the “motivating force” (161) for the altered time structures in Pynchon's later novels, this is undercut time

and time again by a lack of corroborating evidence. That Pynchon represents the 9/11 attacks in *Against the Day* (and now also in *Bleeding Edge*) is hardly sufficient to attribute it as a cause for the novelist's focus on strange temporalities. This is clear from the fact that, in several of Gourley's chapters, such as the seventh, which ably explores Pynchon's interaction with Futurism, terrorism is hardly mentioned. By all accounts, the work on Pynchon and Futurism here, as one example, is interesting and important, but the tenuous connection to terrorism makes it feel somewhat oddly placed within this book.

Furthermore, a core problem of Gourley's book is the range of criticism to which he does not refer and the duplicated effort in which this often results. For instance, Simon de Bourcier has written an entire book on time and relativity in Pynchon's later novels, but this appears nowhere in sight, despite passages on Newtonian vs. Einsteinian time and Minkowskian space-time (118, 130) in *Terrorism and Temporality.* Neither does Katherine Hume's seminal 'The Religious and Political Vision of Pynchon's *Against the Day*' emerge, which many have read as the most important work on terrorism in Pynchon criticism to date. Finally, for Gourley's appraisal of DeLillo's affiliation to literary Modernism in *Point Omega* (85), one would expect to see David Cowart's excellent 'The Lady Vanishes' in which he notes that this text carries a style indebted to a “modernist aesthetic that married a high standard of economy to new representational challenges”.[5]

In short, although this is a book well in-tune with contemporary trends in the study of twenty-first-century fiction, I felt that this particular ascent was betrayed to gravity. While the die-hard Pynchon scholar will be intrigued by the archival document in which DeLillo appraises the importance of *Gravity's Rainbow* as having “an unapologetic global range” (5), the central premise here was problematic. For, perhaps, what lies beneath the criticisms that I have here laid out is the fact that, to some degree, many or all of Pynchon's and DeLillo's novels have been not only about temporality but also about terrorism; that is, about forces that knowingly seek to threaten our lives in the pursuit of their own ends and forces that want us to know this. If this hypothetical conjecture of terror as omnipresent in the work of these novelists could be made to hold up, then it might comprehensively explain an interlinking of terrorism and temporality that doesn't revolve purely around 9/11. Such a study is, however, despite the advances made in *Terrorism and Temporality*, not yet upon us.

End notes

1. Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 214.

2. In the latter case, Gourley gives two chapters to *Against the Day*.

3. Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), p. 153.

4. David Cowart, ‘The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo’s Point Omega’, *Contemporary Literature*, 53 (2012), 31–50 (p. 31). In this last case I appreciate that it may have simply been a timing problem, although other 2012 works are cited.

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