

TERRORISM AND TEMPORALITY IN THE WORKS OF THOMAS PYNCHON AND DON DELILLO

James Gourley

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Terrorism and Temporality in the Works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo offers a series of thought-provoking readings on the recent novels by these two American authors. In the eight chapters that constitute this book, James Gourley analyzes representations of temporality in four of DeLillo's novels —*Mao II* (1991), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), *Point Omega* (2010)— and three of Pynchon's —*Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Against the Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009). The author had already explored the “renewed awareness of time, and indeed, a renewed focus on the politicization of time” in some of these works in the essay “‘The 9/11 Novel’: Eternal Return in Pynchon and DeLillo” (2012: 166).

Although the texts are analyzed separately, and not on a comparative basis, Gourley devotes a good half of the brief Introduction to justify the rationale of his corpus selection. This seems to be a bit unnecessary, on account of the already existing body of critical work on these two authors. Even before David Cowart famously baptized them as “the mythic cousins of American postmodernism” (2002: 7) more than a decade ago, Pynchon and DeLillo were being brought together in monographs and essay collections, and continue to be frequently (Allen 2000; Tanner 2000; Conte 2002; Parrish 2002; Orbán 2005; Fitzpatrick 2006; McClure 2007).

Gourley chooses to bring them together again under the umbrella of two theoretical *foci*: the concepts of temporality and terrorism. The results are

uneven, and they weaken the theoretical basis of the book, which offers an otherwise excellent collection of essays on the two American novelists. For Gourley, the connection between these authors is justified on the basis of their common concern with American contemporaneity, and the fact that they were both residents of New York City when the September 11 attacks took place (2). Anecdotic as it may seem, the second of these aspects is the one on which the book's theoretical premise is grounded: the change in the authors' conceptualization of time is hypothesized as being causally conditioned by the cultural and historical impact of 9/11 on their work.

Gourley's identification of these authors' concern with time, with human perception and artistic representation of temporality, and the manipulation of time through technological mediation, is the book's strongest thesis. From this perspective, Gourley offers insightful narratological analyses of represented time in the novels, arguing that both authors play with narrative technique in order to articulate a postmodern perception of time. His attempt to join Pynchon and DeLillo in a common concern with terrorism is another matter. True, both novelists have written about terror and terrorists. Yet, as the author himself is forced to admit, "terrorism is, for Pynchon, a different beast" (8). Gourley rightly perceives Pynchon's representation of terrorism as a libertarian force as contradictory with the more conventional understanding of terror as an attack on freedom and social order that has permeated the so-called "September 11 novel" (2).

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Another problematic aspect of the book's theoretical premise is the causal logic Gourley imposes on his two *foci*: the belief that the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as a traumatic and culturally defining event, have changed in a radical manner the authors' perception of time. Leaving aside the debate about the extent to which 9/11 has actually constituted such a breaking point in American literary history (see Duvall & Marzec 2011 for an overview of this debate), the causal link is undermined by Gourley's own corpus of texts. Three of the novels he analyzes in the book were written long before 9/11 — *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mao II*, *Cosmopolis*— thus leaving him no other choice but to justify their presence on the basis of their "prophetic" potential. This seems an unnecessary detour, for their common concern with postmodern temporalities would have been a sufficient justification for their inclusion in the corpus of analyzed texts.

Considered individually, many of the chapters offer innovative and insightful readings of these novels, in most cases connected to representations of temporality. Chapter 2 reads *Cosmopolis* along with Paul Virilio's theorizations about the acceleration of time in postmodernism. The reference to Virilio comes from DeLillo's own reading of his texts while preparing for the writing of this novel, as

Gourley convincingly shows through his management of archive material stored at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. Chapter 3, devoted to *Falling Man*, convincingly analyzes the protagonist's devotion to poker as a habit intended to cope with involuntary memory and the attempt to create an automatic mental activity to substitute for the intensity of feeling 'now' all the time after 9/11. Chapter 4, focused on DeLillo's most recent novel to date, *Point Omega*, suggests that the desert works in this novel as a distorting element, altering characters' perception of time.¹ Chapter 5 sees *Gravity's Rainbow* as a precedent for the discussion of terror that was to take place in the aftermath of 9/11. Chapter 6, one of the two chapters of the book devoted to *Against the Day*, reads the use of conceptualizations about time travel, bilocation or counter-worlds in the novel as illustration of "what the world would be like if different theories and concepts had been accepted by the scientific world" (135). Chapter 7 links artistic representations in *Against the Day* to Futurism. Finally, Chapter 8 analyzes Doc Sportello's dope habit as the main device used by Pynchon for the creation of a distorted perception of time in *Inherent Vice*.

It is curious to note, nevertheless, that whereas the book tries to identify a postmodern perception of time as distinct from those of earlier ages or cultural movements, many of the referents used as theoretical support in the different chapters originated in the cultural framework of modernism. Proust and Beckett, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, George Steiner, Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, Albert Einstein...² They definitely contributed to a radical shift in the human perception of time and temporality, but it was one which had little to do with the specific historical impact of September 11. If Gourley had been aware of this irony, his argument about the connection between terrorism and temporality might have benefited from the diachronic perspective on the complexities of 20th century history.

The book, more than the Introduction itself, which suffers from a certain theoretical vagueness, illustrates in a convincing and engaging way the multifaceted nature of Pynchon's and DeLillo's representations of temporality in their recent work. Although his attempt to causally link this renewed awareness of time to recent historical events may seem a bit off target in some of the chapters, Gourley bears witness to the crucial role that these two American novelists have played in shaping contemporary Western consciousness. His is, all in all, a relevant contribution to the scholarly field of postmodernist studies, and to the critical analysis of the two American masters.

Notes

¹. It should be noted, nevertheless, that this is a recurrent issue in DeLillo's pre-9/11 fiction, discussed in several of his early novels like *The Names* (1982), *Running Dog* (1978) and *End Zone* (1972).

². Actually, the only truly postmodern thinker mentioned in the book is Paul Virilio, whose work is used as the theoretical basis for chapter 2, as has already been mentioned.

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