Olivia Chirobocea-Tudor. *History and Fiction in American Postmodernist Novels: Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon*. Constanța: Ovidius University Press, 2019. Pp 262. ISBN: 978-606-060-000-8.

Olivia Chirobocea-Tudor's book, *History and Fiction in American Postmodernist Novels: Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon*, is a rich and elegant discussion of history as an unstable and problematic discourse, subject to postmodernist revision and re-formulations. Published by Ovidius University Press in 2019, the book investigates the features of the American postmodern novel through an informed analysis of the social and cultural dimensions of the 1950s and the 1960s in the United States and capitalizes on key events which are referenced as dystopian versions of more or less probable historical accounts of the period. While elaborating on the traits of postmodern fiction as cryptic and reflexive metafiction, eluding straightforward interpretations, the book offers a sophisticated analysis of history and war as palimpsest of histories and fictitious scenarios, which brings forth the measurable aspects of time (cause, effect, continuity, change), as well as its subtle ideological determinants.

The book is structured in four chapters, further divided into multiple subchapters, each dealing with a particular version of history and trauma, felt in individual and collective terms, as evoked in turn by Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon. The novels considered are Heller's *Catch-22*, Pynchon's *V.*, and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Intended as an insightful description of the decades following the Second World War in the United States, the book brings into discussion the main political events and popular culture icons which structured the *Weltanschauung* of the period, by providing information or suppressing it in the consciousness of the American public. As it compares and contrasts the satirical and allegorical representations of the American realities in the

latter half of the 20th century, the book offers an interesting description of the paradoxical postwar years, characterized by material abundance and social movements, armed conflicts and infringements of human rights. The description of the 1960s is a nuanced reading of the prosperity, conformity and consensus of the period which dilemmatically overlap the turbulent protest and disillusionment.

The novels are read as allegories of the American society, a society bordering on dystopia, which loses its essence and sense of direction, in its vacillation between consumerist impulses and technological surges. The three novelists propound historical scenarios which disrupt official historical narratives and suggest different solutions to various existential problems circumscribed by ideological contexts. In these novels, constructed as complementary sources of official history, the reality of time and history is cancelled through the creation of cultural constructions which take place in a non-linear time. The book takes its audience through investigation of cases of race and gender discrimination, through propaganda-induced fear and paranoia, trials and conspiracy theories. The strength of the book lies in its thorough analysis of unstable narrative voices, confused and uncertain of the version of reality which they inhabit, as well as in the elegant assessment of the postmodern strategies (pastiche, fragmentation, dissociation, parody, intertextuality) used by the three novelists.

The first chapter deals with the manifold ways in which identity is constructed in an over-technologized world that lost its innocence in the aftermath of World War II. By playing on various definitions of history and fiction and history as fiction, and by disrupting the linearity of time and history, the three novelists shed light on ways in which truth can be alluded to, by demystifying traditional approaches to politics and history.

The chapter "History and Fiction: Theoretical Views" proposes a complex overview of the multiple meanings of history as the past, the present, the source and the narrative. A particularly interesting part is the description of the postwar propaganda as the coercive mechanism disguised as national self-advertisement intended to hold captive a nation through Hollywood movie pleasures. The chapter also discusses at length the multiplication of beginnings and endings, the ontological use of

narrative perspectivism, the treatment on an equal footing of fact and fiction, of reality and myth. It offers ample examples to illustrate the fragmentation and looseness of association of the disorderly narrative of postmodernist fiction and to demonstrate the distortion of history by blending history and fantasy in order to create apocryphal history.

The book beautifully illustrates the manifold strategies by means of which history is subverted and alternative versions of history are created. In Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, the society plots against individuals and history is created by events orchestrated by unknown forces. The analysis of the instances of madness offers a systematic investigation of the types of madness and their respective symptoms, as experienced by the postmodern characters. Ranging from mental unbalances, thought and communication breakdown, reality denial, circular reasoning, non-sequitur comments, these facets and versions of madness are strategies employed by each author to make their personal statements about the decadence of civilization through loss of meaning and identity.

The chapter on Vonnegut's vision of history discusses the way in which history is written, how facts reach the public and how they are concealed. The analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a war novel, a piece of science fiction literature, an allegory, a satire and a text indicative of the ideological vocation of its time focuses on Vonnegut's attempts to demystify and erase glamorous views and clichés about war, truth and traditional American values. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is another novel read in a variety of interpretative registers: as a tragicomedy, a satire, an example of militant literature and a sexist novel about military life during the war. Chirobocea-Tudor demonstrates how Heller's use of a distinctive non-chronological third-person omniscient narration reveals the faults and shortcomings of the American society in a cynical tone fraught with black humor. The chapter dedicated to Thomas Pynchon's *V.* focuses on the re-creation and re-interpretation of history in a novel which sends the reader traveling through confusingly abundant themes and human characters in the first half of the 20th century. The book offers multiple examples to illustrate how chronology is disrupted and historical accounts overlap in

discontinuous episodes, in interrupted anticipation and retrospection, witnessed by unreliable narrators.

Through its meaningful analysis of the representations/ histories of the Red Scare of the 1940 and 1950s and McCarthyism, Chirobocea-Tudor's book is an interesting contribution to scholarship devoted to the American postmodernist novel. Scholars and students alike will find a useful reading in this captivating and complex investigation of history as a set of fictitious scenarios, determined by ideological constraints and limitations, which structure subtle and dilemmatic power games.

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