

## CHELSEA MOURNING

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Thomas Pynchon, ed. with an introduction by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1986, 232 pp. \$24.50.

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, ed. with an introduction by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1986, 127 pp. \$24.50.

For several years Harold Bloom has been sprinkling his essays, reviews and interviews with tantalizing remarks about Pynchon's works and about his stature as the greatest living American prose writer. Bloom has seemed preoccupied if not obsessed with Pynchon in a way that suggested he was not merely indulging in trendy chatter but perhaps mulling over the production of a major critical essay on Pynchon. However, Bloom's slap-dash introduction (the same one appears in both volumes) to *Thomas Pynchon* and *Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow* (hereafter *TP* and *TPGR*) is not all his readers might have hoped for. It is unmistakably Bloomian in range and tone, but its nine pages lurch from the profound to the pedestrian and contain a hint of the hokey.

Bloom treats Pynchon as if he needed no introduction or could have no uninitiated readers. Eschewing elaborate conventional placing of Pynchon in a historical or literary context, Bloom simply declares Pynchon "the greatest master of the negative Sublime at least since Faulkner and West." Bloom actually defines the context in terms of Pynchon: "We are now . . . in the Age of John Ashbery and of Thomas Pynchon"; "For Pynchon, ours is the age of plastics and paranoia, dominated by the System." Bloom praises Pynchon's artistic invention, unsurpassed since Faulkner, the "vast control" which is his "greatest talent," and the "gusto" which is "his supreme aesthetic quality." But Bloom does not illustrate; he pronounces. Even readers who share Bloom's admiration for Pynchon (or especially such readers) might appreciate being let in on the reasoning which led Bloom to such judgments, and might also wish Bloom had elaborated on suggestive assertions like the following: "[I]f nothing besides *Byron the Bulb* in *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to me quite as perfect as all of *The Crying of Lot 49*, that may be because no one could hope to write the first authentic post-Holocaust novel and achieve a total vision without fearful cost." Or this: "What does concern me is the Kabbalistic winding path that is Pynchon's authentic and Gnostic image for the route through the Kelippot or evil husks that the light must take if it is to survive in the ultimate breaking of the vessels, the Holocaust brought about by the System at its most evil, yet hardly at its most prevalent."

Gravity's Rainbow gets no conventional introduction either, though Bloom's comments bear most directly on it. (Bloom never mentions either V. or Pynchon's short stories, and mentions Lot 49 only once in passing, as quoted above.) Bloom refers quite casually to the Zone, "which is our cosmos as the Gnostics saw it," to Them, to the Counterforce, to the "apocalyptic rocket," and to Slothrop, "who remains more hero than antihero." Yet he provides no adequate context for these references. "Slothrop is a Kabbalistic version of Pynchon himself." And Gravity's Rainbow is a Kabbalistic novel because "its stories are all exegetical, however wild and mythical." Pynchon "always seems not so much to be telling his bewildering, labyrinthine story as writing a wistful commentary upon it as a story already twice-told, though it hasn't been, and truly can't be told at all."

Bloom devotes two-thirds of his introduction to what he calls a close reading of "The Story of Byron the Bulb." Two-thirds of this two-thirds is little more than a string of often lengthy quotations linked by brief, mostly non-analytical commentary. The rest is pure Bloom.

"The story of Byron the Bulb, for me, touches one of the limits of art, and I want to read it very closely here, so as to suggest what is most vital and least problematic about Pynchon's achievement as a writer, indeed as the crucial American writer of prose fiction at the present time." Least problematic? In his Editor's Note to TP, Bloom calls his reading of Byron's story "a gateway both to Pynchon's Kabbalism and to his authentic nihilism, his refusal of the transcendental aspects of his own Gnostic vision." Is that refusal what is "least problematic"? Bloom would have done well to explain more fully, lest readers unimpressed by nihilism or skeptical of "Pynchon's achievement" take a cheap shot at it through such a breezy opening. Also, the yoking of "most vital and least problematic" itself seems problematic, even un-Bloomian, especially in a description of "the crucial American writer of prose fiction at the present time." Finally, we might have benefited from Bloom's observations on what else is problematic about (and in) Gravity's Rainbow--narrative strategies or attitudes toward history, for instance.

Bloom reads Byron, "Childe Harold in the Zone," as a "living reminder that the System can never quite win," but "a death-in-life reminder that the System also can never quite lose." "[H]is high consciousness represents the dark fate of the Gnosis in Pynchon's vision. For all its negativity, Gnosticism remains a mode of transcendental belief. Pynchon's is a Gnosis without transcendence. There is a Counterforce, but there is no fathering and mothering abyss to which it can return." In the fate of the "poor perverse bulb," Bloom sees "Pynchon's despair of his own Gnostic Kabbalah"--the achievement of complete knowledge purchased by the loss of power. "Byron can neither be martyred, nor betray his own prophetic vocation. What remains is madness: limitless rage and frustration, which at last he learns to enjoy. That ends the story of Byron the Bulb, and ends something in Pynchon also. What is left" for this Emersonian

visionary "is the studying of new modalities of post-Apocalyptic silence."

The essay collections themselves are hard to praise without reservation, since even their strengths are compromised. But first for the strengths. Some of the essays reprinted here (the volumes are made up entirely of reprints, apart from the introduction--which is, however, itself in effect reprinted in one or the other volume) are indeed first-rate. Louis Mackey's "Paranoia, Pynchon and Preterition" (PGR) and Gabriele Schwab's "Creative Paranoia and Frost Patterns of White Words" (PGR), both lively and provocative, deserve wider recognition and a wider readership. David Seed's "Order in Thomas Pynchon's 'Entropy'" (TP) is one of the best essays yet published on Pynchon's short fiction. Since Levine and Leverenz's Mindful Pleasures has been out-of-print for several years, readers will welcome back into print Edward Mendelson's "Gravity's Encyclopedia" (PGR) and Richard Poirier's "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon" (TP). Similarly welcome back is the excerpt from Frank Kermode's "The Use of the Codes" (TP), re-reprinted from Mendelson's now o.p. Pynchon. Smith and Töllyan's "The New Jeremiad" (TP) and Maureen Quilligan's "The Language of Allegory" (TP) are still very much in print in Pearce's Critical Essays, but are nonetheless important enough to be valuable additions to any Pynchon collection. If I was at first surprised to see George Levine's "Risking the Moment" (TP) and Catharine R. Stimpson's "Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism" (TP), both from Levine and Leverenz, and Melvin New's "Profaned and Stenciled Texts" (TP) reprinted here, I was pleased to discover how much they rewarded rereading.

I do not mean to dispute the value to Pynchon criticism of the other pieces Bloom has gathered--except for one abomination, Josephine Hendin's "What is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?" (TP). My concern is with relative value and with the optimal use of available space, given what works might have been included. Friedman and Puetz's "Science as Metaphor" (TP), however appealing, strikes me as less valuable than Puetz's "History, Self, and the Narrative Discourse" (not included), which contains one of the most sophisticated and compelling discussions of V. in all Pynchon criticism. Bloom includes one chapter from Tony Tanner's Thomas Pynchon in each of the volumes, the chapter on Lot 49 in TP, that on Gravity's Rainbow in PGR. To either of those chapters I would have preferred Tanner's chapter on V. from the same book, where Tanner manages to get beyond some of the critical clichés about V. which he himself did so much to help popularize. An excerpt from Craig Werner's Paradoxical Resolutions seems a curiously modest selection for the one piece chosen for inclusion in both volumes. Finally, given the inclusion of Mendelson's and Poirier's essays mentioned above, the inclusion of their reviews of Gravity's Rainbow (Mendelson's in TP, Poirier's in PGR) seems superfluous.

Relative merits of the contents aside, the Gravity's Rainbow volume is only half the length of the general Pynchon one, yet sells for the same price. Could no more worthwhile essays on

Gravity's Rainbow be found to fill up the presumably available space? What about Brian McHale's "Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text"--among the essays most frequently cited in recent Pynchon criticism, and perhaps the most conspicuous omission from Bloom's collections? What about Joel D. Black's "Probing a Post-Romantic Paleontology"? Neil Schmitz's "Describing the Demon"?\* Dwight Eddins's "Orphic Contra Gnostic"? (If PGR had been published a few months later, we would have looked for McHoul and Wills's groundbreaking "Gravity's Rainbow and the Post-Rhetorical.") To suggest still other candidates is easy, and readers will be eager to suggest their own. Bloom's claim in his Editor's Notes that these volumes gather "what I consider to be the best criticism so far ventured" (IP) on Pynchon and "a representative selection of the best criticism yet published" (PGR) on Gravity's Rainbow rings false. I suspect that Bloom (or the Yale grad students said to have assisted him) has not done all the reading and considering a responsible editor should have. My suspicion is aggravated by the Editor's Notes' perfunctory annotations of the contents of each volume; they convey the impression that the editor may not even have read all these essays very carefully.

What flagrantly undermines the usefulness if not the integrity of the volumes is the vandalism which has been done to the selections. They have been stripped of their notes and even of parenthetical page-references. According to a letter from the publisher:

[I]t is Chelsea House's policy to omit footnotes from reprinted essays. Professor Harold Bloom (General Editor) feels that general readership may be put off by the footnotes and that scholars would already be familiar with the contents enough to use the bibliography alone. Since our titles are aimed at a wide range of readers we would not want to emphasize the scholastic points in these pieces.

But this explanation is preposterous. Who needs footnotes more than the general reader? And we are not talking about the Reader's Digest or Cliff's Notes variety general reader; we are talking about a Pynchon reader who is evidently expected to appreciate, not just Bloom's own introductory references to Pynchon's Gnostic Kabbalah and to Derridean dissemination, but also, for example, semiotic and post-structural analyses. Even a reader steeped in Pynchon and Pynchon criticism would probably rather have page references and notes there to ignore than not to have them there to resort to. The lack of references and notes will likely frustrate the general reader even more than it does

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\* The omission of Schmitz has recently been made good in another of Bloom's Chelsea House projects, Twentieth Century American Literature. Volume 6 includes fifty closely-printed pages on Pynchon comprising a dozen reprints and excerpts, notes and all--a virtual third Pynchon volume in which only Kermode overlaps with the volumes under review here.

the scholar. (About the usefulness to any reader of Bloom's bibliographies, more below.) The serious reader, general or scholarly, will want or have to go to other collections or original sources to find the selections intact.

Bloom's bibliographies would disgrace an undergraduate term paper. They are scanty, out-of-date, and poorly selected. The two bibliographies are really only one, since PGR's merely omits a few, but not all, of the items in IP's which treat only V. and/or Lot 49. The most telling difference between them is that each lists the Bloom volume in which the other appears. In each, the Bloom volume is the only listing of an item published after 1983. There is just one 1983 citation, one 1982. (In this light, the fact that the volumes, despite their 1986 copyrights, reprint between them only one piece originally published after 1983 and only one other originally published after 1982 comes to seem a little less like a matter of editorial deliberation than it otherwise might.) Entirely omitted are Clerc's Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, Hite's Ideas of Order, Schaub's Pynchon, Fowler's Reader's Guide, McHale, Black, Eddins, Caesar, Davidson, Grace, Hayles, Herzberg, Holmes, Kappel, Steiner, Weisenburger, White---to name only some of the more obvious and accessible. The esoteric and the foreign, however valuable, are unthinkable. Neither the scholar nor the general reader supposedly so dear to the General Editor is well served. If Yale grad students and professors can't or won't make better use of card catalogs and standard indexes, pity the general reader who entrusts himself to their guidance.

These Chelsea House volumes seem intended more for sale than for use. Bloom's editorship is, of course, the gimmick that will sell them. It shouldn't be enough, being not just a gimmick but, as it turns out, an embarrassment. The selections, many of which are truly outstanding, are published better elsewhere. Bloom's introduction is sometimes brilliant but is also both regrettably under-realized and shamelessly bloated. Even if it were all Bloom at his best, its price would still be steep, especially at one introduction for the price of two volumes. Thus, the dubious introduction, the missing notes, and the execrable bibliographies give the volumes the air of a quick and dirty job. I suspect that libraries are the target market. They'll buy anything. We may apprehend the operation of Gresham's Law, especially in smaller, poorer libraries. We might have expected better from Bloom. Or perhaps such books are just what we might expect when even a Harold Bloom undertakes to edit nearly a thousand volumes in a mere three years or so.

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