

THE APOCALYPTIC ANGEL

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Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow: A Study of Its Conceptual Structure and of Rilke's Influence, by Charles Hohmann. New York: Peter Lang, 1986, 421 pp. \$48.05.

As its title and subtitle announce, Charles Hohmann's book is, in effect, two studies with a single purpose: first, an analysis of the "conceptual structure" of Gravity's Rainbow; and second, a study of the influence on that structure of Rilke's Duino Elegies. At both these efforts the book is largely successful. It thus fills a significant gap in Pynchon scholarship.

In the first part of the study, comprising five chapters and nearly 70% of the overall text, Hohmann discusses the desirability of approaching Gravity's Rainbow through the "referential code" in order "to 'naturalize' the novel on the plane of its ideological references, i.e. to relate it to a contemporary 'vision of the world' or a modern 'system of values'" (45). As Hohmann points out, his notion of the referential code is derived from Roland Barthes's S/Z, while his treatment of the five levels of naturalization is based on Jonathan Culler's Structuralist Poetics. It is in particular Culler's second level, "cultural vraïsemblance," adapted from Gérard Genette's Figures II (the phrases "vision of the world" and "system of values" are in fact Genette's), that Hohmann establishes as his book's method of naturalizing Gravity's Rainbow "on an intellectual or notional plane" (45). Such an approach, Hohmann argues, "yields significant insights into the novel" (45) on a variety of levels.

Although Hohmann acknowledges the presence of Menippean satire in Pynchon's book, he hesitates to label it summarily as such and describes Gravity's Rainbow instead as a "satiric 'anatomy' of paranoia" (42) in order to identify paranoia as the book's thematic center. Using Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's definition of "implied author" as a "set of implicit norms" (29), Hohmann establishes the norm of Gravity's Rainbow's implied author as the rejection of paranoia, and it is against this standard that Hohmann judges the reliability of the book's "several anonymous narrators" (29).

Distinguishing clinical paranoia from that of Pynchon's characters, Hohmann defines the latter as "a drive to impose patterns on an intolerably contingent phenomenal world" (76). While ancient questers evinced "positive paranoia" (56), a sentiment of "being at ease in one's projected world" (57), their modern counterparts practice "negative paranoia" (56), a sense of suspicion in a universe they perceive only as hostile.

In Pynchon's world, according to Hohmann, there occurred in fact not one but two falls: a conventional first fall of original sin, which Hohmann extends to include the Romantic and post-Romantic dualisms of Self and not-Self resulting from ontological and psychological disintegration; and a more insidious and alienating second fall into a modern order of science and rationalism, both of which vainly attempt to (re)unify experience by repressing difference. In short, negative paranoia predominates in Pynchon's vision, particularly because in the modern world sacred terms and their referents have between them "an unbridgeable abyss" (58) that did not exist in preliterate communities.

Although negative paranoia serves to structure the world, lurking ominously behind this world are two far more frightening possibilities: the utter chaos of "total randomness," and, alternatively, the cosmic malevolence of "total control" (72). Moreover, the successful outcome of Pynchon's characters' compulsive quest for ultimate meaning would be "annihilation" (72), for if truth exists--and Hohmann concedes Pynchon is, finally, inconclusive--it exists not in transcendence of the human condition but in waste. Waste, however, represents what terrifies Pynchon's characters most: "the Heraclitean flux of matter" (63), decay, and death. Thus, Hohmann regards as authentic those characters who have accepted guilt, pain, and death; those who, on the other hand, suffer from "a primal existential anxiety" (60) resort to what Hohmann terms in a key concept "the self-transcendence of 'paranoia'" (81), a "dynamism" (81) that rationalizes emotion and leads to sadomasochistic rituals of dominance and submission. The dualistic alternative of anti-paranoia being a form of equally untenable "perceptual anarchy" and "insanity" (81), however, Hohmann argues that Pynchon offers in place of dualisms not dialectics--itself satirized as a type of teleological salvation--but paradox, a form of the acknowledgment of difference:

While the dialectical process itself is ruinous since it always implies the partial destruction of a thesis, paradox, from the perspective of the implied author, creates a tension which although ill-suffered by the "paranoid" mind is basically of a creative nature. (111)

Key affirmations like "hope, grace, and mercy" (120), chiefly the province of children and primitives, constitute Pynchon's "'kinder universe' governed by straight motion which is contingent and asymmetrical," opposed to a "baneful universe subject to cyclical processes" (141), which Hohmann, in an especially informative section, analyzes as a modern version of Gnosticism originating in the Romantic movement. Ultimately, Pynchon refuses to adjudicate between these antithetical visions of the universe, a radical paradox signifying on the thematic level ambivalence and uncertainty. Similarly refusing to

resolve the antithesis, Hohmann interprets Gravity's Rainbow consistently throughout his book along both trajectories of meaning. Also in this first part of Hohmann's study are illuminating discussions of McLuhan, Sartre, the Kabbalah and Moby-Dick, each developing and expanding this basic argument.

In the book's second, shorter part, Hohmann claims that, among Pynchon's many literary references, those to Rilke, especially to the Elegies, Sonnets to Orpheus, and Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, "carry the greatest weight" (271). With no previous studies of Rilke and Pynchon to serve as guides, Hohmann tries to steer a middle course between diachronic-genetic and synchronic-poststructuralist approaches: "The reading suggested in this study will only give a tentative genetic explanation after having approached the texts as synchronic entities, exploring ways in which they can be brought to illuminate one another" (278). Drawing in particular on Harold Bloom, Hohmann calls Rilke's presence in Gravity's Rainbow Pynchon's "'Oedipal' struggle" (277), one that takes place between Modernist and post-Modernist sensibilities over the possibility of successfully reviving Orpheus.

Although differing in their conclusions about the possibility of this revival, both Rilke and Pynchon center their discourse in "the general concept of a split at the core of human existence" (285). Psychologically, this ontological split manifests itself through consciousness as a string of dualities such as "life against death" (285), but the necessarily unsuccessful attempt to repress or deny each duality's less desirable term only worsens the dilemma.

Rilke presents this dilemma as rooted in a human consciousness that, in paranoid Pynchonian fashion, imposes distorting patterns on experience. In the Elegies and Gravity's Rainbow, Hohmann argues, such fallen consciousness contains the same four elements--a singular perspective, rationalized time, utilitarian possessiveness, and paradisiacal nostalgia. Similarly, Rilke's world undistorted by human perception includes four basic Pynchonian forces: "a dionysiac and chaotic drive, an overpowering cosmic will, suggestively akin to Pynchon's cosmic 'They,' and the forces of entropy and gravity" (292).

For Pynchon, accommodation to the "postlapsarian predicament," not transcendence of it, represents man's only hope in a "reality' that may be disconcerting but also full of comforting possibilities" (298). For Rilke, likewise, if man accepts his condition instead of futilely attempting to escape it through angelic transcendence, poetical transformation of earth and man is possible. In Rilke's Modernist poetry, then, man and nature may cooperate to effect salvation, but in Pynchon's post-Modernist fiction, "the universe is probably heading towards a cataclysm" (298). According to Hohmann, Major Weissmann is Pynchon's satiric representation of "the historical

misreadings of the Elegies' theme of heroic transcendence" (353), as Slothrop is Pynchon's parody of Rilke's Orpheus. Rilke's Angel, "which is outside human experience but which nevertheless makes human experience meaningful" (317), stands in contrast to Pynchon's V-2, a metaphor for all totalizing and therefore malevolent systems. Rilke's unapproachable Angel becomes Pynchon's approaching Rocket.

In his "Afterword," Hohmann neatly epitomizes his study. Reaffirming that Pynchon alternates between "mythopoeia and mythoclasm" (367), Hohmann ascribes this alternation to Pynchon's belief that fictions are necessary but in some cases undesirable, an ambivalence signified by the oscillation between paranoid characters' logocentric metaphorization and self-conscious narrators' metonymic discourse.

Hohmann's book, however, is not without dilemmas of its own, although these are perhaps attributable in part to the unavoidable contradictions into which Pynchon's fiction leads all his readers. For example, Hohmann argues that Pynchon's "novel clearly rejects the traditional liberal views of man and society as unauthentic and self-deceptive" (89); yet he cites textual evidence that the novel promotes, if only in local and momentary ways, "sympathy" and "true compassion" (122), values derived from those "traditional liberal views" repudiated at the level of collective myth. More problematic, however, is Hohmann's assertion that Pynchon displays a "nostalgia for the first postlapsarian predicament" (97), that is, a "nostalgic sympathy with the early Puritans" (57)--problematic especially since Hohmann also initially claims that Pynchon makes the Puritan-transcendental "vision of the world the target of his attack" (53). It is possible, of course, to resolve such critical dilemmas by resorting to paradox as the privileged trope and theme of Gravity's Rainbow's implied author, but a "conceptual structure" resting essentially on contradiction may not be a "structure" at all. Or if it is, a productive line of inquiry might involve what Fredric Jameson (whose essay "Post-Modernism and Consumer Society" Hohmann himself uses in his discussion of post-Modernist subjectivity) identifies as "a system of antinomies as the symptomatic expression and conceptual reflex of . . . a social contradiction" (The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act. [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981] 83).

Whatever the final status of such questions, Hohmann's book is profusely researched and documented, aware of both its theoretical premises and their implications, and judiciously argued. It is a valuable study of Pynchon and Rilke, one much needed and now, happily, available.

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