Influences, Parallels, Filiations

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Paradoxical Resolutions: American Fiction Since James Joyce. By Craig Hansen Werner. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1982. 237 pp. $18.95.

Despite its concern with "American Literature Since James Joyce" (there is a double-take effect in the subtitle, which manages to suggest, at least at first glance, that Joyce himself was American), Werner's study is regrettably not the one that some of us have been anticipating for years: it does not address directly the question of the relations between Pynchon's novels and Joyce's. It has long been a truism that Gravity's Rainbow has special affinities with Ulysses, and now Werner informs us that "one of the ironies of the reception of Gravity's Rainbow has been the development of an image of the book as a new Finnegans Wake, inaccessible to all but a highly educated elite," but he is not interested in drawing out the correspondences or examining the implications in any detail. That study remains to be written. Yet Werner's overall approach, which involves placing recent American fiction in two very different contexts, gives him interesting angles on a number of American writers and leads him to a compressed but extremely provocative treatment of Gravity's Rainbow that suggests some interesting directions for Pynchon study.

Insofar as Paradoxical Resolutions is an examination of literary influence, its unobjectionable thesis is that various twentieth century American authors have been affected in various ways by various Joyce productions. Influence, Werner cautions, should be construed in a broad rather than a narrow or Bloomian sense (the Bloom here is Harold, not Leopold): Faulkner and Richard Wright may have produced derivative early books because the example of their Irish precursor was overwhelming, but such diverse writers as Flannery O'Connor, Ronald Sukenick, Saul Bellow, Toni Morrison, William Melvin Kelley, and, of course, Pynchon, were able to pick up elements of Joyce's style, subject matter, experiments with form, narra-

tive stance, or themes, from Dubliners, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ulysses, or Finnegans Wake without succumbing to the temptation to become mini-Joyces themselves. Such writers resemble Joyce in a few respects but not in others, and it follows that they might also have an unsuspected family resemblance to certain other American writers who have been similarly influenced. Werner is thus able to group books that would ordinarily seem to have little in common on the basis of a shared relation to a particular work by Joyce--for instance, Plath's The Bell Jar, Kerouac's On the Road, and Baldwin's Go Tell It On the Mountain are treated together because they all reflect "the combination of Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman, and self-advertisement in Portrait"--and to use this relation to set up comparisons that are frequently quite revealing.

He is not merely concerned with Joyce's influence, however. Werner's other focus in this study is the "paradoxical resolutions" that he regards as characteristic of recent American fiction. Citing a long American tradition in which the main conflict of the novel has been between the protagonist and a hostile social environment, he maintains that the traditional resolutions to this conflict are the "romantic," in which the protagonist is separated from his society at the conclusion, and the "realistic," in which the protagonist either overcomes or capitulates to his society. Werner then contends that Joyce's influence serves to qualify and enrich these traditional patterns until they no longer appear to be exhaustive. Both Ulysses and Gravity's Rainbow, for example, "extend symbolic [i.e., "romantic"] and realistic modes until they seem meaningless impositions of abstract systems on the concrete reading experience."

Unfortunately, Werner's exposition tends to suggest not that Joycean models render the "romantic"/"realist" disjunction obsolete, but that "romantic" and "realist" are simply inadequate conceptual tools for the analysis of any literary work. The two emphases --the first on Joyce's influence and the second on the issue of resolutions--never really mesh, although Werner makes a valiant effort in his opening chapter to demonstrate that Joyce's own work, notably Ulysses,

also has a central conflict between the protagonist and his society. The reading is unpersuasive because reductive; Bloom is not the sole central character, and by Werner's own criteria such an interpretation wrenches Ulysses into a frame already identified as characteristically American. The overall thesis of Paradoxical Resolutions thus tends to remain essentially two theses, and one consequence for the readings of the individual works is that the relation to Joyce, which is used to set up a group of texts for examination and cross-comparison, becomes largely peripheral when Werner addresses the question of narrative resolutions. The comparison between the American works becomes what is important: Werner uses Finnegans Wake as a model for the genre of encyclopedic narratives (in a felicitous phrase he describes American encyclopedias as "supreme biographies"), but once he has John Barth and Norman Mailer together under that rubric, he scraps the Joycean parallels and concentrates on a feature the two Americans share, the tendency to make themselves performers in their own stories. The comparison is illuminating: while it is a commonplace that Mailer has always been his own hero, criticism still tends to view Barth as an aesthete committed to formal experimentation to the exclusion of all "realistic" concerns. Using the Mailer analogy, Werner is able to point out how the character who is remarkably like John Barth has been gradually assuming a more prominent role in Barth's narratives, and to use this insight as the basis for a reading that helps to redeem the poorly-received Letters by exploring the ways in which it develops questions about the relation of the artist to his work that were suppressed or glossed over in the earlier and more highly acclaimed Giles Goat Boy.

The discrepancy between Werner's two emphases has a great deal to do with both the strengths and the weaknesses of the section on Gravity's Rainbow. Werner opens the chapter containing this disucssion ("Recognizing Reality," which groups Pynchon's novel with William Gaddis's The Recognitions) with a reflection on some of the ways in which Ulysses deals with the collapse of traditional categories for making sense out of reality. It is in this context that he

makes his most radical statements about the ultimate indeterminacy of Gravity's Rainbow: Pynchon claims "no authority for his own perspective," denies "the validity of aesthetic unity," and confronts us with a text in which "we must accept the responsibility for the implications of whatever order we find." These observations provoke a number of questions: for instance, how do we distinguish between an author's "own perspective" and the fictional universe on which he presumably has that perspective and which is also, because it is his creation, "his own"? If we must accept responsibility for the implications of whatever order we find, does this mean that Pynchon's text is completely disordered? That it contains a multiplicity of orders with no trace of a hierarchical principle? Can the author ever be entirely innocent of responsibility for such implications? Werner does not anticipate such questions; in a sense, he fails to accept responsibility for the implications of his own theory. On the other hand, in raising the issue of textual indeterminacy at the outset, he goes unerringly to the heart of the problem in attempting any interpretation of Pynchon's writing.

The section in this chapter devoted to Gravity's Rainbow is more disappointing, in that it continues to skirt these issues. Again, the problem may be implicit in Werner's approach; the reading of Gravity's Rainbow follows, and stands in contrast to, a reading of The Recognitions, a book that Werner finds seriously flawed. The implicit basis for contrast thus becomes the relative merits of the two novels, and Werner begins to adopt an inflated tone not evident anywhere else in this study in the effort to communicate just how important Pynchon's work is: "The screaming's human. If we don't believe it's important now, we never will"; "Pynchon forces the resolution of modes off the page and into our lives, where it belongs. If we let him." His emphasis in this section is on closed systems as solipsisms, and on Pynchon's insistence that for both characters and readers "some escape from solipsism into compassion is possible," a point that is fairly familiar by now. In supporting this argument, however, he takes two substantial quotations out of their contexts, and the lapses are

significant in both cases because in both cases the context would complicate considerably the straightforward and close-to-banal conclusion that he draws. In the first case he identifies Katje's meditation on "What more do they want?" (GR, 105, Viking ed.) as "Weissmann's analogous vision of humanity as simple raw material for propagating his own obsessions," which is especially misleading here because "they" refers to the English, and the last sentence of the quotation, "The true war is a celebration of markets," explicitly denies the conventional boundaries that would allow us to dismiss the observation as merely part of Weissmann's "vision." In the second case, Werner quotes the long passage, "You have waited in these places into the early mornings, synced in to the on-whitening of the interior, you know the Arrivals schedule by heart, by hollow heart" (GR, 50-51), without identifying the original referent for the "you" as Pointsman and the motivation as at least partially sexual and at least partially exploitative (Pointsman is cruising for lab specimens here as well as fulfilling more immediate needs): "How Pointsman lusts after them, pretty children. Those drab undershorts of his are full to bursting with need. . ." (GR, 150). Werner prefaces the portion of this episode that he quotes with, "It may be too much to expect, but nothing's more important than trying to find, to love," and follows it with the summary statement, "If nothing else, we can shelter strangers." In Gravity's Rainbow, however, things are not all that simple, and love shades into less attractive emotions in ways that preclude making such unqualified generalizations.

The urge to simplify Gravity's Rainbow in order to get a hold on it is probably irresistible, and one of the most provocative aspects of Werner's study is that it does contain a few such obvious distortions of meaning, as if at some point in the reading process the need for a synopsizable message overwhelms everything else. Such misreadings are common in discussions of Pynchon's novels (my own doubtless included); in Paradoxical Resolutions they are more interesting in themselves than damaging to Werner's overall thesis. That we all seem to need to comprehend--in the root sense of "contain"--a novel like Gravity's Rainbow,

even if comprehension necessitates violating some of its complexities, might well be material for a larger meditation on Pynchon's use of closed systems. In these terms, Paradoxical Resolutions is not only interesting and engaging in itself, but important because of the directions for subsequent studies it suggests.

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