The Little Engine That Could

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A Hand to Turn the Time: The Menippean Satires of Thomas Pynchon, by Theodore D. Kharpertian. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990. 176 pp. $29.50.

A pop quiz: Define--without reaching for your *American Heritage Dictionary* or *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*--the words "ecdysiastical" and "aposiopesis."

Give up? Join the club. Yet such chestnuts roll off the pages of *A Hand to Turn the Time* in a steady rattle, with other nuts like "inter alia" and "adumbrate"--words full of latinate meatiness and stale whiffs of The Academy, and never mind that "ecdysiastical" (for strip-tease) was a Mencken coinage meant to satirize the American stuffed shirt.

Satire and Pynchon are Kharpertian's subjects. As for his style, sometimes it relentlessly pursues the abstract: "The movement from deductive Aristotelian scholasticism and Christian theology to empiricism, rationalism, and positivism constitutes the transformation of the ancient world into the modern one of the west . . ." Sometimes his style has a file-clerk's dogged concreteness: "Mike Fallopian and Stanley Koteks, whose names are punning female metaphors (the former a synecdoche, the latter a metonymy) . . ." Sometimes it verges toward the blankly versical: "the possibility of fertility in *The Crying of Lot 49* is proffered by Pynchon in tropes of femaleness." And sometimes this heavily nominalized style verges into the abyssally metaphorical: "Pynchon's own deconstructions and foregroundings are not only metaphors for uncertainty but also the rhetorical means of achieving a fertilization of perception" (in which a Pynchon fathered by a Derrida either ejaculates or defecates into the reader's--what?--eyes, I guess). "Fertilization" is one of satire's hot themes according to this study.

Mostly, though, this book chugs along like the little engine that could. In its chapters "Barthes, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida" rub elbows, in the space of one page, with "Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg and Gödel," or they stand cheek-by-jowl with "Hobbes, Descartes, Locke and Newton." Pages of writing thus go earnestly clickety-clacking through huge mindscapes in what mostly appears to be the effort to convince a dissertation committee that the aspirant has liberally

"contextualized his project." Or, because the dissertator must also demonstrate his "mastery of the secondary literature," Kharpertian's first chapter dutifully summarizes the "central concepts" of every "seminal essay" or book ever written about Pynchon, then repeats the effort with synopses of every theory of satire known to literary history. His editors at Fairleigh Dickinson should have pressed for changes.

Granted, the average scholarly thesis is typically a net to catch mere breezes, but Kharpertian is after big birds. He reads *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, as a "mock-encyclopedic Menippean satire" which itself takes aim at a "repressed, rationalized, white, colonialist, racist, Puritan-Calvinist, European-American civilization [that] dominates his [Pynchon's] contrary utopian impulses." He might have added "patriarchal" to that Thirtysomething Liberal's Catalogue Of Uglies, but that's by the way. What is more striking is how, in passage after passage like this, Kharpertian presumes that satire would be inconceivable beyond the margins of binary thinking, beyond that dialectical habit of western metaphysics that would pit (for instance) utopia against dystopia, or the presumed norms of an Augustan satire against the follies and vices of its nominal "targets." Allude to Derrida though he may, then, Kharpertian nonetheless lumbers along as if the critique of binarity in postmodern thought hadn't really happened. According to his analysis, Pynchon's writings always deploy the "fertilizing" power of Menippean forms against examples of "the sterile," which opposition makes for some of the most blandly sententious observations about these fictions in the annals of Pynchon criticism. Regarding *V.*, we learn that "Women, however, are not inanimate"; or, regarding *Gravity's Rainbow*, that "the feminine is associated with fertility." Classroom kernels like these verily pop off the red-hot pages.

Again, many of these details might well have been caught by more rigorous editors or referees, so in such specifics the fault is not Kharpertian's alone. Still, the overall conception is his; and one may easily feel put off by the dry, deductive agenda announced in the book's very first sentence. There, the introduction proclaims that "This study demonstrates through the construction, elaboration, and systematic application of a formal-functional generic model that Thomas Pynchon's three major fictions . . . are Menippean satires." Five lines further on, Kharpertian is laying down "two formal conventions, attack and variety, and two functional conventions, fertility and delight." From that general vantage point forward, his own juggernaut of "deductive Aristotelian scholasticism" never leaves the tracks. Each convention is further sub- and sub-sub-categorized, then given "systematic application" to the three texts at hand, each treated

in chronological order. Therefore Pynchon is a Menippean satirist, Q.E.D.

Now, solid Pynchon scholars out there are recollecting that oft-quoted passage in *Gravity's Rainbow* about analytical exegetes who squeeze the (phallic) text until it's limp and dry. According to this commonplace quotation, Kharpertian would stand indicted by the very text he explicates. But so what? These days no one says we have to read always with the grain of a text. The point is, Kharpertian says he began with an idea that current readings of Pynchon err, or at least are "problematic," because the critics have "largely avoided or mistaken the writer's genre." His aim, then, was to say something new about Pynchon by way of satire, while also thereby opening satire to fresh readings since it is, according to Kharpertian, a changeable genre. He is right about both satire and Pynchon's critics, and these then are the yardsticks for measuring the critical reach of his book.

Regrettably, Kharpertian's readings come up way short. Amidst his rather tiresome observations about various binary oppositions indexed by characters, images, metaphors and themes, there is nothing that can't be found in earlier studies by the likes of Cowart, Hite, Hume, Mendelson, Moore, Plater and Schaub. There is nothing new here about satire either. Throughout, the ensemble of generic conventions handed down from Enlightenment critics like Casaubon and Pope, and given formalist s(t)olidity since 1950 by Frye, Kernan and Paulson, stands uncontested. According to this view, satire is a targeted and aggressive, but also a normative and therefore generative discourse; it aims to correct, according to implied or explicit norms. Again, however, the critique of binarity in postmodern thought, and the related problems of privileging anything other than radically contingent norms, should have triggered some very disruptive questions about what has happened to satire since, say, the Black Humorists. A really "postmodern" satire would be taking up such problems as (for instance) the potential complicity of all discourses in legitimizing hegemonic power, and it would commence from the recognition that, paradoxically, the most "generative" signifying acts could well be those which are quite degenerative or in a very uncertain middle ground. But Kharpertian avoids dealing with such cruxes; instead, he belabors a deductive thesis that could well have been fleshed out in an amply footnoted forty-page article.

Kharpertian can also be flatly contradictory at times--for instance, in his discussions of postmodernity. In Chapter One, he defines metaphoricity as a definitive modernist inflection which a postmodern novelist like Robbe-Grillet repudiates. Later, though, a thoroughly postmodern Pynchon is described locating in metaphor "a vitalizing

alternative," and so much so that metaphor here becomes a totalizing norm for his satirical project. Is Pynchon a kind of throwback to the days of Eliot, then?

After it all, after the contradictions and the shopworn quotations from *GR*, after having been talked down to like an undergraduate dweeb here and having watched the latinate jargon soar over my head like a puddleduck there, I got somewhat angry. Because: just who was this book written for (or at)? In conceiving its audience as well as its purpose and controlling methodology, this monograph needed fundamental revision. The real pity is that there is an incredible erudition beneath it all, a profound contact with--if not a critical command of--both theoretical writings on satire and Pynchon scholarship. And Kharpertian's study will indeed have utility as a resource for anyone working on the satirical Pynchon. Still, though, in its words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters, this remarkably well-researched and admirably learned study misfires so frequently and so habitually that my instincts told me to take cover. But then I knew what more to do. Galled at last into taking up my *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* for a definition of "aposiopesis" (it's a trope of incompleteness), I figured the best way to conclude this review would be to simply let my disappointment with the book . . .

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