

## Celebrate, Celebrate

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*The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction*, by Christopher Ames.  
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In *The Life of the Party*, Christopher Ames contends that “festive vision,” which he defines as “life conceived in terms of celebration” (2), offers an “angle of fictional approach” by which to view the progression from modernist to postmodernist practices of twentieth-century British and American novelists. Ames’s specific subjects are Joyce and Woolf; Fitzgerald, Waugh and Henry Green (his “Party Between the Wars” figures, whom he regards as “caught between two novelistic traditions—the realistic and the carnivalistic” [30]); and Pynchon and Coover. The study concentrates on showing that tensions between thematic searches for self-authentication and fragmentation in a modern, secular world, often revealed in party scenes, drive developments in fictive—particularly narrative—technique and experiment.

In his introduction, Ames focuses on party scenes and on the concept of “the party” as the modern analogue of the carnival/festival of classical and medieval culture and literature. “By drawing an analogy to festivals,” he intends “to demonstrate how modern parties reflect the culture as it is structured by universal human needs expressed under changing social conditions” (13). The linkage between festivals and “universal human needs,” as one might suspect, derives largely from Bakhtin’s work on festival and carnivalized vision (primarily *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Rabelais and His World*, and “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”), though Ames also draws on the ethnography of Durkheim, Caillois and Girard, among others. Despite his understanding that “ethnographers writing on festivals have largely dismissed parties in discussing modern inheritors of festival” (13), Ames defends parties as the logical inheritors of festive vision. Doing so leads to some of the more evocative and potentially fruitful critical analyses in his study. He regards, for example, Roger Caillois’s “vituperative devaluation of the modern in favor of the ancient” in *Man and the Sacred* as “stem[ming] from a failure of the imagination” (14), and posits instead that the parodic and differentiating energies of the ancient festival, the polyglossia and

heteroglossia Bakhtin sees informing the "spontaneity of the inclusive present" of festive impulses, have more logically evolved into the "celebrative rituals of parties," which are the "private, informal subgroupings of a local society" (14). The enclosure of public festival and carnivalized consciousness in the private world of individual consciousness, in the "subgroupings of a local society," or in the private mediations between reader and narrative which create, say, the phantasmagoria of "Circe," is indeed a seminal focus through which festive vision in novels like those Ames treats may be explored.

And to a certain extent, *The Life of the Party* does just that. Though Ames backs off of the implications in his critique of Caillois's dismissal of modern festival, deciding that "nevertheless, failed ritual has become a crucial metaphor in modern literature" (15), he goes on to construct a viable notion of the party as evocative ritual, revealing in its novelistic manifestations oscillations between the construction and dissolution of the self alternately in public and private moments of presentation. His readings of Joyce find, rather predictably, that Joyce's festive vision moves from dark, failed communal rituals in the *Dubliners* stories ("The Sisters," "Clay," "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" and "The Dead"), through increasingly positive and affirmative communal celebrations in *Ulysses* ("Oxen" and "Circe") and in *Finnegans Wake*.

Through his analysis of the party and Gabriel's later meditation in "The Dead," Ames identifies a "recurrent, essential scene" in Joyce's work: "a social gathering haunted by the symbolic or literal presence of death" (39). He finds the wake-like failed parties in *Dubliners* to anticipate the transformative energies of *Finnegans Wake*, where the paradigmatic wake scene "grows into a comic emblem of the transcendence of mortality" (42), making the *Wake* "perhaps the most clearly carnivalized work in the English language" (69). This nexus of festive energy and the confrontation with mortality becomes the central thematic focus for the remainder of the study, propelling Ames into perhaps the best chapter in the book, his readings of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*. Ames observes that "the connection between party and self remains crucial" in Woolf, in whose novels "one's authentic being can only be discovered in a social context," since "authenticity emerges only when the accumulated experiences of solitude are engaged by the vibrant life of the community" (83). But if "the quest for the true self must lead from solitude to society," the dissolution of the solitary self into social selfhood—which for Ames is the modern, secular mode for transcending mortality—occurs most profoundly in Woolf through festive confrontation with death. Ames links such moments of personal recognition with social occasions

(Woolf's party scenes) where confrontations with mortality (the figural presence of the dead Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the threat of personal and social death looming through the war in *Between the Acts*) lead the consciousnesses of the characters and, one assumes, the reader out of the dead ends of solitary brooding on death and into the open-ended, parodic, and transformative experiences of selfhood achieved in festive celebrations visited by mortality.

Perhaps accurately, from his point of view, Ames finds Fitzgerald, Waugh and Green, whom he considers representative "writers of the thirties," lacking in power to present effective festive transformations of self, partly because of what he calls their "'betweenness'"—their "being ill-suited to the time, caught between an earlier, greater (and, in terms of war, more heroic) generation and a horrifying future"—and partly because he sees in their writing a "pervasive fear of imprisonment and immobility" that "affects the festive paradigm" (127). He finds the decadence and ennui that characterize the party scenes in their novels to undermine the festive impulse and deaden or defeat the possibilities for carnivalized consciousness, leaving the partygoers and, ultimately, the reader unsatisfied.

Ames modulates from the "decadence" of his thirties novelists to the "apocalyptic savagery" of his postmodern novelists, initiating his examination of the works of Pynchon and Coover. As we might expect, "the party gone wild or threatening to dissolve into chaos emerges," for Ames, "as the paradigmatic form of celebration" in the postmoderns, and "the party scene becomes the site of narrative transgressions of fictional decorum" (223). But instead of investigating the possibilities of those narrative transgressions in light of the transformation of carnivalized vision into new novelistic forms (which the chapters on Joyce and Woolf so nicely anticipate), the study falls back into rather tired definitions of the postmodern (Hassan's extension of his "seven modernist parameters" into postmodernist qualities, for example), and ushers thematic concerns with anarchy and entropy into readings of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Gerald's Party* which find the parties in the novels, not surprisingly, locations "in which creative possibilities for literature and life are dramatized" (225).

Ames's chapter on Pynchon opens with a brief discussion of "Entropy," through which he establishes the idea that Pynchon's work is "carnivalistic in Bakhtin's sense of being all-embracing, transcending hierarchies and categories" (233). *Gravity's Rainbow*, though, is Ames's primary interest here, and he finds it carnivalistic in two ways: in its use of the party as "social microcosm, mirroring in its movement towards chaos and disintegration the entropic tendencies of our entire world" (233); and in the "panoramic, encyclopedic richness" of the

novel's "carnival world," which creates "a tension between form and content that complicates our final response to Pynchon's parties and to his novel" (259). It is through the latter perspective that Ames presents his best readings of *Gravity's Rainbow*. He finds the novel consistently providing examples of the "conquest of festival" and its transformative potential, primarily through violence (the external violence of war, and internal violence like what erupts at the party *Chez Raoul*) and decadence (the impotent, death-bearing decadence of the *Anubis* party, and the more potentially "liberating" decadence implicit in the Counterforce banquet). But this "corruption of festival" in the internal workings of plot and character Ames finds counterbalanced and complemented by the "stylistic carnival" (259) Pynchon creates within the "liberating, comic force of [the novel's] language" (259). In the end, Ames agrees with Tony Tanner in identifying Pynchon's "polyglossia with carnival" as an "'enactment of life freeing itself from old rigidifying forms'" (259).

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