

Twayne in Vain

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Thomas Pynchon, by Judith Chambers. New York: Twayne, 1992. 229 pp.
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As Anglo-American literary criticism approaches the end of the millennium, its apparatus of major authorship has become vast and manifold—ranging from 100-level course listings and Ph.D. exam requirements to the volumes of Cliffs Notes, Twentieth-Century Views, Chelsea House reprints and Twayne books produced every year to meet a demand whose source seems uncertain at best. One presumes, of course, that Pynchon's work would not keep accumulating reader's guides unless it were continuing to draw interest from students, teachers and laypersons, and in this sense it is good to see the critical wheels turning out the usual Pynchon byproducts. On the other hand, since most Pynchon readers are aware of Pynchon's indifference to literary criticism and his loathing of bureaucracies, we tend to shudder at the thought that *Gravity's Rainbow* will ever be "popular" enough to merit its own volume of Cliffs Notes.

As a result, critics writing reader's guides to Pynchon tend to be of two minds about their subject, and Judith Chambers is no exception. Discussing *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, Chambers notes the book's resistance to "canonization," and suggests that such resistance is paradoxically central to the text's cultural value: "This novel certainly makes no claim to being a canonical text (God forbid), and yet its inveighing against canonizing makes it the very kind of text that can deliver the message of *a-lethia*: the truth that is also untruth, the truth that is always and at once translucent and opaque" (172). At the same time (indeed, on the same page), Chambers construes this anticanonical novel as something very like a sacred text: "most readers agree that to read *Gravity's Rainbow* is to be in the presence of a remarkable, profound, unutterable event, an event that is unwittingly sullied by all of us who must make utterances about it" (172). Even for people who might demur from this judgment, this is a familiar conundrum; for as all of us perplexed postmoderns know, the literary text that demolishes "representation" most completely will no doubt be considered our culture's representative literary text. Accordingly, by

this logic, there are some major postmodern texts we critics can do nothing but defile as we attempt to re-present them.

Be that as it may, Chambers's study does not defile Pynchon or his work. It does offer an idiosyncratic and often puzzling reading of the Pynchon *oeuvre*, but in this, surely, it is not alone. What *is* unique about Chambers's critical perspective is that it takes for its inspiration the theoretical work of Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin and Robert Graves, blending this already odd trio with John Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987) and *The Great Cosmic Mother* by Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor (1987). Chambers explains this cast of characters by contending that Heidegger, Benjamin and Graves "have developed remarkably similar theories" (2), and that "Pynchon seems to share with Benjamin, Heidegger, and Graves the belief that truth is hidden, and that the logical oversimplifiers have attempted to strip away and bury its mystery, a mystery that must be resurrected" (55). It is hard to imagine that Chambers could not have chosen other intellectual figures in the Western (or Eastern) tradition who would fit this rubric, who would be more compatible with each other, and who would be more germane to Pynchon's work.

And yet this philosophical clutter would not be so problematic if Chambers did not also suggest, at times, that her readings of Pynchon are readings of his intentions. She offers capable explications of Pynchon's short stories, devoting most of her attention to "The Secret Integration," but when she gets to *V.*, she takes that novel's offhand reference to Graves's *White Goddess* as license for a full-blown theory of *V.* as the former "Goddess of a potent matriarchal culture" whose language was once "rich with paradox and mystery" (95). Since *V.* does indeed seem to weave a narrative of humanity's decline and fall into the Inanimate, and since so much of the novel is pegged on the progressive deterioration of its central female figures, Chambers's account of *V.* as the Moon Goddess from whose culture we have fallen is not implausible. But when the Goddess-thesis reappears in the chapter on *The Crying of Lot 49*, where it is not explicitly warranted by the text, Chambers has to offer her reading as a decoding of Pynchon's conscious (though hidden) design: "By creating a protagonist whose name alludes to a Greek male cursed by his own logic and by making this protagonist female rather than male, Pynchon suggests the extent to which the Goddess has been violated by a history of carnage, colonialism, war, technology, and technical language" (100). Does Pynchon mean to suggest such a thing? Earlier, Chambers had prudently hedged her bets: claiming "not to argue that Pynchon is writing a feminist polemic" in *V.*, she concluded that "to interpret his understanding of the demise of the matriarchal heritage as a desire to

return to a matriarchal religion is to misinterpret Pynchon and to miss the significance of what he is exposing." Instead, Pynchon is to be credited for having "accepted and investigated . . . the events that have fostered and fed warring, decadent society" (69). This is surely a safer claim, but then it is also a claim we could make about hundreds of other contemporary writers as well.

In the end, it is not clear what the White Goddess has to do with Pynchon's textual intentions (or why this matters), nor is it clear what the Goddess might have to do with Caputo's late-Heideggerian idea of "cold hermeneutics" either. Caputo's theory seeks a grounding for what he calls "*caritas* with some teeth in it," and Chambers addresses cold hermeneutics because, like other Pynchon critics, she is trying to account for how a writer so antihumanist and caustic as Pynchon can also be so (seemingly) sincere a sentimentalist. Chambers's answer is that in *Gravity's Rainbow*, his most fully realized work, Pynchon composes a form of fiction that is both profoundly antihumanist and profoundly ethical. The novel thus enables, even if it does not depict, Caputo's ideal of *caritas* with teeth: "Although the characters' lives are not informed by this kind of love, the narrative seeks to place the reader in the condition necessary for such a response" (129). This is, I think, an interestingly problematic proposition, and although Chambers's study does not sufficiently bear it out, the premise is certainly worthy of a second, more sustained effort.

Indeed, the chapter on *Gravity's Rainbow* is dotted with close, local readings both provocative and plausible, my favorite being Chambers's markedly skeptical take on Father Rapier and his corrugated-shack "office" in Hell: "This 'shack,'" she writes, "is a shack for a reason—They have strategically placed it to perpetuate the illusion that anomaly still exists. . . . Father Rapier is merely advocating Their message, and by making himself appear to be a subversive on the side of freedom, he manages instead literally to be Their 'advocate'" (152–53). Since *Gravity's Rainbow* relentlessly reminds us that "in a corporate State, a place must be made for innocence, and its many uses" (GR 419), this kind of paranoid rereading seems only reasonable. Similarly savvy passages can be found in Chambers's reading of Imipolex G as an allegorical emblem of control (147–48), and in her argument that the Firm embraces antifoundationalism whereas the lame Counterforce continues to believe in things like determinacy, fixity, cause and effect: "While the Force understand truth as contingency and use this understanding to Their advantage, the Counterforce, whom They control, are still more comfortable with a truth that is more absolute" (143). This is debatable, no doubt, but these days it does not seem

strange to believe that Pynchon's Counterforce is a group composed of the Zone's leading strategic essentialists.

Over all, though, Chambers's book is thoroughly unpredictable and uneven. It contains a few minor slips that will signify mainly to Pynchonians (two references to Zaph's bookstore [97], a misidentification of Henry Adams's dynamo as a steam engine [49], a mention of annual Pynchon readings at Yale [172]); but more important, it neither elucidates Pynchon for the average undergraduate nor reinterprets his *oeuvre* convincingly for the more practiced reader. A Twayne "United States Authors" book, it attempts both more and less than similar Twayne books on contemporary American writers. And as a Twayne book, it is an essential part of the apparatus of American literary criticism. But I am not sure, finally, what role it will play in that apparatus—or what role it was meant to play.

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