

Beating the Binaries

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Satire in Narrative: Petronius, Swift, Gibbon, Melville, and Pynchon, by Frank Palmeri. Austin: U of Texas P, 1990. 183 pp. \$27.50.

Narcissus from Rubble: Competing Models of Character in Contemporary British and American Fiction, by Julius Rowan Raper. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1992. 165 pp. \$27.50.

Frank Palmeri's *Satire in Narrative* offers a synchronic and diachronic study of narrative satire by means of an analysis of five texts with problematic generic status: Petronius's *Satyricon*, Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Melville's *Confidence-Man*, and Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*. In identifying and elaborating a set of generic features and strategies in the book's first chapter, Palmeri attempts to construct a theory of narrative satire that will in subsequent chapters "illuminate the satiric nature of these narratives and . . . improve our ability to make sense of each" (17). In this effort, he is largely successful.

Recent theories of narrative satire must, of course, come to terms with Bakhtin's account of menippea, carnival, and dialogism, but Palmeri, in effect, out-Bakhtins Bakhtin. Whereas Bakhtin privileges carnival as liberating and utopian, Palmeri claims that narrative satire has historically practiced instead a double parody that attacks both prevailing orthodoxies *and* their carnivalesque subversions. In fact, as the engine of menippean satire, carnival and carnivalesque forms may have, Palmeri writes, "reactionary uses" (7).

Consequently, theories of satire in a postmodern context must also come to terms with the paradox of the absent center. As a genre historically marginalized by more privileged, centralized and centered genres like tragedy, epic, and the novel, satire itself has traditionally been centered on ascertainable, determinate values, norms, and paradigms as the implicit or explicit bases upon which the multiform satiric attack takes shape. Palmeri's analysis and theory of narrative satire, however, demonstrate that, unlike more conservative verse satirists, narrative satirists practice a "radical dialogicality" (20) by which Swift, for example, in subversively parodying both poles of

various antithetical discourses, "points to unspecified spaces outside or between the models he parodies" (63).

Palmeri then develops this thesis of the absent center in a series of chapters devoted to the respective satirists under study: Petronius parodies both older and newer cultural forms and practices; Swift and Gibbon both attack Christianity, but neither unequivocally endorses the proffered alternatives of material exteriority or neopaganism; and Melville ridicules both Christianity and commerce. In all these texts, Palmeri establishes that satiric form, as delineated in his opening, theoretical chapter, obtains: pervasive dialogicality, parody, and self-parody; irresolution; uncompromising antitheses; ambivalence about social forms; reversals without recognitions; and reductions of the ideality of metaphor and allegory (associated by Palmeri with hierarchical medievalism) to materiality (associated by Palmeri with a money economy) through the agency of puns, metonymy, and irony.

When Palmeri applies his conceptual apparatus to *The Crying of Lot 49*, the results are gratifying. In his opening chapter, Palmeri invokes Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to make a strong case for genre's enablement of meaning: "[A] literary genre . . . can prove equivalent to a paradigm in expressing an understanding of the world" (13). In the later chapter on Pynchon, Kuhn provides Palmeri analogously with the principal premise for his analysis of *The Crying of Lot 49*: "Myths and literary genres, like scientific paradigms, serve as conventional models of explanation" (109). Palmeri then asserts that Pynchon's multiplicity of discourses—his heteroglossia—"juxtaposes competing paradigms" in order to seek, in a Blakean or Nietzschean transvaluation, "possible alternatives" (110). Among the competing, antithetical paradigms Palmeri explores are those contained within the metaphors of Narcissus, Oedipus, and (treated at some length) entropy and Tristero, all of which function, Palmeri writes, "as tools that help in describing our condition, not as truths to be illustrated" (114). In particular, Tristero as metaphor enables Pynchon to point beyond its irresolvable antinomies to the "historical truth" of its "legacy of disinheritance" (122). Ultimately, Oedipa's "strategic hesitancy" parodies the conventions of tragedy (which Palmeri thinks narrative satire has more in common with than with comedy) and of the detective novel, thus empowering her resistance to and embodying her (and Pynchon's) critique of disabling binary oppositions.

Synchrony yields to diachrony in the brief epilogue. Palmeri compares Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*" and "Tlön, Uqbar: Orbis Tertius" to the works of Petronius, Swift, Gibbon, and Pynchon, suggesting finally that this century's largely "intolerable choice" between competing but equally undesirable political paradigms

makes narrative satire's double parody a suitable form of expression for the ambivalence of the modern narrative satirist, who "persists in viewing all available paradigms of belief from the outside" (130).

Despite some problems—Palmeri employs decidedly equivocal definitions of the key term "reversal," and neglects to address generic theory's far more serious and perhaps intractable dilemma of circularity—*Satire in Narrative* performs a necessary and desirable service for the currently destabilized field of genre studies. It refines Bakhtinian insights into postmodern theory and, by situating *The Crying of Lot 49* in its broader generic context, will, not incidentally, inform readers of Pynchon as well.

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Julius Rowan Raper's *Narcissus from Rubble* argues that, by mid-century, British and American novelists were beginning to repudiate the phenomenology and existentialism of Husserl and Sartre, and employ instead the psychology of Jung as an approach to character. Raper links the abstractionism of Husserl's concept of the transcendental ego to T. E. Hulme's dominant epistemological and aesthetic brand of abstractionist modernism, so the emergence of the Jungian model of character serves *a fortiori* as a synecdoche for the larger, more profound paradigm shift to postmodernism, and represents, Raper asserts, "the most lively and important struggle in the postmodern intellectual arena" (154).

For Raper, phenomenology's tenet that "we are our consciousness of objects" (3)—embodied principally in the figure of Proteus—began to be replaced by a psychological model—embodied in the figure of Narcissus—that presupposes an unconscious ultimately seeking, despite its apparently outward orientation, self-knowledge. Throughout his analysis, Raper portrays Proteus as a degraded model; thus he endorses not only "the psychological side of the dispute" (2)—invoking as necessary Jung, Freud (with reservations), and Freudian revisionist Heinz Kohut, and theories like transference and projection—but also Narcissus as "the central figure in contemporary Western culture" (153).

To develop and demonstrate his thesis, Raper analyzes eleven texts: Bellow's *Seize the Day* and *Henderson the Rain King*; Pynchon's *V.*; Fowles's *Magus*; Kosinski's *Being There*; Barth's *Chimera*; and Durrell's *Avignon Quintet*. In *Seize the Day*, for example, Tommy Wilhelm has, Raper writes, a "true, introverted self" (16) effectively repressed by an inauthentic drive to replicate his father's degree of success. Under the guidance of his healer, Dr. Tamkin, however,

Wilhelm becomes united with "his real self, the god or king hidden within him" (24).

In discussing *Henderson the Rain King*, Raper differentiates between the effects on personality of phenomenological modeling and psychological mirroring. While modeling provides roles for imitation, such roles are, according to Raper, fundamentally alien to the subject seeking transformation. Mirroring, on the other hand, exploits the subject's latent energies and thus allows both Wilhelm and Henderson (as well as Aubrey Blanford in *The Avignon Quintet*) to evolve into their "real" or "true" selves through acknowledgment of the archetypes of the collective unconscious.

These archetypes are not, Raper makes clear in his discussion of *Chimera*, simply the "universal figures and images of myths," but are rather "the human *energies* . . . those images express" (126). Thus Raper anticipates the objection that such archetypalism can mask a conservative, if not reactionary, crypto-modernist agenda. As his analysis of Barth demonstrates, there are "less familiar, noncanonical myths, or newly invented ones" (126) that Barth's exhaustion of the dangerous and vitiated myth of the male hero permits his readers to imagine.

The Jungian approach thus allows a number of characters to recognize, accept, and express their animas. Expression of Tommy Wilhelm's dominant "'feminine' quality" (17) and of *The Magus's* Nicholas Urfe's "unclaimed archetypes of the feminine" (76)—when mirrored by their respective healers, Tamkin and Conchis—necessarily entails as well rejection of Cartesian, male ways of seeing and knowing in favor of "participatory observation" and "feminine knowledge" (68).

When he turns to Kosinski and Pynchon, however, Raper encounters difficulty in maintaining the force and consistency of his argument. Although *Being There* would seem to work effectively as a satire of what Raper calls the phenomenological model of character—one formed exclusively by awareness of and attachment to external objects—Raper claims that Kosinski satirizes both the phenomenological *and* the psychological type. He then claims that both Kosinski's "phenomenological" protagonist, Chance, and the "psychological" narcissists around him are treated with "empathy" and "in a comical rather than judgmental fashion" (100). Raper explains such manifest ambivalence by attributing it to Kosinski's "own narcissistic investments of personal strengths and foibles in characters" (102). In light of such doubleness, *Being There* would seem better served in Palmeri's *Satire in Narrative*.

In the case of *V.*, Raper is compelled to propose that the book's psychological dimension exists by virtue of its absence: "Viewed from

the double perspectives of Sartre and Freud, the surface of *V.* is redundantly and convincingly phenomenological, but its deep structure, though denied, remains ominously psychological" (58). According to Raper, Herbert Stencil, in his devotion to things external, unconsciously chooses Thanatos and, in seeking to evade the meaning of his quest, leaves Malta apparently to die, as did his father at the hands of the Maltese spirit Mara. That Mara murdered Sidney Stencil and that Herbert Stencil leaves Malta to die are at least arguable; Raper, however, suggests that Herbert Stencil's paranoia causes the loss of "his inner self, his essential resource" (53), while Fausto Maijstral, on the contrary, is able to "reclaim his projections" (53) and thus keep his humanity. Because Raper makes the *a priori* assumption that such inner selves exist, his theory has a certain degree of circularity. Problematic, moreover, is Raper's contention that Maijstral, in undergoing his transformations, retains "his essential Fausto identity" (53); Maijstral himself seems to categorize as a fiction the notion of a continuous or essential identity or self. Pynchon is indeed among those novelists in Raper's study who "dramatize the risks of phenomenological approaches to character," but whether he is among those as well who "establish the biological *and psychological* roots of personality" (152-53; emphasis added) is dubious at best.

Raper takes a dual role in his conclusion. He criticizes, not only the entire phenomenological tradition from Descartes and Husserl to Lacan, but also recent attacks on narcissism like Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism*. And he advocates a more balanced view of narcissism that recognizes "how intimately narcissism is intertwined with all human perception" (148) and that does not "[confuse] the centered self with self-centeredness and self with selfishness" (147).

In the dichotomy of phenomenology and psychology, *Narcissus from Rubble* identifies one of this century's significant characterological and ethical antitheses. Raper raises some provocative questions about concepts of character in British and American fiction, and, perhaps more importantly, about modern experience itself.

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