MYTHOLOGIES NEW AND OLD: HUME AND CURRENT THEORY

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Pynchon's Mythography: An Approach to Gravity's Rainbow. By Kathryn Hume. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987, 262 pp. $19.95.

Probably the experience most common to readers and students of Gravity's Rainbow is the conviction that Pynchon's novel possesses an ethical stability or center in spite of their being unable to find one. This is a book which seems to have no identifiable point of view, but which at the same time seems to coincide wonderfully with the New Left Age of Aquarius. Is it an overgeneralization to say that the resulting criticism has therefore tried to make a moral virtue of the novel's anti-systematic composition, its refusal to close or to champion (narratively or dramatically) a moral perspective?

In Pynchon's Mythography, Kathryn Hume attempts to conjure that ethical center more positively, to make "ordinary values" appear as more than a ghostly trail in a cloud chamber of wisecracks, burlesque routines and elegiac riffs. In her view, Pynchon criticism to date has too often focused upon the uncertainties and ambiguities of the text, its fragmentation and reader-subversion. These "postmodernist" and "post-structuralist" readings, which Hume calls "negative or disintegrative for want of a better term" (3), are fundamentally out of keeping with the persistent ethical aura of the text.

In contrast to these approaches, Hume calls our attention to those elements of Gravity's Rainbow that "can be deciphered" and are "traditional." "There is a vein throughout Gravity's Rainbow," she declares, "that counters all assertions of unknowability. Pynchon has, in fact, used mythology to give structure and values to his fictive world" (xi-xii). Pynchon's Mythography is the attempt to mine that "vein"--or, in a related image, to "disentangle" Pynchon's "mythology" from "the chaotic strands of narrative" (xv).

I confess to being powerfully attracted by this promise, for I was reading Gravity's Rainbow--as were many of us--in the days of Nixon's resignation, the aftermath of Cambodia, and the retreat from Saigon, and it was pretty difficult not to read the novel as an explosive subversion of that entire misbegotten enterprise and the capitalist history of the West which produced it. So why not a reading that sets aside all the chicanery and literary-critical humbug to reveal the text's zany but Aquarian values?

One of the considerable virtues of Pynchon's Mythography is that it answers that question and in so doing helps us to think

about what we do when we read. Hume has framed her project as an alternative to post-structuralism, and so makes the reader unusually conscious of the competing literary-critical methods that swirl about us and by turns frustrate and advance our work. Further, even if we don't grant Hume's assumptions about literature and interpretation--essentially New Critical and humanist--her book will serve for many years as the standard study of mythological elements in Pynchon's novel. Whether those elements constitute a structure or express value, however, is a question directly related to critical method. As I shall argue in a moment, Hume's claim to have discovered a mythological structure is not one I found compelling, but her efforts help clarify for me--not by a long shot a Derridean--just what the limitations of New Critical analysis can be.

Though attending to the "traditional," Hume's claim that Gravity's Rainbow has a "structure" is about as radical a claim as one can make, and is sure to grab the attention of readers who have concluded that Gravity's Rainbow--whatever else it may be--is certainly a mess, and has no interest in making its bed or putting its toys away. Hume identifies two types of structure in Gravity's Rainbow. The first is the Biblical arc from Genesis ("Slothrop's ancestors, like the patriarchs of Genesis, mark the unfolding of early cultural history") to Revelations (the prophecy of destruction with which the book closes): "minds influenced by that great template the Bible tend to demand something like its linear pattern in a mythology. When Pynchon creates stories to embody the values of Western culture, he uses that traditional structure" (21, 87).

In addition to this linear pattern, Hume identifies mythological "elements" common to both traditional mythologies and Pynchon's novel. The invariable result of this syllogistic procedure is that Hume's book becomes an exhaustive taxonomy, seeking to establish analogies or identities between mythologies ("aggregate" myths like the Bible or the Homeric epics) and Gravity's Rainbow (mythological literature).

This procedure accounts for the clarity of the book's organization, which begins (in Chapter One) by "separating ["disentangling"] cosmos from chaos" and then proceeds (in Chapter Two) to identify this "cosmos" as "mythological," replete with "mythological actions" (Chapter Three) and a new mythological "individual" (Chapter Four). Each of these four chapters begins with a definition of the mythic element under scrutiny (cosmos, mythological elements of cosmos, action, individual) and then shows how Gravity's Rainbow possesses comparable elements. In Chapter Five, "Chaos and Cosmos Integrated," Hume argues that the mythological elements (having structure) "interrelate" with those of chaos, and that Pynchon's readers should remain "open" to both. Under the roomy umbrella of this liberal pluralism, New Critics and post-structuralists can coexist, complement and enrich each other.

In this summary I have insisted upon the word "element" rather than "structure" because this is the word Hume so often

uses in its place and because her effort to "disentangle" mythological structure from the chaos of Gravity's Rainbow produces lists of mythic "elements" which she organizes, but no "structure." So, for example, when we finish the chapter titled "The Mythological Cosmos," we have a list of mythic elements in this cosmos and a demonstration that this list (denuded, for the most part, of its tonal differences--of parody, satire, farce, burlesque) is comparable to one we may find in Dante's Commedia or Beowulf, but we are no surer that this constitutes a cosmos--defined in Webster's as "an orderly harmonious systematic universe."

Nor does Hume's conception of myth address what is most interesting about myths--how they function in a culture, or, alternatively, how myths are an expression of culture. By this I don't mean to ignore Hume's careful attention to myth's typical social tasks. She cites Frye, for example: "'it is one of their functions to tell [a] culture what it is and how it came to be, in [its] own mythical terms'" (18). But this idea of mythic work takes mythic narratives at their face value ("in [its] own mythical terms")--or at the level of what Marcuse called "the affirmative character of culture"--and thus steers clear of such interesting questions as how "Pynchon's mythography" -- not myth or mythology, but writing-about-myth -- is a contemporary cultural product, not a transcendental (Archimedean) voice speaking to Western culture, but what Jameson terms an "immanent expression" of the text's cultural ground.

What Jameson means by "immanent expression" is explained in the first chapter of The Political Unconscious, where he takes as his "model" of interpretation "the readings of myth and aesthetic structure of Claude Lévi-Strauss." In Jameson's readings, the "individual 'text'" is "reconstituted in the form of the great collective and class discourses of which a text is little more than an individual parole or utterance," and "the purely formal patterns" of individual narrative are read as the "symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic" (Jameson 76-77).

Hume explicitly rejects this approach. In her view, myth is primarily oral, evolving through a process of forgetfulness in which the "idiosyncrasies, the traces of personal psychology" of individual storytellers are eroded and lost. Because this is not the case with "printed fiction" (such as Gravity's Rainbow), a "direct transfer of Lévi-Strauss's techniques to literature" is not possible. Instead, "some modification of the structuralist approach to mythology would seem more promising" (26). At the same time, Hume appears to recognize that in rejecting Lévi-Strauss's approach she is also rejecting the common denominator of much contemporary criticism, the idea that "'understanding consists in reducing one type of reality to another'" (Lévi-Strauss, cited in Hume 25). All the critic would uncover, using Lévi-Strauss's anthropology (or Marx's sociology or Freud's psychology), would be "cultural anxieties . . . as they are filtered through the individual author's consciousness" (25-26). Hume is unwilling to entertain Marx's idea--in varying

degrees and versions the assumption of so much current theory--that "social being . . . determines consciousness" ("Preface" to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy). Instead, Gravity's Rainbow is Pynchon's writing, his message, which he sends (from "out there") to us (here), rather than a vast intertextuality "leaking" through the agency of a socially constituted subject.

By insisting that Gravity's Rainbow is the private creation of an autonomous self, however, Hume finesses her own project (the novel is fiction, not myth) and fails to isolate the kind of "mythology" which does govern so many of the novel's set pieces. Let's look at one example. As part of her demonstration that Pynchon has provided a "cosmos" and not a "chaos," Hume cites the famous passage addressing Marx (though excising the text's references to him): "Christian Europe was always death, Karl, death and repression. Out and down in the colonies, life can be indulged, life and sensuality in all its forms, with no harm done to the Metropolis, nothing to soil those cathedrals, white marble statues, noble thoughts" (GR 317). Hume uses this passage to show that geography in Gravity's Rainbow has the symbolic character of mythic space ("we find values associated with the points of the compass"[40]). But to the degree that such elements are at all mythic, they are so precisely because they aren't Pynchon's, but are instead cultural (and "collective") formulations which condition the way we think about social and political relations.

These formulations are part of an indeterminate intertextual weave (the "already read" of Barthes) whose brightest colors, in the passage above, are Marx, Freud and Conrad (modulated by the psychoanalytical revisionism of the 50s and 60s), rather than an author's private mythologizing. It is no accident that Conrad's Heart of Darkness surfaced as a revolutionary text during the Vietnam war. Already installed, in the 40s and 50s, as one of the great Modernist texts, it helped from the very beginning to condition the way US foreign policy was interpreted. Witness the similarity to Gravity's Rainbow of Coppola's mythic vision in Apocalypse Now, released only a few years after the novel's publication.

If Gravity's Rainbow has a mythology, or is a mythology--and I'm not convinced of either possibility, as Hume defines them--it would be the natural or unquestioned, the "what goes without saying," that motivates Pynchon. In the example above, it is a version of Modern European Thought (and an attitude toward it) which has informed a large subset of the literate Western public for seventy-five years or so (at a minimum). To read Gravity's Rainbow as an intertext, of course, takes the charisma out of Authorial genius. How can an artist be a critic, a subversive, a sage, if the text isn't his/hers? I don't have the answer to that, but my own critical sense (and my experience with the actual practice of intertextuality, especially in New Historical modes) tells me that some sort of compromise does exist between autonomy and cultural determinism in the creation of texts.

Of course, with Gravity's Rainbow the issue is further complicated by the fact that the text plumes itself as the voice of de-mystification--paranoia is its deconstructive "refracting lens" (to recall Mendelson's image). Yet Barthes himself asked this question of his own enterprise in the 1957 "Preface" to Mythologies: "is there a mythology of the mythologist?"--and answered, "No doubt, and the reader will easily see where I stand" (12). This "mythology" is just what the mythologist, the reader of Gravity's Rainbow as mythology, would uncover, and whatever values it has, and whatever political work it does would emerge from such analysis.

Hume's rejection of post-structuralist ideas, however, denies her access to this intertextual activity and leaves her looking for kinds of pattern Gravity's Rainbow doesn't have, because the book isn't threaded on a submerged story line as (in the simplest sense) "The Wasteland," Ulysses, or, more recently, The Assistant is. Though Hume never attempts to discover something like the Fisher King myth inside the chaos of Gravity's Rainbow, that discovery seems to have been her unspoken desire. Certainly the image of her prey as something with a "structure" promises that a skeleton will appear beneath the x-ray of her analysis. Instead of a modified structuralist approach, her "pattern-seeking" (xvii) seems rooted in the postwar hegemony of Eliot and the New Criticism, when everyone read fiction as myth and many--Ellison, Malamud and Updike, to name three—built their narratives on a lattice of myth. For what is the point of trying to show that Pynchon has given Gravity's Rainbow "structure and values" (xi) except that for Hume, as for Eliot, a text cannot have "values" without "structure"? Mythic pattern, in Eliot's view, could provide narrative with backbone, as both structural support and source of sustaining values. Though Hume refers to Eliot only twice, in two footnotes, Eliot's defense of Ulysses (in The Dial review, which Hume cites) is clearly the model for her own study of structure in Gravity's Rainbow (see Hume 32 and 228, n. 27).

To find values in this way assumes an authorial intent in the book as a bounded entity, and it ignores the system of signs in which both writer and reader are immersed and which makes any communication between them possible. "Structure" is the sign, for Hume, of that authorial intention and its "stable" values. In contrast, post-structuralist criticism only contributes to disintegration: "Destabilizing structures and techniques," she declares, are not "conducive to ordinary values" (xii).

Even so, Hume attempts to mollify "post-structuralist" readers by including their approaches in a productive detente. She encourages the reader to "integrate" the "mythological" (i.e., the New Critical) and the postmodern or post-structuralist (xiii, 2), for each "has a different but interlocking function in the total effect" (32). This invitation is extended again in the final chapter: "When we find the standpoint from which the two perceptions—postmodernist and mythological—can be integrated, we will have exercised a kind of creativity as well" (186). But these exhortations fail to recognize that deconstruction admits

no privileged "standpoint" and likes nothing better than to show "integration" operating in behalf of division and hierarchy. Like post-structuralism generally, deconstruction denies any such "center," and neither can be subordinated to the liberal home of Anglo-American empiricism.

As a result of these misunderstandings, Hume's book misses the chance to address the theoretical questions it raises. For example: Can one demystify the metaphysics of presence and at the same time "make points," and "provide a new model for individual behavior"? How can a text be both "postmodern" and "traditional"? To put this in formalist terms, is it not precisely a feature of "postmodernism" that it may use "traditional techniques" as kinds of style among many available, as colors from a palette, so that this use itself is not in any way traditional because it is conditioned and transformed by the text (or textuality) in which it appears? Thus to see "traditional techniques" in a text is not, necessarily, to see "tradition" in a text--just as one cannot isolate the photographic elements in a collage as proof of its realism. This is an issue--a reality--that will never be confronted if the critic separates the traditional from the postmodern, the "positive" from the "negative."

Post-structuralism, as far as I can tell, is not opposed to values, even "ordinary" values. But because its energies are organized to overturn the self-promoting hierarchies and values of texts and their readers, it appears to oppose all values and to degenerate into mere cynicism (as in fact it does in some American practice). Still, we should keep in mind that Derrida is carrying on a war against transcendence and idealism that has a rather long genealogy predating post-structuralism. If we need to find something "positive" in these critical developments, we may heed their reminder that our values are self-interested and only seem natural because they express the mythology--in Barthes' sense as bourgeois ideology--we take to be truth. Readers may well subscribe to the mythology of Gravity's Rainbow, but they needn't think it has some transcendent or idealist source, in the Author's Imagination or in a miraculous insight of Pynchon's into the workings of the universe. Democratic (preterite), "laid-back," gender-sensitive readers may find a lot to like in Gravity's Rainbow, but such sympathies, far from constituting Pynchon's mythography, are instead an expression of mythology "writing" Pynchon--and his readers.

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