ON ORIGINS AND BEGINNINGS

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Journey into the Past: The Historical and Mythical Imagination of Barth and Pynchon. By Seong-Kon Kim. Seoul: American Studies Institute, Seoul National University, 1985. 194 pp.

Seong-Kon Kim's Journey into the Past: The Historical and Mythical Imagination of Barth and Pynchon, the tenth in Seoul National University's American Studies Institute's monograph series, grounds itself on an analogy: that like Vico, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida, Barth and Pynchon (whom Kim regards as central to their novelistic generation) have recourse to history and the myths of the past in order to repudiate them in a quest for "new order, new language, or new imagination" (1). According to Kim, postmodernist American fiction and post-structuralist literary theory "ultimately unite and correspond to each other in their perception and interpretation of contemporary reality" (1), one which Kim describes as "the nightmare landscape where the truth is absent" (32).

Kim divides his study into four parts: an introductory, theoretical pair of chapters based on Edward Said's distinction between "divine origins" and "human beginnings"; six chapters devoted to Barth; another six to Pynchon; and a final pair of chapters sketching the two writers' "Jungian" visions of eclectic accommodation and concluding that the fictions' ultimate goal of renewal is realized in the process of the quest for renewal itself.

In the introduction, Kim explores the post-structuralist notions that an "anxiety of irrecoverability" (7) motivates the project of the postmodernists (and of such ancestors as Vico and Nietzsche) and that, because of a perceived absence of the absolute origin or center, postmodernism has been impelled to produce instead a discourse of provisional beginnings "with the intention and will to discover new order to replace the old" (21). In Vico, Kim uncovers a "precursor" (7), whose importance lies in his "abandonment of sacred history in behalf of secular history" (8). Similarly, Nietzsche's rejection of "the idolatrous Absolute" (12) in all its conventional manifestations--morality, for example--results in a "genealogical exploration of the past and . . . Dionysian dance [that] eventually produce . . . Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida" (13). Foucauldian genealogy likewise offers an alternative to history, and Derridean theory provides a compelling conceptual terminology that reinforces the absence of a linguistic foundation upon which to base centered, determinate meaning.

Similarly, Kim sees in postwar American fiction an alien cultural stance by writers who recognize that "the Death of the

Novel" means the end of a particular kind of fiction--in Kim's words, "the arrogant highbrow art form that had dominated the Western literary scene since the late nineteenth century" (23)--and create a new, subversive type of countertraditional fiction. In their search for novelty amidst exhaustion, these postmodernists "reexamine the past in order to understand the present reality" (26), and in Kim's titular terms, their journey into a demystified past of history and myth yields "historical and mythical imagination" (26).

In the chapters on Barth's fiction from The Floating Opera to Letters, Kim develops several themes: rejection of the dominant culture; the "spiritual orphanage" (41) of protagonists who rebel against yet ultimately seek reconciliation with the past as symbolized by absent fathers; the ambiguous postmodern condition of deferment or, in Barth's term, "floating," alleviated only by the discovery of new language; and heroism as the effort to escape from the labyrinth of the present by searching for new order in the encounter with the past. Overall, these chapters are done systematically and thoroughly.

The four thematic patterns, however, serve Kim somewhat less consistently well in his corresponding chapters on Pynchon, which comprise about 25% of the text. (The chapters on Barth, on the other hand, comprise about 40%.) Kim views the themes of paranoia and entropy, as well as Pynchon's reclusion, as signs of an "illegal and external stance" (104) necessitated by Pynchon's sense that "the whole of human culture . . . is a product of repression" (104) by a dead, Derridean center of "masculine energy" (105). Following this line of argument, Kim reads V. "as a powerful indictment of the history of this oppressive culture which transforms man into an inanimate plastic manikin" (106), The Crying of Lot 49 "as a book of denial of either/or construction in favor of both/and--that is, the denial of clarity and certainty in favor of ambiguity and uncertainty" (108), and Gravity's Rainbow as "a book about the charismatic authority which tries to rationalize and control the illegal energy and disorder into legal bureaucracy" (111).

Such critical judgments are unexceptionable, but the section is marred somewhat by a weak chapter on parentage (Kim acknowledges that the motif is "relatively less explicit" [117] in Pynchon than in Barth) and some questionable assertions. In particular, it is at least arguable that some of Pynchon's less attractive characters--Kim cites Benny Profane, the Whole Sick Crew, Mucho Maas, Metzger, and Hilarius--are not, as Kim suggests, "floating" in a state "different from the state of inertia or inanimation, or anti-paranoia" (122). Moreover, the inference that "It is, then, ultimately the triumph of the Preterite over the Elect that Pynchon celebrates in Gravity's Rainbow" (112) represents, I think, a serious misreading of Pynchon's text: a celebration, perhaps, but hardly a triumph. Finally, when Kim claims that "Pynchon's creative spirit . . . resists the gravity of the charismatic center of the dominant culture" (104), he offers no further suggestions that gravity and

charisma are terms in Pynchon's fiction that are likely fraught with ambiguity.

But on the whole, describing *V.* as "[p]erhaps . . . the most nihilistic among Pynchon's novels" (140), *The Crying of Lot 49* as "problematic and ambiguous" (141), and *Gravity's Rainbow* as "a grim version of modern *Revelation*" (141) is reasonably on target, especially since Kim realizes that, despite a fictional world "often too grim and pessimistic" and characters "often powerless and helpless" (154), Pynchon's sense of "possibility" outweighs, however slightly, his sense of "despair" (142). Occasional stylistic infelicities aside, Kim's study is well written, amply documented (the bibliography is some thirty pages), and in sum performs a useful task in mapping affiliations between post-structuralism and postmodernism. It is a welcome addition to the Pynchon critical canon.

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