

Included Middles  
and the Trope of the Absent Insight  
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Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon. By Molly Hite. Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1983. 183 pp. \$17.50.

Criticism of Thomas Pynchon's three novels to date (V., The Crying of Lot 49, and Gravity's Rainbow) has been largely concerned with explaining the texts in relation to something else--be it object, concept, or system of ideas--which is perceived as already knowable and known. The critics have seen their task as one of control and mastery. By exploring sharply defined conceptualizations of the text, by way of often convention-ridden critical strategies, these critics have sought to untie the knots of discourse that, of course, conceal a central message, an originary meaning, that will illuminate the entire text. I do not want to suggest by the remainder of this review essay that these efforts have been futile. On the contrary, the explications of Pynchon's use of entropy, historical facts, scientific facts, films, other literature and arts have all contributed to our understanding of the disparate elements Pynchon has amalgamated into his encyclopedic writing.

These pioneering critics venture onto shaky ground, however, whenever they attempt to raise their explications to the status of hermeneutics. They desire either an ultimate meaning, structure, order that will explain everything, or a final confirmation that the texts are incoherent, irredeemably random, meaningless. As Pynchon puts it, it is the tension we recognize in the conditions of paranoia and anti-paranoia--conditions in which either everything is connected to everything else or everything is hopelessly unconnected to anything else: pure and total order versus unremitting chaos. For the reader to make sense of the fictional worlds in Pynchon's texts, the texts must be made to conform to one of these extremes, and the question then becomes: "Who or what is responsible?" Though this dichotomy and question of responsibility are deeply ingrained in Western epistemologies, Molly Hite asserts in Ideas of

Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon that they offer Pynchon's reader a fundamentally wrong approach to the novels.

In her alternative approach, Hite contends that Pynchon's "fictional worlds . . . are pluralistic--governed not by a rigid, absolute, and universal Idea of order but by multiple, partial, overlapping, and often conflicting ideas of order. And these worlds are familiar, even when they are most bizarre and surreal, because they evoke a multilayered reality in which multiple means of putting things together manage to coexist without resolving into a single, definitive system of organization" (10). By foregrounding her study of the novels on this pluralist assertion, Hite examines with great sensitivity the mania for order that motivates most of Pynchon's characters. Herbert Stencil, Oedipa Maas, Ned Pointsman, Tyrone Slothrop, etc.--all become seduced by the desire for and the image of an order that would make sense of everything, an order hidden just below the surface of perceived reality, an order that either will allow the world to continue (the order of a benevolent God) or will fulfill the prophecy of randomness oracled by the second law of thermodynamics. Pynchon's narratives, in Hite's reading, play out the drama/comedy of life, as each character is caught with incomplete data between the metaphysical extremes of order and chaos.

To be able to read Pynchon's texts in this way without succumbing, as Hite admirably does not, to some sort of totalizing metaphor that will privilege a single ordering principle requires a poststructuralist epistemology unavailable to any of the characters. Hite is well-schooled in poststructuralist and deconstructive activities of reading texts (though her readers are spared the turgid or self-indulgent prose that characterizes some deconstructive critical writing). She uses this way of reading to uncover the "middles" that constitute Pynchon's fictional worlds but that are actively excluded by the characters in their individual quests for a meaningful order for experience. Paradoxically, the inclusion of "middles," local systems of order that overlap and interweave to form the fabric of experience, necessitates that we recognize a fundamental "centerlessness" in Pynchon's

fictional worlds and his fictions. Despite his characters' courageous efforts, there is no all-inclusive order or ultimate single meaning undergirding their existences. Hite sees this centerlessness as a condition rather than a theme in the novels, and it correlates with what deconstructionists see as "the gap between language and its true referent"--the referent being always already different and absent from the word and the universe of discourse.

As Hite so cogently demonstrates throughout her study, the condition of centerlessness is the enabling trope that directs each character's quest for an Idea of Order. But such an Order is never accessible, because the quest is always for the "absent insight," the "Holy Center" one always approaches but which never actually exists. The "Holy Center" promises to provide a totalizing answer to the random events in each character's life, yet the failure of the questing characters to discover the center does not mean that everything is an illusion masking a great cosmic blank. Instead, the absence of the center and a single order emanating from it marks a plenitude of smaller, competing, overlapping and always incomplete orders that allow meaning and life to continue. This lack of unity is, moreover, a positive condition--the necessary element in human freedom; thus, Slothrop's scattering at the end of Gravity's Rainbow marks a full embrace of freedom rather than an inevitable loss. It is only to readers who bring their own totalizing metaphors to the text that Slothrop's disappearance marks a nihilistic denouement. But why do we read Pynchon's texts this way?

Hite notes throughout her study how Pynchon's characters tend to "read" the signs of their experiences as if they were characters in a traditional novel. The operative word here is "traditional," since in Hite's view the linear thinking and organization of experience that constitutes the structure of most traditional novels does not ultimately apply to Pynchon's texts. Pynchon's narrators are never god-like presences having complete control over the fictional world; instead, they appear to be in much the same condition of centerlessness as the characters. And if the narrators and the characters have no privileged access to a "Holy Center," then neither can readers expect privileged

access. Nor can they impose onto the narrative a system, based on the tired conventions of traditional novels, that will routinize the text's process of becoming into that of an unchanging artifact. Hite seeks primarily to overturn the convention of seeing narrative structure as operating only within a logic of cause and effect; in its place she proposes we read the many events in Pynchon's texts as elements in a series of resemblances that have neither a single originary event, nor a definitive hierarchical order, nor an end. Resemblances form into orders, but these are mostly orders imposed by a logic that "plots" experiences as if they occurred in novels, and these orders never approach an Order that would explain everything. In Pynchon's worlds the events may be ultimately random, but the drama and comedy in his texts come from the ways his characters, narrators, and readers order their experiences in futile yet necessary quests for total meaning.

These, then, are Hite's premises for her readings of the novels. In looking at V., Hite begins by citing that "Stencil's story does not approximate Pynchon's," and from there she traces Stencil's quest as an allegory of a naturalistic reading of history that seeks to plot events along a deterministic time line that will confirm Stencil's perception of his present day world as the scene of final degradation. The always absent insight or center is the lady V., who presents an enigmatic image that refuses to become clearly defined, that suggests far too much, that neither confirms nor disavows anything which would unlock the secrets of the world. In The Crying of Lot 49 Hite focuses on the novel's parody of a pure linear narrative structure and of Oedipa's paradigmatic acts of interpretation. Oedipa reads each mark of Tristero that she discovers in a search for the cause-and-effect order that is either undergirding or undermining her world, but again the evidence fails to add up, and Oedipa along with the reader is left with a mass of "descriptive residue." However, "this residue constitutes a world," and Hite observes that Pynchon "uses the device of 'descriptive residue' to initiate a radical questioning of whether anything can be merely residue. . . . Waste signifies; it communicates" (76-77).

Gravity's Rainbow inevitably gets the longest chapter in Hite's study. Here Hite shows how the novel dramatizes the conflict between Providential and secular histories--the former being firmly centered in a myth of origin and totally end-directed (eschatological), while the latter is centerless and a celebration of life as it is lived. Thus Gravity's Rainbow is a historical novel, but not in the traditional sense; instead, it contravenes the orthodox literary patterns and focuses for examining historical events, and substitutes a narrative logic that Hite aligns with "Murphy's law": "By making Murphy's law a 'brash Irish proletarian restatement of Godel's Theorem,' Pynchon implies that a truism of experience--something will go wrong, something will always surprise us--derives from the necessary incompleteness of all totalizing conceptual systems" (123-24). This "incompleteness" is marked in the text by the constant use of ellipses, which suggest there is always more to anything than can ever be said. Nearly a third of Hite's chapter is devoted to examining the narrator and the use of "language" in Gravity's Rainbow; though these are not the last words on these subjects, Hite has certainly done a fine job in showing readers how contingent these two can be.

As excellent as Ideas of Order is, it too suffers from some incompleteness and an occasional blindness to the implications of some of its points. For example, in discussing V., Hite makes only passing comments about the eleven chapters that make up the present time of the narrative, and one would like to see a more extended reading of Benny Profane's story within the context of ideas of order. Though Hite is very right in seeing Lot 49 as an assault on linear narrative thinking, on the narratological level of the sentence, the novel manifests some dizzying shifts in focalization and temporal orientation: for all its apparent linearity, Lot 49 is less straightforward in its narrative patterns than Hite implies. And finally, with regard to Gravity's Rainbow, one can cite two rather disturbing assertions. The first has to do with the "incident [that] marks the decentralization of Slothrop's sexuality" (119), Trudi's "nose job," given in Säure Bummer's Berlin apartment (GR, 439). According to Hite, Slothrop's nasal erection is "his final sexual perfor-

mance before he loses coherence as a character" (119), and the shifting of his "hardon" from his penis to his nose marks his "degenitalization." However, Hite overlooks Slothrop's later tryst with Bianca (GR, 468-72), when "something, oh, kind of funny happens here. Not that Slothrop is really aware of it now, while it's going on--but later on, it will occur to him that he was--this may sound odd, but he was somehow, actually, well, inside his own cock" (469-70). The problem with Hite's reading of the "incident" is her making it Slothrop's "final" performance; in so doing she contravenes the logic of the non-totalizing act of reading she is trying to posit.

The second, and perhaps more disturbing, assertion occurs during Hite's examination of "the deathward tendency of the action." Hite observes that despite all of the deathward tendencies in the text, "not one of the major characters dies" (130). First of all, this statement is true for a traditional logic of reading that seeks singular narrative lines organized around particular characters, especially the titular character. But elsewhere Hite wants the reader to recognize that "Pynchon refuses to establish a hierarchy among the cacophony of voices in Gravity's Rainbow" (102). If Pynchon refuses to establish hierarchies (a point I find fundamentally necessary for understanding Pynchon's text), then there is no such thing as "major characters," and some characters' deaths are felt and shared by the "community" (Hite's term) of the novel. If this is not so, then Hite's statement implies (though in no way do I think she intends) that it is okay for minor, or marginal characters to die, since it is really only the central characters that matter. Hite blindly falls, here, into the trap set by conventional habits of novel reading and by her desire to read the novel ultimately as a comedy; as she puts it at the end of the paragraph in which she states no major characters die: "To take the arc of the rainbow seriously as a controlling metaphor is to betray a richly comic novel to the excessive gravity of its providential plot" (131). Hite's careful way of reading is occasionally and similarly betrayed to the excessive gravity of traditional structures of reading.

Although one may quibble with a few elements in Molly Hite's study, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon is a major work of Pynchon criticism, and it marks a significant step forward in our quest to understand, arguably, the most important American novelist living. Hite's work opens new perspectives to novels and to our activities of reading them, and her work is a must for anyone who wants seriously to study Pynchon's writing. Ultimately, the value of Hite's work rests in her break with previous methods for reading the texts--methods that were steeped in the training of New Criticism. Molly Hite reads Thomas Pynchon, through his writings, as one with his age's most radical intellectual movements: post-structuralism and deconstruction.

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