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Beheading the idols: the logic of satire and erasing of intellectual idolatry

In the second chapter of part one of Carter Kaplan's *Critical Synoptics*, the author proposes a duality within the field of literary judgement between those critics who play their "reading games" on the basis of a clinical, authoritarian and analytical posture and those who tend to convey the value of literary texts on the basis of an aesthetic reading. Kaplan's conceptual inventiveness allows him to generate distinct portmanteau words to characterize their corresponding modus operandi: "cat-alytic" for the former type of critic, who operates as a "catalyst in the sense that he remains unchanged while transforming the character of what he criticizes" (71), and "syn-aesthetic" for the latter, who seeks to synthesize "familiar objects and patterns in new forms which either reveal or alter their aesthetic values" (71 Yet nothing is said about the duality that may exist in the academic world "species", between, for instance, anonymous referees of scholarly journals, members of doctoral examination boards, teachers of art and literature, conference organizers and book editors. Where, then, would I fit in? Into which intellectual category would the close reader be subsumed, what sort of attributes and idiosyncrasies might I have to display in my scholarly reading of a book on *Menippean satire and the analysis of intellectual mythology*, had Kaplan set down, as he did for the "species" of literary critics, a "table of dialectical traditions" for conference attenders? In accordance with which set of properties defining the "mechanism", "criteria", "agenda of expression", "mode", "orientation", "antecedents", "political system", "process" and "motivational factors" of book reviewing would I be operating? The question, far from being inappropriate for the

practical purposes of this review, bears witness to the originality of Kaplan's book, in so far as it mimics the self-satirizing mechanism of his highly sophisticated "textual games". These consist of critical analyses inspired both by the literary genre of Menippean Satire and by Wittgenstein's philosophical inquiries into language as mystification. Presented as a series of hermeneutic exercises eclectically combining both literary and philosophical discourse, Kaplan's analyses focus on discreet themes, ranging from works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Jules Verne, through examples of literary dystopias, to theoretical issues of our post Cold War era, such as Stuart Kauffman's complexity theory, artificial intelligence, and information technologies in the service of the global dissemination of what he calls "ideological capitalism".   But what is Menippean Satire, after all? Of what does Critical Synoptics consist?

From the very beginning of his book, Kaplan claims (not without an all too post-modern fear of being misunderstood by his readers) his intellectual affinity and allegiance with the ideals of the Enlightenment. Given that the genesis of these ideals was marked by a naïve and triumphalistic overconfidence in the power of human reason to make unlimited progress in all fields of "interior" and external knowledge, one can understand his posture as an attempt to update the validity of those very ideals, though without naïveté, without triumphalism, yet with a dash of satire. Thus Kaplan's main theoretical purpose is to take up again the rationalist agenda of critical inquiry insofar as this implies a clarification of our world view and the erasing of false and misleading intellectual "idols" – to use Bacon's terminology. For this purpose, the author draws on Menippean Satire (M.S.), calling it both an "art", a fictive yet plausible mode of investigating the manifold domains of human experience, and a "genre", a powerful hermeneutic device for surgically removing all sorts of mythical, religious, ideological,

philosophical and scientific "idols" – past and present – that the conceptually-confused human mind projects onto the real world. Kaplan approaches the meaning, distinctiveness, formal content and functional purpose of M.S. by means of a threefold perspective: philosophical, theological and post-modern.

The philosophical approach allows the author to identify parallels between the procedures of this "oldest and most trenchant form of literary/critical analysis" (26) and British empiricism (in general) and, in particular, its twentieth century offspring, the later Wittegenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (P.I.). Though the congruence between M.S. and P.I. is not absolute, the former being a literary genre, the latter a treatise in logic, they share, according to Kaplan, the same kind of purposes: they deflate language that is devoid of substance and context, and identify distorted conceptual representations of the real world. In an allusion to Wittgenstein's contextualization of the uses/games of language, Kaplan calls his hermeneutical essays "critical synoptics", a procedure "that can be used to refer to a number of analytical activities" (75) and which is actually illustrated by the thematic variety and disparity of Kaplan's own book. Critical synoptics "refers to the examination of the influences of context, scenario, and lexical/syntactical precision upon the meanings of propositions and concepts" (75). In so far as synoptic analysis comprises narrative dissections of the uses/games of language, Kaplan seems to regard M.S. as a literary version of critical synoptics.

In Kaplan's view, the analogy between M.S. and theology can be discerned in the modus operandi of negative or "Apophatic Theology" (A.T.), since both M.S. and A.T. have as a common analytical goal the dissipation of conceptual error: A.T. by stressing the limitations of human knowledge in categorizing God's being, and M.S. by undermining all dogmatic and monist explanations of the world.

The Post-Modern (P.M.) approach to M.S. allows Kaplan to argue that skepticism is common to the intellectual attitudes and literary practices of both, since they share a deep mistrust of the great designs of conceptually closed world models. Rather, they articulate the cautious observation of the particular, the humorous promotion of sensibility and the more sober strategy of recognizing what it is not. For Kaplan, skepticism and dogmatism constitute the two main categories of the "Homo sapiens culture" (33). While utterly absent from the dogmatic codifications of the world, the use of humor, irony and parody, and the lampooning of self-importance, lack of common sense, and the mechanical and pedestrian platitudes of lifeless lives are all devices tinged with skepticism. Having long underpinned the best of literature, they now permeate post-modern fiction, and define the specificity of the M.S. genre. Indeed, in Kaplan's thesis, since its invention in the third century B.C., M.S has been ever-present in western literature.

Seemingly identical in its purposes to Occam's razor against all types of pretentious metaphysical confabulations and verbal follies, M.S. nevertheless is protean, with no fixed formal pattern and, in essence, semantically heterogeneous. In the second section of his book, Kaplan refers to canonic novels, in particular Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, Melville's *Moby Dick* and *The Confidence Man*, and Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, that function as literary examples of M.S. and whose narrative strategies, in Kaplan's reading, use critical synoptics to exorcise the "specter" of intellectual mythologies, whatever form they may take – abstract belief systems, crude idealizations, or blind faith in science.

According to Northrop Frye, quoted and paraphrased by Kaplan, "the Mennippean satirist piles up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon. In same cases

it can take the form of an encyclopedic farrago" (48). Indeed, the profuse and ingeniously articulated information deployed by Mennipean satirists in their acute dissections of mystifying idolatry, are quite appropriate to the critic's "art", whatever be the item under scrutiny. In this sense, the varied scholarly sources Kaplan uses in his discursive analyses, and the wide spectrum of their discrete thematic configurations are the means through which the author reflexively plays the Menippean satirical game of critical synoptics.

Hostile to reductionist or mechanical explanations of a reality made up of an infinity of discrete phenomena, the Manippean satirist draws up lists, tables of classification, nomenclatures and categorizations of all kinds on the most disparate subjects, with the ironic purpose of demonstrating *ad absurdum* and thereby undermining any dogmatic, inductive and generalist system of explanation. Kaplan plays the game masterfully: with inventiveness, as when he conceives the table of dialectical traditions of criticism, or when he arranges paradigms of British philosophy and literature in two columns, one headed *Sense*, the other *Sensibility*, after Jane Austen's novel (112-113); with humor, as when he characterizes Moby Dick scholars under the three headings of "seekers and divers", "scribes" and "readers" (114-117); or even didactically, as when he proposes a fourfold typology of the entire textual and reading universe – the "artifact" (a sort of bibliographical analytical approach), the "scriptural" (based on a philological perusal), the "subtextual" (an extra-literary, psycho-sociological reading) and the postmodern "supersubtextual" game "played in a hall of mirrors, where author, character, setting, critic, ideology and culture reflect upon one another" (63)

In the last section of his book Kaplan has another didactical schemata in which he presents exemplars of books and films that are either dystopian or satirical. Here, the

author stretches his concept of synoptic analysis to encompass what he broadly defines as programmed texts, that essentially consist of models of social and cosmic totality. These literary or theoretical narratives exhibit various "programs" of fictional regimentation and epistemic categorization of social and phenomenal reality, either ironically (as in dystopias), or positively (as in scientific theories). The originality of this schemata lies in the fact that, contrary to what is generally held in the field of utopian studies (e.g Kumar's *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*), Kaplan does not consider dystopia to be a dialectic development of the utopian literary genre, but as an outcome of Mennipean Satire, adopting the same reasoning as those authors (e.g Elliott's *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre*) who differentiate utopias from other contiguous literary forms. Before identifying the differences, Kaplan points out what literary dystopia (L.D.) and M.S. have in common: besides being "highly literary", both of them "are concerned with intellectual mythology, which they critique by exploring the interrelationships that exist among ignorance, intolerance, conflict, brutality, euphemism, passivity, scientism and various modern orthodoxies" (147). In Kaplan's view, insofar as dystopias have their roots in M.S., they exhibit traits of satire, in that they do not primarily dispense invective at human brutality, but rather aim to deflate intellectual mystification. Thus the author views *Gulliver's Travels* as the key text that reveals the "satiric antecedent to literary dystopia" (148): in the first, second and fourth books, Swift portrays the brutality common to most dystopias, but in the third book – a parody of Bacon's *New Atlantis* – the scorn he pours on a dictatorship of scientists, is seen by Kaplan as the "generic forerunner of the literary dystopia." (148). Yet Kaplan's primary aim is not so much to rewrite the genealogy of dystopia, identifying satire as its precursor. Notwithstanding their common role in the analysis of intellectual mythology, they use distinct strategies to achieve this aim. It is from this

standpoint that the author writes his inventory of their differences. The use of humor is the first evident contrast between L.P. and M.S. As Kaplan says, "[e]xcept in rare instances, literary dystopia is not funny" (147); nonetheless, while "satire locates conceptual confusion and intellectual mythology in the present and provides diagnosis", (147) dystopia "uses fiction to portray institutions based on intellectual mythology and essays prophecy, and prognostication" (147). According to the author, what also differentiates these two literary forms is the scope of their own criticism of intellectual mythology, with M.S. directed more towards an examination of conceptual flaws and language fireworks, and L.D. targeting "the possible effects intellectual mythology can have on individuals and society" (147). A formula is then provided for testing the difference between the two literary forms: "[i]f the work describes how bad things are, you have a satire on your hands. If the work describes how bad things could be, you are tangling with a dystopia" (148). It is important to add, in my opinion, that both L.D. and M.S. narrative "descriptions", being non-mimetic, imaginary representations of reality, illustrate the idea that only through distortion and amplification, through the cultivation of irony and hyperbole, can literature fulfill its role of analyzing idols.

In line with his emphasis that L.D. is the child of M.S., whose "primary foci are not despots or corrupt statesmen, but rather schoolmen and academies" (148), Kaplan points to the diluted, transmuted and contaminating presence of M.S. within L.D., referring to "various curricular debates in satire" that have dealt with issues central to L.D. (148). These debates ranged various opposing traditions and canons of knowledge against each other (e.g. philosophy vs. sophistry, tradition vs. modernity, technology vs. humanism). Originally a satirical theme, "the curricular debate", according to Kaplan, was deployed in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, in Petronius' *Satyricon*, in Swift's *Battle of the Books*, before being transmigrated into other forms and incorporated into later dystopias

such as C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*,

Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, and Burgess's *Byrne*.

The cover of Karter Kaplan's *Critical Synoptics* is a oxymoron that reflects the

author's contradictory hermeneutic device of blending the rigorous philosophical

analysis of language with the sophisticated language games of Menippean Satire so as

to simultaneously pursue the tasks of inquiry and demonstration:

- inquiry into the "spectral" uses of hollow concepts – the idols – and

  demonstration of the "spectral" literary uses of language as an instrument of

  such an inquiry;

- inquiry into false intellectual mythology, or in Wittgenstein's words, "the

  bewitchments of our intelligence by means of language" (59), and

  demonstration of genuine, or in Kaplan's words, "transformational"

  mythology – the archetypal perception of the world flowing through the

  creative language of the poets;

- inquiry into multiple language games and demonstration that there is nothing

  to be demonstrated beyond the limits of language;

- inquiry into the ways of expressing the correspondence between language

  and facts, and demonstration that the poetic truth of reality cannot be grasped

  by using fixed categories, only suggested by their continual revising and by

  the influx of imagery.

Kaplan, it seems to me, instead of the Greek and the Roman, opted for the

Hebraic model of scholarship and literary representation, as sketched out by

Blake and described by Auerbach, respectively. The oxymoron of the book

cover is an additional evidence of such a choice: a woodcut displays the biblical

myth of David beheading Goliath and, in doing so, portrays the allegorical death

of the monster of intellectual mythology at the hands of common sense and mythical poetic truth, using, of course, the sling of Menippean satire.