

## Gravity's Rainbow: Performing Reality

To read Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* requires endurance aside from the identification and development of a fluency in its language. The work can be described as episodic, some may argue for its incoherence, others its brilliance. Regardless, to discuss the work itself is an entire challenge. As an example of the postmodern 'genre' the work employs what Lyotard describes as "language games." The very act of reading the novel subverts most all conventionalities of language. Arguable though, is in its seeming-to break-down the paradigms that constitute it as a work of fiction, there's a revelation as to how the work functions—as a novel that denounces the performativity of language in a performance of its own.

Marshall McLuhan is famous for coining the phrase "the medium is the message" (1). In the case of *Gravity's Rainbow* the most apparent medium employed is that of the novel. What a novel is relies less on a prescriptivist perspective and more a descriptivist one. This reiterates the point that novels are called "novels" less because of their fitting a form and more because of their adhering to what is normative. Calling something a "novel" invokes certain expectations, namely that the work is prosaic fiction. It also assumes some sort of narrative functioning throughout. In Pynchon's novel itself, these things hold true—to a degree. The work is fictional and at times even prosaic, its narrative function, though different from what is "normal" in its cascading accumulation, remains recognizable or at the least, identifiable. Perhaps the usurping of the novel as its medium is found not within the work's form—its stimulus, but within its substance.

The density of *Gravity's Rainbow* is due less to its length and more to its substance. It is possible for a book of great length to seem sparse. It is equally possible for a work of few pages to seem insurmountable. The substance of *Gravity's Rainbow* is the result of how it attempts to "textualize" the human experience. Most any work of fiction requires translating imagined experiences into language and that language into words. In that translation, choices must be made to

emphasize what is of significance to make that imagined experience accessible to readers. This correlates to Lyotard's notion of performative language and the digitization of knowledge. In the case of *Gravity's Rainbow* however, the text itself has become the barer of knowledge and its arrangement the performative display.

Modern-day social media is analogous to the function of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and perhaps to Lyotard's notion of the performative in language as well. As a novel done in the postmodern tradition, the words must be arranged in such a way as to advertise their identity as such. The same holds true for a social media page. Someone who claims to be of a certain race or gender on their profile will have posts on their page that corroborate those claims. Therefore, *Gravity's Rainbow* would be expected to implement fragmentary characters and the seemingly banal as a work of postmodernism. Though, its reliance on nostalgia and fantasy prove to act as a sort of double-edged sword that both works within and breaks out of postmodern "conventions".

The concept of nostalgia is prevalent throughout the novel. From the start characters are seen grasping onto any strands from the past that they can. From Pirate's banana breakfasts, to Mexico and Jessica's love, to the sadomasochistic acts between Pudding and Katje, these things serve the function of capturing characters who would rather be reliving the past. In her discussion of the postmodern verses the nostalgic in *Gravity's Rainbow* Attewell calls to question, "Postmodern or nostalgic?" claiming that modern convention places the two at odds with one another when, in fact, the two can operate together (31). She notes *Gravity's Rainbow* performative nature, "not only accommodates our pleasure in generic narratives but locates in such narratives the same political potentialities we saw released by nostalgia, while forcing us to interrogate the modalities of our different reading pleasures" (31). The use of nostalgia in the novel acts as a means of emphasizing the metanarrative of the novel. Without nostalgia, the work would lose one of the foundational elements needed for its "language game" to remain successful.

Regarding the fantastic in the novel there is much that can be said. The first question that the novel poses on the question of fantasy is “what constitutes fantasy?”. There are instances of the supernatural alongside altered states of consciousness induced by drugs, there are ghosts and mediums, there is even a witch (Geli). These fantastical or far-stretching elements seek to do the same thing: reiterate perspective. Part of the form of the novel, inherent in its “language game” is the ever-changing amorphous narrator. Part of what allows for scenes to maintain their legitimacy, their “authenticity,” if not a level of believability, is the narrator. If the narrator remains in a constant state a flux, the characters are always changing, the chronology of the work seems irrelevant, then the serendipitous nature of life can be accurately recreated, even if it is focalized through an unreliable character.

Serendipity and spontaneity are two hallmark characteristics of life and of the novel. Without them, the novel simply would not be as effective. Part of what keeps the fantastical plausible in the novel is its incorporation of chance. Inherent in this is the self-awareness found in metanarrative, yet another key that builds upon the novel’s cascading movement. One of the main mysteries of the novel, Slothrop’s being aroused by rockets, hinges on this idea of serendipity and fantasy.

In his essay pertaining to color within *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Olsen notes Pynchon’s appreciation for the affordances of science fiction and fantasy works, Pynchon’s belief that they allow for a fluidity in the movements of the characters that other works cannot provide. Another influence identified in this essay, was Pynchon’s being influenced by surrealist art and the combinatory revelations that a single frame could pose. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* there is a blurring of what would seem plausible and what seems unimaginable—an admixture of fantasy and surrealist elements. This is allowed into the novel because of the unreliable narration that is prevalent throughout the novel. Interestingly, the prolonged implementation of unreliable narration in Pynchon’s language game leads to a sort of conditioning the reader. At the novel’s start the idea of Slothrop gaining an

erection at the site/sight of a rocket seems foreign, by its end though, even the idea of 'Slothrop' is amorphous.

It seems that one of the main themes Pynchon is elaborating in the novel pertains to language and the labels that constitute language. There is an inherent level of performativity even in language because it proclaims perspective that has been channeled through another construct. Recalling McLuhan's notion that the medium dictates the message, through language one is limited by how that language functions. Accompanying a language too, are its conventions. Aside from being a work rooted in language, *Gravity's Rainbow* relies on text, yet another level of mediation. From there it must be considered that Pynchon himself is shaping the language of the novel. As Lyotard writes, "The postmodern condition is as much a stranger to disenchantment as it is to the blind positivity of delegitimation" (xxiv). As a medium functioning within the postmodern condition, *Gravity's Rainbow* is motivated by the ambition to legitimate the notion that the world and existence is formed from that which is illegitimate (namely history and other human constructs that are performative).

With regards to the overall structure of the novel, the cascading series of episodes and their apparent lack of consistent chronology furnish the idea that *Gravity's Rainbow* is functioning within a form that denies convention and even lessens its accessibility for the reader. It is arguable that, reading this novel having no prior knowledge of the postmodernist movement, upon completion an individual could aptly describe what it is for a work to be postmodern. The novel is both instructional and self-aware.

In the novel, there is a line: "History is not woven by innocent hands" (277). This line can serve as the foundation for the novel. Pynchon is weaving a history of his own, is he not? After all, history is composed of the same words and language and all the accompanying limitations therein.

This raises the question once again about fiction as a medium and whether it, as a performance, is a tenable alternative, even a superior one, to typical “history.”

What determines an object’s comprehensibility relies not on the object itself, but on the inherent histories that those who encounter the respective object hold. Of the substance within *Gravity’s Rainbow*, much is derived in the form of intertextual material. The sheer diversity of knowledge encountered in the work, from music, philosophy, science, art, (from Emily Dickinson to Dodo Birds, to Webern and Rossini), make it impossible for any one person to comprehend everything. The sheer number of allusions discourage looking everything up, but alas, companion texts like that of Weisenburger have sprung up to alleviate the sometimes-alienating effect that they pose.

Upon my reading of the novel, it seems that the Weisenburger usurps the premise of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Density was a choice at the craft level. Part of what that ‘not-knowing’ allows for is discovery and agency for the reader. Whether all the allusions within *Gravity’s Rainbow* are accurate or even necessary, is beside the point. What is of importance is the reader’s encountering of them and the revelation that something is being invoked. The not-knowing is what propels the story forward and it legitimates the characters. In this regard, the allusions bolster the performativity of the novel. The fact that they hold historical merit is of lesser priority.

Much of *Gravity’s Rainbow* deals with what constitutes “love.” Love itself is another amorphous and often ineffable concept because of how diversely it is lived out. There is a notable difference between infatuation and love that parallels to the novel’s continual references to war as a driving force for society. The love that the text portrays between Mexico and Jessica for example, exemplifies how even something labeled strongly as “love” can be subverted both in the context of the novel and in the greater reality.

The love between Mexico and Jessica captures performativity at multiple levels. There's the performance of both characters in the context of wartime. There's the performance on Jessica's part that the love was meaningless after the war. There's the performance and expectation that love and the most banal of realities will persist. In "reality" the love between Mexico and Jessica may or may not have been an infatuation sparked by war. The fact that the war's ending leads to the end of their relationship can be seen either as causation or correlation. Jessica's statement "I must run sweet Roger [Mexico] it's been dreamy . . ." would suggest the former (628). For Mexico the revelation that the relationship has come to an end is heartbreaking. He imagines Jessica erasing the relationship from her memory for its being tethered to the war: "She's beginning to think of their time as a chain of explosions, craziness ganged to the rhythms of the War" (629). Interestingly, up until the relationship's close the relationship has been presented as love, which is a label, but which helps maintain the spontaneity that lends the novel legitimacy.

Using the word love between two individuals is, essentially, a label. Recalling the concept of language and words as performative, it becomes apparent that Pynchon relies upon this technique to maintain believability.

The use of a matter-of-fact tone, the forthright statement of jarring scenes lends to the performative and legitimating of the novel. The scene in which Pudding participates in sadomasochistic acts with Katje adheres to this forthrightness. It also relies on description—visceral and vital to creating the image—in order to further legitimate itself: "He is on his knees again, bare as a baby. His old man's flesh creeps coarse-grained in the light from the candle. Old scares and new welts group here and there over his skin . . . At her command, he crawls forward to kiss her boots. He smells wax and leather, and can feel her toes flexing beneath his tongue . . ." (233). This scene becomes tangible even if it is focalized through a character and even after past instances of unreliable narration. The images captured therein maintain a potency for instilling truth because of

how accessible the image itself has become. In terms of a social-media analog, people posting a comment that they are on a vacation is quite different from their posting images of the resort in which they are staying.

In a way, *Gravity's Rainbow* emulates that which social media does. It is arguable that any work of fiction does so, but *Gravity's Rainbow* does so whilst commenting on the bounds in which it is constructed. Social media is essentially a transcription of interpersonal interactions online. There are of course affordances that differ from what face-to-face interactions resemble, but the same sort of self-censorship takes place. In the novel, there is the recapitulation of various events by various narrators over spanning durations and in diverse settings. There are threads that can be distinguished throughout, narrative ties that serve as the frame of the novel (namely the V-2 rocket 00000 and Slothrop's escapades). These could be linkages between people, their affiliations, likes, and so on. There are even communities fostered within the novel. At the novel's end for example, there's even a reference to a sort of code or jargon having been created:

“We have to talk in *some* kind of code, naturally,’ continues the Manager. ‘We always have. But none of the code is that hard to break. Opponents have accused us, tor just that reason, of contempt for the people. But really we do it all om the spirit of fair play. We’re not monsters. We know we have to give them *some* chance. We can’t take hope away from them, can we?” (756).

This quotation shines light on the sort of communities that are integral to the world of the novel, but also shines light on the novel's metanarrative and its discourse on the different way that language is manipulated by different individuals and different groups. That the way a language, a form, any sort of convention is wielded, can be used to foster both discourse and a community.

Benedict Anderson discusses the concept of an imagined community and the capacity of language to be a unifier, but that it also influences the product—that the language itself (a medium) bears the

burden of influence as well: “In every instance, the ‘choice’ of language appears as a gradual, unselfconscious, pragmatic, not to say haphazard development” (42). This quotation, in its reference to the domination of the English language, rallies a connection between language and community, and elucidates the idea of *Gravity’s Rainbow* being an ambitious work that seeks to achieve something beyond what is typical.

The scientific community within *Gravity’s Rainbow* is one that, on the surface, would seem to conflict with the supernatural and fantastical elements of the novel. Interestingly, the Psi section falls within a quasi-scientific realm within *The White Visitation*. References to mediums are interspersed by references to Pavlov and statistics. Similarly, there is a use of religion for rationalization in the case of the Dodo: “To some, it made sense. They saw the stumbling birds ill-made to the point of Satanic intervention, so ugly as to embody argument against a Godly creation. Was Mauritius some first poison trickle through the sheltering dikes of Earth? Christians must stem it here, or perish in a second Flood, loosed this time not by God but by the Enemy” (110). This quotation incorporates all the aspects that constitute performative language. It alludes to religious constructs (God, the Flood), it preys upon communal/community-held ideologies, and it mounts the supernatural and religious against the scientific.

In the end, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is clearly implementing the sort of language games that Lyotard outlines. It also acknowledges that “knowledge is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth” (Lyotard 18). The accuracy of event pertaining to the war are not the highlight of the novel nor really, is its length. The substance of the novel and the way it performs to maintain a degree of legitimation that emulates the serendipitous nature of life are what establish it as postmodern. Concurrently, they represent the paradox therein. Pynchon’s novel, in all its ambition, seeks to subvert convention itself, it only achieves this while maintaining the novel as its form. Regardless of how that form has been manipulated (episodes,



fragmented/fractured narrative, multiple narrators and focalizers, anticlimax), regardless of all the craft and poetry, regardless of all the signifiers that this work lacks any deeper meaning, readers of it measure its depth and breadth in meaning.

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