

Pynchon Is Not a Narratologist

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Narratologies of Gravity's Rainbow, by Samuli Hägg. Joensuu: U of Joensuu Pub., 2005. 205 pp. 20 Eur.

Narratologies of Gravity's Rainbow provides a sophisticated but ultimately unsatisfying confrontation of Pynchon's most interesting novel with various aspects of classical and postclassical narrative theory. Sophisticated—because Samuli Hägg is a very astute narratologist who is on top of the latest developments in the field and has a knack for expounding them; unsatisfying—because narrative theory as Hägg insists on testing it out is simply no match for the often bewildering splendor of Pynchon's masterpiece. If only Hägg had been more of a Pynchon reader than a narratologist. He is avowedly out to "examine ways in which Pynchon's fiction challenges the concepts of narratological theory by abusing and extending the narrative conventions underlying them" (10), and so he approaches *Gravity's Rainbow* with a desire for theory and totalization the novel itself likes to dare, not least through its thematization of paranoia. Hägg is aware of this, but in my view he still works himself into a corner by letting Pynchon's novel perform a challenge to narratology that can easily be accomplished with a lesser text. This is not to suggest that Hägg does not have anything interesting to say about *Gravity's Rainbow*. But when he does, it is when his engagement with the concepts of narrative theory takes a backseat.

After passable introductory chapters on Pynchon scholarship (in which he consistently misspells Theodore Kharpertian's last name Kharpetian) and the state of narrative theory (in which he does very well on the complicated subject of possible-worlds narratology), Hägg launches into a discussion of the "deconstructive narrative attitude" (13) displayed in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The title of chapter 3, "*Gravity's Rainbow* as a Commentary on Narrative Hierarchy," illustrates his theoretical focus. Using Charles Hohmann's 1986 discussion of Pynchon's narrator as a foil, Hägg submits that "the category of the narrator is not undermined in *Gravity's Rainbow* because of its fantastic adaptability or its tremendous capacity for unreliability" (50). He illustrates and details this claim with a number of examples, first with reference to the status of the narrator—Pynchon's pun on "Forty Million

Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong" (GR 559), "The Story of Byron the Bulb" (647–55) and the use of "sez" throughout the novel. In a later section, Hägg zooms in on instances of metafiction, such as the sudden mention of Ishmael Reed (588), the reception of an improved haiku in the Takeshi and Ichizo section (690–92) and what he calls "documentary" elements like the commentaries by film critic Mitchell Prettyplace (113).

In the case of the pun and of Byron, communication, as Hägg sees it, is going on above the head of narrator and narratee. In the case of "sez," he suggests its use in the novel is so "(intentionally) sloppy" (54) it overturns the narrative hierarchy every reader tries to construct by making clear distinctions between the various voices and the levels on which they speak in any given novel. Conversely, when it turns out some moments of metafiction do not subvert the narrative hierarchy, they are said to parody the undermining of fictionality typical of postmodern fiction. Hägg concludes that Pynchon does not thwart the reading of his novel when playing around with narrative hierarchy, but merely "makes the most of the convention of omniscient-yet-unreliable narrator" (54), or produces "an implicit commentary on the typical conventions of metafiction" (58).

Hägg's readings of his examples imply such an enormous degree of confidence in *the* reader of *Gravity's Rainbow* that they might well be proven wrong by an empirical analysis of the novel's reading process. That would be an interesting undertaking, but a little common sense can already help us along. I would simply suggest that many readers, even smart ones, might actually miss the "Forty Million Frenchmen" pun or (some of) the connections between the story about Byron and the rest of the novel, and might even give up on sorting out the instances of "sez." Probably quite a few readers will not see the nonsubversion of narrative hierarchy in the metafictional moments as parody either. No harm done, of course. Hägg's informed reader, on the other hand, seems to be so smart that he or she might no longer be affected by the relatively simple tricks Hägg highlights in the novel. This informed reader might indeed know that the communicative situation evoked in a novel constitutes an open invitation to authorial virtuosity rather than a tight channel for the transmission of authoritative information. As a result, there will be hardly any subversion of the concepts underlying the act of reading. Finally, readers with little or no experience of unconventional fiction might be so overwhelmed by the way Pynchon mixes narrative levels that they simply stop reading, an option Hägg prefers to forget because it does not fit the reading dynamic as he sees it.

Concepts of reading continue to trouble Hägg in chapter 4, in which he attempts to analyze *Gravity's Rainbow* as a "faux-didactic novel,"

a book that leads its readers astray when bringing up the question of how it should be read. According to Hägg, Pynchon goes beyond narratorial commentary in that he comes up with “made-to-order thematic clues pointing toward what purports to be a sound interpretation of the novel” (62), only to undo their impact elsewhere in the novel. Through its pairs of interpreting characters (such as Mexico and Pointsman, and Franz and Leni Pökler), *Gravity’s Rainbow* seems to privilege “the idea of resisting binary thinking and causal reasoning” (67), but Slothrop’s hermeneutic exasperation, for one, is said to undo such a simple conclusion. “Metaphors of interpretation embedded in the narrative that are not directly linked to characters’ actions or thoughts” (72) allegedly enhance Pynchon’s deconstruction of his own didactic stance. Hägg duly illustrates this point with brief readings of Slothrop’s desk (GR 18), the drinking-game called Prince (212ff.), the discussion of the song “Sold on Suicide” (320) and Prettyplace’s massive study of *King Kong* (275).

Despite the paucity of examples, the proposal that Pynchon intimates coherence and almost simultaneously pulls the rug out from under readers’ feet is tantalizing. Seemingly backpedaling a little on this proposal in an effort to describe the implied author he rightly says readers will construct to make their own readings stick, Hägg suggests *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be interpreted “as postulating two kinds of readers: a naïve reader, on the one hand, ready to accept the novel’s thematic faux-didacticism; and a critical reader, on the other, perceptible [sic] to the novel’s implicit structural strategies against it” (77). So now *the* reader does not exist anymore, which is an improvement compared to Hägg’s previous chapter. Just how naïve, however, are naïve readers? They need to be smart enough to understand the thematically privileged notion of antibinary and anticausal thinking, but they must fail to see its undoing, which in fact provides a further case of the detotalization they are becoming alert to in their thematically oriented reading. In any case, Hägg walks away from his two-readers proposal by concluding there can be no real conclusion in this matter.

Chapter 5 offers a nice summary of Monika Fludernik’s *Natural Narratology* (1996), an elaborate attempt to develop a theory of narrative within the framework of cognitive science. To Fludernik, “any text that evokes an experiencing consciousness—the narrator’s, protagonist’s, or viewer’s—is a narrative” (Hägg 82). To relate natural narratology to the “voices” of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Hägg in chapter 6 draws on Fludernik’s earlier (cognitivist) revision of the theory of free indirect discourse (FID) in *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction* (1993). Fludernik rejects the conventional dual-voice

hypothesis based on certain textual features in favor of a focus on how the context of an FID passage and especially the reader's interpretive frame produce the illusion of two combined voices. In her 1993 book, Fludernik also occasionally refers to Pynchon. For her, as Hägg summarizes it, "the voices of *Gravity's Rainbow* present themselves as fundamentally indeterminate" (94). Hägg revisits some of Fludernik's examples from Pynchon's novel to demonstrate that she is too quick in her assessment of the narrator as a "generally colloquial" speaker when suggesting the narrator's voice cannot be distinguished from that of an equally colloquial character.

Using these corrections as a jumping-off point, Hägg goes on to investigate "the extent of the contextual connectedness" (101) of Pynchon's voices. *The* reader is back in this section: he or she has to "delay . . . voice attributions, or at least be prepared to alter them to accommodate later evidence" (103). This is obviously what reading is all about, and Hägg's analysis of *Gravity's Rainbow* is just too terse here to prove that the novel is exceptional when it comes to reader adjustment. In a move already familiar from chapter 4, Hägg then corrects his own constructive points about voice attribution by suggesting the voices in Pynchon's novel are very often indeterminate after all. His brief examples—from the weekly briefing by Brigadier Pudding (GR 80), the narrator's description of Slothrop (84) and the sex scene involving Slothrop and Bianca (469–70)—are instructive and well taken, but they fail to eradicate the impression that Hägg is really not doing much more than skimming the surface. And who knows, maybe a reader will come along who activates his knowledge of what has come before in such a way that some voices can be identified after all. Hägg is a reader too, but he prefers to keep this under wraps in order to endow his reading with the theoretical import he has envisaged for his study.

In what amounts to the most interesting section of his book for an audience interested in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Hägg completes his discussion of Pynchon's voices with an extensive analysis of how stylistic contagion affects character and narrator discourse. Examples include the description of the Floundering Four (GR 675) and the Kenosha Kid episode (60ff.), which latter leads Hägg to suggest that stylistic contagion in *Gravity's Rainbow* operates on the basis of the "Kenosha Kid Principle": "Any feature of the diegetic situation can affect any aspect of narration" (112). This point is sufficiently broad to accommodate a great variety of readings; it is not theory-driven, and it actually tells us something about Pynchon's novel. Hägg makes his interpretation of this aspect even more appealing by showing that

Pynchon also occasionally plays with the failures of stylistic appropriation by the narrator.

The sequence of chapters 7 and 8 is similar to that of 5 and 6: first theory, then its application. In chapter 7, Hägg discusses how Marie-Laure Ryan, in *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991), tries to “solv[e] traditional narratological problems with the apparatus of possible-world semantics” (Hägg 122). To her, “a text is a narrative to the extent that it invites its reader to interpret it by organizing its contents in a narrative network” (Ryan qtd. in Hägg 123). When accepting this invitation, the reader buys into a “fictional recentering,” which “shifts the center of the narrative universe from the actual world . . . to the world presented as actual in the narrative” (122). In chapter 8, Hägg tests *Gravity’s Rainbow* for hypothetical focalization, a notion developed by David Herman in 1994 and treated by Hägg as an aspect of Ryan’s actual world of the narrative. Hypothetical focalization can be direct—when the narration identifies a “counterfactual witness” (Herman qtd. in Hägg 131)—or indirect—when the virtual perspective is not attributed to a specific observer; it can be strong—when both the focalizer and the act of focalization are virtual—or weak—when only the act of focalization is virtual. Hägg does not see many instances of direct and strong hypothetical focalization in Pynchon’s novel. The direct and weak type, however, is relatively frequent. Starting from a relatively simple example (“This morning it looks like what Vikings must have seen, sailing this great water-meadow south, clear to Byzantium, all eastern Europe their open sea” [GR 549]), Hägg surveys some of the uses Pynchon has for it. It can be “a vehicle for ideological speculation and illustration” or convey “hypotheses about higher mental processes” (Hägg 135).

This might have been the start of an interesting investigation into the many ways Pynchon combines the personal and the political, but, unfortunately, Hägg’s real project prevents him from pursuing that. In the final two sections of chapter 8, he searches *Gravity’s Rainbow* for “problematic cases of hypothetical focalization” (137) so as to correct Herman’s typology and develop a better “theory of focalization based on possible-world semantics” (140). These pages constitute the narratological high-point of Hägg’s book. Not only does he rightly propose to go beyond grammatical markers when trying to identify and interpret hypothetical focalization; he also convincingly argues for replacing Herman’s two dichotomies with sliding scales for the parameters “explicitness” and “verisimilitude” (140). While I am not entirely convinced by Hägg’s subsequent attempt to rewrite Gérard Genette’s classic theory of focalization, his findings in this respect do

enable him to cast more light on a Pynchon passage (the paragraph on GR 9 following the Banana Song) containing mere hints of internal focalization.

In chapter 9, Hägg combines his interests in cognitive narratology and possible-world semantics in a test of Ryan's 2001 notion of the text as game in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. Ryan distinguishes between reading a text "for the world" (that is, for the coherence of its story world and for its relevance outside the pages of the book) and reading "as a game" (Ryan qtd. in Hägg 150), adding that no textual features are so compelling they rule out either of the two. Hägg contends that *Gravity's Rainbow* "falls short of providing a clear-cut illustration of the dichotomy" (151), indicating once more the theoretical thrust of his investigation. In his final visit to Pynchon's novel, he first turns to the four-category model of games developed by Roger Caillois in *Man, Play and Games* (1961) and taken up by Ryan. *Gravity's Rainbow*, for Hägg, is all "*ilinx*," since it transgresses readerly boundaries and reverses established categories. The category of "*alea*" is also relevant, since the novel thematizes games of chance. What is more, the already-mentioned drinking-game Prince (GR 212ff.) "illustrates both textual *alea* and *agon*" (Hägg 157)—the latter being Caillois's category for games based on competition. Unspectacular findings, I would say, but Hägg marches on. The circular episode set in Pirate's maisonette (GR 92–113) enables him to demonstrate how "the immersion typical of *mimicry*"—Caillois's fourth category, referring to games of imitation and make-believe—"and the problem-solving characteristic of *agon* are interdependent parts of the process of the reading of a complicated, yet tellable, literary text" (163). Hägg's reading of the episode (famously interpreted by Steven Weisenburger at the first international Pynchon conference, Warwick University, 1994) is not bad, but its determination by the Caillois vocabulary and by Ryan's notion of tellability (narrative interest) prevents it from becoming really exciting. From the point of view of Pynchon criticism, this is Hägg's most disappointing chapter.

Hägg will most likely retort that this is a biased and therefore mistaken judgment. In his concluding chapter, he describes his book as a series of "interlocutions" (173) between *Gravity's Rainbow* and narratology. The image of a dialogue implies a give and take that ideally does not privilege either of the partners in the conversation. Unfortunately, however, Hägg's analysis of Pynchon's "deconstructive attitude" (178) clearly serves a narratological purpose—the evaluation and occasional dismissal of theoretical concepts. While he realizes he has not gone beyond an "ardently formal approach," he is quite adamant that "there is relatively little to say *in general* about Pynchon's deconstructive strategy, formal or ideological" (177). One wishes he

had tried a little harder in this respect, since he has clearly got what it takes to tackle *Gravity's Rainbow* as a narrative more systematically than ever before.

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