

GRAVITY'S NOVEL:  
A NOTE ON THE GENRE OF GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

M. Keith Booker

Hugh Kenner, in a discussion of Eliot's The Waste Land, notes how comforting it would be to critics if only one had a name for the sort of poem that The Waste Land is.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the comfort to be found in categorization of literature is a general one, forming as it does the basis of the whole field of genre criticism. Such categorization is not always easy, however. For example, when Melville's Moby-Dick was first published in England (as The Whale), a reviewer in the Britannia wrote that he was "at a loss to determine in what category of works of amusement to place it. It is certainly neither a novel nor a romance, although it is made to drag its weary length through three closely printed volumes, and is published by Bentley, who, par excellence, is the publisher of novels of the fashionable world, for who ever heard of a novel or romance without a heroine or a single love scene?"<sup>2</sup> Indeed, much of the reaction to Melville's perplexing book involved puzzled attempts to classify it and thereby render it tame. American reviewers, perhaps less steeped in tradition than their British counterparts, seemed less determined to fit the book into pre-existing categories, but instead were often content to announce it as the beginning of a new genre all its own, calling it such things as an "intellectual chowder," a "Whaliad," and a "prose epic."<sup>3</sup>

This sort of reaction, of course, sounds especially familiar to students of Gravity's Rainbow (henceforth GR), which has provoked quite similar comments since its publication a decade and a half ago. Granted, a generation of critics accustomed to Joyce and Beckett and Robbe-Grillet has been a little less concerned over genre designations than was Melville's original audience, and most commentators appear to regard Pynchon's book as a "novel," apparently without stopping to think what such a designation means. Those who have stopped to think, however, have often concluded that part of the difficulty with GR consists in the fact that it is not a novel at all, and that we are applying the wrong interpretive conventions if we try to read it as such. Morgan, for example, is one of many to note the affinity of GR with Menippean satire,<sup>4</sup> and Smith and Tillyan (while not necessarily denying that it is a novel) place it in the tradition of the Puritan jeremiad.<sup>5</sup> Mendelson, meanwhile, suggests creating a new category called "encyclopedic narratives" (which would also include Moby-Dick, by the way),<sup>6</sup> and Fowler simply suggests that Pynchon's book might profitably be read as poetry.<sup>7</sup> Most of these suggestions turn out to be more or less useful in reading GR, but they should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the book is above all a novel, and an absolutely quintessential

novel at that. In the attempt to illustrate this point, two arguments can be made: first, that GR adheres in an exemplary way to the truly fundamental characteristics that make a work a novel, and second, that its deviations from less fundamental conventions of the novel only serve to make it all the more effective as an example of the novel form.

Part of this confusion over genre arises from the fact that prose genres are in general confused. Nobody really knows for sure what a novel is, though almost everybody has a certain intuitive feel. The problem is largely one of vocabulary, as Northrop Frye explains: "We have, as usual, no word for a work of prose fiction, so the word 'novel' does duty for everything, and thereby loses its only real meaning as the name of a genre."<sup>8</sup> There are, of course, existing "theories" of the novel, of which the works of Bakhtin and the early (German idealist) Lukács are probably the "classics,"<sup>9</sup> but even such theoretical treatments necessarily tend to be rather blurry when it comes to providing strict criteria that must be met by a work in order for that work to qualify as a novel. Still, it is important to note that there is nothing in GR that violates the essence of either of these theories.

The approach of Lukács, with its emphasis on character and plot, would seem to make the fitting of GR into the theory somewhat problematic. However, Lukács himself expresses great admiration for works such as *Don Quixote*, which he calls a "truly great novel."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the essence of the Lukács theory is its emphasis on the "transcendental homelessness" of the questing hero in an alien world.

The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality. . . . Thus the fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectivised as the psychology of the novel's heroes: they are seekers. . . . [T]he content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence.<sup>11</sup>

Pynchon's book may not have heroes in the traditional sense, but it teems with seekers, all with a sense of homelessness in the world, and I would submit that it fulfills the essence of Lukács' conception of the novel in an exemplary fashion.

When one turns to Bakhtin's theory of the novel, GR is even more paradigmatic. To Bakhtin, the novel is a special genre, unique in its contemporaneity, its contact with everyday life, its close connection with extraliterary genres. Bakhtin's theory is founded on language, and argues that the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre is the way it

incorporates the various "languages" of society into its own discourse. "Diversity of voices and heteroglossia enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a structured artistic system. This constitutes the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre."<sup>12</sup> But the languages in a novel have specific socio-political connotations as well, each language representing an entire world-view. "Heteroglossia" refers not just to the words used by different groups in society but to the entire social, cultural, and ideological context of the novel. In the novel, the languages interact dynamically, typically with the development of an opposition between "high" languages and "low." The dialogue in the novel thus dramatizes ideological struggles in the society as a whole.

Bakhtin defines two stylistic lines of development in the novel, the first, which is single-voiced, as in traditional realistic novels, and the second, which is far richer. The Second Line novel strives for "generic, encyclopedic comprehensiveness," including the heavy use of inserted genres, which "serve the basic purpose of introducing heteroglossia into the novel, of introducing an era's many and diverse languages." It embodies the view that "the novel must be a full and comprehensive reflection of its era . . . must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era, that is, all the era's languages that have any claim to being significant; the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia."<sup>13</sup> This Second Line can easily be traced back to Cervantes and Sterne, but its roots go back even further.

Also important to Bakhtin's conception of the novel is the idea of the carnival. Julia Kristeva discusses the highly "carnavalesque" character of many novels that derive primarily from this Second Line, which she refers to as "subversive" or "polyphonic" novels, noting their close affinity with Menippean satire. "Carnavalesque," however, does not connote frivolity. "The laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is serious."<sup>14</sup> She writes that "Menippean discourse develops in times of opposition against Aristotelianism, and writers of polyphonic novels seem to disapprove of the very structures of official thought founded on formal logic." In the subversive novel, "identity, substance, causality and definition are transgressed so that others may be adopted: analogy, relation, opposition, and therefore dialogism and Menippean ambivalence."<sup>15</sup>

This last statement reads exactly like something extracted from a paper on Pynchon, and I have presented these extracts concerning the Bakhtinian conception of the novel in such detail simply because their relevance to GR is so striking. "Polyphonic" and "carnavalesque" (just think of Plechazunga) are as good as any adjectives around for describing GR. Indeed, Allon White has noted that all of Pynchon's novels "provide perfect examples of Bakhtin's thesis. The 'high' languages of

modern America--technology, psychoanalysis, business, administration and military jargon--are 'carnivalized' by a set of rampant, irreverent, inebriate discourses from low life--from the locker-room, the sewers (in V.), the jazz club and cabaret, New York Yiddish, student fraternities and GI slang."<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on the encyclopedic character of the polyphonic novel as a genre is particularly interesting in relation to the above-noted work of Mendelson, and indeed the Bakhtinian novel fulfills most of the requirements outlined by Mendelson for the encyclopedic narrative. The emphasis on Menippean satire also recalls the work of Morgan. To Bakhtin, Menippean satire is not necessarily a separate genre, but a form that can happily exist within the novel form.<sup>17</sup> What clearly develops is that the work of Mendelson and Morgan (and of Smith and Tölölyan), while insightful, useful, and accurate, in no way implies that GR is not a novel. Rather, that work simply helps to define exactly what kind of novel GR might be and therefore to inform the reading of the book in useful (but not totalizing) ways.

It appears, then, that when viewed in terms of such fundamental theoretical considerations, GR is very definitely a novel. It is, though, a complex and difficult novel, and a novel that confounds many traditional expectations that readers have developed for novels in terms of style and technique. However, this property of challenging and going beyond the traditions of the novel genre is itself a central characteristic of the novel, especially in Bakhtin's view. Important to Bakhtin is the character of the novel as an ever-evolving and oppositional genre, as "a genre that is both critical and self-critical, one fated to revise the fundamental concepts of literariness and poeticalness dominant at the time."<sup>18</sup> This characteristic of the novel as something that challenges reader expectations is, of course, familiar to readers of the novels of writers like Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, but it may actually be much more widespread than first appears. Frank Kermode, for example, has emphasized that the work of twentieth-century writers such as Robbe-Grillet may in fact not be so revolutionary as it might first seem. "Hermeneutic confusion and problematical closure are not breaches of contract but natural features of narrative; they are found in dreams, in romances, even in Gospels."<sup>19</sup> This view broadens Bakhtin's concept of the novel as a genre of challenge and implies that such characteristics can be found in all genres. The work of Stanley Fish with Paradise Lost<sup>20</sup> and of Stephen Booth with Hamlet<sup>21</sup> would seem to support this possibility.

This reader-oriented perspective shares a great deal with the work of German reader reception theorists such as Jauss and Iser, who apotheosize literary works (of whatever genre) that challenge the reader's "horizon of expectations."<sup>22</sup> Jauss, for instance, praises works that stimulate thought because they "evoke the reader's horizon of expectations, formed by a convention of genre, style, or form, only in order to destroy it

step by step."<sup>23</sup> This process is a positive one, resulting in an expansion of the reader's consciousness:

The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar. What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation. And it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences. . . . The production of meaning of literary texts . . . does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, this effect can be achieved only if one realizes that conventions (such as those of genre) are being violated. Iser again:

Now if a literary text does not fulfill its traditionally expected functions, but instead uses its technique to transform expected functions into 'minus functions'--which is the deliberate omission of a generic technique--in order to invoke their nonfulfillment in the conscious mind of the reader, anyone who is not familiar with these traditional functions will automatically miss the communicatory intention of this technique widely applied in modern literature.<sup>25</sup>

These "minus functions" would appear to play an extremely important role in Pynchon's fiction, particularly in GR. They contribute greatly to the way the reader of Pynchon is involved and implicated in the action in the text, a process that results in a parallelism between the act of reading and certain modes of Western epistemology that Pynchon apparently intends to condemn ("You will want cause and effect . . ."). Linda Westervelt, for example, has written of the strategies with which GR challenges and frustrates its readers:

Up to a certain point, both frustration and surprise increase the reader's participation in creating the text. . . . Pynchon forces the reader to engage in system-building in the process of "realizing" the text, to understand that that process is analogous to his manner of confronting reality (in the sense that men impose order on reality in an attempt to explain it), and, finally, to evaluate the shortcomings and the ethical implications of that activity.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, any attempts to "ease" the reading process by proposing a relaxation of the expectations associated with the novel as a genre (such as Fowler's proposal to read GR as poetry) would result in a weakening of the effect of the book. It may be useful to keep in mind certain techniques of poetry when reading GR (Eliot particularly comes to mind), but GR is a novel and should be read as a novel. The fact that such reading will result in unfulfilled expectations is part of the point of doing so.

In conclusion, GR should clearly be regarded as a novel. Regarding it as such, complete with the attendant genre expectations, will result in a more effective reading of the book, in spite of (and indeed because of) the fact that the book violates many of those expectations. By adhering to fundamental characteristics of "novelness" and by at the same time "laying bare" and opening up for examination many traditional novelistic techniques, GR places itself squarely in the center of the novel tradition. All this brings to mind the well-known comments of Victor Shklovsky on Tristram Shandy:

The assertion that Tristram Shandy is not a novel is common; for persons who make that statement, opera alone is music--a symphony is chaos. Tristram Shandy is the most typical novel in world literature.<sup>21</sup>

The application of this statement to GR is obvious.

--University of Florida

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Kenner, "The Urban Apocalypse," Eliot in His Time: Essays on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of The Waste Land, ed. A. Walton Litz (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) 23.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Steven Mailloux, Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) 175.

<sup>3</sup> Mailloux 176.

<sup>4</sup> Speer Morgan, "Gravity's Rainbow: What's the Big Idea?" Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. Richard Pearce (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981) 83-98.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus Smith and Khachig Töbalyan, "The New Jeremiad: Gravity's Rainbow," Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon 169-86.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Mendelson, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed.

George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 161-95.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980) 24.

<sup>8</sup> Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 13.

<sup>9</sup> See Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT P, 1971) and M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> Lukács 104.

<sup>11</sup> Lukács 56, 60, 89.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin 300.

<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin 410-11.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," The Kristeva Reader, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 50, her emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Kristeva 55-56.

<sup>16</sup> Allon White, "Bakhtin, Sociolinguistics and Deconstruction," The Theory of Reading, ed. Frank Gloversmith (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1984) 135.

<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that Morgan uses Iristram Shandy as his most central example of Menippean satire for comparison with GR, and Northrop Frye as his major source of information on that form. Frye himself, however, grants that Iristram Shandy can be considered a novel (Frye 312).

<sup>18</sup> Frye 10.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Kermode, The Art of Telling: Essays on Fiction (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983) 108.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley Fish, Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost (New York: St. Martin's P, 1967).

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Booth, "On the Value of Hamlet," Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama, ed. Norman Rabkin (New York: Columbia UP, 1969) 77-99.

<sup>22</sup> The emphasis that Jauss places on history is also interesting in light of the importance of history

in Pynchon's fiction, an importance that is also relevant to the emphasis on history in the later (Marxist) Lukács.

23 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982) 24.

24 Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns in Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974) 290, 294.

25 Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 207-08.

26 Linda A. Westervelt, "'A Place Dependent on Ourselves': The Reader as System-Builder in Gravity's Rainbow," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 22 (1980): 72, 73.

27 Victor Shklovsky, "Sterne's Tristram Shandy: Stylistic Commentary," Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, eds. Lee Lemon and Marion Reis (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965) 57.