WHO'S TALKING HERE: FINDING THE VOICE IN GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

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It goes without saying that Gravity's Rainbow is one of those books which resist, almost diabolically, traditional critical approaches. It has no plot that anyone can follow. One critic, Douglas Fowler, has even gone so far as to say that, because the novel "is unsatisfactory in the resolution of its sub-plots," it is less a novel and more an enormous lyric poem or perhaps a series of "minutely detailed romantic fantasies" á la Mad Comics.[1] The other problem with the novel is that it also has no single consistent narrative voice. The voice seems, rather, to be a veritable cacophony of fragmented voices.

Some critics try to control this fragmentation by seeing the narrator of the novel as a variant of an omniscient, or perhaps omnipotent, narrator. Joseph W. Slade speculates that the narrator could perhaps be a Vietnam veteran "strung out on mysticism and dope."[2] Similarly, Mark Siegel believes the narrator to be omniscient and, in a sense, "the only character in the novel," in that the consciousnesses of the other characters are accessible only as projections of the consciousness of the narrative voice.[3] Molly Hite has noted that Pynchon's fictive "reality" is a multiple one in which "multiple means of putting things together manage to coexist without resolving into a single, definitive system of organization," and that Pynchon's narrator contributes to this by being a "Proteus who can change tone and attitude so completely that his utterances appear to emanate from separate personae."[4] Thomas Schaub writes:

> Pynchon's voice retains the advantages of the intrusive, visible guide, but undermines the stability commonly associated with it, for his knowledge of the world of Gravity's Rainbow is fragmentary. He does know a good deal about the fragments he describes, however, and can move about among them at will . . . providing . . . the coherence of an accompanying voice.[5]

The problem with these readings is that they place the narrator outside the text either as observer, like Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, or as creator, like D. J. "the friendLee voice" in Mailer's Why Are We in Vietnam? However, the voice in Gravity's Rainbow is not external, coming from an omniscient or quasi-omniscient narrator, but internal, coming from within each character and indirectly reflecting the story by communicating only what any given character can know, think, feel, or perceive.

The technical name for this way of telling a story is indirect free style or speech, or, as Henry James called it, third person narrative limited.[6] This style is marked by the use of words denoting mental processes, by use of the features of direct speech, by idiosyncratic idioms and exclamations, and by a sense of heightened subjectivity. It cannot, however, always be recognized on formal grounds and is often a matter of tone and context. It differs from direct speech in that phrases such as "he said" and "he thought" and the quotation marks are omitted, and it differs from indirect speech in that the conjunction "that" is not used. For example, the sentence "He's afraid of the way the glass will fall" (GR 3)[7] is free indirect speech. Not only do we have a word, "afraid," denoting mental processes or feeling, but the sentence can be rewritten either as direct speech or as indirect:

He thought, "I am afraid. . . ."
He was afraid that . . .

Speech in this style of narration is covert because the story is told through what Franz K. Stanzel calls reflector, as opposed to teller, characters. Teller-characters are "fully aware of being engaged in an act of narration," whereas reflector-characters are "completely unaware of being involved in an act of communication."[8] In other words, they show rather than tell the story. And, since they are unaware of themselves as telling the story, they also stand separate from what can be called an authorial "voice," which, through stylistic devices, comments on these characters, thus creating an inherently ironic dual-voiced text.[9]

Gravity's Rainbow is written almost entirely in free indirect style,[10] and not, as it has usually been read, as if told by an omniscient or quasi-omniscient narrator. Shifting "voice" from characters to such a narrator can shift meaning, sometimes substantially. The book starts in medias res: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now" (GR 3). The tense is present, the effect one of immediacy. More than that, the whatever it is that is happening is happening to someone. The event is described in terms of sense impressions ("a screaming" is something heard) and of memory: "It has happened before." The point of view is internal. The who it is happening to is identified in the second paragraph: "Above him lift girders" (GR 3). The tone of panic in preceding sentences--"It is too late," "but it's all theatre," "No light anywhere" (GR 3)--has a source, "him." The use of the third person pronoun to name the character implies the absence of a traditional narrator. First person "I" would place the voice in the "I"; a proper name would place it outside in an omniscient narrator. Point of view is also limited. We can know only what "he" can know or guess. He "sits in velveteen darkness" (GR 3); he cannot see, but he feels "metal nearer and farther rub and connect, steam escaping in puffs, a vibration in the carriage's frame, a poising, an

uneasiness" (GR 3). Even the descriptions of the people around him, the "feeble ones, second sheep, all out of luck and time" (GR 3), which would, in another kind of text, come from an omniscient narrator, are his observations and assumptions. The clue is in the sentence "exhausted women with more children than it seems could belong to anyone" (GR 3).This is what they seem to be to him.

In the next paragraph we have sentences which could be addressed to us by an omniscient narrator--"Is this the way out?" "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into"; "It is a judgment from which there is no appeal" (GR 3,4)--but which are, more or less obviously, free indirect speech. The question is direct speech without the quotation marks. The second sentence has the interjection "no" peculiar to direct speech. The third is not distinguishable from direct reporting, but the context gives it an implicit introductory "I feel that this is . . .", which would make it free indirect speech and not the voice of an omniscient narrator.

Two paragraphs down we have another of these sentences, "Invisible, yes, what do the furnishings matter, at this stage of things?" (GR 4), followed by a series of commands, "Lie and wait, lie still and be quiet" (GR 4). The "you" is implicit, but is this a "voice" speaking to us, or is "he" talking to himself? "He" seems the more logical choice because the commands are followed by questions--"Will the light come before or after?" and "But it is already light. How long has it been light?" (GR 4). This is not an omniscient narrator speaking to us but the befuddled fumblings of a man, Pirate Prentice, waking up. The opening section of the novel has all been a dream.

But does it make any difference? Obviously what the opening section is talking about--war, evacuation, air raids, and death--is clear no matter who is doing the talking. What can change is tone, emphasis, and context. The opening section is a dream, and the dreamer's voice is disembodied; but reading it as coming from an omniscient narrator blurs the transition from sleep to waking and problematizes the status of the dream as dream as well as the question of whose dream, or vision, it is. It also produces a measure of confusion as to exactly what is going on and how we, the readers, are supposed to react. Are we inside the evacuation, feeling the panic, or outside, distanced and dispassionate observers? Are we dealing with a world unified by a single consciousness or with one breaking apart, shattering beyond anyone's ability to order or reassemble it?

Or is Pynchon playing games with us, creating anxiety in the reader by blurring the status of both dream and voice and by presenting us with ever more problematic choices? Assuming, however, that we can make these choices, shifting "voice" in other sections will also produce changes. For example, Schaub has read the Advent section (GR 127-36: Roger Mexico and Jessica

Swanlake attending a Christmas Eve church service) as an example of the "Over Voice," what Schaub calls the "Orphic Voice," which sings to us of the "Other Side" (Schaub 124-26). And indeed it is difficult not to see this as an "Orphic Voice," for the style, as Schaub notes, quickly "modulates to oratory." The question is, however, not whether or not this is an Orphic Voice, but whose Orphic Voice it is. It is Roger Mexico's. To complicate things, however, the section begins from the point of view of the twenty-year-old Jessica Swanlake--"Well, that surprised her, but def, after weeks of his snide comments?" (GR 128); it then shifts to that of a Jamaican corporal in the choir--"quarter of a stick of dynamite man" (GR 128)--before it becomes that of Mexico: "not to mention the Latin, the German? in an English church?" (GR 129). But this persists only briefly, and then the point of view shifts back to Jessica--"He wasn't looking nihilistic, not even cheaply so. He was . . ." (GR 129). Finally it becomes Mexico's voice again, oratorical, Orphic, a soliloquy dealing with, trying to deal with the War.[11]

Unfortunately for ease of argument, the evidence that this is Mexico's voice exists not primarily in the Advent section itself but elsewhere in the book, in every section that contributes to establishing who and what Mexico is and what kind of language and tone is peculiar to him. For example, the last paragraphs of Book I are, without question, spoken by Mexico:

> She is his deepest innocence in spaces of bough and hay before wishes were given a separate name to warn that they might not come true, and his lithe Parisian daughter of joy, beneath the eternal mirror, forswearing perfumes, capeskin to the armpits, all that is too easy, for his impoverishment and more worthy love.
>
> You go from dream to dream inside me. You have passage to my last shabby corner, and there, among the debris, you've found life. (GR 177)

This, combined with the rage of a previous sentence--"Jeremy will take her like the Angel itself, in his joyless weasel-worded come-along" (GR 177)--and the despair of those following--"You're catching the War. It's infecting you and I don't know how to keep it away" (GR 177)--gives us a man who is poetic and deeply pained. From the Advent section we also have an image of Mexico as one who wishes to shelter others from pain even though he cannot:

> But on the way home tonight, you wish you'd picked him up, held him a bit. Just held him, very close to your heart, his cheek by the hollow of your shoulder, full of sleep. As if it were you who could, somehow, save him. (GR 135-36)

The similarities in sentiment and tone between "before wishes were given a separate name to warn that they might not come

true" and "As if it were you who could, somehow, save him" are too close to ignore. The language of the Advent section is that of Roger Mexico.

Schaub has read this section as a unifying overview of the War, as an "elegiac elaboration of the connections in his [Pynchon's] vision of War's arrival and the signs of its Advent" (Schaub 127-28). But Schaub's reading of the "voice" as that of an external narrator has forced him to read the last sentences of this section and the choral "praise be to God!" (GR 136) as bitter direct-address criticism of how insufficient that cry is. If the Advent section is told to us by someone who is not in its situation but outside it, as an observer, this would encourage a reading of the voice as bitter because unmodulated by the despair and doubt of the character, Roger Mexico, who actually has to live the scene. Such a reading ignores the fact that Mexico has been established as a character who reacts to pain and loss by wrapping himself in a protective cover of phony cynicism.[12] Schaub has also neglected to quote the final sentence: "Whether you want it or not, whatever seas you have crossed, the way home. . . ." (GR 136). The choral cry is insufficient, but it is the way home because, in Gravity's Rainbow, salvation comes in small and incomplete ways. Whether we like it or not, we go on living in an incomplete and imperfect world. Thus the cry is not a denunciation but, rather, the despair of a man who wants to believe but cannot accept the terms of salvation in this world. It is the cry of one who, earlier in this section, as if, though briefly, accepting those terms, had said, "this is the hillside, the sky can show us a light--like a thrill, a good time you wanted too much, not a complete loss but still too far short of a miracle" (GR 133).

If the novel as a whole is to be read, as Pynchon indicates on the final page it should be, as being about the fumbling, frustrated attempts characters make to touch each other, to try to connect with something or someone because that is all they can do, then Schaub's reading of the Advent section contradicts this by emphasizing the cynicism of the passage and ignoring that cynicism's function as a defense mechanism. His reading also contradicts the way Schaub himself wants to see the book. He ends his own with:

> His writing therefore keeps us company and awakens in us the possibility that we are not alone. This awakening is the "physical grace" of Thomas Pynchon, at once communal and incomplete, a continuity of song that never resolves. Listen. (Schaub 152)

And Pynchon ends his with "Now everybody--" (GR 760).

This last is spoken by a "Voice" which belongs to no one in that it cannot be attached to any of the characters in the novel and which, according to Schaub, has been speaking to us all

along. But in spite of Schaub's contention that this is a standard omniscient (with modifications) narrator, he talks about what it does to the text as if it were free indirect style:

> The comfort we were feeling, sitting back and listening to the narrator tell his story, is lost. The separation and distance of "story" are gone; the reader-narrator-character triangle has collapsed. (Schaub 129)

The "reader-narrator-character triangle" has collapsed because the narrator, or "voice," and the character--or in this case characters--merge, and the reader, hearing the story as if an echo inside his or her own head (because the narration echoes, to a degree, normal thought processes), becomes one with the other two. The section of the novel Schaub is referring to--Edward Pointsman trying to pry out of Kevin Spectro just "One, little, Fox!" (GR 47-53)--does have the shifting, nightmarish, oratorical quality Schaub associates with the "Over Voice":

> Whenever the narrator adopts this second-person address, the tone becomes meditative, nightmarish, oratorical. The reader inevitably feels himself to be the object of this address. (Schaub 128)

But there are specific signals that the digressions, meditations, and nightmarish fantasies are Pointsman's. For example, a paragraph on Pavlov's "ideas of the opposite" (GR 48-49) is answered "'You're putting response before stimulus'" (GR 49), as if Spectro had heard these thoughts, which indicates that, even though the paragraph looks as if it were either interior monologue or spoken by an omniscient narrator, it was actually spoken aloud. Further on, a direct quotation from Pointsman, "'so he [Slothrop] might turn a particular corner, enter a certain street, and for no clear reason feel suddenly . . .'" (GR 49), merges into "Silence comes in, sculptured by spoken dreams" (GR 49) and a fantasy about a bombed out theater, "you could hear them crying from the rows either side but couldn't move . . ." (GR 49), about death, about seductive, pretty children, about "thousands going away," to be as if closed by "Yet for all his agonizing all Pointsman will score, presently, is an octopus" (GR 51). And the rhythm of the prose of this section, with its peculiar hesitations, is that of Pointsman's speech:

> "he's always springing his . . . senile little surprises. . . ." (GR 48)
> "Not at all. Think of it. He's out there." (GR 49)
> but couldn't move . . . the sudden light filling up the room. (GR 49)
> Gone, the war taking them, the man behind already presenting his ticket. (GR 51)
> Damn it. One, little, Fox! (GR 53)

What this means is that the "you" in, for example, the sentence "You have waited in these places into the early mornings, synced in to the on-whitening of the interior, you know the Arrivals schedule by heart, by hollow heart" (GR 50) is spoken to us not by an omniscient narrator but by Pointsman ruminating to himself about his peculiar habit of waiting in bus stations for orphaned little girls. One of the functions of this section is to establish our sympathy with Pointsman, despicable as he is. If the fantasy about these children were told us by another "voice," then indeed it would be, as Schaub says it is, an accusation, and any kind of sympathy with Pointsman would be hard to establish. But sentences like "One by one, gone. Those who happen to be smoking might last an instant longer, weak little coal swinging in orange arc once, twice--no more" (GR 51) don't work in Schaub's kind of reading. Because of the poetic nature of the language, the focus of the moral judgment blurs, and the accusation takes on an inappropriate lyrical tone which renders it merely sentimental. Also, Pointsman is a lonely man. If we do not understand this, his reaction to Spectro's death (GR 138-40) will make no sense, and assessment of himself--"Women avoid him. He knows in a general way what it is: he's creepy" (GR 141)--will elicit no pity. But it does elicit pity:

> He's even aware, usually, of the times when he's <u>being</u> creepy--it's a certain set to his face-muscles, a tendency to sweat . . . but he can't seem to <u>do</u> anything about it. (GR 141)

He is trapped in this situation, inside himself, and we are trapped inside him. As readers, we can see, hear, feel, think, experience only what he sees, hears, feels, thinks, experiences. There is no "voice" here except that.

Other passages which Schaub credits to the "Over Voice" because of the use of the direct-address "you" reveal, on a closer reading, only the "voice" of a character. For example, near the end of the novel when the last V-2 is about to be fired off with Gottfried strapped inside, the reassuring "Come, wake. All is well" (GR 754) is not the "Over Voice" speaking to the reader but Captain Blicero heard through a tiny speaker in Gottfried's ear. As he has done before, Blicero is alluding to Rilke: "'Want the Change . . . O be inspired by the Flame!'" (GR 97); "At last: something real [. . .] Now it is time to wake, into the breath of what was always real" (GR 754). Earlier in the novel, the section which begins "In Germany, as the end draws upon us" (GR 72 ff) is from Brigadier General Pudding, although it is several pages before this becomes clear. The cliches, the outdated slang--"that is, dotty?" (GR 74)--the gossipy tone, and the old man's "or was that--who <u>was</u> the ginger-haired chap who slept with his hat on? ahhh, come back" (GR 76) all establish this as Pudding's voice. Further, what Schaub calls the "voice" looking forward in time, for example, Bloat being "too busy running through plausible excuses should

he happen to get caught, not that he will, you know" (GR 17; Schaub 131), is just Teddy Bloat talking to himself. Bloat has already been established as a fop--"Bloat, who's nearest, takes it, forkful of bananes glacées poised fashionably in the air" (GR 11)--and the "you know" along, with the preceding sentence--"erected to gratify curious gods' offspring indeed" (GR 17)--is Bloat's characteristic idiom. The "voice," as Schaub defines it, does not seem to be there.

The "voice" does, however, make its presence felt in the novel. It does speak to us, but it is difficult, though not impossible, to pinpoint it in any specific technique or stylistic signal. It seems to exist, for the most part, in the tone of ironic and sorrowing pity which pervades the novel. Schaub is not entirely mistaken when he states that the direct-address "you" signals the presence of the "Over Voice." Often it does signal this "voice." Where Schaub makes his mistake, however, is in assuming that the "you" is always used as a direct address to the reader. It is not, but there are points where the "you" is not a colloquial interjection or the character talking to him or herself but this "voice" speaking to us:

> But the sound is greater than police. It wraps the concrete and the smog, it fills the basin and mountains further than any mortal could ever move . . . could move in time. . . .
> "I don't think that's a police siren." Your guts in a spasm, you reach for the knob of the AM radio. "I don't think--" (GR 757)

Although the "Over Voice" is present throughout most of the novel, its appearances up until the last hundred or so pages are brief and fleeting, rifts in the narrative. The presence of the "Voice" is signaled by the "you" when it is used as a direct-address and by anachronistic references to what would be, in 1945, future events:

> no need even to be there, at the office, for visitors may tune in from anywhere in the Convention to his passionate demonstrations, which often come in the midst of celebrating what hep humorists here are already calling "Critical Mass" (get it? not too many did in 1945, the Cosmic Bomb was still trembling in its earliness, not yet revealed to the People, so you heard the term only in the very superhepcat-to-hepcat exchanges). (GR 539)[13]

But not all of the anachronisms come from the "Over Voice." For example, the Sixties era drug slang used by Bodine in his song "The Doper's Dream" (GR 369) is his own. So even with these, some care must be taken.

But there is one more signal, more subtle, which must be caught in conjunction with these other two. In the last sections of the novel (GR 626 ff), the mode of narration changes from free indirect style to a virtual first person narrative as the "Over Voice" becomes the dominant "voice" and takes on Slothrop's function as the organizing thread of the narrative after Slothrop thins, scatters, and finally disappears:

> in the Zone, later in the day he [Slothrop] became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn't recall [. . .] (GR 626)

The change in tense from the present, the dominant tense in the novel, to the preterite, "became," tells us that this is the "Over Voice" speaking, sharing, as it were, the sentence with Slothrop, the sentence which shifts back to present, "doesn't," and to Slothrop as he fades out, "not a thing in his head, just feeling natural" (GR 626).

Slothrop's function is given to the "Over Voice" because, if Slothrop and his quest had remained the central thread, either the novel would have continued in a line forever, like The Crying of Lot 49, assuming that Slothrop does not find what he was looking for, or it would have come to an end, that is, closure and death, assuming that Slothrop's quest is successful. And if Slothrop did find his "grail," his rocket, his answer, what then? The point of the novel (of most of Pynchon's fiction for that matter) is that there is no answer in any conventional, definitive sense of that word. Indeed, for Pynchon, it is scrabbling for an answer with a capital "A" which kills, as it spiritually destroys characters like Pointsman, Blicero, and even Franz Pökler, in part because the pursuit is quixotic, and in part because such an answer means an end.

But Gravity's Rainbow does not end, does not resolve. The disparate voices remain, distinct and separate, telling us that there is no answer (indeed, what, pray tell, was the question?), no way to bring these voices together, no world that can be unified, no Way, no Truth, no Path. It tells us that the nature of the "Real" is multiple, that our knowledge of it can only be limited and subjective. That the "Over Voice" functions not as an omniscient narrator but as a virtual first person narrator, in other words, as just another "voice" in this fragmentary universe, underscores this point. The "Voice" can know only what the "Voice" can know. This is a scattered, chaotic, and multiple world, and what Pynchon seems to be doing is trying to get us to break out of our sensible and orderly systems, our rationalized living death, and live with what is, respecting the multiplicity of the true nature of things.

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Notes

[1] Douglas Fowler, A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980) 47, 44, 9-10.

[2] Joseph W. Slade, "Religion, Psychology, Sex, and Love," Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 160. Slade is interested in the novel as an exploration of the alienation of modern European (and American) man from natural wholeness. He believes that this impulse toward alienation and fragmentation is expressed in the peculiar nature of the narrative voice in the novel.

[3] Mark Richard Siegel, Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1978) 21-22.

[4] Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 10, 142.

[5] Thomas Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981) 131.

[6] Jane Austen was the first major writer to use extensively this particular way of telling a story. In spite of the fact that an American writer and critic, Henry James, was the first to identify and talk about the style, few American critics have dealt with it. For more extensive discussions of free indirect style, see: W. J. M. Bronzwaer, Tense in the Novel (Gronigen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1970); Kate Hamburger, The Logic of Literature, trans. Marilynn J. Rose (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1973); Roy Pascal, The Dual Voice (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977); Franz K. Stanzel, Narrative Situations in the Novel (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971); "Toward a Grammar of Fiction," Novel 2, 1978; "Teller-Characters and Reflector Characters in Narrative Theory," Poetics Today 2.2 (1981).

[7] Parenthetical references to GR are to Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973/Penguin, 1987). All ellipses, except those in brackets, are Pynchon's.

[8] Franz K. Stanzel, "Toward a Grammar of Fiction," Novel 2 (1978): 249.

[9] Stanzel 249.

[10] One of the advantages, and one of the peculiarities, of free indirect style is that the author can shift out of it when necessary to introduce a character or to introduce information a character may not be privy to. For example, Pirate Prentice is presented via direct authorial voice--"His name is Capt. Geoffrey ('Pirate') Prentice" (GR 5)--but the text returns to free indirect style almost immediately--"His skull feels made of metal" (GR 5).

[11] The sentences quoted mark where the voice shifts from one character to another. Such shifts can also occur in mid-sentence. For example, Authorial voice: "So the pure counter-tenor voice was soaring, finding its way in to buoy Jessica's heart and even [shift to Jessica] Roger's, she guessed, risking glances [. . .]" (GR 129).

[12] As quotations from Jessica indicate: "snide comments"; "nihilistic, not even cheaply so" (GR 128, 129).

[13] The "you" in "so you heard the term" is not a direct address to the reader but merely a generalized pronoun that can be replaced: "so one heard. . .". Even the "Over Voice" does not always speak directly to us. Although it does start out with a direct address (jabbing us in the ribs as it were--"get it?"), it quickly withdraws.