

“How Do You Spell Reality? — ‘O-U-T-A-S-E’”: Or How I Learned to Stop *Gravity’s Rainbow* and Start Worrying

Stephen Jukiri and Alan Nadel

For a number of years I taught *Gravity’s Rainbow* as the last book in my graduate course “Post-WWII American Fiction.” The course usually included a dozen books, with a separate, short writing assignment on each. The students were required to do any three of these short assignments and then a longer research paper. In the short assignments, I usually identified a brief passage from the assigned novel, raised a long list of specific questions about the passage, and asked the students to answer some of those questions in the process of relating a careful analysis of the language to thematic, stylistic, or generic issues concerning the book as a whole.

Devising an assignment of this sort for *Gravity’s Rainbow* became particularly problematic because the idea of selecting a stylistically or thematically “representative” passage seemed to contradict the very points I was making about the book. I was, after all, trying to get my students to realize that information, *Gravity’s Rainbow* implied, became legible only through systems of interpretation, and that interpretation did not originate in the *object* of scrutiny but in the *method* of the scrutinizer. Any methodology, I had argued, depended on privileging one kind of information over another. Like a good scholar of the postmodern, I had been making this case rather consistently throughout the course and now was invoking *Gravity’s Rainbow* as the piece of privileged information to support my methodology. Since, according to my own claims, if I chose a specific passage in the text, I was already structuring the interpretation of the whole, I decided to let my students choose the passages, on the premise that, in trying to decide on an “appropriate” passage, they would discover how much that decision predetermined their interpretations. Perhaps this was, however, a needless lesson; having learned, as graduate students always do, to tailor their papers to the interpretive eccentricities of their professors, the lesson that interpretation did not reside in a text but in a system of privilege could not have been much of a revelation.

A more complex point, and one much harder to make, was that, as “historical” subjects, they were both the readers of history and the

objects to which the texts of history referred. Their sense of their identities—as people of the twentieth century, as Americans, as children of the 1970s and '80s—relied analogously on creating systems of interpretation by privileging specific bits of information. I wanted them thus to see the ways their interpretive problems resembled those of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the ways, even when not writing literature papers (*especially* when not writing them), they had to negotiate the world by privileging arbitrary (or are they really random?) systems of correlation. I wanted them to see that, in making their quotidian claims to be “real” people with “real” histories, they defined themselves in terms of systems of understanding they could not identify. I was trying, in other words, not only to help them identify with what, for most of them, was the most bizarre and estranging book they had ever read, but also to help them see that identification as endemic to their human perception, as definitive of it.

This was, of course, an absurd aim. Who, for even one moment, would think of himself (or herself!) as Slothrop, much less admit it in writing? And the assignment was necessarily, therefore, a compromise, one which picked an (almost) arbitrary selection of topics in hope of demonstrating that correlation creates interpretation and that *Gravity's Rainbow* can be correlated with anything. The assignment was further compromised by end-of-the-term giddiness and my fetishizing of Gloria Talbot, a '50s actress who makes the Stepford Wives look like the stars of *Sex Kittens in Leather*:

Select a passage of about 200 to 300 words, from Section 3 of *Gravity's Rainbow*, that contains shifts in or juxtapositions of narrative voices, points of view, realms of diction, or frames of reference (contextual and/or metaphorical). What is the effect of these shifts? What presumptions does the reader have to make to render the passage intelligible? In other parts of the novel that employ similar voices, are they juxtaposed in the same way or differently? Are there different characters in other parts of the novel who replicate the language, situations, or perceptions of those in this passage? Do the echoes and repetitions help provide a method for constructing the presumptions necessary for reading, or do the echoes and repetitions undermine the process? How? Does the novel: a) contain, b) create its own, c) destroy, or e) resurrect information systems? All of the above? None of the above? “a” and “c,” but not “b”? All but “e”? “d” only?

Consider these questions (and the nature of reality, the high cost of living, that it all comes out in the wash, that there's no cliché like an old cliché) and write a paper on *one* of the following topics, using *Gravity's Rainbow*, and especially your selected passage, as your only source:

The Nature of Love

The Search for Meaning in an Insincere World

The Difficulty of Finding a Meaningful Career

Gloria Talbot's Dilemma in *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (If you choose this topic, you may refer to the movie.)

Although this assignment produced a number of respectable and quite standard papers, no one ever got its point until last fall when I received the following paper by a first-year graduate student named Stephen Jukiri. The paper was put in my mailbox, overlong and overdue, as Steve was on his way back to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to pursue an extended leave of absence from graduate study.

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How Do You Spell Reality?
"O-U-T-A-S-E"

I wish my father had been a blacksmith. Or a carpenter. Or of any trade, actually, other than a college-trained career profession that I can't apprentice into. Anything, so long as it would have allowed me to fill his shoes after him without thinking about it, thus avoiding that 20th-Century plague, the "rewarding career."

Why can't I decide to spend my working years just as I decide which clothes to buy—which means: avoid the issue altogether? I can't handle those kinds of decisions—too many choices, too many options. Instead, people give me a few shirts here and there—birthday, Christmas, etc.—and on occasion I get a pair of pants from a friend who can't fit into them anymore. Easy, no decisions, no problems; I wear what I got and don't think about it. But my *life*? Shit, nobody wants to tell me what to do with it, nobody wants to make that decision for me, nobody wants to tell me what my very own rewarding career should be. What a bunch of wimps. It's like reading *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's a wimp too. He won't make sense of anything. All he wants to do is spew out his stuff and expect *me* to decide what's meaningful.

Maybe I don't wanna.

Maybe, just maybe, I don't want a rewarding career, and maybe I don't wanna make any sense of the damned book. I mean, let's list it right here, off the bat, Presumption #1: I care.

And of course I do. One of the greatest ironies of life is that, once you are exposed to some thought, some crazy notion like "rewarding career" or some blob of information like *Gravity's Rainbow*, you can't erase it—you can't just choose to forget you ever knew it. And so, once the possibility exists that your job can be more than just another job—that it can be a "rewarding career," no less—then you're a goner. You might as well give up, because the minute you start to ask yourself if your career is rewarding, you've called into question the entire nature of reality. It's like reading through *Gravity's Rainbow* and asking, "what does this mean?"

I'll show you what it means.

It means whatever you want it to mean.

But first, let's look at two more presumptions contained within the possibility of my having a rewarding career. First presumption: it doesn't matter what the job is, as long as it's a career. As soon as I *decide* I've got one—as soon as I *call* my job a career—hell, I'm halfway there. Second presumption: it doesn't matter *how* it is rewarding, just so long as it *is* rewarding. I ought to know it when I see it, right?

Wrong.

The problem with finding a rewarding career is that essentially everything, potentially, is a God-damned rewarding career. How the hell do I know? There are too many ways of looking at it. I'd rather puke than work for IBM, and yet, at the same time, I know for a fact that thousands of people every day work for IBM and think that they have got a rewarding career. I write a friend a letter that has a poem in it, and I think, for a second, that I have got a rewarding career ahead of me. And then I think again. You see, the essential problem with the question of "rewarding career" is that it makes you paranoid. You have to keep questioning it, you have to pick it apart, you have to look at it from the perspective of your God-damned grandma before you can accept that maybe, just possibly, you have a rewarding career. But, of course, once you've done all that, you don't. There are too many ways of looking at it, and too much information to make that decision—and more information leads to more questions which lead to more information and more possibilities and more connections and more correlations and more questions and, eventually, books like *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Yes, I am going to talk about the book.

Making sense of *Gravity's Rainbow* is like trying to decide if you really, really do have a rewarding career. It all depends on how you look at it—or, from the perspective of the book, what axes you use to

plot the data. It all depends on what narrative you fit the information into. It all depends on which information system you use.

And of course, first of all, you have to care. I'll presume you do, as does the book. Next, there is one hell of a presumption you have to make: you have to presume that *it is possible* that the book makes sense—and *that's the only presumption you need*. You see, one of the main motifs of *Gravity's Rainbow* is that, if we want, or need, to make sense of something, all we need to do is believe it's possible, and our paranoid little minds will make all the necessary connections. Amazing, isn't it, that it all comes down to faith: that our reality is based on our faith in our own little information systems that select just what they need to perpetuate themselves? But the flip-side of that coin, another main motif in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is that, once we start to get a lot of information—too much information—we start to make connections that don't make sense, or only make sense from a different perspective. And before long, we have more perspectives and more information than we can put together into a coherent whole, and then we lose our grip on reality. And then we can no longer make judgments with any certainty.

For example, when we see the sun rise and set every day, we think we understand what we see, and we do so in terms of physics, in terms of science, and in terms of our literary and artistic narrative traditions that tell us what sunrise and sunset are all about. But what did the tribe of Enzian see, according to *Gravity's Rainbow*?

his tribe believed long ago that each sunset is a battle. In the north, where the sun sets, live the one-armed warriors, the one-legged and one-eyed, who fight the sun each evening, who spear it to death until its blood runs out over the horizon and sky. But under the earth, in the night, the sun is born again, to come back each dawn, new and the same. (322)

Can we say that our own interpretation is any more valid, any more truthful, any more meaningful than that of the tribe? Nope, not if we are honest enough to see more than one way of looking at the world, not once we begin to get more information, and our paranoid minds begin to connect it. It's like the IBM vice president who is told that Mother Teresa also has a rewarding career: can she ever be sure after that—100% sure—that she too has a rewarding career? And the further she digs, the more information she connects in trying to make sense of it, the less sure she becomes. The two understandings of the sun, like the two careers, are just different versions of the same old story. And is any one understanding—like any one career—more meaningful or more rewarding than another?

Well, it all depends.

I'm going to focus in on one passage from the book (324–25), and try to demonstrate how it all depends—how the book constantly shifts from one character to another, one voice to another, one narrative form to another, and one perspective to another.

Enzian himself has gone through numerous changes in perspective, and numerous reconceptualizations of the world around him. He is, from one perspective, a man in search of a rewarding career, a man in search of meaning in his life. We read: "It began when Weissmann brought him to Europe: a discovery that love, among these men, once past the simple feel and orgasming of it, had to do with masculine technologies, with contracts, with winning and losing" (324). Enzian's old notion of love (who knows what it might have been before this, if he even had one?) has been changed. Or rather, he has had to change it to make sense of this new and different world he has been exposed to. Likewise, Enzian "was led to believe that by understanding the Rocket, he would come to understand truly his manhood" (324). In effect, Enzian had been taught a new perspective—a new narrative—that should have led him to a new understanding. If he believed that the story of the Rocket would tell him something about himself, then it would.

Enzian also relied on clichés, images, and other narratives as information systems to make sense of the world. He says: "I used to imagine, in some naïve way I have lost now, that all the excitement of those days was being put on for me, somehow, as a gift from Weissmann. He had carried me over his threshold and into his house, and this was the life he meant to bring me to, these manly pursuits'" (324). Even though Enzian no longer believes in this way of looking at his life, it was his frame of reference for understanding it: a reference system based on the notion—or narrative—of being "carried over the threshold," as though he had become married to that perspective on life, life-bonded to a narrative scenario that he made up for himself. And he remembers that period in terms of images: "I could not believe so many fair young men, the way the sweat and dust lay on their bodies as they lengthened the Autobahns day into ringing day [. . .] the women seemed to move all docile, without color. . . . I thought of them in ranks, down on all fours, having their breasts milked into pails of shining steel" (325).

The way Enzian thinks of that past—the different images he uses to make sense of it—*can* make sense. But at the same time, we know that they are not the only images, not the only ways to make sense. And Enzian himself acknowledges the loss of his naivete—his acquisition of information, in other words. He can no longer make such

easy, simple, and certain sense of the world. He now knows too much to be able to know anything anymore with certainty. Likewise, I can never say, with certainty, that my career is rewarding. There are too many ways to look at it, too much information available for me to take into consideration. And likewise again, as readers of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we end up having the same problem: too much information, too many perspectives on that information. The voices, motifs, and images of the book repeat themselves so much, and connect so many different parts of the book in so many different ways, that our sense of reality, once so stable, breaks down. Our minds, like the characters in the book, begin to see connections everywhere, and, eventually, those connections become unplottable, incomprehensible. For example, look at what Enzian says about Weissmann:

"Did you ever, in the street, see a man that you knew, in the instant, *must* be Jesus Christ—not hoped he was, or caught some resemblance—but *knew*. The Deliverer, returned and walking among the people, just the way the old stories promised . . . as you approached you grew more and more certain—you could see nothing at all to contradict that first amazement . . . you drew near and passed, terrified that he would speak to you . . . your eyes grappled . . . it was confirmed. And most terrible of all, *he knew*. He saw into your soul: all your make-believe ceased to matter." (325)

Enzian seems to be equating Weissmann with Christ—with a character from a narrative that gives him a certain perspective, a certain understanding of his relation to Weissmann. This character changed his life and his whole understanding of the world, replacing all his old beliefs and understandings by making them seem like "make-believe." Weissmann, as Christ, had carried him into a new life and a new world, the new world of Europe as it moved into the Second World War.

And yet, for a reader, it is hard to see Weissmann as this Christ figure—especially when, two pages back, it was Enzian who seemed more like a Christ figure:

Shortly after he was born, *his mother brought him back to her village*, back from Swakopmund. In ordinary times she would have been banished. *She'd had the child out of wedlock*, by a Russian sailor whose name she couldn't pronounce. But under the German invasion, protocol was less important than helping one another. *Though the murderers in blue came down again and again, each time, somehow, Enzian was passed over.* (323; emphasis added)

It makes sense, really, that Enzian should be seen as the black Christ, bringing not light but darkness—blackness from the primitive depths of humanity—bringing not death but death transfigured in the form of racial suicide, all in keeping with Herr Rathenau's earlier predictions (166).

But, from another perspective, perhaps Slothrop should be considered the Christ, with his ability to perform miracles—his miracles being, of course, the way that the rockets always landed wherever he had just had a sexual encounter.

Or perhaps Roger Mexico is the true Christ figure—Roger, who understands the laws and probabilities of the world and knows exactly what humans can and can't predict. Roger, who has the best understanding of the possibilities that the future holds, who tries to gain control over the world and Slothrop by plotting all his data—as if he were trying to account for everything, trying to atone for all the sins—could be the Christ trying to save the world as we know it.

But the point here is that almost anyone can be the Christ, just as almost any career can be a "rewarding" career. It all depends on what information you use and what system you use to put it together. It all depends on whom and what you privilege. But when the information and the different systems begin to pile up, our ability to put it all together decreases. And, just as in the case of "rewarding" careers, it's up to us: *Gravity's Rainbow* refuses to take any responsibility for the connections we make. It refuses to help us make sense of all the information it dumps on us. It refuses to present a single, coherent perspective.

For example, the excerpt on pages 324–25 begins with something like a scene cut—similar to the cuts found in motion pictures and TV—that jumps from a narrative voice to the voice of Enzian talking, seemingly, out loud. We don't know why he is talking, or to whom he is talking, or why we have jumped into this new narrative form. But eventually we learn that he is being interviewed, for somebody asks him, "'Was he [Weissmann] ever jealous of the other young men—the way you felt about them?'" Enzian answers the question and is then asked another: "'And you never doubted him? He certainly hadn't the most ordered personality—.'" But here Enzian turns the tables and becomes the questioner: "'Listen—I don't know how to say this . . . have you ever been a Christian?' / 'Well . . . at one time'" (325). And here Enzian describes the way he saw Weissmann as a Christ figure, as already quoted.

This conversation, or interview, or interrogation, or whatever it is has become, almost, an example of what the whole book is like: Questions are not just questions; they are also statements—they

contain information. And answers, when given, don't just give us more information; they also give us more questions—questions that may or may not contain more information, and so on. In answer to Enzian's question/statement about Christ, we get this: "Then . . . what's happened, since your first days in Europe, could be described, in Max Weber's phrase, almost as a 'routinization of charisma'" (325). Even though the sentence is not punctuated with a question mark, it is still an implied question: "does your experience fit into the phrase 'routinization of charisma?'" Does that phrase carry the narrative weight and the narrative structure to fully explain the experience, to give it meaning? And Enzian's answer: "'Outase,' sez Enzian, which is one of many Herero words for shit, in this case a large, newly laid cow turd" (325).

Enzian's remark is puzzling because we don't know what his frame of reference is. Does he mean "outase" is a better description of his experience than "routinization of charisma"? Does he mean "outase" as a comment on this whole question-and-answer process that seems to be getting nowhere? Is it "outase" that the interviewer would even attempt to take something so complex as Enzian's experience and cram it into a three word phrase? Or is Enzian stepping out of the conversation, out of any attempt to understand, and sidestepping it all by uttering his final exclamation of disgust, "outase"? Any one of these interpretations could be made, argued, proved and disproved; it all depends on how you want to understand it. Likewise, the interviewer can be whomever we want him/her to be: the narrator, the author, Josef Ombindi, Enzian's conscience, or ourselves as readers. But we know too much—and at the same time, paradoxically, too little—and we have too many possible ways to make sense of these interpretations to reach any conclusions with any degree of certainty.

And if we ask the question is it okay for a book to do this—is it still a story, is it still a narrative, is it still an attempt to create a believable reality for us when the book itself interrogates its own characters and jumps around senselessly—then we are calling up that original question of what constitutes a "rewarding career." To believe that a career is rewarding, we have first to believe in the narrative, the story that people call a "rewarding career." Then, second, we have to take everything that happens to us in our job and either make it fit into that narrative or alter our notion of what the narrative should be to include our experience. In the same way, to make meaning out of this book, we have first to believe it is a valid narrative and then second to take everything that happens and make it fit into our idea of what a narrative is—or, again, alter our sense of what a narrative is so that every part of the book can be accounted for.

But the book, similar to our society in the way it is beginning to view reality, won't allow us to fit neatly just the right amount of information into the neat little established narratives. It offers too much information and too many different ways to understand it, and so we are left, always, wondering what is the reality of the book, what is the reality of life, what is the reality of my "rewarding career"? How can I ever know any of those things with any certainty?

Outase.

—Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute