

Blog Post 3: *Gravity's Rainbow* and Its Critics

750-1000 Words

Due Tuesday, April 1st for A-K

Due Tuesday, April 8th for L-Z

Up until this point of the course we have been privileging a particular critical approach to reading, both explicitly and implicitly, which at one point in time went under the heading of “New Criticism.” Though New Criticism has been shown, and quite successfully, to be wanting in a number of different ways since its heyday in the 1940s, it is a critical approach that not only still has a profound impact upon the practice of reading, especially inside the academy, but it has given us a name for something that virtually any critical approach, no matter what its nature, must at some point engage with, and that is the practice of *close reading*. This, as you’re probably aware, is what I’ve been continually asking of you up until this point: to close read the text, to look closely and carefully at specific, important moments in the text, both in class and in your writing assignments, and to say something specific about what you are looking at. Figuring out what a text says, how it says it, how it is made, asking questions about why it might have been made in the way it was, and to pose an argument for an interpretation of the text: all of these things are absolutely necessary for any practice of criticism.

But as this course’s title is Introduction to Critical Reading, it would be absolutely remiss of me to stop our critical engagement at close reading alone, if for no other reason than the various achievements in literary theory and criticism since New Criticism’s heyday have been significant, to say the least. Though it is outside the scope of this course to fully explore the various developments in critical theory of the late-twentieth century, developments that at times have exploded the very ground of reading itself, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers us a particularly interesting node around which to see some of these critical practices in action. It is a novel clearly rich in-and-of-itself, but it is also revealing that *Gravity’s Rainbow* has occasioned a virtual library of rich, interesting, and diverse critical approaches.¹

For your third post I would like you to read one critic’s reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and to report back to us on the blog about that critic’s essay. Each student will be reading a different critical essay on Pynchon and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. I will be passing around a sign-up sheet on Thursday, and students will choose an essay they will want to read and work with. All these essays are on CourseWeb, under Course Documents, in the folder: Critical Articles on Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. I have also handed out a bibliography of *all* of these articles today for ease with citation and so you can see what you have to choose from.²

After you have read the essay that you have selected to work on, I would like you to write a report *and* a response to it. First, I would like you in two to three paragraphs to introduce the essay, describe its argument, and locate its critical stakes. Then describe and show how the critic reads and interprets Pynchon, how they *support* their argument. Pick significant, specific moments of reading and interpretation to focus on. You will probably find that some of these

¹ Indeed, as you move toward thinking about your final paper, you may want to visit the Pynchon section of the library to look at the row-upon-row of shelving Pynchon criticism takes up. You can also access a bibliography of *Gravity’s Rainbow* criticism at <http://www.vheissu.net/biblio/subject.php?w=GR>.

² Before class on Thursday, please take a few minutes to scan a couple articles that you might be interested in reading and discussing so that you will have a good idea of what you want to read and why when I hand out the signup sheet.

essays are difficult and complex. Focus on those moments of difficulty and complexity and try to account for them, try to see what the critic is trying to do and trying to say.

Second, in another two to three paragraphs, I would like you to *engage* with the critic, to comment on their reading, to extend their thinking. One easy way of going about this would simply be to answer the following questions: Do you agree or disagree with the critic? Why or Why not? What has the critic done well? What have they overlooked? You may choose, however, to build upon the critic's work (or read them against the grain), to go *further* in your reading, to allow their insights to lead you toward new, interesting, novel ways of engaging with Pynchon's novel. Though agreeing/disagreeing with a critical text can be an effective way of engaging with it, I find that more often being *generous*, trying to read criticism critically, to see what *more* the critic might have *opened up*, can be a more productive and useful way of reading, writing, and thinking.

Your final paper assignment asks you to engage with at least three of Pynchon's critics, so this is a good way to start doing that work. This assignment is also intended to provide resources for other students, as we will have critical reports of nearly twenty essays after this assignment is complete. So be sure to pay attention to what other people are reading and writing about, as this will surely help you as you move toward the final.

And please feel free to ask any questions of me or get help. Lastly, if there is a critical reading of Pynchon that I have not included but that you want to work on, just let me know what specifically, and that should be fine.