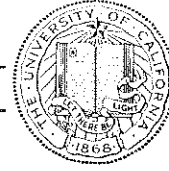


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To the Dissertation Defense Decision Committee for Richard Stock
Philosophical Faculty
Charles University
Prague

I have now read carefully the dissertation by Richard Stock, M.A., "The Puzzle Novel."

Though I know I have been designated as the writer of the "dissenting opinion," I begin by saying that I strongly recommend that Richard Stock be granted the PhD. His dissertation begins with an impressive summary of previous theories of the novel that show how well he has understood, and can cogently recapitulate, the arguments of the novel theorists he has read: Propp, Greimas, Barthes, Genette, Todorov, Ricoeur, Brooks, Lukács, Bakhtin, Blanchot, and others. Three points are central in this long first section of the dissertation: 1) Mr. Stock argues persuasively that two salient recent kinds of novel theory, structuralist and narratologist, have been "failures" in the sense that they have not fulfilled their goals of providing comprehensive theories of the novel and have not provided theoretical frameworks that would lead to satisfactory readings of novels, especially recent novels like the second two of the three works Mr. Stock analyzes in the second part of his dissertation. Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* is discussed at some length. 2) Mr. Stock gives cogent reasons why we should return to three theorists of the novel who precede both structuralism and narratology: the Lukács of the pre-Marxist *Theory of the Novel*, the Bakhtin of *The Dialogic Imagination* and other works, and the Blanchot of *The Step Not Beyond* and *The Writing of the Disaster*. Blanchot's notion of "the outside" is placed in the context of similar ideas in twentieth-century philosophers such as Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Nancy. These three theorists, Lukács, Bakhtin, and Blanchot, Mr. Stock argues, should be returned to and appropriated for use in interpreting recent novels, such as his examples by Pynchon and Powers. 3) On the basis of these first two sections, Mr. Stock elaborates, with help from Deleuze and Guattari, a theory of what he calls "the puzzle novel." This is the theoretical claim that certain important recent novels (his examples are Joyce's *Ulysses*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Powers's *Prisoner's Dilemma*) can best be understood as texts that present in different ways puzzles for the reader to attempt to solve in order to understand the novel. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Mr. Stock distinguishes between, on the one hand, earlier puzzle novels, such as *Ulysses*, that are like complicated games or puzzles in which all the rules and all the pieces are given and the challenge to the reader is to identify these and on their basis understand the novel, and, on the other hand, novels, such as his "post-modernist" and "post-post-modernist" (such terms are actually in current use!) examples, in which, perhaps, some pieces of the puzzle are missing or in which the rules of the game in question perhaps change in the course of the reading. Mr. Stock would say "perhaps" because uncertainties about these two issues are essential to the special challenge to interpretation such novels present.

The second part of Richard Stock's dissertation presents succinct readings of the three exemplary novels he has chosen. (He is explicitly aware that the notion of "exemplarity" is problematic and that his three novels are *sui generis* and to some degree arbitrarily chosen.) The bibliography and his readings themselves show that Mr. Stock is familiar with major secondary literature on his three examples. The discussion of the

three novels is accompanied by the development, on the basis of work by Deleuze and Guattari, of concepts of the puzzle as a game and of self-constructing and self-disassembling machine of interpretation and of the "assemblage." These concepts are used to good effect in the actual readings. *Ulysses*, Mr. Stock argues contains within itself the rules by which it should be read. Complex as it is, it is not really a puzzle novel in the sense Mr. Stock defines it. *Gravity's Rainbow* has a clear "core story," the story about Tyrone Slothrop, but subsidiary stories go off on a "line of flight," like vectors, and cannot, perhaps, ever be fitted in as pieces of a completed puzzle. *Prisoner's Dilemma* is a true puzzle novel because essential pieces of the puzzle appear to be missing. This, however, leaves the reader with creative work to do. This work, according to Mr. Stock, helps the reader learn how to live his or her own life.

The dissertation expresses an attractive modesty. Mr. Stock repeatedly says that his work is provisional rather than definitive and that he hopes his dissertation will lead others to investigate further along the lines he has proposed.

Altogether, Richard Stock's dissertation is an impressive achievement that fully warrants granting of the PhD.

Now for my dissenting critique. What I say is more on the order of suggestions for revision of a possible book version of the dissertation than anything that disqualifies it from acceptance as a PhD dissertation.

The logic of Mr. Stock's argument demands that he find structuralist and narratological theories of the novel to be "failures." The word seems to me a little excessive, since the accomplishments of Barthes, Genette, et. al. are considerable. Taken on their own terms Barthes' *S/Z* or Genette's *Narrative Discourse* are extremely impressive accomplishments, as are the continuing multitude of readings of individual novels still being written today under the aegis of "narratology." I agree with Mr. Stock's reservations about narratology (it seeks an impossible rationalization of the novel as a genre), but I would hesitate to call all this work a "failure."

By distinguishing a little too sharply among "fiction," "narrative," and "the novel," Mr. Stock unnecessarily excludes from consideration masterworks like Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, though it is listed in the bibliography. Theories of fiction or of narrative tend really to be theories of the novel, since, as in Booth's book, the examples discussed are almost always novels.

I sympathize with Mr. Stock's praise of Lukács, Bakhtin, and Blanchot, but the accounts of them are perhaps insufficiently historicized, that is, put, however briefly, within the intellectual tradition to which they belong or within the social situation from which they emerged. Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, for example, is a pre-Marxist work that cannot be understood apart from the vocabulary of German idealism it employs, nor apart from the specific theory of historical succession it proposes, nor apart from the lingering nostalgia for organic unity it manifests. Oddly enough, moreover, though one of Mr. Stock's central points in the long first theoretical section of the dissertation is that we must bypass recent work on the theory of the novel and go back to Lukács, Bakhtin, and Blanchot, and though the accounts of these are good, the actual readings of Mr. Stock's three novels do not use Lukács or Bakhtin, and only intermittently use Blanchot's notions of the assemblage of fragments around an absent center. Much of the explicit theoretical basis for the theory of the puzzle novel and its application to the three examples is from Deleuze and Guattari. The first half of the dissertation does not prepare the reader for the centrality of Deleuze and Guattari in Mr. Stock's actual readings.

The readings of the three novels are very good, but some obvious features in these novels that invite being accounted for are left out. Mr. Stock is primarily interested in identifying the “core story” in each case. He focuses on such questions as identifying the various narrators, the nature of the characters, and puzzles about being sure about what actually happens in the novel. Mr. Stock does admirably in reading the novels from the perspective of these questions. What is almost entirely bypassed is discussion of what hits the “naïve reader” that Mr. Stock persuasively postulates most directly, in the eye, so to speak. This is the stylistic density of all these novels, different in each case. More is said about this in the case of *Ulysses*, but though Mr. Stock uses the traditional names for the sections (“Circe,” “Telemachus,” and so on), he nowhere observes that these names refer to Homer’s *Odyssey* and invite the reader to think of *Ulysses* as somehow echoing Homer. Mr. Stock knows this, of course, but his relative lack of attention to “style,” as opposed to the work of figuring out just what happens in each section, means that he does not find it necessary to refer to the *Odyssey*.

Something similar happens in the case of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This novel manifests a fantastic linguistic exuberance. The pleasure of reading it is to a considerable degree a linguistic pleasure, a “pleasure of the text,” as Barthes, notoriously, puts it. One example of this is the wonderfully inventive names of persons, one source of the dark comedy of this novel. These names are almost but not quite plausible as the possible names of “real people in the real world,” but they often have “allegorical” hints, as “Tyrone Slothrop” alludes to Tyrone Guthrie the director, referred to at least once, to the actor Tyrone Power, and to “sloth.” One result of this complex way of narration is that the reader, this reader at least, has often a lot of trouble figuring out just what the meaning of a given sentence is, what the allusions are, what style is being parodied, how we are to take the immense integument of figures of speech, and so on. What is the point, from the perspective of Mr. Stock’s project, of Pynchon’s penchant for long lists of words or phrases in apposition, or of his use of the present tense rather than the usual past tense of novelistic narration? One result of thinking about these conspicuous stylistic features is to make me a little dubious about Mr. Stock’s claim that Tyrone Slothrop’s life is the “core story.” That is certainly one way to read the story, but another way would be to see it as an immense collection of different stories gathered around the dominant figure of the Rocket’s trajectory and imminent explosion. Slothrop’s story is certainly of central importance, however. The Rocket’s final explosion, or the moment just before it hits the crowded theater that is a trope for humanity, is, after all, the way the novel ends. Perhaps something might have been said about the fantasy, science fiction, or “magic realism” aspect of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. What is the function, from the perspective of Mr. Stock’s project, of the extremely strange mixture in the novel of science (psychology, “rocket science,” mathematics, and so on) and the occult (séances, communications with the other world, etc.)? It is unlikely, for example, in the “real world,” at least the one I think I live in, that the places in London where Slothrop has had yet another sexual conquest would predict where the next buzz bomb will fall. It is a wonderfully comic fantasy. Mr. Stock writes about the novel a little as though it were based on a “realistic” fictional story, that is, a story that happens in the way most people think events in the “real world” occur. *Ulysses*, for example, is based on such a story, and *Prisoner’s Dilemma* almost, but not quite, also has such a basis.

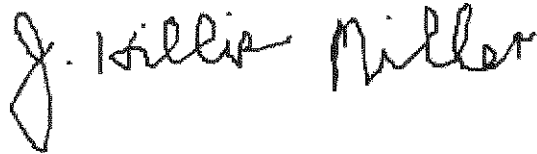
In the case of *Prisoner’s Dilemma* nothing much is done with the title. Why did Powers call it that, and just how does that famous logical puzzle work out in the novel? Moreover, what is the function in the novel of the way the surface stylistic texture, the language of the children, of the father, and of the narrators or narrators, is made up to such a considerable degree of outrageous puns and wordplay exchanged among the characters or uttered by the narrator? Mr. Stock mentions intellectual challenges posed to the children by the father, but these almost always involve wordplay. What is the function of wordplay in relation to Mr. Stock’s project of showing that *Prisoner’s Dilemma* is a true “puzzle novel”? The local stylistic duplicity may have some relation to the uncertainty that Mr. Stock finds in the story line.

My remarks about Mr. Stock's discussion of the three novels adds up to saying that attention to the stylistic texture of the three novels might have reinforced the first-rate readings of the three novels' story lines that Mr. Stock makes.

I have made a few small corrections here and there in pencil in the MS. They can easily be erased if a clean copy is needed for the record.

I end by iterating my recommendation that Richard Stock be granted the PhD and my assertion that my dissenting critique is meant to be somewhat tentative suggestions for possible extension of a version of this admirable dissertation that might be publishable as an important book.

I send this first as an email attachment, and then by mail with the MS.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "J. Hillis Miller". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned in the center of the page.

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