

# Gravity's Rainbow

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**by**  
Thomas Pynchon

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NEW YORK TIMES REVIEW

***Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon**

One of the Longest, Most Difficult, Most Ambitious Novels in Years

By Richard Locke

In America in the late 1950's and early 1960's there appeared a series of comic apocalyptic novels organized around picaresque anti-heroes or schlemiels and filled with what came to be called black humor. Writers like Joseph Heller ("Catch-22"), John Barth ("The Sot-Weed Factor"), Bruce Jay Friedman ("Stern") and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. ("Cat's Cradle," "Mother Night") became celebrities of sorts, cult figures. In 1963 Thomas Pynchon's first novel "V." was greeted with enthusiasm: Stanley Edgar Hyman immediately identified it with "Catch-22" and "Stern" and called it "powerful, ambitious, full of gusto, and overflowing with rich comic invention." Three years later came Pynchon's second novel, "The Crying of Lot 49," as short and swift as "V." was long; it too received high praise.

Yet as the sixties carried on, Pynchon remained silent; his aversion to publicity (no photographs, no bio, no interviews) as at odds with the times; his failure to rush to the marketplace with another hot masterpiece disappointed the getters and spenders. His two novels remained in print in paperback, but sales never really boomed: the exotic intricacy of his plots and the saturnalian density of his prose attracted covens of fanatics; but in a cultural scene where "a boy's got to peddle his book," silence, exile and cunning don't win the day: "You need exposure, baby."

Looking back, however, it seems to me that of all the American novelists who emerged with Pynchon in the 1960's only Vonnegut, Barth and Heller are his peers. Pynchon is a much more complex writer than Vonnegut, a less esthetic and narcissistic one than Barth, and works on a larger scale and has a finer prose style than Heller—though he is not a better architect, or "greater" novelist, or bigger heart.

Pynchon's new book is thus an event—it breaks seven years of silence and allays the fear that he might never go beyond his early success. "Gravity's Rainbow" is longer, darker and more difficult than his first two books; in fact it is the longest, most difficult and most ambitious novel to appear here since Nabokov's "Invitation of a Beheading" four years ago; its technical and verbal resources bring to mind Melville and Faulkner. Immersing himself in "the destructive element" and exploring paranoia, entropy and the love of death as primary forces in the history of our time, Pynchon establishes his imaginative continuity with the great modernist writers of the early years of this century. "Gravity's Rainbow" is bonecrushingly dense, compulsively elaborate, silly, obscene, funny, tragic, pastoral, historical, philosophical, poetic, grindingly dull, inspired, horrific, cold, bloated, beached and blasted.

It could have been titled "v-2." In the Paris 1913 section of "V." there is a passage that states a major theme in Pynchon's work. The heroine, V., is meditating on her lesbian passion for a young ballerina: "It was a variation on . . . the Tristan-and-Iseult theme, indeed, according to some, the single melody, banal and exasperating, of all Romanticism since the Middle Ages: 'the act of love and the act of death are one.' Dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other. Love-play until then thus becomes an impersonation of the inanimate, a transvestism not between sexes but between quick and dead, human and fetish." In the new novel this theme is given Mahlerian orchestration; World War II in Europe is the stage, and the universal object of passion is a fetish of universal death: the v-2 rocket.

"Gravity's Rainbow" is set in England, France and Occupied Germany in 1944 and 1945. It is thick with references and flashbacks to World War I and Weimar days, to England and America in the twenties and thirties, to early experiments with genocide

and concentration camps in German South-West Africa during the Herero uprising of 1904-7, which played a part in "V" as well. Such characters from "V" as Seaman "Pig" Bodine, Kurt Mondaugen and Clayton "Bloody" Chicklitz (who also figured in "The Crying of Lot 49") reappear in relatively minor roles. A central character of "Gravity's Rainbow" is the German Lieutenant Weissmann, who had been V's sado-masochistic lover in Africa in 1922 (he had deciphered the mysterious atmospheric radio signals that spelled out Wittgenstein's proposition "the world is all that is the case").

In the new novel Weissmann has adopted the SS code name "Captain Blicero" (white death) and devoted himself to the creation of v-2 rockets. At the end of the war he commands a Nazi rocket station from which he finally blasts off a secret missile, numbered 00000 and headed for the North Pole, the Herero land of the dead. In the body of the rocket he has imbedded, behind a plastic insulating shield, a fair-haired Aryan boy whom he has been torturing and bugging devotedly throughout the war in partial compensation for the loss of a black South-West African lover, a Herero native called Enzian. At the end of the war Enzian himself is the leader of a group of African expatriate rocket technicians, the Schwarzkommandos, who have dedicated themselves to assembling one more model of Blicero's rocket of death.

This intricate plotting and world-annihilating, phallic, homosexual imagery are well-known characteristics of paranoia. Indeed, an explicit project in all of Pynchon's works is the exploration, celebration, condemnation and proliferating dramatization of paranoia. In an essay on "The Mechanism of Paranoia" (1911) Freud himself discusses a classic case and connects his clinical observations with the tendencies in German literature ("Faust") and music ("Tristan and Isolde") that Pynchon draws on in his novel. "We should be inclined to say," writes Freud, "that what was characteristically paranoic about the illness was the fact that the patient, as a means of warding off a homosexual wish-phantasy, reacted precisely with delusions of persecution . . . . At the climax of his illness, under the influences of visions which were 'partly of a terrifying character, but partly, too, of an indescribable grandeur,' [the patient] became convinced of the imminence of a great catastrophe, of the end of the world . . . . [Soon he believed] he himself was 'the only real man still surviving,' and the few human shapes that he still saw—the physician, the attendants, the other patients—he explained as being . . . 'cursory contraptions.'"

Such is the mental world of "Gravity's Rainbow." Pynchon has brilliantly combined German political and cultural history with the mechanisms of paranoia to create an exceedingly complex work of art. The most important cultural figure in "Gravity's Rainbow" is not Goethe or Wagner, however, but Rainer Maria Rilke, Captain Blicero's favorite poet. In a way, the book could be read as a serio-comic variation on Rilke's "Duino Elegies" and their German Romantic echoes in Nazi culture. The "Elegies" begin with a cry: "Who, if I screamed, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I would fade in the strength of his stronger existence. For Beauty is nothing but the beginning of Terror that we're still just able to bear, and why we adore it is because it serenely disdains to destroy us."

These lines are hideously amplified in the first words of Pynchon's novel: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now." This sound is the scream of a v-2 rocket hitting London in 1944; it is also the screams of its victims and of those who have launched it. It is a scream of sado-masochistic orgasm, a coming together in death, and this too is an echo and development of the exalted and deathly imagery of Rilke's poem.

Pynchon's novel is strung between these first lines of the "Duino Elegies" and the last: "And we, who have always thought of happiness as climbing or ascending would feel the emotion that almost startles when a happy thing falls." In Rilke, the "happy thing" is a sign of rebirth amidst the dead calm of winter: a "catkin" hanging from an empty hazel tree or the "rain that falls on the dark earth in early spring." In "Gravity's Rainbow" the "happy thing" that falls is a rocket like the one Blicero has launched

toward London in the first pages of the book or the one also launched by Blicero that falls on the reader in the last words of the last page.

The arc of a rocket's flight is Gravity's Rainbow—a symbol not of God's covenant with Noah that He will never again destroy all living things, nor of the inner instinctual wellsprings of life that will rise above the dark satanic mills in D.H. Lawrence's novel "The Rainbow." Gravity's Rainbow is a symbol of death: Pynchon's characters "move forever under [the rocket] . . . as if it were the Rainbow, and they its children."

Elsewhere one of the major characters thinks of the rocket as "a peacock, courting, fanning his tail . . . she saw it in the colors that moved in the flame as it rose off the platform, scarlet, orange, iridescent green. . . . Ascending, programmed in a ritual of love. . . . [She] has understood the great airless arc as a clear allusion to certain secret lusts that drive the planet and herself, and Those who use her—over its peak and down, plunging, burning, toward a terminal orgasm."

Thus, for Pynchon, rocket technology is the final expression of Romantic love-death. His novel draws upon the affective world of Wagner, Mahler, Klimt, Munch, Grosz and Fritz Lang and the other German movie expressionists whose work found its apotheosis in Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film "The Triumph of the Will."

But it is Pynchon's ambition to relate the history of Germany to that of America and indeed the entire Western world. He carefully integrates American characters and references within his European scene (Emily Dickinson is quoted as an American equivalent of Rilke) and he writes in an unmistakably American style. The various characters' obsessive search for Blicero's rocket recalls another mammoth American novel, "Moby Dick." In "Gravity's Rainbow" we find the same appetite for technical data, the deliberate bookishness, the dense exalted prose. It, too, is a voyage into space, time and human consciousness, an exploration of the Faustian impulses that drive men's souls, a criticism of what Quentin Anderson calls the American "imperial self."

Pynchon's Captain Blicero is a Nazi Ahab—obsessed, like everyone else in the book, with rockets, trajectories and explosions. His white whale is the rocket ooooo. He has an English counterpart in the Pavlovian experimental psychologist Edward Pointsman (the "man who throws the switches") who believes in the "stone determinancy of everything, every soul."

These Ahab figures are triumphant demons, evil variations of the paranoiac Herbert Stencil of "V.," the man who has dedicated his life to tracking down the hidden meaning and identity of V. but never learns that she is his mother, not merely a mysterious English girl named Victoria but also symbolically the Virgin, Venus, the vagina and—in the end—the Void, Mother Night.

There are also two Ishmael figures in "Gravity's Rainbow," characters who sense that life is more (and less) than a paranoid obsession but succumb to it for a while, and in the end float free of the sinking ship of Western culture. One is Roger Mexico, an English statistician who sees beneath the apparent malevolent determinancy of things into the impersonal nihilistic void, where patterns have no transcendent meaning (again "the world is all that is the case"). The other Ishmael is Tyrone Slothrop, an American serviceman stationed in a London war office, who is first the victim of Pavlovian rocket research and then scrambles free, crisscrossing the face of Occupied Europe, looking for the secret rocket, following Blicero's trail and pursued in turn by complicated, interlocking, yet mutually hostile forces from England, Russia, America and Africa—some of whom are allied in an international rocket cartel that appears at times to have determined the course of European history from the beginning of the century.

The Ishmael figures of "Gravity's Rainbow" are variations and developments of the comic anti-hero of "V.," Benny Profane, self-styled schlemiel wanderer through the streets of Europe and America, lost in the present tense, learning nothing from experience, full of longing but unable to make commitments, always the prey of mindless pleasures.

Slothrop, the more comic Ishmael of “Gravity’s Rainbow,” is also a parody of Blicero. Chased and chasing rockets in a doped-up manic state of fear, he begins to call himself Rocketman, like a comic book hero, and dresses in a cape and Wagnerian opera helmet. It is Slothrop who falls among French gangsters, German black marketeers, renegade American drug dealers (chiefly Pig Bodine of “V”), and is pursued by the evil American Army Major Duane Marvy, who epitomizes America’s go-get’em capitalistic frontier killer ways. In one sequence that parodies the rocket motif, Slothrop and Marvy, in a balloon and a creaky prop plane, duel with custard pies and guns while crossing the Harz mountains in Germany. Slothrop’s madcap peregrinations take up most of the narrative space in the book. His adventures on the Riviera or in an underground v-2 factory in Nordhausen are among its least demanding comic sections.

Though most of the characters of the novel are male, there are two women who have thematic significance. Roger Mexico (the sentimental Ishmael) is wildly in love with a super, British army girl named Jessica Swanlake, who is happy to sleep with him tenderly through the last days of the war but always knows she will go off to marry her safe, complacent fiancé. Pynchon implies that men of soul, like Roger Mexico, always waste themselves by loving treacherous beauties who sell out; there’s no little sexism in this.

Similarly, one of Pynchon’s most despairing and nihilistic characters is the double or triple agent Katje, a bride of Death, who is at various times Blicero’s sado-masochistic mistress and betrayer and Pointsman’s tool for getting all the funds he needs for diabolic research and development. She is also Slothrop’s seducer and manipulator, and finally (unconvincingly) his loving pursuer. (If all this seems hard to follow, rest assured there’s plenty more to unravel: There are dozens of false leads and characters who start out big, drop by the wayside and pop up hundreds of pages later for brief appearances.)

Pynchon is obviously capable of the most intricate literary structures—plots and counterplots and symbols that twist and tangle in time and space. His expert knowledge encompasses: spiritualism, statistics, Pavlovian psychology, London in 1944, Berlin, Zürich and Potsdam in 1945, chemical engineering, the Baltic black market, plastics, rocket propulsion and ballistics, economic and military complexes, international industrial cartels (GE, ICI, Shell, Agfa, I.G. Farben), Tarot cards and the Kabbala, witchcraft, espionage, Rossini operas, pop songs and show tunes of the thirties and forties, limericks, cocaine and hashish fantasies, and the history of American clothing styles and slang.

This range of knowledge enables him to integrate such instances of racial oppression as are symbolized by “Red” Malcolm X, Charlie Parker’s bebop version of “Cherokee,” the Khirgiz steppes, The Lone Ranger and Tonto and the Wild West, excrement and shoepolish, the fear of black dirt and buggery, the concentration camps of German South-West Africa, the extermination of the European Jews, all with the development of v-2 rockets.

Throughout the book there are brilliant set pieces and episodes that play exquisite variations on earlier scenes. For example, one of the finest extended surrealistic excursions in modern American fiction is a journey searching for a harmonica lost down the toilet in the men’s room of the Roseland ballroom in 1938. As Harvard boys come and go outside the stall (where the young Malcolm X is the rag-snapping shoeshine boy) the drunken Slothrop crawls down porcelain sides, into the bowl, deep into the clogged and rusted pipes, thinking of classmate Jack Kennedy and fearing imminent Negro buggery and death by excremental tidal wave.

Hundreds of pages later, totally adrift in the mountains of Europe, strung out too far on his paranoid quest for the secret rocket ever to reassemble an identity, Slothrop reaches down into a purling mountain stream to find the same harmonica, the water flowing freshly through its mouth holes, bending blue notes of water, and he thinks—or rather Pynchon inserts—the last peaceful pastoral lines of Rilke’s “Sonnets to Orpheus.” Then Slothrop sees the Rainbow linking earth and sky and stands crying, at peace, with

nothing in his head, “just feeling natural.” He has completely dropped out. This use of Rilke and the Rainbow is deliberately opposed to the Rilke and Rainbow of Blicero’s rocket. Such symmetry is dazzling.

For a literary standard by which we can measure Pynchon in this book we must turn to Nabokov, the master of fictional chess, magus of Anti-Terra, mirror world to our own, the realist-surrealist of fabulous skills. The operative emotion in Nabokov’s work is nostalgia, a melting sentimental remembrance of Russian things past, which is converted into the total intellectual possession of a compensatory (and grander) verbal world, combining past, present and future, ruled by its only creator, the omnipotent author. (In its more grandiose and querulous manifestations, such as “Ada” and the recent gray conceit “Transparent Things,” Nabokov’s self-preservative and self-celebrating elaborations are repellently narcissistic.)

The operative emotion behind Pynchon’s literary creations is not Nabokovia nostalgia but a fear of the void, which Pynchon converts into the very semblance of megalomaniac paranoia, the construction of plots and counterplots, epic catalogues, unifying symbols and metaphors, intense verbal energy, detailed descriptions of natural and man-made environments, local life styles, manic good times, college humor and rowdiness leading to drunken and drugged orgies, sexual perversions and reversals of role, and finally to an obsession with the sado-masochistic conversion of human flesh to mechanical contrivance, dead matter.

In all of Pynchon’s books there is also an element of soft lyrical sadness, a longing for a tryst with a lost love. But this tenderness is most often inextricable from a drift into passiveness, self pity, withdrawal, emotional impotence, or it is the feeling that links victim and executioner. In Pynchon’s world there is almost no trust, no human nurture, no mutual support, no family life. In “Gravity’s Rainbow” the one romantic love affair is sentimental and doomed as the war ends, and the others are instances of either heterosexual or homosexual lust. This is most unlike Nabokov at his best, when he allows his feelings for people, family and sexual love to stand revealed at the center of his dextrous verbal work. Pynchon doesn’t create characters so much as mechanical men to whom a manic comic impulse or a vague free-floating anguish can attach itself, often in brilliant streams of consciousness.

The risk that Pynchon’s fiction runs is boredom, repetition without significant development, elaboration that is no more than compulsiveness. For all its richness and exuberance, “V.” is more a wonderful, concatenated jigsaw puzzle than an esthetically coherent literary structure. “The Crying of Lot 49” is smaller but better built. In “Gravity’s Rainbow” the structure is strained beyond the breaking point. Reading it is often profoundly exasperating; the book is too long and dense; despite the cornucopia of brilliant details and grand themes, one’s dominant feelings in the last one to two hundred pages are a mounting restlessness, fatigue and frustration. The book doesn’t feel “together.”

This is a judgment about its form, but let me go a step further. One feels in the end that Pynchon’s imagination is so taken with the imagery of Nazi death, so close to Blicero, that he is driven to make the plot larger and larger, to add more and more characters, to invent increasingly zany comic routines and digressions as a frantic defense against the fear and love of death—the odor of the crematorium, burnt cordite, bombed out minds and bodies, ruins. This all gets out of his control. Pynchon’s sensibility and achievement here are limited by the very paranoid traits that he is ostensibly criticizing. The sentimental and comic characters and their mindless pleasures do not have the intended force to counterpoint the theme of death; the druggy, spaced-out comedy becomes too juvenile and self-indulgent to function as a real alternative.

Like one of his main characters, Pynchon in this book seems almost to be “in love, in sexual love, with his own death.” His imagination—for all its glorious power and intelligence—is as limited in its way as Céline’s or Jonathan Swift’s. His novel is in this

sense a work of paranoid genius, a magnificent necropolis that will take its place amidst the grand detritus of our culture. Its teetering structure is greater by far than the many surrounding literary shacks and hovels. But we must look to other writers for food and warmth.

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*Richard Locke is an editor of The New York Times Book Review.*