

# Aria

## "GRAVITY'S RAINBOW"

### RICHARD LOCKE ON GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

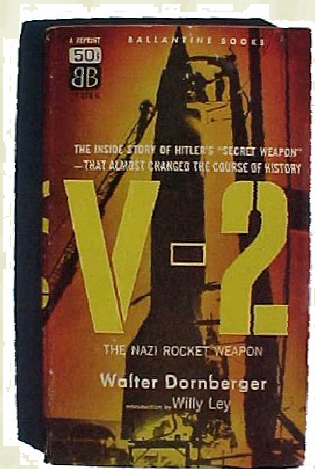
"Gravity's Rainbow" is longer, darker and more difficult than Pynchon's first two books; in fact it is the longest, most difficult and most ambitious novel to appear here since Nabokov's "Invitation of a Beheading" four years ago; its technical and verbal resources bring to mind Melville and Faulkner. 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 bone-crushingly dense, compulsively elaborate, silly, obscene, funny, tragic, pastoral, historical, philosophical, poetic, grindingly dull, inspired, horrific, cold, bloated, beached and blasted.

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, Zurich 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 shoe polish, 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.

### LANGUAGES IN GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

To open Gravity's Rainbow is to step within a shifting field of languages, each with its own spatiotemporal uniqueness. Part 3 represents this field as a horizontal "Zone," an uncertain, skeptical, often violent ground where an old hierarchy of values has been leveled. Everywhere in the novel, words are caught up in the midst of cataclysmic change. Yet the reading must begin with them, and the complexity of that task is apparent from a listing of only those formal discourses we encounter, including

- **Hebrew** (imaged through Kabbalistic writings)
- **German** (through the narrator's references to technical sources on rocketry, the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, and Teutonic mythology)
- **Kazakh** (prior to and during its clash with Soviet bureaucracy)
- **Russian** (through a score of bureaucratic designations)
- **Spanish** (vis-a-vis Argentine literature: Hernandez, Lugones, and Borges)
- **French** (a source of some conversational puns)
- **Japanese** (in references to the kamikaze squadrons and haiku)
- **Herero** (as preserved by nineteenth-century German philology, then in its fateful clash with German colonialism).

Within the word horde of English there are varieties of pop-cultural and subcultural discourse that include, at a minimum,

- **popular slang** (picked up from jokes, street ditties, song lyrics, comic books, street speech, and popular cinema)
- **ethnic usage** (black English, the Hispanic slang oipachuco zoot-suiters, others)
- **underworld cant** (especially as it pertains to black-marketeering in drugs and contraband)
- **regional dialects** (from the American West, Boston, and Britain)
- **service slang** (from both the American and the British military services, probably gleaned from Partridge's Dictionary of Forces' Slang)
- **esoteric cant** (by way of astrology, black magic, freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and the like)
- **folk usage** (as found in children's lore and games, folktales, material culture, and so on)
- **professional jargon** (cinematography, ballistics, statistics, chemistry, behavioral and Pavlovian psychology, and many more).

— Steven Weisenburger, *Gravity's Rainbow Companion*

From the New York Times review, March 11, 1973