The Prismatic Character in Gravity's Rainbow

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In order to begin a meaningful discussion of characterization in Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, it is first necessary for the critical reader to confront the major changes in the novel form which have emerged during the last two decades. Since the early sixties, traditional expectations about what Gerald Graff calls "the narrative method of the realistic novel"[1] have been challenged by a new type of fiction, commonly called the anti-novel or the postmodern novel, which represents, in part, a protest against the established conventions of the novelist's art, as well as a departure from the nineteenth-century emphasis upon the depiction of a recognizable external reality. Consequently, if the reader persists in using the conventions of the nineteenth-century realistic novel (which Linda Hutcheon rightly suggests have threatened to become a genre definition rather than a period description[2]) to judge, structure, systematize, and otherwise pigeonhole Gravity's Rainbow, then the critic will, as many have done, simply toss the book into the heap of unreadable experiments. For there is little doubt that, as George Levine notes,

> Pynchon's novels disorient. They offer us a world we think we recognize, assimilate it to worlds that seem unreal, imply coherences and significances we can't quite hold on to. Invariably, as the surreal takes on the immediacy of experience, they make us feel the inadequacy of conventional modes of analysis, of causal explanatory logic.[3]

Therefore, if the "traditional conventions" no longer apply to contemporary literature in general and to Pynchon's novels in particular, it is up to us, as critics working in the latter part of the twentieth century, to propose, articulate, and establish a new critical vocabulary for discussing postmodernist fiction.

This point is particularly crucial when one attempts to understand Pynchon's use of characters in Gravity's Rainbow. Many critics have initiated their analyses of the novel with tentative statements about Pynchon's characterizations. In almost all cases, Pynchon has been castigated for his inability to create "believable" characters and, as Levine and Leverenz point out, he has been termed "sophomorically obscene, mechanically cold, incapable of creating real characters."[4] Moreover, David Leverenz himself "gave up on Slothrop, idled over sexy little girls, giggled at the toilet bowls and Giant Adenoids, and wondered why [the characters] didn't seem . . . well, complex, richly human and all that."[5] In yet another assessment of Pynchon's characterizations in Gravity's Rainbow, Speer Morgan remarks: "Most of the characters are involved in such weird obsessions or jerking about in such frequent scenes of slapstick in what seems like speedy old film sequences that they have little capacity for dimension or pathos or the other usual requirements for full-blooded novelistic characters."[6]

Unfortunately, these critics are relying upon the nineteenth-century's definition of character, best articulated, retrospectively, by E. M. Forster in Aspects of the Novel (1927). In his chapter on "People," Forster writes:

> We may divide characters into flat and round. . . . The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. . . . Flat people are not in themselves as big achievements as round ones, and they are best when they are comic.[7]

Furthermore, as Forster explains, each flat character represents a certain fixed idea, whereas the round character can be "fully known":

> In daily life we never understand each other; neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessional exists. We know each other approximately by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader . . . their inner

> as well as their outer life can be exposed. (Forster, 32)

Thus, Forster has given us one set of criteria by which to measure novelistic characters. These criteria are based, however, upon an outdated world-view, which was being challenged by the work of writers like Joyce, whose Ulysses appeared five years before Forster wrote Aspects. Like most Victorians and Edwardians, Forster and others assumed that man had an inner nature, an identity which was knowable and could therefore be exposed upon the printed page. In addition, it was assumed that the external world, society, and cultural forces could also be realistically presented by the astute and sensitive writer. The artist, then, could create full and rounded characters simply by illustrating the interaction between two epistemologically secure entities--man's inner self and his external environment. The postmodernist writers, among whom I include Pynchon, have questioned the validity of this basic assumption and, in so doing, have rejected the traditional realistic concept of character. I submit that my term for the postmodernist conception of character--the prismatic character--goes much further toward clarifying our current novelists' vision of twentieth-century man and his predicament, as well as their actual novelistic practice.

Postmodernist novelists like Barth, Gass, Hawkes, Gaddis, Barthelme, and Pynchon reject the nineteenth-century notion of a knowable and describable "reality." In fact, Barth has stated: "If it is impossible and hopeless to make language accurately describe reality, why not let what language creates be reality?"[8] Consequently, in the postmodern world-view, man is alienated--isolated from the self, cut off from the social environment, and separated from even the hypothesis of a god. Obviously, the traditional terms--round and flat--previously used to describe novelistic characters are no longer applicable to the postmodernist view which sees man as an ontologically and epistemologically insecure being. It is in response to these radical insecurities that postmodernists forge the prismatic character. The prismatic character displays a number of opposing, contradictory, and refractory faces, any or all of which can be

colored by the interaction of at least three levels of perception: (1) the situation as each individual character in the novel perceives it; (2) the point of view of the subjective narrator; and (3) the particular angle of vision of each individual reader. This does not mean, however, as many critics have suggested, that the characters simply don a series of masks throughout the narrative. Such an explanation does not go far enough in analyzing the postmodernist writer's concept of characterization because it assumes a "covering up" or obfuscation of some essential self: if one puts on a mask, one obscures the recognizable face beneath the disguise. Furthermore, if a character assumes a number of masks, there is an implied sense of procession or linearity: one wears one mask at one time, and another mask at another time. The prismatic character, on the other hand, has no core or identifiable inner self; his meaning is constructed or diffused by a number of concurrent levels of perception. Moreover, unlike Joyce's characters in Ulysses or Finnegans Wake, who are protean and metamorphose from one level of being to another, the prismatic character is all of his variegated faces simultaneously, any of which can be seen at any given time depending upon the various angles of perception operating within and without the text.

For the purposes of this limited study, I will apply the theory of the prismatic character to Pynchon's protagonist in Gravity's Rainbow, Tyrone Slothrop. During the course of the narrative, Slothrop may be viewed from numerous perspectives: he pursues a quest and refuses to; he is victim and victimizer; a literal figure and a metaphorical one; finally, both the redeemer and the false prophet. Although these various descriptions of Slothrop may at first appear to be contradictory, one finds upon following Slothrop through his many escapades that he can fulfill these roles simultaneously because he lacks a core self, a fixed identity in the nineteenth-century sense. Thus, Slothrop assumes all of these faces but is fully defined by none of them: not one of his various personae is capable of sustaining him in the modern world. The entropic force of Pynchon's world-view inevitably shatters Slothrop's prismatic

personality, diffusing him finally beyond the visible spectrum of human perception. The reader/critic literally loses sight of Slothrop by the conclusion of the novel.

In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon postulates a world comprised of innumerable systems of order--governments, corporations, schools, psychological theories, etc. However, not one of these ordering mechanisms can encompass a totality or, more importantly, give meaning to experience. Thus, within Pynchon's fiction, there is a perpetual tension between chaos and order, complexity and simplicity, chance and control;[9] it is a tension which he imbues with the entropic disorder characteristic of all closed thermodynamic systems. In this environment of increasing entropy, the manifestation of "identity" is only a reflection of the human being's reaction to the despotism of the numerous systems of order imposed upon the individual. Slothrop, therefore, is not and cannot be a character caught up in the process of "becoming" or of "finding himself," in the way that a nineteenth-century bildungsroman hero would be. Rather, Pynchon's protagonist must respond and react according to whatever system of order is imposed upon him at any given moment. In this textual representation of the twentieth century, there is no single totalizing apotheosis of order from which to generate a personal identity. Thus, any number of Slothrop's polychromatic faces are brought to light in response to his perceptions of any given order at any given moment, are limited in range only by the extent of his experiences, and can shift and scatter into new formations as his experiences expand.

Moreover, Pynchon's narrator can, like a film director, manipulate and impose a structure upon the "events" of the novel so that at any one moment the reader is not sure of the level of action, and never knows with certainty how he should interpret isolated incidents. The reader must also decide whether the events unfolding upon the page comprise an account of a film, a dream, a hallucinatory experience, or an "actual" occurrence. Within these various and arbitrary levels of perception exists Tyrone Slothrop, who sets out upon a quest to discover the Schwarzgerät and

Imipolex G, a mysterious substance which the chemist and behaviorist Laszlo Jamf may have used in an experiment upon the infant Slothrop and which will perhaps explain Slothrop's alleged sexual response to the V-2 rocket. Even before his quest quite gets underway, at the Casino Herman Goering where he has just rescued Katje from the giant octopus, Slothrop begins to suspect that his present "mission" is a hoax perpetrated by "Them," and, indeed, to suspect the duplicity of his whole situation:

> So it is here, grouped on the beach with strangers, that voices begin to take on a touch of metal, each word a hard-edged clap, and the light, though as bright as before, is less able to illuminate. . . it's a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia, filtering in.[10]

Regardless of this perceived threat, Slothrop takes Katje to bed and wakes to hear that someone is stealing his clothes and papers. Without his "identity" papers (and having just been stripped of his only friend, Tantivy), Slothrop is left completely identity-less and soon realizes that he and all things, even the objects in the gaming room into which he has just wandered, have no inherent structure or meaning: "Shortly, unpleasantly so, it will come to him that everything in this room is really being used for something different. Meaning things to Them it has never meant to us. Never. Two orders of being, looking identical . . . but, but. . ."(202, emphasis added).

With the chilling realization that he is being manipulated, Slothrop flees the Casino, and the quest continues to Nice, Zürich, the Mittelwerke, Berlin--throughout the Zone, where Slothrop discovers that "nowhere is everywhere." In the postwar chaos of the Zone, Slothrop confronts both his past and his present simultaneously, and recognizes that he is no more than a series of past identities. The individual ego is regulated by sources outside the self. For Slothrop, the questions shift and become: "what is real in this world, and how should I respond to it?" rather than "who am I?":

> Crosses, swastikas, Zone-mandalas, how can they not speak to Slothrop? He's sat in Säure Bummer's kitchen, the air streaming with kif moires, reading soup recipes and finding in every bone and cabbage leaf paraphrases of himself . . . news flashes, names of wheel-horses that will pay him off enough for a certain getaway. . . . He used to pick and shovel at the spring roads of Berkshire, April afternoons he's lost, "Chapter 81 work," they called it, following the scraper that clears the winter crystal attack-from-within, its white necropolizing . . . picking up rusted beer cans, rubbers yellow with preterite seed, Kleenex wadded to brain shapes hiding preterite snot, preterite tears, newspapers, broken glass, pieces of automobile, days when in superstition and fright he could make it all fit, seeing clearly in each an entry in a record, a history: his own, his winter's, his country's . . . (625-26)

For Slothrop the quest has become anti-climactic in the face of this intimation of preterite meaning. His experience in the Zone has stripped him of the need to order experience, and he succumbs to the entropic social processes which have enveloped him. The quest has always been a non-quest because, as Slothrop discovers, the objective is, and always has been, devoid of meaning. The "secret" of Slothrop's self does not exist. Thus, although Slothrop's perceptions tell him at one time that he is searching for "something," and the narrator manipulates the reader's angle of vision so that he believes in the validity of Slothrop's quest, the entire mission is also a farce and always has been. The only truth is that neither Slothrop nor the reader can ever be sure of what he sees, because the converse is always possible: x and its opposite are both equally valid and, therefore, neither is capable of sustaining belief or faith.

Whereas, depending on one's angle of vision, Slothrop may be seen as either the questor or the non-questor, he also can be viewed as both the victim and the victimizer. The reader and the narrator must sympathize with the infant Slothrop who was subjected to:

> Unconditioned stimulus = stroking penis with antiseptic cotton swab.
>
> Unconditioned response = hardon.
>
> Conditioned stimulus = $\underline{x}$.
>
> Conditioned response = hardon whenever $\underline{x}$ is present, stroking is no longer necessary, all you need is that $\underline{x}$.
>
> Uh, $\underline{x}$? well, what's $\underline{x}$? Why, it's the famous "Mystery Stimulus." (84)

Unaware of even the concept of "self," the infant Slothrop cannot defend himself against systems he does not yet recognize. At some time during the course of the narrative, however, the reader realizes that Pynchon uses Slothrop's pre-cognitive predicament as a metaphor for the inescapable contemporary human plight: one is never fully aware of the multiple manifestations of the "mystery stimulus" which perpetually condition and regulate one's responses. In Gravity's Rainbow, the "mystery stimulus" may be constituted by the "entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature" (324) as well as be applied by human manipulators: "power and control, though their effects are everywhere, do not emanate from a center, an originating seat of power. . . ."[11] "They" are inescapable, as the adult Slothrop will learn when he arrives in Cuxhaven:

> Good Evening Tyrone Slothrop We Have Been Waiting For You. Of Course We Are Here. You Didn't Think We Had Just Faded Away, No, No Tyrone, We Must Hurt You Again If You Are Going To Be That Stupid, Hurt You Again And Again Yes Tyrone You Are So Hopeless So Stupid And Doomed. Are You Really Supposed To Find Anything? What If It Is Death Tyrone? (602)

Slothrop is perpetually the victim, just as, in Pynchon's view, twentieth-century men and women are endlessly cozened by the numerous systems of order programming the individual psyche, none of which are able to encompass the totality they promise. The apotheosis of order is illusory. Slothrop discovers that "even those responses which seem instinctual are partly a hype administered by a fearful system" (Plater, 209). How does one assert one's own limited power in

such a world? One victimizes those who have even less power. Slothrop is a victimizer as well as a victim. It is Jessica who poses the question to Roger Mexico: "'Roger . . . what about the girls?' That was all she said. But it brought Roger wide awake" (87). Roger, in turn, poses the question to Pointsman: "'What if Slothrop's--not even consciously--making them [the rockets] fall where they do?'"(87), but it is never satisfactorily resolved. The possibility of Slothrop's culpability remains for the reader to evaluate. Jessica, however, is convinced of Slothrop's responsibility: "Now [Roger] wants to go rescue Slothrop, another rocket-creature, a vampire whose sex life actually fed on the terror of that Rocket Blitz--ugh, creepy, creepy. They ought to lock him up, not set him free" (629).

In his relationship with Bianca, Slothrop himself realizes that he is only using her, even in the intensity of orgasm:

> [. . .] she starts to come, and so does he, their own flood taking him up then out of his expectancy, out the eye at tower's summit and into her with a singular detonation of touch. Announcing the void, what could it be but the kingly voice of the Aggregat itself?[. . .]
>
> But her arms about his neck are shifting now, apprehensive. For good reason. Sure he'll stay for a while, but eventually he'll go, and for this he is to be counted, after all, among the Zone's lost. (470)

Because Slothrop is not able to make love a facet of his experience, both the narrator and the reader lose sympathy for him. Both Slothrop and Bianca are among the Zone's lost. Thus, "Slothrop's orgasm with Bianca comes in the shape of a rocket; like a rocket it explodes, destroys, ends" (Levine, 114). Victimized by a system he partially recognizes but does not understand, Slothrop victimizes those who trust and try to love him, much as Benny Profane does in Pynchon's earlier novel V. Slothrop is both the victim and the victimizer--his prismatic personality revolves in the light of external events and the multiple levels of perception.

In addition, Slothrop is simultaneously a literal figure and a metaphorical one. The narrator of Gravity's Rainbow makes Slothrop a historical figure by giving him a recognizable past:

> In 1931, the year of the Great Aspinwall Hotel Fire, young Tyrone was visiting his aunt and uncle in Lenox. It was in April, but for a second or two as he was coming awake in a strange room and the racket of big and little cousins' feet down the stairs, he thought of winter, because so often he'd been wakened like this, at this hour of sleep, by Pop, or Hogan. (28-29)

But the historical Slothrop is lost in the chaos of the Zone, where past lives and fixed positions no longer have any relevance. The Zone represents "an interval between histories, a figurative zero point where new alignments of time and space are possible" (Plater, 61). The face of the historical Slothrop is consequently darkened, and a new facet of his prismatic persona is illuminated. The literal Slothrop is also the mythical Rocketman:

> But then another message caught his eye:
>
> ROCKETMAN WAS HERE [. . .]
>
> Past Slothrops, say averaging one a day, ten thousand of them, some more powerful than others, had been going over every sundown to the furious host. They were the fifth-columnists, well inside his head, waiting the moment to deliver him to the four other divisions outside, closing in. (624)

In response, Slothrop draws his symbol,  , which, he realizes later, represents the A-4 rocket, seen from below. The entropic forces impinging upon and generated within Slothrop's being are beginning to crack the fragile prism of his psyche. When it finally shatters, Slothrop will lose his bodily substance completely and will fade from the spectrum of human perception.

Slothrop has innumerable other faces which may be perceived by the reader, depending upon his particular

angle of vision. The final double-element of his prismatic persona which I will explore here is the face of the redeemer with its converse manifestation, the false prophet. Slothrop's Calvinist past implicates him in a mission to reorder existing reality. When viewed in the light of his victimization by the mega-cartel and his ensuing quest for the "mystery stimulus," Slothrop "offers the promise of becoming a representational character, a post-war Everyman" (Plater, 98). In various ways, he tries to "save" Katje, Margherita Erdmann, Bianca, Ludwig's lemming, and other individual characters he meets during the course of his quest. Moreover, by trying to escape the established terrors of the mega-cartel, he sets a precedent which appears to be heroic--perhaps he will lead the way to a new order. However, his potential as a redeemer is soon obscured by the immutable darkness of the Zone. Slothrop is revealed as the false prophet when he realizes that he has nothing to profess. In the midst of the Zone, Slothrop finds only his personal Brennschluss point--"a point in space [. . .] where burning must end, never launched, never to fall" (302). In his moment of revelation, he achieves timelessness, finding himself

> lying one afternoon spread-eagled at his ease in the sun, at the edge of one of the ancient Plague towns he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection where the judges have come to set up a gibbet for a common criminal who is to be hanged at noon. (625)

Although the vision of the cross suggests a union of God and the earth, the fact that Slothrop assumes the form of the cross himself undercuts the beatific vision and intimates his preoccupation with his private dilemma. Later, Slothrop sees

> a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural . . . (626)

The redeemer is revealed as the false prophet whose only mandala is the rocket, the harbinger of death and destruction which promises "No return, no salvation, no Cycle" (413).

Pig Bodine, Slothrop's last disciple, is the final person to view him as "any sort of integral creature" (740). Bodine gives Slothrop the undershirt he had dipped in John Dillinger's blood, another veil of Turin, as an emblem of grace: "'Yeah, what we need isn't right reasons, but just that grace'" (741). However, even Bodine cannot sustain the vision of a shattered and dispersing Slothrop. He begins to let him go: "In certain rushes now, when he sees white network being cast all directions on his field of vision, he understands it as an emblem of pain or death" (741). Slothrop's prismatic persona arches vaguely toward the infra-red and the ultra-violet--the peripheral diffusions of the visible spectrum--and ultimately disappears. The narrator drops the subject of Slothrop, except to report various conjectural opinions as to his destiny:

> There is also the story about Tyrone Slothrop, who was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly--perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, his time's assembly--and there ought to be a punch line to it, but there isn't. The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered. (738)

Regardless of the various interpretations of Slothrop's fate, he no longer exists at the end of the novel. Moreover, Slothrop clearly does not conform to our traditional concept of character. Rather, with Slothrop, Pynchon illustrates a revolutionary and strictly postmodernist conception of twentieth-century man--the prismatic character. Instead of donning a series of masks with which to confront the world, the prismatic persona is inherently capable of bringing to light any number of contradictory "faces," depending upon his perception of the external world at any given moment. These various faces, moreover, do not obscure an essential self because, as Pynchon suggests, that inner self is either unknowable or nonexistent.

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Notes

[1] Gerald Graff, "Babbitt at the Abyss: The Social Context of Postmodern American Fiction," Tri-Quarterly, 26, 1973, 305.

[2] Linda Hutcheon, Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1980), 43.

[3] George Levine, "Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 113. Hereafter cited in the text by Levine and the page number.

[4] George Levine and David Leverenz, "Introduction," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 5.

[5] David Leverenz, "On Trying to Read Gravity's Rainbow," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 229.

[6] Speer Morgan, "Gravity's Rainbow: What's the Big Idea?" Modern Fiction Studies, 23, No. 2 (1977), 201.

[7] E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (London: Edward Arnold, 1927), 46, 54. Hereafter cited in the text by Forster and the page number.

[8] Jac Tharpe, John Barth: The Comic Sublimity of Paradox (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1974), 12.

[9] William Plater, The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), xi. Hereafter cited in the text by Plater and the page number.

[10] Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 188. Hereafter cited in the text by the page number.

[11] Khachig Tölölyan, "Prodigious Pynchon and his Progeny," Studies in the Novel, 11, No. 2 (1979), 233.