

## Realizing Gravity's Fantasy

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In the nineteenth century, fantasy could be relegated to children's books, and within these books to places like Wonderland, enclosed by and subordinate to Reality. But with the increasing relativism and subjectivism of the twentieth century, fantasy has entered the mainstream, in works by Joyce, Kafka, Borges, Nabokov: if there can be no truly objective account of reality, if all accounts are subjective, then dreamland and invented worlds necessarily inform our versions of reality. Thomas Pynchon is one of these fantasy-realists whose work is shaped by such a conviction. And Gravity's Rainbow in particular describes a land where fantasy increasingly interpenetrates reality.<sup>1</sup> The novel moves from a relatively discrete and discreet indulgence in fantasy, like Lord Blatherard Osmo's fantasy of the Giant Adenoid, to the realm of the postwar Zone, where fantasy has broken the constraints of logic and flowers everywhere, indistinguishable from so-called reality.

Fantasy literature has traditionally incorporated both fantastical and realistic elements, incorporating the realistic as a way of defining the fantastic, by contrast. Fantasy opposes reality, or at least commonly held notions of reality, notions informed by cause and effect and chronology, and the work of fantasy frequently dramatizes this opposition by incorporating the realistic. We may expect that eating a cake will make us larger--but not that it will suddenly make a seven-year-old girl more than nine feet high, as it does for Alice. By the standards of our ordinary world, such an effect of such a cause seems impossible. Fantasy inheres in such seeming impossibilities. And we are reminded of the impossibility by the presence of some remnant of realistic standards--by the presence, for instance, of "real"-world measurements in inches and feet, and above all by the presence of the commonsensical Victorian Alice, who finds her sudden growth and shrinking curiouser and curiouser. Wonderland seems even more impossible and fantastical when we see Alice reacting to it.

Theorists of fantasy frequently find oppositions in fantasy, whether or not they specifically address the presence of the presumably realistic in the fantasy. E. M. Forster has suggested that fantasy merges "the kingdoms of magic and common sense."<sup>2</sup> Tzvetan Todorov too finds oppositions characteristic of fantasy, tensions between the uncanny and the marvelous, the poetic and the allegoric, while for Eric Rabkin the fantastic inheres in the contradiction of narrative ground rules.<sup>3</sup>

In traditional fantasy fiction, with its contradictions of narrative ground rules, the realistic is present to define the fantastic, not to blend with it. The specification of Alice's varying heights in "real"-world terms--now ten inches high, now more than nine feet high--defines the fantasticality of Wonderland. And "How Doth the Little Crocodile" defines its fantasticality by its divergence from "How Doth the Little Busy Bee." Alice brings "real"-world norms with her to Wonderland, norms that define Wonderland's unreality and help to segregate it from aboveground reality.

The two realms are further segregated by the way in which the "real" world frames the fantasy realm. Alice begins and ends in the "real" world, which is thus the primary world, and the fantasy is just a diversion. And to enter the fantasy realm she must cross a threshold--fall down a rabbit hole and enter a doorway, or walk through a looking-glass. This careful framing not only underscores the boundaries between realms but also subordinates the fantasy. Wonderland is a diversion from serious "reality": it is a realm where a girl-child can play, but even she must return to the "real" world.

Carroll's Alice books are the purest of nineteenth-century fantasies, the most imaginative, the least didactic. Other nineteenth-century fantasists are more intent on teaching us, on leading us to the realm of the spirit, and thus they feel less compulsion to segregate the two realms. For if the fantasy is a metaphor for a spiritual realm, the fantasist wants to invite us to enter and to linger. Thus in George MacDonald's Phantastes the two realms merge invitingly,

the fantasy beckoning the character Anodos, when an ordinary basin is transformed into an overflowing spring and a carpet imitating grass and daisies becomes real grass and daisies;<sup>4</sup> Anodos then enters the realm of the spring, following a footpath through the grass, to make his pilgrim's progress through Fairy Land. Even when Victorian fantasies are less spiritual but simply moralistic, the two realms interpenetrate. In Carroll's own Sylvie books we begin and end in the fantasy realm, and constantly shift between realms. Thus the moral virtues of Sylvie, a much more virtuous girl than Alice, can penetrate into the "real" world. The more didactic nineteenth-century fantasies blur some of the boundaries between fantasy and "reality," but only so that the moral and spiritual gems of the fantasy can enrich our everyday world.

In recent twentieth-century versions of fantasy, fantasy and "reality" interpenetrate even more--and without moral intent. And they interpenetrate not only within individual works but in the literary corpus as a whole: fantasy is no longer relegated to children's literature but has entered the mainstream of serious fiction, in Grendel and Chimera, in Pale Fire and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

Such realms as Nabokov's Zembla and Borges' Tlön seep out of the underground and inundate reality. Instead of sending a "real"-world representative to Wonderland, the fantastical Zembla sends its fantastical Charles Kinbote, apparently mad, to America. Yet we should not dismiss him as a madman but should recognize his genius for flights of the imagination that create their own reality: he may not be a deposed king in exile, but the terrors and loneliness such a king would feel are his terrors, his loneliness. Fantasy invades prosaic reality and becomes a vehicle for what ordinary sanity ignores and hence cannot express. The fantastical Tlön likewise sends representatives: a compass, a metal cone. And finally "reality yielded on more than one account. . . . How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet?"<sup>5</sup> Here fantasy not only retrieves the hitherto ignored but also starts to structure reality, hinting that our

comfortable structures of reality are really subjective, in their own way fantastical. Fantasy and reality interpenetrate more than we might like to admit.

Pynchon recapitulates the movement from discrete eruptions of fantasy in knock-knock reality to interpenetration of the two. I will be primarily concerned with his movement within Gravity's Rainbow, but his fiction as a whole has likewise tended toward greater interpenetration. His first novel V. contains discrete episodes loosely strung together: the Fashoda crisis, Foppl's siege party, Melanie L'Heuremaudit's decadent Paris. What connects these episodes is Stencil's search for a unifying principle, which may or may not exist in reality. And this narrative strand alternates with the Benny Profane episodes, even less clearly unified, except by the recurrence of characters. The Crying of Lot 49 also portrays the search for a unifying principle, as Oedipa Maas pieces together the clues to the Tristero. Yet, as she recognizes, the Tristero might exist, or she might be imagining that it exists, or its apparent existence could be a hoax, or she could be imagining the hoax. In Gravity's Rainbow no single quest unites episodes. The Anubis, for instance, brings together Tyrone Slothrop, Bianca, Greta Erdmann, Miklos Thanatz, and many more. And the sexual daisy chain on board the Anubis becomes a metaphor for the complex couplings of characters and events in the book as a whole. Yet no single line of connection like that sought by Stencil or Oedipa Maas connects the many strands in Gravity's Rainbow: even Slothrop, who has seemed at times the central character, disappears well before the end of the book. We must no longer think in terms of main plot and subplots, but rather in terms of multiple plots. We must no longer think in terms of episodes like beads on a string, strung together by a questing or picaresque protagonist, but rather in terms of multiple episodes, multiple characters, multiple strings.

And within Gravity's Rainbow fantasy and reality increasingly interpenetrate. To mark the changes in Pynchon's treatment of fantasy here I will examine the

four parts into which he has divided the book, even though the treatment in each part is not entirely distinct--much as the boundaries between fantasy and reality blur.

In the early pages we witness Pirate Prentice and his fantasies--in fact, the book disorients us by opening with one such dream or fantasy. One of Pirate's other fantasies contains a Giant Adenoid, which rampages in a Holmesian London: ". . .before the flash-powder cameras of the Press, a hideous green pseudopod crawls toward the cordon of troops and suddenly sshhlop! wipes out an entire observation post with a deluge of some disgusting orange mucus in which the unfortunate men are digested--not screaming but actually laughing, enjoying themselves. . . ."6 So far it seems like a "realistic" fantasy, as it were, one person's imaginings, discrete from knock-knock reality, the stuff of a Grade B horror movie. But actually it's a little more complicated.

For one thing, the fantasy is not Prentice's own. Prentice has a talent "for getting inside the fantasies of others" (12), and the Adenoid fantasy belongs to Lord Blatherard Osmo. No longer is fantasy private. Like our assumptions about everyday reality, it can be shared with another.

For another thing, Prentice has been having these fantasies "outside any condition of known sleep" (13). The fantasy merges with reality as Prentice walks, awake, in the street: "At last, one proper Sherlock Holmes London evening, the unmistakable smell of gas came to Pirate from a dark street lamp, and out of the fog ahead materialized a giant, organlike form" (14). No longer dream or daydream, the Adenoid materializes, in a sentence that first hints at the non-realistic by evoking a literary ambience, the Sherlock Holmes evening, then sshhlops us with what seems a real-world impossibility.

The boundary between fantasy and reality is further eroded through unexpected parallels between the two. Lord Blatherard is eventually "discovered mysteriously suffocated in a bathtub full of tapioca pudding" (16), a fate remarkably like his fantasy ending: assimilation

by the pudding-like Adenoid. Such a fate also resembles our own fate in reading the novel and the fate of the novel's story; for, like the amorphous Adenoid, fantasy assimilates reality, assimilates us-- it disorients us and makes us question what we have previously considered reality. Even this early in the book fantasy starts taking over. For is the fantasy much more absurd than the "reality" for which Prentice frees Lord Blatherard, where "spies with foreign hybrid names lurked in all the stations of the Ottoman rump, code messages in a dozen Slavic tongues [. . .] tattooed on bare upper lips over which the operatives then grew mustaches, to be shaved off only by authorized crypto officers and skin then grafted over the messages by the Firms' [sic] plastic surgeons . . ." (16)?

Even Prentice's fantasies, then, refuse to stay solipsized but try to infiltrate the surrounding reality. Or vice versa. Yet we can still identify what is fantasy and what is reality: Prentice's fantasies are still recognizably discrete, as are other fantasies in Part 1. It takes someone on drugs to see "Dispossessed elves run around up on the roof, gibbering" (93). Or else elves are constrained by simile, as when water bugs "emerge like elves from the wainscoting" (173). Later the elves break free of the simile to inhabit the Zone, anarchic postwar Europe, but here in London fantasy is kept, just barely, in check. Part 1 also alludes to the Hansel-and-Gretel story that materializes in the relationship among Katje and Gottfried and the German Captain Blicero, for whom fairy tale structures reality. But in the still largely "realistic" England of Part 1, fairy tale is confined to simile, as the lovers Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake try to find refuge from the rocket blitz "spooky as an old northern fairy tale" (54). Or Hansel and Gretel are restrained by appearing in a pantomime to which Roger brings Jessica's nieces. Although even here the pantomime can suggest, metaphorically, parents "leaving their children alone in the forest" (176), the fantasy has not entirely permeated reality.

Part 1 also witnesses Slothrop's fantasy voyage down a toilet at the Roseland Ballroom and through the

sewer, seeking his harmonica, a fantasy that merges with one of a "westwardman." In addition to detailing absurd events, absurd compared to the "real" world of Part 1, the fantasy contains phrases evocative of fantasy, phrases like "a Munchkin voice" (63) and a "sunny Disneyfied look" (70). The fantasy is set off from the rest of the narrative in other ways as well, including the square sprocket holes that separate it from the rest of the text.<sup>7</sup> It also begins with--is initially framed by--the dialogue of people from PISCES psychoanalyzing Slothrop, asking him to talk about Boston; hence what follows is "mere" psychoanalytic fantasy. And before the fantasy voyage are variations of "You never did the Kenosha Kid" with different contexts and punctuation (60-61); the fantasy achieves powerful closure by ending with still another variation (71), thereby safely solipsizing the fantasy and disengaging it from commonsense reality, a solipsism reinforced by the solipsism theme in the westwardman episode.

Part 1 is thus still cousin to the Victorian fantasy and the traditional realistic novel, where fantasy can be explained as a mere dream and subordinated to "reality." Cause and effect and chronology still guide us through the narrative, more or less. Our understanding of causality may be defied on occasion, as when Prentice acquires Lord Blatherard's fantasy. But Part 1 remains relatively realistic, its fantasy more or less contained and explained. This part then becomes a norm within the book, a realistic norm against which more fantastical sequences define themselves.

In Part 2 Slothrop has moved to the Continent, away from the comparative safety of insular England, and fantasy has infiltrated his reality. Slothrop structures reality in terms of fantasy, in terms of movies he has seen (a structuring reinforced by the Firm). He "rescues" Katje Borgesius from an octopus, "the biggest fucking octopus Slothrop has ever seen outside of the movies" (186). Later, in her room, they have a pillow fight and then turn to a seltzer bottle:

The what, The Seltzer Bottle? What shit is this, now? What other interesting props have They thought to plant, and what other American reflexes are They after? Where's those banana cream pies, eh? (197)

The next morning, scrambling up a tree and trying to catch the thief who stole his clothes, Slothrop realizes that the thief and his cohorts "were counting on that damned American reflex all right, bad guy in a chase always heads up--why up? and they sawed the trunk nearly through, a-and now----" (199). The Firm is playing with Slothrop's media-inspired fantasies, reifying them, realizing them, undercutting them.

Another media-inspired fantasy, that of King Kong, also influences the world outside film: "the Legend of the black scapeape we cast down like Lucifer from the tallest erection in the world has come, in the fullness of time, to generate its own children, running around inside Germany even now--the Schwarzkommando, whom Mitchell Prettyplace, even, could not anticipate" (275). A film of black rocket troops, inspired by King Kong, appears to have created the "real" Schwarzkommando.

Part 2 also manages to erode some of the apparent reality of Part 1. Investigators cannot locate the women encounters with whom Slothrop commemorated on his map. Did they exist? Did his sexual scores anticipate rocket strikes? Or were the encounters only fantasies? Learning of the findings, "Pointsman avoids the matter--as reflexively as he would any nightmare. Should this one turn out not to be a fantasy but real, well . . ." (272). (Later we learn that Slothrop edited some of the stories he told, changed the names, inserted fantasies [302].)<sup>8</sup>

In general, the war wreaks havoc on pre-existing reality, although in toppling familiar structures it allows nascent structures, such as the Firm's neo-imperialism, to grow and organize the void. Or, more happily, it wrenches Jessica out of her old relationships and allows the fleeting joys of her love affair with Roger, a love that is sanctioned, as it were, by the war and that perishes with it. As the war becomes the War, becomes routinized, and builds its steely



structures of death and duty and austerity, "reconfiguring time and space into its own image" (257), it threatens the fragile budding of love: it "take[s] priority over love, dreams, the spirit, the senses and the other second-class trivia that are found among the idle and mindless hours of the day" (177). Thus the initial disruption by the war allows for new possibilities of growth, which are then mowed down by the impersonal machinery that the War engineers in its routinization. Then, the end of the war again leaves a void, creating a new chaos awaiting structure. The beginning of the postwar period is a time of transition, of what anthropologist Victor W. Turner in The Ritual Process calls liminality, a time when reality needs redefinition and apparent fantasies can become reality, a time of creative possibility.<sup>9</sup>

In Part 3 of Gravity's Rainbow, "In the Zone," in the place and time of greatest transition, fantasy interpenetrates reality even more. This part begins appropriately with an epigraph from the Wizard of Oz, later reinforced by references to Dorothy and the yellow-brick road. The Zone is a fairytale land, inhabited by witches and vampires, dragons and gnomes, elves and trolls, to the extent that "Trolls and dryads play in the open spaces. They were blasted back in May out of bridges, out of trees into liberation, and are now long citified. 'Oh, that drip,' say the subdeb trolls about those who are not as hep, 'he just isn't out-of-the-tree about anything'" (367). This fairytale land, where "everything's been turned inside out"(373), is no longer distinct from "reality": "here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly" (303). Everything in the Zone is infected by fantasy: even G-5 is "living its fantasy of being the only government in Germany now" (290-91). What the previous sections have hinted at, Part 3 literalizes. Or apparently so. Or we become uncertain of what is real, what is not. For when Slothrop encounters a child after seeing her mechanical toys--an orangutan, a crow--she mysteriously "vaporized from his arms" (283); is the fantasy child real? Or has reality become a fantasy?

The interpenetration of fantasy and reality in the Zone is sufficient to confuse even otherwise astute

critics. Mark Randall Leder, for example, asserts that Franz Pökler has indeed raped the young girl who is brought to him as his daughter.<sup>10</sup> Yet a careful reader sees that he has not.<sup>11</sup> The girl has indeed asked to sleep next to Pökler. And after his ruminations on what her presence might indicate about his importance to Them is a paragraph that describes him hitting her, making love to her, escaping with her to Denmark. Not only is the attempted escape inconsistent with the rest of their actions (they don't find themselves in Denmark or get caught attempting to escape), but the next paragraph begins with a resounding "No. What Pökler did was choose to believe she wanted comfort that night, wanted not to be alone" (421). That is why she wanted to sleep next to him. The rape-and-escape paragraph is thus Pökler's fantasy, inserted into the text with some subtlety.

Yet the fantasy is nonetheless real in another sense. For Pökler has metaphorically committed incest. Although he has not physically raped his putative daughter, he engages in mental intercourse. First, by imagining the rape. Second, by conceiving his daughter, through this girl who claims to be his daughter, more truly than he ever had before: "It was the real moment of conception, in which, years too late, he became her father" (421). Thus Pökler's fantasy becomes metaphorically true; metaphoric fantasy is eroding literal reality.

And Tyrone Slothrop is part of the literal reality being eroded. For he is feeling early glimmerings of anti-paranoia, "where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (434). If paranoia gave Slothrop an identity, anti-paranoia disperses it. Slothrop himself becomes a fantasy. As Rocketman, he and his exploits have become legendary, "part of the folklore of the Zone" (596).

Slothrop's dispersal continues in Part 4. Fantasy permeates reality. Or vice versa--we wonder which has priority. Like Slothrop's personality, fantasy and reality are "Scattered all over the Zone. It's doubtful if [they] can ever be 'found' again, in the conventional sense of 'positively identified and detained'" (712). And as in the description of the

Rocket-capital, "Outside and Inside [are] interpiercing one another too fast, too finely labyrinthine, for either category to have much hegemony any more" (681). The physical dispersal of Slothrop and of the Rocket-capital echoes the dispersal of linear narrative in the text and the reader's attendant difficulty in distinguishing fantasy from reality.

Part 4 hints that what seemed so clearly fantasy in Part 1, the trip down the Roseland Ballroom toilet, or some elements of that trip, might have been "real," real at least in terms of Part 4. Slothrop finds the harmonica "he lost in 1938 or -9 down the toilet at the Roseland Ballroom" (623). And there is reference to "the men's toilet at the Roseland Ballroom, the place Slothrop departed from on his trip down the toilet, as revealed in the St. Veronica Papers (preserved, mysteriously, from that hospital's great holocaust)" (688). Perhaps writing something down makes it real. Perhaps imagining it gives it reality. Or perhaps reality has become a fantasy. Part 1's distinctions between reality and fantasy have broken down. Against the realistic norm established in Part 1, Part 4 defines itself as fantasy and redefines fantasy as reality.

A representative section of Part 4, a section where fantasy and reality become almost inextricably intertwined, starts with the story of the Floundering Four and continues with a series of twelve brief titled passages, from "The Low-Frequency Listener" to "Some Characteristics of Imipolex G." Like the Roseland Ballroom and westwardman section, this one is set off from the rest of the text by square sprocket holes. It begins as if chronicling more of the "reality" of the Zone, describing the scenery: "Unexpectedly, this country is pleasant, yes, once inside it, quite pleasant after all" (674). Yet soon we realize that "this country" is populated by fantasy characters, a peculiarly alliterative trio: Myrtle Miraculous, Maximilian, Marcel. Further, still on the first page, a father tries to kill his son in "episode after episode," as if what follows were merely a performance, a berserk Father Knows Best. Later we are repeatedly reminded that we are witnessing a performance, with

its "familiar music-box theme"(675), its proposed "chase-scene" (676), and people craning "to see if a new episode's come on yet" (680). The style is at times more like that of a fairy tale than like that customary in Slothrop's "real" world, for he is described as "a cheerful and a plucky enough lad." Or the style suggests science fiction, "full of extrapolated 1930s swoop-facaded and balconied skyscrapers" (674). Punctuating the episode are alliterative pairs, helpfully capitalized, signals of inventive fantasy: Paternal Peril, Mary Marvel, Wonder Woman, Fatal Flaw, Golden Gate, Brooklyn Bridge, Rolls Royces, Pernicious Pop, Sniveling Slothrop, Transvestites' Toilet. The episode tries to shape itself as a fantasy set off from the "real" world of the book, like one of Prentice's fantasies.

Yet this Floundering Four fantasy is repeatedly punctured by digressions, violating its self-containment--even before the twelve titled sections. There is a digression to the Puritans' glozing neuters; then Slothrop's trip into Iceboxland; then, most damaging of all to the integrity of the fantasy, a digression to the audience, accompanied by the recognition that this "struggle is not the only, or even the ultimate one. Indeed, not only are there many other struggles, but there are also spectators" (679). ~~THIS~~ digression is actually a leap out of the frame of the story, a leap that reminds us that the fantasy is mere fiction, the Floundering Four and their escapades merely a performance. Yet Marcel shows up among the spectators, he and the others "infiltrating their own audience." Marcel has transgressed the boundary between performance and audience, blurring the boundary between fantasy and "reality." The narrator does try to naturalize this intrusion, does try to pretend that the audience is not watching the Floundering Four but other spectacles: "It's somebody else's audience at the moment, and these nightly spectacles are an appreciable part of the darkside-hours life of the Rocket-capital" (680). Yet what does the narrator mean by "at the moment"? Does the audience shift its focus of attention? Is it sometimes the focus of attention itself? Furthermore, there are disorienting implications for the audience outside the book. For

the internal audience is our surrogate, watching scenes in the book. And if it is on the same plane as the Floundering Four, do we become equivalent too? Do we become as fictional, as fantastical, as Marcel and company?

Further complicating the incestuous relations between fantasy and reality is the appearance of the series of brief titled passages, as if each describes a performance in the "nonstop revue" (681) on the Rocket-City stage. They turn out to be, or at least the first five turn out to be, glimpses of what we have hitherto considered the novel's real world: Slothrop encountering the keeper of a communications antenna in Magdeburg, his mother's letter to Ambassador Kennedy to ask for news of Slothrop, Säure Bummer questioning Slothrop about "ass-backwards," then "Shit from Shinola." Instead of enclosing a subordinate fantasy, the real world would seem to become subordinate and enclosed within a fantasy. Even our own real world outside the book becomes part of the Rocket-City revue: the discussion of Shit 'n' Shinola flashes back to the Roseland Ballroom, where a young Jack Kennedy and a young Malcolm X might have met, and a narrative voice belonging not to Slothrop but to someone who weathered the 1960's tells us, "Eventually Jack and Malcolm both got murdered" (688).<sup>12</sup> The levels of fantasy and reality interpenetrate, so that a "realistic"-seeming episode, incorporating a snippet of our own reality outside the book, appears as a performance within the chronicle of the fantastical adventures of the Floundering Four.

The next titled passage, the sixth, continues the Floundering Four fantasy, picking up Slothrop where we had left him--in the Transvestites' Toilet. Then comes "A Moment of Fun with Takeshi and Ichizo, the Komical Kamikazes," with characters inspired by a book belonging to one of the Floundering Four: The Wisdom of the Great Kamikaze Pilots. The Kamikazes are a fantasy within a fantasy, with their own alliterative pairs, Scatterbrained Suicidekicks and Nonsensical Nips, and are eventually explained (in part) as part of a movie, which in turn seems to be part of a game show. Yet since this section is one of the titled

passages, like the earlier passages that are presumably glimpses of the real world (such as the one entitled "Mom Slothrop's Letter to Ambassador Kennedy"), fantasy and reality are in some sense equated. Much as the reality of this section is undermined by a sudden excursion into the audience--"Well, Captain--yes you, Marine Captain Esberg from Pasadena--you, have just had, the Mystery Insight! (gasps and a burst of premonitory applause)" (691)--and by the revelation that Takeshi and Ichizo are in a game show movie, so too the mere existence of this fantastical section starts undermining the apparent reality of the preceding sections.

A later titled episode, the ninth, likewise shows a complex intermingling of fantasy and reality. "Listening to the Toilet," an echo of the earlier toilet fantasy, starts by demonstrating how "you are trapped inside Their frame" (694), for They can cut off the water to your toilet. They engineer, in other words, our versions of "reality." Another way in which They may trap is with the concept that sound does not travel through space. Suppose, though, that it does. Suppose that there is "a medium [. . .], what used to be called an 'aether,' which can carry sound to every part of the Earth" (695). Suppose that the sun makes a steady roaring that we wouldn't know about unless it changed. Pockets of no-sound, where the roaring stops, could shadow stray corners of the earth, enveloping the Sentimental Surrealist, the Kenosha Kid (more fantastical alliterative pairs and an allusion to the frame of the Roseland Ballroom fantasy). Such a sound-shadow could bring with it "bits of sound-debris," including some Japanese, the slogan of an Ohka outfit--and we are back with the Kamikazes. That presumed fantasy acquires substance in this one. And this fantasy is in fact preferable to Their reality, "better than cringing the rest of your life under the great Vacuum in the sky they have taught you, and a sun whose silence you never get to hear" (697). This hypothetical fantasy raises questions about reality: "What if there is no Vacuum? Or if there is--what if They're using it on you? What if They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space,

but your own individual life in time? What if it's in Their interest to have you believing that?" (697). What if, in short, our so-called reality is simply a fantasy They have authorized? Pynchon here undermines our faith in Their authoritative reality--and, analogously, in his own. He portentously intones the names of American towns (Apalachicola, Florida; Phillipsburg, Kansas), a Roll of Honor, it seems, commemorating "the towns of the war dead"--only to turn on his own pontificating: "Well, you're wrong, champ--these happen to be towns all located on the borders of Time Zones, is all. Ha, ha! Caught you with your hand in your pants! [. . .] There's nothing so loathsome as a sentimental surrealist" (695-96).

The next titled passage, "Witty Repartee," demonstrates another facet of Pynchon's interweaving of fantasy and reality: his penchant for straying into the fantasy-land of digression. This section starts with an interchange between Takeshi and Ichizo, itself perhaps a digression from the preceding section, where a Kamikaze slogan makes a cameo appearance. Then in the midst of one sentence we switch from a melted Hotchkiss in the home of James Jello to Hotchkisses trained on Crown Prince Porfirio, or perhaps on his attackers (this uncertainty itself undermining the stability of presumed reality). The switch in the sentence is effected by literalizing a metaphoric king: Jello is "that year's king of Bohemian clowns--but a minor king, from a branch prone to those loathsome inbred diseases, idiocy in the family, sexual peculiarities" (698). In his comic exuberance the narrator leaps from the temporary "that year's king" to hereditary royalty like Crown Prince Porfirio, thus digressing into the realm of the metaphoric "king" and literalizing it. After a long parenthesis we return to James Jello, as if to work our way back up through the layers of digression to the level of textual "reality," back to the Kamikazes, back to . . . But we stop with the aptly named Jello, a solid without solidity. We do not work back through all the layers to--to what? What reality is there to work back to?

The next passage, "Heart-to-Heart, Man-to-Man," comments on this aborted process: Pop and Son discuss how Pop used to turn on to dope on "vacations," but

always returned to Realityland, like Alice straying into Wonderland and back again, yet Son Tyrone thinks of "screwing in" and not returning: "A-and who sez it's a dream, huh? M-maybe it exists" (699). Just as the Jello digression does not return to the level of textual reality, Son contemplates turning on and not returning to Realityland--and something like that is what Slothrop does in the course of the novel, what Blicero attempts in firing his rocket, and what the novel itself does as it immerses itself more and more in so-called fantasy, which becomes more and more real.

The Pop and Son section also brings some hints of closure to the series of titled passages from "The Low-Frequency Listener" through "Heart-to-Heart, Man-to-Man," by returning to Pernicious Pop, with whom the initial Floundering Four section began. Yet the closure is nowhere near as complete as the Kenosha-Kid framing of the trip down the toilet in Part 1. For one thing, there is no direct reference to the Floundering Four but only a recurrence of Pop (not especially Pernicious here) and Son. And their interchange is only the penultimate titled passage of the section. The last is a disquisition on Imipolex G--germane to the concerns of the novel, certainly, and also reflecting some elements of the father conspiracy, but not parallel to the beginning of this series of episodes, nor even to the other episodes, and therefore not closing the series.<sup>13</sup> Nor is the Imipolex G passage even in the same tone as earlier ones: the Floundering Four emerge out of a fantasy story, while the Imipolex G passage, despite the appearance of an alliterative pair, reads like a textbook, or a parody of one: "Under suitable stimuli, the chains grow cross-links, which stiffen the molecule and increase intermolecular attraction so that this Peculiar Polymer runs far outside the known phase diagrams, from limp rubbery amorphous to amazing perfect tessellation, hardness, brilliant transparency, high resistance to temperature, weather, vacuum, shock of any kind" (699).

Thus in this section of Part 4, from the Floundering Four through "Some Characteristics of Imipolex G," the fantasy is not neatly framed; it has inundated reality, much as Slothrop himself seems to be doing, as "He is



being broken down [. . .], and scattered" (738). The frames They try to impose on reality fit rather poorly. And our hope lies in that very fact: we can evade Their frames. Their Reality is mutable. The merging of fantasy and reality, the recognition that reality is subjective, can become a weapon against the Firm and its death-dealing routinizations.

And we are encouraged to use that weapon outside the book. For the toppling of barriers between fantasy and reality within Gravity's Rainbow informs the relationship between the book and our world outside it. The book tries to encroach on our world, much as fantasy permeates reality within the book. In the first place, the book encroaches on the realms of Pynchon's previous fiction, for characters like Weissmann and Bloody Chiclitz and Hogan Slothrop, from V. and The Crying of Lot 49 and "The Secret Integration," surface again in Gravity's Rainbow. Pynchon also smuggles in historical facts, then juxtaposes them to invented facts, often making it difficult to separate fact from invention. As Joseph W. Slade notes, "Pynchon possesses the enviable ability to blend fact and fantasy in such a way that the facts seem less credible than the fantasies."<sup>14</sup> The result is that we start to question our sense of reality. What was IG Farben really like? Or Laszlo Jamf? And is there an Impiplex G? Is there a They who structure our lives?

One of the routinizing structures that the book teaches us to question is the edifice built by literary criticism--such as the gazebo I here perch on the edge of Pynchon's wilderness. Criticism of Gravity's Rainbow always rationalizes the book's complexity. And, fortunately, the book always eludes such routinizations. Criticism should thus be provisional, recognizing its inadequacy, tracing patterns that never quite cohere. And recognizing that the book eludes our patterns, escapes our net, allows us to gauge depth and complexity only indirectly. We can never fully chart it.

Provisionally, then, we can conclude that Pynchon has written a fiction in which fantasy and reality interpenetrate with increasing (more or less) com-

plexity, reminding us that reality is fantasy (for our perceptions are subjective) and fantasy--since it helps to shape our perception and interpretation of it--reality. Like Slothrop, and like the invisible, underground Pynchon himself, we can elude the confining strictures of reality. Yet we do not escape reality. For when the fiction encroaches on our "real" world, refusing to remain safely solipsized within the confines of its covers, then, like the Giant Adenoid, it assimilates reality, assimilates us.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Lawrence Kappel also notes, in "Psychic Geography in Gravity's Rainbow," Contemporary Literature, 21, no. 2 (1980), 225-51. Kappel describes the change in somewhat different terms ("myth" more than "fantasy") and is more concerned with geographical than textual realms, with the "mythic journey through the underworld" (235) than with stylistic interpenetration. He also oversimplifies a little, minimizing the chaos of war-torn London, the extent to which it too is fantastical, the extent to which it allows not only rationalized efficiency but also irrationality.

<sup>2</sup> Aspects of the Novel (1927; rpt. New York: Harcourt, 1955), 116. See also W. R. Irwin, who notes that the fantastic requires "a competition for credence in which an assertive 'antireal' plays against an established 'real'" (The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1976], 8). C. N. Manlove sees fantasy as "containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms" (Modern Fantasy: Five Studies [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975], 1, in italics in the original).

<sup>3</sup> Todorov, The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), 25, 32 et passim; Rabkin, The Fantastic in Literature (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Phantastes and Lilith, intro. C. S. Lewis (1964; rpt. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 19.

<sup>5</sup> "Ilön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," trans. James E. Irby, in Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973), 15. Subsequent references are given parenthetically. All italics in quotations are Pynchon's, as are ellipses, except for ellipses enclosed by brackets.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Mendelson notes, in "Gravity's Encyclopedia," in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 193, n. 4, that the choice of square sprocket holes was not Pynchon's. But presumably the change of section was, however it was to be marked.

<sup>8</sup> For a similar argument, more fully developed, see Bernard Duyfhuizen, "Starry-Eyed Semiotics: Learning to Read Slothrop's Map and Gravity's Rainbow," Pynchon Notes, 6 (1981), 5-33.

<sup>9</sup> See "Liminality and Communitas," in The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94-130.

<sup>10</sup> "The Use and Theory of Metaphor in the Works of Thomas Pynchon," Diss. Yale 1977, 60. See also "The Reader of Movies: Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow," University of Denver Quarterly, 12, no. 1 (1977), 33, where Bertram Lippman refers in passing to "Pökler's incestuous reunions with her."

<sup>11</sup> One such reader is Brian McHale, in "Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text: The Case of Gravity's Rainbow," Poetics Today, 1, nos. 1-2 (1979), 92-93.

<sup>12</sup> Five pages later is another clue from the non-Slothropian narrator, another clue requiring reference to our real "real" world: a newspaper "wirephoto of a giant white cock, dangling in the sky straight downward out of a white pubic bush," accompanied by the headline fragment, meaningless to Slothrop:

MB DRO

ROSHI (693).

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith's discussion of closure in poetry, in Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), is germane to Pynchon's playing with closure here. The recurrence of Pop and Son re-establishes an earlier norm, yet the subsequent Impolex G passage, structurally coordinated with the preceding passages by being titled like them and by preceding the closing square sprocket holes, diverges from the norm in both content and style.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Pynchon (New York: Warner, 1974), 24. See also Manfred Puetz, "Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49: The World is

a Tristero System," Mosaic, 7, no. 4 (1974), 130-32; and Steven Weisenburger, "The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past," Twentieth Century Literature, 25, no. 1 (1979), 54-72.