

# Knowing the Time, Knowing of a Time

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## **The Penultimate and the Postmodern in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow***

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It might be the end of the world, except that it is a fairly average day . . .  
(Pynchon 339)

Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is heavy with symbols of apocalypse. Set mostly during the second World War, its many characters live lives heightened by the tension of doomed days. Rockets are flying, nations are at war, nearing extinction, and time seems perched at the moment before the last. But the novel's tone varies, and the plots that unfold under the shadows of the falling rockets defy the countdown of the last detonation, to the extent that even the novel's penultimate moment is filled with a bouncing-ball singalong on the last page:

There is a Hand to turn the time,  
Though thy Glass today be run,  
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low  
Find the last poor Pret'rite one . . .  
Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,  
All through our cripl'd Zone,  
With a face on ev'ry mountainside,  
And a Soul in ev'ry stone. (760)

The question arises of what happens to the apocalypse if we are singing about it in the traditional folk anthem's plodding iambs and clumsy rhymes? How apocalyptic can a novel be when it features deviations into custard-pie fights staged from baroque zeppelins, or stoned run-ins with Mickey Rooney and Winston Churchill?

Although heavy with symbols of apocalypse, the novel's narrative structure challenges the idea that history might be fit into any large, subsuming pattern such as apocalypse: Conceiving of history as apocalypse implies a pattern immanent in the events of the past, and such an eschatological assertion is the sort of knowledge that the novel ends up eyeing distrustfully. The novel's fragmented structure picks up the pattern of apocalypse and explores it in a variety of approaches, including modifications of our sense of time and causality, fluctuations of characters' subjectivities, and treatments of the discourses of sexuality and nationalism that engage an

apocalyptic poetics. The book concludes by crashing its central metaphor—the rocket—into the head of the reader. Although the rocket unambiguously evokes the form of apocalypse, the content of this historiographic form, in the context of the novel’s postmodern sense of history and ontology, is crucially undeterminable.

Putting aside the novel’s largest weapon of apocalypse (temporarily), there are many other moments that convey an apocalyptic sense. Before examining some of these moments, however, a preliminary definition of apocalypse is in order. To think of one’s own age as apocalyptic is to conceive of the present as a chaotic deviation from the order that is perceived to have existed in the past. Historically, cultural representations of apocalypse have posited it as an other to history, the social order, and rationalism. Apocalypse comes, by violent means, to redress conventional patterns, shattering the world and calling into question the foundations—usually concepts deemed as universal—by which that world is understood.

The content of apocalypse varies historically. In his book *American Apocalypse*, Douglas Robinson formulates five stances towards apocalypse, which can be roughly paraphrased as follows (26):

1. **biblical:** God’s annihilation is followed by restoration and continuation of Paradise. (Book of Revelation, Daniel.)
2. **annihilative:** Secular apocalypse is followed by void. (Steve Erickson’s *Arc d’X*)
3. **continuative:** No end. Secular history continues. (Kushner’s *Millennium Approaches*)
4. **ethical:** Conflict, internalized into individual, yields personal growth. (Ellison’s *Invisible Man*)
5. **Romantic:** Fallen world is internalized by imagination, outer paradise is restored. (Blake’s “America: A Prophecy”)

Robinson conceives this model as a progression, with each step integrating some characteristics from the one that precedes it, while also departing in significant ways. Robinson’s model, itself a critical fiction, usefully exemplifies the variety of content that has been explored under the aegis of apocalypse. The model raises, however, the question of what might *not* fit into the pattern: How can hermeneutic #3, for instance, be considered apocalyptic, if there is only symbolic destruction, and the “real” world is saved?

John Dewey posits a more narrowing definition of apocalypse in his book *In a Dark Time*. For Dewey, the crucial factor in determining the presence of the apocalyptic temper is one’s *emotional* response to desperation. Dewey sketches out two oppositional extremes of reaction: First, there is the millennialist spirit, which moves forward from the moment of apocalypse to build anew, casting the future forward and fitting new events into foretold patterns. On the other extreme, there is the cataclysmic imagination, which charges towards the final horizon with fiery rhetoric, and is “drawn to the big event itself” (12). The apocalyptic temper, in between the two, admirably faces the challenge of mediating between them in a supreme “act of the moral imagination” (15). In doing so, it offers itself as a hopeful “oxymoron of humanity,” going forward bravely long after hope has dwindled (15).

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the Zone represents an analogous location of mediation between past and future:

maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up . . . Such are the vistas of thought that open up in Slothrop's head as he tags along after Ludwig. (556)

The Zone, a psychic state of irreality that comes to exist in the war zone of Europe during 1944, takes the sense of irresolution that accompanies everyday embodied subjectivity and exaggerates it. The depolarization of one's bearings that takes place there links it to the sense of apocalyptic temper discussed by Dewey. What before appeared as self-evident or unremarkable appears, in a new, inverted state which at first seems simply wrong, or unthinkable. These new elements, however, are in fact the harbingers of a new encroaching order, not yet comprehensible.

Dewey's criteria is relevant to the apocalypse in *Gravity's Rainbow* insofar as it defines apocalypse as a subjective state determined by one's location between chaotic phenomenon and ordered cognition. Different characters in the novel are described in terms of this binarism, such as when Roger Mexico contemplates his subjectivity as a conflict between "Outside and Inside," with "the cortex as an interface organ" (141). Likewise, the psychic Carol Eventyr conceives himself to be "an interface between the worlds" (146). And it is not only the major characters that experience this sense of apocalyptic subjectivity as the location between inner order and outer chaos. Galina, a teacher in Kirghhizistan, experiences apocalypse as a dissolution of the boundary between her inward sense of self and the outer world of a doomed structure:

Often she will dream some dainty pasteboard model, a city-planner's city, perfectly detailed, so tiny her bootsoles could wipe out neighborhoods at a step—at the same time, she is also a dweller, down inside the little city, coming awake in the very late night, blinking up into painful daylight, waiting for the annihilation, the blows from the sky, drawn terrible tense with the waiting, unable to name whatever it is approaching, knowing—too awful to say—it is herself, her Central Asian giantess self, that is the Nameless thing she fears. (341)

Galina's perspective, a fantasy of omniscient objectivism, exists in rough tandem with the obscure anonymity of her actual conditions. Her identity toggles between virtual non-existence—for Tchitcherine she is no more than a step in a procedure, compared to "the shape of an alphabet"—and a view of herself as the cause for impending world apocalypse (339).

Apocalypse as conceived both by Dewey and, I will argue, by *Gravity's Rainbow*, is corroborated by Raymond Williams's socio-historical concept of the "structure of feeling." In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams proposes the phrase as a means of understanding the way that human subjects separate past and present. Williams describes how we think in a mode that conceives of the past in terms of completed wholes, rather than as evolving procedures.

Analysis [of the present] is then centred on relations between these produced institutions, formations, and experiences, so that now, as in that produced past, only the fixed explicit forms exist, and living presence is always, by definition, receding. (128)

The conflict between fixed forms of analysis and the social content of embodied experience produces “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency” (130). The structure of feeling is a state in which thoughts are felt, feelings thought. We try to articulate what it is about contemporary life that is specific to our own age, but the act of understanding always falls short of the project, and the structure of feeling always exists contingently, somewhere beyond what can be said of it in terms of ideology or world-view.

Dewey defines the apocalyptic temper as the result of a particular ontological toggling between an inner, coherent, sense of order, and an outer, chaotic, sense of impending doom. Williams’ sociological understanding of culture hypothetically asserts that real human social interaction is always supplementary to the institutionalized patterns that attempt to describe it. Both authors focus on the penultimate moment before the void of nothingness. Williams describes the structure of feeling as existing “at the very edge of semantic availability” (134). Likewise, eschatology—the larger philosophical field within which apocalyptic paradigms are located—derives from *eschaton*, or “furthermost boundary” (Robinson xii). Reading Dewey alongside Williams, we might find an explanation for the ubiquity of apocalypse as a cultural theme: The preestablished patterns of understanding human consciousness are inadequate to the specificity of the present moment. Therefore, these patterns must be abandoned, and whatever is beyond them must be found. However, whatever it is that is found in the beyond seems destined to be absorbed, later, by the same processes of hierarchization and patterning. Unless, that is, the beyond is strong enough to rip apart the present. Perhaps the cataclysmic imagination is the rash fantasy that this will happen, and the apocalyptic temper, as the more tentative stance, is an aestheticization of dialectical mediation.

Throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*, characters obsessively grapple with the same issues as those raised in the theories of Williams and Dewey, wondering how one can know where the outside world stops and the inner self begins. But the particularity of *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* apocalypse comes with the fact that in the world of the novel, there is no certainty as to whether or not there even exists an outside—a beyond—to the system. The novel foregrounds paranoia as a fairly common state for many of its characters, especially Slothrop:

Call a lawyer, Paranoia,  
Lemme will my ass to you, for-ever-more! (657)

This paranoia stems from a fear of the social structure: “There is a pattern,” we are told, in reference to Herero society, “the act of naming obeys the pattern” (322). Characters are unable to know just how far the mechanisms of control—physical, mental, psychological—have penetrated into their various consciousnesses. The supernatural espionage of the White Visitation, as well as the machinations of the Mittelwerke make it impossible to know what is real, and what is programmed. Of Slothrop we are told: “all in his life of what has looked free or random, is discovered to have been under some Control” 209. His many lapses into sodium-amytal-induced hallucinogenic states also contribute to the destabilisation of the division between inner and outer.

The novel also challenges another pervasive binarism of identity: that between public and private self, in which the latter term is emphasized as the locus of a more genuine, real self. This binarism is challenged in the story of Pökler, the German engineer enlisted by the Nazis to build the rockets. Pökler can never know for sure if the girls who visit year after year are his daughter

or a series of carefully-crafted *simulacra*. In the midst of all of the unknowing and epistemological uncertainty we find the novel's most moving prose:

He did, then, let everything go, every control. He veered into the wind of his long isolation, shuddering terribly. He cried. She took his hands. The floating ducks watched. The sea cooled under the hazy sun. An accordion played somewhere back in the town. From behind the decaying mythical statues, sentenced children shouted to each other. Summer ended. (430)

This is a particularly postmodern instance of apocalyptic despair: Surrounded by the symbols of nature, tradition, and history, Pökler finds his sense of reality wholly destabilized. He cannot tell the private from the public, or the real from the copy. There is no larger sense to be made of the world that he finds himself in, and yet Pökler still feels emotional pain as a human subject. This moment (for me the book's most moving) seems exemplary of the novel's stance towards apocalypse: It may be occurring at a large, structural level. Then again, it may just be the system playing tricks on the mind. Since we finally cannot know, the small stories of human lives under the shadows of the falling rockets take precedence.

Apocalypse in *Gravity's Rainbow* likewise dismantles the boundaries between different discursive fields of knowledge. The strongest examples of this are the two symbols of the title. Although there is no center to the pervasive structure that the novel refers to as The System, the rockets launched from Lüneberg Heath become focalized points within the Zone which draw together apparently every disparate corner of global life, designed by national descendants of the German-led Enlightenment. The rocket project enlists the Herero tribe as workers, fusing the Western tradition of science with its apparent other, the non-technological primitive African tribe. The engineers that build the rockets are described, themselves, as being consumed by the rockets, being part rocket themselves, and their perversions are shown to fuel the construction and design of the rockets. The *Blitzkrieg* setting is a well-chosen historical moment to focus upon as a means of exemplifying the far-reaching culpability behind these evil, phallic monuments of progress: The actual V2 rockets were historically first conceived not as weapons, but, in the scientific romances of Jules Verne, as a vision of progress through cosmic imperialism.

The rocket, which "embraces all the Deviations in one single act" is not merely a symbol of humanity's lust for war, but rather indicts a much larger set of cultural concepts (Pynchon 319). The rocket is the cutting edge of the present, analogous to the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*, ever casting itself forward through spatialized time. As the trail left behind by this cutting edge, the rainbow is akin to historiography, attaching the objectified appearance of an arc-like form to the present moment of the rocket.

Gravitational arcs are conventionally seen through scientific explanations, and this is the stance embodied by many of the German scientists working on the project, who, if Pökler is typical of them, are indifferent to the ideology at work behind the rockets' deployment, and focus, instead on simply accomplishing the tasks set before them. What certain characters (Lyle Bland, Slothrop) come to realize in the penultimate moment, however, is that such an understanding of gravity is unsatisfactorily narrow, reducing the rich multiplicity of past events to a narrow spatial trajectory.

To see gravity as something outside of us, controlling our physical bodies and holding us to the surface of the planet, is revealed, finally, to be a suspect conclusion foisted upon us by the

distortion of the system. To think of gravity in the conventional terms of scientific explanation is to think, as we preterite have been historically relegated to do, in terms of “Kute Korrespondences,” of the front brain, whereas those who find peace just before dissolution come to see gravity, instead, as a symptom of an inscrutable totality (590). So Lyle Bland, just before “going out for good,” comes to understand gravity as “eerie, Messianic, extrasensory in Earth’s mindbody” (590). The reference to the earth as mindbody adumbrates the lyrics of the final song (quoted at this essay’s beginning) of “a face on ev’ry mountainside, / And a Soul in ev’ry stone” (760). These images fuse together symbols of, on the one hand, the human soul, and, on the other, the surrounding, non-human outside world. By doing so, they implicitly negate the founding doctrines of modern philosophy as set forth by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*. It was Descartes, along with Bacon, who would be recorded as the founder of Enlightenment thought, and his mind-body dualism would provide the context for his epistemology, which asserted, famously, that everything was doubtable except doubt itself. By starting with radical doubt, Descartes’ method paved the way for modern mathematics, analytic geography, and the natural sciences. Three hundred years hence, the rockets bear witness as the teleological end-result of this long history of empiricism and rationalism. In the moment before the last, both Bland, and, later, the reader, see this founding dualism give way.

The novel calls into question the whole concept of chronology, and suggests that even the *a priori* measures of time and space may be illusions foisted upon us by technology, which becomes figured in a Foucauldian sense as possessing an agency of power that it exerts upon human subjects, to the extent that “this War . . . was being dictated instead by the needs of technology . . . by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques” (521). In the anxious daydreams of some of the characters, such as Kekule, all perception is feared to be nothing more than an effect of a closed system. Such a fear of the impossibility of representing anything doubles back on itself, and is embodied as a serpent holding its own tail in its mouth. This is an apt symbol to describe the maddening project of challenging language through language:

The system may or may not understand that it’s only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. (412)

There is paradox here: We may be playing into the hands of the system by reading the rocket’s movement as a synecdoche for larger movements in time and space.

The concept of gravity cannot be viewed simply as scientific phenomenon, but rather as a mystified centripetal impulse within Earth’s “mindbody.” In Part IV we find a description of the penultimate moment on earth before man’s apprehension of it:

This is the world just before men. Too violently pitched alive in constant flow ever to be seen by men directly. They are meant only to look at it dead, in still strata, transputrefied to oil or coal. Alive, it was a threat: it was Titans, was an overpeaking of life so clangorous and mad, such a green corona about Earth’s body that some spoiler had to be brought in before it blew the Creation apart. So we, the crippled keepers, were sent out to multiply, to have dominion. (720)

Here we find the apocalyptic beyond to the human story *preceding* it. We can only ever know the world in its dead form, after gravity has compounded all of the Earth's primordial elements into oil and coal, products that are produced through massive centripetal gravitational pressure. We can only understand the world after gravity has imposed entropy upon it, and our so-called objectivist, scientific view of the planet is in truth far from objectivist, but rather reflects a view that suits the System that also controls us.

The treatment of apocalypse in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as I have been describing it for the last several pages, indicates the degree to which the novel is distinctly postmodern and poststructuralist in its portrayals of subjectivity, history, and science. I will look more closely at the novel's status in relation to these terms, starting with the first, broader one, the postmodern. The novel is postmodern in its conception of the human subject. It no longer regards that subject as foundational, or even altogether coherent. The novel is also postmodern in its dubiousness regarding the prospect that we can ever view the overall system or structure of human society from any disconnected perspective. In both these senses the novel corroborates the theorizing of Jean-François Lyotard, when he writes in *The Postmodern Condition* that nowadays

Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction. Science "smiling in its beard" at every other belief has taught them the harsh austerity of realism. (41)

The novel's heteroglossia explores diverse languages, discourses, and fields of knowledge with an incredible fluency, and in doing this it is enacting a strategy often automatically equated with the postmodern. What is really postmodern about the novel's pastiche, however, is the skepticism with which these discourses are approached. We are drawn into the scientific lexicon, for instance, that describes the psychological experimentation perpetrated on baby Slothrop. Or we are drawn into complicated technical discussions of the rocket fuse mechanism. Or we are buried in the nonsensical mathematical formulas behind Roger Mexico's statistical research. But these discourses are portrayed as encroachments, as impositions upon humanity, in between which humans must somehow find meaning.

Brian McHale argues in *Postmodern Fiction* that the most important difference between modern and postmodern fiction is that the poetics of the former are concerned with the dominant of epistemology, while the poetics of the latter address ontology. This distinction is helpful for understanding the distinctively postmodern nature of the apocalypse in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Earlier modern novelistic treatments of apocalypse conceived of the form with a content defined in terms of identity. Ellison's *Invisible Man* emphatically foregrounds apocalypse as a redress of systemic racism when it explodes the end of the novel with a race riot of Armageddon-like fury. And the apocalyptic turn that Harry Angstrom's life takes in John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* likewise generates its emotional power from its realistic portrayal of the downfall of a particular sort of man—blue-collar, earnest yet worn, facing the grim middle-class truth that his glory days ended with high school—when exposed to the revolutionary social forces of the Sixties. The apocalyptic ending of *Rabbit Redux* moves us because Harry represents an identity that is defined in connotative terms of race, gender, and class. His apocalypse, insofar as it emerges from his

having met Skeeter and Jill, stems from the conflicts that arise between these lines, and the tragedy of the moment comes at least in part from a story whose logic is one of identities and their misrecognitions.

Pynchon's use of Tyrone Slothrop is conspicuously impossible to identify as a representation of a type. The readerly response is not "who is he like that I know, who does he stand for?" but rather "what conditions are exerting upon this poor bastard to make him, say, take up with a pig as a traveling companion?" Its hard to imagine Pynchon saying, (as Updike did of Rabbit) that his character was himself without the Harvard degree. The postmodern apocalypse does not happen to a particular type of person. This is why the apocalypse can occur and repeat, but the novel can continue on. This is true even after the main character turns into a crossroads.

The postmodern apocalypse of *Gravity's Rainbow* retains the apocalyptic form, but transfers it from a temporal to a spatial grid, disseminating the force that in earlier treatments was honed onto an epiphanal, penultimate moment, and relocating it at various nodes, creating small apocalypses in different moments of the text whose relation to one another in time is not as important as the spatialized connections drawn by the repetition of the form. The shift from epistemology to ontology occurs at the level of content, with the former redressing identity, and the latter redressing consciousness insofar as it can be conceived through Western paradigms. This is why the only lays in the Herero.

The Other of the System is not formulated foremost in terms of national identity, but rather is found in the non-technological of the Herero tribe. As before, however, the interface is sexualized: "There is no outright struggle for power. It is all seduction and counterseduction, advertising and pornography, and the history of the Zone-Hereros is being decided in bed" (318). Unlike founding narratives of apocalypse such as the writings of the Book of Revelation, cities do not tumble now in the grasp of supernatural avatars, but instead blend together into a last metropolis that incorporates the mandalas and totems of the subaltern and strips them of their history, their substance, and their life.

Reassembling the Herero and organizing the Counterresistance, Enzian hopes that "Somewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom" (525). This nostalgic hope to return to a fallen paradise reasserts a Millennial spirit. The non-technological, unmodernized Hereros might yet save us from the control of techniques and death. The ghostly message that Carroll Eventyr receives, however, through a visitation from Jenny Greenteeth, refutes any entertained fantasies of a restoration:

--(Quietly) It's been a prevalent notion. Fallen sparks. Fragments of vessels broken at the Creation. And someday, somehow, before the end, a gathering back to home. A messenger from the Kingdom, arriving at the last moment. But I tell you there is no such message, no such home—only the millions of last moments . . . no more. Our history is an aggregate of last moments. (148-9)

The last thing we see before the bomb hits is a human figure wishing on a star. The star, however, is actually a falling angel of death. A face emerges, familiar but unnamed. We all sing together of a moment when there is

a face on ev'ry mountainside,  
And a Soul in ev'ry stone. . . . (760)

Whose face do we see? Is it Slothrop, back once again? Is it the reader? Is it my own face? The pointed ambiguity of this penultimate moment leaves us, at the book's conclusion, still perched in between these different perspectives, unsettled by the prospect that we are somewhere, unfixed, in between apocalypses.

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