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# The Postmodern Sublime in Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow

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**abstract**

Thomas Pynchon, alongside only, perhaps, Vladimir Nabokov, stands as the dominant figure in post-World War II American fiction. Pynchon's three novels of the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies − *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) − constitute the premier examples of the postmodern sublime in literature. Each work intimates the presence and power of another order of being: the inanimate in *V.*, the Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and quite literally unending series of cabals, conspiracies, and gnostic realms in *Gravity's Rainbow*. These "other worlds" are all finally unrepresentable; we receive intimations and manifestations of their presence within, or impingement upon, our everyday, profane or secular world; but "their" agency is always left unspecified, unlocatable, and uncertain; In fact, Pynchon's characters always encounter things that seem to lie beyond cognition. As the threshold between worlds is crossed, these other realms are revealed as overwhelmingly destructive, and each novel is propelled toward an apocalyptic conclusion. The *effects* of the sublime encounters mark the novels as partaking of the postmodern sublime, for Pynchon depicts in each work an inexorable isolation, alienation, and fragmentation of his hero or heroine − a gradual decay and destruction of all forms of organic, nurturing communities − and presents a vision of America as hopelessly fallen, careening toward an entropic apocalypse. The dominance of these motifs has made Pynchon the greatest master of negative sublime at least since Faulkner and West. The present paper discusses Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, as an example the dominant postmodern aesthetic of the sublime evinced in Pynchon's works.

## Introduction

Thomas Pynchon, alongside only, perhaps, Vladimir Nabokov, stands as the dominant figure in post-World War II American fiction. Pynchon's three novels of the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies − *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) − constitute the premier examples of the postmodern sublime in literature. Each work intimates the presence and power of another order of being: the inanimate in *V.*, the Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and quite literally unending series of cabals, conspiracies, and gnostic realms in *Gravity's Rainbow*. These "other worlds" are all finally unrepresentable; we receive intimations and manifestations of their presence within, or impingement upon, our everyday, profane or secular world; but "their" agency is always left unspecified, unlocatable, and uncertain; In fact, Pynchon's characters always encounter things that seem to "go beyond the limits of cognition; they are thwarted in the pursuit of ends, explanations, …, [or] solutions (Donoghue, *Mannerist Fiction* 92). As the threshold between worlds is crossed, these other realms are revealed as overwhelmingly destructive, and each novel is propelled toward an apocalyptic conclusion.

The *effects* of the sublime encounters mark the novels as partaking of the postmodern sublime, for Pynchon depicts in each work an inexorable isolation, alienation, and fragmentation of his hero or heroine − a gradual decay and destruction of all forms of organic, nurturing communities − and presents a vision of America as hopelessly fallen, careening toward an entropic apocalypse. The dominance of these motifs has led Harold Bloom to criticize Pynchon as "the greatest master of negative Sublime at least since Faulkner and West" (Bloom, introduction 1).

### *Gravity's Rainbow*

In *Gravity's Rainbow* (henceforth *GR*) we see an overall extension and expansion of the same themes that are prominent in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Whereas *The Crying of Lot 49* confines itself to the single conspiracy of the Tristero, *GR* is filled with a quite literally unending series of plots, cabals, and gnostic conspiracies. Here too agency and representability are denied: each of these strands of conspiracy grows and expands until it becomes clear that no limited, earth-bound organization can really account for the dread and terror experienced by the novel's characters. Whereas the earlier novel focuses on the possibility of imagining another world, *GR* shifts to what McHale terms "the unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural" (McHale 25). The concerns of *GR* are wholly ontological: the novel presents the constant intimation of what it terms "another order of being" (*GR* 239), an order that is malign and omnipotent.

*The Crying of Lot 49* depicts the gradual isolation of Oedipa Maas, taking her to the very threshold of destruction at the novel's end; in *GR*, there is an overall expansion of the theme of isolation to include virtually every character in the novel, particularly its peculiar hero, Tyrone Slothrop, who is isolated, fragmented, and ultimately scattered by the novel's close. All attempts

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in the novel at constructing an organic community fail, and the work concludes in the closest thing to a representation of apocalypse as one can achieve in the written word. In short, *GR* is the strongest example of the postmodern sublime in literature.

The novel is set in the closing days of World War II, when apparently stable oppositions like Allies versus Axis are evaporating before more fluid and shifting forces, embodied in the silent, destructive V-2 rocket that every side seeks to possess. The war serves as metaphor for (post)modern technocratic civilization. The rocket (V-2, or A-2) – the "highest" achievement of civilization – "has taken on divine attributes as a sort of negative savior, the perfecter and consummator of Western man's love of death" (Krafft 59). The chief protagonist of the novel is Tyrone Slothrop, who is "a microcosm of the plight of western civilization in the twentieth century" (Siegel 45). In many respects, he is also the vehicle for the reader's experience of this novel: as Slothrop meanders through the novel and encounters one conspiracy after another, each more all-encompassing and threatening than the one preceding, so too the reader's sense of the depth and overwhelming intricacy of the novel grows. When we first meet Slothrop, we are told that he "has become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it – if they're really set on getting him ('They' embracing possibilities far beyond Nazi Germany) that's the surest way" (*GR* 25). The clear implication from the beginning is that it is not Nazi Germany that is the threatening force in this world – the "They" so feared by Slothrop cannot be contained in a single national or military category.

Much later in the novel, another character, Enzian the Herero leader, comes to a similar realization that the German Fatherland that destroyed his native country is not his true enemy, nor is the war in which he finds himself at all the political confrontation between clearly-defined nations that it appears:

> It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theater, all just to keep the people distracted … secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology ... by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war, crying, 'Money be damned, the very life of [insert name of Nation] is at stake,' but meaning, most likely, *dawn is nearly here, I need my night's blood, my funding, funding, ahh more, more*…. The real crises were crises of allocation and priority, not among firms – it was only staged to look that way – but among the different Technologies, Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elite …. (*GR* 521; emphasis original)

Hence a principle that emerges early in the work is the idea that it is not governments or countries that lie behind the numerous plots and conspiracies we encounter in the novel, but that instead these intrigues cross all national boundaries; in fact, they are "pan-cultural" (Siegel 47). The overarching structures of conspiracy are not *controlled by* nations so much as *they control* nations. James Hans expresses this vagueness of agency in book well: "As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the

'government' is not really the 'I' behind the established network, nor is the war really being fought for strictly political reasons. Instead, it is a 'celebration of markets.' GE, ICI, Shell and the like are putting the war and the various political systems to use for their own purposes" (Hans 268).

Slothrop, in his investigations into the various forces behind the construction and deployment of the Rocket, also suspects the great multinational corporations to be jointly involved, regardless of national affiliation: "Who'd know better than an outfit like Shell," he asks, "with no real country, no side in any war, no specific face or heritage: tapping instead out of that global stratum, most deeply laid, from which all the appearances of corporate ownership really spring?" (*GR* 243) Again, Enzian approaches a similar conclusion when he realizes that not only has his enemy become difficult to discern, but so too have his allies:

> Perhaps it's theater, but they *seem* no longer to be Allies . . . though the history they have invented for themselves conditions us to *expect* "postwar rivalries," when in fact it may all be a giant cartel including winners and losers both, in an amiable agreement to share what is there to be shared. . . . (*GR* 326; emphasis original)

This notion finds its clearest expression in the vision experienced by Tchitcherine, the renegade Soviet, of the Rocket State, "that city of the future where every soul is known, and there is noplace to hide [....] A structure cutting across every agency human and paper that ever touched it [.... ] a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul" (*GR* 566). The further one searches for the figures controlling these structures, the more the concept of agency begins to lose hold, as the previously identifiable categories − whether nations or corporations − are themselves subsumed in an overarching structure that has as its core not a person, but *the Rocket*, an impersonal and overwhelmingly destructive force; this renders the examination of the socio-cultural movement towards apocalypse clear (Siegel 46). As Tanner argues,

> [w]hat emerges from the book is a sense of a force and a system − something, someone, referred to simply as "the firm" or "They" − which is actively trying to bring everything to zero and beyond, trying to institute a world of nonbeing, an operative kingdom of death, covering the organic world with a world of paper and plastic and transforming all natural resources into destructive power and waste: the rocket and the debris around it. (Tanner 79)

Slothrop has an inkling of this "force" or "system" before he is turned loose in the chaotic Zone of the Europe of 1945. He and his British friend Tantivy discuss the private structures that lie behind the public institutions in their respective countries; Tantivy remarks on the "old University connection" at Oxford, "a *peculiar* structure that no one admitted to [ . . . ] only at the fringes of what I was *really* up there for." Slothrop responds, "Sure. In that America, it's the first thing they tell you. Harvard's there for other reasons. The 'educating' part of it is just sort of a front" (*GR* 193; emphasis original). This lineage, from the great universities to the great corporations, quickly becomes a quite

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sinister system of power and control to Slothrop after Tantivy disappears and Slothrop finds himself alone in the casino den of his hotel. Here Slothrop begins to see "the paraphernalia of an order whose presence among the ordinary debris of waking he has only lately begun to suspect":

These are no longer quite outward and visible signs of a game of chance. There is another enterprise here, more real than that, less merciful, and systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop. Who sits in the taller chairs? Do They have names? What lies on Their smooth baize surfaces? (*GR* 202)

Slothrop's initial sense is that there are particular persons who are menacing him, or at least that behind the menacing presence he senses there are particular persons who could, theoretically, be tracked down, located, held responsible; but it begins to dawn on him that the forces he dimly perceives will not admit of this kind of agency − where he thinks he sees a man, he instead glimpses an entirely different order of being:

There may, for a moment, have been some golden, vaguely rootlike or manlike figure beginning to form among the brown and bright cream shadows and light here. But Slothrop isn't to be let off quite so easy. 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. . . (*GR* 202)

The sense of conspiracy and control actually functions at two complementary, yet radically different, levels: the first may be called the secular level, in which an elite (Elect) few, concentrated in the great public structures of the world, wield enormous technological power over the preterite many. This level retains at least the theoretical possibility of assigning agency to these oppressive powers. John M. Krafft argues that the Elect (powers) are "grossly secular"; they have "a complex of politico-economic manipulations, …. [T]he vastness and intricacy of Their order are such that They seem to take on qualities once ascribed to God, to have a power to extent explicate only in supernatural terms. The immanence of God has given way to the imminence of man's self-descruction" (Krafft 63). This evinces "a broken postlapsarian world" (Seed 187). Kathryn Hume believes that the world depicted as such gives us no hope (Hume, "Repetition" 250) because the preterite many are always menaced by the controlling networks rendering their world an utter void (Slade, "Escaping" 31).

As the novel unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear not only that the forces aligned against Slothrop are destructive and malevolent, but also that any attempts to locate Their identity or even to describe Their composition are fruitless, doomed to failure from the start. As Tanner states: "'They' are precisely nonspecific, unbeatable. There is always the possibility of a They behind the they, a plot behind the plot; the quest to identify 'Them' sucks the would-be identifier into the possibility of an endless regression. But, whatever Their source and origin, They are dedicated to annihilation" (Tanner 79). These forces epitomize the figure of the sublime: they deny any kind of agency, they resist

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description and categorization of any kind, and they ultimately demand a different *ontological status* than that of the earth-bound figures in this world. This level is what may be called the metaphysical level of the novel.

This second, overarching level of *GR* has been emphasized by several critics. Slade notes that although the "most discernible elements" of the great conspiracies in the book are indeed "the huge corporations and cartels," nevertheless above these conspiracies exists a force that "is cosmic, its reach virtually unlimited" (Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* 161). The otherworldly nature of "Them" is further stressed by Hite: "The shadowy force known as Them is by definition outside the secular realm of human actions, sometimes so far outside that They seem to operate from the Other Side of life, the world of the dead" (Hite 120). The novel is suffused with the sense of what Oedipa Maas calls "'another world's intrusion into this one'" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 120), or what is described in *GR* as "a feeling of population and invisible force, fragments of 'voices,' glimpses into *another order of being* "(*GR* 239; emphasis original). The supernatural, other-worldly presence is ubiquitous; this validates the deepening paranoia in the novel (Hume, "Repetition" 248-49).

This opposition between two worlds in Pynchon's work is perhaps best expressed by Douglas Fowler, who argues that "the basic narrative energy in his novels derives from the clash between this world and what I will abbreviate as The Other Kingdom − between our world of logic and rationality and the five senses and a nightmare world that has begun to penetrate it and threaten it" (Fowler 11). Fowler emphasizes that despite Pynchon's famous use of paranoia in his fiction, the forces depicted in *GR* cannot be accounted for as mere delusion: "the sinister designs which the protagonist finds himself uncovering turn out to be not his own obsessions but the spiderwork of the Other Kingdom" (Fowler 16). This other world is necessarily indescribable: like the figure of the sublime, it resists all categories and cannot be totalized or contained within any system of representation, or mapping; this this, of course, endorses the critical poetics of the postmodern sublime (Noya 516). Consequently, Smith and Tololyan's description of the book as "a forum for 'conceiving the inconceivable'" (Smith and Toloyan 172) seems quite accurate; *GR* is pervaded by an otherworldly atmosphere, what can be described as something, beyond human command, has been unleashed. The repeated allusion to the "supernatural beings and of Them reflects the widespread fragmentation that characterizes Pynchon's world view" (Hume, "Repetitions" 246).

In addition to its indescribability, the second crucial aspect of this Other Kingdom is, as Fowler observes, the fact that it is "potent and malign" (Fowler 11). Its power is matched only by its malevolence, as Slothrop senses even before he begins to suspect the extent of the powers ranged against him:

> It's nothing he can see or lay hands on − sudden gases, a violence upon the air and no trace afterward … a Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then silence forever. Beyond its invisibility,

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beyond hammerfall and doomcrack, here is its real horror, mocking, promising him death with German and precise confidence, laughing down all of Tantivy's quiet decencies … no, no bullet with fins, Ace … not the word, the one Word that rips apart the day. . .. (*GR* 25)

This sense of an overwhelming and omnipotent malevolence turns Slothrop's quest into more of a flight. Like the stray dogs who flee the scientist Dr. Pointsman and his ghastly experiments, Slothrop throughout the book is "seeking to avoid what cannot be smelled or seen, what announces itself with the roar of a predator so absolute they sink to the snow whining and roll over to give It their soft and open bellies…." (*GR* 143) Of all of Pynchon's works, *GR* offers the strongest expression of forces so overwhelmingly powerful and destructive that they can neither be represented nor resisted. As Eddins argues, "the cosmos of *Gravity's Rainbow* is metaphysically volatile, inspirited in the gnostic sense of tortuous human paths constantly opening into ominous penetralia" (Eddins 110).

The final section of the book is entitled "The Counterforce," and there is a suggestion that here an alternative will be offered to the sinister forces dominating the novel. When Katje Borgesius stumbles upon the fledgling group, she gives expression to this hope:

Is this what she thinks it is? Wakened from how many times and pushed away because it won't do to hope, not this much? Dialectically, sooner or later, some counterforce would have had to arise . . . she must not have been political enough: never enough to keep faith that it would . . . even with all the power on the other side, that it really would. . .. (*GR* 536)

Katje's inability to finish her sentence, to give full expression to her sense of hope, is testament to the impossibility of that hope. For the point of the Counterforce in this novel is ultimately to show its own failure, indeed its *inevitable* failure, while at the same time illustrating the omnipotence of the forces against which it struggles.

When Tchitcherine first becomes aware of "a counterforce in the Zone" (*GR* 611), he attributes to it several surprising twists of events that have recently occurred, such as the actions of a mysterious Soviet intelligence man and the disappearance of Major Marvy. What Tchitcherine does not know is that these occurrences are not the workings of any organized "force," but are instead mere random events. The "Soviet" was in fact Slothrop in another of his disguises; Marvy disappeared only because the surgeons sent to castrate Slothrop grabbed Marvy by mistake. Tchitcherine's attribution of these rather absurd events to a "Counterforce" presages the actual presentation of the Counterforce 65 pages later, in which they are given a farcical, parodic rendering as "the Foundering Four" battling "the Paternal Peril" (*GR* 675). The notion of a functioning opposition to the malevolent forces in *GR* is no more than a comic enterprise. Even Roger Mexico, who represents arguably the most competent opposition to the novel's negative energies, recognizes that he is involved in a "failed Counterforce" of "doomed pet freaks." Roger perceives that the Counterforce's efforts are only another confirmation of the overwhelming power of Them: "They will use us. We will help legitimize Them,

though They don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical. . .." (*GR* 713)

The Counterforce represents an opposition that fails, but its failure consists less in itself and more in its status *as an opposition*. That is, the principal failing represented in *GR* is the inability to survive in a world that is structured upon and defined by oppositional, binary thinking. As nearly all critics of the novel have noted, the world of *GR* is defined by "Manichean extremes": "Dualities and antinomies rival North and South: love and death, paranoia and anti-paranoia, sky and underground, the living and the dead, freedom and control, black and white, the Outside and the Inside of the self, gravity and flight, grace and damnation, zero and one, even Rossini and Beethoven" (Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* 168). As Tanner argues, these oppositions are figured in the novel's very title, in which "Rainbow" suggests God's covenant with Noah in Genesis that destruction on the earth will cease, whereas "Gravity" opposes this with another "law," the decree that "all things … are finally, inexorably, drawn back down and into the earth: an absolutely neutral promise that all living things will die" (Tanner 78).

The dilemma of this kind of thinking lies in the inevitable fact that in any binary system, the stronger side of the opposition will assert itself over the weaker side. Hence in this novel Gravity always overcomes the Rainbow, or, seen another way, the rainbow arc of promise always turns out to be the arc of the Rocket, screaming toward earth: "in this apparent hopelessly proliferating novel the rocket is always there. It is phallic and fatal, Eros transformed into Thanatos, invading 'Gravity's grey eminence' only to succumb to it, curving through the sky like a lethal rainbow, then crashing to the earth" (Tanner 78-79).

James Hans has argued that the novel's dilemma consists in finding ways out of "the world of binary codings" which always favour "[t]he 'Firm,' the 'They' of the novel" (Hans 270). Most critics see this effort to evade oppositional thinking to be embodied in the figure of Roger Mexico, the statistician, who abandons his work with the sinister Dr. Pointsman and ultimately joins the Counterforce. Pointsman embodies the ideal of pure, oppositional thinking; whereas in Mexico there is the suggestion of some sort of alternative to this binary logic: "in the domain of zero to one, not-something to something, Pointsman can only possess the zero and the one. He cannot, like Mexico, survive anyplace in between … to Mexico belongs the domain *between* zero and one − the middle Pointsman has excluded from his persuasion − the probabilities" (*GR* 55; emphasis original).

Slade states that Mexico's ability to occupy the ground between oppositions makes him a figure of potential liberation in this novel: "He is the twentieth-century scientist aware of indeterminacy and therefore aware of the possibilities of freedom" (Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* 196). In his ability to "live on the interface between the terms of Their dichotomies," Mexico embodies what many see as the primary technique for resisting totalization by the sinister forces of the work:

The domain between one and zero, the interface between dream and reality,

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between self and society, the internal and the external, recurs frequently in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Denying the absolute validity of dichotomies . . . results in a sense of common humanity as a weapon against the solipsism which insists on perceiving situations simply in either/or terms. (Werner 88)

By overcoming oppositional thinking, by finding alternatives to the binary logic employed with such deadly effectiveness by the totalizing forces of the novel, there is the possibility of finding liberation from these forces.

Yet this argument is guilty of the very fallacy it seems to warn against. That is, it calls for an *opposition* to oppositional thinking, thereby repeating the sin it condemns. This is evident even in the case of Mexico himself, who is figured as the binary opposite to Pointsman: "If ever the *Antipointsman* existed, Roger Mexico is the man" (*GR* 55, emphasis added). Consequently, the novel implies that the effort to overcome oppositional thinking is just one more opposition, hence doomed from the outset to be incorporated into the entire system of control and domination against which figures like Mexico think they are struggling.

That all oppositions lead to the same destructive fate is most evident in what may be the novel's most prevalent opposition, that between paranoia and anti-paranoia. Paranoia, which is Pynchon's "great subject" (Kermode; cited in Donoghue 452), is described in *GR* as "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the Creation" (*GR* 703). This overwhelming sense of connection reflects what Eddins calls the "gnostic enterprises of cosmic domination" that work throughout the novel "to create an absolutely pervasive system of connections, a definitive and inescapable nexus that would usurp nature's orderings and 'correct' nature's randomness with its framework of controlled causality" (Eddins 132, 128). The totalizing power of "Them" is most manifest in this arena, and "Their" power is "mind-boggling" in its complex connectedness (Bersani 102).

"Anti-paranoia", by contrast, is described as the state "where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (*GR* 434). This is a state of radical *un*-connectedness, a floating without relationship, attachment, or purpose. As Slothrop comes to realize, this state is hardly preferable to the other: "Either They have put him here for a reason, or he's just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that reason. . .." (*GR* 434) This movement between the two poles of paranoia and anti-paranoia constitutes the existence of virtually every character in the novel, a condition in which one is either wracked on the Scylla of overwhelming control or sucked in by the Charybdis of overwhelming purposelessness: "as figures move between System and Zone," Tanner explains, "so they oscillate between paranoia and anti-paranoia, shifting from a seething blank of unmeaning to the sinister apparent legibility of an unconsoling labyrinthine pattern or plot" (Tanner 81). The result of this is fragmentation that is represented, primarily, by Slothrop in the novel (Simons 217).

The difficulty encountered by the figures within the novel – and also the difficulty encountered by many of the novel's critics – is that *GR* does not offer an alternative to the deadly logic and the horrifying conditions it portrays. The only possibilities are so mythic and idyllic as to be unrealizable. Tanner argues that "the organizing question of the book" is, "Is there a way back?" A way back from "the City of Pain," from "the cinemas, the laboratories, the asylums and all our architecture of mental drugging, coercion and disarray (derangement)? Out of a world in which emotions have been transferred from people to things, and where images supplant realities?" But he is forced to conclude that the book will not admit of any such paths out of the tortuous binary logic in which it is steeped: "Where, ultimately, would the 'way back' lead, if not to *some lost Eden* previous to all categories and taxonomies, election and preterition, divisions and oppositions?" (Tanner 85; emphasis added). Beyond the myths of a paradise already forever lost, there is no real economy of salvation offered in *GR*.

As testament to the overwhelming control of the negative forces depicted in the book, one need look no further than to the fate suffered by Tyrone Slothrop. Like Oedipa Maas, Slothrop becomes increasingly isolated as the novel progresses. His loneliness is perceived from the novel's outset by Tantivy, who "began to see the extent of Slothrop's isolation. He seemed to have no one else in London, beyond a multitude of girls he seldom saw again, to talk to about *anything*" (*GR* 22-23; emphasis added). When Tantivy disappears, Slothrop is left entirely alone. As he tells Enzian, "I don't have any people" (*GR* 363). Tchitcherine states that Slothrop "is one unhappy loner" (*GR* 390), and when Seaman Bodine offers to get in touch with someone should Slothrop be caught, Slothrop responds: "'Can't think of a soul'" (*GR* 602).

If *Lot 49* ends at the very moment before Oedipa's destruction, *GR* takes its protagonist beyond this point, past his isolation and into his annihilation. As the plot(s) against Slothrop is/are set in motion, he finds himself in a hotel room with Katje, who playfully tosses a tablecloth over him and exclaims, "'Watch closely, while I make one American lieutenant disappear'" (*GR* 198). Moments later, Slothrop's uniform is stolen; he pursues the thief up into a tree, but realizes too late that "They" have sawed the trunk almost in half, and he comes crashing down in a mock cataclysm that foreshadows his fall and disintegration to come: "About then the point of the tree cracks through, and with a great rustle and whoosh, a whirl of dark branches and needles *breaking him up into a few thousand sharp falling pieces, down topples Slothrop*" (*GR* 199-200, emphasis added).

Slothrop's fate in the course of the novel is to be scattered, to undergo a *speragmos* that will fragment and disseminate his very self. This begins to become clear even as we learn that Slothrop's quest – for the Rocket, for the secrets behind his psychological trauma, for the identities of the foes pursuing him, as well as for other, less obvious desires – is itself doomed to failure. "Slothrop," we are informed, "as noted, at least as early as the *Anubis* era, has begun to thin, to scatter." Moments

later we are told that "[t]here is no good reason to hope for any turn, any surprise *I-see-it*, not from Slothrop" (*GR* 509; emphasis original). As Slothrop thins, so too does his search. This crystalizes through Slothrop's fear of being killed by a V-2, "smitten" by the apocalyptic word (Krafft 64): "sudden gases, a violence upon the air and no trace afterword … a Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then a silence forever. […] no, no bullet with fins, Ace … not the Word that rips apart the day" (*GR* 25).

As the novel moves toward its conclusion, we are told that Slothrop "has become one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell – *stripped*. Scattered all over the Zone. It's doubtful if he can ever be 'found' again, in the conventional sense of 'positively identified and detained'" (*GR* 712; emphasis original). Somehow Slothrop's "own assembly [ . . .] went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered" (*GR* 738). In addition, Timothy Melley believes that what is important about this process of "stripping" is that Slothrop does not disintegrate only, but it also represents "a geographical distribution similar to the map he once made of his innermost experiences …. In this movement from … sublime body to disseminated person, the novel's main character finally displays, …, that he … is impersonated by social [controlling] structures" that represent "invisible networks" (Melley 736). Slothrop's decline echoes that of his family (Ozier 74). The decline of Slothrop's family is described in mathematical concept of infinite series that shows a "long rallentando, in infinite series just perceptibly, term by term, dying … but never quite to the zero" (*GR* 28). Seaman Bodine remains "one of the few who can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more. Most of the others gave up long ago trying to hold him together, even as a concept – "It's just got too remote" 's what they usually say" (*GR* 740). But even Bodine "was beginning, helpless, in shame, to let Slothrop go." (*GR* 741) At this point, Slothrop vanishes from the novel, as the final section careens to its apocalyptic conclusion.

Several critics have seen Slothrop's scattering as a positive response to the novel's negative energies. Fowler suggests that "Slothrop's scattering may have been a transformation into another, humbler kind of life" (Fowler 55), and Hite argues that his vanishing is a kind of escape, "an emblem for the impossibility of explaining him" (Hite 120). Eddins notes that Slothrop's *speragmos* has affinities to the transforming and fertilizing powers attributed to vegetation gods, and argues that "Slothrop experiences a moment of Orphic transformation that involves absolute unity with Earth" (Eddins 119-21). But the hopefulness of these readings is belied when seen in the overall context of the novel itself.

As Kathryn Hume and Thomas Knight have convincingly argued, Slothrop's status as an Orpheus-figure, as one whose music can defeat death, is put into question by his silencing near the novel's conclusion. Immediately upon learning of the atomic destruction at Hiroshima, Slothrop's music ceases, replaced by silence. His silencing, like his fragmentation, suggests his inability to counter the malevolence at the heart of the novel:

We do not hear Slothrop's harmonica blues after he sees "Bomb Dropped on Hiroshima," after his loss of his second innocence to a future whose implications he can glimpse . . . *the vision of what Hiroshima implies reduces him to silence*. This loss of his powers, this "scattering," parallels the dismemberment of Orpheus − and the loss of humanity's control over events despite technological and psychological prowess. Chaos rather than Logos reigns. And in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop alone sees this shift in the nature of things, after which he becomes silent and invisible (Hume and Knight 305; emphasis added).

Hume and Knight argue that Slothrop "offers both a warning and a promise, but his voice is lost amid the screams." The *speragmos* he undergoes is neither nourishing nor redeeming, but instead "becomes a violent rending by outside forces" (Hume and Knight 306). This view is echoed by Harold Bloom, who states that Slothrop is scattered "rather in the biblical sense," that is, he is "*apocalyptically* scattered" (Bloom 2-3; emphasis added).

Slothrop could not tell the name of the place (city) in which he was confronted with the overwhelming news of the Hiroshima event. This makes the possible destruction (nuclear) threat ubiquitous, especially when his presence is always connected with impendent rocket impact (destruction). In addition, he was clearly spell-bound and he spent a long time staring at the "cock-like" image of the Hiroshima event in the paper. As a result, he was scattered in the Zone; in fact, he was practically changed into a "rhizome". He kept on trying hard to understand the event giving numerous interpretations (that show his clear disintegration). Bradley J. Fest argues that Slothrop's various interpretations − that do not give any systematic and homogenous apocalyptic interpretation of history − of the Hiroshima destruction relate to sex, text, history, and mimesis as they corroborate Slothrop's paranoia, which is caused now by the overwhelming aporetic interpretation (Fest 134).

Slade offers perhaps the clearest account of the actual nature of Slothrop's fate, acknowledging the hope for his escape but realizing the price paid for any such attempt:

He literally fragments, cut to pieces by energy grids, the victim of his innocence, which is no defense against the complexities of the systems that reform after the war. . .. Slothrop's destiny is to escape the cycle, and he can because he also escapes control. The paradox is that in so becoming free, *he loses his self. He will end in void*. (Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* 184; emphasis added)

This loss of personal identity is crucial to understanding the fate Slothrop suffers by the novel's close. Responding to the notion that Slothrop somehow escapes the binary logic that formed his personality, and that such an escape is a good thing, Hans states that "Slothrop has certainly lost any notion of identity by the end of the novel, but the cost is that *for all practical purposes he has ceased to be a person* − he has opted out, become schizophrenic, dispersed himself into atoms so small that nothing could gather them together again" (Hans 272; emphasis added). What those

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who would valorize Slothrop's scattering fail to understand is that by the end there is nothing of him left to enjoy whatever freedom he may have achieved. In this respect he is emblematic of the experience suffered by virtually every character in the novel: efforts to resist the overwhelming and totalizing forces expressed in *GR* result in the annihilation of the subject. As Werner has argued, "Slothrop's disintegration reflects Pynchon's insistence that his characters cannot resolve the experiences of *Gravity's Rainbow*" (Werner 93).

Hence, like Oedipa, Slothrop is first isolated; then his fate goes beyond what we see in *Lot 49*, as he is broken down and dispersed. This is the effect of the sublime forces depicted in *GR*, to isolate and destroy whatever opposes them: Pynchon depicts the full annihilating effect of the postmodern sublime. A consideration of the other effects of these malevolent powers will indicate the extent of Pynchon's apocalyptic vision in this novel.

One of the chief effects wrought by the powers referred to as Them in *GR* is the destruction of any notions of community and of home. One way to think of the various quests undergone by Slothrop, and indeed by each figure in the novel, is that they are all quests for *home*, for the security and comfort offered by various visions of home that appear throughout the novel. When Roger and Jessica walk into a Kent church during Advent, they find that they, like the other attendants, are seeking some relief from the terror of the night: "something to raise the possibility of another night that could actually, with love and cockcrows, *light the path home*, banish the Adversary, destroy the boundaries between our lands, our bodies, our stories, all false, about who we are" (*GR* 135, emphasis added). The longing for home is constituted as a response to the fragmenting that increases throughout the novel; "home" is figured as a gathering, a making whole, a return to some sort of unity despite the splitting undergone by each of the novel's characters. In a dialogue between two cells about cellular afterlife − that is, the state *after* one has "gone Epidermal" − Pynchon illustrates the longing for a return to home:

> − No − how can you say that − you can't feel the memory? the tug . . . we're in exile, we do have a home! (Silence from the other.) Back there! Not up at the interface. Back in the CNS!
>
> − (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. (*GR* 148-49)

By the close of the novel, there is little doubt indeed that there is "no such home," as Slothrop's own fate again makes clear. In one of his last "appearances," he is presented as childlike, in his old neighborhood, now apparently occupied by soldiers. "If Slothrop wants to get home from here," we are told, he must wind his way through a labyrinth of back alleys, streets, gates, fences; but his paths are being cut off by the pervasive machinations of Them: "But there is the occupation.

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They may already have interdicted the kids' short cuts along with the grown-up routes. *It may be too late to get home*" (*GR* 744, emphasis added).

The ideal of home is represented in a similar fashion during Slothrop's encounters with the Japanese soldier, Ensign Morituri. Morituri tells Slothrop that the key to surviving in the Zone is to keep moving; Slothrop then asks the soldier if to "keep moving" is really all he wants, and Morituri responds with one of the strongest visions of "home," and of its ramifications, offered in the book:

"I want to see the war over in the Pacific so that I can go home. Since you ask. It's the season of the plum rains now, the Bai-u, when all the plums are ripening. I want only to be with Michiko and our girls, and once I'm there, never to leave Hiroshima again. I think you'd like it there. It's a city on Honshu, on the Inland Sea, very pretty, a perfect size, big enough for city excitement, small enough for the serenity a man needs." (*GR* 480)

The *location* of Morituri's home epitomizes the fate of the home in *GR*: it is the site of annihilation, of the devastation of atomic explosion. The opposition between the sublime and the home is quite clear: as Andreas Huyssen states, "what would be more sublime and unrepresentable than the nuclear holocaust, the bomb being the signifier of an ultimate sublime" (Huyssen 215). The home is figured as a notion whose future holds only destruction; one cannot return to the home, because it is no longer there.

The fate of the community parallels the fate of the home in *GR*. Though Pynchon recommends human community, most of his characters end in nearly utter solitariness. Again, this is most evident in the case of Slothrop, who by the end as a solitary and alienated person dissociated from community. The most visible example of a community in the book is the Herero tribe from South-West Africa. Slade describes them as "a unified and integrated tribal life" in which "men can be individual selves and yet parts of the larger self, members of a human and a cosmic community." The Herero ideal is opposed in the book by the linear, technological ethos of the West, an ethos "prizing analysis and differentiation" as opposed to the Herero ideal of "unity and integration." The result of this opposition is the destruction of the Herero homeland and their exile into the Zone; this is the effect of the sublime and destructive forces in *GR* upon every model of community (Slade, "Escaping" 29). The fragmentation/alienation delineated in the novel forestalls any perception of coherent and integrated community.

Another effect of the dark forces at the novel's core is to unsettle the faith Slothrop has in America. In many respects this parallels the action of the novel itself, which functions much like the Puritan Jeremiads. As Smith and Tololyan argue, *GR*, like the Jeremiads, "has the capacity to deal with the condition of apocalyptic dread in the contemporary world, which is a place in which violence is no longer linked to the human will, but rather to a set of technocratic systems that have gained ascendancy and autonomy." The task of *GR* can be described as the task of the Jeremiads: "to bespeak doubts and apprehensions about the American dream,

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to question the fraying but still powerful sentiment that America − and the technology of Western culture − have a favored place and mission in history" (Smith and Tololyan 172).

Slothrop, like Oedipa Maas, is unable to let go of his idealized vision of America. Even as his scattering gains pace, Slothrop finds himself still fantasizing about returning to America, as if his home country could be just that, the mythical and womb-like source of protection and love for which he seeks. However, it is becoming increasingly clear, even to Slothrop, that America too will seek his isolation and destruction:

Yup, still thinking there's a way to get back. He's been changing, sure, changing, plucking the albatross of self now and then, idly, half-conscious as picking his nose − but the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by is America. Poor asshole, he can't let her go. She's whispered *love me* too often to him in his sleep, vamped insatiably his waking attention with come-hitherings, incredible promises. [ . . . ] What if there's no place for him in her stable any more? If she has turned him out, she'll never explain. Her "stallions" have no rights. She is immune to their small, stupid questions. She is exactly the Amazon Bitch your fantasies have called her to be. (*GR* 623; emphasis original)

As Slothrop fades from the novel, so too fades his fantasy of America as a haven for the dispossessed persons, like himself, who haunt the novel.

The dominating effect brought about by the totalizing forces in *GR* is the final apocalypse with which the novel comes to an end. In the closing pages, the rocket whose firing has been deferred throughout the book is finally launched, its target apparently the Orpheus Theatre in Orange County, California. As the theatre manager and his passenger drive along the Santa Monica Freeway − the time suddenly switched into the present − the arrival of the long-awaited atomic doom is suggested:

The sound of the siren takes you both unaware. Zhlubb looks up sharply into his mirror. "You're not holding, are you?"

But the sound is greater than police. It wraps the concrete and the smog, it fills the basin and mountains further than any mortal could ever move . . . could move in time. . ..

"I don't think that's a police siren." Your guts in a spasm, you reach for the knob of the AM radio. "*I don't think* −" (*GR* 757; emphasis original)

The novel's penultimate section is entitled "Ascent," but we are told that "[t]his ascent will be betrayed to Gravity" (*GR* 758). As the Rocket soars over the earth, hints of doom are sprinkled among descriptions of its flight: "you know this is the *last time*," "*it can't be this soon*. . .." Finally, in the last section − "Descent" − the Rocket plummets downward, bringing with it a final apocalypse and perhaps a fleeting revelation, just before the end, of the forces dimly suggested throughout the book:

The last image was too immediate for any eye to register. It may have been a human figure, dreaming of an early evening in each great capital luminous enough to tell him he will never die, coming outside to wish on the first star. But it was *not a star*, it was falling, a bright angel of death.

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And in the darkening and awful expanse of screen something has kept on, a film we have not learned to see ... it is now a closeup of the face, a face we all know −

And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasureable gap above the roof of this old theater, the last delta-t. (*GR* 760; emphasis original)

As Hite has argued, the conclusion is testament to the fact that "*Gravity's Rainbow* offers itself as a symptom of the irreversible process, proclaiming that the unifying, redemptive Word is irrevocably lost and that there is no going back." After 760 pages, "[t]he only revelation that this gravity promises is that the world is destined for the grave" (Hite 113-14). Similarly, Hume and Knight see the conclusion as the end of all oppositions in the book, shattered by the overwhelming power of the Rocket on "its seemingly irreversible trajectory":

When it descends, both apollonian and dionysian dreams will shatter − more vessels broken on Collection Day. There will be no biblical or comic-book or Hollywood ending to the death of victims in the theater, no *deus ex machina* to stay Abraham's hand. The last delta-t will be traversed, and the knife will descend. (Hume and Knight 309)

Pynchon tells us, "For every kind of vampire, there is a kind of cross. And at least the physical things They [Elect] have taken, from Earth and from us, can be dismantled, demolished − returned to where it all came from" (*GR* 540). Because the Elect have used things (of the earthly world) "perversely or passed over", suffering and fragmentation is the eventual result (Chambers 262).

Indeed, more than just the world *within* the novel is destroyed in the closing pages; the world *of* the novel seems to explode as well, as the narrative itself fragments to such an extent that any re-gathering into some kind of unity seems impossible. Eddins has remarked on "the stress that cracks the novel into fragments of narrative − a break-up that escalates dramatically in the book's final pages"(Eddins 151), and Tanner states that "the last section as a whole becomes extremely difficult − impossible − to 'follow' in any way at all, as though the book demonstrates how any kind of narrative that seems to link together fragments and images is becoming impossible" (Tanner 89-90). Unlike *Lot 49*, in which destruction is intimated at the end but not realized, *GR* expands its sense of doom to include itself, and by extension, even its reader. Tanner argues that the repeated use of "we" in the final paragraphs includes *us* in its grasp: "On the very last page we are back in a theatre. We are waiting for the show to start." The apocalyptic rocket is descending upon *us*, but "we don't see it because we are *in* the theatre trying to read the film behind the film; and we won't hear it because, under the new dispensation, the annihilation arrives first, and only after 'a screaming comes across the sky'" (Tanner 90; emphasis original).

This, then, is the novel's conclusion, the realization of the Cold War nightmare of atomic destruction. And yet it is also more than that, for, as Fowler emphasizes, the

rocket "does not fall into the same world that fired it, and it is no longer a specific V-2 weapon with a young German soldier aboard; it is now the Rocket, and, like the Inanimate, the Trystero, or Them, it is [not] available to analysis" (Fowler 89). The Rocket embodies the overwhelming, totalizing, always indiscernible forces − the expressions of the sublime − that wreak havoc and terror throughout the novel; by the end, those forces have managed to destroy just about everything with which, and with whom, they have come into contact. As Fowler states, "[l]ife is poised against death everywhere in Pynchon, but death and the death-wish always prevail" (Fowler 50). The rocket is the mysterious and powerful activity of the "They system" (Simons 210) that fills Slothrop, like *memento mori*, with a fear of death, annihilation, and "zero" (Walker 120-21).

As a final consideration, it is worth asking what it is that makes this destruction inevitable. What is lacking in the world of *GR* that makes the apocalypse so assured? What is needed to avert the concluding doom?

The most interesting answer is hinted at in the book itself. Slothrop states toward the end of his wanderings that he might just be able to survive if he can only find "some state of minimum grace" (*GR* 603). The notion of *grace*, of a forgiveness that is neither earned nor deserved, but nevertheless is granted, is the only hope imaginable for the displaced persons scattered throughout the world of *GR*. The one section of the book in which grace seems to be a real possibility is the passage in which Roger and Jessica visit the Kent church at Advent. This achingly beautiful section is suffused with what Eddins describes as "[t]he novel's most extended and intricate portrayal of … 'Orphic Christianity'" (Eddins 122). As Roger and Jessica listen to the choir, they seem to undergo a transformation:

So the pure counter-tenor voice was soaring, finding its way in to buoy Jessica's heart and even Roger's, she guessed, risking glances at his face sideways and up through brown ghosts of her hair, during recitatives or releases. He wasn't looking nihilistic, not even cheaply so. He was . . .

No, Jessica's never seen his face exactly like this, in the light of a few hanging oil lamps [...] Roger's skin more child-pink, his eyes more glowing than the lamplight alone can account for. (*GR* 129)

However, there is a prevalent sense in the novel that there are other-worldly, malevolent and destructive forces at work.

Therefore, despite the presence in the book of these moments of faith and possibility, what Eddins call "Orphic naturalism," the fact remains that the novel concludes at the moment of an overwhelming destruction, in which nothing, not even the earth, can be said to survive. Eddins himself admits that "[w]hatever rainbow of memory the novel offers is subject to the ubiquitous shroud of nuclear winter, and Orphic song is not a shield against radiation" (Eddins 153). Tanner expresses well the apparent contradiction between such passages as the Nativity scene and the overall timbre of destruction pervading the novel: "Religious hope is teasingly glimpsed at. . . [b]ut it hardly suggests any coming kind of salvation or true transcendence" (Tanner 87-88).

The final apocalyptic scene brings the novel full circle to the opening scene describes the rocket fall as "an approximation of the imminent and continuous threat" (Redfield 160): "A screaming coming across the sky" (*GR* 3). This means that the threat permeates the narrative from the beginning to the end creating "an inevitability of doom" (Drake 238). We are always reminded that there is no escape from the rocket that stands metaphorically for "a horrifying progress" (Swartzlander 138). Pynchon makes it clear that the threat is everlasting and continuous: "the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever, without sound, reaches its last immeasurable gap above the roof of the old theater" (*GR* 760).

The most horrific and terrorizing feature of the nuclear war is that there possibly be nothing left, nothing to effect/start a recovery. For Derrida, the bomb would allow "no remainder" – no consequences" ("No Apocalypse" 20). A nuclear war "would not so much be an event as it would mark the end of the event as a meaningful category, and it would negate the possibility of an apocalypse, …. No revelation would ensue, no truth would be revealed, if the bomb were dropped because that moment also be the *last* moment" (Najarian 44; emphasis original). So, the nuclear war/bomb would be "the end of history" (Derrida, "No Apocalypse" 27). Hence, the idea of holocaust is so close to the sublime; as Derrida writes, "to think the sublime would be to think the unthinkable and to exist in one's own nonexistence" ("No Apocalypse" 7). Najarian puts this eye-opening idea in this way: "To imagine the consequences of nuclear war is to reinvent a civilization and a species capable of suffering those consequences, since both that civilization and that species would be obliterated by the bomb" (Najarian 45). This is, practically, the overwhelming feeling *GR* ends with, especially when we consider that the narrator repeatedly emphasizes the idea that "it is simply too late" to avoid the cataclysmic event (Herman 215).

In the end, Slothrop's fate is representative of the fate of the novel as a whole: in Slade's apt phrasing, "small mercies are possible – but not for Slothrop. Gradually he will forget his 'Grail,' the Rocket, and wander on, looking for innocence and for grace. *Innocence he will find; grace he will not*." (Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* 184; emphasis added). In the absence of this grace, there is nothing to arrest the descent of the Rocket, and nothing to avert the apocalypse with which the novel concludes. This sits well with Mark Siegel's final appraisal of the novel that *GR* is "nihistic extravagance whose message is 'Death Rules' and whose prediction is the imminent extinction of mankind" (Siegel 48). The descending Rocket is presented on the final page as virtually touching the tip of the world it is about to destroy – apocalypse is imminent in the most absolute sense, and its arrival is not represented precisely because it will embody the end of all representation. The arrival of the Rocket is the final edge of the postmodern sublime, the moment in which representation ceases and annihilation is complete.

Ironically, the novel ends with a song borrowed from Tyrone Slothrop's ancestor,

William Slothrop (modelled on William Pynchon, the novelist's own forefather), in which he extends an invitation to "everybody" to sing. The song is but a requiem!

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التدهور والتحطم التدريجي لكل أشكال المجتمع العضوي الذي يعزز وجود الفرد. وتدل هذه الرؤية على إن أمريكا تنهار بدون رجاء مترنحةً نحو الكارثة الإعتلاجية. لقد جعل مثل هذا الموضوع الروائي توماس بنجون سيد الجليل السلبي، على الأقل منذ زمن الروائيين فولكنر وويست. يتناول هذا البحث رواية (قوس قزح الجاذبية) كمثال واضح لجليل مابعد الحداثة الذي طغى على روايات توماس بنجون.

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**مستخلص:**

يعد الروائي توماس بنجون، مع فلاديمير نابوكوف، أهم الروائيين الأمريكيين خلال الفترة التي تلت الحرب العالمية الثانية. وتمثل رواياته الثلاث وهي (في – 1963) و(النداء على القطعة رقم 49 - 1966) و(قوس قزح الجاذبية – 1873) أمثلة رئيسية لجليل مابعد الحداثة في ميدان الأدب. تلمح كل واحدة من هذه الروايات الى وجود قوى أخرى، كغير الحي في رواية (في) والترايسترو في رواية (النداء على القطعة 49) والسلسلة الطويلة واللامحدة للعصب والمؤامرات والممالك الغنوصية الخفية في رواية (قوس قزح الجاذبية). إن هذه العوالم الأخرى هي بالنهاية عوالم غير ممثلة، إذ إننا نجد تجليات لوجودها في عالمنا، أو قُل تأثيرها على هذا العالم. لكن تمثيل هذه العوالم الواضح يبقى غير محدد وغير معلوم المكان، وهي في نهاية المطاف غير مؤكدة الوجود ومبهمة. والحق ان شخصيات الروائي بنجون تجابه دائماً أشياءاً تقع خارج نطاق إدراكها. وعندما تتخطى هذه الشخصيات العتبة التي تفصل عالمنا عن ذلك العالم الآخر، تبرز تلك العوالم على إنها عوالم ماحقة بشكلٍ مهول. إن كل رواية من هذه الروايات تؤول الى نهاية رهيبة ومروعة. كما يشير أثر الجليل الى التقاء الرواية بجليل مابعد الحداثة، إذ إن بنجون في كل عمل من أعماله عزلةً لاترحم وإغتراب وتشظ للشخصية الرئيسية، ويمثل هذا