

Timothy Mills

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McLaughlin

**Rainbow Gravitism: The Mysticality of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow***

*Gravity's Rainbow* is one of those novels that both defies any type of organizational structure and taunts with hints at possible structures at the same time. It will often seem like Pynchon is giving us an organizing structure to help understand the text, but these structures are almost always invalidated shortly after their introduction. An example of this can be seen in many of the plot threads Pynchon develops; just when we think we finally have a set of characters and a stable plot to follow the focus shifts and we do not return to that thread for hundreds of pages, if we return to it at all. The situation seems only marginally better for images that could possibly organize the text; certainly the V2 rocket, and the 00000 rocket specifically, seems to drive much of the text, but even here we have hundreds of pages that have seemingly nothing to do with the rocket. The narrator even tells us that Slothrop, probably the closest thing *Gravity's Rainbow* has to a main character, forgets completely about the rocket at times.

While structure and organization evade us in the normal places we look to find them in novels (plot, character, etc.), it is possible to find themes that organize and structure *Gravity's Rainbow*. Like many other Cold War-era novels, Pynchon's main theme is the threat of nuclear annihilation. The novel is book ended with scenes of incoming rockets: in the beginning by Pirate Prentice's dream and then an actual incoming V2 rocket after Prentice wakes up, and at the end by an ICBM heading for a contemporary movie theater. Much of the text between these two scenes deals in some way with this theme, from V2 explosions to the development of the V2 to

the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima. The threat of nuclear annihilation is not the only theme at work in *Gravity's Rainbow*, though it does seem to be the most important. Pynchon puts many other themes to work in *Gravity's Rainbow* in order to support his main theme. One of the seemingly larger sub-themes Pynchon makes use of in the text is mysticism, specifically Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah. Because Pynchon draws upon mysticism so heavily it is interesting to look at *Gravity's Rainbow* through the lens of mysticism, even perhaps to look at *Gravity's Rainbow* as a mystical text itself.

### **A Brief History of Jewish Mysticism**

Before attempting to look at the mysticism at work in *Gravity's Rainbow* it is useful to have an understanding of the history of Jewish mysticism, specifically Kabbalism. Since Pynchon seems to have relied heavily on Greshom Scholem for his knowledge of Kabbalism, and since Scholem is widely regarded as one of the preeminent Kabbalist scholars, it makes sense that we should also turn to Scholem for an understanding of Kabbalism. Of all of Scholem's work, Pynchon seems to draw most from *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*. Much of this text deals with the delicate balance struck between Jewish mysticism and the dominant, more widely accepted views of Rabbinical Judaism. For Scholem, this delicate balance allows mysticism to be both a confirmation of religious authority and a radical departure from tradition.

Before moving into Scholem's main argument, it is helpful to understand his definition of what a mystic is. For Scholem, a mystic is a person "who has been favored with an immediate, and to him real, experience of the divine, of ultimate reality, or who at least strives to attain such experience" (5). He goes on to explain that the mystical experience is almost always born in some framework of religious tradition (i.e. Judaism, Catholicism, Islam, etc.). Further, the mystic, so grounded in his tradition, is only able to describe his experience in the terms of that

tradition; however, since, as Scholem describes it, the mystical experience is "indistinct and inarticulate" by its very nature, any mystical experience defies translation from the experience itself to the images and symbols of the tradition (10).

Returning to Scholem's main purpose in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, the balance of tradition and radicalism, Scholem remarks that as long as the mystic accepts the tradition and authority of the religious community, that is, as long as the mystic "has no interests in sharing his novel experience and finds his peace in solitary immersion in the divine," there will be no challenge to the authority of the traditional religious framework of the community (6). Only when a mystic is not content to remain in "solitary immersion" does there exist the "danger of uncontrollable deviation from traditional authority" (Scholem 17-18). According to Scholem, it is rare for a mystic (at least in the Jewish Kabbalist tradition) to completely disregard the established religious authority in favor of his own experiences and interpretations. One notable exception to this trend is the 17<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist Sabbatai Zevi, who was the center of the Messianic Kabbalism active at that time (Scholem 90). Zevi and his followers regarded Zevi as the Messiah, perhaps the most heretical belief in any religious tradition. As such, the Messianic Kabbalists were viewed as a threat by the religious authorities, the Rabbis. Scholem states that what is most common in the history of Jewish mysticism (and perhaps the mysticisms of other traditions) is for the mystic to confirm the religious authority by reinterpreting the symbols and images of traditional Judaism (22). In this way the mystic keeps the religion alive by adding a new depth of meaning to the symbols and texts of the religion. Even while doing this most mystics will boisterously deny that they are attempting to make any radical changes to the tradition. Rabbinical Judaism allows for these types of changes to be made through various stages of authority, ranging from Moses as the most authoritative and almost unquestionable to

Elijah as the least authoritative (though certainly more authoritative than a common mystic) (Scholem 19-20). These stages of authority make it possible for new claims to be made without directly challenging the ultimate authority of Judaism. A good example of this type of change in tradition can be seen in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist Isaac Luria. Since Luria's experiences are attributed to Elijah his experiences are given credibility without being seen as a direct attack on the authority of Moses. Since the literal translation of Kabbalah is "tradition," Scholem says that Kabbalists "are, and do their best to remain, traditionalists" (33).

Scholem is also an excellent source on the Kabbalah itself. There is no one text titled the Kabbalah, rather there is a loose collection of texts (such as the *Book of Zohar*) that Kabbalists draw from and contribute to. Much of Kabbalism is based on three fundamental principles guiding the true interpretation of the Torah (the most important of texts for Kabbalists):

1. Torah as God's name.
2. Torah as representing the life of God.
3. Torah as an explication of Yahweh, the divine word. (Scholem 37)

At the root of these three principles is a concern "with the realm of the divine emanations, or *sefiroth*, in which God's creative power unfolds" (Scholem 35). According to Scholem, for the Kabbalists the process of emanation of divine energy and light is the same as the unfolding of the divine language, which is the Torah (35-36). This returns us to the importance of the Torah and the interpretation of the Torah for Kabbalism. Since the Torah is the divine language, any success in unraveling or decoding that language is successful in moving the community closer to the true power and nature of God.

There is a long Kabbalistic tradition involving the multiple meanings that are to be found in the Torah. One branch of this tradition, influenced heavily by the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Moses

de Leon, focuses on the four levels of understanding to be found in the Torah as represented by the four consonants of the word *pardes* (literally paradise): *peshat*, the literal meaning; *remea*, the allegorical meaning; *derasha*, the Talmudic and Aggadic interpretation; *sod*, the mystical meaning (Scholem 57). This four-leveled interpretation has taken on many different forms over the years, from the Torah as a nut with four layers to the Torah as a woman clothed in four layers (Scholem 57-58). Regardless of the form of this myth, it is rare within Kabbalist tradition for a mystic to be able to move through each of these levels of meaning.

There is, however, an even greater distinction to be made in Kabbalism while seeking for the true meaning of the Torah: the written versus the oral. This distinction between the written Torah and the oral Torah goes back to God's original revelation of the Torah to Moses. Kabbalist tradition holds that the Torah existed in two forms as it was revealed to Moses, a "True" written Torah and an oral Torah, an interpretation of the written Torah. According to Scholem, Kabbalist tradition believes that only Moses has seen the full written Torah and that others (mystics, prophets, etc.) have only glimpsed small pieces of the entire written form (49). It is important for us to understand that the written Torah being discussed here is not the written form of the Torah as it exists in our world (i.e. the book that we can pick up and read); the book that we call the Torah is part of the oral tradition of the Torah since it is based on the interpretation of the Torah as it was revealed to Moses. The written Torah that Scholem and the Kabbalists refer to is the Torah as it existed for God and as it was revealed to Moses. This distinction is further complicated in the view of the oral Torah as being written in black fire upon white fire, where the white fire represents the written Torah (Scholem 49). Since God's written Torah is the unformed, undifferentiated essence of our printed Torah (the oral Torah, or black fire) it is represented as white fire, in distinctions can only be made by the most faithful of

minds, namely only Moses and God (Scholem 49). It is the contrast of the black fire upon the white fire that allows all others to glimpse the meaning of the Torah: "This black fire is like the ink on the parchment" (Scholem 49).

For Scholem, the Kabbalists are also responsible for the reintroduction of myth into Judaism, including some of the myths that Pynchon draws on in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Judaism, since its inception, had come to be what Scholem views as a religion based very much in law and philosophy (Scholem 88-89). The traditions and rituals associated with Judaism had largely lost their connections to the mythological beginnings of the religion (Scholem 88). This Rabbinical form of Judaism looked down upon, and nearly eradicated, the connections to myth that the common, uneducated followers held (Scholem 88). The Kabbalists provided a return to myth that reattached the rituals of Rabbinical Judaism to their mythical beginnings. In addition to recreating these mythical connections for traditional rituals, the importance of myth in Kabbalist tradition also introduced new rituals to Judaism (Scholem ch.4). According to Scholem, many of the rituals practiced in the preparation for and celebration of the Sabbath have their roots in Kabbalist tradition (141).

Kabbalist tradition is also the root of one of Pynchon's most powerful mystical images in *Gravity's Rainbow*, that of Greta Erdmann as the *Shekhinah*. It is again Isaac Luria who greatly influences traditional Judaism with his interpretations of the idea of the *Shekhinah*, the presence of God. Pre-Kabbalistic, Rabbinical Judaism viewed no separation between God and *Shekhinah*, that is, God and the presence of God were one in the same. In Lurianic Kabbalism the *Shekhinah* is the "quasi-independent feminine element within" God (Scholem 105). At first glance this idea of the *Shekhinah* does not seem to greatly oppose the original ideas of the presence of God in Rabbinical Judaism, but remember that it was Luria's strong adherence to tradition that made his

interpretations more acceptable to the religious authority of the time. Luria's beliefs regarding the *Shekhinah* arise largely out of the exile of the Jews from Spain and center around three symbols: *tsimtsum*, the self-limitation of God; *shevirah*, the breaking of the vessels; *tikkum*, the mending of the *shevirah* (Scholem 110). *Tsimtsum*, often described as a self-exile of God was a new idea within Judaism that seems to have arisen from the exile from Spain, for, as Scholem posits, "exile as an element of God Himself" was a very powerful and seductive image for the human experience of the Jews (113). It is the ideas of *tsimtsum* (exile) and the *shevirah* (the breaking of the vessels) that lead to seeing the *Shekhinah* as separate from God, for after the *shevirah* "nothing remains in its proper place," including the *Shekhinah*, who has been exiled from God (Scholem 112).

### **Kabbalist Imagery in *Gravity's Rainbow***

Pynchon introduces the reader to Kabbalist imagery and symbolism relatively early in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The myth of the *shevirah*, particularly Luria's interpretation as outlined above, appears in a passage on page 148, a dialogue between two skin cells. When the younger cell asks about visiting the epidermal layer, the "Outer Level," as if it was a place skin cells could go on vacation, the older cell responds with the true mortality involved in a skin cell moving to the epidermal layer. Here the younger cell begins Pynchon's foray into Kabbalism: "—Oh, God. (A pause in which he tries to take it in—then, in panic, pushes it back:) 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!" (Pynchon 148). The younger cell's description of his exile from the central nervous system sounds a great deal like the exile of the *Shekhinah* from God. The older cell expands upon this idea in her response:

—(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 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. (Pynchon 148-149)

Here the older skin cell makes a direct reference to the *shevirah*, the "vessels broken at the Creation." She also touches upon the idea of the *tikkum*, the mending of the vessels that leads to the reunification of the exiled *Shekhinah* and God. However, the older skin cell seems to approach these ideas from a Rabbinical standpoint, that is, she seems not to believe in the myth that the younger cell is relying upon for reassurance; for the older skin cell "there is no such message, no such home."

As mentioned earlier, one of Pynchon's most powerful Kabbalistic images is that of Greta Erdmann as the *Shekhinah* after the exile, the *Shekhinah* clad all in black in mourning of her exile: "Greta had dressed all in black, a hat with a veil covering most of her hair" (Pynchon 477). It is during a flashback from Ensign Morituri that Pynchon makes this connection between Greta and *Shekhinah*. In this scene Pynchon has picked up on the idea of the *Shekhinah* as destroyer, as being aligned with some evil that must be cast off before she can be redeemed from her exile. By some turn of events that Pynchon never explains (certainly not the only case of this type of thing in *Gravity's Rainbow*), Greta has identified herself as the *Shekhinah* and has been murdering Jewish children in a small German spa town. She seems to view her actions as being redeeming for her victims in some way; and shortly before her own redemption of sorts we are given this speech as Greta prepares to kill a young boy:

"You know who I am, too. My home is the form of Light," burlesquing it now, in heavy Yiddish dialect, actressy and false, "I wander all the Diaspora looking for strayed children. I am Israel. I am the Shekhinah, queen, daughter, bride, and mother of God. And I will take you back, you fragment of smashed vessel, even if I must pull you by your nasty little circumcised penis—" (Pynchon 478)

At this point Morituri interrupts Greta's action and by doing so he is able to help Greta cast off her connection to evil, thereby redeeming the *Shekhinah*. Recalling Luria's interpretations of the *Shekhinah* myth we see that this redemption is part of the *tikkum*, the mending of the *shevirah*, that leads to the reunification of the *Shekhinah* and God. Here Pynchon seems to be echoing parts of the skin cell scene from much earlier in *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is also interesting to note here that neither Greta, as the *Shekhinah*, nor Morituri, as the redeemer, are Jewish. This would seem incongruent from the original myth; however, throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon often aligns non-Jewish characters with either Kabbalist myth or the Kabbalists themselves.

One of Pynchon's most interesting uses of the Kabbalah is another example of aligning non-Jewish characters with Jewish mysticism; in this case it is the comparisons drawn between the Zone-Hereros and the Kabbalists. Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon seems to be drawing parallels between the Zone-Hereros' search for rocket pieces to reassemble a rocket like the 00000 rocket with the Kabbalist drive to reassemble the *shevirah*. He also seems to connect the Zone-Hereros' search for additional meanings of the rocket to the Kabbalists' search for additional levels of meaning in the Torah. All of this becomes explicit in the text as Enzian rides through the Zone: "all right, say we *are* supposed to be the Kabbalists out here, say that's our real Destiny, to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to

pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop" (Pynchon 520).

### **How Pynchon Uses Mysticism in *Gravity's Rainbow***

It would be possible to continue explicating examples of Jewish mysticism in *Gravity's Rainbow*; however, it seems more interesting to try to look at how and to what effect Pynchon is using these Kabbalistic images in the novel. In his article "Orphic contra Gnostic: Religious Conflict in *Gravity's Rainbow*," Dwight Eddins argues that the novel's main dialectic, the "Them" in power against the preterite, is mirrored in Pynchon's use of gnosticism (Christian Gnosticism, Kabbalism, etc.). In *Gravity's Rainbow* Eddins sees two religious trends at work, the more traditional, hierarchical religious tradition where "Pynchon locates at the heart of nature the mystical concept of a living conscious earth from which all blessings flow and to which gravity recalls these dispensations in a benevolent cycle of renewal" (164). Eddins sees this latter tradition, which he terms "Orphic Naturalism," as "anathema to the bureaucratic technicians who make up the Kartell," the novel's power structure, who he connects with Gnosticism (164).

Eddins expands on his idea of Pynchon's gnostic power structure to say:

Filled with contempt for the casual flux and the imperfections of nature, refusing submission to natural processes in the name of an absolute and man-imposed control, they work toward establishing a surrogate order, and entirely artificial system that will make nature obsolete and will find its unnatural permanence in the stasis of death. (164)

Eddins turns to Eugene Webb's definition of gnosticism, "a type of thinking that claims absolute cognitive mastery of reality" (qtd. In Eddins 165), to help equate *Gravity's Rainbow's* power elite to gnosticism: "This human usurpation of divine prerogatives, and the privileging of a

cognoscenti who alone have access to the secrets involved, enable us to identify the religion of the Kartell as the gnosticism" (165). What Eddins seems to be saying here is that Pynchon's gnostic imagery and allusions, especially those related to the Kabbalah, drive the paranoia felt through the entire novel.

Eddins's ideas are quite interesting and seem to fit with Pynchon's dialectic of elite v. preterite in *Gravity's Rainbow*. If we recall the Peter Sascha séance scene from *Gravity's Rainbow* we will remember that the elite of IG Farben are communicating with the dead as a way to gain more knowledge of how to better control the earth's resources. In Eddins's words, the IG Farben elite are the "cognoscenti who alone have access to the secrets involved" (165). The Farben elite and others closer to the elite do seem to be intent on creating an "entirely artificial system that will make nature obsolete and will find its unnatural permanence in the stasis of death" (Eddins 164). We need look only to the elite's drive to create ever more complex, and consequently dead, molecules and polymers as evidence of this claim. Pynchon even connects these elite chemists with the Kabbalists during one of Lyle Bland's voyages, where the scientists are referred to as "coal-tar Kabbalists" (Pynchon 590).

To complete the dialectic that Eddins has identified in *Gravity's Rainbow* it is necessary to identify examples of Eddins's "Orphic Naturalism" in the preterite. It is perhaps easiest, and most beneficial, to do this with Slothrop, who is perhaps the most passed over of all the preterite in the novel. Early in the novel Slothrop poses very little threat to the power elite. He seems to be content to carry out what ever orders come down to him, whether it be investigation V2 rocket crash sites in England or studying V2 blueprints and schematics in a French hotel. However, as the novel progresses Slothrop becomes less and less willing to go along with what he views as some world conspiracy to control him. When this begins it almost seems as though the elite will

at some point catch up to Slothrop, but as we read on we realize that will not be the case. Each digression from the elite's gnosticism leads Slothrop closer to Eddins's "Orphic Naturalism." By the time Slothrop meets Geli Tripping, perhaps the one character most aligned with this "Orphic Naturalism" (and unlike other characters, Geli is focused in this naturalism from her very introduction in the novel), it seems clear that Slothrop will be able, at some point before the end of the novel, to evade the power elite once and for all. Slothrop reaches this point later in the novel while wandering the mountains of the Zone with his harmonica (his Orphic harp), which has mysteriously reappeared in a river after Slothrop lost it down a toilet at Harvard. It is at the end of this scene, one of the last scenes in the novel that Slothrop actually appears in (though he is spoken of in other later scenes), when Pynchon finally connects Slothrop fully to this "Orphic Naturalism": "after a heavy rain he doesn't recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of the pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a things in his head, just feeling natural ..." (Pynchon 626). Unlike the power elite, who must know everything and control everything through their gnosticism, Slothrop is content to simply feel in response to the world around him.

Slothrop provides another challenge to the gnosticism of the power elite in addition to what we have seen above. For the Kabbalists and, by extension through Eddins's argument, the power elite it is important to reassemble and recreate: the *shevirah* for the Kabbalists and chemical compounds etc. for the power elite. While some of the preterite of *Gravity's Rainbow* feel compelled toward this type of Kabbalistic recreation/reassembling (e.g. Enzian and the Zone-Hereros), Slothrop by, at the very latest, his mystical rainbow experience no longer (if he ever did) feels compelled to that Kabbalist end. As we have seen, Slothrop seems compelled only by the world that is most immediately surrounding him without worry as to what might

happen next or what has happened previously, and at times he seems content in not even knowing what he is doing in the present. As we have noted, as *Gravity's Rainbow* progresses from Slothrop seeing the rainbow, we begin to see the actual Slothrop less and less; instead what we get are other characters discussing Slothrop and passing comments about how Slothrop may have been here or there. By the end of the novel we are left with the feeling that Slothrop has himself disintegrated into the Zone, that Slothrop has fragmented. The narrator, at one point, tells us that it is possible to find part of Slothrop in all who wander the Zone. This seems to be an allusion to the Kabbalistic myth of Adam, whose soul was fragmented and fell to earth as sparks, each of which became the soul of a person; however, this it seems just as important to note that Slothrop's fragmentation is in opposition to the elite's drive for recreation/reassembling since no one, save for perhaps some characters completely immersed in the Kabbalistic pursuit toward recreation, seems particularly interested in reassembling all the parts of Slothrop.

### ***Gravity's Rainbow* as Holy Text**

Pynchon's use of Kabbalism serves an even more interesting purpose than to further illustrate the dialectic of elite v. preterite. In "Orphic contra Gnostic: Religious Conflict in *Gravity's Rainbow*," Eddins also touches on the idea of *Gravity's Rainbow* as sacred text. Eddins posits that "it is *Gravity's Rainbow* itself as Orphic song, as comprehensive lyric of commemoration, that performs this gathering. The novel *is* gravity, drawing and compressing the wild disparate shards of wartime existence into a living unity" (190). In other words, *Gravity's Rainbow* is the Torah of the "Orphic Naturalism" that Eddins describes.

If we look at Enzian's realization that the Zone-Hereros may be the Zone's Kabbalists we begin to see a way of arriving at this particular reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Recalling this episode in the novel we will remember that while riding through the Zone Enzian begins to

identify himself and the other Zone-Hereros as the Kabbalists of the Zone, the "scholar-magicians of the Zone," seeking for some holy Text "to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated and masturbated till it's all sucked limp of its last drop" much as the Kabbalists have done with the Torah (Pynchon 520). Prior to this episode in the text Enzian and the Zone-Hereros, along with the reader, have assumed that the holy Text being sought, the Zone-Hereros' Torah, was the rocket; however, during Enzian's epiphany he begins to call this assumption into question:

well we assumed—natürlich!—that this holy Text had to be the Rocket, orururumo orunene the high, rising, dead, the blazing, the great one ("orunene" is already being modified by the Zone-Herero children to "omunene," the eldest brother) ... our Torah. What else? Its symmetries, its latencies, the *cuteness* of it enchanted and seduced us while the real Text persisted, somewhere else, in its darkness, our darkness ... even this far from Südwest we are not to be spared the ancient tragedy of lost messages, a curse that will never leave us .... (Pynchon 520)

Enzian then turns to the idea of the Zone itself as holy text: "But if I'm riding through it, the Real Text, right now, if this is it ... or if I passed by it somewhere in the devastation of Hamburg, breathing the ash-dust, missing it completely" (Pynchon 520). What is most interesting about Enzian's statement here, not that the Zone as holy Text is not interesting, is the way that it almost sounds as a warning for the reader. If *Gravity's Rainbow* is in some way its own holy Text, then Enzian's thoughts while riding through the Zone, "if I'm riding through it, the Real Text, right now," could just as easily be read as the thoughts of the reader. If this the case, then through Enzian's thoughts Pynchon would seem to be teaching us how to read *Gravity's Rainbow*. This

idea does not seem entirely out of the question since there are many other instances in the novel where the text itself is instructional in some way as to how we should read *Gravity's Rainbow*.

**"Now everybody—"**

It may be impossible to say with any certainty why Kabbalistic imagery is so pervasive in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but it seems safe to say that Pynchon employs Kabbalism to multiple ends in this novel. If Eddins is correct, one of Pynchon's uses for Kabbalism is to emphasize the dialectic between the power elite and the preterite. More interesting, though, is the idea that Pynchon is using the Kabbalah as a signal that *Gravity's Rainbow* is a holy Text itself. In this case the Kabbalistic imagery that Pynchon makes use of serve as examples of how we should read the rest of the text. If *Gravity's Rainbow* is indeed its own sacred Text, much as the Torah is a sacred Text for the Kabbalists, then, like the Torah, it would seem that there exists some other level of *Gravity's Rainbow* that we have only glimpsed. To return to an earlier image of the Torah, perhaps there are two *Gravity's Rainbows*, the black fire *Gravity's Rainbow* that we read on the page and a white fire *Gravity's Rainbow* that only Pynchon (and perhaps a few others) has access to.

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