

Reading 'Gravity's Rainbow' in Exile

By Lou Morrison

WHY WE LIKE IT: Gravity's Rainbow is a little like Finnegans Wake—in that we're usually wary when someone chirps, "Sure. I've read it. From cover to cover." Frankly, there's talk that even Joyce didn't read FW from cover to cover. The same, alas, holds true for the highly contentious, exorbitantly controversial, lionized, ostracized, demonized and mythologized Gravity's Rainbow. Is it a masterpiece or a mess-terpiece? Who knows? None of us have read it from cover to cover. (And isn't anyone who reads it in some kind of exile anyway?) But like any smorgasbord worth the name, we've sampled some of its delectables. Whole chapters, extended passages, a juicy paragraph, a line here and there, a word. 'V' was magic and remember, the same magician wrote GR. So maybe we're just not (as readers) genius enough to recognize a fellow genius. This whole ramble is starting to sound Pynchian. The way Morrison gets under the skin of Pynchon's voice and eclectic streaming prose is so total it's scary. Once settled into the work, you'd swear it was ole Tom you were reading. We won't say anymore. Just a couple of quotes to let you know what you're getting into: 'I couldn't afford the calories to go over there every day anymore, and the streets were full of quotidian pain.' And: 'He's smiling and all. He's got a Bart Simpson button on and it's supposed to make me relaxed, all these cute touches amid the Danger and High Voltage signs. On the button, Burt Simpson is saying, "Don't have a cow, man!"' A magnificently realized postmodernist expiation by a 'bred in the bone' writer. This is the real deal, folks.

"But the rocket engine, the deep cry of combustion that jars the soul, promises escape."

--Gravity's Rainbow

Some years ago, I read *Gravity's Rainbow*—the seven-hundred-something pages of it—in seven days with only Chinese tea as my nourishment the entire time. I was on the skids, as it were, in a Taipei tenement guesthouse and I had nothing else to do.

I was a prisoner of bureaucracy in Taipei, though it was not Taiwan's bureaucracy I was up against, but Korea's. I was changing jobs in Korea and to change jobs as a foreigner in Korea you had to—and still do, apparently--leave the country so your new boss could kiss some bureaucratic ass to move the paperwork along, and in this sort of case “kissing bureaucratic ass” meant hosting the government official in question to an evening in one of the ubiquitous “room salons” around Seoul where they would drink foreign whiskey and do other things I wouldn't like to imply my new boss would pay for while I awaited the outcome in some foreign city, low on cash. There were no ATMs in those days.

The guesthouse was on the second floor of a back-alley tenement. The room was a high-ceilinged plywood box with a couple of bunk beds—a bare sheet of plywood for a mattress and a woolen military blanket for cover on each—and a bare light bulb hung from the ceiling on a cord bedecked of cobweb bunting. There was a chair in the middle of the room, at a cockeyed angle vis-à-vis everything else. No one else ever came to stay there. There were no windows, only the four, thin, plywood walls. It was dark in there, even with the light on, and the light had to be on during the day if I was reading and when I turned it off during the night the landlord was through the plywood wall with his TV on at full blast.

The landlord was an older gentleman, a widower, who spent the day in his small white apartment through the plywood wall watching shrill game shows massively in his chair, smoking cigarettes, amid the porcelain gods of China, a bikini girl calendar, and an exotic bird in a cage. When he had guests—friends of his own age and temperament—they all smoked more cigarettes and drank tea, laughing loudly.

He was a nice fellow. He seemed sympathetic to my situation. He was always friendly to me and once offered me noodles, which I had to resist, as I knew I would have to begin the starvation process all over again.

It was 1987 and I didn't have communication with anyone except through the expensive and byzantine landline system you could access in a gray building downtown. On top of all that my new boss was a pretty hard-core Christian and he wasn't going to no room salon. My wife had to go kick his ass into gear finally.

Meanwhile, I checked at the Korean consulate every day. I had left my guest house phone number there, but there was only a slim chance they would have called me. Who among them would have called me? The consul himself? The sub-consul? Their secretary? None of them could speak English, and giggled hideously among themselves at the very thought of it every time I walked up to the window to enquire about my visa. I was familiar with this behavior everywhere in Seoul back in the eighties.

As dispiriting as it all was, going over there every day at least gave me something to do during the long and empty days. I had not thought this process would take a full ten days, for a chop on a piece of paper that amounted to nothing more than “permission” to change places of employment as a lowly English conversation night school instructor. Nor had I anticipated that the last seven days would be endured without money or food.

I stood in a bookstore contemplating my last meal as the busses, the cold autumn day blew smokily by outside. Visiting the big bookstore on the way to the consulate to get laughed at was something else I did those days to pass the time. I paged through *Gravity's Rainbow* three days in a row, on my way to and from the consulate. My visa application was buried in a yellowing stack of papers on a wooden desk in the back of a dark storage room somewhere on a silent fifteenth floor in the heart of Seoul. Or so I imagined. I was buried. I was broke. If I were going to spend the last of my money on a meal, it had to be a good one. And if I were to spend the last of my money on a book, it had to be a feast in itself. I was thinking about roast duck, a little of that egg drop soup, and a glass of whiskey. Last meal kind of thing. But a meal is so ephemeral. You eat it and enjoy it, then they strap you into the electric chair.

I was standing on the English language floor of this big modern Taipei bookstore with *Gravity's Rainbow* in hand, hefting it, paging through it, as if all came down to this: a meal, or a book.

On the back cover of the Picador edition of *Gravity's Rainbow* I weighed in Taipei there was a blurb from Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's *New York Times* review: "If I were banished to the moon tomorrow and could take only five books along, this would be one of them." Well we've all imagined what it would be like to be banished to the moon tomorrow, for some odd reason, and we've all mused what books and music we would take along. I felt I was about to find out what that was like. I handed over the last of my Taiwan dollars for the book—enough for two light meals--and pushed out into the blast of noise and dust.

I had read the opening sentence many times: “A screaming comes across the sky . . .” etc. I lay down on my rack and read it again and began to read the novel, with the purpose of actually reading the novel, what with nothing else to do.

I read a hundred pages of *Gravity’s Rainbow* each of the seven days I was in the room. I finished the whole book before I got on the plane back to Korea addled and hungry. That night back in Seoul, with fresh cash and belly full of noodles and beer and soju, I got stomped in an alley by some dudes from the bar I drunkenly outraged shouting “Don’t fuck with the Rocketman!” The upshot of this was that the next day, when I went in for my first day of work at the new Christian language school I had so bravely held out for in Taipei, I faced my new students for the first time with a putrescent black eye and a half a front tooth gone, blood still matted in my hair, and reeking of booze. This is the outcome of this story.

The setting of the novel is the final months of the Second World War in Europe, and its central thematic image is the V-2 rocket; conceived, designed, built, tested until it successfully arcs toward London, falling ballistically into the heart of the city faster than the speed of sound so that its explosive impact is preceded by silence and followed by the shriek of the machine. Following VE day the Allies search for the mysterious rocket called the Scwarzgerat, designated 00000, built by a Nazi regiment of Hereros from Southwest Africa: the Scwarzkommando. The purpose of this hidden rocket is unknown and ominous, as the Scwarzgerat is the only one of the six thousand produced by the Nazis to carry a device involving Impolex-G, a mysterious heterocyclic polymer whose properties may include artificial intelligence.

When I turned the light out for the night and crawled down against the cold, pulling the woolen blanket over my head, I felt drained and had weird dreams. When I awoke in the morning I re-familiarized myself with my shrinking world, had my morning tea with a rolling belch, and took up the book again, hoping when I thought of it to get a phone call from the Korean consulate. I couldn't afford the calories to go over there every day anymore, and the streets were full of quotidian pain. At some point each day however I went up to the cluttered roof. It was the only sunlight I saw. My hunger gnawed ceaselessly, as it does in that first, and last, week of a starvation cycle.

Four hundred pages along late some Chinese afternoon I lay the book down and pulled the blanket around me to shiver a while. Sitting in the chair I had just read a scene where Yank and Brit Army officers in dress uniform break out into song and dance, arms around shoulders and high-kicking, like the novel is a musical, thinking what the heck is all this about now sitting there in the chair in the middle of the room with the blanket around my shoulders. I absently read the blurb again on the back cover. "If I were banished to the moon tomorrow and could take any five books along . . . "

Banished to the moon tomorrow. Five books. And I wondered, Why is it always five books if banished to the moon tomorrow. Five this, five that if banished to a desert isle, or, from the nineteen-sixties with the big space-race jive, to the moon. Five songs. And in my ruminations there with the TV blessedly off and the old man gone, and with just me and the macaw with its occasional, sudden, but not entirely un-pretty squawk, I considered the weight and space limitations in a space capsule. It couldn't be a whole library. Be thankful you get the five!

I imagined myself on a beach, or in a Starbuck's on a Sunday morning enjoying my last cup of espresso and everyone in the ville knew it, they knew about me and the wife breaking up, they'd seen me drunk at parties. In the beach scenario I was this hungry-as-hell and stinking-of-rum wretch and looking it, as I watched the Coast Guard cutters and coke runners race past each other in opposite directions, and in either situation—the Starbuck's loser and the on-the-beach loser--I was waiting for that lucky break when whammo, something in the newspaper caught my eye. In the on-the-beach scenario it dances down the breeze smack into me, wraps around me annoyingly and I glance angrily over the line that leads to the lucky break just before I fling this blown-newspaper annoyance away, and I even crab-crawl a bit down the beach after the paper, and only by chance, in a desperate tussle, do I grab, out of all the blown pages, the critical page with the information about how to make some bucks by going to the moon forever, holding it triumphantly over me where I stand waste-deep in the stinging surf.

In the Starbuck's scenario I glance at it, poised defiantly at my small round table, wonder if I appear to be balding to them, begin to turn the page, then snap quickly back to it, once it hit me, then, catching myself, scan the room of abjuring faces coldly before I dive back into the cesspool of plasma ads and ads for phone sex workers. And there I read the same thing the guy on the beach was reading: “If you were banished to the moon tomorrow, and could take any five books along, what would they be? Call NASA at dit-dit-dit and let us know!”

Both the man in the Starbuck's and the man on the beach felt the first comma in the text was superfluous and that is how they became the two finalists.

Now here I stand on the launch pad itself. The liquid oxygen is fluffing slowly, heavily out into the cool Florida dawn, but you know what the old snowbirds say down here in Florida: “The sun comes up here fast in the morning.”

They are making these little adjustments on my spacesuit I don’t even know what, and everybody is frantic but in a kind of controlled, practiced kind of way and the moment is fast approaching. The moon is hovering up there, distant, faint, full and waiting. And then out of the fleet of tractors and white vans emerges this bookmobile. It is a big shiny white trailer with BOOKMOBILE on it officially in black, with a yellow “Rescue” arrow coming down off the B and the E. I say, Oh, yeah. The book thing. It has been such a whirlwind three weeks since I answered the ad and I had forgotten completely about the book thing. There’s been training films and cocktail parties, and even the Vice-President one day came over to the training center to shake my hand with cameras whirring and clicking. Me, with the Vice-President. So you might imagine how I might have forgotten the whole purpose of this project, which was to answer the question of if I was going to go to the moon, the emptiness, the silent surround forever and I could take but five books what would they be.

“All right,” Hank, my handler the technician, a real nice fellow who has been real good to me throughout this whole thing says as the bookmobile rolls up. “What’s it going to be, Bub? You get fiiiive books.”

He’s smiling and all. He’s got a Bart Simpson button on and it’s supposed to make me relaxed, all these cute touches amid the Danger and High Voltage signs. On the button, Bart Simpson is saying “Don’t have a cow, man!”

Well what with this being the year of the burning icebergs and Monster Hurricanes and all I can't imagine anybody really caring what five books I would want to take to the moon, the shimmering emptiness, the grey surround for cold eternity, much less if they knew my rakehell past, but there we are. There we stand, with the orbs orbiting and the ice that covers the rocket cracking in the crisp morning light, and everybody down on the beach, up since dawn to watch the launch, and all the hawkers selling "Banished to the Moon" t-shirts and hats and because they are overstocked kooky, ridiculously out-sized sunglasses, sunglasses as big as boomboxes and boomboxes blazing and all the journalists in their places, and Walter Cronkite filling in the odd moments of inactivity and the LOX and the President is there, with his wife and their dogs and their friends and colleagues and whatever their coldly political relationships are all sitting in their respective bleachers waiting, waiting as the planets whirl mile by undiscerned mile through the sky and Walter suggests that, "It is estimated that somewhere in the depths of New Guinea somebody doesn't know this is happening today. They will continue to look at the moon, as they do in their atavistic night, by their whispering cannibal river and never know not only that a man sits on the moon alone tonight reading the only five books he could think of to take along, but not know even what a book *is*. Even less, a space capsule." Walter puts it all in perspective—New Guinea nights unknowing—and he brings us back, and back we are, to the question. The books.

I look at Hank hopelessly. It is going to be forever, after all, in that empty desert, that silent unmoving sea, and the only thing I can utter is,

"But why only five?"

A glitch, this answering of the question with a question. Glitches are absolutely out of the question. In Mission Control they are cursing and spitting Skoal. For there is the problem of time. For there is but one moment, fast approaching, one narrow window to shoot through to the moon as it passes slowly overhead. They've got to get me in that bomb gonna blast me at a vastly mounting velocity up to seven miles per second per second ten rib-cracking Gs and stages blasting off out beyond the surly bonds etcetera as the worlds drift into place, out of place, and this is a one shot deal, one chance then we'll have to wait until next month sometime because even that little moon will not hold still.

And Walter, sensing disaster but not naming it, not missing a beat because he was there, D-Day and the Berlin Airlift and all that and now this, the culmination of all our technology sticking like a pin into the pastel blue sky where hovers a devouring moon, is speaking of bolts and miles just to cover for me as I try to get to the bottom of this, my latest big fuck-up.

“And remarkably there are three hundred thousand platinum bolts in and of that ice-caked rocket, each of them programmed to burst away from the rocket exactly one hundred miles overhead. And the important thing we can be assured of and so cast our worries to the great vacuum of physical uncertainty is that not one, not one of them will ever drop into anyone's upturned, gaping, aptly gaping mouth because they will never come down. Never. And neither will he, our lonely lunar arhat. He too will never come down, never again fall into anyone's mouth or loins again because the moon, as it beckoned Li Po who drowned in its wat'ry reflection, beckons he who now stands beside the gantry wrestling with the question . . . “

Hank leans in to whisper in my ear.

“Listen, bud. How much room you think you’re going to have in there? We just don’t have the lift for any more than five books *plus* the forever.”

I look up to the little life support system strapped to the top of the skyscraper rocket and, indeed, it doesn’t look like much room. The world is watching. I must respond.

Dry-mouthed I manage, “It’s the forever I’m worried about.”

“That’s right, guy. That’s the what’s this is all about. Let me run this by you again.”

He sounds uncharacteristically testy, but I understand the pressures he is under.

“If you were banished to the moon tomorrow, no, *this morning*—and you *will* be banished to the moon here in about fifteen minutes—what five books are gonna get you by? If I were you,” he adds at a lower, confidential register, “I’d throw in the Bible and a nice thick Clancy.”

“Yeah, I understand. Space limitations, weight limitations and all that.”

He winks.

“Gotcha,” I respond.

We separate our conspiring heads. What with all the photo sessions and scary rides I had to go on to prepare me for space travel I had forgotten about the book question. And so I’m a little stuck, what with the moment itself of eternal banishment upon me. Meanwhile sun moon LOX etcetera. The President squirms in his seat, smiles it off, winks to someone. The First Dogs are getting restless. Down on the beach people are getting sunburned. A suspicious looking character is Tased and arrested. Cronkite digs up another gem.

“The melting point of liquid oxygen is . . . “

Fast approaching. The melting point of liquid oxygen is fast approaching as the sunlight broadens over the cape. I get the hint, as the moon slips toward the edge of the window.

Cannibal grunts, shifts on his haunches, scratches a mosquito bite. He’s thinking of yams.

Hank nudges me, brings me back. He’s been such a pal through all of this. I think of the weeks we have worked together, and that night we went drinking in Cocoa Beach and those stews who just had to meet the banished man, and we took them back to his place and we all got naked in the Jacuzzi at his apartment complex doing Cuervo shots around two that morning and I want to say Hey Hank, remember those stews, but time is running out. The countdown, the ten-nine-eight part, is but minutes away. And Hank is beginning to look a little steamed, an aspect of his personality I had never seen at this compression, had never anticipated seeing. And I’ve never even seen this kind of compression.

The bookmobile is right there in front of me. The drivers of it, dressed in immaculate white coveralls and hard hats, stay in the futuristically-faceted cab and watch me through their aviator shades. Hank’s hand points the way. Five books. For forever.

I think about all the books that might get me through forever on the Moon. Keeping the Earth and its stories in my head forever on the Moon. Earth forever in my head as I lie up there in my tiny capsule on the Moon. Earth in my head.

I think of all the plots, the ten plots in their varieties of detail and circumstance and all whatever, like it’s a universal constant, the Rule of Ten. I think of the rendering of

things in the simulacrum of pictograph, then in the first sunbaked cities' numbers, and then alphabets. In alphabets the stories told from the beginning of time are inscribed, and re-inscribed, and are moved and transformed by scribal drift. And far off in some unimagined future with towering temples and cathedrals they are set in type and printed. Then Kafka's cockroach. Then *Gravity's Rainbow*. And still they drift. The oeuvre of the Earth is like the story of a million eternally unfolding and interweaving novels that opens with the simple splitting of a rock, a tryst between gods, and the stifling terror of history swallowing them and us up and "A screaming comes across the sky . . . but there is nothing to compare it to now."

I realize with this banishment to the moon thing I have an opportunity here for a new idiom.

"Lookit," I say. "I don't think I want any books."

Hank just gives me a cold stare.

Cannibal runs his hand over a battle scar fondly, absently. A pair of black horn-rims hangs from his neck, a rare trophy passed down the generations. His great-grandfather got them off a white long-pig name of Rokfella lost his way in the swamp long ago. Possession of these glasses is the powerfulest taboo. Already on the beach there have been drunken brawls.

"I think," I say, "I'd just like some blank paper."

"Blank . . ." Hank says.

"Blank," I say, letting the word, the blankness of it hover, take hold. I glance over at Hank to see that it did seem to be taking hold of him, the blankness of it. "That's it," I

say. “That’s all I want. Reams of blank paper. I will create,” I announce, “My own world, and its own literature.”

“Oh, really.”

He’s pissed and he upbraids me and he tells me it’s not in the game plan I don’t take books I take paper. “We don’t have paper. We have books!” he says, jamming his hand in the direction of the bookmobile. Its drivers cock their heads at this motion.

“You have scrolls of computer paper, miles of it, over in the bunker, don’t you?” I say indicating where the launch crew are poised, downrange a mile, with their computers chirring out mile on mile of computer paper.

“Sure, bro. But we ain’t got a pen,” he snarls, then glances wildly around the world, its shapes and ideas, then barks with bald incredulity into my eyes, “Dude!”

And as we argue about it the moon drifts out the window, drifts silently along its eternal arc. And by then, of course, it’s too late. The hawkers down on the beach begin to fold up their tents. Cranky kids and their tired parents begin to load up their cars for the long traffic jam home. The President and his wife and the First Dogs are ushered under armed guard to their helicopter. All the mission control guys remove their headphones and toss them against their consoles.

“It’s an opportunity,” I insist, “To wean myself off the Earth’s formulae. To create my own.”

“Yeah you’re gonna tell it like it is are ya’?” Hank crows, walking away, never to look in my eyes again.

All around me I hear machinery being shut down. The loud hissing vapors are sealed off and I notice for the first time how quiet everything really is without the rocket.

“And there you have it,” Walter says, closing the broadcast. “Blank paper. A dream of a new language, a new literature born in the eerie silence of the moon . . . “

I stand alone by the gantry. Everyone has wandered off. The bookmobile’s drivers--in their white coveralls and hardhats--back it away, confused, irate, another crazy day at work. A child’s balloon is adrift in the sky getting smaller over the sun-bleached sea. I follow it with my eye until it disappears one way or the other.

I drift down the concrete hallway to the little shower room and peel off the blanket, my clothes. I stand under the cold water and my body thrills with the shock and I feel a slow roll of nausea. I open my mouth and the rusty water splashes over my white tongue.

I finish, dry off, dress, wrap the blanket around me again. Weakly I ascend the concrete steps to the roof. The roof is scattered with debris: a broken sofa, a hollow TV cabinet. Rats scamper into the shadows. It is just dusk, and bracing cold. The skyline is a pall of light and smoke. Giant neon signs are coming on all over the city. Rooftops bristle with TV antennae. The streets are filled with motorbikes and busses. I hear jet motors in the sky.

Hunger is not so bad after the first few days. Only after thirty days does true starvation set in. I am just in the craving stage now.

The End

AN: *I wrote this piece soon after my return to Korea from Taiwan. The situation in Taiwan is described factually, although I failed to mention I carried Robert Coover’s The Public Burning with me for the trip and finished it there before I bought Gravity’s Rainbow with literally the last of my money and the weeklong starvation process began.*

Reading two thick metaphysical novels in a row like that may have had some unmooring (i.e.: liberating) effect on my thoughts and voice at the time. Probably the reverie regarding the 'banished man' by the launch gantry did not occur to me until my return to Korea as I began to write. But obviously it was the funnest part to write. Life's most mundane speculations, such as, "If you could take only five books to the moon, what would they be?" can be mined all the way down to a quiz show with the Saturn Five over your shoulder with Walter Cronkite's sonorous ruminations as its rhythm. I mean, what would it look like to send someone to the moon with only five books? How absurdly realistic can we make it? All this occurred in 1987 and I've been in tougher jams since. Indeed, without going into details, I'm in one now. If there's a takeaway, it's this: don't panic. Read a book. Or write one. As to the question of influences, as a writer I've read a lot and I'm not sure who has necessarily influenced my voice, except to say that reading Richard Brautigan from my middle school days is probably what first awoke me to the beauty of words and what could be done with them.

BIO: Lou Morrison received his MFA in Creative Writing from Arizona State. Being a writer has been his life's goal since he was 5, at which time he wrote graphic novels about monsters. He has not yet been published (*until now.Eds.*) and hopes to get one lousy piece in any journal before he dies. In 2001 he arrived in South Korea to write his PhD dissertation on Korean Buddhist painting of the Joseon Dynasty which he didn't finish. He subsequently taught English at a university for 15 years but just lost that job. What's ahead for me? Keep writing I guess.