


Narratives of the Rocket: Chabon's "Amnesiac" Revisitation of Pynchon's Posthuman Zone

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ABSTRACT

This work explores Michael Chabon's use in *Moonglow* of notions related to the uncertainty of memories, categorical thinking, and historiographic metafiction, and the intertextual connections existing between his novel and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Both the narrator's grandfather in Chabon's book and the protagonist of Pynchon's masterpiece share the same quest for the ethically ambiguous rocket when WW2 is coming to its end in Europe. In both novels, the quest highlights its representational rather than actual value thanks to the use of some strategies that ultimately seem to put into question our capacity to know the past and its present consequences in reliable terms. They become a warning that epistemological difficulties should not discourage us from looking for the historical truth and, thus, make the necessary ethical choices.

Introduction: Memory, Cultural Relativism, and the Paradoxical Need for Ethical Decisions

This work analyzes Michael Chabon's *Moonglow* (MG) as an unreliable narrative disguised as realist memoir, which is also intertextually linked to Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (GR) thanks to the use of a particular historical episode. In both narratives, the episode aims at a clear moral target related to the importance of collective memory: Americans should not have forgotten that von Braun was a Nazi and that landing on the Moon had meant earlier experiments with the destructive power of the rocket in its original version as the V-2 weapon. Forty-three years after Pynchon's moral vision warned its postmodern readership about the dangers of the rocket and of wicked politicians and military officers (Weisenburger "Gravity's Rainbow" 44–45), Chabon gives a new turn to the narrative of the phallic techno-device to warn his contemporary readers that ethical standpoints are still necessary. In Chabon's version, unlike in Pynchon's experimental and complex novel, the claim that von Braun and the American space program have their origin in Nazism is explicitly stated. However, although Chabon subscribes to an apparent realist style, he uses a mode that resonates of modernist epistemological difficulties thanks to the deployment of embedded narratives and narratorial unreliability. As Pynchon's fiction already did, *Moonglow* also raises the metahistorical suspicion that what happened does not translate well into language. If still aligned with postmodern and deconstructive theories, Chabon's 21st-century readers may believe that categorical thinking is unethical, as it leads to social discrimination – which Pynchon symbolized in his famous binary of the Elect vs the Preterite (GR 112). However, so far language has proved to be a categorical tool that makes it difficult or even impossible to escape from the either/or rule that, since Aristotle, has led to the imposition of limits and unfair social hierarchies (Solomon, Chapters 13 and 14). Both novels disclose such paradox while at the same time inviting readers to a quest for ultimately unreachable knowledge in which style, be it experimental or realist, blurs traditional categorical limits, thus

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impeding any one-angled answer. Nevertheless, both narratives also infer that ethics works in the opposite direction of cultural relativism and demands clear answers as a preliminary step to action. As argued by influential scholars (see Cowart 87–89; Weisenburger “Gravity’s Rainbow” 49–54; Hume 639–40; Freer 102–25), Pynchon’s ethos aims at capitalized History and white Patriarchy – with the Nazis and dishonest politicians and scientists as the actors of both. In *Moonglow*, Chabon adds to the older writer’s social critique the notion that the untruthfulness of memory also affects recollections of our personal and family lives and that this type of more intimate narratives may also help us to understand larger historical forces.

Memories, Amnesia, and Historical Narratives

Within our limited knowledge of time, we usually think of a consciously retrieved memory as the mental – and frequently visual – trace of a specific past moment in our lives. However, according to both (traditional) psychoanalysis and more recent views developed in other scientific areas – especially in that of brain research (Sossin *et al.* Section 4) – it seems that the individual can never fully grasp what happened in her or his past. There is always a certain level of distortion; there are gaps, smaller or bigger inaccuracies induced by different factors which may go from physical handicaps or psychic trauma to the feeling of nostalgia. Mental gaps, trauma and nostalgia are features that Chabon frequently uses in *Moonglow* to draw a portrait of his narrator as somebody who incessantly challenges our human ability to know the truth about past experiences.

The human subject’s incapacity to remember the past in absolute terms runs together with the debatable ways the collective past is recorded and thus mediated in public and historiographic documents as well as in written and audiovisual media artifacts. The questioning of the epistemological reliability of traditional values became fundamental in the formation of the postmodern ethos. Within the grounds of historiography, the 1970s saw an increasing reevaluation of historical and media documents. Postmodernist history became meta-history (White 5–27), and the new historicist approach questioned the common belief in the apparent objectivity of traditional historiography. Meanwhile, literary and cultural studies emphasized the tricks played by media and artistic representations to argue that ultimate truth was something unreachable. Along the last decades of the 20th Century, scholars in the field of literary criticism such as Patricia Waugh (1984) or Linda Hutcheon (1988) established the important role metafiction plays in the modern novel and, by extension, the importance that self-awareness has in the development of human societies. Especially the latter critic, with her influential concept of *historiographic metafiction* stressed the idea that in postmodernist times the novel had turned out to be strongly historical, but it had also become a self-scrutinizing artifact. By questioning its own historical and discursive accuracy and, thus, revealing its artificiality, the new fiction written by, among others, Thomas Pynchon was also questioning the accuracy of any historical or media record (Hutcheon, Chapter 7). Hence, epistemological barriers between historical records and the new fiction became blurred as part of the continued attack postmodernism and the poststructuralisms sustained against categorical thinking. Why should a scholarly third-person historical voice be more reliable and accurate than a first-person narrator who allegedly had lived in her or his own “flesh” some if not all the events narrated in the story?¹ Whether more or less realist in their style, historiographic-metafictional narratives shared the postmodernist fight against categorical thinking and the traditional humanist ethos.² Since then, culture has portrayed life as an experience much more unpredictable and unstable, even if our present confidence in the new technologies to understand our lives represents a powerful counterforce to the anti-categorical legacy of postmodernism.

Michael Chabon published *Moonglow* in 2016, many years after the postmodernist growth of historiographic metafiction, but, as pointed out by some reviewers, his novel has stuck to the mode of questioning the accuracy of any report of the historical past (Nance 50–52; Derbyshire 1–2). Adding to the erasure of epistemological accuracy, the book is also filtered by the insistent focus that trauma narratives have put on the difficulties or even impossibility to narrate past traumatic events.

Thus, Chabon's novel amalgamates different textual strategies and themes that reinforce the notion that memories are always of uncertain quality. Amnesiac gaps are celebrated from voice to voice within the different levels of the story, but there are also some explicit references to one of the most famous books published at the peak of the Counterculture. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) helps Chabon to revisit the grounds of historiographic metafiction in a literary quest that reveals that Pynchon's fictional story and his own may put into question their objectivity and historical accuracy, but it does not mean that they should be discarded as false or useless documents. On the contrary, as his influential predecessor already did, Chabon takes his readers to the ethical grounds of art, in search of the truth that hides in the allegedly unreachable sources of History.

Chabon's Narrative Voices in *Moonglow*

Moonglow uses an authorial quest for knowledge to remember and understand some aspects of the collective past of Jewish American immigrants and the effects the Holocaust had on the two precedent generations of the narrator's family. Narrator Mike Chabon is portrayed as a processor of multiple sources of information (see Hayles 1–24). Nevertheless, he knows from the beginning that his quest for rigorous knowledge is bound to fail. This narrative voice defines his book as a memoir in an "Author's Note" that, at the same time, helps to erase any confidence readers may put in this *author's* reliability: "In preparing this memoir, I have stuck to facts except when facts refused to conform with memory, narrative purpose, or the truth as I prefer to understand it." However, to counteract such a vigorous defense of narratorial subjectivity, the same page contains the picture of an advertisement allegedly published in *Squire*. Dated in October 1958, it features the 1/20th scale model of a U.S. Navy rocket fabricated by Chabon Scientific Co. The paradoxical condition of a memoir that asserts but also questions its own accuracy is found again at the end of the book, in the author's list of Acknowledgments where some people, "if they existed, would have been instrumental to the completion of this work." The reference to the author's "mother's maternal uncle, Stanley Werbow" (*MG* 429) in the same list of acknowledgments also makes implausible a substantial part of his grandmother's traumatic condition as reported in the story. Finally, Chabon's gratitude goes "for the support, encouragement, love, protection, and, above all, for the existence, however improbable, of [his actual wife] Ayelet Waldman" (430).

Mike Chabon's unreliable quality in his role as narrator and editor of the memoir is subsequently echoed by the many occasions in which, from his extradiegetic level, he casts doubts on the possibility to provide his own account with historical accuracy. Besides, as his central role consists of processing several conversations he sustained with his step-grandfather, mother, and grandmother, he also provides a context in which sometimes his relatives become intradiegetic narrators. Thus, the act of narration results in the use of embedded stories within the main story. Furthermore, the telling of the events is arranged along a non-chronological narrative line.

Chapter I starts *in medias res* and soon offers a first indication of the unreliable quality of narrator Mike Chabon: "This is *how I heard* the story. When Alger Hiss got out of prison, he ..." (*MG* 1; emphasis added). Then, Mike unfolds a story which he fragments into many episodes. In his role as editor, he also "clarifies" some of those episodes with the addition of extradiegetic footnotes, in an apparent search for objectivity. Meanwhile, he advances forwards and backwards in the presentation of the events that become his memoir. Such events mostly concern his maternal grandparents, a Jewish couple who met in America at a moment when their lives had already been profoundly affected by events happened in Nazi-occupied France and in Germany by the end of WW2. Running alongside the two narratives of his maternal grandparents, Mike also recounts some episodes he had heard about his own mother's life. In all cases, he leaves a double imprint behind. On the one hand, Mike had no direct knowledge or participation in the events he reports in his role as both narrator and editor. On the other, trauma symptoms always emerge in the conversations he maintains with his two maternal grandparents and with his mother. Persistently, the narrative voice is involved in a quest for meaning that itself reflects the difficulties to know what actually happened in the past.

Narrator Mike Chabon wants to know more about his family's past. However, he starts from the self-assumed premise that his attempts can only take him to the territory of uncertainty and unreliability because his sources are mediated by memories distorted by unknown traumatic experiences (which allegedly become unveiled as the narrative progresses) and by his lack of consistency as an investigator. Although he has to process a large amount of information coming from his three family sources, the report that offers the most sustained view is his grandfather's. He tells Mike many personal memories during the different conversations they maintained almost at the end of his life. Soon, Mike comments that his grandfather's "recollections emerged in no discernible order apart from the first, which was also the earliest" (MG 5) – this first conversation is about the memory of an event that took place when the grandfather was only three or four years old. Chapter II starts in a classic realist mode, with Mike informing his narratee about his grandfather's earlier life in South Philadelphia and offering at times the old man's direct recollection in their conversation. However, frequently the grandfather's memories are also supplemented with the narrator's remembrances of their conversation or of the people his relative had mentioned in it: "In the winter, the laundry froze stiff on the clothesline,' my grandfather recalled. 'She had to carry it up all those stairs.' Uncle Ray I knew as a playboy of the late 1960s in ..." (7). This technique, which openly blurs temporal and space boundaries, adds to the narrator's frequent use of free indirect discourse – "but he had to come *here today* to stand one final time ..." (11; emphasis added). Thus, he increases the impression that both the time and place of the act of narration and the times and places when and where the story events took place have no clear boundaries among them (see Cohen 99–105).

Not surprisingly, narrator Mike Chabon also plays with omniscience and even dares to convey in his narrative his interlocutor's emotional state – "My grandfather felt there was more to her imprisonment than ..." (MG 14) – which eventually take him to become interested in his grandfather's feelings for his grandmother. This personage is presented from the beginning as showing suspicious symptoms of undergoing a mental disease: "when she was not smiling, she fell into taut silences, seemed to listen for footsteps on the other side of doors, studied shadows in the corners of rooms" (57).³ Mike's work as a listener to his grandparents' complementary stories and his processing of their reports in his role as narrator of the memoir eventually take him to unveil his traumatized grandmother's concealed truth. Before escaping to America, she was raped by a Nazi, getting pregnant of Mike's mother. Such a traumatic episode meant for her the beginning of a long road of physical and emotional suffering. As a result, she tells delusional lies about herself and her daughter and acts in ways so odd that attentive readers may determine that her actions are the result of acting out her traumatic experiences. Following some conversations between Mike and his mother, readers are also informed that Uncle Ray – her stepfather's brother – raped her when she was still a girl. The issue adds to the narrator's role as discloser of his female relatives' hidden traumatic truths and to his eventually efficient role as a processor of the information reported from old memories transmitted in unreliable conversations. Thus, despite the strong presence of narrative unreliability, Mike's capacity to reveal the nature of his grandmother's and mother's hidden traumas paradoxically results in the unveiling of the alleged truth.

However, beyond considerations of *Moonglow* being a report on two specific transgenerational traumas,⁴ the book's mixture of traumatic symptoms shown through unreliable reports also points to the patriarchal roots of such traumas and their epitomic exemplification in Nazism. Mike's reiterative strategy to expose readers of his narrative to stylistic and thematic uncertainty extends to some traces which appear as distorted memories in his conversations with his grandfather but also in his personal reaction to von Braun, the personage who symbolically condenses the evils inflicted to his family. This historical figure as embodied representation of Nazism is addressed and conjured in Mike's narrative in a double way: directly by recounting his grandfather's war adventures and meeting with von Braun, but also intertextually, by means of a number of references to Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, a book which, as happens to *Moonglow*, is also haunted by Wernher von Braun's ominous presence.

Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and the Specter of Nazism

In Mike's report, there are some explicit references to Pynchon's novel. The first time he mentions *Gravity's Rainbow*, he comments on the importance the novel has as a reliable source of knowledge:

I started with *Gravity's Rainbow*, which I had read at UC Irvine for Mike Clark's graduate seminar on the modern novel, and which was the (accurately researched, it turned out) source of most of the little I had ever known about the V-2. I spent an hour flipping through and skimming the relevant passages, starting with the book's epigraph, then following [...] *Frau im Mond* and the rocket craze, the militarization of rocket research that came with Hitler's rise, Peenemünde, and – I was jolted to discover – Nordhausen, where the book's protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop, also turned up at one point. (MG 247)

In line with the historiographic-metafictional mode, the passage discloses Chabon's preference for a fictional work to document his quest but also opens the gate to his literary response to some of the central motifs and symbols present in Pynchon's dense novel. Progressively, connections emerge between the two works of fiction that mainly involve the female symbolism of the Moon, the ominous figure of von Braun, and the similarities existing between the quests carried out by Mike's grandfather and by Pynchon's protagonist Lt. Tyrone Slothrop.

Moon symbolism and the female

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Moon becomes the projected setting from where a new white patriarchal Nazi nation would continue their evil rocket project of destruction. However, Chabon's narrative offers an interpretation of the Moon radically different from Pynchon's bleaker views. The younger author changes its symbolism by turning the satellite of the Earth into a longed-for setting of family love. Furthermore, by liberating the Moon from the terror inflicted by the hideous Nazi personage Captain Blicero, Chabon also invites his readers to reflect on the historical meanings of Pynchon's novel. *Moonglow* recuperates the symbolism that in ancient mythologies links the satellite to female energy, as understood by Henry Adams in his *Education*. The famous historian's association of energy to Venus and the Virgin (frequently associated to the Moon in her role as Mother) became a source amply used by Pynchon since his short story "Entropy" (1959) to build the key figure of the Lady V. in his fiction (Adams Chapter XXV; Pynchon "Entropy" 280; see Collado-Rodriguez 255–60; Herman & Krafft 6).

There is a female personage in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Geli Tripping, who also offers Chabon the opportunity to establish further links with his novel. In the Zone, Slothrop has a brief encounter with her, and during their conversation, Geli tells the American officer something that adds to the symbolic roles Pynchon assigned to women in his novel: "I posed once for a rocket insignia. Perhaps you've seen it. A pretty young witch straddling an A4 [V-2]. Carrying her obsolete broom over her shoulder" (GR 293). As one more example of Pynchon's persistent attempt to question traditional patriarchal ideology, Geli is represented as a "good" witch who helps heroic Slothrop along his quest for the rocket. Similarly, Mike's grandmother also poses as a witch for a TV program, *The Crypt of Nevermore*, "an antebellum Gothic fantasia of toppled columns, tilted headstones, and iron gingerbread. They remembered her as 'Nevermore, the Night Witch'" (MG 181). To throw some light on his grandmother's dark past is one of Mike's main objectives. Thus, finding that she played the role of a witch for a program of mere entertainment echoes the fact that, to conceal her rape by a Nazi, for the sake of her child she had previously invented and played another role in her actual life. Hence, both novels share a similar approach to their female characters: they are victims of patriarchy, used by men in power and forced to perform different roles to survive when male power shifts to another faction. Geli had to befriend the Nazis, became the lover of a Russian officer, and had sex with Slothrop, but Pynchon's novel offers other female figures, particularly that of the counterspy Katje, as embodiments of the many difficulties women have to experience if they want to survive in the patriarchal world. Either they please men and lie to them, or they die. Furthermore, in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon explicitly associates the end of humanity to the Nazis' choice to erase

women and thus heterosexual love by creating their new empire of the sterile Zero. The ultimate rocket prototype 00000 carries young Gottfried tied to its metal structure. Gottfried and his sacrificial death represent the beginning of the new Reich in the new mythic cycle devoid of hope that Blicero imagines may start as a colony in the Moon:

“Is the cycle over now, and a new one ready to begin? Will our new Edge, our new Deathkingdom, be the Moon? I dream of a great glass sphere, hollow and very high and far away ... the colonists have learned to do without air, it’s vacuum inside and out ... it’s understood the men won’t ever return ... they are all men. [...] Gravity rules all the way out to the cold sphere, there is always the danger of falling. Inside the colony, the handful of men have a frosty appearance, hardly solid, no more alive than memories, nothing to touch [...] Fathers are carriers of the virus of Death, and sons are the infected ...” (*GR* 723)

Both Blicero’s new Deathkingdom on the Moon and the sterility of the all-men colony he envisions there prophesize a bleak fascist future for humanity (see *Severs* 147–63). However, the older writer’s description is overtly counteracted by Mike Chabon’s grandfather’s dream of a different type of colony in the Moon, which he has been modelling for many years:

Just before midnight of September 29, 1989, my grandfather completed the model of LAV One. It represented the latest thinking on lunar settlement design (the reason it had needed so many revisions), fourteen years’ work, and about twenty-two thousand individual polystyrene pieces cannibalized from commercial model kits. (*MG* 70)

The grandfather makes figures of himself, his wife, Mike, his mother, and his brother, and also fits a little garden for them in the lunar model, thus transforming Pynchon’s bleak prophecy into a nostalgic site for family love (71). Not surprisingly, the grandfather’s work on this particular lunar model adds to some occasions in the story in which the Moon has recuperated its ancestral, romantic, and female connotations. Thus, he is heard whistling “Moonglow” (*MG* 120), befriends a German priest along his quest for the rocket because both share an astronomical devotion for the satellite (“My grandfather saw moonlight welling in the old priest’s eyes,” 156), and even makes a promise to Mike’s grandmother to “fly her to find refuge in the Moon” (393). Meanwhile, Mike explicitly associates the Moon to his grandmother by disclosing that she also played the part of Queen of the Moon in the theatre (344–45). In this way, he also provides readers with a cue to the romantic ending of *Frau im Mond*, which dispels the distorted use the Nazis made of Lang’s film while also hinting at Pynchon’s use of it in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Of epigraphs and Wernher von Braun’s haunting presence

The story in *Gravity’s Rainbow* ends at the moment that precedes the falling of the rocket on the theatre and the film “has broken, or a project bulb has burned out” (*GR* 760). Such ending both suggests a metafictional breach in the ontological wall that separates readers from literary personages and announces the peril still pending upon readers in 1973. At the time, the development of the American space program had already made it possible for man to land on the Moon. However, as densely argued by Pynchon in his masterpiece, landing on the Moon had its roots in Nazi supremacist ideas and was carried out mostly thanks to the work of von Braun and some German engineers under his supervision. At the end of WW2, they had escaped to the U.S.A., where they set up the American version of the Nazi rocket program. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Wernher von Braun becomes the ghostly but pervasive political figure that haunts the whole book. In Chabon’s story, the historical figure becomes the explicit and visible embodiment of the rocket’s Nazi origins.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the German scientist’s haunting presence can be felt already in the epigraph that opens “Beyond the Zero,” the first section of the novel. Pynchon borrowed the epigraph from an essay that von Braun had published in 1962 (*Weisenburger* “Gravity’s Rainbow” 48): “Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death” (*GR* 1). The epigraphic quote offers an indication that, in effect, the pages that follow combine scientific

ideas related to the first and second law of thermodynamics with ancient religions and myth. But it also offers a critical reflection on the fact that the Nazis – von Braun held the rank of SS-*Sturmbannführer* (Major in the SS) – also searched for spiritual and supernatural devices to conquer and control the world. As it happens, the fact that one of Chabon's aims is to conjure Pynchon's haunting specter of Nazism in *Gravity's Rainbow* is indicated by his use of an epigraph at the beginning of *Moonglow*. Again, the selected quote allegedly comes from none other than von Braun but the ironic contrast with Pynchon's choice is obvious. Chabon's epigraph reads as follows: "There is no dark side of the moon, really. Matter of fact, it's all dark. – WERNHER VON BRAUN." The quote is a famous line from Pink Floyd's song "The Dark Side of the Moon," thus adding to Chabon's use of narrative unreliability. However, the epigraph also precedes Mike's forthcoming intention to respond to von Braun's hypocritical epigraph at the beginning of Pynchon's novel and to the latter's bleak association of the Moon to the Zero represented by the evil duality Weissmann/Blicero. Besides, Chabon's choice of the epigraph contrasts with the title he has chosen for his novel: *Moonglow*. Even if the Moon is a dark satellite, it can still reflect light and illuminate the shadows existing here, on our dark planet. Besides, the female symbolism of the Moon also offers a reflection on the narrator's role as a seeker of illumination for the dark sides of his grandmother's and mother's lives.

Von Braun's name is explicitly mentioned in the pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* only on a limited number of occasions, and he never plays any role in the narrative. However, some critics have reasonably argued that in Pynchon's story the German engineer became grotesquely impersonated by the two-sided entity played by Major Weissmann/Captain Blicero. These scientific and soldierly embodiments of the white patriarchal Zero are described as obsessed servants of the rocket, lured by its capacity to destroy the world, thus pointing to the hypocritical character of von Braun's epigraph (see Cohen 24; Weisenburger *Companion* 374; Friedman and Puetz 347–48). In 2016, Chabon chose to represent von Braun's presence more visibly than Pynchon did. Accordingly, he makes his alleged grandfather meet the man himself in the 1970s, but previously he also draws several coincidences between his grandfather and Pynchon's protagonist Tyrone Slothrop, while explicitly pointing to the older writer's influence on his novel.

In search of von Braun's rocket: in the zone

Together with the Moon, the traumatic roles assigned to female characters, and the inclusion of von Braun's alleged epigraph, Chabon uses other strategies to link his novel to Pynchon's masterpiece, being striking the similarities that exist between Mike's grandfather and Pynchon's protagonist Lt. Slothrop. The grandfather's early obsession with rockets and his qualifications as an engineer eventually take him to design rocket models as a source of income. However, before he becomes a rocket designer, when the invasion of Italy is still underway, he is assigned with the rank of lieutenant to the new "T-Force," whose main objective is to find and capture "German scientists, engineers and technology" (MG 177). Subsequently, in a mission remarkably similar to Slothrop's adventures in the zone, he travels to Germany with his buddy Lt. Aughenbaugh (who also resembles Slothrop's friend Tantity, see MG 119–20). There, he visits strategic sites of the German rocket program, including Peenemunde and Nordhausen (130–31), till he captures an actual V-2 together with one of von Braun's assistants. During his mission, he also unburies a large number of documents about the rocket which the Americans take home to start their own rocket project (267). Furthermore, actual historical names and situations build up a robust set of intertextual references. Thus, Mike explains that the Enzian (the name of one main character in Pynchon's novel) "later would turn out to have been code-named" (MG 145). He also provides an allusion that connects the rocket to the German film *Frau im Mond* – as Pynchon already did – directed by Fritz Lang in 1929 (154), or writes some pages to explain the actual characteristics of the V-2, the first missile which could travel faster than sound (161–65). Another powerful strategy Chabon offers his readers to link Pynchon's to his novel is the explicit reference to the historical event of the

destruction of the Rex Theater in Antwerp on 16 December 1944, which was caused by the impact of a V-2. Several hundred people died (half of them Allied soldiers), and eleven buildings were destroyed by the rocket. The actual event, metafictionally echoed in the first and the last pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, is explicitly mentioned in Chabon's novel: "on December 16, to take the worst example, a V-2 had fallen on the Rex Theater in the middle of a showing of *The Plainsman*, killing or injuring nearly a thousand people" (*MG* 166; see [Herman & Weisenburger](#) 218).

Nonetheless, Chabon's intertextual homage to Pynchon's story of the rocket becomes much more explicit in his presentation of Mike's grandfather's attempt to deal with the historical figure that haunted Pynchon's novel, Wernher von Braun. As already mentioned, although in *Gravity's Rainbow* von Braun becomes grotesquely embodied in the double personage Weissmann/Blicero, he does not intervene as a visible character in the story. However, in Chabon's narrative, the German engineer becomes the actual embodiment of the remains of Nazism. Possibly, each writer used the figure of the German engineer in different ways because the father of the American and the Nazi space and rocket projects was still alive when Pynchon's novel was released in 1973, but he had been dead for almost 40 years when Chabon published *Moonglow*. In 2016, von Braun's reputation for being the rocket driving force had already been impaired if not forgotten by many people. Accordingly, Chabon conjures Pynchon's specter of Nazism by making von Braun be, first of all, an obsessive figure for Mike's grandfather and then an actual character whom he actually meets years after the war has ended.

As the story unfolds, echoing the alleged shifting views of the American people, the grandfather shows contradictory feelings about the former Nazi SS-Sturmabführer. Thus, uncertainty extends its grips on Chabon's narrative as von Braun's questionable ethics becomes one of the most reiterative topics in the grandfather's conversations with the narrator. His opinions about the German engineer shift several times as the story progresses; his love for the space project and the Moon (and symbolically for his wife) become increasingly counteracted by his findings of von Braun's ethical stand. The first time the grandfather's disdain for the German is explicitly pointed out happens at the extradiegetic level, in one of the footnotes provided by Mike. There, he informs readers of the performative and sarcastic ethos of his relative's disdain for the German engineer: "My grandfather always made a show of his disdain for von Braun, said to have been one of the models for Southern and Kubrick's crypto-Nazi Dr. Strangelove. When he mentioned von Braun's name or quoted something von Braun was reported in the papers to have said, he would lay on a comedy German accent" (*MG* 49).

In the report of the grandfather's quest in Germany, readers are also informed that he makes his primary mission to capture von Braun. However, his important objective eventually collides with his wish to see the rocket: "My grandfather had never wanted anything more than he wanted to be the man who brought in this Wernher von Braun. Or may be at that point – he told me – what he wanted more than anything was to see one of von Braun's rockets" (*MG* 131–32). For many ethically ambiguous pages, his worship of the rocket brings Mike's grandfather dangerously close to Pynchon's Nazi characters and their phallogocentric project of destruction in *Gravity's Rainbow*. By extension, his positive reaction to the rocket also echoes the positive American response to von Braun's work. "The rocket was beautiful," Mike reports from one of the conversations with his grandfather. Resounding with Pynchonian connotations, his words show the powerful attraction the rocket exerts on him: "In conception it had been shaped by an artist to break a chain that had bound the human race ever since we first gained consciousness of earth's gravity and all its analogs in suffering, failure, and pain. It was at once a prayer sent heavenward and the answer to that prayer: Bear me away from this awful place" (*MG* 166). For many pages, the grandfather's emotions regarding the German engineer remain unresolved: "My grandfather felt sorry for Wernher von Braun, whom he could not help envisioning as shy, professorial, wearing a cardigan. His pity for and anger on behalf of the imaginary von Braun tapped the reservoir of his sorrow over the loss of [his friend] Aughenbaugh" (166).

Chabon resorts to other strategies to suggest that the grandfather's shifting or even condoning reactions to von Braun's behavior could be extrapolated to the whole American imaginary, thus enhancing the importance of postmodern uncertainty. Accordingly, he reports that his grandfather read by chance an original article published by Daniel Lang in *The New Yorker* (April 21, 1951), in which the author summarized the first years of von Braun's work in the U.S. Army's guided missile program. Charmed by the German engineer, Lang saw no sense in blaming von Braun for anything he did in the past and referred to "the mechanized slave pit Nordhausen where the V-2 rockets had been assembled as a 'production plant' staffed by Russian POWs" (MG 215). Later in the narrative, Mike reports that, according to his grandfather's memories, he was becoming friendly again to the figure of von Braun by the time he approached Nordhausen and could not wait to show "his new friend Wernher von Braun" the motorbike he was riding to get there (238). However, a few pages later Mike's report takes a sharp turn when he *imagines* his grandfather's emotions at the moment of entering the Dora-Mittelbau Camp, which "may have brought him to the point of tears or nausea." It is at this moment that Chabon's approach leans definitely on one of two choices that might categorically resolve the either/or quality of von Braun's actions. Pynchonian echoes add again to the defeat of postmodernist anti-categorical indeterminacy:

What he saw that day, and what he heard from the survivors he questioned, persuaded him that *there was no way* Wernher von Braun could have been technical director of the V-2 program while remaining unaware of how business was conducted in the Mittelwerk. Von Braun *could not* be crowned with the glory of the rocket without shouldering the burden of its shame. All the suffering my grandfather saw had been amassed and all the cruelty deployed at the prompting and in the service of von Braun's dream. (254; emphasis added)

Furthermore, a footnote on the same page provides readers with a bibliographical reference about von Braun's necessary cooperation in the crimes committed by the Nazis as well as the complicity of the American Government to hide his criminal record. That day Mike's grandfather "gave up the dream he had shared with the Wernher von Braun of his imaginings" and wished to find and kill him. However, he will never reach his aim because he decides to abandon the pursuit of the historical figure to find and secure, instead, a large number of documents about the V-2, which historically gave the Americans an essential advantage in the postwar weapon race and space programs (MG 270–71). In one of his conversations with Mike, the grandfather also remembers another "midnight conversation with the rector of Our Lady of the Moon," thus anticipating that in the future his anger against the German engineer will be conjured by the love for his wife, epitomized in his projected lunar residence.

Close to the end of the book, Episode XXXIII represents Mike's final act of reconciliation with his family's past while escaping again from postmodernist uncertainty. Following the mourning period for his wife, the grandfather attends a space congress where the guest speaker is none other than von Braun. The event allows the protagonist to face, and thus conjure, the incarnated evil once and for all. At the scene of their encounter, the writer does not allow the embodiment of Nazism to show any dignity whatsoever. On the contrary, the meeting between the grandfather and von Braun becomes an intertextual response to the German engineer's epigraph at the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*: if all that nature knows is transformation, it has undoubtedly transformed von Braun into a pathetic old man with prosthetic problems. Unaware that the grandfather is in the same room, von Braun "moved towards [a tall ficus] with a hitch in his gait. He unzipped the fly of his brown suit and took out his pallid old nozzle. [...] Von Braun groaned and cursed softly to himself in the most scabrous German my grandfather had heard since the war" (MG 397). Being also an old man at the time, the grandfather initially seems to feel pity for the German engineer, and he starts a conversation with this symbol of the Nazi past. He even finds in von Braun the curiosity of a dreamer like himself (401) and talks to him about his model for the lunar base. However, there is no pity in the narrator's supplementary report addressed to the reader that von Braun's Apollo program was finally abandoned and that the German engineer progressively fell into disrepute, nor in the final words that his grandfather addresses to von Braun: "How do you feel about Jews on the Moon? [...] I did a little

consulting work for the state of Israel,' my grandfather lied wildly. 'They're putting a lot of muscle and money and brainpower into a next-level system, Jericho 2. Lunar orbiters and landers. To build a Jewish settlement on the Moon'" (*MG* 403–04). His sarcastic and revengeful joke offers an extra gloss to Blicero's Deathkingdom on the Moon in Pynchon's book. The narrator writes in the last page of the novel that his grandfather never met von Braun again and ends his story with a comment about the idea of immortality enunciated in von Braun's epigraph at the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Thus, *Moonglow* becomes perfectly encapsulated by the spectral remains of Nazism, embodied in the war criminal who also put humankind on the Moon.

Conclusion: The Past, Unreliability, and the Need to Transcend Relativism

Along the years, the cultivated and critical readership of the postmodernist 1970s has given way to the increasing power of the mass media and to an ever-changing and technological educational system that may be turning people into dumb creatures. At the turn of the millennium, to erase reading complexities might be the advisable paths to follow for any writer interested in making their readership grow. On average, the 21st-century (post)human seems to be insufficiently critical, when not a self-amputated amnesiac controlled by the smartphone and other techno-devices, in line with McLuhan's astonishing predictions of the earlier 1960s (61–69). These factors help to understand Chabon's literary choice of going back to (unreliable) realism to represent again the Pynchonian symbol of the rocket and its paradoxical meaning. Symbol of both massive destruction and interplanetary discovery, along the post-war period the rocket became an almost perfect example of transcending any categorical decision about the ethics of its creators. How could they be judged on account of their past if they actively contributed to reaching the new frontier proclaimed by President Kennedy? However, such political obliviousness, seemingly in agreement with the anti-categorical intellectual positions of postmodernism, is dispelled in the two novels approached here. The younger writer has elaborated a powerful even if half-concealed homage to Pynchon's masterpiece and strongly coincides with his predecessor in suggesting that memories, even if inaccurate, exist to help us not to forget that certain things should not happen again. Writing from the perspective of his Jewish-Americanness, Chabon adds to Pynchon's version the intimacy of events that allegedly happened to his own family, even if he also provides metafictional clues to question the accuracy of his "realist" report. In line with contemporary trauma narratives, transgenerational trauma also plays a part in Mike's necessity to unveil the buried truths of his grandparents' and mother's past lives.

Formally, both novels depart in the quality of their respective narrative voices. Pynchon's narrator is a friendly heterodiegetic and omniscient voice that sometimes addresses the narratee directly, often eroding the credibility of his report and fitting in Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction. Chabon's alleged persona as the narrator of *Moonglow* is halfway between his inventiveness and his realist presentation of the events in the story. He is an interviewer but also a biased processor of information, in between the credible and the metafictionally erosive. He has assimilated the teachings of Pynchon's generation and is aware that the ultimate historical truth is unreachable, but it does not stop him from telling his own, self-professed unreliable truths, in this way also providing his report with the status of historiographic metafiction. Although their styles set the two writers apart, both *Moonglow* and *Gravity's Rainbow* share the characteristics of self-consciousness and an apparent need to question their own credibility together with their necessity to counteract collective amnesia. In other words, both invite their readers not to forget the existing links between von Braun's American space program and the Nazi V-2 rocket. In his new version of the rocket narrative, Chabon has maintained from Pynchon's novel the paradoxical notion that even if we proclaim the necessity to fight categorical thinking, we should not fall in the traps of relativism and refrain from taking a final decision. The necessity to make a choice when dealing with the ethics of the rocket becomes manifested in the number of coincidences between both stories, but also in the glossed quality of Chabon's novel with regards to Pynchon's narrative and its symbolism. His visible incarnation in *Moonglow* parodically contests von Braun's

spectral presence in the older novel. There is also a shift in the centralization of the male rocket project in *Gravity's Rainbow* towards the female Moon in Chabon's book, as well as from the sterile Deathkingdom imagined by von Braun's surrogate Captain Blicero to the lunar family base modelled by Mike's grandfather. Chabon's resulting narrative is also informed by other textual, explicit and implicit, "memories" of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* in his narrator's presentation of several coincidences between the role his grandfather plays in his own story and the role played by Slothrop in Pynchon's masterpiece. Allegedly, the latter had been conditioned by plastic Imipolex to react to the places where V-2s would fall, a condition that eventually turns him into a fantastic being who becomes scattered in a multiplicity of "personae of their own" (GR 742). As Slothrop did, Chabon's narrator also tracks down the shadowy effects of von Braun's work. However, despite the unreliable condition of his realist narrative, his grandfather does not dissolve along his quest in the Zone. Chabon's narrative finally escapes from Bauman's well-known notion of "liquid modernity" (178–79), reflected in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's understanding of "individualization" as a "non-linear, openended, highly ambivalent, ongoing process" (xxiii). The grandfather's former uncertainty and insecurity develop into assertiveness, as he finally chooses to condemn von Braun morally. Thus, Chabon recuperates the notion of the rational individual who is not stuck in the anti-categorical impossibility of having to make a choice. In his final moral stand against the German engineer, Mike's grandfather escapes from Slothrop's path of dissolution, which evoked the end of the humanist individual in postmodernist times (Muste 176). In his own right, Chabon's protagonist offers readers an explicit invitation to advance from the post-modern condition and evaluate, via his story of emotional and personal intensity, von Braun's evil role in the construction of the killing rocket even if it later evolves into the spaceship. In Chabon's narrative, the symbolic Moon becomes an impassioned objective not only because it responds intertextually to Pynchon's warning of the Deathkingdom but also because the grandfather's love for his wife becomes a catalyst for his acceptance and interest in the space program.

Above all, despite their different styles and contradictory responses to the notion of a centralized rational subject, in neither of the two narratives von Braun's historical figure is pardoned. If Pynchon drew in the early 1970s a grotesque portrait of the renowned engineer by using as his surrogates the evil characters of Weissmann and Blicero (*whiteman* and *bleach*), Chabon does not allow any anti-categorical drive to impede his political choice either. When Mike's grandfather finally meets him, von Braun is portrayed as a pathetic old man – stylistically nor far from his grotesque Pynchonian portrait – and, above all, as somebody conspicuously dressed in a brown suit who after so many years is still an anti-Semitic Nazi.

Thus, both writers agree in warning their readers that human memories are, have been, and probably will always be unreliable. However, even if they are unreliable and add to the postmodern sense of uncertainty, there are always ethical choices and decisions need to be taken. The continuous process of eroding traditional ethics to end up in a state of socio-political indeterminacy and cultural relativism became a critical issue in the development of the postmodern condition. Nevertheless, such condition cannot be considered any longer an acceptable reason to erase from the historical records past crimes and ignore that some important collective events, such as the American space program, are not built on solid ethical foundations.

Notes

1. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5* offers an example to the point. He wrote a story based on his own experiences in the European front, as a POW of the Germans in the city of Dresden. However, his memories were also impaired by the personal trauma caused by the tragic events Vonnegut reports in the novel, which in turn generated the strong metafictional approach of the book (see Cacicedo; Veas-Gulani). Historiographic metafiction also qualified strongly experimental narratives that frequently drew grotesque portraits of their historical or invented characters, such as Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), or Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977).
2. In cases such as Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-5* or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the inaccuracy in the report is already a given. A certain degree of self-induced amnesia is recognizable in the metafictional tricks of this type

of fiction that aims at showing an apparent level of accuracy to report on the past while also disclosing its actual incapacity to reach such level (Hutcheon 58–59, 92, 128–29). The narrator’s awareness of his or her incapacity to remember the past in accurate terms both strengthens the subjectivity of the report while paradoxically makes it more trustable for the critical reader; the narrative voice that demotes itself of any appearance of objectivity stands emotionally closer to the understanding of our limitations. In other words, self-conscious fiction helps us to fight the current binary traps imposed by our unavoidable use of categorical language. If the critical self cannot avoid using language to communicate, at least it can question the structure and assertive descriptions of reality produced in and by categorical language.

3. Compare to Caruth’s classic definition of trauma symptoms, 151–57.
4. The notions of “postmemory” and “prosthetic memory” could be relevant for the analysis of Chabon’s novel from the framework of Trauma Studies. See Hirsch 103–07 and Landsbergh 175–77.

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