

James Bond and *Gravity's Rainbow*: A Possible Connection

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Pinpointing the origins of ideas in a writer's work is an often difficult task with not always relevant results. Nevertheless, much excellent scholarship has been devoted to discovering and explicating possible sources for motifs and episodes in Pynchon's work. Pynchon himself, in both his fiction and the few published remarks he has made about his own work, has indicated some of the most important influences on him, some serious, others pop cultural. In the introduction to *Slow Learner*, for example, Pynchon admits he "had grown up reading a lot of spy fiction, novels of intrigue."¹ And in apologizing for the "racist, sexist, and proto-Fascist talk" in "Lowlands," he explains, "The best I can say for it now is that, for its time, it is probably authentic enough. John Kennedy's role model James Bond was about to make his name by kicking third-world people around, another extension of the boy's adventure tales a lot of us grew up reading" (11).² Pynchon's familiarity with Ian Fleming's James Bond novels may account for how a specific idea in one of them, *Moonraker*, found its way also into *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Moonraker (1955), the third James Bond novel, anticipated the soon-to-be initiated space race and the cold war deterrence theory of mutual assured destruction. Hugo Drax, a supposed amnesiac found in a British uniform during the Battle of the Bulge, has become a multimillionaire in the post-War world and has offered his money and services to the British government in order to build the *Moonraker*, an intercontinental ballistic missile. Armed with a nuclear warhead, the *Moonraker* will threaten all European capitals, including Moscow, and so will protect Great Britain from a first strike. James Bond discovers that Drax, in reality a Nazi officer sent behind enemy lines to sow chaos, intends to launch the fully armed *Moonraker* at London. Bond saves the city by resetting the rocket's gyroscope so that the warhead detonates not at Buckingham Palace but in the North Sea, destroying the Soviet submarine on which Drax has escaped.

In addition to some coincidental similarities to *Gravity's Rainbow* (Drax's rocket experts have been recruited from among the Peenemünde scientists and engineers, and his test site, like The White Visitation, is located near the cliffs at Dover), *Moonraker* presents a

piece of information Pynchon also uses: the identifiably unique way individual radio operators send messages. This is the sort of in-the-know tidbit Fleming casually included in his novels to give them a sense of authenticity. In keeping up on the latest developments in the spy business, Bond reads the following report:

The almost inevitable manner . . . in which individuality is revealed by minute patterns of behaviour, is demonstrated by the indelible characteristics of the "fist" of each radio operator. This "fist", or manner of tapping out messages, is distinctive and recognizable by those who are practised in receiving messages. It can also be measured by very sensitive mechanisms. To illustrate, in 1943 the United States Radio Intelligence Bureau made use of this fact in tracing an enemy station in Chile operated by "Pedro", a young German. When the Chilean police closed in on the station, "Pedro" escaped. A year later, expert listeners spotted a new illegal transmitter and were able to recognize "Pedro" as the operator. In order to disguise his "fist" he was transmitting left-handed, but the disguise was not effective and he was captured.³

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Schwarzkommando have learned a similar trick. As their convoy moves toward the Lüneburg Heath, Enzian replaces the scheduled radio operator:

. . . you there Vlasta, take the next radio watch, forget what it says on the list, there's never been any more than routine traffic logged with Hamburg and I wanna know why, wanna know what *does* come through when Ombindi's people are on watch . . . communication on the trek command frequency is by CW dots and dashes--no voices to betray. But operators swear they can tell the individual sending-hands. Vlasta is one of his best operators, and she can do good hand-imitations of most of Ombindi's people. Been practicing up, just in case.⁴

To reconstruct Pynchon's reading before and during the writing of *Gravity's Rainbow*, even with the unlikely help of the author, would be impossible. However, given his tendency to draw information from a wide variety of sources, it seems possible that Pynchon read *Moonraker* and consciously or unconsciously stored up this idea for later use.

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Notes

¹ *Slow Learner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984) 18. Steven Weisenburger's analysis of Pynchon's 1959 application for a Ford Foundation grant confirms that the models for Pynchon's early stories were adventure and war stories ("Thomas Pynchon at Twenty-Two: A Recovered Autobiographical Sketch," *American Literature* 62.4 [1990]: 692-97).

² Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds suggests that Pynchon extends this critique of James Bond in *Vineland's* Brock Vond ("History, Narrative, and Narrating History: Pynchon's *Vineland*," presented at the Modern Language Association Convention, Chicago, 28 Dec. 1990).

³ Ian Fleming, *Moonraker* (1955; New York: Charter, 1987) 10-11.

⁴ *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973; Penguin, 1987) 732-33.