

Coincidental and Contrived Dates
in Gravity's Rainbow

William E. McCarron

Gravity's Rainbow gives some prominence to the year of Pynchon's birth, 1937. Pöckler reminisces about the building of "Pennemünde in 1937" (Viking, 404), and a "'37 Ford" is mentioned three times (644-45). We may recall that V. was published in 1963, The Crying of Lot 49 in 1966, and Gravity's Rainbow in 1973; the separation between first and second novels is three years, between second and third novels seven years. Pynchon is equally adept with his birth year's obverse, the number 73. It marks the publication year as well as the number of "chapters" (or film clips) in Gravity's Rainbow. Pynchon's birthday, May 8, also comes in for coincidental play. For example, V-E Day, marking the surrender of Germany, was May 8, 1945, Pynchon's eighth birthday. In addition, Pynchon's birthday is the birthday "of that President Truman" (382), whom Slothrop hopes to catch a glimpse of at Potsdam.

If we trace further the eighth day of months in Gravity's Rainbow, we find even more coincidences. The first V-2 rocket to hit London did so on September 8, 1944--the same day the real Duncan Sandys proclaimed in the London press that the German rocket blitz was at an end.¹ Toward the end of Gravity's Rainbow, the reader can begin to gauge Pynchon's time scheme because of references to the atomic bombs which hastened V-J Day. Bomb number two was dropped on Nagasaki on August 8, 1945 (the eighth month of the year).

Along the same line, Pynchon's penchant for his date of birth might help explain the nagging anachronism of Blodgett Waxwing's having "seen The Return of Jack Slade twenty-seven times" (247). Could it be that Pynchon is poking fun at us by a deliberately contrived reversal of the number "10" (3+7 or 7+3)? The movie, as we know, came out in 1955, but, then again, with Pynchon's love of 73 and its reversal, one would expect that Waxwing, the aficionado of western movies, would

have seen Slade thirty-seven times. If we back up ten years, then, of course, Slade "would" have been made in 1945.

--USAF Academy

Notes

¹ R. V. Jones, Most Secret War: British Scientific Intelligence 1939-1945 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 578.