

A Long View of V 2

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In tracking down references to the V-2 rocket in the London Times for the period corresponding with the first book of Gravity's Rainbow, I came across a number of interesting items, such as: the official appearance of Duncan Sandys at the opening of a flying bomb exhibition (Nov. 1, p. 2, col. 2); a condensed version of an announcement from the German High Command which was the first public mention of the V-2 rockets, citing rocket strikes in London, the British Government's silence about this new weapon, the destruction of the Euston Station, and "extremely heavy damage to blocks of houses and traffic installations [in the London district]" (Nov. 9, p. 4, col. 4)--this last echoes the opening nightmare of GR (pp. 3-4); the transcript of Churchill's speech before Parliament concerning the rocket attack on Britain, in which we read the statement that the rocket "outstrips sound" (Nov. 11, p. 2, col. 1); a report of a rocket falling back on its launch site (Nov. 29, p. 2, col. 4); numerous reports of the English Spitfires which attacked the launch sites--"Spitfires come roaring in low over the dark sea at supertime" (GR, p. 96); and finally, a technical article on the rocket's operation (Dec. 9, p. 2, col. 3 and p. 10, an illustration). For propaganda purposes the Times downplayed the rocket attacks and rarely gave specific details concerning a strike. Therefore, it is debatable as to how much Pynchon may have used the Times as a source since more complete accounts of the period were available at the time Pynchon was writing.¹

But the most interesting item from the Times, in terms of the text of Gravity's Rainbow, was a letter to the editor (Dec. 12, p. 5, col. 7), which I will quote in full, side-by-side with corresponding passages from the first chapter of Gravity's Rainbow.

A LONG VIEW OF V 2
TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES
Sir--Recently an occasion of extraordinary clarity in the much abused Lon-

The sun is still below the horizon. The day feels like rain, but for now the air is uncommonly clear. [...]

don atmosphere permitted the view of a V2 rocket being fired from its distant base on the far side of the North Sea. Before dawn on that morning I chanced to glance eastward from a small London window and was astonished to see, through a gap between the surrounding buildings, the bright trace of a rocket against a still dusky sky. I had previously seen Press photographs of such trails taken from a point nearer their source, and I readily recognized what I was seeing. A visual range of 200 miles or more may seem surprising, but although London was hidden from the direct rays of the sun, this would not apply to a rocket ascending from a point nearer the sunrise. I will not detail the other observations I made as they would be out of time and place.

Where the rocket went when I lost sight of its trace I cannot tell. But during the following minutes I felt rather like a cricketer deep in the field who sees suddenly a fast ball coming his way and wonders whether he will catch it. With little regret I did not; nor did anyone else.

Yours sincerely,

SCIENTIST

[..] This well-scrubbed day ought to be no worse than any--

Will it? Far to the east, down in the pink sky, something has just sparked, very brightly. [..] The brilliant point has already become a short vertical white line. It must be somewhere out over the North Sea [..].

What is it? Nothing like this ever happens. But Pirate knows it, after all. He has seen it in a film just in the last fortnight ...it's a vapor trail. [..] This is the new, and still Most Secret, German rocket bomb.

[..] the range of these things is supposed to be over 200 miles. You can't see a vapor trail 200 miles, now, can you.

Oh. Oh, yes: around the curve of the Earth, farther east, the sun over there, just risen over in Holland, is striking the rocket's exhaust, drops and crystals, making them blaze clear across the sea....

The white line, abruptly, has stopped its climb. [..]

[..] Already the rocket, gone pure ballistic, has risen higher. But invisible now. [..]

What if it should hit exactly--ahh, no--for a split second you'd have to feel the very point, with

the terrible mass above,
 strike the top of the
 skull.... (GR, pp. 6-7;
 bracketed ellipses mine)

Pynchon, of course, expands upon this scene, but the remarkable resemblance between the two passages, plus the correspondence between the probable date of SCIENTIST's sighting and the late November-early December opening of the novel, is an uncanny coincidence. Furthermore, if Pynchon had seen this letter during his research, he would surely have been intrigued by the enigmatic author--"SCIENTIST"--and the ambiguous last line, which could imply that this rocket is still up there: "Screaming holds across the sky" (GR, p. 4).

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Note

¹ As noted in Javid Qazi's "Source Materials for Thomas Pynchon's Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography" (PN 2, pp. 11, 14), Basil Collier's The Battle of the V-Weapons and Kooy and Uytenbogaart's Ballistics of the Future are essential works on the operational end of the V-2 program, and they contain more details than the London Times of the period.