

Notes

CALL FOR PAPERS: "Deconstructing Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow," a proposed Special Session of the 1983 MLA Convention in New York.

It has been ten years since the publication of Gravity's Rainbow, and the critical responses to Pynchon's novel have been extensive in both number and variety of approach. Nevertheless, Gravity's Rainbow was being written at the same time "deconstruction" was becoming the critical approach used by post-modernists to write and read the novels of the seventies and eighties. In many respects, Pynchon's novel can be read as deconstructing both history's version of World War II and the "war novel's" aesthetic of romantic glory or naturalistic gore. The time has come when we must turn a deconstructive lens of critical inquiry onto Gravity's Rainbow and thus uncover the various deconstructive narratives given play within the zone of the text.

Papers for this proposed special session should focus on the question of Pynchon and deconstruction from the standpoint of either applying deconstruction to the reading of Gravity's Rainbow, or reading the deconstructive narratives within the text, or arguing for or against the validity of deconstructing Gravity's Rainbow.

Please send 8-page papers or detailed proposals to: Bernard Duyfhuizen, Department of English, University of Tulsa, 600 S. College Avenue, Tulsa, OK 74104. Deadline: March 25, 1983.

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[Brigadier Ernest Pudding] was pensioned off around the beginning of the Great Depression-- went to sit in the study of an empty house in Devon, surrounded by photos of old comrades, none of whose gazes quite met one's own, there to go at a spot of combinatorial analysis, that favorite pastime of retired Army officers, with a rattling intense devotion. (GR, 77)

Jonathan Grudin suggests that a possible source for the character presented here is Major Percy Alexander MacMahon (1854-1929), about ten years Pudding's senior but certainly not around for WWII and "The White Visitation." Born in Malta, educated at the Royal Military Academy, MacMahon served in India before returning to Britain to teach mathematics and physics. He retired from the army in 1898 to devote himself to mathematical and scientific pursuits--"a good soldier spoiled," commented military friends. His influential work, Combinatory Analysis, was published in 1915-16, and is still considered "the most ambitious treatise on the subject." Combinatorial analysis, the study of how groups of objects may be permuted under various conditions, has drawn new interest with the advent of the computer, and MacMahon's work was recently republished. Combinatorial analysis has contributed to the development of group theory and quantum mechanics, and it seems likely that Pynchon encountered MacMahon through mathematical rather than historical research.

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Ever since the publication of Gravity's Rainbow, one rumor has held that the epigraph to Part 4, "The Counterforce," which now reads "What?--Richard M. Nixon," had been entirely different in the galleys, being instead a passage from song lyrics by Joni Mitchell. At the request of the editors, Clifford Mead has recently tracked down a copy of the galleys, and found the epigraph to Part 4 there to be:

She has brought them to her senses  
 They have laughed inside her laughter  
 Now she rallies her defences  
 For she fears that one will ask her  
 For eternity  
 And she's so busy being free

--Joni Mitchell

The lines are from the fourth verse of "Cactus Tree," on Joni Mitchell (Reprise, RS6293), 1968.