

Rooney and the Rocketman

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One of the many memorable though puzzling moments in *Gravity's Rainbow* occurs while Slothrop, in the guise of "Rocketman," is retrieving a package of hashish from the site of the 1945 Potsdam summit conference. Looking up, Slothrop/Rocketman freezes as he recognizes, the narrator comments, "well, this may sound odd, but it's Mickey Rooney." As Slothrop recovers his prize and takes off, Rooney--who "will repress the fact that he ever saw Slothrop"--is left behind, "with his elbows on that railing, still watching" (382). This fictional encounter raises two questions: what significance, if any, are we to attach to it, and what inspired Pynchon to use Mickey Rooney, of all people? The answers to these questions turn out to be interrelated, and so they provide yet another example of how Pynchon manipulates historical "reality" and American mythologies within the fictional worlds he creates.

One simple reason for the choice of Mickey Rooney is his star status. Though it may be difficult to imagine today, at one time Rooney and Shirley Temple (who is also evoked in *Gravity's Rainbow*) were the top Hollywood box office draws. Rooney's popularity was based mostly on his role in a series of films as Andy Hardy, "Judge Hardy's freckled madcap son" (382), as the narrator describes him. Andy Hardy is the archetypal teenager of suburban America: mischievous but good-hearted, always fiddling with his jalopy, making up excuses to avoid chores, and creating schemes to get a date with the girl next door, who often turns out to be Judy Garland or Lana Turner. Thus Andy Hardy evokes a certain kind of innocence that died--*had* to die--with the war. Not for the next decade could American teenagers be portrayed in movies with the same kind of naivete. Moreover, Rooney's encounter with Rocketman occurs at a cusp in his own career. Drafted in 1944 and discharged in 1946, Rooney never regained the star status he had previously enjoyed. His age was beginning to show, and his career began to decline, abetted by alcohol and marked by a long series of failed marriages. Slothrop, however, conditioned as he is by the movies, sees only the innocence, and Pynchon's Rooney, unprepared as he is to admit the unreal, will forever repress his vision of the would-be superhero.

This fictional meeting can be read symbolically, but the question remains: *Why* Mickey Rooney and not some other star or celebrity? Pynchon's choice of Mickey Rooney as the one to see Slothrop/Rocketman seems to stem from two possible sources. The first is the matter of historical plausibility. It is possible Rooney was in Berlin, if not Potsdam itself, at the time of the conference. He served in an Army entertainment unit known as the "Jeep Theater" which (like Greta and Thanatz) toured Germany and other parts of Europe putting on shows for the troops. Rooney was with the unit in the summer of 1945, not having secured leave to visit his wife and first son, who was born in July. Pynchon may have known enough details of Rooney's career to know he was near Berlin at that time. In his recent autobiography, *Life is Too Short*, Rooney remembers "doing one big show near Berlin, one that President Truman was going to attend. He didn't show up, we were told, because he was busy conferring with Joe Stalin and Winston Churchill in a Berlin suburb called Potsdam" (329). If Pynchon knew about this show, it would have been a small matter to shift Rooney a few miles to Potsdam itself. Still, one other factor renders the question of plausibility moot.

Steven Weisenburger has revealed that there actually *was* a Rocketman: "Rocketman was originally the creation of Ajax Comics in the early forties. In 1952 Ajax/Farrell Comics published a single *Rocketman* issue (all devoted to his adventures), now a rarity" (*A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* 179). But Weisenburger does not give the full or correct details of Rocketman's beginnings. Rocketman first appeared, along with Rocketgirl, in issue number 1 of *Scoop Comics*, published by Harry "A" Chesler. The flying couple were merely featured performers in *Scoop*, and the comic itself lasted for just eight issues. In 1943, the characters of Rocketman and Rocketgirl were apparently sold to Harvey Publications, which featured them in the first issue of *Hello, Pal Comics*. *Hello, Pal* lasted for only three issues, but Robert M. Overstreet notes that the magazine was unusual because it featured a movie star on the cover of each issue. On the cover of issue number 1 was--you guessed it--Mickey Rooney (*The Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide, 1988-1989* A-44). Thus Potsdam was not the first place Rocketman and Mickey Rooney were in proximity.

These two sources therefore provide yet another illustration of the ways Pynchon historicizes myth and mythologizes history. The "real" Mickey Rooney *might* have been at Potsdam; the fictional Rocketman appeared in the same comic book with Mickey Rooney. Which version--if either--is Pynchon's true source hardly matters, for in context this incident in *Gravity's Rainbow* presents another variation

on Pynchon's recurrent theme of election and preterition. Rooney appears to Slothrop as a vision and member of the Elect, though his position would soon slip. In a poignant reflection on having been passed over for a meeting with the President, Rooney tells how he took solace in having performed for General George C. Marshall, who told him to "Keep it up":

No sweat, General, I said to myself. I assured myself I'd never have trouble keeping it up. I think that's what the general (and my fans) have liked about me: I was always up, always brimming with a lust for life. (That's an unreal expectation, of course. I'd soon make that discovery myself: that no one can be up all the time. And, even though that is what my fans would keep expecting, I'd make myself crazy trying.) (Life 220)

The words could apply to Pynchon's Rocketman as well. The other Rocketman, a minor hero from two failed lines of comic books, is a Preterite superhero--if there ever was one. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop comes to understand that there is more than one reality in the Zone, and that all the plots he has discovered do not always converge upon himself. The actor Mickey Rooney, the comic book character Rocketman, and Tyrone Slothrop are all separate realities that converge in Pynchon's Zone, drawing us into the text and propelling us out again into life in a constant process.

A note of caution though. The coincidences cited above are compelling, but they are only circumstantial. It is entirely possible Pynchon was unaware of Rooney's service history or of *Scoop* and *Hello, Pal* comics. Rocketman may be an original concept, or he may have been inspired by *Bulletman*, another cone-headed superhero of the 1940s, who appeared in various comic books by Fawcett, publisher of the extremely popular character Captain Marvel. Such possibilities, however, do not negate the relevance of this circumstantial evidence. We do not have to judge the text guilty or innocent on grounds of verisimilitude. Rather, Pynchon challenges us to provide the contexts that will endow the text with significance, and if some contexts are more constrained than others, surely Pynchon would not object to their use as evidence.

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