

The Chronology of Episodes in Gravity's Rainbow

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The differences between narrative "story" and "discourse" are well established. Story, known among Russian formalists as fabula and among French structuralists as histoire, is that sequence of events understood to have occurred diachronically (Todorov, Barthes). The discourse of a narrative, its sjužet or discours, takes that sequence and unfolds it synchronically, for example through the agency of point-of-view and plot. Following Gérard Genette, Christine Brooke-Rose further divides the narrative discourse into the lexical groupings of words as we read them, the "microtext," and the larger episodic groupings of events in a plot, the "macrotext." Reading at the micro level gives access to that figure in the carpet she calls the underlying or base structure, while the macrotext shapes that visual model of a plot, its surface structure (Brooke-Rose, 189-90).

We have had no outline of the surface structure in Gravity's Rainbow. The narrative logic of its division into four parts has not been accounted, nor has the respective distribution of 21, 8, 32, and 12 episodes in those parts. Also, we have simply lacked any model for the order Pynchon gives to his 73 episodes, many of which, as it happens, closely correspond with the historical (diachronic) calendar of a nine month period, from mid-December 1944 until mid-September 1945.

What then are these temporal correspondences in Gravity's Rainbow, and how can we describe them? Genette shows that in narrative discourse the diachronic "story" is coded in two ways: it can be internally or externally determined (140-43). For instance, a phrase like "the next day" is relational only inside the text; thus it constitutes an internal determinant. In contrast, a comment like "It's Boxing Day" (Dec. 26: GR, 174) relates the narrative to an external calendar. In the table that follows, these two determinations in Gravity's Rainbow are designated "ID" and "ED" respectively. Episodes featuring a significant analepsis or prolepsis are designated "A" or "P" respectively.

There is one more category of temporal references, beyond the scope of this paper but much in need of further study. It includes all those indistinct references--like "Once," or "One morning"--which mark segments of narrative cut free of any other temporal connection. In the table, episodes wholly given over to such an indistinct chronology are signified by an "I." A pertinent example in Gravity's Rainbow is Episode 16 in Part 1, the "Night's Mad Carnival" (133) episode with Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake. Pynchon shifts the focalization between these two characters (but mostly focalizes through Roger), as he builds around them a set of reminiscences (for they are narrated as analepses) which we must finally read as without date and perhaps even age: the moments are an achrony. Like the room in which Roger and Jessica tryst, these moments stand against that routinized, accelerated time of the War's spinning clocks. Throughout the novel such moments are linked by shared memories, collective nightmare, or parodied myth; and they compose a sizeable amount of the narration. Their meaning in relation to Pynchon's satire of Romantic ontology, with its doctrine of the frozen moment, needs to be clarified.

Readers find other cruxes with the chronological references in Gravity's Rainbow. There is a familiar range of internal references in the text, for example; but any reader will have wanted more of them, and the close reader will have spotted problems in following them. Try, for instance, sorting through all of "The next day" and "That night" references to say when Slothrop arrives at Putzi's, and a near-castration, as Part 3 closes; or try, similarly, to determine from internal and external references the day Slothrop arrives on the Riviera. There are also problems with the novel's external determinations. Aside from the odd and obvious anachronism--like "this is 1945" (81) when it is still 1944, or the mention of "this seventh Christmas of the war" (126)--some will have noticed the more subtle anachronisms, like the date of Anton Webern's death (440) or the rise of Argentine descamisados under Perón (263), both of which occur months too early in the narrative chronology. However, more important than these infrequent errors is this: Pynchon's external determinations do sketch a pattern,

a cyclical surface structure which, with few exceptions, is supported by the great range of chronological markers in the novel.

Among the most apparent external determinations of time in the novel are those pertaining either to Christian or Pagan feast days, or to historical moments easily checked. In some cases, the ritual and historical dates even coincide. Ten days stand out: the narrative opens with past tense references to the onset of the Rundstedt Offensive (Dec. 16, 1944) in the Advent season; then come Christmas and Boxing Day, Mid-Winter, the Spring Equinox (Mar. 21, 1945), Whitsunday (which fell on May 20 in that year); a reference to Walpurgisnacht (April 30) having been nearly a month ago, and a similar past-tense reference to "the Ice-Saints" (May 12, 13, 14) begins Part 3; then come Mid-Summer, Hiroshima and the Transfiguration (which coincided on Aug. 6, 1945), until finally we end the reading in Part 4 in mid-September, on what is probably the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Omitting for a moment the analeptic recall of that cold spring noonday when Rocket 00000 was fired with its sacrificial payload, these ten dates constitute a neatly pegged diachronic movement. One key thing about it: the Christian feast days and the historical dates bracket all four parts of Gravity's Rainbow. And the firing of Rocket 00000, the principal enigma of Pynchon's story, completes this pattern in a stunning way I shall discuss below.

First we should note the range and specificity of other, less apparent, external determinants. For example, Jacob Grimm's Teutonic Mythology supplied Pynchon a variety of direct and oblique references to Norse gods--Tiw, Wuotan, Thor, and Freyr--which appear in the narrative on calendar days named for them. Also, working with Pynchon's periodical source-texts, such as the London Times of 1944-45, it soon becomes evident that among items of historical detail he culled from the sources and transformed into fictional existents were many which support our image of the surface structure. Thus, a reference to "Primo Scala's Accordion Band" playing over a radio fixes the narrative sequence in Part 1, Episode 15, as occurring on Saturday, Dec. 23, 1944, because that is the only time in

December, according to the BBC programming schedules published in the Times, when Mrs. Quoad can have been sitting "by the wireless" and hearing the band (115). Now this sequence, as it happens, sits amidst others which confirm that Pynchon was consulting the Times of Dec. 22, 1944. For interestingly enough, the achronies of Episode 16 are also composed, and thus synchronized, around Dec. 22-23, date of the London Times article from which Pynchon gleaned details about The macaronic caroling that closes the episode with Roger and Jessica. The point, as I see it, is not that the ideal reader is expected to make this determination by unearthing its source. Rather, the considerable evidence of this, and many comparable references, strongly supports the pattern delineated by more apparent dates. Such references (e.g., to weather, phases of the moon, historical events, items taken from closely-dated periodicals)--and they are simply too numerous to list in the table below--are the chronometric trace Pynchon left while researching to fill out the novel's surface structure. They are excellent textual evidence for the reader's emerging model of that structure.

The table gives a working summary of this chronological evidence in Gravity's Rainbow. References are to page/line numbers.

The Chronology of Gravity's Rainbow

EPISODES	DATES	DETERMINATIONS and SOURCES
PART 1		
1 - 5	Probably Mon., Dec. 18, 1944	ID & ED: "This dripping winter noon" (17/9) and other references correspond with information gathered from the London <u>Iimes</u>
6 - 8	Tue., Dec. 19, early a.m.	ID for hours; ED for day: past tense reference to the onset of the Rundstedt Offensive (Dec. 16) at 52/23
9 -11	Wed., Dec. 20, a.m. & after	ID for hours; ED for day: references to Moutan crop up, for instance at 72/27
12	Thu., Dec. 21	ID; ED at several points: "the walls read ice" (72/34) corresponds with weather information for that day; also, the reference to "Bert" or Berchtold (72/23) stems from Grimm (272-82) who associates the god with Thor, and places his festival at the winter solstice
13	Fri., Dec. 22	ED: "The very bottom of the year" (86/39) is the solstice
14	Fri., Dec. 22, afternoon	ID & ED: onomastically, Gottfried (94/26) is associated with Freyr: Friday (Grimm, 212-14) A: to Holland, late-October of 1944 (96/18) A: to Weissmann's tour-of-duty in South West Africa, circa 1922; the "great Herero Rising" (99/38) occurred in that year A: to Frans van der Groov on Mauritius, circa 1670 (see 108/17-18 ff.)

15	Sat., Dec. 23	P: film of Katje being shown to Octopus Grigori (113/31-37) ED: "Primo Scala's Accordion Band" (115/19) played at 10:30 p.m., according to the <u>London Times</u>
16	I	ED: details about macaronic carols were drawn from a <u>Times</u> article of Dec. 22, which listed schedules for caroling planned on the 23rd
17	Sun., Dec. 24	ID
18	I	A: to Berlin, circa 1930
19	I	A: to the day of the "Lübeck raid" (146/27) on Palm Sunday, Mar. 28, 1942
20	Sun., Dec. 24 - Mon., Dec. 25	A: to Berlin, circa 1930
21	Tue., Dec. 26, evening	ID & ED: White Visitation's Christmas Eve party on "this holiest of nights" (167/33); "it's Christmas day" (170/20-21) ID for hours; ED for day: "It's Boxing Day" (174/17-18), the traditional Christmas holiday for Britain's servant class
PART 2		
1 - 2	I	ID: Slothrop arrives in Monaco around Christmas-New Year's, but the text is vague, and elsewhere even contradictory (cf. 143/24 and 256/2-5)
3	I: ranges over some weeks into 1945	ID & ED: "midwinter" (224/25) is Feb. 3
4	I: probably late Feb.	

5	Mar. 20-21	ED: "The great cusp--green equinox and turning, dreaming fishes to young ram" (236/36-37); also, Wernher von Braun "prepares to celebrate his 33rd birthday" on Mar. 23, 1945 (237/2)
6	I: Late-Mar. to mid-Apr.	
7	Apr. 28-29	ED: "Last Tuesday's London Times" (252/14) is that of Apr. 24, 1945; the "April summertime" (253/26) is the traditional end to the tourist season in Monaco, according to Baedeker
8	May 20	ED: "Mr. Pointsman has decided to spend Whitsun by the sea" (269/26)
PART 3		
1	May 20 (approx.)	ED: "We are safely past the days of the Eis-Heiligen" (281/1), the Ice-Saints whose feast days are May 12-14; "a crescent moon has risen" (288/25) corresponds with a waxing crescent moon appearing at this time
2	next day	ID
3	I	[background on Herero culture]
4	May 28	ED: "May Day Eve's come and gone . . . nearly a month" ago (329/13-14); also, details about the Brocken derive from May 28, 1945 <u>Life</u> magazine
5	late-June	ED: "The Zone is in full summer" (336/33)
6	mid-July	A: to the 1920s and Tichitcherine's tour-of-duty in Kirghizia ID: "Last week, in the British sector" of Berlin (359/23), identifies Slothrop as having been there for some days ED: preparations for the Potsdam Conference--July 17-Aug. 2--are under-way (370/5-11)

7	July 18 (approx.)	ED: Slothrop raids the Potsdam Conference area, retrieving buried hashish from "White House" lawn; details Pynchon deploys (e.g., 373/26) are from the July 23, 1945 edition of <u>Time</u> [action aboard <u>Der Aal</u> , the Argentine anarchist U-boat]
8	I	ID
9 - 10	Day after Episode 7	
11	1930s to War Years	A: Franz and Leni Pöckler in pre-Hitler Berlin, until 1945; Franz's memories follow the chronology of Pynchon's principal source, Walter Dornberger's <u>V-2</u>
12 - 15	Late-July	ID: several days pass after Slothrop's Potsdam raid
16 - 19	Late-July	ID: several more days pass as Slothrop and Greta Erdmann leave Berlin, journeying northward aboard the <u>Anubis</u>
20	Mon., July 30, p.m.	EU: "A sharp sickle of a moon has risen" (506/37); the moon entered its last quarter in late-July, and rose at 11-12 p.m. on the 30th
21	I	ID: "Schwarzkommando astride bikes unmuffled go blasting on through tonight" (519/24-25)
22	Tue., July 31	ID: day after Episode 20; Slothrop is directed to Putzi's, in Cuxhaven, and told to arrive in one week (527/3)--he will (see below) ED: the god Svetovid (528/13) is, according to Grimm (201), also the god Tiw (Tuesday)
23	I	ID: "One day [Katje] found the cans of film [at the White Visitation] (533/17) A: "Brigadier Pudding died back in the middle of June" (533/10) A: Part 1, Episode 14

24	I	[a hallucinated journey through "Hell," with Katje and Pirate Prentice]
25 - 27	Aug. 1-2	ID: one day after Episode 22
28	Aug. 2-3	ED: Plechazunga associated with Thor (Grimm, 178); the comment that "There's no moon" (572/30) corresponds with astronomical data--the thinnest sliver of a moon was left, and it did not rise in the sky until after 1 a.m.
29	Aug. 3-4	ID
30	I early-Aug.	A: to 1930s and Lyle Bland's association with the Masons ED: "Harry Truman [. . .] this very August 1945, with his control-finger poised right on Miss Enola Gay's atomic clit" (588/7-9)-- Truman departed Europe Aug. 3 and remained in constant radio contact with the officers who managed the Hiroshima mission
31	Aug. 5, p.m., to Aug. 6, a.m.	ED: "Sandy MacPherson at the Organ" (592/25-26)--BBC schedule in the Times lists him at 10:15 p.m. on Aug. 5; also, the "Small moon [. . .] at its zenith" (608/40) pegs the time at 5-6 a.m. on Aug. 6
32	I	P: to an unspecified date, in London, after the botched castration of Slothrop at Putzi's in Episode
PART 4		
1	shortly after Aug. 6	A: recall of Slothrop's "transfiguration," when he " becomes a cross himself, a living intersection" (625/3-4) on a mountainside
2 - 5	early to mid-Aug.	ID
6	mid-Aug.	ED: Slothrop finds a scrap of newsprint announcing the Hiroshima

7	same	<p>blast of Aug. 6 (693/39-41)</p> <p>ID</p> <p>ED: now in "early Virgo" (712/21), which pegs the time as shortly after Aug. 22; also, "Thermidor" (713/10) has past, meaning it is after Aug. 17</p> <p>A: to Lüneberg in late-Mar., 1945--"it was the equinox" (720/13); it was "only a matter of weeks" until V-E Day (721/21); also, "the latest spring torn across rainy miles" (724/21) identifies the time just before the launch of Rocket 00000 as Mar. 21 to Apr. 1</p> <p>ED: the medicinal herbs mentioned (727/33-34) become ripe and in Sept.</p>
8	late-Aug.	
9	late-Aug. or early-Sept.	<p>ED: "a September morning" (735/30); the "rocket raising" (737) recalls The Exaltation (or Raising) of the Holy Cross</p> <p>A: To spring and the firing of Rocket 00000 (749/15)--that Pöckler had produced "a fairing" for Weissmann and the 00000 "in the spring" (431/21), and that Weissmann had gone, leaving Pöckler to make his own escape during "the first week in April" (432/9), are details that fix the time of this flashback at Easter weekend, 1945, which coincided with April Fool's day</p> <p>P: to Los Angeles, circa 1970 (753)</p>
10 - 11	early-Sept.	
12	mid-Sept., probably Sept. 14, 1945	
Legend of Symbols:		<p>ID = internal determinant(s)</p> <p>ED = external determinant(s)</p> <p>A = analepsis</p> <p>P = prolepsis</p> <p>I = indistinct chronology</p>

This chronology of episodes reveals a carefully drawn circular structure. Gravity's Rainbow is not arch-shaped. Pynchon structured the text as a mandala, its four quadrants defined according to the coincidence of historical moments and key ritual feasts on the Christian liturgical calendar. As Leni Pökler so well describes this kind of structuring to her husband, the movement is "'Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems'" (159).

Part 1 of the narrative begins in Advent and ends on Boxing Day, the day when the British servant classes--the preterite--traditionally celebrate Christmas. Part 2 commences soon afterward, whenever Tyrone Slothrop arrives in Monaco, and it concludes on May 20, 1945, or Whitsunday, a feast celebrating the descent of the Holy Ghost to Christ's disciples, seven weeks after Easter. On this satirically inverted "White-sunday," Pointsman is visited by auditory hallucinations while vacationing at Dover's white cliffs. Part 3 opens with references to obscure saints' days in mid-May, and closes on the morning of August 6, 1945: the Feast of the Transfiguration and the day Hiroshima was obliterated. Part 4 begins with an analeptic recall of Slothrop's transfiguration on a mountainside, when he "becomes a cross himself, a crossroads" (625) and practically disappears from the narrative (just as Christ no longer appeared to the twelve apostles). Gravity's Rainbow ends, then, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14, whose fictional counterpart is the exaltation--the "Rocket Raising"--of V-2 number 00001 by Enzian and his Herero comrades. But this moment opens onto the narrative's most daring representations--the prolepsis to Los Angeles, circa 1970, and the analepsis to the firing of Rocket 00000 from Lüneberg Heath.

What is the date of that firing? All the textual evidence in Gravity's Rainbow, as well as the anticipation set up by Pynchon's use of the liturgical calendar to end all three previous parts, points to Easter, which in 1945 fell on April Fool's.¹ That coincidence had occurred only 43 times since 500 A.D.; it occurred once more in 1956 (the year in which V. is set) but will not grace us again in this century. Thus, Easter fulfills that pattern of religious feasts

bracketing the novel's principal divisions. For the most significant dates on the Christian liturgical calendar are Christmas, Easter, Whitsunday, and The Transfiguration. Pynchon simply reserves the most important one till last. Yet it is equally true that the occurrence of Easter on April 1 completes a thematic preoccupation of the narrative: that the whole enterprise is a poisson d'avril, a red herring, a Fool's Quest. And one can find nothing in the novel to resolve this antinomy.

Everywhere in Gravity's Rainbow the linear, parabolic arch is a symbol of disease, dementia, and destruction. Its counterpart is the circular mandala, symbol of opposites held in delicate equipoise. In the novel, drinking contests and dances move in circles; until their disintegration into a bow-shape, Herero villages were arranged mandala-like on the African veld; and everywhere in the text one finds windmills, buttons, eyes, windows, ferris-and roulette-wheels reminiscent of mandalas. Pynchon's lowly, living, preterite souls come together around such symbols. Psalm 12 claims, In circuitu impii ambient ("the godless wander in a circle"), but Gravity's Rainbow reveals such wandering as a sign of survival and possibly even hope.

Pynchon anticipates this circular surface structure in the opening episode. Watching the first sunlight of morning illuminate a rocket contrail, Pirate Prentice imagines its parabolic trajectory suddenly transformed into a rainbow (6). Given the physics of it--low source of light, high vapor source--this could only yield a perfectly circular rainbow high over the North Sea. For as the narrator reminds us again near the close, like the rocket, a rainbow is not

as we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it "rises from" and the Earth it "strikes" No But Then You Never Really Thought It Was Did You Of Course It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it's only the peak that we are allowed to see. (726)

Put simply, the shape of gravity's rainbow is parabolic; the shape of Gravity's Rainbow is circular.

With this surface structure in mind, a good deal remains to be studied. The numbers of episodes in the novel's four parts were doubtless arranged with certain numerological--chiefly Kabbalistic--motifs in mind, but how they tie in with the broader thematics of Pynchon's narrative is unclear. Still more interesting, the cyclical structure of the narrative seems frequently to repeat itself at the episodic level. Episode 14 of Part 1 is a brilliant instance. It begins with an omniscient view of Katje Borgesius standing at a window, wearing "an old, tarnished silver crown" while posed for Osbie Feel's camera; analepsis, and a shift in focalization to Katje's perspective, take us next to her days with Blicero's rocket battery in Holland; a second analepsis, now through Blicero's focalization, takes us still farther back in time, to South West Africa in the twenties; a third, through the focalization of Pirate Prentice, takes us to the 17th century and Katje's ancestor Franz van der Groov, on Mauritius; finally the episode ends where it began, with what Genette terms a "zero focalization" (the dispersed, omniscient view) and Katje still posed with her hair "secured in a modish upsweep with an old, tarnished silver crown . . ." (113; my emphasis)--only now, rather than being filmed, the finished print of the film is being shown to Octopus Grigori as part of his conditioning. This is the "progressive knotting into" (3) Pynchon anticipates in the novel's opening paragraphs, and it shapes other episodes as well.

Does this "knotting," cycling motion also operate, if only occasionally, in the microtext? Some of Peter Cooper's remarks about style (218-19) suggest that a close examination would show that it does. But studies of the novel should also keep an eye on larger--imagistic, symbolic--patterns. John Muste, for example, has shown the symbolic texture that the mandalas weave through the narrative. And, like many critics, Peter Cooper has also glimpsed (but then as quickly passed over) the image of Gravity's Rainbow as "a gigantic circle" (214), as though it were "the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth" (GR, 412). I suspect Cooper leaves the structuring potential of this image behind because he thinks "the chronology of memories, experiences, and reveries is unimportant" (215).

But again the cautionary note: pursuing this mandala too far is a fool's quest. The obvious anachronies, anachronisms, and internal contradictions all trace Pynchon's other desire--for Disorder, for a withholding of that wholeness too easily achieved had he closed the circle. For there is no "real story," no surely pegged diachronic sequence that will naturalize this narration. The chronology shapes a reading of the narrative, but the narrative is not bound to it. Indeed, the more one considers the details, the more Pynchon's cyclical surface structure stands as the most obsessive of his spoofs on "holy-center approaching," that desire of Western man for a myth of origins, source, and order. We might well read Pynchon's plot as a vast instance of what Molly Hite aptly calls his "trope of the unavailable insight." At stake in the Easter/April Fool's coincidence is an expectation, always deferred, of epiphany. For the characters in Gravity's Rainbow, that deferral or différance is itself an enabling condition for freedom as well as for storytelling. So it should be, also, for the novel's critics.

Gravity's Rainbow turns in a vastly orchestrated tarantella, it is true. The vision of its wheels within wheels within a wheel calls to mind the image of God's throne-chariot in Ezekiel 1, a favorite Puritan image for the Apocalypse and a key, also, to the "throne-mysticism" in Kabbala (see Scholem, Pynchon's source). Still, this vast orchestration occurs in a satire. What the Puritan Saints would have interpreted as a sign of grace--the advent of a son and his greatness in sacrifice--becomes here a mock-hero's calendar, a fool's progress through bloody history and an unholy commonwealth.

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Notes

¹ At least two critics have wrestled with the chronology of the novel's last scenes. In his recent essay, Khachig Tölölyan notes that the firing of Rocket 00000 occurs in April, and certainly before V-E Day (40). Barbara Mooney tries to pin the firing down to May 1, May Day. However, she erroneously assumes that Weissmann-Blicero does not survive after the launch. She also draws on Enzian's claim that the Schwarzkommando "have someone [Thanatz] who

was with Blicero in May. Just before the end" (GR, 663). But "the end" is too unspecific: is it the firing, V-E Day, or even Thanatz's loss of sanity as he fell into the black hole of the DP camps? Also, Thanatz's recollections are, as critics have shown, notoriously fuzzy (see his imagined "windmill" on Lüneberg Heath). In the face of other, more reliable determinations, I see his reported statement to Enzian as another example of characters' exchanging misinformation.

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