

The Pleasures of the Text in the Information Age

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A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel, by Steven Weisenburger. 2nd ed., rev. and exp. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006. 412 pp. \$59.95; pb \$22.95.

Before the 1973 publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, it was already clear from *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* that Pynchon required an unusual range of erudition (or at least the will to such erudition) from his readers. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Jacobean revenge tragedies, the Fashoda crisis, the Herero uprising, bebop jazz, Hanna-Barbera cartoons, Henry Adams and Robert Graves, electrical circuitry, entropy and Maxwell's Demon, philately and postal history—no frame of reference would be out of bounds. With the narrative complexity and sheer length of *Gravity's Rainbow*, those frames of reference proliferated exponentially, yet something larger than allusion alone seemed to be at stake here. Joyce had claimed that the "enigmas and puzzles" of *Ulysses* "would keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant"; but *Gravity's Rainbow*, for all the enigmatic quality of its narrative, is not a puzzle begging a solution. To read the text is not just to be drawn into its carefully detailed Zone of postwar Europe, a concatenation of the grimmest realities and the most outlandish fantasies; the novel's references simultaneously expel us back into the emerging Rocket-City of our own destructive present. Professors or not, we are almost forced to become researchers, veering between the poles of paranoia and anti-paranoia—the twin certainties that everything in both the text and the world is connected and that nothing is connected—looking for, perhaps fearing, confirmation in an image, a context or a quotation.

Thus, fifteen years later, Pynchon's readers—not all of them professors, to be sure—were delighted to see Steven Weisenburger take up the challenge of the book's allusiveness in *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*. Weisenburger glossed terms, unpacked textual and historical sources, and provided synopses of the main events in each of the book's episodes, synopses that are particularly handy for first-time readers. But Weisenburger went even further, noting how the definitions and sources reveal that the

novel's four sections coincide with key events in the Christian liturgical calendar and arguing that the four sections form a mandala symbolic of redeeming wholeness. As Weisenburger put it, while the rainbow of the rocket's path is an arch that ends in destruction, "the shape of *Gravity's Rainbow* is circular." Still, he admitted, "[t]he narrative approaches, but avoids, closure" (GRC 1988, 11), a point seized on by N. Katherine Hayles in her review for *Pynchon Notes* of the *Companion's* first edition. "Given the narrative's frequent spinoffs into other places and times," Hayles argues, *Gravity's Rainbow's* "indistinct mandala . . . is more like a figure that can barely be discerned through extensive smearing and stretching than a sharply drawn structure" (131); however, she concludes, the *Companion* "succeeds even when it fails," being "better at stimulating discussion than foreclosing inquiry" (132).

Inquiry, of course, was not foreclosed. Over the last two decades, readers have advanced new questions, discovered additional sources and proposed explanations for references the *Companion* did not deal with, did not cover fully or got just plain wrong. Here I must confess that I was one of those readers, spurred to delve into the library stacks at first to clear up certain matters, mostly to do with film and popular culture, the results of which research I posted to Steven Weisenburger. Later, I had the chutzpah to put this (and further) information up on a website, *A Companion's Companion: Illustrated Additions and Corrections to Steven Weisenburger's A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* <<http://english2.mnsu.edu/larsson/grnotes.html>>, which in turn prompted readers to contact me with additional corrections, questions, sources and hypotheses. So I admit that I am flattered (for myself and, by extension, for my own contributors as well) to have been cited several times in Weisenburger's long-awaited second edition, revised and expanded, of the *Companion*.

This new edition of the *Companion*, now keyed to the year 2000 Penguin edition of the novel as well as the original Viking and the Bantam, is some seventy pages longer than the original, with additions and corrections that lend greater clarity to the explication of Pynchon's sources and allusions. More source materials are identified, eight pages of maps and illustrations are included, and some of the novel's most perplexing mysteries are solved, among them the reference to the Kenosha Kid and the source of the epigraph from Wernher von Braun for part 1. Although Weisenburger finds even more reason to trust his previous argument for *Gravity's Rainbow's* circular design, he has also taken account of the criticisms raised by Bernard Duyfhuizen and others regarding specific time references in the novel that turn out to be "loose and much more impressionistic than one might expect from the

narrative's concision elsewhere"—appropriate, he admits, to "a fiction that so accents fantasy and dreamscapes, as well as historical events shrouded and nimbused by uncertainty, haunted by ghosts" (GRC 2006, 12). Hayles's claim that the first edition was "a book that no serious Pynchon scholar can afford to neglect" (129) holds even truer for this edition—and holds true, I would argue, for any reader who wants to plumb the novel's depths.

And yet . . . The appearance of this new edition in the year 2006 poses two sets of issues, one practical and one more theoretical. First, despite Weisenburger's and his contributors' careful attention to detail, we all (myself included) managed to miss certain errors of fact in the first edition that persist into the second. For example, *Rigoletto* and *La Boheme* are both termed "comic" operas; the first name of César Flebotomo is traced to a nonexistent origin as "the Etruscan/Latin title for a dictator"; "Electric Charlie" Wilson, President of General Electric during the 1940s and a U.S. government official, is confused with Charles Coffin, GE's founder; and the reference to "Dr. Stanley Livingstone" still stands, as does that to Thor's hammer as "Mullicrusher." An overreliance on Baedeker for place references misses Zurich's Gemusebrucke ("Gemüse-Brücke" in the novel), aka Rathausbrücke, in the city's market district; the town of Wismar is still placed fifteen miles southeast of Rostock when it is actually about thirty miles southwest. The entry on Todd Browning's *Freaks* still gets the ending wrong; there is still the questionable relevance of Weisenburger's citation of a misprinted photo of Wernher von Braun in the Avon paperback edition of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* when the photo was printed correctly in the original Bantam paperback edition; u.s.w.

Some emendations and corrections in the new *Companion* create new errors. A gloss on the astrological sign Taurus defines the word correctly as "bull," but adds "Hence also 'Minotaur,' the [tautological] Bull of Taurus." The entry on Lawrence of Arabia is somewhat more accurate than in the first edition but still refers to Lawrence as leading "Turkish insurgents," an appellation likely to be rejected by those Arabs who fought with Lawrence against Ottoman control. A note on the Rex Theatre in Antwerp refers to William Wellman costarring in *Buffalo Bill*, a film Wellman directed that starred Joel McCrea. While Weisenburger correctly notes the origin of Spaniards (actually a regional variant of Ladino-speaking populations) in "Jews expelled from Spain," he refers to the latter as "Ashkenazik Jews" when they are actually Sephardic. U.s.w.

Despite such slips, the *Companion* is still invaluable to Pynchon's readers for the many more entries it gets right, for the access to cross-

referencing such a book can provide and for the narrative and symbolic contexts Weisenburger identifies for these many references. Yet the errors also point to the larger theoretical questions surrounding such a project as *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* or any similar work of literary scholarship in the Internet Age. If in less than a day, with only Google at my fingertips, I could confirm the errors cited above, then couldn't a research assistant or a University of Georgia Press fact-checker have done the same? And, for that matter, can't any reader do the same? How many of us have stared at the yet-unopened mass of *Against the Day* wondering whether to commit to one long read-through or to risk the potentially endless distraction of keying in each reference as we read, unpacking contexts as we pack in the text while discovering new labyrinths to wander? And what happens to the notion of scholarly authority, the apparatus of peer review and the place of publication in the routinization of academic labor when amateurs (whose name and work are rooted in love) have the potential to get the first word and the last laugh on the arguing professors? Even as I write (for publication perhaps a year or more hence), Tim Ware, "curator" of the Hyperarts Pynchon Pages (<<http://www.hyperarts.com/pynchon/index.html>>), has established a wiki for each of Pynchon's novels (and more), a sort of electronic Tristero system that depends on a literary collectivity operating within, alongside and yet separate from traditional scholarship.

But to what end? There is a somewhat mindless pleasure to be had in discovering a postcard of Fred Roper and His Wonderful Midgets, but does it serve any purpose? Are we all just newer versions of Oedipa Maas, "whiz[z]es at pursuing strange words," but not much else? Perhaps not, for if, as I have suggested, Pynchon's referentiality propels us from the page back into the world by necessity, then the Internet offers the chance of a parallel world wherein we may find each other. And even works like *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* may still direct us to new paths of understanding that go beyond mere allusion. But as reader-scholars, we must choose which path to take. With such aids, *Gravity's Rainbow* (or any book) can be "a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop," or it can be ours "to permute and combine into new revelations, always unfolding." "Which"—as Pynchon might ask—"do you want it to be?"

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