

Staying the Course: Pynchon 101

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A Companion to V., by J. Kerry Grant. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001. 224 pp.
\$40; pb \$18.

Following the format of his earlier *Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*, J. Kerry Grant tackles Pynchon's first novel in his new offering, similarly targeted to those teaching or studying the novel in undergraduate courses. As Grant notes in his introduction, *A Companion to V.* is designed primarily to ease the inexperienced reader's first encounter with the daunting aspects of *V.*, "its shifting points of view and its complex narrative structure, its cast of more than 150 characters and its extraordinarily wide range of reference" (xi). That said, Grant's companion will also appeal to a wider audience, for even sophisticated readers will appreciate not having to spend hours tracking down the sources of Pynchon's allusions or looking up critical commentaries about details of the novel. Need a primer on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*? A clarification of Freud's psychoanalytic version of the theory of entropy? A brief biography of Mohammed Ahmad Ibn Al-Saiyid Abd Allah? Grant's companion proffers helpful illumination, giving fairly equal attention to frequently cited passages and fleeting details in the novel.

The book's brief introduction acknowledges the irony implicit in the production of a companion to a novel that itself satirizes the hermeneutic impulse. Noting that readers of *V.* are "almost inevitably drawn into a quest for meaning that parallels Stencil's," Grant alludes to his own Stencil-like role as the creator of the companion to a novel that undermines conventional readerly expectations and the epistemological assumptions behind them (xii). The selectivity of his notes, he suggests, represents a middle ground between hermeneutic excess and its opposite, a belief that nothing underlies the complex surface of *V.* His approach to the companion, therefore, effectively echoes one of Pynchon's central thematic concerns, "[t]he polarization between Stencil's overdetermined V.-world and the meaningless perpetual motion of Profane's existence" (xiii). Essentially sidestepping potential criticism of any gaps or absences in his companion, Grant offers his readers notes that tease out some of the intriguing

correspondences in *V.* without slighting the practical information that can enrich one's experience of the novel. This interplay between the openness to postmodern impulses and the contrasting desire for order is presented as the perspective from what N. Katherine Hayles calls a "'quantized field,'" within which Grant's notes function "as a series of accretions around individual 'energy knots'" (xiv).

Minor quibbles aside, the companion is companionable, its chapters corresponding to the chapters of *V.* and its annotations keyed to three editions of the novel: the 1999 Harper Perennial Classics edition, the Perennial Fiction Library edition (published in 1986, reissued in 1990) and the 1964 Bantam edition. (Grant does not offer any commentary on textual variations among the three editions.) Like *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*, the new companion provides brief chapter summaries that help to orient readers, followed by notes that are primarily informative or interpretive. Among the former are entries explaining military acronyms or abbreviations, dates, places, foreign phrases and other similar details, all of which are concisely identified for readers who might otherwise be stymied by Pynchon's wide-ranging references. Assessing the book according to its usefulness for its intended readers—frustrated undergraduates—makes one mindful of Grant's inclusion of informative notes that are seemingly unnecessary to more mature readers (an entry for Ed Sullivan); but by the same criterion, one observes curious omissions as well (no entry for Guy Lombardo, a figure perhaps even more remote to contemporary college students). Other inconsistencies crop up from time to time. For example, Grant glosses the name of Mrs. Buffo, the owner of the Sailor's Grave, but not Pig Bodine, a character whose name surely begs some passing commentary.

A book as potentially useful as this one will attract Pynchon readers of all kinds, and most of them will appreciate Grant's investigative work and fact checking. He notes, for example, places in the novel where Pynchon takes creative license with historical chronology and others where he may have been misled by his sources. Grant provides the complete salacious joke about Speedy Gonzalez that Pynchon alludes to with only the punch line. While most of the informative notes are fairly brief, Grant occasionally singles out passages in the novel for more comprehensive explanation. For example, for the passage "an eerie flattening of certain notes which to German ears should have remained neutral," Grant presents a page-long entry that explains the importance of the distinction between major and minor modes in the Western European tradition of art music (120–21). Entries like this may strike some readers as downright quirky, but perhaps *V.* invites a quirky approach. When Pynchon writes that a character "ground his teeth

solicitously," Grant seems unable to resist remarking, "it is hard to imagine how teeth grinding could sound solicitous" (132).

The interpretive notes in *A Companion to V.* primarily distill critical commentary on significant passages and allusions drawn from a seemingly current and comprehensive list of references that includes major studies of Pynchon's work as well as many articles and a few websites. These notes, I suspect, will find a mixed reception from more experienced readers or Pynchon scholars. While Grant does not overlook any of the most-often-cited passages in the novel, his notes are unavoidably selective. At roughly half the length of *V.*, however, the companion offers adequate coverage of the most vexing or ambiguous lines and scenes of the novel. Most of these interpretive notes consist of brief citations from a variety of sources, with Grant sometimes offering annotative remarks about the different perspectives of the authors cited; but elsewhere Grant produces his own readings of less-discussed moments. Perhaps most useful to student readers are the notes that transcend the local instance of a phrase—notes that actually give some guidance about the way a single reference will reverberate or accumulate meaning later in the text. In commenting on the phrase "a hothouse sense of time," for example, Grant observes, "the hothouse (as opposed to the street) assumes greater complexity later in the novel—particularly in Sidney Stencil's formulation" (32). More such notes would make it easier for readers challenged by the novel to retain a sense of *V.*'s larger themes and issues while reading the companion's explication of isolated details.

Appearing seven years after his first companion, and obviously the result of much dedicated labor, Grant's new book is a useful addition to Pynchon-readers' bookshelves. If *The Crying of Lot 49* is more frequently taught, *V.* is arguably a close second, and professors everywhere will be grateful for any teaching aid that might encourage their students to stay the course. At the same time, one cannot help wishing for a more comprehensive introduction, say, along the lines of that to Steven Weisenburger's *Gravity's Rainbow Companion*, which includes commentary on the critical reception of the novel, a discussion of Pynchon's central source texts, and an insightful examination of the novel's patterns of structure as revealed by the annotations collectively. Grant forgoes such information, preferring to let his readers recognize for themselves how each augmented fragment "resonate[s] with its surroundings in new and interesting ways" (xv). If any surprises emerged from the act of compiling his companion, or if any interesting patterns were revealed in the annotating of details, Grant is not telling. Travelers to Pynchon's Baedeker land equipped with this companion will return home with some nice snapshots—more close-ups than

panoramic views—but they might find themselves yearning for a longer tour with a more loquacious guide next time.

—*Xavier University*