

## Fractured Mandala: The Inescapable Ambiguities of *Gravity's Rainbow*

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*A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*, by Steven Weisenburger. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988. 345 pp. \$30; pb \$12.95.

Criticism on *Gravity's Rainbow* has wavered between seeing the novel as a heterogeneous sprawl that defies totalizing interpretation and a paranoid vision in which, as the narrator claims, "everything is connected." Through its astute detective work on the novel's chronology, Steven Weisenburger's *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* strengthens the claim for connection. In line-by-line annotations, Weisenburger explores the conjunctions among the Christian liturgical calendar, ancient rituals, and historical events that, he argues, structure the narrative and give it a mandala-like shape. The argument for this structure is one of the *Companion's* major contributions. Another is the extensive research tracking allusions and references to Pynchon's source materials, particularly the London *Times* from 1943-45 and various technical and historical texts.

As Weisenburger acknowledges, annotation is never merely documentation. Both the reconstructed chronology and the web of references have important implications for how one interprets *Gravity's Rainbow*. Documentation merges with interpretation, and interpretation with theoretical questions in a joining that the author says he welcomes. In this sense the *Companion* is a more ambitious book than the title suggests. By focusing on chronology and making it a principal element of the novel's structure, the *Companion* puts the weight of its authority behind certain kinds of readings. At the same time, the annotative format makes systematic discussion of these issues difficult. As a result, the book claims more interpretive and theoretical territory than it can secure. Nevertheless, it is sufficiently well-documented and provocative to merit wide discussion. Moreover, the annotations contain much useful information and valuable insights, independent of the larger implications that connect them. This is a book that no serious Pynchon scholar can afford to neglect.

The argument about structure emerges largely through entries concerning the narrative chronology. As the *Companion* reconstructs

the time line of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Part 1 begins during Advent and continues through Boxing Day, overlaying the reader's initiation into the narrative with both the birth of Christ and the class discriminations implicit in the difference between Christmas proper and Boxing Day, when Christmas comes to the British working classes. Part 2 runs from Christmas to Whitsunday, the celebration of the Holy Ghost's descent to the disciples and the day Pointsman hallucinates at Dover's white cliffs. Part 3 extends from May to August 6, the Feast of the Transfiguration, the celebration of Christ's final appearance to the disciples, that coincided in 1945 with the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Part 4 ends on September 14, the Feast of the Exaltation (or raising) of the Holy Cross. The section's central event, the firing of Rocket 00000, Weisenburger calculates occurred on Easter. As he points out, in 1945, for only the second time this century, Easter fell on April 1, and thus coincided with April Fool's Day. The ironic juxtaposition of Saviour and Fool sums up the tensions implicit throughout *Gravity's Rainbow's* elaborate counterpointing of historical fact and mythic observance. While the liturgical correspondences suggest that the breath of divinity has touched humankind, culminating in eventual redemption, the historical events tend toward the grotesque and farcical, reaching their tragic conclusion in nuclear holocaust. "And one can find nothing in the novel to resolve this antinomy," Weisenburger writes, arguing that inescapable ambiguities are present on the deepest levels of narrative structure.

Less compelling is the mandala structure that he finds in the four sections sketched above. By analogy with the Herero village, with its four quadrants holding opposites in "delicate equipoise," Weisenburger argues that the novel's four chronological divisions constitute a wheel of redemptive time. Although he acknowledges that the interpenetration of this sacred realm by historical contingency and human folly "hopelessly equivocates any theme of salvation," he sees a "nearly closed" design that points more toward redemption than death. "Put another way," he writes, "only gravity's rainbow is arch-shaped; the shape of *Gravity's Rainbow* is circular." He thus seeks to answer questions about meaning through structure.

But equivocations within the structures defeat this attempt at closure. If there is a mandala in the nine-month span the narrative covers, it clearly does not close on itself. The gap between the closing and opening sections makes it a fractured figure at best, one that gestures toward but cannot itself become a mandala. Given the narrative's frequent spinoffs into other places and times, this indistinct mandala (noisy as well as fractured) is more like a figure that can barely be discerned through extensive smearing and stretching than a

sharply drawn structure. The structural features Weisenburger finds are thus themselves ambiguous, capable of multiple interpretations. Although not likely to resolve debates about the novel's meanings, they provide new information and deserve careful attention.

The research into the sources of *Gravity's Rainbow* is impressively documented, although sometimes perfunctorily argued. Readers who want to know *why* Kooy and Uytendogaart's handbook on rocketry and Richard Sasuly's *IG Farben* can be definitively identified as sources will not find their questions answered in the *Companion*. Less controversial, but perhaps more significant, is the picture the *Companion* presents of how Pynchon created the novel's historical texture. Through hundreds of small details, the *Companion* tracks allusions to advertisements, news articles, songs, listings for radio programs and other ephemera to the pages of the wartime London *Times*. One can imagine Pynchon at a microfilm reader in a library somewhere near Manhattan or Manhattan Beach, poring over the light images which are all that remain of the print medium, striving to recreate through them the cultural context that neither he nor most of his readers can recover from lived memory alone.

Two implications come immediately to mind from this scenario. First, the *Companion* should forever clear *Gravity's Rainbow* of critics' charges that it is slapdash, careless writing. Second, the density of references and the implicit necessity for research underscore that none of this context can be recovered without mediation. From the microfilm images going in and out of focus at the time Pynchon's research was putatively undertaken, to the narrator's interjections that self-consciously draw the reader's attention to strategies of representation, to the complex thematic links between alphabets, chemicals, cartels and the language of the text itself, *Gravity's Rainbow* shows how our assumptions about the world are not natural inferences but political, technological, and ideological constructions. On a thematic level, this has always been clear to Pynchon's critics. The *Companion* makes it clear in a practical sense as well, for it shows the conscious and extensive research that went into creating the networks of historical allusions.

At times the *Companion* reproduces information available in Douglas Fowler's *A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980), but in general its focus is quite different. Whereas Fowler writes for an audience presumed to be struggling to make sense of the text, Weisenburger aims for a later generation of scholars who know the text well and are interested in pursuing its subtextual and intertextual references. Fowler characteristically explains the content of scenes and links them to other portions of the narrative;

Weisenburger instances particular lines and follows networks of allusions, chronologies, languages, geographies, and mystical lore. Fowler continues to be useful for undergraduate students reading *Gravity's Rainbow* for the first time, but Weisenburger's text is more likely to hold the on-going interest of professionals actively working in the field.

The *Companion* offers a wealth of information that makes it indispensable reading for Pynchon scholars. It is a remarkable achievement, representing untold hours of research into the flotsam and jetsam that constitutes the surface of Pynchon's preterite text. If the *Companion* does not provide definitive answers to questions about the novel's structure, it nevertheless raises debate on these issues to a new level of sophistication. In this sense it succeeds even when it fails. Like all good companions, it is better at stimulating discussion than foreclosing inquiry.

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