

INTRODUCTION



Thomas Pynchon

(1937-)

Thomas Pynchon emerged from the Beat movement of the 1950s and hooked the counterculture of the 1960s on his trippy novels *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). He is academic in that his audience today is mainly academics and to understand him requires studying academic criticism. The common reader is unlikely to read past the first page of a novel by Pynchon. Approaching his major work, most readers must ask themselves, How much time do I want to devote to puzzling through the multitudinous details and multiple plots to an ambiguous cop-out ending in the fantasy of a paranoid with a vision as reductive as a sci-fi comic book?

Among many adventures, Pynchon requires his readers to nosedive down a toilet into the sewer, eat shit, and laugh at World War II—he climaxes by dropping an intercontinental rocket on the head of the President of the United States. “Every weirdo in the world is on my wavelength,” he smirks. His career rocketed to the peak of the elite with his encyclopedic *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), which got compared to *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce, though it expresses an opposite vision and is very far inferior. An epitome of Postmodernism, the atheist Pynchon became the most influential novelist on younger writers of the period such as David Foster Wallace, who hanged himself in 2008. The critic Scott Sanders has shown how Pynchon secularized the doctrines of Calvinism and became a giggling Anti-Christ.

WHAT LIFTED HIS ROCKET

(1) The texture of Pynchon’s fiction often has the density of implications typical in Joyce and the style is unusually figurative, allusive and versatile, so that he looks at first impression like a genius of the highest stature; (2) yet he bases his works on the popular lowbrow genres of obscene joke, comic book, movie—in particular musical comedy and German Expressionist film—mystery story, spy novel, and science fiction; (3) his writing seems authentic in being stuffed with facts in the tradition of Naturalism; (4) he packs his narration with so many subplots, flashbacks, complications, jumps cuts, incoherence, dualities, parallels, allusions, historical references, scientific terms, equivocations, ambiguities, clues, speculations, dead ends, and mysterious characters that it took the critics awhile to figure out what he is saying; (5) his fiction illustrates scientific concepts unfamiliar to literary people, giving it an apparent intellectual authority unique among major fiction writers; (6) his writing is deliberately obscure, providing endless opportunities for academics to display their expertise and advance their careers; (7) he *appears* to be a secular Postmodern liberal like most academics since the 1960s because he shares their angst, preoccupation with power, disillusionment with America, disposition to theories, reliance on abstractions, love of radical techniques, adolescent preference for popular culture over literature; (8) solipsistic disregard of the real world outside the Postmodernist bubble; (9) scorn for traditional values and disdain for conservatives; (10) Pynchon is often very funny; (11) his retreat from publicity into hiding made him look mysterious and cool in the media; and (12) he became a popular legend and ongoing topic in faculty lounges.

POE AND PYNCHON

Poe and Pynchon both wrote both fiction and poetry. Both adopted popular generic forms and parodied them, both wrote detective fiction with horrific plots, both were black humorists, both were hoaxers, both excelled at math, both wrote science fiction and incorporated science and its theories into their writing. Both were alienated from society and from Nature. Neither created convincing realistic characters because both are solipsistic and project themselves. As put by the critic Mark Siegel, in *Gravity's Rainbow* "the characters are facets of the narrator."

Both Poe and Pynchon identify society and their own psyches with the expanding universe, which they experience as chaotic and fragmenting—like V. and Slothrop. Both hate Christians, both disbelieve in immortality and hence both are obsessed and terrified by death. Both wrote apocalyptic Gothic fictions in which people are victims of forces beyond their control. Pynchon derived his Gothicism from his Calvinist Puritan ancestors and from the pessimistic Naturalism of Henry Adams.

Poe and Pynchon are both materialists with a rationalistic *vertical* consciousness, which they transcend through imagination. Their vertical consciousness is expressed in binary thinking—dualities, polarization, and "excluded middles"—imaged as black versus white in Poe's *Pym* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Although Pynchon is often ambivalent and tries to write from the "middle" between poles, misleading and concealing and never taking a stand, his position on one side or the other is evident in his tone. Poe and Pynchon both are Expressionists of sensibility lacking in heart. As James Russell Lowell wrote of Poe in *A Fable for Critics* (1848): "He wrote "some things quite the best of their kind, / But the heart seems all squeezed out by the mind."

Focused on science in history, Pynchon has a reductive perspective on human psychology. He ridicules the Freudian Dr. Hilarius in *The Crying of Lot 49* for his optimistic faith in psychiatry as well as the Freudian Dr. Treacle in *Gravity's Rainbow*, yet Pynchon is consistently Freudian himself with his (1) deterministic exaggeration of sexuality; (2) panoply of phallic symbols; (3) belief in the Oedipus Complex; (4) reductive views of repression and deviant sexuality; (5) Atheism; (6) disbelief in the soul; and (7) representation of the unconscious as a sewer with a pipeline to Nature sometimes evident in dreams. The top-down view of rationalists toward the unconscious is a characteristic of vertical dissociation from the spiritual dimension—the depths of the soul.

Pynchon is informed by Jung and uses his theories, but is he is anti-Jung and anti-literary in rejecting the truth of archetypes, metaphors, and myths—he proliferates them in his fiction while parodying them. This is the most obvious evidence of his failure to attain atonement with Nature, psychological wholeness, and transcendence. "The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost." (*Lot 49*) Pynchon is lost. His metaphors come from science books, not from spiritual experience. This is why all his quests are failures. He does not believe in them. Like scientists, his questers look for material evidence outside themselves rather than looking within themselves.

Unlike scientists, poets do not make a "thrust" at truth, they *feel* the truth of a metaphor. Nor do poets think a metaphor is merely an "artifice," as Pynchon does: "Poetry is not communication with angels or with the 'subconscious.' It is communication with the guts, genitals, and five portals of sense. Nothing more." Pynchon's reductive view of the psyche is expressed in his schematic story "Entropy" and in his other polarities of mind above and body below—such as Stencil versus Profane in V. "I know of machines that are more complex than people"; "The only thing a machine can't do is play jokes"; "Slothrop, we're all such mechanical men. Doing our jobs." Pynchon rebels by celebrating the profane, the mindless, the natural, and the deviant—remaining in the 1960s counterculture. Anarchism is also rebellion against compulsions and inhibitions of his own mind, evident in his adolescent tone at times, his obscenities, his celebration of pop culture and other trivia.

There are also significant contrasts: Poe was disowned and impoverished, Pynchon has always been one of the Elect. Poe believed in God, imaged in *Pym* as a white apparition in Antarctica, whereas Pynchon's religious quester Godolphin (*God-dolphin*)—also in Antarctica—finds "Nothing." Says Pynchon, "Everyone has an Antarctica." At the end of *Lot 49* the possibility of religious revelation is an obscene joke. Poe was

a sincere Romantic poet, whereas Pynchon is a winking parodist. The fiction of Poe is clear, economical, powerful, and hugely popular through time, whereas the fiction of Pynchon is obscure, most often excessively long, not emotionally engaging, unpopular with the general public and likely to be less so in the future as graduate programs in literature deflate with the higher education bubble.

BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Jr. was born one of “the Elect” in Glen Cove, Long Island. He grew up in an affluent family with a younger brother and a sister in East Norwich. His father was an industrial surveyor who worked for an engineering firm, was chief of the volunteer fire department, led the local Republicans, and served as a town supervisor in Oyster Bay. As a Freudian, Pynchon made escape from and rebellion against the “Father” a major theme. Fathers “kill” their sons in the sense of conditioning and depriving them of freedom, turning them into objects like V. Pynchon applies his own Oedipus Complex in *The Crying of Lot 49* where the patriarchal Father figure Pierce Inverarity is dead from the start like God, liberating Oedipa Maas his “executrix”—the anima of Thomas Pynchon.

PURITANISM

The Pynchon family can be traced back to the 11th century in England. In 1533 Nicholas Pynchon became High Sheriff of London. The first Pynchon who came to America settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 with the Puritans led by John Winthrop. A magistrate, William Pynchon became treasurer of the colony, presided at a witchcraft trial, wrote controversial religious treatises, and founded both Roxbury and Springfield. He grew wealthy trading in beaver furs with the Indians. The Mohawks referred to all New Englanders as “Pynchon’s men.” William Pynchon is the model for William Slothrop, a Puritan ancestor of the Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In addition to inverting the Calvinism of his ancestors—rejecting their morality and their God—Pynchon implies that the Puritans should not have come to the New World and displaced the Indians, reflecting the sentimental primitivism of the 1960s counterculture.

Members of the Pynchon family were clergymen, merchants, doctors, and teachers. When Hawthorne called the villain in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) Judge Pyncheon, he provoked the Pynchons. They chastised him by letter, but Hawthorne explained to his publisher that he had not known of anyone by that name. Thomas Pynchon would agree with Hawthorne’s criticism of the greedy Judge, a corrupt member of “the Elect,” or the “Firm,” but otherwise he is the opposite of Hawthorne, who valued the Puritans for their virtues and for establishing democracy in America. The Puritans probably would have exiled Thomas Pynchon and shipped him back to England with the decadent pre-hippie Thomas Morton of Merry Mount. Hawthorne might well have seen Pynchon as comparable to his experimental scientist Ethan Brand, the Unpardonable Sinner whose head is dissociated from his heart.

Pynchon was disposed by temperament to such characteristics of psychological puritanism as: (1) binary thinking, as when he says, “Correction—along all dimensions: social, political, emotional—entails retreat to a diametric opposite rather than any reasonable search for a golden mean”; (2) reductive absolutism; (3) dividing all people into two opposing groups, in his case the social Elect and the Preterite; (4) belief in the possibility that *everything* is connected and predetermined, as the Naturalists and his Calvinist Puritan ancestors believed—but with no God. At the same time, he thinks it is possible that *nothing* is connected, that everything is random and meaningless, as Henry Adams believed. In his fiction he dramatizes both alternatives at once and comes to no conclusion, ostensibly avoiding commitment. “Losing faith is a complicated business and takes time....an accumulation of small accidents, examples of general injustice, misfortune falling upon the godly, prayers of one’s own unanswered.”

NATURE

His scientific perspective is based on his belief that the ultimate reality is Nature. Like his Puritan ancestors Pynchon sees Nature as alien and hostile—but worse than the Calvinist God, saving no one. Thomas Pynchon is a New York urbanite whose relation to Nature is abstract, distant and bookish. He has no Central Park, no pastoralism. His heart is an “excluded middle”—the missing “Center” in *Rainbow*. He is known for the motto “Keep cool, but care.” The heart is warm, not cool. He confessed, “I still don’t even

know for sure what a tendril is. I think I took the word from T. S. Eliot. I have nothing against tendrils personally, but my overuse of the word is a good example of what can happen when you spend too much time and energy on words alone." A rootless Postmodernist, he has no tendrils of affection for the place where he grew up: "I mistakenly thought of Long Island then as a giant and featureless sandbar, without history, someplace to get away from but not to feel very connected to." When he writes about Nature most directly in his early story "Low-lands," his questing leads to the town dump, into a junk pile and through deep tunnels to a dead end. When Oedipa reaches her end "she tried to face toward the sea. But she'd lost her bearings. She turned, pivoting on one stacked heel, could find no mountains either."

EDUCATION

Pynchon excelled at Oyster Bay High School, graduated at age 16 as class salutatorian and won an award as "the senior attaining the highest average in the study of English." He won a scholarship to Cornell University and enrolled in the division of Engineering Physics in 1953. One of his teachers recalled that Pynchon had a "voracious appetite for the complexities of elementary particle physics." Science became his primary authority: "The general public has long been divided into two parts, those who think that science can do anything and those who are afraid it will." In the freshman register for his entering class there is a blank space instead of a photograph of Thomas Pynchon. He is reported to have been a shy, unassuming, and modest young man. Later he transferred from Physics, individuating from sense into sensibility, and took his degree in English "with distinction in all subjects."

U.S. NAVY

He interrupted his studies at the end of his sophomore year and joined the Navy, apparently serving in the signal corps—appropriately—gaining experience he used in his first novel. "I had grown up reading a lot of spy fiction, novels of intrigue." Influenced by popular culture more than by literary classics, he modeled his novels on spy fiction, detective novels, sci-fi, movies, and comic books. In the Navy, the dominant polarity was between officers and enlisted men, a military Elect and Preterite. In 1956, while in the Navy he discovered the Beat movement through reading the *Evergreen Review*. His portrayal of sailors on leave in *V.* suggests that he escaped confinement on a ship and military discipline with "mindless pleasures." Sailors on leave celebrate freedom, perhaps the major theme in Pynchon.

CORNELL

In 1957 he returned to Cornell. He took a variety of English courses including one from Vladimir Nabokov, the expatriate Russian novelist much admired during the 1950s for his elegant style and international Postmodernism. "We were encouraged from many directions—Kerouac and the Beat writers, the fiction of Saul Bellow in *The Adventures of Augie March*, emerging voices like those of Herbert Gold and Philip Roth....It was also the era of *Howl*, *Lolita*, *Tropic of Cancer*...It shaped up as traditional vs. Beat fiction....Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories....We are accordingly lost to any sense of a continuous tradition."

"I had been taking one of those elective courses in Modern Art, and it was the Surrealists who'd really caught my attention. Having as yet virtually no access to my dream life, I missed the main point of the movement, and became fascinated with the simple idea that one could combine inside the same frame elements not normally found together to produce illogical and startling effects. What I had to learn later on was the necessity of managing this procedure with some degree of care and skill: any old combination of details will not do." In 1958 Pynchon and a classmate wrote part of a science-fiction musical, *Minstrel Island*, depicting a dystopian future world ruled by IBM.

Friends called him Tom. He was on the editorial staff of Cornell's literary magazine *The Cornell Writer* when it published several stories and poems by his closest friend Richard Farina. Like him, Farina had studied both engineering and English. Tom was a shy guy. Farina drew him out. Once in 1959 the two attended a garden party both dressed as F. Scott Fitzgerald in straw boater hats and Princeton jackets. Pynchon served as best man at Farina's wedding to the sister of folk singer Joan Baez and later, after Farina got killed in a motorcycle accident, he served as one of his pallbearers. Farina wrote about Pynchon in an

essay called “The Monterey Fair” that he included in his book *Long Time Coming and a Long Time Gone*. He also based a musical composition on V. Pynchon wrote a blurb for Farina’s *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* and dedicated *Gravity’s Rainbow* to him.

FIRST FICTIONS

“‘The Small Rain’ was my first published story....[*The Cornell Writer*] Apparently I felt I had to put on a whole extra overlay of rain images and references to ‘The Waste Land’ and *A Farewell to Arms*. I was operating on the motto ‘make it literary,’ a piece of bad advice I made up all by myself and then took.... You’ll notice that toward the end of the story, some kind of sexual encounter appears to take place, though you’d never know it from the text. The language suddenly gets too fancy to read....[I spent] too much time and energy on words alone...My specific piece of wrong procedure back then was, incredibly, to browse through the thesaurus and note words that sounded cool, hip, or likely to produce an effect, usually that of making me look good, without then taking the trouble to go and find out in the dictionary what they meant.” Pynchon is aware that there is “A screen of words between himself and the numinous.”

He published another story in the Cornell literary magazine *Epoch*, “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” (1959); “Low-lands” in *New World Writing* (1960); “Entropy” in *Kenyon Review* (1960); and “Under the Rose” in *The Noble Savage* (1961), which was revised into chapter 3 of *V*. “I thought I was sophisticating the Beat spirit with second-hand science.” In the Introduction to his collection of short stories in 1984, Pynchon displays humility and artistic integrity in criticizing his early work: “How easily some of my adolescent values were able to creep in and wreck an otherwise sympathetic character. Such is the unhappy case with Dennis Flange, in ‘Low-lands’....Old Dennis doesn’t grow...no problem resolution and so not much movement or life....My specific piece of wrong procedure back then was, incredibly, to browse through the thesaurus and note words that sounded cool, hip, or likely to produce an effect, usually that of making me look good, without then taking the trouble to go and find out in the dictionary what they meant. If this sounds stupid, it is.”

ON THE ROAD

When he graduated he had a choice of several fellowships including a prestigious Woodrow Wilson, was invited to join the faculty and teach creative writing at Cornell, and was considered as a prospective film critic by *Esquire*. He thought he would rather become a disc jockey. Later he made Mucho [not macho] Mass a disc jockey in *The Crying of Lot 49*. He worked on *V* while living in Manhattan with friends in bohemian Greenwich Village and on Riverside Drive. After a few months he decided to get a job. He crossed the country and worked at the Boeing Company in Seattle for almost 3 years, writing technical documents and articles for a newsletter on the BOMARC surface-to-air missile deployed by the U.S. Air Force. Boeing is Yoyodyne in *Lot 49*. His experience at Boeing provided material on the Rocket in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Then he moved on and lived in California and Mexico, working on *V*. “I was out on the road at last, getting to visit the places Kerouac had written about.”

Among all the characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the one apparent male exemplar is Roger Mexico, the statistician whose first name is affirmative in communications. He is able to love and his last name evokes what is natural, primitive and south of the border—a recurrent metaphor in American fiction. In *Rainbow* Pynchon seems to identify most with Slothrop (*Slow-throp*) and all his mighty erections and conquests. In real life he disappears from view like Slothrop, he refers to himself as a *Slow Learner* (1984) in his collection of stories, and he knows he is slow to read. “Somewhere I had come up with the notion that one’s personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite.” In fact, “He had decided long ago that no Situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any given moment.” Pynchon is a solipsist, carrying the tradition of Emerson and Existentialism to a Postmodernist extreme: “The reality is in this head. Mine. I’m the projector at the planetarium.”

1960s COUNTERCULTURE

During the 1960s he lived in a small downstairs apartment in Manhattan Beach, California. In 1964 his application to study graduate mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley was turned down. In 1965 he declined an invitation to teach literature at Bennington College. “When the hippie resurgence came

along...Beat prophets were resurrected, people started playing alto sax riffs on electric guitars, the wisdom of the East came back in fashion....I spent a lot of time in jazz clubs, nursing the two-beer minimum. I put on hornrimmed sunglasses at night. I went to parties in lofts where girls wore strange attire. I was hugely tickled by all forms of marijuana humor, though the talk back then was in inverse relation to the availability of that useful substance.” This suggests that marijuana may have been “useful” to Pynchon in the writing of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which case it is likely that short-term memory lapses contributed to the incoherence so much praised by Postmodern critics as a brilliant rendering of discontinuity in modern consciousness. Being “wasted” is a motif in Pynchon that implies being high or intoxicated.

Pynchon became an intellectual voice of the 1960s Counterculture, expressing its hip pastoralism, its romantic primitivism, its anarchism, and its scapegoating—blaming Mom and Dad and America, resistance to steady employment, drug use, rebellion, anarchism, paranoia, and apocalyptic cynicism. The rebel Jack Kerouac was a primary influence on Pynchon, in particular *On the Road*—“a book I believe is one of the great American novels.” *On the Road* is a picaresque quest for Meaning, as are Pynchon’s first three novels. In contrast, however, Kerouac was upbeat and believed in God and America. Pynchon extended the theories of the pessimistic Naturalist historian Henry Adams and the sociologists Thorstein Veblen and Max Weber, based his entire vision on science and was more influenced by social theories and philosophers than by literature, in particular radical writers popular during the 1960s, especially the Freudian Norman O. Brown and the revolutionary Marxist Herbert Marcuse.

The 1960s Counterculture is represented to some extent in *The Crying of Lot 49* by the Tristero, and in *Gravity’s Rainbow* by the “Counterforce,” which fails. “The success of the ‘new left’...was to be limited by the failure of college kids and blue-collar workers to get together politically.” Pynchon laments, “The Psychedelic Sixties, this little parenthesis of light, might close after all, and all be lost.” Yet he revels in decadence: “A disgust at individual human perversity might as easily avalanche into a rage for apocalypse...A pose I found congenial in those days—fairly common, I hope, among pre-adults—was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline....That attractive nuisance so dear to adolescent minds, the apocalyptic showdown.”

LEFTIST POLITICS

Pynchon has remained a hippie adolescent, despite having said that the Counterculture “placed too much emphasis on youth, including the eternal variety.” Like so many liberals schooled in the 1960s, he never modified his simplistic vision. Just as Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters drove through towns in their psychedelic bus with loudspeakers on top and mocked people on the streets for looking conventional—the hip versus the straight—Pynchon divides people into the Elect and the Preterite, parodying the theology of his Puritan ancestors. If you have a job and love your country, you’re one of the conservative Elect. If you’re a Leftist you belong to the Preterite. “Right and left; the hothouse and the street. The Right *can only live and work hermetically, in the hothouse of the past*, while outside the Left prosecute their affairs in the streets manipulated by mob violence.” On the contrary it was the Right, personified in President Ronald Reagan, who ended the Cold War, the rocket arms race, and the Soviet Union. Italics added.

In 1968 Pynchon was one of 447 who signed full-page ads in *The New York Post* and *The New York Review of Books* pledging not to pay a proposed “war-designated tax increase” because they believed that “American involvement in Vietnam is morally wrong.” Yet at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon does not hold President Lyndon Johnson responsible for waging the Vietnam War. Instead his climax is the descent of the Rocket onto the head of Richard M. Zhlubb, a caricature of Richard M. Nixon, President of the United States when the book was published: “fiftyish and jowled, with a permanent five-o’clock shadow...and a habit of throwing his arms up into an inverted ‘peace sign’.” Zhlubb is the night manager of the Orpheus Theatre, nicknamed “the Adenoid.” Pynchon implies that nuclear America is taking over where the Nazis left off—now “managed” by Nixon.

On the contrary, Nixon *reduced* the threat of nuclear war by establishing diplomatic relations with Communist China and by *ending* the Vietnam War he did not start—in the *same* year that Pynchon drops the Rocket on his head. Leftists such as Pynchon hated Nixon because on a U.S. House Committee during the 1940s-50s Nixon exposed over 320 Communists in Hollywood who were spreading propaganda and funneling millions in donations to our nuclear enemy the Soviet Union. Nixon was even more hated after

he defeated the Leftist presidential candidate in a landslide while Pynchon was finishing *Gravity's Rainbow*. Although he poses as if he is outside of all systems, Pynchon is a Marxist propagandist in blaming capitalism for injustice rather than holding individuals responsible for their actions.

During the Nixon administration the only possible source of an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching Los Angeles was the Soviet Union. Pynchon borrowed the ending of *Gravity's Rainbow* from the popular movie *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963), an example of the abundant Communist propaganda from Hollywood. According to this movie (1) the United States blunders into nuclear war through no fault of the Soviet Union; (2) the U.S. military command is insane; (3) the totalitarian Communism of the Soviet Union is morally equivalent to the representative Democracy of the United States; (4) Senator Joe McCarthy, who exposed Communists in the government and was called Tailgunner Joe for his service in World War II, is satirized as a lunatic machinegunning fellow Americans and starting a war that will destroy the Earth; (5) McCarthy is further mocked in being played by Sterling Hayden, an actor famously exposed as a Communist; (6) accordingly, the United States should unilaterally disarm and allow the Soviet Union to intimidate us with their nuclear arsenal. Likewise at the end of his novel Pynchon implies that the threat to world peace is the United States and that we deserve to be destroyed, though he does not even acknowledge the Soviets as the source of his rocket. *Dr. Strangelove* ends with an American rocket hitting the Soviet Union as a nostalgic popular song from WWII swells up ironic and poignant on the sound track. *Gravity's Rainbow* ends with a theater audience singing along as a Soviet rocket descends upon America like the wrath of Pynchon.

Also in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon implies that logging to build homes and make wood products (and paper for his overly long books) is evil: Slothrop laments that his family "made its money by killing trees." Pynchon even encourages eco-terrorism: "Next time you come across a logging operation out here, find one of their tractors that isn't being guarded, and take its oil filter with you. That's what you can do." This is a short step from blowing up equipment and spiking trees as advocated by Earth First! and other eco-terrorist groups. Whatever he may know about other sciences, Pynchon knows nothing about the science of forestry. Because ignorance such as his prevailed, today the national forests are *burning up!* Wildfires are increasingly intense, widespread, and destructive now because through legislation environmentalists have prevented thinning and logging that would reduce overcrowding in forests, create firebreaks, and prevent insect infestations. Now, in effect, it is Pynchon himself who is "killing trees."

COMIC BOOK COSMOS

Though his fiction is densely intellectual and his scientific metaphors seem profound, Pynchon's comic book vision is immediately evident in his names of characters. They are evocative and entertaining but so explicit and abundant they trivialize serious themes: Lardass, Meatball, Profane, Pig, Pirate, Wimpe, Bland, Wren, Owlglass, Waxwing, Swanlake, Grace, Picnic, Geli, Mucho, Bloat, Snodd, Kotex, Bummer, Hilarius, Pensiero, DiPresso, Nefastis, Beto, Paola, Mafia, Squalidozzi, DeRidder, Slab, Bloody Chichlitz, Geronimo, Major Marvey, Brigadier Pudding, Genghis Cohen, Caesar Funch, Zenobia, Diocletian Blobb, Wharfinger, Pointsman, Sphere, Maas, Stencil, Inverarity, Oedipa, Fausto, Weissmann, Eigenvalue, Manny, Manganese, Shale, Moldweorp, Mucker-Mffick, Bongo-Shaftsbury, Goodfellow, Rabbit Warren, Roger Mexico, San Narcisco, Yoyodyne, Fort Roach, Tripping, S S Leak, Byron the Bulb, Thoth, Godolphin, Gottfried. The way for most readers to enjoy Pynchon is to go mindless: forget the plots and Meanings and enjoy the cartoon characters, loopy style, bizarre situations, and humor.

V. (1963)

The picture on the original paperback looks far out, like a different planet. As it turns out, the episodes are set at various widely dispersed locations on Earth. The most effective parts for the common reader dramatize hunting alligators in the sewers of New York and a decadent siege party during the massacre of black Hereros by Germans in Africa. There are two main characters who cross paths but never meet in a metaphorical sense, unlike a V. They express the division in Pynchon between body and mind: Benny Profane lives an aimless life of "mindless pleasures" of the body while Herbert Stencil goes on a global quest for a mysterious woman who may be his mother—"an adventure of the mind."

Many very different women in the novel have first names starting with V, figuratively liberating women from a stencil or stereotype. V is a motif in Pynchon's fiction. "As spread thighs are to the libertine...so was the letter V to young Slothrop." V is a sign intended to evoke as many different connotations as may occur to the reader—including Vagina, Virgin, Vixen, Void, etc.--accumulating so many connotations the *sign* becomes a *symbol* of as many things as possible. This contrasts, for example, with Hawthorne's very precise allegorical control of the various meanings people attach to the scarlet A. Pynchon merely tries to evoke a vague sense of some transcendent Meaning through sheer recurrence. This is what Hemingway called "interior decoration." The end of the novel is like a writer looking at notes he wrote during a drug trip: "Stencil sketched the entire history of V. that night and strengthened a long suspicion. That it did add up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects."

One connotation of V. is 19th-century Victorianism: "Victoria was being gradually replaced by V.; something entirely different." It is no longer possible for society to "Stencilize" women, but in the end, on Malta (*Ma-lta*, *Mal-ta*), what replaces the angelic Victorian ideal is a mechanical female that gets torn to pieces. "Is it only because Malta is a matriarchal island that Fausto felt so strongly that connection between mother-rule and decadence?" In *Lot 49* a character says of Oedipa, "God protect me...from these lib, overeducated broads with the soft heads and bleeding hearts." By 1984, Pynchon had become Politically Correct: "At that time [1960s] I had no direct experience with either marriage or parenting, and maybe I was picking up on male attitudes that were then in the air...inside the pages of men's magazines. *Playboy* in particular." Pynchon became a wimpy male Feminist blaming "The Patriarchy."

The Crying of Lot 49 (1966)

In 1963 *V.* received enthusiastic reviews and won the William Faulkner Foundation Award as the best first novel of the year. Pynchon published sections of *The Crying of Lot 49* in popular magazines including *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Esquire*. In 1966 the novel won the Rosenthal Foundation Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. *The Crying of Lot 49* is the best introduction to Pynchon because it is short—and his best novel--readable, economical, coherent, elegant, vivid, intellectually complex, dense with implications, metaphorically rich, and funny.

Oedipa Maas leaves her traditional role as housewife for the capitalist "Patriarchy" personified in Pierce Inverarity. *Lot 49* is an allegory of women's liberation just as it was getting underway in the 1960s. The name Maas suggests that she is one of a mass movement, while Oedipa, named for Oedipus Rex, implies gender role reversal: she "kills" her mother, traditional womanhood, and sleeps with her father figure. Like the mass of liberated women, Oedipa was seduced into the System and became its lover. The death of Inverarity (invalidity) is the death of the capitalist System predicted by Pynchon. Oedipa's futile quest for Meaning as she "executes" the will of Inverarity is evidence of entropy in America. She ends up an isolated, suicidal paranoid. Implicitly women will do no better than men in this decadent System. The central philosophical issue in the novel is the old Calvinist and later Naturalist view that "everything is connected" versus the Postmodernist view that "nothing is connected." If the mysterious, secret, powerful, unlikely counterculture called Tristero exists, then the old view is right, but if it does not, then Oedipa is paranoid like Pynchon. The author pretends to be openminded by leaving his plot openended, but his mocking tone is cynical. Postmodernists avoid closure like death.

Gravity's Rainbow (1973)

Pynchon's major novel is an Atheist response to Wernher von Braun, the renown scientist who directed the German V-2 rocket project in WWII and later masterminded the American space program. Von Braun's expression of faith in an afterlife is quoted as the epigraph to Part One of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death." Believing in both laws Von Braun cited the *First Law* of Thermodynamics and built real rockets that reached the moon, whereas Pynchon believes only in the *Second Law* and built a fantasy rocket aimed at President Nixon. Pynchon is a leftwing evangelist preaching the end of the world with a smirk on his face.

Gravity's Rainbow is set mostly in London and Germany at the end of World War II in 1944-45. For its lift-off and thrust, the massive novel relies upon a predictable penis, recounting its conditioning in infancy and its erections in response to incoming V-2 rockets. "Slothrop...only gets erections when this sequence happens in reverse. Explosions first, then the sound of approach: the V-2." Thus, he contradicts the dogma of cause-and-effect. In the vision of *Gravity's Rainbow*: God does not exist; Technology is the modern religion; the Rocket is the international totem of the 20th century; greedy cartels rule the world; America is to blame; Americans have succeeded the Nazis; murderers are as deserving of sympathy as victims; gravity explains everything; entropy is everywhere; the self-destructive human race is doomed probably sooner rather than later; if there is any transcendent force determining history it is malevolent; it is more likely that everything is random and meaningless; hence paranoia is enlightenment; solipsism is adaptation; love is unlikely; families are deadly; all forms of order are oppressive; anarchy is the best politics; Death is the end, folks; our only consolations are rebellious humor and unrestrained hedonism; wars are caused by sexual deprivation, cartels, and a lust for immortality—which ain't gonna happen.

The best features of the novel are (1) the central symbol of the Rocket; (2) the various metaphors linked to the Rocket—the motivations of its builders, components, sounds, trajectory, and so on; (3) the abundant accurate historical and technological details that are the foundation of the novel in the literary tradition of Naturalism; (4) the elucidation of scientific concepts; (5) the overriding structural imagery of the Rocket screaming in overhead at the beginning and the Rocket descending at the end, as though the book itself is a Rocket in flight throughout; (6) the episode in the tunnels at the construction site and various others; (7) the insights into the homosexual relationship of Blicero and Gottfried. The Rocket is the most appropriate, timely and powerful literary symbol of the 20th century, due to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the continuing possibility of apocalyptic war. It has the most resonance of any central literary symbol since *Moby-Dick*. The white whale is an organic avatar of divinity in Nature, whereas the white Rocket is an artificial symbol of human nature and technology in history. The white Rocket has all the limitations of humans, whereas the white whale is a monad of the whole Universe.

The image of the Rocket in its parabolic arc is Neoclassical—simple, economical, clear, symmetrical, linear, coherent, efficient—a product of the 18th-century Enlightenment. Below the Rocket in flight, the aesthetics of the novel are Postmodernist, contradicting the prevailing aesthetics of Neoclassicism, Realism, Impressionism, and Modernism. Had the aesthetics of the novel been those of the Rocket, the book would have been more clear, engaging, and powerful. Before the 1960s *Gravity's Rainbow* probably would not even have been published. Editors would have considered it too unfocused, diffuse, obscure, and obscene. As John Irving has said, it is easy to be incoherent and unclear.

(1) Pynchon's narrative is incoherent because he mimics recent scientific concepts such as discontinuity, randomness, exceptions to cause-and-effect, and the "uncertainty principle." However, readers do not live at the subatomic level. They are larger than that. Pynchon is dramatizing abstractions in science rather than concrete real life as people experience it. Accordingly, he discourages belief in cause-and-effect, a foolish attitude especially with respect to driving, sex, drugs, and suicide. The failure of voters to link causes to effects has led to national disasters. Pynchon needs to take a basic course from Babette in *White Noise* by DeLillo—like on how to cross a street.

(2) Whereas the Modernists studied how their writing affected a reader—Eliot and Hemingway in particular—Postmodern academic Expressionists are elitist. Postmodernists would rather masturbate than have intercourse. As put by David Foster Wallace, who said he was most influenced by Pynchon, "I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader." (3) The attempt to make *Gravity's Rainbow* a musical comedy film set in the ruins of Nazi Germany is the worst strategy in American literary history. Pynchon's stage for merriment is crowded with millions of bodies and walking skeletons. (4) He flies over the death camps and throws pies. When we reach Berlin and expect to see Hitler, he gives us Mickey Rooney instead—as if Hitler was just an illusion concocted by Hollywood. The jokes and slapstick in this context are the stupidest blunders ever made by a major novelist. Discontinuity, trivia, nonsense, and adolescent bad taste deconstruct and stall the Rocketbook in flight until it falls to the ground in pieces like V.

Apologists for Pynchon have said that by not mentioning the Holocaust he was being faithful to the limited knowledge of his characters at the time, but he could have transcended their ignorance of the camps as the narrator does routinely otherwise, as in the flashforward almost thirty years at the end of the novel. (5) Pynchon gives his highest priority to personal freedom, but he displays indifference to the freedom of others--whole populations--by ignoring the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe and the implications of the Cold War. Rather than depict the horrors of WWII and its geopolitical implications in relation to the Rocket, Pynchon plays Trivia. (6) He wasted the opportunity to make the most of his Rocket and went limp in his wet dream of himself as tumescent Slothrop (sloth/slow).

Rather than individuate toward wholeness or revelation, Slothrop fragments and vanishes from view like Pynchon, preferring the ruins of Nazi Germany to America. As Wallace said, "We seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have either to make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation or incongruous juxtaposition...or some shit....a fugue of evaded responsibility." Slothrop and Gottfried are projections of Pynchon's self-pity. He should have included among his movie inserts Shirley Booth crying out to her lost doggie, "Come *back*, come *back*, little Sheba!" but in the same pathetic tone, "Come *back*, little Slothrop!"

(7) With his overload of allusions and analogues to popular rather than to high culture, Pynchon makes his novel more ephemeral—more an encyclopedic period piece. Literary classics and ancient myths endure because of universality. Pynchon's favorite old movies are familiar to a very few people who are dying off. His disbelief in the truth of metaphors, his disregard of literary classics and his elevation of pop culture, politics and theory above literature accommodated Feminists and the other Postmodernist academics who abandoned literary values and the canon of American literature. (8) Setting the trend as a "metafictionist" Pynchon deconstructs his own narrative with demonstrations of theory like the academic Deconstructionists who bored students to death and halved enrollments in English departments during the 1980s.

(9) Adopting the narrative voice of a paranoid, Pynchon presents himself as a victim of the capitalist System and evades responsibility for accuracy or truth at the cost of impeaching himself as a reliable witness to history or anything else, epitomizing Postmodernism: (10) "The white image has the same coherence, the hey-lookit-me smugness, as the Cross does....The four fins of the Rocket made a cross." Pynchon detests the "smugness" of both Christians and Capitalists. He satirizes them both at once by paralleling them. Then he tries to use the exceptional to symbolize the rule: To imply that faith in Technology—an expression of Capitalist materialism—has replaced Christian faith in an afterlife, Pynchon had to invent two suicidal Atheist homosexuals, Blicero and Gottfried, to worship the phallic Rocket, because the scientist who actually built the rockets believed in an afterlife.

Pynchon's predictions in *Gravity's Rainbow* have not yet come true: (1) The world has not come to an end; (2) America has not used rockets to conquer the world; (3) as of 2015 America has been made to resemble Nazi Germany by the Left, not by the Right; (4) currently the threat of a nuclear apocalypse is from the Muslim world not from the Christian; (5) America may soon be energy independent and a world supplier. Pynchon predicted happily that capitalist America "must sooner or later crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply."

ROCKETMAN

Though nobody knew yet what it meant, *Gravity's Rainbow* won three major literary awards, sharing the National Book Award with Isaac Singer. The shy guy was in hiding—like Emily Dickinson he implies at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*. He gave no interviews, allowed no photographs to be released and got relatives and friends to reveal nothing about him. Who is this guy? And where is he? There were wild speculations about his true identity, including one that he was the Unibomber. Hiding proved to be great for his career, especially after he sent a comedian to accept his National Book Award—the sloppy Professor Irwin Corey, known for baggy pants, histrionic gestures and nonsensical double talk that could not be distinguished from prevailing academic rhetoric. Most of the confused audience thought the fake professor was Thomas Pynchon. In a fitting irony that Pynchon must have enjoyed, toward the end of Professor Corey's double talk, a naked streaker ran through the hall.

Gravity's Rainbow was unanimously elected by the elite judges for the Pulitzer Prize in literature, but they were shocked to be overruled by the Advisory Board, who called the book "unreadable," "turgid," "overwritten," and "obscene." No prize was given that year. In 1975 the novel won the Howells Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. To his credit, Pynchon declined it: "The Howells Medal is a great honor, and, being gold, probably a good hedge against inflation too. But I don't want it. Please don't impose on me something I don't want. It makes the Academy look arbitrary and me look rude....I know I should behave with more class, but there appears to be only one way to say no, and that's no." After siding with the Preterite so completely in his books, how could he now turn around and assent to being deemed the most Elect of the current literary Elect?

Throughout his career Pynchon has written blurbs, reviews, articles and introductions to novels and nonfiction works, including a response to the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1966, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," and "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" (1984), *New York Times Book Review*. In 1988 he was given a coveted MacArthur Fellowship. So honored, he wrote liner notes for an album by Spike Jones and liner notes for the rock band Lotion. He served as consultant to NBC's *The John Larroquette Show* with script approval on scenes about himself, wrote for the program of *The Daily Show* and made cameo appearances on the television cartoon series *The Simpsons*, playing himself with a bag over his head.

LATER NOVELS

Vineland (1990), set in California, dramatizes the relationship of an FBI agent and a female radical filmmaker—his continuing theme of authoritarianism versus communalism. It got poor reviews. *Mason & Dixon* (1997) is a more straightforward historical saga extensively researched, about the surveyors of the Mason-Dixon line from a wry Postmodern perspective. *Against the Day* (2006) is 1,085 pages long. Pynchon attacks capitalism at tedious length in his sixth novel and reasserts his identification with the utopian ideals of the 1960s counterculture. In the downward arc of his Rocket-ride career, he disappointed the critics, most of whom felt that the 1960s are over: "lengthy and rambling," "silliness," "a baggy monster of a book," "a grab bag of themes," "fairly pointless"—entropy, entropy. *Inherent Vice* (2009) is a psychedelic noir detective novel set in LA and starring Doc Sportello, a paranoid who smokes dope and mourns the end of free love. *Bleeding Edge* (2013) is about the high-tech world of Manhattan's Silicon Valley between the collapse of the dot-com boom and the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11.

DOOM

"In every unbeliever's heart there is an uneasy feeling that, after all, he may awake and find himself immortal. This is the punishment for his unbelief. This is the agnostic's Hell." (H. L. Mencken) Pynchon has written from a deeper pit than the agnostic Mencken--afraid of *life* as well as death. According to critics, this is a writer who in his work has rejected parents, family, marriage, children, friends, society, nation, morality, religion, and reason. Consequently, the news that Pynchon got married was a surprise on the magnitude of the news that the Feminist icon Ms. Gloria Steinem got married. He married his literary agent, a great-granddaughter of Theodore Roosevelt and a granddaughter of Robert Jackson, U.S. Supreme Court Justice and Nuremberg trials prosecutor. You cannot get much more Elect than that. In 1991 the Freudian even became a *Father!* Still, at the end of his rainbow, Pynchon remains the mock Christ-evoking Gottfried (peace of God, or God-freed/fried) wrapped in plastic inside his Rocket, doomed by his own gravity. His are the last words here: "Do not underestimate the shallowness of my understanding....The hand of Providence creeps among the stars, giving Slothrop the finger."

Michael Hollister (2015)

AUDIENCE

"Well, who is Pynchon's audience? [1] First of all, a certain kind of educated young reader who was probably trained to read hard books [by New Critic professors] during the early to mid-sixties and who is also sympathetically responsive to the cultural manifestations of the late sixties—in rock, adult comic books, drug and black styles, filmmaking; [2] second, a number of academics, older than the first group but who nonetheless went through some of the same sequences of interest and development; [3] third, a growing number of quite learned academic readers who enjoy puzzles, especially costumed ones, who

relish intellectual play, and who admire Pynchon's...capacities to 'work up' a subject (like the Fashoda incident or life in London during the blitz) wholly remote from his own personal experiences...[4] fourth, the various readers who come from these three groups, but who are also in the book business, with its hunger for a great writer, any 'great writer' except Norman Mailer or the good grey champion Saul Bellow; and [5] fifth, a lot of people who take their cue from these various groups and who are enthusiastic about a phenomenon without the capacity to understand it, intellectually turned-on groupies who see in Pynchon's obscurities and his personal elusiveness—his refusal to come out of hiding in any way—a sign of radical contempt. He's a radical to whom the establishment has simply had to defer—or so it seems. What is left out of this grouping is of course the central mass of educated general readers....

Neither the amateur nor the professional reader seems capable of reading Pynchon for the fun of it.... Pynchon really has, so far as I can see, no wholly safe constituency except one—the academy...Really to read Pynchon properly you would have to be astonishingly learned not only about literature but about a vast number of other subjects belonging to the disciplines and to popular culture....We don't know *enough* to feel as he wants us to feel."

Richard Poirier
"The Importance of Thomas Pynchon"
Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon
George Levine and David Leverenz, eds.
(Little, Brown 1976) 17, 19-21

ANTI-CHRIST

"[Pynchon] is the genius of his generation...the Antichrist who offered up his own destructiveness to illuminate yours...the one man who realized that the moralist of our time would have to be the devil."

Josephine Hendin
"What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?"
Harper's Magazine 250
(March 1975) 82-92

SOLIPCISM

"It doesn't engage anybody....It's like a fugue of evaded responsibility....The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is impossible to pin down.... Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naïve to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving....It's the act of a lonely solipsist's self-love....Look man, we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid it is?"

David Foster Wallace
(1962-2008, hanged himself)

FALLACIES

"I wish to raise four objections against his view of man and history, objections which are political and philosophical in nature, although they have aesthetic implications:

[1] First of all it seems to me that Pynchon's conspiratorial imagination tends to make our social organization appear even more mysterious than it really is, tends to *mystify* the relations of power which in fact governs our society. Since his leading characters all hover at the margins of conspiracies, they are condemned to be either victims of enterprises they cannot understand, or impotent by-standers, ignorant and ignored. What fragments of the plot they do uncover only make them feel more helpless, more isolated. [deterministic Naturalism]

[2] My second objection is that the paranoid style of understanding the world is inevitably solipsistic. The paranoiac is capable of imagining only plots which center upon himself; and since few of a society's energies are ever in fact polarized upon any given individual, the paranoiac can never understand more than a minute fraction of his world. Because everyone else might be an agent of the conspiracy, no one can be trusted, and the paranoiac must keep his own counsel. Cut off from all forms of community, he can never work to alter the society which is father to his fears. Pynchon raises the possibility that this solipsism may itself be a goal of the conspiracy: 'What if They find it convenient to preach an island of life surrounded by a void? Not just the Earth in space, but your own individual life in time? What if it's *in Their interest* to have you believing that?' Stripped of its mystifying overtones, this becomes a crucial question to ask of the administered society. For what are the social consequences of the belief that every man is an island, armed against every other? Men who are afraid of joining together for collective action obviously make tamer citizens than those who are not afraid. A nation of paranoiacs would be a totalitarian's dream—as witness the universal efforts of dictators to breed fear and mistrust among their subjects.

[3] My third objection is that Pynchon reifies technology. That is, instead of treating it as a body of knowledge which men have developed for satisfying their needs and for dealing with the material world, instead of presenting it as a complex of relations among men, Pynchon has elevated technology into a metaphysical principle standing outside human control. By capitalizing the t., by surrounding the Rocket, its chief token, with an aura of necessity, he has invested Technology with supernatural force. Any sensible man must agree with Pynchon's own observation that our industrial system, if it continues on its present course, will exhaust the earth. But the surest way to bring that catastrophe about it to believe that it is inevitable, that it is dictated by the logic of technology.

[4] My fourth and last objection is that Pynchon has presented a particular social condition—the experience of the anomic, manipulated, paranoid individual within advanced industrial society—as if it were the human condition. He treats the Zone as the World, the Displaced Person as Everyman. He interprets an era of decadence in a particular form of society as proof that we are doomed to fall away from the human, that we are tugged along in a cosmic tide of death. It is this leap from historical observation to metaphysical assertion that I find unacceptable. Pynchon seems to me a brilliant chronicler of our prevailing anxieties, but a faulty philosopher. His fiction is so dominated by an awareness of the pressures that lead to a dissolution of personality and to the disintegration of culture itself that he finds scant space for imagining contrary historical impulses, possibilities for recovery, for renewal, for reunion.”

Scott Sanders
“Pynchon's Paranoid History”
Mindful Pleasures (1976) 157-59

Michael Hollister (2021)

