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Thomas Pynchon

(1937-)

"A richly complex work [V., 1963]...influenced by *The Education of Henry Adams* and Wittgenstein, [V.] deals with two major figures in its plot. One is Benny Profane, a constant failure, who drifts through life in such enterprises as hunting alligators in New York's sewers and is associated with his friends, the Whole Sick Crew. Another major figure, the cultivated Herbert Stencil, is more purposeful as he searches the world for V., the mysterious female spy and anarchist, who is by turns Venus, Virgin, and Void.

Pynchon's second novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), is a shorter fable but marked by the same characteristics. Pynchon's plots are mystery stories combined with science fiction, but the novel's larger metaphors present in baroque fashion motifs not only of quest but of entropy, showing a closed world losing energy as time decays toward timelessness, and order disintegrates into alienation or chaos. Filled with endless esoteric references (including the parodying of other authors' styles) that range from high culture to trivial events, and marked by humor of wild comedy, the mock-heroic, and satire, the novels present the reader a huge array of clues but no clear direction in their purposeful ambiguity. In his second novel the main figure is Oedipa Maas, a California woman whose legacy from a friend requires her to discover the true nature of her inheritance by following clues to a cabalistic social system known to many dispossessed Americans but hidden from people who live within conventional society.

Pynchon's very long third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973, National Book Award), set in the closing years of World War II, is a story of plots and counterplots involving a Nazi Lieutenant Weissman (once V's lover, for Pynchon's novels have echoes), disguised as Captain Blicero, and the American sleuth, Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, while V-2 rockets fall on London. Like all Pynchon's works, the mood moves from black humor to lyricism, and the dream-like fantasy is marked by labyrinthine interconnections until the reader is uncertain about what is 'real' and what is imagined."

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 620

"The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power.... The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values."

Richard Hofstadter

The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays
(New York 1965) 14

"For though his first two books are novels of quest for meaning, in each Pynchon shows himself to be unusually inventive in technique, even if not wholly successful. For though his first two books are novels of quest for meaning, in each Pynchon has employed methods calculated to defeat his characters *lest* they succeed in seeing too clearly. We have had the novel of the anti-hero before; Pynchon has given us a form for the comic novel of anti-vision....

[Like Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon has] given us novels which show, in Ihab Hassan's phrase, 'the deflection of laughter toward anguish.' Both have begun with the absurdity of our experience as a premise, and both have forced a vision from their characters at the point of extremity. But here the similarities end, for, in dramatizing the discontinuity which makes up our experience, they have come to highly individualized versions of the reality implied. In what I take to be a non-ominous coincidence, both Yossarian and Stencil flee to Sweden because of what they have seen, the one to fulfill his vision, the other to avoid his fate. [*Catch-22* (1961), *Lot 49* (1966)] Heller, more than Pynchon, realizes the ancient role of

comedy in focusing attention upon our betrayals of our own values, while Pynchon probes more relentlessly into the nature of things, and into our modes of knowing, by comic excursions into history.

Pynchon's comedy calls us back not to the sanity and freedom for which Yossarian will save his life or die trying, but to an unblissful but tolerable ignorance in the midst of an absurdity which may be intelligible after all. For all the intellectual activity of his questing characters, Pynchon remains tentative about the value of the intellect. In the pursuance of his quest, Stencil acquires a fulfilling sense of animateness. But with the prospect of ending the quest, of making the connections, comes an apocalyptic vision of an absolute threat to life. The threat is not simply from death which, metaphorically, would be right enough, but from the take-over of the inanimate that promises to reduce the whole human enterprise to something utterly meaningless. While 'the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word' of which Oedipa awaits sure knowledge at the end of her quest does not threaten absolutely, it does require, at least, an even more disjunctive, paranoid condition than has already characterized her experience. Thus Pynchon's two novels end in a peculiar kind of misologism, for the perception of rational connections in experience is rejected not because it does not tell us the truth, but because it does.

Through the comic mode Heller tries to identify the spiritually destructive features of our common life which we write into the human story through failure to live by the values that reason would commend. The bitterness in his vision is directed not so much at the nature of things as at a profound failure of intelligence. But his comic exposure of the murderous catch by which we reduce our common life to absurdity always finds its basic premise in the belief that there must be some meaningful way whereby our fractured lives may be made whole.

It there is a more than an accidental relationship between insight and art, it may be that by reference to it we can explain why Joseph Heller's novel is more convincing than are the two novels by Thomas Pynchon. I do not mean in this way to argue with Pynchon about his conclusions, nor even about the perceptions on which he bases his peculiar misologism. But while both men have made the structures of their novels metaphors for the chaos with which they are dealing, Heller has at the same time given his novel a shape which counters the chaos. Pynchon has, however, taken more risks artistically, and perhaps only in this way will more be gained finally for those who are seeking in the modern novel new modes of moral and religious insight pertinent to our time." [Moral and religious insight? Pynchon?]

John W. Hunt
"Comic Escape and Anti-Vision: *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*"
Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature
ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr.
(U Chicago 1968) 87-112

"[Pynchon] reacts against the literature we call modern, the literature represented in English by Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce, in French by Proust, in German by Hesse. Contemporary writers are [rationalists] skeptical of modernist notions of metaphor as a species of supra-rational truth that unifies paradoxical opposites and modernist conceptions of myth which make it a principle of order for art and of discipline for the subjective self.... Pynchon shares in the contemporary critique of Modernism but it is difficult to abstract a theory from his loose and shaggy novel [*Gravity's Rainbow*]. He works through an ironic thematics, an ironic juxtaposition of fools and foolish theories, a technique which makes it difficult to collect the kind of unambiguous quotes one needs to state a theory.... All the characters are fools...

Pynchon sees [metaphor] transforming the human into the inanimate, and in *V.* 'alignment with the inanimate is the mark of a Bad Guy.' The metaphor-making poet is always in danger of becoming one of the supreme bad guys. Pynchon, presumably in his own narrative voice, gives us a graphic demonstration of the process by which metaphor dehumanizes [Pynchon rejects poetry while writing doggerel poems himself.]... Two themes coalesce in Stencil's quest [in *V.*], which pointedly satirizes the mythic journeys in "The Waste Land" and *Ulysses*. Stencil is one of the classic fools in literature; like Don Quixote and Dostoevsky's man from the underground, he models his life on the literary forms of the previous generation, turning the mythic and symbolic quest into a life-style.... Pynchon rejects the notion that myth can be used to order the chaos of history.... The point of the book is to reveal the inadequacy of all metaphors of history, whether they be cycles, waves, spirals or still points... Cyclical history, so often

embodied in the structure of the quest, literally 'stencilizes' everything.... Mythic forms like conspiracy theories of history make the world 'manageably inanimate'.... History, like inanimate objects, has no human meaning....

His immediate targets are of course the conspiracy theories of history which dominated the cold-war mentality, particularly during the McCarthyite fifties. [During the 1950s Senator Joe McCarthy exposed spies hired by liberals in the government, a real historical conspiracy by the International Communist Party directed from Moscow in the Soviet Union. Some of the spies stole atomic secrets and passed them on to the Soviets, exposing Americans to the threat of nuclear annihilation for 40 years. Translation of secret Soviet cables during the 1990s have more than vindicated McCarthy. Pynchon fantasizes false plots and ignores real ones. This critic is a liberal propagandist.]

Richard Wasson
"Notes on the New Sensibility"
Partisan Review 36 (1969) 460-77

[Joseph W. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon*, Warner, 1974]: "This is the first book-length study of Pynchon.... He is quite helpful when explaining...background information about Pynchon's relationship to *The Education of Henry Adams* and *The Waste Land*. He deals with the standard themes—Stencil's reinterpretation of the past, Benny as a schlemihl.... Oedipa, confronting the void, looks for answers transcending either/or. She is led, at novel's end, to an impasse, imperfectly grasping the options which we, as readers, are in a better position to understand. For Pynchon's meaning has been communicated to us through the metaphors of Tristero and Maxwell's Demon—both ways of interacting with established systems, and therefore of surviving. Slade's most important suggestion here is that 'metaphors are our only access to meaning'....

The central opposition in the novel [is] between the Elect (Them) and the Preterite. Slothrop, 'although a member of the Elect' in strict terms, is also Preterite, for his ancestors were visibly unsuccessful, and he himself had been victimized by Them when given to Jamf for his experiment. Slothrop is, like Benny Profane, a schlemihl, a victim who, 'in spite of his conditioning...does not love death'.... The characters who survive, such as Roger Mexico, are those who see history as indeterminate, who finally reject the cause and effect of technology. In Slade's conclusion he calls Pynchon a 'Goethe in greasepaint,' and his study attempts to show how this duality functions in the novels, for if Pynchon is sometimes a clown he is also a serious artist. Slade finds that Pynchon's central idea is 'that individuals should not exclude middles, should try instead to occupy the domain of Oedipa Maas and Roger Mexico, the realm between the void and the labyrinth, between anonymity and solipsism.'

Clark and Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism," 246-47

[Scott Sanders, "Pynchon's Paranoid History," *Twentieth Century Literature* 21 (1975) and *Mindful Pleasures* (1976)]: "Sanders see paranoia as 'the last retreat of the Puritan imagination,' as having the structuring of Puritanism without its God. Slothrop in particular is paranoid, though often, as in his fantasy of the Father Conspiracy, he 'is not so much paranoid as perceptive.' Other characters experience paranoia too, and paranoid patterns are reinforced by imagery of external manipulation, above all that of secularized Puritanism. Paranoia an expand into the entropic vision, where war becomes 'a synecdoche for history itself, the drift toward death.' Reinforcing the deathward movement, according to Sanders, are the mistresses of death, the sexual triangles, the image of the Rocket, the force of Gravity.

Despite the entropic tendency, Sanders suggests, it is worse still not to be trapped in conspiracy, to be 'standing outside all plots, swimming free of all tides.' He cites the passage in *Gravity's Rainbow* which states that we generally cannot bear anti-paranoia for long. (But the difficulty of the condition does not preclude its value. Anti-paranoia might be a precondition for a new and better order—a possibility the novel hints at.) Sanders also chooses to consider the 'few interludes of tenderness and compassion' as 'so fragile and evanescent that they only accentuate by contrast the general drift toward brutality.' (But in addition to Roger and Jessica there are Geli and Tchitcherine. And are the implications of Enzian's search, the Counterforce, and Slothrop's dispersal and return to nature entirely negative?)

Sanders likewise sees the artist as essentially paranoid. He notes the importance to Pynchon of metaphor yet does not note that, unlike paranoia, metaphor-making is tentative, provisional. The artist's ordering bears some resemblance to paranoia but is not identical. Sanders concludes by situating *Gravity's Rainbow* sociologically, showing how well the World War II setting nurtures paranoia, and declaring Pynchon 'our most accomplished chronicler of the structures of thought and feeling that correspond to the experience of living in the administered society.'

Sanders criticizes Pynchon on similar extraliterary grounds: for mystifying the governing powers, for solipsizing and isolating, for reifying technology into a metaphysical principle, for portraying paranoia as the human condition. Yet while it is true that in this complex novel paranoia and decline are important, Sanders does not find that they are nevertheless countered by hints of hope. And is literature not allowed to exaggerate or mystify or reify to make a point? (If it is supposed to reflect reality the question becomes whose reality.) And far from bringing about catastrophe by making it seem inevitable, mightn't literature be able to warn and hence avert catastrophe?"

Clark and Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism," 242-43

[Tony Tanner, "Patterns and Paranoia or Caries and Cabals," *Salmagundi* 15 (1971)]: "He finds that Pynchon's fiction is about the need to see patterns, and the way this tendency easily leads to envisioning plots. A brief section on the story 'Entropy' allows him to outline Pynchon's definition of the two human alternatives to a chaotic and entropic world: one can stand within it and try to mitigate the chaos, or one can stand outside and create patterns to account for it. It is this patterning element which is the fundamental issue in Pynchon's fiction.... The effects and motives of...quests are Pynchon's concern. The patterning tendency is related to the fear of loving and the progressive dehumanization so evident in *V.* Similarly, in *Lot 49* Oedipa wonders whether she should 'project a world,' as Stencil has done. Tanner illustrates how, by projecting one's own obsessions through imagination, and by interpreting the signs and symbols of the world in this narcissistic way, one avoids reality, particularly the reality of human contact."

Clark and Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism," 251

"Thomas Pynchon knows the high cost of living better than anybody except the devil. Pynchon is the evil genius of our time, the man with the quickest eye for what makes this an age of rapacity and sexual hate. He is the American Goya whose dazzling canvases are lit from hell, whose message is: Death Rules For Pynchon winter came somewhere between *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon stopped playing the *V.* game, stopped telling us how to survive. He broke the balance of *V.*, released the deadlock between destructiveness and control, melted the Cold War into an open battle in which the rats surfaced, and violence broke free for a war between life and death. Death won. Pynchon became the devil, the fantasist whose rainbow has its origin in gravity, the spirit of the down....

Pynchon is the devil who went beyond the grave to anatomize the remains of the modern soul. Like Death himself he is the ultimate collector, putting together the emotional, cultural, and historical life of his generation with a brilliance and depth that outstrips in scope what Thomas Mann did for the prewar world in *The Magic Mountain*, that equals James Joyce's compendium of his time in *Ulysses*.... Pynchon is quite simply the genius of his generation. He is the Antichrist who offered up his own destructiveness to illuminate yours. Pynchon is 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? *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*"
Harper's Magazine 250
(March 1975) 82-92

"Even before John Barth came to his present prominence, a younger novelist, a graduate in engineering from Cornell University, was winning awards for nearly all his literary productions.... In 1973 his mammoth *Gravity's Rainbow* merited more media attention than any other such book in recent history, and it was (except for Kurt Vonnegut's novels) the only example of densely experimental fiction to survive on

the *New York Times* best-seller list. At a time when other innovative writers were excluding from their works conventional techniques such as extensive characterization and plot, Pynchon directed his art to the opposite extreme: in his first and third novels characters numbered in the hundreds and plots became Byzantine if not fully incomprehensible.

The Crying of Lot 49, while more economical in its *donnee*, spoke directly to the notion of plot—or conspiracy, as the paranoid delusions of its characters might so interpret. In this sense Pynchon is a member of the school of Exhaustion. His techniques do not serve an attempt to create stable fictions, but as a commentary on themselves. Rather than be a plotter himself, Pynchon assigns that function to a character—in V., Herbert Stencil. ‘He is the man,’ suggests Tony Tanner, ‘who is trying to make the connections and links, and put together the story which might well have been Pynchon’s novel.’ By standing back from fiction’s function, ‘Pynchon is able to explore the plot-making instinct itself.’ Hence technique becomes theme: development is suspicion, plot becomes paranoia, and Pynchon is able to exploit the whole theory that ‘the plots men see may be their own inventions.’ These interests reflect his times, when... ‘The techniques that emerge... get to be more interesting than do the characters themselves...’

Pynchon thus works it both ways: nihilism on the one hand, conspiracy on the other, both to the same effect. Tony Tanner concludes that... ‘By balancing between the two possibilities, it seems... that Pynchon does produce a serious study of the state of consciousness in contemporary America, while a writer like Barth, who opts to emphasize his mockery of plots at an extreme, excessively plotted length, seems to... fall away from seriousness without discovering any compensating new sources of interest or beguilement.’... V. itself sidelights a Barthian artist who produces in acrylics a series of cheese danishes, hardly a viable product: ‘this technique for the sake of technique—Catatonic Expressionism, or parodies on what someone else had already done.’ This manner of ‘Arranging and rearranging was Decadence, but the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations was death.’ Or Barth’s fourth possibility, four years before he published this conclusion himself....

Much has been written about Thomas Pynchon’s thematic concern with entropy, but in all cases the phenomenon is understood in a pejorative sense. However, entropy has aesthetically structural properties: thematically it may suggest chaos and disorder, but the more proper connotation is one of equilibrium, the sublime balance toward which all systems tend.... Yet in none of this three novels does Pynchon propose such a cosmic reordering as an imaginatively entropic system might imply. As author he stands back from his work to make an implicit ironic commentary on plot, but to this point Pynchon has been reluctant to rejoin his work as its self-responsible creator.”

Jerome Klinkowitz

Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction
(U Illinois 1975, 1980) 11-15

“The seductiveness of the praise and the hostility of the criticism might have worked equally well to compromise the special integrity of his talent. At the start, the praise was most dangerous. Indeed, with the exception of *The Crying of Lot 49*, almost every one of his works came in for immediate critical awards.... Pynchon has often been dismissed as merely clever, or as sophomorically obscene, mechanically cold, incapable of creating real characters. One distinguished academic once asked an editor of this volume how he could take seriously so academic a novelist as Pynchon.”

George Levine and David Leverenz, eds.
Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon
(Little, Brown 1976) 4-5

“Among the varieties of Christian monotheism, none is more totalitarian, none lodges more radical claims for God’s omnipotence, than Calvinism—and within America, the chief analogue of Calvinist theology, Puritanism.... A mind that preserves Puritan expectations after the Puritan God has been discredited will naturally seek another hypothesis that explains life as the product of remote control, that situates the individual within a plot whose furthest reaches he cannot fathom, that renders the creation legible once again. Paranoia offers the ideally suited hypothesis that the world is organized into a conspiracy, governed by shadowy figures whose powers approach omniscience and omnipotence, and whose manipulations of history may be detected in every chance gesture of their servants. It substitutes for

the divine plan a demonic one. [Pynchon is an Anti-Christ.] Viewed in this perspective, paranoia is the last retreat of the Puritan imagination.

Thomas Pynchon, whose novels confront us with every degree of paranoia from the private to the cosmic, offers the most thoroughgoing example within literature of the mentality [Richard] Hofstadter has identified in politics, a mentality which assumes 'the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character.' *The Crying of Lot 49*, *V.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* all exhibit the habits of language and the view of history which Hofstadter has named the paranoid style....

One of Pynchon's most distinctive and at times maddening stylistic features follows directly from this deliberate veiling of the conspiracy. All of his central figures—Oedipa Mass in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Stencil and Profane in *V.*, Slothrop and Tchitcherine and Pirate Prentice in *Gravity's Rainbow*—are, in a phrase used to describe Tchitcherine, 'held at the edge.' They are situated as far from the centers of their respective conspiracies, real or imagined, as the Puritan from his God, and consequently must piece together the most obscure hints and petty revelations to make any sense of the plot at all.... We are also 'held at the edge'; we rarely know more than the characters, and they do not know much; and the narrator, if he knows more, rarely tells....

Slothrop's paranoia appears in various guises, ranging from his suspicion that the rocket-bombs falling on London have his name written on them to his fantasy that he is the intended victim of a Father Conspiracy.... Slothrop actually has been the victim of a father conspiracy: his father volunteered him as an infant subject for psychological experiments conducted by Laszlo Jamf—a trauma from which Slothrop has never fully recovered.... Pointsman, the English Pavlovian, subsequently takes the place of the father, once again subjecting him to experimentation.... We are frequently informed of Slothrop's Puritan ancestry, which includes one Salem witch and at least one minister, and which entails expectations of discovering transcendent meaning in the details of everyday life.... Later, upon entering the Zone of postwar Germany where conspiracies proliferate with anarchic splendor, he searches for hidden meanings in everything...having lost 'the numinous certainty of God,' he hunts for conspiracies....

The paranoid must still posit some governing agency at the Center, to replace the numinous God. At various moments Slothrop imagines the conspiracy to be directed by industrialists, secret agents, the Rocket, the Earth, or simply by an unspecified Them. Pynchon himself...posits Gravity.... Part of the difficulty in reading *Gravity's Rainbow* derives from the fact that we are presented not with a plot of interwoven fates, but with overlapping case histories of private manias, each character locked within his or her own conspiratorial fantasy. Clinical paranoia is zealously self-referential: the paranoid asserts that (1) there is an order to events, a unifying purpose, however sinister, behind the seeming chaos; and (2) this purpose is focused upon the self, the star and victim. Thus the paranoid individual becomes a hero once again, he stands at the center of a plot; but it is an incurably private one, into which others can enter only as a threat. This pattern of conspiratorial visions is reinforced in *Gravity's Rainbow* by the recurrent imagery of external manipulation....

The vision of a global industrial conspiracy is in fact a classic instance of the paranoid style described by Hofstadter, according to which the enemy—here the cartel or the Rocket itself—is a 'free, active, demonic agent'.... Slothrop goes so far as to attribute the entire course of the twentieth century to the machinations of the cartel.... Pynchon regards war as a synecdoche for history itself, the drift towards death.... Fears of conspiracy are projected onto the cosmos itself.... Pynchon's entropic vision is paranoia grown cosmic.... From his earliest published stories, one of which was entitled 'Entropy,' on through his three subsequent novels, Pynchon has described a universe bent on self-destruction. Viewed in the perspective of this cosmic process, human history is no more than a transient episode, a bubble adrift upon the tide of death. The entropic movement within history and in the universe at large is a conspiracy on the part of matter itself... In Pynchon's metaphysic, the Zero, the goal toward which all history lurches, takes the place of the Puritan's Last Judgment....

The deathward movement is also figured in human relations.... There are in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as in the two previous novels, a few interludes of tenderness and compassion between human beings; but these

are so fragile and evanescent that they only accentuate by contrast the general drift toward brutality.... The dominant image of deathward movement in the novel is the Rocket itself...a god.... The entire novel takes place under the Rocket's parabolic arch, Gravity's Rainbow, because the Rocket whose crossing is announced in the opening sentence actually plummets down at the close, annihilating both speaker and reader as it ends the book... Gravity indeed becomes, in Pynchon's entropic metaphysic, the very substance of history.... Gravity...serves Pynchon as a name for the power at the center of his cosmic conspiracy, the entropic lust that drives the planet, the inimical power bent on dragging all the universe, and mankind along with it, toward death. Gravity becomes the paranoid God, wreaking destruction upon an entire cosmos imagined, in Puritan terms, as innately depraved. There are no possibilities for grace in this metaphysic: it is Calvinist theology conceived in the mode of perdition rather than salvation....

This binary perception of the possibilities for understanding history is the single most important feature of Pynchon's world view: paranoia or anti-paranoia; either everything is connected, or nothing is connected; reality either radiates from a Center, or it is centerless; history is either wholly determined from without, or it is wholly meaningless; the individual is either manipulated, or he is simply adrift. Once again the pattern of theological expectations is evident: either there is some principle as powerful and absolute as God to order the universe, or else the universe is chaos.... The dread that there *are* no conspiracies appears to be Pynchon's chief spur to fiction-making.... The manic energy of Pynchon's writing suggests...a hopeless attempt to roof the void with words. *Gravity's Rainbow* reads at times like one long stylistic filibuster, a proliferation of symbolically charged passages, all designed to postpone the apocalyptic fall of the Rocket, the reassertion of the inanimate....

Pynchon

paranoia
cosmic conspiracy
Gravity
membership in the Firm
exclusion from conspiracy
multiple narrative patterns
remote control
binary vision
decadence of history
paranoid self-reference
the Zero

Puritanism

faith
God's plan
God's will
election
preterition
typology
grace
theism/atheism
depravity of man
personal salvation
Last Judgment

Scott Sanders

"Pynchon's Paranoid History"
Mindful Pleasures (1976)139-54

"Pynchon's novels disorient. They offer as a world we think we recognize, assimilate it to worlds that seem unreal, imply coherences and significances we can't quite hold on to. Invariably, as the surreal takes on the immediacy of experience, they make us feel the inadequacy of conventional modes of making sense—of analysis, causal explanation, logic... For if the invoked myth of annunciation is one way to talk about Oedipa's situation, it still misses the possibility that nothing is coming, that in fact the book will never yield its secret and threatens to be an elaborate joke, or that whatever is coming is neither divine nor demonic. Even Oedipa's sense of two possibilities—a real conspiracy or a paranoid fantasy—the binary options reminding us of the way Pynchon toys with computer mathematics, flip-flopping, ones and zeroes, misses the possibility of the now excluded middle, the 'bad shit' that Oedipa had learned (probably incorrectly) 'had to be avoided'....

The full significance of Pynchon's fiction is in its styles, in its language, since the language is called upon to sustain the uncertainty it is structured to deny, to imply what cannot be articulated in language. Pynchon denies resolution into myth by wandering among all the available myths, from those of the Greeks to those of modern science, technology, film, comic books, radio. Verbal and mythic virtuosity is not, in Pynchon, show-off obscuring of what might be made clear, but, in a way, what the books are about; and, like almost everything else in Pynchon's world, virtuosity is both a threat and a possibility.

Pynchon himself understands the connections between his own kind of virtuosity and the historical decadence with which his books are so much preoccupied. That connection is one of the dominant explicit concerns of *V. The Whole Sick Crew*, sinking into 'Catatonic Expressionism,' values 'technique for the sake of technique...parodies on what other people had already done.' And Victoria Wren 'felt that skill or any virtue was a desirable and lovely thing purely for its own sake; and it became more effective the further divorced it was from moral intention.' The technology of Pynchon's prose parallels the technology of sex and destruction that runs through the three novels....

With such ambitions, the prose must also be self-consciously amoral, as though the ultimate morality is in a truly Whitmanesque embrace of everything, of coprophilia, sadism, masochism, gangbans and daisy chains, genocide, incest, sodomy, fellatio, transvestitism, torture, physical decay, murder, pie-throwing, decomposition, toilet bowls. But not only these. It is a prose that seems almost desperate in the tricks it will invent to keep from its own finitude, to find some sort of life in the very decadence and de-animation of which it is a symptom.... The question the prose proposes for us at every moment is whether we are strong enough to accept the details as they come to us. Pynchon anticipates the risk of such acceptance. To live exclusively in and with the moment is difficult and dangerous not only for readers but for characters within the fiction; characters who do this reject relations to the past or thought of the future, lose the capacity for love....

Experience belies the simplification of binary choices into which our logic and our language bind us.... The discontinuities, the surprises, the refusals of categories, the fake mythologizing—these all confront us with the possibility that art is most valuable, in a culture where power resides among the organizers, when it rejects the tradition of organic coherence we take as a universal standard. Might not that art be best—at this moment, in this place—that constantly pushes toward the possibility of fragmentation?... We become Stencil, or Stencilized, in our attempt to make order out of various fragments.... The pressure toward anarchy, in a world structured to resist anarchy at any cost, might release us, ironically, into a more humane order.... [Cormac McCarthy mocks this liberal notion in *The Road*, 2006.] The possibilities of an anarchic style and structure seem to me more centrally the 'subject' of Pynchon's fictions than even entropy or charisma or the preterite and elect of Calvinism or paranoia....

It is important to see how much Pynchon participates in the horrors he describes....participates in the technical joys and power lust involved in the activity. Moral judgment becomes irrelevant... Pynchon has been criticized for not creating 'real' characters and, especially, for creating loveless worlds. But traditional character is an imagination of order and structure that belies the pervasiveness of change, variety, aimlessness, waste. Character, in traditional fiction, is the clearest emblem of the elect—dominating and controlling the action of the world. And Pynchon creates character by imagining it as participating in the energies of the world created around it. He mocks (especially in the names) and uses the notions of character fiction has inherited, but, as Fausto Maijstral insists, even the self is an invention....

Despair is a way to avoid the responsibilities of caring.... By all this I only mean that in Pynchon's work I am far more disposed to trust the moments than any ideas I might invent to account for them. Good critics can and do assume that Pynchon is (a) paranoid or (b) mocking the traditional structures that imply paranoia; that he is (a) asserting the inevitable heat-death of the world and the futility of resisting it, even in its local manifestations, or (b) suggesting that life, in its extraordinary capacity to produce surprises, constantly resists the heat-death, as must we all; that there is nothing to be done, or that there is everything to be done; that he is on the side of the elect, or that he is on the side of the preterite; that he is asserting disorder, or that he is implying some kind of transcendent order; that choices are binary or multiple. I keep thinking that I know what I believe on these matters, and then keep discovering that I don't.... Not knowing is an important qualification for participating imaginatively in his fictions. Only by surrendering our demands for order can we be released into the terror of the moment....

It remains problematical for me how seriously we are to take the implicit otherworldliness, perhaps religiosity, of Pynchon's world.... [Slothrop] achieves the anarchist ideal.... The moment becomes the enactment of the anarchic visionary ideal that animates much of Pynchon's fictions. Since it is an ideal it must, in Pynchon's world, dissolve, but if we are willing to risk it, there may be at the center of each

preterite moment a stout rainbow cock and a wet valleyed earth. It is commonplace now to talk of Pynchon as our poet of death, but like everything else we might invent to say about him—perhaps more so—it is a falsification. Certainly, he rubs our faces upsparingly in shit....

Pynchon's world is prepolitical; it implies that every political program is, at best, one more warren in the labyrinths we build between us and the moments, the caring, we ignore. It is not, however, antipolitical We must risk action and loss by penetrating the moment; it would be good if we could do it as Pynchon does, terrified but lovingly, for the risk is the possibility."

George Levine
"Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction"
Mindful Pleasures (1976) 113-35

"Henry Adams' frustrated, haunted search for order amid increasing signs of chaos in human and natural history is a kind of thematic model for 'Entropy,' Pynchon's first published story, and for *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*... In the novels particularly, the plot revolves around a quest for meaning to various bizarre events, which unlike the meaning Adams searches for, may be sinister. In *The Education*, Adams' pursuit of order looked forward to interpretable and therefore controllable structure in history and nature, as opposed to what he grew to fear at the onset of the twentieth century, entire meaninglessness and randomness.

Pynchon's characters search for malign plots in the same way that Henry Adams searched hopefully for structure—to avoid the greater fear of randomness, absurdity, or simply entropy. It might be said that the Virgin, which Adams saw as the dynamism of medieval Europe, a symbol that sparked and directed massive outpourings of human energy, is closely related to *V.*, an elusive and increasingly inanimate object which performs miraculous feats by technological control. This is very close to Henry Adams' view: humanity gives itself up to a source of energy that is no longer alive—the Virgin becomes the dynamo—and thereby the devotion of humanity becomes an expenditure toward chaos, the fear of entropy triggered by fetishism into outright destructiveness. *Gravity's Rainbow* extends and perfects this idea as the symbol of devotion becomes the most dramatic and characteristic product of twentieth-century technology, the supersonic rocket. In this third novel, Pynchon's anatomy occurs more definably within the parameters of modern history than in *V.* or *The Crying of Lot 49*. The central symbol is more literal, less simply allegorical, and therefore more effective....

As *Gravity's Rainbow* unfolds, it becomes apparent that in his third and best novel Pynchon remains fascinated by the force of entropy, perhaps to the point of confusion... One can only wonder if in some odd way Pynchon has not taken the concept of entropy too seriously, allowing an idea from physics, which has validity as a psychological delusion, to dominate his own view of human life. All life—all biological and historical events immediate enough to be of human concern—involves growth and self regulation as well as decay and death, and in not recognizing that fact Pynchon falls prey to a peculiar blindness, a heady eccentricity, broad and fascinating and about as metaphorically accurate as Heraclitus' notion that all things are of fire."

Speer Morgan
"Gravity's Rainbow: What's the Big Idea?"
Modern Fiction Studies 23
(Summer 1977) 199-216

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Pynchon's concept of nature is entropic, and his farce reflects that view... One can only wonder if in some odd way Pynchon has not taken the concept of entropy too seriously, allowing an idea from physics, which has validity as a psychological delusion, to dominate his own view of human life. All life—all biological and historical events immediate enough to be of human concern—involves growth and self-regulation as well as decay and death, and in not recognizing that fact Pynchon falls prey to a peculiar blindness, a head eccentricity, broad and fascinating and about as metaphorically accurate as Heraclitus' notion that all things are of fire."

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"Some contemporary writers—the hardest to read and thus the easiest to teach—claim to be not very interested in 'truth'.... The term 'post-modernism' not only isolates a few writers and praises them, beyond their due, depressing the stock of others or willfully neglecting them; it judges cynical or nihilistic writers as characteristic of the age, and therefore significant, and thus supports even celebrates ideas no father would wittingly teach his children....The writers they then talk about are invariably the 'postmodern' ones—the writers the new term was invented to explain."

John Gardner
On Moral Fiction
(Basic Books, 1978) 53-56

"The fabulative movement grew and flourished...drawing strength from masters like Borges and Nabokov and finally, in works like Gravity's Rainbow, Ragtime, and The Public Burning, turning back toward the stuff of history itself and reinvigorating it with an imagination tempered by a decade and more of fictional experimentation. For experimental fabulation—or 'metafiction,' as I have called it, following William Gass's suggestion—has been one of the special and important features of the fabulative movement.... I have also tried to acknowledge the important fact that not all experiments are successful....

[Postmodern fictions] are essentially amoral and resist violently any attempt to assimilate them as exempla of an orderly moral world. The moral fable is kin to the larger satire; the amoral fable to the picaresque tale, which can grow very long indeed. And both of these large forms have something to do with that movement in modern fiction...which is often called black humor. Many of this country's exciting young writers are connected in some way with this literary movement. Albee, Barth, Donleavy, Friedman, Hawkes, Heller, Purdy, Pynchon, Southern, and Vonnegut have all been stamped with this dark label at one time or another...

Where Stephen Daedalus [Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 1916] found history to be a nightmare from which he was trying to awake, the verbal artists of our time find it readily adaptable to the artifices of daydream and fabulation.... [Works by Pynchon] bristle with facts and smell of research of the most painstaking kind. Yet they deliberately challenge the notion that history may be retrieved by objective investigation of fact [How else?].... Gravity's Rainbow...is documentarily accurate to an extraordinary degree but calmly intersperses outrageous and impossible events among its historical details.... In America myth has always been stronger than reality, Romanticism stronger than Realism." [This dismissal of the

Realist, Naturalist, and Modernist movements is by a secular liberal academic in the Postmodernist bubble who is accommodating Political Correctness.]

Robert Scholes
Fabulation and Metafiction
(U Illinois 1979) 4, 142, 206-08

"Pynchon develops a nostalgia for unity, for a commonly accepted set of values—such as existed in great Renaissance works like the King James Bible and the epic—and utilizes this nostalgia and its contradiction in a fragmented universe to create the absurd. The powerful impact of novels of the absurd, ranging from Melville's *The Confidence-Man* to novels of the 1960s and 70s attests to the fact that man cannot divest himself of the desire for a traditional sense of clarity and meaning. Novelists of black humor and the absurd have an eager audience in our post World War II society because people continue to want unifying principles in a chaotic world....

Black humorists like Pynchon depend on the reader's nostalgia for the allusive mode. They set up patterns of allusions, collapse them, and laugh at the reader's disappointment....These writers laugh at man's helplessness in an alien universe and in a societal complex that has grown way beyond his control. They speak of entropy with casualness. They encourage the reader to work out endless quests for order that conclude in collapse of expectation, causing the reader to respond with existential anxiety or bitter laughter rather than happiness....

Writers of the absurd and black humor do not wish to show quests of great heroes, but instead desire to have protagonists who are deformed, like the gimping Giles [Barth's *Goat-Boy*], who was brought up with the goats (not the sheep), and Slothrop, whose actions were programmed from infancy by Dr. Jampf.... Writers of absurdist literature are motivated by a frustrated desire for order and value. Without a longing for correspondences between man and nature, there would be no literature of the absurd.... This is the pattern found in literature of black humor and the absurd: a continual buildup and destruction; a longing for unity confronted with fragmentation."

Elaine B. Safer
"The Allusive Mode and Black Humor in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*"
Renascence 32 (Winter 1980) 89-104

"[Pynchon] dissociates thought from action, idea from feeling, allocating each to binary or opposing characters and plot lines. He pursues this technique in *V.*, and makes it more convoluted in *The Crying of Lot 49*, which winds around a single character. His purpose is to frustrate the sentimental identification with either character or action; by doing so, he dramatizes within our response to his fiction—in our effort to join idea and feeling—the moral and psychic difficulty of living humanely with what we know to be true."

Thomas Schaub
"'A Gentle Chill, An Ambiguity': *The Crying of Lot 49*"
Pynchon: *The Voice of Ambiguity*
(U Illinois 1980) 21-22

[James Dean Young, "The Enigma Variations of Thomas Pynchon," *Critique* 10.1 (1968)]: "Young finds that 'The Crying of Lot 49 is a briefer, more schematic version of *V*' and he argues that both novels have elicited widely different critical opinions because they are enigmatic—they seem to invite interpretations which, in fact, they resist.... Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil are characters who lack 'individual significance,' and Oedipa is only ironically an Oedipus-figure because she too, like Profane and Herbert Stencil, fails to solve the riddle, and to understand the true meaning which resides in Pynchon's world. By denying the expected and apparent significance of characters, Pynchon points out the distance between their inherent reality and the fictional abstractions....

Similarly, history appears to rest on meaningful interpretations of the past. But by a proliferation of irreducible details, Pynchon shows that the past cannot be meaningfully abstracted in this way. It can be re-created in its complexity, or reduced to a simple generalization; but both are fictional activities.

Geography, in the use of Malta or Southern California, seems to possess a significance which is absorbed into the larger issues of the novel, having no inherent connection with the character or plot."

Beverly Clark and Caryn Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism"
Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon
ed. Richard Pearce
(G. K. Hall 1981) 253

[Roger B. Henkle, "Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," *Modern Fiction Studies* 17, 1971]: "The literary figure Pynchon most resembles is Nabokov, whose novels, particularly *The Invitation of a Beheading*, illustrate the way in which subjectivity so alters the reality of the past that fictions themselves become reality. The search for the character V. is informed by Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, which associates 'the fall of Western culture with the debasement of the religious and poetic myths which the White Goddess embodied.' V. is associated with the White Goddess, and the deterioration of her character as projected by Stencil's imagination suggests 'the decline of the cultural dominance of the European West.' Pynchon's relationship to such antecedents, however, is not one of easy or simple acceptance, and often he parodies the cultural and historical notions which form the patterns of his novels.

While V. suggests the confrontation of European and American cultures, in the distinction between V. and the Benny Profane episodes, Lot 49 'sees America in terms of its own cultural assumptions.' Its characters are isolated and paranoid, but not doomed to remain so. Henkle suggests three major ways in which Pynchon's novels offer hope: individual love for others; the rise of colonial subjects in V., as a way of redeeming the Western world's decline; and the individual acceptance of his or her own culture. Henkle finds, however, that Pynchon's suggestions of affirmation are not convincing or compelling, and that this is largely due to his 'weakness [in] realizing character.' Oedipa, for example, illustrates the failure of character to support the thematic weight Pynchon assigns to her, although Pynchon tries, intermittently, to create characters who dramatize ideas in this traditional realistic way.... Pynchon's loosely structured fictions, with their elaborate, inventive views of the past, are similar to the romantic epic.

While Pynchon's novels emphasize 'the failure of our cultural assumptions, our philosophies, and even our imaginative constructs, to transform our lives.' Henkle suggests that Pynchon as author is a victim of this same failure of imagination. He does not transform the materials and patterns of his art into a fully imagined world. Pynchon's patterns of allusions are too often contrived and superficial, his use of parody and realism too indecisive. Henkle's analysis of Pynchon's characterization has been the most provocative element of this article for subsequent critics."

Beverly Clark and Caryn Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism"
Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon
ed. Richard Pearce
(G. K. Hall 1981) 231-32

[Levine, "Risking the Moment," 1976]: "There are moments of pure experience which do not fit the expected historical or social patterns, and these 'anarchic' moments provide the human element in this fiction which is so often thought to be over-intellectualized. The challenge to Pynchon's characters is to be open to the moments of anarchic experience while retaining the necessary orderly pattern of survival. The virtuosity of Pynchon's language is a way of providing those moments...The explicit description of Esther's nose job in V. is an example of how Pynchon's language functions. It implicates us in the reduction of Esther to an object, for by sharing the stylistic virtuosity of the language, we are allowed no comfortable moral or moralistic perspective.... The language of Pynchon's fiction suggests its own limitations even while offering the possibility of moving beyond them."

Beverly Clark and Caryn Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism" (1981) 234-45

"It's art that's more intellectualized than *realized*.... They're no longer interested in narrative or character, blah-blah-blah.... Think of the reduction in the pleasures that the novel can give us if we have to say that Barth and Gass and Barthelme are the only people who are doing it right, and everybody else should get off the ship... Anyone who's really tried to write strenuously knows that it's *much* more difficult to be clear than it is to be hard to understand; *anybody* can be hard to understand."

John Irving
Interviews

"Pynchon sees and represents post-war America as the logical, prepared heir for German death-technology; he insists on the multi-national origins of technocracy and its financial well-springs, and disturbs many Americans by seeing these global, multinational technocracies as the central fact of World War II. Even the Nazis and the Holocaust remain by-products. They are afflictions whose deeper causes Pynchon's jeremiad seeks to identify.... While it repudiates utterly the Puritan venture into the New World, in its recasting of the chronometric-horological nexus [Pynchon's work] demonstrates the incredibly tenacious hold which Puritanism maintains on the American imagination.... 'A screaming comes across the sky'—intimates a typical jeremiad symbol of God's wrath coming out of the heavens to punish errant humanity.... The controlling idea of *GR* is that the world's present predicament—the system of global terror dominated by ICBMs—threatens to fulfill in historical time the apocalyptic and millennial visions which prevailed in the Puritan culture of colonial New England."

Marcus Smith and Khachig Tololyan
"The New Jeremiad: *Gravity's Rainbow*"
Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon
ed. Richard Pearce
(G. K. Hall 1981) 184-85, 169

"For Henry Adams at the turn of the century, history was like a cannon ball coming directly towards him, and he could trace its five-thousand year curve.... In 1900 'the continuity snapped'.... Pynchon gives palpable shape to the 'new world' Adams tried to imagine—in his fictional landscapes and the very form of his novels, which are at once multiple and monolithic, anarchic and ominously patterned He was born in 1937, well into the century that astonished Adams, and seems to see nothing but discontinuity. That is, he not only understands but has fully assimilated the concepts of modern science—where unity gives way to multiplicity, order to disorder, progress to entropy, continuity to discontinuity, the law of cause-and-effect to the rule of probability, the ideal of certainty to the necessity of uncertainty. And Pynchon confronts the paradox which Adams only began to glimpse: of a 'new world' that is absolutely anarchic and yet totally governed by an impersonal force....

The very act of observation causes uncertainty—as Pynchon shows in the failure of Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas. But Heisenberg—and Pynchon—go further, and show that indeterminacy inheres in nature itself.... If *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* dramatize the uncertainty produced by a central character in the act of observation and investigation, *Gravity's Rainbow* shows that indeterminacy is inherent in Pynchon's world for it lacks a central or unified observer even in the role of narrator. That is, the narrative voice and vantage shift so often, so discontinuously, and so disconcertingly that the narrator is never more than another indeterminate element in the novel's field.... In each of his novels, Pynchon draws us into a search for order, where the information and uncertainty become overwhelming, and where the search itself, while necessary and even ennobling, tends toward disorder....

But a key word in the second law of thermodynamics is 'tends.' A system *tends* to run down. We are back to probability. There is always a small chance of a system not running down—or of a force that counteracts thermodynamic entropy. The possibility of such a force is embodied in Pynchon's characters who search for order—Herbert Stencil in *V.*, Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*—as well as in the reader, whom Pynchon compels to join in the search....

The very act of observation cause uncertainty—as Pynchon shows in the failures of Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas. But Heisenberg—and Pynchon—go further, and show that indeterminacy inheres in nature itself. (Heisenberg's theory is borne out by a phenomenon well known to physicists....).... If *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* dramatize the uncertainty produced by a central character in the act of observation and

investigation, *Gravity's Rainbow* shows that indeterminacy is inherent in Pynchon's world for it lacks a central or unified observer even in the role of narrator. That is, the narrative voice and vantage shift so often, so discontinuously, and so disconcertingly that the narrator is never more than another indeterminate element in the novel's field.

The 'new world' that Adams tried to imagine and that Pynchon invokes is like the world of modern physics. It is discontinuous and uncertain, acting not like a machine but a cylinder of gas, and governed not by the laws of cause-effect but the rule of probability. Since it consists of elements in continual motion and individually unpredictable, and since the motion tends toward disorder—the 'new world' appears anarchic. But since probability rules, it is also governed by an impersonal and despotic order that may result from either accident or design....

Pynchon may reveal the modern world as a wasteland, but unlike Eliot he revels in the waste and disorder. In an early story called 'Low-Lands,' Dennis Flage leaves his home overlooking Long Island Sound for a garbage dump—where he can drink muscatel with his buddies and follow a beautiful gypsy through an old refrigerator into a grotto of delight. This becomes the sewer of *V.* where Benny Profane hunts blind albino alligators, the nightworld of *Lot 49* where Oedipa discovers hundreds of people who have dropped out of the Republic and communicate by depositing letters in containers marked W.A.S.T.E., and the underground of the Zone where Tyrone Slothrop escapes by disappearing from *Gravity's Rainbow*. Which is to say that, while Pynchon more than any other modern novelist makes us feel the tangible threat of disorder, disorder also excites his imagination.... Pynchon's creativity, then, has its own demonic dimension. His impulse, like that of the devils in the medical *sottie* plays, is to excite us—or bring us to life."

Richard Pearce, ed.
Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon
(G. K. Hall 1981) 1-7

"He emerges from that extraordinary proliferation of experimentation in the novel which so deeply shaped the direction of American fiction during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus he takes his place in a period of American writing that includes such authors as William Burroughs, Joseph Heller, John Hawkes, John Barth, Robert Coover, Rudolph Wurlitzer, Ishmael Reed, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, and many others. The aesthetic funds alive at this time were various, but in particular I believe he was affected by the work of William Gaddis, whose novel *The Recognitions* (1955) exerted a general influence that has yet to be fully traced. This generation of American writers was in turn influenced by many European and South-American writers—in particular, Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nobokov, but also Samuel Beckett, Italo Calvino, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Gunter Grass. That list could be extended; but suffice it to say that Pynchon was writing his novels during an extraordinarily rich time of ferment and innovation in the contemporary novel, and quickly became one of its essential voices.

However, looked at from another angle, Pynchon's work takes its place in that line of dazzlingly daring, even idio-syncratic American writing which leads back through writers like Faulkner to Mark Twain and Hawthorne, and above all to Melville and *Moby-Dick*.... We can see Pynchon continuing that series of radical shifts and innovations in fictional technique which was started by Conrad and James, and continued by Joyce—all of whom are both creatively eclectic and unmistakably original."

Tony Tanner
Thomas Pynchon
(Methuen 1982) 90-91

"Pynchon not only anticipates but encourages a [traditional] 'modernist reading' in order to sabotage contemporary habits of mind that derive from certain of the assumptions of modernism.... In the absence of a transcendent God, the source of order can only be the individual human subject.... By confronting his characters with the choice between an outside power imposing order on the world or an inside power (either the shaping imagination, or paranoia, or both) imposing order on the world, Pynchon parodies a post-religious attitude that takes these extremes as exhaustive....

The disjointed chronology and multiple narrators of [V.] do not simply veil a conventional story line; instead, Pynchon thwarts expectations of metonymic coherence in order to emphasize relations of resemblance between past and present events, relations that his characters inevitably fail to recognize.... Pynchon's most straightforward and conventionally 'pure' narrative [*The Crying of Lot 49*] subverts its own sense of an ending by projecting dual conclusions that are in the strictest sense unimaginable. Although all the action seems to anticipate a climactic resolution that will either bestow absolute value and significance on the novel's world or affirm that neither value nor significance is possible, certain apparently nonessential or 'waste' elements of the narrative turn out to have paramount importance.... His shadowy central figures V. and the Tristero personify history, and their inexorable development toward some ultimately nihilistic goal becomes an allegory for the inevitable decline of humanity—or at least becomes such an allegory for those characters (and readers) who are disposed to read experience as a plot. Both works parody the desire for narrative closure...

The arc of the V-2 rocket, the 'gravity's rainbow' of the title, serves as a metaphor for all linear, totalizing systems, including the 'system' of the novel itself. The first section, 'Structures Favoring Death,' draws a parallel between the rocket's parabolic path and the path of providential history moving from its origin in the Fall to its terminus in apocalyptic annihilation, and suggests that the twentieth-century theory of a universe running down as it gains entropy is simply a revised version of the Christian myth, with the possibility of salvation removed. The second section, 'Murphy's Law,' points out the inadequacies that Pynchon finds in all such comprehensive explanatory schemata. No ordering principle can govern all aspects of reality because reality is not a single system, and Pynchon betrays his own apparent gravity—the high seriousness of his apparently nihilistic vision—by allowing the action of the novel to proliferate, thereby evading the control of the ostensible structure metaphor....

Each of Pynchon's novels presents a fictional universe comprised of overlapping networks of codes and inhabited by at least one hermeneuticist who attempts to break these codes in order to reach a culminating revelation. These 'critical' characters function as analogues to the reader, piecing together bits of information to construct a coherent interpretation out of burgeoning intimations of interconnectedness. Each arrives at a reading of the evidence that is at once structurally elegant and thematically despairing: either '*everything is connected*'—in a cosmic conspiracy that reduces individual agency to a pathetic delusion—or '*nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long*'.... [What if many things are connected and many things are not?]

Each of his 'critical' character inevitably arrives at an impasse when his reconstructing activities lead him to the familiar antitheses: the world is either formed or formless, meaningful or meaningless, orderly or chaotic, a unified system or a jumble of random components. But...it is remarkable how few of the novels' proliferating implications are covered by either pole of the antithesis.... If the relations are real, they constitute an ironic argument from design testifying to the existence of a malign or at least antihuman designer—known as Them in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and V. in *V.* In this case, if the quest does get at the truth about the way things are, the truth that human beings are completely under the control of outside forces. Knowledge is not power but proof of impotence, and under the circumstances it may be just as well not to know. If the relations are imaginary, on the other hand, the quest reveals nothing but a desire to discern connections, among a random assembly of wholly unrelated details.... Inquiry is perpetually deprived of its object and locked in its own sterile cogitations. The questing hero becomes the paranoid, intuiting connections out of his own need for order and unable even to share his delusory experience.

The protagonists of all three books confront these alternatives. Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* vacillates between paranoia and antiparanoia until he begins to disintegrate. Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* waits 'for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew' and make room for some 'middle' between the absolute reality and the absolute unreality of her totalizing principle, the Tristero. Herbert Stencil in *V.* weighs his evidence, finds that it points either to a plot that engulfs him or to the fact that he has tried to 'exhume an hallucination' and begins to repeat obsessively, 'Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic.' The persistent opposition is extremely ominous, and Pynchon keeps returning to it to ring new changes on the Sophoclean theme of knowledge as tragedy.

The problem with such 'ominous logic,' however, is that it is not particularly logical. There is an infinite 'middle' region between the hyperbolic extremes of an absolute, externally imposed (i.e., a particular kind of) order and total chaos, and Pynchon's novels inhabit this 'middle' region.... Pynchon's novels themselves are 'middles,' and they demonstrate how much significance can be included within a plurality of limited, contingent, overlapping systems that coexist and form relations with one another without achieving abstract intellectual closure.... His novels, like his characters, are obsessed with connections, but none of the novels adds up to a single idea of order. Each subverts oversimplifications by dramatizing multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory ideas of order that express the human effort to find intelligibility in experiences....

By making their own experiences the consequence of a long historical buildup, they effectively locate the 'rising action' in the past. Both *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* play explicitly on the notion that the climax has already occurred, and that at some retrospective point on the time-line, history took an irreversible downward turn. In both of these books, the plunge toward annihilation was precipitated by a rising technology, which grew like Frankenstein's creature to dominate its creators.... Only America seems bent on self-destruction, and the downward curve is less steep, leading to a progressively more fragmented and banal culture that promises to suffocate people in their own waste. Pynchon finds an analogy for such 'plots' in the vision of universal rundown suggested by the second law of thermodynamics....

In Pynchon's comic vision, Western man is a failed platonist, committed to the proposition that the truth is One, and able to function only because he keeps happening on truths on the way toward the elusive Truth. People take note of diversity by trying to resolve it into unity. By the same token, Pynchon's novels promise to add up in order to call attention to the complex ways in which they do *not* add up.... Yeats wrote, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Pynchon... constructs his radically decentralized texts around the premise that the center is unaccountably missing.... The novels resist efforts to subordinate some parts to others in the interests of a comprehensible coherence. Pynchon is able to sustain multiple emphases by loading the *promise* of insight to come with more connotations than any set of determinate meaning-statements could conceivably bear, and they differing fulfillment of this promise beyond the conclusions of the books. The trope of the unavailable insight thus allows all three books to end before they can 'come to a conclusion.' Because the novels embody a promise of revelation, the thematic 'conclusion'—the articulation of what this all means—haunts each book as something that is not there....

Centerlessness is not so much a theme, finally, as a condition, the given in Pynchon's fictional worlds that makes action, and writing, possible.... Pynchon's fictions inhabit the boundless space between the originating One of a postulated primal unity and the terminating Zero that is the end of time: the space of language and the freedom of language to constitute worlds.... Within the worlds of Pynchon's novels, language is the matter out of which meanings must be compounded, and its 'endlessly diddling play' must produce all the coherence and value that these worlds can have....

If language is the condition of the only experience that is possible within the novels, it is absurd to strain after a 'reality' beyond the reach of words. The space of the fallen world is also the space of radical freedom, and the challenge is to produce versions of coherence out of the fact that words signify each other. Meaning must emerge from the play of language, or it will not emerge at all. In the absence of an external guarantor of truth [God], human beings must constitute fictions to address their needs for meaning and value. The capacity of language to proliferate endlessly serves the enterprise of creating new fictions, each in its own way a response to the demand for a supreme fiction, none of them able to maintain supremacy....

Pynchon's characters and narrators look for causes. In this enterprise they resemble the classical physicist who aims to trace all the phenomena of his world to a system of laws.... The inhabitants of Pynchon's worlds continually try to exchange their freedom for the security of a wholly coherent causal explanation. In this way the yearning to find causes becomes a symptom of a primordial nostalgia for the absent, originating Center [God].... It is because they succeed in foxying inevitability that the novels are ultimately comic.... *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* constantly violate expectation with abrupt shifts in tone, unforeseen plot developments, and contextual implausibilities. Such violations not

only deflate incipient high seriousness but provide new frameworks for multiplying possibilities and discerning unimagined correspondences.”

Molly Hite

Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon
(Ohio State U 1983) 5, 10-12, 101

“Controversy about Pynchon’s work intensified over the years since the appearance of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Roger Sale, in *On Not Being Good Enough: Writings of a Working Critic* (1979), ranked Pynchon among ‘imperial novelists,’ those ‘writers whose imaginations are powerful, inventive, conquering.’ They may ‘detest the American empire’ but ‘were in fact also expressing it, and deriving some of their enormous energy from it.’ Pynchon’s writing, in spite of its flaws, can be ‘stunning,’ impelled by ‘thrusts of energy through long and often magnificent flights and swoops.’ However, John Gardner, in *On Moral Fiction* (1978), listed Pynchon among writers of ‘inflated reputations’—grouped with John Updike and John Barth, they will ‘die of intellectual blight, academic narrowness, or fakery’....

In a survey of ‘The American Political Novel’ (*New York Times Book Review*, 10 August 1980), Robert Alter ranked Pynchon among ‘adversary novelists.’ Their strategy is ‘to render what is conceived of as an American sickness unto death in a zany phantasmagoria of an apocalyptic cast.’ Pynchon’s work (along with others’) exhibited an ‘astonishing degree of puerility.’ Alter also inveighed against Pynchon’s ‘sexual and scatological imaginings.’ He saw this kind of writing as ‘a clear sanction for adolescent outbursts as an appropriate response to politics.’ In his essay ‘The Enemies of Intimacy’ (*Harper’s Magazine*, July 1980), a critique of pseudoculture, the late George P. Elliott expressed his concern for ‘the madness that best characterizes our time...paranoia, or, in dilution, paranoid tendencies.’ He argued that ‘an example is the enormous overvaluation of a novel like Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which does not realistically portray complex characters who, among their other qualities, take a paranoid view of the world, nor does it, as Beckett does, perform astonishing arabesques in the narrow strand between lush paranoia and nothingness. Instead it *projects* paranoia’....

Such disputations over the worth of Pynchon’s work are minimal when compared with the multiplicity of views about its meaning. It is not difficult to see why. Worldwide, Pynchon may be counted among a handful of writers since Joyce who challenge to their utmost the intellectual capabilities of scholars. Because he is so fascinating, invigorating, demanding, he has become the object of an amazing surge of critical interest. His fiction, especially *Gravity’s Rainbow*, is rich, resonant, ambiguous—it therefore invites and generates varied interpretations.”

Charles Clerc, ed.

Approaches to Gravity’s Rainbow
(Ohio State U 1983) 4-6

“His fiction reformulates in human terms the...discoveries that Maxwell, Planck, Heisenberg, and Einstein formulated in their physics.... Pynchon not only bases his thematic analyses of human society and psychology on the concepts or ‘themes’ of today’s science, but he also renders into literature its most challenging epistemological and methodological problems.... Most of what is distinctive in Pynchon, even his radical ambivalence, reflects some development in modern physics. His profound and varied use of science may be his most important contribution to contemporary letters; it is what differentiates him most clearly from the other counterrealists and makes him seem esoteric or inaccessible to many readers.... But despite all his misgivings and qualifications, Pynchon finally sanctions the building of interpretive systems or models of the world. They are imperfect but necessary....

He charts the decay of the West, sometimes despairingly, sometimes mockingly. But he also explores our civilization’s latent possibilities for reversing the trend. Especially in works written after *V.*, he urges repeatedly that things do not have to be the way they are.... The very atmosphere of uncertainty so peculiar to Pynchon’s work suggests that possibilities remain open even if unrealized, that cultural heat death is not, as Callisto thought, inexorable and irreversible. After all, America is not the closed system of physics: it comprises human beings who...are not themselves closed systems.... In all of Pynchon’s works, defining contours dissolve in the general malaise. This is Pynchon’s ‘entropic vision’...his concern not so much

with a moribund cosmos as with 'the dehumanizing processes of mechanistic society that transform animate man into inanimate automaton'....

Besides Pynchon and Barth, the counterrealists include Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*), Ken Kesey (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Donald Barthelme, William Burroughs, John Hawkes, William Gaddis, Tom Robbins, Ishmael Reed, Henry Van Dyke, Susan Sontag, Vladimir Nabokov, and Jorge Luis Borges. Perhaps these writers differ most obviously from the neorealists in their portrayal of the human being as a relatively flat, insubstantial figure adrift in an alien world. That world, sometimes rendered with great particularity, is typically fantastic, grotesque, absurd, mysteriously threatening, filled with unforeseen events or shocking juxtapositions—a labyrinth, oddly animated by plots that seem deliberately and malevolently opposed to human priorities. When preexisting forces shape reality, the individual is shrunk to insignificance. Authors may reinforce this point by populating their works with two-dimensional cartoon-like props, a strategy not appreciated by some critics.... That leads to narrative disruptions and to self-parody."

Peter L. Cooper

Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World
(U California 1983) 3, 47, 73, 110-11

"Cybernetic fiction is the consummate human artifact of a techtopian culture, as much as the computer with which it competes: it is the result of the hypertropic growth of [fictional] techniques into some ultimate tool for the embodiment of consciousness, and yet it seems driven to surpass its own machinery, to resist ironically and paradoxically—in short, to deconstruct—its own incarnate metaphor.... Pynchon's work not only employs cybernetic metaphors and analyses to forge a critique of technology, but that he applies information theory directly to the creation of the style and form of his work.... Pynchon's exegeticists tend to treat his work as though it is an enormous computer. They roam inside its circuitry like Oedipa Maas or Stencil or Slothrop 'caught between the zeroes and ones,' trying to map completely the interconnections...

As many critics have proposed, Pynchon's work is eminently self-reflexive. V., *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* inspire in the reader the same compulsive desire to organize a welter of data and seek some central undisclosed truth as plagues his heroes and heroine. The serious reader of Pynchon who is drawn into this cabalistic game finds only that Pynchon mocks him.... For in Pynchon the only totalizing system is the absence of a totalizing system or the evident lack of a complete and consistent structure of meaning that would satisfy the positivist in us all. In V. (1963), Pynchon calls the mania for system 'stencilizing,' and in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Oedipa's paranoid pursuit of the truth derives from her capacity to be a 'whiz at pursuing clues in strange texts.' In *Gravity's Rainbow*, a salvo against interpretation in general is fired from the labyrinth of Pirate Prentice's dream....

Just as Stencil, Oedipa, and any number of other Pynchon characters do in their fictional world, we discover in Pynchon's texts that everything is connected.... [Yet] 'the metaphorical imposition of structure upon variety' characteristic of Pynchon criticism is 'just the sort of informational control that the novel opposes'.... Pynchon asserts that the act of applying technique to artistic expression leads to the realm of the inanimate; it is part of technology's necrophilia.... *Pynchon has designed a mechanism in the form of elaborate systems and metaphors whose purpose is to make the reader aware of that special place beyond systems of codes and information where our humanness resides....* Pynchon's fictions employ machinery to expose the very un-machine-like machinery of the reader's consciousness at work. If Pynchon's work is systematically meaningful, it is on the cognitive level...we are compelled, willy-nilly, to manufacture 'unified field theories' to explain what we are reading.

Works like *Gravity's Rainbow*, in particular, punch certain cortical buttons that respond to the stimuli of indeterminacy, incompleteness, paradox, complex metaphors, near-crystallizations of sense out of super-saturated solutions of information.... Pynchon creates self-referential metaphors—meta-metaphors—by making at least one of the terms, either vehicle or tenor (figural or literal), a technological one, as though hinting that metaphors are partly mechanical but also partly transcendent of mere mechanism....

David Porush

"Pynchon is the greatest master of the negative Sublime at least since Faulkner and West, and if nothing besides Byron the Bulb in *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to me quite as perfect as all of *The Crying of Lot 49*, that may be because no one could hope to write the first authentic post-Holocaust novel... For Pynchon, our is the age of plastics and paranoia, dominated by the System.... He has found ways of representing the impulse to defy the System, even though both the impulse and its representations always are defeated. In the Zone (which is our cosmos as the Gnostics saw it, the...Great Emptiness) the force of the System, of They (whom the Gnostics called the Archons), is in some sense irresistible, as all overdetermination must be irresistible. Yet there is a Counterforce, hardly distinguished in its efficacy, but it never does (or can) give up. Unfortunately, its hero is the extraordinarily ordinary Tyrone Slothrop, who is a perpetual disaster...who has not inspired much affection even in Pynchon's best critics.... Pynchon surpasses every American writer since Faulkner at invention."

Harold Bloom, ed.

Introduction

Thomas Pynchon

(Chelsea House/Modern Critical Views 1986) 1-2

"The sense of mystery that permeates Pynchon's fiction, emanating from elusive characters and plots, elusive concepts and themes, also shrouds his life.... Pynchon's first book, *V.*, appeared in 1963. It is an intricately plotted novel that moves from alligator hunts through the sewers of New York to an elusive quest to find the enigmatic V., a woman mysteriously connected to the disastrous events of twentieth-century European history.

His second book, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) is a short novel that features another elusive, paranoid quest, this one to discover the significance of a secret postal system. Pynchon's third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), won the National Book Award. Although it concerns an American officer forced into desertion toward the end of World War II, it is impossible to summarize. In its unremitting mixture of literary and popular styles, its unrelenting parody and paranoia, its technical jargon and multilayered plot structure, the novel not only portrays a labyrinthine world but becomes one itself....

In his collection of early short stories, *Slow Learner* (1984), Pynchon included 'Entropy,' a story he claims was inspired by his reading of Henry Adams and the mathematician Norbert Wiener. Connections—sometimes bizarre, sometimes terrifying—among modern history, technology, and communications consistently form the core of Pynchon's fiction. Praised for its inventiveness and criticized for its obscurity, Pynchon's fiction continues to be controversial. Like James Joyce's and Vladimir Nabokov's, Pynchon's prose bristles with puns, cross-references, and layered meanings. Like Edgar Allan Poe's and Nathanael West's, Pynchon's characteristic imaginative mode combines the comic, the satiric, and the apocalyptic. Like John Barth and Walker Percy, Pynchon moves with considerable confidence and authority in handling complex philosophical, psychological, and even scientific concepts. Like Herman Melville, he displays an affinity for arcane, offbeat information—an affinity so deep that one suspects him not only of reading almanacs but of being able to write them. His grasp of contemporary data and materials is especially remarkable.

What holds such rare talents together, enabling Pynchon to balance and control them, is an overriding concern with plot, a concern that begins with his own elaborate arrangements, in which he takes delight in everything from intricate entanglements to outrageous coincidences. Yet Pynchon's own plots are only a beginning. They have analogues everywhere—in the plots his characters concoct for themselves, in the divergent plots of their co-conspirators and their enemies, and in the crazy quilt of competing designs that emanate from the technologies, organizations, bureaucracies, and governments that surround them. Pynchon's characters frequently become the manipulated objects of their own plots, of the designs they initiate and the roles they choose. But they are the objects of endless machinations long before they begin foolishly to dream of possessing manipulative powers. Even their scramble merely to understand the plots and tangles that enclose them is finally doomed. They work in the dark, and they work alone.

One vestige of a shared community resides in their memory of loss, which is sometimes elegiac, sometimes ironic. Another, more telling vestige—the last, as it were—consists of wariness and suspicion that fade into paranoia as people wait apprehensively to see which encompassing plot will take control of their lives, which encompassing conspiracy will take over their world. Pynchon frequently writes as though he were standing at the end of time, examining and describing, even celebrating, the death not only of freedom but of culture. As much, perhaps, as any artist of his time, he is willing to question everything, including his own need to question everything. Finally, however, language is for him a means of resisting as well as examining and describing the end, and the celebration we sense in his style is not of the end but of our resistance to it.”

David Minter
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 2217-18

“Thomas Pynchon, the man at the end of the rainbow: Thomas Pynchon may well be the most inventive novelist writing in America today, and he is certainly the most encyclopedic in the range of his cultural, historical, and scientific knowledge. From Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) to Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the characters of Pynchon's novels have been gripping examples of the psychology of paranoia. At the same time, Pynchon himself has become legendary for avoiding public attention with such ingenuity that speculation has emerged that the author himself is profoundly afflicted with the disorder that permeates his fiction. Speculation has been fueled by the long silence that has followed the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*.”

Karen L. Rood, ed.
American Literary Almanac: From 1608 to the Present
(Brucoli Clark Layman/Facts on File 1988) 250

“Thomas Pynchon, Jr., is the most controversial, the most discussed, and the most mysterious of the post-World War II writers who have pioneered what is called metafiction (roughly, any fiction that calls attention to its fictive nature).... Pynchon's fictions weave their complex interactions around the twin themes of entropy and paranoia. In his decaying world, characters are always afraid that they have been singled out for some dreadful fate; in many cases, the fear is justified.... Despite his relative lack of productivity and his long silences between publications, Pynchon is assured of a place among the most significant novelists of the mid- to late-twentieth century. His incredible range of knowledge, his mastery of a bewildering variety of styles and his ability to combine the most serious materials with outrageous comedy mark his work as unique. If he publishes nothing more, his work will continue to amaze, confound, amuse, and terrify readers.”

John M. Muste
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 3
Frank N. Magill, ed.
(Salem 1989) 1233-34

Michael Hollister (2014)