

## 160 QUOTATIONS

### Thomas Pynchon

(1937- )

Thomas Pynchon epitomizes Postmodernism. As a precocious teenager he was inspired by the romantic Jack Kerouac and the Beats. He joined the 1960s counterculture, adopted what he later described as an “adolescent” vision of life and then became an alienated cynic. Influenced by the Naturalism of pessimistic Henry Adams, Pynchon is a fantasy writer, a densely intellectual entertainer, an Expressionistic cartoonist--often funny if you have the tolerance to keep reading. Critics were awed by his (limited) knowledge of science. His light dazzles, then dims the more he exposes himself. Pynchon rocketed to the top in literary prestige among elite Postmodernists in New York and in the universities with his first three novels, *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and his major work *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). He made himself legendary by avoiding photographs and contact with the public, identifying with Emily Dickinson. Where is he now? became an ongoing topic in graduate schools around the country. As sightings of Pynchon were reported at different places simultaneously, he became the Postmodern parody of the ubiquitous white whale. It is characteristic of Postmodernism that Pynchon is a product of hype by the New York and academic elites and has never been popular because he is too obscure, turgid, pretentious, trivial and silly: *Gravity's Rainbow* elaborates the thesis that a rocket is a phallic symbol, that World War II was funny and that competition for nuclear arms is penis envy.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, legendary recluse, America, urbanity, old Victorian paradigm, Feminism, the rocket, women, merely sign language, sex, isolation, Naturalism, chance, indifference, religion, atheism, science, entropy, pessimism, technology and power, paranoia, 1960s counterculture, pacifism, anti-capitalism, Communism, Postmodernism, Postmodern poetry, Political Correctness, apocalyptic glee, dehumanization, amorality, limited vision, solipsism, binary thinking, reductive politics, longing for transcendence, loss of belief in literature, fantasy, parody rhetoric, writing, arrogance, words, foolish fictions, refuses honor, advice, death:

#### YOUTH

[I was] an unpolitical '50s student.

I had grown up reading a lot of spy fiction, novels of intrigue.

We were encouraged from many directions—Kerouac and the Beat writers, the diction of Saul Bellow in *The Adventures of Augie March*, emerging voices like those of Herbert Gold and Philip Roth.

The conflict in those days was, like most everything else, muted. In its literary version it shaped up as traditional vs. Beat fiction.... Against the undeniable power of tradition, we were attracted by such centrifugal lures as Norman Mailer's essay “The White Negro,” the wide availability of recorded jazz, and a book I still believe is one of the great American novels, *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac.

As bop and rock'n roll were to swing music and postwar pop, so was this new writing to the more established modernist tradition we were being exposed to then in college.

He quoted to the phone operator from Ezra Pound's Cantos.

I thought I was sophisticating the Beat spirit with second-hand science.

Every weirdo in the world is on my wavelength.

#### LEGENDARY RECLUSE

*You* hide, they seek.

Let me be unambiguous. I prefer not to be photographed.

Hey, over here! Have your picture taken with a reclusive author!

My belief is that “recluse” is a code word generated by journalists...meaning, “doesn’t like to talk to reporters.”

#### AMERICA

America, withal, for centuries had been *kept hidden*, as are certain Bodies of Knowledge. Only now and then were selected persons allowed glimpses of the New World.

Who has sent this new serpent into our ruinous garden, already too fouled, too crowded to qualify as an locus of innocence—unless innocence be our age’s neutral, our silent passing into the machineries of indifference.

America *was* the edge of the World. A message for Europe... America was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it.

#### URBANITY

So the city became the material expression of a particular loss of innocence—not sexual or political innocence but somehow a shared dream of what a city might at its best prove to be—its inhabitants became, and have remained, an embittered and amnesiac race, wounded but unable to connect through memory to the moment of injury, unable to summon the face of their violator.

It was always easy, in open and lonely places, to be visited by Panic wilderness fear, but these are the urban fantods here, that come to get you when you are lost or isolate inside the way time is passing, when there is no more History.

What the road really was, she fancied, was this hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain, or whatever passes, with a city, for pain.

This is America, you live in it, you let it happen.

#### THE OLD VICTORIAN PARADIGM

A number of frail girls...prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world.

Born in 1901, the year Victoria died, Stencil was in time to be the century’s child.

Victoria was being gradually replaced by V; something entirely different.

#### FEMINISM

Mucho is not macho.

What did she so desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental...looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair. When it turned out to be Pierce she’d happily pulled out the pins and curlers and down it tumbled in its whispering, dainty avalanche, only when Pierce had got maybe halfway up, her lovely hair turned, through some sinister sorcery, into a great unanchored wig, and down he fell, on his ass.

The are stripping away, one by one, my men.

No word to recall that Oedipa and Metzger had ever been more than co-executors. Which must mean, thought Oedipa, that that's all we were.

"God protect me...from these lib, overeducated broads with the soft heads and bleeding hearts."

Is it only because Malta is a matriarchal island that Fausto felt so strongly that connection between mother-rule and decadence?

The Oedipal situation in the Zone these days is terrible. There is no dignity. The mothers have been masculinized to old worn moneybags of no sexual interest to anyone, and yet here are their sons, still trapped inside inertias of lust that are 40 years out of date. The fathers have no power today and never did.

"I posed once for a rocket insignia. Perhaps you've seen it. A pretty young witch straddling an A4. Carrying her obsolete broom over her shoulder."

### THE ROCKET

A giant white cock.

The Tower...is also the Rocket.

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, another mandala.

Slothrop...only gets erections when this sequence happens *in reverse*. Explosions first, then the sound of approach: the V-2.

Love, among these men, once past the simple feel and orgasming of it, had to do with masculine technologies, with contracts, with winning and losing. Demanded, in his own case, that he enter the service of the Rocket... Beyond simple steel erection, the Rocket was an entire system *won*, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature.

There once was a fellow named Moorehead, / Who had an affair with a warhead. / His wife moved away / The very next day-- / She *was* always kind of a sorehead.

There was a young fellow named Hector, / Who was fond of a launcher-erector. / But the squishes and pops / Of acute pressure drops / Wrecked Hector's hydraulic connector.

There was a technician named Urban, / Who had an affair with a turbine. / "It's much nicer," he said, / "Than a woman in bed, / And it's sure as hell cheaper than bourbon!"

Jamf was only a fiction to help him explain what he felt so terribly, so immediately in his genitals for those rockets each time exploding in the sky...to help him deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death.

Before the Rocket we went on believing [in God], because we wanted to. But the Rocket can penetrate, from the sky, at any given point. Nowhere is safe. We can't believe Them any more. Not if we are still sane, and love the truth.

### WOMEN

Someday, please God, there would be an all-electronic woman.

Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth.

Katje has understood the great airless arc as a clear allusion to certain secret lusts that drive the planet and herself, and Those who use her—over its peak and down, plunging, burning, toward a terminal orgasm.

The Rocket's purely feminine counterpart, the zero point at the center of its target, has submitted. All the rest will happen according to laws of ballistics. The Rocket is helpless in it.

It all comes down, as it must, to the desires of individual men. Oh, and women too of course, bless their empty little heads.

Men being positivists and women more dreamy, having hunches still remained at base a feminine talent.

#### MERELY SIGN LANGUAGE

As spread thighs are to the libertine...so was the letter V to young Slothrop.

Now he's awakened to discover the pursuit of V. was merely a scholarly quest after all, an adventure of the mind, in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* and *The White Goddess*.

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.

#### SEX

He was visited on a lunar basis by these great unspecific waves of horniness, whereby all women within a certain age group and figure envelope became immediately and impossibly desirable. He emerged from these spells with eyeballs still oscillating and a wish that his neck could rotate through the full 360 degrees.

"Your fly is open," whispered Oedipa. She was not sure what she'd do when the bidder revealed himself. ["I heard a Fly buzz when I died," Emily Dickinson]

#### ISOLATION

"The pin I'm wearing means I'm a member of the IA. That's Inamorati Anonymous. An inamorato is somebody in love. That's the worst addiction of all.... I was lucky. I kicked it young.... We're isolates, Arnold. Meetings would destroy the whole point of it."

#### NATURALISM

We are digits in God's computer.

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.

Our world of toil and blood, it all lies beneath the notice of the hacker we call God.

In the eighteenth century it was often convenient to regard man as a clockwork automaton. In the nineteenth century, with Newtonian physics pretty well assimilated and a lot of work in thermodynamics going on, man was looked on as a heat engine, about 40 percent efficient. Now in the twentieth century, with nuclear and subatomic physics a going thing, man had become something which absorbs x-rays, gamma rays and neutrons.

Think of the ego, the self that suffers a personal history bound to time, as the grid. The deeper and true Self is the flow between cathode and plate. The constant, pure flow, Signals—sense-data, feelings, memories relocating—are put onto the grid, and modulate the flow. We live lives that are waveforms constantly changing with time, now positive, now negative. Only at moments of great serenity is it possible to find the pure, the informationless state of signal zero.

As every good Romantic knows, the soul (*spiritus, ruach, pneuma*) is nothing, substantially, but air [or energy?]; it is only natural that warpings in the atmosphere should be recapitulated in those who breathe it.

Everyone has an Antarctic.

#### CHANCE

All variables are independent.

There was no difference between the behavior of a god and the operations of pure chance.

Life's single lesson: that there is more accident to it than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane.

#### INDIFFERENCE

The hand of Providence creeps among the stars, giving Slothrop the finger.

#### RELIGION

Religion was always about death. It was used not as an opiate so much as a technique—it got people to die for one particular set of beliefs about death.

#### ATHEISM

It's been a prevalent notion. Fallen sparks. Fragments of vessels broken at the Creation. And someday, somehow, before the end, a gathering back to home. A messenger from the Kingdom, arriving at the last moment. But I tell you there is no such message, no such home—only the millions of last moments...nothing more.

She has turned her face, more than once, to the Outer Radiance and simply seen nothing there. And so each time taken a little more of the Zero into herself.

Losing faith is a complicated business and takes time. There are no epiphanies, no "moments of truth." It takes much thought and concentration in the later phases, which themselves come about through an accumulation of small accidents, examples of general injustice, misfortune falling upon the godly, prayers of one's own unanswered.

You had dispensed with God. But you had taken on a greater, and more harmful, illusion. The illusion is control.

#### SCIENCE

A screaming comes across the sky.

Given my undergraduate mood, [Henry] Adams's sense of power out of control, coupled with [Norbert] Wiener's spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness, seemed just the ticket. But the distance and grandiosity of this led me to short-change the humans in the story. I think they come off as synthetic, insufficiently alive.

"And men of science," cries Dixon, "may be but the simple tools of others, with no more idea of what they are about, than a hammer knows of a house."

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.

## ENTROPY

People think I know more about the subject of entropy than I really do.

I think I took the word from T.S. Eliot.

She did gather that there were two distinct kinds of entropy. One having to do with heat-engines, the other to do with communication.... As [Maxwell's] Demon [a metaphor in physics] sat and sorted his molecules into hot and cold, the system was said to lose entropy. But somehow the loss was offset by the information the Demon gained about what molecules went where.... There are untold billions of molecules in that box. The Demon collects data on each and every one. At some deep psychic level he must get through. The sensitive must receive that staggering set of energies, and feed back something like the same quantity of information. To keep it all cycling.

## PESSIMISM

The Laws of Thermodynamics: you can't win, things are going to get worse before they get better, who says they're going to get better.

## TECHNOLOGY & POWER

Go ahead, capitalize the T on technology, deify it if it will make you feel less responsible—but it puts you in with the neutered, brother, in with the eunuchs keeping the harem of our stolen Earth for the numb and joyless hardons of human sultans, human elite with no right at all to be where they are.

Do not underestimate the shallowness of my understanding.

## PARANOIA

Paranoids are not paranoid because they're paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves, fucking idiots, deliberately into paranoid situations.

The true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from.

Like other sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the Creation. [Naturalism]

Through that whole terrible day, I had an erection...don't judge me...it was out of my control...*everything* was out of control-- [Naturalist determinism]

If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long.

For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America, and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.

## 1960s COUNTERCULTURE

A pneumatic toy frog hops onto a lily pad, trembling. Beneath the surface, lies terror.

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. It was the same, only different.

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.

The Psychedelic Sixties, this little parenthesis of light, might close after all, and all be lost.

#### PACIFISM

The Home Front is something of a fiction and lie, designed, not too subtly, to draw them apart, to subvert love in favor of work, abstraction, required pain, bitter death.

This War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted...secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology...by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war.

Harry Truman...with his control-finger poised right on Miss Enola Gay's atomic clit, making ready to tickle 100,000 little yellow folks into what will come down as fine vapor-deposit of fat-cracklings wrinkled into the fused rubble of their city of the Inland Sea.

#### ANTI-CAPITALISM

A whitewashed bust of Jay Gould [19<sup>th</sup> century robber baron] that Pierce kept over the bed on a shelf so narrow she'd always had the hovering fear it would someday topple on them.

We are here among you as seekers of refuge from our present—your future—a time of worldwide famine, exhausted fuel supplies, terminal poverty—the end of the capitalistic experiment. Once we came to understand the simple...truth that earth's resources were limited, in fact soon to run out, the whole capitalistic illusion fell to pieces. Those of us who spoke the truth were denounced as heretics, as enemies of the prevailing economic faith. Like religious Dissenters of an earlier day.

Taking and not giving back, demanding that “productivity” and “earnings” keep on increasing with time, the System [Capitalism] removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable, and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which must sooner or later crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide.

Shit, money, and the World, the three American truths, powering the American mobility.

Oedipa...had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all our more than honorary.

All the animals, the plants, the minerals, even other kinds of men, are being broken and reassembled every day, to preserve an elite few, who are the loudest to theorize on freedom, but the least free of all.

A pig is a pal, who'll boost your morale.

#### COMMUNISM

“Marxist dialectics? That's not an opiate, eh?”

“It's the antidote.”

Die to help History grow to its predestined shape.

Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good.

#### POSTMODERNISM

Why should things be easy to understand?

There is nothing so loathsome as a sentimental surrealist.

Or this technique for the sake of technique—Catatonic Expressionism. Or parodies on what someone else had already done.... This sort of arranging and rearranging was Decadence.

The apartment, perched high over Riverside Drive, ran to something like thirteen rooms, all decorated in Early Homosexual.

To begin with optimism; and once the inadequacy of optimism is borne in on him by an inevitably hostile world, to retreat into abstractions.

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.

So reverences are dying.

#### POSTMODERN POETRY

Free verse: why not? There was simply not the time to cast it into rhyme or metre, to take care with assonance and ambiguity. Poetry had to be as hasty and rough as eating, sleep or sex.... No metaphysics. Poetry is not communication with angels or with the “subconscious.” It is communication with the guts, genitals, and five portals of sense. Nothing more.

#### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Who claims Truth, Truth abandons.

If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers.

#### APOCALYPTIC GLEE

Then...in the absence of faith...

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.

#### DEHUMANIZATION

To have humanism we must first be convinced of our humanity. As we move further into decadence this becomes more difficult.

If there is a life force operating in Nature, still there is nothing so analogous in a bureaucracy.

Freud's vision of the world had no Buchenwalds in it.

## AMORALITY

What, I should only trust good people? Man, good people get bought and sold every day. Might as well trust somebody evil once in awhile, it makes no more or less sense.

## LIMITED VISION

It was a neat theory, and he was in love with it. The only consolation he drew from the present chaos was that his theory managed to explain it.

Perhaps history this century, thought Eigenvalue, is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated, as Stencil seemed to be, at the bottom of a fold, it's impossible to determine warp, woof, or pattern anywhere else.... We are accordingly lost to any sense of continuous tradition. Perhaps if we lived on a crest, things would be different. We could at least see.

The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are.

## SOLIPSISM

What happens when paranoid meets paranoid? A crossing of solipsisms.

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 specific moment.

The reality is in this head. Mine. I'm the projector at the planetarium.

## BINARY THINKING

All of which went to support his private thesis that correction—along all dimensions: social, political, emotional—entails retreat to a diametric opposite rather than any reasonable search for a golden mean.

Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth.

Either Oedipa in the orbiting of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero.

She had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided.

## REDUCTIVE POLITICS

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. And cannot live but in the dreamings of the future.

Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit.

## LONGING FOR TRANSCENDENCE

Dreams will help you not at all.

Slothrop thinks he's chasing like a grail.

What are the stars but points in the body of God where we insert the healing needles of our terror and longing?

I wanted to break out—to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become.

Dope never gave *you* immortality. *You* hadda come back, every time, into a dying hunk of smelly *meat!* But *We* can live forever, in a clean, honest, purified, Electroworld.

M-maybe there *is* a Machine to take us away, take us completely, suck us through the electrodes out of the skull ‘n’ into the Machine and live there forever with all the other souls it’s got stored there.

#### LOSS OF BELIEF IN LITERATURE

The poet is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice.

The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost.

#### FANTASY

Shall I project a world?

“Cherish it!” cried Hilarius, fiercely. “What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don’t let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be.”

But with a sigh he had released her hand, while she was so lost in the fantasy that she hadn’t felt it go away, as if he’d known the best moment to let go.

#### PARODY RHETORIC

But Lord Blatherard Osmo was able at last to devote all of his time to Novi Pazar. Early in 1939, he was discovered mysteriously suffocated in a bathtub full of tapioca pudding, at the home of a Certain Viscountess. Some have seen in this the hand of the Firm.

It is difficult to perceive just what the fuck is happening here.

#### WRITING

Get too conceptual, too cute and remote, and your characters die on the page.

Why not pluck a few words from the multitudes rushing toward the Void of forgetfulness?

“The Small Rain” was my first published story.... 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*.

It is simply wrong to begin with a theme, symbol or other abstract unifying agent, and then try to force characters and events to conform to it.

You’ll notice that toward the end of the story [“The Small Rain”], 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.

#### ARROGANCE

Everybody gets told to write about what they know. The trouble with many of us is that at the earlier stages of life we think we know everything—or to put it more usefully, we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance.

## WORDS

A screen of words between himself and the numinous.

Remember that Puritans were utterly devoted, like literary critics, to the Word.

He was a peculiarly moral man. He felt hardly any responsibility toward the word, really; but to the invisible field surrounding the play, its spirit, he was always intensely faithful.

[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.

## FOOLISH FICTIONS

A former self is a fool, an insufferable ass, but he's still human, you'd no more turn him out than you'd turn out any kind of cripple, would you?

## REFUSES HONOR

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.

## ADVICE

Keep cool but care.

## DEATH

There ought to be a punch line to it, but there isn't.