Introduction

The novels of Thomas Pynchon are recognised as among the greatest produced by a contemporary American writer. Each one is vast in scope, presenting the reader with a cornucopia of colourful characters, bizarre narrative twists, and delightfully comic moments, while displaying its author's formidable knowledge on topics as diverse as the German chemical industry during World War II, the use of the sector in eighteenth-century astronomy, and the location of legendary Buddhist holy lands. Pynchon is an originator of the postmodern style in literature: from his first novel *V.* (1963) to the recent *Bleeding Edge* (2013), his work exemplifies postmodernism in its irony and black humour, in recreating and adapting various generic modes, and in referencing high art and popular culture with equal enthusiasm. Integrating fiction with (often obscure) historical fact, Pynchon's encyclopaedic novels also largely fall into Linda Hutcheon's category of postmodern historiographic metafiction.[1] Yet postmodern texts are often seen as closed off from the world, as self-absorbed and apolitical, while quite the opposite is true of Pynchon's work. Indeed, Pynchon produces fiction laden with political critique and his novels are to be recognised as important works of political philosophy.

Pynchon is profoundly concerned with exploring and making vivid the mechanisms and motivators of oppression, and his narratives span continents and centuries in their attempts to trace historical developments in the tactics of repressive forces. Pitting themselves against such forces, the novels are carefully constructed so as to challenge preconceptions and prejudices, and encourage independent critical speculation or investigation. Formed of tangentially connected fragments and diegetic strands to be woven together and interpreted by a reader acting with relative autonomy, the work is innately anti-authoritarian. Concomitant with this post-structuralist promotion of the exercise of individual thought and imagination comes Pynchon's considerable interest in small-scale oppositional groups operating in the fields of literature, art, culture, or

more traditional political arenas, and the alternatives they offer to current socio-economic systems. As his literary career has progressed, the author's antipathy to capitalism has become ever more visible, as has his relative sympathy for anarchist solutions, which is fully confirmed by *Against the Day* (2006). But Pynchon's politics are subtle and complex, and he must not be aligned too readily with any established ideology.

Although fully deserving of comprehensive critical attention, much of the political commentary Thomas Pynchon has offered still waits to be unravelled and appreciated. This is despite the fact that Pynchon's insights could represent a valuable contribution to political debate at a time when modern societies are growing more intertwined, the fortunes of each dependent on the courses taken by many others, and the imperative to learn historical lessons and avoid pathways leading to violence and the abuse of power is making itself ever more strongly felt. Whether literature can, in fact, play a significant role in fostering such understanding is a matter of long debate, and one to which Pynchon himself contributes in his 1984 introduction to the *Slow Learner* collection of his early short stories. Here, Pynchon claims that fiction writing lies on a "spectrum of impotence" with regard to political change, incapable of really doing anything about the "succession of the criminally insane" who hold power.[2] He is in good company in this contention, with fellow postmodern innovators as diverse as Kurt Vonnegut and Kathy Acker offering similar meditations on the problem.[3] Nevertheless, every one of Pynchon's novels is politically engaged, a fact which testifies to the author's ongoing struggle in the hope that literature can, in fact, exert an influence and promote social change. Whatever his assessment of their final political import, Pynchon stubbornly creates texts on the model of the graffiti which appear in the Weimar Germany of *Gravity's Rainbow*, texts which are "revealed in order to be thought about, expanded on, translated into action by the people."[4]

Acting from a position of (supposed) political neutrality, literary critics can of course facilitate the first stage of the process described in this quotation, clarifying the meanings embodied within novels and offering them up to the wider society for further reflection. *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* thus offers an elucidation of certain elements of Pynchon's political philosophy, contributing to the critical dialogue on Pynchon's politics that has recently begun to gain ascendancy over thematic analyses of the author's work or considerations of its self-reflexively postmodern attributes. Sam Thomas's book-length study *Pynchon and the Political* (2007) is perhaps the most developed and notable expression of this new trend to date, offering a perspective on Pynchon's critique of

society from the Enlightenment onwards, on his treatment of war as a literary subject, and on some of the potential alternatives to oppression he sets forth in his work. Other recent works of criticism approaching the political dimensions of Pynchon's fiction include Cyrus R. K. Patell's *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* (2001), Stefan Mattessich's *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (2002), several of the essays collected in Niran Abbas's *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins* (2003), and Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise's *Pynchon's "Against the Day": A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* (2011), not to mention a number of articles that have been published on the subject.[5] In a 2005 review of Abbas's *Reading from the Margins*, Kathryn Hume called for more analysis in this field, claiming that the essays making up the collection's section on politics acted as "a prolegomenon to something that needs to be done, namely to map Pynchon's political views and social values and contextualize them in the sources of their time."[6] Significant contributions to this project have been made since the publication of Hume's comment, but much remains undone. In particular, as Hume emphasises, a greater sense of the *context* of the author's ideas is required. Several historical contexts are of course applicable to an analysis of Pynchon's politics, but the most relevant of these is, I suggest, the era of the sixties counterculture.

The 1960s enjoy a symbiotic relationship with postmodernism in general, whether seen as the form's generator or antithesis, and many critics and commentators have recognised the importance of the decade to Pynchon's fiction. For Sam Thomas "the experience of the sixties functions as the most significant juncture in Pynchon's political universe."[7] Thomas also quotes Cowart in his contention that "Pynchon's novels and other short stories revolve in planetary orbits around the sunlike moral intensity of the 1960s."[8] Similarly, Victor Strandberg "find[s] at the base of all Pynchon's work the temperament of a hippie rebel against tradition, convention, and all forms of social hierarchy."[9] When the sixties began, Pynchon was twenty-two years old and newly graduated from Cornell University. He was about to start his career as a professional writer; his first short story had been published in March 1959, and was followed by more stories and a novel in the early years of the following decade. In his article "Smoking Dope with Thomas Pynchon: A Sixties Memoir," Andrew Gordon underscores the importance of the sixties as a formative experience in the author's life, explaining that he "consider[s] Pynchon a quintessential American novelist of the nineteen sixties because he came of age as an artist during that entropic decade and shows its stamp in all

his work."[10] We all attribute a routine significance to the era in which we reach maturity or choose our course in life, but this temporal convergence had unusually strong repercussions on the creative practice and political convictions of Thomas Pynchon.

The sixties was an era of extreme social and political turbulence that few within the United States could ignore. Attacking the moral and epistemological foundations of contemporary society, the colourful and impassioned protests of those heterogeneous oppositional groups and cultural innovators known collectively as the counterculture inspired and challenged many onlookers, Pynchon among them. Despite the wide-ranging eclecticism and broad scope of his work, the subversive fervour of the decade asserts its presence in all of Pynchon's novels. This is true as much of those written or published during the sixties – *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* – as of the later production. Indeed, Pynchon's 2009 novel *Inherent Vice*, which is set in 1969–70, perhaps makes this point most clearly. (It should be noted here that, to some extent, a dialectic of inspiration operated between Pynchon and the counterculture, with whom his works enjoyed considerable popularity. Todd Gitlin describes how, given the surreality of the times, "the fiction that young freaks and radicals read in [1967–70] tended toward postmodern weirdness, the false calm of allegory, or the eerie simplicities of the saucer's-eye abstraction: Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Hermann Hesse."[11] Even counterculture royalty like the leader of the psychedelic movement, Timothy Leary, admired Pynchon's work. In fact, Leary declared in a 1980s interview that Pynchon was, for him, "the finest writer living," and the person he would most like to meet.[12]) Yet although critics acknowledge the sixties character of much of Pynchon's fiction, surprisingly little relevant analysis has been published. Sam Thomas considers the sixties to inform Pynchon's politics in important ways, but his aforementioned study does not have a particular focus on that decade. Stefan Mattessich's *Lines of Flight* deals more directly with the subject, but is limited by its thematic focus on time. David Cowart dedicates a chapter of his book *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* to "Pynchon and the Sixties," complementing articles published in previous years by Jeffrey S. Baker and Frederick Ashe on Pynchon's affinities with the New Left and counterculture. However, these shorter pieces, limited in scope, are unable to go deep enough into the vast web of interconnections between Pynchon's novels and the era's various cultural and political innovations.[13] Because it offers a huge array of commentaries, tales, and histories relating to wildly divergent fields of human experience, Pynchon's work is of course by no means reducible to

its connections to sixties politics, but there is a concrete lack of criticism addressing this important aspect of his fiction. The intention behind this book is to help in remedying this lack.

As noted earlier, historically Pynchon criticism has based itself primarily on analysis of the writing's postmodern qualities, the novels often considered as centrally concerned with formal and aesthetic innovation and having little to say on social or political issues. But while the majority might perceive Pynchon's narratives as curled in upon themselves in their complexity, fragmentation, and obscurity of allusion, as the list of commentators on Pynchon's politics given previously attests, not everyone agrees. Thomas Schaub took the opposing line relatively early on, stating in 1981 that: "Pynchon's books are not self-reflexive because they reveal and document the reality of history," and labelling Pynchon "the most compelling social writer we have."[14] A similar case is made by Sam Thomas, who points out that the novels contain numerous "innovative and unsettling discussions of freedom, war, labor, poverty, community, democracy, totalitarianism and so on [which] are often passed over in favor of constrictive scientific metaphors and theoretical play" by critics.[15] Because a substantial proportion of critical debate has been abstracted into the realm of the purely aesthetic, the author's ethics have received relatively scant attention. But I would agree with Alan Wilde in his contention that "[a]lthough some critics find an unbridgeable gap between Pynchon's postmodernism and his ethical concerns, he is, in fact, not only a moralist but an insistent, urgent, and sometimes (most notably in *V.*) a heavy-handed one."[16]

No writing can operate entirely independently of its social context, and the hermeticism of postmodern fiction has been overemphasised across the board, not only in the case of Pynchon. As Linda Hutcheon suggested in her 1989 study *The Politics of Postmodernism*, the dichotomy that critics of art and literature have tended to draw between the postmodern and the political is a false one:

> Postmodern art cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations – its images and stories – are anything but neutral, however "aestheticized" they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity. While the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*, it does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique.[17]

Pynchon's work certainly engages in such critique, seeking to destabilise all kinds of complacently held beliefs and naive assumptions,

and demonstrates that postmodern literature can be playful, parodic, fragmentary, obscure, and self-referential, while at the same time having considerable political bite. However, the present study contends that Pynchon's novels do not fit entirely with Hutcheon's theory in that they *do* have agency, and courses of political action are proposed, however tentatively or provisionally.

In the chapters that follow I do not find it useful to read Pynchon as a "postmodern" author, partially because of this ongoing common false association of postmodernism with insularity, but also because the term "countercultural" seems more to the point. Many of the postmodern literary techniques employed in Pynchon's work and discussed in this study are, I suggest, motivated primarily by countercultural values. After all, as it was forming during the 1960s, before there was a well-recognised "postmodern" model to emulate, the new aesthetic in literature had to be the result of external factors, and I suggest that these were largely the same factors that spawned many counterculture movements. (Of course, to describe postmodernism as expressing nothing more than a reaction against literary modernism is untenable.) To offer some specific examples, Pynchon's emphasis on the participation and independence of the reader seems to be, as I mentioned earlier, an expression of anti-authoritarianism and a preference for the creative freedom of the individual. Likewise, his use of fantasy (or magical realism) is intended to promote the exercise of the imagination and the liberation of the mind from reified thought patterns, a major goal of the psychedelic movement in particular, as I discuss in Chapter 3. His metafictional incorporation of obscure histories of oppression and brutality often functions to critique capitalism, but also to endorse a process of continuous learning on the part of the reader, something at the core of countercultural ideology. This is also true of the numerous intertextual allusions made in Pynchon's novels. Even the more jocular elements of Pynchon's prose can have a deep political valence, and this is in line with the tactics of groups such as the Yippies, epitomising an emphasis recurrent within the counterculture on imbuing protest with pleasure.[18]

Another point on which my approach differs from much previous criticism is the degree of legibility I assign to Pynchon's politics within his works. Of course, a work of fiction is far from being a political manifesto and, as Seán Molloy points out, without any such clear and direct statement on Pynchon's part "any interpretation must perforce be partial and provisional."[19] But with every new work that appears the author is more forthcoming, expressing his political sympathies more directly. This

progression is, I admit, decidedly relative; Pynchon has always preferred to veil his values somewhat. Yet it is an exaggeration to say, as Charles Hollander does, that from the short stories to *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Pynchon's politics are absent, or in deep code," and that "[n]ot until *Vineland* … did he explicitly articulate his political beliefs."[20] Contemporary readers of this earlier phase of Pynchon's production would not, I suggest, have had to "cryptanalyze" to discover these beliefs, although to some extent this is now necessary.[21] In his journalism and other non-fiction work both early and late, Pynchon is by no means evasive in this area – we need only think of his blunt criticism of the government agencies of the "humanitarian establishment" in his 1966 article "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" (discussed at greater length in Chapter 4). Likewise, in each of his novels, I suggest, Pynchon speaks his politics fairly clearly given the constraints of his anti-didactic approach.[22] If his values appear to us *deeply* encoded, it may be due either to our temporal (and perhaps also geographical) distance from the contemporary social scene of their production, or to an expectation that political ideas should be simple and one-sided, while Pynchon's are subtle and ambivalent.

Pynchon's ambivalence, his refusal to endorse any single viewpoint without qualifications, is an important reflection of his anarchic political philosophy, and indeed functions as a structural principle in his narratives. All of Pynchon's commentaries have an open-ended quality; there are very few, if any, final judgements in his work. Rather than asserting one or another particular perspective, Pynchon promotes habits of critical thought. For the Italian writer Italo Calvino, such an attitude is admirable: the literary object must "know itself and distrust itself," as must political discourse. If it achieves this, he argues, literature can be positively educative, offering "a type of education that can yield results only if it is difficult and indirect, if it implies the arduous attainment of literary stringency."[23] Confirming the importance of such stringency to Pynchon and his political goals, Schaub argues in his classic study *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* that "[t]he complexity of his understanding prevents opposition from declining into false division."[24] Pynchon's ambivalence bespeaks his intellectual rigour, his ability to think critically on all fronts, adopting the kind of questioning approach the best counterculture thinkers sought to foster. Throughout this book, I therefore make a concerted effort to underscore such doubts and ambiguities, so as to avoid misrepresenting or simplifying Pynchon's politics.

Turning to more practical matters, my method in the present study is essentially to unravel the significance of sections of Pynchon's novels

containing apparent countercultural commentary via close textual analysis conducted with reference to particular texts, personalities, organisations, and ideologies of the era. The works of literature and social/political philosophy which function as intertexts in this book are each representative of a particular countercultural perspective that helped to shape and define the oppositional sixties. All were well known if not notorious in their time and are texts which Pynchon is either known to have read, or which my analysis demonstrates he must have been familiar with. Pynchon's commentaries sometimes refer more directly to countercultural figures, and I identify in what follows variously clear-cut references to Timothy Leary and Eldridge Cleaver, and to groups including the Black Panther Party (BPP), the Yippies, and radical feminist organisations. Occasionally, my analysis bases itself on certain ideological themes of the sixties; this is true particularly of Chapter 2's discussion of "love" in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Comments made by Pynchon in his journalism or other non-fiction are employed to reinforce my interpretations. In these ways *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* attempts to demonstrate the extent to which Pynchon's novels (or parts thereof) align themselves with or, indeed, reject particular countercultural arguments, theories, and tactics. Within and between chapters, interconnections traced between seemingly disparate narratives and commentaries build a sense of the coherence and development of Pynchon's politics over the course of his career.

The overarching themes of this book, which tie together Pynchon's responses to the various manifestations of the counterculture discussed, are anarchism, escape and escapism, altruistic love, community, political violence, consciousness expansion, and the role of the rational intellect. Given that the dynamic of the sixties counterculture, the process by which its earnest hopefulness and positive activism turned to hedonism and violence, is so fundamental to the insights and lessons offered in Pynchon's political philosophy, the chapters which follow move chronologically through the late fifties and sixties in terms of their reference to particular movements and groupings. In terms of their reference to Pynchon's novels, however, the sequence is not chronological. Instead, chapters feature analysis of the work or works with most relevance to the subject matter at hand. As a result, *The Crying of Lot 49*, published in the middle of the sixties and revealing much about Pynchon's values at this juncture, features quite heavily, alongside *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland*, and *Against the Day*, whereas *Mason & Dixon* and *Inherent Vice* are less prominent. In the case of the latter, this is because, although set in the era and containing various direct comments on it, the action seems comparatively

lacking in depth of signification with respect to the particular themes and movements at issue in this study. The former, *Mason & Dixon*, is an extremely well-respected member of the Pynchon canon, and its importance must not go unacknowledged. However, its manner of relating to the 1960s offers less in the way of the kind of specific commentaries and analogies on which my analysis of Pynchon's writing bases itself. Although its emphasis on love and community and its consistent critique of the oppressive behaviours of the powerful identifies its essential political concerns with those of many countercultural figures and groups, it treats the major issues, themes, and grand narratives of modernity more broadly than does Pynchon's other work, viewing these from an expanded historical perspective which is reflected in the novel's greater temporal distancing from the present moment. Pynchon's latest novel, *Bleeding Edge*, has been published too recently to allow inclusion in this study.

My analysis begins in the pre-countercultural 1950s, the first chapter of this book uncovering an originating source of Pynchon's left-wing values in his early enthusiasm for the Beat movement. A reading of Pynchon's introduction to his *Slow Learner* short story collection – in which he professes admiration for Beat writing and particularly Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* – suggests that what Pynchon found inspirational in the Beat project was its raw motive energy, which stood in stark contrast to the static purposelessness of the fifties mainstream. In *On the Road* the trajectory of Sal and Dean promises access to surprise, joy, freedom, and spiritual meaningfulness (later to become core countercultural values), as they disentangle themselves from the reified hierarchies of the familiar city. Pynchon's first two novels, *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, depict characters who strain towards these same goals, seeking liminal, anti-structural spaces and marginal associations in order to achieve what the anthropologist Victor Turner described as *communitas*.[25] Yet there can be no easy escapes in Pynchon's prose, and he substantially problematises *On the Road*'s hedonistic model of liberation, latched on to by many within the counterculture. For Pynchon, I argue, neither flight along the highway nor pursuit of that ineffable high Dean calls "IT" bring one very far towards the attainment of real freedom. Rather than rejecting organisation entirely, it is a case of recognising those structures that are useful or indispensable – language, rational thought, and such like – while challenging the *excessive* capitalist superscription of both the physical and psychological landscapes of the times.

In Chapter 2 I explore Pynchon's treatment of subversion as conducted through more traditional political channels, gauging the extent of

his novels' sympathy for the core values and methods of the New Left. Pynchon's early work is pervaded by a sense of apocalyptic urgency – imaged most forcefully in the final scene of *Gravity's Rainbow* – that was shared with major New Left groups such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who considered themselves potentially "the last generation in the experiment with living" as a result of the development of the atomic bomb.[26] Analyses of the author's treatment of protest groups and direct action in *The Crying of Lot 49* and his article "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" suggest Pynchon's support for the egalitarian, non-paternalistic, cross-community approach New Left groups exercised particularly in the early to mid sixties, but also a preference for artistic commentary over the setting up of schemes. Pynchon's reaction to New Left groups' turn away from the commitment to love and non-violence expressed in key texts such as SDS's *Port Huron Statement* (1962) towards a more aggressive, idealistic, and communist-influenced stance in the late 1960s is clarified via a reading of the role of love in *Gravity's Rainbow* and the novel's treatment of the activism of Leni and her communist comrades in Weimar-era Germany. I argue that non-possessive, altruistic love (conceptualised in Chapter 1 as *communitas*) can effectively motivate political action for the Pynchon of 1973, but only if one remains staunchly aware of love's co-optive and manipulative potentialities. Regarding tactics, *Gravity's Rainbow*'s treatment of organised street protest points to the risks to self involved from an overzealous police force, while anarchic approaches like those of the Yippies are presented as more viable and effective.

The third chapter further develops arguments around the importance of community, heightened awareness, and anarchism to Pynchon's political philosophy. It begins with a discussion of commentaries on the early psychedelic movement and its leader Timothy Leary visible within *The Crying of Lot 49*, proposing that these demonstrate both the author's sympathy for a man demonised by the mass media, and his basic support for the careful, guided, and politically motivated use of LSD as a tool of consciousness expansion as promoted by Leary pre-1966 in interviews as well as in publications including *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964). Raising awareness is as important to Pynchon as it was to Leary, both men considering it a necessary precursor to political action and social reorganisation. However, psychedelic drugs are not the ideal means of achieving this for Pynchon, whose alternative approach is to invest his novels with consciousness-raising properties. This para-psychedelic method is epitomised in *Against the Day*, whose use of fantasy troubles our notions of the "real," offering a related thematic linking of light, illusion, and (capitalist)