

## *Introduction*

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Thomas Pynchon has long had a place in the pantheon of Great American Writers. His status lies in the scope of his work – the number of publications, the prodigious detail and expansiveness of his topics – as well as the sheer quality of his writing, all of which quickly led to comparisons with Herman Melville and James Joyce. His writing is widely taught (as part of required literature survey courses at universities, for example), and remains the subject of many scholarly articles, dissertations, and monographs not just in the United States and other English-speaking countries, as one might expect, but also across Europe and Asia. According to the database of publications compiled on [Vheissu.net](#), more than 400 doctoral dissertations have been accepted and more than 100 monographs and essay collections published on his writing already, mostly in English but also in other languages such as Spanish, Italian, and German, with a handful from publishers in Korea, China, and Japan. However, Pynchon is not just a canonical writer within scholarly research and teaching communities. Because of their scope and imaginative richness, his novels also have great appeal outside academia, and many devoted readers share their interest in his novels on websites dedicated to exploring his work. It is to help all such readers and students that *Thomas Pynchon in Context* brings together forty-four essays by some of the foremost specialists in the field, providing the most comprehensive resource yet published on the many ways in which his writing engages the wider world.

Given Pynchon's sizable, diverse, and devoted readership, it has not been unexpected, at least once a year and at least since *Gravity's Rainbow* was published in 1973, to find Pynchonites, Pynchonians, or Pynchonheads wondering if this would be the year a Nobel Prize in Literature would finally be awarded to their chosen author. Fans of other novelists will have similar hopes, no doubt, but like a reverse doomsday cult trying to explain why the world did not end as predicted, followers of Pynchon's career can offer a number of good reasons every October why the Swedish

Academy has again passed him over. One has been the suspicion that Pynchon, who values his privacy to the point of being branded a recluse, might not show up to a prize ceremony at which he would reveal his face to the world after six decades without an official photo. If avoiding the embarrassment of a no-show Laureate was a goal for the Swedish Academy, however, Bob Dylan foiled that plan in 2016. That Pynchon might not have accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature in the first place is a more likely conjecture, insofar as Pynchon has politely declined literary awards since 1975. Statements by the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy Horace Engdahl in 2008, which to some observers implied a bias against American literature for being parochial and not part of world literature, added another explanation for a dearth of American literary Nobel Laureates since Toni Morrison in 1993. Whether or not fans of Thomas Pynchon's writing are primed to see conspiracies in many places, readers of this volume have an opportunity to assess whether his writing styles, topics, or settings are as isolated as he is perceived personally to be (or as Engdahl seemed to imply American authors were in general). As the selection demonstrates, there is nothing parochial or isolated about the wealth of contexts relevant to his authorship, and being able to choose forty-four different contexts for this collection has been an exercise in restraint, though it may not seem so. As the editor and as a fan, I am convinced that the great appeal of Thomas Pynchon's writing lies in how open it is to the world and almost everything in it.

Since the publication of his first short stories in 1959, Thomas Pynchon has become a prolific author in more senses than one. Although seventeen years intervened between the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the first of his "century novels," and *Vineland* (1990), the second in the cycle of what have now been called his "California novels," the early twenty-first century has so far seen three novels published: one of them more than 1,000 pages in length, the others more than 300 and 400 pages long respectively. It is not, however, the simple quantity and size of his novels that foster critical appreciation. Readers also appreciate – to the point of being overwhelmed if unaided – the books' unparalleled scope (in terms of historical periods, geographic locations, and cultural, political, and social themes), a quality that best justifies references to Pynchon's "encyclopedic" style of writing. Readers of his longer, "century novels" (*Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular) might feel obliged continually to consult an encyclopedia when reading these seemingly all-inclusive texts. What this collection reveals, however, is that while they teem with references and allusions, formal invention and generic parodies,

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encyclopedic knowledge and flights of imagination, it is both possible and beneficial to identify significant and recurring themes, ideas, and events in his texts. *Thomas Pynchon in Context* highlights many of these, bringing together concise, focused, and clearly written essays by forty-seven researchers whose work on the author has previously appeared for the most part in specialized scholarly essays and monographs.

The essays in *Thomas Pynchon in Context* fall into three sections. The first, *Times and Places*, not only sets out what is known about the reclusive author but also discusses his novels in terms of their temporal and geographical settings. These cover hundreds of years and almost every continent, which means that although not much may be known about Pynchon's own whereabouts for the last six decades, there is plenty to say about the wheres and whens of his novels. The second (and largest) set of essays, *Culture, Politics, and Society*, identifies and helps map the most significant fields with which Pynchon's writing engages and in which it operates. Although each essay functions independently, many also form clusters that may be read in combination, ideally enabling either a deeper understanding of connected themes or a fruitful dialogue, not least for those seeking to research different angles on Pynchon's work. The social, political, and cultural contexts rehearsed in this collection may be the most numerous. However, given the prolific nature of the "Pynchon Industry" (which has grown impressively over the past four decades), this anthology's third and final section, *Approaches and Readings*, offers a thorough grounding in the variety of stances from which Pynchon's unique, highly complex, but very rewarding fiction may be read and understood. Essays in this section not only review and update classic ideas to which researchers still refer when explaining Pynchon as a beacon in postmodern literature; they also identify some of the newest departures in Pynchon studies, including material and digital readings. This set of essays also includes an assessment of the strong community of readers, fans, and academics active in both online fora and the thriving market for academic publications on every aspect of Thomas Pynchon's writing.

No man is an island and no woman is isolated when getting to grips with the wealth of information on, approaches to, and contexts for Thomas Pynchon's writing. The sense of community around and loyalty toward these works undoubtedly helped me convince forty-seven men and women from several different continents, ranging from younger scholars via emeritus/a professors to Pynchon experts based outside academic institutions, to contribute their knowledge, insights, and hard work to this collection, and I want to thank them all for doing so. I am particularly grateful for

such commitment to the cause. It meant that many people made efforts, provided encouragement, and volunteered additional information beyond the remit of their particular essay when asked. Among them are John Krafft, Albert Rolls, and Katie Muth, who between them made invaluable contributions to the successful compilation of both the chronology and the further reading list. Thanks to the encouragement of Ray Ryan of Cambridge University Press and the efforts of his staff, the opportunity to edit this *in Context* volume (the first on a living author) has enabled me to expand on some of the ideas developed with co-editors Luc Herman and Brian McHale in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2012) about what would be useful to a community of his readers. I also owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Aarhus University, Tobias Omø Kristensen and to Dale Carter, who provided substantial practical support in the making of *Thomas Pynchon in Context*, proving that a great author can encourage a selfless and communal spirit when the goal is to help fellow readers. Finally, it has been a particular joy to receive a generous offer from the artist Etienne Delessert, known for previous illustrations for Pynchon work, to create a new portrait of the author for this volume: no small challenge, in the absence of authorized pictures of a writer who has long guarded his image in the face of widespread public interest and curiosity. Creating such a unique artistic interpretation to represent this novelist, now in his eighties, seems a respectful way of serving both interests: his for anonymity and ours for an icon. Though Pynchon's own work may not (yet) have been judged the most "ideal" or "idealistic," in accordance with the wording of Alfred Nobel's will, there is a certain idealism among those who truly love his work. I hope this collection proves a useful tool for all those readers and students of Pynchon entering this world, and who welcome a helping hand on their journey.