

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76974-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon

Edited by Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman and Brian McHale

Excerpt

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INGER H. DALSGAARD, LUC HERMAN AND BRIAN MCHALE

## Introduction

“A screaming ...

... comes across the sky”: certainly the most celebrated opening sentence in twentieth-century US fiction, probably surpassed, in the whole of American literary history, only by its nineteenth-century counterpart, the opening of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1850) – “Call me Ishmael.” What screams across the sky in this signature sentence is a V-2 rocket – or a nightmare of one – falling on London in 1944, and the novel that it opens is of course Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), generally acknowledged to be a masterpiece of American and world literature. The author of seven novels to date – four of them of gigantic proportions, the other three more conventionally scaled – as well as a volume of short stories, Pynchon is a major figure of postwar American literature despite (or because of) his formidable difficulty, polymathic range of reference, personal elusiveness and reputation for outrage and obscenity.

It is impossible to conceive of postmodernism in literature without reference to Pynchon’s fiction. Canonized in the 1980s as the foremost American postmodernist mainly on the strength of his two most celebrated novels – *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity’s Rainbow* – he has become a staple of academic reading lists dealing with the period. Indeed, while his works are all complex, and some of them are massive, his indispensable position in the literary canon has ensured that he is widely taught on all university levels in the US and Europe, and that he remains a popular topic of advanced research at colleges and universities around the world. Academic publishing on Pynchon has proliferated to the point that scholars speak self-deprecatingly of a Pynchon industry, or “Pyndustry,” analogous to the Joyce industry. Yet at the same time Pynchon has also attracted a devoted readership of non-academic fans, earning him a “cult” status comparable in some ways to that of (say) Kurt Vonnegut Jr. or Charles Bukowski.

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Despite the sheer volume of published scholarship on Pynchon, the editors of the Companion that you hold in your hands believe that it addresses a definite need, and fills a particular niche. While the academic Pyndustry is booming, there are relatively few books aimed specifically at those who study and teach Pynchon as part of the many courses devoted either to his works in particular or to their place in the postmodern canon more generally. There are even fewer books about Pynchon that the non-academic fan could pick up and read with pleasure and profit. We hope that the present Companion satisfies the needs of all these (overlapping) constituencies – teachers, students, fans and, yes, scholarly specialists too.

There are a few notable exceptions to the norm of specialist literature aimed at the research community, including Patrick O'Donnell's edited volume, *New Essays on "The Crying of Lot 49"* (1991), the Chelsea House books edited by Harold Bloom, on *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1986 and on Pynchon's oeuvre as a whole in 2003, Steven Weisenburger's invaluable companion to *Gravity's Rainbow* (1988; 2nd edn., 2006), J. Kerry Grant's similar companions to *The Crying of Lot 49* (1994) and *V.* (2001), and the volume of essays specifically devoted to the teaching of Pynchon's novels, edited by Thomas Schaub (2008). Line-by-line explanations of terms and references in Pynchon's texts are increasingly available online, where readers can look up explanations for slang terms, technical references and historical and literary allusions in co-created wikis. These and other more specialized works can be found in the bibliography to the present Companion. An earlier bibliography of work by and about Pynchon, compiled by Clifford Mead (1989), is so comprehensive for the earlier decades of Pynchon scholarship that we have opted to skew our own selection of secondary sources toward the present, retaining only a few of the older works, those that still seem most relevant today. In the interests of capturing as wide a range as possible of notable books and essays, we have generally refrained from listing individual essays from collections of Pynchon scholarship or those that have appeared in *Pynchon Notes*, the pre-eminent journal in Pynchon studies. So central is this journal to the field that any kind of Pynchon research should always start there, not least because each issue contains a bibliography of recent publications by and on Pynchon. We also list important websites, among which the wikis for each of the novels, curated by Tim Ware, are particularly useful.

By contrast with most of the items on our selected bibliography, which either take the form of very close textual guides or are exclusively aimed at the community of advanced researchers, the present Companion comprises essays which give a broader overview than textual companions and wikis can provide, while also making accessible advanced specialist insights,

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reflecting the state of the art in the field. Unlike various online resources, whose contributors' reliability and expertise may be inconsistent or questionable, our Companion showcases the work of proven Pynchon experts capable of formulating cutting-edge ideas while introducing fundamental issues in ways that are stimulating and accessible for teachers, students and fans alike.

## “Shall I project a world?”

Who *is* Thomas Pynchon, anyway? We know relatively little about his private life, hardly more (or so it sometime seems) than we do about Shakespeare's, some four hundred years earlier; and evidently Pynchon himself prefers it that way. In any case, the little that we do know is summarized by John Krafft in the chronology and biographical note included in the present volume. While the chronology that launches our Companion is relatively extensive, Pynchon's decision early in his career to avoid personal publicity has meant that his life could only be put in the proper perspective in a separate biographical note. John Krafft enhances the record by integrating all the available material into an essay that respects Pynchon's privacy but does not hesitate to consult early letters or to venture the occasional guess as to his whereabouts in the 1960s. The latest developments are included as well. With his guest “appearance” on *The Simpsons* in 2004 and his voice-over for a YouTube video to promote his latest novel, *Inherent Vice* (2009), Pynchon has started playing around with his own media status as a reclusive author.

The chapters that follow Krafft's biography are organized into three sections. First comes a series of chapters specifically focused on the novels and short stories of the Pynchon canon, beginning with the earliest (the short stories and *V.*) and proceeding chronologically to the more recent novels, apart from one chapter that groups together the three shorter novels set in California, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* (1990) and *Inherent Vice* (2009). The second section is devoted to aspects of Pynchon's artistic practice, or poetics, that can be found right across the Pynchon canon, in all of his novels. A third section addresses some of the largest issues engaged by Pynchon's writing, including history, politics, otherness (or alterity), and science and technology. A coda asks how one is supposed to go about reading a novelist as challenging as Pynchon, and ventures some answers.

**Canon.** Pynchon's canonization in the 1980s as the iconic author of American postmodernism has produced at least two accepted masterpieces, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. The status of Pynchon's first novel, *V.* (1963), is less clear, which may well be due to the fact that

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it still carries many signs of his apprenticeship as an author. Tracing the start of Pynchon's literary career from its inauspicious beginnings in a high school newspaper to the early 1960s, Luc Herman in Chapter 1 highlights the importance of the V. typescript at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, as an important clue for an understanding of Pynchon's artistic development, and especially of the central role the historical imagination would come to play in his subsequent work.

Thomas Hill Schaub's topic in Chapter 2 is a trilogy of novels published at wide intervals across Pynchon's career – *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice*, published in 1966, 1990 and 2009 respectively – which are all set in the same place and time, Southern California in the late sixties, and which together trace a trajectory of late twentieth-century American culture from its high-water mark of social experimentation and utopian hopes to the conservative reaction of the Nixon and Reagan years. Where *Lot 49*, Pynchon's most widely taught novel, is forward-looking, bursting with subcultural alternatives and subversive energies, *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* are retrospective and reflective, focused less on utopian possibilities than on exposing the apparatus that maintains the status quo.

The highpoint of Pynchon's career, by almost universal consensus, is *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Though he had originally intended to entitle it "Mindless Pleasures," it is hardly escapist entertainment, for all its humor and carnivalesque extravagance; rather, as Steven Weisenburger shows in Chapter 3, it is a supremely *mindful* moral fiction. A historical novel about the roots of the Cold War and the military-industry complex, *Gravity's Rainbow* explores our collective complicity – including its author's own personal complicity – with bureaucracies of terror and mass destruction. If some of the novel's characters imagine a postwar condition ripe with possibilities for freedom, Pynchon counterbalances their euphoric vision with a darker, ironic alternative in which history's arc terminates in the death camps.

In her chapter on *Mason & Dixon* (1997), Pynchon's massive re-imagining of one of the formative episodes of American history, Kathryn Hume develops a reading method derived from central metaphors in the novel itself. By visualizing the text both as layers of material and as networks of connected points – two structural images Pynchon himself develops throughout, for instance when he identifies the sandwich as an example of lamination – readers can relate to Pynchon's speculation about the existence of alternative realities. Hume proposes the archetypal American plot of two men going into the wilderness as the chief layer in such a reading, and science and power – but also less weighty matters such as beavers and the Black Hole of Calcutta – as some of the nodes that facilitate connections with other layers of the novel.

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A gargantuan work over 1,000 pages long, *Against the Day* (2009), according to Bernard Duyhuizen in Chapter 5, is based on the genre of Menippean satire, which mixes multiple genres, blending them into a heteroglossic narrative containing a multitude of voices and discourses. The early chapters featuring the Chums of Chance evoke dime-novel boys' adventure novels and science fiction. Later chapters display traces of such genres as the espionage thriller, adventure travel writing, the anarchist novel, the multi-generational novel, the revenge plot, noir detective fiction, and various types of film, theater and popular song, all woven together into a dense fabric of genres, voices, allusions and parodies.

**Poetics.** In order to place Pynchon in literary history, the topic of Chapter 6, David Cowart first turns to the period of his apprenticeship, when the premises of modernism were being reframed to suit mid-century needs. Not satisfied with the work of Norman Mailer, the Beats and other contemporaries and predecessors, Pynchon forged a new poetics in which pastiche became central. Cowart goes on to suggest that Pynchon's work not only satisfies the traditional demands of literary permanence (not least because of his deep engagement with history) but also displays great sensitivity to contemporary questions of class, race and gender. Pynchon's greatest achievement, however, is his superb evocation of the encyclopedic vision, which he consistently undermines so as to expose our insistent but futile desire to understand the world. In a final section, Cowart briefly considers the contemporary authors who have been inspired by the master.

Pynchon's fiction is literally the paradigmatic case of postmodernism, Brian McHale argues in Chapter 7. Pynchon's novels exemplify various theories of postmodernity – the historical and cultural conditions of the postmodern period – including those of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Haraway and others. They also illustrate various theories of postmodernism – the period's characteristic aesthetic forms and practices – including those that characterize postmodernism in terms of double-coding (Huyssen, Jencks), suspensive irony and pastiche (Wilde, Jameson), the ontological dominant (McHale) and cognitive mapping (Jameson). Pynchon's novels exhibit the full range of typical postmodern narrative strategies, including strange loops and *mise-en-abyme*, narration under erasure and gardens of forking paths.

Pynchon is above all a historical novelist, and his evocation of the past relies, as David Seed demonstrates in Chapter 8, on his practice of intertextuality, that is, on gleaning textual material from a diversity of historical sources. V., for instance, draws heavily on Baedeker guidebooks for travelers. *The Crying of Lot 49* makes telling use of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, just as *Gravity's Rainbow* does of Pavlov's *Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes*, counterpointed against the Freudian writings of

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Norman O. Brown. Charles Mason's and Jeremiah Dixon's journals are a source for the novel bearing their names, while *Against the Day* articulates its history of the early twentieth century through references to the popular fiction that flourished in that period.

**Issues.** In Chapter 9, on the issue of history, Amy Elias contends that Pynchon shares three assumptions in common with the contemporary philosophy of history, namely the assumptions that history always features a medley of voices, that it is produced by events reconfiguring the social landscape, and that it is determined by the tropes available for the telling of stories. The notion of polyvocal history leads Pynchon to offer paranoia as an instance of the "cognitive mapping" that Fredric Jameson has described as meaningful resistance against the disorientation of the individual in late capitalism. History as event entails Pynchon's construction of history as sublime. The notion of history as tropological narrative, finally, turns Pynchon's fictional historiography into explanatory myth, a legend about the values grounding society.

Jeff Baker, in Chapter 10, locates Pynchon's fiction within an American political tradition derived from Ralph Waldo Emerson, entailing a notion of "self-reliance" that can be understood in starkly opposed ways, as either the rugged individualism of laissez-faire capitalism or as democratic communitarianism. From novel to novel across his whole career, Pynchon reflects on the political differences between these two versions of the Emersonian self, and explores how each in turn might define the nature of American exceptionalism. Averse as he is to direct political statement, Pynchon in his novels nevertheless insists that responsibility for cultural resistance begins with the self-reliant, community-minded Emersonian individual.

Deborah Madsen defines "alterity" in Chapter 11 as the process that constructs an "Other." She documents Pynchon's engagement with this process by showing how his work has simultaneously undermined and legitimized various examples of such construction. Zooming in on Slothrop's disintegration in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Madsen establishes the fundamental uncertainty affecting both characters and narrators in Pynchon's fictional worlds. Devoid of the innate selves imagined by liberal humanism, these figures appear determined and even kept in check by agents such as corporations or popular culture. The pervasive presence of colonialism in Pynchon's work is no coincidence, since it provides the author with a metaphor that reveals both individual alienation and complicity with the powers that be.

In Chapter 12, Inger H. Dalsgaard surveys key features of Pynchon's wide-ranging use of science and technology, and representative approaches to this distinctive aspect of his writing. Pynchon, she finds, interrogates through science and technology many aspects of Western industrial civilization,

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from the nature of power to the powers of nature. This aspect is explored by critics primarily interested in his treatment of engineering, material or human, as subject matter. At once critical and reflexive, however, Pynchon also enacts the premises and methods of science and technology *within* his own work. Science and technology, Dalsgaard suggests, fuel both Pynchon's experimental poetics and the deeper issues raised by his novels.

**Coda.** Reading Pynchon is not easy. In a coda to this Companion, Hanjo Berressem surveys the history of Pynchon criticism to highlight the main solutions to this problem so far. From early views of Pynchon as a prophet of doom, through a poststructuralist phase, and continuing on to an approach informed by New Historicism, critical takes on Pynchon have developed a logic of multiplicity that is suited to the exuberance and variety of his work. In the second part of his coda, Berressem considers the communal dimension of every creation of meaning. Pynchon looks for this sense of community and resonance with his readers, but the will to resonance is repeatedly overridden by forces outside one's, or for that matter the community's, control. Berressem concludes that the production of complex narratives may help to resist that (sometimes violent) determinism.

## “They fly toward grace”

The creation of meaning is communal, Hanjo Berressem tells us, and Pynchon seeks community with his readers. Yet how can this be? His books are notoriously difficult, sometimes to the point of hermeticism, demanding kinds and degrees of attention that casual readers may not be willing to grant. Some readers may be alienated by Pynchon's irresponsible frivolity, by his obscenity, by what sometimes appear to be displays of sexism, misogyny and homophobia, or even aggression or resentment toward the reader; he does *not* always appear to be reader-friendly. Moreover, don't his reclusiveness and his refusal to do interviews or to make media appearances – even the paper bag that his animated surrogate wears to disguise his features on that famous episode from *The Simpsons* – don't these all indicate the *opposite* of seeking community with readers? And what about the cultishness of Pynchon fans, and of academics who labor in the Pynchon industry – their tendency toward obsessiveness, their circulation of choice details and phrases from the books like magic talismans, their delight in gossip about Pynchon sightings, their in-jokes – aren't these all ways of flaunting a special “insider” status, and of turning one's back on the larger community of readers? A case in point: the subheadings of the three sections of this very introduction, each drawn from a different Pynchon novel – “A screaming ...” from the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*, “Shall I project a



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world?” from near the middle of *The Crying of Lot 49*, “They fly toward grace” from the very end of *Against the Day* – all immediately recognizable by Pynchon “insiders,” but no doubt cryptic and opaque to everyone else.

That’s one side of the Pynchon problem – the dark side; but there’s another side as well. The very difficulty and apparent unfriendliness of Pynchon’s novels create a sense of solidarity and, yes, community among Pynchon’s readers – a sense that we are all participating in a collective enterprise of reading wherein no one of us could succeed without the help of the others. Pynchon’s refusal to make himself publicly available – which only means, really, his refusal to cooperate with the apparatus of celebrity – has the effect of clearing a space in which we, his readers, can make up our own minds, free of “authoritative” pronouncements and directives (apart from rare exceptions such as the introduction to *Slow Learner* [1984]). Pynchon, it appears, has decided to *leave us to our own devices*. It is this sense of having been left to our own devices, and of needing to help each other out, that animates such collective enterprises as the co-created online Pynchon wikis, or a journal like *Pynchon Notes*, or for that matter the very Companion that you are holding in your hands. Our Companion has been a communal effort from start to finish, involving not only close collaboration among the three editors and eleven other contributors, but also the support and assistance of others both inside and outside the Pynchon community, among whom the editors want especially to acknowledge Dale Carter and Toon Staes.

It is the sense of sharing in a collective enterprise of reading that transforms a cult of insiders into a community. We invite you to join the community of Pynchon readers. We are all in it together.



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## Biographical note

Thomas Pynchon has so carefully guarded his privacy that relatively little is known about his personal life. He evidently prefers to have readers focus on his fiction. His principled determination to avoid personal publicity has led to his routinely, and inaccurately, being described as a recluse, has sparked some bizarre rumors – that he was J. D. Salinger, or the Unabomber – and has provoked some spiteful and some self-serving revelations.<sup>1</sup> Now in his seventies, Pynchon seems to have let down his guard a bit, perhaps as the effect of being a family man with a teenage son. In 2004, he mocked his own reputation as a “reclusive author” by allowing himself to be represented in two episodes of *The Simpsons* as a figure with a brown paper bag over his head, voicing the caricature himself. In 2009, he even narrated a short promotional video for his latest novel, *Inherent Vice*.<sup>2</sup>

Pynchon’s ancestors can be traced back nearly a millennium, to the time of the Norman Conquest of England.<sup>3</sup> His earliest ancestor in America, William Pynchon (1590–1662), born into the modestly landed English gentry, joined the Great Migration of Puritans to New England in 1630. A member of the Massachusetts Bay Company and treasurer of the Bay Colony, William Pynchon was a founder of both Roxbury and Springfield in Massachusetts. He was a successful merchant and fur trader, a magistrate and an amateur theologian. But he returned to England in 1652 after stirring up controversy by writing *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* (1650), a book which Massachusetts authorities judged heretical and ordered burned in the Boston marketplace because of its subversive political, as well as theological, implications. William’s son John (1625–1703) was also a prosperous New England merchant, trader and landowner. The rest of the Pynchon family tree includes politicians, clergymen, educators, scientists, physicians, inventors and financiers. One wrote a chemistry textbook; another wrote a Gothic tale about a ghostly dog; one patented both an instrument for performing nasal surgery and an airship propelled by dynamite, and wrote a pamphlet on enemas; one was a stock broker and noted

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yachtsman. The family tree does not include the “Pyncheons” so fiercely satirized in Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables* (1851); they were actually modeled on Hawthorne’s own ancestors.<sup>4</sup> The novelist’s father, Thomas R. Pynchon, Sr. (1907–95), was an industrial surveyor, highway engineer and local Republican politician. His mother, Catherine Bennett Pynchon (1909–96), was a registered nurse and volunteer librarian.

The eldest of three children, Pynchon was born on May 8, 1937, in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York, and grew up in nearby East Norwich. This scion of New England Puritans was raised a Roman Catholic. A half-dozen of his earliest known stories appeared anonymously in the Oyster Bay High School newspaper, *Purple and Gold*, in 1952–53. These satirical, irreverent juvenilia feature issues and techniques central also to Pynchon’s mature fiction.<sup>5</sup> After graduating at sixteen from Oyster Bay High School as class salutatorian and a prize-winning English student, Pynchon entered Cornell University with a scholarship as an Engineering Physics major. He remained in that program for only one year, then switched to Arts and Sciences.<sup>6</sup> As summer employment, he may have done the kind of roadwork recalled by his characters Profane and Slothrop.<sup>7</sup> After his sophomore year, he enlisted for a two-year tour of duty in the US Navy. During the Suez crisis of 1956, he served aboard the destroyer USS *Hank* in the Mediterranean, possibly as a communications specialist. He returned to Cornell in 1957 and graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in English in June 1959. Offered a Woodrow Wilson Graduate Fellowship and the opportunity to teach creative writing at Cornell, Pynchon reportedly preferred to concentrate on his own creative writing.<sup>8</sup>

At Cornell Pynchon became close friends with other aspiring writers, notably folk singer and novelist Richard Fariña, and editor, historian and activist Kirkpatrick Sale. Sale and Pynchon collaborated in 1958 on a never-finished dystopian musical, “Minstrel Island.” Faith Apfelbaum Sale would have editorial responsibility at J. B. Lippincott for Pynchon’s first novel, *V.*, shortly before its publication. Other Cornell friends included the freelance writer Jules Siegel and the future fiction-editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* C. Michael Curtis. No reliable evidence available to date supports the persistent rumor that Pynchon took a course taught by Vladimir Nabokov, the author of *Lolita* (1955), although he may have audited Nabokov’s classes, known him personally or worked with him informally. Pynchon’s most famous instructor of record was M. H. Abrams, later the founding editor of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

The year 1959 saw publication of Pynchon’s first two mature short stories, “The Small Rain” and “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna.” Pynchon was already being represented by Candida Donadio, who would remain his agent