

Modern Critical Views

THOMAS PYNCHON

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



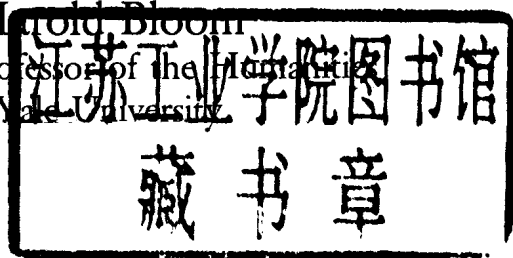
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Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This volume gathers together what I consider to be the best criticism so far ventured upon the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, arranged in the chronological order of its original publication. I am grateful to Peter Childers, David Bloom, and Susan Laity for their aid in editing this book.

The editor's introduction is devoted to "The Story of Byron the Bulb" from *Gravity's Rainbow*. Byron's story is closely read here as a gateway both to Pynchon's Kabbalism and to his authentic nihilism, his refusal of the transcendental aspects of his own Gnostic vision.

Frank Kermode's exegesis of *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which that novella is used to illustrate the limits of Barthesian Structuralism, commences the chronological sequence of criticism, which continues with Edward Mendelson's passionate review of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz also address themselves to *Gravity's Rainbow* in an attempt to define "the thermodynamics of life" as the vast novel's central metaphor.

A vision of Pynchon as "the American Goya" is presented by Josephine Hendin, who sums up both *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* as spiritual self-portraits of the author and even ventures the hypothesis that Byron the Bulb is a surrogate for Pynchon. A very different perspective, that of the distinguished critic Richard Poirier, results in our being enveloped in Pynchon's own multiple perspectives, all of which partake of one another. To Poirier, "Pynchon is a great novelist of betrayal," and the true contemporary heir of Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville, and so another seer "of cultural inundation, of being swamped, swept up, counted in before you could count yourself out."

George Levine offers yet another perspective, a suggestion that Pynchon's work disorients us, risks every moment, and for the sake of the ideal (if it is that) named by Pynchon as "sado-anarchism." Part of Levine's strength comes in his agile movement between all three of Pynchon's major fictions, which are thus read as an implicit and rather drastic unity. In an essay on the early stories, Catharine R. Stimpson meditates upon the problematic place of women

in Pynchon's work, seeing it as akin to what always renders women equivocal actors in apocalyptic imaginings. Melvyn New, examining *V*, concludes that Pynchon allows only two functions for the literary artist: to prefigure apocalypse or to lie. A somewhat more varied sense of literary function is sketched in Maureen Quilligan's account of allegorical language in Pynchon, with her acute realization that the reader is compelled to be the allegorist: "Whether Slothrop's last moments are to be dismissed as true transcendence or a kind of Mucho-Maas dematerialization is something, however, which the text forces us to decide on our own."

A very specific allegorical reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* as an American jeremiad is attempted by Marcus Smith and Khachig Tololyan, who find in the novel an ultimate demonstration of how Puritan tradition never abandons the American literary imagination. The early story "Entropy" is analyzed by David Seed as a kind of inverted allegory of order, an analysis worked out also by Tony Tanner in his examination of the opposition between thermodynamic entropy and entropy in information theory, an opposition he defines as central to *The Crying of Lot 49*.

The entropy of love, its tendency to collapse back into solipsism, is the emphasis of Craig Hansen Werner's discussion of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Charles Berger, contrasting James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, ends our book of apocalyptic musings upon the apocalyptic Pynchon by finding hints of survival in both Merrill and Pynchon. Such a discovery returns us full circle to the editor's introduction, with its broodings on the failures of the Counterforce in Pynchon and on the madness of poor Byron the Bulb, while it reminds us nevertheless that there is a Counterforce, and that Byron the Bulb's illumination remains indomitable, though to his own eternal frustration.

Contents

Editor's Note	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Harold Bloom</i>	
The Use of Codes in <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i>	11
<i>Frank Kermode</i>	
Pynchon's Gravity	15
<i>Edward Mendelson</i>	
<i>Gravity's Rainbow</i> : Science as Metaphor	23
<i>Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz</i>	
What Is Thomas Pynchon Telling Us?	37
<i>Josephine Hendin</i>	
The Importance of Thomas Pynchon	47
<i>Richard Poirier</i>	
Risking the Moment	59
<i>George Levine</i>	
Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism: Thomas Pynchon's Early Fiction	79
<i>Catharine R. Stimpson</i>	
Profaned and Stenciled Texts: In Search of Pynchon's <i>V.</i>	93
<i>Melvyn New</i>	
Thomas Pynchon and the Language of Allegory	111
<i>Maureen Quilligan</i>	
The New Jeremiad: <i>Gravity's Rainbow</i>	139
<i>Marcus Smith and Khachig Tololyan</i>	
Order in Thomas Pynchon's "Entropy"	157
<i>David Seed</i>	

<i>The Crying of Lot 49</i>	175
<i>Tony Tanner</i>	
Recognizing Reality, Realizing Responsibility	191
<i>Craig Hansen Werner</i>	
Merrill and Pynchon: Our Apocalyptic Scribes	203
<i>Charles Berger</i>	
Chronology	217
Contributors	219
Bibliography	221
Acknowledgments	223
Index	225

Introduction

I

We all carry about with us our personal catalog of the experiences that matter most—our own versions of what they used to call the Sublime. So far as aesthetic experience in twentieth-century America is concerned, I myself have a short list for the American Sublime: the war that concludes the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*; Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*; Wallace Stevens's "The Auroras of Autumn"; nearly all of Hart Crane; Charlie Parker playing "Parker's Mood" and "I Remember You"; Bud Powell performing "Un Poco Loco"; Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*; and most recently, the story of Byron the light bulb in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

I am not suggesting that there is not much more of the Sublime in *Gravity's Rainbow* than the not quite eight pages that make up the story of Byron the Bulb. Pynchon is the greatest master of the negative Sublime at least since Faulkner and West, and if nothing besides Byron the Bulb in *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to me quite as perfect as all of *The Crying of Lot 49*, that may be because no one could hope to write the first authentic post-Holocaust novel, and achieve a total vision without fearful cost. Yet the story of Byron the Bulb, for me, touches one of the limits of art, and I want to read it very closely here, so as to suggest what is most vital and least problematic about Pynchon's achievement as a writer, indeed as the crucial American writer of prose fiction at the present time. We are now, in my judgment, in the Age of John Ashbery and of Thomas Pynchon, which is not to suggest any inadequacy in such marvelous works as James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* or Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* but only to indicate one critic's conviction as to what now constitutes the Spirit of the Age.

For Pynchon, ours is the age of plastics and paranoia, dominated by the System. No one is going to dispute such a conviction; reading the *New York Times* first thing every morning is sufficient to convince one that not even Pynchon's imagination can match journalistic irreality. What is more startling

about Pynchon is that he has found ways of representing the impulse to defy the System, even though both the impulse and its representations always are defeated. In the Zone (which is our cosmos as the Gnostics saw it, the *kenoma* or Great Emptiness) the force of the System, of They (whom the Gnostics called the Archons), is in some sense irresistible, as all overdetermination must be irresistible. Yet there is a Counterforce, hardly distinguished in its efficacy, but it never does (or can) give up. Unfortunately, its hero is the extraordinarily ordinary Tyrone Slothrop, who is a perpetual disaster, and whose ultimate fate, being "scattered" (rather in the biblical sense), is accomplished by Pynchon with dismaying literalness. And yet—Slothrop, who has not inspired much affection even in Pynchon's best critics, remains more hero than antihero, despite the critics, and despite Pynchon himself.

There are more than four hundred named characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and perhaps twenty of these have something we might want to call personality, but only Tyrone Slothrop (however negatively) could be judged a self-representation (however involuntary) on the author's part. Slothrop is a Kabbalistic version of Pynchon himself, rather in the way that Scythrop the poet in Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* is intentionally a loving satire upon Peacock's friend the poet Shelley, but Kabbalistically is a representation of Peacock himself. I am not interested in adding *Nightmare Abbey* to the maddening catalog of "sources" for *Gravity's Rainbow* (though Slothrop's very name probably alludes to Scythrop's, with the image of a giant sloth replacing the acuity of the Shelleyan scythe). What does concern me is the Kabbalistic winding path that is Pynchon's authentic and Gnostic image for the route through the *kelippot* or evil husks that the light must take if it is to survive in the ultimate breaking of the vessels, the Holocaust brought about by the System at its most evil, yet hardly at its most prevalent.

The not unimpressive polemic of Norman Mailer—that Fascism always lurks where plastic dominates—is in Pynchon not a polemic but a total vision. Mailer, for all his legitimate status as Representative Man, lacks invention except in *Ancient Evenings*, and there he cannot discipline his inventiveness. Pynchon surpasses every American writer since Faulkner at invention, which Dr. Samuel Johnson, greatest of Western literary critics, rightly considered to be the essence of poetry or fiction. What can be judged Pynchon's greatest talent is his vast control, a preternatural ability to order so immense an exuberance at invention. Pynchon's supreme aesthetic quality is what Hazlitt called *gusto*, or what Blake intended in his Infernal proverb: "Exuberance is Beauty."

Sadly, that is precisely what the Counterforce lacks: *gusto*. Slothrop never gives up; always defeated, he goes on, bloody and bowed, but has to yield to entropy, to a dread scattering. Yet he lacks all exuberance; he is the American as conditioned reflex, colorless and hapless.

Nothing holds or could hold *Gravity's Rainbow* together—except Slothrop. When he is finally scattered, the book stops, and the apocalyptic rocket blasts off. Still, Slothrop is more than a Derridean dissemination, if only because he does enable Pynchon to gather together seven hundred and sixty pages. Nor is *Gravity's Rainbow* what is now called “a text.” It is a novel, with a beginning, an end, and a monstrous conglomerate of middles. This could not be if the *schlemiel* Slothrop were wholly antipathetic. Instead, he does enlist something crucial in the elitest reader, a something that is scattered when the hero, poor Plasticman or Rocketman, is apocalyptically scattered.

Pynchon, as Richard Poirier has best seen and said, is a weird blend of the esoteric and insanely learned with the popular or the supposedly popular. Or, to follow Pynchon's own lead, he is a Kabbalistic writer, esoteric not only in his theosophical allusiveness (like Yeats) but actually in his deeper patterns (like Malcolm Lowry in *Under the Volcano*). A Kabbalistic novel is something beyond an oxymoron not because the Kabbalah does not tell stories (it does) but because its stories are all exegetical, however wild and mythical. That does give a useful clue for reading Pynchon, who always seems not so much to be telling his bewildering, labyrinthine story as writing a wistful commentary upon it as a story already twice-told, though it hasn't been, and truly can't be told at all.

II

That returns us to Byron the Bulb, whose story can't be told because poor Byron the indomitable really is immortal. He can never burn out, which at least is an annoyance for the whole paranoid System, and at most is an embarrassment for them. They cannot compel Byron to submit to the law of entropy, or the death drive, and yet they can deny him any context in which his immortality will at last be anything but a provocation to his own madness. A living reminder that the System can never quite win, poor Byron the Bulb becomes a death-in-life reminder that the System also can never quite lose. Byron, unlike Slothrop, cannot be scattered, but his high consciousness represents the dark fate of the Gnosis in Pynchon's vision. For all its negativity, Gnosticism remains a mode of transcendental belief. Pynchon's is a Gnosis without transcendence. There is a Counterforce, but there is no fathering and mothering abyss to which it can return.

And yet the light bulb is named Byron, and is a source of light and cannot burn out. Why Byron? Well, he could hardly be Goethe the Bulb or Wordsworth the Bulb or even Joyce the Bulb. There must be the insouciance of personal myth in his name. Probably he could have been Oscar the Bulb, after the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest* or of that marvelous fairy

plans—he's gonna organize all the Bulbs, see, get him a power base in Berlin, he's already hep to the Strobing Tactic, all you do is develop the knack (Yogic, almost) of shutting off and on at a rate close to the human brain's alpha rhythm, and you can actually trigger an *epileptic fit*! True. Byron has had a vision against the rafters of his ward, of 20 million Bulbs, all over Europe, at a given synchronizing pulse arranged by one of his many agents in the Grid, all these Bulbs beginning to strobe *together*, humans thrashing around the 20 million rooms like fish on the beaches of Perfect Energy—Attention, humans, this has been a warning to you. Next time, a few of us will *explode*. Ha-ha. Yes we'll unleash our *Kamikaze squads*! You've heard of the Kirghiz Light? well that's the ass end of a firefly compared to what we're gonna—oh, you haven't heard of the—oh, well, too bad.' Cause a few Bulbs, say a million, a mere 5% of our number, are more than willing to flame out in one grand burst instead of patiently waiting out their design hours. . . . So Byron dreams of his Guerrilla Strike Force, gonna get Herbert Hoover, Stanley Baldwin, all of them, right in the face with one coordinated blast.

The rhetoric of bravado here is tempered and defeated by a rhetoric of desperation. A rude awakening awaits Byron, because the System has in place already its branch, "Phoebus," the international light-bulb cartel, headquartered of course in Switzerland. Phoebus, god of light and of pestilence "determines the operational lives of all the bulbs in the world," and yet does not as yet know that Byron, rebel against the cartel's repression, is immortal. As an immortal, bearer of the Gnostic Spark or *pneuma*, Byron must acquire knowledge, initially the sadness of the knowledge of love:

One by one, over the months, the other bulbs burn out, and are gone. The first few of these hit Byron hard. He's still a new arrival, still hasn't accepted his immortality. But on through the burning hours he starts to learn about the transience of others: learns that loving them while they're here becomes easier, and also more intense—to love as if each design-hour will be the last. Byron soon enough becomes a Permanent Old-Timer. Others can recognize his immortality on sight, but it's never discussed except in a general way, when folklore comes flickering in from other parts of the Grid, tales of the Immortals, one in a kabbalist's study in Lyons who's supposed to know magic, another in Norway outside a warehouse facing arctic whiteness with a stoicism more southerly bulbs begin

strobing faintly just at the thought of. If other Immortals *are* out there, they remain silent. But it is a silence with much, perhaps, everything, in it.

A silence that may have everything in it is a Gnostic concept, but falls away into the silence of impotence on the part of the other bulbs when the System eventually sends its agent to unscrew Byron:

At 800 hours—another routine precaution—a Berlin agent is sent out to the opium den to transfer Byron. She is wearing asbestos-lined kid gloves and seven-inch spike heels, no not so she can fit in with the crowd, but so that she can reach that sconce to unscrew Byron. The other bulbs watch, in barely subdued terror. The word goes out along the Grid. At something close to the speed of light, every bulb, Azos looking down the empty black Bakelite streets, Nitalampen and Wotan Gs at night soccer matches, Just-Wolframs, Monowatts and Siriuses, every bulb in Europe knows what's happened. They are silent with impotence, with surrender in the face of struggles they thought were all myth. *We can't help*, this common thought humming through pastures of sleeping sheep, down Autobahns and to the bitter ends of coaling piers in the North, *there's never been anything we could do*. . . . Anyone shows us the meanest hope of transcending and the Committee on Incandescent Anomalies comes in and takes him away. Some do protest, maybe, here and there, but it's only information, glow-modulated, harmless, nothing close to the explosions in the faces of the powerful that Byron once envisioned, back there in his Baby ward, in his innocence.

Romantics are Incandescent Anomalies, a phrase wholly appropriate to John Ashbery's belated self-illuminations also, defeated epiphanies that always ask the question: Was it information? The information that Pynchon gives us has Byron taken to a "control point," where he burns on until the committee on Incandescent Anomalies sends a hit man after him. Like the noble Lord Byron, who was more than half in love with easeful death before he went off to die in Greece, Byron the Bulb is now content to be recycled also, but he is bound upon his own wheel of fire, and so must continue as a now involuntary prophet and hero:

But here something odd happens. Yes, damned odd. The plan is to smash up Byron and send him back right there in the shop to cullet and batch—salvage the tungsten, of course—and let him

be reincarnated in the glassblower's next project (a balloon setting out on a journey from the top of a white skyscraper). This wouldn't be too bad a deal for Byron—he knows as well as Phoebus does how many hours he has on him. Here in the shop he's watched enough glass being melted back into the structureless pool from which all glass forms spring and re-spring, and wouldn't mind going through it himself. But he is trapped on the Karmic wheel. The glowing orange batch is a taunt, a cruelty. There's no escape for Byron, he's doomed to an infinite regress of sockets and bulb-snatchers. In zips young Hansel Geschwindig, a Weimar street urchin—twirls Byron out of the ceiling into a careful pocket and Gesssschhhwindig! out the door again. Darkness invades the dreams of the glassblower. Of all the unpleasanties his dreams grab in out of the night air, an extinguished light is the worst. Light, in his dreams, was always hope: the basic, mortal hope. As the contacts break helically away, hope turns to darkness, and the glassblower wakes sharply tonight crying, "Who? *Who?*"

Byron the Bulb's Promethean fire is now a taunt and a cruelty. A mad comedy, "an infinite regress of sockets and bulb snatchers," will be the poor Bulb's destiny, a repetition-compulsion akin to the entropic flight and scattering of the heroic *schlemiel* Slothrop. The stone-faced search parties of the Phoebus combine move out into the streets of Berlin. But Byron is off upon his unwilling travels: Berlin to Hamburg to Helgoland to Nürnberg, until (after many narrow escapes):

He is scavenged next day (the field now deathempty, columned, pale, streaked with long mudpuddles, morning clouds lengthening behind the gilded swastika and wreath) by a poor Jewish ragpicker, and taken on, on into another 15 years of preservation against chance and against Phoebus. He will be screwed into mother (*Mutter*) after mother, as the female threads of German light-bulb sockets are known, for some reason that escapes everybody.

Can we surmise the reason? The cartel gives up, and decides to declare Byron legally burned out, a declaration that deceives nobody.

Through his years of survival, all these various rescues of Byron happen as if by accident. Whenever he can, he tries to instruct any bulbs nearby in the evil nature of Phoebus, and in the need for solidarity against the cartel. He has come to see how Bulb must move beyond its role as conveyor of light-energy alone. Phoebus

has restricted Bulb to this one identity. "But there are other frequencies, above and below the visible band. Bulb can give heat. Bulb can provide energy for plants to grow, illegal plants, inside closets, for example. Bulb can penetrate the sleeping eye, and operate among the dreams of men." Some bulbs listened attentively—others thought of ways to fink to Phoebus. Some of the older anti-Byronists were able to fool with their parameters in systematic ways that would show up on the ebonite meters under the Swiss mountain: there were even a few self-immolations, hoping to draw the hit men down.

This darkness of vain treachery helps to flesh out the reason for Byron's survival. Call it the necessity of myth, or of gossip aging productively into myth. Not that Phoebus loses any part of its profit; rather, it establishes a subtler and more intricate international cartel pattern:

Byron, as he burns on, sees more and more of this pattern. He learns how to make contact with other kinds of electric appliances, in homes, in factories and out in the streets. Each has something to tell him. The pattern gathers in his soul (*Seele*, as the core of the earlier carbon filament was known in Germany), and the grander and clearer it grows, the more desperate Byron gets. Someday he will know everything, and still be as impotent as before. His youthful dreams of organizing all the bulbs in the world seem impossible now—the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are more than enough traitors out on the line. Prophets traditionally don't last long—they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it.

This seems to me the saddest paragraph in all of Pynchon; at least, it hurts me the most. In it is Pynchon's despair of his own Gnostic Kabbalah, since Byron the Bulb does achieve the Gnosis, complete knowledge, but purchases that knowledge by impotence, the loss of power. Byron can neither be martyred, nor betray his own prophetic vocation. What remains is madness: limitless rage and frustration, which at last he learns to enjoy.

That ends the story of Byron the Bulb, and ends something in Pynchon

also. What is left, whether in *Gravity's Rainbow*—or in the immense work-in-progress, a historical novel depicting the coming-on of the American Civil War and reported to have the title *The Mason-Dixon Line*—is the studying of new modalities of post-Apocalyptic silence. Pynchon seems now to be where his precursor Emerson prophesied the American visionary must be:

There may be two or three or four steps, according to the genius
of each, but for every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts,—
I and the Abyss.

If at best, the *I* is an immortal but hapless light bulb and the *Abyss*, our Gnostic foremother and forefather, is the socket into which that poor *I* of a bulb is screwed, then the two absorbing facts themselves have ceased to absorb.

