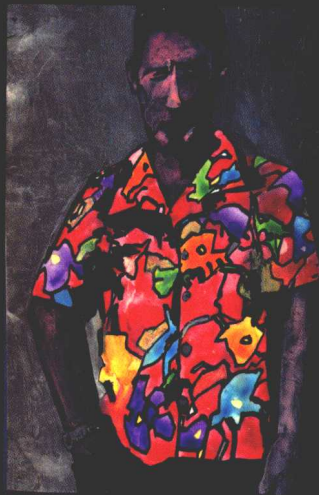


THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



# THOMAS PYNCHON

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

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COMPANION TO  
THOMAS  
PYNCHON

EDITED BY  
INGER H. DALSGAARD  
LUC HERMAN  
BRIAN MCHALE



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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
THOMAS PYNCHON

The most celebrated American novelist of the past half-century, an indispensable figure of postmodernism worldwide, Thomas Pynchon notoriously challenges his readers. This *Companion* provides tools for meeting that challenge. Comprehensive, accessible, lively, up-to-date and reliable, it approaches Pynchon's fiction from various angles, calling on the expertise of an international roster of scholars at the cutting edge of Pynchon studies. Part I covers Pynchon's fiction novel by novel from the sixties to the present, including such indisputable classics as *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Part II zooms out to give a bird's-eye view of Pynchon's novelistic practice across his entire career. Part III surveys major topics of Pynchon's fiction: history, politics, alterity ("otherness"), and science and technology. Designed for students, scholars and fans alike, the *Companion* begins with a biography of the elusive author and ends with a coda on how to read Pynchon and a bibliography for further reading.

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*A complete list of books in the series is at the end of this book*

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## CHRONOLOGY OF PYNCHON'S LIFE AND WORK

- 1937 Thomas Pynchon is born on May 8 in Glen Cove, on Long Island, New York.
- 1945 The Second World War in Europe ends on Pynchon's eighth birthday, VE Day.
- 1952 Pynchon's earliest known stories begin appearing, anonymously, in his high school newspaper, *Purple and Gold*.
- 1953 Pynchon graduates from Oyster Bay High School and enters Cornell University as an Engineering Physics major.
- 1955 Pynchon joins the US Navy.
- 1956 During the Suez Crisis, Pynchon serves aboard the USS *Hank* in the Mediterranean.
- 1957 Pynchon returns to Cornell as an English major.
- 1958 Pynchon collaborates with Kirkpatrick Sale on a musical, "Minstrel Island" (unfinished).
- 1959 Pynchon's first two mature short stories, "The Small Rain" and "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," are published. He receives his BA and moves to Greenwich Village. He applies, unsuccessfully, for a Ford Foundation Fellowship to work with an opera company.
- 1960 Pynchon moves to Seattle to work as a staff writer for Boeing Airplane Company's in-house newsletter *Bomarc Service News*. Two more short stories, "Low-lands" and "Entropy," and the technical article "Togetherness" appear.
- 1961 "Under the Rose" appears. It will receive an O. Henry Award.
- 1962 Pynchon leaves his job at Boeing, his last known salaried employment, and moves to Mexico.
- 1963 Pynchon's first novel, *V*. (J. B. Lippincott), is published. It will receive the Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel of the year and also be a National Book Award finalist.
- 1964 Pynchon tells friends he has recently been denied admission to an undergraduate program in mathematics at the University of California at Berkeley. His last short story, "The Secret Integration," appears.

- 1965 Pynchon turns down an opportunity to teach at Bennington College. In "A Gift of Books," in *Holiday* magazine, he praises Oakley Hall's western novel *Warlock*.
- 1966 Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (J. B. Lippincott), is published. It will win the Rosenthal Foundation Award. The essay "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts" appears in the *New York Times*. By now Pynchon is apparently living mostly in California.
- 1968 Pynchon's name appears, along with more than 400 others, in an advertisement protesting the US war in Vietnam.
- 1973 *Gravity's Rainbow* (Viking) is published. It will share the National Book Award with Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Crown of Feathers*, be a runner-up for the Nebula Award, and be recommended for but denied a Pulitzer Prize.
- 1975 The American Academy of Arts and Letters awards Pynchon the Howells Medal for *Gravity's Rainbow*. He refuses it.
- 1983 Pynchon writes an introduction for the reissue of his late friend Richard Fariña's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*.
- 1984 Pynchon collects five of his early short stories, with a reflective introduction, in *Slow Learner* (Little, Brown), and publishes "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" in the *New York Times*.
- 1988 Pynchon receives a five-year MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. "The Heart's Eternal Vow," his review of Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, appears in the *New York Times*.
- 1990 Pynchon's fourth novel, *Vineland* (Little, Brown), is published. Pynchon is now married and living in New York City.
- 1992 Pynchon writes an introduction for the collection *The Teachings of Don B.*, by his late friend Donald Barthelme.
- 1993 Pynchon's essay on sloth, "Nearer, My Couch, to Thee," appears in the *New York Times* as part of a series on the deadly sins.
- 1994 Pynchon writes liner notes for the retrospective CD *Spiked!: The Music of Spike Jones*.
- 1995 Pynchon writes jacket notes for the band Lotion's CD *Nobody's Cool*.
- 1996 "Lunch with Lotion," an interview conducted by Pynchon, appears in *Esquire*.
- 1997 Pynchon's fifth novel, *Mason & Dixon* (Henry Holt), is published. Pynchon also writes an introduction for the reissue of Jim Dodge's novel *Stone Junction*.
- 1999 Pynchon writes "Hallowe'en? Over Already?" for the *Cathedral School Newsletter*.
- 2002 *Playboy Japan* publishes sarcastic remarks attributed to Pynchon about reactions to the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Pynchon's agent quickly disavows them.
- 2003 Pynchon writes a foreword for the George Orwell Centenary edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

# CHRONOLOGY OF PYNCHON'S LIFE AND WORK

- 2004 Pynchon lends his voice to the character "Thomas Pynchon" in two episodes of *The Simpsons*.
- 2006 Pynchon's sixth novel, *Against the Day* (Penguin Press), is published. Pynchon also writes a program note, "The Evolution of *The Daily Show*," for a tenth-anniversary celebration.
- 2009 Pynchon's seventh novel, *Inherent Vice* (Penguin Press), is published. Pynchon narrates a promotional video for the book. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences names him a Fellow.

Compiled by JOHN M. KRAFFT

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## 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.

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,

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

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.

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