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## *Thomas Pynchon*

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**BRIAN JARVIS****Thomas Pynchon**

Thomas Pynchon is perhaps best known for knowing a lot and not being known. His novels and the characters within them are typically engaged in the manic collection of information.

Pynchon's fiction is crammed with erudition on a vast range of subjects that includes history, science, technology, religion, the arts, and popular culture. Larry McMurtry recalls a legend that circulated in the sixties that Pynchon "read only the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*."<sup>1</sup> While Pynchon is renowned for the breadth and depth of his knowledge, he has performed a "calculated withdrawal" from the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> He has never been interviewed. He has been photographed on only a handful of occasions (most recently in 1957). Inevitably, this seclusion has enhanced his cult status and prompted wild speculation (including the idea that Pynchon was actually J. D. Salinger). Reliable information about Pynchon practically disappears around the time his first novel was published in 1963.

While Pynchon the author is a conspicuous absence in the literary marketplace, his fiction is a commanding presence. His first major work, *V.* (1963), has a contrapuntal structure in which two storylines gradually converge. The first line, set in New York in the 1950s, follows Benny Profane and a group of his bohemian acquaintances self-designated the "Whole Sick Crew." The second line jumps between moments of historical crisis, from the Fashoda incident in 1898 to the Second World War and centers on Herbert Stencil's quest for a mysterious figure known as "V." Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), is arguably his most accessible work and has certainly been the most conspicuous on university syllabuses. *Oedipa Mass*, a suburban

Californian housewife, is asked to act as executrix to the will of her former lover and real estate mogul Pierce Inverarity. Subsequently she appears to uncover a secret organization - the Tristero - although the novel leaves open the key question of whether this cabal is real, a hoax, or merely Oedipa's paranoid fantasy. Pynchon's most approachable fiction was followed by his most challenging: *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Tony Tanner sums up the consensus among many literary critics that *Gravity's Rainbow* is "one of the great historical novels of our time and arguably the most important literary text since *Ulysses*."<sup>3</sup> The initial focus in the text is an American lieutenant, Tyrone Slothrop, stationed in London during the blitz. A map of his sexual conquests appears to predict precisely where German V-2 rockets are going to hit the city. The explanation for this uncanny coincidence leads to an explosive proliferation of conspiracies and characters that may lead the reader to repeat the epigraph from section four of the novel: "What?" Richard M. Nixon."<sup>4</sup>

A collection of short stories, *Slow Learner*, were published in 1984 but it was seventeen years before Pynchon's next novel appeared. *Vineland* (1990) is set mainly in California and jump cuts between the rampant conservatism of the Reagan 1980s and the promissory but frustrated radicalism of 1960s counterculture. *Mason & Dixon* (1997) centers on the astronomer Charles Mason and the surveyor Jeremiah Dixon as they attempt to fix the boundary line between Pennsylvania and Maryland. The tale of the Mason-Dixon line is narrated in a stylized eighteenth-century prose by one Reverend Cherrycoke and includes numerous fantastic digressions into a world of mechanical ducks and were-beavers, giant cheeses, and a druggy George Washington. *Against the Day* (2006) sweeps magisterially from the Chicago World Fair of 1893 to the wake of the First World War. It passes through a host of locations both real and fantastical and features a vast gallery of historical and fictional characters that includes anarchist

bombers and capitalist bosses, miners and mathematicians, scientists and shamans. *Inherent Vice* (2009) is set in Los Angeles in 1970 and follows a hippie “private gumshoe, or do I mean gumsandal” called Larry “Doc” Sportello as he becomes embroiled in the malevolent machinations of a sinister corporation known as the Golden Fang.<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, the preceding précis are necessarily reductive. A defining feature of Pynchon’s fiction is the way it vigorously resists summation due to its scope, complexity, and open endedness. Aside from the deceptively slim *Lot 49*, Pynchon’s novels are lengthy affairs that teem with characters and rhizomic plot structures shooting off into sub-plots and sub-sub-plots. The encyclopedic range, structural entanglement, and tantalizing indeterminacy of Pynchon’s writing are frequently commented on by his critics. Pynchon criticism is almost as vast and variegated as the author’s own writing. One online bibliography of Pynchon criticism lists over 3500 published items that includes over fifty monographs and essay collections, guides and companions to particular novels, journal articles and reviews.<sup>6</sup> While it is impossible here to map all of the subjects addressed by Pynchon criticism, this chapter surveys six key areas: the postmodern, the historical, the geographic, the scientific, the political, and the spiritual.

Pynchon is routinely referred to as a quintessentially postmodern writer. Many of the formal signatures of his fiction are central to definitions of postmodern culture: the prominence of pastiche and eclectic combinations of genre, style, and tone; the splicing of high art and popular culture; the frenetic intertextuality and self-reflexivity. Collectively, the Pynchon canon resembles a veritable catalogue of literary and paraliterary genres and styles: travel and quest narratives, detective and spy stories, historical fiction and magical realism, comic book and burlesque, psychedelic noir and gothic science fiction, Jacobean revenge tragedy and Menippean satire, surrealism and the absurd, the picaresque and the pornographic. This archive is

supplemented by a range of extra-literary discourses from the scientific (thermodynamics and ballistics) and mathematical (vectors and quaternions) to the philosophical (behaviorism and determinism) and theological (Puritanism and Manichaeism). To the list of genres that defines the hyper-generic Pynchonesque we must also add Pynchon himself. Pynchon texts often repeat other people, places, and terms from other Pynchon texts. So, for example, one of the *Chums of Chance* novels referenced in *Against the Day* is “*The Wrath of the Yellow Fang*.”<sup>7</sup> This fictional children’s adventure story represents a proleptic auto-citation (the Yellow Fang reappear in Pynchon’s next novel, *Inherent Vice*) as well as a contribution to the text’s rampant and retro-hypertextuality. *Against the Day* weaves a patchwork pastiche of genres from the era in which it is set: the adventure stories of Tom Swift, the Hardy Boys, and the 1895 edition of *Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen*; the pulp westerns of Zane Gray; the *fin-de-siècle* science fiction of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells; the Victorian Gothic of Bram Stoker, Arthur Machen, and Robert W. Chambers; the spy fiction of Joseph Conrad and John Buchan; the exploration memoirs of Henry Morton Stanley and the erotic adventures of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Alongside the incessant literary allusions in Pynchon’s fiction, one finds countless references to film, television, and music. Often, high and popular culture will be conjoined, as for example in *Gravity’s Rainbow* when “André Omnopon, of the feathery Rilke moustaches and Porky Pig tattoo on stomach,” performs a (fake) Haydn Quartet on the kazoo.<sup>8</sup>

Wild modulations in tone are another trademark of the postmodern and the Pynchonesque. Passages of apocalyptic terror are intercut with daft limericks, vaudevillian show tunes, raunchy romps, and anarchic toilet humor (often literally involving privies). Language games are central to Pynchon’s postmodern comic sensibility and typically involve giddy puns along with absurd appellations and acronyms. Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr. clearly finds names

funny and accordingly infects the whole process of nomenclature with sophomoric silliness: a native American called “Defecates-with-Pigeons,” a reverend called “Lube Carnal,” or a Viennese operetta called “*The Burgher King*.” In *Against the Day*, Gottlob Frege points out that the “English word ‘pun,’ upside down, is... ‘und’” - an observation which niftily couples Pynchon’s passion for playful paronomasia *and* connectives.<sup>9</sup> “And” is arguably the most important word in Pynchon. More than any American writer since Whitman, Pynchon’s work is founded on expansive lists and a fierce sensitivity to the nexus between each and all.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon describes paranoia as the “leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation.”<sup>10</sup> Everything in Pynchon’s fictional creations is connected by paranoia, conspiracies and “master cabal[s]” at every level, from the historical and political to the galactic and sub-atomic.<sup>11</sup> Paranoia in Pynchon is seen to be both a legacy of the “Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible” and a survival strategy for the subjects of modernity.<sup>12</sup> The metastasis of powerful global organizations, information glut, and, omnipresent surveillance technologies provide the material conditions in which paranoid fantasy can flourish. However, it is worth noting that in Pynchon paranoia is almost always justified: there *are* huge conspiracies and people *are* being controlled and duped and surveilled. Consequently, as Leo Bersani notes, paranoid thinking in Pynchon, “at least in the traditional sense of the word — [is] really not paranoid at all.”<sup>13</sup> This key term is also problematized by its very ubiquity. Again, as Bersani inquires: “since when do paranoids label themselves paranoid?”<sup>14</sup>

In Pynchon’s novels everything appears to be intricately connected in baroque and burgeoning structures. Often his plots are about the activity of *plotting* itself. The Pynchonian protagonist, enmeshed in cabals and conspiracies, struggles to make sense from an endless

bombardment of cryptic signs, images, and texts. Herbert Stencil in *V.* forlornly attempts to interpret and integrate innumerable references to *V.* Similarly, in *Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas is confronted by the will of Pierce Inverarity, a series of stamps, a painting, a Jacobean drama, letters, acronyms, and graffiti on a toilet wall. Quite simply, these protagonists model reading and interpretation and thus serve as the reader's double. The metafictional dimension to Pynchon's work was vigorously pursued by deconstructive criticism from the mid-1980s.

While deconstructionists have placed Pynchon's fiction in the fun house of self-reflexive semiotic shenanigans, other critics have prioritized his importance, first and foremost, as an historical novelist. *Mason & Dixon* offers some of Pynchon's most explicit commentary on what Hayden White terms "metahistory, or the "deep structure of the historical imagination"<sup>15</sup>

Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers . . . History is not Chronology . . . not a Chain of single Links . . . - rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep . . . History is hir'd, or coerc'd, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power . . . She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honourably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry Radius.<sup>16</sup>

History, here, is a fiction manufactured by the powerful and based on the illusions of "Fact," linearity, coherence, and progression. Pynchon aligns himself instead with the tradition of crafting counter-histories that are dialectical and discontinuous. Like Walter Benjamin, Pynchon aims to "blast open the continuum of history"<sup>17</sup> and he is motivated by the conviction that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."<sup>18</sup>

Pynchon keeps himself secret and his historical imagination is animated by a sense of hidden networks existing between disparate events. In *Against the Day*, for example, the

following historical strands are intricately interwoven: contemporary scientific speculation regarding the Æther, the “hollow earth” hypothesis, and a quarrel in late Victorian mathematics divided between Vectorists and Quarternionists; the “War of the Currents” between Tesla and Edison, experiments with Iceland Spar and Hollywood in the silent era; railroad networks in the American west and across Europe; labor battles in the Colorado mining industry and political upheavals in Mexico; anarchist and espionage activities across America and Europe; Shamanic mythology in Central Asia, the mysterious Tunguska event, and the First World War. It is important to recognize the extent to which Pynchon’s novels also offer a history of the present. Thus, for example, the “Anarchist question”<sup>19</sup> in *Against the Day* offers a thinly veiled commentary on political violence and terrorism in the twenty-first century. Khachig Tölölyan and other critics have observed that Pynchon’s Second World War novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, hardly mentions Hitler or the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> However, as Dale Carter illustrates, Pynchon’s history deftly imbricates the formation of the Nazi Rocket State in the 1930s and 1940s with the subsequent cold war and nuclear terror, the permanent arms economy, the NASA space program, the Vietnam War, and Watergate.<sup>21</sup>

Pynchon’s historiography triangulates then and now to produce a third space: “the realm of the Subjunctive.”<sup>22</sup> History, in this process, is spatialized: “Time is the Space that may not be seen.”<sup>23</sup> The historical and the geographical imagination in Pynchon are inseparable. Unlike the West of Cormac McCarthy, or Paul Auster’s New York, there is no one distinctive Pynchonian place; instead, frenetic travel between multiple locations is his geographical trademark. Pynchon’s fiction is relentlessly migratory and his characters are typically involved in quests (for V, the Tristero, the Rocket, Shambhala). In the process Pynchon travels beyond US national boundaries more frequently and widely than any other American writer. In *Against the Day*,

Pynchon's wanderlust achieves epic proportions as the reader is propelled across the US and Mexico, Europe and Central Asia, beneath the desert sands, through a hollow earth, and off toward a "Counter-Earth" on the far side of the sun. Pynchon's "World-Narrative" is characterized not only by its geographical diversity, but also by an insistence on intimate global *connectivity*.<sup>24</sup> Various "trans-national plexuses"<sup>25</sup> evolve in his work from the economic and military (multinational corporations and a borderless Rocket State in *Gravity's Rainbow*) to the environmental and mystical (the spiritual afterglow of the Tunguska event experienced at different points across the globe in *Against the Day*). For Pynchon, "geography is as much spiritual as physical."<sup>26</sup> At the centerpoint of Pynchon's spatial imagination lies the possibility of crossing over into "territories of the spirit" beyond and beneath the everyday landscapes of capitalism.<sup>27</sup> These mystical locations assume various forms - Vheissu in *V.*, the Yurok Land of the Dead in *Vineland*, Shambhala in *Against the Day*, Lemuria in *Inherent Vice* - but are always associated with the utopian yearning for an end to exile. In this scheme, America is not only the fallen world, "a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes," but also, still, a space "for all that *may yet be true*."<sup>28</sup>

In *Mason & Dixon*, the thwarted promise of the New World is viewed in relation to cartography: "the West . . . seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known . . . winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair."<sup>29</sup> Maps are a striking motif in Pynchon's work: *Gravity's Rainbow* begins with the uncanny doubling of two maps and *Against the Day* abounds with Foreign Office maps and maps of battlefields, mines and railroads, and invisible cities. Typically, the map in Pynchon is an instrument of imperial power. Even the "Sfinciuno Itinerary,"<sup>30</sup> a map to the mystical Shambhala, may in fact

be pointing the way “to unexplored reserves of gold, oil, Plutonian wealth.”<sup>31</sup> The eponymous cartographers in *Mason & Dixon* come to realize that their map making is not a purely scientific exercise, but one that intersects with capitalism and colonialism, slavery and Indian removal. In place of the violence of a Cartesian cartography that inscribes lines of power on places and people, Pynchon practices a counter-hegemonic “Parageography . . . alternative Maps of the World superimpos’d upon the more familiar ones.”<sup>32</sup>

Pynchon’s commitment to putting new and even white spaces back on the map should be read as part of his general hostility toward the Enlightenment project with its “Gospels of Reason” that produce a systematic disenchantment of the world.<sup>33</sup> Science is a key component in this process and an indispensable ingredient in the Pynchon novel. Entropy, both thermodynamic (to do with energy and “the decline of the animate into the inanimate”) and informational (as a measure of uncertainty in communication), is a recurrent concern.<sup>34</sup> Engineering features prominently in *V.*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (alongside rocketry, chemistry, calculus, probability theory, and behavioral science), and *Against the Day* (alongside maths and physics). Science, in Pynchon, is the enemy when it serves the controlling interests of business, military, and government. At the same time, he valorizes the scientific imagination when it is not subjected to the “Disciplines of Control,”<sup>35</sup> but aspires instead to the condition of art or religion. In *Against the Day*, for example, *Æther*, light, and electricity are treated as quasi-mystical phenomenon and the clash between Vectorists and Quaternionists has the devotional intensity of ecclesial factionalism. As well as offering a challenge to general standards of scientific literacy, Pynchon also resists the division of the humanities and science into what C. P. Snow in 1956 famously termed “two cultures.”

A similarly dialectical comprehension is evident in Pynchon's approach to technology. His early fiction concentrates largely though not exclusively on the threat and increasing autonomy of the mechanical. *V.* delineates the reciprocal process whereby machines become increasingly animate (the cyborgs SHOCK and SHROUD) while humans become increasingly robotic in their behavior and have inanimate grafted onto their bodies. In parts of *Gravity's Rainbow*, technology is deified as the driving force behind history: "this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre . . . secretly it was being dictated by the needs of technology."<sup>36</sup> Alongside the apocalyptic Rocket, however, there is the serio-comic allegory of "Byron the Bulb": "an old, old soul" trapped in a "glass prison."<sup>37</sup> The technophobic and Luddite tendencies in Pynchon are tempered in places by a technological romanticism that rejoices in fantastical contraptions: a "mechanickal Duck" in *Mason & Dixon*, or the airships, "paramorphoscope[s]" and "Integroscope[s]" of *Against the Day*.<sup>38</sup>

The redemptive possibilities for science and technology in Pynchon are inversely proportional to their intimacy with money. Capitalism in Pynchon assumes multiple forms but is always the enemy: a "dusty Dracularity, the West's ancient curse."<sup>39</sup> In *Mason & Dixon* the East India Company is depicted as the prototype of the multinational corporation: "richer than many a Nation, yet with no Boundaries"<sup>40</sup> and with designs on "total Control over ev'ry moment of ev'ry Life."<sup>41</sup> The same goal drives the Vibe Corporation in *Against the Day* and in *Gravity's Rainbow* interlocking cartels (IG Farben, Shell) transcend nation-states and threaten to make them obsolete. Global conflict itself is deemed to have been manufactured by the needs of capital: "the real business of the War is buying and selling . . . The true war is a celebration of markets."<sup>42</sup> In *Inherent Vice* the Golden Fang represents a comic book incarnation of a global capitalist order that throughout Pynchon is associated with social conflict and environmental devastation.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* the American businessman Lyle Bland speculates that Earth is a living critter, after all these years of thinking about a big dumb rock."<sup>43</sup> Environmental politics and eco-spirituality emerge as a possible counter-force to the deathly alliance of money and machines. Tyrone Slothrop apologizes to a grove of trees for the fact that his family made their fortune from the paper industry and is offered the following penance by a pine: "Next time you come across a logging operation out here, find one of their tractors that isn't being guarded, and take its oil filter with you."<sup>44</sup> The eco-mystical epiphanies in the final stages of *Gravity's Rainbow*, such as Geli Tripping's vision of the Titans, resurface in Pynchon's subsequent fiction. Following the Tunguska event in *Against the Day*, Kit Traverse watches in wonder as "[t]wo small black birds who had not been there now emerged out of the light . . . Kit understood for a moment that forms of life were a connected set."<sup>45</sup> Sentient animals form a connected set in Pynchon that underline, often in magic realist visions, his eco-political sentiments: *Against the Day* features Siberian wolves who quote scripture, talking reindeer, and a dog who reads Henry James; *Mason & Dixon* includes the Learned English Dog and a were-beaver who enters a tree-cutting contest; in *Vineland*, Desmond runs off with a pack of "ghost-dogs"; and in *V.* we meet a rat, called Veronica, who wants to be a nun.

In *Against the Day*, a homosexual spy achieves Veronica's aspiration by becoming a postulant after a miraculous sex change. Pynchon has been criticized for a dated and even reactionary sexual politics (Cyprian Westwood's mystical gender reassignment might appear to reinforce homophobic stereotypes). It has been suggested that he indulges in pornographic fantasy and subscribes to sexist cliché. A casual glance at his most recent novel, *Inherent Vice*, might tend to reinforce this suggestion as "Doc" Sportello drools over a succession of receptionists and stewardesses and "oriental cutie[s]"<sup>46</sup> all with "unquestionably alluring

ass[es]”<sup>47</sup> and “exquisite . . . no-bra tits, their nipples noticeably erect.”<sup>48</sup> It might be countered, however, that such descriptions are a reflection of the novel’s milieu (pre-second wave feminism) and that Pynchon has a distinguished track record of parodying patriarchal stereotypes (in *V.*, for example, where *V.*, precisely, is not a woman so much as a series of feminine archetypes constructed by Stencil), of critiquing phallogocentrism (in the sexual symbolism of the rocket throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*), and of offering a number of strong and complex female characters, such as Oedipa Maas, Frenesi Gates, and Yashmeen Halfcourt.

A key component in Pynchon’s sexual politics is his depiction of sex. Sexuality is polymorphous in Pynchon – threesomes and orgies, striptease and spankings, fetishes and flagellation, bestiality, coprophagia, and paedophilia – but it tends to push in one of two directions. Sex is depicted in a carnivalesque mode as liberatory and life affirming, or it becomes a sinister sadomasochistic spectacle at the interface between desire and power. S&M is typically gendered by Pynchon in accordance with classical psychoanalysis. Most of his gallery of sadists (Blicero, Brock Vond, Zarpazo, Adrian Prussia) are male and many of his masochists are female (Frenesi Gates and Shasta Fay Hepworth). There are, of course, exceptions (for example, the submissive role play of General Pudding in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and Cyprian Lockwood in *Against the Day*), but in general terms while Pynchon recognizes political problems with masochism he unequivocally identifies sadism as the enemy. Sadism is linked to oppressive control and forms of colonialism both geographical and biological: *Gravity’s Rainbow* integrates the sexual decadence of German imperialism in Africa with behavioral psychology and Slothrop’s fear that his “programmed” penis is “a colonial outpost . . . another office representing Their white Metropolis far away.”<sup>49</sup> Psychoanalytically self-consciousness in Pynchon often teeters on the brink of Freudian farce, but the coupling of rocket and phallus in *Gravity’s*

*Rainbow* offers a deadly serious critique of violent eroticism as mechanized death wish. Like Walter Benjamin, Pynchon sees the sadist as one who is “bent on replacing the human organism with the image of machinery. Sade is the offspring of an age that was enraptured by automatons.”<sup>50</sup>

In general terms Pynchon’s political sensibility is founded on an opposition, often melodramatic, between “Them” (the powerful sadists) and “Us” (their) victims. On the one side there are the capitalists, states, governments, bureaucracies, and technocracies. “They” can assume different guises but are united by their desire for power. “They” aim to replace love and sex with violence, nature with technology, the animate with the inanimate and ultimately life with death. Aligned against these apocalyptic forces Pynchon assembles a rag-bag of likable losers, dopers and drifters, surfers and schlemiels, the preterite and the lost. Pynchon is politically motivated by visions of justice for the oppressed and disinherited but often sceptical about the possibility of an organizing a collective counter-force. His characters are typically more concerned with avoiding power rather than obtaining it for themselves *en masse*. Consequently, his fiction leans toward alternative rather than oppositional cultures and micro-political moments of spontaneous rebellion and personal liberation as opposed to structured programs for social change. There are numerous points at which Pynchon’s politics intersect with a left-wing perspective. All of his novels are passionately opposed to capitalism, and labor history features in *Mason & Dixon* (General Wolfe and the Stroud Weavers’ strike of 1756), *Against the Day* (the Ludlow massacre and Linderfelt’s Company B), and *Vineland* (the IWW and Hollywood blacklisting). At the same time, Pynchon tends to favor forms of anarchism (anarchists appear in most of his novels and are central to *Against the Day*) and countercultural

subversion rather than the programmatic collective action and political organizations traditionally favored by the Left.

Issues of race and empire have always been integral to Pynchon's politics. In a review of *Mason & Dixon*, Louis Menand claimed that "nearly everything Pynchon has written is, essentially, a lament over colonialism – political, economic, cultural, sexual."<sup>51</sup> In *V.* the focal point for these interests is the Herero tribe in South-West Africa. Pynchon documents the history of the Herero and Hottentot Rebellion and its brutal suppression by General Lothar von Trotha between 1904-1907. During the Herero Uprising of 1922, von Trotha's exploits are recreated by Foppl on his plantation in a violent and murderous orgy. The Herero genocide is returned to in *Gravity's Rainbow* where political and psychosexual conflicts are mapped onto the relationship between the Nazi Captain Blicero and the half-Herero Oberst Enzian. Black and white are the key colors in *Gravity's Rainbow*, or rather white fantasies of blackness are projected onto subjects, signs, and spaces ranging from Enzian's *schwarzcommandos* to King Kong. As in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the novel to which *Gravity's Rainbow* is most often compared, whiteness becomes the color of terror. The director of the Nazi rocket program, Blicero (the "bleacher") is also Weissmann (the "white man"), while the Pavlovian Pointsman directs sinister experiments in behavioral psychology at "The White Visitation."

Michael Harris has connected the representation of the Herero in *Gravity's Rainbow* to the Native Americans in *Mason & Dixon* and the genocide of the Yurok tribe in *Vineland* as evidence of Pynchon's postcoloniality.<sup>52</sup> Toward the end of *Vineland*, Jess Traverse reads a passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson that promises "Divine Justice" for the lost and dispossessed. This extract is taken from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and "variety" is precisely what characterizes Pynchon's engagement with the mystical. His fiction swells with spiritualities:

Puritanism features prominently (and perhaps unsurprisingly given Pynchon's Puritan ancestry); Protestantism is similarly ubiquitous (and often aligned with a rationalist and de-sacralizing modernity); Manichaeism receives its most explicit and extensive representation in *Against the Day* alongside Islam, Buddhism, and Shamanism; Judaism, the Kabbalah, and eco-spirituality figure in *Gravity's Rainbow*; Jesuits and Quakers are important to *Mason & Dixon*; while paganism, animism, Native American beliefs, and New Age mysticism are similarly significant in *Vineland*. Alongside ultra-modern scientific and technological discourses in a Pynchon novel the reader will encounter a theological lexicon that can be quite arcane. Tony Tanner suggests that the religious in Pynchon "usually takes the form of a yearning or a sense of absence" and in this context his fiction might be read as a form of "hierophany" (a term he uses in *Lot 49*) – an attempt to manifest the sacred and thus re-enchant the profane landscapes of modernity.<sup>53</sup>

Some critics have lamented the parabolic curve of Pynchon's career with the rise to *Gravity's Rainbow* followed by a falling off. It would, however, be hard to find many novels that were not left trailing in the flight path of Pynchon's *magnum opus*. Other critics have remarked disparagingly on the tonal shift in Pynchon's fiction away from the gothic and apocalyptic shadings toward day-glo comedy, whimsy, and soft-focus sentimentalism. Nevertheless, Pynchon has been ahead of the critics for half a century: he was mercilessly parodying phallocentricism during the rise of second wave feminism; he was addressing issues of empire, colonialism, globalization, and whiteness before the advent of postcolonial theory; he was blending history and fiction before new historicism; he was practising eco-theory *avant la lettre*; he was examining the "Disciplines of Control"<sup>54</sup> and surveillance before Foucault's work was popularized in the academy; and challenging all forms of binary logic long before deconstruction became *de rigueur*. For the influence he has had on the academy and across the arts, for his

peerless erudition, for his indefatigable questioning and lyrical achievement, Pynchon has to be engaged with by anyone with a serious interest in contemporary fiction.

### Further Reading

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Larry McMurtry, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p.128.

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- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 101.
- <sup>3</sup> Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 75.
- <sup>4</sup> Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Picador, 1975), p. 617.
- <sup>5</sup> Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 239.
- <sup>6</sup> 'A Thomas Pynchon Bibliography of Secondary materials':  
<http://www.vheissu.name/biblio/alles.php> (accessed March 2010)
- <sup>7</sup> Pynchon, *Against the Day* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 1019.
- <sup>8</sup> Pynchon, *Gravity's*, p. 711.
- <sup>9</sup> Pynchon, *Against*, p. 62.
- <sup>10</sup> Pynchon, *Gravity's*, p. 703.
- <sup>11</sup> Pynchon, *V* (London: Picador, 1975), p.91.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- <sup>13</sup> Leo Bersani, "Pynchon, Paranoia and Literature," *Representations*, 25 (1989), 101.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.179.
- <sup>15</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p.ix.
- <sup>16</sup> Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Picador, 1997), pp. 349-50.
- <sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 262,
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- <sup>19</sup> Pynchon, *Against*, p. 37.
- <sup>20</sup> Khachig Tölölyan, "War as Background in *Gravity's Rainbow*" in Charles Clerk (ed.), *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983), p. 56.

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<sup>21</sup> Dale Carter, *The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State* (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Pynchon, *Mason*, p. 543.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>24</sup> Pynchon, *Against*, p. 1023.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 936.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>27</sup> Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Little, Brown & Company, 1990), p.317.

<sup>28</sup> Pynchon, *Mason*, p. 345.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Pynchon, *Against*, p. 425.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 631.

<sup>32</sup> Pynchon, *Mason*, p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>34</sup> Pynchon, *V.*, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Pynchon, *Gravity's*, p. 238.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 521.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 648.

<sup>38</sup> Pynchon, *Mason*, p.372 and *Against*, p.249 and p.1061

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>40</sup> Pynchon, *Mason*, p. 140.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>42</sup> Pynchon, *Gravity's*, p. 105.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 590.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 553.

<sup>45</sup> Pynchon, *Against*, p. 782.

<sup>46</sup> Pynchon, *Inherent*, p. 76.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>49</sup> Pynchon, *Gravity's*, p. 285.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 386.

<sup>51</sup> Louis Menand, "Entropology," *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 1997.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1159>

<sup>52</sup> Michael Harris, "Pynchon's Postcoloniality" in Niran Abbas (ed.), *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins* (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), pp.199-214.

<sup>53</sup> Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 50.

<sup>54</sup> Pynchon, *Gravity's*, p. 238.