



Pynchon, Thomas (1937-)

American novelist, known for his experimental writing techniques that involve extremely complicated plots and themes. His most famous novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), won the National Book Award.

Life

- Pynchon was born on Long Island, New York. He studied engineering at Cornell University, left to serve in the United States Navy, and returned to complete a degree in English in 1958. He worked in the aircraft industry for two years before publishing his first novel, *V.*, in 1963. His other novels include *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Vineland* (1990), and *Mason & Dixon* (1997).

Life

- Pynchon's books generally portray a vast social network made up of the industrial, military, mass-communication, and entertainment systems that developed during World War II (1939-1945).
- He traces the development of this network from the European roots of free enterprise, throughout the founding of the United States, to modern times.

Work

- *Mason & Dixon* is his only work not to be set in the late 20th century; it focuses on the work and friendship of 18th-century British surveyors Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon as they travel across pre-Revolutionary America.
- Pynchon's novels are broad in scope and use scientific theories, historical facts, and details of popular culture with great accuracy.
- He directs large casts of characters through interwoven plots that are often incomplete.
- He uses a variety of narrative techniques, including satire, humor, and suspense, to paint a dark, but not hopeless, picture of society.

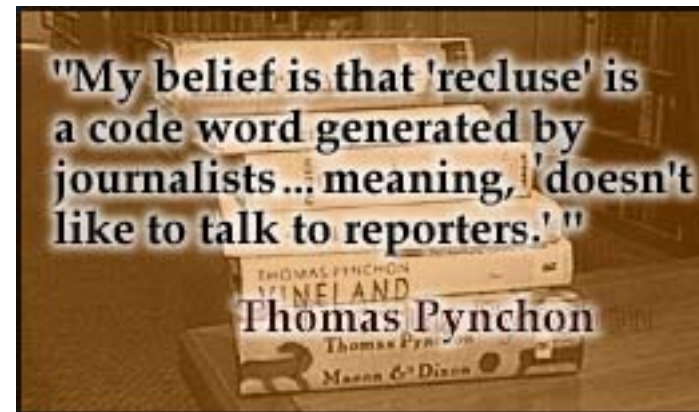
Where's Thomas Pynchon?

- Much of Pynchon's personal life remains a mystery. He has lived in seclusion for many years, and his academic and military records have been lost.
- See the CNN report "Where's Thomas Pynchon?"
<http://www.cnn.com/US/9706/05/pynchon/>



Pynchon

(CNN)



Pynchon himself, in the introduction to *Slow Learner*, says:

"Somewhere I had come up with the notion that one's personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite."

Facts about Pynchon

- Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Jr was born to Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Sr. and Katherine Frances Bennett Pynchon on May 8, 1937 in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York. They moved to East Norwich when Thomas, Jr was just a child. His father became town supervisor of Oyster Bay and later an industrial surveyor. He has two siblings, sister, Judith and brother, John.
- He graduated from Oyster Bay High School in 1953 at the age of sixteen, salutatorian of his class and winner of the Julia L. Thurston award for "the senior attaining the highest average in the study of English." A scholarship to Cornell University and enrollment in the division of Engineering Physics followed. At the end of his sophomore year he left Cornell for service in the Navy.

Facts about Pynchon

- He returned to Cornell in the fall of 1957 transferring to the College of Arts and Sciences from which he would attain his degree in English. During this time, he took a course from Vladimir Nabokov, was on the editorial staff of the *The Cornell Writer*, and also published his first short story: "The Small Rain" (*The Cornell Writer*, March 1959). He received his B.A. in June of 1959 with "distinction in all subjects."
- Publication of many other short stories followed: "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" (*Epoch*, Spring 1959), "Low-lands" (*New World Writing*, 1960), "Entropy" (*Kenyon Review*, Spring 1960), and "Under the Rose" (*The Noble Savage*, May 1961).
- Upon graduation, Pynchon had many options including, several fellowships (a Woodrow Wilson for one), teaching creative writing at Cornell, becoming a disk jockey, and consideration as a film critic for *Esquire*.

Facts about Pynchon

- Instead, he began work on his first novel, *V.*, while in New York and, with the money from the publishing of "Low-lands" making the trip possible, later in Seattle during a job with the Boeing Company. He worked there as an "engineering aide" writing technical documents from February 2, 1960 to September 13, 1962. He finished *V.* in California and Mexico, and it was published in 1963. It won the William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel of the year.
- The publishing of a short story, "The Secret Integration" (The Saturday Evening Post, December 19, 1964) and parts of a work in progress "The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity" (Esquire, December 1965) and "The Shrink Flips" (Cavalier, March 1966) followed. His second "novel", *The Crying of Lot 49*, was published in 1966 and won the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Facts about Pynchon

- He wrote "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" for The New York Times Magazine (June 12, 1966), and, as his success in avoiding any public exposure (heh, heh) continued for the next seven years, he worked on Gravity's Rainbow which was finally published in 1973. In 1974, it shared the National Book Award for fiction with Isaac Bashevis Singer's A Crown of Feathers. It was also unanimously selected by the judges for the Pulitzer Prize in literature, but the selection was overruled by the Pulitzer advisory board whose members called it "unreadable," "turgid," "overwritten," and "obscene." No prize was given that year.

Facts about Pynchon

- Gravity's Rainbow (originally titled "Mindless Pleasures") was also awarded the William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1975 which is given every five years to a work of fiction; however, Pynchon declined the award through a letter, suggesting that it be given to another author.
- He wrote, "The Howells Medal is a great honor, and, being gold, probably a good hedge against inflation, too. But I don't want it.
- Please don't impose on me something I don't want. It makes the Academy look arbitrary and me look rude. . . . I know I should behave with more class, but there appears to be only one way to say no, and that's no."

Facts about Pynchon

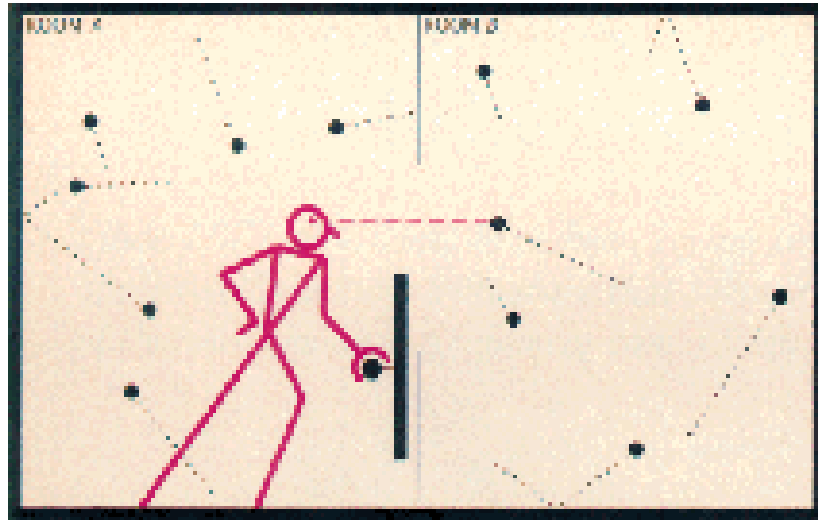
- In the following years, any knowledge of Pynchon's whereabouts became increasingly valuable and scarce.
- His early short stories, excluding "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" and including "The Secret Integration" were published in 1984 under the collected title *Slow Learner* with the first autobiographical notes from the author; in 1989, he was awarded the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (\$310,000 over five years),
- and in 1990 *Vineland* was published.

The Excluded Middle

- The obituariness of the biography above might be due to the well noted disappearance of Pynchon from the public eye.
- The most outlandish: John Calvin Batchelor claimed Pynchon was J. D. Salinger -- not true.
- Sightings continue to occur. He's not as reclusive as one might think. It's not like he never goes out in public.
- David Gale mentions that Pynchon was doing research in 1979 in London, and in October of 1987 was in Boston.
- Pynchon is also thought to have lived in Aptos, California for an extended period of time between completion of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*.

Facts about Pynchon

- Jules Siegel, in his article for *Playboy*, remembers Pynchon informing him that Nabokov's Russian accent was so thick it was hard to understand anything he said.
- Also, when asked about the complexity of V. , Pynchon replied, "Why should things be easy to understand?"



<http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/entropy/index.html> On entropy



"Thermodynamics." Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2001

- Entropy can be thought of as a measure of how close a system is to equilibrium; it can also be thought of as a measure of the disorder in the system.
- The law states that the entropy—that is, the disorder—of an isolated system can never decrease. Thus, when an isolated system achieves a configuration of maximum entropy, it can no longer undergo change: It has reached equilibrium.

Entropy

- Entropy is a quantity that, in its two contexts, characterizes not only all form and life in the universe, but all signal, language, information and written material ever produced anywhere.
- There are two fields which define this concept:

Entropy

- **Thermodynamics** is the science of the relations between heat and other forms of energy. It deals with the changes that occur in a system if the energy distribution is unbalanced, therefore it "can be regarded as governing the direction of all physical changes taking place in the universe. With time, the energy within a system will inevitably tend to become distributed in the most probable pattern, which consists of all the individual particles of the system engaging in random, disordered motion" (OED). Thermodynamic entropy is the measure of this disorganization in a system. Furthermore, this "most probable pattern" is actually a state of equal energy among particles, as collisions cause bodies to exchange heat. A closed system inevitably proceeds toward uniformity of energy.

Entropy

- **Information Theory** is the mathematical theory of communication that is used to find out the speed and quantity of information transmission. It uses statistical concepts of probability to compute the extra information (redundancy) necessary to counteract the distortion and losses that may occur during transmission from one information source to another. Entropy within this theory is the "measure of the rate of transfer of information in [that] message" (OED). For a specific examination of information entropy in *COL 49*, see ["The Paradox of Truth, the Truth of Entropy"](#)

- The concept of Entropy first emerges in Pynchon's published writing in his short story "[Entropy](#)" (1958 or '59).
- **Callisto, a prophet of impending doom, dictates aloud the tale of his own discovery of the entropic end of culture:**

Origins of Entropy in Pynchon (Norton 2478)

- "Nevertheless," continued Callisto, "he found in entropy or the measure of disorganization for a closed system an adequate metaphor to apply to a certain phenomena in his own world. He saw, for example, the younger generation responding to Madison Avenue with the same spleen his own had once reserved for Wall Street: and in American 'consumerism' discovered a similar tendency from the least to most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos. He found himself, in short, restating Gibbs' prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease." (*Slow Learner*, 88-89)

Read the text on Norton Anthology p. 2478

- Here Pynchon invokes the concept of "**heat-death**," where energy is no longer exchanged between particles which have reached the most probable state in a closed system .
- **Callisto (a prophet)** looks at this stagnation and foresees a similar destiny for ideas.
- Today, with increased travel of information and capitalist consumerism across the planet's CNS (Marshall McLuhan's term), many prophesize an analogous "global monoculture" as a final state of sameness.

Summary

- Meatball Mulligan throws a lease-breaking party at his apartment in Washington, D.C. in early February of 1957. His guests are a colorful bunch, including Sandor Rojas, an "ex-Hungarian Freedom fighter," and the avant-garde Duke di Angelis quartet comprised of Duke, Vincent, Krinkles and Paco who together perform an original piece in complete silence. Saul, a neighbor of Mulligan's, comes in through the window after an argument with his wife concerning communication theory and the tendency for noise to "screw up your signal," making for "disorganization in the circuit." The party degenerates during the course of the story into a chaotic mess: more guests arrive with more booze, drunken Navymen barge in mistaking the place for a 'hoorhouse,' a woman almost drowns herself in the shower, the fridge needs repair. Meatball, however, decides to take action rather than hide silently in the closet, and through the energy he exerts succeeds in minimizing the chaos of the party through the establishment of order, however temporary and fleeting.

Summary

- Meanwhile, upstairs in the apartment above Mulligan's lives a man named Callisto in a hermetically sealed hothouse with a half-alien woman named Aubade who perceives all sensory input as sound. Callisto clutches a dying bird to his chest while expounding on the nature of Thermodynamics and its theoretical extension beyond the limits of physics into the realms of society and culture as well: just as all closed systems lose energy over time until a 'heat-death' occurs wherein motion ceases, so too does culture have a tendency to lose differentiation and slide toward what Callisto terms 'the Condition of the More Probable.' Entropy, then, which Callisto defines as 'the measure of disorganization for a closed system,' is valuable in that it is "an adequate metaphor to apply to certain phenomena in [the] world" such as the consumerist trend away from difference and toward sameness. Often Aubade checks the temperature outside, which has remained at a constant 37 deg. Fahrenheit for a number of days despite the drastic change in weather. The story ends with the death of the bird Callisto has attempted to sustain through the transfer of heat from his own body to that of the sick animal. Aubade, finally comprehending Callisto's thoughts, punches out the windows of their apartment/self-contained ecosystem and sits with Callisto to await "the moment of equilibrium" between their world and the world outside.

Pynchon on "Entropy"

- On a stylistic level, Pynchon expresses dislike for this story in his Introduction to *Slow Learner*.
- He criticizes himself quite harshly, asserting that the work seems to have stemmed from the desire to "commit on paper a variety of abuses, such as overwriting."
- He claims that the work is an example of a young writer's mistake of forcing a theme onto the characters rather than having the former develop through the latter, that his concentration on the concept led him to "shortchange the humans in the story."
- He offers budding writers the following words of wisdom: "Get too conceptual, too cute and remote, and your characters die on the page."

Pynchon on "Entropy"

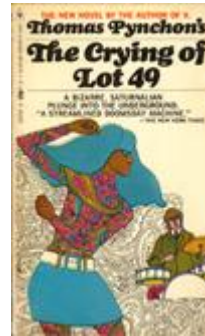
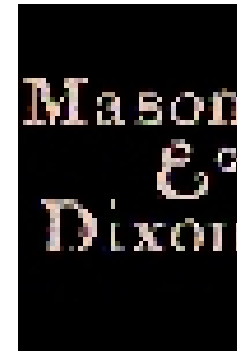
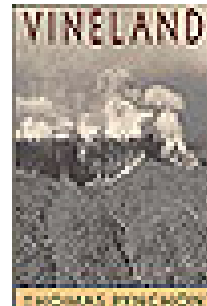
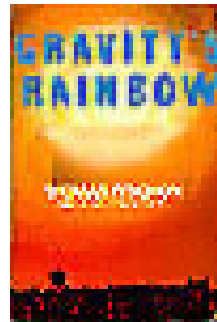
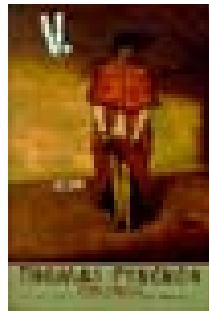
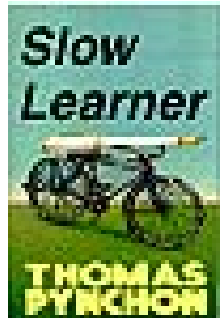
- In his discussion of this work, Pynchon takes much care in attempting to explain the significance of the notion of entropy as he chose to portray it in his story as well as his general take on the concept.
- Pynchon is the first to admit, however, that **entropy is a difficult concept to get one's head around:** he writes, "Since I wrote this story I have kept trying to understand entropy, but my grasp becomes less sure the more I read."
- He beckons us to research the subject and come up with an understanding of it on our own, for, like Callisto, Pynchon seems to feel quite strongly that entropy is a concept metaphorically applicable to many aspects of life..

Commentary

- "Entropy" is extremely significant for students of Pynchon in that it provides us with an early peak into the development of the author's thought in terms of ideas which carry as themes in later works. Many concepts which play a key role throughout the bulk of Pynchon's fiction can be found here in various stages of infancy.
- For example, the notion of entropy itself is reexamined and more deeply probed in both *V.* and the *Crying of Lot 49*.
- Another example: Saul's wife is "bugged by the idea of computers acting like people:"

Links

- Classic Note on Pynchon:
http://www.gradesaver.com/ClassicNotes/Authors/about_thomas_pynchon.html
- <http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/entropy/index.html> on Entropy
- <http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/index.html> San Narciso College Thomas Pynchon Home Page



<http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/index.html>

<http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/> Pynchon at themodernworld.com

