

For someone with a history of persuading strangers, however irresponsibly, of his ability to read novels, I came to know Thomas Pynchon quite late.

For as long as I can remember, when I heard the author's name—or that grisly adjective, "Pynchonian"—referred to in conversation, I'd put on a face and wait for more recognizable words: "truth," "whiskey," "collateral"—any of the ones I knew that I knew. At the same time, the topic had always enticed me: Pynchon seemed to have a way of bringing people to hushed tones, with which they'd address only those who'd also read him, as if the rest of the room had woken mid-day, missing the explosion. For whatever reason, I had ignored him for a very long time. So, when I happened upon the most recent issue of *Bookforum* some weeks ago and noticed "PYNCHON NOW" emblazoned on the cover, I jumped at the chance to learn more—and, quietly enough, my affair with Thomas Pynchon began.

The article in the magazine consisted of some prominent authors (Lorrie Moore, Don DeLillo, Jeffrey Eugenides) invariably casting Pynchon as a hero, some kind of prophet, the author without whom they'd have stayed in retail. "Pynchon set the example for my generation of what an American novelist should be. His fiction made it clear that, if you wanted to write, you had to know everything," wrote Eugenides; and DeLillo: "It was as though, in some odd quantum stroke, Hemingway died one day and Pynchon was born the next." For

who haven't or don't or won't, they've a tendency to use words like "coward". I wasn't a coward, though—I was much too frightened.

GET OFF THE INTERNET

My job at a university library provided ample opportunity to scour the stacks and internet for information—and I did, feeding what soon became an obsession, immersing myself in anything Pynchon and writing manic emails to distant friends about his miraculous identity. The day I first typed "Thomas Pynchon" into Google, I didn't know what to expect, but I assumed I could find an inordinate amount of something: he was Pynchon, after all, and he seemed to be able to be everywhere. He is. There are hundreds of websites devoted to him and his work, ranging from scholarly journals (he is a continual subject in *20th Century Literature*) to quasi-scholarly journals ("Pynchon Notes" comes out twice a year) to well-organized collections of press, references, research, and personal reactions, to marginally-legit, tabloid-like sites devoted to making sense of his identity, gossip about ex-girlfriends, and the search for that one authentic, recent photograph...

Within this repository, I set out to learn everything I could about Pynchon's life prior to 1963, when he first fled from public view. The more I learned, the more I

and Judith. If one combines the hierarchies of our two families, then, Thomas comes above and before the two who reared me: he is my mother and father's Big Brother, an ultimate authority for their three children. I had taken Pynchon's word over my parents' from the beginning, but now it all made perfect sense.

The photograph of Pynchon most often used in articles (there are never any author portraits on his book jackets) was taken from his 1953 Oyster Bay High School yearbook—and what a striking resemblance his deep-eyed, small-mouthed, self-obsessed visage bears to the boy writing this paragraph. Indeed, the resemblance struck with such force that when I first encountered it, I tore upstairs to the kitchen where a few of my housemates were eating dinner: "I look more like Thomas Pynchon than anyone else in this house," I cried, forgetting, for the moment, how there was only one other white person at the same address.

And finally, there are birthdays: Thomas Pynchon was born on May 8th, 1937; my parents landed at whichever hospital very late in the evening of May 7th, 1985, and if the presiding obstetrician hadn't been such a greedy, hasty motherfucker, he wouldn't have ripped me out of my mother's swollen reproductive cavity so obviously early. He would have let me emerge as I was meant to emerge: just after midnight, the morning of May 8th, so that one could divide the distance between Pynchon and my own existence and come out with a round number. Damn him—damn the doctor—damn.

ONLY BETTER

And here, thankfully, finally, 'fate' runs its course: on returning to Cornell after time in the Navy, Pynchon studied under Nabokov and devastated the undergraduate literary magazine with vicious prose; Nabokov is dead, and I've never devastated anything. There are few reliable quotes from those who profess to have known Pynchon in his fully-developed, post-Navy years; presumably, he has retraced his steps since then and convinced nearly all former acquaintances to lock their doors when reporters come through town. One fellow Cornell student, though—whom Pynchon must have forgotten about—once wrote that he was "a constant reader" at the time: "the

frame of reference not only encompasses the history of literature, but extends into "science, to pop culture, to the traditions of analysis, and even to the orderings of the unconscious, to dreams themselves." Where most other writers, at least up until Pynchon's time, considered science and technology impositions upon a human consciousness best expressed through the written word, Pynchon recognizes and foregrounds how science and technology, the military-industrial complex, and the mechanics of a movie projector at the cinema are just as much an expression of us as the literature, film, and music we create.

And so, I found myself reading about an identity spawned from a literature which draws little or no distinction between fiction and reality—a negative space where only the most amazing judgments make sense. "Pynchon's mind is the steel trap of American literature: Nothing, large or small, has ever escaped it," writes Lorrie Moore. Such assertions are almost conceivable when seen alongside remarks made about Pynchon's personal character.

Tom Maschler, the London-based publisher of *V*, once wrote, "Pynchon's fantastically aware of everything around him... he'd been in London for two days and seemed to know more about the city than I did."

Roland Barthes' landmark 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" inveighs against the modern tendency of placing the author at the center of any literary consideration, as if a text "were always in the end... the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us." Such an approach lends itself to a model in which a book can be purchased, deciphered, **c o n c l u s i v e l y** interpreted, and then put aside, so as to make room for another. Also, this mode limits the scope of reading and critical analysis to "the task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained.'"

type to read books on mathematics for fun... one who started the day at 1 p.m. with spaghetti and a soft drink... and one that read and worked until 4 the next morning."

Upon graduating, Pynchon lived and wrote in Greenwich Village for a time, but quickly moved to Seattle to work for Boeing as an "engineering aide," helping to write technical documents. He then lived in California and Mexico while he finished *V*, published in 1963 to great critical acclaim. Richard Poirier called it "the most masterful first novel in the history of literature." Three years later came *The Crying of Lot 49*, perhaps the most widely-read of Pynchon's novels, and then, in 1973, the undisputed masterpiece: *Gravity's Rainbow*.

When it was first published by Viking Press, the *New York Times* called it "bonecrushingly dense, compulsively elaborate, silly, obscene, pastoral, historical, inspired, horrific, bloated, beached, and blasted." For critic David Kipen, the book "mocked and savaged and pitied and generally made hay out of America"—and if he were to be stranded on a desert island with only two books, "I'd take two copies of *Gravity's Rainbow*."

Searching for the identity of Thomas Pynchon inevitably runs alongside an unending catalog of literary criticism, wherein Pynchon's novels are seen as the divine, the inscrutable code to which we all must abide. And the process of reading over the many magnificent—if also somewhat chilling and impossible—conclusions that countless writers draw is almost as invigorating as the manhunt itself. Reading them one is, depending on his brand of impressionability, either drawn toward the nearest bookstore or pulled away from Pynchon, trembling in fear.

SIGNALS WILL BREAK THE DARKNESS

In truth, I fell into the latter category. My inclination to put down so many secondary sources and begin to read Pynchon's work itself was suppressed by warning after warning. Aside from having to take on hundreds of characters, a constant stream of words like "oneiric" and "antinomian," and navigate hundreds of pages devoid of any traditional plot-line, critics are relentless in emphasizing the breadth of knowledge that Pynchon's work demands. This is because Pynchon's

Barthes then argues that in order to free reading and literature from these constraints, one must consider a text not as putting forth one single "message" from the author, but as stemming from "a multi-dimensional space" in which the text is contested, "a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture." Hence, most famously, the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."

In light of Barthes, there is perhaps no other contemporary author who so markedly defies our system of publishing and publicity while still drawing mass readership and critical acclaim. Indeed, the beginning of Pynchon's isolation, in the 1960s, coincided with the advent of the post-structuralist movement, from which Barthes' essay emerged. And at every turn since then, he's limited his audience's ability to associate the five novels with a distinct personality, with an author whose personal history and perspective could provide some semblance of conclusive interpretation—he even asked his former middle and high school principals to make his files confidential. While Pynchon was supposedly shy even as a child, I believe his forty-year evasion of the public eye most likely stems from a profound personal integrity and respect for the medium of literature. He, unlike just about all of his contemporaries, lets the writing speak for itself.

In many ways, my initial fascination with Pynchon's character as opposed to his literature reveals a profound guilt: instead of ignoring Pynchon—a process he's made rather easy—I pursued him, falling in line with the very mode of readership Pynchon would seem to loathe. Mine is a literary tendency I think many others share. So often, it is not the text that captures our affections, but the author; or the idea of the author having experienced the story he tells, having endured, in some mythic way, the pooled emotions of all his characters. One does not hear, at the edge of parties, talk of *The Sun Also Rises*' intertextuality; one hears (if literature even comes up at

all) about Hemingway the "bad-ass", the storied drinker, the closeted homosexual. I know about these conversations because, for better or worse, I've had them.

Accordingly, in recommending a book, one is equally if not more likely to speak of the author's life, perspective, and individual personality. J.D. Salinger's famous words are hung on banners in however many Barnes & Nobles, reminding consumers to stay the course: "...what really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it," and it is the fulfillment of this desire which Pynchon's (and, ironically, Salinger's) reclusiveness so violently denies.

RESOLUTIONS

While Pynchon can serve as a shining example of walking the post-structuralist walk, my own celebrity-infused experience has not been in vain. During the last week, and perhaps as a result of my inability to talk

about anything but Pynchon, my apartment, along with a few other friends, formed a *Gravity's Rainbow* book-club, and we are set to begin the book. Whether or not I'm able to detach my reading from everything I've learned, I have purchased the book and Pynchon—wherever he is—has probably been compensated, and *Gravity's Rainbow* will be something to talk about. So for me, as with countless Pynchon fans, the author's personal story eventually forged a way to the text. Nonetheless, many fans tell of how the novels provide so much that, thankfully, one's interest in the man subsides: you want him to do whatever he has to do to keep writing.

It was over, then: the end of the affair. Finally, I thought, having satiated my desire to learn about Pynchon, I could sit down with *Gravity's Rainbow*. I had reason to believe that the book would be able to stand on its own, if only I'd

be able to keep my memory out of the way. After quite a while, I seemed to have pinned down where exactly Pynchon had been: he was in the books. There was nothing to worry about, and there would never be anything to worry about: I had been drunk on a man, I admit it, but this was the next morning—I was sure.

TOOKEN ABACK

Then I had a conversation. On a porch outside a friend's apartment some nights ago, I found myself sitting next to a recent Brown graduate, and we began talking. I will call him Stephen. He rolled his own cigarettes; he loved to talk about literature; he had a girlfriend, even. I asked him if he'd ever read any Pynchon: he had. In fact, Pynchon was probably his favorite author. I asked him which of the novels he most enjoyed: he liked *Gravity's Rainbow*. I think I asked him why Pynchon was his favorite author, or perhaps I asked how he

first came to know the author's work.

Stephen spoke about Pynchon as so many do—with reservation—but he appreciated my curiosity and quietly responded to the questions. And then his eyes lit up. I had asked him what he thought of the

author's reclusiveness. "He's not a recluse," he said. "Have you ever seen that photograph from 1997, the one on the sidewalk?" he asked me. "Right on the streets of New York City." I had not. Apparently, as I've come to learn, a reporter tracked Pynchon down some years ago, intent on exposing his image to the public. Somehow, he found out not only that Pynchon lived in Manhattan, but his exact address. Camping outside the building, the reporter eventually spotted a man he assumed was Pynchon. Upon being photographed, the man covered his face and ran away, cursing. It is, to be sure, not a revealing photo: Pynchon's face is out of focus—one can only note his apparent height, graying curly hair, and wardrobe: all black, with a hooded flak jacket. While the photograph can be found on the internet, Pynchon himself, along with his fervent devotees fought to keep the photograph from being published, and it can be found on the web only after extensive searching. But there he is, supposedly, caught by surprise at sixty years old, standing up straight, just between blinks. And there are the sidewalks of New York City, and there are the strangers in the street—they are there, it is certain—going about the business of a morning. They are so innocent; they are so oblivious. This is Thomas Pynchon's neighborhood.

And so, Stephen went on to tell me what happened to him some years ago when he went to buy Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* at a small bookstore right here in Providence. "Having eventually found the book on the shelves, I went up to the cash register," Stephen began. "The woman who almost always worked there wasn't around, though, for some reason. In her place was a man I'd never seen there before, ever. When I put my copy of *Mason & Dixon* on the counter, the cashier took it up in his hands, flipping through the pages.

"Pynchon?" he seemed to ask me, though he sort of said it into the book.

'Yeah, he's one of my favorites,' I told him. 'Have you ever read any?'

'Not yet,' the man said. But it was odd: I caught the slightest little smirk forming on his mouth. And he looked so old, I remember thinking. What was he doing here? Especially on a Saturday, when it was so busy. He didn't seem especially adept at running the cash register, either. And he was so old, I thought.

"So the guy continued to flip through my *Mason & Dixon*, peering over once or twice to give me a look. Hard to say exactly what kind of look it was. 'But yeah,' I told him. 'I'm really looking forward to it.' I said as I put my cash on the counter. The guy took my money as I put the book in my backpack. 'Hey, enjoy,' he said, as I started to head for the door.

And then it all fell down. It was him; it was Pynchon; it was him, right here in the bookstore, right here in Providence. The graying hair, that angular face, everything I remembered from the photo I'd found on the internet. Everything was there, all the details. I charged the counter as the next customer piled her books in front of the man, stopping short just a few feet away.

'Are... do you work here?' I whispered. I don't even know what came out of my mouth, really. 'I mean, are...' I had trouble, but I tried again. Out of breath already, I'm sure, nervous as anything: 'Are you?' I remember how the woman trying to pay gave both of us a really confused look. And then the old man winked, and I ran out of the store, and I ran all the way back to campus."

Suffice it to say, I haven't started reading *Gravity's Rainbow* yet.

ADAM DELAHANTY B'07 defies literary gravity.

Illustrations by ZAK SMITH featured on www.themodernworld.com/pynchon/zak_smith/title.htm

On Not Reading Pynchon

In Search of the Author Who Wouldn't Be Found

BY ADAM DELAHANTY

Richard Powers, reading Pynchon is "the closest thing I have to a private religious ritual. I do it to remind myself of the size of the made world, of what story might still be when it remembers itself." These candid, reverential words, from authors I genuinely admire, astounded me: if these authors were to me so much less than Pynchon was to them, who was this monster, and could I ever be ready to read him?

Eventually, in reading the longest piece, by Gerald Howard (an editor at Doubleday), I came to learn some details about the author he called "Commandant" Pynchon—or, that is, I came to learn nothing at all: the last time Thomas Pynchon appeared in public, I read, was in 1963. That year, when an American reporter caught up with him in Mexico City for a photograph and interview in conjunction with the release of his first novel, *V*, Pynchon jumped out of his hotel room window, hopped a bus into the mountains, and stayed there for months, growing a long mustache and earning a nickname from the locals: "Pancho Villa." He has never been photographed or interviewed since. There is only the writing.

His story—or, the absence of any story at all—piqued my curiosity much more than the prospect of reading his novels themselves. Did the privacy somehow enable his writing? Or did Pynchon avoid public attention because there was something extraordinary to hide: illegitimate children, fame for another reason, a history of violence? And most unnerving of all, might I already know him, or her, or perhaps the army of writers responsible for this literature? When those who've read Pynchon write about those

became convinced that my pursuit of the author wasn't the stuff of an irrational mid-summer lust, but merely the serendipitous intersection of two young American egos: Pynchon's, and mine, Tom and Adam, the space between us dwindling in size as the balloons between our hips ran out of air. The terror that marked my view of Pynchon the present-day writer was softened by a past I could relate to.

I LOVE YOU BECAUSE YOU'RE JUST LIKE ME

Pynchon and I were born on the outskirts of New York City. When we were in high school, we satirized our local communities in the school newspaper (though Pynchon's pieces included words like "heretofore," which I still don't know how to use). Pynchon attended Cornell University for two years before enlisting in the Navy; after his two-year service, he returned to school and changed his course of study from Physics to English. I have been at this school for two years but am on the way out, and though I've yet to make plans, they could very well involve both boats and guns; still, in the end, I'll probably end up crawling back to Providence to study English, as opposed to whatever it was I used to. Also, the flagrantly mid-centuryish names of Pynchon's two younger siblings are exactly the same as those of my parents: John