

Pynchon in Life

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I know where Pynchon lives. Once no fact would have been more luminous to me. Now, although my friend called me as soon as he learned and I listened as breathlessly as I ever would have, knowing where Pynchon lives finally doesn't matter so much. I'm not going there to try to spot him. I've lived too long with the desire to learn something, anything, about the actual human being. Learning something so spectacular now, and so accidentally, makes me realize how knowledge of Pynchon has come to represent a certain sort of elusive, unwanted knowledge about myself.

A few years ago at a conference, I gave a paper, "Pynchon in China," based on what I'd chanced to learn about Chinese translations of Pynchon (mainly a certain section of *V.*) during a year teaching in China. Few attended, including one of my fellow panelists. It was disappointing. The other panelist, however, told me after the session that he loved Pynchon. Soon the talk turned from the author to the man. In my experience, it usually does on such occasions. My man said that a friend of his had recently traveled to Nicaragua and was absolutely certain Pynchon had been along. Why was she so certain? Had they both been part of a group? Or did she just meet him? On with the conference. I never saw again the man who told me about Pynchon in Nicaragua.

I liked this last phrase. I resolved to write a paper so titled, based on a *global* Pynchon. The paper would investigate the critical construction of "Pynchon" as a hopelessly American one. Perhaps it would finally develop into a consideration of how any author comes to command an international reputation. Certainly it would draw on my own foreign teaching experiences. During a year teaching in Saudi Arabia, I had written an article on Pynchon (an Egyptian friend translated it into Arabic) after I was told that there were no Arabic translations of him.

I never wrote about the global Pynchon. Less than two years after resolving to try, I was again teaching abroad, this time in Brazil, but now with my most precious single book having been lost in transit: a lovingly, intricately annotated Viking paperback *Gravity's Rainbow*. A whole box including it had never arrived at the Rio consulate. Since I had a Fulbright and was permitted to use government mailing services,

the loss was particularly inexplicable. But if the system was special, the box was no easier to trace within it; my *Gravity's Rainbow* (I didn't care about the rest of the contents) could be literally anywhere in the world.

Why, I kept asking myself for months afterward, hadn't I taken it on the plane with me, as I had when I'd gone to Saudi Arabia and China? Was it just that I hadn't needed to read any Pynchon at all during those two years? But then why possess the great book at all in Brazil? Did consigning it to the mails signify some attempt to accommodate my uncertainty? (The larger dimension was the question what of me, once again, would prove to be valuable in another country, and what should better have been left behind.) Or did clinging during each previous flight to my big green Norwegian backpack, with the bulky Viking copy inside almost bent, not come to seem to me a kind of infantile fixation?

On Pynchon? No, I concluded. By the time I left for Brazil, I'd published four articles on Pynchon—enough, I supposed, to qualify me as some sort of “expert,” and quite sufficient to certify me to direct the dissertation on him of an American living in Brazil (which worthy aim was apparently one of the reasons I was chosen for the Fulbright). I really didn't care about someone else's critical concerns; perhaps “Pynchon” had come to constitute the designation for the far more ambitious book that I felt was in me to write. In it I would address how haplessly repressed by Pynchon studies the sheer mindlessness of Pynchon had become. Or did I want to contend that he is the sort of writer who has an almost, well, infantile relation with all that's most vital to him? In any case I doubted if I had the sort of claim that's worth a book. What is worth a book? What is worth?

As advising the dissertation developed, I didn't need my own copy of *Gravity's Rainbow*. My advisee's sufficed. Furthermore, I was astonished to discover something else I must have dimly suspected: after innumerable readings of the text, including teaching two graduate seminars each half devoted to it, I could cite the page number of many of my own most enabling passages. I just didn't need the material book. This was a very disturbing realization. I own thousands of books. I was again flirting with a life abroad in which I'd have to give almost all of them up, but I didn't think I ever really could. There were a few books at least which I felt I couldn't literally live without.

What can any of us truly live without? What kind of life do we have to have in which the knowledge can be inescapably revealed to us? In Brazil, I assumed, there would certainly be no Pynchon stories. Maybe, by then, that's one reason I chose to go. Every Pynchon story I'd happened to hear over the course of fifteen years just whetted my

appetite for more—and made more grim, each time, the inescapable fact that I just didn't know many "Pynchonites," or that I simply wasn't institutionally favored to enjoy some commerce with the sort of people who *really* know about Pynchon.

Take the time one of Pynchon's editors had to call an emergency-only phone number, only to discover it was that of a California phone booth: was this really true? Or the time Pynchon suddenly appeared, "intensely paranoid," at the New York apartment of a friend (whose brother told me the story) in order to correct what turned out to be the proofs of *Gravity's Rainbow*: did he actually get all excited at one point when his book could have had exactly the same number of pages as the Random House edition of *Ulysses*? Surely there were people—academics, like me—who knew far more detailed, intimate facts. No matter that they were as effectively unknown to me as Pynchon himself.

It's either silly or craven or both to be reduced to the status of a *fan*, dotting on gossip and scraps. Perhaps many as devoted to Pynchon as I've been have managed to avoid it. I first read *V.* in 1964. Even then, I think, I quickly became fascinated by what there was to glean of the strange, paradoxical celebrity already being conferred upon Pynchon as a consequence of how little was known about him. Ten years later I was famished for the dazzling feast of biographical truth that came my way, courtesy of a man who didn't care anything for Pynchon but who recalled a little of what an old friend, also an old friend of Pynchon's mother, had mentioned to him.

It was not so commonplace in 1974 to claim that an important strand of Pynchon's writing is in part based upon a reading of Hawthorne. The adolescent Pynchon, I learned, had wandered around for days afterwards, once he finished *The House of the Seven Gables*, exclaiming, "I'm in a book!" This is essentially all I was told. It was enough. When Slothrop sees his initials, T.S., in Jamf's codebook, we read, "Well, holy cow, Slothrop reckons, that must be me, huh" (286). In other words, he's in a book. So is Herbert Stencil. Oedipa Maas is in a sense born from Inverarity's will. A variation on this same theme can be seen in Prairie's feeling at one point in *Vineland* while watching still more film once shot by her mother "that if she kept her mind empty she could absorb, conditionally become, Frenesi" (199).

How significant is a book? What constellation of forces does a book represent? To put the matter more pointedly: if you're an academic, are you a failure if you haven't published a book? A book, after all, is the only way for an academic to get, as we say, *known*. Perhaps I felt desperately unknown by 1974. The occasion of my hearing the *Seven Gables* story was an NEH Summer Seminar. The

paper on Pynchon which I tried to write for that seminar is the only paper I've failed to complete. Months later, I did slap on a conclusion, but submitted it too late for a special Pynchon issue of *Twentieth Century Literature*. Out of this issue developed the collection *Mindful Pleasures*, edited by George Levine and David Leverenz. One of the editors wrote me that there was a good chance I would have made the magazine had I submitted sooner.

Well over a decade after receiving this letter, and no matter now the essays published in between, I may have wanted to lose my copy of *Gravity's Rainbow* as I packed for a year in Brazil. I can't explain why. I hadn't published a book. I hadn't even been published in one. The story about the adolescent Pynchon remained my best one. Pynchon still seemed to me a very American writer. I hadn't been able to get out of the university where I'd been teaching for appallingly close to twenty years. I flew down to Rio as afraid of flying as ever, clutching my old green Norwegian backpack.

The weather gradually got cooler as the months passed. I got mugged. My marriage collapsed. I couldn't write anything. Rio was monotonously colorful and provocative. At one point a Brazilian at the American consulate told me not to miss just about the weirdest Fulbrighter passing through she'd ever met. The woman taught in southern California. We arranged to meet for dinner. When she rather breezily inquired whether I'd heard of "an American writer named Thomas Pynchon," I hardly knew how to respond. There was no context for her question. I managed some airy assent. "I know him," she then declared very slowly and emphatically.

Did I choke on my chicken? I remember how immediately I tried to conceal my shock. People who know Pynchon are sworn to secrecy. Isn't this true? But I didn't ask. The woman said one of the major characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* is modeled on her. I didn't openly speculate. She told, very vaguely, of first meeting Pynchon at a Berkeley rooming house in the '60s. Perhaps I expressed too much of my incredulity with the opinion that this sounded right.

By the time she complained that Pynchon didn't write much anymore, I suppose I'd become too obviously suspicious. I feared asking where Pynchon lived, but risked soliciting some specifics from her about what he looked like, or what sort of person he was. The woman wasn't giving any. "He's a good friend" was soon her final word. Was she actually telling the truth? Did she now feel guilty for having mentioned anything at all? Yet why had she? My soon-to-be former wife dined with us. She quickly tired of this "Pynchon business," insisted afterwards that the woman had no reason to lie, and refused to admit my insistence that I had every reason to be upset.

Could such a disclosure, on such an occasion, have happened only in a foreign country? This is the only thing about which I was fairly certain.

Something which particularly bothered me was that this woman was so *plain*. Weird, yes, but mostly because there was so much vacancy around whatever she said; she really wasn't compelling, vivacious, challenging, freaky, or any of a number of other things one imagines about any friend of Pynchon's. It seemed to me that, by default and absurdity, I in effect knew Pynchon better. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? It only came last year, in a review of *Vineland* in the New York magazine *7 Days*, where I read the following story as a rebuke. The reviewer reports that in the early '70s he met a man who claimed that his father was Pynchon's lawyer, retained after a meeting held, at Pynchon's request, in a Kansas City rib joint. "How will I recognize you?" asked the lawyer. "It'll be easy," replied Pynchon. "I'll be the most ordinary-looking guy in the restaurant."

In other words, beware of literary versions of experience. I hadn't. No matter that, with respect to Pynchon, such versions were all I had. Or that, with respect to myself, such versions of versions were all I aspired to. Why write a book? Because life is too commonplace, even banal, when we want it to be exceptional, mysterious, and visionary? It's hard to say. But the motives won't be completely realized in the book, and the author may be misrepresented entirely; much of what is unknown may simply be unknowable.

Furthermore, much of what is known is already in books. Too much, Pynchon would appear to suggest. This may constitute reason enough for writing no more books. It certainly constitutes reason enough to be suspicious of them, even afraid of some. In fact, it might even be possible to say that the knowledge available in books represents experience only to misrepresent it—a fashionably theoretic position that can result no less in personal anguish if what one is interested in is one's relation to books in the first place.

Two years ago in a used-book store, I gulped and plunked down my money for an especially clean copy of the Viking *Gravity's Rainbow*. I wanted to own one again, but I'd never read this one straight through, I promised myself. I haven't. I'd only see, page after page, the marginal notes of my lost edition, with elaborate cross-references that amounted to a wholly other text—my own. Is this one reason another article I once contemplated writing was about the various texts quoted from and referred to in *Gravity's Rainbow*? Or was this proposal just a sort of Borgesian conceit? I've still got my old Grove edition of Borges. Where is it that he says you can only lose what you never had?

At the end of that year, I never had to face the decision to buy *Vineland*. My father had given me the hardback of some trashy bestseller, and I succeeded in exchanging it for the new Pynchon at a university bookstore. Actually, my new wife brought off the ruse. She's never read Pynchon. I don't care. Maybe she was happier than I was to hand me *Vineland*. I could avoid reading it for less than a week. One of the first things I did on a semester's sabbatical last year was write a long paper on *Vineland*. A feminist reading, it articulates a complex of thoughts about Pynchon that seemed wholly new to me.

I sent copies of the article to two friends. One is the woman whose dissertation adviser I was. She has her Ph.D. now. Had anybody on her committee so much as read one novel by Pynchon? She was never able to determine. I forget now whether she told me the Brazilian translator of *Ulysses* had accepted or declined a publisher's request last year to translate *Gravity's Rainbow* into Portuguese. Pynchon is not widely known in Brazil. My friend has a copy of *Vineland*, but it may still be unread, because, she said months ago, she's afraid it won't be any good.

The other friend is not an academic, although he has an M.A. in English, and was in the second of the grad classes in which I taught *Gravity's Rainbow*. He bought *Vineland* immediately, read it unhurriedly, and loved it. He's the one who called me a couple of months ago about where Pynchon lives. He met his wife during that grad class. Now they're about to be divorced. They remain friends enough for her to have called him immediately after her lunch with a well-known cartoonist who was visiting her campus for the day. Mentioning that he happened to live in the building where a novelist named Thomas Pynchon lives was merely one of the many things they chatted about.

My friend's ex-wife-to-be has never read Pynchon. The cartoonist said he read *The Crying of Lot 49* once he became aware of the novelist down the hall, got through most of *V.*, but couldn't get into *Gravity's Rainbow*. He doesn't really know Pynchon—not the man, and hardly any more the critical reputation. I'm not sure how fully aware he is of how loathe Pynchon is to be known. I am aware, and so I believe I should forebear naming the cartoonist, relating any of the few little Pynchon anecdotes he told, or disclosing even the name of the city in which both live.

Of course, mine is a written account, and therefore not theoretically precluded from being untrustworthy, no matter how honest I affect to be. So what difference would some disclosure make? None, I suppose, in the reading, especially if I want to concede to the writing this kind of duplicity. But I don't. I received my friend's

intelligence as true—it's too casually come by, for one thing—and I give it as true. What counts more for me is the process whereby knowing where Pynchon lives pretty quickly becomes a kind of knowledge very difficult to characterize—too precious not to matter, and yet so precious that it either won't be believed or can't be shared if it could be believed.

What's that line I love from Stevens about something being too much like thinking to be less than thought? The sort of knowledge about the human being, Thomas Pynchon, in which I've conspired for as long as I've been reading him has been too much like knowing to be less than knowledge. Yet now that I've got what I can only call a *fact*, it feels like less after all. One reason is that I came too late to this knowledge; the accidents of my own life have altered the very conditions in which anything I knew about Pynchon could abide. Perhaps some of what I knew was meant to be lost.

Another reason could be expressed this way: even if too much of what we know is in a book, including the most secret sources of our identities, some of that knowledge is better off there. Why? I suppose because we need our ignorance. I'm not entirely unmindful of what I'd say to Pynchon if I could meet him, but I'm probably still profoundly unaware of even so apparently simple a question as whether or not I really admire him. Moreover, I don't even know if he feels he's failed—as a writer, as a man. Which matters more to him?

Worse, I may not care. The "real" Thomas Pynchon is, for me, finally just another notion with which to try to elude the literariness of experience itself. It can't be eluded. About Pynchon anyway, books are all I have. His *Slow Learner* introduction speaks of an authenticity "found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live" (21). Is the notion of such a life Pynchon's own way of eluding the literary? Perhaps. But what *is* the cost of authentically possessing this life? Maybe that we ultimately have to live as if books were dispensable after all, and to acknowledge that a certain face of experience is so plain and so obvious that it may as well be unknowable.

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