

A Thoughtful Thomas Pynchon

Charles Clerc

I recently renewed my friendship with a former student, Jeff Bartlett, who told me a story that will add to the lore about Thomas Pynchon, particularly his thoughtfulness.

We need to go all the way back to the early 1970s for the beginning of the story. Jeff was then an undergraduate at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. A fan of Pynchon and a superior student of literature, he was distressed that Pynchon had not been heard from since *The Crying of Lot 49* in 1966. So Jeff wrote a poem about Pynchon's silence in which he implored Pynchon to produce some more work.

Back in those days, the Marin Writers' Conference invited undergraduate students to attend, and, if they were good enough, to read their work. I nominated Jeff from my writing workshop to appear, he was chosen, and over at Marin he read his poem "Invoking Thomas Pynchon." The poem (77 lines of free verse) was later published in a booklet of student writing under the auspices of the conference. That was in the spring of 1972. In June or July of that year, Jeff sent Pynchon, through his publisher, a copy of the poem. Of course Jeff never expected to hear from Pynchon, nor did he have any idea that *Gravity's Rainbow* was looming on the horizon.

One day at Jeff's family home, there arrived from New York a large package containing galley proofs of *Gravity's Rainbow*, autographed by Pynchon to Jeff. According to Jeff, the proofs were numbered and close-to-final copies. Several small diagrams appeared at the bottom of pages, with instructions for their placement in the final copy. Virtually everything else in the proofs was as it appeared in the simultaneous Viking hardcover and paperback editions, including even the film-sprocket squares. Jeff received the proofs near Christmas, 1972, three months before publication. When he checked the published novel against the proofs, he found late changes to be minimal.

Given the reputation Pynchon has acquired for reclusiveness, it is a pleasure to report that he would answer a student's invocation in such a kind way. As Jeff himself said, "A very gracious response, eh?"

We all know about Pynchon and his work. Let me catch you up on Jeff. He went on to take a doctorate in American literature at the University of Iowa--his dissertation focused on William Carlos Williams and Henry Miller. Jeff now lives in Berkeley and is the author of *One Vast Page: Essays on the Beat Writers, Their Books, and My Life, 1950-1980*.

So, Jeff has his valuable copy of autographed galley proofs of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and I have a rewarding story to tell about him and Pynchon.

--University of the Pacific