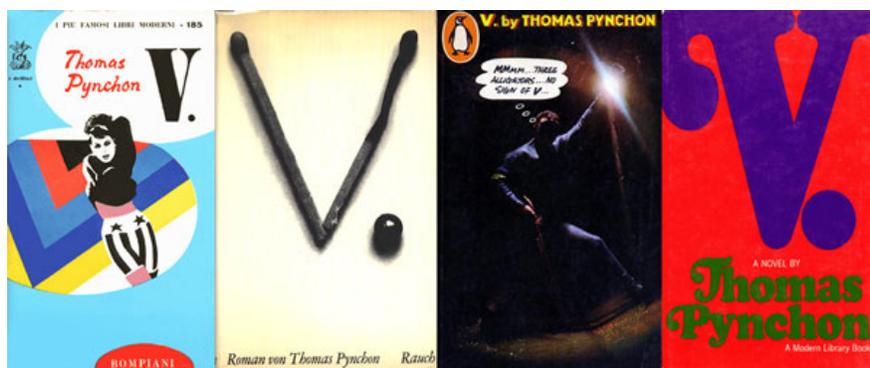


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Pynchon Is Here

February 24, 2012



V. Covers. From L-R: first Italian edition (1965), first German edition (1968), first English paperback edition (1966), first Modern Library edition (1966)

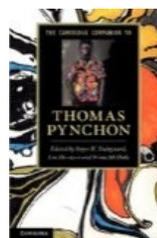
by **Martin Paul Eve**[*The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon.*](#)

Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale, eds.,

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 212pp.

The Cambridge Companion series has become, in academic literary circles, the equivalent to the Hollywood walk of fame; it comes with connotations of canonization, recognition and acceptance. It would seem somewhat surprising, then, to see Thomas Pynchon, the most notoriously elusive author of the twentieth century, a figure who has consistently subverted award ceremonies and rejected honours, bestowed such insider recognition. Of course, the fame is not here heaped upon the man, but as the editors themselves note, in light of the fact that Pynchon's writings, in their infamous complexity, bind readers and critics together as a community.

This volume, published on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *V.* [1963], brings together seventeen of the foremost heavyweights from over forty years of Pynchon criticism in a work tailored for those "who study and teach Pynchon [...], to the non-academic fan" (2). The editors here propose the common reader's Pynchon, a disentanglement from the various Wikis, obsessive mailing lists, close textual analysis and scholarly works for "advanced researchers". It is against these ambitious self-imposed standards, then, that the work must be judged.

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**With perfection,
there's no more
discussion...**

"A writer in the act of writing must fear neither his own words nor anything else in the world." Heini tells Algin in Irmgard Keun's After Midnight. Algin is considering writing a historical novel that will satisfy the stiff submission requirements of the Reich Chamber of Literature. The historical novel might be relatively safe because the players have passed.

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**Apples Explode**

It isn't Salter's language alone that numbers him among the masters.

The collection is structured threefold into “canon”, “poetics” and “issues”. Beginning at the beginning, *The Companion*’s opening section kicks off with a broadly chronological run-down of Pynchon’s fiction. This ranges from the distillation of John Krafft and Luc Herman’s extensive archival research on early Pynchon, including its draft versions at the Harry Ransom Center, into a biographical note and appraisal of *V.*, the *Slow Learner* collection [1984] and assorted early paratexts; Thomas Hill Schaub’s expert elucidation of *The Crying of Lot 49* [1966], *Vineland* [1990] and *Inherent Vice* [2009], wherein Pynchon’s politics are explored and his optimism downgraded; Steven Weisenburger on *Gravity’s Rainbow* [1973] as a profoundly moral fiction of fascism, with which we are all, including Pynchon, complicit; Kathryn Hume examines the nodal networks that link *Mason & Dixon* [1997] to an extra-material reality; and Bernard Duyfhuizen explores *Against the Day* [2006] as a continuation of Pynchon’s polyphony and Menippean satire.

This section on canon will be of use to those new to Pynchon scholarship as well as baffled readers from an undergraduate level and beyond. While it does, at times, go beyond the realm that could truly be described as for the “non-Academic fan” – I’m not sure too many would welcome reference to an “Althusserian focus” (34) – in these cases, for the most part, points of external reference are clearly explained. In fact, all of these pieces demonstrate remarkable clarity while broadly capturing the key thematic insights of each fiction discussed. Of course, clarity and capture do tend toward authoritarianism and that can often feel the case here; these essays feel watertight, as though no challenge to their status could be possible. This is not the case and I am sure is not the intention of the authors or editors, but rather a perhaps inevitable knock-on effect from the self-imposed audience constraints.

The second portion of this edition, falling under the title “Poetics” assesses Pynchon’s aesthetics. David Cowart here provides an excellent appraisal – also featured in his recent *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History* [2011] – of Pynchon’s historical situation, suggesting useful interlocutors and successors; Brian McHale outlines the ways in which Pynchon’s postmodernism works under his widely known theorization of epistemological to ontological shift; and David Seed examines Pynchon’s poly-vocal framework and the function of allusion in the novels.

Clearly, this section is more advanced than that on canon and introduces many of the key areas upon which newcomers to Pynchon will undoubtedly want to focus. The suggestion of critical complements by David Cowart is particularly welcome and, despite the vast body of Pynchon work already published on myth, Northrop Frye remains a solid, yet often overlooked, starting point. Similarly, it becomes all too easy, when early in one’s acquaintance with Pynchon, to become stagnated upon the postmodern referential framework. McHale and Seed both explore ways in which this paralysing stasis can be avoided, while also providing strong rationales for the validity of Pynchon’s encyclopaedic mode.

Finally, in a broad thematic sweep, the *Companion* addresses, at a now sophisticated level, the various critical lenses through which Pynchon has been seen. This ranges from Amy J. Elias on history (and metahistorical fiction/romance); the stunning Jeff Baker on politics, whose “Amerikkka Über Alles” journal should be required reading for anybody studying *Gravity’s Rainbow*; through Deborah L. Madsen on alterity and otherness; to Inger H. Dalsgaard unravelling Pynchon’s vexed relationship to science and technology. Finally, in an afterword, Hanjo Berressem gives a more general piece of advice on reading methods compatible with Pynchon’s prose.

There are many commendable aspects of this selection. Foremost is the continual return to the ethical

but it is what strikes you first. From Light Years of 1975: ‘On the stands in nearby orchards were hard, yellow apples filled with powerful juice. They exploded against the teeth, they spat white flecks like arguments.’ From the story ‘Am Strande von Tanger’, on the death of a bird: ‘A heart no bigger than an orange seed has ceased to beat.’

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‘Nothing but a fourth dimension’

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implications of Pynchon's writing, an aspect that is all too often buried beneath a heap of indeterminacy and pseudo-scientific quantum hokum. The volume also coheres superbly; each of the pieces is relatively short and works in a self-contained manner but, at the same time, a notion of progression is maintained and the editors and contributors should be congratulated on this formulation. The audience level is also well pitched; the canon sections are ideal starting points for those entirely new to Pynchon while the progressive "difficulty" of the concepts ensures that this issue will also bear fruit for those with an already firm grasp upon the subject.

Overall, this is a superb selection, but the parting remark that needs to be made is upon the notion of community that the introduction puts forward as its other central tenet, alongside accessibility. Although it may be true of literary studies in general, Pynchon scholarship has a notorious reputation as an old boys club. This is not entirely merited; Pynchonites can universally be counted as among the most generous, open spirited and intellectually interesting people I have ever met. It is certainly not exclusive in any paranoid, conspiratorial sense. However, a brief scan of the authors above reveals a still deeply-ingrained male-bias with a mere five female contributors of seventeen total; an ongoing problem for the field more generally and not specific to this book. Also, as already commented upon, the tightly-integrated mode of these pieces works both ways. In one sense, it is ideal, that lofty height for which we all strive. On the other, it leaves one feeling, as with Beckett's doppelgänger figures in *Ohio Impromptu*, as though "little is left to tell". Indeed, this community feels as though it is a community of one voice that has reached consensus. I cannot say that I am convinced that this is a true reflection of the critical landscape and a concern, albeit minor, is whether this could be seen as a barrier to entry for new scholars. The work in this selection is excellent, but I remain hopeful, in the generous spirit in which we all always should, that the best work is still yet to come.

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Cowart, David. *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. Print.

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Martin Paul Eve is a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex. His work has been published in *Textual Practice*, *Rupkatha* and he has forthcoming pieces in *Pynchon Notes* and a book chapter from Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée.

Themes : [Cambridge Companion](#), [Martin Paul Eve](#), [Review](#), [Thomas Pynchon](#), [V](#)

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