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## Letters and notes

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## LETTERS AND NOTES

# "A Shorthand of Stars": From John to Thomas Pynchon

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The June 1888 issue of the *Phonographic World* magazine presented John Pynchon, an ancestor of Thomas, as "The First American Shorthand Reporter". While most biographical criticism to date of Thomas Pynchon has focused on the cameo appearance of a thinly veiled William Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*, we here set out further historical information on John alongside an appraisal of shorthand in the novels of Thomas.

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In the June 1888 issue of the *Phonographic World* magazine, an organ by and for professional shorthand writers in the U.S., an item appears that may be of interest to Pynchon scholars. Under the title "The First American Shorthand Reporter," J.N. Kimball reports on some odd-looking shorthand manuscripts discovered in the Springfield, Massachusetts library. They are transcriptions of sermons delivered in 1639 by Rev. George Moxon at Springfield's Pynchon House, and they are the work of John Pynchon, son of William Pynchon, ancestor of Thomas. Kimball could not discern what system of shorthand Pynchon used, and finds that, "His 'system' was evidently an arbitrary one—special words and phrases being represented by arbitrary characters of his own invention" (219). All of the information about John Pynchon in the article is drawn from *King's Hand Book of Springfield*, a source likely well-known to Pynchon scholars interested in the family lineage, and it provides little detail on the man himself. The article's last words reiterate the claim in the article's title, that "HE WAS THE FIRST AMERICAN SHORTHAND REPORTER" (219, caps in original).

There are no editorial remarks on the article and no commentary on it in later issues of *Phonographic World*. Other matters of controversy could generate months of published replies and exchanges, so we can surmise that Kimball's claims were either accepted at face value or regarded as inconsequential to the magazine's readers. And as intriguing as it would be to think that Thomas Pynchon's ancestor was the first practitioner in what would become a rich and varied form of writing in America, it seems unlikely that there was a "first" American shorthand reporter in any significant sense or, if there was one, that it was John Pynchon. Shorthand writing was practiced so widely in England at the time, and it was used so frequently to transcribe Puritan sermons, that there were likely people practicing it in America before 1639. Powers, who decoded John Pynchon's notes and translated his transcriptions of Moxon's sermons into longhand, finds that Pynchon's system was less "arbitrary" than it appeared to Kimball. According to Powers (2016), Pynchon's system was based on the one found in Thomas Shelton's *Short Writing, the Most Exact Methode* (1626). Powers found that "John did not actually follow the Shelton method. He adopted some of the symbols Shelton devised for common beginnings and endings for 'long words,' but John gave

them his own meanings. And he seems to have simply made up many other signs" (2). As Meredith Neuman's *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England* makes clear, shorthand transcription was already central to the documentation of Puritan sermonizing by the time of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's foundation.

This last fact provides a good way of locating John Pynchon in the writing environments of his era. If it is a stretch to call him a foundational figure in American shorthand, he and others like him do occupy a fascinating place in the Anglo-American shorthand tradition. As Francis Sypher writes (and we have to note the Pynchonian ring of that name), "The importance of shorthand for religious uses is apparent from the early [shorthand] manuals, which pay special attention to biblical and liturgical vocabulary, phrases and proper names." Further, "there exist in British collections numerous shorthand diaries that consist of private religious outpourings. The fluency and confidentiality of shorthand were well suited to such outpourings" (92). Here shorthand occupies an interesting position as an enabler of both the public dissemination of religious doctrine and private confession of religious feeling. In both cases, shorthand was used to capture and record immediate experience whether of the public or private variety. Sermons carry only so far as the human voice can project, and the tumult of the soul stops when it meets the outer boundaries of the body. Shorthand seems to have made these boundaries and limitations permeable, letting voices carry beyond the rooms that contain them and providing outlet for the angst of inner conflict.

The significance of shorthand to European religious history, and vice versa, was first articulated by Sir Isaac Pitman, whose 1837 *Stenographic Sound-Hand* would inaugurate the era of "modern shorthand." Pitman confirms Sypher's view that shorthand and Puritan spiritual practices (among others) emerged in tandem. In the eleventh edition of his *A Manual of Phonography* (1864), Pitman claims that since "the principles of the Reformation were extensively promulgated [in England] from the pulpit," the desire to "preserve for the future private reading the discourses of the principal preachers of that day, led to the cultivation of the newly invented art of shorthand writing" (17). As Pitman sees it, the flourishing of shorthand writing in England between 1588 and 1682, "may ... be considered as resulting from the dawn

of RELIGIOUS FREEDOM" (17, caps in original). In this view, shorthand writing and Protestantism coevolved in the English-speaking world, the former enabling the latter and the latter providing a critical mass of readers and writers for the former.

This is, of course, a reductive interpretation of the spread of the Reformation in England; shorthand was not the *only* factor that enabled the spread of the Reformation, and the Reformation was not the *only* factor that encouraged the growth of shorthand. Moreover, this will probably not square with whatever idea of shorthand lingers in our cultural imaginary. If we ever do think of shorthand today, we probably think of a world of (mostly female) secretaries in offices scribbling indecipherable squiggles on yellow pads as men in suits dictate to them, then taking their notes to the typing pool for translation. In this view, shorthand is quaint and outmoded, charming in its obsolescence, an artifact of communications technologies rendered wholly unnecessary by the digital era. (The historian Carole Srole has documented how, in America, shorthand made this transition from a tool of religious and social reform into a mere business instrument.) But the same religious fervor that brought the first English colonists to America also brought shorthand to America. Whether or not he was, as the *Phonographic World* would have it, "THE FIRST SHORTHAND REPORTER IN AMERICA," John Pynchon's shorthand reporting was bound up with the religious life-world he inhabited, the religious logic and spiritual practices of colonial America, and so the prehistory of the United States. John Pynchon was more than a mere vessel for the words of Rev. Moxon. Shorthand, as it was practiced by New England Puritans, was intimately tied to the sense of mission that brought the Pynchons to America in the first place.

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For obvious reasons, there is a dearth of biographical criticism on Thomas Pynchon and his ancestry. The few pieces that do exist, however, center on the appearance of William Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* under the thinly veiled alias of the heretical William Slothrop (Storey, Hollander). There are also a small number of broader historical accounts that note William's centrality to the founding of Springfield, Massachusetts (Morison) and a popular biographical book (Powers 2015). John Pynchon, however, remains an under-explored figure in all of these works.

What is perhaps more interesting for the scholar of the contemporary Pynchon, though, is the curious intersection of encryption, communication and speed, and family that can be traced from this affiliation with John. These themes have, arguably, been key to Pynchon's work for some time, although not in a straightforward way, as we shall see.

To deal first with *Gravity's Rainbow*, there are four instances in the text where shorthand is mentioned and, for the most part, they are associated with the feminine or with Slothrop's sexual conquests. The reader is told that there is a "cool clean interior, girl and woman, independent of [Slothrop's] shorthand of stars" (Pynchon 2000, 115); that "a pretty blonde auxiliary in black boots and steel-rimmed glasses is sitting here taking down shorthand notes of everything she hears from Springer" (Pynchon 2000, 511); and that at another instance a "young lady under gargoyles is taking it all down in shorthand" (Pynchon 2000, 679). The systems of encryption for the purposes of speedily notating details that constitute "shorthand" are, then, actually recurrent throughout the sinister unfurling of the psychological/psychochemical/psychosexual – warfare elements of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Indeed, the refraction of shorthand here through Slothrop's "shorthand of stars" (that denote his sexual conquests but, also, V-2 rocket strikes) alongside a "pretty blonde auxiliary", clothed in the fetishistic garb for which Pynchon's writing is infamous, locates the other Pynchonian ancestry of the text within a domain of sexual knowledge and power. This aspect is only intensified when the final reference to shorthand in *Gravity's Rainbow* is added: "Milton Gloaming, who achieved perfect tripos at Cambridge ten years ago, abandons his shorthand to rise and go shut the gas off" (Pynchon 2000, 31). Milton Gloaming is, of course, the commissioner of Roger Mexico's statistico-analytical work on paranormal events for the war effort.

Shorthand then, supposedly core to Pynchon's ancestry in at least one source, is also sporadically present throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is also the text upon which most biographical criticism of Pynchon has set its sights. Yet, this yields a slight challenge for the arc of Pynchon's oeuvre. For, while *Gravity's Rainbow* may feature the clearest cameo appearances of Pynchon's ancestry, Ali Cheywynd has rightly identified that it is the patronage plots of *later* Pynchon novels that grow from "a model of organic obligation whose paradigm is the family" (948). In other words, and in more than one sense, *Gravity's Rainbow* is not so much of a family

novel when compared to Pynchon's late texts. Given this shift towards a thematic focus on the family, it is, therefore, curious that so much biographical work should centre around the early phase of Pynchon's career, as opposed to the later.

Alas, though, most of Pynchon's later novels do not have shorthand as anything like a central aspect. In *Against the Day*, for instance, there are only two instances of the term, in both cases referring to being under-staffed (as in: short-handed). Shorthand does not feature at all in *Vineland*, *Mason & Dixon*, *Inherent Vice* or *Bleeding Edge*. Might we then attribute the appearance of shorthand in *Gravity's Rainbow* to the fact that Pynchon was clearly undertaking family ancestral research at that time? It seems possible but also a stretch. For, while the themes of encryption and the dangers of remediation extend throughout Pynchon's writing career, it seems that John Pynchon and his alleged primacy of shorthand are of less interest to the contemporary author.

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### Competing Interests

Martin Paul Eve is an editor of the journal. This note was not peer-reviewed but was approved by another member of the editorial team.

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