Thomas Pynchon?

Tonight's talk was advertised as "Thomas Pynchon?" with a question mark, not merely as "Thomas Pynchon", and there's a certain appropriateness to that. This is partly because Pynchon is a mystery man, but also because you might wonder why I chose this particular topic. I was given my choice of subject matter, so why choose to discuss a particular American novelist, among all the other possibilities? Why Thomas Pynchon?

Well, partly because Pynchon is not just any American novelist. He's one of our unequivocally *major* current novelists writing in English. Singling out Pynchon allows me to pursue some issues that seem especially relevant to a group such as the Existentialist Society. I'd like to raise issues about how literature informs our understanding of the human situation — if we accept that it does. Hence, I want to find a way for us to talk about literature, and especially the novel.

In particular, I want to ask the question: "What do we expect of our major current novelists?" What do we want them to provide? What do we hope to get from their work?

You might still ask, "Why Pynchon in particular?" Presumably, I could have talked about some other major novelist, whoever might count as one of Pynchon's peers. The topic might have been Salman Rushdie, or Margaret Atwood, or Don DeLillo, or whoever your favourite author might be.

At this stage, I need to go into autobiographical mode and confess that one reason is simply that I used to know a lot about Pynchon — a long time ago now, I wrote a Ph.D thesis that focused largely on his work, and this was a chance to refresh old memories and bring myself up to date on a topic of personal interest.

(My actual topic related to the supposed return to myth in modern fictional narrative — a pet idea of the great Canadian critic Northrop Frye — but I explored how the idea might apply to a small number of contemporary authors, including Pynchon.)

So, this talk provides a chance to raise questions of general interest via discussion of an author of some personal interest to me.

I should say before I go too far what I *can't* do tonight. I can't offer you a talk that introduces Pynchon, offers you my reconstruction of Pynchon's worldview or philosophy of life, and backs this up with analyses and quotations. That would be an attractive approach, but I think it's the wrong approach to an author like Pynchon. I'm not entirely sceptical about all talks that might be structured in that way, but I actually would be sceptical if anyone claimed to have sorted out so clearly what Pynchon is telling us. I doubt that his novels really work that way: though you can certainly see themes and values coming through, they tend to subvert their most obvious meanings.

That immediately takes me to another question: "What is it that we do when we interpret literary texts?" Or again, "What is it that we produce when we offer interpretations of texts? Do these interpretations constitute knowledge in some sense, or what are they?"

With all that background, let me plunge into some detail about Pynchon and his body of published work — more, in fact, about the latter. He was born on 8 May 1937, so he's now in his early seventies. He's notoriously reclusive, little is known about his movements, and he's published relatively little beyond his novels and short stories. Ironically, his reclusiveness has become so legendary that it's now a well-known meme reproduced and exploited within the popular culture, including in cameo appearances by Pynchon in *The Simpsons*.

You can read almost his entire body of work if you get hold of just eight books:

(1) *V.* (published 1963).

(2) *The Crying of Lot 49* (published 1966).

(3) *Gravity's Rainbow* (published 1973; this is probably Pynchon's most famous book, and the one that got people talking about him in the same breath as Herman Melville and James Joyce ... its first sentence, "A screaming comes across the sky," is one of the most famous in modern English literature).

(4) *Slow Learner* (published 1984; this is a collection of Pynchon's early fiction, plus an introduction in which he largely castigates his own efforts).

(5) *Vineland* (published 1990; this is a more overtly political book, set in 1984 and looking back to the end of the 1960s — it asks what went wrong with the social revolution and presents a picture of the Nixonian repression).

(6) *Mason & Dixon* (published 1997).

(7) *Against the Day* (published 2006; this is a huge book that is difficult to sum up, though it is more stylistically accessible, and perhaps more likeable, than *Gravity's Rainbow*).

(8) *Inherent Vice* (published 2009).

[Note — in the actual talk as presented, I elaborated somewhat more on each book.]

What themes or values or ideas run through this body of work? What can we say about its general style or approach? Reference is often made to Pynchon's zaniness, to the whacky characters and bizarre events depicted in a certain over-the-top style. Pynchon is also seen as post-modernist author, especially in his depictions of the characters, who can seem cartoon-like. Contrast the depth psychology approach to character, as exemplified in, for example, the high Modernist work of James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence. Often, Pynchon seems almost to be resisting this, as if denying the possibility of this kind of deep knowledge of people. And yet his work has its own high Modernist moments, especially in some of the impressive epiphanies experienced by characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Certain themes also recur. Central to the experience of reading Pynchon is what seems like an obsession, what I'll call: *The way power works its way in history.*

All of Pynchon's novels are historical novels even when they are set in the very recent past, as with *The Crying of Lot 49* (which seems to be set in 1963, and was published just a few later in 1966).

[Note — again, in the actual talk I elaborated on this claim.]

They are also, in a broad sense, political novels. Again, they show how *power* operates in history. Or, at the least, they give some kind of vision or impression of this, and of various ways in which power is resisted.

Pynchon clearly shows fear, loathing, and anger at rapacious governments and corporations, and at the numerous exercises of control, surveillance, and exploitation that his books portray. He identifies with those who are passed over or marginalised — or worse — as power operates in history. He celebrates resistance or subversion, however ineffectual, local, loony, or purely symbolic it may be or seem to be.

But there's much else in the narratives that seems to subvert this. First, there's a sense of human-beings as pattern-making creatures, finding conspiracies and not forces that are not real, or at least may not be. Second, much of the satire seems to cut both ways: often a sort of Brechtian estrangement seems to be at work, even to the extent that characters will burst into song. And then there are the endless issues of who is on which side, and often of where the implied authorial presence, really stands.

Does Pynchon develop over time as he handles recurrent elements in the books? Does he change his mind? Another recurrent obsession in his work is with sexual decadence, but it's not always clear what we should make of this. Is it portrayed as demonic or as somehow redemptive? Is it a site of resistance to oppressive powers or something quite the opposite — something dehumanising, perhaps? I see no clear answer to questions like these, though *V.* seems to show an element of moral and sexual conservatism that fades from the later books. All the same, it's sometimes difficult to know what is being described with distaste and what is offered with relish.

Let's return to the questions that I started with, about what we really want from our major current novelists. Is it a worldview, a vision of our situation, or something of the kind? Is it high art, as expressed in linguistic verve and style, or in elements of aesthetic patterning, or in portrayal of character? Is it political commitment, or sheer entertainment, or something else again? A writer such as Pynchon offers us all of this, but at the same time, or at various times, seems to resist some of these values.

He certainly provides texts that are rich and open to interpretation, but is that enough. If literature is supposed to nourish us, well ... what does that really mean?

I see tonight's talk as a dialogue, or better, a conversation. I said, early on, what I can't provide, but hopefully I've said enough for the conversation to begin.

— Russell Blackford, 2011.