

Ali Chetwynd. "The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon." *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 39.4 (Fall 2012): 142-145

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Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman and Brian McHale, eds. 2012. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. \$90.00 hc. \$27.99 sc. xii + 193 pp.

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Thomas Pynchon joins Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo and John Updike on the list of US novelists to merit a Cambridge Companion during their lifetime: a significant milestone in the academic mainstreaming of an author who, despite his reasonable sales and attendant research ‘Pyndustry’, retains a cultish aura. The volume is an informative, intuitively structured introduction to Pynchon’s work. Sharing a publication date with *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, it constitutes an extended claim that Pynchon’s career can stand for the precedence of postmodernism in that historical period. A wider readership, however, might find just as much interest in what the revealed limits of Pynchon studies—claims for enduring relevance grounded on mid-80s theory—tell us about postmodernity’s relation to contemporary canonicity.

The editors’ brief introduction establishes the book’s necessity: there are currently “relatively few books aimed specifically at those who study and teach Pynchon” and even fewer “that the non-academic reader could pick up and read with pleasure and profit” (2). Starting from a point intelligible to Pynchon novices, the collection gets progressively more complex and theoretical. After a biographical note synthesises what reliable information we have on this reticent author’s life, it is divided into three sections. Chapters under the heading of ‘Canon’ introduce Pynchon’s various works, outlining the infamously complex plots, examining representative passages, and pointing to sustained thematic concerns. There follow three chapters addressing his distinctive forms of narrative-making under the heading of ‘Poetics’, introducing some literary history, terminology and criticism. Four ‘Issues’ essays that combine literary theory with cultural and historical citation then cover Pynchon’s career-spanning engagements with ‘Politics’, ‘History’, ‘Alterity’ and ‘Science and Technology’, before a short coda on readerly approaches that surveys the critical and theoretical roles his work has been made to play within the academy.

This deepening structure readably scaffolds some very complex ideas: anyone starting from page 1 would be well prepared to judge the ‘Issues’ chapters’ wide-ranging claims. Indeed, so lucid is the exposition throughout that this makes

almost as good an introduction to canonically postmodern approaches to the fiction of the 60s, 70s and 80s as it does to Pynchon in particular. Furthermore, it comes in, in spite of the vastness of its subject's novels, at under two-hundred pages, around fifty below the average for the series. The cover-to-cover reading its structure invites and even requires is thus not a daunting prospect. Early chapters aim explicitly to help readers past the alienating aspects of Pynchon's styles and structures, and the overall effect is to disarm his exaggerated reputation for inaccessibility.

Providing a point of access is not the limit of the editors' ambition, however, and their other stated aim, to compile "advanced specialist insights, reflecting the state of the art in the field" (2/3), is more problematic. If the varying contributors can be said to offer a unifying argument, it's best summarised by Brian McHale's contention that our understanding of postmodernism is as dependent on Pynchon's work as our understanding of that oeuvre is on the social and theoretical contexts of postmodernity. The "state of the art" in Pynchon studies is thus hard to untie from models of postmodernism that emerged during the process of his initial critical canonisation.

John N. Duvall, introducing that *American Fiction after 1945* Companion, suggests that the 'postmodern metafiction' of the Pynchon generation now represent little more than "the dead hand of history" (4) to scholars of, and authors within, the contemporary. The Pynchon Companion operates, unsurprisingly, on very different axioms, best summed up by David Cowart's contention, in his chapter on 'Pynchon in Literary History', that—far from being "superannuated" (94)—Pynchon's methods and preoccupations have grown into the "default" (95) logic of mainstream entertainment in the US today. Even this defence locates the still-publishing Pynchon's achievement in the academic past, however, and the essays here rely almost exclusively for theoretical context on works on postmodernism (most frequently those of Linda Hutcheon and Frederic Jameson) published over twenty years ago. Only Jeff Baker's excellent contribution on 'Politics' works outward from criticism and theory published within the last decade. One could not ask for a better collection of "advanced specialists" as contributors: over half of them have published monographs on Pynchon's work. But eventually the emphasis on Pynchon's centrality to 1980s postmodern theory traps his work in a straitjacket of precisely that theory, downplaying the distinctiveness of some subsequent critical work and, more crucially, the half of his fiction that he has published since.

New angles on Pynchon emerge here from one particular source: not theoretical or methodological advances, but the availability of new bits of early Pynchon. Such recent uncoverings allow Luc Herman to recast 'Early Pynchon' in terms of the *V.* manuscript at the University of Texas library, and Steven Weisenburger to base an argument about *Gravity's Rainbow* and complicity on Pynchon's own youthful work as a military technical writer. Thomas Schaub's unusually bleak focus on the centrality of betrayal to *Inherent Vice*—the comical genre-pastiche of which has spurred most critics to lighthearted readings—casts intriguing light on Pynchon's earlier California fiction, but otherwise the newer novels' potential role in generating a "state of the art" is underplayed: those critical works (Kathryn Hume or Frank Palmeri on the dwindling significance of *Paranoia*, Joseph Tabbi on Pynchon's theories of cognition, Daniel Punday on the changing role of haunting) that *have* made a case for the recent novels' distinctions are barely acknowledged. The looser organisation of some other Cambridge Companions can allow readers to compare the chapters' various approaches and identify some of the faultlines that organise conversations in their discipline. The unique structure of this Companion leaves nary a faultline to be found.

On these grounds, its short span might be reconsidered. There's nothing here that anyone would want to cut, but one wonders what else might have been included. The volume's intense coherence contributes to its readability, and conveys what the editors call the "sense of solidarity and, yes, community among Pynchon's readers... participating in a collective enterprise of reading..." (8). That community, as framed here, shares a majority of theoretical and contextual axioms, and its academic members' interest in each other's work is rarely geared towards refutation (the editors draw comparisons between their 'Pyndustry' and the world of James Joyce studies, but the dynamics could not be more different). Work on Pynchon and his generation of oppositional, restless and formally experimental authors emerges as one of the less dissent-intensive fields in current literary study. A chapter that scrutinised the consensus, identified those disputes that do exist, and attempted to work out their consequences for "those who study and teach" postmodern fiction would have been particularly welcome.

This volume, then, is a plausible last word on the canonically postmodern version of Pynchon. Its strengths as well as its limits confirm that any critic seeking to reconceive postmodernism's role in our contemporary critical landscape must viably reconceive Pynchon. Anyone interested in classic postmodern theory and how it still defines the way innovative US fiction is read should read this book. What's missing, however, is a sense of how Pynchon's relevance might endure

once the identification between the contemporary and the canonically postmodern finally becomes untenable.