

## PORTER'S "FLOWERING JUDAS" AND PYNCHON'S V.

John Vukmirovich

Chapter 7 of Thomas Pynchon's V. (1963), "She Hangs on the Western Wall," contains one of the novel's most interesting characters, the Venezuelan revolutionary known as the Gaucho. This character has his origins in an earlier fictional revolutionary, the character Braggioni in Katherine Anne Porter's short story "Flowering Judas" ("Flowering Judas" and Other Stories, 1935). In fact, this story, and its central image of the Judas tree, can be seen as a seed for this crucial chapter in Pynchon's novel.

Porter's story deals with the relationship between a North American woman, Laura, and an arrogant Mexican revolutionary, Braggioni. The personality and physical characteristics of Braggioni, a mixed blood, are quite interesting in relation to Pynchon's Gaucho, as will be seen below. Braggioni has a "mournful voice," as well as being given to "snarling under his breath" while playing his guitar (FJ 139). He possesses a "specialized insolence," and has a tremendous sense of "self-esteem" that none of his followers dares to stand up to (FJ 140). Braggioni is a "leader of men, a skilled revolutionist, and his skin has been punctured in honorable warfare" (FJ 140). Although overweight and overdressed (FJ 141, 143), Braggioni was once "so scrawny all his bones showed under his thin cotton clothing" (FJ 153). This, we learn, fits Laura's romantic view of what a revolutionary should look like: "a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith" (FJ 141). Although the story seems set in a post-revolutionary time, Braggioni is still trying to foment revolt, and he tells Laura about how a possible clash soon will be played out on May Day: "[The] Catholics hold a festival in honor of the Blessed Virgin, and the Socialists celebrate their martyrs on that day. . . . 'There will be two independent processions, starting from either end of town, and they will march until they meet, and the rest depends . . .'" (FJ 155-56).

Pynchon draws on these characteristics of Braggioni for the Gaucho and on other details of Porter's story for the situation in Chapter 7 of V. First, Pynchon endows the Gaucho with the air of insolence and activism exhibited by Braggioni. Early in the chapter the Gaucho haughtily proclaims to Signor Mantissa, who has retained the Gaucho to help him steal Botticelli's Birth of Venus, "I'm a man of action, signor, I'd rather not waste time" (V 161). In keeping with this air of aggressiveness, the Gaucho likes to refer to himself as a lion and not a Machiavellian fox (V 162). The Gaucho, a mixed blood like Braggioni, further describes himself in a way that is, perhaps, Pynchon's humorous allusion to Porter's story: "I come from the north, and there may be some tedesco [German] blood in these

veins. The tedeschi are taller than the Latin races. Taller and broader. Perhaps someday this body will run to fat, but now it is all muscle!" (V 164; emphasis added). Furthermore, the Gaucho is in Florence to stir up a revolt among the Venezuelan nationals living there (V 179). The clash between the Venezuelan nationals and the Italian army--which also provides a diversion from the attempted theft of the painting--follows to a certain degree Porter's description of Braggioni's May Day disturbance (V 207).

It is the central image of the flowering Judas tree, however, that makes the final connection between this chapter in V. and Porter's story. Porter uses the tree to stand for a series of betrayals. Laura is a foreigner who teaches English to peasant children. Although we are not told specifics, Laura feels that she "owes her comfortable situation and her salary to [Braggioni]" (FJ 140). Braggioni uses his power to try to win Laura's affections, but she rejects him, as she also rejects a smitten young minstrel (FJ 149). These rejections can be seen as forms of betrayal. At one point Laura herself feels betrayed "by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be" (FJ 142). She therefore maintains a "stoicism" and tries to deny "everything" concerned with the world around her (FJ 150-51), but to deny existence is in essence to betray the promise of life.

In V., Signor Mantissa plans to steal The Birth of Venus, which he obsessively desires, from the Uffizi rolled up and placed inside a hollowed-out Judas tree. But once in the gallery, Mantissa realizes that his obsession is nothing but a "gaudy dream, a dream of annihilation" (V 210). To seize and own the mistress of his obsession would be to betray his love. Moreover, Mantissa recognizes that he is obsessed with an inanimate object, merely an alluring surface, that could only betray his love.

What else can be said about Pynchon's use of Porter's short story? By using the elements discussed above, Pynchon accomplishes three things. First, the Gaucho personifies the Machiavellian man of action, a type who will be lost in the chaotic, entropic world Pynchon sees evolving after the turn of the century. Second, Pynchon's version of Braggioni--in conjunction with the paranoid reaction to Vheissu--helps provide the motive force that unleashes the revolution and disorder associated in the novel with the modern world. Third, the Judas tree allows Pynchon to place into the heart of the novel a tension between the ideas of obsession and betrayal. V. can be viewed as a novel of obsessions: Herbert Stencil's obsessive quest for V., Hugh Godolphin's obsession with Vheissu, as well as Signor Mantissa's obsession with The Birth of Venus. Yet to attain the object of one's desires is to betray the very motive force which centers one in a world of chaos and entropy. Pynchon's use of elements from "Flowering Judas" allows him to

develop this tension which radiates throughout the rest of the narrative.

--University of Illinois at Chicago