

Abusing Surrealism: Pynchon's *V.* and Breton's *Nadja*

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In his introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon mentions two aesthetic movements which influenced his own writing: that of the Beats, and Surrealism. While he says the effect of the Beat writers was "exciting, liberating, and strongly positive" (7), he also positions his own writing as "post-Beat" (9). In contrast, he says he has "abuse[d]" Surrealism even more extensively than other influences in the years since writing his early stories in the late 1950s and early 1960s (20). This remark suggests that the influence of Surrealism continued to grow rather than wane as Pynchon wrote *V.* and his other novels, and that Surrealism may be an even more important influence on Pynchon than the Beats. Although the Beats share certain narrative techniques with the Surrealists, as exemplified by works like Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and Ginsberg's *Howl*, the focus in this essay will be on the Surrealist techniques advanced by André Breton as they are manifested in *V.*

Michael Vella has followed Pynchon's references to Surrealism to what he sees as an inevitable conclusion: Pynchon is a Surrealist "perpetuating the literary project of André Breton" (TPI 136). However, while Vella sees Pynchon as reverential toward Surrealism, Pynchon actually parodies the Surrealist movement, just as he parodies various other styles and themes in *V.* He does not declare his "political affinities" (TPI 144) with Surrealism; to use Pynchon's own word, he "abuses" Surrealism, recombining elements of Surrealist theory and practice in new ways to achieve a proto-postmodern form of writing. Despite Surrealism's seemingly liberatory nature, Breton, the "pope" of Surrealism, was actually dictatorial, and Surrealism, as he defines it, consists of a rigid set of artistic theories. Breton decried several Surrealist artists, claiming they did not adhere closely enough to his theories to be considered true Surrealists. This is the aspect of Surrealism that Pynchon parodies throughout *V.*, as can be shown by comparing Pynchon's novel with Breton's 1928 novel, *Nadja*. While *Nadja* is remarkably similar in some ways to *V.*, notably in the narrative device of searching for an elusive idealized woman, certain crucial differences indicate how Pynchon deviates from Surrealist orthodoxy.

Pynchon writes in *Slow Learner* that he was taking a course on modern art at Cornell when the Surrealists caught his attention. He says

he “became fascinated . . . with the simple idea that one could combine inside the same frame elements not normally found together to produce illogical and startling effects.” Only later, he says, did he learn that this procedure should be carried out “with some degree of care and skill: any old combination of details will not do” (20). Vella argues that Pynchon “would not be affirming that there is a right way to perform surrealist assemblage and a wrong way” unless he felt some “adherence to surrealist principles” (TPI 132). In fact, Pynchon criticizes some of his own work, including the post-*V*. “Secret Integration,” for its lack of attention to skillful assemblage, the “junkshop or randomly assembled quality to many of the scenes” (SL 20). Because of Pynchon’s personal invisibility and his reticence about his work, the brief introduction to *Slow Learner* receives a great deal of critical attention, perhaps more than it deserves. His words about Surrealism take on an almost mythic importance to some critics. But the introduction is still useful in pointing toward the Surrealists as an important influence on Pynchon’s writing.

Nadja and Surrealism

Although the term “surreal” is often taken to describe anything fantastic or bizarre, “Surrealism” in the aesthetic sense denotes a strict set of principles. In several Manifestoes of Surrealism, Breton developed the theories behind the movement. In the first manifesto (1924), he defines Surrealism thus:

SURREALISM, *n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. (MS 26)

He clarifies this definition by saying that Surrealism attempts “to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in a process of unification, or finally becoming one” (2), and that he believes “in the future transmutation of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality, so to speak” (8). Breton’s own fiction attempts to mediate these spaces. In *Nadja*, one of the best-known Surrealist novels, he explores in fictional form the same ideas he explicates in his Manifestoes.

Nadja was published in France in 1928; the first English version appeared in 1960. Although a novel, the book apparently recounts a series of actual events in Breton’s life—recounts them faithfully,

according to Breton. Some critics were skeptical when the novel first appeared, claiming that Nadja was wholly an invention. However, The Nadja of the novel was actually Leona-Camille-Ghislaine D., whose last name still remains unverified, forgotten by most and kept secret by the few who remembered. Leona indeed called herself Nadja in real life, inspired "not by a nonexistent knowledge of Russian but by a popular American dancer who used Nadja as a stage name" (Polizzotti 266). In life, as in the novel, sometime after her encounters with Breton, Nadja went insane and was institutionalized. After spending fourteen months at the Perray-Vaucluse Hospital in southern Paris, Leona was transferred to a hospital closer to her hometown of Lille, where she died of cancer on January 15, 1941 (Polizzotti 285).

The novel, based on her relationship with Breton, consists of two parts. The first presents a series of incidents related by coincidence, all serving as "decisive episodes" in Breton's life. This section presents "a shifting mosaic whose underlying strangeness both illustrates the book's thesis on the determining value of fortuitous coincidence and prepares the ground for Nadja herself" (Polizzotti 282). The second part of the novel, nearly twice as long as the first, consists of an account of Breton's interactions with Nadja over the ten days during which he went from extreme infatuation to ultimate frustration.

Yet an analysis of the character Nadja reveals a clever construct, a personification of the ideals of Surrealism itself. The Nadja of the novel, through her speech and actions, manifests the attributes of Surrealism as Breton defined it. First is the sense of play and humor so important to the Surrealists. When Nadja applies for a job at a bakery and is offered "seventeen or eighteen" francs a day, she replies she'll take the job "for seventeen, yes; for eighteen, no" (70). Throughout the novel she is given to similar humor. This sense of play has its annoying and convention-defying aspects, just as the work of the Surrealists does. On occasion, Nadja deliberately "bores" (105) Breton and tells him lengthy stories about previous relationships that he does not want to hear and finds "exasperating" (102). She also shocks him by acting strangely, or "frivolously" (80), as he terms it, especially toward the end of their relationship.

Nadja seems to give no thought to anything she says or does. Her "poor" clothes and oddly applied makeup, which Breton remarks on a number of times, consist of a kind of assemblage in themselves. She eats and stays "wherever [she] happens to be . . . it's always this way" (71). She has no job, no money, and no direction. She represents a kind of automatic living, to extrapolate a phrase from Breton, in which her actions express her thoughts unfettered by reason. Her character perfectly represents Breton's definition of Surrealism, a "free genius . . .

a spirit of the air" (111). For Breton, Surrealism united the dream-state with reality to produce surreality, and Nadja illustrates this union well. She describes herself as a "'thought'" (101), and when asked who she is, replies "'I am the soul in limbo'" (71).

Nadja also exhibits some talent for reading minds, forecasting the future and knowing things she could have no rational way of knowing. She has strange powers over those around her. When she and Breton go out for dinner, the waiter stumbles, stutters and breaks plates around her, although "he serves the nearby tables without incident" (98). Nadja, the reader is told, has control over certain men, who "are compelled to come and talk to her" (99). Men pay homage to her, waving and throwing kisses, which "always happens to her and she seems to enjoy a great deal" (107). This attractiveness goes beyond the kind of notice afforded to a beautiful woman, and Breton implies some kind of supernatural influence. He himself is drawn to her "without a moment's hesitation" (61) when he first sees her.

Breton is cognizant of Nadja's affinity with Surrealist principles. In fact, on occasion he flees from her when she begins talking about the day-to-day aspects of her life. He does not want to hear this, as he cannot bear the thought "of her becoming natural" (135). Breton dealt with this theme again when he revised *Nadja* for a 1963 reprinting. Claiming the only things he wanted to change were some minor "stylistic flaws and lapses of taste" (Polizzotti 611), Breton actually removed any trace of his sexual relationship with Nadja. This alteration diminishes Nadja's physical presence as a character, making her even less natural, as Breton desired. Without even a suggestion of the sexual relationship that existed between the two of them, Nadja becomes more ephemeral, even more of a spirit or a force than she was before. This supports the hypothesis that Breton conceived of Nadja as a representation of Surrealism and viewed her as a set of concepts rather than a character. Breton even writes that he read the letters Nadja wrote him "the same way I read all kinds of surrealist texts . . . with the same eye" (144), further suggesting that he has positioned her as a personification of Surrealism itself, generating Surrealist texts and actions ad nauseam.

Nadja has been described as a state of mind, more like a vision or idea than a character. Yet the novel's form and structure depend on her and her actions. This fact suggests a correlation between Nadja and Pynchon's V. in all her many forms. *Nadja* and V. share techniques designed to draw both the reader and the characters through the narrative: the obsessive pursuit of a woman who is more a presence than a person. Breton writes that his pursuit of Nadja is a pursuit of "what, I do not know," but a pursuit designed to stimulate "all the

artifices of intellectual seduction” (108). Near the end of the novel, the themes become even more explicit. Breton writes that Nadja represents the kind of freedom he advocates:

[F]reedom . . . must be enjoyed as unrestrictedly as it is granted, without pragmatic considerations of any sort, and this because human emancipation—conceived finally in its simplest revolutionary form, which is no less than human emancipation in *every respect*, by which I mean, *according to the means at every man’s disposal*—remains the only cause worth serving. Nadja was born to serve it. (142–43)

He also declares that “each individual must foment a private conspiracy, which exists only in his imagination,” and strive to escape the prison of logic, “one of the most hateful of prisons” (143). He asserts that “life needs to be deciphered like a cryptogram. Secret staircases, frames from which the paintings quickly slip aside and vanish . . . buttons which must be indirectly pressed to make an entire room move sideways or vertically” (112). If such remarks seem suitably Pynchonesque, *V.* nonetheless creates a complex web of relations and tensions with *Nadja*. What *V.* represents differs fundamentally from what *Nadja* does, as do the perspectives from which Pynchon and Breton write. Although Breton advocated liberation from constraints, he was actually tied to a rigid set of theoretical principles of his own creation. Pynchon, writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was free to transform Breton’s ideas and use them for his own purposes.

V. and Surrealism

Because *V.* encourages close readings and is filled with extratextual references, readers are often placed in the position of Stencil when analyzing the text, searching for things that might not be there. References to a “bad priest” in Breton’s first Surrealist manifesto (MS 26), for example, might take on an unwarranted importance. However, *V.* contains some explicit references to Surrealism. One such reference is the novel *Hebdomeros*, by the painter Giorgio de Chirico, mentioned by Fausto Maijstral. “[W]ith its dreamscapes, its journey motif, and its structure that reads like a picaresque of the subconscious” (Vella, PV 31), *Hebdomeros* is an exemplary Surrealist novel.

In addition, certain elements of *Nadja* are replayed, slightly skewed, in *V.* For example, a juxtaposition of ideas on page 89 of *Nadja* reappears in altered form in *V.* Nadja tells Breton that she adores her young daughter because “she resembles other children so little”; the primary difference is that most children have “a mania for taking out

their dolls' eyes to see *what's there* behind them.'" And Breton observes that Nadja "knows that she always attracts children: wherever she is, they tend to cluster around her" (89). This juxtaposition of clustering children and children's desire to remove doll's eyes recurs in the dismemberment scene in *V.*, in which Maltese children disassemble the Bad Priest, an avatar of *V.*: "The children inside were clustered round a figure in black" (341); "the children peeled back one eyelid to reveal a glass eye. . . . This, too, they removed" (343). Given Pynchon's avowed interest in the Surrealists and the fact that *Nadja* appeared in English just when he was writing *V.*, this textual echo seems clear evidence of a debt to *Nadja*.

The emblem "V" itself, which represents so many ideas in *V.*, can be traced to the Surrealist journals *View* and *VVV*, vehicles for many of the Surrealists, including Breton, who had fled Europe for New York City at the beginning of the Second World War. Breton quickly "became dissatisfied with [*View*]" for being "eclectic and not thoroughly and uniquely committed to the surrealist cause" (Vella, TPI 135). With David Hare, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst, he founded *VVV* in 1942. Explaining the multiple meanings for the Surrealists of the symbolic V, Breton defines *VVV* on the title page of the magazine as "V + V + V":

a vow—and energy—to return to a habitable and conceivable world, Victory over the forces of regression and of death unloosed at present on the earth . . . over all that is opposed to the emancipation of the spirit, of which the first indispensable condition is the liberation of man . . . towards the emancipation of the spirit . . . activity. (qtd. in Vella, PV 30)

Breton is concerned here with ensuring the triumph of the animate over the inanimate (the reverse movement is a cause of anxiety throughout *V.*). Although "victory over the forces . . . of death unloosed at present on the earth" is a clear reference to the Second World War, Breton intends *VVV* to transcend the war and promote triumph over all forces of regression and oppression.

In addition to liberation, Breton's V signifies "the View around us, the eye turned towards the external world"; VV "the View inside us, the eye turned toward the interior world"; and *VVV* "a synthesis . . . of these two Views . . . the resolution of their contradiction tending only to the continual, systematic enlargement of the field of consciousness towards a total view" (qtd. in Vella, PV 30). Breton thus symbolically represents his theory of Surrealism, represents the thought in action. The *VVV* logo, with its three letters joined, "translates . . . the psychic upon the physical" (qtd. in Vella, PV 30). Vella discusses how Pynchon's *V.* similarly manifests concern over the looming threat of

inanimation and promotes a total or liberated consciousness (TPI). However, the novel resonates even more fully with Breton's concepts.

The settings in *V.*, particularly the generalized Street and Vheissu, are often Surrealistic. The outlandish Vheissu—"reached by a route reminiscent of James Hilton's . . . *Lost Horizon* (Frank Capra's 1937 film version is probably Pynchon's source)" (Vella, TPI 138)—described by the explorer Hugh Godolphin sounds remarkably like a Surrealist vision, with its overwhelming "phantasmagoria of visual experience" (Vella, TPI 138):

"The colors. So many colors. . . . The trees outside the head shaman's house have spider monkeys which are iridescent. They change color in the sunlight. Everything changes. . . . No sequence of colors is the same from day to day. As if you lived inside a madman's kaleidoscope. Even your dreams become flooded with colors, with shapes no Occidental ever saw. Not real shapes, not meaningful ones. Simply random." (Pynchon, *V* 170)

As Vella also points out, "Vheissu" sounds like "V is you" (TPI 139); and as Max Schulz was one of the first to point out, it also suggests the German question "Wie heißt du?": "Who are you?" (234). Vella argues that "V. is an attempt to provoke the phantasmagoric experience of Vheissu, or at least the thirst for it, in its readers, altering their consciousness and attuning them to surreality" (TPI 139). Pynchon's Street, too, draws on Surrealist imagery. Besides evoking de Chirico's painting *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* (Vella, PV 32), a print of which hangs in Rachel Owlglass's apartment (*V* 303), Pynchon's Street "has its primary intersection with dreams" (TPI 138). Neither real nor symbolic, it is a "dream-street" (*V* 151, 325): "The street of the 20th Century. . . . A street we are put at the wrong end of. . . . [T]his is 20th Century nightmare" (323–24).

Other similarities are more material. *Nadja* includes a number of photographs and drawings. While illustrations are few in *V.* (notably the Kilroy and its analogue, the band-pass filter [435, 436]), in Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Tristero's muted post-horn symbol is an important element of the narrative, showing that Pynchon understood how to incorporate drawings as vital parts of his narrative. And although *V.* lacks the numerous illustrations of *Nadja*, Pynchon's use of songs as both textual disruptions and magnifications of his themes is similar to Breton's.

Comparing the first song in *V.* to the first picture in *Nadja* illustrates the functional similarities. Plate One in *Nadja* is a photograph of the Hotel des Grands Hommes. On the facing page, Breton writes, "My point of departure will be the Hotel des Grands Hommes, Place du

Pantheon, where I lived around 1918" (23). The photograph has a dual effect. It both disrupts the flow of the narrative, by diverting attention from the text, and draws the reader further into the story. By observing the hotel, supposedly the exact place named in the text, the reader is aligned more closely with the narrator. This effect was exactly what Breton intended. He writes that he wanted "to provide a photographic image of them [the objects in the pictures] taken from the special angle from which I myself had looked at them" (152).

Pynchon's songs serve a similar purpose. The first of many songs in *V.*, the old street singer's ditty about "Christmas Eve on old East Main" (9), at once conflates the reader's perspective with Benny's by transporting the reader to East Main, and encourages an ironic distance from the narrative. Like many of Breton's illustrations, the song is silly, with lines like "Santa's bag is filled with all your dreams come true: / Nickel beers that sparkle like champagne, / Barmaids who all love to screw" (10). Pynchon uses songs throughout the novel to manipulate the reader's perspective on the actions and characters. Like the pictures in *Nadja*, they are at once lightly humorous and crucial to the reading.

V. as a Parody of Surrealism

Despite these similarities, the claim that Pynchon is greatly indebted to the Surrealists is problematic. The symbol "V" and its multiplicity of meanings constitute only a somewhat superficial borrowing from Breton, and for the most part, when Pynchon borrows from the Surrealists, he does so for the purpose of parody. The best evidence is Slab, the "Catatonic Expressionist," with his paintings of cheese Danishes, including "Surrealist cheese Danishes" (V 282). Although many readers take Slab's work for pure invention intended to parody modern art, Giorgio de Chirico actually "painted series after series of paintings of pastries" (Vella, PV 31). If Pynchon was familiar with de Chirico's obscure novel, *Hebdomeros* (actually published in *View*), he probably knew this fact too. In this light, the Whole Sick Crew, of which Slab is a member, functions as a parody of the Surrealists as well as the Beats. Further supporting this idea are Fergus Mixolydian and his artistic creations, "all incomplete." One of these was "a wall he'd had removed from a stall in the Penn Station men's room and entered in an art exhibition as what the old Dadaists called a 'ready-made'" (56). This is, of course, a gloss on Duchamp and his entry of a signed urinal in a 1917 New York art exhibition.

However, Pynchon's portrayal of Mixolydian contains a critique or sly parody of Surrealism. Of all the Whole Sick Crew, Mixolydian is perhaps closest to becoming an inanimate object. He "laid claim to

being the laziest living being in Nueva York" (56), and it was difficult for visitors to tell whether he was sleeping or awake. In addition, in a process mirroring V.'s increasing mechanization, Mixolydian "devised an ingenious sleep-switch, receiving its signal from two electrodes placed on the inner skin of his forearm. . . . Fergus thus became an extension of the TV set" (56). This criticism of the Whole Sick Crew implies likewise a criticism of the Surrealists, an implication Vella never addresses. The misconception that television represents an ideal Surrealist state is common. For example, J. G. Ballard claims that "the creation of a TV monoculture dissolving the last barriers between fantasy and reality is a surrealist domain in its purest form" (89). Yet this is a complete misunderstanding. The Surrealists favored action above all else. In his First Manifesto, Breton advises readers to set the internal needle "marked 'fair' at 'action' . . . the rest will follow naturally" (MS 31). Television, which encourages passivity and has even been shown to slow metabolism, promotes everything Surrealism is opposed to. Mixolydian channels his creativity into becoming more inanimate, and "alignment with the inanimate is the mark of a Bad Guy" (V 101) throughout the novel.

In fact, to return to Slab's cheese Danishes, Pynchon not only parodies Surrealism but subtly mutates it into its proto-postmodern forms. Thus, "[t]he subject of Cheese Danish # 35 occupied only a small area, to the lower left of center, where it was pictured impaled on one of the metal steps of a telephone pole" (282). This bizarre image alludes not only to de Chirico but also to a repeated image in Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series. In 1962, Warhol began creating a series of gory silkscreens of accident victims and other ominous images, such as electric chairs, and newspaper headlines proclaiming, for example, "129 DIE IN JET" (Bockris 169; cf. Pynchon, V 290-91). One of these silkscreens, *White Disaster I* (1963), depicts five-fold a body, thrown from a car, impaled through the chest and hanging from a horizontal spike in a telephone pole at the left margin of the image. The similarity to Slab's image seems too great to be coincidental, and it reveals one of Pynchon's methods in the novel, that of recontextualizing Surrealist ideas and devices (the Danish) to represent the proto-postmodern aesthetic (Warhol's disaster painting).

Conclusion

V. cannot be considered a Surrealist text in Breton's sense of the term if it parodies Surrealism. In addition, it is certainly not an example of the "automatic writing free from conscious control" that Breton advocates. If anything, the text is tightly controlled, although its

amazing density sometimes gives the illusory impression that Pynchon is out of control as an author. Pynchon uses devices that the Surrealists employed and advocated, but sets them in a new context—postmodernism. If the character Nadja represents the ideals of Surrealism, the character V. portrays the themes of postmodernism. Although postmodernism was not an aesthetic category in 1963, V. was ahead of its time in representing postmodernist concerns. A proto-postmodern work, it was readily accepted by the new generation. V. depicts a “fragmenting, self-disassembling, declining world” (Tanner 55) through the progressive inanimacy of V. These same elements, fragmentation and loss of identity, are the foundations of postmodern fiction.

The brutal ends that both Nadja and V. meet are also noteworthy. Nadja goes irremediably insane, and V. is physically dismembered. Since V. is, in part, a symbol of entropy, her disintegration might be expected. However, if Nadja represents a Surrealist text and V. a postmodern one, then the fates of these female characters reflect on their respective literary movements. Breton uses Nadja’s insanity as an opportunity to rail against social injustices, particularly poverty and psychiatry. Pynchon performs an interesting reversal of Breton. Whereas in *Nadja*, a mental collapse leads to a tirade against physical and social repression, in V. a physical collapse, or disintegration, is the index to a critique of cultural entropy and encroaching inanimacy. This contrast illustrates a further difference between Breton as a Surrealist, concerned with social reform, and Pynchon as a postmodernist, interested in aesthetic and intellectual commentary.

Thus these differences between Nadja and V. as characters shouldering the burden of representing the aesthetic movements of their authors dramatize the point at which Surrealism began to transform into postmodernism. Pynchon was at the forefront of constructing a new literary tradition, a darker vision perhaps, using for his own devices some principles of Surrealism as advanced by Breton. In a curious example of life imitating art, and a vindication of Pynchon’s fear of “progression toward inanimateness” (V 410), V. finds an analogue in Salvador Dalí’s wife, Gala. Born Helena Diakonoff around 1890, Gala too turns up at crucial junctures in history. But instead of appearing at moments of “local or global military conflict” (Graves 66) like V., Gala appears at significant intellectual turning points in the history of Surrealism, moving from artist to artist and scene to scene. By the time Gala was in her late seventies, a lifetime of facelifts began to cause problems: “her skin had been weakened . . . by the face-lifts and tucks, which now erupted in hideous sores.” She became “a nightmare of decaying flesh . . . decaying in front of Dalí’s eyes” (Etherington-Smith

398). As a result of all the plastic surgery she had undergone in an attempt to transcend the limitations of her human form, her skin split and sloughed off, causing her eventual death. A better metaphoric representation could hardly be found both of the dangers of tampering with the organic and of the ultimate collapse of Surrealist ideals into postmodern fragmentation and disintegration as the century progressed.

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