

A HIGH SCHOOL RECORD
FOR DISTURBING THE PEACE

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Pynchon finished writing V. when he was twenty-five; he had begun, in effect, preparing to write V. when he was fifteen. In addition to some recognizable characterization, the premise that twentieth century life is so controlled and lifeless that it turns destructive is evident in Pynchon's serial story "The Voice of the Hamster," published in his high school newspaper, Purple and Gold.

Pynchon's characters often find placid normality unappealing. His modern technological man seeks an escape from suffocating routine, an escape which indulges the primitive urge to ignore history and abandon consciousness. Liberated from control, he senses the possibility of altering his environment. Even in high school, Pynchon created characters who believe that a wild outbreak is all that one needs to make the past distant and the future irrelevant. In the first "Voice of the Hamster" column (November 13, 1952), narrator Boscoe Stein starts off his tale to Sam by reminding him that they had met at a party; that party initiates a string of chaotic events during which Pynchon's characters desperately look for a release from everyday life.

The "slightly odd" Mr. Faggiaducci, for example, "always tells be-bop jokes" in class:

There's nothing actually wrong with him, it's just that he used to be a bop drummer, and now he wishes he were back with the boys at Birdland and Eddie Condon's. He talks to himself a lot and I've heard rumors he takes heroin. A real "gone guy." (P&G 13 Nov.)

The jazz musician McClintic Sphere in V. has the bumper sticker motto "keep cool but care." The former jazz musician Faggiaducci appears to face a similar dilemma, trying to find a refuge or a formula where none seems available or applicable.

Characters looking to escape proliferate. Coach Willis "drinks a lot" and "smokes like a fiend, too." Boscoe's narrative conveys what such troubled characters experience and suggests what to expect from them. "[A]nd I have a lot of trig homework to do. Not that it has to be done for tomorrow, as chances are Mr. Faggiaducci won't be there; he's out on another binge." The desire for release or escape through musical binges, alcohol or drugs is not peculiar to the adults. "And remember me to Beer-belly Mac Pherson and the rest of the mob. Your drunken amigo, Boscoe Stein" (P&G 13 Nov.).

Such desires to break loose develop further in the next installment of "The Voice of the Hamster," which prefigures the opening of V. in that both the story and V.'s opening scene present a primal release that eventually succumbs to the power of authority. Both episodes involve holiday parties--New Year's Eve in the story, Christmas Eve in V.; both are disrupted by social insurrections that afford a kind of release; and both conclude with the law smashing down upon the characters.

Though Pynchon's party fiction in high school is not nearly as salacious as his later work, it has a kindred spirit, juggling overstatements and understatements in a breakneck reporting style. Boscoe Stein tells Sam in a letter that he is in the "midst of recovering from a party" he attended on New Year's Eve: "It was what can only be called a riot, and that's about what it ended up as."¹ Pynchon makes a point of detailing the progression from controlled serenity to increasingly wild spontaneity, romping release, liberation.

Everything was quiet until Crazy Harrigan, with some mob from Queens, started a conga line sometime around 1:30 in the morning, and that was about all it took to start an argument. Marge objected to the noise, and Sid agreed with her. Sid got pretty mad and started shoving Crazy around; Crazy threw a punch at Sid, Sid threw one back, Crazy hit Sid over the head with the punch bowl, and pandemonium broke loose--before we knew it we had a full scale free-for-all on our hands. Marge was crying, Sid was sitting on the floor clutching his head and swearing a blue streak, and their St. Bernard, O'Malley by name, was gaily romping through the whole mess and wrecking chairs, lamps--anything that happened to be in the way. The men from Queens, evidently suffering from delusions that they were musketeers or some thing, were happily duelling with the curtain rods, with Mr. Scully's imported Oriental drapes as cloaks. Crazy Harrigan was dashing around with a chair like a lion tamer, screaming some nonsense about how he was a jolly good fellow and if anyone denied it Crazy would bash his head in. (P&G 22 Jan. 2)²

The eruption by Crazy Harrigan and some mob from Queens is a performance not unlike that of the crew of the aptly named Impulsive in V.

"Boys," Mrs. Buffo announced, "it's Christmas Eve." She produced the boatswain's pipe and began to play. The first notes quavered out fervent and flutelike over widened eyes and gaping mouths. Everyone in the Sailor's Grave listened awestruck, realizing gradually that she was playing It Came Upon a Midnight Clear, within the limited range of the boatswain's pipe. From way in the back, a young

reserve who had once done night club acts around Philly began to sing softly along. Ploy's eyes shone. "It is the voice of an angel," he said.

They had reached the part that goes "Peace on the earth, good will to men, From Heav'n's all-gracious king," when Pig, a militant atheist, decided he could stand it no longer. "That," he announced in a loud voice, "sounds like Chow Down." Mrs. Buffo and the reserve fell silent. A second passed before anybody got the message.

"Suck Hour!" screamed Ploy.

Which kind of broke the spell. The quick-thinking inmates of the Impulsive somehow coalesced in the sudden milling around of jolly jack tars, hoisted Ploy bodily and rushed with the little fellow toward the nearest nipple, in the van of the attack. (15)

So much for the nurturing warmth of the Christian nativity scene. The characters feel no such warmth, but rather a coldness under an uneasy peace.

In his high school writings, Pynchon depicts an era in which those with a sense of individualism look for release or sanctuary. In the 1955-56 of V., a fictional time three years after the actual time of the high school writings, characters trapped in this same era seek liberation by means that can be both extreme and pathetic. But even in high school Pynchon understood that the peace cannot be disturbed without precipitating trouble.

About that time the men in blue arrived, and we started to calm down a bit--all, that is, except Moe Klunk, who climbed up on a chair and started yelling about how that was capitalistic oppression and bourgeois tyranny, etc. Finally he got acquainted with the business end of a nightstick the hard way, and that sort of put an end to the party. (P&G 22 Jan. 2)

From his high school writings on, Pynchon shows how disturbing the peace during an age steeped in control leads to pain, isolation, even paranoia and death. The opening section of V. also presents a clamping down by the authorities.

Outside came sirens, whistles, running feet. "Oh, oh," said Pig. He hopped down from the shelf, made his way around the end of the bar to Profane and Paola. "Hey, ace," he said, cool and slitting his eyes as if the wind blew into them. "The sheriff is coming."

"Back way," said Profane.

"Bring the broad," said Pig.

The three of them ran broken-field through a roomful of teeming bodies. On the way they picked up

Dewey Gland. By the time the Shore Patrol had crashed into the Sailor's Grave, night sticks flailing, the four found themselves running down an alley parallel to East Main. "Where we going," Profane said. "The way we're heading," said Pig. "Move your ass." (17)

Though such a release may temporarily seem liberating, both "The Voice of the Hamster" and V. show release ending in futility.³

The actions of the "Boys" in Pynchon's Purple and Gold pieces are more than just high school pranks; they are psychological experiments in persecution--the "Boys" "are trying to see how much Faggiaducci can take before he flips his lid" (P&G 22 Jan. 2). One key difference between Pynchon's high school stories and his later works is that his earlier protagonists are the masters of their environment, inducing paranoia in their alleged superiors through a calculated series of tricks, whereas the later protagonists are victims of conspiracies real or imagined. While hope progressively drains out of Pynchon's narratives from novel to novel, his high school writings exude an optimism rarely found in his professional fiction. In three of the four segments of "The Voice of the Hamster," the "Boys" triumph by undermining authority figures, who are sent to psychiatrists, put in mental institutions, and stuffed into dumbwaiters. Meanwhile, the "Boys" take control of the classroom, leading to their passing the trigonometry Regents with flying colors. But in Pynchon's novels, the environment prohibits the protagonists from having such power and success. Though not as dark as Gravity's Rainbow, V. begins bleakly enough: "Underfoot, now and again, came vibration in the sidewalk from an SP streetlights away, beating out a Hey Rube with his night stick; overhead, turning everybody's face green and ugly, shone mercury-vapor lamps, receding in an asymmetric V to the east where it's dark and there are no more bars" (10). And in V. bars seem to be one of the few alternatives to--or sanctuaries from--the "inanimate."

In his high school works too, Pynchon seems to be groping toward some alternative to the ultra-conservative environment in which he grew up. That environment was characterized as much by the weekly recurrence of air raid drills as by President Eisenhower's visit in 1953 to Pynchon's neighborhood, Oyster Bay on Long Island, to celebrate that village's three-hundredth anniversary. Steeped in a traditional conservatism, Oyster Bay was typical of the early 1950's. But an editorial in the same issue of Purple and Gold that contains Pynchon's party blowout story indicates what was simmering beneath this layer of fearful peace. Although the editorial calls for "faith in the principles of God" and democracy to combat the "godless doctrine of communism," its writer discards this shrill tone to make a personal response of vulnerability and disillusionment.

We hear much talk by educators and sociologists on the surprising, almost alarming maturity of our

generation. They have called us cynical and apathetic and bitter, and many learned treatises have been written concerning the teen-ager, his psychology, his habits, his morals.

These men are absolutely right; for to adapt to the frightening technological and sociological changes in this world into which we have been born, to try to live with the horror and rottenness that is screamed at us every day by newspaper headlines, to try to retain some semblance of sanity in a world which shows increasing signs of madness, all these require us to be hard and cynical. (P&G 22 Jan. 2)

The tension in that writer's tone is what is released in Pynchon's riotous "sophomoric" prose. Aside from serving as places where people can let loose and enjoy themselves, Pynchon's parties bring chaos into controlled environments and bring hope, albeit temporary and illusory, of finding a liberating alternative.

One of Pynchon's greatest skills is charting the results and repercussions of what remains after the party's over. The final party in the movie theater on the final page of Gravity's Rainbow marks the end of following the bouncing ball. Pynchon's high school writing strikes the initial note and rolls the first reel. After disturbing the peace, "Sid had to have two stitches taken, and there were a lot of split lips and bloody noses, and Marge was almost in hysterics. Happy New Year!" (P&G 22 Jan. 2)

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Notes

¹ The parties Pynchon presents in his fiction contrast markedly with the tamer type of senior parties reported in Purple and Gold. One of the most exciting events of a trip to Washington was when "Ray Knight was scared to death with a barrage of paper which came flying into his room" (Senior News).

² Details of character, behavior, and situation may suggest other parties in V. and in, for example, "Entropy" as well.

³ By the time of V.'s New Year's Eve party, an SP is already incessantly battering a fire controlman, who got out of control, in the stomach with a nightstick until a "final clobber" sends him down (22).

Works Cited

"Lost Generation?" Editorial. Purple and Gold. 22 Jan. 1953: 2.

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