

Surprise Birthday Party for Thomas Pynchon

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No chief yeoman tried “to urinate in the gas tank of a ’54 Packard Patrician” parked outside the bar, but on 8 May, 1975, patrons inside Riordan’s waterfront tavern in San Francisco experienced an invasion of unfamiliar characters carrying books by Thomas Pynchon. It was his thirty-eighth birthday, and a surprise party had begun. The real surprise, however, would be if the elusive author of *V.* showed up. Never photographed or interviewed (at least no public photographs), who knew what Pynchon looked like if he did show up?

But I run ahead of myself.

I had an epiphany one day walking into a bookstore and seeing the intriguing cover of the Bantam paperback *V.* showing a red-haired woman in a blue gown against a blue backdrop, with white-trimmed blue lines going off into infinity. (If parallel lines meet in infinity, they form a V.) A giant white V. towered over the woman, whose face was obscured, and I recalled my mysterious Aunt Veronica, nicknamed Vee, a woman who never revealed herself until she suffered from dementia and the State claimed her estate. I eventually discovered that Aunt Veronica was nothing like either Veronica in *V.*, two of many V.’s in Pynchon’s first novel who are objects of Herbert Stencil’s quest.

I opened *V.* to the wonderful scene at the Sailor’s Grave bar with Benny Profane and Pig Bodine, a scene which demonstrates Pynchon’s humor:

A miasma of evil suddenly enveloped Profane from behind; an arm fell like a sack of spuds across his shoulder and into his peripheral vision crept a beer glass surrounded by a large muff, fashioned ineptly from diseased baboon fur.

“Benny. How is the pimping business, hyeugh, hyeugh.”

The laugh could only have come from Profane’s onetime shipmate, Pig Bodine. Profane looked round. It had.

Pynchon describes Pig Bodine’s guttural laugh in some detail, the forced sound being “horribly obscene.” Pig and his pal Profane become part of the “whole sick crew,” but they are only two of many colorful characters in this picaresque novel.

I bought *V.* and began my life as a Pynchonite. I discovered that the book was more complex than the opening gag. *V.* is a marvelous display of scholarship and imagination. With its often comic chapter-titles, it captures the feel of eighteenth-century satirical novels; yet it has the modern sensibility combining high and low art eventually called postmodernism. Merging history, humor, physics, pop culture, literature, songs and comic names, Pynchon's prose can be lyrical like Melville's in one paragraph, only to turn a deliberately bad pun in the next. Even in 1963, Pynchon could make the banal seem surreal and the surreal somewhat commonplace. Young Stencil's search for *V.* is unsuccessful, and the book ends with the mysterious death of Stencil's father in the sea off Malta. (Pynchon's books never seem to end, but rather stop.)

My point here, however, is not to analyze Pynchon's work, but to describe the surprise party thrown for him at a waterfront dive not unlike The Sailor's Grave. I had had some success as a playwright and was living with a gifted photographer, an elegant woman with thick curly hair who carried a silver card that read *Jackie Poitier, Real Elegant Photography*. The card was meant to evoke business and amusement. Our other roommate was an old friend, Warren Mason, a creative lead-guitarist who later gained some fame as the teacher of Kurt Cobain. Warren is a quiet man with brown hair combed forward and dark brown eyes, but he becomes a monster with an electric guitar in his hands. Though a guitar artist, he never invaded Memphis to build a reputation, never claimed to play the notes Clapton missed. Warren and I had put a few of Pynchon's comic songs to music, including "Doper's Greed" and "Loonies on Leave." (Warren could stand in for Pynchon's guitarist Dewey Gland, only without the beak.) At one performance, I recited "The Aqyn's Song" from the Kirghiz Light sequence in *Gravity's Rainbow* while Warren played an eerie series of dissonant chords. (An aqyn is a tribal bard.) One semester at a community college, I taught a class on Pynchon, concentrating on *Gravity's Rainbow*, probably the most remarkable American novel since *Moby-Dick*. I was struck that so many Pynchon readers looked like characters out of his books. They seemed part of the preterite he writes about, passed-over souls, all of them eccentric, colorful, gifted.

I had a suggestion one night after a spirited discussion. "Why don't we throw a surprise party for Pynchon on 8 May?"

A student named Greg looked at me. He resembled one of the long-haired characters out of the underground comic strip *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*. Greg and Jackie had been lovers at one time.

"Pynchon is paranoid," Greg said. "I mean, maybe he is onto something. The party would blow his cover."

"If he's really onto something, he's not technically paranoid. And who knows what he looks like?" I asked. "Except maybe a resemblance to Joe DiMaggio."

"And what do we say if he shows up?" Carol asked. She resembled Mélanie, the doomed dancer and lover of the mysterious Lady V. in the chapter "V. in Love." Though a committed lesbian, Carol enjoyed men.

"What do we say? I don't know. How about 'Happy birthday, Tom'?"

Jackie, an Irish refugee before the economic boom, considered it a good idea. We decided to throw the party for fellow Pynchonites, those consumed by the Pynchon magic, those willing to follow Pynchon and Alice down the rabbit hole. (To join this underground club, one had to read *Gravity's Rainbow* at least four times and master the famous Pig Bodine laugh.) Of course, Pynchon is not for everyone, and his diversions will drive many readers to furious impatience. The trustees for the Pulitzer refused Pynchon the prize for *Gravity's Rainbow* because it was "unreadable" and "obscene," as if a moral judgment over an aesthetic one mattered in literature.

Greg, who worked in advertising, designed a poster: a V-2 rocket falling on a birthday cake and "Happy birthday, Tom." A disclaimer stated that the "real surprise" would be if Pynchon showed up. Herb Caen, of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, mentioned the poster in his column and expressed regret that Pynchon might not show. I'm not sure if Caen was truly disappointed, but he gave us great publicity.

When 8 May arrived, Warren went early to Riordan's Tavern, a bar full of rum-dums, winos and people living on the fringe. Any one of them could have been the old sailor with the post-horn tattoo in *The Crying of Lot 49*. "No one's here," Warren said on the phone. "The party is a bust."

"No one we know?" I asked.

"Yeah. Though there are a few people here who don't look like the regulars."

"We'll be down," I said.

Riordan's Tavern was a dive; there is no other way to describe it. A few patrons shot pool while others sat at the bar drinking shots and beer from 6:00 AM until closing at 2:00 AM. They were the lost souls, those who waited for the next welfare or disability check, those who might die anytime in some fleabag hotel because of a cigarette dropped from yellowed fingers. The smell of dust and cheap whiskey and unwashed drinkers gave Riordan's a distinctive tragic ambiance that

Pynchon had described poignantly in *Lot 49*. Then I noticed other characters, unusual, not part of the bar, all of them somewhat eager, bizarre even: a sailor with thick hair on his hands, like Pig Bodine; a small young woman with a "sensual trudge]" and "a nice ass," like Rachel Owlglass; and others unremarkable except that they carried editions of Pynchon's books. One by one, we formed a pack.

"I saw the Herb Caen article," a young man said. "We live at the Y. Most of us are gay."

"Pynchon doesn't like gays," Greg said.

"*Au contraire*," the young man said, and referenced a scene in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

"I was the model for Rachel Owlglass," the short woman told us. "But I don't do cars. He made that up."

"Really? You *know* Thomas Pynchon?"

"Sorry," she said, "we're sworn to secrecy."

"I met Pynchon on the docks in the Navy," the sailor said. "He stole my laugh."

He demonstrated the laugh. It was passable.

"What did he look like?" I asked.

"Like that Joe DiMaggio," the sailor said.

The bartender suddenly called me over. He had a hatchet face and missing teeth. "This Pynchon fella just called. He's on his way over."

"Great," I replied. "Gimme a shot."

The party continued, and everyone got drunk. Warren played "On the Good Ship *Lollipop*" as a woman sang in a Shirley Temple voice. Jackie had not brought her camera, so party images would perish. Occasionally, a regular patron of Riordan's would stare at us, a bit hostile, and then turn back to the pool table or dark, cloudy bar-mirror. A man in his late thirties suddenly announced he had graduated with Pynchon from Cornell.

"I know what he looks like. I saw him with Dick Fariña."

In April of 1966, I attended a San Francisco State folk festival where Richard Fariña performed, and I was saddened to hear of his death a few days later in a motorcycle accident. Pynchon dedicated *Gravity's Rainbow* to him.

"What does he look like? Joe DiMaggio?"

"He's right over there at the bar," the man insisted. "That's him!"

We all looked. A tall man with reddish hair and slightly protruding teeth sat at the bar, drinking a beer and occasionally glancing our way. There was a slightly malevolent glint in his eye, and he clearly didn't fit the Riordan's profile.

"Maybe I should talk to him," Jackie said. "See if he's having a good time." Though she had lost her Irish accent, a wicked gleam of Irish madness could appear in her eyes at any time. She had the plump sensuality of Rubens's women.

"Leave him be," Greg insisted. "If it is him, he's pissed that we've blown his cover. Don't ever antagonize the Pynch."

"But if he's here, he *wants* to be contacted," I said.

"He's a fake," the short woman said.

"Don't look like DiMaggio to me," the sailor added.

I approached the tall man at the bar. He watched me coming. I knew I was drunk and one day I would have to quit or end up a rummy at Riordan's. "Okay," I said, "here's the deal. We're throwing a surprise party for Thomas Pynchon, the surprise being if he shows up. A guy over there insists you're the great T. P." I blinked a few times. "Well? Are you Thomas Pynchon?"

"No," the man said. After a pause, he added, "I'm Duane Marvy."

Any Pynchonite knows that Marvy is the fat racist in *Gravity's Rainbow* who gets castrated when mistaken for Tyrone Slothrop. The man with red hair looked nothing like the insane Duane, but his tone was not comic.

"I see." I walked back to the group. "That ain't him."

"I saw him," the Cornell grad insisted. "That's him."

"He says he's Duane Marvy."

"Duane ain't real. Maybe he's the model for Duane Marvy."

"In that case," I said, "he could have twin forty-fives hidden somewhere."

Holding the phone, the toothless bartender waved to me. "Pynchon's stuck in traffic," he said.

The scattered conversations continued:

"Pynchon knows about the pattern of random coincidences . . ."

"He understands the conspiracy that is America . . ."

"The W.A.S.T.E. postal system is the only way to avoid the Man . . ."

"Señor, please get your hand off my ass . . ."

By late afternoon, the crowd had thinned out, after many Pynchon stories and discussions. I didn't notice whether the woman who claimed to be Rachel Owlglass drove an MG. The red-haired man had disappeared. The party confirmed that many Americans communicate through secret channels, like the underground postal system in *Lot 49*. (Now, with the internet and e-mail, the regular post office seems even more outdated.) Drunk, we rode home in Greg's van.

"That wasn't him," Greg said. "Why would T. P. find himself at that dive, surrounded by the fans he avoids?"

"You're right," I said, "though I hear Pynchon does have red hair and protruding teeth."

Warren struck up a few chords of "Doper's Greed" in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. His guitar is almost an extension of himself. Greg dropped us off. When I woke up the next morning, my headache seemed Pynchonian in its bigness. "Had I met the mysterious Thomas Pynchon?" remained the lingering question for the day.

"I love some of his sentences," Jackie said over coffee, "but I don't understand a lot of it. He digresses all over the place. He's difficult, like Joyce." She wore a slip and spoke in a smoky rasp. "Is the payoff enough after all that work?"

"For me, it is."

Warren appeared with his guitar. "We could put that toilet scene to music," he said. "You read, and I'll play."

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

I gulped a morning beer and began reading aloud the scene where Slothrop goes down the toilet in the Roseland Ballroom after his harmonica before "awful Negroes" can bugger him. Warren accompanied Pynchon's surreal prose with sliding blues notes bent into another key. That cartoon moment in the novel demonstrates how Pynchon can make an absurd scene somehow believable, and capture a bit of history as well, with Malcolm X shining Jack Kennedy's shoes.

It was a good feeling to be hopeful artists living together and planning to create new art.

During the year, Warren joined a band in his home state of Washington. Jackie moved back in with Greg, and then briefly hooked up with a former grammar school classmate, gonzo journalist Richard Boyle, as if one Irish renegade weren't enough. I was offered a teaching job in Idaho. The scattering of friends had begun. When my ex-wife came to visit, she discovered that the three of us had lived in the very house where she grew up. Was this another example of a Pynchonian random yet somehow connected coincidence?

It was time to let go of the past, but I had to visit Riordan's Tavern one last time. I rode down to the waterfront; Riordan's remained unchanged, a poorly lit dive for sad, wasted creatures, members of the underclass, doomed to die alone and forgotten. The bartender had vanished. No Pynchonites searched the bar for fellow cult members in the Clan of T. P., so that added charm was gone. The bar seemed even more depressing. I ordered a 7-Up.

An old man with thick veins lining bone-thin arms sat next to me. His tattoos were blurred and fading. For safe passage, I placed a copy of *Lot 49* on the bar.

"Listen," he said, lighting a cigarette. "I got a Goddamn slut at home. Never knew what a piece of ass was a year ago, and now she's got four kids. Who pays the bills? I do!"

"Four? That's amazing," I said.

"Not only that, she's going to have four more!" He wheezed around the cigarette.

"That is *really* amazing."

"I can't keep the little whore in the house. She does it in the alley."

I looked at the sunken, jaundiced face. "You're telling me she's going to have four *more* kids? What are the odds? You did ultrasound?"

"Hell no."

Then I saw the huge bag of cat food propped against the barstool.

"This 'whore' is a cat?"

He didn't answer. He was staring at my book. "He's right. All life is a plot. They're up there, hidden creatures flying through the night, wearing goggles in the shape of infinity signs, and everything is planned by *Them*. Things happen, and often it's just too coincidental. *They* are in control."

"Who is 'They'?"

The old man didn't answer, but dragged on the cigarette, quickly coughing.

"We had a surprise birthday party for Thomas Pynchon here," I said.

The old man met my eyes. "Try New Jersey, next time. Or maybe Long Island. You'll have better luck."

"What's your cat's name?"

"Ursula."

"Get her spayed."

"And interfere with her reproductive rights?" He glared at me. "Listen, young man, don't drink, don't smoke, and don't fall in love—ever!"

"I'll remember that."

It was raining when I left the bar. No buck-toothed man wearing a trench coat watched from the neon shadows. Shortly after arriving in Idaho, I heard that Riordan's had burned down. I don't remember how I got the news; perhaps it was a tramp using the W.A.S.T.E. system. Nothing remained of Riordan's but charred ruins and the ghosts of old winos. In what zone lived the old man and his cat?

I still keep in touch with Jackie and Warren. He lives in Aberdeen, Washington, and on any weekend night one may hear Jimi Hendrix

notes screaming out of the local bar or VFW hall. Thirty years after the surprise birthday party, with Pynchon now sixty-eight, his shadow stretches longer than ever, though he remains the most invisible major American writer alive. Of course, it is the work that is important. We have the massive *Mason and Dixon*, and no doubt America's greatest living writer will surface again.

—*Idaho State University*