

Real Imaginary Lines in “The Secret Integration”¹

Robert Holton

Something has as it were remained hollow here, in fact a new hollow space has only just developed. Dreams drift in it, and possible things circulate inwardly which can never perhaps become outward. . . . Of course, nothing would circulate inwardly either if the outward were completely solid.

—Ernst Bloch (196)

In “The Secret Integration” (1964), some middleclass white boys find themselves one night in the hotel room of a black man, the first they have ever met. Carl McAfee is a homeless jazz musician, alcoholic and broke—an exemplary figure of Beat mythology. The stories he tells them about his life and loves, his travels and adventures, his anguish and fear reveal to these kids from secure homes the outer limits of a world whose existence they had never suspected. “Tim’s foot felt the edge of a certain abyss which he had been walking close to—for who knew how long?—without knowing. He looked over it, got afraid, and shied away” (SL 183). In his relation to these white boys, McAfee evokes a literary legacy traceable back to Huck’s Jim and further. Exploration along the edges of America’s racial boundaries has long been accepted as a part of white male coming of age; indeed, its ritualized function was clear to Leslie Fiedler, who observed that, “Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle down to being what we are told we really are: white once more” (134). Pynchon’s story does more, however, than simply rehearse this quintessential American white male imagery as part of a coming-of-age tale. “The Secret Integration” calls attention to the racial taxonomy that makes this trope possible, examines the enculturation process by which this racial coding is inscribed as part of growing up white, and situates it at a historical moment when its conditions of possibility are being challenged.

Tim’s meeting with McAfee enacts just such a ritual testing of social limits, and McAfee—black and vagrant—represents precisely one limit that white middleclass identity imposes. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, “to give a social definition, an identity, is also to impose *boundaries*”

(120). The function of boundaries in the process of cultural reproduction is to establish social identity by enclosing the subject within certain limits and by excluding other areas of social life, which can then be approached only through an act of transgression. According to Bourdieu, there is a “social magic” (120) that “foster[s] a misrecognition of the arbitrary nature of the limit and encourage[s] a recognition of it as legitimate” (118). The problem of social reproduction was exacerbated by a legitimacy crisis at the story’s moment in American history, and one transgressive white strategy was a self-induced exclusion through identification with marginalized others like McAfee. In the postwar period, the ritualized transgression of racial lines that could normally be safely accepted as a part of growing up began to spin out of control as rebellious white youths in the 1950s and ‘60s—beginning with the Beats and their relation to African-American identity and culture—resisted completing the final step of, as Fiedler puts it, settling down to be white. While McAfee reveals strange and frightening dimensions of the adult world to Tim and his friends, the kids are also intrigued. To emulate him, they go to the nearest city—significantly hopping a freight—to buy false mustaches (to look like men) and, more important, blackface makeup (to look like black men) (186). Having glimpsed a world apparently larger and more various than their own, these white kids want to cross the line, to become black.

Their own 1950s (or early-1960s) middleclass world is becoming too standardized, bereft of interesting possibility, and, like the Beats of that period, they are looking elsewhere to find what Ernst Bloch refers to as a “hollow space” in which a sense of possibility can survive. As the story opens, for instance, Tim is hiding—curled in a fetal position—in the hollow of an old washing machine which he had previously imagined to be a space ship; as he matures, however, this childlike ability to pretend possibility into existence is leaving him (146). But the process of personal aging is not the only problem here: this space of possibility is not objectively available in the modern new section of their town either. Like King Yrjö’s mansion, the older houses display a kind of character, provide opportunities for the imagination less and less available in this era of conformism:

[T]here was nothing about the little, low-rambling, more or less identical homes of Northumberland Estates to interest or to haunt, no chance of loot that would be any more than the ordinary, waking-world kind . . . no small immunities, no possibilities for hidden life or otherworldly presence; no trees, secret routes, shortcuts, culverts, thickets that could be made hollow in the middle—everything in the place was out in the open, everything could be seen at a glance. (158)

The search for a space different from this suburban panopticon, the search for a hollow space, began to lead many alienated whites to consider, even explore, the possibilities of subcultural life in the margins of the mainstream, where such hollows might still be found. For some, African-American culture appeared to provide just that opening.

A slightly earlier literary example of cross-racial identification occurs in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the Beat classic published a few years before "The Secret Integration," which Pynchon refers to in the introduction to *Slow Learner* as "one of the great American novels" (7). Kerouac's Sal Paradise finds himself "wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (180). Pynchon also refers to such "centrifugal lures" (7) as Norman Mailer's "White Negro," another discussion of the cross-racial nature of hip male identity. In this influential and peculiar essay, Mailer draws a clear line, offering white men a black and white choice: "One is Hip or one is Square . . . one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of the American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society" (313). For a white man to be hip, according to Mailer, he must become a white negro, taking on those nonconformist, even psychopathic behavior patterns Mailer ascribes to African-American men. The imperatives of white male self-fashioning in the postwar period, a period distressed by conformism, opposed to dissent, yet haunted by images of alienation and alterity, thus resulted in the imaginary identification of many hip whites with the racial margins of that culture. Jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow, whose autobiography, *Really the Blues*, describes a life as troubled as Carl McAfee's, established a pattern even before the war by actually changing his official identity from white to black: "That was the last ofay job I ever held in my life," he writes of the moment when he crossed the racial line, "the last time I was ever connected with anything white and awkward, ugly and soul-starved. . . . [M]y soul moved across 110th Street, straight into Harlem, with me toddling along right behind it. The two of us have been living there ever since" (205). In his ground-breaking poem "Howl," Allen Ginsberg placed his "starving hysterical naked" hipsters on the "negro streets at dawn" (ll 1, 2); and as Beat fellow-traveller Seymour Krim put it at the time, the hipster "did everything but paint his face black in his effort to . . . be like a negro" (40).

Pynchon discusses the Beat era and his own relation to the Beat scene in some detail in the retrospective introduction to *Slow Learner*, and from the party scenes in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" and "Entropy" to V.'s Whole Sick Crew, references to 1950s bohemianism

are frequent in his early fiction. “By the time I wrote ‘The Secret Integration,’” Pynchon recalls, “I was out on the road at last, getting to visit the places Kerouac had written about. These towns and Greyhound voices and fleabag hotels have found their way into this story” (22). In addition to the general tenor of McAfee’s stories, Pynchon includes more specific references to Beat mythology as well—particularly to *On the Road*. Cheyenne, Denver, Algiers (Louisiana), home of *On the Road*’s Bull Lee (William Burroughs): all these Kerouac locales find their way into McAfee’s stories, along with “a Mexican girl he’d been with for a while . . . [who] had a baby boy” (179–80) and who sounds like Sal Paradise’s “fellahin” lover Terry. One of the most interesting aspects of Pynchon’s reworking of Kerouac, however, concerns Pynchon’s critique of the images of African-American culture that had provided a hollow space of possibility for Kerouac and at least some of the other Beats—and for the white boys in Pynchon’s story.

This attraction to reverse passing shared by Sal Paradise and Pynchon’s white boys posits a freedom across the racial line unavailable to inhabitants of the mainstream, a new kind of American frontier for white men to explore complete with what Mailer describes as “wise primitive[s] in the giant jungle” (317) of America from whom the white explorers can learn. A notion common not only to the Beats, this modern and somewhat urban variation on the pastoral tradition (or the image of the noble savage) posits the existence of a social group living in a more intense and poetic relation to the world, more in harmony with the natural rhythms and desires of the body, less bound by the rules and regulations of the mainstream. While this imagery focussed mainly on African-Americans, other marginalized groups could and did serve as objects of white desire for a social space outside the constraints of the conformist culture. In the minds of some white Americans, like Mailer and Kerouac, non-white cultures seemed to promise an expansive masculine identity denied in emasculated middleclass white America, kinds of fulfillment unavailable to the Man in the Grey Flannel Suit and to the Organization Man. If it seems a bit odd that middleclass white men would seek a space of freedom in the situation of oppressed blacks in a deeply racist America, the sense of oddness is only exacerbated by passages like Sal Paradise’s declaration of his desire to “exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (Kerouac 180). These attitudes, as Eric Lott has argued, are related to the complex mixture of cross-racial feelings—feelings of condescension and envy, fear and desire, ignorance and affection—that inspired the long, peculiar history of blackface minstrelsy, a history which, because of rising anti-racist pressure, was winding down just as Pynchon was writing his early stories. In fact, Mr.

Cognomen, the man from whom the kids purchase the blackface, says "You guys must be reactionaries. . . . You trying to resurrect vaudeville or something?" (186).

Cultural and racial lines were essential to the creation of Beat identity, separating these exiles from the mainstream straight world and defining them by positing a different kind of social space on the other side of those boundaries, a space of deprivation in some ways but of freedom in other—more essential—ways. Bourdieu argues that such social lines "exist only for a subject capable not only of perceiving the differences, but of recognizing them as significant and interesting, i.e., exist only for a subject endowed with the aptitude and the inclination to *establish* the differences which are held to be significant in the social world" (237). The establishment of racial lines as significant might be predicated on many diverse interests, and it would be a mistake to reduce all such taxonomies to a single narrow definition of racism. It could be argued that the Beats' interest in establishing these lines for their own purposes eventually helped draw attention to the lines themselves and their pernicious effects on American culture—a development evident throughout Pynchon's work. In the introduction to *Slow Learner*, he notes the extent to which he was influenced by the "centrifugal lures" of the Beat movement, and his early stories reveal his interest in the same kinds of racial and ethnic lines.

In "Low-lands," for example, Dennis Flange, a white lawyer, leaves his nagging consumerist wife to find freedom with a Gypsy lover in a garbage dump run by a black man. This story epitomizes the pattern Barbara Ehrenreich, in *The Hearts of Men*, has identified as fundamental to the Beat phenomenon and to the alienation of 1950s and '60s men: women and their domestic concerns were frequently considered an integral part of the Establishment power structure that seemed to lock men in servitude to a conformist culture. Leaving this life behind, Flange makes a symbolic journey "down a long spiraling road," arriving finally at "the center of the spiral, the low point" (SL 63–64). The dump supervisor is "a fat Negro with a pork-pie hat" (63)—a style of hat made famous by jazz musician Lester Young, an important influence on bebop and hip identity. Pynchon's pork-pie-hat-wearing African-American deals with the problem of domesticity in a forthright and 'manly' fashion: "Wife is a nuisance sometimes," he tells the middleclass white protagonist; "I got three or four scattered around the country and glad to be rid of them all" (64). While the Beat exploration of cultural boundaries, of the discarded and excluded, provides much of the substance that makes Pynchon's stories interesting, Beat attitudes are reflected as well in the weaknesses Pynchon finds in this early work. He writes of the lack of awareness he—"an unpolitical '50's

student" (SL 6)—displays, of the immature and reactionary nature of the stories, and of the "unacceptable level of racist, sexist and proto-Fascist talk throughout" (11)—with one exception: "The Secret Integration."

Describing himself as a "post-Beat," Pynchon sees this group as "coming to see deeper into what, after all, was a sane and decent affirmation of what we all want to believe about American values" (9). He self-deprecatingly notes his desire to "sophisticat[e] the Beat spirit with second-hand science" (14), and it seems he attempted to sophisticate the Beat spirit politically as well. No matter how well-intentioned, the desire to be a "white negro" appears—to say the least—naïve, and Pynchon's situating this desire among children in "The Secret Integration" argues his awareness of the fact. The boys' purchase of blackface makeup is tellingly juxtaposed, in the next paragraph, with the arrival of the Barringtons, a black couple moving into a white neighborhood. Exemplifying a very different strain in the racial politics of this era, the Barringtons—Christian homeowners—do not fit within the lines of hip black identity as understood by the Beats or of African-American identity as accepted by the white mainstream. There is an ironic reversal here: while the white Beats sought a space of freedom from oppressive mainstream conformity in the lifestyle of some hip blacks, the Barringtons seek freedom from oppression by integrating into the white mainstream. While the McAfees of America—indigent and strung out—pose no threat, stay for the most part behind their lines of marginality and are easily dealt with by white authorities policing the lines, the Barringtons challenge a fundamental socially-consecrated line defining American community. And they are made to pay for this challenge, as their white neighbors carry out a transgressive (or counter-transgressive) response which retains the garbage dump imagery of "Low-lands": they dump their household garbage on the Barringtons' front lawn.

Were it the case that "The Secret Integration" simply documented Pynchon's growing political sensitivity to injustice, this would be noteworthy, a turn away from the Cold War attitude that, as Thomas Schaub has pointed out, assumed "collective action was futile," and therefore "black discontent as a potential agency of social change" could be discounted (145). Instead of calling into question the existence of the lines that create discontinuity, the strategy common to some Beat-inspired writing accepted, even fetishized, these lines, and as Bourdieu puts it, "the sacred boundary remains clear" (122). By the early 1960s, however, Pynchon had moved beyond this strategy, a development which coincides with what he refers to as the shift from the apprentice phase to the journeyman phase of his work (SL 3). V.,

for example—published nearly two years before “The Secret Integration”—explores issues of race and identity, power and history with a complexity almost unprecedented in fiction by white writers of this period. In Pynchon’s work at this time, questions of politics and power were already inseparable from questions of epistemology and representation, so we might reasonably expect the subtle awareness that informs *V.* to inform his next narrative as well.

In any case, it would be difficult to cast Pynchon as a social-issues writer in any traditional sense. In adding a political dimension to a post-Beat sensibility, Pynchon also moves toward a deeper understanding of the ontology of the lines of force structuring American community, the “social magic” which, as Bourdieu puts it in a Pynchonesque observation, “always manages to produce discontinuity out of continuity” (120). In “The Secret Integration,” as in *V.*, this deeper understanding involves calling into question the political and epistemological nature of the lines themselves, lines not so much objectively present in the world as historically constructed, culturally learned and socially imposed. As the trope of suggestion therapy early in the story indicates, belief affects reality, whether it is belief in the imaginary power of a purple light to cure warts or belief in the power of racial lines to define social existence. This awareness of the ultimately arbitrary, ideological and thus changeable nature of social boundaries is, as Bourdieu observes, an essential step in the establishment of the “Archimedean point which is objectively made available to truly political action” (236). In “The Secret Integration,” we can see the process by which the indeterminate social world takes on pattern and structure in the minds of these maturing white boys. From Grover’s suspicion that the Tom Swift books his parents give him are meant to reproduce in him the racism of those narratives (145), to the boys’ repeated witnessing of their parents’ racism, the images of racial exclusion are forceful. And yet, in spite of its intentions, the rebelliousness the kids manifest would not constitute “truly political action” in Bourdieu’s sense because the kids lack an understanding of the political stakes involved. In fact, they themselves complain about the lack of focus and resolution of their actions:

Nothing ever seemed to change; no “objectives” were taken that didn’t create a need to start thinking about new ones, so that soon the old ones were forgotten and let slip by default back into the hands of grownups or into a public no man’s land again, and you would be back where you’d started. . . . as if there were something basically wrong . . . with the plot itself. (166)

In making explicit some of the patterns that structure social being and the objectives that must be addressed, in recognizing this Archimedean point, Pynchon signals that his early unpolitical period, as Donald Larsson notes (92), has clearly come to an end.

Throughout the story, two forces are in tension: on one side, the kids' desire to refuse the lines, and on the other, their dependence on the lines that circumscribe home, family and community, a dependence which militates against their desire. The first force inspires a pattern of escape and resistance on the part of these not-yet-completely socialized kids, and the story opens with Tim escaping from mother and home to plan more rebellious acts with his friends. The second force is an intimate connection to the very structures they are trying to resist: no matter how determined they are as they set out to create havoc against that apparently inert and arbitrary adult structure of power, "there was a point at which the reflex to their [parents'] covering warmth, protection, effectiveness against bad dreams, bruised heads and simple loneliness took over and made worthwhile anger with them impossible" (189). When he does approach the edge of the abyss, Tim realizes "how hard it would be, how hopeless, to really find a person you needed suddenly, unless you lived all your life in a house like he did, with a mother and father" (183).

The two forces are pitted directly against each other in the mock attack on the school carried out in a field where the magic force of the white chalkline representing the school proves too powerful: "too many little kids had been doing just great up until they got to the white outline of the school building, then they'd stopped short and stood around scuffing it into the grass with their shoes" (156). In spite of the kids' rebelliousness, this symbolic line imposes itself with the authority of prison bars. The power of such lines to enclose is re-emphasized later as the boys consider the difficulty of real opposition: "something inert and invisible, something they could not be cruel to or betray (though who would have gone so far as to call it love?) would always be between them and any clear or irreversible step, as much as the powdery fiction of the school's outline . . . had stopped the little kids last year" (188). These lines exist not only to keep the McAfees and Barringtons of America out, but also to keep white boys in. As Bourdieu observes, one "function of all magical boundaries . . . [is] to stop those who are inside, on the right side of the line, from leaving . . . to discourage permanently any attempt to cross the line, to transgress, desert or quit" (122).

The utopian imagination, as Bloch points out, enables the temporary transcendence of many lines of social division, which reassert themselves under the pressures of daily struggle. The boys' purchase

of blackface makeup constitutes a first attempt at the traversing of racial lines; the second attempt involves their invention of Carl Barrington, an imaginary friend whose first name is taken from Carl McAfee.² The imaginary—indeed secret—integration carried out in the invention of Carl Barrington may be politically commendable but will do little to challenge the racial taxonomy of the community. As the kids walk Carl home one day, they meet with stark evidence of the racist lines drawn by their own parents. The kids' racial fantasy of integration collapses the moment they try to cross a very real imaginary line, and Tim's complaint about the mock attacks—"Running across a line, making believe it's a door, that's one thing. But you need the door itself" (156)—is answered. At Carl's house they find very real garbage—their own family garbage thrown by their own racist parents—"shin-deep all over the lawn, neatly spread right up to the property line" (190). Pynchon emphasizes the conflict here between the kids' desire to overcome racial lines and the draw of their own family connections: Tim finds

the familiar A&P shopping bags his mother always brought home, and the skins of some big yellow oranges an aunt had sent them as a gift from Florida, and the pint box of pineapple sherbet Tim himself had bought two nights ago, and all the intimacy of the throwaway part, the shadow-half of his family's life for all the week preceding, the crumpled envelopes addressed to his father and mother, the stubs of the black De Nobili cigars his father liked to smoke after supper, the folded beer cans, always with the point coming in between the two e's of the word "beer," exactly the way his father did and had taught him how to do. (190)

The very stuff of his family life is spread out here as garbage, as an assault against what the parents perceive as an intrusion from outside the magic line of white community. The refuse from inside community lines is deployed to refuse those outside. Unlike the little kids who hesitate during the mock attack, the boys here, not understanding the social ontology of this property line, initially cross over, "as if compelled to do so" (190), and begin cleaning up. But from her position on a very different threshold, Mrs. Barrington lacks the luxury of fine distinctions; unlike McAfee, who opens his door to let the boys in, she refuses to accept them on her side of the line, either symbolically or literally: "the front door opened and Mrs. Barrington started yelling at them."³ When Tim tries to explain that "'We're on your side,'" she replies, "'We don't need any of you on our side'" (191).

While in "Low-lands," the garbage dump—with its African-American associations—is a site of freedom from repression for the downwardly-

mobile Flange and for its black supervisor, in this later story, garbage is seen as repulsive by the white parents and by the black Barringtons. The essentialist racial association is severed. Conversely, the kids have a sentimental attachment to the waste, finding in it a source of identity and creativity. And just as the Beats did, they seek possibility in marginal spaces, spaces Bloch refers to as the hollowed spaces of hope. Tim finds a hiding place in a discarded washing machine. Étienne Cherdlu's father owns a junkyard, from which they take items of personal value. Carl, the imaginary black friend, is himself a composite of discarded and cast-off material: "Carl had been put together out of phrases, images, possibilities that grownups had somehow turned away from, repudiated, left out at the edges of towns, as if they were auto parts in Étienne's father's junkyard—things they could or did not want to live with but which the kids, on the other hand, could spend endless hours with" (192). And just as the Beats sometimes fetishized African-American marginality, the kids imagine Carl's marginal racial position as part of an imaginary identity of their own: "His words were the kids' own words; his gestures too, the faces he made, the times he had to cry, the way he shot baskets; all given by them an amplification or grace they expected to grow into presently" (192).

"All my life I'd had white ambitions," laments Sal Paradise as he searches for a hollow space to escape to in the image of "fellahin" African-America (Kerouac 180). But, as the Barringtons' move to a middleclass housing development demonstrates, social ambitions cannot be defined by race. The trash imagery of racial positioning is reversed when Mrs. Barrington not only is offended by the garbage on her lawn but drives the white boys back across her property line, calling them "'you trash'" (SL 191). Mrs. Barrington's position here challenges a number of racial associations in the minds of these white boys, particularly the essentialist notion that to be African-American is in itself somehow connected with a liberated space outside the mainstream, a space itself connected with garbage. And the Barringtons, by moving into Northumberland Estates, are themselves becoming part of the modernist conformity, a space without hollows, that some Beats were trying to escape by means of the hollowed space of racial imagery. In the end, the cycle is completed by the banishment of Carl, the imaginary African-American, who is himself finally cast off. The real social issues, as Étienne's father's remarks about automation and unemployment suggest (150, 188), may have more to do in the end with class than with race. As Pynchon observes in the introduction to *Slow Learner*, "It may yet turn out that racial differences are not as basic as questions of money and power, but have served a useful

purpose . . . in keeping us divided and so relatively poor and powerless" (12).

This brush with the power of real imaginary lines—an event that recalls the disputes around that time over white presence in the Civil Rights movement—puts an end to blackface fantasies and imaginary black friends. The kids return "each finally to his own house, hot shower, dry towel, before-bed television, good night kiss" (193). But the security of home is no longer unalloyed, and bedtime brings "dreams that could never again be entirely safe" (193). A sense that their security rests on arbitrary and violently-defended imaginary lines of inclusion and exclusion now undermines the boys' childhood sense of safety and inducts them into the insecurities of adulthood perhaps; but it also demonstrates the contingency of the imaginary lines, the difficulty, though—as the Barringtons demonstrate—not the impossibility, of challenging the lines and getting through the bars that structure the social imagination. "Knowledge of the social world and, more precisely, the categories which make it possible," Bourdieu writes, "are the stakes *par excellence* of the political struggle, a struggle which is inseparably theoretical and practical, over the power of preserving or transforming the social world by preserving or transforming the categories of perception of that world" (236).

In "The Secret Integration," both the practical and the theoretical are areas of struggle as the story examines a number of social categories and the lines which define them, the lines delineating the "scaled-up world" of adults (SL 143). And, like the Berlin Wall, a line whose existence Grover rails against, these lines are at once imaginary and real, stubbornly fixed and historically shifting, solidly impermeable and astonishingly porous. Images of such lines and crossings proliferate in the story. For instance, Hogan Slothrop and Kim Dufay are both characterized as "passing" (174, 155). Elsewhere, and more pointedly perhaps, the barrier separating sodium from water in the homemade sodium grenade is supposed to break when the grenade is tossed, resulting in an explosion. As it happens, the grenade's diaphragm stubbornly refuses to burst, the mixing of the two ingredients is prevented, and no explosion occurs. Such an explosion, like the emotional explosions that result from the Barringtons' crossing the racial line, would have repercussions difficult, if not impossible, to predict. In fact, explosions resulting from the forcible elimination of the lines of segregation were occurring with increasing regularity, in Little Rock, Birmingham, every location where the Archimedean lever of the Civil Rights movement challenged the political assumptions of the white mainstream.

In the 1990s, racial lines can hardly be said to have disappeared; but they have taken different forms, forms which might not have been foreseeable thirty-five years ago. In 1966, only a couple of years after "The Secret Integration," Pynchon wrote of the lines which divided black and white cultures in Watts and other urban centers: "only a few blocks" away from the white world "is country which lies, psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem at present willing to travel" (J 78). Regardless of geographical proximity and the absence of "real" boundaries, the power of those force fields was and still is substantial. To cross these lines—especially at a time when the Civil Rights movement was news rather than history—implies the ability to risk a break with one's own community, a difficult and radical act.⁴ But as Grover explains in his definition of integration, a political concept he aptly confuses with its mathematical meaning, those lines can never entirely stop people from getting through. "[D]rawing an x-axis, y-axis and curve . . . [and] straight vertical lines from the curve down to the x-axis, like the bars of a jail cell," he explains:

"you can have as many of these [lines] as you want, see, as close together as you want. . . . [But] it never gets solid. If this was a jail cell, and those lines were bars, and whoever was behind it could make himself any size he wanted to be, he could always make himself skinny enough to get free. No matter how close together the bars were." (SL 186)

The bars, the lines, are close and clearly marked perhaps, but freedom remains a possibility.

"The Secret Integration" could be read—and often is—as a standard, fairly ordinary coming-of-age tale, a narrative of disillusionment and resignation, and as exemplifying the racial identification among white male youth Fiedler describes. By the end, for instance, the boys' infatuation with imaginary African-Americans is chastened, and they return to their white homes and families. Yet it makes sense to read the story as a growing-up story only if one takes that phrase in a sense wide enough to include the complex socialization process implied in growing up. Pynchon's kids are being imprinted with real imaginary racial lines, and they are learning about those lines. And if the lesson seems a hard one for them to comprehend—well, it is. We can hope the boys would retain a commitment to resist racism and its pernicious line drawing as part of their anti-establishment program as they grow up, but we know there are no guarantees. So much of the radical political ambition of the 1960s ultimately failed to accomplish its

goals, according to Pynchon, because of “the presence of real, invisible . . . force fields” (7) like the ones that structure this story. Certainly the ending—as so often in Pynchon’s work—is ambiguous. Grover’s closing “I don’t know anything” (192) could be taken as signaling the onset of a deeper (and necessary) understanding of what is really at stake, of how powerful those imaginary lines are, of the ways the boys—as whites—are already implicated. The ending is not happy by any means, but it suggests “a progressive *knottling into*” (to borrow a phrase from *Gravity’s Rainbow* [3]) that is necessary and unavoidable. It is good that they don’t sleep so soundly; they shouldn’t. More than thirty years later, and even after the tumult of the 1960s, “The Secret Integration” still has much to say about the process by which the lines of racial difference are imagined.

—Okanagan University College

Notes

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²In 1963, almost two years before “The Secret Integration” appeared, Norman Podhoretz published “My Negro Problem—and Ours,” a discussion of racial lines in America, which begins with an anecdote about a black childhood playmate named Carl. Podhoretz uses this anecdote about his eventual falling out with Carl—by the end they are no longer on speaking terms—to illustrate the barrier which separated black and white in America. The article tries to imagine the possibility that the bars may be gotten through, but recognizes that getting through may, after all, be impossible.

³Just as in “Low-lands,” or *Huckleberry Finn* long before, a woman guards the door against the boys who are testing the limits of the culture. In fact, the story is framed by such incidents: at the beginning, Tim has to escape from his mother, who guards the door, and at the end, he is expelled by Mrs. Barrington, who guards the door and the lines of property and race.

⁴To recall the stark sense of division which obtained at the time, we might refer to a letter William Faulkner wrote in 1960, only a short time before Pynchon wrote this story. Faulkner, a Southern moderate, declared his non-support for the NAACP because of what he felt to be that group’s excessive radicalism and the inevitable racial polarization he predicted would result. He argued that it was imperative to avoid “a situation where the white people who hate and grieve over the injustice which your people have to suffer, will be forced to choose either for or against their own people, and they too, the ones

which your people consider the best among my people, will have to choose the side of the rest of the white people" (444). White people, it seemed, would have to stick together: the lines could not be crossed.

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