

Abrams Remembers Pynchon

Charles Hollander

When I talked with John Freccero recently about parallels between Pynchon and Dante, he suggested I phone M. H. Abrams to see what he remembered about Pynchon. I did. Abrams recalled receiving a term paper from Pynchon when Pynchon was a junior at Cornell. Abrams thought it was too good to have been written by an undergraduate, and he suspected it had been plagiarized. He suggested discreetly that Pynchon make an appointment to discuss the paper (a pretext for an oral exam). Within the first few minutes of their meeting, Abrams recognized that Pynchon was the paper's author. (Funny how little things stick in the mind: forty years later, Abrams recalled Pynchon as tall and slim and sporting a pencil-line moustache.) That was their most memorable meeting. The ending of Pynchon's paper made such a haunting impression on Abrams that he read it to his classes for years, even before Pynchon became PYNCHON. I asked him if he could find it. He said he would look and leave word on my answering machine if he did. When I came back from walking my dog, Diz, this message awaited me:

Charles Hollander, this is Mike Abrams at Cornell. I found that quotation from Pynchon's term paper, which was in English 313, on eighteenth-century English literature. It was a paper discussing Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* in conjunction with Voltaire's *Candide*. And the paper ended with these sentences: "Like *Candide*, *Rasselas* ends on an imperative note: again, to submit; but above that, to endure. It leaves us with less hope than Voltaire, but with more determination." I hope that can be of use to you. It seems to be an interesting quotation. Good luck.

This is also the message at the end of *Vineland*: "fuck it, play to the end. . . . Zoyd . . . found himself listening to the Eagles' *Greatest Hits*, in particular 'Take It to the Limit,' basically his whole story these days, singing mournfully along" (373-74). Maybe submit, but for sure endure. In his student days, Pynchon viewed Voltaire as a *farceur* and Johnson as a stern moralist. Exactly this dichotomy runs through all Pynchon's work: the comedy of fools against the episodes of high seriousness. The term paper suggests he may have been trying to teach himself to write like Voltaire and like Johnson in alternation in one

work. As a mere lad, Pynchon was working out his own philosophical stance and inventing a way to express it. Within a year, he had developed the literary equivalent of the musical fugue, in "Entropy," and he was off and running. He has been using that zany/portentous formula ever since. You can't teach an old writer new tricks.

—*Baltimore, MD*