

Pynchon on Household:
Reworking the Traditional Spy Novel

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A possible influence on the creation of the Victorian explorer Hugh Godolphin, "F.R.G.S.," who appears in V.,¹ may be found in a character with the same unusual surname in Geoffrey Household's spy-thriller, Fellow Passenger.² Of minimal literary merit, and far less exciting than other Household classics of the thriller genre, Fellow Passenger is a boring book by a notoriously uneven writer. Yet besides the character named Godolphin, it contains the seeds of a number of complex themes which subsequently flourish in the far richer imagination of Thomas Pynchon, who read Household as a teenager.³ I want to explore the relationships between V. and Household's book in order to demonstrate how Pynchon transforms the materials from a lowly potboiler into a serious work of art, and I want to focus finally on the metamorphosis of the Godolphin we see as a fatuous romantic escapist in Fellow Passenger, to the prophet of the twentieth century's impulse toward destruction and doom we find in V. But first it will be necessary to give a brief summary of Household's novel, since it is likely to be far less familiar to readers than V.

The hero of Fellow Passenger is Claudio Howard-Wolferstan, an Englishman and a former spy for the Allies, who has been living in South America since the end of the Second World War. When his father dies, son Claudio returns to England to claim his estate, but his ancestral home has been purchased by the British government, which is using it to conduct top-secret research relating to atomic reactors. In a covert attempt to snatch some family jewels from a secret hiding place, Howard-Wolferstan is discovered and wrongly arrested as a traitorous Communist spy. He escapes, and the remainder of the novel revolves rather tediously around his repeated thwartings of both Scotland Yard and the Communists, who are convinced that Claudio is one of theirs.

Fellow Passenger concludes with Howard-Wolferstan's re-capture by the British, his subsequent imprisonment in the Tower of London, and his writing the memoir which is the book we have just read. Then follows a pompous but accurate "Epilogue" written by an establishment aristocrat and government scientist, the abundantly titled Alexander Romilly, "S.H., D.Sc., D. Litt., F.R.S.," who has helped secure Howard-Wolferstan's release. Romilly attributes Claudio's arrest to the rampant anti-Communist paranoia of the "Red Scare," which typified so much Western political activity in the post-war 1950's. Romilly is right, but his bedrock belief that objective information can explain away any muddled situation, such as Howard-Wolferstan's, gives the lie to his own Olympian self-assurance about the true nature of contemporary reality.

Alexander Romilly, a throwback to a Victorian age of confident optimism, can only appear naive, at times ludicrous, to conscious inhabitants of the multiplifarious world of the twentieth century. Romilly sees only surfaces, comprehends only facts, when it is what lurks beneath those surfaces, and the questionable truth of those "facts" that so complicate our understanding of the modern experience.

Does this mean that Geoffrey Household, who lampoons Romilly's bloated certainty, adopts a world view closer to that of his younger contemporaries, Thomas Pynchon for instance? It is difficult to say, because we seem to be dealing with "two Households" here: the conventional thriller writer whose forte is the escapist entertainment, and the latently serious writer who seems to see the contradictions that exist within his own created world. The "two Households" fail to converge in one coherent stance. Trapped by the limited conventions of the genre within which he writes, Household seems content only to touch on issues of immense subtlety and complexity, while the burden of his book rests yawningly on old spy fiction formulas, formulas reminiscent of his mentor, John Buchan, master of the "hunted hero" novel.

What then does Pynchon do with a novel so promising and yet ultimately disappointing? He takes Household's

trivial book and parodies its form, as well as its themes, with a serious intent. What I think may have specifically interested Pynchon about Fellow Passenger is its ironic structure. It makes its hero the center of an intricate web of factitious circumstances and events of which he has no knowledge and about which he would perhaps not care. The accusations against Claudio Howard-Wolferstan have been devised by men trained to unearth plots and conspiracies, even if, as here, they do not exist.

Not urcoincidentally, Pynchon has chosen the same Cold War period, indeed the same year as the publication of Household's novel, 1955, for the opening of V. Pynchon is fascinated by people's obsessions with fashioning plots out of the essential plotlessness of life. There is in his world, unlike the world of Alexander Romilly, no actual, or knowable, objective reality. Thus the Cold War serves as a perfect historical period within which to explore the contrasting relationship between the mind's interpretation of external events and the empirical "reality" of those events. Not a fighting war, but instead a verbal struggle where minds contend against minds, the Cold War is fought with words, essentially in the minds of its antagonists, although those warring intelligences can turn their thoughts into actions, as we see in V., where real war threatens to erupt in the Middle East.

But Pynchon does not wish to limit his understanding of international politics solely to the Cold War. Set in 1899, the Florentine section of the novel, where we first encounter Hugh Godolphin, is an immensely (and I think deliberately) confusing parody of complicated spy story plots in which every event must somehow tie in with every other event, culminating in a solution to the posed mystery. But Pynchon subverts the spy novel principle by not relating to each other the various separate stories which compose the Florence chapter. All that really exists is what a veteran of such muddles, Sidney Stencil, of the British Foreign Office, calls "The Situation." "No Situation had any objective reality," concludes Stencil; "it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment" (V., 174).

In spite of his belief, which he shares with Sidney Stencil, in the pointlessness of all existence, Pynchon nevertheless sympathizes with, even participates in (through his novels) his characters' efforts to extract meaning from meaninglessness. Central to this basic paradox in Pynchon is a fabled country called Vheissu, which has purportedly been seen by the explorer Hugh Godolphin. To discover Vheissu, the novel seems tantalizingly to argue, is to discover the secret of V., the woman who symbolizes it. For V. is the twentieth century, and Vheissu is its emblem. What then is Vheissu? To Hugh Godolphin's horror, he learns that Vheissu is only an integument, a bright-colored skin, a "madman's kaleidoscope," "not real shapes, not meaningful ones. Simply random, the way clouds change over a Yorkshire landscape" (V., 155). Vheissu is like a dream then, but a dream which masks its nightmare significance: "Nothing" (V., 188). It is the pure emptiness of a reality into which we pour our own mental creations. And because V. has no meaning, our thoughts about it become, for Godolphin, a "gaudy dream . . . of annihilation" (V., 190), which bewitches the twentieth-century mind. The Lady V. enslaves and destroys Hugh Godolphin, who falls under her nihilistic spell after his vision of Victorian order is shattered by Vheissu.

In Fellow Passenger we encounter a Peter Bowshot St. John Godolphin, who I believe gives rise to V.'s Hugh Godolphin.⁴ Household's Godolphin is an amusing, slightly mad English gentleman-explorer, clearly out of another age, who has found his own escapist (from the twentieth century) Shangri-La in South America. Peter Godolphin is described by his friend Claudio Howard-Wolferstan in language which makes him the comic counterpart of his doomed fictional progeny, Hugh Godolphin:

He was an old schoolfellow and intimate of mine, whom I had rediscovered in a primitive little paradise of his own making, halfway down the eastern slopes of the Andes. If ever a man were completely lost to sight, he it was. He allowed me to help him with a few necessaries, but made me swear not to bring down on him his family or

their letters. He wanted to be left in peace with his three Indian wives and his peculiar religion. (FP, 174, my emphasis)

Peter Godolphin exemplifies the classic British eccentric who flees the restrictiveness and conventionality of his native land in order to "get away from it all." It does not seem to me that the phrase "paradise of his own making" means a great deal to Household in this context, but it does reflect his novel's implicit theme of the manufacturing of "reality." On the other hand, I would argue that the phrase could have meant much more to Pynchon when he read Household's novel. One of the motives for Hugh Godolphin's life-long explorations, as with those discoverers who sought a passage to India, is the search for an earthly paradise. What he finds instead, as we know, is the dreaded Vheissu. But Vheissu may, as old Hugh--using language which echoes Household's on Peter Godolphin--tells his friend, Signor Mantissa, be a creation of his (Hugh's) own making: "'If it [Vheissu] were only a hallucination, it was not what I saw or believed I saw that in the end is important,'" says Hugh. "'It is what I thought. What truth I came to'" (V., 190).

Hugh Godolphin's picture of reality, as well as, I would argue, Thomas Pynchon's, differs greatly from that of Peter Bowshot St. John Godolphin and his creator, Geoffrey Household, even though, paradoxically, they emerge from the same source. Hugh's is a vision of darkness, of mind at the end of its tether, of a despair which leads men to desire their own deaths and the deaths of others. Pynchon seems to be saying either we wholly fabricate reality, which means that isolation, loneliness and solipsism result, or we abandon ourselves to the chaotic randomness of the world, which can only lead to purposeless drift. Between solipsism and drift there is little to choose. This is a long way from the reality of Geoffrey Household, whose Fellow Passenger concludes with a fatuously happy ending. It is fascinating then to observe how Thomas Pynchon has assimilated the crude matter of a traditional spy-thriller and re-shaped it into the substance of art and of vision.

Notes

¹ Thomas Pynchon, V. (1963; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1964). Quotations will be cited within the text.

² Geoffrey Household, Fellow Passenger (1955; rpt. New York: Pyramid, 1966). Quotations will be cited within the text.

³ Thomas Pynchon, Introduction to Slow Learner: Early Stories (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 18.

⁴ For an entirely different discussion of the origins of Godolphin's name, out of Edgar Allen Poe's Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, see Hanjo Beressem, "Godolphin - Goodolphin - Goodol'phin - Goodol'Pyn - Good ol'Pym: A Question of Integration," Pynchon Notes, 10, 1983, 3-17.