

PYNCHON, V., AND THE FRENCH SURREALISTS

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It is appropriate to suggest connections between Pynchon and French surrealism for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that Pynchon himself points us in that direction in his "Introduction" to Slow Learner. There, Pynchon reminisces about his student days in an elective art history class where what most impressed him was surrealism. After admitting what we might call a "shock of recognition," Pynchon says that as an apprentice writer he tried to apply surrealist techniques—chiefly that of assemblage--in his early stories. This passage in his "Introduction" evidences Pynchon's early commitment to surrealist techniques, but more to the point are his self-criticisms for not quite having "done it right" (he accuses himself of misunderstanding assemblage and of not having had enough access to his dream life); for such reflections made more than twenty years after the fact can be construed as at least a residual belief in the legitimacy of the surrealist aesthetic. The title he gave to his collection of early stories, Slow Learner, suggests as much.

I would like here simply to sketch out some of the concrete ways we might pursue Pynchon's involvement with surrealism and go beyond his general remarks in Slow Learner. My purpose is not to argue Pynchon's "indebtedness" to surrealism so much as it is to point towards the aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual climate in which I think he created V.

One of the most impressive and provocative correlations between V. and surrealism has to do with two avant-garde reviews published in New York. In View and WVV, the French surrealists who exiled themselves to New York during the Occupation found outlets for their writing, graphics, and manifestos. In this self-imposed exile, Breton, Masson, Tanguy, Ray, Ernst, Duchamp, among others, formed an impressive core of talent and creative energy that remained active in New York throughout the Forties. Their first vehicle of expression was the extant avant-garde magazine View, which published their work from 1940 until about 1945. But by 1942, Breton had become dissatisfied with View's eclecticism, and together with David Hare, Duchamp, and Ernst, he launched the more uniformly surrealist WVV. Since WVV was thoroughly surrealist in orientation, it had an agenda, and each issue contained a manifesto-title page put together by Breton:

VVV
that is, V+V+V. We say

. . . — that is, not only

V as a vow—and energy—to return to a habitable and conceivable world, Victory over the forces of regression and of death unloosed at present on the earth, but also V beyond this first Victory, for this world can no more, and ought no more, be the same, V over that which tends to perpetuate the enslavement of man by man,

and beyond this

VV of that double Victory, V again over all that is opposed to the emancipation of the spirit, of which the first indispensable condition is the liberation of man,

whence

VV towards the emancipation of the spirit, through these necessary stages: it is only in this that our activity can recognize its end

Or again:

one knows that to

V which signifies the View around us, the eye turned towards the external world, the conscious surface,

some of us have not ceased to oppose

VV the View inside us, the eye turned toward the interior world and the depths of the unconscious,

whence

VV towards a synthesis, in a third term, of these two Views, the first V with its axis on the EGO and the reality principle, the second VV on the SELF and the pleasure principle--the resolution of their contradiction tending only to the continual, systematic enlargement of the field of consciousness

towards a total view,

VVV

which translates all the reactions of the eternal upon the actual, of the psychic upon the physical, and takes account of the myth in process of formation, beneath the VEIL of happenings.

Apart from evident similarities between the mere title of Pynchon's novel and that of the review VVV, the message of Breton's manifesto, with its plethora of explicated V's, reads

like a veritable list of V.'s general themes. Together with Minotaure, VVV was one of the most striking of the surrealist magazines, and it often figures in histories, exhibitions, and discussions of the movement.² Insofar as VVV is mentioned often and its title page frequently reproduced, there is a good possibility that Pynchon's art history class at Cornell made reference to it—evidently he took the class in 1957-58—or that Pynchon's enthusiasm for the surrealists led him to the discovery of VVV on his own, perhaps in the New York Public Library, where Pynchon is reported to have often worked and where to this day both VVV and View remain readily available.³ The uncanny correlations between Breton's exposition of V's in the VVV title page and the general themes of V. suggest such a link.

As much as there is reason to suspect Pynchon may have seen VVV, there is circumstantial evidence suggesting he knew of View as well. This would not be altogether surprising since the two are often discussed in tandem. Pynchon, for example, has Fausto Majstral cite a relatively obscure novel, Hebdomeros, as one of his inspirations. In fact, Hebdomeros is a surrealist novel by the painter Giorgio de Chirico (mentioned elsewhere in V., as we shall see), a man whose work the surrealists esteemed, largely because it adumbrated their own. Hebdomeros, for example, foreshadowed their literary endeavors with its dreamscapes, its journey motif, its structure that reads like a picaresque of the subconscious and thus is so suggestive of the automatic writing to which the surrealists were so attached. The point here, however, is that, if Pynchon read Hebdomeros (and there is reason to believe he did⁴), he read it either in an obscure 1929 French edition, and this seems unlikely, or in View, where it was published in two parts in a translation done by Paul Bowles in 1944. No other English translation was available until 1966, three years after V. was published.⁵

De Chirico had already attracted attention in the New York art world before the surrealists came to New York bringing their enthusiasm for his work with them and subsequently spreading it to Americans like Bowles, among others. In 1935-36 de Chirico visited New York to sell paintings and participate in shows. His major collector, promoter, and early defender in New York was James Thrall Soby. Soby's collection of de Chirico was the most extensive anywhere, and it was this collection that was eventually bequeathed to the New York Museum of Modern Art (hereafter NYMMA), becoming part of its permanent collection. Not only was Soby the man who largely made de Chirico's paintings present in New York; he also frequently wrote about the artist. If Pynchon, for example, had only read about Hebdomeros without actually reading the novel, Soby is a likely source.⁶

Another example of the de Chirico-V. connection that winds back to the surrealists exiled in New York has to do with Pynchon's "Catatonic Expressionist," Slab. Slab paints endless sequences of Cheese Danishes, but his obsession is more than another example of Pynchon's humor. De Chirico himself painted series after series of paintings of pastries, and the best of these were bought by Soby and bequeathed to the NYMMA. In

September and October of 1955, the NYMMA had a major exhibition of de Chirico for which Soby wrote the catalogue. Pynchon had just finished his first two years at Cornell and would shortly leave on Navy duty. It appears he had not yet taken his art history elective, and if we assume this class is the most likely source of his discovery of the surrealists, we would have to assume here a prior interest in contemporary art sufficient for Pynchon to go see the de Chirico exhibit. In any case, textual correlations and edition history both suggest an "early" awareness on Pynchon's part of Hebdomeros. Had he discovered Soby's mention of Hebdomeros and de Chirico's obsessive painting of pastries in the catalogue?

Elsewhere in V. Pynchon mentions Paola's having a print of "di Chirico's street." Is it possible that Paola's print is that of de Chirico's most famous painting—one that hung for a long time in Breton's apartment, figured as a backdrop for many surrealist gatherings, and eventually ended up in the NYMMA collection—the well-known Melancholy and Mystery of a Street? Does the Street that figures so importantly in V. find its origin, or at least its imaginative equivalent, in the many paintings by de Chirico of emptied, eerie streets like that in Melancholy and Mystery of a Street?

To call Slab a "Catatonic Expressionist" is another of Pynchon's jokes, of course, but its humor depends on what New York-based Abstract Expressionism was, and once again, highly suggestive cultural links between V. and the exiled French surrealists seem at play. The Abstract Expressionists grouped around Pollock, Motherwell, and Rothko shared a primary tenet having to do with "action painting" as a technique, the rough equivalent in painting for "automatic writing" in surrealist writing. Action painting is most associated with Jackson Pollock, but the spontaneity it presupposes was a characteristic of the movement.

The fact is that action painting was perhaps the single most important inheritance of the surrealist presence in New York for Abstract Expressionists like Motherwell, Rothko, and Pollock, among others. Not only did these artists contribute to both View and VVV; they came under the influence of the surrealist aesthetic—"automatism" is only one such influence—because people like Matta, Tanguy, Ernst, Masson, and Breton arrived on the New York art scene at precisely the moment when a whole generation of young American artists was just coming into maturity. According to one art historian, the surrealist technique of "automatism" aided the young American artists to free themselves of academicism and, through the route of action painting and spontaneity, tap their creative resources in what has come to be called Abstract Expressionism.⁹ That Slab paints endless sequences of Cheese Danishes may be a humorous remaking of the croissants and pastries that obsessed de Chirico, but that he is a "Catatonic Expressionist" plays upon the important liberating factor of automatism for the Abstract Expressionists, something they inherited from the French surrealists. Pynchon's

off-the-wall joke is built upon knowledge of everything that Rothko, Motherwell, and Pollock represented.

Another of V.'s artists who suggests Pynchon's familiarity with the French surrealist presence in New York is Fergus Mixolydian. When Pynchon writes that Mixolydian's creative ventures included taking a wall from a men's room stall in Penn Station and entering it in an art exhibit "as what the old Dadaists called a 'ready-made,'" he is retelling an infamous anecdote about Marcel Duchamp, an anecdote the surrealists cherished and which has become legendary within the history of the movement. In 1917 Duchamp was invited to serve on the exhibition jury of New York's Grand Central Palace Exhibit (patterned along the lines of the surrealists' Independents exhibits in Paris). Duchamp secured a mass-produced ceramic urinal, signed it "R. Mutt," titled it Fountain, and submitted it to the theoretically open-entry exhibit. When it was refused admission, Duchamp resigned from the jury in protest.¹⁰

Not only was Duchamp one of the "old Dadaists" Pynchon mentions; it was Duchamp himself who coined the term "ready-made" especially for the mass-produced objects, gadgets, and devices for which America was becoming so famous. Duchamp merely took such objects from their banal and quotidian contexts, altered them slightly, and by presenting them in other less banal and more "aesthetic" contexts, such as in shows and galleries, claimed them as "ready-made" works of art. The infamous Fountain was merely one of the first of Duchamp's "ready-mades"; others like Bicycle Wheel followed. Both of these well-known Duchamp ready-mades, for example, were initially shown in New York's Sidney Janis Gallery, and eventually they, too, like much of the art we have been discussing, ended up in the NYMMA to become part of the general New York artistic patrimony.¹¹ The point is not only that the "old Dadaist" Duchamp is the legendary figure upon whom Mixolydian is modeled; more important, I think, is considering this and other of the details I have been mentioning as evidence of how important the surrealists were to enriching that patrimony for artists and writers in New York. Duchamp's ready-mades, de Chirico's paintings, Breton's avant-garde review—these remained objectively present in New York as materials for inspiration, imitation, and creative provocation for a whole generation of artists and writers coming of age in the Fifties.

In fact, Pynchon's portrait—at times satiric—of the Whole Sick Crew is a rough sketch of the New York avant-garde circa 1955-1960, years in which Pynchon finished college and began writing V. while living in Greenwich Village. The slightest details in V. often resonate with the quasi-bohemian currents of the period: take, for example, Pynchon's mentioning the vogue of "accidental art" during the mid-Fifties, or the Whole Sick Crew's "aesthetic experience" before an open refrigerator during one of their parties. This latter, a relatively unimportant detail, recalls Rauschenberg's 1955 Interview, a kind of collage-sculpture consisting of an open cupboard door with various banal objects exposed—family photographs, a baseball,

etc. Rauschenberg insisted he worked "in that gap between" art and life, and generally avowed his debt to Duchamp.¹²

The extent to which the New York heritage of Dada and surrealism, to use William S. Rubin's words,¹³ clearly is a factor in contemporary American literature has, I think, tended to be underestimated in a way that has not occurred in our understanding of the modern plastic arts. Men like James Thrall Soby, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and Sidney Janis, among others, and the institutions they represented--the museums, the galleries, the forward-thinking collectors--succeeded in legitimizing, indeed "institutionalizing" the avant-garde aesthetic of the exiled French surrealists by collecting, exhibiting, defending, and maintaining their work as a highly visible part of the artistic and cultural matrix of New York; and they thus made certain aesthetic strategies and values available for a budding writer like Pynchon.

By the time Pynchon was actually composing V. in Greenwich Village, the surrealist and Dadaist undercurrents were surfacing and becoming pretty explicit. In 1959, for example, the NYMMA put together a large show of many works that ultimately derived from this heritage. The "New Images of Man" exhibit, as one of its participants wrote, can be seen

as part of the Dada revival which has been flourishing since the last decade and which seems to be as little confined to any particular locality as was the original movement. The Dada groups which sprang up in Zurich and New York during the First World War were in rebellion against the lies of convention, against militarism and the suicide of war. It is hardly surprising that at a time when the means of mass communication have made for a much greater conformity and when lunacy seems to have become world policy, young artists conjure up a new kind of trenchant mockery.¹⁴

Frank O'Hara, also writing for the exhibit catalogue, declared that "In physics and philosophy, in technology and communication, the elements of change and motion underlie the concepts of our own time. In one way or another, a great many artists have attempted to cast these principles of transformation and of a world in flux into visual form."¹⁵ If anything, in V. Pynchon "conjures up a trenchant mockery" of modern forces of mass destruction and also recasts "principles of transformation and of a world in flux" into literary form. In fact, insofar as the "New Images of Man" exhibit was the culmination of the surrealist and Dadaist heritage in New York, similarities between passages in its catalogue and the general thematic concerns of V. tend to substantiate the suggestion I have been making here--that Pynchon was enriched by the Dadaist and surrealist heritage in New York and that at least in V. he was a creative participant in that cultural matrix. In the Preface to the exhibit catalogue, Paul Tillich wrote that "Whenever a new period is conceived in

the womb of the preceding period, a new image of man pushes toward the surface and finally breaks through.¹⁶ The new image of man that Tillich saw in the exhibit art was one of man in rebellion against "the dehumanizing structure of totalitarian systems," the "consequences of technical mass evil," and "the danger of [man's] losing his humanity and of becoming a thing amongst the things he produces."¹⁷ These are themes central to *V.* Consider Jean Dubuffet's remark cited in the catalogue: "the key to things must not be as we imagine it, but . . . the world must be ruled by strange systems of which we have not the slightest inkling."¹⁸ Once again, a more concise declaration of a concern shared by Pynchon could not be had.

The "New Images of Man" exhibit took place at the NYMMA from late September through November 1959. By this time, Pynchon had returned from his Naval duty in a Mediterranean tense with the Suez Crisis; the world had been on the brink of World War III during his ship duty. Now he had returned to graduate from Cornell in June 1959. After having performed his military service during a moment of extreme world tension, after having worked as an apprentice—a "slow learner," to use his words—on the staff of *The Cornell Writer*, in which he published an early story, after having installed himself in Greenwich Village, where he worked on *V.* until February 1960, he began like the artists on exhibit not far from him at the NYMMA to construct for himself a "new image of man." His techniques in *V.* owe much to surrealist assemblage, and his themes and preoccupations seem largely to have been formulated within what Rubin calls the Dadaist and surrealist heritage in New York.

By 1960 the surrealists' intrusion into the New York art scene was complete. Happenings, events, avant-garde reviews, manifestos, shows in the galleries and museums, and the efforts of private collectors had made of a once marginal, deviant, and underground movement a driving cultural and artistic force. From November to January 1960, New York's D'Arcy Galleries mounted another major surrealist exhibit, this time directed by Andre Breton and Marcel Duchamp themselves. The exhibit was titled "The Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain." Its theme was more or less explicitly the surrealist presence in America, but by then Pynchon had left Greenwich Village, taking the manuscript of *V.* with him, to work on technical documents for Boeing in Seattle. At the moment when the surrealist presence in New York broke surface, Pynchon had disappeared into the belly of the leviathan

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Notes

¹ *VVV* 4, Feb. 1944. Ed. David Hare, Andre Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and Max Ernst.

² Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, Exposition Catalogue, Hayward Gallery, London, January 11-March 27, 1978 (Arts Council of Great Britain:

Westerham Press, 1978) 375-76. The title page of VVV is reproduced in Dawn Ades, Dada and Surrealism Reviewed, and in Surrealists on Art, ed. Lucy Lippard (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970) 212.

3 Pynchon may indeed have seen View or VVV in the New York Public Library, where apparently he worked in the north wing of the reading room. According to Francis O. Mattson, Curator of Rare Books for the New York Public Library, both VVV and View are to this day in the stacks, the former in the Art Division and the latter in the General Research Division. According to a library spokesperson, VVV and View have always been "rapidly accessible." Letter of October 22, 1987 to my query from Francis O. Mattson, Curator of Rare Books; letter of October 23, 1987 from Reproduction Services, New York Public Library. Pynchon's working habits at the NYPL are mentioned in Earl Ganz, "Pynchon in Hiding," Plum 3 (1980): 5-20.

4 There is not sufficient place here to discuss fully the de Chirico-V. link, but there is both textual and extra-textual evidence suggesting correspondence between the two novels. See note 6 below.

5 Giorgio de Chirico, Hebdomeros, trans. Paul Bowles. View, Series 4, Autumn 1944, and No. 4, December 1944. The edition history of Hebdomeros is as follows: 1929, original French edition (Paris: Editions de Carrefour); 1942, Italian edition; and 1964 French re-edition. In 1966 Four Seasons Book Society in New York published Hebdomeros, trans. with an Introduction by James Hodkinson. In 1968 a British edition appeared (London: Peter Owen Ltd.) trans. Margaret Grosland. The same year Viking brought out the American version of this edition. My source for this edition history is Flammarion, the holder of world rights to Hebdomeros.

6 In both The Early Chirico (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1941) and De Chirico (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), James Thrall Soby discussed aspects of de Chirico in words that resonate with V. "'To be really immortal,' de Chirico wrote, 'a work of art must go completely beyond the limits of the human: good sense and logic will be missing from it In this way it will come close to the dream-state, and also the mentality of children.'" Quoted by Soby in De Chirico 6. Of Hebdomeros Soby wrote "In this picaresque of the imagination de Chirico relates how Hebdomeros, the central character, moves from place to place (if 'place' is not too tangible a word) in search of what is primarily Eternal Truth, encountering strange situations on the way, and philosophizing about them in a dramatic if inconclusive manner." De Chirico 6-7. See also page 8 for other such passages.

⁷ Slab's Cheese Danishes have a lot in common with de Chirico's paintings of pastries: "Certain objects occur so frequently in Chirico's early paintings that they are clearly obsessive in origin," wrote Soby. "For example, edible objects--fruit, candy, biscuits and vegetables--occur time and again in these paintings As a child, Chirico is said to have had an enormously sensual appetite for sweets and delicacies, many of them forbidden him. As an adult in the Italian army at Ferrara, he spent his hours of leave in pastry shops, in an ecstasy of gratification, buying the macarons and biscuits which play so important a part in the paintings of his 'metaphysical' period. Whatever its ulterior motivation, physiological or psychological gourmandism itself is a definite obsession, and perhaps it alone accounts for the fact that edible objects in Chirico's paintings are rendered with such sharp clarity of appeal." The Early Chirico 33-34.

⁸ De Chirico's series of mysterious, empty streets and squares is as curious as his paintings of pastries. Delights of a Poet, Montparnasse Station, and Enigma of a Day are all well-known examples of this series, and all were in the Soby bequest to the NYMMA. De Chirico, with texts by Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, Domenico Ponzio, Wieland Schmied, Dennis Messler (Paris: Societé Nouvelle des Editions du Chêne, 1979). [Editors' Note: Melancholy and Mystery of a Street appears on the dust-jacket of David Seed's very recent The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1988). Seed discusses aspects of the de Chirico-Pynchon connection on pages 74 and 102 in ways that are consistent with Vella's more detailed discussion here.]

⁹ The arrival of the surrealists in New York in the late Thirties and early Forties was especially important for the then maturing group of American artists. They were influenced by surrealist aesthetic strategies such as the "personage" motif, biomorphism, primitivism, collage, frottage, and automatism. In a more removed way, their influence continued well into the Sixties in the Pop Art movement. According to Lucy Lippard, surrealist "ideas and techniques have expanded and been absorbed so thoroughly that traces of the original esthetic and antiesthetic can be found in the most unlikely places." One of these places is recent American prose fiction, as I have been suggesting here. Surrealists on Art 212.

¹⁰ The Duchamp anecdote is recapitulated in Dawn Ades, Dada and Surrealism (Woodbury, NY: Barron's, 1978) 11. The anecdote is frequently retold in histories of the movement.

11 See William S. Rubin, Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982) and Bernard Noël, Marseille—New York 1940-1945 (Paris: André Dimanche, 1985) with parallel English trans. by Jeffrey Abrams.

12 See Rubin 56-59. In Slow Learner, Pynchon recalls his youthful enthusiasm for the Beats, themselves greatly influenced by surrealism. For a "reconstruction" of the Beat scene and the general vie de bohème of Greenwich Village in 1960 when Pynchon was writing V., see Ned Polsky, Hustlers, Beats, and Others (London: Penguin, 1971). Polsky is a sociologist whose "participant-observer" study, apart from its sociology, enables us to get a sense of Village life at the moment Pynchon was writing V.

13 Rubin 56-59.

14 Peter Selz, New Images of Man, Exhibition Catalogue, with a prefatory note by Paul Tillich. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959). Distributed by Doubleday. 141.

15 Selz 146.

16 Selz 9.

17 Selz 9.

18 Selz 63-64.