

The Clock as Metaphor
in "Mondaugen's Story"

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To Tony Tanner, Pynchon's novels suggest "that the fantasies we build to help us live represent, in fact, an infiltration of that death we think we are so eager to postpone."¹ Tanner refers here to a propensity of many to "avoid confronting the human reality of other people, and of themselves, by all manner of depersonalizing strategies" (23). To avoid the specter of death, men either exchange their humanity for "inanimate objects and abstract theories"² or reduce their fellows--those reminders of age, decay, ineluctable mortality--to inconsequential, dehumanized object status. The novel *V.* offers manifold examples of both tendencies. Rachel's fondness for her M.G., Eigenvalue's attachment to his precious dentures, Mantissa's obsession with Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, and, obviously, *V.*'s desire for "a foot of amber and gold" (459) illustrate how far people will go in seeking some comforting thing, some object "to pray to,"³ to quote Henry Adams. The reduction of people to "thing-status" (Tanner 23) is no less apparent in *V.*'s manipulation of Mélanie and the "near-inanimate barmen, taxi-drivers, bellhops, guides" (384) populating the tourist's Baedeker world.

An equally popular response to death in *V.* is a rage for order. Sensing that "chaos [is] the law of nature" (Adams 451), man develops an urgency for the great plan, the universal schematic which ties all of life's varied and seemingly random elements into an intelligible, thus controllable, whole. Such a notion constitutes Sidney Stencil's conception of "The Situation," and he recognizes that the organization which man deludes himself into perceiving in the world has no "objective reality" (174) and that "order [is] the dream of man" (Adams 451).

This demand for meaning and orderliness also finds expression in the image of the clock in *V.* Allusions to time and clocks appear throughout the novel. It is not for nothing that when seeking work and purpose

Profane visits the "Space/Time Employment Agency" (199) where he meets "a slim girl who seem[s] to be all tight--tight underwear, stockings, ligaments, tendons, mouth, a true windup woman--mov[ing] precisely" (200) through the hours of her day. Her name, Rachel Owlglass, conjures up the hourglass. Likewise, Profane feels somehow trapped in the "simple clockwork" (201) of a yo-yo's existence.

Of more interest, however, is the clock as a metaphor for the closed system, "an isolation defined by boundaries that enclose a totality and an organization that tends increasingly toward chaos."⁴ The clock, as a mechanism of redundancy operating along rigidly defined and controlled lines, is designed to record time through a fixed scale of twelve hours, creating an artificial order Pynchon terms a perpetual "mirror-time" (36), time as merely repetition, a reflection of that which has already been, not a process toward something new or different. When robbed of energy, either electrical or mechanical, the clock loses organization and slips into disorder, the eventual end of all closed systems, whether biological, mechanical, or social. Nowhere is this metaphorical function of the clock more evident than in "Mondaugen's Story." More particularly, clock imagery informs the entropic process of Foppl's siege party, an affair which moves steadily toward disorder as the fortress becomes further isolated from the people and events surrounding it.

Foppl's fortress itself has some affinity with the clock, and both can be seen as closed systems. Constructed as a redoubt of German imperialism, the fortress stands as a tribute to von Trotha's abominations of 1904 and a buttress--a means both to "confront shapeless space" (Tanner 34) and to arrest time, to replay history--against the recession of the sanguinary glory won in Deutsch-Sudwestafrika. A clock "controls" time by imposing on what is essentially a continuum an arbitrary, thus factitious, mechanical segmentation and unvarying reiteration. Like the clock, the fortress provides Foppl and his guests a means by which they may "control time . . . [and] impose their own history on the events of the world" (Plater 39), allowing them an

opportunity to recreate the events of "nearly twenty years" (223) past. Annular, with ravines and fortifications set in ever-tightening, concentric circles, the fortress appears to be a clock on a grand scale when seen from above. Also, its internal workings are as well ordered as the clock's. Moving through a series of recurring meals, parties, debaucheries, and killings, the inhabitants "mark time" in an environment hermetically sealed off from the outside world, perpetuating a redundancy of movement as thorough as that of the clock. Such repetitiveness brings about a disregard among the residents for human life. Indulging in life only as voyeurs, they step out of the realm of human compassion and into a solipsistic detachment which leads them to treat others as objects, to live in a hall of mirrors where "they experience life only as spectacle" (Tanner 25).

The clock dominates the whole story as well, and in his wanderings Mondaugen confronts numerous dehumanized characters who have become clocklike. Before his stay at Foppl's, Mondaugen meets Willem van Wijk, a petty official who sees himself and other bureaucrats as

the lead weights of a fantastic clock,
necessary to keep it in motion, to keep an
ordered sense of history and time prevailing
against chaos. (216)

In his behavioral regularity, Foppl approaches clockwork, assembling in his mirror-time fascination an array of souvenirs from the von Trotha era. Portraits of the general adorn galleries and hallways; military attire of the period garbs many revelers--especially Foppl himself--and the bloody counter-rebellion's ubiquitous emblem, the sjambok-scarred Bondel, presents itself at almost every turn. Most fittingly, in the very bowels of his home Foppl maintains a mechanical solar system. Set in motion through a complicated arrangement of belts, pulleys, and gears attached to a treadmill, the planetarium reduces its operator--usually a Bondel--to a trifling part of its mechanism, making him party to the "parody of space" (222) and time it represents. The planetarium, like the fortress, simulates a clock, "parodying" in this instance the movements of the celestial spheres on

which time is based. Yet nothing emulates the clock more poignantly than Vera Meroving, V. in one of her many guises. In mad allegiance to the clock, she replaces one of her eyes with a miniature timepiece complete with

the delicately-wrought wheels, springs, ratchets of a watch, wound by a gold key which [she] wore on a slender chain round her neck. (219)

Hoping to force "the events of life to conform to some elaborate vision known only to her" (Plater 33), Vera Meroving appropriates time and history even more deliberately than Foppl. Her assimilation of time, at least the instrument thereof, indicates a "closed world of time made personal" (Plater 34).

Only Mondaugen escapes the physically and spiritually debilitating fortress, Foppl's haven of arrested time. Mondaugen's departure, to some extent, results from his access to external events, since the "sferics" he monitors are the "only link remaining with the kind of time that continued to pass outside Foppl's" (256). Although tempted, as are Weissmann and others, to find an absolute "code" (258) in the disparate atmospheric whistles, pops, and static his apparatus records, Mondaugen refrains from interpreting them as some conscious message, a stance foreshadowing his position in Gravity's Rainbow. An older Mondaugen, after his stint in Africa, "recognizes the need for an illusion of order and sequence with which men can explain their existences," yet he rejects "a cause and effect, sequential system of time and history," subscribing instead to an "Einsteinian," relativistic view of the world (Plater 37). The seeds of such consciousness rest in the only "message," if it may be deemed such, the sferics communicate in V.: "The world is all that the case is'" (259), the opening proposition of Wittgenstein's Tractatus.

This inkling of the essential randomness, the accidental make-up, of life leads Mondaugen to abandon the seeming, insular security of Foppl's for free-flowing time. He flees from a people, particularly Foppl and Vera Meroving, who have not only appropriated

time and history but also given it a specific, fixed geography of Germany or of desirable colonial substitutes. Opting for the living world of the present, Mondaugen leaves the fortress to the "dehumanized and aloof" (260), saved from extinction in Foppl's personal space/time continuum by the knowledge "that history is all that is the experience of time" (Plater 41), by the realization that events carry with them a multitude of possible "historical" interpretations, no one necessarily more valid than another. When he last sees them, the guests and host alike are bleached "Fasching-white" (260), their faces little more than "concave cheeks, highlighted temples, bone of the starved corpse" (226) as are those of the masses populating depression Munich. Transformed by the slant and intensity of the light of the morning sun into the ghosts haunting Mondaugen's Fasching dream--ghosts who are caught in the reach of the "black . . . clock" which ticks "terribly loud in strange waves of silence that [sweep] regularly over the company" (226)--the fortress's inhabitants are victims of "the despotism of artificial order which nature abhor[s]" (Adams 458):

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Notes

¹ Tony Tanner, "V. and V-2," in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 36.

² Thomas Pynchon, V. (1963; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1964), 380.

³ Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams, ed. Ernest Samuels (1918; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 380.

⁴ William M. Plater, The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), 2.