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Abstract:

This article documents the contents of Thomas Pynchon's essay "Hallowe'en? Over Already?," positing that the approach Pynchon takes to discussing the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, a tour of which Pynchon describes, provides an approach for writing a biography of Pynchon.

Thomas Pynchon and the Vacuum Salesman in Guadalajara

Albert Rolls

In the essay "Hallowe'en? Over Already?" (1999), Thomas Pynchon writes about some of the fall 1998 goings on at the Cathedral School in New York City, where his son, Jackson, was enrolled in the second grade. They included a picnic, though not for Hallowe'en;[1] the Blessing of the Animals, which the Pynchons missed that year as they had the year before, at the church associated with the school, the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine; and a field trip to the Tenafly Nature Center, where the second grade observed and were observed by a giant bullfrog, compensation "(sort of)"[2] for missing the elephant's yearly appearance at the Blessing.[3] Pynchon goes on to recall an "impromptu tour" (1) of the Cathedral that he and his son, along with a number of other children, were treated to the previous year. Under Pynchon's eye and the children's curiosity, which had been awakened by the enthusiasm of their tour guide, Gina Bria Vescovi, the church becomes a site of both actual and imaginative exploration, as if it were "a sinister and wonderful Card Table which exhibits the cheaper Wave-like Grain known in the Trade as Wand'ring Heart, causing an illusion of Depth into which for years children have gaz'd as into the illustrated Pages of Books."[4]

The children's gazes, of course, had objects less illusionary to explore at the Cathedral than those that can be projected into an eccentric eighteenth-century wood grain. The highlights include "organ consoles, amplifiers, hiding places," and a "Pentecostal profusion of mini-chapels" (3). The chapels, the guide reveals, were incorporated into the building—the "'original core'" of which "'was an orphanage, in the oldest and best sense, a place for people who had nowhere else to go'" (3)—for the benefit of newcomers arriving in the city during the church's construction, something that ties the architecture of the building to the history of the United States, particularly "the great wave of immigration" (3) around the turn of the century. The setting isn't completely lacking in illusion: lest we mistake the scene's interest as simply factual, Pynchon draws his readers' attention to the nave that seems high enough to accommodate the Statue of Liberty, presumably from the children's perspective—although the reference to Lady Liberty connects Pynchon's interest in the Cathedral's hospitable place in the history of immigration to the children's wonder—and to a stained-glass window depicting the Titanic in which the children search for Leonardo DiCaprio, perhaps another reference to the United States' immigrant past, to which DiCaprio's character in the movie *Titanic* (1997) would have belonged. Pynchon then turns his focus to spiral staircases that wind

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up into shadows inaccessible to the public and about which the knowledgeable guide will say nothing except that we wouldn't believe what was up there. More questioning on Pynchon's part merely elicits the guide's mild laughter.

Pynchon is looking forward to revisiting, along with the children, the Cathedral for another tour. Maybe this time he'll get upstairs, but "with Hallowe'en coming" (3) that might not be the best idea. What's there? That becomes the question. Playing off the Cathedral tradition of showing classic horror movies during Hallowe'en week and an apparent rumor that a bishop's ghost haunts the pews—which may be an allusion to the spectacle of "a giant ghost rising from the august tomb of Bishop William Manning" that was an element of the yearly holiday festivities that accompanied the film festival[5]—Pynchon offers the possibility of bats, "vampire bats" (3) or strange people swinging on bell ropes. He concludes by wondering if he should wear his kid's Darth Vader costume from the previous year and carry its light, with new batteries "just in case" (3).

This rare autobiographical essay, written for the sole delight of the Cathedral School community—though it is hard to imagine that Pynchon wasn't resigned to having copies find their way onto the collector's market—provides a model, perhaps the best one available at present, for fashioning a biography of Pynchon. One is obliged, after all, to "*project a world*" or "[i]f not project then at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among constellations and trace out your Dragon, Whale, Southern Cross,"[6] even if one also takes part in a metaphorical quest—as Mathew Winston characterizes the process of researching his early biographical essay—analogous to the one Stencil is on in *V.* (1963). The biographer, in fact, approaches Pynchon's life much as Pynchon approaches the Cathedral and the shadows above its spiraled staircases and the space beyond—or the children the objects they come across, particularly the stained-glass picture of the Titanic, a representative example, the reader assumes—developing a text from available information, whether it derives from rumor or more substantial sources. The question one is left asking is not only "What is there to be found?" but also "What shape can be traced over the cluster of information that one finds?"

Consider, for example, the Pynchon anecdotes told by the television producer Deane Rink—who attended Cornell a few years after Pynchon and studied creative writing under Walter Slatoff, with whom Pynchon had also studied. Rink tells his stories as part of an early Web exercise in which he sent emails for publication to the *B&R Samizdat Express* at the end of 1996, when he was in McMurdo, Antarctica, to work on *Live from Antarctica* (1997) for PBS productions. Discussing mostly literary figures, Rink turns to Pynchon and the origin of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," which Rink initially mistakes for "Under the Rose," an error he asks to have corrected in a subsequent email. Claiming Slatoff as his source, Rink writes that in order to ignite an otherwise desultory creative writing class, Slatoff put "a random sentence on the board and ask[ed] everybody in class to start off with that sentence and write for the whole hour. Pynchon

refused to turn his paper in at hour's end, but walked across the hall to the English Dept. office and continued to scribble away for another hour. He finally turned the story in: it was subsequently published in *Epoch* . . . [and] was anthologized in the *Best Short Stories* of whatever year that was."[7]

The anecdote is fascinating, but even if one ignores the confusion over which short story Rink is discussing and which one appeared in *Best American Short Stories,*[8] one remains unsure of its value as biographical fact. Rink is ad libbing to impress an audience —as Slatoff may well have done to inspire a desultory class in which Rink participated— with what he hopes will be accepted as insider knowledge, something further illustrated by his "revelation" that while *V.* was Pynchon's first published novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) was the first to be written, an assertion that leaves one wondering whether Rink had read the second novel, which contains references that clearly place its time of composition after *V.* 's publication, or, if he had, whether he remembered it. Rink further reveals his desire to impress when he recalls, "Rumor was that he [Pynchon] was offered an instant professorship upon graduation, but turned it down to sell vacuum cleaners in Guadalajara." The professorship is an embellished characterization of the Wilson Fellowship that Pynchon was offered. It would have obliged Pynchon to teach, but he turned it down to focus on his writing. The vacuum-salesman business, by contrast, is obvious fiction, mentioned for its shock value and perhaps to evince the mysteriousness of Pynchon's public persona. Still, it raises a question, even if Rink never asserts it is true: whose story is it, Rink's or the Cornell rumor mill's of the mid-sixties, when it apparently circulated? Without corroboration from another student of the period, one isn't inclined to take Rink at his word, but the problem turns out to be more complicated than one would at first imagine.

That wild rumors about Pynchon circulated on the Cornell campus in the 1960s is certainly believable. Even before he became a novelist, John Diebold and Michael Goodwin—both Cornell students in the early 1960s—tell us, Pynchon was a subject of discussion there, "a well-known campus character, respected as much for his adventures with Cornell Folk Song Club president Richard Fariña as for his writing abilities."[9] The vacuum-salesman story could simply be one of the rumors. Rink, however, isn't the only one to relate a story about Pynchon being a vacuum salesman, and the context of the other one has nothing to do with Cornell campus conjecture. In a review of *Journey into the Mind of [P.]* (2002), Ron Silliman recalls Mimi Fariña, Fariña's widow, telling him in the early seventies, before the appearance of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), "Pynchon was . . . selling vacuum cleaners door to door, having exhausted his earnings as a writer," though Silliman adds, "It was hard to envision then & I still don't know if Mimi was teasing me."[10]

Rink could have picked up the notion that Pynchon was a vacuum salesman from someplace other than Cornell—from someone else Mimi or another member of

Pynchon's circle misinformed or from a source further removed—forgotten where he heard the story, and assumed he must have done so while he was in college. Pynchon or someone among his circle could also have heard about the Cornell rumor and decided it would be amusing to spread it beyond the campus community, altering some of its elements to furnish it with an air of credibility, however slight. Other possibilities for where the story originated are imaginable, though it would be pleasant to think that Pynchon had something to do with Mimi's answering inquiries about her late husband's friend with the absurd notion—that he had provided her with a tale to relate. That such was the case isn't beyond the realm of possibility. In 1963 Pynchon had told Faith Sale in the event any reporters called her in search of information about him, she should "either (a) tell them nothing at all, or (b) better, tell them something far out, like I am a Negro living in Ft. Wayne with my grandmother and keeping her in narcotics by working as a freelance jobber in auto accessories. And very fat, though I subsist on nothing but saki [*sic*] and raw Brussels sprouts."[11]

If his suggestion to Sale or his considering telling *Who's Who,* "he was born in Mexico, that his parents were Irving Pynchon and Guadalupe Ibarguengotia and that he was 'named Exotic Dancers Man of the Year in 1957' and 'regional coordinator for the March of Edsel Owners on Washington (MEOW) in 1961'"[12] is any indication, Pynchon has toyed with the possibilities his approach to publicity offered throughout his career. And he, at least occasionally, has taken on a role similar to the one Ms. Vescovi assumes on the Cathedral tour when dealing with the space above the spiral stairs, that is, serving as the unforthcoming, amused guide. He, for instance, wrote, or is believed to have written, to the *Soho Weekly News* to say "Not bad, keep trying,"[13] after it published, in 1976, John Calvin Batchelor's "Thomas Pynchon Is Not Thomas Pynchon," an article in which Batchelor claimed "Thomas Pynchon" was a pseudonym that J.D. Salinger had assumed.[14] More publicly, Pynchon appeared on the *Simpsons*, making fun of his reputation for reclusiveness: "Hey, over here! Have your picture taken with a reclusive author! Today only, we'll throw in a free autograph! But wait, there's more!"

Beyond his novels, Pynchon has more often addressed the public with silence—nonetheless insisting, facetiously no doubt, in a 1978 letter to Candida Donadio, "As for spilling my life story, I try to do that all the time. Nobody ever wants to listen for some strange reason."[15] The record has, as a result, become colored by "gossip about girlfriends, drug use, favorite TV programs and pig fetishes, and trivia about eating habits and clothing preferences,"[16] as John Krafft writes. The portrait of Pynchon that the biographer can sketch is, therefore, a mixture of rumor and fact, both of which are a part of the story of the public figure Thomas Pynchon has simultaneously become and avoided being and thus are important to understanding the making of Thomas Pynchon.

Authors Notes

I'd like to thank John Krafft for his generous editorial advice.

End notes

1. Paul Royster's description of the essay as "a 500-word article on [Pynchon's] son's school Halloween picnic," information taken from the rare-bookseller Ken Lopez's Catalogue 135 or 139, is inaccurate. The picnic, mentioned at the beginning of the introductory paragraph, is only touched upon briefly and does not appear to have had anything to do with Hallowe'en, which had yet to arrive, suggesting the essay was written in mid-October. The picnic could have been as early as September, relating perhaps to the beginning of the school year. The Blessing of the Animals, mentioned right after the picnic, is held the first Sunday of October each year, and the trip to the Tenafly Nature Center took place, and is discussed, after the Blessing. The sequence suggests a progression of events from picnic, to missed Blessing, to field trip, and the "Over Already" of the title must therefore reference the date not of composition but of publication, January 1999, adding a note of disappointment to the essay, maybe because the second tour of the Cathedral did not take place.

2. "Hallowe'en? Over Already?," 1. Further references will be cited parenthetically.

3. The elephant had been a fixture of the Blessing for years; it was missing in 2011, "the elephant that normally came ha[ving] died." See Paz.

4. *Mason & Dixon,* 1.

5. Bell.

6. *Crying of Lot 49*, 82.

7. Rink.

8. "Entropy" appeared in the *Best American Short Stories* in 1961; "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," while it never appeared in the *Best American Short Stories*, did receive an honorable mention in that publication in 1960.

9. Diebold and Goodwin.

10. Silliman.

11. Letter to Faith and Kirkpatrick Sale, June 2, 1963.

12. Gussow.

13. Quoted in Tanner, 18.

14. Batchelor later acknowledged that Salinger was not Pynchon. See Alexander, 254-56. Coincidently, Batchelor's son attended the Cathedral School at the same time as Pynchon's son, and an essay by Batchelor appears next to the latter part of "Hallowe'en? Over Already?" on page 3 of the January 1999 *Cathedral Newsletter*.

15. Gussow.

16. Krafft, 12.

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