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Pynchon's *Juvenilia* and *Against the Day.*

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"... the son is *doppelgänger* to the father." *V.*, 199

Time-travel with me back to the fall of '52 to eavesdrop on young Tom Pynchon during his senior year (1952-53), as he was writing "The Voice of the Hamster"columns for the Oyster Bay High School's newspaper, *The Purple and Gold*. In this essay I'll compare his early use of some tropes, or the style of his *Juvenilia*, to his later use of his signature tropes, or his mature style, as we find it in *Against the Day*. We'll discover, in this temporal right angle to linear time, as William Wordsworth may have been the first to say, "The child is father of the man." Then as now, Pynchon's major concern has always been justice.

I'll resist the usual temptation of an "early/middle/late" analytic scheme, because I believe Pynchon was from the start a precociously well-formed writer, as the adolescent Mozart and Mendelssohn were well-formed composers. Pynchon took to

writing larger scale works as he mastered control of his medium – from high-school columns, to college short stories, to post-graduate novels. This essay will show how he had invented a considerable number of his favorite adult tropes by the time he was fifteen!

If we view all of Pynchon's collected *Juvenilia* as one work, and apply the allusion-tracking method for reading Pynchon's *œuvre*, we ought to find many of Pynchon's favorite tropes in their earliest forms. And we do! In his first writings there is already "indicative naming" – half-names like Roscoe (U.S. Senator during post Civil War era, Roscoe Conkling) and Talleyrand (French statesman before, during, and after the French Revolution: Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord); homonymically similar names like Woodgrouse (sounds like English writer, P.G. Wodehouse, who was taken prisoner for a time by the Nazis at the outbreak of WWII); and encoded names like Sowfurckle (I'll leave that to you to decode). Pynchon will use these same techniques with greater finesse and fluidity later on. They are the same, only different.

Moreover, there are many other distinctive characteristics in this early work – seeking anonymity, disrespecting authority figures, and (though I'm not certain he'd studied Dante yet, beyond cursory adventures into his father's books) visiting Dantesque fantasy-punishment on those authority figures as reward for their perceived sins. And we surprisingly find the use of "counternarrative" in at least two of the "hamster columns." There may be other writers who use any one of these tropes, or even a handful, but none who use the whole package. You might say these particular tropes, taken together, are a snapshot of Pynchon's prose style as a teenager, and constitute an early *neo-natal* prediction of things to come.

Of the six Hamster columns in the OBHS newspaper that year, one has to do with stuffing an anonymous Czech substitute teacher down a dumb-waiter shaft; while another involves J. Fattington Woodgrouse, the W.C. Fieldsian hereditary school-

inspector, upon whom The Boys cast a furious onslaught. These seem merely adolescent games, titillation of an adolescent audience, but they pre-figure what will later become Dantesque retributions. And they serve as cover for some more serious contemplations.

Pynchon's long-term concern with Dante (most visibly in *V.* and *Vineland,* and arguably in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna") continues on page 154 of *Against the Day*, where he offers a direct quote from the carving above Hell's gate that (partially) reads; "I AM THE WAY INTO THE DOLEFUL CITY." Pynchon wants us to see this Dantean section (149-155) as an allegory about good and evil, something Christian, deep, dark, and universal. The city is "the city of man," as opposed to "the city of God" in the terminology of Saint Augustine, a source Dante used freely. Its objective correlative is twofold: a real-life "whirlpool" where the Hudson River feeds the Harlem river known as the "Spuyten Doivil" or (I've been told) "eye of the devil," also known as "Hell's Gate" and so marked by cartographers since New York was called New Amsterdam; and a "far-fallen object [that] would prove to harbor not merely [an evil] consciousness but an ancient purpose as well, and [an evil] plan for carrying it out" [my evil brackets]. Pynchon asks, not necessarily in a single question, if everyone in the city had been hypnotized by a rock? ... a falling star? ... a fallen Archangel? The echoes of Milton are very strong here; and Satan, who has merely a minor role in the Bible, is the dark star, the "darkness radiant"of *Paradise Lost.*

Another of Pynchon's favorite tropes is to have a character's name be a word we'd expect to find in, say, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but when we go to the alphabetized place where it should be, we find instead a series of cognates or a most likely homonym. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon offers a character named "Nefastis," which leads us to "nefastous," a synonym for "nefarious," meaning "wicked, iniquitous, villainous"; and to the preceding entry, "nefandous," meaning "not to be spoken of, abominable." He sometimes leads us in this way from one clue in a reference book, to another, nearby entry. Something like the code of the Jesuit brotherhood,

which led the reader to pertinent passages in the Bible. Pynchon's leading is the same, only different, as I'll explain.

In the quotation from Dante in *Against the Day*, in addition to what he *does* give us directly, which may satisfy those who would recognize the beginning and carry in mind the oft-quoted ending, "ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YE THAT ENTER"; Pynchon *withholds* what may be the most revelatory line of the entire quotation, about half-way through: "JUSTICE MOVED MY MAKER ON HIGH." This is confirmed a little farther on in the text when, on page 215 speaking of "The Chums," he writes: "As if those boys might be agents of a kind of *extra-human justice* ... " (his italics). This sentence uses the sobriquet "those boys" for the Chums of Chance, as he used "the boys" to stand for the insurgent kids of his Hamster columns, who were in turn related to "the (real) boys" of OBHS. The "extra-human justice" stands for Dante's divine "JUSTICE," and youthful idealism seems more in touch with justice than practical adulthood.

A more modern concept of justice, or fair-play, or ethics (depending on whether you want to dress it up or down), is in each of us from childhood. So wrote the world-renowned Swiss developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, whose works are still studied nearly fifty years since his most prolific period, and who believed "justice" was one of those ideas that (culturally or genetically) is part of our developmental schema. Growing up we hammer it out on the playgrounds as informal fair-play, and (later) in the courts as formal law. Justice, like language or music, is one of those things that makes us human.

See Piaget: "... these satisfactions are, as it were, made 'legitimate' by the rules of the game, through which competition is controlled by a collective discipline, with a code of honor and fair play" (168). For a more current overview (that mentions Piaget), see Pinker for a review of the literature readable by educated laymen, for example: **"**A list of human universals collected by the anthropologist Donald E. Brown includes

many moral concepts and emotions, including a distinction between right and wrong; empathy; fairness; admiration of generosity; rights and obligations; proscription of murder, rape and other forms of violence; redress of wrongs; sanctions for wrongs against the community; shame; and taboos."

The notion of fair-play ties in with satire in that both depend on a shared moral sense, an acceptance of the "rules of the game." If a public person is to be held up to ridicule because of abuses in office, we must all share a sense that what he is doing is outside the rules, is wrong. As satire attempts to shame its targets, it must have the collective moral wisdom of the people behind it, lest its warnings fall upon deaf ears. And Pynchon is nothing if not a satirist.

Pynchon's career-long concerns for the underdogs, the preterite, and the disinherited mark his concern for social justice. And we find this as early as the Hamster columns showing up as resentment towards what "the Hamster" sees as arbitrary and capricious use of adult power. Didn't we all feel idealism more acutely at fifteen?

Certain organizing narrative devices in the Hamster columns will also reappear later—a subculture opposed to the prevailing culture, for one, and its (sometimes mis) adventures. The rebels whose deeds are related in "The Voice of The Hamster" columns are one, and The Chums of Chance in *Against the Day* (both referred to as "the boys"), another. The kids in "The Secret Integration," the sinners in "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," the "Whole Sick Crew" in *V.*, The Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and the "24 fps" film commune in *Vineland* added together make a pretty convincing list.

Pynchon also employs anonymity through epistolary narrative technique in the "Hamster columns," and in *Mason & Dixon*. These are used in some of Reverend Cherrycoke's passages in *Mason & Dixon*. For one example, he reveals (9) he used to post unsigned accounts, or bear witness to, "certain Crimes I had observ'd, committed

by the Stronger against the Weaker" in public places. For "the crime they styled 'Anonymity,'" Cherrycoke was subsequently "exiled" to the colonies. This links Pynchon's calls for fair-play to his concern for "anonymity." [By the way, no one at OBHS knew "The Hamster" was Pynchon until the class Yearbook was published and blew his cover].

In "The Purple Knight" column he uses a great deal of space to set up an *egregious pun*, as he most famously used puns throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. These defining tropes and more are found in neo-natal form in the Hamster columns.

Most tellingly, he uses indicative names that carry arcane allusions to a long ago near-civil war in England (the conflict between Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart "Queen of Scots"); to the French Revolution (Talleyrand, a diplomat of that era); to the Salem witch trials (Miss Phipps; a Sir William Phips was the Governor of Connecticut during the trials); and to the Old Dynasty/New Dynasty (coal & steel versus oil & non-ferrous metals) competition in our more recent national history. All of these are embedded in Pynchon's six devilishly precocious "Hamster columns."

How are we to interpret these allusions, so rife with strife and civil wars? For example, why does Pynchon quote Thelonious Monk in the epigraph of *Against the Day*? Is it for the content of the epigraph? Is it for recognition of jazzman Monk as epigrammatist? In Monk's biography lies the answer. We open *Against the Day* to the puzzling words of Thelonious Sphere Monk, "It's always night, or we wouldn't need light." This reminds us of jazzman McClintic Sphere in *V.*, especially when he offers the paradoxical koan-like epigram, "Keep cool, but care."

More than mimicking the epigrammatic sayings of T.S. Monk, Pynchon's invocation of Monk reminds us of Monk's real-life, long-term relationship with the Baroness Panonica "Nica" Koenigswoerter, an historical person with familial

allegiances to the European Old Guard for generations since (at least) the Napoleonic wars, whose family lost much of its financial and social position during WWII. Nica was a Rothschild.

Another reason for thinking McClintic Sphere stands for T. Sphere Monk, is as demonstration of what I call Pynchon's literary "feint." For decades, many folks thought Sphere stood for Ornette Coleman, because each of them played a white saxophone. Could that white sax be a red herring Pynchon put in his first novel on purpose, just for those who would take the bait and look no deeper? The case for McClintic Sphere as a stand-in for T. Sphere Monk is more compelling, and meshes more adroitly with Pynchon's other later tropes and thematic ideas, such as exile and disinheritance. For example, on page 177 of *Against the Day*, the narrator enters the grace note "civil war again," seeming as though he means the American Civil War. But it also seems as though Pynchon sees history as a series of civil wars. T.S. Monk's muse, Nica, was a victim of what might be called a "corporate war." A strong case cannot be made for Coleman's being important in the same ways, though he's a fine musician and a very interesting figure in his own right.

For another example, Pynchon names Remedios Varo in *The Crying of Lot 49.* Varo was an obscure surrealist painter, whose works were important to Pynchon. But more importantly, I believe, the name Varo leads us to the Roman writer Marcus Terentius Varro, whose name differs by only one letter, who happens to be one famous devotee of Menippean satire, which is, as some dissertations have shown, Pynchon's favorite *genre*. The name Varo does double duty. "Varo" leads us to surrealistic painting, *and* it is the cover-story for "Varro," the Roman Menippean satirist, himself a victim of a civil war, "the war of the triumvirs." The name Varo is a "feint," as is Sphere's white saxophone. When we go to reference books, some not so modern ones that haven't included an entry about Remedios Varo, but do contain an entry about the Roman M.T. Varro, Pynchon is telling us to read his work as a Menippean satire.

And what is so compelling about naming one of the "Chums of Chance" Darby Suckling, in *Against the Day (2006)*? In his (1964) short story, "The Secret Integration," Pynchon mentions a fictional place on Long Island, The Lovelace Estate. These two are innocent enough sounding half-names, Lovelace and Suckling, but they are also names of two Cavalier Poets, Richard Lovelace and Sir John Suckling, who were on the losing Royalist side of the strife against the Parliamentarians known as "The English Civil War." So, by page 3, actually the first page of text of *Against the Day*, Pynchon has already flagged two "Old Guard versus Young Turk" conflicts (via Monk and "The Baroness" and how her family lost out; and the two Cavalier poets, Lovelace and Suckling and how they lost out), as a "thread" he wants us to attend, perhaps to notice the "nobility" of the losers, and the ruthlessness of the winners. Noting these half-name allusions, Lovelace and Suckling, a "*click*" went off, connecting Pynchon's *Juvenilia*, more accurately his short story "The Secret Integration" (1964), and *Against the Day* (2006), connecting (forty-two years later) these two works to the English Civil War.

I'd thought about writing an article on "Pynchon's Juvenilia" for years, but I couldn't find organizing principles. Recently learning more details about Elizabeth's feud with Mary, Queen of Scots (and her powerfully backed allies), I heard another "*click*." A TV film I saw recently mentioned Fotheringhay (pronounced fother-in-ge-hay) Castle (razed in the seventeenth century), in Northamptonshire, where Mary was taken after house arrest in various Royal Castles from 1569 to 1587, and eventually beheaded in 1589. The Hamster has a character named Fotheringay (pronounced fother-in-gay) in his "Ye Legend of Sir Stupid and the Purple Knight"(1953). This word brings with it all the freight of the conflict between Queen Elizabeth I and her cousin Mary Stuart. The Hamster is alerting us to another of Pynchon's favorite adult preoccupations, the succession of state power, a close cousin to civil war, and an historical concern for most states: how can we achieve a transfer of power *without* civil war?

I sat down and reread the six "Hamster columns." In addition to the name "Fotheringay," there were other names fraught with meaning, as there were more of Pynchon's favorite tropes. They weren't as well placed, or as smoothly insinuated into the flow of the narrative as he would later teach himself to do. We oughtn't expect too much. He was only a kid when he wrote these columns, so we oughtn't hold him to the same critical standards that we would hold the mature author. Still, he gives himself some very knotty problems to solve.

The first four columns were written as letters to the Hamster's fictive pal, Sam. This epistolary technique allows the writer to distance himself from the actual people he might be writing of. By camouflaging names, and moving the place and time-frame around, the writer can create the illusion of not writing about the here and now. Pynchon develops a kid narrator named Boscoe Stein who attends the fictional Hamster High, where all the hijinks occur. The allusion is to Bosco, a once-popular chocolate syrup, and is Pynchon's earliest "feint," a real thing, differing with the character's name by one letter, that will later set up an apparent typographical error (the typing of Roscoe for Boscoe as his signature) that leads us to Roscoe Conkling, who is mentioned by name twice in *Against the Day,* and whose life leads us to something *most* serious.

Our letterist, Boscoe, is not sweet and syrupy, but acerbic and a bit nasty. For example, the 19 February 1953 column is about how The Boys beat up the proctor of the Regents exam, the nameless Czech substitute, and "stuffed him in the dumbwaiter." Assuming all relatively powerless kids have such fantasies at least some of the time, Pynchon was pandering to their voyeuristic tendencies. But, again, he was only a kid himself, yet artist enough to figure out how to work the mechanics of such writing without any training.

The second column (18 Dec. '52) is signed "Roscoe," which looks like (and could be) the kind of typographical error you'd find in a high-school publication. But it invites the knowing reader to consider the biography of U.S. Senator (1867-1881) from New York, Roscoe Conkling. This is a very subtle, well camouflaged, and cleverly set up half-name allusion, and is Pynchon's first try at setting up a counternarrative. In the first column Pynchon establishes the narrator of the letters as Boscoe Stein, so it seems an innocent enough error, this mistyping of Boscoe to Roscoe — speaking of cleverness. And I'd have said it was a typo, if I hadn't known about Varo and Varro, Nefastis and nefastous, McClintic Sphere and T.Sphere Monk, and if tracking down Roscoe Conkling hadn't yielded such pointed results.

It is only in hindsight that we know the "Robber Baron Era," or "Gilded Age" of 1875-1900, would become a favorite historical period of Pynchon's; an era when the American twentieth-century's political-economic competitions began, and the time the main "plot"of *Against the Day* (in the largest sense, a "revenge tragedy") begins; an era Pynchon will allude to again in his short story "The Secret Integration," and in his novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. This is an allusion preceded by a diversionary chocolate syrupy feint (pretty advanced for a kid), that points to the era when rapid industrialization took place, great fortunes quickly accumulated, and a political competition began between the old-money corporate "Establishment," the coal, steel, railroad, and New England-led Vanderbilt-Astor-Morgan clique; and the rising, new-money corporate "Establishment," the just-then-evolving, oil, non-ferrous metals, aircraft, and mid-western-led Rockefeller-Mellon clique of the national economy (a competition sometimes termed "*The Yankee and Cowboy War*," Oglesby). I suspect, given Pynchon's wider family and its role in the national economy (as a brokerage closely allied to J.P. Morgan for a generation or so before the Stock Market Crash of 1929), he probably heard a bit at the dinner table about national politics and the economic cliques that were behind the scenes.

By calling Roscoe Conkling to mind, he figures out how to write one thing on the surface of the tapestry (ostensibly the tale of J. Fattington Woodgrouse's humiliation), while summoning by allusion another (the life and times of Roscoe Conkling) on the tapestry's underside – the counternarrative in opposition to the narrative. Indeed, so much has this become a technique for understanding his complex works, a colloquium is scheduled for 2008, in Munich, titled "Against The Grain: Reading Pynchon's Counternarratives." This is now considered a signature trope of his later writing, writing simultaneously about two apparently disconnected things, creating counter-narratives.

This way of reading may seem to the uninitiated as attributing too much puzzle-building skill to the young Pynchon; but decades of tracking his *oeuvre* from one allusion/clue to the next has yielded such consistent results that it is easier to read his early work filtered through his later (more complex) work, where "feinting" and "half-naming" allusions lead us from the text to sources outside the text, what I term "misdirection," and the allusions on the "surface" of the tapestry lead us from the narrative to the "second story" or counternarrative on the "underside" of the same tapestry. All these have become some of the standard tropes of his adult style, based as it is on Dante, and (to my knowledge) unique among current American writing.

The life and work of Roscoe Conkling, named on pages 161 and 349 of *Against the Day*, lead us to the emerging competition between the Republican U.S. Senator Roscoe Conkling, and the equally Republican President James Garfield, feuding over (among other things) who would control post-election patronage appointments in New York state, the Senator or the President. According to *Against the Day Wiki* Conkling "opposed reform, acted as a friend of Big Business, engineered the selection of Chester A. Arthur as [Garfield's] vice president, and was suspected of involvement in the assassination that made Arthur president." Garfield served about six months in office.

After President Arthur was sworn in, he and Conkling soon found they had differing views and grew apart when Arthur made his position on patronage known.

Well, well. From the Underwood of a teen (Who said, "From the mouths of babes oft-times fall gems"?), falls another inconvenient truth. *Regicide!* And in American politics! In the French legal system, to this day, when someone kills a head of state the first question asked is, "Who profits?" Rather than "innocent until proven guilty," those who profit most, the accused, are assumed guilty and have to disprove their guilt and prove their innocence when such charges are made. The Napoleonic Code is not the system in the U.S., but, informally, people will talk everywhere. There was a lot of talk that tried to implicate Roscoe Conkling in Garfield's assassination, but after some hearings he was exonerated.

Did Pynchon know as much as a fifteen-year-old as he does now? Obviously not. But, he might have known enough. Why else mention an obscure New York politician involved in a, then, seventy-year-old dispute? The answer is—to alert us to how hard the game was being played then. This wasn't a mere political slur: this was a heads-up call to an American moment as portentous as was the beheading of Mary Queen of Scots in England—her death another *Regicide!* This act, an execution of a head of state charged with conspiring to usurp the English throne, could have decided which side of the religious divide would win out and set the tone of England's (and Europe's?) leadership for generations. The assassination of President James Garfield was another such moment. This is where two Hamster columns, with his allusions establishing a counternarrative in tension with the narrative, two of the fifteen-year-old Pynchon's first published works, lead us.

Historically, the election of 1880 opened the door to a twisting-turning political road that culminated (momentarily) with the son of James Garfield supporting Theodore Roosevelt and his new Progressive Party in 1912. During his administration

(1903-1908), Roosevelt became known as a "Trust-Buster" who had the courage to take on the Standard Oil Trust. Pynchon mentions the nascent Trust in *Against the Day* (101), during the period before the Trust actually became the dominant force in the national economy: "A lot of talk about some kerosene company out in Cleveland […] 'The Standard Oil.'" Something involving competition between large American corporations is alluded to, again, as it has been in Pynchon's entire *oeuvre*, or nearly so.

Theodore Roosevelt has special meaning for Pynchon, then as now. As a child, Pynchon's father studied at Sunday School in Oyster Bay, L.I. with Ethel Roosevelt, a daughter of Theodore Roosevelt. T.R. was visible around town and liked to greet the youngsters at church. Later, our author would wed a great grand-daughter of T.R.'s. Of course he couldn't have known whom he would marry when he was fifteen (unless *he is an actual time-traveler?*), but he seems to have known a lot of American corporate/political history early on.

In the 19 March 1953 Hamster column entitled "Ye Legend of Sir Stupid and the Purple Knight," Pynchon sets up an Arthurian parody involving King Arthur, Sir Launcelot, Sir Cholmondesley, Sir Bushwack etc. engaging in a mock battle to determine who among them is fearless, and who is ... CHICKEN. Enter Sir Stupid and Old Sir Fotheringay to attempt to clarify matters, which (it becomes clear) is Pynchon's cover story for the launch of his first egregious pun.

King Arthur exclaims, *"I say, old Fotheringay's gone and fallen into the wine vat. Old Fotheringay! Haw, Haw, Haw! Old Fotheringay's got high on grape juice! Haw! In the still of the knight!"* This leads us to the 1937 Cole Porter song, "In the Still of the Night," which differs (again) by only one letter (is he giving us a clue here?). And that's almost all there is to the story. Is this tale a satire of lengths to which men and (to generalize from high-school) boys will go—wrecking everything in sight to prove they are not CHICKEN, all to launch the pun "In the still of the knight"? And to use the word

"Fotheringay"? The use of the name "Fotheringhay" (the castle where Mary, Queen of Scots met her end) is also the second-earliest allusion to a civil conflict I know of in Pynchon's writing—and the second counter-narrative. In this case, a postponement of the civil war that would occur with Cromwell's rise to power some years later, during which the Cavalier Poets Lovelace and Suckling came to prominence.

I'm not sure how up-to-consciousness in the teenaged Pynchon's world-view were the details of the Scottish attempt to place Mary on the British throne. He surely knew about Fotheringhay Castle to name his Purple Knight Fotheringay (again, the two names differ by only one letter). It is too unusual to have been a casual name. In his later short stories we see repeated use of indicative naming, particularly punning and naming foolish or secondary characters in his fictions for real persons (like Roscoe Conkling), places (like Fotheringhay Castle), or things (like the bust of Jay Gould in *The Crying of Lot 49*) that have great historical resonance. Gould was called the most devious Robber Baron of The Gilded Age.

Often Pynchon's collegiate stories lead us to historical personages involved in real civil wars (Unamuno and the Spanish Civil War in "Entropy" [1960]), or persons who were exiled due to their being on the losing side in a real, historical conflict (King Carol and the Rumanian Civil War in "The Secret Integration" [1964]). Civil wars, inevitable winners and losers, changing of the guard, exiles, as archetypal situations were more than minor preoccupations—though never spoken of directly—of Pynchon the college boy. The philosopher Unamuno and the King Carol, who populate his short stories by allusion, are "They, whose names must not be spoken."

In *Against the Day*, Pynchon uses a lot of characteristic themes, ideas, and tropes he has been reworking throughout his *oeuvre*, as if to say: "this is how it looks to me now that I'm seventy." In more refined form he uses indicative naming, names that must not be spoken, half-names that recall historically important people, names that are

similarly spelled but for a few letters being transposed (he even calls our attention to this on page 62 of *Against the Day* saying; "Professor Edward Morley and Charles "Blinky" Morgan were one and the same person! Separated by a couple-three letters in name as if alphabetically double-refracted, you could say"), plus the preoccupation with civil wars, agents, double-agents, political surveillance, lists of persons of interest, political murder, political discoveries expressed as religious revelations, Dante and Dantean buzz-words, taking the higher moral ground, distrust of the Plutocracy and (by extension) the State he defines as "the juggernaut that had rolled down on the country and flat stolen it."

Some reviews recognized strong similarity of *Against the Day* with his earlier works and commented in effect, it was the "Same old same old." But Pynchon has never been at a loss for invention. Why did he decide to go in this direction? I'm certain he could have written a love story, or a story concerned with aging if he chose. Why did he write a massive book that goes over so much the same ground, and uses much the same bag of tropes to express his favorite themes? That is a question few, if any, reviewers raised or answered. Now that I've raised it, I guess I have to take a crack at answering it.

He goes over his checklist again, same thing only different, because the same things in our national saga are still demonstrably going downhill as they were in 1964 when he wrote "The Secret Integration." Our quality-of-life, the gulf between the rich and middle-class/lower-class Americans, etc., can be shown to have gotten worse despite a period of increasing national prosperity we've enjoyed since the end of WWII. A recent AP-Ipsos poll reported only 25% of those surveyed feel the country is going in the right direction. Former President Jimmy Carter said recently that the current administration is, in regard to our relations with other countries, "the worst in history." Having a former president say that about an incumbent administration is pretty harsh.

Since then, I've seen "Worst in History" bumper stickers. It's an in-joke. Every politically awake American knows what it means.

I think what Pynchon has been all about since he's been writing is hinting toward the "hidden history" of the USA for those willing to do the scholarship by tracking down the clues he offers. Our country, Vineland the good, with all its promise for bringing a truly wonderful era to everyone on the planet, has been sold out by her plutocrats for their gain.

Pynchon, wylie coyote that he sometimes is, on page 1076 of *Against the Day* allows the child Jesse Traverse, who will become the *pater familias* of the large clan we meet in *Vineland*, to answer an assignment to "write an essay on What It Means To Be An American." Jesse's essay is as follows: "*It means do what they tell you and take what they give you and don't go on strike or their soldiers will shoot you down"* (his italics).

When Pynchon writes such opinions into his novels, he is castigated by some humorless reviewers as an aging idealistic hippy left over from the 1960s. Jimmy Carter, by contrast, is a statesman (albeit an embittered one), when he says, "I think that the almost undeviating support by Great Britain for the ill-advised policies of President Bush in Iraq has been a major tragedy for the world." Funny how things go.

Pynchon has been calling our attention to the abuses of those in power for over fifty years, using Northrop Frye's Menippean satire, "code" and allusion, anagrams and metaphor, analogy and enthymeme, letting the reader fill in the blanks, never saying what he means directly, beginning with his deeply embedded naming games during the McCarthy era when he wrote his Hamster columns and his collegiate short stories.

Through the decades he has gotten freer, and somewhat less arcane in his expanded technique; for example, invidious look-alikes (or personality-alikes) of well-

known people, as in *Vineland,* where he suggests a film ought to be made, *The Life of Kissinger,* starring Woody Allen. Or in *Against the Day,* where he mentions on page 161 R. Wilshire Vibe's "'horrible' musical dramas he kept composing, fake, or as he preferred, *faux,* European operettas on American subjects—*Roscoe Conkling*." So he is still inventing new and original insults; still taking aim at our leadership; for example, naming the Chums' Washington D.C. adventure, *The Chums of Chance and the Evil Halfwit.* Through Pynchon's use of *synecdoche* good Pynchon readers all know whom he means. Everyone in America knows. Everyone in the world knows. In this latest book he seems less hesitant and much more outspoken. Perhaps this is his "wake-up call" to his readers to be more outspoken and concerned citizens, shy of going to prison. Maybe submit, but for sure, endure (see Hollander).

When Vonnegut was about the age Pynchon is now, I saw him interviewed by an attractive, eye-candy local news reporter seeking some insight into his latest novel. She asked him how he might react to his critics who charge him as being as idealistic as he was in his youth. Vonnegut riposted something like: "Well, Plato was an idealist, Locke, Descartes, Kant, and many more, so if I am an idealist, I'm in good company. Who do you keep company with?" She looked at him uncomprehendingly. Was she supposed to tell him who she was dating?

On similar grounds, if Pynchon is an aging idealistic satirist, he keeps good company. With *Against the Day* Pynchon, I feel, has earned the right to be called "America's Dante." He writes courageously through perilous times, insulting people in high places. He rivals the greatest writers of the centuries, including Shakespeare, Dante, Joyce and whoever else deserves to be on the shortest list of the best-ever. Why does Pynchon write? And why write the way he writes? Just as Shakespeare and Dante and Vonnegut wrote the way they wrote: Because he must.

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The "Hampster Columns," short of the originals that have been stored at the Oyster Bay High School, are to be found in:
Mead, Clifford. *Thomas Pynchon: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials.* Champaign, ILL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1989; in the Appendix titled "Pynchon's Juvenilia."
The text can also be found at *The Modern World*, http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_essays.html, noting that the signature at the end of letters three and four, given as Bose, not Bosc, is open to questioning.