

ANALYSIS

V. (1963)

Thomas Pynchon

(1937-)

“Benny Profane, a schlemiel as sailor and human being, recently discharged from the U.S.S. *Scaffold*, after wandering around the East Coast of the U.S. looking for a way of life, joins Zeitzuss’s Alligator Patrol, a quasi-military organization whose business is to hunt through the sewers of New York City for the blind, albino alligators that roam there, having been flushed down toilets when they grew too large to be children’s pets. Also traveling through this underground world but in a purposeful way is Herbert Stencil, trying to trace the secret of a 19th-century manuscript dealing with one V., a mysterious woman involved in anarchic plots and international spying. By turns she is associated with Victoria Wren, an expatriate British aristocrat and ‘self-proclaimed citizen of the world,’ with Vera Meroving, a German woman possessed of an artificial eye in which is implanted a clock, and with other esoteric figures to be conceived variously as Venus, Virgin, and Void.

The quest for V. involves Stencil in investigations of remote and exotic regions and curious historical lore as well as encounters with many odd characters, including Benny Profane, whose path he crosses more than once. The ceaseless pursuit of his mysterious woman takes Stencil, as it took his father before him, through a maze of complex puzzles whose relationships are both labyrinthine and phantasmagoric.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 785

“In *V.* Pynchon controls meaning, keeps obscure the connections apparently obtaining between events, by placing his narrator in competition with his characters. In their own right, the characters take an ambivalent attitude toward learning the meaning of their experience. They are at once yearning to make connections and afraid they might make them. ‘Approach and avoid’—such is the strategy. Thus the novel is deeply involved in tension, not only within the characters but also between the characters who are reluctantly learning meanings by making connections and the narrator who, for the reader, is calling these meanings into question, not by denial but by comic multiplication of connections. Justification of this tension lies in the vision the novel is trying to suppress, and for that we must look closely at the structure of the novel.

Three story lines are developed in the novel. Two of them—Benny Profane’s and Herbert Stencil’s—are in the novel’s present tense, 1953-56, while the third, focusing upon Victoria Wren, is over by 1942. Initially, the two present-tense stories appear to have little to do with one another. The first traces Benny’s meanderings from Norfolk to New York City and finally to Malta. Benny, an ex-Navy man, is an incorrigible *schlemiel* whose chief activity is yo-yoing up and down the East coast or between Times Square and Grand Central on the subway. He is not on an obvious quest, has no apparent direction, makes no effort to seek out or to avoid a group of friends from his old Navy destroyer *The Scaffold* or another group known as the Whole Sick Crew who lounge about New York City, mostly at their bar, the Rusty Spoon. Roadwork, if anything, is his occupation, but he has no commitment to it and learns from it only that all streets lead simply to more streets. In the course of his yo-yoing he works underground shooting alligators in the sewers for New York City’s Street Department and briefly holds a job as a night watchman for a company doing research on casualty kinesthetics and fallout effects. At the end of the novel he is on Malta, still man-on-a-string, vaguely planning to find road-work there.

The action of the second present-tense story centers upon young Stencil’s quest for the meaning of the letter ‘V.,’ a reference to which he had found ten years earlier in his father’s journal under the heading of Florence, 1899: ‘There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what:

what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report.' His discovery of this passage had roused young Stencil from the half-conscious inertness of regarding sleep as life's major blessing to a grim but strong sense of animateness. He hangs about with the Whole Sick Crew, hoping by serendipity to stumble across clues to his puzzle. He takes a special interest in a girl from Malta, Paola Maijstral, yet draws back, feeling that somehow Malta is his destiny as it was his father's, who disappeared there in 1919.

Both present-tense narratives seem to go nowhere, finally, although there is something of a dramatic shape to each. Benny starts on the streets and ends there, yet he is responsive to Paola, Fina, and Rachel and, in a crucial scene with Rachel, learns something about himself. In the course of his story, Stencil gathers a great deal of information about V., and he does go finally to Malta, taking Benny and Paola with him, but when it appears that he might discover the meaning he seeks, he goes off to Sweden on an apparently false lead.

The third narrative, Victoria Wren's, is woven into the novel mostly through Stencil's reconstruction of the various ways in which the evidence he has gathered can go together. Victoria, who appears in the narrative under a number of aliases and disguises, seems to be part, at least, of what was denoted by the letter 'V.' in old Stencil's journal entry. Her story spans the period from 1898 (when she turns up in Alexandria at the age of eighteen) to 1942 (when she dies in Malta), while young Stencil's quest for the meaning of V. begins in 1945 and carries into the novel's present tense, 1955-56.

The sections of the novel in which Victoria's character is presented—and they are six in number, taking up half the book—vary greatly in reliability. In the first, young Stencil projects himself into the role of eight imaginary characters who witness V.'s appearance as Victoria in Alexandria and Cairo in 1898. It is an episode of espionage centering on the Fashoda affair and ending with the murder of one British spy and Victoria's seduction of another. In this first episode there is established the pattern whereby 'V.'s natural habitat' is shown 'to be the state of siege.' The account of V.'s second appearance, which is told by Stencil, concerns Victoria's presence in Florence in 1899, where she seduces old Stencil on a couch in the British Consulate and then participates in a siege of the Venezuelan Consulate.

The third episode is about the experience of Kurt Mondaugen, a young engineering student studying sferics, who was with V. in 1922 at a plantation in German South-West Africa while it was under siege for two and a half months during a revolt of the native Bondels. Kurt's story is retold by Stencil. V. appears in this section as Vera Meroving, and we learn that she had also been at Fiume in 1920 with D'Annunzio during the Christmas siege. The confessions of Fausto Maijstral, covering the years from his birth in 1919 to V.'s death in 1942 but focusing upon the war years, is the fourth major source on V.'s career. It is not edited by Stencil's imagination, but information about V. is only part of Fausto's story. Here she appears as the Bad Priest and is killed by a falling beam in an air raid during the siege of Malta.

The fifth episode, the story of V.'s erotic love for the girl Melanie in Paris in 1913, is told by the narrator but as if he were piecing the evidence together from Stencil's point of view. Finally, the last chapter of the book is given as an epilogue relating the encounter of old Stencil with V.—under then name of Veronica Manganese—on Malta in 1919. The narrator of this section is unambiguously omniscient, although he does not tell all he supposedly knows.

Now, it is the manner in which the three narrative strands are presented which gives V. its special character as a novel of comic discontinuity. Within the first few pages a special relationship between the reader and the narrator is established by the latter's mode of direct address: 'Try to squeeze a watermelon into a small tumbler sometime when your reflexes are not so good,' we are told. 'It is next to impossible.' Later passages present us with a rundown on the news of the day—actual events from the news media for 1956. At one point we are even directed to confirm the facts just presented: 'Look in any yearly Almanac, under Disasters'—which is where the figures above come from.' Such passages indicate that what we are being given here is something in the nature of a report, an attempt to put data before us from any and all points of view by a narrator who refuses commitment to any specific meaning or set of meanings the material might suggest.

However, the narrator-reader relationship aside, it is the narrator's relationship to the three stories he is telling that gives the novel its comic character. Benny's story is fragmentary in its very nature—his movements are random, his character is passive—and with it the narrator has little difficulty in exploiting the comic possibilities. But Stencil's story is something else again, for of its own force it drives toward some coherence, some conclusion. As Stencil's quest begins to gain momentum, the narrator adopts a strategy of anti-narrative in order to achieve his end of anti-vision.

It is, of course, Stencil's pursuit of the background story of V. that makes all the difference, for V.'s story takes us into the deeper sources of the present-tense characters' experience. As V.'s story unfolds through Stencil's investigation, that is, as the novel becomes unambiguously devoted to historical interpretation, connections between contemporary events begin to be explained. Initially, indeed, the actions of the characters peopling Benny's story take much of their comic quality from the fact that they are presented *sui generis*—such as the scenes of thirsty sailors fighting for advantageous position at Suck Hour before the beer-spouting foam rubber breasts ornamenting the Sailor's Grave bar in Norfolk; or of Rachel making erotic passes at her M.G., paying special attention to the gearshift as she washes it; or of Benny heaving mousetraps at the night watchman down the passageways of the ship *Susanna Squaducci*; or of Da Conho, with his .30 caliber machine gun, in imagination cutting down with a 'yibble, yibble, yibble' the smug American Jews in Hart Schaffner and Marx suits who ought to be in Israel fighting the Arabs, he feels, rather than stuffing themselves in their restaurant where he is the chef.

These antics would not have the effect of implying any serious definition of the human condition, were it not for the introduction of Stencil's quest. But, in this context, they become dramatic images of an ominous logic in human events. The incidents in Benny's story do, of course, imply all along the conclusions to which Stencil is driven in his quest. Paola's disguise as Ruby, Esther's nose operation, Fina Mendoza's Jeanne d'Arc act with the Playboys which ends in her rape by the whole gang, Benny's education by Rachel about his 'schlemielhood'—these and other scenes cannot be taken lightly. But, were it not for the fact that Stencil takes a quest-journey, they would remain only so much 'local' detail.

When Stencil is first introduced he knows (or imagines) only the incidents in the V.-story centering in Egypt, Florence, and Paris, and the quest which gives shape to his movements appears to lead everywhere and to imply, ultimately, everything. But by the time the evidence comes in from South-West Africa in 1922 and from Malta during the Second World War (he never learns what the reader learns about Malta in 1919), the V.-story takes on a general meaning beyond his personal destiny. All the while, the narrator is pursuing his strategy of anti-vision by keeping sheer boundless multiplicity of both event and meaning before the reader: V. is Victoria, Vera, Veronica, but also Valleta on the island of Malta, as well as Vesuvius and Venezuela; and the mysterious letter seems also to stand for the 'V' of perspective lines made by lines on a receding street, the 'V' of spread thighs or of migratory birds; it is the V-Note, where the Whole Sick Crew listens to jazz, as well as Veronica the sewer rat, the Venus Botticelli, the Virgin Mother, and the *mons Veneris*.

There is even the suggestion, but no clear evidence, that V. is Stencil's mother. By functioning as historian-reporter, finding the letter V' everywhere, the narrator competes with Stencil to defeat the meanings he is trying to build. It is the narrator, not Stencil, who for the reader is making Stencil's quest into a quest for a metaphysical absolute, and he does this by forcing V. to mean everything and thus nothing. Stencil is trying to narrow V. down to something comprehensible—though certainly not with any incisiveness, for he fears, and with good reason, that real understanding will send him back to half-consciousness.

As he sorts through the 'grand Gothic pile of inferences' he has gathered from the 'rathouse of history's rags and straws,' Stencil sees the world about him explained as the product of an ominous and appalling force in human affairs, a force that promises an ultimate annihilation of the human world and its complete replacement by the inanimate. It is not simply a vision of death and destruction, but a ravaging of all meaning, an emptying of all significance in the human enterprise, the coming of a Nameless Horror, a horror not even bestial but insensible. It is, of course, in Victoria's personal history that he sees this most clearly. Hers is a 'progression toward inanimateness' fitting 'into a larger scheme' of which she is both victim and priestess. The scheme is literally present in her very flesh, for, as she grows older, she becomes

increasingly obsessed ‘with bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter’—a glass eye with a clock iris, a wig, false teeth, fabricated feet, a star sapphire sewn into her navel. Her love for Melanie is, in Stencil’s mind, a desperate attempt to journey into a fetish world to postpone her fate. Even Stencil, who bitterly thinks ‘let her be a lesbian,’ let her turn to a fetish, let her die: she was a beast of venery and he had no tears for her’...

As Victoria evolves from a person of specific identity to a paradigm of political history, she becomes gradually desexed. Disguised as the Bad Priest on the island of Malta, she preaches not chastity, but sterility, and Stencil has a vision of her as mechanized in all functions, including ‘a complex system of pressure transducers located in a marvelous vagina of polyethylene; the variable arms of their Wheatstone bridges all leading to a single silver cable which fed pleasure-voltages direct to the correct register of the digital machine in her skull.’ Throughout V.’s story there are images of the female being ravished by the inanimate: the impalement of Melanie at the crotch on a pointed pole ‘slowly raised by the entire male part of the company’ of automatons at the Theatre Vincent Castor; ‘Malta...a noun feminine’ lying on her back, ‘an immemorial woman. Spread to the explosive orgasms of Mussolini bombs’; Foppl with the Herero girl; Melanie’s self-ravishment with a mannequin beneath a mirror.

So long as these violent images have a human base, Stencil is able to maintain his pursuit of the V.-structure. But when the stories of Kurt Mondaugen and Fausto Maijstral give credibility to the existence of an ‘ultimate Plot Which Has No Name,’ Stencil begins to panic: ‘Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic,’ he repeats over and over again to himself, placing emphasis on different words. Do they *seem* to be ordered? Are they seemingly *ordered*? Is the logic *ominous*? As he nears the answer to his questions on Malta, he begins to sleep over long periods, to fall back again into the pre-1945 state. When the evidence about Father Fairing comes to Stencil, he is desperate: it is no longer by coincidence that he is learning these things, but by design. The logic is ominous, ‘something far more appalling’ than history. When Benny confirms the information about Fairing, Stencil rushes to Fausto, who says, ‘God knows how many Stencils have chased V. about the world.’ Stencil’s last words in the novel then occur; about himself he asks, ‘Is it really his own extermination he’s after?’

In *V.* Pynchon tells us that he does believe in history, if that means only that there are facts. But, if there is more than discrete fact, then we are at the bottom of a fold in history’s fabric and cannot determine warp or woof or pattern.... History gilds, alters. As an act of social memory it is, to use Fausto’s words, based ‘on the false assumption that identity is single, soul continuous’; and thus it gives rise to ‘the fiction of a humanized history endowed with “reason.”’ Since Pynchon implicitly rejects such history, he feels, at this time anyway that we cannot, perhaps should not, see what the facts mean, for when we do they appear to mean too much: man’s self-defeat, arising from overconfidence in his own virtue, at the hand of his own inanimate creations.

There is an ominous logic in all this—*maybe*. There are accidents: connections which do connect and connections which are only misleading. But what we do know is multiplicity, diversity, fragmentation, discontinuity. ‘The world is all that the case is’—this message, decoded from Kurt Mondaugen’s sferics in 1922 (and which some readers will recognize as the opening sentence of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, published in 1922), is the message of the spheres, and to remain sane we should let it go at that and ask no questions. What one can most hope for any one individual is what Fausto hopes for his daughter—that she be ‘only Paola, one girl: a single given heart, a whole mind at peace’ and not, like Stencil, ‘a repertoire of identities’ or, like himself, a series of rejected personalities. In the face of the ominous logic which seems to take shape ‘from events much lower than the merely human,’ Stencil is right to escape. Benny is also right to cling to his ‘schlemielhood’: he can survive, if he can believe what he tells Brenda when she asks what he has learned from ‘all these fabulous experiences.’ ‘Offhand,’ says Benny in his very last words in the novel, ‘I’d say I haven’t learned a goddam thing.’”

John W. Hunt

“Comic Escape and Anti-Vision: *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*”

Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature

ed. Nathan A. Scott

(U Chicago 1968) 87-112

“While his novel *V.* contains a variety of plot-makers, he is in no sense committed to the plots they might make. It would be too glib to say that his is an ‘Augustinian’ novel about ‘Manichean’ people; it would also be misleading, since the novelist is clearly inwardly affected by the Manichaeism of his characters.... But he manages to preserve his distance, particularly by locating the main plotting instinct in one character, Stencil. He is the man who is trying to make the connections and links, and put together the story which might well have been Pynchon’s novel....The point is that by taking bits of history from different countries in different times during this century and putting them in the novel with no linear or causal relationship, Pynchon is able to explore the possibility that the plots men see may be their own inventions. The further implication of this—that such things as the concentration camps may be simply meaningless accidents—is responsible for the sudden depths of horror in the book.

The narrative material consists of episodes from history since 1899, and episodes in the lives of various people living in contemporary America called, as a group, the Whole Sick Crew. Just as the historical episodes tend to focus on various sieges, and chaotic violent events preceding or involved in the two world wars, so the episodes connected with modern America tend to focus on wild parties sinking into chaos and exhaustion which seem to reveal morphological similarities with the historical events not otherwise directly related to them....The general theme of the operation of entropy on every level serves to relate the disparate temporal and geographic material the book contains. Every situation reveals some new aspect of decay and decline, some move further into chaos or nearer death. The book is full of dead landscapes of every kind—from the garbage heaps of the modern world to the lunar barrenness of the actual desert....

On all sides the environment is full of hints of exhaustion, extinction, dehumanization; and *V.* is a very American novel in as much as one feels that instead of the characters living in their environment, environment lives *through* the characters, who thereby tend to become figures illustrating a process... One common background is the accelerating release of power which Adams spoke of and foresaw. Man’s ingenuity in this respect is kept in view by references to trains, planes, ships, all kinds of mechanical appliances and weapons of war. At the same time all these inventions are often more productive of destruction than anything else.... This points to perhaps the most inclusive theme of the book: not that man returns to the inanimate, since that is the oldest of truths, but that twentieth-century man seems to be dedicating himself to the annihilation of all animateness on a quite unprecedented scale...

What he shows—and here the juxtaposition of the historical and the personal dimensions is vital—a growing tendency, discernible on all levels and in the most out-of-the-way pockets of modern history, for people to regard or use other people as objects and, perhaps even more worryingly, for people to regard themselves as objects.... If one theme of the book is the acceleration of entropy, another is the avoidance of human relationships based on reciprocal recognition of the reality of the partner.... One agent in the book is killed because of a fatal lapse into humanity, an act of recognition....

That this is related to the narcissistic habit of turning people into reflections of one’s own fantasies and obsessions is alluded to by a series of references to mirrors, culminating in the episode called ‘*V. in love*’ which describes a Lesbian affair conducted entirely by mirrors. What unspeakable cruelties are made possible when that line is crossed and both self and others are experienced as inanimate objects, the various unpleasant scenes of sadism and sadomasochism, which recur throughout the book, serve to dramatize. The general falling away from the human which is under way is underlined by the transformations in the lady *V.*.... Imagining *V.* as she might be at the present moment, Stencil envisages a completely plastic figure, triggered into action by miracles of technology. This is in line with the more general tendency towards fetishism and away from humanity detectable throughout....

The way in which people avoid their own reality (or are refused it) is paralleled in the book by the way in which events are experienced as staged episodes in a meaninglessly repetitious masquerade. On the political, as on the personal, level role-playing has preempted the possibility of real experience, leaving only symbols and games. History is as ‘stenciled’ as the people who compose it, and the result is the theatricalization of reality on a massive scale. Thus history becomes a scenario which the participants are unable to rewrite or avoid. Once again, we find a vision of people being trapped inside an unreality which seems to be the result of some nameless conspiratorial fabrication; humans are akin to props in a cruel and dehumanizing play by author or authors unknown. (Of course Pynchon is aware of the additional irony that

these characters are also caught up in a play arranged by *him*—the affliction of his characters is the condition of his form.)

In this world there is very little chance of any genuine communication. Language has suffered an inevitable decline in the mouths of those stencilized and objectified figures. Rachel Owlglass, the figure who more than any other seems to harbor a genuine capacity for love, is reduced to speaking to her car in 'MG words'; while Benny Profane, who seems to want to love, feels his vocabulary is made up of nothing but wrong words.... The guarded maxim of the black jazz musician, McClintic Sphere, 'Keep cool, but care, is about as much genuine emotion as the book seems to allow. As such it is unconvincing. Moreover, in the main, people seek to avoid caring. One girl specifically yearns to become like a rock, and a state of emotional impermeability is sought by many others. Just as the main characters move towards the rock of Malta, so more generally the human race seems to be hastening to return to 'rockhood'... It is an image of a central point of inanimate rock and death drawing people back to that inert state. [Compare this to the rock symbolism in *Pierre* (1852) by Melville.] The Epilogue describes how the ship carrying Stencil's father was suddenly sucked under by a freak waterspout just off Malta, leaving a dead level sea which gave no sign of what now lies beneath the flat surface—this concludes the book. One way or another, then, everything is sinking....

V. is an elusive female spy anarchist who appears in one of her multiple identities in all these episodes; she once seduced Stencil's father, thus becoming, it seems, Stencil's mother. Her names have varied—Virginia, Victoria, Veronica Manganese, Vera Meroving—and at the end Stencil leaves for Sweden to follow up a remote clue connected with one Mme. Viola. Stencil's quest is thus linear through time; but as the book shows—and indeed as Stencil realizes as he turns this way and that, following up peripheral clues—there are innumerable Vs, a point made on the first page of the book which shows a V-shaped cluster of innumerable smaller Vs.... So from one point of view Stencil has far too much to go on, since he is bound to find clues everywhere—a fact he recognizes near the end: 'V. by this time was a remarkably scattered concept.' Indeed, as this 'concept' expands to include ever more manifestations of V., and as opposites such as love and death, the political right and left, start to converge in this inclusiveness, it points to that ultimate disappearance of differences and loss of distinctions which is the terminal state of the entropic process. If V. can mean everything it means nothing.... His quest may all be 'an adventure of the mind, in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*.... Stencil is the copy of his father; the quest is his legacy. The historical melodrama of international interconnections which he puts together may be only the map of his own obsessions. At the same time...Stencil is representative enough to be called 'the century's child'....

The book recognizes that such fantasies may be necessary to maintaining consciousness and purposive motion; yet it reveals the solipsism that is implicit in them as well, for one of the subject of Pynchon's book is the inability of people to love anyone outside their own fantasy projections.... [Stencil] is in fact a vacancy, filled in with the colours of his obsession, not a self, but in truth a stencil. And all his techniques of self-duplication and self-extension may be construed as protective screens for avoiding direct engagement with reality.... Like Callisto in 'Entropy,' Stencil lives in a hothouse of hermetically sealed fantasy where the past is arrested, as in a museum.... Like a stencil he will admit no configurations of experience that cannot be shaped into the pattern of his fantasy. Like a hothouse, his identity is a protected enclosure, given definition by the exotic growths artificially fostered within it. If Stencil is trapped in the hothouse of the past, Benny Profane is astray in the streets of the present....as unaware of clues and indifferent to patterns as Stencil is obsessed by them....

The Right can only live and work hermetically, in the hothouse of the past, while outside the Left prosecute their affairs in the streets by manipulating mob violence. And cannot live but in the dreamscape of the future.... The street and the hothouse are the dreams by which man avoids confronting that nothingness which is the shapeless truth behind the structured fantasy of human history. As with so many apparent opposites, the street and the hothouse meet and merge in V....

References to channels and tunnels occur in the description of the strange land of Vheissu and the subway travel in modern New York. Hints at the possible existence of an inherited reservoir of primordial knowledge suggest that a deliberate Jungian dimension has been added. The notion that the unconscious

nourishes art, even if the unconscious is comparable to a sort of primeval sewer, and that there is much to be gained by descending into our dreams, is so customary by now that one can see that Pynchon has gone some way to turning it into dark farce—Benny and his alligators. At the same time he seems to want to preserve the notion that somehow it is more ‘real’ under the street than in it. When Benny finally has to end his job we read: ‘What peace there had been was over. He had to come back to the surface, the dream-street’....

The far-ranging geography of the book provides a composite image of the various areas of human consciousness. The street is the zone of the waking, planning consciousness which, unable to endure the meaninglessness of the absolute present, projects plans into the future or finds plans in the past. The hothouse is the realm of memory where the mind is sealed up in the secretions of its reveries over the past. The sewer or under-the-street (also compared to under the sea) is that area of dream, unconscious, perhaps the ancestral memory, in which one may find a temporary peace or oblivion, and into which the artist must descend, but where fantasy can run so rampant that you may start seeing rats as saints and lovers if you remain down there too long. Indeed all three areas suggest the human compulsion or need to construct fantasies, as though each level of consciousness was another form of dreaming.

The modes of motion which prevail in the street are yo-yoing (in the present) and tourism (in the past). The historical episodes are full of references to people living in a ‘Baedeker world.’ Tourists are ‘the Street’s own.’... When Stencil (supertourist) and Profane (super yo-yo) converge on Malta without quite understanding their motives for doing so, we read: ‘Malta alone drew them, a clenched fist around a yo-yo string.’ The illusory purposefulness of Profane’s meanderings, both serve to illuminate the condition of movement bereft of all significance except the elemental one of postponing inanimateness. Both modes of motion, in fact, accelerate entropy, just as they both serve to bring Stencil and Benny Profane to the rock of Malta.... We do cover the blank surfaces of our sinking world, and then live within our paintings....

Hugh Godolphin found Vheissu on one of his surveying trips for the British Army; his description of the journey and the land itself reads like a mixture of Borges and Conrad. There are no maps to Vheissu, but it is the country which is really at the heart of the book.... He admits that he wondered whether the place had a soul.... Making his way to the pole he digs for his answer, and when he does penetrate the surface what he finds is—‘Nothing.... It was Nothing I saw.’ He continues his account: ‘If Eden was the creation of God, God only knows what evil created Vheissu’.... It is part of the intention of the book to suggest that the world may now be engaged in making actual a mass dream of annihilation, submitting reality to a nihilistic fantasy.

In Malta, in a final talk with Godolphin, V. reveals her similarity to Vheissu further; for, having expressed her delight at watching Nothing, she goes on to say how much she would like to have a whole wardrobe of different shaped feet in a rainbow range of colours. V. is all those constantly changing shapes which make up the dazzling and enchanting surface of Vheissu. She is also the void beneath the decoration, the Nothing at the heart of the dream. We need all those coloured dreams to get us along the street—which may also be a dream.... V. is whatever lights you *to* the end of the street: she is also the dark annihilation waiting *at* the end of the street....

Pynchon’s point seems to be to remind the reader that there is no one writable ‘truth’ about history and experience, only a series of versions: it always comes to us ‘stenciled’.... I think it is part of Pynchon’s intention to demonstrate that the various styles of writers in this century who, in a sense, have imposed their private dreams on us are like those iridescent surfaces with which we adorn the walls of our galleries and cover the countries of our dreams. The attendant implication is that under all this decorative sheen there lies the cold truth of the void. One result of this is, I think, that Pynchon himself has written, no doubt deliberately, what amounts to a ‘hollow’ book.”

Tony Tanner
“Caries and Cabals”
City of Words
(Harper & Row 1971)

[Robert O. Richardson, "The Absurd Animate in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*: a Novel," *Studies in the Twentieth Century* 9 (1972)]: "Richardson redresses the imbalance of critics who find in *V.* only a progress toward chaos, by pointing to characters who counterbalance the overall drift toward passivity and chaos: Rachel, Paola, Fausto. Though Rachel may seem sentimental in personifying her surroundings, especially when compared with Benny Profane, is Profane really objective in seeing his surroundings (including its inhabitants) as inanimate—or is he simply being reductive? Paola, on the other hand, is rather enigmatic in the novel, protected by a kind of rock-like numbness, yet she and McClintic Sphere find feeling creeping up on them and they try to find a middle way between absolute coolness and excited madness.

The spokesperson for these characters, the most authoritative such character, is Paola's father Fausto, who 'explains the salvation of human beings as human beings to be a matter of caring for human values in spite of that indifference he knows to be the primary quality of the world external to the human mind,' as he evolves toward a kind of absurdist humanism. Fausto eventually recognizes that attributing human qualities to the world falsifies, but that such an action is necessary to sustain life. Richardson rightly realizes that the bulk of the novel emphasizes the trend toward the non-human, yet Pynchon does not remove all hope for humanity but, Camus-like, 'harbors a preference for the wise which his fascination for the wisened-up does not quite conceal'."

Beverly Clark and Caryn Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism"
Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. Richard Pearce
(G.K. Hall 1981) 242-43

"The importance of the structure of *V.* becomes even clearer when structure is seen as an expression of one of the novel's major themes—the form, function, and ultimate limitations of knowledge. Herbert Stencil's search for *V.* is a quest for both knowledge and a kind of pattern or connection. The two are closely related, if not identical, because knowledge itself cannot exist without form. Formlessness implies meaninglessness, as Pynchon knows. A primary source of tension in *V.* lies in the conflict between the attempt to discover or create form and the overwhelming tendency toward formlessness in the universe—a tendency variously called entropy, political anarchy, decadence, mindless sexual activity, tooth decay, irrational acts of violence, and the apparent randomness of history. At every turn form is defeated by formlessness, and old certainties are revealed as alarmingly uncertain.

Generally, chapters centering on the search for *V.* alternate with those dealing largely with The Whole Sick Crew. The two streams of narrative material mingle frequently throughout the novel and finally flow together in Chapter Sixteen ('Valetta'). Stencil and Profane come in this chapter as close as they ever will to a father/son relationship before Stencil absconds to Sweden, leaving Profane stranded on Malta. Like the V-shape of the parallel street lights in Chapter One and like so much in the novel, these unions prove to be more illusory than real. A merger of another sort takes place in the epilogue when the omniscient narrator, associated with The Whole Sick Crew, relates, for the first time in the novel, a substantial block of information pertaining to *V.* This particular structural feature of *V.* is of some significance, because Pynchon expresses the epistemological aspects of his theme chiefly through narrative technique and the manipulation of plot in the preceding Stencil/*V.* chapters.

Each of the six chapters in which *V.* appears as a human being is narrated in a different way, a tactic which strongly implies an attempt to explore diverse literary methods of discovering and communicating knowledge. Who, for example, is the narrator of each chapter? What are Stencil's sources of information? How reliable are they? How reliable is Stencil himself? A close examination of narrative strategy, plot, and point of view in these chapters is essential for understanding the extent to which such issues inform the structure of the entire work....

Pynchon's use of multiple points of view, somewhat in the manner of Faulkner or Durrell, underscores the difficulty of piecing together historical truth and of separating it from the purely subjective. The narrator's reliability is consistently undermined by dream, disguise, and 'poetic license.' In the final sequence, the observer's identity is totally effaced. He becomes merely a possible vantage point. None of the 'eight impersonations' knows the complete story, and neither, without creating part of it himself, can Stencil. The plot, to paraphrase the Wittgensteinian message of Mondaugen's atmospheric signals, is all

that the case is. If a pattern, coherent story, or history exists, it must be put together by the reader, who, in a sense, mimics Stencil by supplying the pieces necessary to form a whole. If some of the pieces—the essential ones, the vital connections—are imagined by Stencil, then no plot really exists. The plot of Chapter Three becomes a metaphor for all plots (in every sense of the word), including the great ‘plot’ that is history. Metaphor itself is, as Fausto Maijstral realizes, a kind of disguise, and the plot centering on the murder of Porpentine may be nothing more than an elaborate system of impersonation and speculation whose purpose is to disguise the truth: that there is no pattern, no cause and effect sequence, no recoverable story, no history.

In the prefatory section to Chapter Seven (‘She hangs on the western wall’), Eigenvalue, ‘the soul-dentist,’ reflects on the causes of cavities and concludes that ‘even if there are several per tooth, there’s no conscious organization there against the life of the pulp, no conspiracy. Yet we have men like Stencil, who must go about grouping the world’s random caries into cabals.’ ‘Random’ is the key word here. For Stencil, the threat of conspiracy is an acceptable alternative to the horror of randomness. In Pynchon’s most recent novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, paranoia is pervasive. Every character imagines an indefinable ‘they’ pulling the strings. An older paranoia—belief in a transcendent God who imposed an order on a formless universe—has given way to a new kind. Technology, man’s boldest attempt to create his own order, has become ‘a control that is out of control.’ Unable to accept the notion of ‘out of control’ as it applies either to the universe or to man-made systems, many characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow* engage in frenetic efforts both to control others and to identify the ‘they’ whose ultimate control would make sense out of nonsense. Even a master cabal, a grand and perhaps sinister plot, would be better than no design at all.

The connection between religion and the various paranoid obsessions of Pynchon’s novels is important. Religion is only one manifestation of the uniquely human urge which Stencil’s search embodies. The relationship is made explicit in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: ‘If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long.’ In seeking evidence of order or design, Stencil is driven by the instinct that is the fountainhead of science and art as well as of religion. ‘She hangs on the western wall,’ a second attempt to discover such a design, is apparently related by Stencil to Eigenvalue. Once again, the source of Stencil’s information is uncertain, although we are told that some of it comes from Sidney Stencil’s journal and some from ‘on-the-spot’ investigation.’ Once again, putting plot together is of primary importance, for both Stencil and the reader.

In this chapter, however, the centers of consciousness are characters within the story, not outside observers nor eavesdroppers on scattered fragments of conversation. Pynchon’s technique makes possible an increased sense of the fabric of history, as well as a sense of its personal dimension; here again one cannot ascertain how much is truth and how much is speculation or re-creation. The increased complexity of the plot, moreover, adds immeasurably to the difficulty of determining what ‘really’ happened. Nevertheless, since the source of the information is not so vague as before, and since the elder Stencil appears as himself in the chapter, a kind of progression toward clarification can be seen, even if it proves in the end to be illusory. Another important difference between the two chapters is an increased tendency of the characters themselves to reflect on their situations—or of the elder Stencil on *The Situation*. The alternation of point of view from one character to another provides a means of recording these reflections.

By the end of the Florence chapter, the reader might, as Eigenvalue later does, notice that a number of the concerns of principal characters reflect Stencil’s own. For instance: old Godophin’s obsession with Vheissu, its randomly changing surfaces and the hollowness beneath; Victoria Wren’s casual remarks that ‘perhaps the only radiance left is Vheissu’ and that there may be ‘no Via del Paradiso’ anywhere in the world...; Godophin’s conception of mass paranoia as ‘a kind of communion’; and, finally, an observation by the elder Stencil which explains much about the structure of Chapters Three and Seven and sheds some light on the epistemological theme of the entire novel: ‘He had decided long ago that no Situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment.’ More than possibly, much of this, as Eigenvalue puts it in the following chapter, has been ‘Stencilized.’

The plot of Chapter Seven is itself of thematic importance, and the way in which its participants perceive it is at least as significant as the way in which it is narrated. The plot is, of course, a real plot of the

cloak-and-dagger variety, or, more accurately, a series of such plots. The counterpointing of the Vheissu/Venus/Venezuela conspiracies is extraordinarily complex. The English, concerned with a conspiracy of worldwide scope, come to see Vheissu as the private obsession of an old man; the Italians are largely preoccupied with the Venezuela crisis (when they are not pursuing art thieves) and assumes that Vheissu is a code name for Venezuela until they are informed otherwise by the English; and the Venezuelans scarcely know what to make of anything.

In this chapter, as in *The Crying of Lot 49*, conspiracies are both public and private. One plot involves anarchy—a political version of the entropic tendencies which terrorize both Stencil and Benny Profane. Another involves Rafael Mantissa's abortive attempt to possess Botticelli's Venus, a V. who is 'Mantissa's entire love' but who may be, like old Godolphin's Vheissu, only 'a gaudy dream, a dream of annihilation.' The reality of Vheissu finally ceases to matter even for Godolphin: 'Does it make any difference?' Godolphin said. 'If it were only a hallucination, it was not what I saw or believed I saw that in the end is important. It is what I thought.' His experience at 'the dead center of the carousel' confirms his belief in the nothingness beyond the randomly shifting, kaleidoscopic colors of Vheissu.

At the outset of Mondaugen's story a further structural pattern within the Stencil/V. chapters begins to emerge. From a scrupulously objective reporting of the 'facts' in Chapter Three, Pynchon moves in Chapter Seven into the minds of characters involved in the action. Mondaugen's story, as the title of the chapter implies, is related by a single witness. The process of interiorization which begins in 'She hangs on the western wall' moves here a step further. The narration is almost, but not quite, in the first person. The emphasis has shifted from the exterior world of 'facts' to an interior world of feelings and impressions. This kind of account, however, proves to be no more reliable than Stencil's 'impersonations' or the cryptic information in his father's journals. If, as the elder Stencil says, no Situation has any objective reality, and if, as the structure of Mondaugen's story strongly hints, knowledge gained subjectively is itself, like Stencil's impersonations, only speculation, dream, or delirium, then how can any pattern be found? Is it possible to know anything?

The specifications of Mondaugen as Stencil's source of information is not all that it seems. One might expect that, at last, with an eyewitness account of an episode involving V., the pieces might begin to fit together with some degree of certitude. In fact, however, both Mondaugen's story and Fausto's confessions are variations on the unreliability of subjective narration. The omniscient narrator of the preceding chapter has made clear that 'when Stencil retold it, the yarn had undergone considerable change: it had become, as Eigenvalue put it, Stenciled.' But Stencilization is only one permutation of reality in this chapter. At one point Mondaugen asks himself, 'Had a new phase of the siege party begun with that dusk's intrusion from the present year, 1922, or was the change internal and Mondaugen's... No way to tell, no one to say.'

Neither can one be sure whether Foppl's reminiscences are really his or whether they are hallucinated by Mondaugen during his illness. Structurally, the multiple points of view used in the preceding chapters are maintained, but they are now within each other rather than parallel. Stencil relates to Eigenvalue what may be Mondaugen's account of what may be Foppl's past. That there is, obviously, much room for error is precisely the point. Chapters Three and Seven question whether a Situation can be known by piecing together various accounts of it. Mondaugen's story questions the validity of those accounts themselves. While Mondaugen's story seems on the surface to render further information about V., it is really, because so little in the chapter can be accepted at face value, another dead end.

Like Chapters Three and Seven, Mondaugen's story parallels the main plot of V. in several very interesting ways. Here, as in the earlier chapters, both narrative strategy and subject matter reflect Stencil's obsession with finding some pattern and or connection that can be called truth, some scrap of indisputable evidence that history is not random nor all knowledge relative. V. is in a sense a vast hall of mirrors in which Stencil may discover an indefinite number of variations on his own fears and uncertainties but no way out of his dilemma. The long siege party at Foppl's farm, for example, is the life of The Whole Sick Crew and, indeed, of the modern world as Pynchon sees it, played in another key.... The decadence of Foppl's farm seems to result in part from Foppl's earlier vision of humanity's defeat by the inhuman. Later in the novel Faust says, 'Decadence, decadence. What is it? Only a clear movement toward death, or, preferably, non-humanity.' In 'V. in love' Itague remarks, 'A decadence...is a falling-away from what is

human, and the further we fall the less human we become.' Repetition, then, rather than the usual kind of novelistic progression constitutes the major structural and thematic framework of *V*.

More closely allied to the epistemological theme of the novel is the question of Mondaugen's voyeurism. Like Stencil throughout the novel (and most revealing in Chapter Three), Mondaugen is more an observer than a participant. Mondaugen's mission in Southwest Africa, to record atmospheric radio disturbances, is both a function of his voyeurism and another version of Stencil's quest to find pattern or meaning where none may exist. Significantly, Weissmann, not Mondaugen, thinks he has decoded the sferics; Mondaugen cannot be so sure. He fails also to understand the Bondel's song at the end of the chapter. Just before he leaves the compound, Mondaugen reflects on his uncertainties and concludes that one cannot in any definitive way distinguish external from internal reality. If even 'the dreams of a voyeur can never be his own,' Mondaugen's attempts at understanding are doomed from the start—and so, implicitly, are Stencil's.

Chapter Eleven, 'Confessions of Fausto Maijstral,' has been criticized for being 'too lucid'—a notion which results partially from a failure to read the confessions in the context of the preceding Stencil/*V*. chapters. The movement into overt subjectivity reaches its climax here, as does the concomitant movement toward the apparent clarification of Stencil's source material. Chapter Eleven is the only direct first-person narrative in *V*. and is the novel's only extended episode which purportedly exists in manuscript form. Fausto...strives for extraordinary reliability by continually commenting on what he has written before in his rather Proustian 'successive rejection of personalities.'

The process is, of course, self-defeating, as Fausto realizes, because 'the writing itself even constitutes another rejection, another "character" added to the past.' No more certainty is to be found here than in Mondaugen's story nor in Stencil's eight impersonations. The ostensible reliability of a written, first-person narrative makes Fausto's confessions a natural place for the themes of this very thematic novel to emerge most fully, while the undermining of that reliability is consistent with the book's overall insistence on the difficulty of knowing. Once again the operative tension is between the urge to state and restate until the truth is captured and the inevitability of the truth's ultimate escape.

Fausto's statement of the novel's themes may be the most elaborate, but it is by no means the first. Mondaugen, for instance, discovers 'that his voyeurism had been determined purely by events seen, and not by any deliberate choice,' an early variation on Fausto's 'fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with "reason".' A number of such statements are cryptic or oblique, like those in Chapter Three concerning the attempt of Hanne, the barmaid, to ascertain whether the V-shaped stain on a plate is real or an optical illusion. Foppl's reflections on the defeat of humanity by the inanimate are more direct, but are they his, Mondaugen's, or Stencil's; even if they are his, does Mondaugen believe or understand them? The repetition of such thematic elements in different rhetorical contexts recalls the technique used in some kinds of musical compositions and long poems, such as *Four Quartets*. If *V*. is seen as a thematically rather than a dramatically oriented work, one should object no more to the lucidity of Fausto's confessions than he would to the thematic clarity of the final movement of 'The Dry Salvages.'

One of the themes on which Fausto elaborates—the nature and purpose of disguise—recurs as a major motif throughout the novel, and its function is far more than illustrative. Fausto says of himself (speaking like both Stencil and Henry Adams, in the third person): 'Living as he does much of the time in a world of metaphor, the poet is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice....[This is the false generalization of a philistine.] Human kind, insofar as Fausto Maijstral is concerned, can bear very little reality. Disguise is everywhere in *V*. Stencil, impersonating Gebrail in Chapter Three, says, 'the city is only the desert in disguise.' The city is a form of plastic surgery on a grand scale... Plastic surgery is a way of avoiding the truth....

Other instances of disguise in *V*. are too numerous to discuss in detail. Weissman, Melanie, Paola, Fausto—all disguise themselves in one way or another. Even Kilroy... In *Gravity's Rainbow* a character remarks, speaking of the V-rocket, 'We'll all use it, someday, to leave the earth. To transcend.' In both novels technology, the instrument that man thinks can further his evolution to the superhuman, is really the death trap that hastens his reduction to the subhuman. The tendency toward the inanimate is, as Nathanael

West put it, 'a tropism for disorder,' a tendency away from pattern, from certitude, from ways of knowing what has happened and what might happen next. Stencil dons disguises 'to involve him less in the chase,' to protect the scrap of humanity which the chase itself provides. What Stencil really fears is that, as in the case of Kilroy, humanity itself is only another disguise. 'Approach and avoid' is Stencil's rule, because to find V. would mean the loss of everything. 'Disguise is one of her attributes.' She is metaphor for the connection that makes any meaning, knowledge, or humanity possible; and she may be, in Fausto's terms, the Greatest Lie of all.

In the chapter entitled 'V. in love' Pynchon attempts one more narrative ploy before surrendering the V. material in the last two chapters to the omniscient narrator. Once more the story is undoubtedly Stenciled, although Stencil's source, Porcepic, the composer, remains discreetly in the background; 'V. in love' does not center on him. The 'facts' are presented with scrupulous attention to objectivity, but at this point one is not likely to put much faith in what is, after all, third-hand information. After calling into question various modes of knowing and of communicating knowledge, Pynchon almost seems to place this most conventional chapter near the end of the novel to test just how greatly the reader's perception has been altered. Stencil has absolutely no way to be certain that the events told to him by Porcepic and to Porcepic by V. happen in the way he describes them to Profane. The structure of the Egypt and Florence chapters argues against the 'objective reality' of any Situation; and Mondaugen's story and Fausto's confessions belie the hope that it can be reconstructed from subjective accounts. The sources themselves cannot be believed....

The larger structural pattern which contains all the novel's other structural features is the alternation of the Stencil/V. plot with the Benny Profane plot, and the simultaneous alternation of narrative techniques. The Profane plot is essentially static, a series of scenes taking place at different times and in different locales, but with no real development. Profane yo-yos up and down the East Coast, but like the planets yo-yoing around the sun, he really goes nowhere. An illusion of development is important to the Stencil plot, as various ways of knowing are tested, but it is just an illusion, because each way is found to be inadequate. Stencil's travels repeatedly bring him back, figuratively speaking, to the point from which he started. In the end, Stencil's excursion into the past are only a form of yo-yoing. The different narrative strategies employed in the Stencil/V. chapters are an essential part of Stencil's quest. The rest of the novel is related by the same omniscient narrator. In the last two chapters the two parts of the book which have been tending toward each other for hundreds of pages at last come together. The connection is tenuous, since the union of neither plot nor narrative is quite consummated.

The relationship of Profane and Stencil throughout *V.* is more thematic than dramatic. Profane, in his endless battle against the intellectual obsession with V-ness. Benny, who in some ways longs for death, is human in spite of himself. At one point he says of Fina, 'Why did she have to behave like he was a human being. Why couldn't he be just an object of mercy.' Yet he is constantly being provoked into combat by the inanimate world. Something in him, some shred of humanity, is capable of being antagonized by the inanimate. Stencil and Profane do move together in a dramatic sense, however.

Near the end of the novel Benny begins to frequent the Rusty Spoon and the Forked Yew, where he inevitably engages Stencil in conversation. Stencil explains to Profane the reasons for his search for V., and relates to him—not Eigenvalue—'V. in love.' In Chapter Sixteen, 'Valetta,' Benny becomes actively involved in Stencil's chase. Even in Malta, however, Profane is no more concerned with the pursuit of V. than Stencil is concerned with Benny as an individual. One afternoon Benny awakens and finds Stencil gone. Profane is again 'out in the street.' That it is in Valetta rather than New York, Norfolk, or Newport News hardly matters.

The coming together of Stencil and Profane and their subsequent splitting apart has, along with the obvious maternal implication of V., reminded a number of critics of *Ulysses*. The association is an appropriate one, because in *V.*, as in *Ulysses*, the issue of parentage operates on important thematic and narrative levels. In *V.* children scarcely know their parents; some do not even know who their parents are. Stencil knows his father primarily through his journals, and although Pynchon hints that V. may have been Stencil's mother, one has no way to be sure; Stencil himself calls the question 'ridiculous.' Victoria is estranged from her father, Sir Alastair Wren, and Paola is separated from Fausto. Evan Godolphin,

although 'fond of his father,' rarely sees him. When Benny Profane goes to his old neighborhood to visit his parents—his sole journey home in the entire novel—they are out. Personal history is the most logical beginning of any quest for a pattern in history at large. If more definitive connections than these or a greater degree of knowledge of the most immediate kind of cause and effect relationship cannot be found, what can be known? In this context, that Stencil and Profane fail in their impersonation of father and son is entirely appropriate—two lines about to converge miss the opportunity and veer away from each other forever.

Pynchon's fictional territory might be said to lie along the perimeter which divides knowledge from non-knowledge. As long as the perimeter itself cannot be clearly defined, one cannot possibly distinguish between what is known and what is not known, since Pynchon clearly implies that we fill the void beyond the perimeter with illusions that pass for truth. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the faith that science and technology increase human knowledge is revealed as another means of replacing an unacceptable emptiness with the warmth and safety of a delusion. Everywhere in Pynchon's work the insistence that the perimeter can be expanded, that knowledge can be increased, is undermined. The information which Mr. Thoth provides to Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* is vital to the outcome of her search for the truth about the Tristero System, but it is 'all mixed in with a Porky Pig cartoon.' The message Thoth delivers is finally too unreliable to add to Oedipa's knowledge, although it certainly stimulates her speculations. In *V.* what is reported as fact often turns out to be mere hypothesis or rank fabrication.

In the last two chapters of *V.* Pynchon reasserts both the difficulty of knowing what happens and the impossibility of knowing why. If events happen randomly, independent of connection or 'plot,' how can the search for knowledge be anything but blind and meaningless groping? To know what happens is plainly useless without knowing why, since each act of cognition would then be a new beginning leading no further than the one before. The mysteries of *V.* are only partially solved in these final chapters, which is to say that they are not solved at all, as Stencil's flight to Sweden clearly indicates. The apparent progression in the Stencil/*V.* chapters toward greater thematic clarity and, on the surface at least, greater reliability of source material, is continued in 'Valetta' and the epilogue when the omniscient narrator assumes control and presents for the first time what might be called an unbiased view of *V.* In 'Valetta' Stencil is on the scene gathering evidence, but his role has changed. He is no longer the reader's primary source of information about *V.*

In the epilogue, with Stencil effectively out of the novel, the narrator is left to approach *V.* more closely than Stencil would have dared. The information provided in the epilogue derives neither from Stencil's dossier nor from his on-the-spot investigations. Stencil can never know the absurdly accidental, ridiculously random way in which his father died. The omniscient narrator, instead of revealing a pattern, a crucial connection, a plot, or at the very least a means of knowing, only exposes once again 'the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with 'reason.' Even if Stencil knew, as the reader does, the exact circumstances of his father's death, he would then only know that he could know nothing."

Richard Patteson

"What Stencil Knew: Structure and Certitude in Pynchon's *V.*"
Critique 16 (1974) 30-44

[John Stark, "The Arts and Sciences of Thomas Pynchon," *Hollins Critic* 12.4 (1975)]: "In *V.*, Pynchon relies on entropy and cybernetics to reinforce his themes. The physical disintegration and social decadence of his world is related to the energy loss of entropy; and, the cybernetic concepts of information gathering help explain the characters' responses to this entropic world (for example, the reference to the 'flop-flop circuit' becomes a metaphor for a personal dichotomy within the self)."

Clark and Fuoroli

"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism," 247

"Pynchon's verbal complexities astound and confound, amaze and bewilder, because his mixed modes concern the ultimate formlessness of a world that for a decade now he has urged as much as described. Everything...leads simultaneously to hope and despair. All these pressures make linear communication

inadequate, chronology a joke, and organization destructive...the most frequent entrance into his fiction is through the concept of entropy....How can Pynchon be persuaded of entropy's irreversibility and simultaneously of a second coming? How can he claim a winding down of the world and its winding up to spirit? He manages these, in fact, by slipping beyond simple apocalyptic themes to a reimagining for these days of Apocalyptic as a literary genre—which he parodies, as he parodies everything. V. and the rest of Pynchon's novels 'behave' as if the End were past and most of the world didn't even know it, so needed an exemplary convincing....

Pentecost is a religious term which strikes fear and loathing in some, but means ultimate life to those who accept it. The spirit, at Pentecost, merges with the profane. Pentecost is as formless as entropy; but if entropy describes the ultimate collapse into material, Pentecost describes an ultimate ascent into the spiritual.... Pentecost is a version of the state of entropy which takes what is, and celebrates it. Pentecost is entropy with valued added—the value of communication.... If entropy is the carnivore Pynchon looses on literature and the humanities, Pentecost is the dove he hold up to science and the doom-sayers. And it is also his further rebuke to the standing traditions of literature, for Pentecost is a phenomenon of the preterite: it is the delirium tremens of the downtrodden, and a threat to logical, rational, or analytical structures.... V. herself is the Paraclete, or Holy Spirit....

The Church instituted hierarchy, but the coming Paraclete will abolish its authority and return 'promiscuity.' Promiscuity is the anarchist's dream and bureaucrat's anathema: to be promiscuous is to be pro mix, indiscrete, and fused with the world.... From the angle of tongues, promiscuity is positive. The trend to promiscuity is not merely anti-Christian, but against all control, toward a loosening of all repressive structures, toward more communication.... Pynchon's work is also increasingly promiscuous in each successive novel. In *V.* (1963), all revelations are hidden, double, though growing less so as the novel proceeds. In *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Oedipa more compactly encounters a greater rush of signals—scrawled on walls and sidewalks, printed on stamps, hidden in obscure plays. She's never sure, but always surer, of a disinherited alternate reality... In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), everything announces, testifies, instructs, and spells itself out...

As the novels reflect successive stages of history tending toward global Pentecost, the woman V. summarizes the same drift in her lifetime, and in the one book Pynchon devotes to her, V. has six verifiable incarnations, with two in each of her three stages. Representing the Father, she is Victoria Wren first in Cairo, 1898, and second in Florence, 1899. Her name derives from England's imperialist Queen and perhaps from Christopher Wren, England's famed architect of St. Paul's, the cathedral named for the apostle of edification. The age of the Father is stabler than its successor, thus Victoria's name is the same in Cairo and Florence, and her character is continuous.

Next representing the age of the Son and His 'liberal love-feast,' she is thirty-three, appears in Paris, 1913, and is known simply as V. She causes a riot and participates in a surreal love affair with a young ballerina. Her next appearance is in 1921 as Vera Meroving at Foppl's siege party in Southwest Africa. This incarnation is chronologically inappropriate because she has skipped an appearance in 1919 on Malta. But the temporal lapse constitutes a thematic and formal stroke of genius in that it so handily emphasizes V.'s immunity to normal criteria as well as her reactionary decadence at this point—the siege party is an attempt to recapture the mood of 1904, when von Trotha's troops entrenched orgiastic genocide in the twentieth century.

Moreover, chronology is untrustworthy in anything having to do with Malta (where V. will be next), because that island is 'alienated from any history in which cause precedes effect.' The last name, Meroving, evokes the slack Merovingian dynasty which sub-subdivided its ever shifting lands and was characterized by chronic warfare. The first name, Vera, means 'faith,' but its other connotations qualify that meaning. That is, the wood of the vera tree is used as a substitute for *lignum vitae*—literally 'wood of life.' Also, the wood of the vera tree is characteristically yellow (a color which recurs incessantly in *V.*), the same color as the alloys and alliances to suggest adulteration of the pure traditions previously maintained under the earlier elect dispensation. And the name also points not just to adulteration of tradition but to adulteration of life itself, which V. represents in her next two appearances.

In her Pentecostal age, V. appears first as Veronica Manganese in Malta, 1919, where Pynchon (via Demivolt) suggests she is the Paraclete. The legendary Veronica survived Jesus when she lent Him her veil to wipe His face as He carried the cross to Calvary. In addition, Veronica is preterite because she is not listed in official calendars of saints. Also, this name stems from the Greek *Pherenice*, 'bringing victory'; thus it faintly bears the genetic strain of Victoria Wren. Unlike Victoria Wren, who is associated with Saint Paul and edification, Veronica Manganese is associated with Saint Peter—advocate of tongues and priest of the first Pentecost—because the legendary veil is preserved in St. Peter's cathedral, Rome. Manganese is a chemically active metal which does not occur free in nature, though its compounds are widely found. This description is similar to that of vanadium and implies the increasing inanimateness of V. as she assimilates things beyond her, and as she continues to ally-alloy herself with the world—which is what the ecstasy of tongues is about. Her last incarnation is as the Bad Priest....

The clues merely nudge sacredness into the reader's awareness; they don't cancel V.'s profanity. V. is profane: a Bad Priest, an embodiment of inanimateness—with her clock eyeball, sapphire omphalos, metal feet, false teeth. But V. is also sacred: the Paraclete, the communicator, a significant totem in a world otherwise devoid of meaning.... V. is a profoundly profane sinner afraid and also a profoundly transfigured woman wailing tongues 'past speech'....

Just as the novel's entropic instances do not mean the world is yet wholly entropic, the bulk of V. is para-Pentecostal, slipping near tongues. Pynchon mentions or employs some twenty languages or argots, including the MG language Rachel speaks to her car, mock Eskimo, Maltese, and Taureg.... With all this attention to language, and specifically to the language of the Pentecost, the feeling through the bulk of the novel is of a longing for transcendence, and an imminence of the spirit, but of no chance for it to occur.... Most of V. leaves the character at the surface, in straight and linear discourse; in short, it leaves them profane. And the character by that name, Benny Profane, has a vocabulary 'made up of nothing but wrong words'....

Supposedly, bureaucracy and organization mediate between elect and preterite, ruler and ruled, God and man. But Pynchon's bureaucracies buffer professionals from grace....Two-dimensional organization inculcates elect discourse by throwing out preterite insight and preterite words.... In practice, one is either cool with edifying discourse or flipped into tongues.... There are warring modes of edification and tongues within V. They correspond to an ancient struggle coming to a head beyond the novel, between this world and the one to come. Pynchon's vision is different from modern ideas of apocalypse because his understanding of it is not contemptuous. He predicts—even urges—a second coming that is frightening and selfless, transforming and subversive, irreversible and natural. From one perspective the coming is entropic, but it is also Pentecostal: the apocalypse strikes awe but is not awful....

Post-modernist fiction has found little to sustain...in the...usual modern longing for authentic order and viable tradition. Tradition of almost any sort is anathema to Pynchon by the fact of its inevitable fossilizing in time's eons; and there is no greater lie for him than myth. He prefers beginnings. Therefore, he has relied upon pop preterition, as partly witnessed by his use of tongues.... When...Modernists celebrated common folk—Faulkner in Yoknapatawpha, Joyce in Dublin—they often did so by paralleling protagonists with sanctified ancient myth. Where Modernists injected significances, Pynchon places people solely on their own terms—vulnerable, costumed, but essentially themselves for whatever they are worth, as much damned as graced, as much nothing as something.”

W. T. Lhamon, Jr.

“Pentecost, Promiscuity, and Pynchon's V.: From the Scaffold to the Impulsive”

Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon

eds. George Levine and David Leverenz

(Little, Brown 1976) 69-85

“V. mocks the synthetic minds that insist on making shapes out of the meaningless variety and colorfulness of experience, what the original title of *Gravity's Rainbow* called 'Mindless Pleasures.' A critic of Pynchon needs to consider whether he isn't Ned Pointsman to Pynchon's Roger Mexico, whether he is not mistaking the occurrence of 'caries' for 'cabals,' and thus wasting yet more of the vital energies that might keep us from being turned into mere objects....

By and large, *V.* mixed enthusiasm and deference with puzzlement and uneasiness. Of course, there was the *Commentary* review by Irving Feldman, who saw the whole novel as silly collegiate showing off in a tradition of beatnikism that *Commentary* never liked and will, apparently, never forgive. Yet serious critics did see that Pynchon was a writer likely to matter. Stanley Edgar Hyman, in a *New Leader* review, felt obliged to make the inevitable comparison with *Catch-22*, and to put Pynchon in the tradition of black humor. As had Richard Poirier in *The New York Review of Books*, Hyman detected a direct influence of Nathanael West and Djuna Barnes. But, as Hyman says, Pynchon's imagination is wilder than that of any of these other writers, and pushes him to a wider and richer vision.

Poirier's review...seems very cautious. But the caution is mixed with a certainty that with *V.* Pynchon 'earns the right to be called one of the best [novelists] we have now.' The reservations have to do with Pynchon's mixture of modes (a mixture that has in fact grown more daring since *V.*), with the way Pynchon's brilliant and sardonic comic treatment of characters seems at odds with the seriousness with which he apparently wants us to take them. In particular, Poirier objects to the 'sloganeering,' as he calls it, of McClintic Sphere in his now famous line, 'Keep cool, but care.'

For a first novel, *V.* attracted a surprising number of very impressive or very well known critics... [George] Plimpton called Pynchon 'a young writer of staggering promise'... [Ihab] Hassan's review was—characteristically for *V.*—disappointingly conservative and balanced. The book is 'too mannered and...too dull,' the comedy too gory, but, Hassan added, Pynchon's knowledge of the 'particular nihilism that ravages our time is compelling'... Whitney Balliett noted the obvious comparison with the beats, but argued that Pynchon's novel was superior to their work because it was free of sentimentality and self-pity. Disoriented by the comedy, Balliett saw the major difficulty of *V.* to be that it is a 'comic novel whose author doesn't take it seriously enough'."

George Levine and David Leverenz, eds.
Mindful Pleasures (1976) 5-6

"The most daring and ambitious American writer alive today, Pynchon lives out the myth of the artist as a man apart.... This ironic moralist put life together as a diabolic plot in which you could trade your soul for insurance against hell on earth.... Published in 1963 [*V.*] was set in 1955 because the cold war was an unbeatable image for the stand-off between Eros and Thanatos in suburban marriages...for the deadlock whose linear representation was the symmetrical letter V....

This is an image of nature as a Newtonian motion machine powered by crap.... Pynchon loves and hates his messiah machine, Benny Profane, a human yo-yo whose nightmare is that his 'clock-heart' and 'sponge' brain will be disassembled on the rubble-strewn streets, but whose grace is his ability to be a perpetual-motion man who rolls on too fast to lose his heart or let anyone touch the controls of his mind. The Profane Christ is the one who won't get crucified.... He wants a woman who will not love him but will be a really self-contained machine. 'Any problems with her you could look up in a maintenance manual'.... It took the male and female forces of modern history three generations to produce him. Profane's inanimateness is the twice-transformed version of a Victorian belief in order. Sidney Stencil is Pynchon's favorite Grandfather... Out of a flirtation with the mysterious woman V. he had a son, to whom he left his notebooks. But Herbert Stencil cannot learn his father's lesson.... What his father hoped to save was civilization. What Herbert hopes to save is himself....

Herbert's reasoning is like a Wittgensteinian proposition in which each term is a model of his reality. His mind is a series of dead ends. For Herbert life is possible only as the romantic pursuit of an unattainable meaning, an unattainable woman. The purpose of the hunt is to hunt forever. If you find your Venus, you find death. Hugh Godolphin is Grandfather Romance, the Victorian explorer who believed in his immortal soul and the British burden. He lost his faith in Vheissu, an 'outland' arousing sexual appetites symbolized by iridescent spider monkeys... Godolphin escaped to the South Pole, hoping to find his soul again. But digging a hole to plant the British flag, he uncovered a dead spider monkey and found a network of tunnels leading from Vheissu to the pole. The heat of sex is bound up with the ice of death. One leads to the other because, in this novel, intimacy kills.

In Pynchon's vision of history as the change from fathers to sons, the mind that is an escape from chaos becomes an involuted trap; sex kills romance, and war perverts sex. All you can be sure of is your paralysis in vulnerability.... The works which hover through Pynchon's imagination of the period: Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Husserl's *Ideas* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*. This is the generation whose effort to control experience only produced the profanes who will not try to shape anything, who do not look for meaning in the illusion of meaning but in embracing their historylessness, their replaceable clock-hearts, as values....

V. is female serenity, the clean, eternal balance of emotional control. She absorbs the shock of war, of male striving, as an erotic curio and returns it when, as mother, she abandons, as lover she murders and as protectress she corrupts. She is the indestructible woman who sees herself as an objet d'art, who mutilates her body to become one with golden feet and a glass eye. She is always young, always fascinatingly beautiful. Stencil dreams of her ecstatically as a young machine: at 'age 76, skin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic, both eyes glass, but now containing photographic cells connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves.... Perhaps even a complex system of pressure transducers located in a marvelous vagina of polyethylene, all leading to a single silver cable which fed pleasure voltages direct to the correct register of the digital machine in her skull.' She is Profane's woman, the girl who lost her virginity to the gear shift of her MG, whose great love is her car or its human equivalent, Profane. V. is a self-contained autoerotic machine. V. is the crucial pivot, the profane fulcrum on which you can survive forever....

Pynchon is saying that men control their destructiveness through Profane-like passivity and disengagement; that women conquer their vulnerability to men, life and death by becoming virtual automatons who cannot feel a thing. 'Keep cool, but care,' someone advises. The only way to contain your destructiveness is to deadlock the two, to be...locked in endless, mechanistic, profane life, forever content.... Pynchon could not take his eye off civilization and the soul's death. V. is Pynchon's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, a book of life written with intelligent compassion by a man who wants to survive the touch of death. The holistic impulse to pattern personal aggression and the disorder of modern history, and the disintegrative love of chaos, balance in V. like those ancient antagonists life and death. But Pynchon rejected the balance and became, like Rilke, an elegist. He methodically went into the breeding ground of emotion, unfroze the spider monkey that is all clutch, and staged an open war between life and death. Death won. Pynchon descended towards a new vantage point, going from an ironic modern heaven toward an ironic hell. He invented himself as the Devil, the fantasist whose rainbow has its origins in gravity, the spirit of the down, of depression."

Josephine Hendin
Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945
(Oxford 1978) 192-98

[Manfred Puetz, "Thomas Pynchon: History, Self, and the Narrative Discourse," 1979]: "Central to Pynchon's work is a search for order, a search for an historical context against which to define the self.... In V. Benny Profane is 'the caricature of a selfless self,' unable to mediate between history and self, while Herbert Stencil tries to control and subjectively shape chaos, by reconstructing the history of V. Other characters too undertake quests for self and history, sometimes parodic quests, yet without such quests humanity would become inanimate... Is there an overarching conspiracy controlling all, reducing humanity to inanimate puppets? Or is there no order, only increasing entropy, with hints of order merely reflecting one's own paranoia?..."

The fiction is not a means for presenting historical reality but for presenting characters' struggles with fragmentary historical phenomena. Such fiction actually questions whether objective historical discourse is possible. When characters cast doubt on their own and others' structurings, and when the narrator reminds us of the limitations of any one perspective, historical truth becomes relative, and the old historical novel impossible."

Clark and Fuoroli
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism," 240

"We find it difficult to keep track of the novel's characters (of Benny Profane as he aimlessly yo-yos, Herbert Stencil as he ceaselessly searches for V., V. as she continually transforms herself into new guises,

and a host of cartoon characters who are always on the move). We also intimate that they are moving in obedience to some universal but unnatural law.”

Richard Pearce, ed.
Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, 3

“*V.* (1963), Pynchon’s most purely horological fiction...is obsessed with history and historiography. *V.* is not only a cipher for various entities—Virgin, Valletta, Venus, Virtu—but also a graphic representation of the choice of fates (the arms of the V) made possible in a particular historical moment (represented by the apex of the V). The record of the past, which was a succession of such moments of choice, is distorted. Official history offers us, in both *V.* and *GR*, a vectoral, one-dimensional, deterministic version of past reality; it ignores the ‘might-have-beens’ which were available to individuals or to the colonial Puritans, and by obscuring the alternatives offered by the past also obscures the possibilities that the present may still be offering Now, under the shadow of the Rocket.

Pynchon seeks to return us to those possibilities by eliminating the ‘normal’ tension in most openly moralizing fiction, between what is and what *ought* to be, and replaces it with the double tension between what is and might have been, on the one hand, and what is and *can* be, on the other. Inevitably, this burdens his fiction with the dominant moods of loss and fear, since he continues to see the imminent apocalypse of a rocket-borne atomic dawn as the likeliest conclusion of the horological predicament.

Given this vision, Pynchon hesitates as he returns us to his alternative, the chronometric Now that is pregnant with possibility; yet it has been a persistent hesitation, one that began to manifest itself in *V.* There, Rachel goes to visit the plastic surgeon Schoenmaker who is about to operate on her friend Esther. For Rachel, such an operation represents false hope and false possibility. In depicting Rachel’s anger at what she perceives as deception, Pynchon offers us his vision of hope and the rhetoric proper to it by presenting us with a denial of one and a parody of the other; like most post-modern authors, he is embarrassed by warmth, optimism, or the naivete of intense feeling even as he endows an occasional character with them, and so he works by negatives and eschews the lyrical (except for a few extraordinary passages in *GR*).

Rachel and the narrator consider time and reverse-time, world and mirror-world (the young Pynchon tends to borrow authority from the discourse of physics), and conclude that the plastic surgeon’s waiting-room is appropriately equipped with mirror and clock... Rachel’s anger at the plastic surgeon stems from her feeling that what is offered here is the false promise of escape by reversal: the offer to replace a hook-nose with the ‘inward bow of a nose-bridge’ is only an emblem of all the other false promises to reverse the temporal (clock) and spatial (mirror) realities in which the characters of *V.* (and of *GR*) are enmeshed.

Like his fictional character, Pynchon is not simply ‘puritanical’; he does not so much reject the pleasure Esther may derive from her changed appearance as he rages at the fact that such ‘change’ comes to be perceived as the only possible and effective way of shaping one’s life. Later, Esther deals with a pregnancy by resorting to the ‘reversal’ that abortion can provide. Again, Rachel’s anger—and Pynchon’s—is directed not at the choice of abortion, but at the choice which Esther earlier refuses to make: passive about sex and birth-control, she becomes pregnant. Responsibility she leaves to the plastic surgeon who has become her lover, and who does not care about her pregnancy either, since there are medical techniques for dealing with it.

This whole set of episodes is perhaps chosen naively and with an eye to the main chance for a criticism of society, but the young Pynchon hammers at the point which is directly relevant to *GR*: there are ‘nodes’ (in time and space) in which technology offers the possibility of a freedom that is false because it makes us all the more dependent on itself. Analogically, we are seduced by our visions of a total and predetermined historical design into yielding our control of the separate moments of life. In Pynchon’s narratives, characters are constantly lured away from the fleeing possibilities of shaping a fragment of Self or a minute part of History.”

Marcus Smith and Khachig Tololyan
“The New Jeremiad: *Gravity’s Rainbow*”
Critical Essays (1981) 176-77

“To attach names like ‘entropy’ or ‘decadence’ to the V-symbol in *V.* is to limit the resonance of that symbol to a certain frequency, and part of the mystery (and the humor) of *V.* comes from the way V. functions as a free-floating signifier with a potentially inexhaustible range of reference. In attaching multiple levels of connotation to an initial, Pynchon plays on the convention that an initial synecdochically ‘stands for something—usually some word beginning with that initial (although the Roman numeral five creeps easily under the rubric... The symbol is so overdetermined that all of its manifestations in the novel seem only distortions or approximations of an ultimate core of significance. Entropy and decadence are large concepts, but they do not banish the mystery of the central symbol; they fall far short of the magnitude of its implied message. As the novel proceeds, V. comes to promise so much that any resolution to the quest would seem ludicrously deficient. Yet the symbol never gets a range of reference so limitless that the question of what V. ‘stands for’ becomes completely meaningless...

All of the separate, limited manifestations of V. in the novel point to the idea that the truth about V. cannot be expressed in language; but because V. somehow exists beyond the text, so completely whole that language is always inadequate to express it, all of these manifestations can coexist. Much of the fascination of the book arises from the fact that the various character, voices, and incidents have so little conventional narrative connection to one another. Yet because they are all associated with V. by relations of juxtaposition and resemblance, they participate in the charisma of the unavailable insight that V. somehow ‘stands for.’ All somehow point back to it—point back, as if they had it as their common origin, as if the insight had generated all of them. For the novel presents itself as radically incomplete, ‘radically’ in the sense that it is unable to recover its origins. Because Pynchon’s working premise is that the unavailable insight cannot be incarnated in language, this insight appears to have exfoliated an incredible variety of manifestations—the V-words in *V.* These manifestations, the novel contrives to suggest, are unified only by virtue of their origin in, and their reference to, a common source....

It has become a critical commonplace that *V.*...is directly concerned with the nature and limits of human knowledge. *V.* may be described as an epistemological fable, or fable of knowing, in that it raises questions about what an individual character knows or can know, in order to invoke the larger issue of the conditions and possibilities of knowledge *per se*. As an ironically modified questing hero, Herbert Stencil, one of the novel’s two protagonists, is absorbed in connecting the multifarious data of his experience into a revelatory pattern. His goal is to identify V., a project assuming at the outset that V. is the sort of thing that can be identified. But at what should be the climactic moment of his quest, Stencil realizes that he is pined between two contradictory but equally compelling world views.

‘Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic,’ he finds himself muttering, and one of two conclusions seems to follow from this logic. Either the lady V. exists, in which case the Plot Which Has No Name dominates the fictional present, or the lady V. does not exist, and Stencil has hypothesized or even hallucinated relations between random events; in the first case, a repressive order manipulates events; in the second, apparent order veils real chaos. But one irony of this formulation is that neither explanation comprehends the information confronting Stencil. A further irony is that this dilemma has even less application to the information confronting the reader....

The assumptions on which Stencil proceeds are fundamentally Naturalistic, in that he approaches his evidence as if it encoded a traditional story line, in this case centering on the adventures of a malevolently picaresque heroine. He works on the supposition that if the incidents of his father’s life do not add up to a conventional plot—which takes on overtones of ‘conspiracy’—they are entirely unconnected, and thus late in the book he comes to suspect that his reconstructed history adds up to nothing more than ‘the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects.’ But even such an admission of failure begs the question, for it does not explain why the initial and the objects recur so intrusively in the history that he studies. Stencil’s project of identification runs up against the convention of duplication that is the governing structural principle of *V.*, which is only to say that Stencil’s story does not approximate Pynchon’s.

Yet Stencil’s story is enormously persuasive—as are Stencil’s presumptions about what a story is. A ‘Stencilized’ reading of the events in *V.* vacillates between two poles of interpretation that on examination turn out to have exactly the same consequences. Thus, if V. exists, her ‘plot’ is so far-reaching that it

effectively makes the contemporary world a closed system, subject to eventual entropic rundown that terminates in a state of chaos. If V. does not exist, her absence effectively guarantees that the world is already chaotic. In essence, the two lines of interpretation converge at a point of chaos, the nadir of a structural V. In this way Stencil reduplicates the V-symbol and makes incoherence the truth about a fictional world characterized by ballooning implications of coherence. For the V-symbol is chronically overdetermined. It signifies, and thus associates, not only the women that Stencil identifies as successive manifestations of the lady V. (Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, Veronica Manganese, and so on), but places (Venezuela, Valletta, Vheissu, the V-Note Tavern), qualities (virtu, velocity, violence), and even symbols *for* association (V is the logical sign for 'or'; [V pointing right] is the logical symbol for implication and the notation for vectors). Theses that the lady V. exists—or that she does not exist, for that matter—do not explain the intrusive presence of the letter V in these diverse contexts, and the intrusive presence of the letter V is the central enigma of the novel.

But the impulse to translate the events of the novel into evidence for or against V.'s existence is difficult to resist because Pynchon's fictional worlds are very evidently overlapping networks of codes. Modernist conventions suggest that readers who break these codes will arrive at a statement about what 'really' happens, and V. is the most overt of the three novels in inviting criticism of a particular kind, criticism that in its aims and methods is analogous to sleuthing. Yet the invitation to play literary detective is duplicitous. Too many clues turn out to be red herrings. In fact, there is no way to decode or reassemble this text so that it reads sequentially, yielding definitive information about who V. 'really' is or what 'really' happened to Stencil's father.

But if V. does not have a unitary narrative thread, it achieves coherence in other ways, through repetition of key patterns and themes on different levels, through the juxtaposition of incidents in the 'real time' of the narrative present and the 'mirror time' of the narrative past, and through the recurring initial. The metaphoric duplications are so pervasive that they give the novel a labyrinthine, box-within-a-box structure: for all its preoccupation with history, V. is static and spatial rather than dynamic and progressive. It is the *presence* of the past that signifies, not an obscured chronology that relegates history to nonexistence except as a residual force or influence. [compare Faulkner]

Within this context Stencil's quest acts as a lure, promising an embedded plot that will culminate in a vision of what his story—and, by implication, history—means. By offering the character of Stencil as a critical role model, V. duplicitously fosters the epistemological assumption that experience is somehow a story that will yield up its significance when it is given.... Precisely because the Stencils are adept at reading formulaic, 'stenciled' texts, they are incapable of reading a novel by Pynchon. They assume that the important ordering principles will be identity and causality, and so they miss the multiplying resemblances and the governing convention of doubling. Ironically, this peculiarly Stencilian myopia is itself doubled in V. In his quest to compete his father's narrative and reveal the 'real' story, Herbert Stencil assumes that things are related only if they have a single trait or property in common. In particular, he is obsessed with disclosing an unbroken narrative thread lying beneath the disparate incidents of his own life and the life of his father.... He fails to see that his intuition of a cosmic plot lurking under the appearance of diversity echoes his father's predilection for interpreting experience in terms of alias, disguise, and code. Yet one of the most obvious connections between the two Stencils is that their habits of mind are very similar. In their inability to recognize family resemblances, the Stencils have a marked family resemblance....

'She hangs on the western wall' is a tour de force of narrative technique, in this case of a style of omniscient narration that manages to balance the concerns of six main characters without giving precedence to any one of them. Just as no one V-word encapsulates the significance of the letter V in this chapter, no one character emerges as central, and no one action achieves prominence, subsuming the other actions to a grand design. The plot of this chapter remains multiple, involving four separate actions intertwined by a network of local and contingent relations into a cohesive sinister Situation that subordinates diverse events to a governing intention is only one of these actions.... Stencil labors to realize his ideal of narrative coherence. His assumption that the various V-words conceal or encode an identity leads him into a quest after the 'real' meaning of Vheissu, an exotically remote country whose name, like the initial V., functions as a free-floating signifier. Vheissu refuses to yield up a fundamental referent under

his probing. Instead, it accretes other V-words—‘Venezuela,’ ‘Vesuvius,’ volcano’—and as Stencil struggles to synthesize all of them, he is driven to construct an increasingly comprehensive plot which finally postulates that agents of an unknown power plan to infiltrate and conquer Western civilization. The fantasy swells to global proportions...

He accordingly tries to define V. so that she has global and even cosmic implications but still remains the kind of being he can reasonably expect to find.... That is, her various manifestations must be appropriate to a character in a naturalistic fiction. She cannot be in two places at the same time, for instance, and her character must be explicable in terms of her prior experiences and proclivities...V’s capacity for disguise helps him justify his theory that Victoria Wren...is the same woman who turns up in Southwest Africa in 1913 under the name of Vera Meroving, and in Malta during the 1944 siege as the Bad Priest.... Starting with an initial, Stencil tries to build a metonymic narrative out of patterns of recurrence....a series of adventures linking his heroine with a selection of twentieth-century catastrophes... ‘V by this time was a remarkably scattered concept.’ And most of the appearances of the V symbol remain scattered outside the narrative framework that Stencil tries to build around them....

His theory of disguise will not explain how Veronica, who is indubitably a rat, albeit a beautiful rat, and Victoria, the girl tourist at Fashoda, can be ‘one and the same V’... The thesis that V. is a historical personage does not account for the recurrence of the V-symbol in words like ‘Venus,’ ‘Vesuvius,’ ‘Venezuela, velocity... The Vs proliferate beyond Stencil’s quasi-authorial control, so that though Stencil defines himself as He Who Looks for V., it is the reader who keeps running into her—or it.... His thesis that manifestations of the V-symbol add up to a quasi-allegorical figure who acts as the presiding genius of a socially entropic, terminally ill century is an attempt to account for the mid-fifties culture of the novel’s ‘present’ sections. This culture is for the most part dehumanized, half-conscious, and absorbed in banal fetishes; the narrator repeatedly calls it a decadence. But by making these tendencies into a global movement and giving this movement a name and a genesis, Stencil endows a selection of events with the shape of necessity...he commits this process to a determinate end....

Stencil’s reading of the evidence does not embrace all the manifestations of the V-symbol. His projected plot translates contemporary history into apocalypse and makes individual choice either impossible or irrelevant. But Stencil’s failure to link the V-word coherently does not indicate that Stencil has merely fantasized or hallucinated a relation between a random collection of terms. For among other things V. does contain a sort of story about a sort of eponymous heroine.... In general, each chapter introduces a new cast of characters. Furthermore, the lady V. plays very different roles in the different stories and gets very different kinds of narrative treatment. In fact, the ‘past’ chapters are so inescapably different from one another—and from the ‘present’ chapters—that they raised the problem of V.’s identity to another level...

V. emerges as a parody of character development. She ‘grows’ by a literal process of accretion, assimilating inanimate objects into her body with the passage of time until at her death she is simply decomposed—again quite literally. This mechanical rendering of development denies any insight into V.’s motives and intentions and fails to elucidate her relation to the outbreaks of violence her presence seems to signal. She always seems more a symbol than a character, calling attention to such repeated motifs as decadence, the inanimate, and the polarized visions of ‘hothouse’ and ‘Street,’ paired terms reflecting the pseudo-dilemma of a rigidly ‘plotted’ order versus total chaos....

It appears that V. lived and died—died eleven years before the action of the ‘present’ narrative begins. There is a hint in the epilogue that she is Herbert Stencil’s mother, but the information is extremely equivocal; in the long run, it reveals only that Victoria Wren seduced the elder Stencil in the year preceding Herbert Stencil’s birth. This obscure clue suggests a causal link between past and present, but it remains only a clue. There is no detective-story denouement in which it is either affirmed or denied.... The text raises unanswerable questions about which of the ‘past’ narrators is trustworthy. The reader can string ‘past’ chapters on a story line to produce a fundamentally naturalistic narrative only by ignoring the naturalistic question of where these chapters come from. But V. persists in raising this question in complex and confusing ways.

The eleven 'present' chapters describe the adventures of Benny Profane, Herbert Stencil, the Whole Sick Crew, and various associates and hangers-on during the years 1955 and 1956.... The structural metaphor for the 'present' seems to be Profane's habit of yo-yoing, and the well-intentioned (*bene*) Benny himself, the presiding deity of a profane world, travels in a circumscribed orbit that is finally a parody of the linear plot, going from Norfolk to New York to Valletta without learning anything. Because the structure of the 'present' chapters emphasize the failure of learning, the 'past' chapters that mysteriously punctuate the dominant story line acquire additional emphasis.... There is no way to distinguish fact from Stencilian fiction, an implication that the text reinforces in numerous ways.... True to his name, Stencil seems to be stenciling the figures of his obsession all over his father's personal landscape, and it would follow that four of the six 'past' chapters are 'really' imaginative reconstructions....

The effect of the epilogue is to blur the distinction between 'real' and 'imagined' information beyond recovery.... In the long run, the theory that swells the limited, myopic Stencil into a virtual persona of the author does little to make sense of a narrative that jumps intermittently into a nostalgia-laden past, and jumps on two occasions without Stencil's help.... History does have a pattern in this book; it is organized by a sort of repetition compulsion that rages unchecked because no one seems to see it.... Outside Foppl's villa German soldiers gun down a stragglng remnant of the Herero tribe that has somehow survived the carnage of fifteen years earlier. Inside, Foppl's guests act out their nostalgia for the genocide of 1904-7 in an orgy of violence that turns into unabashed death worship.

The characters Mondaugen and Weissmann serve to suggest how the same scenario will be transposed into the context of the Third Reich. In addition, the 'present' chapters framing the story duplicate its motifs on other levels, as in Mafia Winsome's intellectual racism or the self-conscious decadence of the Whole Sick Crew.... By suggesting that von Troth was in competition with Hitler, the narrator implicitly denies that an irreversible force produced both of them. Historical episodes resemble each other, but this resemblance does not signal an underlying 'plot.' Even decadence is a recurring phenomenon in *V.*, although characters always view it apocalyptically as the running-down of history. The important thing about resemblances is that they can be recognized; it is always possible, if highly unlikely in Pynchon's view, that someone will learn. That the novel encourages conventional and 'stenciled' expectations only to undermine them is consequently to the point.

Since the Romantics, writers have been fascinated by...art as the painted veil over the abyss, the pattern obscuring the void, or, as Hugh Godolphin sees it, the tattooed skin that conceals Nothing. But this version of underlying chaos is thoroughly hyperbolic because it denies the name of order to any state of affair short of a comprehensive 'plot' like the one once attributed to Providence. It locates significance 'underneath' experience and refuses to acknowledge that the relations among events, objects, and people constitute local patterns and yield local meanings. It fails to recognize that there are different kinds of relations than those pointing to a controlling designer who manipulates history to a preordained conclusion. Taken to its extreme, as it is in *V.*, this constricted vocabulary of order and chaos makes action pointless and learning impossible....

In *V.* it is the reader who is tempted to reconstruct the 'ominous logic' of the novel's world, and the irony is that this 'ominous logic' is not even good logic: the two poles of cosmic 'plot' and total randomness leave room for any number of 'middles.' This pseudo-dilemma does not exhaust the possibilities. The novel itself is not constructed according to either of them. The encouragement that *V.* offers to such reconstructions is duplicitous, for *V.* evades reduction through its structural dependence on proliferating duplications: recurring character types, repeated circumstances, reflected themes, and a reiterated initial. Ultimately, this evasion of reduction is consistent with the real subject of *V.* By using a metaphoric structure instead of a conventional plot—by placing the emphasis on resemblances rather than on chronological development—Pynchon could take the twentieth century as his subject in *V.* and write of its devastations without committing it to a fixed and final destiny."

Molly Hite
Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon
(Ohio State U 1983) 27-28

“With Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, we enter more firmly into the modern mode, where the novelist is conscious of modernist techniques and attitudes and uses them as needed, while at the same time remaining solidly within traditional American themes... *V.* is the more elusive piece of work and suggests a future development in Pynchon of even greater indirection, toward that self-consciousness of technique which has been associated with postmodernism....

The structure of *V.* (1963) is not of two legs attached at an angle, creating the letter V, but of a mosaic in which pieces do not quite touch an asymptote, as it were, of converging elements. The novel is shaped something like a film in which rapid cuts do not give the viewer an opportunity to settle in; Pynchon’s forte is the fast break, the ellipses we associate with a visual technique. He appears to omit everything in between, although, eventually he cuts back to the lacunae. Meanwhile, he convinces us that as much is omitted as is contained. Our expectation for more is an element in the making of *V.*; as in a modern poem—Eliot’s ‘Waste Land’ and apparent example—we yearn for missing pieces, only to discover we do not need them. The novel is made up as much in our minds as it is on paper.

V. lacks narrative, but is full of stories; lacking true characters, it is overloaded with people; lacking place, it is full of locations, and one of them, legendary Vheissu, seems absolutely essential. It recalls Kafka’s example offering us so much we only slowly begin to realize how little is there. For all its five hundred pages, *V.* is minimalist fiction; and paradoxically, for all its half-million words, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is not too much, but too little, a minimalist exercise. In each, Pynchon was aiming at only slightly less than a history of the twentieth century; and the two novels, we can see in retrospect, should be read together, as one book—in the way that Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* and *JR* are really one book, or *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*, sequential histories of our time.

A book constructed like a mosaic has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage for the author is that incoherence cannot be a factor, since disconnection except where edges touch is the rule, not the exception. At several junctures in *V.*, for instance, Pynchon moves to the crowd Benny Profane knew when in the navy, or else does navy scenes—the book begins with one such episode. Characters like Pig Bodine, Pappy Hod, and others move through these scenes, and they reflect the typical high jinks we associate with service personnel. Their fun and games are service equivalents of fraternity ‘Animal House’ activities. Though they may serve some small function as parallel activities for the Whole Sick Crew in New York, they are in themselves amusing at such low levels they demean the book; Pynchon, usually sophisticated, insightful, and historically very mature, cannot resist such bouts of masculine play. The question is not of function, but of quality of scene itself, here and in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where several of the characters (Pig, Chiclitz, others) reappear, as do several incidents. German Southwest Africa, somewhat marginal here, becomes central there.

We could possibly argue that the high jinks are initially necessary, since through them we find the original connection of Profane and Paola Maijstral (Pappy Hod’s wife), which leads him on to Malta, Valletta, etc. Also, we could further point out that the presence of such scenes—the final one in Valletta, as a capping event—reinforces Pynchon’s idea of yo-yoing, in which everything repeats itself. That reliance on yo-yoing, taken from those who shuttle between Times Square and Grand Central, suggests all life as repetitious and cyclical.

We follow that lead, in our effort to connect yo-yoing to the repetition of even adolescent materials. The yo-yoing of alternating activities, along with the more general theme of entropy or things running down, provides powerful tensions: chiefly, delusive spatiality juxtaposed to dead, waste-land areas. Here, as later in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, such tensions suggest how things of the world lead us toward death, no matter if will and function choose otherwise.

Profane, Pynchon’s hesitating but operative man of life, can move between spaces, even between groups, and yet always end up in stagnation, much as the Times Square shuttle, that archetypal yo-yo. The movement of the shuttle through the labyrinthine underground maze is rapid, but its terminal points never alter. Movement alternating with ‘dead landscapes’ characterizes *V.*: Malta under air attack of the Germans and Italians; Valletta, a dying, almost dead city; Vheissu, that mythical and legendary area which has died out except in memory; Stencil, a version of his father, seeking *V.*, who may or may not be dead, who may

or may not have even existed as Stencil imagines her; New York City underground, filled with dead alligators in caves and the Whole Sick Crew above; Southwest Africa, where Germans have systematically massacred the Africans, preparation for even larger-scale exterminations.

As part of this vision of suffocation, decline, passivity, and frantic activity leading nowhere, Profane seeks various refuges, and one connects with the Pig and Pappy crowd. To follow this: Profane moves in holes, rooms, subterranean mazes, tunnels, and in odd, marginal jobs—as a night watchman, for example, in a robot factory. The infantile crowd is just one such arrangement. He has decided against the world of dynamics and progressive energy (although not against life), and his literary points of contact are underground man, invisible man, Kafka's withdrawn victims, Beckett's bums and questors, all of them marginal, but still vital. To fit Profane's locale, Pynchon has devised for him a language of onomatopoeic sounds which punctuate the silence around him.

The mosaical arrangement sustains such connections and such scenes, since everything can touch. Withal, these juvenile episodes of fun and rioting, of using contraceptives as bombs, display a side of Pynchon that weakens his work. He locates Profane in an obsessively masculine tradition, insists he is okay, not 'queer,' and lets him drink and brawl in mindless parties among his fellows. Profane expends tremendous amounts of energy on producing disorder, in this respect the opposite of Herbert Stencil. From this, we perceive Pynchon's sympathies with energy and activity, *even when* they are recycled into waste.

Although Profane, as his name implies, is the antibourgeois principle in action, like Rabelais's Panurge, his rejection of a productive life is not a negation. By way of the groups Profane associates with—once again the mosaic principle—Pynchon arranges types of life around him: the Puerto Ricans with whom he hunts alligators, the Whole Sick Crew introduced to him by Rachel Owlglass, the Pig-Pappy crowd from his navy days, the people around Stencil involved in the V. quest, and so on. Profane wants an adversary life that no longer obtains; and he sinks into passivity when he cannot find it. Yet he does not succumb to total ennui. Pynchon here and Bellow in *Augie March*—both books products of the fifties and therefore not so dissimilar—are probing comparable malaises of character and event. And just as Bellow would not accept malaise, but had to seek some resolution in life, so Pynchon cannot desert Profane in the intensity of his countering existence. The dilemma seems characteristic of the postwar American novelist: to seek energy in areas that all for Kafka-like passivity and silence; to insist on the energy, and then to recycle it into waste.

Under these conditions we could close the circle of our argument and possibly view the infantile antics of the Pig-Pappy crowd as quite necessary. The navy crew are full of vitality, however mindless; they have not given up on life, though their quality of life is not high; and they represent the dynamic principle, however wasteful this sense of the dynamo has become. Yet even if we grant this, Pynchon heads into confusion, for if Profane, who seeks life, is the antithesis of Stencil, who seeks repetitions or duplications, then one is hardly preferable to the other. Profane represents the familiar 'making out' quality of American masculinity as a form of life spirit, a shaping of energy; when, in fact, it is also something dead. Profane's profanity is weakened, not defined, by his fun and games with Pig Bodine, and these sections loosen, do not reinforce, the mosaical arrangement.

Yet these episodes aside—and there may well be those more sympathetic to them—Pynchon's arrangements in *V.* occur at high levels of imagination. Points of departure are seemingly disconnected: the obsessive quest for V.; the legendary quality of a briefly glimpsed Vheissu, an Edenesque memory; the city of Valletta, capital of Malta, and Malta itself, emblematic of continuing life, despite conquests, bombings, conspiracies; the episode at Fashoda in 1898—France and England carving up Africa as a foreshadowing of World War I; the German conquest of Southwest Africa, leading to its extermination tactics in World War II; the Whole Sick Crew, a stencilized New York version of real art and artists, those who do not create but talk 'about people who do.' These are the major points of contact, the places where pieces of the mosaic touch; and the key element is the pursuit of V.

The quest for V., whoever she is, whenever she lived, if she did live, if she is still alive, is not linear. The brilliance of the conception of the novel makes *V.* into anything and anyone beginning with the letter, from Victoria to Valletta. It is, also, a sexual symbol of the female, the two legs of the V meeting in the

great feminine mystery. Pynchon's V. as a legendary female appears to owe a good deal to Durrell's sense of Justine in his *Alexandrian Quartet*. 'Disguise is one of her attributes,' Stencil states; that is, she moves like Proteus, a legendary confidence woman.

Behind both Justine and V. is a long tradition of women in literature, described by Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony*: merciless women, deeply sadistic and often masochistic, whose appeal is their ability to convey pain and suffering as sexual substitutes. Such a woman reappears as Katje in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The desirability of V., if she really exists as Pynchon makes her seem, is her elusiveness, her ability to be all things, her protean nature, her disappearances. All her movements transmit pain, first for the elder Stencil, then for his son, who must repeat the experience. Vera Meroving, Veronica Manganese, Victoria Wren—these are some of the guises of V., who ultimately is the pursuit of an idea, an ideal: like Vheissu, that paradisiacal vision, an Antarctic Shangri-la. The elements of highest value in Pynchon are intangible, in them mental or imaginative quest.

That everything remains beyond reach is significant, for the novel is a reflection, deeply so, of the 1950s. The present is 1955-56; and even background events, starting before the turn of the century and continuing into the twenties, are refocused in the mid-fifties. Pynchon's response to the decade is not unlike Bellow's or Heller's. The Bellow I have in mind, besides *Augie March*, is *Henderson the Rain King*; an Africa of the mind, a politics of existence. Heller's *Pianosa* is similar, a place created rather than existing. For Pynchon, who is virtually our archetypal American writer, his background reaching deep into Puritan times, America is beyond reach. The 1950s proved to be a time when America chased the chimera; it, not the sixties alone, split the country. In this respect, America became an unknown country, even as the media and some intellectual journals spoke of reconciliation. Pynchon's America is like Vheissu: the legendary Eden briefly glimpsed, lost, and then unachievable. One quests for it, as for a new Zion, but it remains elusive. Vheissu is, then, a larger vision of what V. might have been. Each is the lost vision.

Aspects of the 1950s *mise-en-scene* appear in several guises. The Whole Sick Crew—a stencilized version of real culture, a yo-yoing group of superficial talents—is Pynchon's (unjust) version of the Beat movement. Benny Profane is the dysfunctional man of the fifties, an oddball because of his inability to achieve affluence; *anti* force when everyone else is *pro*; a profanation not of God but of God's culture. The surrounding world, like Stencil's preoccupations, is dead, dying, diminishing. The search for V., attached to dead matter as it is, is somehow a countering movement to death, in the way Kafka's protagonists, caught in dying situations, struggle to maintain minimal life.

Profane is the schlemiel, a figure who plays a large role in our postwar literary culture, who yearns after some form of unattainable purity. The schlemiel is never far from the idealistic tradition, a counter to heroism (Mailer fights mightily against becoming or creating a schlemiel), an adversary force in American culture. Everything that the fifties in their larger sense came to represent is opposed by the schlemiel image: lack of achievement, dropping out, loss of direction, stress on some personal form of purity, an innocence which makes accomplishment impossible. The phenomenon need not be Jewish, although Jewish self-deprecatory humor and guilt lend themselves to the schlemiel tradition.

The schlemiel accommodates well a vision based on irony, self-deception, disguise. As half Jewish (half Italian), Benny Profane fits, in this respect, into Pynchon's ironic sense of America and American destiny. The irony is based on promise versus achievement, Eden (Vheissu) versus what is, the quest for V. versus what V. may turn out to be. Profane runs the gauntlet of 1950s ideologies. Hunting alligators in New York City's sewers and becoming a watchman in a robot factory are his means of achieving schlemielhood while everyone else is advancing or running down. He walks a treadmill until he returns to Malta, where he can vanish: 'Profane and Brenda [a college girl] continued to run through the abruptly absolute night, momentum alone carrying them toward the edge of Malta, and the Mediterranean beyond.' Profane disappears into the night, as Yossarian paddles toward Sweden: both 'resolutions' coming through the schlemiel's way of handling antiheroism, dislike of violence, a self-preserving effort at idealism amidst corruption. The schlemiel in contemporary fiction often serves the role of Thoreau at Walden: a refusal to enter the mainstream, to compete, to go for the prize. The schlemiel and the 'insane' touch.

Further, the schlemiel in contemporary fiction has qualities of the 'holy innocent,' a divine dimension. Profane is not sacred; but he is, as a profane man, often more sacred than those who assert divinity—this condition will be one of the many themes of those in Stencil's past who quest after power. Like the Herreros in German Southwest Africa, who rebel only to be exterminated, Profane represents an inner function. And yet he cannot be sentimentalized; nor is he a viable alternative to Stencil, who represents the 'world.' He is not a solution to anything, but a more reliable part of the problem. He *does* work at robot testing, for Anthroresearch Associates, where SHROUD ('synthetic human, radiation output determined') and SHOCK ('synthetic human object, casualty kinetics') are being constructed, eventually, to replace man. He only loses the job when he oversleeps. Through work, he enters into the scientific dehumanization of man, Pynchon's major theme, and even feels a 'certain kinship' with SHOCK, 'which was the first inanimate schlemiel he'd ever encountered.'

V. established Pynchon's position in mainstream modernism [Postmodernism] by exploiting those elements which originally made modernism possible. With his background in engineering physics and the humanities, he was uniquely equipped. The rhythms that underlie his work, the sense of opposites, the tensions and conspiratorial silences, derive from meetings between technology and humanism. The advent of speeded-up technology permeating the culture had its humanistic counterpart in opposition, undermining, in frantic and often useless attacks on technology's values. American politics often rest there, not in ideologies. Pynchon is in that tradition: seeing dynamo undermine virgin, technology destroy faith; and yet his strength lies in exploiting elements of the conflict. *Gravity's Rainbow* becomes our novel of the 1970s: where the self is minimized in the name of the self; where ego is reduced in the name of ego; where the individual is diminished in the name of the individual. The play of opposites, as in V., gives Pynchon the drama of ironies and paradoxes that modernism affords only the best novelists.

There are in V. repeated areas of disguise, hiding, layers of concealment. Only Profane is out front; the rest invade shadows to discover what lurks there. The outlines of the novel are concerned with questing after what cannot be clearly seen, no less found.... Every foreground action has its parallel of background elements; Pynchon is always busily working back and forth, individual and history, now and past, real and stencilized. Tensions and conflicts are all focused on trying to find what constitutes freedom, whether the individual lives skew to the rest of society or in frantic relationship to the culture. Surrounding him are all the factitious elements, from Stencil's nonproductive search for V. to the Whole Sick Crew as a carbon copy of artistic achievement. Neither is the real thing, which lies in murk. It may lie in alligator hunts, where Profane feels comfortable underground, bizarre, himself against nature. Perception is *there*.

Yet even as Pynchon celebrates Profane's vitality—human energy as against technological, mechanical energy—significant elements of the novel do not lie with him. He is only tangentially connected to what matters, which is the quest for V. The concealed and disguised obtains, the conspiracy, not only the human energy expended in seeking. Stray elements of detective fiction—Greene, Chandler, Hammett—haunt V. Early in the novel, we gain some sense of how Pynchon intends to mirror elements inner and outer, human and technological, etc., in a temporal image which combines many diverse quests—Profane, Rachel Owlglass, Paola Maijstral, and young Stencil. The time is 1956, when the earlier Fashoda incident of 1898 would reappear in the Anglo-French, Israeli Suez venture, a warmup for the new war, as Fashoda was for World War I....

Time, reflection, narcissistic impulses, the mirror image, all provide a transition from the Whole Sick Crew to Stencil and his quest. By way of the clock, Pynchon can move in and out, between real time on the clock face and mirror time, which is, as it were, a distorted version of clock time. In that reflected image of clock time we find Stencil—himself a copy of his father, himself a mirror image of the real one. The twisting and turning here are brief images of the alternations of display and disguise which characterize the novel's structure. Because he operates in real time, Pynchon can speak of freedom, can free himself for whatever he wants to pursue. Unlike Rachel with her car, Esther Harvitz (another member of the Whole Sick Crew) with her remade nose, Stencil with his tracking of V., Profane is not part of the gallery of fools, malcontents, robotlike creatures. He is asked what he does and responds: 'Kill alligators.'

He then defends his choice: 'Because it [the myth of the alligators] wasn't born from fear of thunder, dreams, astonishment at how the crops kept dying after harvest and coming up again every spring or

anything else very permanent, only a temporary interest, a spur-of-the-moment tumescence, it was a myth rickety and transient'—and therefore neither mechanical nor demeaning. When Profane is offered a clerk's job, he declines—'I don't go for that inside work too much'—and he does not wish to move up or make something of himself. He glories in being a schlemiel—'A schlemiel is a schlemiel'—because of the choices involved. Even waiting for the interview at the employment agency sends him into a funk, and he runs out, to return to alligator hunting, which is itself winding down, like big-game hunting.

Pynchon, in *V.*, in 1963, was attempting to become a spokesman for the decade that had just passed, as well as the one coming. For the decade that had passed, he saw a stencilized existence: the quest for a chimera in the person of *V.* and the search for a Shangri-la in the shape of Vheissu. Those searches paralleled in their intensity the exploitation of people and self that were the buildup for war. He observed diminution and exhaustion of resources in the quest for personal fulfillment which was little different from robotlike action. In *SHROUD* and *SHOCK*—as he would demonstrate in *Gravity's Rainbow*—he foresaw the mechanical personification of man's quest. And yet in those false efforts, he could not completely condemn the energy, the conspiratorial quality, the paradoxes of quest and discovery; in this, he entered mainstream America. Although his career is still young, Pynchon may be our quintessential American writer, the way Hemingway was for the two decades before World War II.

Much of *V.* depends on experimentation with forms of language.... With Profane's activities, we have current American, really Americanese, the slurred, slangy speech of the big city. Gesture, sounds, movement are more significant than words, the voice is emblematic of a life style rather than the desire to communicate. With Fausto Majjstral and Malta, deep in the conspiracy, we have Nabokovian parody; the description of St. Giles Fair, in Fausto's journals.... Not only Nabokovian parody, but Nabokov; Humbert is located in here, as is Shade's fruity poem.

Describing the Whole Sick Crew, Pynchon is parodic in a lower key—not as witty, however, as he would like to be. Presenting Foppl's Siege Party and the German extermination of the Herreros in Southwest Africa, he is objective and clinical, only intermittently voluptuous. Foppl's Siege Party, the holding of Faschung while war rages outside the barricaded compound, is a more corrupt form of the parties of the Whole Sick Crew, Foppl's group sinister in their pleasures while massacres and mutilations proceed outside their walls. Through levels of language, Pynchon was trying to find one that was suitable for him, an experiment that continued into *The Crying of Lot 49*. By *Gravity's Rainbow*, he appears to have discovered a voice, one voice with several variations. Here, in *V.*, there are several voices, a virtuoso effort: a voice for each element of the fifties, another for the sixties."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 302-07

"The emphasis on stylization, the primacy given technique, and the ensuing treatment of oneself or others as inanimate objects all conduce to that machine-age fetishism and sado-masochism figuring so prominently in his fiction. In 'Mortality and Mercy in Vienna,' the jaded Debby Considine, a prototype of *V.*, is magnetically attracted to the 'Windigo psychotic,' Irving Loon, not knowing that she, like many Pynchon characters after her, has become sexually fascinated with the cause of her own death. Sex and death, especially fetishistic love for the instrument of one's demise or subjugation, are recurrent and related themes, most notably in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The masochistic Esther is sexually aroused by her graphically described nose job. Shale (as in rock) Schoenmaker, a plastic surgeon with an apt name, works on her 'gently, like a lover,' and then makes love to her urgently, like a working professional....*V.* with her lovers, especially Melanie l'Heuremaudit [cursed hour], epitomizes this urge to stylize the act, to be self-conscious, to reduce one's partner and oneself to an inanimate object.... Even Benny Profane, who usually fears inanimate objects, wonders before sex with Rachel Owlglass if someday 'there would be an all-electronic woman. Maybe her name would be Violet [sustaining the pattern of 'V' references]. Any problems with her, you could look it up in the maintenance manual.' As Richard Lehan notes, 'Pynchon believes that the machine age pushed the Puritan fear of women—that is, of sex—to its final destructive conclusion, led modern man 'deeper into fetish country,' until the woman 'became entirely and in reality...an inanimate object of desire....'

V., as Stencil perceives her career, devolves from a woman into a grotesque automaton, tracing the analogous course of Western civilization. And as many critics have noted, her degeneration parallels that of Henry Adams's Virgin into dynamo. In the first chapter, a Christmas carol celebrating the virgin birth gives way to 'suck hour,' during which rowdy sailors guzzle beer from mechanical imitation breasts. With insistent repetition that itself becomes mechanical, the novel graphically portrays humanity or sexuality degraded into mechanism, a motif climaxed when Melanie dies accidentally impaled on a spear during a dance entitled 'Sacrifice of the Virgin'....

Herbert Stencil seems to adopt his V.-paranoia deliberately in order to give his life a purpose that enforces activity. 'It may be that Stencil has been lonely and needs something for company,' he says of himself. Paranoia offers him some last hope of escaping a seemingly terminal ennui that threatens to degrade him into a somnambulist or an automaton; it is for him what the subway is for Benny Profane—a means to keep moving. Convincing himself that 'his quarry fitted in with The Big One, the century's master cabal,' Stencil begins his dogged quest. He becomes so dependent upon his 'acquired sense of animateness' that 'having found this he could hardly release it, it was too dear. To sustain it he had to hunt V.; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid.' On Malta, when faced with having to end his psychologically imperative quest, the panicked Stencil loses all pretense of mental balance and lapses into overt demonism, regarding V. as a malignant, indestructible and all-powerful agency....

The V-shape, like the waterspout at the end of the novel, suggests entropy: when gas is emitted from a nozzle, diffusion of the molecules increases with distance and time. The first V. reference in the book raises a number of possibilities, all of which fit the major themes of urban blight, apocalypse, decadence, dispersal, and distorted perception: 'overhead, turning everybody's face green and ugly, shone mercury-vapor lamps, receding in an asymmetric V to the east where it's dark and there are no more bars.' V. becomes a 'remarkably scattered concept,' even in the mind of the single observer, because that observer can adopt an unlimited number of viewpoints. And as Sidney Stencil notes, the Situation observed becomes more varied and complex with each new observer."

Peter L. Cooper

Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World
(U California 1983) 48-49, 52, 75, 185

"We find the cybernetic in the ever-narrowing distinction between what is human and who is mechanical: an all-pervasive theme in V. For instance, Benny Profane's schlemielhood is only the broadest of a series of statements of the conflict between man and his own inanimate creations. Benny seems to be competing with—and generally loses to—machines. Another expression of the theme is found in Pynchon's proliferation of androids, the unholy hybridization of man and machine. Victoria (alias Vera Meroving, alias the Bad Priest) acquires a growing number of artificial replacements for her original equipment—a prosthetic eye which doubles as a timepiece, a plate in her skull, artificial legs—until, still barely living, she is gleefully dismantled by the urchin children of Malta while she lies helplessly beneath a collapsed building.

The incidental characters who populate 'Baedeker world...waiters, porters, cabmen' are described as 'automata.' Bongo-Shaftesbury calls himself 'a clockwork doll' and reveals 'shiny and black, sewn into his flesh, a miniature electric switch.... The silver wires ran from its terminals up the arm, disappearing under the sleeve.' Fergus, one of the Whole Sick Crew, has plugged himself directly into a TV set through electrodes on his arm, forming a servo-mechanical feedback loop: if his attention falls beneath a certain level, the TV turns off. At one point, Pig Bodine gets a job working for Anthroresearch Associates who have developed SHROUD and SHOCK, Synthetic Humans... The spy Porpentine is not only a master of disguises as so many Pynchon characters are, but he may be a robot as well; his skin peels off his face and he can take the worst falls without suffering damage. Evan Godolphin's face has been fatefully reconstructed using inert materials which are later rejected by his body's immunological system, causing monstrous disfigurement.... Characters subjugated by the system or else serving repressive governments are 'human machines.'

The emblematic controlling system is 'The Situation,' an ongoing political crisis that Stencil traces through the recent colonial history of England and Germany and which 'has no reality outside the mongrel sum of the various minds that conceive it'.... The military-industrial Yoyodyne of Bloody Chiclitz, which is to figure again in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* as an unambiguously evil force, is also exemplary of the hi-tech threat of systemization.... Even those characters who gain our sympathy—members of the Whole Sick Crew, for instance—unwittingly tend to contribute to the inanimateness of the human world: Benny yoyos on the subway up and down the East Coast; Esther gets a nosejob; Slab's anti-Catatonic Expressionism is 'technique for the sake of technique.' On the other hand, the anarchic and dissipative lives they lead seem unconscious attempts to create islands of entropy and proved a contrast to Stencil's paranoid determinism....

Decadent art tempts the artist because it is, in its way, so highly technical. It is technique emptied of the contingent... The artist's problem is to avoid giving over art to technique entirely. In Pynchon's mythology, art decays into technology when it abandons its humanity.... Mondaugen's research acts as a metaphor for reading Pynchon: 'The only thing the reader can do with the facts of Pynchon's novels is to try to impose some order on all the clicks and whistles, all the noise'.... In *V.* the metaphors stand for and reflect the reader's processing of the text by converting the figural into the literal or vehicle into tenor. In *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon begins to use the metaphor as a cybernetic device to exaggerate this 'processing' effect.... In other words, metaphors become self-referential, and the reader becomes caught in the reflective machinery of a hall of mirrors."

David Porush
The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction
(Methuen 1985) 115-22, 123, 125

"*V.* preserves the epistemological dominant of modernism. Its frame, the story of Herbert Stencil's pursuit of the endlessly elusive Lady V., takes the form of an epistemological quest, a detective story like those of Conrad, James, or Faulkner, but blown up to gargantuan proportions. Within that frame Pynchon has embedded a series of stylized imitations of characteristic modernist strategies. In one chapter, for instance (Ch.3), he detracts his espionage melodrama through the extremely limited perspectives of no fewer than seven supernumerary characters.... In another chapter (Ch.9) we get a tale of imperialist savagery from the heart of African darkness, employing a Conradian unreliable narration at two removes; in yet another (Ch.11), a Proustian first-person memoir displaying the vagaries and instability of selfhood, studded with self-conscious allusions to Eliot's high-modernist poetry. Finally, there is Herbert Stencil himself, the hero (or anti-hero) of the quest, who practices 'forcible dislocation of personality' by referring to himself in the third person, as Henry Adams does in *Education*... (or, for that matter, as one of Pynchon's own characters does in his 1960 short story 'Entropy'....

The fantastic alternative reality which Stencil constructs in the course of his quest—a reality incorporating the 'lost world' of Vheissu, a clockwork woman fabricated from prosthetic devices, the frame of Stencil's unreliable information and ill-founded or outright fictional speculations. Until the end, that is, when we readers—but *not* Stencil himself—are confronted with apparently reliable, authoritative information tending to confirm the existence of this alternative reality."

Brian McHale
Postmodernist Fiction
(Methuen 1987) 21-22

"Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, was greeted with puzzlement by many of its readers and with the fanfare accorded an important new talent by many critics. The book won the Faulkner Award as the best first novel published in 1963. Its characters, either Navy men who spend their shore leaves being drunk and disorderly or a group of raffish New Yorkers who speak of themselves as 'the Whole Sick Crew,' are linked by the character of Benny Profane. Benny thinks of himself, accurately, as a 'schlemiel.' He has left the Navy but he returns to Norfolk to drink and fight with his old buddies when he cannot think of anything better to do. In New York, he is part of an equally pointless life.

V. is not, however, simply a depressing novel about sad and useless characters. Pynchon's style and the way in which events are presented often make the grimmest scenes comic. In one sequence, Profane joins a motley group of men who are issued rifles and shotguns and sent into the sewers beneath the streets of New York to kill the alligators which, grown too big to be pets, have been flushed down the city's toilets. This action is murky but hilarious. Its links to other actions in the novel are tenuous. The novel is held together by its characters' search for a mysterious woman named V., who has appeared in various guises at crucial points in the history of the Western world ever since 1898. The search itself is ludicrous and tragic by turns. The only hope for the searching characters is provided by a tenor saxophone player: 'Love with your mouth shut, help without breaking your ass or publicizing it: keep cool, but care'."

John M. Muste
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 3
Frank N. Magill, ed.
(Salem 1989) 1233

Michael Hollister (2015)