

HISTORY AND METAFICTION: V.'S IMPOSSIBLE COGNITIVE QUEST

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Despite recent critical assertions that still qualify Pynchon's first novel *V.* (1963) as the "story of a quest for history", in this paper I try to show that this narrative also centers upon a quest for meaning and accuracy in the enunciatory act of communication, a quest which relocates the novel in a more contemporary, poststructuralist milieu. The paper stresses the validity of a narratological analysis to disclose some metafictional devices which center around the human necessity to build stories —interpretations of reality—, suggests Pynchon's anticipation of Derridean analysis, and concludes the ironical use of either/or structures in *V.* as a means to enhance the importance of categorical thinking in the humanist building on which contemporary society is still established.*

In Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury's recent volume *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, the latter critic writes a few lines about the narratives created by Thomas Pynchon, one of the most controversial and celebrated writers of the last decades. Without any mention, as yet, of Thomas Pynchon's historically corrosive fourth novel (*Vineland* 1990), the few lines Bradbury dedicates to Pynchon's first novel (*V.* 1963) are enough to make his readers aware of one of the obsessive motifs of both Pynchon's fiction and interpretive theory: the quest for history. Echoing well-known critical opinions, Bradbury describes Pynchon as "a restless and unrelentingly difficult writer" whose novels (that is to say, the three Bradbury mentions) "are major fictions of their time". The words this critic dedicates to *V.* also reflect general, widely-held critical opinions of Pynchon's first novel:¹

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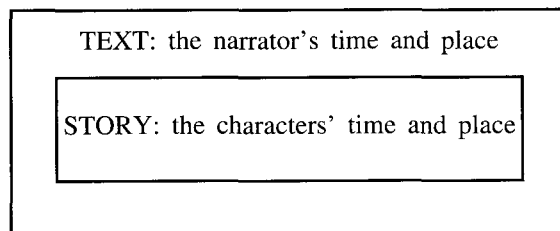
¹ See the list of works cited at the end of this essay.

V. tells the story of a quest for history in a chaotic, synchronic, cybernetic universe. Its two central figures are Benny Profane, an inanimate modern man, and Herbert Stencil, born in 1901 into Henry Adams's modern multiuniverse, the 'century's child.' While the profane Profane yoyos his way through modern urban entropy, Stencil searches the past for *V.*, an elusive female figure who has been associated with major historical crises, but whose name and identity constantly shift, like the lost significance of modern history. (1991, 323)

Despite such a recent reassertion of the critical consensus, I try to show here that *V.* is *not* simply the "story of a quest for history", Stencil's apparent pursuit. As Bradbury himself reminds us, Stencil is only one of the two male protagonists and as many critics —also including Bradbury— have remarked, Stencil's search for *V.* draws him into a complex web of references in which the capitalized letter *V* and its ever accompanying punctuation mark, the period —*V.*— stand not only for "an elusive female figure" but for many more, shuffling signifieds/referents. It is my opinion that while Pynchon's novel does concern Stencil's quest for *V.*, the work also centers upon another, second quest: a quest for meaning and accuracy in the enunciatory act of communication in which the narrator, Profane —the other central, male character—, and some other characters are especially involved. To defend my view I shall have to shift the focus of analysis from the story to the act of narrating, this is, from *what* is said in the novel to *the way* in which it is said. Of course this shift of focus is nothing new as it responds to contemporary interpretive theory. The attention paid to the act of narrating does, though, presuppose my convictions concerning the validity of a narratological analysis to offer insights which may help the reader reach a better understanding of a novel that, curiously enough, is not considered difficult to comprehend. Bradbury refers to "the lost significance of *modern* history" [emphasis added] and it is my thesis that Pynchon, in his first novel and despite its appearance (1963) years before the successful spread of poststructuralist theories in America, refers to the lost significance of History, capitalized and unqualified. In *V.*, Pynchon attests to inherited epistemological problems well-known to high-modernist writers and announces contemporary views on meaning, knowledge and communication.

The narratological analysis is used here to uncover some of the most striking metafictional² mechanisms which operate in *V.* to produce the blurring of frontiers between the textual and the story levels, that is to say, between the “world” of the narrator and the one of the characters. Metafictional devices are many in number but not all of them are centered on the textual act of narrating. Therefore, and in order to clarify any possible doubts about the terminology employed here, I will start by explaining what a narratological analysis of Pynchon’s novel may discover about the interaction between these two levels under scrutiny.

V. is narrated, on a first level, by an external narrator (Bal 1985, 120-6), that is to say, by a voice which stands out of the world of the diegesis: this narrator was not a character playing a part in the story it is narrating. This fact already discloses the existence of a temporal difference which usually appears in fictional narratives: the narrator “narrates” in the present tense whereas the events it tells the narratee about are located in the past. In the same way, we are bound to think that location is also different: the narrator tells the story from a place which does not have to coincide with the place or places where the story happened. Summarizing this narratological approach in a diagram, this is what results:



² Metafiction, as Patricia Waugh defines it, “is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (1984, 2). The list of metafictional devices is certainly very extensive. Among others, we could mention the use of narrators visibly engaged in the act of composing the story; the narrator’s direct address to the reader *as* reader; the extensive disruptions of chronological sequence; the use of *mises en abyme* and of infinite regresses of structure; grotesque or comical names; thematic concern with the relations between fiction and reality, etc. A more thorough analysis of the repertoire of metafiction can be found in Stonehill (1988, ch. II).

However, in Pynchon's *V.* this external narrator, located in an unspecified time (later than 1956, as far as the reader knows) and place, is not the only "voice" narrating the whole story of the novel. On the contrary, there is also Stencil, an internal "narrator", my inverted commas suggesting here that, as we will see, the reader may never be completely sure whether Stencil's activities are really narratorial or are simply nothing more than "impersonation and dream". The first attack on the reader's capacity to recognize who is narrating at certain moments, whether the external narrator or Stencil, comes when we are told that "Herbert Stencil, like small children at a certain stage and Henry Adams in the *Education*, as well as assorted autocrats since time out of mind, always referred to himself in the third person" (62). In other words, Stencil has decided to fantasize on his own self, in a sort of Lacanian longing for the ultimate *je idéal*, but in so doing the reader will frequently have to guess who is narrating at certain moments, the external narrator or the character Stencil. Stencil is questing for the identity of *V.*, perhaps his disappeared mother; he is the son of a Foreign-Office secret agent who died in Malta in 1919 "under unknown circumstances" and whose private journals are used by young Stencil to trace back the meaning of the unknown signifier *V.*:

Under 'Florence, April, 1899' is a sentence, young Stencil has memorized it: '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'. (53)

What follows is Stencil's long quest to find the meaning of *V.*, a quest which also ironizes the reader's search for the narrative voice. Once we know, at the beginning of chapter 3, that Stencil refers to himself in the third person, his own story gives way to a story within the story when, using his father's journals, he apparently imagines some events that could have happened, events theoretically leading to the historically real Fashoda crisis (63-94). As the narrator—the external one or Stencil?—confesses, "[h]e'd only the veiled references to Porpentine in the journals. The rest was impersonation and dream" (63). In this way the reader is left with a double cognitive puzzle: who is the voice and what kind of historical knowledge can be drawn out of "impersonation and dream". Puzzlement augments if we recognize two more aspects relevant to our analysis of the metafictional devices

in the book: Stencil's quest is almost a total parody³ of Henry Adams' *Education*, specifically of Chapter XXV "The Dynamo and the Virgin". Furthermore, these "impersonations" in chapter 3 of *V.* are nothing but a revision of one of Pynchon's earlier short stories, "Under the Rose" (1961). For Pynchon's readers the girl Victoria Wren —the first interpretation of *V.*— has already appeared in this short story and, in this way, intertextuality participates in the game of questing for *V.*, offering a place and time different from those found in the novel itself.

The similarity between Stencil and the historian Henry Adams has been posed by many critics, which is not strange since Stencil or the external narrator already pointed out such a coincidence. But Stencil has not only inherited from Adams the metafictional use of the third person to refer to himself. The pages of "The Dynamo and the Virgin" disclose highly suggestive grounds for establishing history as an apparent aim in Stencil's quest and, furthermore, illustrate how the above-mentioned metafictional technique serves to disrupt the very possibility of objective historical knowledge. Henry Adams himself tells us in his essay that he has been puzzled by the force and mystery of the dynamos at the Paris Exposition of 1900, and such bewilderment leads him to ponder over the spiritual power the Virgin has been exercising for many centuries in Western culture:

Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man's activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done; *the historian's business was to follow the track of the energy*; to find where it came from and where it went to; its complex source and shifting channels; its values, equivalents, conversions. [emphasis added] (1970a, 863)

And Stencil becomes Henry Adams' —the historian's— stencil, his parodic reflexion in the mirror, looking for the source and aims of the energy symbolized in the metonymical *V.* for Virgin, the Mother, a historian's quest which soon leads the protagonist to many different manifestations of the unknown signifier: *V.* may stand for Victoria Wren, for one of

³ In the sense given to this term by Hutcheon: "Parody is repetition, but repetition that includes difference . . . it is imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Ironic versions of 'trans-contextualization' and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage" (1985, 37).

the rats in Father Fairing's "parish", for Vheissu, for Venezuela, for Valetta, etc. The novel will finish but the historic energy will remain uncaptured and the reader will have to accept the open ending of Pynchon's book. However, Stencil's impersonation and dream take us a step further from Adams' parodied quest, as Pynchon's story may also be interpreted as a piece of "historiographic metafiction",⁴ its seriousness always under the erosive attack of metafictional techniques.

Stencil's reflexive and parodic behavior is also the external narrator's pose. I have already mentioned the confusion of levels which operates due in part to Stencil's presentation of himself in the third person, but this rupture of frames — "metalepsis" in Genettean terms (Genette 1980, 234-7)— is further confirmed when the reader realizes that the narrator lacks confidence in its own report, which also characterizes Stencil. Very soon the narrator rejects the conventional capacity of so many external narrators to become omniscient and affirms that it is one of "us" — "Some of us are afraid of dying" — (20), or gives the reader a hint as to the validity of its story — "And we know who it was Rachel spent the day with" — (417), or overtly confesses that its role is similar to the one of a reporter or historian — "If Esther objected verbally to the proceedings, no record of it exists" — (356). On these occasions the narrator is focalizing its activity on Profane, the other protagonist of the novel, and his circle of acquaintances, thus favoring the collapse of any definite historical validation: the reader is offered so many arguments as to doubt the veracity of both Stencil's and Profane's activities or "impersonations". Or, as Hutcheon puts it,

In Pynchon's *V* . . . the writing of history is seen as an ultimately futile attempt to form experience into meaning. The multiple and peripheral perspectives offered in the fiction's eye-witness accounts resist any final meaningful closure. And despite the recognizable historical context (of the Cold War years and their paranoia or of German policies in southwest Africa), the past still resists complete human understanding. (1989, 68)

⁴ As defined by Hutcheon: "By [historiographic metafiction] I mean those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Midnight's Children*, *Ragtime*, *Legs, G.*, *Famous Last Words* . . . its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (1988, 5).

But more metafictional devices are centered around the human necessity to build stories —interpretations of reality. *Mise en abyme* and infinite regression⁵ are techniques which have become very popular in twentieth-century literature and both of them are used in *V.* to suggest the ultimate impossibility to come to terms with the historical referent, with the presence of History or Truth. Examples of “stories within the story” abound in Pynchon’s novel; the human urge to “narrate” is being continuously foregrounded in its pages. Profane’s work with the Alligator Patrol offers the external narrator the possibility to tell the reader about the story of Father Fairing and his peculiar “parish” of rats and soon after we are offered entries from Fairing’s journals (118), a device which is not only a literary parody of certain eighteenth-century novels but one more element which mirrors Stencil’s use of his father’s journals in his quest for *V.* Later on, in chapter seven, Stencil obtains from Eigenvalue the story of Godolphin but once again, the human capacity to reach acceptable knowledge is problematized. The external narrator is the one who apparently narrates this chapter but just before beginning the story of Godolphin, Eigenvalue —focalized⁶ by the narrator— is pondering about the following:

Perhaps history this century, thought Eigenvalue, is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated, as Stencil seemed to be, at the bottom of a fold, it’s impossible to determine warp, woof or pattern anywhere else. By virtue, however, of existing in one gather it is assumed there are others, compartmented off into sinuous cycles each of which come to assume greater importance than the weave itself and destroy any continuity. Thus it is that we are charmed by the funny-looking automobiles of the ’30’s, the curious fashions of the ’20’s, the peculiar moral habits of our grandparents. We produce and attend musical comedies about them and are conned into a false memory, a phony nostalgia about what they were. We are accordingly lost to any sense of a continuous tradition. Perhaps if we lived on a crest, things would be different. We could at least see. (155-6)

⁵ According to the definition of Lucien Dällenbach “est mise en abyme toute enclave entretenant une relation de similitude avec l’oeuvre qui la contient” (1977, 2). In this sense, the *mise en abyme* may also suggest a relation of infinite regression. See Stonehill (1988, 8-9 and 45).

⁶ On the concept of focalization, see Bal (1985, 100-15).

Of course Eigenvalue's "words" and their curious metaphoric contents may remind the reader of high-modernist emphasis on the relativity of knowledge, but here they are even paradoxical: the narrator who seems to be a sort of historian or objective reporter at other moments is now capable of focalizing on Eigenvalue's thoughts about the impracticability of total knowledge! What follows, immediately after, is Eigenvalue's story but this time, we assume, focalized —dreamt or impersonated?— by Stencil (156-212). However, the most exaggerated occasion of *regressus in infinitum* is provided by the story of Mondaugen, a character who will reappear ten years later in Pynchon's outstanding narrative *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).

The end of chapter 8 marks the beginning of a new narrating activity whose doubtful gnoseological basis is, in this case, clearly indicated by the narrator:

A week or so later, in one of the secluded side rooms of the Rusty Spoon, Mondaugen yarned, over an abominable imitation of Munich beer, about youthful days in South-West Africa. Stencil listened attentively. The tale proper and the questioning after took no more than thirty minutes. Yet the next Wednesday afternoon at Eigenvalue's office, when Stencil retold it, the yarn had undergone considerable change: had become, as Eigenvalue put it, Stencilized. (228)

What follows (chapter 9) is the "stencilized" version of Mondaugen's story whose credibility is, once more, at stake when metaleptically the resultant Mondaugen-Stencil-narrator has a "dream" about Flopp's account of his (Flopp's) early period in the German Army: in other words, within Stencil's impersonation of Mondaugen the latter impersonates Flopp and goes from 1922 almost twenty years back in time (261-5). The reader is subjected to a double journey backwards: from the first narrative —about Stencil's activities in 1956— to 1922 in which the events apparently told by Mondaugen (his possible encounter with V.) happened and from here, in this apparent "dream",⁷ to the period of 1904-07 when Flopp was a young soldier under the orders of General Lothar von Trotha, whose troops effec-

⁷ "As he passed the imprint on the coverlet of the scurvified body which had lately occupied it, Weissmann gave it (so Mondaugen [hidden under the bed] fancied) a coy, sidewise smile. Then he vanished. Not too long after that Mondaugen's retinae withdrew, for a time, from light. Or it is presumed they did; either that or Under-the Bed is even stranger country than neurasthenic children have dreamt it to be. . . . One [already meaning

tively —and historically— massacred the Hereros and Hottentots, rebels against German rule. Once again an historical event appears mixed in a complex web of references and narrative instances, and any possibility of coming to terms with the real and historically true is gradually and persistently eroded. Mondaugen's story is also one of Pynchon's clear tributes to high modernism (compare McHale 1987, 21-2): this character tells Stencil about events which took place in 1922 —that “magic year” of modernism—, and we are told that ironically Mondaugen lived in a tower in the middle of the African wilderness, trying to isolate himself from the decadent atmosphere that surrounded Flopp and the other Germans (277). Parodic irony overflows at the end of the chapter: Mondaugen is awakened by Weissmann, the future nazi officer in *Gravity's Rainbow*, who says he has finally deciphered the code Mondaugen was looking for, the message being nothing but “DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST” (“the world is all that the case is”), the first proposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, first published in book form and with an English translation in the year 1922. The intertextual reference to this famous essay, which argued for the impossibility of actual knowledge by means of language, is finally echoed in the last words of the chapter, when Mondaugen trots away in the company of a Bondel who begins to sing, but “[t]he song was in Hottentot dialect, and Mondaugen couldn't understand it” (279). Only some pages later (288-9), and back in 1956 again, Charisma will sing a joyful song, in English this time, about love and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, repeating its first proposition despite the fact that he has nothing in common with Mondaugen. At this moment, the reason for this “coincidence” may be glimpsed at by the reader: perhaps the whole collection of stories within the main story of *V.* is nothing but a number of “impersonations and dreams” devised by a playful narrator which is not ashamed of subtly producing a web of repetitions and coincidences which operate to dissolve narratorial —ultimately ontological— borders.

The dissolution of borders between different characters and narrative levels (i.e. story and text) is a technique which operates thoroughly in the novel but which has also confused Pynchon's critics (Richardson 1972, 36;

the sanguinary Flopp] could as well have been a stone mason. It dawned on you slowly, but the conclusion was irresistible: you were in no sense killing. The voluptuous feeling of safety, the delicious lassitude you went into the [Hereros'] extermination with was sooner or later replaced by a very curious . . . operational sympathy” (261).

Richter 1974, 131-32; Sanders 1975, 191; Klinkowitz 1992, 103-04) and deserves a more detailed analysis. I have already mentioned the fact that both Mondaugen and Charisma can evoke Wittgenstein's work and that the roles of the external narrator and Stencil are sometimes very dubious and interfere with one another, and we can add some more examples of the narrator mixing with other characters or of different characters repeating the same words, ideas and experiences. Such is the case of McClintic, whose favorite motto is revealed by the narrator in a paragraph written in that other favored technique of modernist writers, free indirect discourse. McClintic focalizes, the narrator narrates:

there came to McClintic something it was time he got around to seeing: that the only way clear of the cool/crazy flipflop was obviously slow, frustrating and hard work. Love with your mouth shut, help without breaking your ass or publicizing it: *keep cool, but care*. He might have known, if he'd used any common sense. [emphasis added] (366)

The motto, which very soon became famous among Pynchon's critics, is soon repeated by another "character" —if we can call SHROUD a character—, when this dummy wishes Profane farewell once the protagonist has been dismissed from his job as watchman for Anthroresearch Associates (369).

As one of the two protagonists in the novel, Profane also seems to exert a powerful influence on the narrator, to such an extent that the latter contracts some peculiarities of Profane's worldview and does not hesitate in affirming: "All *things* gathered to farewell" [emphasis added] (379) when narrating some events preliminary to the two protagonists' departure for Malta. From the beginning Profane is characterized as haunted by the inanimate, a characteristic here transferred to the narrator. Behind his spell lies the notion of the second law of thermodynamics, the dissolving entropic forces which will eventually destroy the world. The animate is becoming inanimate in Profane's peculiar interpretation of entropy but metafiction discovers once again the subtle way in which Stencil and Profane are also becoming more and more similar: an already stencilized Profane dreams of "an all-electronic woman. Maybe her name would be Violet" (385). Or maybe the reader could name her Virgin or V. because, in his quest for the unknown and never fulfilled signifier, Stencil will track down a V. whose

body—when it apparently dies in Malta—has finally become a cyborg, half a human being, half a machine. From the Virgin we have come to the dynamo whose energy is however seriously threatened by the entropic conspiracy. As Stencil puts it in one of his last impersonations: “If V. suspected her fetishism at all be part of any *conspiracy leveled against the animate world*, any sudden establishment here of a colony of the Kingdom of Death, then this might justify the opinion held in the Rusty Spoon that Stencil was seeking in her his own identity” [emphasis added] (411).

At the end of the novel the frontiers separating the narrator’s, Stencil’s and Profane’s identities have become so confused that a conscious reader may have the impression that Pynchon has tried to evoke here also the power of dissolving entropy: it is not surprising then that Stencil cannot finally come to terms with the meaning(s) of V. But there are stronger suggestions which anticipate Pynchon’s favorite motifs in later novels: the fact that we have two protagonists in this novel and that one of them is continuously trying to discover the historical enigma (Stencil) whereas the other seems to be and calls himself an urban shlemihl (Profane) already offers the reader an either/or alternative. Either we try to understand the historic forces which ultimately give form to the social establishment (Stencil) or we simply “keep cool but care” (Profane). This dualistic option is not new to western ideology: the either/or option is nothing but the manifestation of Aristotelian categorical thinking, also called “the law of the excluded middle”, and it has constituted our way of thinking and ideology for many centuries. What our narratological analysis proves now is that V. also becomes a subtle attack or, at least, ironic comment on this human tendency to structure reality by means of categorical thinking: the concept of a unified character named Stencil or named Profane is under attack by means of the metafictional blurring of boundaries, a technical device which reaches the figure of the narrator itself. We are apparently told an historical account of Stencil’s quest for V. and of some events befalling shlemihl Profane in contemporary America. But, in fact, both “personalities” disintegrate, just as V. does, in an apparently chaotic mixture of stories within stories and characters’ erosion of individual limits.

To introduce the notion that V. is an attack on categorical thinking and the either/or fallacy is not to state that Pynchon was a poststructuralist as early as 1963 or that he anticipated Derrida’s criticism of western dualities: I am simply suggesting that this novel’s subtle

but corrosive undermining of categorical thinking anticipates the much more overt, ironic attack which Pynchon executes in his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). What seems to be behind such striking foresight, in both cases, is not Pynchon's anticipation of contemporary interpretive theories but his outstanding knowledge of physics (McConnell 1977; Nadeau 1981). In the microscopic world, physicists had discovered several decades earlier that the electron behaves as *both* a particle and a wave (Plank's wave-particle duality of light) which means that it is not subjected to the either/or human option, as it is both things at the same time/place, a discovery which led Werner Heisenberg to postulate his already famous "uncertainty relation" which stresses the relative knowledge to which humans can aspire: the scientist can measure the position or the speed of the electron but not both things at the same time.⁸ In a metaphorical sense, we can argue that the person capable of measuring both the place and momentum of the electron would be experiencing a revelation of reality. "Revelation", one of the favorite motifs in Pynchon's works, is Stencil's main aim but the Virgin-energy remains unrevealed despite the successful deployment of devices to blur categorical frontiers.

What is then left to the reader after the analysis of the metafictional elements we have considered up till now? The first conclusion we can reach here is related to the novel's insistent presentation of characters telling stories about apparently real —historical— events: as I have stressed, metafictional devices erode the validity of all these discursive acts to such an extent that even the external narrator loses any opportunity to seem reliable.⁹ To the enunciating but dissolving entities of the narrator, Stencil and Profane, more examples could be added, such as the case of Fausto Maijstral, who also writes journals and also refers to himself in the third person when writing his "confessions" to his daughter Paola (chapter 11), in this way parodically mirroring both Stencil's and Adams' written accounts;

⁸ "All description thus implies a choice of the measurement device, a choice of the question asked. In this sense, the answer, the result of the measurement, does not give us access to a given reality. We have to decide which measurement we are going to perform and which question our experiments will ask the [quantum] system. Thus there is an irreducible multiplicity of representations for a system, each connected with a determined set of operators" (Prigogine and Stengers 1985, 224-5).

⁹ McHale's opinion that the novel's "Epilogue 1919" offers the reader "authoritative information" is unfounded (1987, 22). Compare Richardson (1972, 36).

or the dentist Eigenvalue, who thinks that the religious discourse had been deposed by the psychoanalyst who in time has been replaced by the dentist ("Appointments became sessions, profound statements about oneself came to be prefaced by 'My dentist says'. . . ." [153]). All of them, led by the example set by the narrator, contribute to the continuous blurring of frontiers between the two narratological levels I presented in the diagram at the beginning of this essay: the reader is frequently made to go from the story to the text and back again, but this restless movement is produced precisely because the emphasis is put on the activity of narrating, an activity which here is not a prerogative of the external narrator but which is eventually responsible for the confusion of roles and identities. The result that all this metafictional repertoire brings about is also the same one suggested by those instances of infinite regression analysed here: meaning is always deferred, neither Stencil nor the reader is able to grasp the absent referent of V.,¹⁰ the several stories located *in infinitum* functioning as *mises en abyme* of the whole novel.

In contrast to critical discussion of Pynchon's later narratives, especially *Gravity's Rainbow*, the critics do not usually consider *V.* a highly "experimental" novel (Richardson 1972, note 1; Ritcher 1974, 131-5), perhaps because its metafictional devices are less overt than those found in other Pynchonian works. However, the existence, as I argue, in this first novel of metafictional techniques—intertextuality, parody, mirrored characters, infinite regression, dissolution of the characters' personalities, and blurring of the borders between the text and the story—certainly deserve critical recognition. Some other metafictional devices could also have been mentioned, such as the signifying role conferred to the characters' names—Profane, Stencil, Eigenvalue, Maijstral, etc.—(Young 1967, 71) or the fact that the first page of the novel is a fractalic representation of V. (Davies 1987, 57-64). And the novel can even be, on occasion, quite overt in its modernist/contemporary attack on human views of the availability of knowledge.¹¹ If the book is, as Bradbury proposes, a quest for history and if modern history has—again as Bradbury claims—lost significance, some of the charac-

¹⁰ In this way anticipating, as I have mentioned earlier, Derridean thought: "The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. We signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence" (Derrida 1982, 9).

¹¹ I must stress here that a position similar to that of poststructuralist criticism concerning human cognitive capacity is defended by many influential scientists. As Prigogine and

ters in *V.* express rather radical positions. The narrator itself—or is it Stencil?—does not hesitate to affirm,

People read what news they wanted to and each accordingly built his own rathouse of history's rags and straws. In the city of New York alone there were at a rough estimate five million different rathouses. God knew what was going on in the minds of cabinet ministers, heads of state and the civil servants in the capitals of the world. Doubtless their private versions of history showed up in action. (225)

A few pages later the “stencilized” Mondaugen—one of the characters who will intertextually reappear in Pynchon's third novel—also suggests that humans are “perhaps, the lead weights of a fantastic clock, necessary to keep it in motion, to keep an ordered sense of history and time prevailing against chaos” (233).

These examples also fulfill the function of a call of attention in their iconic exposure of the main issue—in this reading—of the novel: the uncertainty of human knowledge and our necessity to imagine and impose an order for reality, an order enunciated and, therefore, mediated by our discursive activities: poststructuralist criticism has taught us that duality, manicheism, or either/or categorical thinking form part of the discursive codes which still maintain the ideological humanist building on which contemporary society is established (White 1981; Hutcheon 1989). In *V.* the reader embarks upon a quest for historical meaning which proves to be impossible as the artificiality of the historical representation or of any other type of narrative is gradually disclosed in its pages. But what is also discovered and ironized is the either/or of established social discourse and organization: either you are a winner or a loser, either you live in light or in darkness, either rich or shlemihl, either Stencil or Profane; life has been organized by human discourse and discourse, the Derridean archive, is what stands to grant the rights and continuity of the establishment.¹²

Stengers put it: “We have emphasized the importance of operators because they demonstrate that the reality studied by physics is also a mental construct; it is not merely given. . . . One of the reasons for the opposition between the ‘two cultures’ may have been the belief that literature corresponds to a conceptualization of reality, to ‘fiction’, while science seems to express objective ‘reality’. Quantum mechanics teaches us that the situation is not so simple. On all levels reality implies an essential element of conceptualization” (1985, 225-6). Compare the contrasting opinion of Solomon (1988, ch. 7).

¹² And probably many readers, and also some critics, have been trapped by Pynchon's ironic game of the either/or. See Young (1967, 75); Lhamon (1975, 173); McHale (1987, 22-5).

Despite the criticism inherent in *V.*'s discursive subversion (Jackson 1981, 82-91; compare Klinkowitz 1992, 164), Pynchon's first novel has never been considered, explicitly, a work of serious experimentation and social commitment. Some other American novels concerned with contemporary history and also written in the 1960s, such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) or Norman Mailer's *Why are we in Vietnam?* (1967), were soon granted the label of "experimental". Meanwhile *V.* has simply remained as the first long narrative of the author of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Perhaps to be qualified as a "socially committed" and "experimental" work, Pynchon's novel should have been more overtly metafictional and entered a direct dialogue with the "reader" (as Norman Mailer's does), or should have described the miseries and foolishness of the war in a more open and direct way (Heller's). Or perhaps, as I have tried to prove, *V.* is not, after all, a narrative about history but about the fallacy involved in the concept of History: at the end of the novel the reader is left with the impossible dream of understanding the meaning of *V.* and with a suggestion of the coming of the Kingdom of entropic Death, but even that final possibility may be simply another ironic joke of the text. Intertextuality comes again to our aid to make us remember something which also seems to have escaped many critical opinions of Pynchon's first novel: after having argued about the source and aims of that energy perceived in the Virgin and the dynamos, Henry Adams becomes involved in a deep study of the second law of thermodynamics and dedicates chapters xxxiii and xxxiv of his *Education* to the concept of entropy and the working out of a formula to interpret the course of history in terms of this second law.¹³ It is parody again: the reader-narrator-Stencil-Profane must continue his/her/its inexhaustible quest for impossible historical-contemporary knowledge.

¹³ "There is nothing unscientific in the idea that, beyond the lines of force felt by the senses, the universe may be —as it has always been— *either* a supersensuous chaos *or* a divine unity, which irresistibly attracts, and is *either* life *or* death to penetrate. Thus far, religion, philosophy, and science seem to go hand in hand. The schools begin their vital battle only there. In the earlier stages of progress, the forces to be assimilated were simple and easy to absorb, but, as the mind of man enlarged its range, it enlarged the field of complexity, and must continue to do so, even into chaos, until the reservoirs of sensuous or supersensuous energies are exhausted [= entropic heat death], or cease to affect him, or until he succumbs to their excess" [emphasis added] (Adams 1970b, 874).

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