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Of Models, Muddles, and Middles:  
Menippean Satire and Pynchon's V.

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That V., The Crying of Lot 49, and Gravity's Rainbow contain satire, few sensible Pynchon critics deny; that these fictions are satires, few dare to assert, for to do so would require the development of a useful methodological model of a genre whose theoretical and practical slipperiness is a matter of historical fact and critical embarrassment. Worse yet, to propose that Pynchon's texts are satires might also entail the corollary that Pynchon is a satirist, an uncomfortably singular and tropological assertion about this writer. For Pynchon has created such polymorphous fictions that a unitary generic identification would seem to be an exercise in Procrustean folly; furthermore, these fictions are too narratively unstable to justify the critical claim of moral superiority conventionally associated with satire. (Since the genre's inception, the satirist has been viewed as speaking from a privileged moral position.) Yet Pynchon's fictions are indeed satires--Menippean satires--and Pynchon is therefore, first and foremost, a satirist.

Such an unequivocal declaration may seem to run counter to the most successful modern critical approaches to Pynchon (especially, for example, the decentering absences of deconstruction), but the opposition is, I think, a spurious one. In this essay, I hope to demonstrate that the conventional model of satire is mistakenly restrictive and that an expanded model can be more adequately applied to Pynchon's V. The problem of genre is, after all, more than trivial. A death in detective fiction, for example, evokes one kind of reading, but a similar event in tragedy evokes quite another. It is, in sum, one thing to read Pynchon's fictions as "novels" (however deformed their representations); it is quite another to read them as "satires," in which these deformations serve not as mimetic metonymy but as functional metaphor.

While many critics have applied the term "satire" casually to Pynchon's texts, there are four whose more rigorous work in this area is pioneering and significant: MacAdam,<sup>1</sup> Seidel,<sup>2</sup> Morgan,<sup>3</sup> and Braha.<sup>4</sup> MacAdam and Seidel concentrate respectively on The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow but do not mention the satires' Menippean form. Morgan and Braha do acknowledge and explore the Menippean form, focusing their attention primarily on Gravity's Rainbow. Both the latter rely on Frye's notable delineation of the form in Anatomy of Criticism,<sup>5</sup> Morgan exclusively and Braha in conjunction with Bakhtin's conception in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics.<sup>6</sup>

In the Western literary tradition, the protean nature of the term "satire" is exceeded most probably only by that of the term "irony." The OED defines "satire" as "[a] poem, or in modern use sometimes a prose composition, in which prevailing vices or follies are held up to ridicule," and Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines it as "a usu[ally] topical literary composition holding up human or individual vices, folly, abuses, or shortcomings to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other method sometimes with an intent to bring about improvement." These are seemingly adequate definitions,<sup>7</sup> but "satire" has had a tortuous denotative genealogy, which such lexicons relegate of necessity to prefatory notes and capsule etymologies.

"Satire" derives, of course, from the Latin "satura," which itself underwent a denotative shift in its substantive form "satur" from "fullness" to "miscellany." In poetry, Ennius (239-169 BC) first used the term "satura" as the title of poems miscellaneous in both metrical form and content.<sup>8</sup> Lucilius (180-102 BC) subsequently added personal polemicism, a technique possibly derived from Aristophanes (although it may have had roots in Greek iambs), and in his later period introduced a consistent hexameter form. Thus Horace (65-8 BC) called Ennius satire's auctor, Lucilius its inuentor.<sup>9</sup> Varro (116-27 BC) mixed prose and verse, a method likely originating in the works of the Greek writer Menippus (c. 3rd cent. BC), but Quintilian (c. AD 30-96) proclaimed, "Satura

. . . tota nostra est.<sup>10</sup> The notion that satire was exclusively Roman poses a problem if "satire" and "satura" are collapsed; that is, since Quintilian was aware of Greek "satire," such a declaration seems presumptuous at worst, contradictory at best. Nevertheless, in one sense, Quintilian was correct, for there was no Greek "satire" as such. Aristotle, for example, theorizes only that comedy originated with the authors of the phallic songs, evolving in early antiquity both from dramatizations of the ludicrous, first attempted by Homer in Margites, and from lampoons in iambic measure.<sup>11</sup> Thus Quintilian was likely referring to a Roman verse form, not "satire" in our modern sense.<sup>12</sup> By the time "satire" entered English during the Renaissance, an intervening body of post-Classical criticism had confused the origin of "satire" with the Greek "satyros" and thereby sanctioned the Renaissance notion of satire more or less exclusively as a rude reproval of folly.<sup>13</sup> Only Casaubon and Dryden, a transmitter of Casaubon's scholarship, rectified the etymological error.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, because of a declaration by Horace, post-Classical and Renaissance theories of the origin of "satire" mistakenly linked it genetically to Greek Old Comedy.<sup>15</sup> Modern scholars, however, regard poetic "satura" as possibly having derived from the proto-dramatic, native Roman "saturae," which were plotless shows in a vaudevillian style, or more likely having developed from impulses similar to those that generated dramatic saturae.<sup>16</sup>

In all of these poetic and critical writings, little is written about Menippus or Menippean satire. Quintilian ignores him utterly, declaring that Varro wrote merely an "older type" of satire, an elliptical statement that might even refer to Ennian satire. Dryden, again following Casaubon, dismisses Menippus as a writer only of dialogues and epistles, not satires, and proposes that Varro's acknowledgment of his own satires as Menippean was instead a matter of style, manner, and facetiousness. (Dryden had delimited satire, in the modern manner, to curse or invective with a reformative function.)

Since only titles and fragments remain of Menippus' own writings, we must rely for evidence on these and

on his ancient commentators, who confirm his mixing of prose and varied meters of verse but disagree on the degree of seriousness in his works.<sup>17</sup> In any case, he seems to have been the originator of spoudogeloion, the seriocomic form. A Cynic, Menippus concentrated his seriocomic efforts on ridiculing more established Greek philosophical schools like Epicureanism and Stoicism. In addition to mixing prose and verse, a technique probably derived from Cynic diatribe, he parodied learned genres like the symposium, epistle, and dialogue.

Varro expanded Menippean subject matter from philosophical presumption to social folly, and Lucian (b. c. AD 120), like Varro a self-acknowledged Menippean, served as the chief source of Menippean influence in the Renaissance, through a modern tradition initiated by Erasmus and continuing with, among others, Rabelais, Swift, and Voltaire.

While modern scholars tend either to analyze satire's form as both an attack and a vision of comic fantasy or to disassemble it into its rhetorical techniques, it is of signal importance that, since the Renaissance, the general conception of satire has excluded the genre's etymologically signified and historically practiced formal convention of variety. Clearly this exclusion came about in part because of the narrowing of the critical sense of "satire" to the mistaken etymology derived from "satyros." Satire, however, had always been a "low" kind (perhaps even more so before the Renaissance), subordinate to both tragedy and epic (and later to the novel and lyric). Its very lack of unity and decorum contributed to its marginal status, and Renaissance scholars' misguided inflation of the Aristotelian notion of unity likely helped to create a critical atmosphere further privileging genres that were in principle unified and decorous. (Dryden, however, acts somewhat as a compromiser: he is willing to allow the genre's diversity but demands primarily, nevertheless, a unity of subject matter.)

In order to correct this exclusion, we may claim justifiably that satire's elemental formal conventions are the curse (or, more generally, attack) and

variety. The first is realized by means of rhetorical techniques and is evidenced largely in abbreviated forms like the epigram, and the latter is manifested principally as structural parody of other genres.<sup>18</sup> The emphasis of Menippean satire on parodistic variety requires, therefore, a radical juxtaposition of different forms; and the comic and fantastic in particular, forms of the ordinary and the extraordinary originating in Aristophanic Old Comedy, provide two additional formal elements of satire's variety that serve, inter alia, the following primary functions: the comic moderates the negativism of the curse, making the latter more acceptable, and the fantastic, like the curse, provides a vehicle and form for the satire's aggressive impulses.

Thus, in V., Pynchon's "plot," a comic and fantastic distortion of conventional plot, parodies the picaresque and the quest romance respectively in the Profane and Stencil narratives and by means of these parodies ridicules their totalizing absolutes of disorder and order as well as the passivity and violence of twentieth-century life. In The Crying of Lot 49, Pynchon's "plot" parodies the detective form, and the resulting eccentric narrative is informed by a bitter denunciation of modern America. In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon's attack extends to the institutional pathologies of order in Western civilization from the time of the Renaissance, and the fiction, replete with structural and local parodies, is itself a parody of order.

Let us attempt to apply the proposed model in more detail to V. Like verse satire, Menippean satire attacks by rhetorical means. In V., the dominant narrative tone is dispassionate, but parodies, ironies, sarcasms, and invectives serve to establish the vertical perspective of the satire's curse. Folly is represented in the text by the "inanimate," and this representation takes three basic forms: first, protagonist Benny Profane's passivity (ridiculed in the text as "yo-yoing" and "schlemihlhood"), which accords him the status of reified object and functions to attack American decadence; second, Herbert Stencil's own escape from personality into the reifi-

cation of an impersonal quest, a satiric parody of Modernist aesthetics;<sup>19</sup> and third, the incorporation of inorganic matter by V. (and others), a satire by the disabling imagery of grotesque fantasy of European decadence and violence. These three areas of representation constitute the central signifiers of the attack in V.

Menippean satire's second formal convention, variety, is manifested in the text's comedy, fantasy, and structural parody. In V., as in Pynchon's subsequent fiction, comedy takes two principal forms, paronomasia and farce. Pynchon's paronomasia, an employment of mock-significant onomastics, continues a basic tradition of poetic, dramatic, and narrative satire.<sup>20</sup> Names such as Profane and Stencil have an obvious kind of denotative or referential significance; others such as Charisma have ironic significance; in certain instances, such as the name Mafia Winsome, for example, the significance is both denotative and ironic; and a fourth category of names, such as those of Porpentine and Bongo-Shaftesbury, exemplifies an inventiveness that serves to entertain and to heighten the text's artifice. The puns in V., such as "he had one foot in the Grave anyway,"<sup>21</sup> constitute another form of paronomasia and, like the mock-significant naming of characters, entertain the reader, emphasize textual artifice, and help to develop thematic patterns. Pynchon's second form of comedy, farce, serves comparable purposes. Associated largely with Benny Profane, it entertains as it advances textual themes, in particular that of Profane's "schlemihlhood."

Fantasy takes three basic forms in V.: first, the V. narrative itself, a parodistically historical fantasy composed of four episodes whose correspondence to actual events is an indeterminate mixture of fact and fiction; second, the grotesque, embodied in The Whole Sick Crew, in the episode of Father Fairing's rat parish in the sewers of New York City, and in the depiction of V. as increasingly inanimate; and third, the supernatural, represented in Profane's "conversations" with robots while he works as a night watchman for Anthroresearch Associates, in German engineer Kurt Mondaugen's voyeuristic dreams in South-West

Africa, and in Mehemet's tales of time-travel and of the spirit Mara. These forms of the fantastic entertain and advance rhetorical points in the satire.

The third and principal form of Menippean variety, parody, structures the narrative dualism of present and past into the Profane and V. narratives, parodies, respectively, of the picaresque and quest romance. In effect, Pynchon parodies novelistic conventions of plot: Profane is more victim than agent of the random action in his narrative, and Stencil's quasi-scholarly, quasi-paranoid obsession with V. yields only an uncertain possibility of a constructed coherence in a V.-centered, conspiratorial, apocalyptic "plot"; moreover, the arrangement of chapters and of tales within chapters parodies chronology, causality, and closure. The text does not endorse Profane's passivity, but the status of Stencil's quest is, finally, ambiguous, revealing Pynchon's ambivalence about the effectiveness of metaphor and paranoia as modes of recognition. Profane's self-effacement without a quest object is ultimately a form of the sterile and functions as a satire on American decadence, but Stencil's self-effacement with a quest object dramatizes by caricature the ridicule only of Stencil and his totalizing method, not necessarily of its function. Despite the text's reflexive subversions of metaphor and plot, Stencil's quest functions to transform his inactivity into activity and may yield, in an unexpected way, a form of coherence.

The picaresque, parodied in the Profane plot, is a form that traditionally has an episodic structure, emphasizing accident and chance, and a protean protagonist whose ethical and emotional vacuity signifies, in the words of Stuart Miller, "a total lack of structure in the world."<sup>22</sup> The picaro is typically a rogue of low socio-economic origins. He works little, relying chiefly on his wits to survive, and performs at best menial tasks for others who represent a wide variety of backgrounds, a situation that permits incidental satire of higher socio-economic classes. Although a source (and possibly an object) of satire, the picaro functions chiefly as a knave in a world of knaves. His morality is conventionally an amorality, and his character remains static throughout

the episodic narrative, which tends towards a detailed realism with plain and often indecorous diction.

In many of these respects, the Profane plot is picaresque, and Profane is a picaro. The plot's episodic structure, its emphasis on fortune, and Profane's menial jobs all are conventions of the picaresque. Profane's "inanimateness," however, a form of folly, signifies picaresque parody.

V.'s second structural narrative parody is that of the quest romance of Herbert Stencil, an Englishman who seeks the eponymous V. V. is an ambiguous figure who may be Stencil's mother and who comes to symbolize the paradox of Europe's entropic descent into personal and social inanimateness and its negentropic ascent towards violent apocalypse. Ultimately, V. embodies the two principal properties of fascism, attachment to the "hothouse" of the inanimate past and to the "street" of the violent present; and in "The Confessions of Fausto Maijstral," the scene of her death, ironically the result of an air raid on Valetta by the very forces of violence she encourages and represents, provides the central fantastic image and attack of the satire.<sup>23</sup> Almost totally inanimate, she symbolizes the decadence into which Europe has fallen. Thus she serves as both the knavish object of satire and the symbolic vehicle of the satire on European decadence and violence. Like the Profane narrative, then, the V. narrative minimizes the attack and works principally by the dramatic ironies of its parody, fantasy, and comedy, but periodic rhetorical ironies signify the narrator's satiric relation to the material. Moreover, the narrative parody of quest romance serves to satirize the teleological historiography of Stencil's obsession, which, as Stencil himself comes to realize, "add[s] up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects" (419). Thus as an object of satire as well as its vehicle, Stencil, a type of philosophus gloriosus, occupies an ambiguous position in V. In this way, Pynchon can have it both ways; that is, he can present a structure of ambivalence and as Molly Hite argues, "take the twentieth century . . . and write of its devastations without committing it to a fixed and final destiny."<sup>24</sup>



The Profane narrative and the V. narrative constitute, then, a binary opposition: as the Profane narrative dramatizes entropy (and ridicules its principal exponent, Profane), so the V. narrative dramatizes the contrary effort at negentropy (and ridicules its principal exponent, Stencil), and the two narratives co-exist within the frame of the text, therefore, in ironic relation to each other. This structural irony, in which the integrity of each element of the binary opposition is subverted and yet each element seems logically to imply the other, forms a closed circuit whose only alternative is neither element but the largely unexplored gap between them. Later, Pynchon uses the phrase "excluded middles" to denote this gap, implying that such oppositions, while logically compelling, constitute inexhaustive categorizations and exclude valid epistemologies. Herein lies the essence of Pynchon's ambivalence, for although "plot" is subject to satiric parody, metaphor receives qualified textual endorsement as it serves throughout V. to bring into the foreground the decadence and violence of early twentieth-century Europe.

In V., the dominant tone of the narrator implies a dispassionate, non-evaluative stance towards the material, but this may also be read as critical Cynic detachment. The common definition of "satire" presupposes the passion of anger mediated by rhetoric: this passion motivates the curse and invective, for example, in which the form of attack is direct and explicit, and sarcasm, in which it is not. However, Pynchon's V. is not "satire" in only this restricted, conventional sense of attack. If we recall that satire denotes also a verse form and that Menippean satire denotes a prose-verse form, then the issue is clarified, for the common definition of "satire" is then seen as reductionistic; certainly (in a trivial sense), the curse and other rhetorical forms of direct attack are present in all satire because satire so defined denotes only the verse forms in which such "satire" is dominant, but in Menippean satire, it is the form of the fiction, not "satire" per se, that dominates the genre. Thus the presence in V. of

parodistic, fantastic, and comic forms constitutes the genre's signature, and the dominant attacks in the verse form, although not necessarily absent, are relegated to a secondary role and function. As Alvin Kernan suggests, in formal verse satire the satirist or his persona is stressed (and thus the mode of direct, personal attack is available), but in Menippean satire the scene or fiction is stressed (and thus the "satire" works by the implications of the narrative forms themselves).<sup>25</sup> Even so, in *V.* the attack does appear in the narrator's and characters' rhetoric: the narrator's sarcastic remark on the sixty thousand Herero dead and the ridicule of protagonists Profane and Stencil by the narrator, by the characters, and by Profane and Stencil themselves (as well as other incidental "satires") serve to identify and reinforce the narrative stance as "satiric." Most important, the attack of Menippean satire is also necessarily diffused through the forms of variety. Thus, the two parodies that structure *V.* are forms of satire, ridiculing dullness in Profane, pomposity in the Whole Sick Crew and through them human and artistic sterility, and obsession in Stencil, but also more fundamentally the totalizing extremes of chance and plot.

Ultimately, the particular effect of satirizing Stencil as a fool is to deny textual endorsement to the explanatory order of the *V.* narrative, yet the contrary mode of disorder is equally unsupported by the textual status of the Profane narrative, its principal embodiment. Thus the irony of these contrary poles compels the reader to reject the contradiction as invalid in *toto* and to seek "explanations" elsewhere, in the *Tocus* of what Bakhtin calls the "joyful relativity"<sup>26</sup> of Menippean satire and what Pynchon himself calls the "excluded middle."

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alfred MacAdam, "Pynchon as Satirist: To Write, to Mean," The Yale Review, 67:4 (1978), 555-66.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Seidel, "The Satiric Plots of Gravity's Rainbow," in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 193-212.

<sup>3</sup> Speer Morgan, "Gravity's Rainbow--What's the Big Idea?" rpt. in Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. Richard Pearce (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 82-98.

<sup>4</sup> Elliot Braha, "Menippean Form in Gravity's Rainbow and in Other Contemporary American Texts," diss., Columbia Univ., 1979.

<sup>5</sup> See Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), 308-12.

<sup>6</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 106-37. Braha uses R. W. Rotsel's translation published by Ardis Press in 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Literary critics generally agree. See, for example, Sheldon Sacks, "[From] Toward a Grammar of the Types of Fiction," in Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 330-39, in which Sacks defines satire as "works which ridicule particular men, the institutions of men, traits presumed to be in all men, or any combination of the three" (330).

<sup>8</sup> For a useful summary of the name, origins, and development of "satura," see "Satura," The Oxford Classical Dictionary, 1970 ed.

<sup>9</sup> Sermones 1. 10. 66; 1. 10. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Institutio Oratoria 1. 10. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Poetics 4. 7-12.

<sup>12</sup> See G. L. Hendrickson, "Satura Tota Nostra Est," in Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism, 37-51, who argues along similar lines.

<sup>13</sup> Hendrickson, 49, points out that only "satire" derives from "satura." All variants--satiric, satirical, satirize, satirist--can be traced, mistakenly, to "satyr." See also Oscar James Campbell, Comical Satyre and Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida (San Marino, CA: Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1938), 24-34, for a survey of Renaissance theories of satire.

<sup>14</sup> See Isaac Casaubon, De Satyrica Graecorum Poesi & Romanorum Satira (1605) (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1973), and John Dryden, "Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of SATIRE," in The Poetical Works of Dryden, ed. George R. Noyes (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1950), 281-322.

<sup>15</sup> On this muddle, see Campbell, 24-29.

<sup>16</sup> "Satura," Oxford Classical Dictionary.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene P. Kirk, Menippean Satire: An Annotated Catalogue of Texts and Criticism (New York: Garland, 1980), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Scholars of Menippean satire agree generally that parody is at the root of the genre. See, for example, E. Courtney, "Parody and Literary Allusion in Menippean Satire," Philologus, 106 (1962), 86-100.

<sup>19</sup> See Robert E. Golden, "Mass Man and Modernism: Violence in Pynchon's V.," Critique, 14:2 (1972), 5-17, who considers the book a "satire on modernism" (9).

<sup>20</sup> The tradition harks back to the label names of Aristophanes, for example. Thomas E. Berry, "Charactonyms," Word Study, 25:2 (1949), 1-2, suggests the term "charactonyms" for this technique, and Gilbert Highet, The Anatomy of Satire (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), 275, n. 50, writes, "Distorted or ridiculous names are always a sure sign of satire." See Kelsie B. Harder, "Names in Thomas Pynchon's V.," Literary Onomastics Studies, 5 (1978), 64-80, who points out the connection in V. between names and theme.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Pynchon, V. (1963; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1964), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Miller, The Picaresque Novel (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve Univ., 1967), 131.

<sup>23</sup> See Ronald Paulson, "The Fictions of Satire," in Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism, 340-59, who argues that what is memorable in satire is "a fantastic image, or a series of them" that "represent[s] the characteristic fictions through which the satirist conveys his subject matter: the corruption of an ideal and the behavior of fools, knaves, dupes, and the like" (340).

<sup>24</sup> Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1983), 66.

<sup>25</sup> Alvin Kernan, "A Theory of Satire," in Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism, 257.

<sup>26</sup> Problems, 107.