

# **Pynchon's *V.* and the Rhetoric of the Cold War**

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In these postmodern times, Marjorie Perloff argues, most critics have "tended to dismiss genre as a more or less anachronistic and irrelevant concept" (3). But we cannot do away with the notion of genre: "however 'irrelevant' generic taxonomies may seem in the face of the postmodern interdisciplinarity of the arts . . . [and] however pointless it may seem to classify and label texts that refuse to fit into the established categories, practically speaking, it is virtually impossible to read a given new 'text' without bringing to it a particular set of generic expectations" (Perloff 4).

*V.* seems to resist falling into any conventional literary genre. But the fact that it is difficult to classify makes a genre analysis all the more important: "the more radical the dissolution of traditional generic boundaries, the more important the concept of genericity becomes" (Perloff 4). In the broadest sense, genre criticism involves the discerning and classifying of rhetorical similarities among different discourses. A genre is "a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic"; and these forms include substance, style and "perception of the [rhetorical] situation" (Campbell and Jamieson 21). Besides serving as a framework for an understanding of the significance of rhetorical similarities and differences among texts, the concept of genre also indicates the way a text is connected to the historical/social context of its production. For as Campbell and Jamieson explain, "The critic who classifies a rhetorical artifact as generically akin to a class of similar artifacts has identified an undercurrent of history rather than comprehended an act isolated in time" (26). Thus genre is "more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action" (Miller 153). This notion of rhetorical situation (historical/social context and social function) has been especially underrepresented in Pynchon criticism.

Despite varied speculation on the genre of *V.*—picaresque, quest, black-humor, spy novel—few Pynchon critics have looked at the rhetorical function of genre or the interplay of substance and style in genre, but instead have merely thrown the mantle of a genre over the novel. One reason for the difficulty of placing *V.* generically is that, much like the character V., *V.* is an unusually rancorous critical object.

It seems designed to resist closure and to defy traditional classifications and even the critical classification process itself. Khachig Tölölyan argues that Pynchon's texts make critics uncomfortable and are problematic because they blur the line between what is literary and what is not: critics are shocked by "the inability of their narrow generic and modal categories to deal with Pynchon's work" (314). In a 1989 review of Pynchon scholarship over the preceding 25 years, Bernard Duyfhuizen says that critics have been overly concerned with discerning the "message" of Pynchon's work at the expense of investigating "stylistic instability, genre, literary mode, and characterization" (76). Theodore Kharpertian comes to a similar conclusion about the gap in Pynchon scholarship: "Pynchon's critics have largely avoided or mistaken the writer's genre." Along with this failure to treat the question of genre comes a related failure: "questions of form are largely overlooked" (20, 17). Kharpertian himself is one of the few critics to have attempted a full-length genre analysis. He declares *V.* to be a Menippean satire, but he defines Menippean satire so broadly that it can be made to include virtually anything most of us call novels. His analysis founders for the same reason many of the earlier attempts to place a genre label on *V.* have failed: not taking into account the social function of genre. As Carolyn Miller argues, "one way a genre claim may fail is if there is no pragmatic component, no way to understand the genre as social action" (164).

By contrast with previous critics, I will refrain from attempting to force Pynchon's novel into a traditional literary genre, but instead will identify a contemporary non-literary genre that Pynchon appropriates to shape his novel. Bakhtin demonstrates that novels always contain other generic "voices," and *V.* certainly contains elements of the detective story, the picaresque, the dialogical novel, Beat fiction, and Menippean satire, among others. But the non-literary, "Communist-plot" voice is the strongest of the generic voices. The Communist plot plays a central role in providing much of the structure, substance, and style of the novel.<sup>1</sup> An understanding of Pynchon's appropriation of the conventions of the Communist plot also clarifies the novel's rhetorical function within the Cold War context of its production: the purpose of *V.* is to undermine the Communist-plot genre itself.

In 1960, the Americanism Committee of the Waldo M. Slanton Post 140 of the American Legion published a curious "handbook" titled *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association*. The handbook attempts to expose a sinister Communist plot led by a mysterious woman, Vera Micheles Dean, to subvert the U.S. government. According to the Americanism Committee, the Foreign Policy Association (FPA) is actually a Communist organization bent on enslaving the United States

and establishing one-world government. Much of the handbook is devoted to trying to reveal Vera Micheles Dean's sinister influence on U.S. foreign policy. But the task is not easy, for she is a master of concealment and disguise. Her language "used for her shrewd purpose is colorless, odorless and tasteless [as] she pours her distilled poison into the thought-stream of America" (42). Also, she is secretly aligned with the forces of evil and the hosts of the inanimate. She is "like the trap-door spider which is the color of the dead leaf" to conceal her "deadliness" (42).

The impression of hidden menace emanating from the descriptions of the mysterious Vera Micheles Dean is very similar to the impression of shadowy menace evoked by the plots surrounding the woman V. in Pynchon's novel. Like Vera Micheles Dean in the handbook, V. also is a mysterious conspirator, and is described as having "a latent talent of her own for espionage" (198). Furthermore, the description of Pynchon's character V. as "connected, though perhaps only tangentially, with one of those grand conspiracies or foretastes of Armageddon which seemed to have captivated all diplomatic sensibilities in the years preceding the Great War" (155) could just as easily fit the Americanism Committee's Cold War vision of the deadly Vera Micheles Dean.

The fact that the handbook and many other books and magazine articles concerning Vera Micheles Dean were published in the years just prior to the publication of *V.*, that both Dean and V. are portrayed as mysterious, elusive figures who use disguises and seem to have strange powers, that both seem to be at the heart of sprawling, sinister conspiracies that threaten to engulf the world, and that the name "Vera Micheles Dean" is phonetically very similar to two of the possible names (Veronica Manganese and Vera Meroving) for the character V. all indicate that Pynchon might have used Vera Micheles Dean as a model for his fictional V.<sup>2</sup> The clues are certainly tantalizing. However, although irresistible to some readers, this type of critical detective work, the knitting together of scraps of information to form a plot that reveals a source, is an activity that Pynchon (paradoxically, by encouraging) questions and problematizes in the novel. Pynchon derides pseudoscholars like Herbert Stencil whose analytical skills have run amok, driven by a hysteria that causes them to "go about grouping the world's random caries into cabals" (153). Granted, the identification of a source for V. is intriguing; but other important issues are raised by the similarities in substance and style between the conspiracies in the Americanism Committee's handbook and those in *V.* Genre analysis helps locate the handbook as less a specific source than a paradigmatic example of the Communist-plot genre that

flourished amidst the Cold War anti-Communist sentiment in the United States during the 1950s and the early 1960s. This Communist-plot genre is the real source for the substance, style and structure of *V.*

In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Richard Hofstadter points out that conspiratorial, countersubversive discourse has been extremely popular throughout American history. One of the earliest countersubversive books was John Robinson's *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies*, published in Edinburgh in 1797 and then in New York one year later. Hofstadter shows that this alleged conspiracy of the Illuminati is only one of a series of conspiracies that have stirred the popular imagination in America, provoking, for example, the anti-Mason movement of the 1820s and '30s and the anti-Catholic movement of the 1830s through the '60s. All these conspiracy theories share, Hofstadter shows, the same substantive features, and their central defining feature is a belief in "the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character" (14). One of the primary rhetorical purposes of this genre is to reveal the conspirators and expose their plot so they can be stopped.

The Cold War, the psychological tensions and apocalyptic fears unique to living under the constant threat of nuclear superpower confrontation, gave a particular shape to Americans' predilection for conspiratorial thinking, engendering the Communist-plot genre. During the years between the end of the Second World War and the publication of *V.*, America was swept by a virulent anti-Communist hysteria. In 1945 (significantly, perhaps, the year Herbert Stencil began his quest for *V.*), the atomic bomb became a reality. In 1950, the Korean war broke out. In 1952, the United States tested a hydrogen bomb, and in 1953, the Soviet Union also obtained the hydrogen bomb. In 1959, the first intercontinental ballistic missile became operational. The further development of nuclear weapons, the Berlin crisis of 1961, the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962 (the frenetic height of the Cold War), and superpower confrontation in Southeast Asia and elsewhere intensified the anxiety of the Cold War. Many in the United States thought another world war was inevitable. This historical context is reflected in the frequent references to catastrophic superpower confrontation in both the Americanism Committee's handbook and Pynchon's first novel.

One manifestation of this superpower tension was a compulsion to envision elaborate, feverish, Communist conspiracies and plots for world domination. Beginning in 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy

exacerbated Americans' fear of the Soviet Union by "revealing" a Communist conspiracy to infiltrate the U.S. State Department. Also in 1950, Congress passed the McCarran (Internal Security) Act. The McCarran act established a committee to monitor "subversive" organizations and authorized concentration camps for national emergencies. The McCarran Act also institutionalized "the thesis of a conspiracy 'to establish a Communist totalitarian dictatorship in countries throughout the world'" (Belfrage xiv).

In 1956, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles helped define the style of U.S. Cold War foreign policy when he declared, "You have to take chances for peace, just as you must take chances in war. . . . [T]he ability to get to the verge without getting into the war is the necessary art. . . . If you try to run away from it, if you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost" (qtd. in Mosley 395).<sup>3</sup> This is "brinkmanship": going to the verge of catastrophe and pulling back at the last moment. The tension inherent in brinkmanship was integral to the apocalyptic rhetorical situation of the Cold War and pervades the Communist-plot genre.<sup>4</sup> Brinkmanship is reflected in the hints of catastrophic superpower confrontation in Pynchon's novel. Carrying out the McCarran Act, practicing brinkmanship, and other official United States government responses to the very real military threat posed by the Soviet Union contributed, unwittingly or otherwise, to fearful conspiratorial thinking among American citizens. This thinking and the events that induced it are the undercurrent of history expressed in the Communist-plot genre and in Pynchon's appropriation of that genre.

In the autobiographical introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon confirms the influence of Cold War anxiety on his writing:

Our common nightmare The Bomb is in there too. It was bad enough in '59 and is much worse now, as the level of danger has continued to grow. There was never anything subliminal about it, then or now. . . . I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it. (18-19)

The Cold War Communist-plot texts of the 1950s and early '60s (the years from Pynchon's early adolescence through his writing of *V.*) are generically akin to the conspiratorial, countersubversive rhetoric found throughout American history. This time, the conspiracy is that Communists are secretly plotting the overthrow of the United States government. These Communist-plot writings share the same

substantive and stylistic features Hofstadter finds in earlier American countersubversive rhetoric: the conspiracy is described as ubiquitous, omnipotent, perpetrated by monstrous superhumans, catastrophic; also the texts exhibit a similar use of recurring metaphors to connote the evil of the conspiracy, rhetorical questions, and fragmented narrative structure.

Most relevant to *V.* is a curious cluster of texts written during the years just before *V.*'s publication and holding that the Foreign Policy Association is orchestrating a Communist takeover of the United States. They include Dan Smoot's *Invisible Government* (1962), J. M. Shea's "Conspiracy in Foreign Affairs" (1961–1962), Myron C. Fagan's *Our Invisible Government Made Visible* (1962), and especially *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association*, the handbook compiled by the Americanism Committee (1960, 1961). These works and others like them provide an essential part of the generic atmosphere for *V.*<sup>6</sup> They "reveal" that the FPA is part of a grand Communist plot to control the entire world. For example, Smoot sets out to reveal that the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and one of its most influential "propaganda affiliates," the FPA, are involved in a terrifying conspiracy: "Somewhere at the top of the pyramid in the invisible government are a few sinister people who know exactly what they are doing: they want America to become part of a worldwide socialist dictatorship, under the control of the Kremlin" (173). Shea's article, subtitled "a brilliant exposé of the influences at work in shaping U.S. foreign policy," outlines a pro-Communist conspiracy similar to Smoot's, but focuses a bit more on Vera Micheles Dean and the FPA. Shea anticipates one of the central questions of *V.*—"Eigenvalue, to see what he could see, inquired: 'Who then is V.?' " (155)—with the equally enigmatic question "Who is Vera Micheles Dean?" (Shea 90). Shea's attempt at an answer begins with the idea that "We have learned that Vera Micheles Dean has been the guiding genius of the FPA ever since 1928" (89). For the purposes of analysis, *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* may serve as the paradigm of the Communist-plot genre as a whole since it 1) is one of the longer texts in the "Vera Micheles Dean" cluster, 2) is often cited by the other texts, and 3) includes much of the material presented in the other texts. Comparing Pynchon's *V.* with *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* clarifies the way Pynchon has appropriated the essential conventions of the Communist-plot genre.

*The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* is a patchwork of copies of newspaper articles, magazine pages, official U.S. government documents, and "explanatory" editorial comments. This jumble of texts centers on Vera Micheles Dean, who allegedly controls the

Foreign Policy Association, and claims the FPA is helping orchestrate a "red conspiracy" (106) designed to enslave the United States and the world under a Communist dictatorship:

*we are being brainwashed into the belief that we can safely do business with Communism*—brainwashed by an interlocked group of so-called "educational" organizations offering "do-it-yourself" courses which pretend to instruct the public in the intricacies of foreign policy, but which actually mask clever propaganda operations designed to sell "co-existence" to Americans. There are many of these propaganda outfits working to undermine Americans' faith in America, but none in our opinion, is as slick or as smooth or as dangerous as the Foreign Policy Association of Russian-born Vera Micheles Dean. (1; emphasis in original)

The members of the FPA themselves assert that they are an educational organization that works to "stimulate wider interest, greater understanding and more effective participation by American citizens in world affairs" (qtd. in Irwin iv), and a cursory reading of some passages of the organization's voluminous publications suggests that they are what they say they are. That is, the FPA is a think tank, much like the Trilateral Commission or the Rand Corporation, that does research and issues papers on world affairs. The real Vera Micheles Dean was head of research for the FPA. In 1960, a Fulton County, Georgia, grand jury declared FPA materials subversive and recommended they be removed from public schools. Dean resigned her position as head of research shortly after the Georgia court's ruling. However, to the best of my knowledge, no member of the FPA was ever convicted of any charges of subversion or treason. So, the "truth" about the Foreign Policy Association seems to be that the Americanism Committee's charges manifested wild fear grossly out of proportion to any threat the FPA could possibly pose.

Like *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association, V.* is also about an attempt to reveal a conspiracy. Just what is the heart of the conspiracy in *V.* is not entirely clear; conspiracies involving many plots swirl throughout the book: the plot to steal *The Birth of Venus*, the plot to establish an anarchist state in Venezuela, plots to keep the French out of the Nile Valley, the Italians out of Malta, and the Germans in South-West Africa, the inanimate's plot to destroy the animate, and many others. However, virtually all the conspiracies in the novel are connected, at least in Stencil's mind, to a character designated V. Throughout most of the book, the reader follows Stencil on his quest to reveal a menacing and all-encompassing conspiracy orchestrated by this V. Stencil discovers that "she'd been connected, though perhaps

only tangentially, with one of those grand conspiracies or foretastes of Armageddon which seemed to have captivated all diplomatic sensibilities in the years preceding the Great War. V. and a conspiracy" (155). But the mere fact that V. is filled with conspiracies does not prove Pynchon appropriates the conventions of the Communist-plot genre. To show that, we must show that the substantive and stylistic elements of V. are found in the same dynamic fusion as in the Communist-plot genre.

One substantive element of the Communist plots is that the plot and its perpetrators appear ubiquitous. The plot articulated by the Americanism Committee is international in scope, without bounds, extending from Europe to Asia to North and South America. One "proof" of the conspiracy in *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* involves showing that the FPA, under Dean's direction, has lobbied for allowing Communist ("Red") China into the United Nations. On the other side of the globe, Dean and the FPA have worked to split the NATO alliance by advocating German reunification (22). The FPA seems to reach across all nations. Russian-born Dean herself especially seems omnipresent. She has "cooperated with the world's toughest Communist agents, such as Tsola N. Dragiocheva of Bulgaria and Madame Madeleine Braun, the French Communist deputy" (46). The Americanism Committee uses pages reproduced from a House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) report that places Dean at an "International Assembly of Women," where, it is hinted, she colluded with Communist leaders from around the globe: "Following the traditional 'boring from within' tactics, foreign Communist women delegates participated, as well as outstanding pro-Soviet Americans [such as Dean]" (48). Ultimately, her international contacts and interests cause her to be called "the ubiquitous missionary for the Soviet Union" (42, 113).

Not only is Vera Micheles Dean virtually everywhere, but her minions in the FPA are as well. As "boss of the whole FPA" (Truth 21), she controls the various members described as the "internationalists, the relativists, the atheists, the humanists, the pro-Russian apologists, the Red China Lobbyists and the Socialists" (3a). These internationalists help the Communist plot sweep across the entire world. The profusion of direct references to Dean and indirect references to people she is "linked" to in *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* makes Dean seem awesomely omnipresent.

Similarly, the vaguely menacing plots surrounding Pynchon's V. are of epic international scale. Stencil traces (and creates) the plot involving V. across a vast expanse of both time and space: references to the V. plot are found in 1898 Egypt, 1899 Florence, 1913 Paris,



1919 Malta,<sup>6</sup> 1922 South-West Africa, Second World War Malta, 1956 New York, and other times and places. The character V. (as Victoria Wren) is "self-proclaimed a citizen of the world" (166). She is even implicated (as Veronica Manganese) in aiding (directing?) the formation of one of the most influential and destructive ideologies of the twentieth century, fascism: "She was now intimate with various renegade Italians, among them D'Annunzio the poet-militant, and one Mussolini, an active and troublesome anti-socialist" (472-73). The wide variety of geographical and temporal locations of the plots in *V.* heightens the sense of menace characteristic of the Communist-plot genre.

Another recurrent substantive element of the genre is the conspirators' omnipotence. The Americanism Committee's descriptions of the FPA make the FPA seem as powerful as agents of Satan. Dean herself is depicted as having various strange powers, such as the power to "vitalize our moral strength and our self-respect" (44), and she can transform people: "she can even turn patriots into pliable dupes" (42). At times the powers attributed to Dean border on the supernatural; she can control minds: "she weakens her readers' respect for honor, increases their tolerance for disloyalty, and conditions the participants in her study groups to tolerate or to condone whatever she is peddling at the moment" (44). Dean also "has brainwashed the uninformed adults and children of her 'Great Decisions' operation" (22). By the end of the handbook, Dean and the FPA seem horrific: "For the brainwashing 'Great Decisions' discussions will have accomplished any [unnamed] political objectives concerning this country's foreign policy that Vera Micheles Dean wants accomplished" (111). Although enormously powerful, Dean is curiously elusive. She is described as using "semantic tricks" with which she "slickly makes unequal things equal" (42); she has the power to invalidate the universal laws of logic. The descriptions of her as the "smoothest and most ambiguous of Soviet apologists" (42) and a "professional confusionist" (50) heighten the mystery and sense of power surrounding Vera Micheles Dean and the FPA.

In *V.* as well are hints of omnipotent conspiratorial forces that threaten to overwhelm the world. One of the possible threats arises from a fantastical plot to conquer the world hatched by seemingly omnipotent beings. These beings are described as members of "a barbaric and unknown race, employed by God knows whom . . . even now blasting the Antarctic ice with dynamite, preparing to enter a subterranean network of natural tunnels" (197) to take over the world. The exact nature of most of the conspiracies in *V.* is rather vague; however, Pynchon clearly conveys the tremendous power the hidden

conspiratorial forces wield, power beyond imagination: “your colleagues have stumbled on something so vast and terrifying that they are afraid even to speak its name aloud” (196). The lines hint that the conspiratorial forces are so powerful that “they” might wreak vengeance on any who would dare even a whisper about, let alone against, them. V. herself, Pynchon intimates, has superhuman powers. She lacks the power the Americanism Committee attributes to Vera Micheles Dean to brainwash people, but V. is so powerful she can (or at least makes the attempt to—Stencil imagines) control history by overcoming random chance: a “vast system of channels, locks and basins she had dug for the rampant river Fortune” (199). Like Dean of the FPA conspiracy, V. is feared to have seized control of history itself. The clue (in his father’s journal) that seduces Stencil into his quest to unveil the conspiracy suggests V.’s limitless diabolical powers: “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” (53). V. is so powerful and terrifying that Sidney Stencil had not dared even to describe, much less to attempt to reveal, the secret of the conspiracy.

There is nothing like the threat of a world-shattering cataclysm to get someone’s attention, and the menace of an apocalyptic catastrophe lies at the heart of the Communist-plot genre. Both the explicators of the Vera Micheles Dean plot and Pynchon intimate an all-encompassing, horrific but cleverly concealed catastrophic threat. Of course, given the political tensions during the Cold War between the world’s two nuclear superpowers, the fear of a destructive war with the Communist Soviet Union readily found expression as a fear of Communists in general. But in the Communist plot, this fear is a hysterical distention of justifiable concern.

The Americanism Committee conveys the threat of Communists in feverishly apocalyptic terms, making it seem, although hidden to the naive and uninitiated, imminent and catastrophic: “*we are being brainwashed into the belief that we can safely do business with Communism.*” The Americanism Committee constantly warns readers that the apocalypse is near: “this post has no desire other than to save America from knuckling under to the enemy before it is too late” (111). The threat is not just that Dean may convert a few Americans to Communism, but the absolute unthinkable terror of total annihilation. There is no middle ground: “With God’s help and with the cooperation of patriots, this post will carry on its fight to save America” (111). The book concludes with the strongest apocalyptic warning yet: Communism “is conceded by all to be the greatest evil ever visited upon the earth, except in the diseased minds of its fanatical followers”

(114). Dean specifically is revealed to be working for no less than “the liquidation of America!” (42).

The imminent threat of apocalypse is also a central substantive element in *V.* For example, Evan Godolphin muses on the apocalyptic plots that swirl around him: “Perhaps in a matter of weeks, they say, the whole world will be plunged into apocalypse. . . . Here we are, in the thick of a grand cabal!” (192–93). The conspiracy is intimately linked with the idea of apocalypse; the novel hints that they are one and the same, as is evident in the description of *V.* as connected to “grand conspiracies or foretastes of Armageddon” that Stencil believes permeate twentieth-century history. The phrase “conspiracies or foretastes of Armageddon” makes the two concepts appear equivalent.

The threat of apocalypse is an incentive to try to find out more, to begin to think conspiratorially. After being exposed to the fear of some sort of ill-defined cataclysm, the characters in *V.* shift into a paranoid, excessively conspiratorial way of thinking. At the start of Chapter 7, for example, Evan refuses to believe his “loony” (175) father’s outlandish and enigmatic travel stories and also refuses to believe that a mysterious “They” are following him and his father; but by the end of the chapter, he has begun to experience a vague fear that causes him to begin to see and to believe in conspiracy: “But they don’t tell you why. All they give you are mysterious hints. The Germans are apparently in on it. The Antarctic is concerned in some way” (192).

This threat of apocalypse both terrifies and intrigues; it is also a powerful incentive to attempt to find some meaning in even the most tenuous clues. One must seek to know more, for one’s very life might depend on how much he knows about those that are out to destroy him. These hints tantalize the reader just as they do the characters in the novel. Compelled to read on anticipating revelation, we are seduced into participating in conspiratorial thinking. But Pynchon departs from the conventions of the genre by keeping the reader in suspense, forever waiting for the key to apocalyptic events that never occur. This suspension of revelation is not only a significant difference between *V.* and the Communist-plot genre, but also one of the ways Pynchon undermines the genre.

One or more substantive features of the Communist plot can obviously be found in many texts; but instances of these features alone do not mean that a text belongs to the genre. Again, what makes a given text a member of the genre is that these substantive features are fused with the other recurrent elements of the genre. Substantive elements of the text in question must interact with the stylistic elements in the same way they do in paradigmatic texts of the genre. In *V.*, they are and do.

One of the recurrent stylistic elements of the Communist plot is the use of metaphors for the insidious, omnipresent, and intricate complexity of the conspiracy, typically spiders, octopi, and other multi-legged, vaguely sinister animals. In *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association*, the spider and the octopus are metaphors for the sinister power of Vera Micheles Dean and the FPA. The chapter "Vera Micheles Dean" opens with an image of an octopus: "If the Foreign Policy Association has as many tentacles as an Octopus and as many faces as sin, it has only one Brain. That is Vera Micheles Dean" (42). On the same page, Dean is described in terms of another threatening, eight-legged creature: "like the trap-door spider which is the color of the dead leaf she uses for her camouflage, Vera conceals her deadliness" (42). But the octopus is the controlling metaphor for the entire Communist plot. The conclusion of the handbook graphically depicts the eight-level hierarchy of the plot, starting with the publication *Foreign Policy Bulletin* and ending with Vera Micheles Dean (113), one level of hierarchy for each leg of the octopus crawling across America. The metaphoric link between the evil Vera Micheles Dean and the octopus is highlighted with a full-page drawing of an evil-faced octopus with sprawling tentacles that reach across the entire map of the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii (112).

Pynchon makes a similar use of metaphor to connote an omnipresent, insidious conspiracy. Many metaphorical octopuses or squid in *V.* intimate the presence of conspiratorial forces in various scenes. Ferrante waves a squid (intended for his supper) while discussing a "vast and terrifying," unspeakable international conspiracy (196). Firelily's rider (perhaps Foppl) first meets Sarah on "a breakwater they were building of sleek dark rocks that the women carried out by hand, deep-sixed and slowly, painfully stacked into a tentacle crawling along the sea" (270). Mélanie senses a threat of catastrophe thus: "Perhaps certain of its tentacles already touched the roof of the cabaret" (397). Late in the novel, Sidney Stencil, surrounded by plotting, "was now ready to succumb to the feathery tentacles of a nostalgia" (475).

Another stylistic device Pynchon shares with the Americanism Committee is erotema (the trope of rhetorical question) fused with logical fallacies. The Americanism Committee uses erotema for a variety of purposes related to the apocalypticism of the text. One purpose is to draw the reader into the Manichean struggle of good versus evil by the revelations in the Communist plot. After "translating" some of Dean's foreign policy recommendations, the Americanism Committee forces the reader through a series of questions:

Can the reader feel the little jabs at America's self-respect that Vera constantly takes to shame it into feeling pampered . . . ? The questionable conduct of both of them can be brought into sharper focus if you, the reader, will supply the answers to the following questions—

1) How many Communist fronts have *you* joined? 2) **HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU CIRCULATED A READING LIST OF OBSCENE AND BLASPHEMOUS BOOKS?** 3) Does not a thief on trial heighten the suspicion of his guilt by using a fellow thief as a character witness? (77; emphasis in original)

The Americanism Committee expects that contemplating this series of questions will bring the danger of the FPA (and its minion the National Council of Churches) into sharper focus. Logically, merely considering the answers to these questions will not cause the conspiracy to come into sharper focus or induce in the reader any firm conviction; but, in conjunction with the other substantive and stylistic elements of the genre, the open-ended questions lead the reader towards a hazy belief in the conspiracy. Can one answer yes to one question and still not be a part of the plot? The Americanism Committee never answers these questions; raising them alone is apparently enough to strengthen the reader's belief in the conspiracy.

The Americanism Committee also uses erotema to enhance the sense of menace and power associated with Vera Micheles Dean and the FPA. Here erotema is fused with the logical fallacy begging the question: for example, "Shall we let her pull the wool over our eyes?" (43). The rhetorical question heightens the menace posed by Dean and obliquely confirms that Vera Micheles Dean is indeed the genius behind the threat to America. The question confirms the existence of the plot because to think of answering it one must assume that Vera is indeed trying to "pull the wool over our eyes." Another example of this fusion of erotema and logical fallacy occurs when the editor, after describing some of Dean's alleged propaganda tactics, tries to make the reader link her to the apocalyptic threat America faces by asking: "is it any wonder that we are losing everywhere? Whose interests were served fifteen years ago, when we let this Russian-born woman vitiate our moral strength and our self-respect with her observations in *Is Russia Alone to Blame?*" (44). Thus, the rhetorical question induces the reader to think conspiratorially while at the same time encouraging the reader to gloss over the need for hard, obvious, definite facts.

Despite the goal of revelation, *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* ends with questions: "is it possible to be too extreme in your loathing of Communism? Too resolute in your hatred of evil?" (114). The use of these questions to confirm the existence of

conspiracy induces another logical fallacy, the false alternative. The Americanism Committee must take for granted answers to the questions it raises that confirm the existence of conspiracy; otherwise, the questions are absurd. For example, from the Committee's perspective, one cannot answer the question "Is it any wonder we are losing everywhere?" by saying something like "no, it is not surprising, but it is not all the fault of the FPA." For the Americanism Committee and other writers of Communist plots, either one has total belief in the conspiracy, or one is a dupe of the conspiracy and believes nothing is being plotted. It is ironic that a document intended to reveal answers contains so many questions.

The same fusion of rhetorical questions, conspiratorial question-begging and false-alternative fallacies is also found in *V.*, only more so. Like those who articulate the Vera Micheles Dean plot, Pynchon uses rhetorical questions to create the impression of an outlandish plot and to evoke the apocalyptic menace that emanates from *V.* and her hidden machinations. Of course, the whole novel is structured around the question that arises from a cryptic entry in Sidney Stencil's journal: "There is more behind and inside *V.* than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she." Herbert Stencil's search centers on answering a series of related questions like "This one's only Victoria, Victoria . . . but what was there about her?" (73; Pynchon's ellipsis). The ultimate question Stencil (like the reader) has to wrestle with is Eigenvalue's "'Who then is *V.*?" The piling up of rhetorical questions induces conspiratorial thinking by engaging the mind without arousing immediate denial or a demand for proof the way a direct statement like "an elite group secretly controls your entire life" would. Merely asking the question about the nature of *V.* asserts the truth of the existence of some kind of conspiracy behind *V.*

As in the Americanism Committee's handbook, erotema fused with logical fallacy evokes apocalyptic fears in *V.* For example, some of Profane's old shipmates on the *Scaffold* wonder what exactly had destroyed the ship's propeller: "The Navy would rather blame something alive—preferably human and with a service number—than pure accident. Fish? Mermaid? Scylla, Charybdis, wha. Who knew how many female monsters this Med harbored?" (432). Here again, metaphorical creatures, one tentacled, evoke unfathomable, sinister forces. But more important, the questions induce fallacious reasoning by presupposing that there are monsters lurking in the depths: to answer the question "who knew how many female monsters?" one must postulate the existence of monsters. This series of questions raises the possibility of the existence of forces outside human ken and heightens the sense of menace posed by these forces. Like both

Stencil and the Americanism Committee, these sailors near the epicenter of the Suez crisis fear the unknown and try to control their fear by giving it an understandable shape, a conspiracy theory. Thus erotema fused with question-begging engenders apocalyptic fears.

A similar example of erotema appears in Chapter 3 of *V.*, the Fashoda crisis episode, which contains questions like "God, who knows how many of us will have to be sacrificed this coming week?" (88) that evoke the fear of unimaginable catastrophe.<sup>7</sup> In the epilogue, Sidney Stencil has come to a Malta swirling with plots to take over the government. Shocked, if not surprised, by the butchery of the Great War just ended, Sidney is concerned also about the revolution in Russia and wonders: "What next? What Apocalypse?" (472). The questions keep all horrific possibilities open. Only knowledge revealed by an expositor of the conspiratorial plot can soothe and close down this distressing line of inquiry.

One of the most intriguing and pervasive stylistic features of the Communist-plot genre is the fragmented narrative. Hofstadter argues that "what distinguishes the paranoid style is not, then, the absence of verifiable facts . . . but rather the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events" (37). This curious leap in imagination is necessitated and realized stylistically *through* the fragmentation of the linear, univocal structure of expository prose narrative.

The narrative of *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* is jumbled and disconnected, fragmented on the level of its global structure and of its sentences. One way the Americanism Committee fragments its narrative is by "Stencilizing" (cf. *V* 228): some passages have to be translated by the expositors of the conspiracy so they can serve as proof. For example:

Of [Dean's] six proposals, two can be given here in their innocent wording, after which I will translate them into plain English:

1. "We should give economic aid on the basis of ascertained needs, without regard to ideological considerations. We have made a start in this direction by giving aid to Communist Yugoslavia and Poland. . . ." Translated, the Dean gobbledegook means this: Let America continue to borrow itself bankrupt in order to send financial aid to Communist countries, thereby strengthening the enemy at America's expense, and propping up the Soviet overlords of the satellite countries. (45)

To those not initiated into conspiratorial thinking, Dean's words seem fairly innocuous, even to someone philosophically opposed to Communism. Indeed, the "translation" seems an absurd distortion of

Dean's proposals. However, for those already initiated or on the verge of being initiated into the conspiracy theory, Dean's words are clear, conclusive proof that she is the mastermind behind the most sinister and comprehensive plot to destroy humanity since the dawn of time. The presentation of a text followed by a translation of it is a typical strategy of Cold War Communist plots. The entire *Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* is organized this way.

The "facts" of the handbook—newspaper clippings, Dean's and the FPA's published writings, letters, sections of the Congressional Record, and HUAC reports—are a jumble of mini-narratives that often seem conspiratorial worlds of their own. Moving down a level into one of these mini-narratives makes for frequent disruptive shifts from the editorial voice. For example, after a discussion of Dean's role in controlling American foreign aid, the HUAC file on Dean is introduced with an abrupt transition: "The record of Mrs. Dean, who has been called 'smoothest and most ambiguous of America's Soviet apologists' by Felix Wittmer, follows immediately as it appears in the Public Files of the House Un-American Activities Committee" (45). The reader is then thrown suddenly into another realm, the world of official U.S. government information, a world of seemingly irrefutable facts. The editorial paragraph makes a shockingly brief transition to an entire world of sinister possibility.

Not only is the overall narrative disrupted by the interjected mini-narratives, but the HUAC reports reprinted in the handbook are themselves fragmented. Moving down another level into one of the HUAC reports, the reader discovers that the report is a type of jumbled literary bibliography. The reports list all the numerous places (book reviews, newspaper articles, other HUAC reports) Dean and other members of the "plot" have been found to be referred to in print, but no connections or transitions exist between the entries. In the section on Dean, a text within a text supposedly proves her role in orchestrating the conspiracy. The entries include: "In the *New York Times*, April 6, 1947 (Book Review Section), Edgar Snow reviewed two books . . . by Vera Micheles Dean" (46); "Joseph Starobin, columnist for the Communist *Daily Worker*, referred to Mrs. Dean as follows in the issue of May 3, 1943, p. 8" (47); "*New Masses*, a Communist magazine, in its issue of December 23, 1947 (p. 19), briefly reviewed 'The United States and Russia,' by Dean" (47); and on, and on, in a disjointed series of citations of Dean's name.

Although no charge is ever explicitly made, these brief, scattered references are meant to provide conclusive evidence that Dean is orchestrating an international Communist conspiracy of historic proportions. The repetitious association of Dean's name with



Communist and suspected Communist organizations induces the reader to see Dean as a Communist and as the hidden link behind all the entries. Such entries in the handbook, although they are fragmentary and disrupt the main editorial narrative, reinforce (perhaps by sheer numbers alone) the belief in a conspiratorial world just below the surface of the everyday world.

And indeed, another level down into the HUAC report, the world beneath just one of the references to Dean can appear amazingly complex and deserving of further inspection. For example, beneath the heading "The following is quoted from sworn testimony of Mr. Walter S. Steele before the Committee on Un-American Activities, July 21, 1947, pgs 62-63" (48), we find three paragraphs on the activities of a suspected "Communist front," the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. At the end of the testimony is a reference to another bibliography, a "rather extensive Bibliography on the Soviet Union for teachers" (48) written by the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. The entry ends with the dramatic, if a bit illogical, statement that some of the books used for teaching were written by Dean (48). If the references seem tangled, they are. Vera Micheles Dean here seems almost insignificant compared to the entirely new world of Communist conspiracy involving the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. Which should the reader fear more?

As in the other references to Dean in the HUAC report the handbook incorporates, Dean's involvement in a grand conspiracy is far from conclusively demonstrated. The reader is required to jump over several cognitive lacunae unaided by analysis or linear transitions among the "facts" in the entry: is the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship really a Communist front? Granting that it is, does the fact that it obtained some books by Dean mean she too is a Communist? And just what was in her books anyway? The HUAC report leaves these questions unanswered, opening enormous possibilities for the existence of tantalizingly and disturbingly insidious forces. HUAC itself provides the qualifier for all these scattered references to Dean: "This Committee makes NO EVALUATION in this report" (46; emphasis in original). So what exactly is the purpose of the report?

Although, in general, no real transitions are made between the items in the HUAC lists, connections might exist. The handbook leaves readers to make their own connections. The individual entries by themselves seem incapable of causing alarm, but once readers attempt to make connections, as the Americanism Committee tries to persuade them to do through the process of Stencilization, Dean begins to seem truly sinister and omnipresent. The multiplicity of fragmentary

connections and cross references to alleged Communist organizations and alleged Communist agents that lead to still other references in other HUAC reports leaves the reader with the impression that the conspiracy is an unfathomable evil.

And this narrative fragmentation occurs, not only on the level of the handbook's component documents, but in the very sentences themselves. All the incorporated HUAC reports contain sentences disrupted by ellipses. For example, six ellipses occur within the three-paragraph excerpt from the testimony of Walter S. Steele mentioned above. These paragraphs, riddled with ellipses, make the reader feel that the revelation of Dean's involvement in the conspiracy can go on forever. Also, although the frequent ellipses may jar the uninitiated reader, they make the "facts" seem to fit more smoothly into the overall conspiracy structure. For example: "Listed as source material are the following books. . . . The authors of these books include . . . Vera Micheles Dean. . . ." (48; ellipses in original). What was left out? Who can say? Such ellipses, along with the handbook's use of other substantive and stylistic elements of the Communist-plot genre, make the reader likely to think that what was left out was probably more evidence linking Dean to the conspiracy. The information in these HUAC reports has been translated by ellipses to fit into a conspiratorial framework.

Fragmentary structure is central to the persuasive force of the handbook. The multi-leveled fragmentation makes the conspiracy reported seem menacingly vast and stunningly intricate. The fragmentation, down to the very sentences, allows for infinite real and imagined connections among the fragments so that virtually every allusion to anything in the handbook appears to fit into the conspiracy.

Like the handbook, *V.* is also fragmented on both the global-structural level and the sentence level. The novel as a whole consists of loosely episodic, largely non-conspiratorial Profane chapters set in the present (1955-1956) interspersed with even more episodic, largely conspiratorial Stencil chapters set in the past (from 1898 to 1922)—and two other historical chapters, "Confessions of Fausto Maijstral" (1943), which is unStencilized, and the epilogue (1919), whose source is uncertain. The Profane chapters narrate the jumble and jangle of events in the street; the Stencil chapters nurture coherence in "the hothouse of the past" (468). Like the expositors of the Communist plot, Stencil takes the raw material of events, documents, recollections and suspicions, and constructs the edifice of conspiracy. As Eigenvalue tells him, "In a world such as you inhabit, Mr. Stencil, any cluster of phenomena can be a conspiracy" (154). Like the makers of the Communist plot, Stencil translates (Stencilizes) apparently random,

isolated events, people and facts into a conspiratorial scheme. He weaves at least two of the novel's episodes from the cryptic notes in his father's journals and assorted bits of accumulated information and rumor. The Egypt episode, for example, is manufactured this way: "He'd only the veiled references to Porpentine in the journals. The rest was impersonation and dream" (63).

As in *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association*, V.'s fragmentary, multi-tiered narrative structure conveys the impression of a vast and fathomless conspiracy. On the highest level, the entire novel is structured as a shifting between the chapters of the Profane narrative and those of the Stencil narrative, with some intriguing, inferred links between the two. Down a level, shifts in focus also occur within chapters, as, for example, in the Florence episode. The first section of that chapter takes place in New York in the novel's present. Stencil asks Eigenvalue about a possible clue to the identity of V.; then, suddenly, without warning, the narrative focus shifts to Florence in 1899 and to Evan Godolphin and his role in a series of plots within plots. Each of the subsequent sections of the chapter jumps to other loosely related subplots. The discontinuities are jarring, but the recurring motifs, phrases and objects in the narratives foster the perception of tenuous links among the sections. Another abrupt shift from the present to an intricate plot in the past, and to a still more intricately layered narrative, occurs between Stencil's listening to Mondaugen over beer in 1956 New York and the plunge into "Mondaugen's Story" of 1922 in South-West Africa. Experiencing such sudden shifts in narrative focus throughout the novel and trying to wrest a sense of coherence from the many plots tempt readers to share in Stencil's sense of being in the midst and at the mercy of a vast, unfathomable conspiracy that sweeps across decades and continents.<sup>8</sup>

The observations of the waiter Aïeul in the Egypt episode constitute one of the most striking examples of the substantive and stylistic effects of narrative fragmentation in V. These fragments are part of a subsection (one of Stencil's eight impersonations) which is part of a chapter which both interrupts and is contextualized by the Profane narrative of the novel's present. Overhearing Porpentine and Goodfellow almost in spite of himself, Aïeul indulges in increasingly complex conspiratorial speculation:

This fat one was out to seduce the girl, Victoria Wren, another tourist traveling with her tourist father. But was prevented by the lover, Bongo-Shaftsbury. The old one in tweed—Porpentine—was the macquereau. The two he watched were anarchists, plotting to assassinate Sir Alastair Wren,

a powerful member of the English Parliament. The peer's wife—Victoria—was meanwhile being blackmailed by Bongo-Shaftsbury, who knew of her own secret anarchist sympathies. The two were music-hall entertainers, seeking jobs in a grand vaudeville being produced by Bongo-Shaftsbury, who was in town seeking funds from the foolish knight Wren. Bongo-Shaftsbury's avenue of approach would be through the glamorous actress Victoria, Wren's mistress, posing as his wife to satisfy the English fetish of respectability. (64-65)

This stunningly contradictory passage is so fragmented that it is hardly intelligible. First the two spies (to say nothing of the others) are just tourists, next anarchists, and finally(?) vaudevillians. But, in keeping with the rest of the Egypt episode, the quick, tentative mini-narratives here suggest some kind of secret conspiracy looming just beyond perception.

Given such narrative fragmentation in *V.*, virtually anything can be made to fit into the framework of the conspiracy. For example, Stencil transforms his interview with Mondaugen to fit his conspiratorial worldview: "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). Not necessarily a liar, Stencil manipulates facts so they fit into the conspiratorial framework, just as the editors of *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* translate facts and fill out incomplete references in HUAC reports and other sources to create the Communist plot. Of course, if the fragmentation of narrative in Communist plots is taken too far, exploited too obviously opportunistically, it can destroy credibility and degenerate into complete confusion.

Fragmentation in *V.* occurs not only at the global level but at the sentence level as well. As in *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association*, ellipses in *V.* disrupt narrative continuity and evoke the vastness of conspiratorial possibility. In the epilogue, for example, feeling he has lost control of events on conspiracy-ridden Malta, Sidney Stencil hints at his helplessness: "'We've lost our contacts. We've lost more than that . . .'" (490; Pynchon's ellipsis). The ellipsis leaves open a whole host of sinister possibilities. Another example, fused with the rhetorical question, is the previously quoted "This one's only Victoria, Victoria . . . but what was there about her?" The ellipsis here enhances the feeling that there is much more to *V.* than meets the eye. The possibility ellipsis suggests can be positively apocalyptic. When, in the novel's present, Stencil and Profane discuss going to Malta so

Stencil can track down V., Stencil muses that, if V. went to Malta to wait out the Second World War and perhaps was also there during the First, maybe her going to Malta is somehow connected with the outbreaks of World Wars. Stencil expresses the implications of his paranoid connections: "'Paris for love, Malta for war. If so then now, of all times . . .'" (387; Pynchon's ellipsis). The ellipsis induces Profane (and the reader) to consider the possibility of a Third World War—"You think there'll be a war"—no idle speculation given the state of heightened world tensions during the Suez Crisis, Stencil's "'now.'" Stencil knows a third World War in the nuclear age would be catastrophic: "The Middle East, cradle of civilization, may yet be its grave" (387).

In both the paradigmatic Communist-plot exposition and V., the multi-leveled and fragmented narrative manifests the conspiratorial way of looking at the world. Two worlds exist for those who see conspiracy: the flat world of the ordinary uninformed citizen, a mundane world without coherence, and a fathomless, secret but somehow ordered world, the true world below the chaos of the surface. Conspiracy theorists absorb, arrange and translate or Stencilize their observations to reveal the true, numinous conspiratorial world.

By exhibiting the same substantive and stylistic features in the same dynamic fusion as the Communist-plot genre, V. arouses the same kind of expectations *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* arouses. Having been induced to see all events as evidence of a fearful plot to destroy the world, the reader hungers to know who is behind the conspiracy. *The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association* offers to satisfy the hunger it creates: Vera Micheles Dean lurks behind the conspiracy, and all true Americans must band together to uncover the eyes of the country and oppose her with all their power. But while V. arouses similar desires for revelation, it never satisfies them. This failure to satisfy the expectation of revelation is just one of the important differences between V. and the Americanism Committee's handbook.

Such differences show that Pynchon attempts to resist and problematize the Communist-plot genre as a whole. He subverts the genre through parodic hyperextension of the conventions, overusing them so that, instead of evoking fear and menace, they evoke laughter and ridicule. The conventions make the reader buy into the genre and participate in conspiratorial thinking so that the undercutting of those same conventions has increased cognitive force. Once the reader engages in conspiratorial thinking, the shock of having that thinking exposed as incomplete and futile becomes all the more powerful. So,

while the function of the genuine Communist-plot genre is to reveal hidden knowledge and call people to take action based on that knowledge, Pynchon's undercutting of the genre shows the genre's inability to reveal anything, and shows the dangers of participating in conspiratorial thinking.

For example, although *V.* is permeated with loomings of sinister forces edging the world towards apocalypse, it is also chock full of mock apocalypses. Pynchon further undercuts the threat of catastrophe by showing that, despite all the threats of cataclysm, many never materialize. The imminent terror often does not arrive. Britain and France do not go to war over Fashoda; Mantissa decides not to steal Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*; the rats do not take over New York City,<sup>9</sup> nor does a barbaric race take over the world; Rooney Winsome does not bomb Moscow. And *V.*'s identity and her role in shaping (or misshaping) history are never conclusively revealed. Even the First World War, Sidney Stencil muses, does not bring revelation: "The Armageddon had swept past, the professionals who'd survived had received no blessing, no gift of tongues" (461).<sup>10</sup> Nor do Pynchon's readers receive that blessed gift of the conspiracy theory, the revelation of those who have secretly controlled and still control all human history.

Pynchon problematizes the Communist-plot genre another way, by undermining its stylistic conventions. Humorous overuse of the octopus metaphor undermines its use elsewhere to connote the menacing tentacles of a sinister conspiracy. "Profane, a dim figure looking like a quadruply-amputated octopus, stopped flailing around" (390). A quadruply-amputated octopus is hardly an octopus, and this hardly-useful metaphor suggests that sometimes an octopus is just an octopus. Deviation from the conventional use of erotema also undermines conspiratorial thinking, for example, asking two-pronged rhetorical questions that induce the false-alternative fallacy. These rhetorical questions offer two ways of evaluating the same event. The purest form of the fallacious either/or question is "Intention or accident?" (389). This question strikes at the very heart of conspiratorial thinking. As Hofstadter observes, conspiracy theories make no allowance for accidents: the world they depict "is nothing if not coherent—in fact, the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities" (36). But Pynchon's incessant questions engender myriad ambiguities and also hint that all the "intention" of the mysterious conspirators may be nothing but random accident.

Pynchon also undermines the Communist-plot narrative structure's promise of revelation at the global level and at the sentence level. At

the global level, Stencil's "mad time-search" (406) episodes are presented in no clear logical order. The chronological chaos of the chapters confuses more than it intrigues or reveals. Furthermore, the final section of the novel, "Epilogue, 1919," completely subverts expectations that the truth about the conspiracy will finally be revealed. The chapter reports many conflicting conspiracies, and Sidney Stencil obsessively questions himself; but it provides 1) no summary or conclusion, 2) no revelations, 3) no epilogue to anything. In general, the narrative is so hyper-fragmented that it cannot reveal truths. The multitude of plot recursions, leaps in time, and reiterated references to V. bewilders Stencil and the reader. By the end of the novel, V. is "a remarkably scattered concept" (389). Everything in the world starts to become a clue to the secret of V.; but the idea that clues to V. are everywhere leads to chaos in perception, and to madness.

At the sentence level, Pynchon undermines the expectation of the narrative, not only through parodic rhetorical questions, but also through overuse of ellipses. Some sections of the novel have ellipses on every page; some have ellipses in virtually every paragraph. One of the most extreme examples occurs when Hanne overhears a conversation between the British spy Porpentine and Varkumian the pimp, also perhaps a spy:

- " . . . keep him safe at all costs . . . "
- " . . . capable men in this sick world are at a . . . "
- " . . . Bongo-Shaftsbury will try . . . "
- " . . . the Opera . . . "
- " . . . where? Not the Opera . . . "
- " . . . Ezbekiyeh Garden . . . " (91; punctuation Pynchon's)

The representation of the conversation continues in this way for another half page, ellipses before and after each item of dialogue, becoming ever more difficult to make sense of as the conversation progresses. Of course, even to try to come to some definite conclusion about the conversation is ludicrous. Ellipsis can elicit interest by teasing the reader with what might have been left out of the narrative, but, overused, it destroys the power of the narrative to reveal anything. The overuse also shows the absurd lengths to which someone in the conspiratorial frame of mind might go to try to fill in unfillable gaps.

Taking his use of the conventions of the Communist-plot genre as a whole, perhaps Pynchon is not only subverting the genre but also highlighting the fact that the Communist plot undermines itself. The

Americanism Committee's handbook contains a curious (although apparently unwitting) commentary on the Committee's own attempts to unravel the conspiracy. The Committee describes the "propaganda" of the FPA thus:

The Fact Sheets used in the program are the realized dream of the professional confusionist, consisting of a welter of statements, comments, opinions and quotations, all so artfully jumbled as to leave the reader who tries to sort some sense out of them in a state of exasperated or drowsy befuddlement—ready in either case to vote [in the FPA's favor]. (50)

Ironically, the Americanism Committee's criticism of the FPA can just as easily be applied to its own efforts to unveil the FPA conspiracy. The Americanism Committee's handbook is so crammed with scribbles, texts pasted over texts, "facts," redundancy and repetition and recursion that it becomes senseless. In the obsessive attempt to prove conclusively the existence of a vast yet well-hidden conspiracy, the narrative structure at times becomes fragmented beyond comprehension. The reader of the handbook is put into drowsy befuddlement while trying to make sense of the information in it. And perhaps this self-undermining is what Pynchon highlights by undercutting the Communist-plot genre, that it or any obsessive attempt to amass every possible scrap of proof ultimately undermines itself; instead of revealing, it merely confuses.

But Pynchon's undermining of the Communist-plot genre by deviating from its conventions is not an end in itself. The subversion serves an important social/rhetorical function given V.'s Cold War context. First, the undermining is therapeutic, releasing tension by letting the reader venture a laugh, even at one of the most horrific threats imaginable. The laughable mock apocalypses help the reader put the whisperings of nuclear apocalypse prevalent during the Cold War into perspective and make the fear of war at least a bit more manageable. We can laugh at those who become crazed paranoiacs forever dwelling on the threat. And when we laugh, we are also warned not to become like them and lose our sanity. Conspiracy theories of history induce fear that induces still more conspiracy theories in a rabid, self-perpetuating cycle. Pynchon's undermining of the Communist plot promotes a Rabelaisian, healing laughter that helps break this maddening cycle.

More important, the undermining of the genre not only helps the reader live with the very real threats of the Cold War but also shows the dangers of excessive conspiratorial thinking. These dangers are illustrated by V.'s effect on the magician Ugo Medichevole: V. could



"perform a certain magic of her own; for one morning Medichevole was found out in a field, discussing the shadows of clouds with a sheep. His hair had become white, his mental age roughly five" (388). Indulging in conspiratorial thinking and pursuing V. reduce one to the blithering idiocy of chasing shadows. Herbert Stencil becomes a joke, seeing clues to V. in everything. The hysterical search for hidden Communists in Cold War America, like the feverish search for V., is debilitating.

Pynchon's answer to the propensity to conspiratorial thinking that was heightened by the Cold War is simple: "keep cool, but care" (366). If "keep cool, but care" seems a simplistic sentiment, it can serve nonetheless as an antidote to overwhelming paranoia. It echoes earlier, more complex advice on the same subject by Machiavelli, whose influence on his thought concerning the role of the individual in affecting history Pynchon acknowledges (SL 18). Pynchon's injunction against conspiratorial thinking seems to come straight from *The Prince*. For Machiavelli, the ideal ruler "ought to be slow to believe what he hears and slow to act. Nor should he fear imaginary dangers, but proceed with moderation, prudence, and humanity, avoiding harshness born of excessive distrust" (60). Pynchon's translation is presented by the hip jazzman McClintic Sphere, who knows "no magic words," but perhaps "obviously slow, frustrating and hard work" can keep his country from going crazy with the Cold War tensions between "us and Russia" (365-66). Pynchon's undermining of the countersubversive genre helps his Cold War audience keep cool and laugh at conspiracy theories, keep the theories from overthrowing their reason.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Critics have made some other provocative attempts to discuss the links between countersubversive discourse and literary works. Robert Levine, in *Conspiracy and Romance*, shows that countersubversive (conspiracy theory) discourse in the nineteenth century influenced the literary works of Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville. Levine also very briefly mentions Pynchon as a postbellum writer who incorporates popular conspiracy theories into his writings (232). Alan Nadel, in "Rhetoric, Sanity, and the Cold War: The Significance of Holden Caulfield's Testimony," shows how Salinger appropriates Cold War countersubversive discourse in *Catcher in the Rye*. Nadel states that "uncovering duplicity was the quest of the day" (355) during the Cold War in the 1950s. See also Joan Robertson, "They're After Everyone: Heller's *Catch-22* and the Cold War." A thematic treatment of the general notion of the conspiracy theory of history in Pynchon is Scott Sanders,

"Pynchon's Paranoid History." Sanders does not address *V.*, nor does he provide any genre analysis or detailed discussion of possible influences of the contemporary Cold War historical context on Pynchon's novels; but he does use Hofstadter's definition of the conspiracy theory of history to discuss Pynchon's thematic treatment of paranoia and conspiratorial thinking in *Gravity's Rainbow* and America's Puritan heritage.

<sup>2</sup>The name Vera itself is intriguing and ironic in this context, since it is related to the Latin *verus*, "truth." Also, Veronica is the name of a saint said to have wiped the face of Jesus as he was being taken to be crucified. The image of Jesus's face is said to have been imprinted on the piece of cloth Veronica used.

<sup>3</sup>Ironically, John Foster Dulles was accused in 1963, in the John Birch Society's *The Politician*, of being part of a nefarious conspiracy to destroy America. Robert Welch, founder of the Birch Society, calls Dulles "a Communist agent who has had one clearly defined role to play; namely always to say the right things and always do the wrong ones" (qtd. in Lipset 256).

<sup>4</sup>The tension and fear associated with brinkmanship not only are seen in the references to nuclear confrontation and superpower tension but also extend to Pynchon's style, particularly the frequent rhetorical questions and evocative ellipses. Pynchon's style is rhetorical brinkmanship. His stylistic techniques bring the reader to the verge of cataclysmic revelation, but pull back at the last moment. Pynchon never pushes the reader over the edge into full-scale revelation; he only leads one to the brink.

<sup>5</sup>The John Birch Society, founded in 1958 and still active today, also promulgated many "Communist plots." The group holds that the Illuminati, thought by some in the 1790s to be conspiring to subvert America, are still active: "their main habitat these days seems to be the great subsidized universities, tax-free foundations, mass media, and a myriad of private organizations such as the Council on Foreign Relations. . . . [the illuminati] today as yesterday groups together 'the cleverest and most diabolical minds'" (Lipset 258).

<sup>6</sup>Stencil may or may not mediate the epilogue, "1919," and may or may not be privy to the information it contains.

<sup>7</sup>Chapter 3 is a reworking of Pynchon's short story "Under the Rose" (1961). Interestingly, one of the major differences between the two versions, as David Cowart explains, is that Pynchon removed the frequently-occurring word "apocalypse." For the critic, this removal only heightens the importance of the word and the idea.

<sup>8</sup>According to Northrop Frye, such disruption of the narrative by frequent time shifts, "working backwards and forwards," creates the impression that the narrative manifests an awe-inspiring, timeless omniscience (267).

<sup>9</sup>Pynchon's Father Fairing may be a parody of Father Charles E. Coughlin. Fairing and one of his rat converts, the churlish Ignatius, debate whether the

early church was Communist. When Fairing explains that the saints share their accumulated spiritual treasure, Ignatius replies, "I cannot see how this differs from Marxist communism, which you told us is Godless. To each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities" (119). During the Depression, Coughlin "kept millions of radio listeners spellbound with his charges that the Great Depression was the result of 'an insidious conspiracy of international bankers and world Communism'" (Shenton 177).

<sup>10</sup>That is not, of course, to minimize the catastrophic war itself: "Ten million dead and twice that wounded" (458-59). Sidney stresses that no one should have been surprised by the war, and seems to doubt that anyone learned from it, though he later muses that "the tough old earth would take its own time in dying and would die of old age" (461).

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