

## **Profane Illuminations: Benny Profane, Herbert Stencil and Walter Benjamin's *Flâneur***

Louis P. Simon, Jr.

Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) addresses the confluence of representational art and twentieth-century technologies. Specifically, Benjamin sees the intrusion of technological apparatuses into the creation and reception of art as tending toward the alienation of both the creator and the audience. Pynchon's investigation in *V.* of the aura-divested, mirror-obsessed, decadent and inanimate world of "twentieth-century nightmare" can be read as a fictional treatment of the same concerns—mass production, alienation, loss of aura, fascism and politicized aesthetics. Benjamin concludes his essay by remarking that "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."<sup>1</sup> In *V.*, where the inanimate intrudes into and threatens to take over the realm of the animate, such self-alienation lurks behind *V.*'s fetishism, Foppl's Siege Party, Rachel's auto-love and Esther's nose job, to mention only a few examples. A focus on image, appearance and materials fills the emptiness caused by the loss of contact with what it means to be human. As Itague says, "A decadence . . . is a falling-away from what is human, and the further we fall the less human we become. Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories."<sup>2</sup> And as Fausto Maijstral confesses, "To have humanism we must first be convinced of our humanity. As we move further into decadence this becomes more difficult" (322).

Benjamin's focus on technological alienation, mass reception and the politicizing of aesthetics aligned him with his Leftist contemporaries in the Frankfurt School—Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and, to a lesser extent, Bertolt Brecht (Brecht, a friend of Benjamin's, was not considered a member of the School).<sup>3</sup> But Benjamin's idiosyncrasies—he was a Marxist who wrote essays about the joy of being a collector—and his commitment to the surrealist movement set him apart from his fellow social philosophers. His eclecticism, his concern with history and dehumanization, his literary brilliance and his fascination with correspondences (à la Baudelaire)

parallel many of the intellectual and aesthetic concerns of *V.* Benjamin's concept of the *flâneur* is especially relevant to Pynchon's novel.<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin borrowed the concept of the *flâneur*, or stroller, from Baudelaire.<sup>5</sup> In a typical move, Benjamin takes the poetic concept and applies it to a theory of history in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." As Hannah Arendt says, "It is to him [the *flâneur*], aimlessly strolling through the crowds in the big cities in studied contrast to their hurried, purposeful activity, that things reveal themselves in their secret meaning" (12). Arendt's comment ties Benjamin's *flâneur* to both Benny Profane, who strolls aimlessly through the big city, and Herbert Stencil, who wanders in search of secret meaning. (This correspondence between Profane and Stencil is in keeping with the doubling technique of *V.*) In an essay that examines *V.*'s affinity with surrealism, Michael W. Vella—who does not cite Benjamin—observes: "The Street that Pynchon describes in *V.* . . . derives from the surrealists' random, urban promenades (in the sense of the French verb *flâner*) meant to yield haphazard epiphanies. In *V.* the activity of *flâner* finds its analogue in 'yo-yoing,' the bouncing back and forth like a yo-yo, whether in New York streets or subways."<sup>6</sup>

Benny Profane thus functions as an urbanized and Americanized version of the Parisian *flâneur*. Even Profane's modes of travel yo-yo between walking, traveling in Rachel's auto, taking the ferry with Paola, riding the subways and, finally, taking the Susanna Squaducci to Malta. Further, Profane yo-yos between employment and unemployment, his equivocal position in this respect fluctuating between alignment and disalignment with what is for Marxists the defining condition of industrialized existence: work. According to Michael W. Jennings, "the flâneur's pace protests against the accelerating tempo at which urban life must be experienced, a tempo better reflected in the daily newspaper; the ragpicker's accumulation of unrelated detritus from all walks of Parisian life reflects the division of labor, the prime cause of the fragmentation and reification of human experience" (22). The stark division of labor in the metropolis appears to Profane the *flâneur* in the shifting spectacle of the affluent commuters and the unemployed, homeless denizens of the world beneath the street. Profane's subway yo-yoing alternates between the bustle of rush hour and the inertia of off-hours: "Since sunup all manner of affluent have filled the limits of that world with a sense of summer and life; now sleeping bums and old ladies on relief, who have been there all along unnoticed, re-establish a kind of property right, and the coming on of a falling season" (37-38).

The image of decline, "a falling season," suggests the other bohemian world through which Profane drifts: his subway yo-yoing ties him to the decadent and fragmented world of the Whole Sick Crew and to the terrifying world of V. When Profane falls asleep on the subway, he has a dream that is "all tied up with a story he'd heard once, about a boy born with a golden screw where his navel should have been" (39). In the nightmare, Profane fears that "not only his ass but also his arms, legs, sponge brain and clock of a heart must be left behind to litter the pavement" (40). Encoded in the dream, unbeknownst to Profane, is the story of the Bad Priest (V.) and her disassembly by the Maltese children; this story in turn links Profane to one of the children—Paola, who is given V.'s ivory comb—and hence to Stencil's obsessive search. While Profane muses that "it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine" (40), V., as the Bad Priest, is literally disassembled. In the story of V.'s dissolution, the golden screw becomes a sapphire, one of her inanimate, ornamental appendages. After stripping the Bad Priest, the children see that "[a]t her navel was a star sapphire" (343). A boy digs the gem out with a bayonet, and the resulting wound apparently causes V. to bleed to death.

Profane thus unknowingly inhabits what Stencil sees as V.'s "'country of coincidence'" (450). While Stencil is obsessively writing the sentence "'Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic,'" he is interrupted by Profane "lurch[ing] in on him" (449). In the latter half of the novel, Stencil attempts to come to grips with two potentially antagonistic views: either events are ordered into an ominous logic, suggesting an unimaginably grand conspiracy, or what Stencil has discovered while tracking V. is a set of mere coincidences. But when Stencil—who searches for a unifying order—and Profane—who attempts to exist outside any such order—interact, "ominous logic" and "country of coincidence" collide, and, rather than repel one another, the two views merge and coexist in a dynamic tension, a both/and rather than an either/or relation. Profane and Stencil, linked by their *flâneurism*, partake of this dynamic equilibrium. The dynamism of their relation is reified in their attitudes toward history, attitudes that also find corollaries in Benjamin's concept of the *flâneur*.

Stencil's historical awareness, which contrasts with Profane's essentially ahistorical or anti-historical existence, resembles the historical perspective Benjamin attributes to the *flâneur*. In the ninth of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin envisions an angel looking at the phenomenon of human history:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. . . . [A] storm is blowing from Paradise . . . [which] irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (l 257-58.)<sup>7</sup>

#### Arendt explains:

In this angel, which Benjamin saw in Klee's "Angelus Novus," the *flâneur* experiences his final transfiguration. For just as the *flâneur*, through the *gestus* of purposeless strolling, turns his back to the crowd even as he is propelled and swept by it, so the "angel of history," who looks at nothing but the expanse of ruins of the past, is blown backwards into the future by the storm of progress. (13)

Like this angel of history, Stencil as *flâneur* faces the past. His searches continually lead him to historical images of espionage (the ritualization of bureaucratized paranoia), murder, sadism, genocide and war—in other words, "wreckage upon wreckage." Profane as *flâneur*, though he yo-yos seemingly without purpose throughout the novel, cannot avoid being influenced and propelled by events in the external, historical, politicized world so assiduously, albeit eccentrically, explored by Stencil. Profane is inescapably implicated in V.'s ominous logic.

Moreover, Stencil as wandering detective bears a striking resemblance to Benjamin's *flâneur* as one to whom "things reveal themselves in their secret meaning." In his notes for a book on Baudelaire, Benjamin meditates on Baudelaire's concept of the *flâneur* as observer: "In times of terror, when everyone has a bit of the conspirator in him, everyone also is in a position to play detective. "Flanerie" gives him the best prospect of this. . . . When the flâneur becomes a detective against his will like this, it is especially convenient for him societally" (quoted in Jennings 27).

Stencil's *flâneur*istic detective activity, his search for the manifestations and lineages of V., carries on the family tradition (Stencil is vaguely motivated by guilt and filial piety) begun by his father. V. represents a conspiratorial movement toward inanimateness, toward fetishism (mirror time), dehumanization and, ultimately, genocide. In one sense, the search for V. is a death-trip, but, on another level, the search for V. is an attempt to understand, to put into perspective, the "twentieth-century nightmare." In this latter sense, "Stencilization" is a creative act that motivates Stencil and lends him animacy:

Before 1945 he had been slothful, accepting sleep as one of life's major blessings. . . . His random movements before the war had given way to a great single movement from inertness to—if not vitality, then at least activity. . . . [W]hat love there was to Stencil had become directed entirely inward, toward this acquired sense of animateness. (54–55)

Stencil's obsessive activity, which may at first appear pathological and futile, counters the creeping destructiveness of V. Stencil not only carries on the spy work of his father, but takes an essentially fragmented and divisive enterprise—international espionage—and inverts it, making the search for V. a potentially unifying concept. The creative power of Stencilization points to the ways the search for V. also engages the reader of Pynchon's novel, providing the experience of solitary reading with constructive public significance. As Vella argues:

what most animates Pynchon's writing is a reaction to war and technologically efficient mass violence. V. is an exploration of what it is about human consciousness, history, indeed knowledge, that yields war and destruction. . . . Pynchon is less concerned with realistically portraying the ravages of war in order to provoke revulsion in his readers, and far more concerned with at least momentarily altering the reader's very consciousness, redirecting it, as it were, from its usual destructive course. (135)<sup>8</sup>

Pynchon invests the letter "V" with the power to redirect Stencil's consciousness and to focus the reader's consciousness. His choice of a single letter suggests the potential of language to provide imaginative connections—a potential greatly augmented by the use of surrealist techniques like dream associations, startling juxtapositions, oneiric logic and networks of coincidence.

Benjamin's ambitious, unfinished *Arcades Project* (the *flâneur* strolls through Parisian *arcades*) seeks to create a textual assemblage of fragments, notes and quotations related through juxtaposition, correspondence, personal association and perhaps even logic. Each sheaf of the manuscript is titled with and keyed to a single letter of the alphabet.<sup>9</sup> Although any connection to Pynchon's *V.* is undoubtedly coincidental, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* shares with *V.* a commitment to exploring the unifying force of certain linguistic signs and their ability to alter consciousness and historical and personal action. (This same principle operates in *The Crying of Lot 49*, as Oedipa Maas is "redeem[ed]" from "inertia"<sup>10</sup> in her search for significations of the Trystero.) As Jennings observes, Benjamin felt:

Twentieth-century man can establish a “continuum of experience” only through the perception of certain words stamped with the originary form of an integrated human experience. . . . In a late letter to Adorno, Benjamin stresses again the importance of similarity as a “category of knowledge.” . . . He defines Baudelaire’s *flanerie* as a “state of intoxication” capable of penetrating the appearance of the new which shapes human experience under capitalism. The flaneur, through his reverie, recognizes the essential similarity of things and events; he tears the curtain of ideology and allows for a new consciousness conducive to historical change. (119)

V. invites its readers to participate in the discovery of patterns of similarity, establishing a continuum of experience through language similar to that which Stencil establishes through his search for manifestations of V. With the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin hoped to reestablish in a socially positive sense the iconic significance of words and letters. In a 1982 translation of the provisional table of contents for the project, the rubric for the letter “V” reads:

V conspiracies, compagnonnage (Smith 39)

—Loyola University, Chicago

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 242.

<sup>2</sup>V. [1963] (New York: Perennial, 1986) 405.

<sup>3</sup>See Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, introduction to “Esthetic Theory and Cultural Criticism,” *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1988) 214–15.

<sup>4</sup>“Profane Illuminations: Benjamin’s Theory of Experience and Philosophy of Language” is a chapter title in Michael W. Jennings’s *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987). The phrase appears (in the singular) in Benjamin’s essay “Surrealism,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978) 177–92. William Dawers (“That Other Sentimental Surrealist: Walter Benjamin,” *Pynchon Notes* 20–21 [1987]: 39–60) mentions the concept, as well as that of the *flâneur*, in relation to Pynchon’s work in general and *Gravity’s Rainbow* in particular. Dawers does not discuss Benny Profane as *flâneur*, though he does compare Benjamin’s “Storyteller” (I 83–111) to a passage in Chapter Ten of V., and notes that “both Pynchon and Benjamin return again and again to a few central issues: the rise of information, the decline of experience, the sequestering of death, the importance of technological change” (40).

<sup>5</sup>See Arendt's introduction, "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940" (I 1-58), esp. 52.

<sup>6</sup>"Thomas Pynchon's Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain," *Twentieth Century Literature* 35.2 (1989): 137.

<sup>7</sup>Dawers relates Benjamin's "angel of history" to references to angels in *Gravity's Rainbow* (44-45).

<sup>8</sup>We may question Vella's contention that the reader's consciousness is usually bent on a "destructive course."

<sup>9</sup>Pynchon's penchant for letters, symbols and numbers in *V.* resembles Benjamin's in his *Arcades Project* in that both works attribute iconic significance to graphemes. The following is from the translators' introduction to "'N,'" *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. Gary Smith, trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) 38:

The "Notes and Materials" of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* are composed of hundreds of 22X28 centimeter sheets of yellowish paper that have been folded in half to create 14X22 folios, the first and third sides of which contain Benjamin's minuscule notes in blue and black ink. Each group of these folios is in turn gathered into a *Konvolut* or sheaf according to its central paradigm or theme. The manuscript is divided into 36 such sheafs, their titles keyed to the letters of the alphabet. In addition to Benjamin's occasional cross-references to the rubrics of other sheafs . . . 32 mysterious symbols (squares, triangles, circles, vertical and horizontal crosses, etc. in various inks and colors) also punctuate the manuscript.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* [1966] (New York: Perennial, 1986) 82.