

In Fascism's Footprint: The History of "Creeping" and *Vineland's* Poetics of Betrayal¹

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Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.

—O'Brien to Winston, George Orwell, 1984

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (1891)

Why have critics of *Vineland* failed to agree on the nature and scope of the fascist menace looming over the novel? Brad Leithauser's review typified the book's negative early reception in claiming that *Vineland* lacked something "overarchingly malignant" for its characters to combat. Federal agent Brock Vond, while clearly intended as a scaling-down from the operatic portrayal of evil in *Gravity's Rainbow's* Blicero, looked to Leithauser, "even by cartoon standards, . . . insubstantial," unable (as his budget line is miraculously cut at the end) to disturb the book's cloying recurrence to themes of family and home (9, 8). Subsequent, subtler readings noted Pynchon's reinventions of Orwell, from the 1984 setting to warnings against television's mind-control and new and improved Thought Police—"Tube Police, Music Police, Good Healthy Shit Police" (313).² In more concrete terms, David Thoreen undercut critiques like Leithauser's by showing *Vineland's* true backdrop of fascist apocalypse to lie in foreboding references to Reagan's potential invocation of emergency powers and a police state ("Fourth Amendment"). But the surprising trend of recent readings, more rooted in American political philosophy, has been to put Vond's vision of former radicals as infantilized members of an "extended national Family" on a rational and manageable footing, regarding Vond as extreme but placing him in the broad context of US liberalism's difficult relationship to community (VL 269). Thus Jerry Varsava and Cyrus R. K. Patell independently argue for seeing Vond as representative of a communitarianism that is, in Patell's words, "coercive, majoritarian, and bad"—the wrong path for community to take, they show Pynchon arguing, but far from the accusations of a totalitarian America which *Vineland* still, however reduced its scale, seems intent to make (Varsava 65, Patell 171).

Here I explain this confusion over the darkest reaches of *Vineland* and Pynchon's prophecies as a product of his insistence on a punning narrative maneuver I call, as he does at times, "flipping" or "turning." These moves function in small but endemic features of temporality, image, and historical and literary reference richly connected to his theme of betrayal. For, true to the 1960s milieu it dissects, *Vineland* adopts as its central political fear not so much totalitarian take-over as the acts of betraying comrades that might or might not lead to it—the fear of an evil within, unsuspected, making a sharp and sudden expression, best militated against (or so is Pynchon's ambition) by the pliable structure of language. N. Katherine Hayles documented in one of the earliest critical essays the victory of "the snitch system" over kinship and other traditions in *Vineland* (15). But betrayal, I argue, creates an entire poetics for Pynchon, insinuating itself into levels of the novel deeper than Hayles' analysis of plot and character allows. In trying to render Frenesi's "turn," Pynchon invests in images and single words that can be seen, in a metaphorical sense, turning themselves—holographic language that maintains elements of bright, almost utopian promise in moments that seem on the surface to portend the worst in American political culture, and vice versa. Such flickering images are rarely read in all their elusiveness by *Vineland* critics seeking, as Varsava calls it, Pynchon's "determinate political stance" (63).

These images' disjunction is what I register with my two epigraphs, which are Pynchon's sources for the boot-sole image on which my analysis (and, I claim, an entire arc in Pynchon's corpus) culminates. On the one hand is Whitman's great statement of Romantic, democratic promise and the individual's endurance; on the other, the Vondian impulse of Orwell's dystopianism. Both remain equally present in that climactic passage, and the purpose of my essay is to vivify the self-conscious remove from Pynchon's long-time procedure of political prophecy that their dualism allows him to instigate.³ Surprisingly, *Vineland's* allusions to some of the most sacred texts of democratic individualism, while making for awkward characterizations and plotting, also render the novel's critique of American fascism much more thoroughgoing than its lighter atmosphere would suggest. This book's malignance is found not arching through the sky but incubating underfoot.

Centering *Vineland* on the question of flipping gives its smaller scale an illuminating continuity with the larger, wilder Pynchon visions from which the novel's difference has been more sensed than understood. Varsava and Patell, for instance, both pair *Vineland* with *The Crying of Lot 49* as Pynchon's two smaller novels of "domestic" politics; but *Vineland* has deep connections to those big novels, *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which Pynchon diagnosed American politics through analogy to international fascism (Varsava 64). Those works ask: If the US did go fascist, how would it happen? The question appears often in coded terms of "werewolf" transformations that merge language about insanity's spasms—"flipping" in its colloquial sense—with a

deep reading of fascistic potential. McClintic Sphere in *V.* muses that human brains, like computer circuits, “could go flip and flop.” In World War II, “the world flipped”; then “come ’45, [. . .] they flopped,” and the Cold War ensued: “Everything got cool” (293). Charismatic love might result for those who now “flip back,” Sphere suggests, “But you take a whole bunch of people flip at the same time and you’ve got a war” again—a warning of, in the words’ evocation of the switch detonating a nuclear device, a new wave of totalitarian warfare led by American bombs (293). On its second page *V.* sounds an overture to a career full of such “abruptness,” of “normal night’s dream turning to nightmare. Dog into wolf, light into twilight” (10). The book will later connect the wolf image to both the Germans’ dress rehearsal for the Holocaust in Südwestafrika (where Mondaugen hears the incessant call of the strand wolf) and the betrayals of the 1956 New York cast (who are, in the August heat, on the verge of “Werewolf season”) (300). In its central conceit *Gravity’s Rainbow* expands on Sphere’s speculations about the innocent American lover gone mad: conditioning by Nazi Laszlo Jamf may have flipped the one and zero of stimulus and response in Slothrop’s brain, and—“a monster,” says Pointsman—he unwittingly brings Nazi rockets in the wake of his sexual love (147). And *Gravity’s Rainbow* follows in *V.*’s werewolf vein too by reserving the image for two enforcers of totalitarian regimes: Tchitcherine and Blicero. The latter, we hear, grows on the Lüneburg Heath, “in his final madness,” “into another animal . . . a werewolf . . . but with no humanity left in his eyes” (494).⁴

By *Vineland*, however, the chief fascist has been downgraded from werewolf to badger (the Old English meaning of Brock, as David Cowart points out), and Pynchon is working on a more complex, more realistic version of the fascist flip, centered on Frenesi (Cowart, “Continuity” 178). Here we have no singular moments of gothic transformation, nor the willed opacity of Pynchon’s previous female double agents like *V.* or Katje Borgesius. It is true that during the bad-weather sequence in Oklahoma City where her betrayal of Weed becomes complete, Pynchon does associate Frenesi, “electrically excited” by sex, with “gray mother storms giving birth,” the scene in effect casting her as the Whore of Babylon to Vond’s Satanic “Beast” (*VL* 212). But Pynchon parodically defuses Frenesi’s likeness to *V.* and other such White Goddess figures in his previous texts: in his wink at readers right before her reunion with her mother, Prairie plays a game of crazy eights in which “the whereabouts of the Mother of Doom,” the queen of spades, is in question; Prairie wins that hand, and her mother proves no such thing (367). It indeed seems that Pynchon, for much of the book, wishes to render Frenesi as “just another mom in the nation of moms,” not a werewolf but “[o]nly an animal with”—when it comes to her parenting particularly—“a full set of pain receptors after all” (292, 287).

But even as one of Pynchon’s most realistically human-scaled creations, Frenesi has—rightly, I think—aroused critical skepticism, particularly in relation

to her key acts of betrayal. As Joseph Tabbi notes, her reasons for submitting to Vond's power come down to unconvincing lines like, in her plea to DL, "I'm not some pure creature [. . .] [Y]ou know what happens when my pussy's runnin' the show" (Tabbi 96; VL 260). The word "turn," while inherently milder and more understandable than "flip," operates in such contexts as Pynchon's awkward call back to the reserve of fascistic madness he evoked through werewolves and the sado-masochistic seductions of Blicero. For example, Frenesi, like her mother, feels "a helpless turn toward images of authority, especially uniformed men" in a scene that projects her decision-making onto (as Sasha explains) "some Cosmic Fascist" splicing in "a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction" and initiating an "ancestral curse" (83). At these crucial moments of explanation, there seems to be little distance between Frenesi's vague search for her motives and Pynchon's, as in the ellipses of both character's and author's thinking here: "Of all [Frenesi's] turnings, this turn against Sasha her once-connected self would remain a puzzle she would never quite solve, a mystery beyond any analysis she could bring to it" (292). For an author who has before scoffed at analysis (literally a "loosening up," as of a knot) with lines such as "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knottin' into*" (GR 4), the language for Frenesi's mindset signals a definite slackening.

But Frenesi is being built according to other, almost heuristic principles. Tony Tanner has remarked at length on a line from *Mason & Dixon* that encapsulates Pynchon's belief in the capacity of American culture to pass quickly from ideal states to violent ones concealed within it; there, "the latent Blades of Warriors press more closely upon the Membrane that divides [the] Subjunctive World" of America's utopian promise "from our number'd and dreamless Indicative" (Tanner 224-5; MD 677). Frenesi, seven years earlier, was Pynchon's attempt to embody in one character's variability the thinness of that metaphorical "Membrane" and the grand, grammatical categories of ideal and history it barely divides. She gains such allegorical scope from the family history Pynchon assembles around her, lineage that ripples always with the arbitrary nature—the unpredictable turns—of genetic transmission. Cowart was first to point out the anagram for "sin-free" in the "Eve-like" Frenesi's first name, underscoring the blue-eyed innocence which, in Pynchon's image system, makes her all the more susceptible to arrogant assumptions of her Election ("Continuity" 185). But there is also a pun in her grandparents' combined family name, Becker-Traverse. Is it a stretch to see Be-Tray or Be-Trayers in the merger of the two names, given Pynchon's tendency for punning? Is the innate oppositionalism implied by Traverse (one meaning of which is to contradict or deny) thwarted by the whim of a new signifier?⁵ It was "blind fate," the text says, that Eula Becker and Jess Traverse ever met in a Wobbly hall in Vineland, and Pynchon here is nuancing (if still also leaving distressingly gendered) the biological determinism implied by Sasha's vision of the "Cosmic Fascist" gene (76). Of the three generations of daughters

Vineland traces from the Becker-Traverse union, each takes a notably different path: from Sasha's allegiance to radical causes (despite her love of men in uniform), to Frenesi's betrayal of 24fps, to Prairie's undetermined choice—she vacillates in the dual ending between rejection of Vond and her chilling last whisper: "You can come back [. . .] Take me anyplace you want" (384).⁶

As volumes of critical work attest, history has always been a structure of uncertainty for Pynchon; but *Vineland* adds to his work a new ambition to match the historical with the genealogical, in relations more proximate and less magisterially determinative than Stencil's obsession with his father's journal, Slothrop's connection to his Puritan ancestor William, or Oedipa's inheritance from Pierce. The family in *Vineland* is as a consequence hardly the emblem of safety and renewal it seems to be. Rather, family is the intimate seat of the assumption that history is on a Whiggish upward arc from generation to generation, that the young redeem the old. In a rare glimpse into Pynchon's private thoughts, Molly Hite reports on uncovering a copy of *Vineland* he sent to his undergraduate mentor at Cornell, Walter Slatoff. It is inscribed: "Dear Walt, this is what you get for asking, a third of a century ago in class, 'How about a story where the parents are progressive and the kids are fascists?' See? You never know when somebody might be listening" (qtd. in Hite 140).

Pynchon clearly regards *Vineland* as an ambitious feat of ironic narrative construction, rare in American literature and, indeed, his own corpus, a story in which the sins of the fathers are not visited on the children—because that would imply the children were, as Frenesi wrongly assumes, "sin-free." Familial inheritance in *Vineland* is thus doing what, for example, Enzian—in his transformation from Germany's colonial victim to inheritor of Blicero's rocket obsession—did in *Gravity's Rainbow*: providing the ironic "Membrane" structure by which those who seem least susceptible to fascism end up its agent. Pynchon's inscription also reveals a fundamentally pessimistic valence for the youngest character's surname: Prairie is named Wheeler not as an image of cyclical renewal, but as an intimation that American family inheritances are on a wheel of fortune, with no predictability to how each generation will turn. As Raymond Williams points out, in its original usage "revolution"—a word used freely in *Vineland* by both radical filmmakers and drug enforcement agents, each claiming to be leading the "real" one—meant only a major turn on the political wheel, without direction specified (Williams 270-74; VL 27, 101).

Since family recapitulates nation on many levels in *Vineland*, these poetics of betraying genes seep into Pynchon's choice of multivalent adjectives for American historical change and, by extension, the pacing evoked by his narrative. Consider "creeping" in the novel's first sentence, a line in which much of the narrative is crystallized: "Later than usual one summer morning in 1984, Zoyd Wheeler drifted awake in sunlight through a creeping fig that hung in the window, with a squadron of blue jays stomping around on the

roof" (3). Thoreen, characteristically among *Vineland's* critics, reads "creeping" here as the simple companion to the 1984 reference, an ominous suggestion of "the many-tentacled military and government bureaucracies that shape so much" in the book ("Political Parable" 46). But as with so many of Pynchon's words—and especially his key opening and closing gerunds, like "screaming" and "crying"—"creeping" cuts in multiple directions, exemplifying not just Vondian inroads into American culture but the preterite's movements as well.⁷ If "Wheeler" has a negative aspect beneath its obvious meaning, "creeping" has a positive one. In Pynchon's vocabulary, creeping is most often that low-to-the-ground, insect-like persistence through which *Vineland* identifies and celebrates its Counterforce.

DL best embodies the creeping spirit. "Skidding" and "slid[ing]" are verbs often associated with her and her motorcycle. She is rat-like, with the "rodent-brown rinse" she gives her hair and the "rodent hour" at which she invades Brock's prison camp (116, 255, 134). DL's name, pun for disabled list, links her creeping to its etymological kin of cripple, reminding us that, as *Gravity's Rainbow* says, humans are the creation's "crippled keepers" rather than its controllers (734). There is also continual connection between living creepers like DL and the Thanatoids—creeps in the undead sense who try to restore the balance of justice by bringing Underworld retribution closer to the Earth's surface, as when two of them usher the fallen Vond to his dismemberment by *woge* spirits in the book's ending. The patriarch of Frenesi's radical family, Jess, is crippled by a sabotaged tree and driven halfway into the ground, an image that recalls the dead sitting up in their tombs on Judgment Day (played on in Dante's *Inferno*) and anticipates the Thanatoids' later resurrection. All these deep connections with the earth lie in implicit contrast with the fascist imagery of flight. Vond resembles "the sleek raptors that decorate fascist architecture," a 1990s American rocket captain in his own way, flying in a black helicopter and offering his lower-level operatives the seeming protection of the "federal wing" (287, 87). Like Blicero, and like the image of Hobbes's Leviathan on which the aspirations of both are modeled, Vond wishes to loom over landscapes. These are all examples of politics as an embodied state—felt in crippling, reinforced by posture.

But we need to do one more turn (at least) on "creeping." For if making states of fascism and anti-fascism behavioral and embodied helps Pynchon combat presumptuous essentializations of political identities, it also means anyone can be either fascist or anti-fascist at any time, depending on how he or she behaves. Suddenly Thoreen's intuitive reading of "creeping" seems right again. Vond too is called a "creep," in a derogatory sense, and the Thanatoids who serve as his twin Charons are named Blood and Vato—the same initials as his, in an echo of "Be-Trayers" and of Benny Profane and the Bad Priest in *V.* (VL 141, 200). At the center of such flips and turns is, of course, Frenesi. She exists for years in an inverted "underground of the State" in which turning has

been routinized and the signifiers of the outlaw applied to those inside the system (31).

All this undermining of the metaphors of both resistance and power recalls Pynchon's 1993 essay, "Nearer, My Couch, To Thee," about a state of resistant passivity similar to creeping. An analysis of sloth in history, the essay is, thirty years later, Pynchon's return to Sphere's invocation of "flop." And while "flop" seems in Sphere's formula like a viable state of cool passivity into which to withdraw after war, Pynchon insists that it is not safe from turns to violence. Sloth can flip back as well: Pynchon details its deep religious history as a sin of despair against God, then tracks its newer meanings, in the industrializing world of nineteenth-century America, as a sin against clock time, an imaginative rebellion connecting Melville, Kafka, and much of modernism. But then, one paragraph later, sloth cuts in an opposite direction—flop becoming fascist flip in the way Sphere implied. "In this century we have come to think of Sloth as primarily political," Pynchon writes, "a failure of public will allowing the introduction of evil policies and the rise of evil regimes, the worldwide fascist ascendancy of the 1920s and 1930s being perhaps Sloth's finest hour, though the Vietnam era and the Reagan-Bush years are not far behind" (57)—a good summary, in fact, of *Vineland's* historical arc. Before the essay ends Pynchon has gone back to thinking of sloth as a concept with, again, an oppositional future, if it can teach us to "[p]ersist in Luddite sorrow" in an era ruled by technology (57).

In the parallel case of the fate of creeping in history, Pynchon's ambivalent usage grows naturally out of the strangely resilient and reversible history of the word in the American political lexicon. An internet search run on "creeping" today would find thousands of opinions about democracy's descent into fascist and other totalitarian orders, indicting everything from, on the right, political correctness and constraints on free enterprise to, on the left, government spying programs and military-industrial alliances. The word has a hold on the Cold War and post-Cold War American imagination, despite the changing nouns that come after it. "Creeping" began its American career in far less menacing form than its latter-day usages would suggest, in—from the socialist point of view that was its primary target—an almost positive form. In 1944 the godfather of conservative economists, Friedrich Hayek, warned of "creeping socialism" in *The Road to Serfdom*, published first in England and, a few months later, in the US, selling hundreds of thousands of copies in the US each year through the end of the 1940s and reaching many more in a condensed *Reader's Digest* version (68). Hayek used the trauma of the war to assert the perfection of free-market capitalism and damn all systems of planning that contradicted it. Thus, underscoring Weimar policy and the Socialism in National Socialism, he aligned Hitler with all those interested in centralized planning of any sort, under the catch-all of imminent totalitarians. Omitting the terror, militarism, and genocide crucial to most definitions of the

totalitarian, Hayek characterized activist labor in England and America as a mere pawn in monopoly capitalism's scheme, the accomplishments of worker protection—the eight-hour day, union bargaining powers—as slow, creeping inroads toward a socialist, and thus to him totalitarian, order.

As he tries to find common ground among 1930s socialists, 1960s counterculturalists, and their 1980s remnants, Pynchon surely has this earliest meaning of creeping in mind, and *Vineland* reads in part as a reclaiming of socialist creeping for the Traverses, Beckers, and Gates, the New Deal believers Hayek (and, the novel points out, Reagan [265]) attacked. But Pynchon desires embodied political dynamics more than polemics, and so his recalling of a positive creeping digs into the temporality of the image as well. He makes us see the totalitarian questions raised by creeping and turning against a huge backdrop of history, and not just humans'. For the creeping fig hanging over *Vineland* is a clock of sorts, differentiating slow time as much as the rocket's "delta-t" does fast time in *Gravity's Rainbow*. There, Pynchon wrote of a "mineral consciousness," explained by the Argentine Felipe:

Rock's time scale is a lot more stretched out [. . .] "We're talking frames per century . . . per millennium!" [says Felipe] [. . .] Sentient Rocksters [. . .] [see] that history as it's been laid on the world is only a fraction, an outward-and-visible fraction [. . .] [W]e must look to the untold, to the silence around us, to the passage of the next rock we notice—to its aeons of history under the long and female persistence of water and air (who'll be there, once or twice per century, to trip the shutter?). (623)

Gravity's Rainbow says elsewhere, "[W]e have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world" (521), and this rock camera and the creeping fig are two such meters that Pynchon—the slow learner, the teacher of slowness—helps us imagine. Via similar play on "creeping," the vast domains of ecological time hinted at in *Vineland*—the stories of the *woge*, the looming of ancient redwoods, the untrammelled land echoed in the title—serve as models of patience for readers' and revolutionaries' sense of political time. Pynchon finds, far beneath conventional understandings of historical progress, attunements to slow time that truly counteract the fascist impulse.

In spite of *Vineland's* relative smallness, then, wide temporal bandwidths abound. Undetectable inner movements disconnect humans from the imperial instinct for spatial exploration and draw them to the kind of animacy a creeping fig experiences. As Hite points out, Frenesi's name suggests "frenzy" (150). We could see the whole text, in fact, as the juxtaposition of states of frenzy, with the "rapture" and technological rush of Vond-types on one side, and creeping, "rock and roll" in its literal meaning, and more palatable frenzies on the other (VL 212). Takeshi's experience with the Puncutron Machine is one such invisible inner motion; antidote to a slow, slow moment of dying, it attunes him to others rather than isolating him and inspiring dreams of

vengeance beyond his body's reach. Pynchon also parallels Takeshi "purring into transcendence" with the minor story of Van Meter (180). His name connects him back to *Gravity's Rainbow's* calls for meters whose scales are unknown in this world, and when he removes the frets from his bass, he discovers what Pynchon is evoking through these odd images of vibration and movement: "the abolition of given scales, the restoration of a premodal innocence in which all the notes of the universe would be available to him" (224). Tellingly, Van has to "keep forcing himself to slow down" when he plays creeping hits for the Thanatoids, including the super-slow "As Time Goes By" (225).

At all points, the key error, to Pynchon, is to assume that time or history is going by at the speed one expects, which is often dictated by a machine. Frenesi's camera lens enacts the epistemic problem. One of her favored words, "action," inspired by her camera, is a key opposite of creeping. We can imagine a director of the Sentient Rockster film shouting "Action!" and then having to wait centuries for his take. In fact, Slothrop discovers in *Gravity's Rainbow* that the "Fascist ideal" is "Action, Action, Action" (270). But Frenesi struggles much more with this lesson, becoming a symbol of the narrow view of the revolutionary moment that doomed 1960s activists in Pynchon's account. She sees 24fps as her own "Action News Team" and takes on, along with the Romantic arrogance of her Election, a very narrow temporal bandwidth: she understands her service of Vond "as the freedom, granted to a few, to act outside warrants and charters, to ignore history and the dead, to imagine no future, no yet-to-be-born, to be able simply to go on defining moments only, purely, by the action that filled them" (195, 71-72).

What new meter whose scale is unknown in the world can record and sort all these highly ambiguous, easily inverted, and easily betrayed movements within history? To find a resolution point between creeping and flying, vibration and action, I want to finally examine images of the daily state of walking on two feet, present here in the key image of the footprint, which *Vineland* has in several sizes. The underside of the shoe is an almost ultimate point of obscurity and darkness, a spot where the forgotten and the wasted accumulate, an ideal, toilet-like place for Pynchon to perform one of his secret histories. To be underfoot is the ultimate reminder of preterite humility; the Buddha's footprint, as Pynchon probably knows from the Zen research that went into the novel, is a sacred sign in parts of Asia. To forget what's underfoot, on the other hand, is the ecological alienation from which nearly every fascist crime and perversion in Pynchon could be said to flow. For to the Sentient Rockster, of course, there is menace in just walking around, stepping on all those conscious beings on the earth. Pynchon undoubtedly also wants to call up the whole tradition of colonial contact evoked by that most famous footprint in literary history—the one of Friday that Crusoe discovers on the beach—as well as more contemporary

resonances of metaphors for human impact such as ecological footprints and urban footprints. (Oedipa sees a version of the latter in the “printed circuit” of the city visible from the hills above San Narciso [14].)

Footprints are important in two other key respects. First, they appear only as a having-been-there, indexical signs, which Pynchon may have learned about from C. S. Peirce, taken by John Johnston, among others, to be the namesake of *Lot 49*'s present absence, Pierce Inverarity (Johnston 56). Pynchon explores the maddening bottomlessness that can follow from such signs when Pointsman muses in *Gravity's Rainbow* about the pins *piercing* Mexico's map of rocket hits: “A pin? not even that, a pinhole in paper that someday will be taken down, when the rockets have stopped falling” (141). Second, in another undoing of our notions of final responsibility for an action, the footprint's signification cannot be easily separated from the act of its making—which, as the victim of that Orwellian boot and the colonized subject both know, often entails a violent imposition of the self or state. These foundational acts of sovereignty's violence are distanced from the core of the state, as a colony is separated from its metropolis and the foot, seemingly, from the self—an extremity, as we call it.

Most importantly, though, a footprint is a basic unit of measurement, the basis for one foot, a measure handed down by history whose scale may need re-imagining. In its evocation of scale the footprint promises a way into the question that has so bedeviled critics: how to compare the evil in *Vineland* to that of previous Pynchon work. One of the least discussed and incongruous parts of *Vineland*, Takeshi's insurance investigation of a Godzilla-sized footprint on the Japanese coast where a computer lab used to be, calls to mind Slothrop's investigations of rocket hits at the start of *Gravity's Rainbow*. This Godzilla subplot, dangling in the middle of *Vineland* like a remnant of an earlier draft, seems like Pynchon's intentional reminder of his old, far more apocalyptic methodology, with Godzilla's act figuring as Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the most extreme of America's violent footprints, presaged by *Gravity's Rainbow*'s many portrayals of the rocket as King Kong. When Takeshi notes that he cannot grasp the footprint as a footprint while standing in the middle of it, he echoes *Gravity's Rainbow*'s image of people living “inside the Fist of the Ape” (281). To leave Godzilla in the text in this underformed way, as Pynchon does, only underscores the contrast between the large-scale crime of nuclear war and the smaller-scale sins *Vineland* is mainly about, what Sasha calls “not [. . .] world history or anything too theoretical, but [. . .] humans, usually male, living here on the planet, often well within reach, committing these crimes, major and petty, one by one against other living humans” (80). Destructive behaviors have happened before and on large scales, *Vineland* seems to say, yet here there is something to compare them to.

Still, there is a definite awkward extremity to this everyday violence, this turn away from the earlier works' evocation of American fascism by corporate

connections and Nazis making it to America—an awkwardness related to the straining means by which Pynchon’s flips attempt to get utopia and dystopia, Whitman and Orwell, side by side. *Vineland’s* version of Blicero is Vond, certainly, but also Millard Hobbs, a former actor who, after appearing in late-night commercials, slowly buys into, and now owns, a lawn-care company under the name “the Marquis de Sod.” Through him *Vineland* puts the Sentient Rockster thesis in play and gives a political edge to every footfall. In his commercials,

the Marquis [. . .] might carry on a dialogue with some substandard lawn while lashing away at it with his bullwhip, each grass blade in extreme close-up being seen to have a face and little mouth, out of which, in thousandfold-echoplexed chorus, would come piping, “More, more! We love eet!” The Marquis, leaning down playfully, “Ah cahn’t ear you!” (46-47)

Thus the grass express those “unacknowledged desires for [order]” that Vond sees in flower children (269), here evoked as faces on the blades. Leviathan looms over his kingdom once more, now explicitly named after Thomas Hobbes. Hanjo Berressem was first to point out that the Marquis, in a rather cartoonish way, inherits the position of sado-masochist Pynchon so thoroughly explored through Blicero (215-16). But de Sod is too, above all else, a travestying of Whitman. Isn’t the commercial meant to ironically evoke Whitman musing on the child’s question “*What is the grass?*” in section 6 of “*Song of Myself*,” where he writes that, though those beneath the grass are dead and gone, he still “perceive[s] after all so many uttering tongues” coming from it (120)?

The legacy of *Leaves of Grass* is indeed at issue for Pynchon from *Vineland’s* title on, and his portrayal of Whitman as a sado-masochistic gardener speaks to just how thoroughly infused his work has become with attempts to hide the darkest America in the lightest, the lightest in the darkest. Whitman’s “The Sleepers” is surely an intertext for Takeshi and DL’s dawn sighting, out their office window, of the Thanatoids waking up—another of Pynchon’s flickering images, written over with the language of forking, turning, and flipping:

Although the streets were irregular and steeply pitched, the entryways and setbacks and forking corners, all angles ordinarily hidden, in fact, were somehow clearly visible from up here at this one window—naive, direct, no shadows, no hiding places, every waking outdoor sleeper, empty container, lost key, bottle, scrap of paper in the history of the dark shift just being relieved, was turned exactly to these windows. (173)

And then, like the Tristero’s signs for Oedipa in *Lot 49*, it all disappears as the *Vineland* sun rises: “the shadows come in to *flip* some of the angles inside out as ‘laws’ of perspective [are] reestablished” (173; emphasis added). The “naive,

direct" view of down-and-out Americans the passage implies must be that of Whitman, whose leveling eye Pynchon, the finder of Elect and Preterite in every American setting, will not allow himself (yet by which he clearly feels tantalized). Whitman never doubts the perspective from which he is able to democratically equate all the sleepers, whatever their waking status: "I go from bedside to bedside, I sleep close with the other sleepers each in turn / . . . Only from me can they hide nothing" (441). Pynchon, with his ghostly Thanatoid sleepers, turns us at every point to the elegiac pulse in Whitman, making him, quite oddly, almost a gothic writer, going well beyond the uglification of him familiar to us (and no doubt to Pynchon) in Allen Ginsberg.⁸ Pynchon takes the sweep and scope of Whitman's democratic vistas and shows blood to be running through them, as in DL's realization (*contra* Frenesi) of her "entanglement" in "the crimes behind the world, the thousand bloody arroyos in the hinterlands of time that stretched somberly inland from the honky-tonk coast of Now" (180).

Whitman's catalogs undoubtedly had a major influence on the explosion of style Pynchon made in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and passages like the one on Slothrop's desire to "make it all fit" and see signs in every piece of trash juxtapose a Whitmanesque sensibility with, as that passage ends, its grim betrayal by the Bomb (638). (Elaine Safer is telling only part of this bifurcated story when she writes that *Gravity's Rainbow* "turns Whitman's transcendental vision of man's natural goodness on its head" [47].) But only here in *Vineland* do we see Pynchon engaging so explicitly with Whitman as legacy. Whitman is to *Vineland*, in fact, what Rilke was to *Gravity's Rainbow*: the presiding poetic presence who shapes the particular kind of Romanticism Pynchon dissects and discredits in the text. Thus while de Sod may seem like only a cartoon fascist, without the depth of Blicero and befitting the lighter atmosphere of *Vineland*, in a sense the latter novel hits closer to home by focusing its criticisms not only on an American setting but an American literary canon, trying to construct a tradition of American fascist leanings without the deep investigation of European Romanticism and modernism that *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* offer. If a fascist genetics is inherent in Americans, this lineage asks in a different way, what avoiding of the "ancestral curse" can there be? Likewise, as Millard Hobbs's movement from actor in a commercial to owner of the company suggests, Pynchon sees these Sadean and Hobbesian ways as inevitable results of the homogenizing effects of cultural history. The charisma of Whitman cannot be sustained in hundreds of millions, over hundreds of years.

American Transcendentalism seems to be under attack elsewhere in *Vineland*, which clearly represents, especially after *Mason & Dixon's* appearance, a turn in Pynchon's reading toward American texts. True, Emerson's "On Sovereignty" is lovingly quoted at the ending reunion, but, in another instance of ambivalence, Pynchon encodes contrary readings elsewhere. Ralph Wayvone is a mafioso who heads up *Ralph Wayvone Enterprises*—a sly reference, along

the lines of Blood and Vato's link with Brock Vond, to Ralph Waldo Emerson? In a book with much suspect talk of joining the "wave of History," Wayvone's name—reversible to One-Way or One-Wave—may hold a judgment of the future-centered (and past-denying?) vision of a pond's ripple in Emerson's "Circles" (VL 27). Given Pynchon's critiques of American homogenization elsewhere, the waves that continually create each individual's new horizons—"every end is a beginning"—could indeed seem to him, in historical practice, to be one wave (Emerson 228). Certainly the line definitive of Frenesi's fascist turn—her belief in a "freedom, granted to a few, to act outside warrants and charters, to ignore history and the dead, to imagine no future, no yet-to-be-born, to be able simply to go on defining moments only, purely, by the action that filled them"—sounds a criticism of an Emersonian eternal present (71-72). Emerson's famous "transparent eyeball" that "see[s] all" and is "part or parcel of God" might also be troped in the camera eye with which Frenesi often shields herself from experience, a camera called at one point—during the People's Republic of Rock and Roll scenes that set her betrayal in motion—her "throbbing eye" (Emerson 11; VL 210).⁹

Readers' problems with truly believing in Frenesi's turn have everything to do with these strained attempts not just to trace the fall-out of individualist credos but to find an intellectual lineage for fascism and other perversions in American Romanticism. As with creeping, Pynchon somehow needs to invest single images with the fullness of America's Romantic and democratic potential (Whitman) and the dystopianism (Orwell) which pulls him in an opposite direction. Pynchon wants it, in essence, both ways, the way back always present even in the darkest images, and perhaps even through their very darkness. The point is well illustrated in a culminating passage about another footprint, a single homogeneous one formed by many successive generations of tramping, which we can read as Pynchon's cynical image for what centuries of American individualists have done in their communions with nature and their supposed trailblazing. This footprint comes at the end of one of the most telling passages in *Vineland*, yet one difficult to understand for the way it mixes promise with despair and dystopianism, along with Pynchon's own self-consciousness about his portraits of fascist America. The scene is the closing Becker-Traverse family reunion:

And other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows. One by one, as other voices joined in, the names began, some shouted, some accompanied by spit, the old reliable names good for hours of contention, stomach distress, and insomnia—Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic

interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nightwide remoteness of light, but below, diminished to the last unfaceable American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf on the forest floor that nobody wanted to turn over, because of all that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (371-72)

The language sounds anthemic, and, indeed, as with “the song They never taught anyone to sing” that ends *Gravity’s Rainbow* against the rocket’s red glare, here in this moment—a “twilight” that must not have its last gleaming, the suggestion of a new stars and stripes in the “constellated” “interweaving,” a chorus of voices joining together—*Vineland* also recasts the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Its dissenting singers focus “not [. . .] above [on] any nightwide remoteness of light, but below,” underfoot, on the preterite and Whitman’s dead. As in *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s ending too, Pynchon defers the key question, leaving the nation suspended in “prefascist twilight,” just as he left the rocket hanging above us. That uncertainty is recapitulated in the Whitman/Orwell conjunction visible in those “meanest of random soles,” the Kerouacian, off-beat America they evoke alongside the sovereign over-use and the well-beaten paths of a paved nation they do as well. If de Sod’s whipped flowers are remembered here, then in the boots’ stomping lies a kind of everyday fascism, warring on nature. The “blackly fermenting” leaf they create, in line with Pynchon’s images of an America that can flip at any time, is an emblem of both the nitrogen cycle he often celebrates and of something “virulent” just on the other side of the membrane—if anyone will “turn [it] over.” If we think of how disintegrated that leaf would be in its blackened, trampled state, we see that the flip is no longer really a flip at all; the leaf is simply all one mass, and fascist empire is, right along with a fecund American garden, here in the US, on ground westward expansion has claimed and despoiled. Still, it takes the ever-turning images of Pynchon’s text to get us readers to turn up this soil, for in doing so we risk the “flip” Thomas Schaub sees in a similar hoeing image in *Lot 49*: by looking beneath “the cheered land,” Oedipa becomes “unfurrowed,” both living outside the grooves of American culture and, like the old sailor, contracting a kind of “delirium” (from the Latin *delirare*, literally “to leave the furrow”) (149, 105, 104; Schaub 150).

A leaf is to Pynchon what it was to Whitman: an image of nature but also of the book (though note here that Pynchon, critiquing Whitman, sees only one homogeneous leaf, not many). This is a passage about texts, full of elliptical, highly literary connections to other books and, as importantly, Pynchon’s own. Ambitiously synthetic in its language, the passage caps not only *Vineland* but the whole development of Pynchon’s ideas of a fascist turn I have documented here. In the passage we see a bookend to Sphere’s warning about a flip that America cannot let occur, as well as suggestion that reading for such flips is itself a kind of madness, a “delirium”—but a necessary one. Still,

“prefascist twilight” seems like a letdown from the visceral nature of “werewolf season”; Pynchon has dealt in the image of the flip so many times before that it has become almost completely abstracted from V.’s visions of Weimar “fever” (353). Indeed, Pynchon seems to wonder aloud here (especially to the ear that has heard his other, more bracing renditions of this connection) whether the “perennial question” of the US’s fascist turn has really been his *own* flowering perennial—“the old reliable names good for hours of contention” and three previous novels, one of which drew, on the arcs of rockets, a line from Hitler and Blicero to Nixon that is not unlike what the old radicals rehearse here.

If *Vineland*’s postmodernism is “attenuated,” as Cowart claims, then we ought to read it not only for the well-troddenness of popular culture, but for Pynchon’s re-use of his own signifiers as well (“Attenuated Postmodernism” 6-8). Here I have traced the totalitarian thesis of the 1960s and 1970s as it meets several impasses in *Vineland*, chief among which is the difficulty of embodying a totalitarian turn in ways that do not call on elaborate forms of metamorphosis. Seeing this both realistic and highly conceptualized betrayal at the heart of *Vineland* clarifies the absence of a more controlling evil and distinguishes Pynchon’s new achievement: a language for political resistance that maintains vigilance and undermines fascistic assumptions at their fundamental bases. Thus does the novel creep, turn, and flip through the attentive reader’s mind.

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Notes

¹ Thanks to participants in the International Pynchon Week in Granada, Spain, June 2006, for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

² Of the many moments of such analysis, see for example, Booker and Bumas (163-65). For Pynchon’s own muted suggestions of his connections to Orwell, see his Foreword to *1984*’s centennial edition (Orwell vii-xxvi).

³ Certainly Pynchon has been widely interpreted as a writer who rejects narratives that end in the triumph or defeat of resistant cultures for the much messier prospect of suspended judgment, as in, for instance, John Johnston’s claim that “logically disjunctive” (76) possibilities about the politics of the Tristero confront Oedipa and the reader in *Lot 49*. But Oedipa, however many bodily metaphors Pynchon brings to her, is essentially only a mind grappling with that paradoxical state. My reading tries to understand the stakes of embodiment in Pynchon’s creation of these political paradoxes: the visceral swings into madness, the betraying character who must turn away from emotional attachments as well as abstract ideals. In other words, where Johnston’s is a typically end-centered view of Pynchon’s uncertainty, I read for the means by which “both-and” states develop sentence by sentence for Pynchon and the reader.

⁴ For prompting my collection of Pynchon’s werewolves, I owe a general debt to

Manfred Kopp's reading of the "Wolf of Jesus" in *Mason & Dixon*. (See Kopp 163-64.) Kopp notes many mentions of werewolves in *Mason & Dixon* but does not pursue the image in earlier Pynchon.

⁵ Gates, Frenesi's father's name, extends the idea with its suggestion of (as in Sphere's speculation) computer circuits and their flips between the one and zero of binary code, troped on elsewhere in *Vineland* (see 90-91).

⁶ On the fate of feminism and feminist theory more generally in *Vineland* and in the "Cosmic Fascist" passage, see Hite, especially 140-41.

⁷ The Biblical dimension of the creeping fig adds to its ambiguity. Pynchon invokes Jesus's prediction of Jerusalem's fall in Mark 13, known (appropriately for small-scale *Vineland*) as the "little apocalypse": "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer [for which read the end-time] is near." Is Pynchon calling up the solace Mark's apocalypticism represented to preterite early Christians? Or do we emphasize the autumnal time the novel ends on, with Reagan's re-election on the horizon and Prairie's possible turn to her mother's ways? What time is it, in essence, on this little apocalyptic clock?

⁸ On Pynchon's appreciation of the Beats, see his Introduction to *Slow Learner* (14, 22).

⁹ Patell, while not uncovering these direct allusions, sees Pynchon's politics as a deep critique of the Emersonian individualism at the root of "liberal ideology." See Patell, especially 1-33, 167-73. Tanner, writing on William Emerson, a magician figure in *Mason & Dixon* who teaches students to fly, aptly calls Pynchon "an Emersonian with shadows" (237).

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