

Coming Home: Pynchon's Morning in America

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"Remember how the acid was? Remember that windowpane, down in Laguna that time? God, I knew then, I knew . . ."

They had a look. "Uh-huh, me too. That you were never going to die. Ha! No wonder the State panicked. How are they supposed to control a population that knows it'll never die?"

Vineland (1990) is a provocative, rambling meditation on the aftermath of that periodization of American history known as "the sixties." We are in 1984, after the Nixonian repression, at the height of Reagan's triumph. The surface of Pynchon's novel obsessively, distractingly (distressingly to some), bears witness to the impact of media and popular culture on those who would examine the recent past. A faultless ear for reminiscences and questions carries forward the soul-searching the predicament demands. We "listen" to the self-indulgence of zany and marginal types, hippies who were "turned" to work for the other side, as their would-be revolution fizzled. Pynchon pushes his characters to the edge of madness, through the discovery of the cynical manipulation and make-believe which brought down the dream.

Jacques Lacan on the structure of psychosis (and, of course, the by-now ubiquitous orders of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real in which the speaking subject is enmeshed) can help develop the notion of what a "psychotic text" might be. A reading of *Vineland* that works from Lacan's concept of the "law" calls attention to the seriousness of Pynchon's charge that the "law" had been ignored, and to the possibility that the novel can be read as that discovery over time.

In the Lacanian psychotic experience, the signifier and the signified present themselves in a completely divided form. For the psychotic, everything is there in the signifier, which he takes for the signified. There are a minimum number of anchoring points between the signifier and the signified, and when they are not established, or are foreclosed, the psychotic is produced. For Lacan, the name-of-the-father is a shorthand for indicating the symbolic order into which one is born

prematurely. While the mother's role of physically giving birth is obvious, the father's importance must be "made up"; that is, his role is giving the name that designates the place of the speaking subject, before she or he is born into the social-historical context. It is this second "birth" that will provide the possibilities of expression and the construction of a personality. But, by the time physical maturity has been achieved, the subject is spoken by the codes she or he has grown into. In the psychotic experience, this second birth is botched: there is a foreclosure of the parental signifier, the name-of-the-father. In psychosis, the imaginary or specular order blocks ascension to the symbolic.

In *Vineland*, the American imaginary is sustained by an audio-visual network so elaborate and so invasive that the signifiers of popular culture become a loop of reruns which simulate reality in an immediacy of voice-over and image which imprisons the subject in the mirrors of the imaginary present. The "law," in Lacan's sense, means that the formation of subjectivity must occur on the other side of the oedipal crisis, using the symbolic order as such. This personhood, successfully achieved, is the ability to use the signifier to stand for the subject, to signify meanings, point towards signifieds, yet be able to distinguish between the two.

Vision, more than any other function, would deny this splitting of the subject or symbolic castration. Indeed, the gaze and the voice always furnish the come-on, the illusion of a seamless, unified world. In *Vineland*, this world was the "high" of the sixties, the present enhanced by drugs, sex and rock 'n' roll. This psychotic sense of immortality, this luminous immediacy of the senses, excluded the obligation of a debt to the dead implied by the symbolic order. At the end of *Vineland*, we are told, death resumes making possible life's renewal. This is, in the Lacanian view, the reestablishment of a proper distance: one doesn't take the signifier for ultimate meaning and one's self for God, for the Other with a capital *O*.

Pynchon's reader senses a withdrawal of the law because the labyrinth of simulations relayed in conversation and experience makes the apprehension of an outside, the symbolic, seem unnecessary or impossible. And yet these psychotic effects are produced by a writing patiently advancing a distancing, a maturity, which assumes the letter and the spirit of the law. This culminates in a reunion which is precisely and explicitly an imaginary one, carefully floated by a text, knowing of the law and its withdrawals, of what the name-of-the-father exacts and makes possible in the fullness of time.

Throughout *Vineland*, the characters are caught in a search for the truth about their relations with each other, and in the contradictions

discovered in the flip-flops of cold war and drug war allegiances and betrayals. Double agents abound, opposites attract, and dreams of power and submission trigger pleasure. Children are conceived through auto-erotic fantasies which isolate the coupling lovers in a non-relation as separate dreamers who are divided and attracted. The memory of a time when bliss, hope and beauty were within the reach of the likes of gypsy roofers and students is crowded out by the scattering clutter and distraction of what has come to be called the commodification of spectacle. The promises of escape and immediate gratification, in which most grovel and fritter away their lives, do everything to deny symbolic castration. There is a withdrawal of the law when desire is overwhelmed by images of its satisfaction. The same thing occurs in the all-too-convenient binary oppositions of the cold war, the straight and the freak, fascism versus flower children. The illusion of justice is meted out in the shadows and lights of movie-making, whose shooting and cutting makes the shoot 'n' cut of real violence a simulation. These imaginary experiences of an exacting law trivialize death and repress the displacements of the symbolic, which alone can permit an intuition of the always absent real.

It falls to the women in *Vineland* to educate each other, to connect the lives, to discover the codes of culture. The men are psychotic in their frenzies, in and out of the lives of women. They all seem to be in need of "tubal detoxification," what Pynchon calls relief from "videocy," or too much television. But women—Frenesi Gates, her daughter, Prairie, and DL Chastain—will, all three, discover the signifier in its abject materiality, manipulated for purely signifying ends. Zoyd Wheeler, Hector Zuñiga and Brock Vond never really escape from the onanistic fixation on desired reunions or penetrations. This operational fantasizing keeps them from learning what Prairie learns: who is behind the camera, mother.

The partial pleasure of men, each propelled by a fetishized vision, is opposed to women's pleasure, a desire without an object, a desire for desire. The women learn that the real is the impossible, but are close to madness, while the men are duped by the lure, the *objet a*, which covers the abyss of desire. Lacan has shown how the subject tries to find a substitute for the lost object, that is, a pre-oedipal union with the mother. The phallic fantasies, the manipulation of the "copula," keep men from the drift, the *dérive*, the knowing of women. They break through to the other side, to the danger of annihilation, experiencing the invisibility of the ninja or the erasure of the "protected witness" forgotten in total anonymity. This is the vertigo experienced by women, who explore arrangements of reality off-limits to men, even as they share the same space. Zoyd's comic defenestration through

a simulated plate glass window (it is made of sugar crystal), dressed as a woman, is a pathetic parody of the terrifying transgressions realized by women seeking to know. Most of the characters are "karmic prisoners" or "thanatoids," prisoners of the specular, even as they promote movie-making and the twenty-four frames per second necessary for the illusion of movement.

In contrast, Prairie's search for her mother becomes a kind of Proustian apprenticeship in which life is slowly understood to be one's appearances in time, one's dispersion, rewound, speeded up, to give the imaginary, continuous self. What Prairie learns, more disturbing than betrayal, is that the mutual attraction of opposites can fail to fulfill its promise of complementarity. Thus her mother, Frenesi, had become Brock Vond's lover and a double agent, derailing a campus rebellion and destroying its leaders; but in this complicity between the forces of order and the rebels is a terrible loneliness: the lovers are prisoners of their perversity, their role-playing. In bed with Brock Vond, but outside in post-coital melancholy, Frenesi knows she is cut off from the boy he once was, or might have been, by his manhood in the service of national security.

To go over the edge, through the window, is to discover the contingent "thereness" beyond the simulations of life, to discover the signifier, its effects on and in the body, like the stage props of a movie shoot made available—the gun, the hardon. They are all the more precious seen now, later, in their abject availability, their banality, yet fueling the pain of remembered intensities, a lost ignorance, unforgivable and indispensable.

If the name-of-the-father is the entry into the cultural codes into which one is born, *Vineland* shows Pynchon's vivid representation of the sixties made possible by his coming of age in the configurations of the previous decade. It was the special privilege of those born around 1937 to experience the cultural revolution of the 1960s in their twenties, a decade in which their every adolescent fantasy wish came to pass, from 1956 to 1966, from Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" to Mick Jagger's "Satisfaction." A "withdrawal of the law" at the peak of the sixties was particularly striking to those who had listened for sounds of change in the padded confines of the 1950s. All of Pynchon's writing bears the traces of being on the cusp of this generational metamorphosis. This is why he is able to have simultaneously the remove to judge and the authentic affection to regret the times they had. Indeed, Pynchon could hardly bear the puerility, the cringing gawkiness of those "slow learners," the straights of the fifties. While many emerged, as from a chrysalis, into a second

youth of many colors in the mid-sixties, they could never shake off the memory of America before the grassy knoll in Dallas.

Edward Mendelson speaks, perhaps, to the effects of such a chronology:

The contrast between the achingly nostalgic tones of the story and the harsh judgement of its content is *Vineland's* most calculatedly unsettling quality. The effect is designed to educate the nostalgia that the book itself evokes. *Vineland* adopts the nostalgic wish of its early chapters precisely in order to expose the delusion and fantasy of those wishes later. (44)

Thus Frenesi, sought and wooed on all sides, is scarcely worthy of all the attention when she comes to be known for what she is; yet she was the emblematic Marianne of their revolution. Pynchon carefully documents the irresponsibility and the missed opportunities for the "movement" to connect with a much older tradition of opposition and resistance, alternate Americas, from union struggles to Indian myths. This is pieced together as women tell women, taking over the traditional patriarchal duties of linking generations.

It is, however, the provocative delight in highlighting the littered lives and landscapes of "Midol-America"—the coves and fairings of a Trans-Am's body, or the curling wave that introduced *Hawaii Five-O*—that has proven to be the most scandalous or disappointing register of the novel. Considered as what Baudrillard and Eco have called the America of "hyper-reality," or a camp send-up of the consumer society, Pynchon's "junk" is improperly understood. For Pynchon, the materials he so lovingly chronicles, the thrown-away, the media surround, are nothing less than a text which illustrates what Gregory Ulmer calls "mystory." Ulmer explains in *Teletheory* that:

The genre of mystory elaborates at the level of discourse the hieroglyphic/alphabetic translation made possible by the Rosetta Stone, whose contemporary equivalent may be found in the multi-track capabilities of video. As such, it brings into relationship the three levels of sense—common, explanatory, and expert—operating in the circulation of culture from "low" to "high" and back again (plus the register of "bliss sense," which provides the unconscious dynamics driving the exchanges across registers). Teletheory offers mystory, that is, as a translation (or transduction) process researching the equivalencies among the discourses of science, popular culture, everyday life and private experience. (vii)

Ulmer explains Lacan's pun *jouis-sens* (from *jouissance*, or "bliss-sense"), which "names that affective unconscious involved in the logic

of identification, transference, and the drives of desire that inform the subject of knowledge, the subject who wants to know, which teletheory also attempts not to strip from learning but to acknowledge and tap for the representation of invention" (57). In other words, Pynchon has already been doing what Ulmer suggests. His writing—in which wretched puns and looney tunes accompany Rilke, Emerson and entropy—brings together materials usually kept apart by domain, tradition and common courtesy. But the Lacanian "bliss-sense" catches the erotics of knowledge, when knowing is the generation of text that can draw on the entire range of signifiers and work with the incessant tumult of the audio-visual consumer culture. The unacknowledged building blocks, the inadmissible, irreducible nonsense, the contingency of the personal phantasm, are validated in bliss-sense.

A compilation of the multi-track culture we live in must come out, surge up into the realm of high-cultural literacy. First it was a secret, private integration; now, with Pynchon and Ulmer, it is an up-front montage, which uses the edges and breaks to enrich the mix. This had its origins for Pynchon in the 1950s, when he discovered "how at least two very distinct kinds of English could be allowed to coexist" (SL 6). In the introduction to *Slow Learner* (1984), he writes about "often unacknowledged divisions in civilian life," which were:

exciting, liberating, strongly positive. It was not a case of either/or, but an expansion of possibilities. I don't think we were consciously groping after any synthesis, although perhaps we should have been. The success of the "new left" later in the '60's was to be limited by the failure of college kids and blue-collar workers to get together politically. One reason was the presence of real, invisible class force fields in the way of communication between the two groups. (7)

"The Secret Integration" (1964), the last story in *Slow Learner*, is about a group of kids who imagine a black playmate when a black couple "integrates" their neighborhood and panics their parents, who throw garbage on the newcomers' lawn, even though the couple is childless and therefore will not "integrate" the school. "Carl" "had been put together out of phrases, images, possibilities that grownups had somehow turned away from, repudiated, left out at the edges of towns, as if they were auto parts . . . things they could or did not want to live with but which the kids, on the other hand, could spend endless hours with, piecing together, rearranging, feeding, programming, refining" (192). Yet then he fades from their lives. The kids take leave of their imaginary playmate, "abandoning him to the old estate's other

attenuated ghosts and its precarious shelter; and rollicked away into that night's rain, each finally to his own house, hot shower, dry towel, before-bed television, good night kiss, and dreams that could never again be entirely safe" (193). The shelter, the enclosure of childhood, was followed, back then, by further segregation. Indeed, Pynchon tells us he sought a way out of "the sense of academic enclosure we felt which had lent such appeal to the American picaresque life the Beat writers seemed to us to be leading. Apprentices in all fields and times are restless to be journeymen" (22). He also tells us, "I believe I was also beginning to shut up and listen to the American voices around me, even to shift my eyes away from printed sources and take a look at American nonverbal reality" (22).

The Distant Early Warning line was the ultimate rampart of 1950s America, and *Junior Scholastic* the official news digest used in the social studies classes. The official confidence, innocence, righteousness stretched on and on, led to the construction of personal DEW-lines to register tremors of possible life or change outside a completely rationalized and apparently unchanging reservation. Only someone who grew up in such a context could imagine the Zone of *Gravity's Rainbow*. As for history, Geoffrey O'Brien put it best in *Dreamtime*. As boys on the playground imagined it:

They would grow up to be a part of it, too. It was something that happened in public, a kind of display. It was big and final. It had something to do with the awesome sleek shapes that filled the skies of *Strategic Air Command* or the arsenal of missiles poised to launch at the slightest tremor of the DEW-line. They had seen the four-color diagram in *Junior Scholastic*. Somewhere down at the end of every road of thought, the brave blue jets lined up on the runway for eventual takeoff toward dimly imagined Soviet mountains. (2)

In citing Pynchon's early writings marked by the fifties, and in calling attention to the sense of destiny imparted by *Junior Scholastic*, we can imagine the place from which the sixties were so eagerly welcomed and so affectionately and toughly judged. Between stretches the great arc of Pynchon's bow: *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). *Vineland* is, perhaps, a compilation of what had been withheld during that trajectory, the journeyman's record of American voices and marginal lives, autobiographical materials, the private jokes and confessions heard while hanging out.

Pynchon is a survivor. Born ten years later, he might not have survived the sixties. He understands the debt he owes to the dead, and to the "living dead." *Gravity's Rainbow* mapped the tumult of the

sixties onto Europe at the end of the Second World War, in the Zone, that is, in defeated Germany as the Allies were establishing their occupation. With *Vineland*, the Zone is revealed to have been the 1960s and after, remembered in California in 1984 as survivors take refuge in the northern part of the state.

Lacan too was a survivor. His career, ostensibly a "return to Freud," became a brilliant national cultural distraction, a performance which reinvigorated psychoanalysis and permitted the slow healing of shame after France's, and the West's, greatest debacle. Stuart Schneiderman reminds us, in his *Jacques Lacan: Death of an Intellectual Hero*, that myth-making can be a "process of symbolization through which the catastrophic event is submitted to the symbolic order" (160). What Schneiderman says of Lacan can be applied to Pynchon as well: "Given the historical and social context he was working in, it is hardly surprising that his own work would have the quality of being fragmented and somewhat disjointed, even fictional at times" (160-61).

As a "slow learner" and creator of "secret integrations," Pynchon, the *bricoleur*, worked with what could be salvaged. The "morning in America" at the end of *Vineland* is the result of listening, psychic healing, karmic adjustment—writing. But, unlike Reagan's slogan, Pynchon's morning welcomes the reaffirmation of death, and the novel can be read as an Antigone-like burial rite for his brothers and sisters who lost their way or gave their lives in the attempt to forge an alternative America. It is a debt paid so life can go on. *Vineland* is the movie demanded at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the gravitational pull home, as the rocket is poised to fall, erupts into the audience's chanting "Come-on! Start-the-show!"

Just as *Gravity's Rainbow* predicted what it could not have known, in spite of all it did know, so *Vineland* anticipates a new psychosis brought on by the end of the cold war: the invasion of Panama and the CAMP drug wars in California's Humboldt county. Like dispatches from Vietnam, complete with rock 'n' roll soundtrack, they signal the farcical spasms of a national security state adrift, bereft of an enemy . . . until Saddam Hussein.

The "mad" pirouettes of Lacan and those of Pynchon's crazies show us that, as in the Maupassant story, the borrowed necklace we lost and worked to replace was worthless, a fake; but the effort to buy a "real" one organized our lives, our culture, polarized our desire, spent us: it was the story of our lives. The slow learner may be a long way from his *Junior Scholastic*, but then, it was all there in the DEW-line, now the distant early warning of the artist, the writing that will have

ghost-written a space in which unthinkable "withdrawals" can come home.

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