

# Apocalyptic Quest in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*

Andrei Vasilenko

Chilean author Roberto Bolaño's last (posthumous) novel *2666* (2004) has some aspects intriguingly in common with Thomas Pynchon's *V.* A full comparative analysis of these two novels would be a daunting task for two reasons. Pynchon's *V.* has been so thoroughly analyzed that it is next to impossible to say anything new about it, whereas the novel of recently deceased Bolaño (1953-2003) has not yet received due scholarly attention, and therefore there is scarcely any critical material to lean on or to take issue with.

*V.*, published in 1963 and a product of its time, is extremely voluble about the major anxieties of the Cold War era. These anxieties receive additional weight as the novel revisits those historical events that were instrumental in dragging the world to the brink of a global catastrophe, presentiments of which keep cropping up in the narrative. Several critics have stressed that the tone of *V.* is rather more mock apocalyptic than apocalyptic, as many of the gloomy apprehensions sketched out in the novel do not materialize (see Celmer), its all-pervasive irony not admitting the possibility of a "real" end of the world. In David Seed's words: "The possibility of Armageddon which hovers constantly in the background of *V.* . . . remains firmly in that background" (110). The same could be said of any final revelation about this dreadful event. The sewer alligator does not receive the gift of tongues and the spheric message to Kurt Mondaugen says that there is no message. I would still argue that despite the ironic tone and slapstick humor, *V.* is imbued with a genuine concern about the future outcome of the political and social processes described in it. This concern is inherent in all Pynchon novels, though it seems most pronounced in *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is true that one does not find any concrete description of the End; however, we should not dismiss the fact that one of the major preoccupations of this novel is the chain of events which seems to be leading to the possible nameless (to borrow the term used by Derrida, 31) destruction of the planet. Pynchon's treatment of entropy, for example, has nothing optimistic as compared to the views expressed by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers in their 1984 study *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*—according to which entropy may be regarded as a positive force for change. As Peter L. Cooper has noted, besides the "fast apocalypse" of a global catastrophe there is also the "slow

apocalypse” of entropic decline (64). The force of entropy, one of Pynchon’s favorite themes, is conspicuously at work in *V.*, whose world is slowly but surely running down. There seems to be less and less space for humanity and human feelings, as the inanimate gradually encroaches into all spheres of life. David Seed is less categorical in this respect. Although admitting the presence of entropic decay in the events related by Pynchon, he emphasizes the ambiguity of the author’s approach to this process, as he seems to be “both suggesting” and “contradicting it” (115). However, despite these ambiguities it is difficult to perceive *V.* as an optimistic narrative. The famous phrase of the electro-mechanical doll Bongo-Shaftesbury—“humanity is something to destroy” (79)—possesses the sinister ambivalence that should not be taken too lightly. It is not only humane attitude but also the human race which is at stake in this gradual process of dehumanization whose figurehead is the mysterious woman called *V.*

The frightening revelations about the destiny of the twentieth century, including the past events and the possible occurrences in the future, come about in the course of Herbert Stencil’s obsessive quest. Led by this character we embark upon the search for an enigmatic figure who embodies, among other things, the transition of the Virgin into the Dynamo, as described by Henry Adams, the attributes of the White Goddess as described by Robert Graves, as well as reminiscences of a character called “*V*” pursuing Sebastian Knight in Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), to name but a few of the findings of Pynchon scholars.

The search for the elusive *V.* is a tiresome and unsatisfying experience. We can never be sure if it is one and the same person, if she is indeed Victoria Wren gradually turned into an automaton. It is remarkable that the common features that all these women share are the easily replaceable inanimate objects like the artificial eye, or the ivory comb rather than some unalterable trait of the living body. In a way, the reader is faced with the same dilemma as Franz Pökler in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, who is only allowed to see his daughter at distant intervals, and therefore he is unable to tell whether this constantly changing person is his real daughter or simply one in a succession of impostors. Different incarnations of *V.* may also be construed as a collective image of the inanimate and decadent, and about whose insidious activity we learn through Herbert Stencil’s “specialized” vision of history.

Much has been said about the abundance of words that begin with “*V*” in the novel: Veronica the rat, Vheissu, Volcano Vesuvius, Venezuela, Valetta, and so on. The omnipresence of this letter suggests to us that *V.* must be something more than simply a woman. What is important is that the pursuit of *V.* allows Stencil, and the reader as well, to look at certain moments in history where the tragic and yet sometimes farcical aspects make us wonder what has gone awry in the twentieth century, and ask ourselves why the destruction of humanity has become for some of its representatives not simply a cynical motto but a command to be carried out.

Many critics take Benny Profane's statement "offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing" (491), as symptomatic of the static, unalterable nature of his character. For example, Frederick R. Karl argues that Profane always "end[s] up in stagnation" (303). I believe that this phrase has been taken too literally on the one hand, and too casually on the other. Should we really believe this answer? In my opinion, it is wrong to say that Profane didn't learn anything in the course of his seemingly useless peregrinations, as opposed to the purposeful search of Stencil. The fact that Profane remains a schlemiel and a human yo-yo, that he does not settle and have a career of sorts, is not evidence of his having learnt nothing. I would say that a person who has had the disturbing conversation with SHROUD cannot be sincere in claiming ignorance. Profane's phrase might be interpreted as wishful thinking, as a deliberate lie he utters to Brenda Wigglesworth's enquiry about his experience. Maybe it is precisely because he has learnt too much that Profane refuses to change his lifestyle. Everybody learns something during the quest for V. and how to cope with this knowledge is one of the major concerns of the novel.

Roberto Bolaño's *2666* definitely shares themes explored in *V*. In Bolaño's novel, the mysterious figure whose destiny appears to provide the clue to the tragic events, past and present, as well as to the emergent uncertainties expressed by many at the end of the twentieth century, is the reclusive German writer Benno von Archimboldi. Like the search for V., the quest for Archimboldi leads to a series of dramatic revelations that can explain to us or at least give us a hint of what has gone wrong in the twentieth century. *2666*, like Pynchon's novel, has a fragmentary narrative. It consists of five more or less autonomous parts, all of which converge on the fictitious Mexican city of Santa Teresa as well as lead to the discovery of the enigmatic German writer's biography. In the first part, appropriately called *La Parte de los Críticos*, we learn about four critics from Spain, Italy, Great Britain, and France who build their academic careers by interpreting, translating, and popularizing the works of the "difficult" writer and perennial Nobel Prize candidate, Benno von Archimboldi. It is hard not to notice that Bolaño's portrayal of these four critics is a subtle satire of the inevitable emergence of academic industries around such writers as James Joyce or Thomas Pynchon. The critics are not satisfied with merely the works of their hero, and they decide to hunt down the reclusive genius in person, an explicit nod toward those frustrated *pynchonologists* who seem to have despaired in their attempt to transcend the texts and aspire to come into contact with the human agency that has given birth to them. The search of the critics, like that of Stencil, proves to be unsuccessful. The journey itself, however, acquires great importance. Following some scraps of information obtained from a Mexican student, the critics arrive at the pivotal point of the whole novel, the city of Santa Teresa. They know that Archimboldi should be somewhere in this place, although the purpose of his sojourn in the city remains unclear to them. The discovery of this fictional place that, according to Juan Carlos Galdo is a carbon

copy of Ciudad Juárez (24), and its relation to the fate of Archiboldi, triggers the apocalyptic quest that we readers need to undertake in the course of this twelve-hundred page novel. This study, therefore, far from attempting a general comparison of the two books, limits itself to an analysis of the similarities within the area of the theme of the apocalyptic quest.

Santa Teresa is a Mexican city on the border with the United States in which several hundred women have been viciously murdered since 1993. Most of the victims have been raped. Their abandoned corpses—either burnt, or badly mutilated, or in an advanced state of decomposition—keep cropping up in the vast rubbish tips of Santa Teresa, in vacant lots, and in the desert. In the fourth part of the novel, Bolaño undertakes what can only be compared to Vladimir Sorokin's description of the methodical and brutal extermination of the whole Russian village by the title character of the novel *Roman* (1994) which has not yet been translated into English. With forensic detachment, Bolaño describes in minute detail the bodies of numerous female victims, paying attention to the ways in which they have been raped and disfigured, telling us where their corpses have been found and giving a glimpse into their background. The majority of the murdered women prove to be poor workers at the *maquiladoras*, foreign-owned assembly factories. Some of the victims are prostitutes. There are even schoolchildren amongst the murdered. The local authorities and the federal government are pathetically helpless, being unable to stop the series of merciless crimes or catch the main culprit. The police do succeed in some cases, catching men who took the life of their own wives or partners and arresting a gang of thugs, *Los Bisontes* (The Bisons), who have been emulating the elusive multiple murderer of Santa Teresa, but most of the cases remain unsolved. The police also fail to detain *El Penitente* (The Penitent), an eerie man whose desecration of churches causes quite an outrage even against the background of the ongoing slaughter of the innocent. The growing mountain of female corpses acquires a metaphysical dimension and, as the final part of the novel shows, there are reasons to believe that these crimes are a link in the long chain of the actions carried out with an eye to destroying humanity and bringing about apocalypse.

There are various ways of bringing about the inanimate condition described in *V*. It may be self-induced, as is the case with different re-incarnations of lady *V.*, who replaces her eyeball with a watch, and inserts a star sapphire in her belly, to name but a few of the inanimate objects she incorporates into her anatomy. The action may have sexual connotations as the relationship between Rachel Owlglass and her car shows.

The condition, however, may have more sinister undertones. These may be found in the evocation of a staggeringly large pile of human bodies as the symbol of the dehumanizing impulse some representatives of humankind have proved to possess. This subject is introduced in a silent conversation between SHROUD and Benny Profane. The radiation output test dummy

compares a pile of junk cars with the amassed bodies of concentration camp victims: "Remember the photographs of Auschwitz? Thousands of Jewish corpses, stacked up like those poor car-bodies. Schlemihl: It's already started" (314). SHROUD's revelation harks back to Mondaugen's story in which we learn about the rehearsal of the Holocaust, undertaken by the German colonizers in South-West Africa. The same terrifying metaphor may be applied to the dead bodies of the Hereros, who have lost about eighty percent of their population in the retaliatory action triggered by Lothar von Trotha. As the narrator bitterly observes, "This is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good" (259).

The image of piles of murdered women's bodies found in peacetime at the end of the twentieth century in Santa Teresa fits in with the major scheme of decadence delineated in Pynchon's novel. There is another logic of wickedness behind this extermination, which, with reference to the actual crimes in Ciudad Juárez, the prototype of Santa Teresa, has been dubbed *feminicidio* or homicide of females. In Bolaño's work, *feminicidio* takes on the proportions of a new kind of genocide. The Hereros were decimated after their uprising, which had been triggered by the wish to stop the colonial exploitation. The Jews were of a race doomed to extinction by Nazi ideology. The women of Santa Teresa are abused and slaughtered because they represent the most vulnerable group of population in the era of globalization: they are poor and they are women. In the symbolism of these murders it is possible to read the dreadful prospect of a genocide on the basis of class and gender, and it appears that the dark allegory of Santa Teresa warns us precisely of that.

The coincidences existing between the victims of Santa Teresa and of the Holocaust and Stalinist repressions become obvious in the fifth part, in which we finally come to learn about the life of Prussian-born Hans Reiter, who is to become the world-famous writer, Benno von Archimboldi. The fate of this man is at once ordinary and extremely extraordinary, and this strange combination has been, in all probability, the decisive factor in his development as a writer. Hans Reiter is an autodidact, who educates himself by reading books. The first book he is exposed to, by the way, is a treatise on the flora and fauna of the European coastline.

Reiter drops out of school and for a while works as a drudge in the country house of a rich aristocrat, whose large library gives him access to the treasures of world literature. Reiter's conscription into the German army as a young man and his participation in World War II indicate a common destiny of German males at the time. Hans Reiter is not a Nazi criminal, he is an ordinary German citizen caught in the whirlpool of that particular historical period. At the end of the war, Hans Reiter is taken prisoner and is kept for some time in a POW camp, upon his release, he moves to Cologne and embarks upon a writing career. The crucial event that takes place in the camp and that will haunt forever the would-be writer is the only crime he commits. Hans Reiter strangles

a certain Sammer, a functionary responsible for sending forced foreign labor from Poland to “las fábricas del Reich” (“the Reich’s factories”) (940, hereinafter my translation). Due to some mistake, he is put in charge of a train full of Jews that should have gone to Auschwitz. He is ordered to execute them himself, which he carries out, after a short spell of moral hesitation, by forwarding the order to his underlings. Although perfectly realizing the enormity of his crime, Sammer tries to come up with extenuating circumstances that sound abysmally lame to his interlocutor: “Otro en mi lugar—le dijo Sammer a Reiter— hubiera matado con sus propias manos a todos los judíos. Yo no lo hice. No está en mi carácter” (“‘Somebody else in my place,’ said Sammer to Reiter, ‘would have killed all those Jews with his own hands. I didn’t do that. It’s not in my character.’”) (959). Sammer’s narrative, which evokes the horrors of the Holocaust, is a revelation which transforms the life of Hans Reiter, who then becomes a murderer and a writer. The Reich functionary’s story opens Reiter’s eyes to the real stakes of this war, making him aware that there is darkness in human nature that has to be faced, and the best way to do it is to create art, in his case, to become a novelist. Archimboldi’s career as a writer may be viewed as a polemical response to Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum about the barbarity of writing poetry after Auschwitz. What Hans Reiter realizes is that you *must* write poetry after Auschwitz, but it should be done in a certain way, it should bear the scars left by the crimes against humanity in order to promote humanitarian values.

The writer Benno von Archimboldi is a man without country and without a whole, integral identity. He willingly transforms himself into a collage made up of different shreds and pieces, like the portraits by the Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, about whom Reiter learns while leafing through the notes left by the Russian-Jewish writer Lev Ansky. Archimboldi constantly changes the place of his habitation, retaining all but a flimsy connection with his editor. But his trajectory, like that of most of the characters, is programmed to home in on the Mexican city in which the rehearsal of a new Holocaust is taking place. Having learned about the murders of the women and about his nephew being suspected as the main perpetrator, the eighty-year-old Archimboldi realizes that at the end of his life he has to face once again the problem that he has dedicated his entire life as a writer to trying to exorcise. His journey to Santa Teresa, which is about to begin on the last page of the novel, is an apocalyptic quest of his own, the results of which we never learn, but we might guess that it will lead him to the realization of the impending danger that might bring about the end of our civilization and bury it in the cemetery of the year 2666, which serves as the title of the novel. In the note to the first edition of the novel, Ignacio Echevarría points out that this date has been borrowed by Bolaño from his previous book, *Amuleto* (1999), in which Avenida Guerrero is compared to “un cementerio de 2666, un cementerio olvidado debajo de un párpado muerto o nonato, las acuosidades desapasionadas de un ojo que

por querer olvidar algo ha terminado por olvidar todo" ("a cemetery of 2666, a cemetery forgotten under an eyelid, dead or unborn, in the dispassionate wetness of an eye that, wishing to forget something, ended up forgetting everything") (qtd. in Echevarría 1124).

The apocalyptic imagery in both novels deserves our attention as well. As has already been mentioned, in *V.* these images are infused with a certain degree of irony. For example, the apocalyptic anxieties over the impending World War, whose shadow hangs over the Egypt episode of the novel, are conveyed through several references to the end of the world. The solemnity with which these references are sometimes charged is undercut by the humor or impropriety of the narrative. In the fifth part of this episode there is an evocation of the main dramatis personae in Islamic eschatology: Mahdi the redeemer, Dejal the antichrist, and Asrafil the angel who will sound the coming of the Last Judgment. However, the apocalyptic tone adopted in this reference is somewhat undermined by the subsequent description of Gebrail, an atheistic namesake of the archangel, contemplating the backside of his horse: "A poor horse's ass. He nearly laughed. Was this a revelation then from God?" (83). Nevertheless, one should not perceive such conjunction of eschatological imagery and cynical commentary as the mere dismissal of apocalypse as something that will be forever postponed. Even when apocalyptic discourse is made light of, it is possible to discern genuine anxiety: will it be postponed forever, taking into account our knowledge of twentieth century history?

The rat as the inheritor of the depopulated earth is another unmistakably apocalyptic image, especially relevant in the Cold War context, where the rat becomes culturally appropriated as the sole survivor of the nuclear war. The grotesque story about Father Fairing's enterprise of converting rats to Christianity during the Great Depression as the successors of the soon-to-be extinct New Yorkers suggests to us another instance in *V.* of a dress rehearsal. This time, it is the rehearsal of a truly apocalyptic event: nuclear holocaust. What is remarkable is that there is also a rat in Bolaño's *2666*. This rat, called Nikita, is the last bosom friend of the Soviet science-fiction writer Efraim Ivanov, with whom he holds long conversations in a prison cell before being wiped out by Stalin's regime:

Ivánov le contaba a la rata cosas de su madre, en la que solía pensar a menudo, y cosas de sus hermanos, pero evitaba hablar de su padre. La rata, en un ruso, apenas susurrado, la hablaba a su vez de las alcantarillas de Moscú, del cielo de las alcantarillas en donde, debido al florecimiento de ciertos detritus o a un proceso de fosforescencia inexplicable, siempre hay estrellas.

Ivanov told the rat about his mother (he often thought of her) and about his brothers, but he avoided talking about his father. The rat, in its turn, in a barely whispered Russian, told him about the sewers of Moscow, about the sky of the

sewers which always had stars in it thanks to the blossoming of certain debris or to a process of inexplicable phosphorescence. (909)

The entropic symbols in *V.*, like the hothouse or the clock, could also be attributed to the set of apocalyptic images invoking the above-mentioned “slow apocalypse” of gradual universal decline. The mysterious land of Vheissu appears to possess apocalyptic significance as well, encoded in the Vheissu spider monkey found by Hugh Godolphin at the South Pole. Judith Chambers believes that with the Vheissu spider monkey Pynchon allegorically refers to a destructive nuclear energy: “The blue-green spider monkey frozen in the ice at the heart of unexplored territory, like Einstein’s energy locked into structures in a ‘frozen state,’ tells the awesome tale of the thrilling struggle for knowledge . . . Godolphin sees in the Antarctic the discovery of the properties of uranium and thus its natural power” (73).

The apocalyptic symbols present in *2666* are also extremely important. The desecrator of churches who emerges out of nowhere and equally mysteriously disappears could well be the Antichrist of the New Age, who begins his noxious activity by triggering off the female homicides of Santa Teresa. A sinister figure with an enormous bladder that goes from church to church defiling them with his urine and excrement seems to be de-converting Santa Teresa from Christianity, establishing there his reign of terror and injustice inaugurated by the series of female homicides.

An eloquent comment on the world being in the process of dissolution is professor Amalfitano’s “ready-made” gesture, when he attaches a treatise on geometry to the clothes line. The book that purports to describe the earth is subject to the natural elements loose in the primary object of its enquiry. The slowly disintegrating pages of the geometry textbook symbolize the gradual decline of the world around.

The test mannequins SHOCK and SHROUD, as well as the switches in the arms of Bongo-Shaftesbury and Fergus Myxolydian, can be perceived as the symbols of the secular apocalypse to come, in which human beings will be ousted by inanimate forces. A similar attitude towards the danger of losing one’s human properties may be found in the story of Edwin Johns, a mad artist in *2666*. He realizes that the only direction left for contemporary art, if it is to remain true to the current precarious situation, is to convert the animate into the inanimate and use it as the material for art. His last painting, or, to be more precise, collage, is the poignant illustration of the distrust of the live human body as the agent capable of slowing down the overall degradation with the power of art. Edwin Johns would not subscribe to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s famous phrase: “the world will be saved by beauty” (402). The world has little chance to be saved in Bolaño’s novel. Edwin Johns stresses this fact by cutting off his own hand (reminiscent of Van Gogh cutting off his own ear), mummifying it and pasting it onto his self-portrait. Paradoxically enough, in



order to make his representation more true-to-life he reduces the humanity of the original. The creating hand of the artist has become a dead object to be used as a mere detail, no matter how spectacular, in the painting that claims to be the masterpiece of contemporary art. One can see uncanny parallels in the inanimate arms with the switches of Pynchon's characters and the mummified hand of Bolaño's mad artist.

2666 is a novel that, by the apocalyptic number in its title and manifold references in the story, tries to awaken us to the realization that we should not treat lightly any sign indicating that there is something amiss at the present moment, for it may have consequences of such great proportions that it will be well nigh impossible to cope with them. The perspective of this book is that of the beginning of the twenty-first century. This period is unavoidably being interpreted as a watershed impregnated with ominous significance due to the experience we had at the *fin-de-siècle* a hundred years ago. Roberto Bolaño has written a book that does not leave much hope, as it makes us ask ourselves the notorious question from *V.* as the gratuitous mass murder of women in Santa Teresa seems to be on the wane: "What next? What Apocalypse?" (510).

—*University of Latvia*

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