

Re-Stenciling Lesbian Fetishism in Pynchon's *V.*

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V. is an important text for anyone interested in recent attempts to theorize female fetishism. "V. in Love," the last overtly "Stencilized" of the novel's historical chapters, tells the story of the abortive love affair between a fifteen-year-old dancer, Mélanie l'Heuremaudit, and a mysterious patroness identified only as the lady V. Viewed from the perspectives of the members of Mélanie's theater circle, this relationship is the object of numerous pseudo-Freudian speculations connecting fetishism, narcissism and lesbian desire. Eventually these speculations are mirrored both in the musings of the story's ambiguous teller, Herbert Stencil, and in the commentary of the unnamed narrator who appears to supersede Stencil's narratorial role in the final third of "V. in Love." By the end of the chapter, which depicts Mélanie's death by impalement the night of her premiere, the relationship between the young dancer and V. has been implicated in a grand conspiracy between lesbianism, fetishism and death:

If V. suspected her fetishism at all to be part of any conspiracy leveled against the animate world, any sudden establishment here of a colony of the Kingdom of Death, then this might justify the opinion held in the Rusty Spoon that Stencil was seeking in her his own identity. But such was her rapture at Mélanie's having sought and found her own identity in her and in the mirror's soulless gleam that she continued unaware, off-balanced by love; forgetting even that . . . their love was in its way only another version of tourism; for as tourists bring into the world as it has evolved part of another, and eventually create a parallel society of their own in every city, so the Kingdom of Death is served by fetish-constructions like V.'s, which represent a kind of infiltration. (411)

This provisional explanation of the chapter's events has received convincing, and contrary, interpretation from critics operating within different veins of poststructuralist thought. Hanjo Berressem accepts the authority of this passage and treats it as support for his argument that Pynchon's novel "fictionalizes Baudrillard's vision of a fully simulated subject." According to Berressem, "V. in Love" is a nightmarish dramatization of Baudrillard's history of the body, whereby the semiotic progress of the fetish's "staged castration" is revealed in

the reduction of the woman to a mannequin, or a pure signified of sexuality (53, 58).¹ Alec McHoul and David Wills, on the other hand, reject the historical progression implied in the narrator's commentary, relying on a Derridean understanding of the fetish as a deconstruction of natural origins, "a supplement, both replacing and adding to" (182). By their reading, the discourse on fetishism in "V. in Love" precludes any attempt to pinpoint V. as a stable term in a male/female binary. Both of these interpretations, however, miss—either by preserving the psychoanalytic focus on fetishism as an exclusively male perversion, as does Berressem, or by neutralizing the gendered perspective on fetishism entirely, as do McHoul and Wills—the challenge Pynchon's portrayal of lesbian fetishism poses to the psychoanalytic prohibition of women from fetishistic practices. Published in 1963, *V.* anticipates by nearly twenty years the theoretical project to define a distinctly female fetishism.

Freud, Female Fetishism and "V. in Love"

That project, which has its roots in the work of Sarah Kofman in the early 1980s,² finds its chief target in Freud's de facto exclusion of women from the practice of fetishism. Freud's definitive essay of 1927 presents the fetish as a phallic substitute, constructed by the male and offered as a supplement to the female body, rendering it tolerable as an object of desire. The need for this supplement is rooted in the fear of castration experienced by all males on first glimpse of the female genitals. According to Freud, a young boy's perception of the female genitals (usually his mother's) stands as a shocking corrective to his unconscious belief that women, like himself, are phallicly endowed. Because the mother's evident castration threatens his own possession of the penis, the boy offsets this threat by investing another object—a foot, piece of underclothing, hair—with the narcissistic importance previously attached to the mother's "lost" penis. But the fetish does not erase entirely the troubling reality of the mother's lack. Instead, it forms a concrete embodiment of the "energetic action" taken to disavow it. Disavowal enables the boy to continue in his belief that the woman has the phallus, while also acknowledging its absence. By this process, the fetish becomes "a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it" (F 154). The importance of fetishism in providing evidence for male castration anxiety is thereby secured: "An investigation of fetishism is strongly recommended to anyone who still doubts the existence of the castration complex or who can still believe that fright at the sight of the female genital has some other ground" (155).³

Freud's theory leaves no room for women as fetishists, since it forecloses fetishistic loss as female lack, categorically limiting the lost object to an imaginary penis in which a woman could not, presumably, invest any narcissistic importance. Efforts to define female fetishism have therefore targeted Freud's connection of fetishism to castration anxiety as the obstacle to including women in perverse practices. But there has been little agreement on how to reclaim fetishistic loss for feminist politics. Kofman's ground-breaking work locates its possibility of female fetishism in what Derrida describes, in *Glas*, as the fetish's "power of excess in relation to the opposition" (211). For Kofman, the double-column structure of *Glas* textualizes a "diabolical double sex" which oscillates between feminine and masculine poles, escaping the confines of a binary economy predicated on castration (C 128–29). Responding to this liberating version of fetishism, however, in a reading of "bisexuality" in George Sand, Naomi Schor is not nearly as optimistic about female fetishism's escape from the clutches of castration. Her essay ends by transforming the notion of Kofmanian undecidability into a somewhat pessimistic political oscillation. According to Schor, female fetishism may enable a model for structuring the aporias in feminist claims for equality *and* difference, or it may be, after all, only the "latest and most subtle form of penis envy" (FF 371).⁴

More recently, Emily Apter has criticized Kofman for translating fetishism from a sexual into a purely textual phenomenon, abolishing the notion of sexual difference altogether (110). Striving to feminize the fetish by preserving sexual difference, Apter sees in clothes and postpartum object-traces an "erotic economy of severance and disappropriation, itself less fixed on a fiction of castration anxiety" (121). Yet Apter's suggestion that nearly any form of female loss can be considered fetishism has come under attacks of its own. Teresa de Lauretis accuses Apter of a reductive generalization that preserves gender difference at the expense of fetishism's sexual dimension (274–75). By contrast, de Lauretis's female fetish signifies a perverse lesbian desire in which the site of loss is the female body itself. Arguing that the "mannish" lesbian experiences the female body as a fantasmatic object, de Lauretis brings the site of loss full circle from Freud's narrative, in which the female body serves as the bedrock of factual reality.⁵

To argue the relevance of Pynchon's novel to these debates might seem strange, given that *V.* has not fared particularly well under feminist scrutiny. Mary Allen argues that the violent, sexually symbolic death of Mélanie at the end of "V. in Love" is evidence of Pynchon's strong indictment of lesbianism (45). Alice Jardine describes *V.* as a

“mother-fetish . . . not meant to be found, but only deconstructed into her component parts, never adding up to a whole” (252). And Catharine Stimpson, who acknowledges the presence of female fetishism in *V.*, argues that it is more sinister than the male variety because “Pynchon assigns women that normative task of acting out and symbolizing natural fertility” (37–38). Yet if Pynchon’s presentation of lesbian sexuality and fetishism has been interpreted negatively by feminist critics, there is much in the novel to justify a reevaluation. Mark Hawthorne’s analysis of “gender blending” in *V.*, which engages directly with Allen, Jardine and Berressem, is one attempt to recontextualize Pynchon’s portrayal of gender and sexuality in the cultural milieu of 1950s America. Where Hawthorne takes a wrong turn, however, is in rejecting psychoanalysis as irrelevant to Pynchon’s depiction of sexuality and perversion.⁶ In doing so, he misses Berressem’s central point, which is not that Pynchon’s novel strictly adheres to psychoanalytic models, but rather that it invokes psychoanalysis only to subvert and challenge its relevance to a new cultural scene.

Nevertheless, the problem with Berressem’s reading is that, although it attends to Pynchon’s subversive use of Freud, it backgrounds, and ultimately forgets, the most challenging aspect of Pynchon’s portrayal of fetishism: the depiction of women as active participants. As recent efforts to define female fetishism suggest, the exclusion of women from the practice of fetishism is a far more notorious psychoanalytic constant than is Berressem’s notion of a conventional inanimate fetish object. His description of the Freudian fetish as a substitute phallus formed from “a material, inanimate object associated with women’s bodies” (59) is an oversimplification which conceals Freud’s repeated mention of fixations (feet, hair and the nose, among others) that do not fall so clearly under the heading of the inanimate. As a result, Berressem’s reading deflects attention from Pynchon’s attack on the one constant that unifies the definition of the fetish in Freud, Lacan and Baudrillard: the phallic prototype.⁷

In what follows, I argue that “*V. in Love*” enters debates about female fetishism from two directions, corresponding roughly to the chapter’s two-part structure. The first part, beginning with Mélanie’s arrival in Paris and ending shortly before her first conversation with *V.*, implicitly challenges the psychoanalytic definition of the fetish as a substitute phallus. Initially, the chapter’s exclusively male perspective on the fetish—grounded in a narrative fixation on women’s clothing—appears to endorse a psychoanalytic model in keeping with the novel’s earlier presentation of what I call profane fetishism (because both unspecialized and focalized through the character Benny Profane). As

"V. in Love" progresses, however, female perspectives stage an attack on the word "fetish" itself, forcing it to bear the weight of affiliations which unsettle its strict relation to a phallic prototype. Ironically, this semantic shift can be diagnosed with reference to a lesser-known Freudian account of female clothing fetishism, itself contradicted by Freud's 1927 theory.

Part 2 of "V. in Love" hints at a complementary relation between female fetishism and lesbian desire. In this it supports de Lauretis's argument regarding the mannish lesbian, while foregrounding an issue undeveloped in her theory: the significance of fetish items for feminine, as opposed to masculine, lesbian subjects. By constructing a loose framework of lesbian desire within which to view *Mélanie's* narcissistic fantasies, Pynchon's novel contributes to a theory of lesbian fetishism, and suggests how de Lauretis's theory might be extrapolated to account for the femme fetish. Toward the end of this essay, I attempt such an extrapolation. My re-Stenciling of *Mélanie's* perverse desire, in keeping with the theoretical origins of female fetishism, takes root in the textual undecidability that characterizes the narration of V.'s descent, via lesbianism, into inanimacy and death. The close association the text establishes between this supposedly objective description and Stencil's own dreams and ploddings problematizes any attribution of omniscience to the narrator who emerges in the latter portion of "V. in Love." The doubt thus cast on the authoritative interpretation of lesbianism and fetishism enables a counterreading which affirms, rather than denies, the possibility of a distinctly female fetish.

Profane Fetishism

Pynchon introduces the theme of fetishism early in *V.*, through a combination of unstated referents and visual focalization. From the outset, the novel assumes the reader's familiarity with a popular conception of the fetish as one of a relatively limited series of sexualized feminine accoutrements. It is this assumed familiarity that enables the specific referent or referents of the word "fetish," when first used in the novel, to remain tacit. Thus Esther, attempting to seduce her plastic surgeon, makes an appearance at his office "garbed underneath as lacy and with as many fetishes as she could afford" (109). Similarly, Rooney Winsome attributes to Paola Maijstral the "passive look of an object of sadism, something to be attired in various inanimate costumes and fetishes" (221). The latter example foregrounds the extent to which Pynchon's presentation of fetishism harmonizes, at least at first, with the psychoanalytic privileging of the

male perspective in clothing fetishism. Women adorn their bodies—or allow them to be adorned—with supplementary fetishes to secure the notion of an essential femininity in the eyes of the male, in keeping with the Lacanian masquerade.⁸ The text secures a space for the fetish's phallic referent by positioning the reader to view commonly fetishized articles solely through the eyes of its male characters. And this phenomenon works in reverse, so that these articles, even when not labelled fetishes, become ripe targets for narrative fixation. Benny Profane's encounter with Rachel Owlglass in the employment office provides an example:

Soon there came the hurried and sexy tap of high heels in the corridor outside. As if magnetized his head swiveled around and he saw coming in the door a tiny girl, lifted up to all of 5' 1" by her heels. Oboy, oboy, he thought: good stuff. . . . Smiling and waving hello to everyone in her country, she clickety-clacked gracefully over to her desk. He could hear the quiet brush of her thighs, kissing each other in their nylon. Oh, oh, he thought, look at what I seem to be getting again. Go down, you bastard. (216)

The framing of visual and auditory detail in this passage exemplifies what Apter calls a "gendered scopic poetics" (32). Attention to Rachel's shoes and stockings, at the expense of other descriptive information, places the reader in the position of voyeur and fetishist.

This visual configuration of the fetish scene in accordance with the male scopic drive is central in most discussions of fetishism. Laura Mulvey's influential reading of fetishism in film emphasizes how contemplation of the on-screen female reveals the projection of male fantasy even as it halts narrative movement (19). And Whitney Davis argues that a fetishistic subjectivity, in Freudian terms, is "constituted as a doubled and reversed *Nachträglichkeit* of memory images as the embodiedness of vision itself" (93). Pynchon's implicit reservation of fetishistic looking to men (and to Benny Profane in particular) thus complements his emphasis on the fetish as an article of women's clothing. The term "fetish" implies not only a certain sexualized set of objects, but also the viewing of those objects from a particular gendered perspective—that of the male.

"V. in Love," a supposedly true story Stencil tells Benny,⁹ appears at first to confirm and even amplify this gender bias. While registering Mélanie's arrival in Paris and her first rehearsals for the ballet, Stencil's narrative eye pays particular attention to common fetish objects like those seen earlier in the novel, taking every opportunity to zone the female body for scopic enjoyment. A narrative preoccupation with

shoes, lingerie and especially stockings dominates descriptions of the female characters throughout the early part of the chapter. In just the first seven pages, there are eight separate references to skirts fluttering above stocking tops, dancers adjusting their stockings, and embroidery on women's hosiery. Often these moments of erotic contemplation are focalized through male characters, as when Mélanie is introduced to the ballet's choreographer, Satin: "She stood awkwardly on one leg, reached down and scratched her calf, hot under its black stocking. Satin watched hungrily" (396).

More than just an issue of descriptive focalization, however, references to stockings and lingerie crop up within the diegesis of "V. in Love." Mélanie's stage name, the reader soon discovers, is "Mlle. Jarretière." And M. Itague, welcoming Mélanie to the theater, greets her with, "'Come, fétiche, inside'" (395). That Mélanie takes the French words for garter and fetish as her nicknames suggests that her identity is generic, consisting in nothing more than an assemblage of feminine clothes and accoutrements. Her alternative names push the Lacanian model of the female masquerade to an extreme, implying that she is hollowed out and, at the same time, filled up by her function of reflecting male desire, or being the phallus.

But Mélanie's role as a depthless screen for the projection of male fantasy is complicated by her dreams and memories. Three of Mélanie's reveries are presented in the first part of the chapter, each challenging in different ways her construction as an empty sign of male desire. The first is a recurring fantasy in which she imagines herself sliding down the roof of her ancestral home in Normandy, observed by her mother (395). The second is a kind of make-believe fashion show she envisions putting on for her father (397–98). The third, just before the end of part 1, is a dream in which Mélanie is transformed into a wind-up doll receiving attention from a man who is both her father and a German engineer (401–02). I will return to the first and last of these fantasies later; for now, however, the second one deserves attention for the way it unsettles the chapter's previous gendered focalization of fetishism. Here is Mélanie dressing for the first time in her Su Feng costume:

Back in the hot room she quickly removed shoes and stockings, keeping her eyes closed tight until she had fastened her hair in back with the spangled amber comb. She was not pretty unless she wore something. The sight of her nude body repelled her. Until she had drawn on the blond silk tights, embroidered up each leg with a long, slender dragon; stepped into the slippers with the cut steel buckles, and intricate straps which writhed up halfway to her knees. Nothing to restrain her breasts: she wrapped the underskirt tightly around her hips. It fastened with thirty

hooks and eyes from waist to thigh-top, leaving a fur-trimmed slit so that she could dance. And finally, the kimono, translucent and dyed rainbowlike with sunbursts and concentric rings of cerise, amethyst, gold and jungly green. (397)

The absence of detail regarding Mélanie's naked body, and the lingering over sartorial specifics align this passage with Benny's earlier leering at Rachel. But the vital difference is that now Mélanie herself is charged with the scopical prejudice that transfers attention from her body to her clothing. For Mélanie, the kimono, skirt, slippers and tights occasion a narcissistic arousal which becomes evident when, dressed in her outfit, she lies on the bed and stares at herself in a ceiling mirror, enamored with her own beauty.

By attributing this fetishistic looking to Mélanie, "V. in Love" challenges the notion, common to Profane and psychoanalysis, that such speculation is unique to men. More than this, however, Mélanie's fixation on her own clothes recalls an early, and little-known, Freudian contribution to the problem of female fetishism. While discussing male clothing fetishism in an address to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1909, Freud makes this brief aside:

In the world of everyday experience, we can observe that half of humanity must be classed among the clothes fetishists. All women, that is, are clothes fetishists. Dress plays a puzzling role in them. It is a question again of the repression of the same drive, this time, however, in the passive form of allowing oneself to be seen, which is repressed by clothes, and on account of which, clothes are raised to a fetish. Only now we understand why even the most intelligent women behave defenselessly against the demands of fashion. For them, clothes take the place of parts of the body, and to wear the same clothes means only to be able to show what the others can show, means only that one can find in her everything that one can expect from women, an assurance which the woman can give only in this form. (F&F 155–56)

In the context of efforts to theorize female fetishism, the value of this passage has been a matter of some debate.¹⁰ Yet regardless of its inherent value or consistency, the mere fact that Freud's sole admission of a female fetish presents it as a substitute for a *female* body-part suggests that his 1927 theory is a deliberate effort to safeguard the centrality of the phallus in desire, which he knew very well was threatened by (his own understanding of) female fetishism. Mélanie's fixation on her clothes indicates a fetishistic substitution that does not depend on—or at least does not depend *only* on—a phallic substitute.

This is not to say, however, that Mélanie's fixated looking creates an absolute rupture between the fetish and the phallus. Rather, the threat to the phallic economy posed by her fetishistic speculation is diminished to the extent that her fetishism also implies—at the same time—an internalizing of the male perspective on her own body. Mélanie's belief that "she was not pretty unless she wore something" partakes of the classic male fetishistic view of the female body, in which the fear of her real genitals remains, according to Freud, a "*stigma indelebile* of the repression that has taken place" (F 154). At most, Mélanie's fantasy sets in motion an oscillation between two interpretive approaches to her clothing fetishism: one that casts the fetish prototype as a portion of the female anatomy (in keeping with Freud's rejected theory), and one that maintains the phallic reference (as per Freud's 1927 essay).

This oscillation is taken up by the narrative itself. The alternative explanations of Mélanie's perversity are expressed in "V. in Love" by two characters—one male and one female—who speculate on and seek to decode the dynamics of her narcissistic desire. The first perspective is that of the ballet's impresario, M. Itague, a man we are told is well versed "in the new science of the mind" (408). In a heated discussion with Satin, Itague offers a detailed interpretation of Mélanie's narcissism. In his reading, her love for self-adornment reflects her father's desire: "'Have you seen the child's furs, her silks, the way she watches her own body? Heard the noblesse in the way she speaks? He gave her all that. Or was he giving it all to himself, by way of her?'" (399). Itague's speculations resonate with Freud's 1927 theory, in which the man gives the woman the classically fetishized furs and silks to render her a desirable sexual object for himself. As in Freud, the particular details of this supplementation are not as significant as the universal female lack, perceived by all men, which is made tolerable by the fetish. Hence, for Itague, Mélanie "'functions as a mirror. You, that waiter, the chiffonnier in the next empty street she turns into: whoever happens to be standing in front of the mirror in the place of that wretched man. You will see the reflection of a ghost'" (399). That Itague's list of possible reflections is limited to male figures also reveals his psychoanalytic knowledge, in that the fetish-display is configurable solely from a male perspective.

Yet at the same time, Mélanie is already becoming a source of interest to the lady V., whose cryptic comments on fetishism and femininity point to the instabilities and omissions in Itague's theory. While Itague focuses on Mélanie's costumes, V. addresses the issue of Mélanie's metaphoric clothes, her names: "'Do you know what a fetish is? Something of a woman which gives pleasure but is not a woman.

A shoe, a locket . . . une jarretière. You are the same, not real but an object of pleasure'" (404). V.'s definition of the fetish as "something of a woman" recalls Freud's rejected theory of the female fetish, but it is more than just an oblique reference to that abandoned model. By using Mélanie's stage name, Jarretière, to refer to a commonly fetishized object and to Mélanie herself, V. gives explicit voice to the idea that woman's identity is inseparable from the cultural masquerade of her femininity. At the same time, however, she enables us to see how a profane definition of the fetish can also prove a latent threat to the phallic prototype.

That threat resides in the dual coding of common fetishes, such as Mélanie's stockings and garters, as markers of both male desire and feminine otherness. Berkeley Kaite discusses this dual coding in her analysis of mainstream pornography:

Although the fetish may be a masculine prerogative, and phallic in its properties, the pairing of the fetish with castration fears is questionable. That is, the marking of "woman" as different is a dual maneuver: on the one hand, the fetish preserves the fiction of "otherness." In that sense the fetish is like a mirror: the reader sees himself in the phallic death wish. But on the other hand, that otherness—the writing that signifies the feminine—is a partially phallic discourse which allows for a "delicate" difference, like the high-heel shoe the model sports: a precarious balance. (95)

In a male speculative economy, the fetish serves as a "stand-in" for the "missing element," whether the phallus or the reader himself (Kaite 94). In this manner, as Itague's interpretation suggests, the fetish enables Mélanie to function as a mirror for any male. But even while the fetish secures the organization of difference on the basis of having or not having the phallus, the cultural recognition of classically fetishized objects as signs of the feminine also threatens the exclusive role of the fetish within male speculative fantasy. This is because, as Kaite points out, such objects also signal the absence or death wish of their phallic authors. The fact that the "writing that signifies the feminine" is also "a partially phallic discourse" implicates the fetish in the denial of difference, and precludes its dependence on any clear anatomical prototype.

That death wish enters the text of Pynchon's novel when Itague describes Mélanie, rather than her fetish objects, as a mirror. Yet it remains only a latent threat until V. uses the words "fetish" and "jarretière" to foreground Mélanie's status as an object. This deliberate conflation of terms breaks down the referential chain in which a specific fetish such as une jarretière can serve as a placeholder maintaining the

distinction between the fetish as a universal substitute for a *fantasmatic* phallus and the female body as the site at which lack is universally perceived *in the real*.¹¹ If *Mélanie*, as a fetish, is not a woman but “something of a woman,” then more important than her inclusion in a list of inanimate objects is the fact that woman, as one pole of a binary opposition, has gone missing. The implication for Freud’s 1927 theory of fetishism is that the fantasmatic phallus, as the fetish’s universal referent, loses its guarantee of a real, anatomical female lack to which it can oppose itself in establishing its psychic privilege. Instead, it now appears that the lost fantasmatic object is the female body itself. As a result, the male author reflected by this undecidable real/fantasmatic female body loses, in turn, his privileged perspective. He becomes the ghost Itague describes, forever oscillating between presence and absence, reality and fantasy.¹²

V.’s definition of the fetish therefore challenges the traditional psychoanalytic understanding of fetishism by establishing, as did Freud in 1909, a substitutive relation between the fetish and the female body. Yet there is an important difference between V.’s suggestion and Freud’s; for where Freud’s admission of female fetishism posits the fetish as a replacement for a part of the real female anatomy, V. seems to imply a disavowal of a fantasmatic body or body-parts. The latter concept is more radical than Freud’s theory because it goes further toward displacing fetishism from an exclusively male speculative framework. In Freud’s account, women use the fetish to shield themselves from men’s eyes and to signify “everything that one can expect from women,” thereby preserving female lack as an unquestioned ground on which the fetish depends. V.’s definition, by contrast, threatens to eject the phallus from the fetish scene and to replace it with another form of psychic loss.

That this new site of loss might be configured from a uniquely female point of view is suggested in a highly charged scene that ends the first part of “V. in Love.” After a Black Mass attended by members of the theater crowd, Itague watches V.’s subtle erotic play with a young sculptress:

The lady was absorbed in burning tiny holes with the tip of her cigarette, through the skirt of the young girl. Itague watched as the pattern grew. She was writing *ma fétiche*, in black-rimmed holes. The sculptress wore no lingerie. So that when the lady finished the words would be spelled out by the young sheen of the girl’s thighs. (403)

Here the two possible interpretations of *Mélanie*’s narcissism, represented in the perspectives of Itague and V., come together in a

reconfiguration of the fetish scene. For now it is the woman who quite literally writes her desire onto the girl. The burned skirt serves as a stencil through which the new referent of the word “fetish” emerges in the sheen of the sculptress’s body. But note that both the skirt and the flesh beneath are essential for this optical effect: the referent of “ma fétiche” is both the girl’s body and the clothes which (partially) conceal it. Moreover, in a chapter which turns women’s stockings into a motif, it is through their absence that the word “fetish” becomes discernible in this new visual configuration. The referential link previously used to foreground the fetish’s phallic aspect (the lingerie which could remain unspecified and yet be understood in a profane definition of the fetish) is now literally absent. In this configuration, “fetish” is revealed as an optical phenomenon formed from an oscillation between the woman’s fashion-embodiment, her clothes, and the body. Pynchon seems to suggest here that the fetishization of feminine artifacts as objects of pleasure opens onto new psychic terrain that enables the possibility of a distinctly female fetishism.

Re-Stenciling the Lesbian Fetish

If the first part of “V. in Love” concludes by suggesting that V.’s writing and speculation, and Mélanie’s narcissism might be more than the mere internalizing of fetishistic male perspectives and desires, the second part of the chapter seems to both fortify and undermine that suggestion. On the one hand, the lesbian relationship which evolves between V. and Mélanie in the chapter’s second half is directly implicated in a new economy of visual speculation. V.’s redefining of the word “fetish,” and its impact on Itague’s theorizing are presented by the narrator as integral to understanding V.’s fetishistic relations with Mélanie: “Had they [the theater circle] seen the skirt of the little sculptress-acolyte from Vaugirard, heard the pet-name the woman had for Mélanie, or read—as had Itague—in the new science of the mind, they would have known that certain fetishes never have to be touched or handled at all; only seen, for there to be complete fulfillment” (408).

Competing with this interpretation, however, are a series of narrative interventions that extend Itague’s pseudo-Freudian ponderings into a vast conspiracy. These hypotheses, posited by a narrator well acquainted with Stencil’s obsessions and fixations, actually halt the flow of the narrative, interrupting the story at a crucial moment during Mélanie’s first visit to V.’s loft:

The bed was a great four-poster. Mélanie’s wrap had fallen away: her legs, blond and bedragoned, lay unmoving half on the pouf, half on the oriental

rug. The woman sat down beside the girl, resting her hand lightly on Mélanie's shoulder, and began to talk.

If we've not already guessed, "the woman" is, again, the lady V. of Stencil's mad time-search. No one knew her name in Paris.

Not only was she V., however, but also V. in love. Herbert Stencil was willing to let the key to his conspiracy have a few of the human passions. Lesbianism, we are prone to think in this Freudian period of history, stems from self-love projected on to some other human object. If a girl gets to feeling narcissist, she will also sooner or later come upon the idea that women, the class she belongs to, are not so bad either. (406-07)

More than anything else, perhaps, it is the disruption of the narrative flow that lends authority to the narrator's interpretation of lesbianism and fetishism. Compared with the other Stencilized chapters in the novel, "V. in Love" is notable for the apparent objectivity of its narration up to this point.¹³ The voice that exposes and ironizes the chapter's coyness about V.'s identity recalls attention to Stencil's narratorial role even as it takes over that role. Consequently, the new narrator derives authority from the ability to demystify the unobtrusiveness itself of Stencil's story-telling as testament to Stencil's lack of reliability. Expounded from a position seemingly untainted by any "soul-transvestism" (V 226), the lengthy theoretical bridge between Mélanie's visit to V.'s loft and her later death on stage denies the possibility of female fetishism by equating its distinct psychic terrain with that of tourism and death:

The smallest realization . . . that she [V.] fitted into a larger scheme leading eventually to her personal destruction and she might have shied off, come to establish eventually so many controls over herself that she became—to Freudian, behaviorist, man of religion, no matter—a purely determined organism, an automaton, constructed, only quaintly, of human flesh. Or by contrast, might have reacted against the above . . . by journeying even deeper into a fetish-country until she became entirely and in reality—not merely as a love-game with any Mélanie—an inanimate object of desire. (411)

This passage underpins Berressem's conclusion that, in V., "Pynchon laments . . . the demise of the human and the advent of the dreamless machine" (75). But to accept this theorizing as Pynchon's final word on fetishism is not without problems. First, considering that Stencil refers to himself in the third person throughout the novel, the grounding of narrative authority in a voice that speaks of and about Stencil from an external vantage is inherently suspect in the context of

an already Stencilized chapter. Second, and more important, although the new narrator introduces the provisional explanation of V.'s fetishism as an index to what Stencil does not know (or reveal) about the story he tells, that explanation actually ends up dovetailing with Stencil's own knowledge and perspective. In the sentences that immediately follow the passage above, the narrator's description of V. concludes by relating Stencil's daydream about her as an automaton. Even more telling is the fact that the entire historical explanation of V.'s decadence ends with a return to the perspective of Stencil (by way of his informant Porcépic's), who seems to have full knowledge of the theoretical and physical transitions described:

Love is love. It shows up in strange displacements. This poor woman was racked by it. Stencil however only shrugged. Let her be a lesbian, let her turn to a fetish, let her die: she was a beast of venery and he had no tears for her. (412)

If the authority of the second narrator's voice depends on its standing beyond the reach of Stencil's obsessions, then the account given of V.'s historical progression into inanimacy is undermined by its close association with Stencil's "usual ploddings" (411).

Furthermore, to accept as definitive the theorizing which permeates the end of "V. in Love" is to neglect its power as a critical reflection on how psychoanalysis itself has disavowed historical narratives of female fetishism. According to Jann Matlock, virtually all major studies of perversion before 1908 included cases of fetishistic behavior in women.¹⁴ Even discounting Freud's early admission of female fetishism, his 1927 essay must be read as a selective screen memory of previous discourses on sexual perversion. Similarly, the fact that Stencil's narratorial presence is re-acknowledged and usurped at the moment V. and Mélanie presumably consummate their love allows one to hypothesize that the diegetic presentation of lesbianism is too traumatic for Stencil as narrator to relate. Rather than finish the story, Stencil disavows it through an elaborate theory of desire. In this light, the emergence of a second narrator who knows everything Stencil knows yet seeks to distance himself from that perspective represents what Freud calls the "splitting of the ego" in the process of disavowal.

This shying away from the traumatic sight of female desire has a clear precedent in *V. Benny*, too, finds himself faced with evidence of female perversity. In an early scene strongly reminiscent of Freud's narrative of fetish formation, Benny spies on Rachel washing her car in the middle of the night. From his hidden vantage, he stumbles on a

horrifying genital revelation—one in which the genitals revealed are not Rachel's, however, but the car's:

She had climbed in the car and now lay back in the driver's seat, her throat open to the summer constellations. He was about to approach her when he saw her left hand snake out all pale to fondle the gearshift. He watched and noticed how she was touching it. . . . He didn't want to see any more. (29)

Unlike the little boy beneath his mother's skirt, Benny is disturbed by the sight not of a missing penis, but of a penis where none should exist—a sexual object created through Rachel's active, perverse desire. This object threatens the privileged place he assumes for the penis in the female imaginary, and his response, like that of Freud and Stencil, is a theoretical disavowal. He later tells Rachel, "I only started to think about being a schlemihl, about a world of things that had to be watched out for, after I saw you alone with the MG. I didn't even stop to think it might be perverted, what I was watching. All I was was scared" (384). Rather than acknowledge a frightening female desire not tied solely to the phallus, Benny's schlemihl theory strips the woman of all capacity to desire. Compare his ultimate wish with what Stencil envisions as the end of V.'s lesbian fetishism:

Someday, please God, there would be an all-electronic woman. . . . Any problems with her, you could look it up in the maintenance manual. Module concept: fingers' weight, heart's temperature, mouth's size out of tolerance? Remove and replace, was all. (385)

Stencil even departed from his usual ploddings to daydream a vision of her now, at age seventy-six: skin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic; both eyes glass but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix could ever be. (411)

Stencil and Benny disavow female fetishism by positioning the fetish and female desire within a male speculative economy that denies subject status to the woman whose behavior suggests that all desire is not tied to the phallus. Unable to acknowledge the disorder with which female perversity threatens their phallogocentric models, Stencil and Benny imaginatively reduce the female subject to a paradigm of orderly functioning: the machine.

But does Pynchon's text enable an alternative reading of female fetishism that would counter this disavowal? I believe it does, but only

if the lesbian relationship between Mélanie and V., which receives little elaboration in the text, is taken as a lens through which to review the chapter's earlier challenge to the phallic prototype. Constructing an affirmative model of female fetishism through "V. in Love" necessitates building on the links established in the first part of the chapter between a new visual configuration of the fetish scene and the new form of psychic loss unique to this scene: the fantasmatic female body. Toward that end, Mélanie's as yet unexamined dreams and fantasies will serve as the basis for an extrapolation of De Lauretis's theory of lesbian fetishism.

De Lauretis affirms the relevance of castration to female fetishism by relying on Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's iconoclastic reading of castration-disavowal, which portrays it as a liberation from, rather than a testament to, desire for the phallus.¹⁵ In de Lauretis's model, however, it is the woman's disavowal of her own (rather than her mother's) castration that matters. Female disavowal, according to de Lauretis, is never rooted in the perception of a lost penis, since that object can hold no narcissistic interest for the woman (263). Rather, female disavowal forms the basis of perverse lesbian sexuality, and of lesbian subjectivity, because "the fantasmatic object is the female body itself, whose original loss in a female subject corresponds . . . to the narcissistic wound that the loss of the penis represents for the male subject" (231).¹⁶

The shift from the penis to the female body as the lost object of fetishism is grounded, for de Lauretis, in the lesbian subject's experiential loss of the mother's body. This loss becomes visible to the mannish or butch lesbian in a perceived failure to fulfill the mother's desire. For the lesbian subject, the inability to live up to the mother's expectations is experienced as a failure to fulfill the mother's narcissistic desire for the female body (rather than the phallus) both in herself and in her daughter. The mother's rejection of her daughter, perceived by the mannish lesbian as the loss of her mother's body, is then doubled in a fantasmatic instance by a second lost object: the lesbian subject's own missing or absent body. This fantasmatic female body, formed from what the daughter imagines to be her mother's expectations, is later displaced to become the signification of desire (250). In turn, the lesbian fetish, which points both to and away from this impossible original, represents the absence of, and wish for, a lost female body-ego. For this reason, it signifies within both an individual fantasy scenario and a wider cultural arena (228). Masculine lesbian fetishes such as men's clothes are prevalent, de Lauretis explains, because in a strongly homophobic culture, these objects deny the

female body within the subject and convey a unidirectional yearning toward women (263).

De Lauretis's model offers a convincing account of how the masculine lesbian fetish sustains "a perverse desire that specifically operates . . . as a particular form of subjectivity" (261). Its limitation, however, is that it offers no comparable paradigm that would explain the significance of the fetish for a feminine lesbian subject like *Mélanie*. While de Lauretis acknowledges the "masquerade of the femme" as a reverse discourse also capable of signifying the lost female body (264), her account does not make clear how the feminine lesbian fetish could in fact act in this capacity, or whether it would do so in the same way as the masculine fetish. Given the dual cultural coding of objects such as skirts and high heels as markers of femininity and as prevalent fetishes for men, it seems doubtful that the femme fetish could signify desire for the lost female body with the same unidirectional efficacy as the masculine fetishes of the butch. Furthermore, would a femme lesbian subject necessarily experience the loss of the mother's body as a doubling of her own, given her closer relation to embodied femininity?¹⁷ Clearly, some nuancing of de Lauretis's model is necessary to understand this reverse discourse.

Pynchon's text is valuable here because *Mélanie*'s fantasies support de Lauretis's general framework while also suggesting how her theory can be modified to account for the femme fetish. That *Mélanie*, like de Lauretis's mannish lesbian, has suffered rejection by her mother is emphasized several times. Early on, we read of the indifference her mother feels for *Mélanie*: "The mother had gone off to tour Austria-Hungary. She did not expect to see *Mélanie* in the foreseeable future" (394). Later, Itague twice reflects on this lack of maternal affection. In his discussion with Satin, he remarks, "'With the father deserted . . . she's free. The mother doesn't care'" (398). And when V. asks Itague about the girl, the narrator tells us again, "The mother did not care, the girl herself, he suspected, did not care. The father's flight had affected her in some curious way" (400). Yet although Itague attributes *Mélanie*'s behavior to the father-daughter relationship, *Mélanie*'s dreams and fantasies suggest that the loss of her mother is a defining one. *Mélanie*'s recollections of her game with her father in her parents' bed locate Maman as a silent presence "in the other room" (394). And one of her favorite daydreams is constructed with her mother as audience:

She had always wanted to slide down the great mansard roof: begin at the top and skid down the first gentle slope. Her skirt would fly above her hips, her black-stockinged legs would writhe matte against a wilderness of

chimneys, under the Norman sunlight. High over the elms and the hidden carp pools, up where Maman could only be a tiny blotch under a parasol, gazing at her. She imagined the sensation often: the feeling of roof-tiles rapidly sliding beneath the hard curve of her rump, the wind trapped under her blouse teasing the new breasts. And then the break: where the lower, steeper slope of the roof began, the point of no return, where the friction against her body would lessen and she would accelerate, flip over to twist the skirt—perhaps rip it off, be done with it, see it flutter away, like a dark kite!—to let the dovetailed tiles tense her nipple-points to an angry red, see a pigeon clinging to the eaves just before flight, taste the long hair caught against her teeth and tongue, cry out . . . (395)

What distinguishes this fantasy from those centering on her father is that Mélanie gradually sheds her clothes as she falls. This act betrays a longing to return to some anatomical ideal in the eyes of her mother, toward whom she is presumably sliding. But Mélanie never reaches the end of her descent; the dream always ends in mid-air, as she leaves the roof. Even in her fantasy, she is unable to carry through to a landing, unable to come up to what she imagines to be her mother's expectations. This suggests that, though Mélanie clearly perceives the loss of the mother's body de Lauretis describes, she is unable to interpret that loss solely as her own anatomical failing, as in the case of the mannish lesbian.

Indeed, Mélanie has no reason to believe she does not meet any purely anatomical standard of femininity her mother might desire. Pynchon's text consistently emphasizes the femininity of her body, the statuesque femaleness which shines through even her male clothes when she begins to dress as a boy for V.¹⁸ But Mélanie does not fetishize male clothes; instead, she uses feminine objects to disavow a disturbing perception about her own body, as when she dresses as Su Feng. What then is being disavowed through her need for self-supplementation?

The answer lies, I suggest, in the dual coding of Mélanie's feminine clothing fetishes which Pynchon's text takes such pains to emphasize. If Mélanie cannot be said to positively disavow either the anatomical female body or the lack of a penis, it may remain that her fetish serves to disavow both. To understand how this might be possible requires reopening the question of what kind of female body and/or what kind of phallus Mélanie could imagine herself to be lacking in her mother's eyes.

De Lauretis's argument that the lesbian subject cannot find narcissistic investment in the penis—and that therefore her fetish has no phallic referent—stems from her assumption that the prototype of

psychoanalytic fetishism is always the paternal phallus. The maternal phallus, according to de Lauretis, is not ontologically different from that of the father: it is what the mother would have were she phallicly endowed (224). As E. L. McCallum points out, this in fact limits the possible lost object of fetishism to an alternative anatomical norm, since it is either the paternal phallus or the female body (94). Yet what if, following McCallum, one were to admit the possibility of a maternal phallus, trusting her observation that, for the femme fetishist, it is the impossible phallic woman who stands as the presumed object of the mother's desire?¹⁹ Such an admission would be in keeping with Pynchon's earlier shift toward presenting the fetish as a substitute for the absent anatomical female body.

In this scenario, the assumed object of the mother's desire would no longer be what she already has (the female body, for herself and for her daughter), but what she does not and can never have: the phallic *female* body which is simultaneously the ideally feminine female body. For the femme lesbian subject, the fetish would therefore signify the inability to decide how she had failed to live up to her mother's expectations. Mélanie's loss of her mother is experienced as a failure to embody some purely fantasmatic model of femaleness whose image is an impossible resolution of the oscillation between phallic and ideally feminine bodies. Of course this fantasmatic model can have no anatomical referent: no image of this body, no natural prototype for it exists anywhere. Hence when Mélanie slides down the roof, hoping to strip away the social coding of her phallic femininity in search of the impossible original she believes her mother desires, there is no anatomical ground on which to land. Instead, she oscillates between the two positions: her fetishes signify both that she has the phallic female body, not the ideally feminine one, since she needs the fetish, and also that she has the feminine female body, not the phallic one, again since she needs the fetish.

Moreover, as Pynchon's text suggests, this oscillation defines the splitting of the ego for the femme lesbian subject. In "V. in Love," that split becomes evident in Mélanie's third dream-fantasy. This is an elaborately detailed but mostly static scene which seems at first to confirm Itague's assumption of the incestuous roots of Mélanie's narcissism. In the dream, Mélanie, dressed as Su Feng, lies supine on a bed in her dressing room, watching herself in a ceiling mirror. Beside her stands her father, now conflated with the German engineer responsible for crafting the ballet's automated dancers. The dream's only action occurs when the father/engineer asks Mélanie to roll over on the bed so he can wind the key in her back. At this point, Mélanie directs him to search between her legs for what he seeks, but he does

not. Instead, he finds the key in her back and begins to wind it, causing Mélanie to awaken from the dream, "moaning as if sexually aroused" (402). It would be simple enough to treat this reaction as confirmation of Mélanie's incestuous desires; but the trouble with reading this scene as proof of Mélanie's longing for the paternal phallus stems, once again, from its focalization. For Mélanie's narcissism is given a new visual configuration when she imagines herself witnessing the dream-scene from two perspectives simultaneously—one embodied, lying on the bed, and the other "as if she were disembodied and floating above the bed, perhaps somewhere behind the quicksilver of the mirror" (401). Furthermore, Mélanie's division into two perspectives is mirrored in the dream by the doubling of her own body with a faceless mannequin that lies beside her.

In the framework of lesbian desire, the two bodies on the bed—Mélanie's and the mannequin's—represent Mélanie's fantasied feminine/phallic female body and its anatomical impossibility, respectively. The key which forms part of Mélanie's anatomy is an imaginary rendering of the missing phallus which she conceives as the object of her mother's desire—a female phallus because small and displaced to the back, not threatening the genital femaleness between Mélanie's thighs. For this reason the key is the object of attention of a father who, as a double of the engineer, is also part mother, giving birth and life to the ballet's automated dancers. But the key is anatomically undecidable: the dream does not reveal whether it is an original part of Mélanie's body or a removable supplement. To heighten this uncertainty, Mélanie's doubled perspective frames the dream's climactic moment in sartorial detail: "The skirt twisted on her thighs: she saw their two inner edges blond and set off by the muskrat skin on the slit of the skirt. The Mélanie in the mirror watched sure fingers move to the center of her back, search, find a small key, which he began to wind" (402). Here the fact that Mélanie's slit skirt is edged with skin recalls the earlier description of its "fur-trimmed slit" (397), troubling the safe negotiation of the animacy/inanimacy divide, while also presenting the female genitals as a fetish-prototype. Meanwhile, the faceless mannequin, stripped of its clothes and any visible marks of sexuality, demonstrates the impossibility of desire and sexual difference in any referent, anatomical or otherwise, which precedes the doubly-coded writing of difference. Mélanie's oneiric attribution of a faceless head to her mannequin/double is a particularly apt symbol of what Derrida calls the "headless head" (209) of the question of fetishism: undecidability.

Read in this way, from a perspective that acknowledges the lesbian relationship between Mélanie and V., the dream reveals Mélanie's desire for and lack of a phallic/feminine female body the impossibility of

whose anatomical referent she both affirms and denies. As a femme lesbian subject, she is not satisfied with either the father or the mother as a sexual object; the need for the impossible amalgam, the phallic woman, remains. The femme's fetishes seek to secure for her the closest possible approximation of this phallic woman, the mannish lesbian. But whereas the masculine lesbian fetish signifies a unidirectional desire for the woman's body outside the butch, Pynchon's novel teaches us that the feminine fetish is bidirectional, representing the desire for a phallic/feminine body both outside and inside herself. These masculine and feminine fetishes complete each other at the level of fantasy (de Lauretis 251), enabling a reconstruction of the lost fantasmatic object from both perspectives.

Ultimately, of course, the finding of that fantasmatic object in *V.* occurs only in dream. Mélanie's fate is to die on stage as Su Feng, the result of her forgetting to wear a protective chastity belt during a simulated impalement. Her death is a chilling reassertion of the centrality of the phallus in fetishistic desire; it is also a fitting conclusion to Pynchon's critical engagement with psychoanalysis. Mélanie's genital impalement before a theater of spectators dramatizes the imaginative violence done by Stencil and Benny when, in response to female perversity, they construct their robotic, compliant female subjects. The fact that Itague, Satin and Porcépic are left to speculate on, but never to resolve, the reason for Mélanie's catastrophic forgetfulness is a final blow to the claim that traditional psychoanalysis can account adequately for female sexuality. Nevertheless, Pynchon's criticism should not be taken as an effort merely to discredit psychoanalysis as a model of knowledge. If "*V. in Love*" satirizes Freudian theory through Itague or its ambiguous narrator, it also points the way to improvement by illuminating the concealed mechanisms through which that theory excludes and marginalizes. Mélanie's fate is Pynchon's warning about how readily the unexamined disavowals and denials that preserve the consistency of theory are transformed into the destructive machinery of social oppression and even death. At the same time, Mélanie's narcissistic desires and her lesbian relationship with *V.* are the fictional signposts by which Pynchon stakes out new ground for revision of theory and history.

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Notes

¹For Baudrillard's account of the history of the body, see chapter 4 of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, particularly 101–11.

²See "Ça Cloche" and *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*.

³Freud had already emphasized the importance of studying fetishism some twenty years earlier. In *Three Essays on Sexuality* he writes: “No other variation of the sexual instinct that borders on the pathological can lay so much claim to our interest as this one, such is the peculiarity of the phenomena to which it gives rise” (153). And he would return to fetishism again in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, portraying it as a “particularly favourable subject” (203) for analyzing the splitting of the ego. See also his unfinished “Splitting of the Ego in the Defensive Process.”

⁴Schor’s skepticism about the value of fetishism for feminist politics is even more evident in her later “Fetishism and Its Ironies.” There she revises her earlier claims about the potential inherent in fetishistic undecidability and argues instead for “an irony peeled off from fetishism” (98).

⁵Other contributions to the debate on female fetishism, less central to my purposes, are those of Marjorie Garber, Elizabeth Grosz, Anne McClintock (“The Return of Female Fetishism”), and Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen. For more detailed summaries of the history of female fetishism as a theory, see chapter 4 of McClintock’s *Imperial Leather*, especially pages 200–03, and chapter 2 of E. L. McCallum’s *Object Lessons*.

⁶According to Hawthorne, “Pynchon’s analysis of sex and gender directly owes little to sexology or psychoanalysis” (74).

⁷The central importance of the phallus in Lacan is well known. For a discussion of the phallicism of Baudrillard’s simulation model, see Gane 204.

⁸The Lacanian masquerade is best summarized in this oft-quoted passage: I am saying that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in the body of him to whom she addresses her demand for love. Perhaps it should not be forgotten that the organ that assumes this signifying function takes on the value of a fetish. (289–90)

⁹The suggestion that Benny is the immediate audience for “V. in Love” comes at the end of the previous chapter:

“So what year is it.”

“It is 1913,” said Stencil.

“Why not,” said Profane. (392)

¹⁰Apter argues that “Freud’s idea of woman as ‘clothing fetishist’ allows us to think of woman’s sartorial autoreification as the symptom of an extended, projected affirmation of female ontology” (97). McCallum, however, argues that Freud’s early theory ultimately denies the possibility of individual female fetishism by making it a norm for all women (55).

¹¹This placeholder function has already been subtly emphasized in Pynchon’s text, in the early scene in which Schoenmaker undresses Esther. One of Esther’s previously unspecified fetishes is identified in a way that

previews Pynchon's later attack on the exclusivity of the male gaze in fetishism. That Schoenmaker "comment[s] *only* on a black garter belt" (109; emphasis added) suggests, first, that other fetishes remain unspecified, and second, that this particular fetish enjoys a privileged status in contemporary culture as a point of contact between the male gaze and the female body. Mélanie's nicknames will foreground that privileged status, and V.'s comments will suggest how that privilege can actually ground a substitutive relation between the fetish and the female body. Even in the early scene, however, the virtual disappearance, in Schoenmaker's eyes, of Esther's body and any additional fetishes which adorn it demonstrates how the essential distinction (found in psychoanalytic and profane definitions of the fetish) between the fetish and the female body both depends on and is partially undone by the male gaze.

Interestingly, by staging his attack on the psychoanalytic fetish at the level of the word itself, Pynchon builds on a Freudian analogy between clothing fetishism and the fetishism of words. In the same address in which he discusses female fetishism, Freud mentions a male clothing fetishist for whom names played "an especially important role," and who eventually became a speculative philosopher: "In this patient something similar to what took place in the erotic domain occurred in the intellectual domain: he turned his interest away from things onto words, which are, so to speak, the clothes of ideas; this accounts for his interest in philosophy" (F&F 154). That V. is a word fetishist is suggested when she describes Mélanie as "[u]ne fétiche" and we are told, "She pronounced the silent *e*'s, as if she were singing" (406), thereby demonstrating her love of the visual word-object. Furthermore, Stencil's word fetishism is implied in the story of his first encounter with V. as a textual fixation, when, as he read his father's journal, "the sentences on V. suddenly acquired a light of their own" (54). In Pynchon's novel, however, fetishization of the word "fetish" breaks down the distinction between word and idea on which Freud's analogy rests. For an essay which further develops the connections between word fetishism and female fetishism, see Elizabeth A. Frost.

¹²Of no small importance here, of course, is the impact of V.'s pronouncement on the male speculative framework of the chapter as a whole. As Hawthorne, following Allen, points out, V. herself is not a woman, but only a man's idea of what a woman should be (86). Itague suggests as much when he reflects, "Who knew her 'soul.' . . . It was her clothes, her accessories, which determined her" (400). It is thus V.'s absent body that condemns Stencil, a true ghost in Itague's terms, to haunt the various historical periods he frequents through his "soul-transvestism" (V 226). In this light, what I will shortly describe as Stencil's narrative effort to disavow the trauma of lesbian fetishism can also be taken as an effort to disavow V.'s role as the signifier of the absent or fantasmatic femininity he seeks.

¹³According to Molly Hite, the chapter's Balzacian tone of detachment and its Parisian setting intentionally suggest a too-literal translation of a French narrative (60). Robert Holton calls "V. in Love" the "least overtly political of the historical chapters" (336).

¹⁴For a comprehensive list of these studies, see Matlock 31n2. One pre-Freudian discussion of female fetishism is found in Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a copy of which Brigadier Pudding stumbles across en route to his meeting with the Domina Nocturna in *Gravity's Rainbow* (232).

¹⁵Disavowal of castration, in this reading, liberates the desiring subject from attachment to the paternal phallus as the sole signifier of desire, and facilitates the cathecting of new objects which are treasured precisely because they are authentically different from the penis. Hence the fetishist, according to Bersani and Dutoit, knows that the fetish does not completely replace the missing penis and does not want it to function solely in this way (68–69).

¹⁶Grosz's theory of lesbian fetishism is similarly based on the masculine lesbian subject's disavowal of her own castration; but for Grosz, the lesbian fetish is always the whole body of another woman. This fetishized subject stands in opposition to the partial object fetishized by the male (113–14). For the limitations of this theory, see de Lauretis 277–82 and McCallum 80–86.

¹⁷The embodiedness of the femme, relative to the mannish lesbian, is suggested in the structure of the latter's desire: "I want another to love me, and to love me sexually. . . . This lover must be a woman—and not a faulty woman, dispossessed of her body (like me), but a woman embodied and self-possessed as a woman, as I would want to be and can become only with her love" (de Lauretis 249).

¹⁸The inconsistency of Mélanie's adopting male attire is a matter of comment by those in the theater group: "Speculation among the company was that a peculiar inversion had taken place: since an affair of this sort generally involves one dominant and one submissive, and it was clear which one was which, the woman should have appeared in the clothing of an aggressive male" (407–08). This inversion—which would appear to challenge my reading of Mélanie's fetishism—is itself countered by the report Porcépic gives (supposedly on V.'s own authority) of the "love-play" inside the loft. There Mélanie apparently plays the role of the femme, dressed in her feminine clothes, surrounded by mirrors; yet to further confuse the issue, we are also told that "The clothing each wore was incidental" (409–10).

¹⁹McCallum argues that de Lauretis's model leaves no room for alternative lesbian subjects such as the "femme fetishist" or "dyke daddy," who rely on the fetish "to recover as their own what they could never have (the phallic woman, the child), not what they were expected to have (the female body libidinally invested as feminine)" (94–95).

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