

Perplexing Utopia: Modern and Postmodern Alienation in *Vineland*

Neil Brooks

The *Vineland* of Pynchon's 1990 novel is not the fertile land of the Norse saga, but a fictional expanse in Northern California where, in 1984, a diverse group of survivors of the 1960s find themselves involved in conspiracies and political innuendo they can neither control nor understand. In Reagan's America, 1960s culture often seems either an irrelevant aberration (as embodied by Zoyd Wheeler) or a movement so utterly coopted by the existing power structure that all oppositional force has been dissipated (as seen through Frenesi Gates). As Molly Hite observes, *Vineland* "could only have been written looking back from a certain perspective on the sixties" (136). The novel deals with both the presence of the past and the pastness of the past as various characters seek to make sense of 1984 America, each with his or her own perspective on the 1960s. I will focus primarily on the Wheeler family, since family or kinship, as N. Katherine Hayles has persuasively argued, represents the primary opposition to much of the state repression documented in the novel.

The various interpretive methods the characters in the Wheeler family use can be viewed as either essentially modernist—attempts to find a metanarrative which rationalizes all that is seemingly random and chaotic—or essentially postmodernist—attempts to live within the chaos and to repudiate any one official interpretation of events or cultural productions.¹ Ultimately, the book allows for neither the rejection of modernist metanarrative nor the denial of postmodern suspicion of such narrative. However, in admitting the necessity of some master narrative, it demands an active attempt to construct new master narratives which can incorporate their own contingency without threatening their efficacy in establishing social justice, if not the Utopia implied by the novel's title.

In the opening chapters, the eternal hippie Zoyd attempts to ascertain why government drug enforcement agents have taken a renewed interest in him and the annual public act of insanity which allows him to maintain his eligibility for a mental disability cheque. Much of the second half of the novel catalogues Zoyd's former wife Frenesi's encounter with her past, the repercussions of which she thought she could avoid by entering the Federal Witness Protection

Program. In 1984, however, she finds herself dropped from the computer and menaced by the same government agencies which threaten Zoyd. Linking the stories of Zoyd and Frenesi both structurally and thematically is the story of their teenage daughter, Prairie, who is every bit as much a child of the eighties as her parents were children of the sixties. However, the phrase “child of the sixties,” both in our culture and in the novel, has clear resonances. It carries a countercultural ring which Prairie cannot find in the 1980s, largely because if, in a postmodern culture, one denies any official, authorized culture, then clearly defining what constitutes a counterculture becomes correspondingly problematic. Prairie also finds herself engaged in a struggle, literally to find her mother and figuratively to find a way of understanding the past that will help her cope with the many contradictions in her present.

The revolutionary cries of the 1960s serve in *Vineland* as a version of Habermas’s radical modernity, where changes within all spheres of social interaction were called for simultaneously. This modern movement reaches its zenith in the novel in the memory of a short-lived Utopia, a sort of Haight-Ashbury with a more far-reaching political conscience, resulting from a total and totalizing campus rebellion. As the narrator describes the genesis of the community:

So, in the name of the people, the kids decided to take [the College campus] back, and knowing the state was in on the scheme at all levels, including the courts, where they’d never get a fair deal, they chose to secede from California and become a nation of their own, which following a tumultuous nightlong get-together on the subject they decided to name, after the one constant they knew they could count on never to die, The People’s Republic of Rock and Roll. (209)

Rock and Roll represents a form of popular culture which had been able to present truly oppositional social values. For Prairie and the 1980s, even rock and roll has died, or at least become incomprehensible, as illustrated through Prairie’s boyfriend’s post-punk band, whose music is an often cacophonous pastiche of various styles, and through the parodic lyrics Pynchon sprinkles throughout the book. *Vineland* demonstrates that finding any stable meaning in rock and roll is impossible, and the attempt ludicrous.

A search for stability motivates Zoyd, Frenesi and Prairie as they each attempt to solve a mystery from the past and thus learn to navigate the complex cultural terrain of 1984 America, which is directly contrasted throughout the novel with 1960s America.² Of course, we cannot equate the fictional world of Pynchon’s *Vineland* with our own

cultural horizon. However, the novel does reflect and parody some of the possible consequences of a postmodern society. David Cowart, who refers to *Vineland* as “a meditation on the American social reality” (73), observes that this novel, more than any of Pynchon’s earlier works, “reveals its author as truly concerned with the way the present evolves out of the past” (74). I would add also how the past can be consciously re-articulated in the present.

As the novel opens, however, this sixties paradise is being invaded by a version of 1984 more bewildering in many ways than Winston Smith’s. Big Brother is clearly represented by the authoritarian Reagan government, but Pynchon suggests that postmodern culture can empower Big Brother in ways more subtle and even more insidious than Orwell had imagined. Instead of inhabiting a state which strictly controls and disseminates all cultural productions, Zoyd finds himself within a culture so diverse, a culture which requires so many different codes of understanding, that he becomes less and less capable of making any sense of or establishing any order in his world.

Again, the central mystery Zoyd attempts to solve is why the Federal agents he believed had receded entirely into the past have reappeared. For more than a decade, Zoyd has had an idyllic life in *Vineland*, earning money through odd jobs like harvesting crawfish which would be sold as “*Vineland* lobster” to satisfy “the depraved Yuppie food preferences” (35) of his California neighbors, and by performing his annual act of insanity to merit the mental disability pension. This latter act also serves as Zoyd’s way of demonstrating to the authorities that he is happy to continue his peaceful life in *Vineland* and that he is a threat only to the picture windows through which he jumps to earn his certification.

Vineland thus shows the alienation of the postmodern bricoleur. The central consequence of decentered postmodern culture is not freedom of choice but the horror of being unable to validate any choice. This problem is exacerbated by the transitoriness of the popular culture our postmodern condition empowers through its blurring of the distinction between high and low culture. Although some critics have suggested *Vineland* demonstrates that Pynchon delights in popular culture³—and the novel certainly demonstrates a very broad acquaintance with rock and roll, television programs and video games—the ever-present Tube ultimately becomes a tool of state manipulation, which may “suddenly stop showing pictures and instead announce, ‘from now on, I’m watching you’” (340).

In fact, Zoyd’s television-saturated outlook renders his investigation futile. Time for Zoyd has been “cut into pieces” (38) like television

programming slots, and away from the Tube the pieces do not fit together. Once the agents move back into Vineland, Zoyd cannot respond effectively because he has been narcotized by television, and in attempting to decipher the clues he sees, he realizes “there were no genial vibes from Pat Sajak to find comfort in, no tanned and beautiful Vanna White . . . to wish him well, to flip over one by one letters of a message he knew he didn’t want to read anyway” (13).

Zoyd has been narcotized by television, and indeed at times in the novel the television culture of the 1980s appears to be an inferior substitute for the drug culture of the 1960s. Zoyd still believes that marijuana and LSD are liberating, but that the drugs of the 1980s, like cocaine, are as dangerous and destructive as the tube. Record producer Mucho Maas, who was forced to give up drug use after nearly being destroyed by a cocaine addiction, explains to Zoyd the relations among popular culture, drugs and state control. Feeling Mucho is about to launch into a sermon on the evil of drug abuse, Zoyd asserts that the government has embraced that rhetoric for ulterior purposes: “they need to put people in the joint, if they can’t do that, what are they? . . . might as well be another show on the Tube” (311). But Mucho does not deliver the simplistic antidrug lecture Zoyd expected. Rather, he explains that at one point, the late 1960s, drugs were not only defensible but valuable as a weapon against the state; now, however, drugs, like the cultural productions which were once subversive, have been coopted. Drugs had taught Zoyd and his generation that the state did not have ultimate control over their minds. Mucho observes, “they thought they had the power of life and death. But acid gave us the X-ray vision to see through that one, so of course they had to take it away from us” (313). When Zoyd responds, “yeah, but they can’t take what happened, what we found out,” Mucho counters:

“Easy. They just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it’s what the Tube is for, and though it kills me to say it, it’s what rock and roll is becoming—just another way to claim our attention, so that beautiful certainty we had starts to fade, and after a while they have us convinced all over again that we really are going to die. And they’ve got us again.” (314)

The beautiful certainty for which Mucho is nostalgic echoes the most idealistic versions of modernism. Indeed, there is a sense that both rock and roll/television (popular culture) and drugs once provided the perfection of the art world associated with the aesthetic modernity of writers like Baudelaire. At first, drugs seemed to Zoyd “like mystic

visions, an obvious alternative to official communications channels" (Slade 135), an alternative which allowed for a more authentic communication. Now they merely empower the official channels.⁴

But television reality is not only an epistemology coopted by the government in the 1980s the way drug reality had been as of the late 1960s. It is also the final nail in the coffin of the drug-inspired counter-knowledge of the 1960s. As Joseph W. Slade observes, "at the beginning of *Vineland*, federal agents keep tabs on trouble makers by sending them government checks. By the novel's end, television has rendered that expense unnecessary" (129).

So, as for the mystery Zoyd sets out to solve—why have the government agents returned?—we can see what Zoyd never fully grasps: they have not returned because they never really left. Rather, they have not harassed Zoyd because he has become utterly unthreatening to them. In 1984 America, people like Zoyd are beneath the state's concern, and he is useful only as a trivial bargaining chip in elaborate and totalizing schemes of cultural reformation. In the postmodern condition of *Vineland*, Zoyd finds himself neither a part of established authority nor a threat to that authority. He is quite simply outside the loop even when it comes to making decisions about his own life. Zoyd's tragedy is that of someone who tries to make sense of his life in the 1980s using codes of understanding derived from the popular culture of the 1960s. His attempts to clarify his situation resemble his attempts to find Frenesi: "Try to read signs, locate landmarks, anything that'll give a clue, but—well the signs are there on street corners and store windows—but I can't read them. . . . [I]t's in English, but there's something between it and my brain that won't let it through" (40). The problem with Zoyd's search for a metanarrative is that the state has bigger and more powerful metanarratives which Zoyd can neither threaten nor entirely comprehend.

Zoyd's story illuminates a central concern throughout the book regarding the dangers of postmodern culture. Postmodern culture does not offer an alternative which avoids the dangers of a totalizing modernism; rather, it can enable the worst kind of totalitarian, fascist control by dividing and conquering any resistance. The reappearance of drug enforcement agents in Zoyd's life may seem disturbingly random, yet it speaks of a much greater and totalitarian agenda. Agent Hector Zuñiga explains the operation: "We don't know why. But it's no game in Washington . . . this ain't tweakin' around no more with no short-term maneuvers here, this is a *real* revolution, not that little fantasy handjob you people was into, is it's a groundswell, Zoyd, the wave of History, and you can catch it, or scratch it" (27). The "wave of History" has become a tool of the totalitarian state. Fredric Jameson's

worst fears about postmodern culture seem confirmed, but his dictum "always historicize" sounds remarkably ineffective against a state which has realized the importance of history and has set up mechanisms to control the ways one can even begin to historicize.

Zoyd can only hold onto his memories of a shared plenitude, not in some distant archetypal past but in his own recent past. His attempt to hold together his family is a struggle to hold onto this version of the past. Hayles sees the battle for history in *Vineland* as a battle between a "kinship system," which establishes order and community, and a "snitch system," which functions on paranoia and isolation. The kinship system relies on "peace and love," while "the two ingredients essential to the snitch operation are money and the computer, dollars and information" (Hayles 83). Elaine B. Safer, discussing "Zoyd's dream of family," observes that "Zoyd's aspiration connects him to the people who founded our nation. . . . The family was a way of imposing a 'meaningful order upon reality'" (120). Zoyd's repeated failures at reuniting his family, according to Slade, underscore "the difficulties of establishing and maintaining genuine human relationships in a culture in which the electronic medium mimics community" (131). In their quest for a totalizing understanding of history and present social formulations, both the kinship system and the snitch system can be seen as modernist attempts to deal with postmodern society. Both are doomed to fail precisely because they are nostalgic for an ultimately stable social order which, if it ever did exist, has now been rendered impossible both by the cultural productions so important to Zoyd and the kinship network, and by the technological advances so integral to the snitch network. So before turning to the conclusion of the book, where Zoyd's family does, at least briefly, reunite, we will explore Frenesi's experiences as part of the snitch system and Prairie's attempt to find any system of which she can feel a part.

Frenesi Gates, the radical underground filmmaker who married Zoyd Wheeler, vowing "'for real, in trouble or in trippiness . . . to remain always on the groovy high known as Love'" (38), abandons family, causes, and grooviness to become a member of Brock Vond's espionage and enforcement organization. Frenesi comes from a left-wing revolutionary background—Hollywood Red parents, Wobbly grandparents—yet somehow she becomes a member of the very establishment her forebears and her own early films sought to subvert. She becomes, according to Safer, "like Pynchon's earlier character V., a twentieth-century monster" (115). What could cause such a radical transformation? Once again our visual and technological culture becomes Dr. Frankenstein. Frenesi "moves from being a passive viewer of TV to being the unemotional, mechanical user of a camera" (Safer

114). The camera allows her to escape the consequences of her actions, since everything she does takes on the quasi-fictional character of a movie or a television show. She “frames” the innocent Weed Atman, and her frames lead to the collapse of the People’s Republic of Rock and Roll. Her culpability, however, seems inconsequential to her because she has learned to view her life as, not part of the vital world, but part of a movie, as she reflects after framing Weed:

she had taken at least one irreversible step to the side of her life, and . . . now, as if on some unfamiliar drug, she was walking around next to herself, haunting herself, attending a movie of it all. . . . [She was] safe in a world-next-door-to-the-world that not many would know how to get to, where she could kick back and watch the unfolding drama. (237)

Alan Wilde notes that Frenesi, like Mucho Maas, has embraced the worst of modernist escapism: “Mucho’s beautiful certainty, the acid-induced dream of immortality, is only a replay of Frenesi’s desire for timeless moments” (167). From seeing herself as a mere recording apparatus witnessing life, Frenesi moves easily to a worldview in which she becomes a mere series of ones and zeros in a computer. Thus she can eliminate many of the difficulties of her often painful, often messy organic existence. But she can equally easily be eliminated. Her confidence that she will have no worries in the Witness Protection Program (the ultimate example of the state stripping an individual of her identity) results in part from the fact that “The computer . . . never has to sleep, or even go take a break. It’s like it’s open 24 hours a day” (90). Yet while this techno-vigilance facilitates for Frenesi, like Zoyd, a life of state-sponsored indolence, it also makes her dismayingly vulnerable.

When Frenesi investigates her disappearance from the computer, she finds she has mistakenly assumed that the state would be able to free itself of internal contradictions and conflicting agendas. She learns that, in fact, she is being pursued by two different agents of the state, each with very different purposes and very different views of the past. Vond seems to be pursuing Frenesi because of an obsessive sexual jealousy that has only increased over the years. However, Frenesi’s body takes on a much greater significance to Vond: it becomes the site of the battle between his snitch network and the family (or community) values which threaten that network. Vond does not want simply to destroy the sense of community: he wants to overtake it, put the hippies through PREP (Political Re-Education Program) and remake them into good soldiers of his neo-Nazi regime. Because the body represents the uncontrollable and organic, threats to Vond’s conception of sterile

order, his “greatest and attendant fear is of the human body—that uncertain, destructible vessel of human incarnation” (Wilde 168).

Nonetheless, in 1984, Vond has reason to be both hopeful and fearful. Reaganism seems the perfect climate for another rise to power, but the rhetoric of Reaganism depends on a return to “family values,” the return to an America where agents like Vond are superfluous. As M. Keith Booker observes, “one reason the government in *Vineland* is forced to stimulate transgression is that official power has done such a thorough job of suppressing any genuine resistance” (14). Thus, as Hayles points out, Vond “continually tries to appropriate the signs of the kinship system and reinscribe them within the snitch system, changing their significance and altering their value” (81). Thus Frenesi realizes that Vond’s renewed attempts to appropriate her are not counter to the protection program in which she resides but a part of it. The more she investigates Vond’s motives, the more she understands the inevitability of his (or someone’s) reappearance. She has, in fact, “been content to leave it that way, to go along in a government-defined history without consequences, never imagining it could end, turn out to be only another Reaganite dream on the cheap . . . [run by] the State law-enforcement apparatus, which was calling itself ‘America,’ although somebody must have known better” (354).

Like Vond, Hector hopes to curry favor in Washington by appropriating Frenesi, hiring the former activist to direct an antidrug movie. He confronts her in Las Vegas about the proposed movie, in which he wants Frenesi to catalogue “[h]er life ‘underground,’ with a heavy antidrug spiel” (345). Hector’s is yet another version of the modernist quest for order—art can make the past understandable so it can be used as a model for the present. He believes, as Frenesi once did, in “offering [a] sacrifice at the altar of Art, and worse,” he is guilty of “believing that Art gave a shit” (346). In this case, Frenesi takes the more postmodern position that, once you put a frame around an artwork in an attempt to give it a stable, constant meaning, you relegate the artwork to the past. Stable, unchanging meanings are always threatened by the history which is happening today. She initially rejects Hector’s revisionist nostalgia. But Frenesi, who has managed to justify her actions by separating herself from the everyday world and immersing herself in a film world which lacks the consequences of cause and effect, is stripped of her “hard case and cold bitch” (349) persona and brought back to the vital world, ironically, by Hector’s producing an artwork—a photograph. The photograph is of Prairie, the daughter Frenesi had abandoned, with the family dog. This photograph causes Frenesi to allow herself actual human feelings again, and simultaneously generates an epiphanic modernist moment. The vignette

does not end with Frenesi and Hector signing a contract; rather, both near tears from having confronted their memories of actual loved ones who long ago turned into mere television fantasies, Hector and Frenesi dance through the Las Vegas hotel. With Pynchon elaborately and lyrically setting up the casino as microcosm, Frenesi and Hector “somehow danced out into all the deep pile and sparkle of it, like a ritzy parable of the world.” The photograph of Prairie remains “face up on the table” (350); the modernist artwork has brought order both to the confusion of Las Vegas and to Frenesi’s and Hector’s tragic and chaotic lives.⁵

Investigating her disappearance from the computer, Frenesi realizes that despite Reagan’s rhetoric about the importance of the war against drugs, Frenesi Gates, informant, was dropped from Federal protection because of a budget cut. Like Zoyd, she is individually beneath the notice of the state. More important, Frenesi realizes that she does want to see her daughter, Prairie, who throughout the book has been searching for her.

Even more directly than her parents, Prairie embarks on a quest to understand the past so she might be able to make sense of her present.⁶ Scenes involving Prairie frequently feature extensive references to brand names or to specific songs and TV shows. This extensive referentiality makes clear the confusing, often contradictory influences in Prairie’s life. When we first meet Prairie, she sits in the living room with Zoyd, eating Chee-tos and drinking “grapefruit soda from the health-food store, watching baseball highlights, commercials, and weather” (14). The incongruity between the Chee-tos and the health food is emblematic of the contradictions Prairie continually confronts. The conflict between her father and her boyfriend perhaps most clearly points to Prairie’s dilemma. On the one hand, she shares Zoyd’s peace-and-love philosophy, has a job at the Bodhi Dharma pizza temple, where employees have scheduled meditation breaks, and has a sense of Vineland community. Prairie, Anne Janowitz points out, “the nearest to an innocent in the novel, ‘was a California kid, and she trusted in vegetation’” (132; quoting VI 108). Yet, simultaneously, Prairie is part of the violent world of her boyfriend, Isaiah,⁷ and the violent rebellion of punk-rock anarchy. Prairie hopes that, in finding her mother, a woman who has given herself (philosophically and physically) to both Zoyd and Vond, she will be able to reconcile the polarities which distress her.

The (mostly) women who meet and advise Prairie on her search all warn her that the old certainties no longer exist. Her chief guide and advisor, DL Chastain,⁸ warns that in 1984, “‘we all have to be extra paranoid’” because the Reagan technological police state is “‘squaring

each of us in a different way” (262). Prairie’s friend Ché tells her, “‘Moms are a mixed blessing,’” and tells her that the traditional family Prairie idealizes is as degenerated on the outside as in jail, where “‘what the girls are into, ‘s that hookin’ up together in threes, one’s the Mommy, one’s the Daddy, and one’s the little child—hard, soft, and helpless’” (330). As Johan Callens notes, because the images of perfect families Prairie sees appear only on television, this ideal has become “other-worldly and fatuous, and [television] renders human reality to a proportionate degree painfully inadequate” (128). Booker takes the argument a step further, claiming, “family ‘love’ thus functions, not as a counter to the demands of society, but as a training ground for obedience to authority” (32).

Nevertheless, Prairie persists in her quest to find her missing Mother. And as a detective, Prairie has one talent both her parents lack: Prairie is able to use a computer, not just be used by one. Zoyd and Frenesi both look for information, but information no longer comes from speaking to the correct people; it follows from viewing the right files. Knowledge is power, and Prairie has the ability to access knowledge. Computers have invaded all aspects of life. Even in the “mountainside retreat of the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives” (107), the senior attentive tells Prairie, “‘we subscribe to some outside data services here, but we also maintain our own library of computer files’” (112).

One of those files at the Kunoichi retreat is a substantial one on Frenesi, which includes images of her as radical filmmaker and pictures of Frenesi and DL. As Prairie attempts to reconstruct at the computer terminal her mother’s haunted past, she feels as if she herself is wandering through a haunted house: “She already knew about how literal computers could be—even spaces between characters mattered. She had wondered if ghosts were only literal in the same way. Could a ghost think for herself, or was she responsive totally to the needs of the still-living, needs like keystrokes entered into her world, lines of sorrow, loss, justice denied?” Prairie concludes, “But to be of any use, to be ‘real,’ a ghost would have to be more than only that kind of elaborate pretending” (114). This is precisely why Frenesi is of no “use” to Prairie. In her escape into “the 24–frame-per-second truth” (241), Frenesi is nothing more than a ghost capable of elaborate pretending, but incapable of terminating the pretense. Frenesi’s file echoes Jim Collins’s description of postmodern culture: neither forms “a planned or well-managed pluralism, but a discontinuous, conflicted pluralism” (27). Frenesi can be of use only when she decides to stop being merely files or images on a screen, to stop claiming to be part of both the kinship and the snitch networks,⁹ and to encounter her daughter in person, not merely as a photographic image.

As it does so often, the plot of *Vineland* confounds readers' expectations when finally the family does reunite. The reunion between Prairie and her mother barely appears on-screen, approached off-hand when the narrator mentions that Prairie "seldom if ever would . . . talk about Frenesi, whom Prairie had managed at last to meet" (366-67). The meeting is anticlimactic, with Prairie's grandmother attempting to "clown them through it" (367) by appealing to Frenesi and Prairie's shared memory of the lyrics to the theme from *Gilligan's Island*. Vond never confronts Zoyd or Frenesi "in any frontal way" (374), and his attempt to coopt Prairie in the book's final pages ends abruptly. Just as he is being lowered on a winch from a helicopter to kidnap Prairie, the message arrives that "Reagan had officially ended the exercise" (376) Vond was using for cover, and Vond is hoisted back up against his will, the machine that he had for so long controlled now controlling him. Eventually, he is uncannily taken to where he can never be a threat again, allowing the seemingly happy, pastoral ending of the book. This suggests to Hayles that "sometimes the good guys do win, not because of the infallibility of Emersonian justice, but because of the ironic patterns of fate or Pynchonesque whimsy" (89).

Most critics see in the ending more than fate or whimsy, but a statement of how the good guys can come to terms with postmodern culture. To Janowitz, "*Vineland* is a novel about the left, about making sense out of the last twenty years, about the transcendence of postmodernism, and it is also a novel, in the tradition of much American literature, about innocence and experience" (131). She reads the ending as positive, arguing that "in *Vineland*, Pynchon has trumped his own postmodern aesthetic of entropy so that it no longer denotes the negative winding down of volition, choice, possibility, but rather suggests the possibility of an ethical balance" (132). But does it really offer an ethical balance that can be applied today, or only a profoundly nostalgic hope for an ethical balance which was glimpsed in the 1960s? Cowart insists that the "equipoise between sixties and eighties keeps *Vineland* from being the simple-minded exercise in nostalgia some take it for" (74). He reads the book as not so much offering an agenda as depicting a country which, from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties, "veered from a liberal to a conservative bias, from the new frontier and the Great Society to 'Reaganomics'" (75).

Janowitz and Cowart agree that the 1960s represent in *Vineland* a great political opportunity. Janowitz believes that postmodernism allows the ideals of the sixties to overcome both the debilitating effects of entropy and the totalizing modernism that limited the effectiveness of the pre-postmodern left. *Vineland*, then, shows the beginning of effective rebellion, and Vond's disappearance suggests the collapse of

the value system he represents. This view of Vineland as postmodern Utopia, however, is hardly consistent with many parts of the novel itself. Cowart, in denying that *Vineland* remains merely nostalgic, still reads *Vineland's* "meditation on the American social reality" (73) as suggesting the need to return to an earlier value system. In commenting on Pynchon's technical achievements, Cowart argues that Pynchon is simultaneously modernist and postmodernist. He says that Pynchon, better than any other contemporary writer, can both break down metanarratives (which Cowart equates with myths) *and* assert universal truths, and goes on to argue that Pynchon "has never divorced himself entirely from the modernist position on myth; and in *Vineland* he has it both ways—privileging at least one myth, deconstructing at least two others" (72). Despite the numerical advantage Cowart gives to postmodern (or at least poststructural) approaches, his version of a modern/postmodern synthesis ultimately favors modernist formulations: some eternal truths are privileged, and Pynchon's genius lies in choosing which sixties metanarratives should be asserted as the cultural basis for overcoming the disaster of right-wing postmodern 1984.

Hayles's construction of recuperation comes closer to a radical critique of Pynchon's nostalgia, but her analysis too suggests Pynchon is solving the *problem* of postmodern culture rather than exploring how neither the narratives prevalent in the 1960s nor those of the 1980s can provide an adequate answer to the injustices in our own society. Hayles contends that *Vineland* offers the more positive sort of recuperation because "it operates on a diminished scale, the problems seem more solvable, more as if they had a human face in contrast to the looming presences that haunt *Gravity's Rainbow*" (87), and that *Vineland* is wiser than the earlier book, which lacked "the realization that apparently totalized structures have fissures which can be exploited for progressive purposes" (88). The solution, the recuperation, according to Hayles, results from the sense of humanity, from the triumph of the humane, interpersonal, life-affirming communication of the kinship network over the cold, sterile communication of the snitch network's computers. However, the very ambiguities in the ending, which Hayles does acknowledge, suggest that one can infer only the most limited and temporary victory for the kinship network. Indeed, Judith Chambers concludes that *Vineland* "merely documents the shrunken and postmodern nature of [the human] condition" (190).

Since the solutions proposed in the novel may seem ineffective and are to some degree ridiculed, Pynchon can be accused of a nihilistic defeatism. "Slivers and shards of hope in a landscape of postmodern despair provide only fragments of possibility" (Chambers 185). He does

demonstrate skepticism that we can live without metanarratives, while equally disparaging the metanarratives produced by both the 1960s and the 1980s. Nonetheless, *Vineland* at heart celebrates those who search for new stories. The Wheeler family, unlike so many of the novel's other characters, actively seek new ways of formulating their own experiences. In their searching, they contrast directly with the "tubed out" (53) Thanatoids, who live an even more thoroughly television-saturated existence somewhere between life and death. Zoyd's and Frenesi's victories come not in what they learn but in the fact that both once more open themselves to learning. Their active quest for new explanations, a quest complicated but not defeated by the knowledge that the grail may be just another empty metanarrative, is the core of Pynchon's text, and perhaps the lesson offered to Prairie. The sixties are not a model, but the questioning of state (and television) authority must be recuperated if the next generation is to escape the clutches of, or prevent themselves from becoming, the new Vonds.

Prairie, Isaiah and Ché, who represent the postmodern generation, are all from either broken homes or dubiously functional families, and find themselves not empowered but bewildered and confused by their decentered culture. Ché turns to crime as rebellion, and finds in jail a mirror of the family disorder outside. Isaiah accepts chaos as the natural order of things and becomes obsessed with violence. By contrast, Prairie is the novel's only major character from this generation who embarks on a journey to find whether the ghosts of the past can help explain her present. Although the book ends with her blissful in a meadow, she never does find the answers she seeks. Postmodern understanding becomes an endless deferring of understanding because one can never be secure of one's position in relation to the uncontrollable past. But the effort Prairie makes is still privileged. The book's conclusion remains guardedly pessimistic, but pessimism too is a metanarrative which must be questioned.

The plot of *Vineland*, then, suggests the failure of all the strategies the characters use to appropriate the past. Prairie lying in the field does not represent a victory for any of the epistemologies, but rather a final critique, disguised in pastoral and Utopian language. In the same concluding paragraph in which Prairie's "small meadow shimmered in the starlight, and her promises grew more extravagant as she drifted into the lucid thin layer of waking dreaming," the night "now at any turn could prove unfaceable" (384).

This cynicism is underscored when, in the final sentence, a member of the Wheeler family absent since the opening pages returns. This character has also been all but absent from my discussion, so I can introduce him in Pynchonesque fashion to seal my arguments about the

underlying pessimism of the book's conclusion and about the need to search for new narratives to explain our own condition. The character is Desmond, the Wheeler family dog. Desmond first appears on the second page of the book, the victim of blue jays who come "screaming down out of the redwoods" (4) and carry away his food. We learn 353 pages later that Desmond had "taken off" when Vond's strike force arrived to seize the house, and is now rumored to have joined a pack of other runaway dogs who are "not above ganging innocent cows at their grazing" (357).

Before the last sentence, Desmond appears significantly one other time. The photograph of Prairie which manages to bring order to the chaos of Las Vegas, the photograph which leads to the one moment of heightened modernist awareness for Hector and Frenesi, the two aesthetic modernist characters, is a photograph of Prairie "sitting on a weathered wood porch beside a large dog with its tongue out" (347).

As the book ends, Prairie is being licked awake by "a warm and persistent tongue all over her face. It was Desmond, none other, the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe, roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home" (385). *Vineland's* Utopian vision ends with a family reunion, with a girl and her dog, with images of grandmothers and smiling, with the word "home." But this affirmation of the kinship network, this triumph of human communication, seems rather hollow given that human beings have, in fact, been utterly unable to achieve it. Also, this life-affirming conclusion contains within it death, Desmond's "face full of blue-jay feathers," which reminds us that Desmond was last mentioned killing cows. Desmond may think he must be home, but the events of the book have shown that home as the traditionally understood place of refuge is no longer possible.

Vineland, which ends with the thoughts of a dog, opens with an epigraph from Johnny Copeland: "Every dog has his day, / and a good dog / just might have two days" (iii). In between, human beings try to have their day, but almost always fail because they cannot connect the past to the present. The postmodern culture of 1984 in *Vineland* signals a rupture with the past which leaves an unbridgeable gap between generations, between people, and between people and their own personal history. Still, if Prairie, the representative of the next generation, can actively seize her past rather than let the tube and the government define its meaning, then she too might have her day.

—Huron College, University of Western Ontario

Notes

¹This construction of an easily definable opposition between modernism and postmodernism provides a framework for the issues of interpretation I discuss in this essay, but admittedly oversimplifies the complex relation between these literary and philosophical movements, as well as between the terms themselves. My argument, then, cannot necessarily be extended to the many important aspects of the modern/postmodern debate I do not discuss here.

²In *Vineland*, as in many other texts, the sixties as a cultural phenomenon begin mid-way through the decade and seem to end about 1973.

³For example, Cowart says of Pynchon, “no doubt he is genuinely fond of much popular culture” (71); and William E. McCarron says that, despite the deeper warnings in the novel, we can find Pynchon “sit[ting] inside the text” inviting us to join him “to play and connect, to yuk, have fun, shake our heads at the outrageousness” (11). The play and the fun, however, might also illustrate the very reason the deeper warnings are so difficult to heed.

⁴The suggestion here parallels the argument Barbara Pittman makes that what had once been oppositional has now become mere distraction. These many distractions are far from innocent diversions in *Vineland*, Pittman contends: Reagan’s “move into the White House occurred, not only because we were not looking, but because the structure of an increasingly fragmented society called us to look elsewhere, and we answered the call” (43). Other critics, however, argue that *Vineland* presents a more radical critique of the sixties themselves. According to Booker, the novel suggests “that the emancipatory political rhetoric of that decade . . . was a reinscription of these fantasies that lacked the theoretical sophistication to have any real hope of success” (7). *Vineland*’s attitude toward the sixties is debatable, but its suggestion that the sixties offered an opportunity not available in 1984 seems undeniable. Perhaps the rhetoric was to *precede* the theoretical sophistication, but the revolution became too fond of its own incipient state to move forward.

⁵Having the modernists dance in Las Vegas seems particularly fitting, since Las Vegas has been discussed as *the* postmodern city in several places, most notably Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour’s study of postmodern architecture, *Learning from Las Vegas*. Some of their arguments parallel the message I argue is intrinsic to *Vineland*: “There is a perversity in the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. And withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensible. This is a way of learning from everything” (3). *Vineland*’s moral may be self-reflexively to withhold any clear and permanent moral. This in no way suggests the abandonment of the search for a clear and transcendent lesson—a personal or cultural jackpot. In the final chapter, a lawyer tells Zoyd, “‘life is Vegas’” (360)—but Zoyd scoffs.

⁶Reviewers have pointed out the parallel between Prairie's search and Tēlemachos's in *The Odyssey*, but the consequences of the complete gender reversal—Zoyd as a faithful but ineffectual Penelope; Frenesi as a once-esteemed Odysseus whose heroic exploits are remembered with reverence but whose behavior in more recent years and failure to return home bring into question all her achievements—need to be studied further, particularly in light of Hite's compelling "Feminist Theory and the Politics of *Vineland*."

⁷The contradiction is also embodied in Isaiah himself, whose hippie parents named him Isaiah Two Four after the Bible verse about beating swords into plowshares, but whose dream is to open a chain "of violence centers, each on the scale, perhaps, of a small theme park, including automatic-weapon firing ranges, paramilitary fantasy adventures, gift shops and food courts, and video game rooms for the kids, for Isaiah envisioned a family clientele" (19).

⁸DL herself must also navigate a confusing postmodern milieu, and her story forms an important second plot in *Vineland*. Indeed, DL's story can be likened to the Stencil plot in *V.*, and Zoyd's story to the Profane plot. Both Susan Strehle and Stacey Olster provide substantial commentary on DL in their essays in *The Vineland Papers*.

⁹Frenesi has, since her abandonment of Prairie, married Flash Fletcher and had a son, Justin, but even she realizes her life with Flash and Justin "had never taken her outside Brock's long-distance possession" (354).

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