

From *V.* to *Vineland*: Pynchon's Utopian Moments

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Critics have only just begun to retrieve the elements of utopian thinking in Pynchon, following the publication of *Vineland* (1990). Pynchon's most explicitly political text so far, *Vineland* has prompted politicization of his earlier work against the tradition of mostly formalist Pynchon criticism.¹ Tracing a trajectory from *V.* (1963) to *Vineland*, from his first to his latest novel, I would like to suggest that one possible point of entry into the political in Pynchon is through his utopianism, broadly understood as "social dreaming" (Sargent 3). The movement from *V.* to *Vineland* corresponds to Pynchon's critique and rejection of what I call the utopia of modernity, and his subsequent embracing of a different utopianism that may offer correctives to the dystopian, postmodern world portrayed in *Vineland*. This reading also reflects the postmodernist ambivalence toward utopia as both a negative and a positive sign.

V. and *Vineland* contain a vast array of textual references to literary, social and religious utopias. In *V.* are Vheissu, a geographical utopia that is both *eutopia* and *dystopia*, technological utopias where men become extensions of the inanimate, Father Fairing's demented utopia of a model rat republic in the sewers of New York, and the Morlock-like underworld of the dispossessed living under the Street. In *Vineland*, whose overriding concern is the failure of the American Dream, are allusions to Orwell (Pynchon's novel describes the screen-controlled, tubed-out America of 1984), Transcendentalism, *Walden Two*, the Wobblies, Communist sympathizers, the counterculture of the sixties; different versions of mythic utopias like Eden, and heaven and hell; the Faustian myth; traces of filmic utopias and "intentional societies" like the Sisterhood of the Kunoichi Attentives, a kind of monastery for Ninjettes; Thanatoid communities; and *Vineland* itself. The aggregate effect of formal exuberance created by the rich parodic intertext, stylistic pluralism, fantasy and encyclopedism has encouraged concentration on the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of Pynchon's writing, leading paradoxically to modernist readings of essentially anti-modernist texts.

Genre critics have placed Pynchon's utopianism in the context of Menippean satire, to some the dominant generic matrix of his fiction.²

Alternatively, he has been placed in the tradition of the Puritan jeremiad, marked by a strong dystopian component (Smith and Tölölyan 169). In Bakhtin's well known discussion, Menippean satire exemplifies "dialogical" literature, which opposes the absolutist, dogmatic and repressive "monological" tradition. Elaborating on Bakhtin's distinction, Kristeva links the dialogical tradition with the subversion of such monologic discourses as "Aristotelianism, formal logic, Christianity, Renaissance humanism, rationalism, and the privileged autonomy of subject and object" (Kharpertian 32). Those historical forces shaped the project of modernity. In Pynchon, dialogical and monological discourses seem constantly pitted against each other in the critique of modernity's forms of power and mastery.³

In its relation to modernity, *V.* can be seen as an epistemological treatise embodying and deconstructing Western metaphysics founded upon a belief in the unitary subject, the teleology of history, social and moral perfectibility, and the infinite progress of knowledge. Such assumptions constitute the utopia of modernity that has informed liberal-humanist thought ever since the Enlightenment (Madsen 116). *V.* challenges this dominant discourse (or the discourse of the master) by presenting anti-essentialist constructions of the subject, by demonstrating how far this subject is entangled with its own strategies of representation (Berressem 4), and by illustrating the consequences of such an entanglement when it is extended to the "other." As many critics have pointed out, *V.* is a novel about vision and perception, or about signification.⁴ Its epistemological theme is organized around the plots involving two protagonists, Herbert Stencil and Benny Profane, who represent two extreme forms of vision: the former overdetermined, obsessively rationalistic, aimed at order and control; the latter completely random, passively empiricist, driven by chaos and contingency. (Stencil and Profane have their metonymic counterparts in the hothouse and the Street.) Both plots remain unresolved, thus suggesting Pynchon's refusal of closure and his questioning of both totalizing principles. By ironizing these binary poles, he compels the reader to change his/her habitual perception and "to reject the contradiction as inexhaustive" (Kharpertian 84).

Pynchon's treatment of Stencil, Profane and other characters, like Fausto Maijstral, reveals the questionable status of the subject who, rather than being autonomous and unitary, is dominated by cultural and ideological pressures. However, the most radical deconstruction of essentialist identity is conducted through the figure of *V.*, the ever-deferred object of Stencil's quest. As McHoul and Wills write, "she/it is pure signifier" (163), an empty sign, a site of constant projection of meaning and interpretation. She is also the screen against which the

violence of representation can be revealed. Conventional critical readings of V. as the embodiment of decadence, the symbol of the growing degeneracy of the human toward the inanimate, the death-drive, or some other ominous destructive force fall prey to the same illusion that drives the Stencils and the Godolphins of Pynchon's world. The figure of V. foregrounds the enactment of strategies of power and containment that characterize the master's discourse, strategies inherent in the very act of representation.

The possibility that V. can be not only an agent of violence but also its victim becomes apparent in the scene of her supposed death on Malta, when she, in her incarnation as the Bad Priest, is gradually disassembled by the children testing out their theories on her ("It's a lady"; "That's Jesus"; "She comes apart" [342]) and trying to wrench out from her the secret of her body, which they later abandon, mutilated and brutalized. Read allegorically, this scene shows that the unrepresentable, the uncanny, is repressed and destroyed because it may threaten the subject's self-representations. Symptomatically, V. reflects the fear of the "other" in those who interpret her, as she is persistently coded by them as a woman (Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, Veronica Manganese, and V. as Mélanie's lover) or as a genderized place called Vheissu, identified with a colonial "other."

The persistent coding of V. as woman is certainly not warranted by the text itself, for the text disseminates different V's to the point of informational overload. McHoul and Wills view the genderization of V. in terms of writing on the body of woman, where woman's body is appropriated as "the metonymic signifier of the search itself" (196). A similar process is evident in Hugh Godolphin's description of Vheissu as "a dark woman tattooed from head to toes" (171), whom he wants to flay to penetrate beneath her skin (which is also the screen of his projection). It is evident again in the story of Firelily's rider and the Herero child-woman Sarah who, even raped repeatedly, cannot be possessed by his desire. Contrary to what some critics claim about V.'s dubious "gender politics,"⁶ by exposing the violence of trying to "know," of imposing a male fantasy on the physical/geographic body of the other, Pynchon's text deconstructs the place assigned to the other, to woman or a colonial subject, in patriarchal culture.

The case of Vheissu symbolizes the possible degeneration of the utopian dream into totalitarianism and violence, racism and colonialism. Remembered by old Godolphin as an Edenic place of colors, music, fragrances and glittering surfaces, it is at the same time another potential Empire post: "The English have been jaunting in and out of places like Vheissu for centuries" (170). Its strangeness gradually becomes more sinister for Godolphin, whose obsession with Vheissu

grows, until during his expedition to the South Pole he discovers that "The skin which had wrinkled through my nightmares was all there had ever been. Vheissu itself, a gaudy dream. Of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation'" (206). In Godolphin Pynchon parodies European representations of otherness as both a void and an apocalypse, best exemplified by Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. *V.* thus exposes a Eurocentric myth that "the zones beyond North European civilization are a reservoir for the magic the old world has lost . . . and grounds for apocalyptic anxiety" (Dugdale 91).⁶

Godolphin's "dream of annihilation" discovered beneath the skin of Vheissu is ironically juxtaposed with the actual genocide of the natives of German South-West Africa in 1904. Beyond the unspeakable violence of Von Trotha's massacre, in which 60,000 people were exterminated ("only 1 per cent of six million" later to be killed in the Holocaust, Pynchon's narrator reminds us [245]), *V.* also discloses everyday strategies of imperial power, domination and control. In the words of a civil servant, the Empire's mission is "to keep an ordered sense of history and time prevailing against chaos" (233). European paternalism is revealed in a soldier's reminiscence that among the natives "you felt like the father colonial policy wanted you to be when it spoke of Väterliche Züchtigung; fatherly chastisement, an inalienable right" (267). Chapter Nine, "Mondaugen's Story," in which these atrocities are recounted several years later, in 1922, ends with a powerful image of Mondaugen running away from Foppl's Siege Party, riding virtually on the back of a black man who is singing a song in Hottentot dialect, which Mondaugen cannot understand.

As his own mental constructs entrap the master, the violence of representation equally implicates another variant of imperialism, the colonization of the mind of the other. Fausto Maijstral makes this point when he curses his hybridity: "Perhaps British colonialism has produced a new sort of being, a dual man, aimed two ways at once: towards peace and simplicity on the one hand, towards an exhausted intellectual searching on the other" (309). Submersion in English language and culture—"the curse of knowing English"—has left him uprooted from both worlds: to Fausto, being Maltese means living an animal-like existence "at the threshold of consciousness" (309), while thinking in English has brought about the awareness of war and time, of the pressure of history.

The extended trope of tourism in *V.* links representation and power. In the two-dimensional projection of Baedeker land:

War never becomes more serious than a scuffle with a pickpocket . . .
depression and prosperity are reflected only in the rate of exchange;

politics are of course never discussed with the native population. Tourism thus is supranational, like the Catholic Church, and perhaps the most absolute communion we know on earth: for be its members American, German, Italian, whatever, the Tour Eiffel, Pyramids, and Campanile all evoke identical responses from them. (409)

Equating tourism with the religion of the father, this passage offers a "scale model of imperialism" (Dugdale 118). Tourism invades and reifies the other into a pure object, voiding in the natives of Baedeker land any traces of humanity except for their functions as barmen, waiters, bellhops and taxi drivers. As one of them thinks, "there remains a grand joke on all visitors . . . the permanent residents are actually humans in disguise" (78).

The perversion of the dream of order into violence is perpetuated from one generation to another, the madness of the fathers passed on to the sons. Stencil inherits his quest for V. as "a legacy from his father" (155). Similarly, Godolphin's utopian dream of Vheissu is passed down as "something valuable, some truth to tell to a son," a gift of words to be used by the son "for his own life" (204). The father/son motif thus stresses the ambivalence of the reproduction of culture and ideology. It also reveals metaphorically how the subject is not his own but inscribed in the network of tradition and influence.⁷

The utopian dream, metaphorically coded as the impossible inheritance from the father, reflects Western metaphysics and the Western world's entanglement in its own representations. V. indicts these representations as white, Eurocentric, patriarchal and extremely rationalist constructs. However, Pynchon's radical critique of the utopia of modernity seems counterbalanced by his readiness to seek other redemptive utopias, as he aligns our sympathy with the underprivileged and the excluded. One of the novel's most striking counter-monologic strategies is Stencil's impersonation of the voices of colonial subjects, figures like Aïeul the waiter, Yusef the factotum, Waldetar the conductor and Gebrail the cabdriver. Stencil's impersonations exemplify Pynchon's dialogical imagination that refuses to privilege the discourse of the master. And this alignment with the marginal becomes more and more pronounced in Pynchon's fiction after V.⁸

While V. problematizes representation "in order to expose [the] system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others" (Madsen 122), *Vineland* emphasizes the subject's seduction by and cooperation with the system. In that sense, Pynchon's latest novel explores a truly postmodern dilemma: the complicity of the subject and power. As one character puts it, co-

option is inevitable: "Everybody's a squealer. We're in th' Info Revolution here. Anytime you use a credit card you're tellin' the Man more than you meant to. . . . [H]e can use it all'" (74). It is against such facile excuses that *Vineland* seeks the possibility of redemptive action.

One obvious continuity between *V.* and *Vineland* is the motif of colonization, which takes the form in the latter book of what Paul Virilio calls "endo-colonization": "It's no longer exo-colonization (the age of extending world conquest). . . . One now colonizes only one's own population" (95). Where *V.* examines how the other is transformed by the master's discourse, *Vineland* measures the effect of the oppressive discourses of morality, government bureaucracy, law enforcement, capitalism, rationalization, organization, the mass media and technology on America's own children. In the process, it unmasks how social and political control is inextricably bound up with cultural control, with TV as a major colonizing force. The image of the Tube as Big Brother—which might suddenly "stop showing pictures and . . . announce, 'From now on, I'm watching you'" (340)—hovers over *Vineland*.

The America of *Vineland* has become the world of simulacra, simulated reality, produced daily in the flow of images from the mass media: television, magazines, computers, popular music, movies. Its space has been dehumanized by freeway systems and suburban malls where consumerism runs rampant. It is a dystopian world because surveillance and invigilation have become accepted as part of everyday life. The government maintains an elaborate network of snitches and special employees, and sponsors pacification campaigns like CAMP (Campaign Against Marijuana Production) against its own population. The extreme Right is vigilant, with government agents promoting the ideal of "drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra-good behavior, maybe a cookie" (222). The "Nixonian Repression" (71) and the Reagan era seem attempts to "restore fascism at home and around the world" (265). With a federal Political Re-Education Program, CAMP and Tubal Detoxification, the country has been turned into "the State law-enforcement apparatus . . . calling itself 'America'" (354).

Vineland confronts us with the reality of the American dream. After all, "Vineland" is the first name ever given to the New World by the Old. A distant echo of the myth of a new Garden of Eden reverberates in its ironic rewriting as a contemporary drama of co-option and betrayal, starring Frenesi Gates as Eve to Weed Atman's Adam and Brock Vond's Serpent. Through these figures, the nation's

complicity with such facts as "War in Vietnam, murder as an instrument of American politics, black neighborhoods torched to ashes and death" (38) can be questioned. Gatsby's dream seems lost in "the lampless wastes, the unseen paybacks, the heartless power of the scabland garrison state the green free America . . . was turning into" (314).

Through women like Frenesi's mother, Sasha, and Sister Rochelle, Pynchon articulates the indictment of American culture as masculinist. Sasha begins to identify "[t]he injustices she had seen in the streets and fields . . . not as world history or anything too theoretical, but as humans, usually male, living here on the planet, often well within reach, committing these crimes, major and petty, one by one against other living humans" (80). By identifying the agents of power as white and male, Pynchon shows that "power is a function of privilege and that privilege has racial and gender parameters" (Hite 135). As in *V.*, the discourse of the master is related to a male position. The construction of gender and power is revealed in Sister Rochelle's feminist revision of the Fall, a parody of the originary tale, which is also an ironic counterpart to the American dream. In her version, women, the original happy inhabitants of Eden, were tricked into submission by men, who invented subdivisions and labels, including "'good'" and "'evil,'" thus wrecking the Creation. Men handed women "'the keys to the church, and headed off toward the dance halls and the honky-tonk saloons'" (166).

Vineland stages the negotiation of the American dream as a repeated encounter between the father and the rebel-child in the long tradition of idealism that refuses to fade. The tradition of sixties' idealism goes back historically to Sasha's parents' union activism in the twenties and thirties and her own involvement from the late thirties to the fifties. Interestingly, the parental metaphor is given a new twist here: while *V.* symbolically codes the father/child relation as inheritance by the son doomed to repeat the father (the tyranny of tradition), *Vineland* codes it as rebellion or revolution against the father (the tradition of anti-tyranny).

U.S. Attorney Vond, the arch-villain of the story and chief orchestrator of anti-revolutionary action, repeatedly thinks of the counterculture movement as "[c]hildren longing for discipline," and envisions the possibility of engineering their easy co-option: "They'd only been listening to the wrong music, breathing the wrong smoke, admiring the wrong personalities. They needed some reconditioning" (269). In this deadly world ruled by the father, the child is a willful accomplice in being co-opted, as shown by the example of Frenesi, the revolutionary turned federal informer. The dialectic of adult/child,

however, becomes even more complex as we get glimpses of more salutary fatherhood in Zoyd Wheeler's relation with his daughter, Prairie. Perhaps Pynchon's ambivalence about the sixties is contained in his thematizing of "the double aspect of innocence as both 'childlike' (positive) and 'childish' (negative)" (Berressem 230).

Pynchon has been accused of being alternately too ironic/critical and nostalgic/celebratory in his vision of the revolution of the sixties. Paradoxically, what his ambivalent critique of the revolutionary stance seems to signal is the inadequacy of thinking in binary oppositional terms. Adversarial conflicts like revolution versus counterrevolution and individual versus state may ultimately only reinforce the dominant term of the opposition. By exposing both, Pynchon seems to anticipate the need to go beyond binarism and to transcend the terms of the master's discourse.

The alternatives to Big Brother's Tubal reality are present in Vineland itself, a fictitious county in northern California and the locus of Pynchon's new utopianism encoded in the vision of home reclaimed and the vision of "other" America. This good place to "'hide'" or "'get lost in'" (305) is the last sanctuary of the counterculture, chosen by Zoyd as shelter for himself and Prairie in their flight from Vond. The community spirit still survives here, and there is room enough for all kinds of outcasts. It is also where the annual grand family reunion of Prairie's maternal grandparents and their relatives takes place, which brings together Prairie and Frenesi, her long lost mother. The descriptions of Vineland hark back to the beginnings of the American dream, as Vineland's "sea coast, forest, riverbanks and bay [are] still not much different from what early visitors in Spanish and Russian ships had seen" (317). Against this pastoral backdrop, Zoyd keeps alive his dream of reclaiming his house from federal agents, and also, metaphorically, the hope of coming home for America as a better world.

In the meantime, however, this home is haunted by the spirits that have been exiled by the master and that might reveal his past crimes. One such powerful presence is pre-Columbian Yurok culture, which, dispossessed of its territory, inhabits the features of the landscape and materializes in the novel through the fantastic interpenetration of the magic and the real. At the end of the book, Pynchon evokes the Yurok death legend to dispose of Vond. Rather than raising charges of romantic appropriation of native culture, Paul Maltby sees Pynchon's invocation of Yurok culture as a sign of utopianism in his characters' search for home as "a territory of the spirit," in which "men and women are figured in a non-alienated relationship to their world" (182).

More hints in *Vineland* of "another order of things" (220) might offer some redemptive hope.⁹ *Vineland* is also populated by Thanatoids (victims of/participants in a mass tube-out), described as "like death, only different" (170). Most notably, Weed Atman, a counterculture leader whose assassination was framed by Frenesi, refuses to die, hanging on as a Thanatoid in the hope of finding justice. He describes a dream in which his corpse (like that of an assassinated U.S. president), laid out on a train, rides the country for many years, trying "to find a local coroner willing to perform an autopsy" that would reveal Weed's murder and murderers to the world (365). Similar sentiments animate the Emerson quoted via James near the end of the novel:

"Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil." (369)

Albeit qualified, some optimism seems to be expressed in *Vineland* that the dream is still alive and that the ghosts haunting America's subconscious will eventually find peace.

As Lyman Tower Sargent reminds us, "Utopias and the changes they undergo both help bring about and are reflections of paradigm shifts in the way a culture views itself" (12). The changes I have recorded here in Pynchon's attitude to utopia resemble a certain paradigm shift within the postmodern discourse, with emphasis shifting from negatively valorized dreams of essentialized identity to more positive dreams of social transformation through communitarian and ecological effort. This recuperative movement is most succinctly reflected by the titles, with *V.* suggesting a riddle of identity and *Vineland* pointing to a concretized mythic space of "home."

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Notes

¹For more political recent readings of Pynchon, see Bérubé, Hite, Madsen and Maltby.

²See Kharpertian (32), who recognizes utopianism as one of Menippean satire's characteristics, but does not analyze it in Pynchon. He also discusses Elliot Braha's unpublished dissertation, "Menippean Form in *Gravity's Rainbow* and in Other Contemporary Texts" (Columbia University, 1979).

³I understand “modernity” in Gadamer and Habermas’s sense as the modern period which began in the Enlightenment, with twentieth-century Modernism as its culmination. Lyotard’s “postmodern condition” marks the end of modernity. Cf. Madsen 116–23.

⁴Cf. Madsen, McHoul and Wills, Newman, and Patteson.

⁵Cf. McHoul and Wills 197.

⁶For critical readings complicit with Godolphin’s Eurocentrism, compare the following: “Godolphin describes not the horror at the heart of darkness, but the horror that there is no heart” (Dugdale 90); “[Godolphin] went to Africa to civilize the natives and discovered the cannibal in himself. . . . [T]he explorer [thus] embodies civilization’s crucial question: how to keep the monkey off your back?” (Hendin 38); and Safer, who interprets Godolphin’s obsession with Vheissu as a quest for the Edenic land, which ends in horror, thus stressing “the loss of an Edenic wilderness and the estrangement of man from nature” (62). “Man” here is presumably white and male.

⁷Dugdale provides a series of father/son entanglements: Romanticism/Modernism, Modernism/postmodernism, European Empires/the U.S., the 1920s/the 1950s (103).

⁸Cf. Maltby’s mapping out of Pynchon’s oppositional strategies in *Gravity’s Rainbow: Anti-Eurocentrism, Anarchism, Naturism and Clown-Freak Mentality* (161–67).

⁹Cf. Porush, who mentions “messages from beyond,” DL’s Ninja Death Touch, Ninja magic, Thanatoids, etc. (34–35).

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