The Power of Love in *Chimera* and *V.*

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> A truly democratic society should encourage each individual to perform a variety of social roles, ranging from simple household tasks to community leadership. In contemporary society, having a unified self and a consistent identity may reflect a poverty of social experience.
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> —The Associates in Military Leadership, USMA, quoted in Hunter S. Thompson, "Dance of the Doomed"

> You are Eternity's hostage, a captive of time.
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> —Boris Pasternak, "Night"

False self and false elements of the self haunt John Barth's *Chimera* and Thomas Pynchon's *V.* In both is the ultimate betrayal of the body, the sexual self; in both is the false, unnatural, substitution of the false for the true limbs, eyes, teeth; in both is the betrayal of the body unused, the atrophying of the self.

And yet, in *Chimera* and *V.* is also the "coming-around" of the recognition of the purity of Self, both literally and figuratively. Whether it be spiral navel or shell or whirlpool, the orbital travel of stars above or ships below, we come around to recognition. Whether it be the quest of the content or the quest of the eternally discontent, we finally arrive at the point of the quest—which is merely a casting-off place once again.

In both *Chimera* and *V.*, the repetition—the following of the pattern—is important beyond all other elements. In fact, the repetitive telling stories that never end ("Dunyazadiad"), retracing the paths of past glory ("Perseid" and "Bellerophoniad"), and searching for "the woman" (*V.*) all contain an obsessive lust for "the quest" itself. The elaborate patterns of cause and effect seem to deny the possibility of escaping time; however, each book tantalizes us with the suggestion that the characters (and, by extension, we ourselves) can escape the bounds of social/legal/arbitrary time by surrendering ourselves to one overmastering moment—one pure moment of voluntary surrender of

the socially-barricaded and guarded self to the immediate emotion and physicality of what is presented to the self in that moment.

The weight of Eternity—of myth and mythos—bears on both *Chimera* and *V.* Gods, sex, man, woman, image—all personify the bounds of the tale told. These elements of life, these icons riddled with superstition and hope and despair—these personages invested with fate, being, and necessity—that rule the lives of all the characters in all the stories, signal the pattern of language and the rhythm of movement within and without the pages we read. There is an end to the labyrinth: it is the moment after the surrender of oneself to fate—one's future (and past) caught up with; to being—one's body placed willingly at the behest of a great natural force; to necessity—the realization that the labyrinth of one's life will end at the moment of surrender. Perseus and Stencil both reach that moment of surrender, are both carried out of their labyrinthine lives, their discontent, their tormented quests, and placed within the spiral, there to find the end of it all—and the beginning.

Perseus sets out to reenact his youthful glory days because he fears he is physically petrifying; he hunts Medusa now because she may be able to unstone him (under certain conditions). He begins his re-journey armed only with a golden dagger the size of his phallus (99–100)—which dismays him because an instrument of "love" could never win in war. Indeed, all these clues point to the cause and the cure of Perseus's petrification, and the "self-reflection" of the Medusa head might be final petrification—or final awareness (100).

Perseus begins his journey naked. He reaches the blind Graeae and, as they pass around their tooth of speech, bargains with them to regain their passable eye if they will tell him Medusa's whereabouts. However, they figure out his deception and jettison him. Drowning, he gives up hope, not knowing his life is to be "Continued in the next installment" (103). Indeed. Perseus, saved, is unsure of what he has done and how he has gotten into the temple of his life's actions. For, as he sees, although the murals in the second whorl of his life echo those in the first, he has no memory of the events of his "late mortality" (103). He depends on Calyxa's (and Barth's) rendering of his own tale, his own immediate past. His memory is "re-collected" by the murals Calyxa shows him. His memory of his own past can be rendered only by someone other than himself, someone who can access information he cannot, even though he is the person to whom the events occurred (105–06). His complete history can be rendered only by someone who was not there.

Now we discover that Perseus is telling the story of his sojourn with Calyxa in his life-temple to someone other than Calyxa. To whom

does he speak? There are more clues, as we see the process of Perseus's de-petrification (112). He recounts the moments of lovemaking with Medusa, and her confession that his "sea-nymph" could depetrify him, if. If. Medusa loves Perseus, even though he beheaded her, and she has been given the power to depetrify, just once, one person who loves her—although she will be instantly re-Gorgoned if she does so. Unjust? The Goddess of Wisdom is not the goddess of justice (113–14). However, if the man truly loves her as she does him, they will both be ageless as the stars and together forever; but he must dare the possibility that it is a trick and she is yet a Gorgon (115–16). Perseus wavers, still petrified in his heart, afraid to take the eternal dare of love. Thus, his transportal to his life-temple by Medusa and the retelling—self-reflection—of his tale—his travel around his life—his becoming his own man again and this time with the capacity to understand what he had been lacking (119–20). He sees, at last, "Perseus loves _____" and knows, at last, the name to write in the sands of his time. He goes out to reclaim his herohood and his depetrification for the right reason—one moment of trust in pure emotion. He returns to the garden of stone men and there, re-creating a victory of flesh amid the stone, gives up his dream of his mortal love and, with emotion conquering the necessity for motion, kisses the "paradoxic precious New Revised Medusa"—and becomes, with her, part of the endless spiral circling the earth eternally, their "immortal parts" spinning round his story (120–36). However, Medusa fears that this story, retold with such attention to past loves, means that Perseus did not experience that act of true love, perfect emotion, but that he kissed her and looked at her as an act of suicide, not trust—or that his desire for immortality made her reveal herself (her "beauty") to the wrong man and become "a Gorgon forever" (140). Perseus tells her the truth: that he unveiled her beauty to himself—that he was wise enough to give up his youth—and that their love, in a perfect moment, was transfiguring, no matter what their mortal parts are doing on earth. Their story never ends; it winds through space and time, endlessly retold as the stars spin in the heavens (141–42).

Chimera is like *V.* in many ways: part-human, part-monstrous characters; people in the process of becoming less human in their body parts; the repetition of acts and paths; the endless questing for a "someone" to give one's life meaning; the search for one moment of true understanding. Indeed, the searching is obsessive in both texts. In *Chimera*, it leads to murder, hatred, betrayal, love, death and transfiguration, to the differentiation of lies and truth, true love, written words and myth, and to the moment of realization. In *V.*, Stencil's quest for V. is the quest for the truth about history, for the possibility

of love, and for perfection. Statues are people enstoned in *Chimera*; statues are things like people in *V.* V. herself appears as part statue, and other characters become progressively artificial by their own desire to escape their "mortal parts," their "decaying" or imperfect flesh replaced by false breasts, false teeth, silver limbs, false (passable) eyes. The obsessive retracing of one's (and others') steps in search of that moment of knowing, the half-monsters that must be slain or kissed to be vanquished, the retelling and re-remembering of one's youth, and the desire to redo it in an attempt to understand what one's actions meant, one's memories mean—all are elements common to both works. Even though heroic myths are mocked and mortal parts lost in *Chimera*, that moment of understanding and joy is allowed; the process of re-telling is rewarded by a moment of complete cognition and acceptance. In *V.*, however, the moment, so elusive, comes only as an end to one man's—Stencil's—anguished quest: his acceptance means an end to his torment; the gift is the void rather than love or immortality.

In *Chimera*, the "key to the treasure is the treasure" (64), and the key to understanding the place of man in the world is woman: only through trust and love is understanding possible. So, too, would it seem in *V.* Both Barth and Pynchon, modern men, invest women with the qualities of storyteller, love object, acolyte, goddess, and the way to (possible) immortality. However, while Barth invests his male and female characters with humor, the first key to unlock hidden understanding, Pynchon invests his with a lack of humor or of empathy between the sexes. V. is unknowable because men cannot understand her, or indeed any human (or half-human) woman. V. is unreachable, not because of her nature, but because of the (linear-thinking, history-censoring) male nature that tries to rape/conquer/uncover her mystery. The key to V. may be acceptance—an acceptance Stencil learns too late.

Identity. Too often, identity, personhood, is assigned by those outside the person's experiential process. Too often, men, especially, assign identity to women, not by experience, but by the body. The female body in *V.* can be anything, as long as it responds to the needs of men: the foam-rubber breast beer taps (12–13); the chain of victims of the plastic surgeon (44–49); the horror of Esther's nose job (102–10), as an "outcast" is redeemed by fake materials and "human machines" to be a "worthy" sexual partner; the girls with no faces, nice asses, and empty eyes, who are available for a quick sexual adventure (138–41); the ivory comb of crucified men (167–72) so like the enstoned men in *Chimera*, both cases of enshrinement in nonliving material by the woman with power; the tattooed skin of a woman (170–71; cf. 45); the windup woman and clockwork self (216–17) so

like the amalgam of woman's parts in *Chimera*; V.'s false, "passable" eye (237) so like the Graeae's; the changes of flesh and skin (257, 270) so like the Chimera itself and Medusa, both Gorgon and woman; the plastic surgeon's repeated wish to do more work on Esther's flesh to make her more desirable (294, 296–97); the disassembly of the Bad Priest/V. (342–43) like Bellerophon's dissolution of the Chimera and Perseus's transmutation of Calyxa into a nebula—all women rendered "harmless"; the revelations in Chapter Thirteen about Benny and Rachel's acting in love, not being in love, about the inanimate, about the interchangeable unnatural blondes, about Rachel as her car's accessory, about modular electronic women; the greater horrors of Chapter Fourteen—the women automata, the headless lay figure, the girl acting as a mirror, the literal and figurative dances for automata, the woman as a sexual fetish rather than a woman, a human object for V., the mirrors and objects and inanimation, V.'s progression from animate to inanimate as part of Stencil's fantasy, and the end of the dance; the dancing statues (437–38); V.'s comb again (443); the recurrence to V.'s glass eye and disassembly (445–46); ending (?) with the legend of Mara/V., the "living figurehead" of a ship of men's voyage, raped and maltreated and mystified, the restorer of bodies, including her own (461–63); more about substitutes for and rearrangements of human flesh (475, 484); V.'s comb and eye once again, and her face as a blank mask, and her dream of a wardrobe of feet—the better to travel with (486–88).

Pynchon dehumanizes his female characters, indisputably; does he dehumanize his male characters to the same extent? The easy answer is, of course, no. But, he holds out his altered, marred, partly monstrous females as potential lifelines of loving and trusting women—even their flesh—that his male characters will not catch. The male characters dehumanize the females. The closer any man gets to a woman in *V.*, the easier it becomes for him to make every effort, even to defy the bounds of the past and of history itself, to make her into an object, a mirror damaged enough to deflect self-reflection, to consider each woman part of a pattern, a repetition of movement, a step on the way to tracking down the perfect woman—who is completely artificial. Only an artificial woman could never age, could always be perfect sexually, could always fulfill every man's fantasy. V. is that perfect woman: sexually practiced, and yet eternally remote; physically beautiful, and timeless in her beauty—because her beautiful parts are replaceable; strange and therefore exciting, and yet as familiar as the clock on the wall. Stencil will not understand what V. means until he surrenders his passion to her and is caught in the whirlpool created by that figurehead of flesh and forgiveness.

The question of V.'s identity is not the question; the question of Stencil's identity, and the identity of every other person caught up in the tide of the book, is. V. is the reflection of their search, and as unreachable as their unknown goal. V. is her constant movement, her "confused" identity, her apparent lack of ethics or morals, her mechanical body parts—all are reflections of the other characters' ceaseless, aimless motions, barren memories, confusion. V. may be a "historical fact" (226), as Stencil would so desperately like to believe; but V. is also her own woman; she is not just a cheese danish to be rendered over and over by untalented hands (282). V. has her own hands, even though she represents Stencil's (and others') desire to divorce mind from body, mind from soul. V. represents the repeated attempts to insult, degrade, alter, replace, hate the female body, and that body's triumph over such petty sadism. V. goes beyond sadism, beyond masochism, and triumphs over them, because she has incorporated them into her very being—which goes on in her search for the love and trust of a man, each man.

Both Stencils give themselves up to the whirlpool and accept the being, the necessity, the fate, that is V. V. demands no less than this: the total surrender of oneself, from one's past, one's history, one's quest, to the understanding of V. herself. V. simply is: her alterations are only temporary and decorative; her body parts are assumed by herself as part of the existence of V. V. is immortal. Her mortal followers may learn, or may not (although the lessons are presented on many levels), that, in order to understand V., they must give up every mortal fear. They must refuse to run from life; they must refuse to run from love; they must refuse to run from imperfection. They must accept all these things, and only then may they be swept away from the pettiness, swept into a whirlpool of the instant reconciliation that follows mortal recognition of that which is immortal, and that which V. represents: V. is the key to the treasure and, as such, is the treasure.

V. may well resemble Mary Shelley's monster more than a little. If she does, then she resembles that monster by her innate humanity, marred by her creator's inhumanity, her creator's dabbling in the Promethean myth no less than did Shelley's mad inventor. V.'s body parts, however, are not merely ragged, cast-off flesh, nor are they the cheap plastic and rubber that inform the female form and trivialize it elsewhere. No, V.'s body parts are Swiss clockwork and gold feet, precious materials for a precious body. V.'s creator, no less Stencil than Pynchon, dabbles in the quest for love and truth in the world, and presents what he has found: indomitable V., a myth as grand as any ever told, a fiction that is already legend, a journey that stops only to take mere mortal life away. Finally, V. removes all uncertainty, all

subjectivity, all attempts at false history-making, all attempts at illusion. V. simply is.

Stevick remarks that "new" fiction "*seeks this value-less quality not as an act of subtraction, or dehumanization, or metaphysical mystification, not as a gesture of despair or nihilism, but as a positive act in which the joy of the observer is allowed to prevail as the primary quality of the experience*" (356–57). V., then, is the embodiment, just as *V.* is the cyclical journey, of constantly progressing repetitions to attain joy from observation. *Chimera* is the embodiment of the immortal—non-body—arts, attaining joy from being observed, from being seen. Male attempts to explain the embodiments of timeless myths in a linear repetition of archetypal images and journeys are integrated by Barth and Pynchon into the recognition of the woman as the key to the treasure and as the treasure. Woman—women—is/are the key to self-awareness, to body awareness, to the integration of body and self and soul. Both Barth and Pynchon are aware within the frame of their texts of the importance of love, of the moment of trust, of both self-awareness and other-awareness, and of the possibility of immortalization, of transfiguration, of attaining both that which is beyond body parts and that which does not reject them. That is the power of *Chimera* and of *V.*

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