

METAPHOR AND V.:  
METAPHYSICS IN THE MIRROR

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Wipe your hands across your mouth and laugh;  
The worlds revolve like ancient women  
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

--T. S. Eliot, "Preludes"

In the afternoon we saw what was supposed to be a  
rock, but it was found to be a dead whale.

--Cook's Voyages  
"Extracts," Moby-Dick

Thomas Pynchon's V. is, among other things, a lament over the separation of the physical from the metaphysical in modern existence. To use D. H. Lawrence's terms from Studies in Classic American Literature, V. is a parodic narrative about those "post-mortem effects" which follow Moby-Dick, such as the "ghoulish" quality evident in Whitman's poetry:

So that you see, the sinking of the Pequod was  
only a metaphysical tragedy after all. The world goes  
on just the same. The ship of the soul is sunk. But  
the machine-manipulating body works just the same:  
digests, chews gum, admires Botticelli and aches with  
amorous love. (171)

Lawrence's description is an eerie anticipation of V. and its ironic relation to Moby-Dick. Both novels have to do with "metaphysical tragedy" as a sinking of the ship of soul. As Edward Mendelson argues, V. is a "tragedy of human limitation, and like all tragedy it points towards the larger frame in which the tragic action occurs" (116). V., by drawing its structural metaphors from Moby-Dick, mirrors the earlier novel as its "larger frame"--its metaphysic, if you will. V. laments the loss of anima, in life and in art.

The poem that Brenda Wigglesworth reads to Profane, "I am the twentieth century," reiterates this theme of the loss of soul, of "ghoulish" effects as promiscuous plasticity.

". . . I am the virgin's-hair whip and the cunningly  
detailed shackles of decadent passion. I am every  
lonely railway station in every capital of Europe. I  
am the Street . . . the tourist-lady's hairpiece, the  
fairy's rubber breasts, the traveling clock which  
always tells the wrong time and chimes in different  
keys. . . . I am all the appurtenances of night."  
(454)

In this parody of Whitman, Brenda's free-verse assertions of identity have become a cliché, showing the result of the dangerous tendency, the contradiction, always inherent in American democratic idealism. To be "all" is to feel superior to everyone else, while paradoxically losing one's identity. To quote Lawrence again, "Think of having that under your skin. All that!" (172). Such bodily plasticity can lead, according to Lawrence, and has led, according to Pynchon, to the purely mechanical and its deification. The imitative form and the content of Brenda's poem indicate that Lawrence's worst fears have been realized, for unlike Whitman, Brenda presents herself as a series of inanimate objects. Further, she recognizes that this soulless identity is not even her own: "'It's a phony college-girl poem. Things I've read for courses'" (454). Brenda's conventionality contrasts with Profane's pedestrian honesty, which necessitates, however, equally bleak assertions:

"The experience, the experience. Haven't you learned?"

Profane didn't have to think long. "No," he said, "offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing." (454)

Profane's journey has not been a soul's progress but only the getting to another "apocheir," "the point furthest from the yo-yo hand" (35), a return, via the same repetitive movement, to the state already achieved in Chapter One.

Profane, like Ishmael, begins his novelistic journey as a wanderer and one-time sailor. He arrives at a seaport, Norfolk, on Christmas Eve; Ishmael arrives in New Bedford in December, and the Pequod sails on Christmas Day. Profane's tavern, "the Sailor's Grave," carries the same ominous connotations that Ishmael's tavern has--"The Spouter-Inn:--Peter Coffin." In each case the name foreshadows the novel's conclusion, but in V. a pun makes the death-in-life theme more explicit: Profane "stood in the doorway a moment watching; then realizing he had one foot in the Grave anyway, dived out of the way of the fight and lay more or less doggo near the brass rail" (10). In the Grave, Pynchon combines low humor with the Divine Comedy: all the barmaids, thanks to a quirk of the owner, are called Beatrice, for according to Mrs. Buffo, "just as small children call all females mother, so sailors, in their way equally as helpless, should call all barmaids Beatrice" (12).

Mrs. Buffo's "Beatrice" is a relatively simple example of the increasingly complex functioning of metaphor in the novel and serves as an embryonic version of the novel's major symbol, V. In this case we have the analogical process through which the metaphor is created--Mrs. Buffo is named Beatrice--and the terms on which it is applied. The naming adds a kind of harmonious consistency to the atmosphere of the Sailor's Grave, even if it results in a loss of individual identity for the

barmaids and creates confusion for the reader--the Beatrices, as mentioned in the narrative, are indistinguishable.

Earlier in the chapter we learn that Profane has applied the same process of metaphoric leveling to his world, although his motive seems to be exhaustion rather than a desire for order:

After that long of more named pavements than he'd care to count, Profane had grown a little leery of streets, especially streets like this. They had in fact all fused into a single abstracted Street, which come the full moon he would have nightmares about. (10)

Profane's "Street" is one continuous thoroughfare--in Richard Chase's terms, a "field of action," one "conceived not so much as a place as a state of mind" (19). For Profane it serves as a private yet vague symbol for the randomness of his movement, the purposelessness of his activities, the meaninglessness of life. But other characters use the street as a private symbol as well. For Fausto Maijstral, whose streets in Valletta were bombed during the Second World War, it symbolizes "The street of the 20th Century, at whose far end or turning--we hope--is some sense of home or safety"; "A street we are put at the wrong end of"; "But a street we must walk" (323-24). And for Sidney Stencil the street represents a political faction, those alienated by rigid governmental control:

"If there is any political moral to be found in this world," Stencil once wrote in his journal, "it is that we carry on the business of this century with an intolerable double vision. Right and Left; the hothouse and the street. The Right can only live and work hermetically, in the hothouse of the past, while outside the Left prosecute their affairs in the streets by manipulated mob violence. And cannot live but in the dreamscape of the future." (468)

Fausto's and especially Stencil's metaphorical uses of "street" explain in increasingly sophisticated terms Profane's private symbol. Profane lives in what was in 1919 "the dreamscape of the future"; his Street is a nightmare because he represents the "highly "alienated" populace" Stencil predicts will predominate "within not many more years" (468). Profane's symbolic Street is to Stencil's what Mrs. Buffo's Beatrice is to Dante's: a vestigial form of the original, a metaphor without a metaphysic.

The street is that realm of disorder outside the sanctuaries of Western "culture"--outside the "hothouse," as Sidney Stencil calls it. Thus it is metaphorically a negative space, an amorphous region defined only by the controlled environment of tradition, order, or authority it borders. For its inhabitants like Profane, it represents a level of

consciousness, an awareness of the meaninglessness of life. Pynchon, as well as Profane and Fausto, uses the street as a spatial metaphor for the hard realities of everyday life, including the encroachment of the inanimate, and for humankind's consciousness of that reality.

Nevertheless, in the largest sense, as a novelistic trope, "street" incorporates and transcends private associations and functions. It is, like East Main in Norfolk or Strada Stretta in Valletta, an actual part representing the whole of urban civilization, the open territory, field of action, and battleground of the twentieth century, the one area which remains public, accessible to everyone. It is both a part of civilization and the periphery of social organization. In *V.*, the street is the frontier where anything can happen, where the forces of order and power--whether armies of Imperialists, police, or the Shore Patrol--clash with indigenous populations--whether Maltese, Arabs, Hereros, winos, bums, AWOL sailors, or yo-yos.

This realm of empirical observation contrasts with the territory "under the street"--the subway, the sewer, or the bomb shelter--the territory of the unconscious, of sleep, of fantasy, or of escape from danger. In those parts of the novel involving Profane, "under the street" is the area of the fantastic, where events and reported events seem least credible. For example, Profane takes a job in the New York sewers shooting alligators although he has never used a shotgun at street level. "But a shotgun under the street, under the Street, might be all right" (43). There he ventures toward the even more fantastic by way of the stories about Father Fairing's Parish:

The stories, by the time Profane heard them, were pretty much apocryphal and more fantasy than the record itself warranted. At no point in the twenty or so years the legend had been handed on did it occur to anyone to question the old priest's sanity. It is this way with sewer stories. They just are. Truth or falsity don't apply. (120)

These stories recount Fairing's efforts during the Depression to convert sewer rats to Catholicism. They derive from the priest's journal, which is "still preserved in an inaccessible region of the Vatican library, and in the minds of the few old-timers in the New York Sewer Department who got to see it when it was discovered" (120). Profane gets the legend by word-of-mouth, but journalistic excerpts are included in the narrative for the reader. This interpolated story performs three functions: first, it causes Profane and the reader to question the relation between "history" and "fiction," between "fact" and "myth"; second, the novel's record of a record further blurs the distinction between reality and fiction within the novel; and third, the first two functions have a leveling effect, serving as a reminder that Profane himself is a fictional

creation and making the reader wonder whether there are in fact levels of reality at work in the novel. Pynchon uses this same principle to create the major symbol of the novel, V.

The V. mystery begins with the introduction of Herbert Stencil, former British Foreign Office agent. We learn that Herbert's sole purpose in life is the pursuit of "V.," a quest inspired by his father Sidney's journal entry from "Florence, April, 1899":

"There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report." (53)

Pynchon sets up the reader to pursue V. as single-mindedly as Stencil does, but never provides a definitive solution to the mystery. The problem is not a lack of clues but the superfluity of them. In the various interpolated narratives which cover events dating from Alexandria in 1898 to Malta in 1943, the weight of the evidence suggests that V. is an English woman who undergoes drastic transmutations, including changes in name (Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, and Veronica Manganese), occupation, personality, national allegiance, place of residence, religious belief, sexual habits, and bodily parts. Such changes force us to consider what constitutes identity, not to mention "character." In her chronologically latest appearance, as the "Bad Priest," V. is dismembered by the children of Malta, but the parts they remove are inanimate--false teeth, a wig, a glass-eye-clock, artificial feet, and a sapphire from her navel (342-43). These items seem like displaced parts from earlier sections of the novel: the false teeth remind us of Seaman Ploy's, and the sapphire of Profane's dream of the boy with the golden screw in his navel. In fact, V.'s deterioration from "personhood" leads us to associate V. with all the other "V.'s" in the novel: Botticelli's *Venus*, Venezuela, Vheissu, and Vesuvius in the Florence episode; Hedwig Vogelsang in Mondaugen's story; the V-Note bar in New York; the novitiate rat Veronica in Father Fairing's journal; Profane's mechanized dream-woman, Violet; Valletta; Queen Victoria; and many more.

V. is also connected with violence, voyeurism, and venery, as both the agent and the victim these terms imply. Stencil suspects her "natural habitat to be the state of siege" (62), and by 1919 she has become an agent provocateur in Malta. As the Bad Priest, she is victimized by the violence of the children. As voyeur, V. is most obviously the agent in the Paris episode, when *Mélanie l'Heuremaudit* becomes her lover and "fetish." According to Stencil--or the narrator--lesbianism and fetishism are both forms of narcissism; *Mélanie*, V., and a mirror multiply identities and couplings (407-10) so that watching another becomes a version of watching oneself. Victoria, Vera, and Veronica are watched by a series of would-

be lovers, agents, and voyeurs, and Stencil's search for V. may be his form of narcissism: the crowd at the Rusty Spoon in New York concludes "that Stencil was seeking in her his own identity" (411). V. is "ambiguously a beast of venery," with its double meaning--"chased like the hart, hind or hare, chased like an obsolete, or bizarre, or forbidden form of sexual delight. And clownish Stencil capering along behind her, bells ajingle, waving a wooden, toy oxgoad. For no one's amusement but his own" (61-62). In the context of both meanings of venery, V. is the pursuer and the pursued, but Stencil is primarily the hunter.

Work, the chase--for it was V. he hunted--far from being a means to glorify God and one's own godliness (as the Puritans believe) was for Stencil grim, joyless; a conscious acceptance of the unpleasant for no other reason than that V. was there to track down.  
(55)

V. is for Stencil not just the object but the principle of the hunt, since its value remains only insofar as it is not attained ("but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness?" [55]). In this respect V. is a fetish, an object of self-love, for she--or the symbol--gives Stencil life and identity as "He Who Looks for V." (226). According to the narrator, by telling about V., Stencil "had left pieces of himself--and V.--all over the western world"; "V. by this time was a remarkably scattered concept" (389).

With her myriad identities V. suggests the condition of twentieth-century identity--elusive, plastic, diffused, defined by its appurtenances and accessories, by the ease with which it can fragment, in short, by its lack of soul. Schizophrenia is its characteristic, and integrity of character a thing of the past. Thus the mannequins SHOCK and SHROUD have as much character as many other characters in the novel, their level of existence being about on a par with that of Fergus Mixolydian, whose only animation is as an extension of his television set (56). As a narrative principle, "V-ness" (as Alvin Greenberg calls it) diffuses throughout the novel, causing the reader's occasional inability to identify the narrative voice and accounting for such bizarre happenings as Mondaugen's having (apparently) Foppl's dream. Just as Profane's private Street is coopted by other characters, so old Godolphin's secret Vheissu--a fantastic, alien land and a kind of global "under the street"--becomes common knowledge. Godolphin tells Vera Meroving, "'our Vheissus are no longer our own, or even confined to a circle of friends; they're public property'" (248). In the world of the twentieth century and of the novel, the mystery of identity is that the concept is disintegrating, and "V-ness" is the negative quality which indicates that loss and comes to fill the void created by identity's fragmentation. As Tony Tanner argues, "If V. can mean everything it means nothing" (58).

V.'s identity, like Moby-Dick's whiteness, has the "all-color, no-color" significance which opens up a spectrum of possibilities, or forces interpretation to either extreme. Moby-Dick has a fully determined and fixed symbolic value for Ahab alone: the whale represents the force of evil which must be destroyed before it causes more destruction. Ahab, essentially a destructive force, searches for "destruction" because it is a projection of himself. Similarly, Stencil, a vestigial identity, maintains a semblance of identity by tracing a vestige, one which embodies their jointly representative fragmentation. As a shade of identity searching for his shadow, Stencil is like Ahab's soulless mirror image. Stencil nevertheless shares Ahab's narcissism, his search for the "ungraspable phantom of life," which is his own reflection. His obsessive self-effacement, so to speak, is ultimately the supreme egoism:

"Forcible dislocation of personality" was what he called the general technique, which is not exactly the same as "seeing the other fellow's point of view"; for it involved, say, wearing clothes that Stencil wouldn't be caught dead in, eating foods that would have made Stencil gag, living in unfamiliar digs, frequenting bars or cafés of a non-Stencilian character; all this for weeks on end; and why? To keep Stencil in his place: that is, in the third person. (62)

Stencil's technique of "forcible dislocation of personality" allows him to maintain a smug sense of superiority because he detaches "Stencil" from most of what he does. The real self remains private, but fades away; the plastic self takes action. Such dissociation relieves "Stencil" of responsibility and involvement, so that it becomes an equally artificial concept, an "other" removed from the experience of the self.

If Stencil represents one extreme of identity--its complete fragmentation--then Profane represents the other. He remains "himself" throughout the novel, but also refuses commitment and purposeful action. By allowing himself to be victimized by inanimate objects, he contributes to their control. Together Stencil and Profane represent the polarization of society predicted by the elder Stencil: the smug "Stencil," an inhabitant of the hothouse of the past, represents the Right; Profane, the man on the Street, represents the Left. Both are alienated from the "real present" (the "proper relation" to extremes, according to Thomas Schaub [12]) because they are convinced of its meaninglessness, and the inanimate defines the identities of both. In this respect they are mirror images, reversals of each other, exhibiting the century's "intolerable double vision" (468).

The scene of Rachel's visit to Schoenmaker's office suggests the important connection between mirror-imagery, time,

and identity. A mirror hangs behind an ornate "turn-of-the-century clock" with a "double face" (45), creating, from Rachel's point of view, a double vision: "time and reverse-time, co-existing, cancelling one another exactly out" (46). The two faces of the clock move in opposite directions, one toward the past and one toward the future, making the room a nodal point of "zero" time because the opposing forces create a kind of vacuum, paradoxically fixing an image of movement. The time captured at this node is not the same as the "real present," which moves only unidirectionally; the node creates an artificial present by mirroring the past. The node--the room--is the place of fake identities, appearances, attracting "the imperfect, the dissatisfied," giving them a mirror image, and causing them to live afterward in the mirror to grasp the phantom of identity.

We find mirrors elsewhere in *V.* besides Schoenmaker's office, other reflections of extreme artifice and other attempts to establish a nodal point of zero time. Foppl's Siege Party in 1922 retreats into memories, fantasies, and reenactments of 1904, the year of von Trotha's extermination of the Hereros, mirror-image of Hitler's extermination of the Jews. In this episode we, like Mondaugen, cross the equator and enter "mirror-time in the South-West Protectorate" (230). *V.*'s Paris apartment in 1913 holds the "null-time of human love" (409), and Mélanie's last name (1'Heuremaudit = "Cursed hour") suggests the danger of living in this temporal zone. Both these episodes are characterized by transvestism, fetishism, and voyeurism. As the mirrors multiply, time disappears, identity fragments, and individuals become interchangeable. Mondaugen watches others in mirrors and then has their dreams (246, 258); Mélanie and *V.* each reflects herself and the other (409).

Figurative mirror images, as reflections and distortions, are a narrative device throughout *V.* When the Whole Sick Crew retreats to the Rusty Spoon or Rachel's apartment, where they talk "proper nouns" and drink as a way of asserting their animateness (130-31), they mirror Foppl's Siege Party, another clique of decadents attempting to stave off--but perhaps only hastening--decay. Profane's yo-yoing is a version of a Cook's Tour, without a Baedeker. Although Profane follows no guidebook for his "Distribution of Time," he is a tourist: one of the "Street's own," yet more like the "near-inanimate barmen, taxi-drivers, bellhops, guides: there to do any bidding, to various degrees of efficiency, on receipt of the recommended baksheesh, pourboire, mancia, tip" (408-09). Herbert Stencil and Evan Godolphin are mirror images and "de-generations" of their fathers. Stencil's quest is essentially a reenactment of his father's history. The disfigured surface of Evan's face, the result of failed plastic surgery, recalls Hugh's vision of Vheissu: "'I wondered about the soul of that place. If it had a soul. Because their music, poetry, laws and ceremonies come no closer. They are skin too. Like the skin of a tattooed



savage. I often put it that way to myself--like a woman'" (170).

"Like a woman"--that is, like *V.*: each of these mirrored fragments reflects the novel's central metaphor. Like identities, metaphors in *V.* are displaced appearances, surfaces only, as Hugh says, a "gaudy godawful riot of pattern and color" (171), leprous tissue which both disguises and reveals the actual decay underneath, the decadence of the twentieth century. The entire novel is a node of zero time housing "a transient population of the imperfect, the dissatisfied," a populace alienated from the "real present." The mirror imagery indicates that the world of the novel, like that world "if not created then at least described to its fullest by Karl Baedeker of Leipzig," is "two-dimensional." Its "supranational" tourists have "identical responses"; "they share the same landscapes, suffer the same inconveniences; live by the same pellucid time-scale" (408-09). Their world is analogous to the mirror world of Schoenmaker's turn-of-the-century clock.

This mirror image of time and identity also reveals the status of metaphor itself in *V.* The novel is a tissue of analogies, and the reader makes connections by tracing the similarities or identities from one episode to another. For example, "V.'s" appear in the journals of both Father Fairing and Sidney Stencil, suggesting a relationship that at least pushes the limits of credibility. We may conclude with Stencil--"placing emphasis on different words"--that "Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic" (449). The repeated fragments come in like Mondaugen's sferics, atmospheric sounds which may have some pattern of significance or may be only so much noise. We may assume, as Weissmann does of the sferics, that they are a code signifying a conspiracy (277-78). They may be clues to plot within the novel--"The Big One, the century's master cabal" (226)--to the plot of the novel, or to Pynchon's plot against the reader. In any case, because the images work as a series of overlays which fail to match perfectly, the reader may "Stencilize" his own patterns on the text, or may (Profanely) refuse to do so--the interpretation reflecting the interpreter. The novel's metaphors are therefore self-reflexive: images mirror each other but have their significance assigned from the outside by a voyeuristic reader who sees himself in their reflections. A reading is like one of the elder Stencil's "Situations," having no "objective reality" but existing "only in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment" (189). The reader becomes one of the crowd with the characters, part of the "fiction" of the twentieth century.

Yet, although Pynchon's metaphors reveal their self-reflexivity, they also refer to the world external to the novel, which, in its turn, can be construed as another Situation with no objective reality. But this dissolution of epistemological limits does not negate the novel's function: novel and reader

can work together toward a new imaginative construction by turning the novel on its side, so to speak, and including the reader in the fictional circle. V. asserts the necessity of stretching the imagination toward new possibilities if we are not to collapse under the weight of the conspiracies we have artificially created. The quality of our fictions--which are reflections and projections of ourselves--determines our future.

In describing how the Maltese survived the air raids of the Second World War, Fausto Maijstral explains the function of metaphor in the novel:

The same motives which cause us to populate a dream-street also cause us to apply to a rock human qualities like "invincibility," "tenacity," "perseverance," etc. More than metaphor, it is delusion. But on the strength of this delusion Malta survived.

Manhood on Malta thus became increasingly defined in terms of rockhood. This had its dangers for Fausto. Living as he does much of the time in a world of metaphor, the poet is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice. So that while others may look on the laws of physics as legislation and God as a human form with beard measured in light-years and nebulae for sandals, Fausto's kind are alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the "practical" half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie, confident that their machines, dwellings, streets and weather share the same human motives, personal traits and fits of contrariness as they.

Poets have been at this for centuries. It is the only useful purpose they do serve in society: and if every poet were to vanish tomorrow, society would live no longer than the quick memories and dead books of their poetry.

It is the "role" of the poet, this 20th Century. To lie. (325-26)

Fausto's--and Pynchon's--metaphors do not signify some absolute, but assert the need for an operational metaphysics, for a "transcendental function," for a faith to give us the will to continue. The "fact" of life is that we live by metaphor anyway: even the secular, the "Profanes," create their symbolic streets and give life to the "innate mindlessness" of inanimate things. But "metaphor has no value apart from its function." While Esther identifies "rockhood" with "loss of Estherhood" (106), the Maltese identify it with their own strength, which in turn serves to reinforce and verify that strength. The metaphor is a mirror image, an appearance only, with no intrinsic life or soul, yet still an appearance which validates identity. The

poet's role in the twentieth century is to revitalize the mindless inanimate constructively. Pynchon performs this role, not by continuing to deceive readers about "the Great Lie," the belief that "their machines, dwellings, streets and weather share the same human motives, personal traits and fits of contrariness as they," but by admitting the artifice, letting readers in on the secret that the novel, like the Maltese children's playing at war, is "poetry in a vacuum" (332). Readers must be able to face the "facts": to see that the reflections are imaginary and that, as McClintic Sphere says, "There's no magic words" (366). To refuse to project destruction onto the objects and metaphors of human creation may be to regain some control over human affairs. In that way, "life" may be returned from "the universe of things that simply are" to a re-animated humanity. Dahoud's pedestrian point in Chapter One, after Ploy's attempted suicide, seems appropriate in this context:

"Man, I want to die, is all," cried Ploy.  
 "Don't you know," said Dahoud, "that life is the  
 most precious possession you have?"  
 "Ho, ho," said Ploy through his tears, "Why?"  
 "Because," said Dahoud, "without it, you'd be  
 dead." (12)

In a novel whose characters have one foot in the Grave already, these corny lines achieve a new significance. Metaphor as a prosthetic device must not be an end in itself, but a reminder that "To have humanism we must first be convinced of our humanity" (322).

Because Fausto explains the function of metaphor in the novel, he therefore reveals the "location" of V. In presenting his former "identities," Fausto recounts his decay into the inanimate and his subsequent return to humanity after administering extreme unction to the Bad Priest (344). This ministrations is an assertion of the animate because it attempts to redeem what "soul" still remains in V. Before this, Fausto had been part of the "decadence," by "pretending it was a great struggle between the laws of man and the laws of God," of "human law v. divine," "within the arena in quarantine . . . his soul and . . . the island" (322). By couching the problem in this way, by refusing responsibility in effecting its solution, "Fausto" disappeared, and what appeared in his place between the extremes of the physical and the metaphysical, "human law v. divine," was the sign of another fragmented identity--a "v." V. appears again in a state of siege and at the scene of violence, not as a cause but as an agent provocateur, one that finds space in the field of human activity and change when the individual no longer assumes responsibility for his actions. Her forms can be linked to situations as various as the German soldier's torturing Hereros in Mondaugen's story and Sidney Stencil's idling time away with Veronica Manganese during the June Disturbances on Malta. As Sidney realizes, "The street and the

hothouse; in *V.* were resolved, by some magic, the two extremes" (487). *V.*'s location, quite literally in the middle of things, suggests that she occupies the arena of human activity and possibility, the territory of uncertainty and change. Like Machiavelli's Fortune, "She shows her power where there is no wise preparation for resisting her, and turns her fury where She knows that no walls and dykes have been made to hold her in" (Ch. 25). *V.* is intrinsically neither malign nor benign; she is simply chance, who gains power with the loss of responsible human control.

In one of his impersonations, Stencil becomes Waldetar, a conductor on the Alexandria and Cairo express and one of the most sympathetic "characters" in the novel, reflecting an admirable fragment of Stencil's identity. Waldetar ponders the story of Ptolemy Philopator's unleashing a herd of drunken elephants in the Hippodrome to kill imprisoned Jews only to have the elephants turn "on the guards and spectators instead." Waldetar, although "a highly religious man," is "inclined to take the common-sense view"; he doubts that the Jews' escape was due to God's intervention: "elephants have souls. . . . Events between soul and soul are not God's direct province: they are under the influence either of Fortune, or of virtue. Fortune had saved the Jews in the Hippodrome" (78).

The story is a parable. *V.* presents a bleak vision of society, but the picture is not entirely hopeless. Chance plays a crucial role in determining the plot and the future, but just as its effects are incalculable, so are they not necessarily destructive. *V.* therefore offers a wide range of possibilities, for it contains two variables: chance and the varying degrees of human control, or fortune and virtue. *V.*'s characters represent a deteriorating society, but through their constant activity, they still show signs of life, even if it seems more animalistic than human. Society in *V.* functions like Ptolemy's drunken elephants; nevertheless, "Anything that can get drunk," we must conclude with Waldetar, "must have some soul" (78). A Pig Bodine or a Benny Profane is not yet a SHROUD, and even in a novel we can still tell the difference.

Pynchon's imagination and his humor serve to counteract the bleakness of the world he describes. His novels demonstrate that artifice can be a humane response in the face of a grim reality. So long as metaphors are used in the service of humankind, the possibilities for society and the novel will not be exhausted.

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