

# Traces of Blood and the Matter of a Paraclete's Coming: The Menstrual Economy of Pynchon's *V.*

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Oh man,  
I want some young blood,  
Drink it, gargle it, use it for a moufwash.  
Hey, young blood, what's happening tonight. . . .  
—Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (300)

Damn men and their politics.  
—Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (90)

The 1990 printing of the Perennial Library edition of Pynchon's *V.* features on its cover the depiction of a woman in a cardinal's gown, her turned face hidden by windswept black hair. She holds the gown up over her knees, revealing her legs almost to the full extent of her thighs. The crimson fabric of her garment gathers and creases in suggestive folds across the top and down the sides of her legs. The folds of the red gown form a dark, oval recess out of which her legs emerge: her lower body becomes a magnified image of her vagina. A shadowy V-shape separates the tops of her thighs. The woman is neither black nor white, but somewhere in between. Brown or racially mixed, she is perhaps a composite representation of all the women from different cultures in the novel. In the upper left-hand corner of the cover is the book's title: *V.* Together with this enigmatic letter or initial, the painting that adorns the book's cover inaugurates the quest for who or what *V.* is. In the middle of the second chapter, when Herbert Stencil recites the haunting passage from his dead father's journal, this mystery takes center stage: "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). The search is on. Like Oedipa's Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49* and Slothrop's Rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Stencil's *V.* both beckons and evades the questor, imparting the possibility of a realm of meaning that is simultaneously sacred and dangerous, or sacred because dangerous.<sup>1</sup>

From the very beginning, then, Pynchon's text characteristically involves the kind of enigma which, in Teresa de Lauretis's words, coexists with the "desire that will generate a narrative" (111). And this desire, as *Alice Doesn't* repeatedly stresses, is masculine. The question or quest that drives narrative involves the elusive object of woman, the sacred/monstrous enigma of femininity. Beginning with classical myths, de Lauretis investigates the paradigmatic structure of narrative and finds that a "centuries-long patriarchal culture [is] still at work with a vengeance in contemporary epistemologies and social technologies" (125). We thus have Freud's story of ego formation in which woman functions as both the male subject's obstacle and his reward in the process of individuation; and we have Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, which finds that patriarchal folk tales position the female figure as a conduit for a man's ascension to power. According to de Lauretis, the structure of myths—the legends of Oedipus and Perseus, for instance—establishes the mythical subject as male and the object/obstacle of his quest as "morphologically female" (119):

The received interpretations of the Oedipus story, Freud's among others, leave no doubt. The desire is Oedipus's, and though its object may be woman (or Truth or knowledge or power), its one term of reference and address is man: man as social being and mythical subject, founder of the social order, and source of mimetic violence; hence the institution of the incest prohibition, its maintenance in Sophocles' Oedipus as in Hamlet's revenge of his father, its costs and benefits, again, for man. (112)

In the Oedipal narrative's delineation of sexual difference, masculine and feminine line up under the terms active and passive. The hero's movement is a penetration into another realm; *he* is culture's "active principle," while "she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix, matter" (119).<sup>2</sup>

Pynchon's *V.* appears to embrace just this assumption or governing principle. Stencil's quest for the meaning of the woman in his father's text is mythical and epic in its scope; he journeys all over the Western world, gathering the stories told by men who have encountered *V.* in various guises. *V.* is the occasion of their narratives, the matter of the riddle Stencil tries to solve. As Alice Jardine writes in *Gynesis*, *V.* occurs as "that which must be explored through an erotic merging at the interior of language, through a radical dismemberment of the textual body, a female body" (246). Consequently, the several plotlines of *V.* interconnect through the scattered appearances of the eponymous, enigmatic and feminine figure, and Stencil's quest becomes the reader's: every single *v*-word, from the rat's name Veronica to the word

“versus,” becomes a clue to the novel’s meaning. The mysterious woman and the fragments of some kind of truth are inseparable: according to the logic of the quest, the questor—and, by implication, the reader—is masculine.

Jacques Derrida’s *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, an investigation of the alignment of femininity with truth, maintains the premise that “it is the man who believes in the truth of woman, in woman-truth” (63–65). Here, of course, “the man” represents the male-dominated tradition of philosophical thought which situates the masculine subject as the agent of metaphysical investigation. Opening his own philosophical investigation of Nietzsche’s styles in *Spurs*, Derrida writes: “it is woman who will be my subject” (37). From this unexpectedly clear assertion, he weaves his way through Nietzsche’s alignment of truth’s possibility with femininity. Not easily won, truth resembles, in Nietzsche’s metaphor, a chaste woman:

Supposing truth to be a woman—what? is the suspicion not well-founded that all philosophers, when they have been dogmatists, have had little understanding of women . . . that the gruesome earnestness, the clumsy importunity with which they have been in the habit of approaching truth have been inept and improper terms for winning a wench? . . . Certainly she has not let herself be won. (qtd. in Derrida, S 55)

Derrida then plays with the terms of this supposition and attempts to find a space for woman beyond or within the masculine infrastructure of Nietzsche’s rhetoric. A feminine position on such dogmatic and phallogocentric quests for meaning would be, for Derrida, one of “distance” and disbelief:

And she is woman precisely because she herself does not believe in truth itself, because she does not believe in what she is, in what she is believed to be, in what she thus is not. In its manoeuvres distance strips the lady of her identity and unseats the philosopher-knight. That is, if he has not already been twice-spurred by the woman. (53)

Whatever femininity is, it will not be located in masculine epistemological models. In an introductory note to the selection from *Spurs* in *A Derrida Reader*, Peggy Kamuf aligns this characterization of truth as a withholding and dissimulating woman with other terms in Derrida’s writings, such as the *pharmakon* and the hymen, which “do not name an essence but an undecidable process of inscription” (354). Ultimately, for Derrida, woman’s distance from phallogocentrism—her alignment with the indeterminacy, the non-rigidity, of writing—is an

"affirmative power," one that offers something other than "truth and his phallus" (S 67, 97). Not reducible simply to anti-phallogocentrism or even anti-castration, the meaning woman locates is a kind of dissimulation of meaning, embracing the play of undecidability rather than thirsting after the law of truth.

Pynchon's novel invokes or reproduces the masculine epistemological quest, but, like Derrida's manipulation of Nietzsche's terms, it also fractures and parodies this quest. "As spread thighs are to the libertine," chapter 3 begins, "flights of migratory birds to the ornithologist, the working part of his tool bit to the production machinist, so was the letter V to young Stencil" (61). Read from bottom to top, from low to high, the letter spreads open, refusing consolidation as it expands in two directions. It is in essence a parodic antithesis of what Stencil desires—one answer, a direct correspondence—and becomes linked in turn to the instability, to the ventilation or exposure, of masculinity itself. From "Suck Hour," when sailors attach themselves to beer taps "made of foam rubber, in the shape of large breasts" (12–13), to the various incidents of rape, the parody aimed at masculinity ranges along a cutting edge. The quest motif in the old joke about the boy whose ass falls off when he finally removes a screw from his navel (39–40) sheds proleptic light on the novel's hero. Self-defined as "He Who Looks for V." (226), Stencil threatens to fall apart at the resolution of the enigma. The reader is offered no easy identification with a hero who not only refers to himself in the third person, in a "[f]orcible dislocation of personality" (62), but also tries "not to think . . . about any end to the search" (55). His subjectivity, his sense of being coherent or consistent, is both preserved and menaced by the mystery of a woman behind a letter. V. is Stencil's umbilical screw, and her characterization in the text is filtered through the lens of his attachment to her.

Juxtaposed to Stencil's desperation for V. is Benny Profane's aimlessness. For Profane, the riddle of femininity is just a nuisance. He dreams of "an all-electronic woman" who would give him nothing to worry about: "Maybe her name would be Violet," he muses. "[M]outh's size out of tolerance? Remove and replace, was all" (385). Profane is typically anti-heroic; even his descent into the underworld of the New York City sewer system finds him fighting monsters (alligators) who *want* to be killed (146). Of course, his wandering nature is deeply attractive to women, but, as he remarks to himself, "sometimes women remind me of inanimate objects" (288). Only half-heartedly does he go "prowling for coño" with the guys who get him the job in the sewers (138). His apathy relegates the feminine to a more extreme passivity: the realm of the inanimate. Locked in a masculine adolescence, Profane

is a schlemihl who perpetually yo-yos through life, bumming off the generosity of women (9).

Thus, hinged on the adventures of Stencil and Profane are interlaced examples of masculine absurdity and of women attempting to negotiate a world run by men. From farcical episodes like Suck Hour (and, for instance, the scene in which sailors bomb one another with water-filled condoms [376]), the novel moves to more violent male games or prerogatives: mutilation of women, rape, two world wars, and imperialism. The quest that defines masculinity is aligned, in Pynchon's text, with domination and absurdity, not apotheosis. If *V.* is a novel about interpretation, about the search for some kind of truth, it is also about the way interpretation both relies on gendered foundations and extends to ideological practice. Profane, "[thinking] himself into an erection," interprets history through the lens of sex. If Profane were the theorizing sort, the narrator remarks, "he might have said all political events: wars, governments and uprisings, have the desire to get laid as their roots" (214). And Profane realizes, if vaguely, that the battleground is metaphorically and often literally the female body.

The text, then, investigates the act of interpretation and illuminates Profane's hypothesis. In a self-reflective moment, for example, it introduces a character who requires violent metaphors about women to disclose his experiences. Hugh Godolphin, an explorer and servant of empire, understands only the type of undertaking that involves mastery and penetration. Describing his perception of the fictional land Vheissu to Victoria Wren (a *V.*-figure in the novel), he says:

"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. I hope I don't offend." (170)

He is a figure of misreading, of a sadistic need to know or to impose and possess meaning. For Godolphin, the search for meaning resembles the desire to flay the skin from a tattooed woman, to "'leave the veins and ligaments raw and quivering and open at last to your eyes and your touch'" (171). Godolphin is involved in a senseless circle of filling in what he perceives as blank spaces (on a map, for instance) and then flaying them open, and Pynchon reserves for him the horror of meaninglessness. From Godolphin's perspective, the world, which he pictures as passive and feminine, is a void and "'a dream of annihilation'" (206). As Eva C. Karpinski observes, *V.* "indicts these representations": exposing the "Western world's entanglement in . . . white, Eurocentric, patriarchal and extremely rationalist constructs"

(37), the text calls into question the construction, and highlights the danger, of metaphors like Godolphin's.<sup>3</sup>

It also presents glimmers of alternatives. The chapter which contains Godolphin's confession invokes an entirely different perspective on the appropriation of a passive, feminine object. Chapter 7, "She Hangs on the Western Wall," circulates around a (finally abandoned) quest by a group of male admirers to steal Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. Plotting the details of the heist, one conspirator remarks to another, "'And I love her too. We are comrades in love'" (165). But when, in a scene replete with metaphors of sexual intercourse, the moment comes to plunge the knife into the canvas, the chief conspirator, Rafael Mantissa, is "struck suddenly impotent." Venus's main suitor, he is horrified by the knife blade's vicious sawing through "the painting's gorgeous surface" (209). The sight recalls to him Godolphin's "gaudy dream . . . of annihilation," and Mantissa turns toward Venus with the question "What of her God, her voice, her dreams?" (210). In deciding to leave the painting where it is, Mantissa repudiates the desire to tear something open and possess it. The chapter as a whole, then, captures the motif of the search for V. and unsettles it. It asks a different kind of question, a kind of question which releases the questioner from a position of aggression. Mantissa's simple "'Yes'" to his accomplice's incredulous "'You have come all this way . . . and now you will leave her?'" (210) gestures toward a love without possession, interpretation without mastery.

The exploration of Vheissu and the abandoned plan to steal the Botticelli are subsequently paired with the historical colonization of South-West Africa and rape of African women. Stencil's rendering of Mondaugen's research in South-West Africa and his encounters with V.-figures shifts the meaning of V. from some metaphysical feminine truth to the realities of masculine brutality. Two V.-words in particular equivocate the feminine identity of the text's problem: von Trotha's 1904 "'Vernichtungs Befehl,' whereby the German forces were ordered to exterminate systematically every Herero man, woman and child they could find," and "Väterliche Züchtigung," or "fatherly chastisement," as Pynchon translates it (245, 267). As Stencil's quest takes him through the horror of Mondaugen's recollections about a "Kingdom of Death" (273), he finds female manifestations of V. (Hedwig Vogelsang and Vera Meroving) only on the periphery of masculine, imperialist acts of entitlement.

The quest motif is thus part of the text's self-conscious position on the construction of woman-as-truth, and V. is primarily about the ways the so-called enigma of femininity is a masculine discourse, a discourse which constitutes a culture of violence. According to Jardine:

V. is a novel *about* interpretation, *about* the possibilities and impossibilities of “making sense,” of “making plots.” And it is *a* woman who is at the source of these (im)possibilities. V. is about how a woman is narrative’s problem, about how a woman is the object of the subject-in-narrative’s quest. (247; Jardine’s emphases)

V. is also about how a woman is the scapegoat of patriarchal legacies, how femininity becomes a projection of masculine desire and fear. Each tale Stencil hears about V. becomes “Stencilized” (228), and Stencil is not always a sympathetic listener or reteller. Alternately condemning and fearing V. throughout the novel, Stencil ultimately believes he hates her (412). The narrator subtly provides a different focalization, remarking at one point that Stencil “could have as vile a mind as any of the [Whole Sick] Crew,” and that according to Stencil, V. is a “beast of venerity” (411, 412).

A kind of scapegoating also occurs in criticism of the novel. Attempting to understand the function of, or reason for, V. in the text, critics often align her with Pynchon’s scenes of degeneration and violence. Although Pynchon’s parody is not necessarily self-evident, it does emerge when we shift focus away from Stencil’s obsession. V. is not a straightforward adaptation, as Dwight Eddins claims, of Henry Adams’s *Virgin/Dynamo*. While Eddins’s point that Pynchon draws on “a powerfully realized version of the [feminine] archetype” (51) is well made, the notion that V. is “a malevolent goddess figure” modeled after Adams’s *Dynamo* is not entirely convincing. Eddins writes:

The Virgin of Chartres and Venus—“Venus genetrix,” as Lucretius calls her, “life-giving Venus”—have degenerated into a terrifying goddess who promotes suffering. . . . The dynamo, it seems, has its own ruling antispirit, its decreating deity, a figure that can be best projected as a negative of the redeeming Virgin—in short, as Pynchon’s V. (53)

Even Deborah Madsen, at one stage in her argument, claims that V. ushers in the twin horrors of death and the inanimate; while her analysis negotiates the possibility that V. must be somehow perceived according to four-dimensional time and space, Madsen claims that a “V metaphysic” governs “selective perception” and decadence (34). And like both Eddins and Madsen, Catharine Stimpson discusses V. in terms of an obstruction to what she surprisingly calls the “healthy male sexuality” in the text (80).

Karpinski, however, finds that V. is a personification of malignancy only when (mistakenly) viewed from a Godolphin/Stencil perspective:

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. (35)

We can locate in the narrative voice, moreover, a note of sympathy resonating in the construction of V. It is not clear, the narrator says, that V. "suspect[s] her fetishism . . . to be part of any conspiracy leveled against the animate world"; she is unwitting. "What would have been her reaction, had she known?" he asks (411). V. is "racked by [love]" (412) and seduced by the image of a mechanical woman. She even reflects Godolphin's image of "'a tattooed savage'" (170), remarking, "'But if a girl could have, oh, a lovely rainbow or wardrobe of different-hued, different-sized and -shaped feet . . .'" (488; Pynchon's ellipsis). Taking on the role of the fetish, she exposes the transformation of masculine metaphors about femininity into destructive literality. In Stencil's narrative, this transformation is horrifying; but what the narrative voice appears to impart is the conviction that, in Dorothy Dinnerstein's words, women must "stop serving as scapegoats . . . for human resentment of the human condition" (234).

As scapegoat and fetish, V. bears the burden of evil as it is delineated in Pynchon's text. She occurs at the thematic nexus of sexuality and death, embodying the masculine fear of the body's fragility and of what cannot be known. Her incorporation of metallic matter (gold feet, perhaps precious-metal teeth, for instance) reflects the extension of this fear of corporeality and decay. Hanjo Berressem's *Pynchon's Poetics* offers a reading similar to mine of V.'s literal incarnation as "an inanimate object of desire" (V 411; Berressem 73). In phallogocentric discourses, or "phallogocratic society," Berressem writes, woman "crosses the border from being a cultural object, but still human and animate, to being an inanimate fetish object" (65, 66). What V. and her lover Mélanie L'Heuremaudit reveal is an internalization of the male desire to turn the female "'chaos of flesh'" into an automaton or doll (V 404; Berressem 65). For Berressem, the fetishization of V. and Mélanie is an extension of the novel's investigation of colonial aggression; the female body is a "privileged site" for redefinition and mutation (74). When V., with her cigarette, burns "ma fétiche" into the skirt of a young sculptress (V 403), she tells it like it is and undercuts the male hallucination. In her reclusive world of mirrors, into which she brings Mélanie, she blurs the subject/object opposition on which fetishism



rests (Berressem 70) and permits Mélanie's desire to return to and reflect Mélanie herself.

The chapter "in which Esther gets a nose job" anticipates the thematic treatment of the fetishization of V. and Mélanie. Delineating a horrifying scene of mutilation, chapter 4 casts the event in terms of male control over women's bodies. Esther Harvitz's face is violently penetrated and transfigured. On the one hand, Esther is constructed as willingly undergoing the procedure, but, on the other, Pynchon makes it quite clear that her so-called choice is governed by idealized renditions of the female form (V 103; cf. 50). The scene is circumscribed, moreover, by delineations of love between women, in particular, Rachel Owlglass's compassion for Esther (which Esther fails to recognize). This compassion contrasts with Dr. Schoenmaker's later admission that he loves Esther, as he says, "'not as you are. But as I see you'" (294). For Schoenmaker, women are a chaos of flesh which masks an ideal image he can release, provided they succumb to his quest: "'Esther, I want to give. I want to do things for you. If I can bring out the beautiful girl inside you, the idea of Esther, as I have done already with your face . . .'" (294; Pynchon's ellipsis). A ticking clock in the background of this conversation alludes to Esther's imminent pregnancy, to the vitality of her body, from which Schoenmaker ultimately flees.

The gang rape of Sarah in the South-West African concentration camp takes the horror of male domination even further. The rape is not a "sadistic 'affair,'" as Eddins describes it (70); it is the pivotal scene of brutality in the novel, and it recalls the gang rape of Fina by the Playboys (V 151). Handcuffed as Sarah is to a German soldier's bed, it is unthinkable to imply that she demonstrates some kind of female passivity. Her initial attempts at resistance are completely overcome not only by the institution of colonialism but also by the material manifestations of its force: barbed wire, weaponry and manacles. Any possibility of choice is completely erased, as is the possibility that, like Mélanie's, Sarah's suicide is accidental. But Sarah's suicide does jam the colonial machinery, if only in a limited way. It is an act of refusal to be violated further or to yield her body, her labor, to the camp's enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

Exploring the narrative and ideological calibration of femininity with passivity, the text thus exposes it. From abortion, abstinence, disguise and suicide to lesbian and heterosexual love, V. discloses (or leaks), by means of the actions of its female characters, maneuvers against the enclosure of passivity. These maneuvers tend to mystify the male characters, and coincide, moreover, with V.'s power to encourage abortion, to spread love and to support revolutions: "The woman was

clearly a troublemaker" (473). Furthermore, V.'s influence extends through the threatening leverage of undecidability. As Stencil père muses, "Riot was her element, as surely as this dark room. . . . The street and the hothouse; in V. were resolved, by some magic, the two extremes. She frightened him" (487). V. repudiates or deconstructs identity and truth—"Disguise is one of her attributes'" (388, 462); "Sinister uncertainty surrounded the priest" (340)—and she places the act of questioning in the hands of women. As one of the girls Fausto Maijstral encounters in besieged Valletta asks, "'how can there be faith if you don't ask questions? The [Bad?] priest said it's right for us to ask questions'" (328). V. inheres in the endless reverberation of questions without answers. She undermines entrenched orders. Only death exhausts "all possible permutations and combinations" (298).

While the patriarchal legacies in *V.* attempt to write and perpetuate themselves across the idealized, passive female body, V.'s is not necessarily a maternal or matriarchal power, as Jardine and Stimpson argue.<sup>5</sup> Although Maijstral's memoirs (his legacy to his daughter) circulate around an obsession with the maternal feminine, patriarchy cannot be patriarchy's alternative in the text; it is only an inverse reflection of Maijstral's anxiety about a world at war. "All our babies," he writes in his journal, "have had only one father, the war; one mother, Malta her women" (325). This anxiety is displaced onto a V.-figure, whom he believes to be in some way occasioned by the war and whom he watches be dismembered, and apparently die, under a fallen beam. The beam, though, pins her down only temporarily; she metaphorically slips out from under it, and her scattered pieces reemerge in the hands of other women. These women, as manifestations of V., appear throughout the novel as prostitutes, virgins, mothers, lesbians, nuns.

What cuts across each representation of female sexuality is menstruation; it is the link among women scattered throughout a world divided by violent masculine governance. The proliferating allusions to menstruation and menstrual blood, which surround the cryptic characterization of V., have been entirely overlooked in the criticism of the novel. Menstruation remains unheeded or unspoken. Yet, as Claude Daly explains in his psychoanalytic essay "The Menstruation Complex in Literature" (1935), once the repression of menstruation in conscious thought is overcome, "it will be discovered everywhere in literature, art, mythology, etc., by those who are willing and able to see it" (qtd. in Lupton 10). When we consider Pynchon's attention to vision, and to what flickers at its edges, menstruation occurs as a possible, if unconscious, signifier in the text. Like V. herself, menstrual blood materializes in veiled, ambivalent forms, provoking male dread and

fascination. As an aspect of *V.*, it equivocates her alignment with either maternity or death; she embraces each. Menstruation is both a positive and a negative power, the blood simultaneously an announcement of fertility and its negation. In *V.*, a symbolics of menstrual blood informs the various images of stains and strange pools of blood which haunt Profane, Hannah the barmaid, Mondaugen and Maijstral. It also emerges in oblique references—characteristic of menstrual symbolism in myth and literature—to ticking clocks, to the prospect of “mirror-time” (*V* 46), to the moon and to another, as yet unheeded, order of communication. Menstrual blood renders permeable the bar between the active and passive opposition, stains the pages of masculine legacies in the text.

The text does not long for fecund heterosexual relations as an antidote to the violence of the twentieth century, nor does it place in *V.* the impediment to this vision of restored vitality. Rather, *V.* opposes male domination through the figure of the menstruating woman, whose bleeding body is both the curse of and the cure for patriarchal consolidation. This pharmacopoeic image, this simultaneity of harming and healing, accounts for the ambiguous responses to *V.*, both in the novel and in its critical reception. The criticism tends to claim that Pynchon’s novel searches for a goddess of the twentieth century, and that the search culminates in an image of a goddess half revealed, half concealed by the century’s fetishization of inanimate things. Perhaps, however, in its menstrual economy of images, the text gestures toward a different cultural organization of male and female, represented in part by goddess iconography. The blood spilled by twentieth-century hostilities, the blood which appears to usher in *V.*, potentially signifies its opposing terms: renewal, synchrony, even a refusal to reproduce the systems of violence. As Pynchon himself is rumored to insist, the title of the book is not *V* but *V.* [*V-period*], hinting perhaps at the significance beyond the initial, at the fluid context of the letter.<sup>6</sup>

Chris Knight’s *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* offers resources for comparison with Pynchon’s *V.* Claiming that “revolution is at the heart of what we are,” and that the earliest women synchronized their activities and cycles to establish collective responsibilities with men (4), Knight’s exhaustive anthropological study encourages a reinterpretation of, and offers a new vocabulary for, Pynchon’s placement of *V.* at the scene of riot and rebellion:

Blood had been constructed, during the course of the human revolution, to signal inviolability or “taboo.” In my narrative there was nothing complicatedly “symbolic” about this. Women just went on sex strike at the biologically appropriate period—during the time of the month when

menstruation normally occurred. Any man noticed to be blood-covered might then have been suspected of “strike-breaking.” Like a rapist or murderer, he would have had “blood on his hands.” Assuming that men wanted to avoid suspicion, this consideration would have motivated the shunning of menstrual stains. (38)

Returning again and again to this point, Knight emphasizes that menstrual taboos emerged as women’s way of signaling “no” to aggressive men. According to Knight’s revolutionary thesis, it is this negative assertion which marked women’s gender solidarity and which initiated an extensive system of bargaining and cultural organization with men. It becomes for Knight a vision of cooperation, a way out, even, of present humanity’s “power to destroy . . . itself” (1). “Human culture,” he writes, “has not always been capitalist; neither has it always been dominated by persons with light-coloured skins.” Similarly, he argues, “culture was not invented by—and has not always been dominated by—men” (3). Culture may, in fact, have emerged out of women’s capacity to synchronize their menstrual cycles and to involve men in strategies of group survival.

Viewed from this perspective, V.’s nostalgia is not so much for a goddess of sexual love as it is for a way back to, or a vision of, resistance to systems of domination. When, for instance, V. appears in South-West Africa in the midst of a tribal revolt against the colonial powers, her presence there seems to connect her with an imperative, strategic conflict. Her advent is foreshadowed by a stain in the courtyard of the colonial house:

Back here Mondaugen could also see down into a kind of inner courtyard. Sunlight, filtered through a great sandstorm far away in the desert, bounced off an open bay window and down, too bright, as if amplified, into the courtyard to illuminate a patch or pool of deep red. Twin tendrils of it extended to a nearby doorway. Mondaugen shivered and stared. The reflected sunlight vanished up a wall and into the sky. He looked up, saw the window opposite complete its swing open and a woman of indeterminate age in a negligee of peacock blues and greens squint into the sun. (235–36)

Later, seeing “twin streams” of spilled wine flowing, Mondaugen remembers those “two streaks of blood (when had he begun to call it blood?) in the courtyard” (276). The streaks or stains of “blood” are linked both to V. and to the scenes of violence within and without the compound. The stains intimate that blood is being spilled on both sides of the defensive ravines, symbolically repudiating the inside/outside

barrier the colonizers try to erect. The blood signals a denial of this barrier in sympathy with the rebelling Africans.<sup>7</sup>

Reading menstrual blood as a negative power, as a refusing "no," is central to Knight's argument. He asserts that menstrual synchrony created solidarity and bargaining power among early women:

Where their cycles were randomized, females could be dealt with one by one and thereby managed and controlled. Synchrony, by contrast, would have been a manifestation of inter-female solidarity; its achievement would have granted females a special kind of power, enabling them to escape being privatized by dominant males either monogamously or in harems. (222)

In one of V.'s final manifestations in the novel, as Mara, both her association with other women and her disruptive presence in a totalitarian state are significant in terms of Knight's argument. The "sorceress Mara" declares to the Imperial court in Constantinople:

"I have done it all . . . taught your wives to love their own bodies, showed them the luxury of a woman's love; restored potency to your eunuchs so that they may enjoy one another as well as the three hundred perfumed, female beasts of your harem." (463)

This "powerful inter-female coalition," to borrow Knight's phrase (220), looks back to Rachel's love for Esther, to Rachel's assurance to Schoenmaker that Esther's period "'has been right on time'" (V 50), and to her ironic remark to Profane that women "'can all be conned because we've all got one of these,' touching her crotch, 'and when it talks we listen'" (384). The notion of a female coalition surfaces with explicit reference to menstruation when the narrator quips that Mafia Winsome's novels "ran a thousand pages each and like sanitary napkins had gathered in an immense and faithful sisterhood of consumers" (125).

Even the minor character Hanne is introduced against the backdrop of this menstrual economy. Thinking "Damn men and their politics," she is suddenly struck by her inability to wash an eerie stain off a plate:

She rinsed and stacked the last plate. No. A stain. Back went the plate into the dishwater. Hanne scrubbed, then examined the plate again, tilting it toward the light. The stain was still there. Hardly visible. Roughly triangular, it extended from an apex near the center to a base an inch or so from the edge. A sort of brown color, outlines indistinct against the faded

white of the plate's surface. . . . The stain flickered . . . now crescent, now trapezoid. (90)

The stain then seems to fasten to her eyes, affecting her vision and swimming "over the crowd, like a tongue on Pentecost" (92). It seems to indicate her peculiar affinity with another realm of meaning or communication within a male-dominated world. Pynchon never explains the stain; it flickers in and out of sight. As the authors of *The Curse* argue, menstrual blood appears in literature "invariably in disguise" (Delaney 186). The unmentionable is a submerged symbolic possibility: "A number of poetic symbols may at times signify menstruation: sickness, mud, volcanoes, the arrival of a visitor, bathing, dumping garbage, falling from a high place, odors, leakages, stains, clocks, swamps, rags, tamps, tidal rhythms, and the colors red, pink, and purple" (187). To this list of colors, we could add Pynchon's "sort of brown . . . against the faded white." The stain on the plate appears when Hanne questions the way men and their politics devastate or (and the word is implied in the text) "fuck up" the world: "Didn't they even use the same word for what a man does to a woman and what a successful politician does to his unlucky opponent?" (90). Seeing something the men around her do not, Hanne is initiated by this menstrual image into V.'s political vision: the fluid space between "'Right and Left,'" in which the "'dreamscape of the future'" escapes the violence of the past and present (468). Associated with the Pentecost, the stain implies that Hanne has access to something sacred, to something that ushers in communion with others.

When Stencil père asks, "what gift of communication could ever come from a woman[?]" the text appears to provide an answer in menstruation. Hanne's vision of the stain links directly with Sidney's train of thought:

The matter of a Paraclete's coming, the comforter, the dove; the tongues of flame, the gift of tongues: Pentecost. Third Person of the Trinity. None of it was implausible to Stencil. The Father had come and gone. In political terms, the Father was the Prince; the single leader, the dynamic figure whose virtù used to be a determinant of history. This had degenerated to the Son, genius of the liberal love-feast which had produced 1848 and lately the overthrow of the Czars. What next? What Apocalypse?

Especially on Malta, a matriarchal island. Would the Paraclete be also a mother? Comforter, true. But what gift of communication could ever come from a woman. (472)

Roony Winsome seems to be asking the same question when he smuggles “a tape recorder, disguised as a Kotex dispenser, into the ladies’ room at Penn Station” (124). Between the Christian imagery in Sidney Stencil’s reverie and the commonplace image of a Kotex dispenser, the conceptualization of menstruation draws sacred and profane together. Menstrual blood is both a stain or smear and a sign of communion or comfort. It reemerges as this integrated symbol in the sewer-parish where Profane hunts alligators. Near the place where an old priest had “sat preaching to a congregation of rats with saints’ names, all to the intention of peace” (120), Profane notices a strange stain. At the nexus of sacred and profane, a possible image of menstrual blood briefly flashes into view: Profane “swung the beam over the old inscriptions, saw a dark stain shaped like a crucifix and broke out in goose bumps” (121). Profane’s reaction is one of mystification, even terror, before the sacred. Here, in the sewer, is a possible clue to the meaning of V. The stain is clearly over-coded, and like menstrual blood, it is associated with the blood of the crucified Christ.<sup>8</sup>

V. is a threshold figure, bridging sacred and profane, presence and absence, past and present. She displaces either/or oppositions, marking the limits of order and contaminating it. Her element, as Mara, is the sea; as one version of all the other female characters, Mara makes the link between the sea and menstrual blood. The two fluids interconnect in cosmogonic myths. As Mircea Eliade illustrates in *The Sacred and the Profane*: “In whatever religious complex we find them, the waters invariably retain their function; they disintegrate, abolish forms, ‘wash away sins’; they are at once purifying and regenerating” (131). And as Knight follows, human culture began along shores, where women synchronized their periods with the lunar/tidal rhythms. The flow of water and the flow of blood are inextricably linked in cosmologies around the world; they are the fluids which make existence possible. Each is linked in turn to periodical destruction and regeneration; flooding water and flowing blood subsume the opposition of death and life. A cosmological vision arising out of menstrual symbolism—“blood-drenched cosmogonies,” in Eliade’s words (SP 51)—does not, therefore, separate form from formlessness, life from death, cosmos from chaos.

In Pynchon’s chaotic world—“Ten million dead and twice that wounded,” as Sidney Stencil muses about the First World War (458–59)—the messenger of some kind of cosmological order materializes as V. The text aligns blood from wounds with menstrual blood, intimating that the world may *not* destroy itself, that there can be bleeding without dying, a new cycle following from an old one. Maijstral thinks

he performs V.'s last rites when, kneeling over her mutilated body, he uses "her own blood, dipping it from the navel as from a chalice" to perform the sacrament of Extreme Unction (344). But V.'s chalice-like bleeding navel provides an image of resurrection. Like Kali (recalled by the name of a military airfield, Ta Kali, repeatedly mentioned in Maijstral's memoirs), V. establishes a cyclical connection between life and death.<sup>9</sup> As Kali, the "blood-drinking" menstrual goddess in whom "cosmic vengeance materializes" (Helen Smith 74), she enters the scene, with her own blood on her lips, when Maijstral thinks the world is coming to an end.

Poised against the bleeding V. are the inanimate machinery and weaponry that smash the buildings where she is apparently killed. While machinery eventually grinds to a halt, and grinds other things to dust, the human body—particularly the female body—exhibits the flux and flow of a larger, cosmic order. For instance, V.'s greatest love, Mélanie, also juxtaposed with machinery, stalls the advance of mechanization by her symbolic actions. During the mechanized dance in chapter 14, when she is lifted above the stage by a troupe of dancing robots, she allows herself to be impaled in the crotch by a long pole. Having refused or forgotten to wear "a protective metal . . . chastity belt" (V 414), she gushes blood down her legs. This blood is another ambiguous crucifixion/menstrual image: a sort of not-death, a reminder of the life beneath the layers of mechanization over Mélanie, a sacrifice. Mélanie's blood imparts her defiance of the system which tries to deform her body or encapsulate it within its machinery. The hideous dance (a perversion, perhaps, of ancient menstrual dances<sup>10</sup>) never makes it past opening night. As Katherine Sutherland writes, female blood is imagined as "potentially destructive but also absolutely constructive of culture itself. . . . Although it circulates in a closed and patriarchal system, it threatens always to transgress the boundaries of that closed system, thus destroying the system" (30–31). Mélanie's bleeding vagina, positioned at center stage, marks a return of the repressed; Mélanie is unbound, and she unveils what is usually hidden from sight, leaving the spectators a sight they would live with "for many years" (V 414).

According to Knight (contra Levi-Strauss), women were not originally passive objects of exchange between men. Menstrual blood, furthermore, was not always concealed or banished from sight; archaeologists have uncovered countless depictions of menstruating women.<sup>11</sup> Of menstrual taboos and "their recurrent magical and cosmological dimensions," Knight writes: "a menstruating woman may be forbidden—but she is forbidden not because of her powerlessness or degradation, but, on the contrary, precisely because of the peculiar intensity of her assumed magical powers" (385). In the ancient "blood-



centered symbolic systems" (282), women's cycles were "powerful clocks," in time with the changing moon. Ancient astronomical and arithmetic systems reveal the correspondence between female periodicity and the cycle of the moon. As custodians of the lunar calendar, women initiated a "menstrual self-identity" (374) and drew cooperative men into it. They synchronized themselves for sexual and political reasons: to draw men into blood taboos around which reproduction was organized in the name of collectivity, to create a ritual domain of human life and death, and to maintain female solidarity. The species endured, Knight claims, because women initiated solidarity among themselves and with men.

We may glimpse the concept of the female body-clock in Pynchon's depictions of woman-woman love and friendship. Throughout *V.*, moreover, there are allusions to the "rhythms" and "pulse" of history (307), to *V.*'s clockwork eye, to the possible existence of another conceptualization of time.<sup>12</sup> Rachel, for example, viewing the reflection of a clock in a mirror, ponders:

here were time and reverse-time, co-existing, cancelling one another exactly out. Were there many such reference points, scattered through the world, perhaps only at nodes like this room which housed a transient population of the imperfect, the dissatisfied; did real time plus virtual or mirror-time equal zero and thus serve some half-understood moral purpose? (46)

The world has not always conceived of, or feared, time as linear and apocalyptic, as Eliade explains in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. A lunar perspective once informed a "cyclical conception of . . . disappearance and reappearance" (87); an ontology of cyclical time, derived from the waxing and waning of the moon, linked humanity to the rhythms of the cosmos. With her red cape and "glass eye in the shape of a clock" (*V.* 388), *V.* conjures up a menstrual, cyclical dimension of time which equivocates the despair, articulated by Profane, that "It's one way. . . . All one way" toward death and destruction (286).

*V.*, endlessly conjuring up symbols of menstruation, is a sorceress or witch: "Oh, at last he knew: he was in the presence of a witch," remarks Mehemet to Sidney Stencil on *V.*'s manifestation to the Sultan as Mara (463). She is the menstruous and monstrous figure who bewitches the text and exceeds the boundaries of representation. Spreading contagious advice and leaving traces of herself everywhere, *V.* diffuses; she inheres in an economy of fluidity which shimmers as both a curse and a cure. By referring to her in memoirs bequeathed to

the next generation, Stencil père and Maijstral ultimately align her with the proliferating power of writing. *V.* links blood to ink, the poisonous cure of memory and intention (as Derrida argues in *Dissemination*).<sup>13</sup> In the medium of blood-ink, *V.* unfixes truth—the intended meaning from father to child—and gives rise to multiple interpretations. As Jardine writes, *V.* is “the space of slippage, the spaces of non-resemblance, within the sign, among the signifier, signified and referent” (248). Menstrual blood is, then, the fluid medium of this slippery movement and indeterminacy.

Sidney Stencil disappears, in the epilogue of *V.*, when his ship is slammed into the depths of the sea by a tremendous waterspout. The image recalls the wrath of *Moby-Dick* and the sinking of the *Pequod*, Melville’s ship of state, because of her captain’s maniacal quest. *V.* thus positions itself within its American literary heritage, lamenting an increasingly technological world hell-bent on destroying itself. The Virgin Land—Henry Nash Smith’s “master symbol” of America (50)—is God’s promise; but it is lost on an overly ambitious, decadent people. Indeed, *V.* reverberates with overtones of the American jeremiad rhetoric on which Melville, like his predecessors, drew. The language of the Puritan political sermons retains its message of “doom and promise” in Pynchon’s world vision (Bercovitch 29). In *V.*, the Old World father leaves a legacy to his (metaphorically) New World son, cryptically encoded as *V.* Perhaps the legacy is America, the Virgin Land, where the promise of cyclical regeneration for a fallen world lies latent. Here, the promise and the warning materialize in *V.*, a figure who embraces oppositions. Her womb is both threatening and fertile—like America, according to the imagery of the old sermons. And according to Pynchon’s imagery, this threat and promise of destruction and creation inhere in the menstrual aspect of his witch-goddess, *V.*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The conjunction “sacred because dangerous” is cited in Chris Knight’s *Blood Relations*. Quoting George Devereux’s “Menstruating Woman as Witch,” Knight illustrates that the equation is also reversible: “‘dangerous because sacred’” (qtd. in Knight 384).

<sup>2</sup>Similarly, Gayatri Spivak, investigating the role of the feminine in philosophical investigation, writes: “The discourse of man is the metaphor of woman” (44). In “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman,” she invokes Derrida’s turn on the word “we” as “we-men” (the “we-men” of philosophy) to claim that “‘we-women’ have never been the heroes of philosophy,” of the kind of interrogations which nonetheless use femininity in the enterprise of

interrogation (49). The philosopher's relation to a world gendered feminine displaces women; the world becomes the womb and then the "idea" (56).

<sup>3</sup>These constructs nonetheless give rise to interpretations like Melvin New's, for example: "Like Godolphin, we would like to impose our own 'dream of order' on the ever-moving surface of *V.*, for like Vheissu, *V.* and all significant literary works can be considered a tattooed woman whose mystery we are driven to penetrate and possess" (102).

<sup>4</sup>Furthermore, while both Fina and Sarah are sacrificed to Pynchon's thematic treatment of male violence, they leave the reader with a haunting image of hollowed and mirthless eyes, eyes formerly filled with reflections of the sky and sea (151 [cf. 139], 272).

<sup>5</sup>Jardine claims, for instance, that *V.* illustrates the son's return "to the mother's-body-in-narrative in order to find himself through an act of heroism and will—one directly leading to his death" (256). And Stimpson asserts that the text engages only two types of women: "mothers and lovers"; according to Stimpson, "ordinary women," in Pynchon's utopic vision, "would be fertile. Goddesses would protect the natural bounty of the womb" (80, 91).

<sup>6</sup>This insistence may be apocryphal. Bob Orlowsky posted an anecdote to the Pynchon e-mail list about a woman who supposedly met Pynchon and referred to his novel as *V*; Pynchon reportedly exclaimed, "It's *V* period. Not *V*! Damn it! *V* PERIOD." Orlowsky ventures, "railing not at her, but at stupid reviewers and readers, I guess" (pynchon-l@waste.org 8 Nov. 1994). Other list members have heard similar stories involving strangers who received this admonition.

<sup>7</sup>The colonial settlers holed up in Foppl's villa, drinking and dancing while the rebellion rages outside, recall the upper-class revelers in Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," who similarly and frivolously attempt to seal themselves off from a source of danger. Delaney, Lupton and Toth, citing Claude Daly's "Menstruation Complex in Literature," write: "Daly thought that Poe's story . . . fully captured the menstruation trauma [male fear of castration and death]. The red, disease-bearing visitor comes like a 'pall of death, shutting out the pre-historic past'" (186).

<sup>8</sup>The iconography of the eucharistic, bleeding god borrows extensively from the menstrual symbolism of goddess religions. See Helen Smith's unpublished dissertation, "The Female Questor," as well as Gail Kern Paster's chapter "Laudable Blood" in *The Body Embarrassed*.

<sup>9</sup>*V.*'s comb, which shows up in the hair of various characters (Victoria Wren, the Bad Priest, Paola Maijstral, Veronica Manganese), also connects her to Kali, as Stimpson notes (83). For Stimpson, the comb's carving of five crucified soldiers is a combined image of destruction and resurrection—the two realms over which Kali presides.

<sup>10</sup>See Knight's association of the Rainbow Snake and the menstrual dance: "the 'Snake' is nothing other than women's culture-creating, menstruation-synchronising dance" (477).

<sup>11</sup>Knight includes many such images among the illustrations in *Blood Relations*.

<sup>12</sup>The moon is also, at one point, "impossibly bright," and a character remarks on it (392).

<sup>13</sup>Linking ink to the *pharmakon*, the poison/remedy, Derrida writes, "there is no such thing as a harmless remedy" (D 99).

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