

***Vineland*: TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA FICTION (Or, St. Ruggles' Struggles, Chapter 4)**

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To and for Sharon and John (and with
apologies to the deft sensibilities of
TDWNN)

It was a bit like this:

T.B. McText, sitting in a backyard in suburban Long Island, homesick Australian on a lit. binge, preferring this suburb-that-could-have-been-anywhere to the hard, strange and unique coffee-grain surfaces of Manhattan. He has the manuscript—for a while at least—until the Pynchon Party starts. No one wants to ask where it came from, though they're curious. There's a call from New Orleans. There's even a reporter for *People* magazine over from Los Angeles to try to suss out all these Pynchon freaks and what's so special about this novel that's going the (admittedly tight) rounds.¹ Not so many miles from Glen Cove, an autumn-cum-winter sun's getting through here and semi-glaring back off the Xeroxed pages. He's only got another hour with the MS, and he's rushing. Only one thing he can think, getting towards the end: what's all the fuss about?

This *Vineland* is a wild offspring:² an odd-shaped egg from the old boiler himself, so curiously egg-bound for so long (seventeen years!—shit, it's already a teenager by the time it's born!) We'd all expected something crisp and pomo as Laurie Anderson, with as many voices and texts interwoven as herself. Something up to date, cyberpunk, inexplicit action, the merging of bodies with one another and with machines; extended philosophical passages of inexplicit narratorship; inconclusive non-resolutions, leaving readers to ponder the abyss, a world pregnant with micro meaningettes but adding up to no Big Ultimate Meaning. We'd heard there was a massive number on the boil (in the boiler?), maybe about the Mason-Dixon line, or even about a Japanese film series starring a giant moth!³ Once the title was out and circulating, some of us had speculated about it being another *V.* A *V.*-inland. Think about that: the push and pop from Europe to America, yo-yoing from *V.* to *Lot 49*, then back to Europe again with *Gravity's Rainbow*. (Art, culture, art . . . as one theory of American lit. would

have it.) The pattern suggested, and pretty much came up with, America again. Like that bloody dog Desmond, at the end, thinking he was home.⁴

But of course, as someone once said, you can't go home again, especially when you're made welcome and comfortable, holing up in that long island, finger pointing out and back through the Atlantic, along the 40th parallel, towards Europe, away from any home in any new world. So it's not so much a novel we're dealing with here as a "Situation," a location of a reading and a writing—which is what any novel must be—a contexted event. It's like no one knows the text "as such." They read or write or both, in places and times and certain conditions. So what's a postmodern boy away from home to make of this lot?

There's a fairly constant, almost traditional narrator, who tells a not-too-tangled tale in an almost linear way, about a guy who's trying to get back his own little bit of post-hippie paradise, his neo-Walden, from the repressive state, enlisting along the way a variety of no-hopers, drop-outs, failures and the usual ragbag of the poor-but-cute. Even the punks are charming.

And after a gallimaufry of detours—the only inexplicable one being a strange encounter in an airplane with alien beings (outside, be it noted, US territory)—there's a kind of cool detective suspense as to whether the Star Wars villain, a Reaganite henchman, will get his way and do a Schwartzkopf on Vineland, or whether the generation that "Won't Get Fooled Again" will return for a local Woodstock reunion. Might have been nicer for this story, a bit more like the Ruggles we know and love, if this never got cleared up, so that McText would be left there, in a Long Island garden, going into the party with a headful of his usual indeterminacy. But instead, the reunion is on. Three generations of women (Sasha, Frenesi and Prairie—plus, of course, DL) finally meet up, necessarily accompanied by their various men, past and present, in the countryside, after their various machinations against, with and around the masculine state-war-and-movie machine. Just like those famous Last Plays. The scene with the burning trees on *Vineland's* dustjacket (which look strangely enough like the trees on Kathryn Hume's front flap) never comes to pass.⁵ Not just an ending (think of *Lot 49*), but a reasonably happy one.

So could it be that there's a more political, even vaguely feminine, angle to old Ruggles these days—after all he said in the intro. to *Slow Learner* about his own fascism and sexism? Well maybe. Like I said, these women seem to be accompanied in most of their small victories, and most other places, by men. While they're clearly valorised, there are plenty of other women around who get referred to, narratorially, as

"hot-eyed packages" (344) and "cheap floozies" (348—only it's in the singular there). There's even a full-blown misogynist comedian whose terrible jokes are sometimes repeated in full. (Why?—are they funny?) Frenesi and the other central women are what used to be called "positive characters," capable of taking action, controlling their destinies as much as anyone can in any province of Pynchonland, but they all seem to require the standard phallus connectors, just like women in the daily soaps and the various other branches of pop culture *Vineland* so closely resembles. In fact, they're not unlike the officially "strong" women you can find just lately in Marvel and DC comics. I'm thinking of *The Huntress*, for example, or the occasional ninja sidekick the (abysmally Bushite) Punisher takes on board.⁶ They fight their share of the battles. They handle the macho weapons and their own deftly-trained muscles exceptionally well. But there's always a view from beneath—a well-placed crotch shot, complete with projecting mons—or else a view from above—a bulging nipple beneath the tight costume—suggesting that behind this tough actional surface (which is problematic enough in its own right) lies just another fuck in some man's endless inventory of imaginary fucks.

Of course, we've come to expect a little standard heterosexual paedophilia from Ruggles. But isn't it perhaps a bit much—McText now turning into the home straight, reading the final chapter, the ending of the beginning of a novel, the place where you complete that overwhelming first impression that stays with you for every other reading—isn't it a bit much, after *Prairie* and *Ché* go on their streetkid shoplifting spree, that the bag should be full of not much more than sexy underwear? And that we should get the obligatory Pynchon scene of teenage girls getting their gear off, putting it on, talking about what men like to see, and the rest (331–32)? Then, in the midst of this, what business has any narrator got saying: "*Prairie* watched them playing centerfold and thought, strangely, of *Zoyd*, her dad, and how much he would have enjoyed the display" (332)? It's not that this narrator can be innocent of the implications—after all, that same narrator makes it pretty damn clear that *Ché's* half-life as a sex worker is a product of getting ogled, felt up and eventually fucked, at home, by her Mom's new old man, curiously known as *Lucky*. So, yes, they're tough, but then so are the main characters in *Kick-Boxing Slave Nymphs of the Orient*.⁷ I won't go on, but it can't go unsaid—again.⁸

What about the rest of the politics? Well, it was touted around in Pynchon-grapevineland for a while that this novel was supposed to answer his friends and critics who said he wasn't writing politically enough. I don't know if that's how it was (who could?)—but it's doing the rounds here as the pages flap in the Long Island breeze. It's

certainly true that the book deals explicitly with real and imagined political events from the Vietnam War to the Contra debacle. It's also true that there's a clear demarcation (perhaps too clear a demarcation) between the politically sound, the politically naive and the politically corrupt. And also: the everyday lives of characters are more clearly tied to national and international political structures and formations than they are in most of the other Pynchon novels (where the political tends to be just one facet of a complex but mysterious controlling Other, refracted through various tensions of paranoid consciousness).

In this sense, along with the shift away from the philosophically speculative "serious lit." of the other novels towards the popular genres of thriller, pulp and soap, it could be said that *Vineland* is much more of a novel of popular political consciousness than we have seen yet from TRP. If only for this one virtue, then, it has to be welcome: it might put a stop to the Pynchon critics' usual transcendental nonsense about binaries, entropy, hope-or-hopelessness, order vs. chaos, and the rest of the dated freshman pseudo-philosophical hysteria that has been the soft backbone of the industry for so long. Whatever the critics are going to make of it in the long run, they are still going to have to write about a political America (an America so much American culture denies) if they are going to write about *Vineland* at all in any half-sensible way.

But there will still be a problem with going along with *Vineland's* politics. Inside the novel, against the state, represented in terms of covert and paranoid dealings in everyday affairs, there is not so much a critique—more a '60s nostalgic quietism. It's as if some possible other America were stillborn in that decade—a potential political shift, now lost to the dominance of popular cultural genres and media (which, incidentally, the "form" of *Vineland* itself draws on), particularly television. Who knows how sympathetic the narratorial viewpoint is—though nothing much else in the novel suggests a counter-position—when Isaiah Two Four tells Zoyd:

"Whole problem 'th you folks's generation . . . nothing personal, is you believed in your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it—but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th' Indians, sold it all to your real enemies, and even in 1970 dollars—it was way too cheap." (373)

Whether *Vineland* always approves of it or not, within its covers there's a wistful nostalgia for a moment in the late '60s or early '70s when it could all have been put to rights, a moment scotched by TV

and drugs, brought together in the form of Tubaldetox Units for unfortunates like Hector, who:

crept out of his ward at night to lurk anywhere Tubes might be glowing, to bathe in rays, lap and suck at the flow of image, more out of control than ever before in his life, arranging clandestine meets in the shadows of secluded gazebos and window reveals with dishonest Tubaldetox attendants who would produce from beneath their browns tiny illicit LCD units smuggled from the outside, which they charged exorbitant rent for and came at dawn to take back. (335)

When you have a twisted brain, its neural, glial and synaptic connections are made sometimes at all the oddest places—and McText is no exception. But when you take such a brain out of its familiar environment and place it in contact with a text it could hardly have expected (such as *Vineland* in Long Island in late 1989), then it will make connections which are barely even metaphorical. Sometimes they're not even worthy of being called "free associations." So when he reads this passage—Hector getting TV fixes from illicit sources—right before a Pynchon Party, he somehow manages to think of some other addicts' insatiable quest for consumable Pynchon texts and trivia. Perhaps to the list that contains TV and drugs we should add trendy fiction?

But that would be to fall into what is, after all, a pretty conservative view of popular culture. Whatever it is that's the latest pop culture wave—Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles *or* Teenage Mutant Ninja Fiction—there seem to be only two available discourses for getting a handle on it. One is an outraged conservatism, whether of the right ("It harms the kids") or of the left ("It keeps the masses' minds off the real machinations of the state"). The other is a kind of libertarianism ("Anything goes, and *should* go, on TV—violence, exploitation, let's have more of it"). Why only two, I wonder? Why are they both so politically problematic? And why does the narratorial position in *Vineland* (with some occasional lapses into celebration) appear to favour the former? I wonder. And I wonder what a Pynchon novel—another and different one—could possibly do, under other circumstances, to shake the dominant binary between knee-jerk conservatism and silly libertarianism?

I have a suspicion, though, that there couldn't be a Pynchon novel like that anymore—at the risk of betraying my own nostalgia for a kind of writing that looks to have passed. There's a character called The King of Mice in John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* who professes the view that "LIFE IS SERIOUS, BUT ART IS FUN."⁹ There's a strong

sense in *Vineland* that the opposite is true: serious Art (whatever that might be), for that reason, can go screw.¹⁰ Via the (sympathetically treated) consciousness of Frenesi, poor TV'd-out Hector, the prospective film-maker:

reminded her of herself when she was in 24fps [a political film collective], inside some wraparound fantasy that she was offering her sacrifice at the altar of Art, and worse, believing that Art gave a shit—here was Hector with so many of the same delusions, just as hopelessly insulated, giving up what seemed already too much for something just as cheesy and worthless. (346)

Hector's film project *is* cheesy, no doubt about it. But were Frenesi's? Were all agitprop-type film groups'? Is all writing, filmic or otherwise, if it ever gets classified as "Art"? Can these seemingly easy transferences be accomplished? It seems to me that there are clearer and finer distinctions to be made here—clearer and finer, especially, than any curious binary between "Art" and "Life." The question is, would you want to buy into any version of it: *The Hotel's* or *Vineland's*? Separating the world into these odd domains called "Art" and "Life" is, for one, a very strange prospect; but then going on to valorise one over the other is even weirder.

I would want to agree that the politics of High Art snobbery—a politics which calls itself apolitical—is to be combatted at every point. But this rejection does not mean that particular versions of "committed art" or "political art" should be repudiated just by virtue of their using the term "art"—though let's by all means dispense with Pynchon's/Frenesi's¹¹ capital "A." This must be especially pertinent after Derrida's strong arguments for a politics of/as writing.¹² So, slipping into a completely unwarranted transference of my own, between Frenesi and "Pynchon"—if I may be allowed that brief moment: assuming that, say, *Gravity's Rainbow* is (more than *Vineland*) somehow a contender for the epithet "art," it also seems to be the case—and more important—that a novel like *Gravity's Rainbow* (considered as a post-rhetorical and perhaps post-generic text) opens a lot more scope for critique, in the sense of challenging strongly-held views about how the world can and should be represented, than does a novel like *Vineland*, where there's (as I have said) a more overt "real world" politics on the surface of the narrative but much less of a challenge to how people in post-industrial societies might think (of themselves, and necessarily of their political milieux). This is especially so when the "vehicle" for *Vineland's* politics is a continually retrospective and nostalgic consciousness. There's no doubt about it:

Vineland is a very different novel from the rest in many respects, but especially in the sense that it tries to *cut off and close down* the indeterminacy of meanings just as much as the others tried to add them on and open them up.

So, getting back to these relics of the '60s—Frenesi, Hector, Zoyd and the rest: it seems that, since they missed their golden moment (a moment when idealist peace rhetoric looked like it might just spill over into actual and new political structures), they are now condemned to being mere simulacra, tokens of a past political struggle. When Frenesi refuses to cross an airport picket line, you can't help but feel that someone is poking fun at her. She seems so silly: "'Darlin', Flash advised her, 'these folks don't fly the airplane, all's they take care of's the maintenance in the terminal, so just don't use the toilet or nothin', OK?'" (351). And then, adding a note of barely reconstructed almost-pastoral idealism, the narrative has the striking workers vote to let Frenesi and family through the line!

At La Guardia, just a ways up the road from this garden where he sits reading, the Eastern Airlines staff have been on strike for months. And getting nowhere. They're confined to a tiny roped-off area in one small part of the entrance to one terminal. They walk around it with placards, caged and pacing, treated (by both airport authorities and passengers) like zoo animals or museum exhibits instead of men and women with dignity.¹³ As *Vineland* plays with the remnants of an outmoded politics, America goes its way, treading heavily in a space where labour relations might exist—as "Pynchon" might say, "following its dick"¹⁴—looking for the next footfall.

So, he has to wonder, as the last crisp slip of American quarto gets turned up on the thick pile that is the *Vineland* MS, as the guests begin to arrive for the party: where did this wildish child come from? There's something bugging him, another misconnection of the twisted brain waiting to be made. Though he doesn't work it out until much later, after a surprise discovery of a bottle of Tyrrell's Australian Long Flat Red on the Party table, it ends up coming out like this:

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Vineland is set mainly in 1984. An important year in several respects for some—and not without literary significance. I mean, same year as that the Scots novelist Iain Banks' first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, came out. It was incredibly badly received by the critics. By comparison *Vineland* got off scot free. To quote only a few instances—each with its own Pynchonian resonances:

If the story of two mad and vicious half-siblings (one certified, the other at large to persist in the systematic persecution of brute creation) appeals, then the contrived hermaphroditic condition of one will add further salacious value to the fantasy. The majority of the literate public, however, will be relieved that only reviewers are obliged to look at any of it. (*Irish Times*)

A literary equivalent of the nastiest brand of juvenile delinquency: inflicting outrages on animals. (*TLS*)

A repulsive piece of work and will therefore be widely admired. Piles horror upon horror in a way that is certain to satisfy those readers who subscribe to the currently fashionable notion that Man is vile. (*Evening Standard*)

Any resumé is bound to read like a cross between Charles Addams and the d.t.'s. (*Observer*)

And there's a lot more like this, proudly reprinted in the front of the Futura paperback edition. Ruggles: read this and weep.

The twisted brain landed on *The Wasp Factory*, however, because it too has a central character who is a wild child—much wilder than Prairie. Though Frank is confined to a small island in Scotland and doesn't have the whole of America to run riot in (perhaps wildness dissipates in proportion to the space available?). Not a shopping mall in sight here; just sand dunes. (Americans could think of *Local Hero*.) Frank's brother, Eric, who appears in the novel almost exclusively via his wonderfully asemiotic phone calls, does have a wider range—being, as he is, on the run from the nuthouse. His particular penchant is for setting fire to dogs—but that's another tale altogether. Frank and—perhaps—Eric are somewhat curious about their own parentage—like Prairie. Like Prairie, too, they have an ex-hippie father, a biochemist, who has become something of a recluse. Again, the father's life in the '60s and its meanings are pretty much lost on babyboomers' babies. Frank, though—much more clearly than Prairie—has an obsession and a fascination with discovering the details of his conception, origins and early childhood.¹⁶ There's something back there, in the earliest years, days or moments (he doesn't know which) that has had some terrible effect upon his life—and he suspects that there must be something equally odd about Eric's past that needs to be cleared up. The old house Frank lives in with Angus (the father) is decorated with old hippie symbols and designs. Must be like growing up in a former Nazi stronghold in 1956, say. There are constant, if obscure, references to

Angus's life and other events back then. Otherwise Angus is just your average dour old Scot. Frank knows, if there is any crucial evidence on his case, it's hidden away in his father's study. But the door is kept resolutely, paranoiacally locked. It's just about the only space on the island Frank can't access.

Then one day his father gets even more horribly drunk than ever before and passes out—allowing Frank the chance to take the key to the study door. What he finds behind it, something of crucial significance to *that* novel, I won't relate here. But there is something else there of significance to this *other* novel: namely, a novel.

Most of it was junk. Junk and chemicals. The drawers of the desk and the bureau were filled with ancient photographs and papers. There were old letters, old bills and notes, deeds and forms and insurance policies . . . pages from a short story or novel somebody had been writing on a cheap typewriter, covered in corrections and still awful (something about hippies in a commune in the desert somewhere making contact with aliens) . . . some old Beatles singles . . . Rubbish, all rubbish.¹⁶

A "novel somebody had been writing on a cheap typewriter . . .,"
u.s.w.

I think this is what is forming in his twisted brain, as that last sheet is turned over and put down on the garden table, to be realised later in a bottle of the good LFR. But *you can never be too sure with fictional characters*. And anyway, the party is starting, and the journalist from *People* magazine is already asking questions about the mysterious Mr. P. Better let someone else have a look at this. Every dog has his day. Just the one though—no matter how good.

Whatever else gets said about *Vineland*—and I suspect it's going to be very, very mixed—this curious egg-novel, in which everyone except the dog has a doggy name, will one day make a great David Lynch mini-series. It's not particularly filmic—but it has tremendous television potential. Be interesting to see whether TRP & Co. would allow that.

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Notes

¹Jamie Diamond, "Pages," *People* (29 Jan. 1990): 63, 65–66.

²Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990).

³Robert D. Newman, *Understanding Thomas Pynchon* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1986) 4.

⁴There's a character called Eric later in this story who'd have something to say about that.

⁵Kathryn Hume, *Pynchon's Mythography: An Approach to Gravity's Rainbow* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987).

⁶*The Punisher* (Marvel Comics 2.25 [Nov. 1989]).

⁷Anon., "Movie Reviews," *Macho Pig* 1.1 (1990): 39.

⁸Alec McHoul, "Gravity's Rainbow's Golden Sections," *Pynchon Notes* 20–21 (1987): 31–38.

⁹John Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire* (London: Corgi, 1982) 274.

¹⁰The philistinism this betrays tallies with the grapevine rumour that *Vineland* was going pop: going for the airport book-stands and so on. But by the same token, *Vineland* is pretty selective in the popular forms it celebrates: hence the campaign against (?) the Tube.

¹¹It's hard to attribute this position to anyone exactly. The old indeterminacy creeps in. Let's say that both of these characters have been underground for quite a while—and perhaps that the undergrounds have their own texts and codes.

¹²Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978).

¹³Alec McHoul, "What's Left?: Politics in America at the End of the 1980s," *Meanjin* 49.2 (1990): 317–23.

¹⁴See *Vineland* 364 ("dick") and 377 ("penis").

¹⁵Remember that Prairie is none too anxious to meet her mother—the moment itself is pretty cool-but-caring—nor is she particularly fazed by the late discovery, à la *Star Wars*, that Brock Vond (cf. Darth Vader) is her father.

¹⁶Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (London: Macmillan, 1984) 172.