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THOMAS PYNCHON

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Introduction:

Thomas Pynchon: A Parody of Polemics

Teleological frustration—the unifying theme of Thomas Pynchon’s fiction—is manifest quite distinctly in each of his major works. One’s quest for design and purpose in an absurd world is undeniably central to Pynchon, yet at the heart of that teleology is the pursuit of individualism and personal freedom in a labyrinth of global warfare and multinational capitalism. For Herbert Stencil, that struggle is with the subjectivity of history and the purported “historical truths” of tourist-dictated guide books through commercially historical landscapes; for Oedipa Maas, that struggle is against the patriarchal arbiters of her bourgeois Californian culture; for Tyrone Slothrop, it is with the eschatological Ideological State Apparatuses of his middle-class upbringing. Even in Pynchon’s shorter work “Entropy,” Callisto’s anxiety concerning the “eventual heat-death for the universe” (85) is predicated upon the uncertainty and conjecture of meteorological science. Yet each of these quests addresses the sublimely bizarre, apocalyptic environment of twentieth-century capitalist culture. The V2 bombing campaign of London, anarchist Porky Pig cartoons, the Herero Genocide in German South-West Africa, all manner of sexual and commodity fetishists, rhinoplasty, Beatlemania, the folklorization of science, Plastic Man comic books, Tupperware parties, and, indeed, every comical, peculiar, or terrifyingly real facet of late capitalism undergirds Pynchon’s often ribald indictment of a capitalist mode of production.

Yet simply acknowledging Pynchon’s work as an interrogation of the systemic problems with capitalism and liberal bourgeois values would be to only decode half of his cipher. When one digs beyond the surface level of these texts and considers the

numerous critical approaches and philosophic outlooks that Pynchon parodies—Machiavellianism of the late nineteenth century through characters like Raphael Mantissa, Cesare, and the Gaucho in *V.*; mathematically purported “truths” through Roger Mexico’s insistent (and failed) application of the Poisson Distribution in *Gravity’s Rainbow*; New Critical orthodoxy and its singular interpretation of a text through Emory Bortz and his cynical graduate students’ snide remarks on the historicization of canonical authors in *The Crying of Lot 49*; Pavlovian psychology through Pointsman’s short-sighted (and, again, failed) study of Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*; the conjectural nature of meteorology through Callisto’s unsupported fear of the universe’s inevitable “heat-death” in “Entropy”; Freudian Psychology (relentlessly parodied in all Pynchon’s novels) through Oepida’s former-Buchenwald-employee-turned-acid-dosed-psychiatrist Dr. Hilarius, through Dr. Eigenvaule’s psychodontia sessions with Stencil in *V.*, and through Oedipa Maas’s very name—one acknowledges Pynchon’s skepticism toward the myopia of various philosophical perspectives and appeals to logic when applied to the horrifying and logically unsettled world of late capitalism: the world of the V2 bombing campaign and the Suez Crisis, California supermarkets and inevitable, drastic climate change.

Indeed, Pynchon often employs and refuses various critical discourses through characters who are representatives for these discourses, yet in stark contrast to his cynicism—and indeed skepticism and often hostility—towards the applications of Freudian and Pavlovian psychology, New Criticism, Machiavellianism, and capitalism in general is the noticeable absence of parodic treatment of other schools of thought or

critical approaches. And in this distinct absence of skepticism toward certain critical approaches, Pynchon exposes his sympathies.

Metafiction, as defined by Jeremy Hawthorn in *Studying the Novel*, is “the sort of novel or short story which deliberately breaks fictive illusions and comments directly upon its own fictive nature or process of composition” (Hawthorn 156). While it is perhaps superfluous to assert that Thomas Pynchon’s novels are metafictional—or at least have metafictional aspects—the name of every single one of his characters in every piece of his fiction clearly suggests his tendency to bear the devices of his texts. By tagging his characters with names like Oedipa Maas, Tyrone Slothrop, Benny Profane, Stanley Kotecks, Mike Fallopian, Prairie Wheeler, Ned Pointsman, Callisto, Herbert Stencil, Manny DiPresso, etc., Pynchon childishly parodies the act of allusion itself. And this parody of onomasiology seems to emulate—if not directly target—any lingering Jamesian types or remaining descendents of early allegories and medieval morality plays still occupying the literary canon.

Specifically discussing the significance of the name of Oedipa Maas, in his *Companion to Crying of Lot 49*, Grant notes “[m]ost take for granted that it is significant in a straightforward way: by referring the reader to some extratextual network of meanings the name appropriates some or all of those meanings for the novel, which thus draws part of the significance from the resonances they generate” (3). The problematic issue for the reader, however, is that Pynchon’s fiction—and most postmodern fiction in general—relies on these entrenched tropes and conventions of Western literature, while openly expressing hostility toward one of the foundational elements of traditional literary interpretation: allusion. This built-in, self-reflexive commentary on narrative devices

functions as a parody of interpretive techniques at the expense of the well read by humoring the reader's interpretive tendencies only to expose the artificiality of the literary device itself. And, in a sense, this strategy works as an indictment of Western literary tropes more generally by reconsidering and deforming the assumption that a text—while open to various interpretations—should have something resembling a fixed meaning or network of meanings, a belief that resonates in Randolph Driblette's questions to Oedipa: "Why...is everybody so interested in texts?" (61). Pynchon's idiosyncratic manner of naming characters challenges this notion as he simultaneously employs and rejects this convention; he offers the drowning reader a life preserver in the same instant that he deflates it, extending the reader a familiar device and then declaring that device bankrupt or exhausted. This antipathy toward the conventions of the past and the resulting sense of frustration over the suggestion that the literary canon is overpopulated and polluted with stodgy, staid customs manifests itself in Pynchon's fiction through an undeniably childish system of signification. Peter Pinguid—of the Peter Pinguid society in *The Crying of Lot 49*—for example, has been glossed as "greasy prick" (Grant 59-60), and, of course, the names of characters like Frenesi Wheeler—not to mention Stanley Koteks and Mike Fallopian—are almost deliberately anti-subtle in their assertion of innuendo. The reader is thus stripped of one of the useful tools of text analysis previously at their disposal. Beyond lampooning the simplicity of certain literary devices, however, Pynchon's novels do make distinct and profound statements. And while his novels may do more to expose the futility of accepting any one view, any one polemic, they still support particular perspectives.

And Pynchon's novels certainly do parody the act of polemics. Throughout his fiction, characters assert or embody one specific solution to a massive problem, and those characters are inevitably destined to fail or made to look foolish. As one of the chief exemplars of a myopic polemicist in all of Pynchon's fiction, Ned Pointsman's delusions of grandeur in *Gravity's Rainbow* are finally defused after a botched attempt to castrate Slothrop, resulting in career suicide for Pointsman. And Slothrop himself—as well as Oedipa and Stencil—only fails when he asserts a polemic, when he positions one person or group as guilty or chiefly responsible for something: Slothrop disintegrates, only to discover that “there never was a Dr. Jamf...Jamf was only a fiction”(738), and he was instrumental in his own ideological oppression all along; Oedipa is left with “only some vague idea about causing a scene violent enough to bring the cops into it” (151), and Stencil finally concedes that “V. is a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth” (500). Whether the individual character is treated sympathetically or unfavorably, his or her defeat is the result of a failed attempt to pursue a single answer, to obey a single network of beliefs.

When asked why he does not engage in polemics, Michel Foucault responded, “[the polemicist] proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question...my attitude isn't a result of the form of critique that claims to be a methodical examination in order to reject all possible solutions except for the one valid one. It is more on the order of ‘problematization’” (19-20). Like Foucault, Pynchon does not prescriptively assert a polemic, simply because it would be anathema to his pursuit of exposing the ideological flaws of his characters' myopic perspectives. Instead, he

problematizes the very assumptions of pronounced ideological statements through his recurring presentation of frustrated polemicists.

Yet while Pynchon does avoid any pronounced polemical statement, he is particularly inviting of feminist perspectives; exceeding mere sympathy, his novels are often wholly compatible with a gynocentric outlook, as many have noted. Josephine Hendin argues, “V. herself is female serenity, the clean eternal balance of emotional control. She absorbs the force of war, of all male thrusts, as erotic curios, and returns them” (39). Similarly, Mattessich argues that “Stencil...serve[s] Pynchon as [a vehicle] for parody of the male discourse on women” (3). On the other hand, certain critics either disregard these overtly gynocentric themes, or simply interpret them more generally as an aspect of Pynchon’s literary parody. Regarding Pynchon’s characters’ names as a hermeneutic smokescreen, these critics see his peculiar system of signification and onomastic transvestitism—evident in the names of characters like Oedipa or Mike Fallopian—as a red herring. Caesar, for example, claims that “Oedipa is no Oedipus, or only one at the earnest reader’s peril” (5), and Tanner argues that “[c]haracter’ and identity are not stable in his fiction, and the wild names he gives his ‘characters’...either signify too much...or too little” (178). Tanner further asserts that Pynchon’s characters’ names “are a gesture against the tyranny of naming itself” (ibid). And while this idiosyncratic system of signification does reconsider—and perhaps defuse or discredit—the necessity of emphasis on the gesture of allusion, it is not accurate to solely regard these names as simply an indictment of literary tropes; indeed, parody and meaningfulness are not mutually exclusive interpretations. Although Pynchon’s fiction often appropriates traditional or mythical narratives to an absurd extent—like a suburban

housewife whose name is a variation on that of a mythical king, or the depiction in *Gravity's Rainbow* of Christ's birth from the perspective of an insect present in the manger—his female characters are undeniably assertive and subversive of a feminine stereotype, especially in contrast to their male counterparts: Aubade in “Entropy” punches through the apartment window as Callisto lies motionless; Oedipa rages against her patriarchal oppressors (the Tristero), while her husband is too insecure and self-critical to maintain his job as a used car salesman without feeling like a swindler or a fraud; Vera Meroving seduces and sexually dominates a colony of genocidal rapists in German South-West Africa; Victoria Wren debauches British intelligence officers in Egypt; the Bad Priest in Valletta patiently endures the physical agony of being dismembered by children, and Domina Nocturna whips and tames Brigadier Pudding into a docile coprophagist. In each instance, Pynchon's female characters exert their dominance over the phallogentric, over forces of patriarchy and imperialism.

Although his characters' names may entail a parody of typical interpretive techniques—simultaneously enticing and deflating the hermeneutic impulse—the characters themselves are treated with more sensitivity—often with sincerity and reverence. Various critics acknowledge this sensitivity in Pynchon's fiction toward those who have been traditionally disinherited or disregarded throughout the Western Literary Tradition. Patrick O'Donnell, for instance, supports Cathy Davidson's assertion that “[Oedipa] effectively ‘challenges the cherished myths of a male-dominated society, assumptions which, in their way, comprise a Sphinx as implacable as the female figure encountered by her mythic namesake’” (Qtd. in O'Donnell 9). Indeed, despite—or perhaps because of—the unavoidable ironic discrepancy between the forceful phallic

suggestions of her name and the culturally designated subordinate position of her gender, Oedipa's purpose within the novel greatly exceeds the simplistic metafictional function of interrogating literary devices, like allusions; rather, she serves Pynchon as a reconsideration and exaltation of a feminine type. Through her alignment with an ancient king, Oedipa subsumes the implied regal force of Oedipus and redirects his kingly power to fulfill her own quest of deciphering her male-dominated culture, thereby co-opting a phallogentric construct—the archetypal quest—and using it to understand, and therefore undermine, the very source of that construct—her culture.

Pynchon's first two novels, in a sense, are complementary texts. In *The Crying of Lot 49* the feminine voice is provided a platform; in *V. the Feminine* exercises supremacy. And many critics have argued the connection between these novels. Hite purports, "In many ways *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to respond to those reviewers who maintained that in *V.* Pynchon was unable to control his subject matter" and that "[*The Crying of Lot 49*] is a minimalist remake of *V.*" (67). Likewise, Mendelson claims, "Pynchon's first two novels are in many ways inverted mirror images" (112). Parsing out the novel's distinct uses of entropy as a theme, he argues that in *V.* entropy is used as a metaphorical corollary for our modern culture's ensuing demise: the inevitable projection towards the inanimate; *Crying*, he argues, depicts an individual's salvation from succumbing to the same variety of entropy: the Tristero as a solution—albeit one that is never fully realized by the protagonist—to the "exitlessness" of modern society (117). Considering Mendelson's assertions about entropy and reapplying them in terms of the novels' statements about Womanhood, the Tristero is such an enticing prospect for Oedipa for the very reasons that Mendelson argues: it introduces the opportunity of an

exit from the inescapable system of patriarchally-governed consumerism in which she is so entangled. As Oedipa comes to realize, “San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America” (147). The Tristero is her hope of escape, but as a woman, she is restricted from its ameliorative promises. V., on the other hand, has already made her escape from the feedback loop of modern culture, and centuries before Stencil stumbles across her name in Sidney’s journals.

Both V. and Oedipa represent a distinct opportunity of transcendence for woman-kind, yet the former has achieved that ideal, while the latter is always restricted. In each case, however, the Feminine is placed as the mitigating factor between the historical and the metaphysical, mediating the tension between disparate teleological inquiries of all disciplines—psychology, philosophy, mathematics, the hard sciences, and even the humanities—all of which Pynchon depicts as both inextricably phallogentric and doomed for failure. Pynchon problematizes polemics, and while his novels do support a gynocentric outlook by presenting sympathetic depictions of female characters, they do not declare the Feminine as the solution to greater riddles of the universe, nor do they simply demand the necessity for the superiority of female characters over male characters; instead, they exalt the Feminine by allowing her to expose the futility of such endeavors and the flaws of these male-dominated critical discourses. And in his placement of the Feminine at that critical point in the perpetually thwarted pursuit of the Truth, Pynchon confers a distinct amount of power on his female characters, not simplistically advancing a gynocentric position—or any prescriptivist position for that

matter—but suggesting the inadequacy of the multitude of phallographic positions from a descriptivist perspective. And simply because they were conceived by a male consciousness, his novels can never approach pure “white ink”— pure *écriture féminine*—yet they certainly do challenge the fundamental assumptions of patriarchal bourgeois culture.

Chapter 1

The Female Quester, the Ideological State Apparatus, and the Conspiracy Theory in *The*

Crying Of Lot 49

Advanced industrial society is indeed a system of countervailing powers. But these forces cancel each other out in a higher unification—in the common interest to defend and extend the established position, to combat the historical alternatives, to contain qualitative change.

--Herbert Marcuse,
One-Dimensional Man

Like all of Pynchon's protagonists, Oedipa Mass is trapped in an environment of inescapable, hegemonic consumerism, and the endless delights available to the bourgeois ideologue housewife of the 1960s are very much a part of her daily routine: fondue, Tupperware parties, whiskey sours, and television. Yet all these comforts of her suburban lifestyle are irreversibly disrupted as she gains an awareness of the possibility of the Tristero and she is awakened to the potential of escape from her vapid existence as a southern Californian—and as an American in general. Despite her multifaceted investigation, the ameliorative prospect of the Tristero—of transcendence from the “endless convoluted incest” (5) of American consumerism and mainstream culture—remains just that for Oedipa: a possibility.

In her attempted completion of Inverarity's gnomon, Oedipa investigates every unusual, aberrant, or downright weird fascination of American culture: from the physics thought experiments of Maxwell's Demon, to philately, to plain-old psychoanalysis. She eventually faces the truth, however, that her larger inquisition deals only superficially with Inverarity or even the Tristero, and her true quest is into the underbelly of American society—acknowledging that “she had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America” (147).

However, Oedipa's slice of the American landscape, San Narciso, is very much governed by forces of patriarchy, as she discovers at every turn that "Inverarity owned that too" (26). Indeed, the most frustrating of masculine presences—an ex-boyfriend—is a ubiquitous and oppressive force throughout Oedipa's landscape. Ultimately being driven "out of [her] skull" (141), Oedipa discovers the omnipresence of phallogentrism in San Narciso embodied—or rather disembodied—in the presence of Pierce Inverarity.

And on multiple levels, *The Crying of Lot 49* is certainly sympathetic to the weight of phallogentrism. While Oedipa's quest is directly impelled by her curiosity about the Tristero, her broader frustration is with the patriarchal society of San Narciso—and America in general. And trapped in a male-dominated universe Oedipa certainly is. Consider the deficit of woman-kind in the novel: disregarding the minor characters of Helga Blamm, Grace Bortz, and the Paranoids' girlfriends, Oedipa is virtually the only female in her distinctly male-populated world. Metzger, Mucho, Pierce, Hilarius, Manny DiPresso, Roseman, Mike Fallopian, Stanley Koteks, Mr. Toth, Tony Jaguar, Ghengis Cohen, Randolph Driblette, Emory Bortz, Zvi, the old sailor, and Winthrop Tremaine are all not only men, but can be linked to the Tristero. Since the technicalities of this shadowy organization are never clearly outlined, the Tristero is never explicitly designated a "boys-club." However, the absence of female members—or even of Oedipa's knowledge of female members—certainly suggests that the organization's membership is distinctly male.

For a male author to even attempt such sensitivity to issues of womanhood, as Virginia Woolf argues in *A Room of One's Own*, is an unusually difficult task—one that she pronounces inherently flawed and perhaps impossible. According to Woolf, "it

remains obvious, even in the writings of Proust, that a man is terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of women, as a woman in her knowledge of men” (87). Offering the example of a notably masterful male author—one whose complexity Woolf admittedly admires—she argues that the greatest male literary minds are incapable of successfully capturing a woman’s consciousness. Accepting her belief that male and female consciousness are naturally mysterious to each other, Pynchon’s attempt at creating a female consciousness—much like countless male authors before him—may not even approach perfection, but his willingness to attempt a female perspective—and sympathetically, nonetheless—is evidence enough to support his compatibility with gynocentric perspectives. Pynchon’s pursuit, however, goes beyond mere sympathy—for blanket sympathy is arguably repressed condescension, and that would tacitly assert that woman-kind is naturally inferior to mankind. And condescension to women—or any culturally oppressed group, for that matter—is anathema to Pynchon’s larger goal. As Cooper argues, “Pynchon, like his character Dennis Flange, romanticizes or idealizes the ‘disinherited,’ a tendency that surfaces in much of his writing...[he] suggests that hope lies in the ability...to take what has been spurned and integrate it back into our lives” (86-7). Reconsidering Cooper’s assertions, Pynchon takes the subjugated woman and places her at the ideal position between the historical and the metaphysical, two divergent forces that are unambiguously monopolized by men throughout the novel, and through her journey, she successfully demystifies these discourses as failed polemics. While her quest is never completed because of the narrative’s premature termination, through her demystification of these male-dominated discourses, Oedipa unveils a critical aspect of

her subjugation as a woman and, therefore, possesses a unique amount of power as an oppressed woman.

In her quest for the Tristero, Oedipa pursues a similar thread of leads as Stencil in *V.*, and the result of Oedipa's detective work is just as fruitless. After consulting various male "field-experts," a psychologist (Dr. Hilarius), an expert of literary texts (Emory Bortz), multiple lawyers (Roseman and Metzger), an engineer (Stanley Koteks), a philatelist (Ghengis Cohen), and even an anarchist (Jesus Arrabel), Oedipa is left helpless and defeated, which resonates in the final piece of advice that she receives in the novel: the Inamorati Anonymous' member's remark that "It's too late" (146). Like Stencil, Oedipa is fixated on the prospect of a transcendent moment in which she will glimpse a system of order or logic organizing her absurd and chaotic environment—one of sanitized depictions of multinational warfare, like Metzger's *Cashiered*, and of bleak, postindustrial landscapes, like San Narciso, a town that is not a traditional urban community, but merely a collection of "census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei"(13)—but that proof of an order is always withheld, thus leaving her in the anarchic waste of her American landscape.

The problem for Oedipa, though, as Hite points out, "is not that order and chaos are inadequate encapsulations of the world...the problem is that both order and chaos are interpretations that could comprehend this world completely—reducing it in the process to inconsequence" (67). According to Hite, Oedipa is placed at the center of chaos—the randomness of American culture in the age of late capitalism—and order—the idea of a structured, patterned existence within the Tristero. It's not the elusiveness of the Tristero that moves Oedipa to tragic insanity, but it's her inability to accept the paradoxical nature

of her culture's excluded middles. For her, excluded middles are "bad shit; to be avoided" (150). And consider how she is repeatedly guilty of the "false dilemma" logical fallacy, inventing systems of binaries that inevitably breakdown. For example: "Either Tristero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa, so hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man's estate" (88), or "Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream...or you are hallucinating it" (140-1).

Evaluating the implications of her use of these binaries, Hite argues,

The real significance of these dichotomies is pointed up by the narrator's comment on Oedipa's 'excluded middles.' The narrator does not address the question of which alternative is preferable or which is correct; instead he asks how the options got so limited: 'and how had it ever happened here with the chances so good for diversity?' How did the proposed interpretations of experience dwindle to two unlivable positions? (17)

Despite—or more likely because of—her acculturation in America, Oedipa is incapable of conceiving anything but these "two unlivable options," left pondering, "[i]f the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?" (12). Indeed, what else is there if her culture allows her only two mutually exclusive explanations of existence: captivity or freedom?

Functioning as a repressive apparatus, these binaries fuel Oedipa's paranoia and keep her preoccupied, barring her from addressing greater issues of inequality within her culture's male-dominated ruling class. Mike Fallopian asks, "[h]as it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something

Inverarity set up before he died?” (138). Like Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Oedipa can acknowledge her paranoia as an Ideological State Apparatus, but only obliquely, “like the thought that someday she would have to die” (ibid). The narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* too discusses the pernicious nature of paranoia as a hegemonic force in the “Proverbs for Paranoids,” asserting, “if they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers” (251). And Oedipa is certainly preoccupied with the possibility of a conspiracy—she is, in a sense, “asking the wrong questions.” Yet the true tragedy—for Oedipa as well as Slothrop—is not that this conspiracy may or may not exist; whether Oedipa has been duped into believing in a spurious conspiracy, or she has been barred from membership in that secret organization is irrelevant. The real tragedy of Oedipa's story is that her fixation on this possibly fictional, historical plot distorts the real issue of her subjugation within a culture of patriarchy, much like Slothrop's obsession with the V2 rocket and consequent search through the connections of Lazlo Jamf only leads him away from the truth, prohibiting him from facing the horrific reality that he is “in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's death” (738). Inverarity, the novel's representative force of omnipresent phallogocentric oppression, introduces Oedipa to this conspiracy—possibly fictional, possibly real—as a distraction from the more immediate issues regarding her oppression as a woman. Like the source of her mythic namesake, Oedipus, Oedipa is restricted from seeing the unbearable truth directly in front of her, and in her case the truth is so shocking—leaving her “[speaking] the name of God, [trying] to feel as drunk as possible” (1)—simply because it would compromise—and in many ways destroy—her cushy bourgeois lifestyle of lasagna and television, of shopping and

suburbia, therefore forcing her to confront the suggestion that her interests and pastimes are merely capitalist reifications of “happiness” or “comfort.”

As a woman in America, Oedipa is a member of the amorphous disinherited classes, and she is bequeathed nothing “except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic” (12). Wondering “[w]hat was left to inherit? That America coded in Inverarity’s testament, whose was that?” (149), she associates herself with other dispossessed peoples: those living in “immobilized freight cars,” “squatters who stretched canvas for lean-tos behind smiling billboards along the highways,” “drifters she had listened to,” who are still “Americans speaking their language carefully, scholarly, as if they were in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in” (ibid). But Oedipa clings to the possibility of hope for potential, of “that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word” (ibid). Significant in Oedipa’s conception of hope, though, is that this amelioration will manifest “herself” out of the multifarious bunches of disinherited; however indirectly, she acknowledges that this savior from the ranks of the dispossessed is a distinctly feminine presence, the “magical Other” of the Western tradition: Woman. And in that recognition—not only of the legitimacy of the disinherited, but of their emancipator as a woman—Oedipa finally comes to terms with her gender’s unique predicament in a late capitalist culture, and she accepts her latent potential to transcend that position, at last rejecting her bourgeois values as patriarchal and repressive.

Coming to realize that “if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia” (151), Oedipa ultimately willingly associates herself with this othered group who will reveal the Truth, the “trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word.” Wondering, “what was left to inherit?” (149), she begins to entertain the hope of transcendence within this culture, even if that hope is only a very distant glimmer in the firmament. In that willingness for estrangement from her own culture, after encountering an unbearable truth, Oedipa further aligns herself with her mythic antecedent, who also purposely went into exile when forced to confront a horrific reality. Oedipa’s realization, however, is that her bourgeois culture has pampered her so effectively and comfortingly that she has been blinded from the brutal truth that the necessary and much concealed complement to any civilization is genocide, destruction, and atrocity. As Metzger declares, “‘Hap Harrigan comics, which she is hardly old enough to read, John Wayne on Saturday afternoon slaughtering ten thousand Japs with his teeth, this is Oedipa Maas’ World War II’” (59). Indeed, at the very heart of Oedipa’s tragic realization of her constricted independence as a woman in a late twentieth-century capitalist culture is her subconscious recognition that her cultural identity has been formed amidst bourgeois reifications, acknowledging that in the mundane and superficial aspects of her life, “[i]n the songs Miles, Dean, Serge and Leonard sang was either some fraction of the truth’s numinous beauty...or only a power structure” (150). While she does not complete her quest to decode the riddle of the Tristero, she does come to understand the sheer vastness of the system itself. And in that partial enlightenment,

Oedipa fulfills—or at least begins to fulfill—her purpose as an archetypal female quester: comprehension of the various social apparatuses designed to stifle the female voice.

In her discussion of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Susan J. Rosowski discusses what she deems the “‘novel of awakening,’ a type of literature about women analogous to, yet different from the bildungsroman” (26). *Pride and Prejudice*, *Portrait of a Lady*, or *House of Mirth*, for example, “all present a female character’s development through a series of awakenings to limitations. All learn that their inner, private values are incompatible with public ones; all measure their achievement by their capacity to realize restrictions; all receive reward through male characters (the women tame or circumscribe men in marriage; they bear men-children)” (ibid.). And, indeed, *The Cry of Lot 49* exemplifies these features almost exactly.

With Oedipa’s possible discovery of the Tristero and all its historical force, she must entertain, yet not without much hostility, the notion that her pleasantly superficial lifestyle as a suburban bourgeois ideologue housewife (and all of its endless pleasures: spiked fondue, muzak renditions of kazoo concertos at the supermarket in Kinneret-Among-The-Pines) has been controlled by a shadowy and sinister organization—or at least that that organization is secretly instrumental in certain critical aspects of how her culture works. Much like the predicaments of Lily Bart, Emma Bovary, or Isabel Archer, the Tristero represents the female protagonist’s tragic acknowledgment that her idealistic, youthful values are at odds with a patriarchal establishment of faceless, hegemonic oppressors. What’s more is that Oedipa certainly acknowledges the restrictions that are placed upon her. “Meaning what?” Oedipa asks, “That Bortz, along with Metzger, Cohen, Driblette, Koteks, the tattooed sailor in San Francisco, the W.A.S.T.E. carriers

she'd seen—that all of them were Pierce Inverarity's men? Bought? Or loyal, for free, for fun, to some grandiose practical joke he'd cooked up, all for her embarrassment?" (140). Oedipa comes to recognize the Tristero, the representative force of patriarchy in the novel, as something untranscendable. And her relationship with Mucho, her comically insecure husband, is indeed compatible with Rosowski's variant on the typical female quester's eventual marriage to a "man-child." Thin-skinned Mucho is not only an emasculated male with his hang-ups about the filthy "rituals of trade-in" (5) of his former profession as a used car salesman, but he is also emotionally immature, and dangerously so, as he is prone to infatuations with young girls at KCUF record hops.

Oedipa can only entertain notions of—but never attain moments of—transcendence; she is, however, capable of exerting a certain amount of control over her male-dominated culture, and such control is empowering, albeit on a small scale. One aspect of that empowerment of the Feminine in *The Crying of Lot 49* is the undeniable amount of gender bending in the novel. Regarding Oedipa as a transvestite Oedipus, and disregarding Caesar's assertion that "Oedipa is no Oedipus, or only one at the earnest reader's peril" (5), *Crying's* female quester is firmly associated with the Masculine, yet, as the reader is reminded again and again, the novel's male characters are also associated with the Feminine. Citing Mike Fallopian and Stanley Koteks, Watson points out the novel's exploration of transexuality and the connection of the male characters to "strictly female processes" (60). And Mucho is not exempt from this transgendering within the novel. Appropriately, he can rationalize his fetishization of the nymphets at KCUF record hops by reminding himself that "any boy heels might make her an inch taller" (32). Mucho's emasculation exceeds the infatuation with "young stuff" (84) that excites

Nefastis or Metzger; Mucho's pedophilic tendencies distinctly entertain the notion of cross-dressing, even if that cross-dressing only entails footwear.

Pynchon poses many of the questions in *The Crying of Lot 49* that he answers in *V*. It is true that the publication of the former followed the latter, but the ideas for both novels were conceived simultaneously, and many critics see the two as complementary texts, exploring different perspectives of the same issues of American culture. For example, Hite purports, "In many ways *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to respond to those reviewers who maintained that in *V*, Pynchon was unable to control his subject matter" and that "[*The Crying of Lot 49*] is a minimalist remake of *V*." (67). Mendelson too discusses the thematic similarities between the novels and their corresponding concern with the sublimely bizarre aspects of a late capitalist culture. *V*'s response to the themes of *The Crying of Lot 49* is certainly apparent when one considers the way in which both novels treat issues of Womanhood. *Crying* presents the plight of the disinherited American female, while *V* presents her successful escape from the exitlessness of America and the cult of consumer culture.

Conforming to Rosowski's theory of the Novel of Awakening, Oedipa gradually learns that her personal goals of asserting her individuality are at odds with her culture's traditions of repressing the female voice, and despite her best efforts to counteract these forces, her ideals will always be squelched by her culture's Ideological State Apparatuses. In her quest through the American landscape, through "the hieroglyphic streets," where "there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth" (150), Oedipa consults a multitude of men, all of whom make a failed attempt to guide her through her journey. Yet if Oedipa is uniquely constricted as a woman in her culture, she

learns that lesson at the expense of these men, each representing a failed polemic—a failed branch of the greater phallogentric enterprise of pursuing ultimate truths. And in this suggestion that these disparate critical discourses (psychoanalysis, physics, literary criticism, etc.) are flawed arguments of phallogentricism, Pynchon himself engages the descriptivist endeavor of highlighting the ideological flaws of these discourses, thereby exalting his female protagonist for exposing these viewpoints.

Chapter 2

Deformation of Gender Binaries in *V.*

Where is that ebullient, infinite woman who immersed as she was in her naiveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallogocentrism, has been ashamed of her strengths?

-- Hélène Cixous,
"The Laugh of Medusa"

In almost every regard, Oedipa Mass and the mysterious entity known solely as *V.* are inverse images of each other. Both are placed at the center of their respective novels; both are at the focal point of a multigenerational conspiracy; and both deflect or discredit forces of patriarchy and imperialism—*V.* through her ability to continually elude Stencil as he pursues these numerous, patrilineal critical approaches, and Oedipa through her repeated discovery of the failure of these same enterprises. Yet while Oedipa is her novel's quester, *V.* is the object of the quest; while Oedipa cannot transcend California's "hieroglyphic streets" (150), *V.* remains "a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth" (500), and while Oedipa finds herself at odds with an aggregate of phallogocentric forces, *V.* exists outside of the hegemonic rule of culture altogether, appearing throughout space and time, throughout geography and history.

If *The Crying of Lot 49* is compatible with Rosowski's variant of the archetypal quester, then *V.* is the necessary complement, the next logical extension, of that formula. *The Crying of Lot 49*, and indeed *The Novel of Awakening* in general, is sympathetic to the othering of women in fiction and by extension a counterblast to the phallogocentric traditions in which it was written. Oedipa struggles with her recent discovery of a ubiquitous organization of male-dominated forces—the Tristero—and that knowledge, of course, has greater implications regarding her understanding of American culture.

Written from Oedipa's perspective, in primarily the third-person, omniscient point of view, *The Crying of Lot 49* is particularly sensitive to the plight of the female quester coping with her patriarchal culture. *V.*, on the other hand, exceeds mere sympathy; it empowers the subjugated other of the West. While the mysterious woman *V.* keeps Stencil, the novel's representative male quester, at bay, *V.* inverts one of the very foundations of traditional Western literature.

If the narrative mode in *The Crying of Lot 49* is sensitive to the struggle of the female quester by allowing Oedipa's perspective, *V.* empowers the main female character by doing the exact opposite: by never allowing the reader into her consciousness. Stencil pursues a historically objective truth in his unsuccessful hunt for *V.*; he seeks concrete affirmation of the existence of a woman with whom he equates myth and mystery—a quest that remains unfulfilled at the novel's closing. As Stencil ultimately lacks a logically unified understanding of *V.*, so too is the reader's understanding of this character obscured by the absence of her voice. Hendin sees *V.* as “the destructive, indestructible objet d'art” (39). Reconsidering Hendin's claims with regards to the narrative voice of the novel, through the absence of her point of view, *V.* exercises her destructive and indestructible energy over not only Stencil, but the reader as well, maintaining total inaccessibility and dominance. In that withheld proof of her existence, Pynchon exempts his central female from simplistic critical interpretation, thereby sheltering her—at least partially—from the polemical discourses of literary analysis. And, in that sense, *V.* presents a meta-problematization of literary gender roles, functioning at once within the fictional realm—through Stencil's impeded quest to understand *V.*—and upon the reader—through the absence of *V.*'s perspective.

V.'s identity maintains its mystique. While her voice is never made distinct throughout the novel, her presence and power loom omnipresent. Her identity exists as a multitude of women, women across the globe and throughout history. What's more, each of those incarnations of V. represents a distinctly abnormal or aberrant variation on a feminine "type": the mysterious lesbian lover of Mélanie l'Heuremaudit, the rat concubine of Father Fairing, and the tragic, half-mechanical Bad Priest in Valletta whose prosthetic components are slowly removed by children. Manifesting herself in a dizzying multiplicity of forms, V. signifies the power of the Feminine over the phallogocentric in her occupation of these various subjugated female hosts. With a Holy-Ghost-like presence, V.'s powers of salvation for woman-kind come from her ability to represent and commune with the most destitute or desperate, unusual or atypical varieties of women, thereby exploding assumptions and conventional depictions of women in fiction. And in this deformation of a feminine "type," Pynchon further interrogates the restrictive representations of culturally-dictated gender roles within literature.

Transexuality, as Hawthorne points out, is a major theme in both *V.* and *Crying*, and throughout both novels, Pynchon problematizes the nature of traditional gender roles. While each character in *V.* has a clearly defined biological sex, "through 'V. in Love' and in her role as The Bad Priest, Stencil and Fausto identify [V.] with masculine gender or sex role identity" (2). V.'s status as a woman is never questioned by the reader or the characters, yet she is at times associated with the masculine. Likewise, Benny's biological sex is never up for debate, yet he is undeniably anti-Byronic, anti-masculine. While this trait does not wholly align him with the Feminine, it certainly more closely associates him with it by inverting and rejecting standards of masculinity. Slade sees

Benny's insecurity—specifically his insecurity about women—as emblematic of his inability to conform to gender stereotypes, noting,

ambivalence toward women afflicts Profane. Women: (a) make Profane horny, so much so that he possesses a near-constant erection... (b) frighten Profane by reminding him of the inanimate, a fear he has in common with Stencil *père* and *fil*s and with Fausto Maijstral, who has referred to female biological processes as 'mechanical and alien'... (c) repel Profane by seeking to become dependent on him. (93)

He is, as the subtitle of the first chapter dubs him, a schlemiel, not only incapable of maintaining a meaningful relationship with any one of his many suitable mates—Fina, Rachel, Paolo—but also incapable of correctly doing typical, socially-designated “macho” stuff. Note also that he frequently “cut[s] himself shaving” (31, 408), and he is prone to such three-stooges-esque mishaps as “ripp[ing] a frayed towel in half” attempting to dry himself off, or “[taking] ten minutes getting his fly zipped” (32). As a schlemiel, Profane struggles with the world of the inanimate to a comical, bumbling, often slap-stick extent. Despite his former position in the U.S. Navy, and all the suggestions of masculinity that are associated with that position, he is utterly incapable of fulfilling the very basic requirements for survival, making him distinct from typical American male protagonists evident in the fiction of Fitzgerald or Hemingway, whose novels are populated with hunters, gangsters, and mentally-anguished veterans; and unlike the protagonists of Pynchon's closer contemporaries, like Kerouac—whose *On The Road* Pynchon proclaims in *Slow Learner* to be “one of the great American novels,” (7)—there is nothing sexy or provocative about Profane's dejectedness, rather he is

simply the vehicle for much of the novel's juvenile gags. Much like his surname suggests, he is indeed profane, lacking regard for his culture's emphasis on the importance of masculinity, or even the appearance of masculinity. Yet Pynchon's incessant caricaturization of Benny's survival skills—or lack thereof—is symptomatic of the character's inability to adapt—even at the most basic level—to the stimulating whirlwind of modern, industrial life—life with zippers and shaving apparatuses and complex toiletries.

In many ways, Benny is unfit to live in an environment that requires cohabitation of man and machine, and Pynchon employs that struggle as a leitmotif throughout the novel. Through Benny's problematic relationship with the world of the inanimate, Pynchon offers a complication and reconsideration of Darwinian principles. By using cartoony, heavy-handedly comic presentations to depict his protagonist's inability to become accustomed to the increasingly inanimate world—a world in which his part-time employment includes the monitoring of the automaton S.H.R.O.U.D.—Pynchon suggests a sort of human evolutionary stasis—or at least an evolutionary trajectory that has been thrown off course through entering into competition with insensate objects. In this use of slapstick humor as a platform to depict the retardation of modern man's abilities of adaptation to various technologies—technologies as simplistic as zippers and as complex as talking robots—Pynchon parodies evolutionary ideologies, thereby questioning yet another polemic by reducing it to infantile comedy. In one of the more significant exegetic instances of character development, Benny admits to Brenda, his final love-interest, that “offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamned thing” (506). This fragment of dialogue, however, has greater implications beyond the context of the individual scene;

indeed, when one considers that this is one of Benny's final lines in the novel, it becomes clear that he is destined to an utterly static condition and evolutionary shifts—however small—are outside the realm of possibility for him.

The novel's complication of gender roles, however, exists at the subtext as well, going beyond Profane's anti-masculine tendencies and clownish struggle with non-sentient things. By opening on Christmas Eve, the novel is marked by the celebration of a peculiar sexual—or rather nonsexual—relationship: Mary's virginal conception of Jesus. Jesus knew his biological mother, yet his earthly father was absent. As Hawthorne points out, young Herbert Stencil's predicament is the opposite: he knows his father, yet his biological mother's identity is unclear (4). Hawthorne sees this complication and contraposition of gender roles as “another case of the denial of, or inability to accept, parental sexuality” (ibid). Culturally defined gender roles—boyfriend/girlfriend, mother/father, etc.—are denied, resisted, or at least reconsidered by each of the novel's central characters: Benny, Stencil Sr., Fausto, even V. herself. Accepting Hawthorne's claims, it is rather appropriate, then, that Herbert's last souvenir of his father is a postcard on which Sidney writes that he feels like “a sacrificial virgin” (61). Whether one interprets that hypothetical virgin as male or female, Sidney willingly associates himself with a sexless being, thereby presenting the reader with another complex gender hermeneutic, which is further complicated in Stencil Jr.'s cherishing of this written acknowledgement of his father's ambiguous gender designation. Yet this resistance to or complication of gender roles is symptomatic of the novel's hostility towards a patriarchal system and its ideological classification of male or female “types.” In this impartial complication of gender roles, Pynchon engages the descriptivist pursuit

of exposing the inherent ideological flaws of these categories; he thereby does not simply assert the superiority of the feminine over the masculine, but rejects this binary of “male/female” as an insufficient or inadequate tool for assigning meaning to existence.

Mrs. Beatrice Buffo, the head barmaid at The Sailor’s Grave, presents the reader with another interesting complication of socially defined gender roles. The title “Mrs.” signifies her gender clearly enough, but when one considers the name’s partial allusion, one recalls that while Beatrice had a relationship with Dante, that relationship was strictly platonic, nonsexual. What’s more, as Hawthorne points out, is that “Buffo” is a variation on the Latin word for toad, and that word is gendered masculine (4). The three elements of her name, then, oscillate from female, to sexless, to male—all the while leaving the reader with an unstable hermeneutic of gender. That complication of gender roles is taken one step further when one recalls Beatrice’s request that all of her female barmaids adopt the same (middle, sexless) moniker as her: Beatrice. Hence, all of Mrs. Buffo’s barmaids are marked by a camouflaged gender identification. If their names disguise their gender roles, then it is merely subterfuge—a smokescreen to provide the opportunity for these women to execute their attack. Considering the appropriate behavior for men during the bar’s “suck hour”—latching on to a beer-dispensing nipple-tap, the barmaids in The Sailor’s Grave exert their control over the rowdy sailors by the most basic means that a woman has: breastfeeding—or at least simulated breastfeeding. By reducing their male patrons to infantine states, these women exercise their distinctly feminine prowess, and Pynchon once again suggests the power of the Feminine over figures of masculinity and warfare, over drunken sailors and lawless brawlers, by presenting the value of the maternal.

While both *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* are sympathetic to the Feminine or even subvert the dominant male/female power structure, their exploration of these themes goes deeper than that. With both novels, the Feminine is the mitigating factor between philosophical and empirical perspectives attempting to explain the logically unsettled world of late capitalism. Both novels place the Feminine as the ideal at the center of these conflicting viewpoints. Since both are inherently flawed in their applications—the metaphysical is not provable, and the empirical is naturally too myopic—they can never provide the objective truths that Pynchon’s characters require of them; and certainly these characters’ unreasonable pursuits of singular answers to enormous questions of existence function as epistemological arguments within the novel itself. Hite argues that “In *V.* order and chaos emerge as equally untenable interpretive categories, and the joke is that neither can contain and explain the proliferating manifestation of *V.*” (67). Not for lack of trying, though, is Stencil’s application of both empirical and metaphysical means a failure. Pursuing advice and leads from a comical proliferation of avenues—from Dr. Eigenvaule’s hybrid of dentistry and psychology, to traveling through New York’s sewage system, to consulting the son of noted Egyptologist Eric Bongo-Shaftsbury—Herbert’s search for truth is ultimately left unfulfilled; very much like Oedipa Mass, he can never reconcile the order and chaos of the twentieth century. At the center of these binaries of order and chaos—or even the empirical and metaphysical enterprises of explaining and organizing that order and chaos—Pynchon places *V.* herself, leaving Stencil, the male quester, unsatisfied and his search perpetually incomplete. In doing so, however, Pynchon does more than simply invert the dominant paradigm—more than simply place the Feminine in the superordinate slot of a gender binary; rather he removes

the Feminine from the power structure altogether, allowing her to expose the flawed nature of these phallogentric pursuits, thereby rejecting the very power structure itself as a phallogentric construct.

Conclusion:

Women in the One Dimensional Society

In his discussion of the factorization of Europe and the transition from economic dependence on handicraft and manufacture, to a more mechanized system of industrial capitalism, Marx addresses the gradual shift in the manner and intensity of the average laborer's working day. A direct result of that economic shift is the change in an individual's workday from using and honing a particular skill set to the tedious surveillance of a machine, and an inevitable product of that paradigmatic shift in economic models is the removal of cultural emphasis on one's unique, learned abilities in exchange for the movement toward valuing an individual in terms of their natural, physically distinct traits of muscle power, stamina, and brute endurance—not as distinct markers of one's usefulness at a particular task, but as a means of cultural currency. Without the ability to assert one's uniqueness purposefully and constructively through a specific trade, Marx argues that individuals in society will resort to expressions of individuality by relying on these more visible distinctions. One of the most immediate consequences of this redirection of cultural attention—aside from boiling identity down to crude evolutionary pseudo-science—is that those who are physically slighter or weaker—regardless of the reason (age, physical impairment, gender, etc.)—are quickly rejected and displaced by the stronger, more dominant forces within a society. Marx argues, “In place of the artificially produced distinctions between the specialized workers, it is natural differences of age and sex that predominate” (545), and acknowledging Marx's observation, this economic transition is certainly instrumental in ensuring the subjugation of women within an increasingly technological society. If

Pynchon's novels problematize or complicate issues of gender or gender supremacy, it is because his larger and less subtextual critique is of a capitalist mode of production and the individual's thwarted assertion of his or her independence within that repressive mode, and while that subjugation—both in Pynchon's fiction and in reality—is a horrifying feature of society, woman-kind is merely one subcategory within the larger scope of the capitalist's exercise of hegemony. As diverse as their plots or central thematic elements are—postal conspiracies, World War II, aging hippies, etc.—Thomas Pynchon's novels are unified in their portrayal of the dangers of limitless, unchecked capitalism as they relentlessly parody the instant and endless reification and commodification of the modern consciousness—and the utterly fractured result of that process—through recurring parodies of modern industry, media, and technology: the Galactronics division of Yoyodyne, Inc., a simulacrum of space-age industry; *The Paranoids*, a spoof on early British Invasion bands and the bubble-gum fads of rock and roll, and the Metzger/DiPresso film project—obvious criticism of Hollywood—about a lawyer who becomes an actor who becomes a lawyer who becomes an actor, ad infinitum.

Marx wrote *Capital* while industrial capitalism was still very much in its formative stages, speculating—and in many ways accurately predicting—the stages of late capitalism and the capitalist's increasingly adroit exploitation of the proletariat. Accepting Marx's arguments, however, about the equalization of laborers' abilities and the consequent urge to assert one's individuality as a result of widespread capitalist industrialization, the logical result of this equalization effect is that it necessarily breeds in-fighting and factionalism among various groups living under that system. While this

tendency toward plurality suggests the possibility of transcendence from a heartless capitalist machine in its opportunity to pursue individuality, that prospect of transcendence is a gross misrepresentation of reality. Indeed, this fracturing of the public consciousness into numerous “types” of identity—a “typical” man, a “typical” woman, a “typical” anything— supports the very capitalist system that it attempts to transcend by distracting the masses from their greater economic oppression, thereby ensuring the widening of socioeconomic divides through the promotion of a multiplicity of identities, all the while deflecting attention away from the capitalist forces responsible for the divide in the first place. Herbert Marcuse discusses just how effective of a hegemonic force this ideologically driven encouragement of individuality can be in a technologically advanced society, claiming, “The reality of pluralism becomes ideological, deceptive. It seems to extend rather than reduce manipulation and coordination” (51). In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson also agrees “the ideology of groups and difference does not really strike a blow, either philosophically or politically, against tyranny” (340). And Pynchon’s fictional realms are certainly governed by the same “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” that Marcuse argues, “prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress” (1). Indeed, the hegemonic forces of San Narciso and Nueva York are barely required to lift a finger to keep these female characters subordinate and subjugated. Yet V.’s rejection of this culture—and expatriation from it—is not only what makes her such an outstanding figure of femininity, but is precisely what makes her so fascinating to Herbert Stencil, Fausto Maijstral, and the reader as well, as she anticipates and deforms traditional gender roles

and expectations, thereby also rejecting the tacit assumptions of her patriarchally governed bourgeois culture.

If Pynchon's female characters are markedly powerful in comparison to their male-counterparts, it is because he is reacting against a culture that favors men and money, and the social oppression of women—and, indeed, the oppression of any group disfavored by the dominant classes—is merely a symptom of the greater economic oppression of all culturally stifled groups. Characteristically Pynchonian terrain and the “One Dimensional Society” that Marcuse discusses—a society that encourages “the regulation of free competition among unequally equipped economic subjects” (Marcuse 1)—are one and the same. What's more, both trace the cultural ills of the late twentieth century back to capitalism's transformation of identity into a collection of disjointed and consumable reifications.

As two of the most distinct specimens from Pynchon's parody of twentieth-century culture, Benny Profane and Tyrone Slothrop both mindlessly absorb and re-project the empty commercial signifiers that surround them. Benny Profane begins *V.* “wearing black Levi's, suede jacket, sneakers and big cowboy hat” as he strolls through Norfolk, Virginia, where “Every night is Christmas Eve on old East Main” (1)—every night is a commodified secularization of a sacred event—and because the basic components of his identity have been formed by this culture, he ends the novel wearing the same outfit, utterly incapable of progression out of, or even within, that culture, fully integrated into his static identity. With a personality very similar to Profane, Slothrop keeps his desk under a waste heap of “much cigarette ash, very fine black debris picked and flung from typewriter ribbons, decomposing library paste, broken aspirins ground to

powder...a scatter of paperclips, Zippo flints, rubber bands, staples, cigarettes butts and crumpled packs, stray matches, pins, nubs of pens” (18), and various other spent commodities, all of which function as metonymic extensions of Slothrop’s scattered identity. He is merely a conglomerate of transactions—of used, and therefore useless, market items, further evident in the ultimate dispersal of his identity throughout *The Zone*; indeed, tragically, all that Slothrop amounts to—his only lasting statement—is his guest harmonica performance on “The Fool” LP, much like Profane, whose only stable expression of significance to his culture is his unchanging collection of fashion items.

Written in 1963 and 1965 respectively, *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* don’t necessarily prefigure the radical feminist ideals of post-structural thinkers like Kristeva and Cixous, but Pynchon’s first two novels do precede the zeitgeist of 1970s French feminism by almost ten years. “The Laugh of Medusa,” for example was published in 1975, and it was not translated into English until a year later. While Pynchon’s novels are in no way prototypes for these feminist thinkers, they certainly are compatible with them, as they sympathetically depict the oppressed female—in the case of *The Crying of Lot 49*—and conceive of an alternative historical paradigm—in the case of *V.*—in which the Feminine is removed from the phallogentric construct of a gender binary altogether—not merely transcending this power structure, but confounding the expectations of the male characters by doing so. In this recognition and reconsideration of a feminine type, Pynchon not only interrogates cultural assumptions of identity, but poses the question of whether public valorization of the Feminine entails actual exaltation of that identity, or if that praise is inherently booby-trapped—if it is at once an enticing proposal of individuality, and also an effective tool of ideological means for the faceless ruling

classes of men with money. And while he never directly answers that question—thereby avoiding the assertion of a polemic—he does unmoor one of Western culture’s foundational elements simply in posing it as a challenge.

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