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Abstract:

Pynchon's seriously playful manipulation of narrative makes the reading of his first novel *V.* (1963) an exploration of V. not only as literary experience but also as psychoanalytic quest into the self of the reader. Like the detective genre that he parodies, *V.* is a novel that invites the reader to follow along in the process of investigating V. and in so doing of asking the question of what is V., but more importantly of what is the reader's V.? The course of the present investigation will be one of going beyond the multiplicity of possible V.s in order to determine the essence of V, insofar as this may be a vehicle for analyzing the manner in which Pynchon utilizes narrative in order to formally exemplify the content of his novel. What will then be important to look at is not the particular manner(s) in which V. appears in the novel and to try and prioritize one over the others or rule some out; what must be determined in order to comprehend the essence of V. is that which supplies the relation between all the various manifestations of V. in the novel. What this points toward is the necessity of an emphasis of focus upon the formal dimension of the text and concomitantly the formal nature of V.

# "How pleasant to watch Nothing": Narrativity and Desire in *V.*

Timothy Gilmore

"Character
begins to form
when we first feel anxiety about ourselves."[1]

## Introduction

Readers of Thomas Pynchon's novels are familiar with the unconventional narrative style that he employs and that has led to his reputation as not only one of the greatest but also one of the more daunting writers of the twentieth century. Lack of closure, temporal disjunction, slippage between diegetic levels, and multi-layered focalization are just a few of the narrative strategies he employs to create a reading experience that forces the reader to actively engage with the text, or else throw it across the room in exasperation. But before one goes to such an extreme, it must be asked to just what purpose Pynchon employs these narrative strategies, all of which challenge the expectations of the reader and put into question conventional narrative stylistics. Dismissing the conception of Pynchon as some imp of the perverse seeking to play with the minds of his readers — which he clearly is — it becomes apparent that his narrative style and strategy serve a distinct and serious purpose. Due to the challenging nature of his narrative, the reader is compelled to struggle with the text and actively participate in its construction. His texts do a particularly good job of drawing the reader in and making the reader experience the subject matter of the text as something living, as directly connected and pertinent to one's own life, rather than as an abstract or distanced object to be digested and simply enjoyed and forgotten. As readers, we live with Pynchon's novels and feel the overlap between the world of the text and our own in a way that few writers are capable of achieving. What he is doing, then, is utilizing various formal innovations in order to construct a narrative that foregrounds the ideas developed and meditated upon in the novel's content in such a way that these ideas are taken up into (*Aufhebung*) the reader in a dialectical reflexivity. If we can penetrate the formidable surface and delve into the depths of the novel, we find ourselves, as readers, immersed in a world in regard to which it is difficult to maintain a comforting aesthetic distance.

This seriously playful manipulation of narrative makes the reading of Pynchon's first novel *V.* (1963) an exploration of V. not only as literary experience but also potentially a psychoanalytic quest into the self of the reader. Like the detective genre that it parodies,


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*V.* is a novel that invites the reader to follow along in the process of investigating V. and in so doing of asking the question of what is V., but more importantly of what is my V., of what is the real, in Lacanian terms, of my own desire and of how my narrativity both produces, and is produced by, it?" The course of the present investigation will be one of going beyond the multiplicity of possible V.s in order to determine the (non-)essence of V., insofar as this may be a vehicle for analyzing the manner in which Pynchon utilizes narrative in order to formally exemplify the content of his novel. What will then be important to look at is not the particular manner(s) in which V. appears in the novel, prioritizing one or ruling some out, nor will it be constructive to find V. as Kenneth Kupsch does in his essay "Finding V."; what must be determined in order to comprehend the (non-)essence of V. is that which supplies the relation between all the various manifestations of V. in the novel. This process entails an articulation of the relation in question in the sense of an examination of both the links and those things that are linked in such an articulation, so that the V.-structure may be glimpsed and thus the (non-)essence of V. understood. What this points toward is the necessity of an emphasis of focus upon the formal dimension of the text and concomitantly the formal nature of V.

In order to facilitate this inquiry, special attention will be given to the third chapter, "In which Stencil, a quick change artist, does eight impersonations." By analyzing the narrative stylistics utilized by Pynchon in this section, the formal exemplification of the novel's content may be revealed in its multi-dimensional structure, thus opening up the subtle ways in which Pynchon uses narrative form to invoke his subject matter and accentuate it. Because of Stencil's role in the novel as a major narrative figure and chief pursuer of V., the conclusion of the paper performs an analysis of the form-content relationship of *V.* that focuses on the problematic desire informing his narrative style. The (non-)essence of V. may be discovered primarily through Stencil's narrativity rather than his narrative, from the way he tells his stories and recreates events rather than from the stories and events themselves. This section explores Stencil's construction of V. as a potentially traumatic female other and the manner in which his narrativity seeks to avoid an encounter with its object-cause in order to maintain the desire producing it. The exploration of narrativity in the novel will also seek to open up the question of the reader's own narrativity and the manner in which *V.*'s form provokes one to reflect on the stencil of their own desire.

## *Objet Petit V.?*

Before proceeding to the analysis of chapter three and the subsequent exploration of narrativity, the (non-)essence of V. needs to be delineated through the analogic relation of V. to Lacan's *objet a*. Bringing V. into relationship with Lacan's topology of the subject and the dialectic of desire opens up the novel to a greater appreciation of the psychological depths Pynchon explores in his characteristically satiric fashion. The

novel, as Hanjo Berressem argues, contains a critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, but it performs this critique of the premises of psychoanalysis in such a way that it ultimately helps develop them in a more sophisticated manner. As Berressem argues in his analysis of the chapter "V. in love," "the chapter, which at first glance seems to invalidate psychoanalysis, should be read *with* rather than *against* Freudian or Lacanian theory. In fact, the chapter perfectly hollows out the space in which Lacanian theory operates."[2] In addition, I would argue that the novel's critique of Freudian psychoanalysis places it in close alignment with the revision of Freud's thought undertaken by Lacan. This will be particularly apparent in the figure and concept of the automaton analyzed in the final section. Before we get there, however, V. must be placed in relation to the *objet a*, that paradoxical object-cause of desire.

As already stated, with *V.* we are given a text that invites the reader to actively engage in the puzzling out of just what is going on and of what or who V. really is. Clearly, V. may be read as many different things that all appear in the text under the sign of V. While priority must be given to the woman constructed by Stencil in his narrative episodes, it is important to determine what all the various V. instances have in common, so as to grasp the underlying connection between them. In his essay "Finding V.," Kupsch argues convincingly that V. is not an all-encompassing symbol within the text, but a particular and thus exclusionary one. For Kupsch, V. represents the motivating force behind human historico-cultural activity that Henry Adams linked to the Virgin and which he argues Pynchon traces back to the Virgin's genesis out of the Phoenician goddess Astarte. Astarte is an early instance of the feminine deity linked to love and, as such, desire. Out of her figure were subsequently generated first Aphrodite and then Venus and ultimately the Virgin. For Kupsch, V. is a symbol for the motivating force, and he believes that it functions in the text to indicate the manner in which this motivating force transforms over time according to specific cultural developments. Thus, he asserts that the purpose of V. in the novel is to indicate the transition from a motivating force centered upon the Virgin, and thus the Roman Catholic Church, to one centered around what Adams saw embodied in the Dynamo — the power inherent in technology. This assertion is borne out by V.'s metamorphosis in the text from perversely devout Roman Catholic Victoria Wren, through multiple transitions and synthetic bodily incorporations of inanimate matter, culminating in her final appearance as the Bad Priest, whose disguise and actions reveal her final status as androgynous combination of the Virgin and the dynamo, of flesh and metal. If we extend this idea further, it becomes evident that V., as defined above, illuminates the historical transition already discussed as centered on WWI. It was through this seminal event of mass carnage that the cultural naiveté of Europe, in regard to the possibilities of technology, was shattered. WWI signaled a cultural shock that broke down the hold of the Virgin over history and surrendered it to technology. The transition of motivational power facilitated the loss of prominence of a set of values exemplified by the Duello that old Stencil lives by and which young Stencil effetely

seeks to re-capture. By the time of WWII, the submission of culture to the new world exigencies of capitalism and its technics was made horribly clear, and it is fitting that it is at this time that V. should perish in a bizarre wailing of tears and disassembly. The tears and wailing signify the death of the Virgin in history as a motivating force and the disassembly renders clear the lack of unity and the dispersal of values characteristic of the new age dominated by the synthetic. The contemporary episodes take place in this void and one must understand the characters in light of this fact.

Yet, as clearly coherent and important as this reading may be, it leaves out something of great importance. This absence is evident in Kupsch's assertion that Vheissu is a type of "red herring." As he says: "Since it is now clear that Vheissu is not the answer to the question 'Who or what is V.?' then this story would seem to have functioned to distract the reader's attention from any premature discovery of the answer to the book's central mystery."[3] If we accept his conception of V. then Vheissu is indeed a distraction, but if we move beyond his exclusionary conception and penetrate into the formal depths of V., then, as I will soon show, Vheissu is a fundamental and important example of the core of V. If we remember that Kupsch links V. to the Virgin and thus to Astarte, it is possible to indicate that the essential thing about these symbols for the deity is their connection to, or rather embodiment of, desire. Through all the permutations of this figure of the feminine deity, the unifying factor is their symbolization of desire and thus of desire as motivating force, regardless of how each instantiation of the deity ordered and portrayed desire. In light of this, it becomes clear that the supercession of the technological and the synthetic over the Virgin represents a transition from a divine foundation of desire to a mechanistic one. This transition is clearly expressed in the gradual transformation of V. into a synthesis of both principles and the eventual supremacy of the mechanistic. At the root of all these surface symbolizations of desire is the object-cause of desire and the *jouissance* it proffers even while it closes it off.

The most fundamental and instructive reading of the significance of V., then, and the one that moves from the level of textual content to that of form and, ultimately, to that of the reader, is that which posits V. not as anything in particular, a particular content, but rather as the signifier aimed at indicating the object-cause of desire — an object-cause that remains on the level of pure form and is in fact an absent cause. As Žižek points out, the object-cause "can never be attained. The object-cause is always missed; all we can do is encircle it."[4] As an absent cause, the *objet a* remains forever elusive and beyond our attempts to grasp it through symbolization. Similar to Derrida's trace, the *objet a* is not an actual object but is the condition of possibility for any object to be the object of desire; it is a pure form structuring our desire and subjectivity, which may only be approached through its manifestation as the desiring process of aim and goal. As Žižek writes:

> It is precisely (and only) the logic of desire that belies the notorious wisdom that "nothing comes from nothing": in the movement of desire, "something comes from nothing." Although it is true

> that the object-cause of desire is a pure semblance, this does not prevent it from triggering a whole chain of consequences that regulate our "material," "effective" life and deeds.[5]

If the object-cause does structure our desire and in doing so regulates our material lives, and may only be discerned in the dialectic of aim and goal, it remains forever behind the scenes and is thus intimately related to the real, is, in fact, the real in us, the darkness inside. It is a pure form giving shape to the real insofar as it appears as form only, as the penumbral distortion around the object of desire. The *objet a* is the opening forever closed and the promise never fulfilled of *jouissance*, for to enter into and experience *jouissance* is to fulfill the desiring process and thus end desire and, with it, life. It is important to note that every character in *V.*, no matter how far he or she is sunk in apathetic lethargy, is driven by the *objet a*. It is only the manifestations of the *objet a* in character specific object-goals and the levels of intensity of desire involved that differ from character to character. Slab has his cheese Danishes; Profane has the parallax of street lights moving off into the vanishing point of the horizon; Esther has her desire for someone to desire her; Paola has her need to atone for some unknown guilt; old Godolphin has Vheissu; and, of course, Stencil has V.

In the novel, Stencil's construction of V. is the most dramatic example of the workings of the *objet a*, and in her status as Thing (which I will discuss in the final section), she is intimately connected to the problematic of the *objet a*. She is both the goal and the cause of his quest and the distorted manner in which she is revealed throughout the text is a perfect illustration of the manner in which the *objet a* is discerned. As Žižek explains:

> The paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the object *a* is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze "distorted" by desire, an object that *does not exist* for an "objective" gaze. In other words, the object *a* is always, *by definition*, perceived in a distorted way, because outside the distortion, "in itself," *it does not exist*, since it is *nothing but* the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion, of this surplus of confusion and perturbation introduced by desire into so-called "objective reality." The object *a* is "objectively" nothing, though, viewed from a certain perspective, it assumes the shape of "something."[6]

Thus, V. is nothing but the projection of Stencil upon certain bits of information or clues that serve as an 'objective' basis to his narrative construction of V., which is in actuality a self construction of himself insofar as his construction of V. is the working out of his own desire within a narrative fantasy space.

By extension, V. is more than just the V. constructed by Stencil. As already stated, every character has a V. or more aptly, an *objet petit V.* that gives them consistency and sets them circling around in search of the avoidance of their goal. Rather than assert with Kupsch that such a radical encompassing of content renders V. less effective, it is the encompassing nature of V. as *objet a* that gives it its true power and allows it to slip outside the level of narrative content and into that of impetus for reflection on the part of the reader. This may be illustrated by a consideration of the significance of Vheissu, which Kupsch was forced by his argument to relegate to the position of 'red herring.'

The sections that deal with Godolphin's obsession with Vheissu are some of the most interesting in the novel. Not only do they give us insight into Godolphin's personal obsession and drive, but they also allow us a look into a complex cultural motif and the attitudes that support it. The picture we are given of Vheissu by Godolphin is one of a place well rooted in the western fantasy of the Eldorado type utopian civilization hidden away in the jungles of the New World. Yet, Godolphin's Vheissu is an inversion of the expected idealized culture and is presented as a dreamlike realm where the integument of the dream is always shifting and threatening to peel away and reveal a nightmare. Godolphin, in an especially revealing passage, describes Vheissu metaphorically as a woman:

> [...] as if the place were, were a woman you had found somewhere out there, a dark woman tattooed from head to toes. [...] soon that skin, the gaudy godawful riot of pattern and color, would get between you and whatever it was in her that you thought you loved. And soon, in perhaps only a matter of days, it would get so bad that you would begin praying to whatever god you knew of to send some leprosy to her. To flay that tattooing to a heap of red, purple and green debris, leave the veins and ligaments raw and quivering and open at last to your eyes and your touch. (171)

This metaphoric connection of Vheissu to a woman links Vheissu to V., not only because she is a woman, and a dark lady, but also because Godolphin's description of her as tattooed points to the relation of the symbolic to the real. In many indigenous cultures, the *socius*, the symbolic itself, is inscribed upon the bodies of its members through tattooing, scarification, and the like. Thus, what Godolphin is indicating here about himself and Vheissu is that Vheissu is a state of mind, or more pointedly, it is the externalization in a place of the complex dynamic previously delineated as the dialectic of desire. What he wants is to break through the gaudy and transient symbolic, its lack of staticity and permanence, to something real. He wants to penetrate beneath the skin of Vheissu and thus of the symbolic into the real, and it is precisely because in Vheissu dreams seem real that he is able to perceive the fantasy character of subjectivity and thus penetrate beyond it. In the process, he is revealing the truth of the imperialist dream of the "noble savag" utopia as a fantasy space in which the inadequacies of the western symbolic may be addressed and a better way envisioned. What he finds, though, in Vheissu is that all there is in Vheissu and life is the shifting integument of the symbolic — beneath it is nothing, "a hard dead-point of truth" (184). As he tells Mantissa:

> "It was not until the Southern Expedition last year that I saw beneath her skin."
>
> "What did you see?" asked Signor Mantissa, leaning forward.
>
> "Nothing," Godolphin whispered. "It was Nothing I saw." (204)

This is the same Nothing that Veronica Manganese feels is 'pleasant' to look into and which Godolphin finds terrifying. To V., in love with chaos and riot, Nothing is pleasant, but Godolphin seeks to penetrate beyond the symbolic for the same reason all great explorers do — to find the stability of the absolute. Thus, those such as him who are

seeking to find that which will ground the fallible and fissured symbolic are repulsed by the void they discover instead: "Vheissu itself, a gaudy dream. Of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation" (206).

Vheissu is the fantasy space of Godolphin cycling around the *objet a*. As such, Vheissu is directly connected to V., and rather than distracting the reader from discovering the truth of V., it directly complements and illuminates the V. structure as object-cause of desire. It is in the discovery of the truth of V. that the reader may then ask: what is my V.? Regardless of the answer to this question, the reader must find out whether or not they are like the tourists described in the novel, who only want the skin and are content to unquestioningly engage in and perpetuate the symbolic, or whether they wish to penetrate to the heart of things like Godolphin and face the Nothing at the heart of the symbolic and of the subject they are. It is only in doing so that one may come to see the outline of their fantasy space and the symptom that constructs it and then may identify with that space and symptom and become consciously engaged in the production of their subjectivity. Thus the V. complex understood as *objet a*, as the pure form making possible the specific form desire takes, invites readers to move beyond the text into a deeper reading of the symbolic text that they, as subjects, are. This understanding is further illustrated by the word Vheissu itself. As several critics have pointed out, the word Vheissu may be understood as signifying the German phrase "Wie heisst du?," or may indicate that "V. is you."[7] The reading of Vheissu as "V. is you," or some permutation of this such as "V. she is us" or "V. he is us"[8] points to the earlier assertion that Vheissu is intimately related to all the other V. forms in the novel by virtue of their connection to the *objet a*, and thus "V. is you" serves to accentuate the fact that V. is not restricted to the novel alone. The obvious pun relating Vheissu to the German question "Wie heisst du?" is interesting in that it may be translated loosely as "what is your name?" and brings up the question of identity that is so crucial in the novel, but this phrase literally translates as "how are you called?" and as a result moves beyond mere questioning of identity to the question of how in fact the naming and addressing of the subject constructs identity. If we consider that the symbolic is the very stuff of ideology and that it is ideology that gets between us and the real, that informs the unconscious and contributes to the ordering of desire, then we may say that it is ideology that we must become conscious of if we are to approach the question of the V. that is us. The literal translation of the German places emphasis upon the calling of the subject as subject, which Althusser indicates when he says that, "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*."[9] It is the interpellation of the subject as subject of, in, and through ideology that the pun opens up for discovery and pushes readers to discover in and for themselves. Ideology infuses the dream the subject dreams of itself, and at the root of this dream, this fantasy space of subjectivity, lies the *objet petit V.*, both source and construct of the narrative of subjectivity, the absent cause at the heart of self-production, the V. that Stencil pursues and by which he is pursued.

## Veracity in Narrative Impersonation

Now that the sleight of hand of desire has been adumbrated, it is possible to look closely at one of Stencil's narrative episodes in order to see how the formal stylistics employed by Pynchon serve to accentuate and embody the problematic of V. If V. is an expression of the *objet a*, then all attempts to discover the essence of V. are akin to searching for a black hole by perceiving the anomalies around its event horizon. The main problem behind Stencil's narrative attempts to comprehend V. is one of the V-word never mentioned in the text — veracity. His is a search for truth, but because of the absent nature of the *objet a*/V./truth, it reveals the narrative fallibility of all attempts to find truth in history and in the understanding of identity. This is ironically highlighted in the "eight impersonations" section by the disparaging reference to *The Golden Bough* and *The White Goddess*, as texts that are merely scholarly attempts to capture and recreate some kind of cognizable order to history, so as to deny its contingent nature. All such attempts, Stencil's included, must look through a glass darkly at "a few dead objects" (445) and invest them with significance, must create connections, values and meanings where often none appear of themselves. V.'s identity is less a question of her identity as it is of Stencil's, for when Elizabeth Campbell suggests that "Stencil's search for V. may be his form of narcissism,"[10] she also points out that the "the crowd at the Rusty Spoon in New York concludes "that Stencil was seeking in her his own identity."[11] This question of identity is also that of the readers, who are invited in by the narrative style of the text for the first time in the impersonation section and offered a chance to observe and question the credibility of narrativity and its prime function as the weaving together of a structure of significance that enlivens the symbolic and contains the real.

So, if the episode in question is the "impersonation and dream" of a "clownish Stencil," who tends the nutritive scungille farm of his fantasy construction taking pains to be "always carefully avoiding the little dark deep right there in the midst of the tame shellfish" (60), then it is necessary to examine the manner in which the formal character of Stencil's narrativity works to contain the "dark deep" even while revealing it as the fundamental motivating force of his narrative. As soon as we look closely at the episode, it becomes evident that the narrative works on a multiplicity of diegetic levels. To begin with, the narrative is that of a character in the novel and as such focalized through his diegetic gaze — in this case it is more apposite to use "gaze" than "voice" because, while it is indeed Stencil's narrative, it takes on the quality of a voyeuristic gaze attempting to penetrate into the interiority of a situation to which he must always remain an external observer. The limited focalization through Stencil is then further narrowed through eight displacements that focalize the narrative through characters in the narrative within the overall narrative. Thus, we are given a Russian doll narrative in which the objective narrative contains Stencil's narrative, which in turn contains the mini-narratives of the impersonations that Stencil assumes. The narrative structure is one of a story within

a story, where the mini-narratives appear independent from Stencil, promoting the illusion of yet another narrative level, as if Stencil had become an objective narrator slipping out of his own limited position as character. This creates a layered narrative that reflects upon itself insofar as the pseudo-objectivity of Stencil in regard to his impersonated narrative brings its own credibility into question and reflects back upon the objective narrator of the main narrative, bringing the credibility of that voice into question. Alan Brownlie has argued that "[t]his narrative technique allows for clues to be embedded which cast suspicion upon each other and upon the notion of an omniscient narrator."[12] It would seem, then, that by having Stencil tell his tale as if he were external to it and was creating his own 'novel,' Pynchon is bringing into question the authority and credibility of the narrative voice, as such, and by extension the author who hides behind it in a guise of impartiality or at most authoritative commentary.

This problematic is further enhanced by the tangential nature of the 'narrative by accident' used by Stencil, composed of marginalized characters who observe voyeuristically from the outside events they are not privy to, and in doing so mirror Stencil's position. By extension, this voyeuristic, limited position is that of the reader as well, because, by virtue of the act of reading, the reader is placed in the position of observer who is invited into the narrative and even is intrinsic to its production, but who is always on the outside, insofar as they are not (or rarely as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* shows) actual participants — as characters — in the narrative. It is Pynchon's genius to problematize this participation of the reader and force the reader to not only construct the text in the reading but to struggle with the text as a puzzle by controverting the expectations brought to the text by the reader. Such a situation in which the reader is actively engaged and forced into a questioning position has the possibility of engendering reflection on the part of the reader. In a situation like we are currently investigating, where narrative credibility is being questioned in such a way as to show how the construction of subjectivity takes the form of a projection — that in this case is rendered more apparent by having it be a projection onto narrative voices of Stencil's own preoccupations — in narrative form of a specular complex, the reader may then question their own similar process of narrative self-construction, and they may ask what it is that drives them. This tangential narrativity works, then, to reveal the tangential position of the reader in regard to the text, that of Stencil in regard to the object of his gaze, and that of the impersonated characters in regard to the action of the episode; this last being the very means by which Stencil's own marginality is exposed and thus, finally, that of the reader. This formal convolution of narrative, an intrinsic part of Pynchon's *oeuvre*, disrupts the ostensibly seamless process of the traditional narrative and foregrounds the narrativity that informs the narrative and is always constrained by its diegetic position. All narrative is embedded in a historical and temporal horizon that determines the manner in which, in Hayden White's terms, the content of the form may manifest and so it cannot transcend itself into objectivity. As a result, the narrator

is, like Stencil, subject to the *objet a* and the drives ordered around it. This becomes especially clear when one observes the *oeuvre* of an author, such as Pynchon, and sees in it the evolution of definite preoccupations and dominant themes. All this serves the purpose of bringing into question the diegetic gaze, of rendering it visible to the reader and playfully indicating our own finitude and fallibility.

But, to return once more to the tangential form of Stencil's narrative impersonations, we can see that Stencil's impersonations are structured so that they perfectly exemplify the very problematic contained in and manifested by the V. structure as analogue of the *objet a*, insofar as they are a continual foray into the unknown from the outside that serves not to render the Thing known in itself, but rather acts as circumlocution delineating a space circulating around an absence, a missing truth, an activity which is the very substance of our, and Stencil's, subjectivity. This can be shown by considering the commonalities between, and then in turn the key elements of, each impersonation. The main feature that they have in common, as has been intimated already, is the fact that each gaze we are given is that of some random character who happens upon some piece of the narrative action by chance and has no idea what is going on. In addition, each focal gaze rests in a marginalized type of character, such as the waiter, factotum, bierhalle wench, and grifter. Yet, it is interesting to note that the characterization of these marginal characters, despite the severe limits given to them in regard to textual space, rivals that of some, if not most, of the characters in the objective narrative episodes. A fact that would seem to indicate not only a surplus flowing over of Stencil's character into his creations, but which also acts to emphasize the point that "the permanent residents [of Baedeker's world] are actually humans in disguise" (78). This difference of characterization, I would like to argue, suggests that the contemporary episodes are full of characters that have succumbed to the tourist mentality of contentment with the skin and, thus, to the insulated life of post-WWII capitalism, protected within illusion from the real, while Stencil is overly determined to penetrate beneath the skin, like many of his fictional creations, who tend to be on the margin, inhabiting the liminal space between levels of reality. We will see how each impersonation exemplifies this compulsion of Stencil's in increasing intensity.

In the first impersonation, we are given the waiter Aïeul, who is a Frenchman transplanted to Alexandria for unknown reasons and who, aside from being "outwardly inert but teeming inside with sad and philosophical reflections" (64), is also an astute observer — certainly we may recognize Stencil in this description. Despite his belief that "there was little to be curious about in the conversations of Englishmen" (64), he nonetheless is drawn to listen in, and in an important passage, he speculates about the story behind the two gentlemen he is serving. This speculative reflection on his part mimics and foregrounds the overall speculative character of these impersonations. By having this character engage in the exact same activity as Stencil, Pynchon renders

Stencil's position all the more clearly and invites the reader to join in the game. In this section, we are also given the one time in which Stencil parenthetically intrudes upon his impersonated focalization. The purpose of this may be to remind the reader of Stencil's presence but it also serves to include speculation that Stencil would deem important but which would seem out of place in the thoughts of Aïeul — a fact that indicates the shortcomings inherent in limited narrative perspective, in which we all are participants. The section ends with an image of the "usual sets of criss-crossing concentric circles" (66) that fill the square on a daily basis. What are these circles? What else but the paths of people that weave in and out of each other amidst the also involved play of light, and which remind one of The Situation, defined by Stencil — by way of old Stencil — as something that,

> "existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment, [and that] since these several minds tended to form a sum total or complex more mongrel than homogeneous, The Situation must necessarily appear to a single observer much like a diagram in four dimensions to an eye conditioned to seeing its world in only three" (189).

This is a perfect image of what Lacan calls the immixture of the subjects. According to Žižek's penetrating discussion of this:

> [...] social reality is unveiled as the coexistence of the plurality of individual or family destinies; each of these units forms its own exclusive universe of signification with its hopes and despairs, so that although they coexist as parts of the same global mechanism, they are wholly oblivious to each other — what keeps them together is not some deeper common axis of meaning but numerous contingent, 'mechanical' collisions that produce local effect of sense [...]. Crucial for the experience of 'immixture' is this notion of *sense as a local effect of the global nonsense*: the intermixture of individual lives is experienced as a blind mechanism in which, despite the lack of any Purpose regulating the flow of events, 'everything functions', so that the view of the totality provides an enigmatic, strangely pacifying, almost mystical experience.[13]

Thus, the imagery at the end of this first impersonation intimates what will be further elaborated on in old Stencil's description of The Situation — an understanding of the contingent collimation of various strains of significance intermingling in an immixture of subjects. It is an understanding and an image that bears out on the formal level of this episode, as what we are given is none other than individual universes randomly coinciding with each other and creating sense around a particular group of individuals, whose actions, seen from the limited perspective of each impersonated gaze, make no cohesive sense, but when pieced together assume an ostensible totality of speculative sense against the background nonsense that mirrors the limited speculative sense each impersonation attempts to construct.

The second impersonation is focalized through Yusef the anarchist, whose preoccupation with chaos represents an attempt on Stencil's part to assume a perspective alien to his need for order. In addition, Yusef is important in that his predilection for the Nothing — illustrated by his love of balloons, which connects him to the idiom "up goes the balloon," a euphemism for the start of conflict — directs

his attention to Victoria, whom he describes as "A balloon girl. A balloon girl" (67). His reference to her as a balloon girl foreshadows her future affair with chaos and the Nothing, while also objectifying her as a sexual object connected to his childhood love of balloons and thus his fantasy space. This connection to the fantasy space in which Yusef renders her into a metaphoric fetish object in his libidinal economy mirrors the function of V. for Stencil, whose construction of her is libidinally charged insofar as it is through his construction of her that he may tap into the life force, the animateness, within him.

Maxwell Rowley-Bugge is a grifter who milks the tourists of Alexandria and is allowed to do so because he adds local color: the illusion of a flirtation with the underbelly of the city that the tourists do not, in fact, wish to see. In his person, he illustrates this dichotomy of appearance and reality: his external clothes are spotless, while his underwear is rotting. What is interesting about him is that he exemplifies the dilemma Stencil is caught up in: rich narrative clothing hiding a paucity of internal wealth. The other important aspect of this section is the fact that he remains incapable of communing with the agents in his habitual manner because he, like Stencil, is not privy to the game they are playing; he may remain on the periphery feeling uncomfortably excluded but cannot gain access to the truth of the situation. It is interesting to note as well that the mask Bongo-Shaftsbury is wearing when he appears is that of Harmakhis or Horus, the child of Osiris and Isis. What is important about this ostensibly trivial detail is that the story of these three characters — father, mother, and child — is one of the early precursors of the virgin birth motif. As the story goes, when Set killed Osiris by encasing him in a sarcophagus, Isis tracked down her husband and conceived Horus from his dead body. Horus then was born as the result of his father's passing and his mother's regenerative powers. As such, Horus symbolizes birth from the old and the birth of a higher stage of spirituality. What is interesting in relation to *V.* is that the death of Porpentine — as made sufficiently clear by the version of the present tale in Pynchon's short story "Under the Rose" — represents the death of the old order of the duello and the noble spy — so important in relation to Stencil — and the birth not of a higher spiritual development but rather a more corrupt one, which is all the more important because the vehicle for his death and the symbolic birth of the new order it inaugurates is none other than Victoria.

In the fourth impersonation, the focalization is through Waldetar, a train conductor whose love for his wife and children marks him as one of the most humane characters in the entire novel and serves to highlight in this section the inhumanity of the spies, as he overhears Bongo-Shaftsbury say, "Humanity is something to destroy" (81). The key aspect of this section is the image of the deserts creeping slowly in on both sides in a v-shape whose terminal point is Cairo. This image seems to imply a connection to the progress of this narrative episode, which is increasingly encroached upon by the threatening desert of the real as it closes in on its goal. The increasing anxiety of the

impersonations finds voice in Waldetar's question: "what sort of world is it when they must let children suffer?" (82).

This anxiety is enhanced in the next section where Gebrail is obsessed with the desert and the nothingness, the absence of life, that it represents. His home was consumed by the desert inexorably and irrevocably and now he must live in the city to survive, but he sees the city as just another form of desert. It would seem that Stencil has chosen to use such a gaze because, as he nears the end point of his narrative, he is moving closer to the Nothing, and thus his characters are more and more consumed or threatened by it. The final paragraph of this section — "Night was coming rapidly. This haze would make the stars invisible. Brandy, too, would help. Gebrail enjoyed starless nights. As if a great lie were finally to be exposed..." (85) — may be read as a reflexive comment on the lie, the fantasy, that Stencil is weaving, precisely in order to cover over that other great lie: that there is something guaranteeing meaning and existence. As Richard Patteson has argued in regard to this chapter, "the plot centering on the murder of Porpentine may be nothing more than an elaborate system of impersonation and speculation whose purpose is to disguise the truth: that there is no pattern, no cause and effect sequence, no recoverable story, no history."[14] Stencil's quest, then, covers over the nothingness at the heart of history and of his subjectivity.

The sixth impersonation uses the character of Girgis the mountebank to give us a view into the decline of Porpentine. The character of Girgis is apposite for this section because he is a truly liminal character. Not only is he a mountebank by day and as such a participator in a long tradition of social critique from the socially authorized perspective of the fool, but he is also a criminal by night, who robs wealthy tourists. He gives enjoyment to tourists during the day and accepts payment within the authorized economy and takes from them by night controverting that economy. Thus, his liminality helps to highlight the liminal status of Porpentine who is forced to skulk about in the dark spying on his partner and being drawn into the human passion that Victoria unconsciously exploits and which will lead to his irrevocable subsumption into the "unclean" world of humanity and thus to his death. Girgis's intimation that Porpentine is mad may be read as an indication that Porpentine is crossing the threshold of the symbolic and being caught in the real.

Porpentine's dangerous proximity to the real is confirmed in the next impersonation when he breaks down and extends himself to Victoria and "understands" her situation. This understanding, this act of humanity, is what leads to his death and reveals Victoria as a destructive force in the symbolic world, even though she has not yet consciously committed herself to the Nothing. As David Cowart suggests, "Porpentine is destroyed [...] by misguided chivalry; misguided because he serves, in Goodfellow, a careless Lothario, and in Victoria, a woman whose morals alienate her family to the point of abandonment."[15] The significance of Porpentine's act is symbolically manifest in the

barmaid Hanne, whom Stencil impersonates. What is interesting about Hanne is that she is a cow-like individual who ostensibly acts and thinks according to the herd and thus is unconsciously accepting of her construction by, and through, the symbolic. Yet, after her lover Lepsius asks her to snoop for him, she begins to hear and see the ordinary in a new light and is forced to question what she normally takes for granted. This questioning leads to a traumatic encounter with the real represented by the stain on the plate she is trying to wash and is the reason why, when she sees Lepsius later, "[s]he had only the desire to remove his spectacles, snap and crush them, and watch him suffer" (93). It is his fault that she has been confronted by the madness of the world from which she was formerly protected by her ignorance. But what of the stain, what is its function and significance? According to Lacan, "the function of the stain and of the gaze is both that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness."[16] We will soon come back to the stain's connection to the gaze, but first it would seem that this stain on the plate that then moves into her field of vision is an anamorphotic blot that functions in her consciousness as a "meaningless stain that "denatures" it, rendering all its constituents "suspicious," and thus opens up the abyss of the search for a meaning — nothing is what it seems to be, everything is to be interpreted, everything is supposed to possess some supplementary meaning."[17] When she looks at the stain it flickers in and out of existence and changes shape depending upon how she looks at it. This anamorphosis of the stain reveals it as the piece of the real in reality that she has encountered because of the ambiguity and supplemental meaning that all the conversation around her has assumed as a result of her looking at it with new eyes and ears. The stain pops up precisely at the moment when Porpentine has crossed over the threshold: has died to the symbolic code of the spy by showing his humanity. His symbolic death is figured in the stain, which reveals the real and signals the move into the gaze of the next impersonation.

In the final impersonation, Stencil does not create a character through which to focalize the action; rather, he narrates the section as if he were a director setting up a shot or a narrative perspective in a Robbe-Grillet novel. This move to the objective, fixed shot of a cinematic kind is meant to empty out the narrative of all subjective content. By doing so, the symbolic death of Porpentine is mirrored in the coldly objective form of the scene. In addition, there is indication of an attempt on Stencil's part to render the second death of Porpentine in all its cold and brutal reality, while also setting up a perverse gaze in which the death of Porpentine can realize Stencil's own desire for annihilation as well as that of the reader, without having to actually undergo it. According to Lacan: "The gaze I encounter [...] is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other."[18] Lacan locates the gaze, as opposed to the eye that sees, in the Other, that which is over against us. It is because of this that he can say that the eye sees but it is always already looked at from every direction. The gaze is connected to the stain by

virtue of the stain's function as the piece of the real beyond symbolization and thus as the focused point from which one is gazed at by the Other. It is precisely the split between eye and gaze that is indicated by the penultimate paragraph of the section: "Vision must be the last to go. There must also be a nearly invisible line between an eye that reflects and an eye that receives" (94). The line described is that of the scopic field between eye ("eye that receives") and gaze ("eye that reflects"). Vision here becomes symbolic of consciousness and its passing away with death. Porpentine is "assumed exactly into the space of this vantage" (94), is assumed into the real via the gaze as his eye no longer receives and he thus becomes part of the real and, as such, a body that inertly gazes back at us, signifying the mystery that lies beyond understanding. This mystery is the mystery of the text itself, as it invites us to quest after the mystery of V. with Stencil, even while his quest is meant ultimately to avoid that which V. embodies. By ending the episode with a narrative through the gaze itself, Stencil assumes the point of view of that which he is avoiding in order to hide within it, as if proximity blinded one to the thing itself. He is also following a progression of increasing fixation with that which lies beyond the symbolic, which leads to an artificial assumption of the place from which we are seen by the real that renders it harmless by giving it shape and substance. His narrative production is a skillful practice of approach and avoid.

## Stencil

Aside from the encompassing omniscient narrator that holds the novel together structurally, there are two narrators within the narrative of *V.* These two sub-narrators, Stencil and Fausto Maijstral, act as narrative focalizations within the diegetic structure of the text giving it a multi-level, story-within-a-story quality that raises questions as to their function within the novel. As the only two characters within the novel who actively engage in the construction of the text through their diegetic production, they are immediately connected together through such proximity of function, and thus Fausto may act as a counterpoint to, and illumination of, Stencil as narrator.

Fausto appears first in the novel as the author of his confessions, which Stencil comes across through Fausto's daughter Paola. It is important to note that the narrative document of Fausto's that we are given is in fact a confession. Traditionally the confession genre has been one of the narrative re-creation of the writer's educational experience and thus subjective development. Like Augustine's and Rousseau's famous confessions, Fausto's confession is a narrative re-construction of his subjectivity in its various stages of development; he even numbers his various selves and delineates the circumstances of transition between them. This detached third person style of narrative discourse links Fausto's confession to that other important confessional work *The Education of Henry Adams* and thus to Stencil himself who, "like small children at a certain age and Henry Adams in the *Education*, as well as assorted autocrats since

time out of mind, always referred to himself in the third person" (62). What becomes apparent from this complex of connections is that such confessional writing attempts, through narrative, to come to terms with and create meaning out of the seemingly random contingency of existence that works to construct one as a subject. Such activity involves the "forcible dislocation of personality" (62) in order to render one's self an object that may be controlled and understood, to be detached from its existential facticity and articulated as a known quantity. Unlike Fausto, who understands that his schematization of the self is a literary tool easing the narrative portrayal of his development, Stencil forcibly persists in the attempt to keep himself in the third person in daily life. The answer to why he does this is given by his name. Stencil is attempting to be a living stencil, a form into which a content may be shaped. As a stencil, Stencil's narrativity shapes the information and clues he discovers into the form that he desires them to have. As critics such as Campbell, Brownlie, and Molly Hite have noted, he cannot help but stencilize the facts in such a way that they are formed into a shape that contributes to his dominant obsession. Stencil represents, then, the willful and largely unconscious process whereby the data of experience and history are distorted and altered according to the desire of the informing subject. Stencil as investigative historian surveys the field of facts and attempts to find relations between ostensibly disparate facts that create order through his very desire to have it be so. As Henry Adams says in *The Education*: "Historians undertake to arrange sequences, — called stories, or histories — assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect. These assumptions [...] have been astounding, but commonly unconscious and childlike; so much so, that if any captious critic were to drag them to light, historians would probably reply, with one voice, that they had never supposed themselves required to know what they were talking about."[19] Like Adams' historians, Stencil is molding the facts into the pattern of his desire. Consequently, Stencil's narrative activity reveals the manner in which subjectivity is constructed through narrative meaning-making and the telling of stories. A necessary outcome of this process, and one the novel foregrounds through the difference between Fausto's and Stencil's narrative self awareness, is the realization of the fallibility of such narrative and thus an undermining of narrative credibility and authority.

In order to understand the desire of Stencil ordering his investigation and consequently undermining his narrative credibility, the object of his quest must be understood, so that the shape of our stencil may be delineated. As previously noted, it is the construction of V. that Stencil seeks. Based on a few short lines in his father's journal, Stencil has structured his entire existence around the quest to discover the truth behind V. The lines in question that awoke him from his somnambulance, a result of an absence of life-sustaining and -affirming meaning, are: "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write an answer, either here or in any official report" (53). This brief reference acts as the enigmatic message that sets Stencil in motion, such that "[w]hatever the

reason, he began to discover that sleep was taking up time which could be spent active. His random movements before the war had given way to a great single movement from inertness to — if not vitality, then at least activity" (55). As a member of a generation that lived through the first Great War and as an Englishman, Stencil embodies a spiritual lethargy resulting from the great cultural loss of innocence brought about by WWI. Yet, Stencil contains the memory of another time embodied by his father, when a certain cultural consistency of purpose and meaning still existed and had not yet broken down. It is fitting that old Stencil should die in 1919, as his death acts as a symbol of the death of a cultural arrogance and imperialist confidence after the war ended. His world had passed and thus he too with it, as we observe in his feelings of uselessness in the final intrigues of the novel. In dying as he does, he is spared the pathetic degradation that Godolphin suffers as a lingering manifestation of a lost age. What is important about this for our present purposes is that young Stencil contains the memory of this age embodied by his father. Through his adoption of the hunt for V., he is, therefore, seeking to escape the spiritual ennui of his own time through the creation of a fantasy space around V. This atavistic longing of his is confirmed first by the recognition that he has moved from "inertness" into not "vitality" — a state of meaningful life-affirming activity — but rather mere "activity", and then by his aversion to the Whole Sick Crew, whose name indicates their spiritual decrepitude and who remind Stencil of his pre-war state of being. It is crucial to note from the beginning that Stencil's entire hunt for V. takes place as, and within, a fantasy space in which he may play out the circuit of his desire.

Although Stencil latches predominantly onto the who rather than the what of V., his construction of her as female object of investigation provides, as I'll be showing, much insight into the what of V., especially if we consider the subjectivity and thus fantasy of Stencil as historical subject as being interfused with the problems and cultural currents of his historical conjuncture. Stencil is set in motion by his nascent obsession with V. and constructs himself through his narrative construction of her. We may then ask what it is that is constructed by him in his quest. A first surface answer is that he re-constructs from fragmentary facts the life of a particular woman, whose many names and disguises all point to a unitary phenomenon behind the shifting façade. It has been sufficiently pointed out by many critics, such as Brownlie and Berressem, and is obvious in the text itself, that the progress of V.'s life is one of an inexorable and even fetishistic movement toward the inanimate, such that in her final appearance as the Bad Priest her status as woman has been effaced completely and she has incorporated into herself many bits of inanimate matter. While this may indeed be read as a symbolic attempt to render the degradation of the Virgin in a time of technological fetishism and thus of a movement from a life-affirming to a mechanistic and destructively hollow reality principle — a reading completely in conformity with that given above of Stencil's atavism — it must be understood as well that she is the narrative construction of Stencil, first and foremost, even if she appears 'objectively' in the novel outside of Stencil's narrative episodes. In

light of this, V. must be understood as a narrative fantasy projection of Stencil's, as modern masculine subject. Thus, V. may be read as an example of, in Lacan's terms, the construction of the woman as Thing.

The narrative construction of woman has a long history and finds especial prominence in the poetry of courtly love, a tradition of constructing woman that has had great implications for the conception of woman in western culture. It is Žižek's contention that the spiritually pure ideal of the Lady presented in the literature of courtly love is a secondary phenomenon meant to cover over a more fundamental conception of woman as an inscrutable Other beyond masculine understanding. As Žižek states: "The Lady is thus as far as possible from any kind of purified spirituality: she functions as an inhuman partner in the sense of a radical Otherness which is wholly incommensurable with our needs and desires; as such, she is simultaneously a kind of automaton, a machine which utters meaningless demands at random."[20] Noting the description of the Lady as an automaton and machine, one cannot help but think of Stencil's V. and the bits of inanimate matter incorporated into her body. V. has links to the Lady in that she too is of an inhuman character, and is a vague shifting entity within the novel devoted to creating disorder and chaos. As old Stencil points out in the epilogue, "Riot was her element [...] She frightened him" (487). Her devotion to the chaotic is alien to the masculine drive for order embodied by old Stencil in his capacity as FO agent and adherent of the Situation. Her statement, "How pleasant to watch Nothing," (487) could not be further from his own mentality and further points to her status as radical Otherness and the concomitant connection to the real she manifests as the Thing. Žižek elucidates this connection thus:

> This coincidence of absolute, inscrutable Otherness and pure machine is what confers on the Lady her uncanny, monstrous character — the Lady is the Other which is not our 'fellow-creature'; that is to say, she is someone with whom no relationship of empathy is possible. This traumatic Otherness is what Lacan designates by means of the Freudian term *das Ding*, the Thing — the Real that 'always returns to its place', the hard kernel that resists symbolization. The idealization of the Lady, her elevation to a spiritual, ethereal Ideal, is therefore to be conceived of as a strictly secondary phenomenon: it is a narcissistic projection whose function is to render her traumatic dimension invisible.[21]

Her professed love of the "Nothing" is, in Lacanian terms, a sign of her passion for, and link to, the real. In addition, I would argue that, as Stencil's narrative other, she is situated in the position of the Thing. She becomes the embodiment of the feminine principle of sensuality and creation, of a force of nature beyond the ken of man and thus terrifying in its wild mystery. As such an embodiment, she is connected to the real, to that which is beyond symbolization, but from which all symbolization springs. As an instantiation of the Thing, she represents the impossibility of containing the real as embodied in the feminine mystery. The fact that Stencil on two separate occasions refers to her as a "beast of venery" (412) indicates not only her status as hunted, as pursued in the tradition of courtly love — a connection further alluded to in his description of her as "chased like the hart, hind or hare" (61), all traditional tropes for the Lady in

courtly love literature — but also, because of the phrase's sexual connotations, points to her status as sexual object, sexual mystery, and thus as the Thing, insofar as the Thing is always a manifestation of the impenetrable mystery of the real. As such, V. is representative of the underlying void of meaning that is revealed in the gaps of the symbolic. Her glassy-eyed stare at the Florence riot and subsequent commitment to the creation of chaos in all spheres — whether it be the political, as in her apparent involvement in the attempt to keep Malta independent of Italy, or personal, as in her manipulations of both Godolphins — points to her role in the novel as more than simply a radical character, but rather as a Stencilized projection of V. as radical alterity and thus as the inversion and perversion of the imaginary order he attempts to create for himself through his construction of her. In this capacity, she transcends her singular function as object of Stencil's quest for imaginary self consistency and acts as the central absence around which the symbolic is constructed and which it is meant to conceal. It is in this understanding of V.'s formal function in the novel that we see her status as *objet petit a*, and from which we may move beyond a discussion of V. as singular meaning — such as Kupsch's idea of V. as Venus and the feminine — and explore the polysemous quality of V. and V. as floating signifier. Now, it remains to be seen how the status of V. thus delineated allows us to more clearly observe the manner in which Stencil's narrativity undermines itself.

Because V. has been unveiled in its function as Stencilian narrative construction — as the pure form both motivating desire and informing its object — V. may now be understood as a narcissistic projection of Stencil's. V. is the enigma appearing as a part of reality that is the surface supporting his fantasy projection while also only gaining form as such a surface through that projection. As noted earlier, the idealization of the Lady is a secondary phenomenon meant to cover over her traumatic status as Thing. As Žižek again states: "Deprived of every real substance, the Lady functions as a mirror on to which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal."[22] Stencil's narrative production seeks to contain and pacify the Thingness of V. by constructing her as the ostensibly innocent and victimized Victoria Wren in his first narrative episode. But as the novel progresses his construction of her gradually bends toward the sinister, as if to suggest that his narrativity cannot contain the Thing and by extension his own masculine anxiety. Žižek points out that, "we have to answer this question: where does that empty surface come from, that cold, neutral screen which opens up the space for possible projections? That is to say, if men are to project on to the mirror their narcissistic ideal, the mute mirror-surface must already be there. This surface functions as a kind of 'black hole' in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible."[23] It is in and through the progress of Stencil's narrative attempts to comprehend V. that we observe his gradual inability to do so and the breakdown of his pacifying attempts. We see a picture of V. emerge in which she moves ever more toward a synthesis between the animate and the inanimate. She is exposed as a "beast of venery," a creature of a decidedly sexualized passion for chaos,

and as such, she becomes an embodiment of Stencil's own frustration and fear in the face of the object of his desire. V. is the traumatic object of desire that, like the Lady, must be kept at a distance while not being lost altogether. V.'s problematic and formal quality for Stencil is illuminated in the following:

> Finding her: what then? Only that what love there was to Stencil had become directed entirely inward, toward this acquired sense of animateness. Having found this he could hardly release it, it was too dear. To sustain it he had to hunt V.; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid.

Like the Lady, often hunted as a hart, V. represents the anxiety-ridden dialectic of desire, in which there is anxiety about the status and form of the desired object — its place within one's fantasy space as imaginary support of reality — and anxiety about the loss of the object and thus of desire itself through the attainment of the object. What the poet in regard to the Lady wants least, despite his professions of love, is to attain the love of the Lady because in so doing the necessary distance and obstacle driving desire would collapse and with it the desiring process.

If we consider V. as a narrative construction of a narcissistic nature, a product of Stencil's attachment to his new found animateness, it becomes apparent that V. is ultimately nothing more than the support for an attempt at self construction that takes place by virtue of a kind of mirroring. The mirror, in Lacanian terms, is the symbol for the imaginary process of ego/self construction. The animateness Stencil experiences and latches onto is nothing but the active process of projecting onto the mirror that is the self in order to construct a structure of significance that will invest life with purpose and meaningful sustenance. His construction of V. is less a construction of her as it is of an attempt on his part to escape the spiritual torpor he had formerly been caught in and which permeates his age. Rather than yo-yoing around devoid of affirmative meaning the way Profane does, taking things as they come but never actively creating himself or his world, Stencil rushes after V. with a zeal characteristic of the paranoid — who, finding or sensing that there is no absolute ground to meaning, fanatically posits some "Other of the Other" to fill in the gaps in the symbolic, in the big Other of culture.[24] Stencil realizes his quest must never have an end and that if it did he would fall once more into the void. In a classic definition of desire, "approach and avoid," Stencil's entire situation is rendered, and it is made evident that the goal of desire is not the object of desire but rather the perpetuation of the desiring process. In his fanatical construction of V., he is avoiding the 'black hole' inherent in the mirror, the stain in the reflection through which the real makes itself known. But, because V. is a product of this frenzied activity of avoidance she contains both elements: the positive and negative. V., like the Lady, "therefore functions as a unique short circuit in which *the Object of desire itself coincides with the force that prevents its attainment*."[25] It is in light of this that Stencil's reticence to approach Malta may be fully understood.

The doubt that always plagued Stencil from the first narrative episode — where he is noted to have dreamt "once a week that it had all been a dream, and that now he'd awakened to discover the pursuit of V. was merely a scholarly quest after all, an adventure of the mind" (61) — finds its culmination when he finally ventures to Malta. Up to this point, Stencil has acted as a parody of the classical detective. He has been what Lacan calls "the subject supposed to know" and as such has acted as a narrative authority in the novel.[26] Like the analyst who, as the subject supposed to know, is ostensibly worthy of the analysand's confidence despite the fact that this status is a fiction, narrative authority is built upon the fiction that the narrator is privy to special knowledge and so worthy of our confidence. So, too, as narrator, Stencil seems to exude an aura of infallibility characteristic of the classical detective until it is ironically undermined by the narrative authority proper. Because we are given the story of V. through the narrativity of Stencil, we may easily fall prey to the belief, propagated by the nature of narrative authority, that what we are given is objectively true in some way. Yet, there are indications throughout Stencil's narrative episodes that reveal on various levels of subtlety that the history of V. we are given has been, as Eigenvalue puts it, "Stencilized." By the point when Eigenvalue uses this term to characterize what Stencil does to Mondaugen's story and his other narrative material, it has become clear that Stencil is not the most credible of narrators because he filters everything through his obsession. This problem is further confirmed during Stencil's retelling of Mondaugen's story to Eigenvalue when Eigenvalue interrupts Stencil to question an aspect of his retelling. Eigenvalue explicitly points out that he, "think[s] it strange that [Mondaugen] should remember an unremarkable conversation, let alone in that much detail, thirty-four years later. A conversation meaning nothing to Mondaugen but everything to Stencil" (249). This remark, coming as it does as the only intrusion upon Stencil's narrative by a listener, undermines his narrative authority by questioning his narrative veracity and the motivations behind it ("I understand only [...] that your attitude toward V. must have more sides to it than you're ready to admit. It's what the psychoanalysts used to call ambivalence, what we now call simply a heterodont configuration" (249)), and confirms what the reader has been suspecting regarding the quality and credibility of Stencil's narrative. Prior to these explicit indications there are other more subtle clues that Stencil is not the "subject supposed to know" at all, is in fact playing at the role of 'classical detective' and old-time spy in an attempt to connect to his father and his father's time.

One such clue is the odd parallel between the circumstances surrounding Stencil's last communication with his father and those constructed by Stencil between the Godolphins in the Florence episode. We know that the last message his father sent expressed a desire for his son to contact him ("Sidney's message read: 'I feel old, and yet like a sacrificial virgin. Write and cheer me up. Father.'"), and that Stencil's failure to do so left him with a sense of guilt. We read:

> Young Stencil hadn't written because he was eighteen and never wrote. That was part of the present venery: the way he'd felt on hearing of Sidney's death half a year later and only then realizing that neither of them had communicated since the picture-postcard. (63)

Stencil is motivated in his quest for V. by his feeling of guilt toward his father and this is subtly expressed in his narrative through his construction of the relationship between Godolphin and his son. In the Florence episode, we are given a picture of young Evan Godolphin as a foppish youth who upon receiving a message from his father that expresses a certain distress immediately goes to find him. Not necessarily a dutiful son, Evan seeks out his father mainly out of curiosity at the mention of Vheissu. What is important about this relationship in connection to Stencil is that Evan does make the effort to respond to his father's note and that in doing so he is led to an emotional reconnection to his father, whom he comforts in a time of need. We find them at the end of the episode floating away together in a mood of communion that Stencil is barred from in reality but may act out in the fantasy space of his narrative. This narrative dynamic illuminates the ambiguity that Stencil has toward his construction of V., a construction that seems more of a complex in need of working out than an objective narrative.

It is from clues such as these that the façade of Stencil as credible narrator and "subject supposed to know" is revealed as just that: a façade. Despite his attempts at forcible dislocation of personality — for example through his construction of very specific focalized narrative foils — and his third-person self-reference, he cannot escape the highly subjective nature of his narrativity. It is worth quoting at length Žižek's description of the hard-boiled detective at this point because it exemplifies the position of Stencil in relation to V. As Žižek writes:

> The hard-boiled detective gets mixed up in a course of events that he is unable to dominate; all of a sudden it becomes evident that he has been "played for a sucker." [...] [A]ll his effort is directed toward clarifying the contours of the trap into which he has fallen. The "truth" at which he attempts to arrive is not just a challenge to his reason but concerns him ethically and often painfully. The deceitful game of which he has become a part poses a threat to his very identity as a subject. [...] [I]t is the detective himself [...] who undergoes a kind of "loss of reality," who finds himself in a dreamlike world where it is never quite clear who is playing what game. And the person who embodies this deceitful character of the universe, its fundamental corruption, the person who lures the detective and "plays him for a sucker," is as a rule the femme fatale, which is why the final "settlement of accounts" usually consists in the detective's confrontation with her.[27]

Stencil's position is much the same as that of the hard-boiled detective: both are pursuing a quarry that seems to be the one truly in control, experience a loss of reality as a result, constitute their identities through the pursuit, and are confronted by a female figure who embodies universal corruption, and this mainly because of her elusive nature as feminine mystery. The difference between the traditional femme fatale and V. is that whereas the femme fatale derives her potency from embodying the man's idea of her and uses it to control him at the cost of losing her autonomous self, V. is nothing but the idea of Stencil, while also transcending him as universal formal object-cause of desire. Thus,

V. is both the construction of Stencil and that which constructs Stencil as a desiring-subject.

The resolution of the hard-boiled detective story comes when the detective breaks the hold the femme fatale has over him, denies her power and, in doing so, reveals her to herself as an object, "a passive element in the interplay of libidinal forces" and, as such, an embodiment of what Lacan means by his formulation "the woman does not exist."[28] By revealing in the moment of her loss of control that her entire identity with all its narcissistic pretensions has been constructed by masculine desire and its concomitant discourse, the femme fatale finally becomes a subject for herself, and since this results from the loss of positive desire — manifested in power over men —, she is put face to face with her negative desire: the death drive. It is in the break from her control that the detective saves himself from the effects of her negative desire — and thus transfers it back to her — and is able to find his own positive desire and, thus, reaffirm himself as subject, regaining the comfort of his narcissistic identity.[29]

Stencil on the other hand affirms and creates his narcissistic identity through his narcissistic construction of V., and thus as his doubt in relation to her consistency as an actual entity grows, so too does his own despair and loss of reality grow. Unlike the ultimately conservative purpose of the hard-boiled detective narrative, the inversion of it that we find in Stencil's story is meant to hold the traumatic kernel driving desire before us, by showing us a kind of subjective destitution rather than narcissistic reinforcement. The culmination of Stencil's breakdown comes when he finally goes to Malta, meets Fausto Maijstral, and faces the emptiness of his desire. As he recounted his narrative to Fausto, he "strengthened a long suspicion. That it did add up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects" (449). It is at this point that he confronts the hard kernel of truth behind his whole narrative project. He comes face to face with the emptiness of his desire and sees that his entire project has been the filling in of an arbitrary design around the initial V. It is at this moment that his identity breaks down; he glimpses the real through the gap-ridden symbolic, and falls into an obsessive lethargy. When he goes to see the woman who may have the clock eye, he cannot muster the charm he associates with his father and thus with his game of playing at being a spy, and he feels tired. In Stencil's case it is at the moment when he is overcome with doubt, when V. scatters into an artificial conglomerate of signifiers without a cohesive center, becomes a floating signifier, a form without definitive content, when his approach has come too close for him to continue to avoid, that he experiences the breakdown of his fantasy and its underpinning desire. While for the hard-boiled detective this moment generally signifies release, for Stencil it signifies the inverse possibility, namely, that as a man "he *identifies* with the woman as symptom and meets his fate in a suicidal gesture."[30] Of course, Stencil does not succumb to the death drive unleashed by his identification with V. and thus his identity dispersal resulting from her own dispersal as coherent object

is not total. He meets the threat of falling back into a slumber of the real, where his imaginary fantasy space and the symbolic activity supporting it have collapsed after the traumatic encounter with the real of his desire, and moves once again, at the slightest provocation, into frenetic activity. When he experiences the connections surrounding Father Fairing, he begins repeating, mantra-like, the phrase: "Events seem to be ordered into an ominous logic" (449). In order to escape absorption into the real, he enters more fully into a paranoid fantasy to which his repetition of this paranoid phrase is meant to give substance. This paranoid complex is clarified by what he says to Profane just before Profane's mention of Fairing sets Stencil off for good:

> V.'s is a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth. Whose emissaries haunt this century's streets. Porcépic, Mondaugen, Stencil père, this Maijstral, Stencil fils. Could any of them create a coincidence? Only Providence creates. If the coincidences are real then Stencil has never encountered history at all, but something far more appalling.
>
> Stencil came on Father Fairing's name once, apparently by accident. Today he came on it again, by what could only have been design. (450)

History and design are the result of some 'Other of the Other' that works behind the scenes ordering things in ways we cannot comprehend and thus acts as guarantor of meaning, shoring up the symbolic and filling in its gaps and in doing so containing the real. What Stencil apperceives as the other alternative explanation of coincidence and finds to be "far more appalling" is the radical contingency of the universe. V. acts for Stencil as the automaton — symbolized by her gradually becoming more machine than human within his narrative production of her. As automaton in psychoanalytic terms, V. functions as the unifying habitual principle or activity that gives consistency to Stencil's subjectivity — V. is the unconscious desiring machine driving his activity. Yet, as such, V. contains within her the *tuché*, which Lacan "translated [...] as *the encounter with the real*"[31] and of which he said:

> The real is beyond the automaton, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle. The real is that which always lies behind the automaton. [...] The function of the tuché, of the real as encounter — the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter — first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma.[32]

Importantly, Lacan says that the encounter with the real is something that appears "*as if by chance*"[33]. Stencil is appalled at the coincidences that seem to happen as if by chance and which point to a radical contingency that threatens the coherency of his world-ordering symbolic processes. He attempts to create himself through creating V. and as such she acts as the automaton, but also in that role she contains the real, insofar as it presents itself in the random encounters that seem to disrupt and point to a fundamental lack in the symbolic. It is this traumatic element of V. that Stencil finally can no longer avoid in Malta and which almost overwhelms him. He is overcome by anxiety, an anxiety that, as Žižek points out, "is brought on by the disappearance

of desire."[34] Thus, he must continue ever on, tracking down new leads that are meant simply to prolong his avoidance of the inevitable and perpetuate the desire that keeps him from a life of sleep and which constructs the fantasy space in which he lives.

Stencil breaks down not only as a character, then, but as a credible narrative voice as well. The extreme subjectivity and, in fact, psychosis of his narrativity bars the reader from taking his narrative episodes as anything more than the obsessive circumspections of an interesting but fallible fantasy space. The cause of the undermining of his narrative authority and credibility is at root the very object-cause of desire itself and its function as pure form.

Stencil's narrativity works to contain and avoid its object even while it ostensibly seeks to attain it, and in its cooptation of V. and that which lies beyond, yet inside, the symbolic, it illustrates the manner in which the fantasy space is inextricably bound up and mixed in with the objective. His narrativity is the meeting ground of the real, symbolic and imaginary, where Stencil creates himself as an imaginary or specular ego in search of the Truth of V. through the symbolic, whose very nature it is to cover over the real and obscure the imaginary nature of the ego. Thus, Stencil is an example of the desiring process that seeks its own furtherance through *méconnaissance* or misrecognition and understands unconsciously that the goal of desire is not the object of desire but the desiring process itself, not the final discovery of V.'s identity but the quest itself that keeps him, and us, from vegetation and oblivion, from being Profane, whose name points to his refusal to actively engage in the sacrosanct activity of constructing meaning.

## End notes

1. Yevtushenko, p. 11.
2. Berressem, p. 58.
3. Kupsch, p. 58.
4. Žižek (2002), p. 4.
5. Žižek (2002), p. 12.
6. Žižek (2002), p. 12.
7. Hite, p. 54; Eddins, p. 65.
8. Cooley, p. 313.
9. Althusser, p. 65.
10. Campbell, p. 62.
11. Quoted in Campbell, p. 62.
12. Brownlie, p. 22.
13. Žižek (2001), pp. 208-209.
14. Patteson, p. 22.
15. Cowart, p. 68.

16. Lacan, p. 74.
17. Žižek (2002), p. 91.
18. Lacan, p. 84.
19. Adams, p. 382.
20. Žižek (2001), p. 90.
21. Žižek (2001), p. 90.
22. Žižek (2001), p. 90.
23. Žižek (2001), p. 91.
24. Žižek (2002), p. 81.
25. Žižek (2001), p. 96.
26. Žižek (2002), p. 57.
27. Žižek (2002), p. 63.
28. Žižek (2002), pp. 64-65.
29. Žižek (2002), pp. 63-66.
30. Žižek (2002), p. 66.
31. Lacan, p. 53.
32. Lacan, pp. 53-55.
33. Lacan, p. 54.
34. Žižek (2002), p. 8.

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