

CONSTITUTING SELVES:  
CHARACTER AND FRACTAL HISTORICISM  
IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS PYNCHON

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A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate  
Faculty of the University of Virginia  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English  
University of Virginia  
May 1995

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May 1995

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Abstract

Most critics of Thomas Pynchon see in his complicated structures and multiplicity of details the portrayal of a world bereft of meaning. Readers are continually put in the same position as the characters to learn that story, or history, rarely coheres in the way(s) we expect and hence must be constructed to accommodate the material at hand. What happens, however, when material cannot be accommodated? This is a central question faced by Pynchon's characters which has been overlooked.

Many American writers have explored the relationships between an individual's sense of self and sense of history. Moby Dick, Absalom, Absalom!, and All the King's Men are only a few works which portray characters struggling to understand their worlds and themselves by creating narrative history. Pynchon's works extend this tradition by directly confronting "failures of history" when no story can be made from a character's data.

An examination of Pynchon's characters and the ways in which they handle the data of the (hi)stories they try to create reveals a fiction which shares concerns with its roots in American literature and which shares terms with the study of Chaos, a science which recognizes and values data

which does not conform to any expected continuity. Pynchon explicitly pushes his characters towards the recognition and valuing of the irregular and the seemingly contradictory. His fiction urges us to consider the fragments which make up our history and which may have something to tell us, even if they cannot be made to make a traditional Story. When examined together, Pynchon's novels present characters who come to terms with such non-narrativized, or fractal, history in increasingly significant ways.

The characters in Pynchon's works face with varying degrees of success and comfort situations in which their notions of history, historical process, and their own historical place are severely threatened. Within this work new modes of constituting a coherent sense of identity within history emerge. The characters in Thomas Pynchon's novels collectively move American literature towards a ground from which both fractals and the characters who play them can be recognized and valued.



To Kevin

My light, my hope, my strength

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Douglas Day for a seemingly endless supply of patience, support, and critical input without which this dissertation would never have been completed; for all that he has provided, I am deeply grateful. I would also like to thank Professor David Mascitelli for his advice and support and for generously sharing his time and insights. And to Marlene Miller for her careful scrutiny of this project as it neared its completion. Thank you as well to friends and colleagues for continued encouragement throughout the course of my work. A very special thank you to my parents, Marjorie and Chuck Evans for always being there when it was most important and for helping me to see the end. And to Rebecca and Geoffrey for their interest, patience, and continued understanding. Finally, thank you Kevin for a constant willingness to read and reread and to discuss this work and for the countless ways in which you were willing to give of yourself and your time.

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If she could only give up, relax, and live in the perfect knowledge that there was no hope. But there was never any knowing or any certitude; the time to come always had more than one possible direction. One could not even give up and hope. The wind would blow, the sand would settle, and in some as yet unforeseen manner time would bring about a change which could only be terrifying, since it would not be a continuation of the present.

The Sheltering Sky (214-215)

I had to admit to myself that I lived for nights like those, moving across the city's great broken body, making connections among its millions of cells. I had a crazy wish or fantasy that some day before I died, if I made all the right neural connections, the city would come all the way alive. Like the Bride of Frankenstein.

The Instant Enemy (122)

## Chapter One

### The Demythifying of America: Narrativized History and Fractal Historicism

Farina has going for him an unerring and virtuoso instinct about exactly what, in this bewildering Republic, is serious and what cannot possibly be--and on top of that the honesty to come out and say it straight. (Thomas Pynchon on Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me)

You have the feeling, reading these stories, that Hughes Rudd, like some kind of Satanic Santa Claus, is leading you under the shadow of the great, grotesque American Christmas Tree and over to an assortment of gift packages, each one of which is quietly ticking. The explosions may come while you're reading, or after you've finished a particular story. But it's the thought behind them that really counts: To bring you ready or not into the presence of truth. Without copping out behind idle metaphors . . . Mr. Rudd has succeeded in telling . . . exactly what the hell having to be an American, now, during years of total war, epidemic anxiety, and mass communications whose promise has been corrupted, is really about; where it's really at. . . . he is not only a writer with an enormous genius for spinning a yarn, but also one whose fine ear is tuned both to the reverberations of global history and to the secret whisperings of the human spirit. (Thomas Pynchon reviewing My Escape From the CIA)

Underneath, you can feel a good solid rage, a deep sense of care, and most hopefully, a refusal to believe that the world he's telling about really has to be like it is. (Thomas Pynchon reviewing Looking for Baby Paradise)

At its heart is an awareness that the America which should have been is not the America we ourselves live in; that the dissonances set up between the two grow every day wider and more tragic. (Thomas Pynchon reviewing DeFord)<sup>1</sup>

America: what it is, what it pretends to be, what it can be.

Thomas Pynchon, no less than the writers he reviews here

reveals a "solid rage" and a "deep sense of care" about America in both his responses to others and in his own fiction. Pynchon, like Steve Erickson, another writer he reviews, has a "rare and luminous gift for reporting back from the nocturnal side of reality" (Mead 48), a side which does not endorse America's mythic, nostalgic view of itself or its past, but which struggles against a culture which continually promotes a narrative notion of history which endorses a causal, coherent, unified and meaningful (i.e. closed) historical process in the face of experienced history which is not so easily narrativized. Pynchon's approach to the work of his contemporaries opens up a clear line of investigation into his own work and into a specific tendency within modern American literature to raise questions about mythifying attitudes towards the past and integrative structures to accommodate history. Pynchon's novels, like those of the writers he reviews, promote an understanding of history which does not privilege the narrative, but which opens us up to other possible approaches to discovering what and who we are.

The examination of Pynchon's four novels, V. (1963), The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), Gravity's Rainbow (1973), and Vineland (1990), which I undertake here argues that the demythifying impulse in American literature finds in him not only a committed voice, but a voice which, in another echo from his own reviews, refuses to believe that the America he

is writing about really has to be constructed as it is. His writing reveals what it means to relinquish faith in a clearly delineated America and to move towards forging meaning within history. Pynchon places his characters in the midst of confused masses of entangled historical facts where they find that traditional or expected methods of making sense fail to operate successfully, thus apparently stranding them "in the middle"--a ground which neither coalesces nor dissolves.

Each of Pynchon's novels focuses on a significant character's quest. Awakening to an awareness that their lives have somehow lost clarity (Oedipa and Stencil), or that the clarity they believed in has been revealed as false or hollow (Benny and Slothrop), or that they have not yet attained any clarity whatsoever (Prairie), each quester looks to the past as the ground on which his/her desired meaning should be found. Each character believes that he/she has failed to or has been unable to assimilate some part of history which will make them whole. The task seems easy: accept the need for the quest, search out the necessary "facts," put the findings together, and complete the story which will infuse their lives with harmony and meaning. Each initially approaches the quest with determination, a certain degree of optimism, and confidence, and each is quickly confronted by disillusioning experience which fails to follow or even allow itself to be coerced

into any acceptable or coherent form. The consequent struggles, arising from the perceived dissolution of the very ground of the quest, are largely marked by anxiety, fear, and confusion as the questers begin suspecting the possibility of finding meaning in an incoherent world. As we read through Pynchon's novels, however, we find evidence of tentative coalitions and even more tentative celebrations as the questers learn important lessons about history and the possibilities of living within the non-narratable.

Roland Barthes, in his essay "The Discourse of History," provides a useful distinction for this discussion between "narrative history" and "intelligible history." He examines the paradox that developed out of the nineteenth century approach to history which privileged narration as the "signifier of the real":

History's refusal to assume the real as signified (or again, to detach the referent from its mere assertion) led it, as we understand, at the privileged point when it attempted to form itself into a genre in the nineteenth century, to see in the 'pure and simple' relation of the facts the best proof of those facts, and to institute narration as the privileged signifier of the real. Augustin Thierry became the theoretician of this narrative style of history, which draws its 'truth' from the careful attention to narration, the architecture of articulations and the abundance of expanded elements (known, in this case, as 'concrete details'). (18)

In this way, Barthes argues, narrative structure, originally developed as a fictional mode, becomes the sign and proof of



reality. "Intelligible history," which Barthes sees as gaining prominence in the present day, on the other hand, rests not on narration or chronology, but "seeks to talk of structures"; it is a history subject to analysis in terms of the intelligible, not the narratable.

In an essay titled "Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," Hayden White expands on Barthes' argument and leads us to a further understanding of this perceived link between history and narrative. He begins with a proposition that is most salient for Pynchon's confused and anxious questers, that giving real events the formal coherency of a story is a gratification of fantasy, a fulfillment of a cultural desire. Historiography, he argues, "is an especially good ground on which to consider the nature of narration and narrativity because it is here that our desires for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual" (4). Real events, he continues, do not often offer themselves as stories, with narrative closure and plot, and narrativizing them (providing the structure and order of meaning) often proves extremely difficult. Historical events, clearly, are not inherently narratable. Indeed, in narrative history, "reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience. Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a plot all

along, they give to reality the odor of the ideal" (White 21).

White's examination of the developing relation between the "true," the "real," and the narrated leads him to a specific critique of modern historical understanding and a conclusion very similar to Barthes', namely that modern history presupposes a notion of reality in which "'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity" (6). This conclusion describes precisely the initial position of Pynchon's characters as they confront their culture's attitude toward history. The pressure to create narrative is a pressure to create a certain kind of culture or self, one which can be shown to have the immutable narrative values of intrinsic meaning, coherence, structure, and one last crucial element discussed by White: a closure which rests on morality.

The demand for closure in history, as in narrative, White asserts, is a demand for moral meaning, an expectation that narrative history will moralize the events it treats (14). Thus he equates closure with a specifically moral meaning and transmutes narrativity into a value which, as Barthes argues, paradoxically connotes objectivity and realism:

When it is a matter of recounting the concourse of real events, what other "ending" could a given

sequence of such events have than a "moralizing" ending? What else could narrative closure consist of than the passage from one moral order to another? I confess that I cannot think of any other way of "concluding" an account of real events, for we cannot say, surely, that any sequence of real events actually comes to an end, that reality itself disappears, that events of the order of the real have ceased to happen. . . . There is no other way that reality can be endowed with the kind of meaning that both displays itself in its consummation and withholds itself by its displacement to another story "waiting to be told" just beyond the confines of "the end." (White 23-24)

Given this "necessarily" moral nature of ending and the necessarily artificial nature of closure, it becomes clear that the moral lessons we seek to derive from history are actually prior to it. In other words, although narrativity has come to connote an objectivity which validates lessons drawn from history, in fact we can only impose narrative on events if we have a moral structure to begin with. Hence, if, without narrative, without a narrativized history, we do not even partake of the passage from one moral order to another, how are we to understand our selves, our past, our present, our future? In a stunning set of questions, White lays out the very causes of anxiety and terror felt when the narrative grounding of history is challenged:

Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see "the end" in every beginning? Or does it present itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicles suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning

or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? And does the world, even the social world, ever really come to us as already narrativized, already "speaking itself" from beyond the horizon of our capacity to make scientific sense of it? Or is the fiction of such a world, capable of speaking itself and of displaying itself as a form of a story, necessary for the establishment of that moral authority without which the notion of a specifically social reality would be unthinkable? (24-25)

Pynchon's readers and characters engage these very questions and feel this very anxiety in a specific context in which "meaningful" not only remains codependent on "narrated" but on the specific moral value of narrative which supports and upholds the cultural myths and ideals of closure: the past can be shifted away, a sequence of events can be presented as "actually coming to an end," social reality is upheld. This ideal informs each quest in Pynchon, as characters struggle to shape their material into the formal pattern of beginning, middle, and end. When this pattern is not realizable, is not constructable, however, Pynchon's characters must face the questions of how to live meaningfully--individually and/or collectively--outside of narrativized history and all of the values it has appropriated.

Indeed, what has been curiously unaddressed in Pynchon studies are both the extent to which he pushes his characters towards a ground on which narrative cannot be created, constructed, or imposed and his fundamentally American attitude towards characters grappling with such questions of history. A full understanding and appreciation

of Pynchon can only come when we look into his place in an American literary tradition deeply concerned with questions of identity and the individual's relation to the past. We have been too willing to accept the notion that Pynchon's characters are flat characters, merely present to help achieve the aims of structure and theme. An examination of these characters, however, from the perspective of historical understanding and historical processing shows Stencil to be significantly more than simply "he who looks for V."; Oedipa, Slothrop, and Prairie to be more than pawns in a larger aesthetic game; and Benny Profane, perhaps one of the most ignored and misunderstood characters in American literature, to be a central, even potentially heroic, figure.

A complex interaction between history, myth, and reality guides and informs not only American literature, but also the actions and attitudes of the characters in Pynchon's four novels. Quoting Frances Fitzgerald from The Fire on the Lake, James Robertson in his own study, American Myth American Reality, asserts that Americans have always had before them

a seemingly unlimited physical space  
 . . . to escape the old society and  
 create a new world. The impulse to  
 escape, the drive to conquest and expan-  
 sion, was never contradicted in America.  
 . . . Americans can ignore history for  
 to them everything has always seemed  
 new. (42-43)

Indeed, as Robertson argues, America was settled on the premise that a complete break with the past is possible, desirable, and necessary and "the myth of a new world is a glittering vision still" (42). In order to build and thrive, early Americans needed to privilege the present and future over the past. But this myth of necessity has been codified in a characteristically American attitude towards questions of continuity and historical process. As Alan Trachtenberg argues in his forward to Harry Henderson's book Versions of the Past, an examination of the American historical novel: "The whole [American] culture was geared to think of itself as 'new,' to take its bearings with a 'break' with Europe. . . . The past was seen as all that America was not. Even the image of the past seemed removed from the process of history, stripped of specific associations, transformed into an idea, into a state of consciousness" (vii). Our beliefs and our literature have been born from a people who consciously objectified or narrativized history and put it neatly away. The American people received a view of history as seamless and whole, relatively compliant. Trachtenberg's notion that the past is mere image is quite apt here; Americans tend to regard the past as pageant or spectacle, something with complete, even final closure.

Although, as Henderson argues, American writers have not produced historical novels in the tradition of Sir

Walter Scott, any examination of American literature shows it to be very much concerned with questions of history. The impulse in American literature, however, is the opposite of the impulse of the historical novel typified by Scott. The latter uses historical settings as a background to its fiction. An exploration of modern American writing reveals a concern with the subject of history itself, novels in which characters confront discontinuities and complexities in a culture suspicious of non-narrated history and in which the question of how or whether the individual can recover a sense of place, community and meaning within such discontinuities becomes one of central importance.

Indeed, modern American literature seems largely preoccupied by inevitable explorations of the past (or history) which result to varying degrees in the demystification of a superficially compliant world and the exposure of what seems to exist beneath the surface of consensus and order. This fiction focuses largely on what happens when the glittering surface falls away to reveal "the processes of history," the events which do not resolve themselves into a narrative and the characters who are left to cope with the felt need to accommodate these events.

Such characters are prevalent in modern American fiction and deserve our notice before we turn to the characters of Thomas Pynchon and how they respond to their own experiences with demythified history. Quentin Compson

in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! provides a clear foundation from which to begin such a study. Faulkner's treatment of the South and the South's attitude towards its own history prefigures Pynchon's treatment of characters' attitudes toward history on a broader scale. Absalom, Absalom!, largely considered the story of Thomas Sutpen and his ravages upon a family and community, a story emblematic of conditions tolerated, encouraged, and then condemned by a tight-knit, tightly drawn society, is more accurately the story of Quentin Compson, the student displaced to the North who finds himself embroiled in a confrontation with history. Closed in his dorm room with his roommate Shreve, the only documents before them the letter from Quentin's father and Quentin's renditions of the narratives he has absorbed, his is a quest for understanding, an understanding of the story he has been told and his own relation to it. Shreve and Quentin try to piece together the story of Thomas Sutpen out of the various versions Quentin has received; out of diversity, Quentin and his "guide" try to produce an interpretive continuity.

Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law, has called upon Quentin to be the receiver of her story both because of family connection and because she trusts in his gentlemanly objectivity and his chivalric willingness to help her discover just who is occupying Sutpen's house. Quentin, a practiced listener of his father's renditions of the past,



indeed seems a logical choice. But Quentin does not completely grasp Rosa's convoluted narrative and turns to his father for information, thus providing him with another set of data, another perspective on the story. These two voices do not provide Quentin all that he needs, however, to successfully manage the story and so Shreve becomes involved as Quentin's listener, and subsequent helper, in discovering or constructing the elements needed to make the story work.

What becomes important for our purposes here is Faulkner's (and Quentin's) attitude toward the project of understanding Sutpen's story. Quentin feels the pressure of a moral imperative to comprehend and even complete Rosa's story of Sutpen. He and Shreve enter into a creative partnership with the material as they answer questions raised by the story (especially questions concerning Henry Sutpen's murder of his half-brother Charles Bon) in an effort to confer meaning on the past. This conferring of meaning on recalcitrant material is legitimated by the text; Quentin's narrative job (which being a literary type he is well suited for) is exactly to produce narrative. The degree to which he becomes aware of what he is doing becomes directly related to his impatience with and anxiety about the material, and by extension the identity, he is shaping.

Quentin does not embrace Rosa's choice of himself as conduit of this history. We know Quentin's character from The Sound and the Fury and from conversations in this novel

as a young man who feels the past has failed him and that the present and future do not hold much promise. Like Rosa, who has sealed herself up in her house for 43 years in an apparent effort to stop time or understand time, Quentin desires nothing more than to escape the pressures of time and the inexorable dissolution it brings. Finding himself called upon to delve into the past and make sense of it is an absurdly painful task for Quentin. The only story he can construct--one of incest, miscegenation, murder, and lost love--convinces him of his own, his family's, his culture's doom. Like Thomas Sutpen himself, the man who comes out of nowhere to try to create a southern dynasty, he cannot construct the life/story he wants, but neither can he escape the past/material he has been handed.

Sutpen dies, rather violently, unable to coherently or successfully reconcile his past with the reality of his present or the fantasy of his future. The degree to which he himself needs to believe in a rather strict causality is revealed in his own telling of his story to General Compson years earlier (handed down to us through Quentin's father and Quentin) in which he hopes the General will be able to "perceive and clarify that initial mistake which he still insisted on, which he himself had not been able to find" (341). Rosa similarly removes herself from the present, as Robert Dunne argues in his article, "Absalom, Absalom! and the Ripple Effect of the Past,"

. . . looking backward to that period trying to make sense of it. Like one of Sherwood Anderson's grotesques, her life is locked into a position of looking backward in time, to figure out how she might have lived in the present had past events turned out differently. (57)

Until she can "make sense" of what has happened, she cannot reenter time; calling Quentin to her is perhaps one final effort to find a way of understanding her own rage and her own place in the story of Sutpen's drive for ascendancy in Jefferson. Rosa does not receive the Answers or Certainty that she needs, and she collapses into a coma when she sees Sutpen's house, with Henry Sutpen within, go up in flames, taking all possible answers with it.

Mr. Compson provides another perspective on the issue of story telling and history when he tries to help Quentin sort through the strands and fragments he has received:

Its just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames. . . . They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest . . .; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, make no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy, inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (124-25)

Clearly, for Mr. Compson as well as for Quentin if you have all the correct elements of a story (or of a chemical formula) a processed whole should result. Words, shapes, symbols cannot remain "just" themselves; if they do not combine and reconstitute into a whole, then additional elements need to be added: interpretation, speculation, possibility. This is what Quentin and Shreve engage in in the cold dorm room at Harvard and this is what Quentin begins to fear is a necessary facet of "producing History." As he and Shreve work to combine the elements of the Sutpen story, Quentin begins to question the possible shape or shapes of history:

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished.  
 Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe  
 on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples  
 moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a  
 narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which  
 the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this  
 second pool contain a different temperature of  
 water, a different molecularity of having seen,  
 felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the  
 infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that  
 pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even  
 see moves across its surface too at the original  
 ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm . . .  
 (326)

Quentin's image of the pebble ripple is significant for what it suggests about the contingency of events and the manner in which events, actions, even interpretations, may comfort the reflector but it will not change the possibly inherent acausality of history. Water will ripple that never even

saw the pebble and the closest observer will be at a loss to confirm the origin of the viewed effect. But Quentin's speculation is also significant for its very speculativeness. Framed by the series of "maybe's," his statement introduces a doubt concerning the process of history, a doubt which plagues him as he continues on the enterprise of narrative reconstruction. His idea also echoes an earlier one presented in the reported discourse of Judith Sutpen, herself trying to understand the behavior of her brother, Henry, and Charles Bon:

. . . you are born at the same time as a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it can't matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying and then all of a sudden it's all over . . . (157)

Judith, like Quentin in his later struggle with the material, expresses both faith in and doubt of an emergent logical pattern. Understanding can't matter because there is no mode of understanding and yet it must matter because it is all that these characters can think about. What they face is a need to construct or narrativize their material in a way which accommodates both the material and the felt need

for coherence.

To differing degrees, the characters in Absalom, Absalom! are able to manage these constructs consistently. Sutpen desperately attempts to revise his history to match his vision of himself as the powerful plantation lord and Rosa just as desperately attempts to satisfactorily reconstruct her past to reveal the inherent meaning and shape of her suffering and grievances. But neither character allows even the least amount of flexibility in his/her sense of himself/herself or of the past, and both are destroyed by the recalcitrance of the material of their lives to resolve into such fully delineated History.

Quentin, however, survives to produce the necessary narrative. It is its message which causes his despair, not the mode of its birth. In The Sound and the Fury Quentin commits suicide 7 months before the narrative time of Absalom, Absalom! He dies in the earlier novel for much the same reason Rosa dies; he cannot stop time long enough or successfully enough to understand his past and thereby redeem his (or his family's) future. Again, "like one of Sherwood Anderson's grotesques," he spends the last day of his life in The Sound and the Fury locked out of time (breaking his watch, avoiding clocks and shadows, deliberately confusing his senses) trying to make sense of his life. But time does not stop and his sensibilities continue to be outraged until his death. In this second

novel, however, Faulkner resurrects him to confront the nature of history and to learn how to construct a story. The story that Quentin and Shreve create is acknowledgedly only one possible combination of elements, but it is one which adds up for them at that particular moment in that particular dorm room. It suffices, but it is tentative for it is fluid and subjective. Quentin and Shreve, even the reader, only tacitly allow that the history they have made is provisional, not Final Truth.

In Absalom, Absalom! Quentin enters the space of Rosa's narrative, as Shreve enters the space of Quentin's narrative, carrying a received understanding that history has a defined shape and meaning; this shape may have to be exhumed or revealed, but it is discernable. However, when fragments and threads of the narrative fail to fit the weave of the expected pattern, they can neither be thrown out nor ignored. Quentin finds such fragments threatening, too threatening to be allowed to remain unaccommodated elements; Shreve, less threatened by their presence, sees the fragments as allowing a space for "play" (in constructing the story of Sutpen, Shreve interrupts Quentin twice asking "let me play"), implying a higher degree of comfort with the notion of a "flexible history." But neither Shreve nor Quentin can allow the fragments their own valid existence or history its own contingencies. They remain fixed in the dorm room until they construct a fragile history, a history

which will suffice until new threads or fragments are introduced, new ripples form from new pebbles dropping into the pond, threatening the unstable structure.

Jack Burden, in Robert Penn Warren's novel All the King's Men, is thrust into the role of historian similarly to Quentin Compson and even more painfully learns about the nature of history and one's place within it. Jack, indeed, was a graduate student in American History, a degree he abandoned when the subject of his dissertation became too confusing and threatening. He was researching an ancestor, Cass Mastern, and though he had a plethora of facts about him, he could not reach a point at which he felt he knew the man well enough to put the life down in writing. Like Mr. Compson's analogy of the chemical elements, Jack believed that once he had successfully collected all the facts of Cass' life, the story would cohere. When this does not happen in the way Jack expects, he abandons the project. But he cannot get far from his passion for research; he turns to a brief career as a reporter and then goes to work for Willie Stark where his primary responsibilities continually involve him with finding things out.

Jack reminds us most specifically of Pynchon's characters in his seeming willingness to go after facts and to try to make a story. But he has significantly more highly developed avoidance strategies to rely on when his stories don't materialize. All the King's Men, though most



often taken as the story of the rise and fall of Willie Stark or as the story of the relationship between Jack Burden and Willie Stark, is really more accurately the exploration of why Jack could not finish his dissertation and what he learns about historical construction which allows him to reenter a lived life. One of Jack's favorite avoidance techniques is something he calls "The Great Sleep." When events do not cohere in the way he expects or people do not act the way he expects, Jack will take himself to bed. This is a form of stopping time, much like Rosa Coldfield's self-imprisonment in her home. In these "time outs" from life, Jack is able to escape the confusion of experience and hope that while he "rests" the world will realign itself. While working for Willie, Jack evolves another way to look at life, which he calls "The Great Twitch." This is a philosophy through which everything can be explained. Due to the nature of his work with Willie and the things he finds out about people and events, Jack needs such a theory to protect himself from his own culpability in history. Looking into the face of an old man at a filling station, Jack notices a twitch which for him becomes a sign of the arbitrariness of events, people and history:

You would think he was going to wink, but he wasn't going to wink. The twitch was simply an independent phenomenon, unrelated to the face or to what was behind the face or to anything in the whole tissue of phenomena which is the world we are lost in. . . . I did not ask him if he had

learned the truth in California. His face had learned it anyway, and wore the final wisdom under the left eye. The face knew that the twitch was the live thing. Was all. (313-14)

Events, like the twitch, are independent phenomena which will occur despite whatever control we may try to exert. Therefore, control, understanding, even responsibility become irrelevant philosophies. And if everything is mechanistic and determined, then no matter how confusing it may seem, it can be explained.

At the time that Jack goes to work for Willie Stark, he has much of himself invested in believing in such totalizing explanations; he struggles, as Arthur Mizener argues, to "keep his existence a timeless preserve of images," unable to fully face what experience will do to the perfection of the Story his reason has made up about life ("Robert Penn Warren" 55). Jack's strategies for escaping time remind us of Binx Bolling, in Walker Percy's novel The Moviegoer, and his equally elaborate strategies for remaining in time. Binx (whose given name, interestingly is Jack) is on a similar search for meaning as Quentin Compson, Jack Burden, and the characters in Pynchon. Yet when his world does not behave as he expects, when he cannot make a Narrative Whole of his past, he does not desire "escape"--a chance to view time from a still center, as Quentin and Jack Burden. Binx conversely desires to understand and embrace time, terrified by the notion that he may slip through the cracks of history

if he does not find a way to manage them. His rituals, such as "Certification," "Repetition," and "Rotation," prefigure the desperate and despairing methods of Pynchon's characters as they struggle to find coherence within history, too frightened to even consider living in a world where History is exposed itself as mere construct or unconstructable.

Shortly after Jack Burden goes to work for Willie, he receives the assignment which will inexorably initiate him into the world of experience and necessitate a radical reformulation of his relationship to life and history: he is told to "find the dirt" on his respected friend, Judge Irwin. Jack follows through on this investigation motivated, significantly, by the desire to prove that the Judge is exactly what he seems, that there is no "dirt." But like his research into Cass Mastern, Jack does come up against a fact which does not fit his story of the Judge: the Judge has accepted a bribe and is implicated in a suicide of another man. Jack confronts the Judge with what he has found, hoping to have it explained and neutralized, and his picture of the past restored, "continually seeking the elusive moment of illumination, the dazzle which will explain and justify all" (Cunningham 46). However, this research sets in motion a series of events which ends up implicating Jack directly in the shards and fragments of history. Jack's research seems to establish the ground for the Judge's suicide, the murder of Willie, the murder of his

friend Adam, his own discoveries that the Judge is his real father, that Anne Stanton (his childhood love) is Willie's lover, and that his "father," Ellis Burden, and his mother are acceptable human beings, which all collapse in upon Jack and cannot be managed by either The Great Sleep or The Great Twitch. Instead, in desperately trying to understand all of these events, Jack looks back to Cass Mastern's journal and finds what he needs now in order to survive. It is another theory, this time one which allows for contingency, which does not demand cause and effect, and which helps Jack see how to live with the realities he discovers.

" . . . it was as though the vibration set up in the whole fabric of the world by my act had spread infinitely and with ever increasing power and no man could know the end," (178)

Cass Mastern learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils about you who have touched the web. . . . It does not matter whether or not you meant to brush the web of things. Your happy foot or gay wing may have brushed it ever so lightly, but what happens always happens and there is the spider . . . (188-89)

Jack's spider web, Quentin's pebble, Judith's loom are all images of a history in which clearly nothing exists in a vacuum and nothing can be understood in its entirety. People and events are bound together even if we never understand how; the story goes on beyond any single story

man's reason invents. Jack's inevitable disturbance of the web forces him to consider his own complicity in history. Since he cannot abstract himself out of history, he must find a living way to accommodate the web.

As Willie never answers Jack's question about whether or not he winked at Jack at their first meeting, a meeting which inaugurated their relationship, because some things are not meant to be known, Jack comes to accept that events and actions effect other events and actions, even if there are no discernable causes. His experience with Willie enables him to come to terms with Robert Penn Warren's own perspective on history: "Time, change, and evil are irreducible aspects of the blind ruck of history; the essence of maturity is to learn to live with them and to superimpose order on chaos" (Moore 67). Neither Robert Penn Warren nor Jack Burden are prepared to or positioned for a perspective which would allow the fragments, the elements of history, to remain fragments and to negotiate among them; like Quentin Compson, Jack has been given a task not of finding Truth, but of rendering a pattern. But Jack accepts this responsibility to make a moral meaning out of history; in Hayden White's words he expects his order will moralize the events it treats, and at the end of the novel, he is released "into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time" (All the King's Men 438).

William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Walker Percy are only a few American writers who specifically address the disjunction between received notions of History and lived history which does not so easily cohere into wholes. Eudora Welty, in The Optimist's Daughter, also addresses the issue of the constructed nature of history. The novels of Kurt Vonnegut are saturated with attempts to fit an absurd past into some kind of explanatory pattern. Perhaps the greatest American work struggling with the darkness and despair of the conflict between History and contingency is Melville's Moby Dick. Richard Brodhead, in his article, "Trying All Things," calls Moby Dick a "cosmologically anxious book," which elevates anxiety to one of the most elemental human passions. Specifically Brodhead finds the novel to center on the anxiety about the ground of our being, an anxiety that drives us to continually worry about how our world is framed and governed (4). He continues to examine the way in which every particular that enters the narrative is in immediate danger of being seized on and pressed to yield a model of the world in a constantly renewed thrust toward ultimate statement and projected visions of the world (5).

Brodhead's language and the novel's structure both reveal a fundamental point which concerns this study of characters' interactions with narrative and historical processes. The thrust toward final shape and understanding is repeatedly seen as itself a thrust with a conceivable

end--a shape, a vision, a statement can ultimately resolve because at the very least (or most) it can be created or envisioned for the future. No "particular" is left only a particular with its own meaning or pattern; the anxiety which drives this fiction drives characters to bound everything within a conceivable ground.

The degree to which this fiction prompts questions revolving around images of narrative coherence rather than ever prompting questions about the coherencies within the particulars--or fragments--is further indicated by other writings on novels such as Moby Dick. James McIntosh argues that such texts militate against univocal interpretation and asks if they run the risk of having images mean nothing at all. "Does jumbling views," he asks, "have any value?" (27). What is needed, McIntosh suggests, is a model for interpreting fluid consciousness, to show how to find wholeness and form in multiplicity (28). The answer provided here is not necessarily one to comfort someone who sees this literature as "militating" against narrative history or running a "risk" of a fragment meaning "nothing." For Pynchon's novels move clearly from the very anxiety voiced by McIntosh and countless characters in American literature precisely to a model not for interpreting, but for accepting, fluid consciousness. No image means "nothing," but images may and can mean something other than what we need or expect them to. Stencil, in V., and Oedipa,

in The Crying of Lot 49, most specifically struggle with the same set of questions McIntosh poses here. Their later incarnations Slothrop (Gravity's Rainbow) and Prairie (Vineland) begin to respond by examining the ways in which fragments can "mean" if their own shape and pattern are granted validity.

Ishmael's response to Ahab, the quest, and the whale itself provides one such model for accommodating a fluid or demythified history in itself. Paul Lukacs and Arnold Hartstein both see Moby Dick as establishing a dialectic between Myth and History, narrative and fluidity. Throughout the novel Ishmael provides a "fluid expansive response to experience" where Ahab operates under a belief in the determined shape of events, the inevitability that is his life (Hartstein 31). The fact that Ishmael survives causes these critics to look most carefully at the nature and outcome of his survival and what it means particularly for forging a livable life in modern America. Hartstein sees Ishmael's survival and Ahab's death as marking the "failure of philosophy to describe a spiritually cohesive history," it destroys the notion of a continuity between historical time and mythic or providential time, releasing Ishmael into the terror of the twentieth century. From his post-quest vantage point, Ishmael struggles to establish a mode of comprehending an increasingly uncertain world (37), and Hartstein clearly recognizes his "attention to his



metaphysical dilemma as he remains poised within the Emersonian and American drama of man and nature, between the enchantment of spirit and the horror of blank matter" (39). Lukacs offers a similar yet slightly less bleak examination of Ishmael. Commenting on Ishmael's mode of apprehension in "The Blanket" (Chap. 68), he states:

Ishmael's goal is comprehension, and only his failure to reach that goal produces fragmentation and discord. His writing provides him with a wealth of empirical data, but this data does not yield the comprehension he wants. Indeed, his encyclopedic exposition keeps raising the very problem it seeks to resolve; for as it becomes more comprehensive, the truth he seeks becomes ever more elusive. He speculates repeatedly about the whale's meaning, but he laments that his speculations are just that--guesses and hypotheses, 'only . . . opinion.'" (148)

Lukac's characterization of Ishmael has clear correspondences to what we see in Pynchon's novels. Stencil, for one example, like Ishmael produces an "encyclopedic exposition" on V., the truth about whom constantly recedes before him the more he "learns." What is particularly interesting here is Lukac's statement that Ishmael's situation causes fragmentation and discord, a state that both he and Hartstein seem to see persisting to the end of the novel. Hartstein sees this as a permanent separation from the providential and the mythic, where Lukacs sees Ishmael as choosing narrative history over Myth, over "exposition" and "metaphysics" even though he desires, like Ahab, to transcend history's uncertainty. Both see

Ishmael as essentially alienated--from Mythic History, Sacred History, and his fellow man--at the end of the novel, an alienation or separation which has no clear antidote. His loss is viewed as a burden and his future one of rather bleak accommodation.

Ishmael's position is not so far removed from Quentin Compson's, Jack Burden's or the principal characters in the novels of Thomas Pynchon. They are all facing the failure of material to cohere as expected and, to differing degrees, a loss of faith in a mythic "univocal" History, be it inherent or constructed. Pynchon explores the ground of this loss from a particularly open perspective and freely explores not just survival, not a reluctant acceptance or inescapable burden, but an embrace of the possibilities which surface out of such demythification. Pynchon clearly moves in a direction distinct from his modernist precursors, distinct from the "subjective historicism" in which he has been said to participate.<sup>2</sup> He is not interested in constructing a new vision of historical truth which acknowledges its frailty at the very moment that it also declares its meaning. His novels do not depict a history "moving forward toward a future of uncast shape," with an assumed thrust toward univalent meaning (Olster 11), but explore a new ground of understanding history. As we look at American literature we see an obsession with questions of history as our ideals crash against the lived experience of

our lives. As George in Edward Albee's play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? states: "I seem preoccupied with history. Oh! What a remark. 'I am preoccupied with history'" (50). And, as Pynchon's questers doggedly pursue clues and facts to make their history, to make something real, they simultaneously and with equal desperation face the related possibility that their earlier counterparts never raise: what happens when clues and facts, details and events cannot even be made to accommodate a constructed history? This calls into question not only the epistemological value of the data that has been collected--if it cannot be made into narrative, is it real? and if it does not appear to have an analyzable structure is it intelligible?--but also calls into question each character's relationship to all categories of received data.

Thomas Pynchon's characters approach these very questions in a specifically post-modern world. They become involved not in elaborate rituals or strategies for escaping history, nor in their own complex constructions, but in a gradual relinquishing of the historical assumptions and faith in received narrative which they so bravely take with them into their quests. They find themselves immersed in hitherto unsuspected epistemological quandaries, aptly expressed by Zoltan Abadi-Nagy in an article titled "Ironic Historicism in the American Novel of the Sixties." Characters, he states, find themselves asking who is in

charge of a reality which has turned into a jigsaw puzzle to be assembled rather than a familiar tableau to be contemplated (86). And when characters turn to themselves as assemblers and even then find that the puzzle cannot be satisfactorily assembled, that they cannot or do not even want to impose an order, what then becomes of their relationship with history or of their ability to establish a firm sense of self within a viable context?

The characters in Pynchon's fiction confront the reality that the fabric of their lives is based on a constructed, not inherent, narrative and gradually begin to understand the difficulties inherent in such constructions. And, at the same time that these characters are becoming aware of the different shapes of history, they are also becoming sensitized to alternate modes of living within their culture, modes which authenticate or make possible a life which does not rely on narrated or even constructed History. These possibilities, which each character engages to widely different degrees--from Herbert Stencil in Pynchon's first novel V., who refuses to give up his faith in teleological, coherent historical narrative, and frantically continues his search for the piece of data which will enable him to solve the mystery of V., to Prairie Wheeler in Pynchon's most recent novel Vineland, who moves easily into a milieu of uncertainty and accommodation--lead consistently to crucial re-evaluations of how we need to understand the

process of history and self within history. David Porush, in his article "Purring into Transcendence: Pynchon's Puncutron Machine," suggests that our only hope for escape from the rigid narrativizations of history is to find a ground from which our "epistemological and ontological commitments can collapse into the transcendental--to transcend the quest for certainty and give up simply surviving and immersing" in favor of deeper and "unutterable" truths (94). What Porush hypothesizes is precisely what Pynchon's characters begin to explore and what they so definitively move toward through the progresses of their quests--the possibility of another mode of existence and establishing identity outside of the codified.

Pynchon's novels, particularly when examined together, provide a significant re-examination of historical understanding and move towards just this kind of "collapsed" ground, in which history can be more comfortably approached as a "play of structures, just like language, itself a form of écriture," which doesn't significantly differ from "imaginary narration as found in the epic, novel, or drama" (Barthes 3,7). Pynchon's novels free his characters from the constraints of holistic narration, of myth, of structured analysis and provide the possibility for them to move into an arena where they can play in the middle, where history need be neither narrated nor analytical. But the way into this middle is marked by a very real terror as the

characters feel the grounding beneath them shift and slide in unexpected and unaccountable ways; regaining a sense of the stable self in the midst of such quakings by no means seems a certainty.

N. Katherine Hayles, in her recent book Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science, relates a mathematical version of the Fall from Paradise quoted from Joseph Ford which helps us to understand the historical anxiety of the characters under consideration here.

Man, at first content with simple integers, succumbs to temptation when he accepts an infinite number from his mate. The man's mind 'reached and fleetingly grasped the meaning of  $(1+1+1 \dots)$ , but by morning he retained only the empty symbols.' Ford thus implies that from a human viewpoint, infinite information is indistinguishable from total incomprehensibility. (163)

Hayles reviews Ford's argument that infinite information is essentially inhuman largely because "when such seemingly well-behaved creatures as real numbers are capable of chaotic behavior, they bewilder the humans who conceived them" (161). This suggests that that which is bewildering or which does not fit our expected patterns of understanding falls outside accepted systems and is best left alone. By extension, then, when seemingly well behaved creatures such as historical facts fail to align themselves in clearly causal patterns, they will bewilder the humans who are

trying to understand them. This is certainly one response on the part of the literary characters who are confronted with pieces of history which do not fit the patterns they are hard at work supporting. Extraneous pieces or "facts" which are bewildering cause a significant interpretive dilemma: should they be jettisoned to help preserve an orderly view of history or should they be worked over and somehow made to conform to preexisting expectations? Both horns of this dilemma clearly pose serious problems of their own. For the even slightly responsible interpreter, ignoring information for the sake of a pattern or theory should be unthinkable. The characters who constitute this study certainly may be attracted to the possibility of dropping bewildering or incomprehensible information, but have an intellectual conscience and drive which prohibits them from successfully carrying this out. Similarly, changing the shape of the material to make it fit does not ultimately satisfy real desires to know; the true historian, quester, or interpreter will always be bothered by a feeling that her/his project is marred by an overt manipulation of material, not to mention the seemingly endless series of manipulations which may be necessary as each new piece of material would need to be accommodated.

What Hayles and other scientists of Chaos ("Chaologists") suggest for physics and what I argue we see in the novels of Thomas Pynchon is no longer an attempt to

bring unruly information into the established folds of "Science" or "History," but the suggestion that what is needed is a new way of thinking, a new way of responding to the non-linear, the non-narrative, and bringing it into our lives in a way that does not deny its non-linearity/non-narrativity but also does not completely uproot our sense that we exist within a comprehensible world.

"Many scientists working on chaos speak of a need to develop intuition. They point to the fact that most textbooks treat linear systems as if they were the norm in nature. Students consequently emerge from their training intuitively expecting that nature will follow linear paradigms. When it does not, they tend to see nonlinearity as scientifically aberrant and aesthetically ugly" (Hayles 163).

This again corresponds to a received understanding of history and the American experience. History is expected to follow established paradigms and when it does not something more awful occurs than seeing particles as aberrant or aesthetically ugly. What occurs is a crisis of knowing--knowing about ourselves and our past. Beginning with the seemingly benign task of rooting out primary causes, Pynchon's characters repeatedly find themselves in the position of victims--victims of a history which refuses to cohere in any traditional way. These figures are then faced with a completely different kind of project, one which demands of them that they turn their attention not to the shaping of their material, but to the actual properties of



that material and the ways in which it allows and/or refuses shape.

Returning to Hayles and other chaologists we learn that nonlinearity has been ignored "for good reason": nonlinear differential equations rarely have solutions (161). What do we do then with problems that do not have solutions, or analogously with a history which does not have a delineated shape, with a history which from White's perspective has no moralizing energy? An answer comes not only from these scientists but from our writers as well: we begin to learn how, in the words of Thomas Pynchon in Gravity's Rainbow, to play the patterns or live on the interface, to appreciate and value the events in history and their meaning without demanding their complicity in an authorized or systemized view of history, and in the words of Benoit Mandlebrot, a foremost figure in the study of chaos, we begin to learn to look at nature (or history) fractally. What Hayles says about Mandlebrot and attitudes towards nature can be directly translated into a statement about history and attitudes toward history.

[Mandlebrot] argues that thinking that nonlinearities are strange is itself strange, since complex figures appear regularly in nature. He compiles adjectives that other mathematicians have used to describe nonlinear geometry-- 'monstrous,' 'counter-intuitive,' pathological, 'psychopathic'--in much the same spirit as a Jesuit catalogues arguments refuting the existence of God, as an encyclopedia of misperception and error. Mandlebrot insists that on the contrary,

highly complex and irregular forms are entirely compatible with our intuition and as beautiful as Nature herself. . . . This beauty has been misperceived as 'monstrous' because traditional geometry is ill equipped to deal with its complexities. (Hayles 164)

To deal with these complexities, Mandlebrot coined a new term and invented a new "science" which is most useful to us in the context of approaches to history in modern American literature: fractal geometry.

The word "fractal" suggests both the words fraction and fracture; it connotes an extremely complex form. Hayles' explanation reminds us of a similar description, though this time of an historical complexity, introduced in Thomas Pynchon's novel V.

Perhaps history this century, thought Eigenvalue, is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated, as Stencil seemed to be, at the bottom of a fold, it's impossible to determine warp, woof or pattern anywhere else. By virtue, however, of existing in one gather it is assumed there are others, compartmented off into sinuous cycles each of which come to assume greater importance than the weave itself and destroy any continuity. (155)

What Eigenvalue contemplates here is Stencil's difficulty with his quest for coherent information about the lady V. Stencil has files of data, but no "story," no definitive narrative which tells him how V. is significant to his life. Eigenvalue tries to account for this failure of narrative or "failure of history" in a way that does not completely

undermine Stencil's or all historians' projects by suggesting the importance, the validity of data which does not necessarily contribute to a pattern. And, in so doing, he does approach a theory that resembles or can share terms with the study of chaos, a theory which recognizes and values discrete data--or cycles--data which does not conform to any expected "weave " or continuity. A linear (or in Mandlebrot's terms, deterministic) approach to such material "would be not only tedious, but doomed to failure. . . . The goal of achieving a full description is hopeless, and should not even be entertained" (Hayles, quoting Mandlebrot, 167). What is called for is a new way of thinking, a new perspective on old material, one which allows for complexity, for fragments, for an accommodation of that which seems not to fit.

Pynchon is not proposing as Hayles suggests "living postmodernism. . . . living a world of disconnected present moments that jostle oneanother but never form a continuous (much less logical) progression" (282); rather his novels purport a new way of seeing, less codified but still meaningful. The characters in this literature confront an often incomprehensible condition in which their understanding of history and their place in history is turned upside down. Their expectations of linkage and pattern are frustrated; their stories do not cohere in any easy way; they are left with what seem untranslatable fragments and a

fragmented sense of self and history. But, as Thomas Pynchon explores most explicitly and as other American writers strongly suggest in their portraits of terror and confusion, we need to look beneath the received myths of History and the narrativizing of every historical event into a clear lesson of American ethics and values and see what has been there all along: irregularity, contradictions, acausality, and different modes of meaning. What Pynchon urges us to accept and value are these fragments which make up our history and which may have something to tell us, even if they do not or cannot come together and make a traditional Story. What his novels force us to consider, indeed, is a notion of history which studies and foregrounds the non-linearity, the non-determinism of events, and the path he sets his characters upon is toward a new discipline, a new study of fractal historicism.

## NOTES

1. Pynchon's endorsements of contemporary writers are collected and reprinted in Clifford Mead, ed., Thomas Pynchon: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials, 39-49.
2. Stacey Olster groups Pynchon with Norman Mailer and John Barth as subjective historicists, American postmodernists in whom "the concern for historical order originates in a predilection for structure itself" and whose characters are terrorized by an absence of structure (9).

## Chapter Two

### Benny and Stencil as Counterparts: Questions of Coherent Identity

Thomas Pynchon's treatment of the paired protagonists Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil in his first novel, V. (1963), clearly establishes the tensions and concerns which characterize the body of his work. Most studies of the novel ignore the significance of these characters, treating them as mere ciphers in a larger aesthetic game of Pynchon's.<sup>1</sup> Those who do examine the relationship between Benny and Stencil focus on it as contrapuntal, emblematic of a dialectic which underlies the novel's thematic and structural center: a fugue of the active and passive, the meaningful and the random. The eventual meeting and pairing of Benny and Stencil on the quest for V. and the incongruities it introduces are regarded as a prime example in the novel of an intersection which fails to produce a meaningful connection. Their relationship is held up as emblematic of the text's concerns with material that continually promises revelation, but withholds that promise as it dissolves into discrete fragments, emphasizing randomness and arbitrariness. But such an approach completely misreads the significance of these characters, together or separately, and oversimplifies the tensions in the novel.

The critical response to Benny and Stencil arises from

a set of expectations concerning quest narrative and the relationship between characters on a quest. When Stencil meets Benny and shares the story of his quest for V. and later coerces Benny into helping him remove the "identifying" set of dentures from Eigenvalue's office and accompanying him to Malta, we consciously (and with relief) expect the two to have a significant effect on each other. At the very least, the meeting and ensuing "partnership" lends interest to the development of the novel as we read to discover the effect of this unlikely friendship on the plot. Up to this point in the novel, Benny's and Stencil's stories have remained separate (even though they have acquaintances in common) and opposite. Benny is accepted in virtually all treatments of V. as the passive schlemiel, the unwilling victim he claims himself to be. And Stencil is the obsessively focused, single-minded quester. They come together in a seemingly traditional quester and helper relationship, and our interest is driven by our own need to discover how Benny will aid Stencil. Accepting Stencil as the primary focus, most readings of V. show little concern with what Benny may accomplish here. Our understanding of plot and structure also drives us in our conviction that this conjunction of characters must have a purpose. However, as in other such gestures in the novel, the promise is indeed unfulfilled and we are forced to question why we expected or were led to expect a paradigmatic friendship between these characters.

The need to examine the relationship in a particular way indicates the degree to which we are influenced by conventional expectations of plot and the difficulty of reading Pynchon in this way, a difficulty examined in detail throughout Pynchon scholarship. Indeed treatments of the novel largely stop at this point, demonstrating the failure of the plot to act like a plot and arguing that the significance of the novel lies in its exhaustive, but innovative treatment of randomness and arbitrariness.<sup>2</sup> But there is a relationship between Benny and Stencil, and it is a crucial one. They are counterparts, not counterpoints, and an understanding of their pairing opens the way for a full consideration of Pynchon's treatment of history and historical understanding.

To fully comprehend the pairing of Benny and Stencil, it is necessary to first understand how they function individually within the structure Pynchon has established. The novel begins with a fully developed characterization of Benny Profane and leads us to Stencil only through a group of Benny's acquaintances referred to as "The Whole Sick Crew," a questionable group of artists and intellectuals. Significantly, the novel also ends with a focus on Benny, as he runs toward the sea on Malta with Brenda Wigglesworth.<sup>3</sup> Though the novel takes its name from Stencil's quest and most of the "action" of the novel is provided by this quest, Stencil's story is carefully bracketed by (and interwoven



with) Benny's. Thus the structure of the novel clearly signals the importance of Benny. He leads us to Stencil and ultimately he leads us away from Stencil. But it is Stencil who leads us most directly into the tensions explored by the novel and, therefore, he will provide our starting point here. Stencil is not to be treated as superior to or more important than Benny, but complementary. Indeed Benny and Stencil together anticipate the more sophisticated explorations of Pynchon's later novels, and to devalue their significance, individually or together, is to close ourselves off from a complete exploration of Pynchon's concerns.

We first meet Stencil when he attends a Crew party, a scene which gathers several central characters together, but which provides no immediate significant connections. It functions to shift the narrative from Benny to Stencil and to Stencil's quest for the lady V. It also prepares us for Stencil's reluctant interest in Paola, a Maltese girl at the party who Stencil believes can provide him with leads concerning both V. and his own father's unexplained death. At the time of the party, Stencil has already consciously placed himself in the role of the isolated quest hero, dedicating himself to the pursuit of leads and clues about V., a woman who he believes holds the hidden Truth about his family, his past, and his self.

Significantly, at the time of the quest's beginning, ten years before the scene which introduces Stencil, he is

unconsciously already an isolated figure. His father has died, his mother is unknown, he has become increasingly removed from the network of connections inherited from his father, and he has dropped out of active society. He spends his time reading his father's journals, sleepwalking through life, waiting for something to happen. When he suddenly seizes upon the reference to V. in his father's journal, he does so with an announced purpose: to get himself moving. This is a quest not so much thrust upon the quester as sought out; Stencil is not taken by surprise but has, at a certain level of consciousness, been searching for a search and welcomes the call to cross the threshold. As he himself explains:

[After the war] he flirted with the idea of resuming that prewar sleepwalk. . . . He was leafing through the Florence journal idly when the sentences on V. suddenly acquired a light of their own. . . . 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. . . . What love there was in Stencil had become directed entirely inward, toward this acquired sense of animateness. (54-55)

Stencil values, indeed overvalues, the "acquired sense of animateness" provided by his quest into the meaning behind V. Consequently, the quest, meant to be a healing experience, an adventure to lead one to a new understanding of self within society, becomes an anxious fever dream.<sup>4</sup>

Stencil's own description of the quest provides the reader great insight into how this has occurred.

Having found this [animateness] 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 was there to go but back into half-consciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid. (55)

And later, when he fears that he has perhaps found the answer to the V. question, Stencil obsesses:

Stencil would have liked to go on believing the death and V. had been separate for his father. This he could choose to do (couldn't he?) and continue on in calm weather. He could go to Malta and possibly end it. He had stayed off Malta. He was afraid of ending it, but, damn it all, staying here would end it too. Funking out; finding V.; he didn't know which he was most afraid of, V. or sleep. (345-46)

Stencil has been so focused on his sense of animateness that he believes that the end of the quest will bring the end of purposeful activity. Inherent in this, clearly, is an underlying belief that the quest can and will end, if he lets it. Conversely, the quest can and will continue as long as the quester generates questions, or fails to be content with answers he/she receives. It is precisely this double edge which plagues Stencil. His desire to know and his belief that he can know directly conflicts with the threat he feels to his adopted identity of quester, to his own "acquired sense of animateness" which he believes will

dissolve if the quest is completed. As long as he continues to collect clues, he is "safe."

As the quest develops, the reader becomes increasingly aware that beneath the surface of the V. search lurks a larger question about the nature of identity and history. Stencil, too, senses that there is something more important that he ought to be doing, but he fails to pursue (or avoids) the direction in which the quest leads him. Though he understandably avoids leads which may "end" the quest, he more curiously avoids clues which suggest the opening up of his quest, an opening up which would preclude an ending, by introducing elements which may be significant, but not "fit" his construction. Unless he can engage this facet of his endeavor, however, Stencil will not be released from his obsession and will not learn the lessons of V. Stencil's rigid focus on V. makes it impossible for him to comprehend the deeper implications of his search and further reveals his ambivalence towards his project. Closure, even an imposed closure, he believes, would affirm his notions of the past or of history as an understandable linking of events, but would leave him nowhere to go but back into "half consciousness"; inability to close would leave him "animated," but would de-stabilize all his assumptions about the past, about history, and about one's ability to determine an identity with which to face the future.

Stencil's search brings him to New York City in early

1956. Here, through the following of various leads, he becomes involved with The Whole Sick Crew. The Crew quickly and predictably sizes up Stencil's problem as "contemporary man in search of an identity" (226). However, Stencil's quest becomes much more than an investigation of himself. The exploration into his father's death, his father's identity, and V.'s identity becomes, by implication, an exploration into historical processes. Herbert Stencil, "the century's man" and "the world traveller" (52) approaches a question endemic to twentieth century American literature, yet he, like so many other characters in this literature, is locked into patterns of thought which keep him from being able to understand the problem or accommodate his quest. Stencil's search becomes an attempt to forge an identity within history, and his struggle to understand this mirrors an ongoing struggle examined in our literature to reconcile a felt need for concrete identity within an abstract, fluid history.

Stencil approaches his quest intellectually and confidently, collecting clues and bits of information about V., expecting to weave them into a single narrative of his father's, and his own, past. And it is a narrative which Stencil has confidence he can produce, a narrative with its events arranged in a time sequence, with causality and linkage and closure. His dominant mood even when he reaches his most feverish pitch is one of belief in his ultimate ob-

ject. Looking at Stencil's project from a different perspective for a moment helps to clarify the nature of this undertaking. If we consider Stencil as both psychiatric patient and analyst, we can see the kind of enormous integrative task he has set himself. As Donald Spence explains in Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis, it is virtually impossible to arrive at a general theory from narrative truth, narrative truth being creative (and created) rather than veridical (or universal). Spence himself says it most clearly:

. . . if the analyst functions more as pattern maker than a pattern finder, then we may be faced with a glaring absence of general rules. . . . It may be comforting to assume, as is the custom, that we have a general theory waiting in the wings, waiting to be confirmed; but the fact that after almost one hundred years we are still waiting for a set of confirmed postulates should give us a good grasp of future prospects. . . . [The analyst] is handicapped in his task of constructive listening by the search for certain kinds of universals, and if some of these universals never appear, or appear in somewhat different forms, he is handicapped even further. He may, for example, miss the interpretive opportunities of the moment while waiting for some vague shape of the future.  
(293)

This, as we shall see, is precisely Stencil's problem. He is both relating and listening to his data, waiting for the general theory, the universal to reveal itself. His misguided focus and assumptions about the relationship between narrative truth and historical (universal) truth--that one exposes the other--keeps him from making significant inter-

pretive discoveries. Stencil fails to see that he is engaged in a primarily analytical, artistic struggle with his data and himself. Where, as Spence states, it may be comforting to assume we have a general theory, or in Stencil's case to assume we have History, we need to think of it more as metaphor than as established fact; we need to "spend less time searching for confirmation" and more time appreciating and understanding the complexity of the encounter between searcher and data (Spence 296).

E.M. Forster, in Aspects of the Novel, establishes a similar approach to analysis as Spence, but from a distinctly literary point of view. Forster describes a reader's approach to understanding narrative in terms which Stencil would find most agreeable:

The reader . . . will constantly rearrange and reconsider, seeing new clues, new chains of cause and effect, and the final sense (if the plot has been a fine one) will not be of clues or chains, but of something aesthetically compact, something which might have been shown by the novelist straight away, only if he had shown it straight away it would never have become beautiful. (88)

This notion of narrative privileges exactly what Stencil values and believes in while glossing over any distinction between narrative and historical truths. When Stencil reads his father's three sentence journal entry, "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official

report" (53), he immediately accepts the challenge offered by Forster's formula, a challenge to produce an aesthetically compact, coherent History. Indeed, it is Stencil's felt need to produce this History--and by extension to produce himself--which deafens him to the richer, more urgent voices which compete for his attention. Stencil approaches the past monologically, as something with one voice, not dialogically, or even "heterologically," and this cuts him off from the very meaning he seeks.

Stencil's whole existence becomes focused on constantly ordering and rearranging his clues to make a seamless whole of his father's story. And this endeavor dictates the shape of Pynchon's novel. The chapters concerning Stencil's quest and his discoveries about V. are all narrated by Stencil as he relates his information to a third party. For example, Stencil's story of Vheissu and the events in Florence is told to Eigenvalue, and the story of V. in love is told to Benny. Although this material seems an objective retelling of fact, a close look shows us that Stencil has indeed filled in several gaps in his information; he has indeed constructed these as stories. The connections are manufactured; they are made in order to create a plot. This is seen most explicitly in the narrative of Porpentine's murder in Chapter Three, an attempt to provide a coherent rendering of an event for which Stencil only has limited information. To compensate for this, Stencil dislocates himself into



eight different personalities, each with its own perspective on and knowledge about the murder. He believes stringing these perspectives together is all that is necessary to create a sensible version of events. Indeed, when we first meet Stencil, he has taken on so many identities in his attempt to piece together the story of V. that The Whole Sick Crew's earlier determination of his identity crisis seems a farcical understatement:

The trouble [with the Crew's analysis] was that Stencil had all the identities he could cope with conveniently right at the moment. He was quite purely He Who Looks for V. (and whatever impersonations that might involve) and she was no more his own identity than Eigenvalue the soul-dentist or any other member of the crew. (226)

Richard Patteson's discussion of this chapter in his article, "What Stencil Knew: Structure and Certitude in Pynchon's V.," emphasizes the futility of this effort:

None of the "eight impersonations" knows the complete story, and neither, without creating part of it himself, can Stencil. . . . If a pattern, coherent story, or history exists, it must be put together by the reader, who, in a sense, mimics Stencil by supplying the pieces necessary to form a whole. If some of the pieces--the essential ones, the vital connections--are imagined by Stencil, then no plot really exists. The plot of Chapter Three becomes a metaphor for all plots . . . including the great plot that is history. (21)

Stencil clearly holds off any such recognition about history because it strikes too deeply at his own desire for grounded

identity. He has not the skill nor the courage to create or accept data if he cannot use it to discover or create an acceptable plot.

Indeed, we see here the same tendency exhibited by Quentin Compson in Absalom, Absalom! and in characters throughout American literature. There is a confidence that the events of the past will present themselves as a narrative with coherence, meaning, and a moral dimension. When Quentin investigates the structure of the past through the eyes of Rosa Coldfield, his father, Shreve, even himself, as I discussed above, he finds that the events do not make a single narrative, but that events only lend themselves to interpretation. The realization that history is not inherently narrative forces Quentin into new considerations about himself and his past. Stencil's experience similarly leads not to a discovery of meaning which heals the self, but to an increasing awareness of a lack of received or constructed meaning which he finds threatening and terrifying.

The reader is first led to recognize Stencil's desperation to make or discover narrative by Dudley Eigenvalue, the "soul-dentist" to whom Stencil confides much of the V. story. Interestingly, we are never told how Stencil is led to Eigenvalue or why he chooses him as a confidant; this remains an open link in the reader's quest for understanding. But we do know that Stencil visits Eigenvalue regularly to discuss his search. During one such visit he tells

of his meeting with Kurt Mondaugen, an engineer at Yoyodyne Inc., who he believes met V. in 1922 in Africa. Eigenvalue interrupts Stencil's narration of Mondaugen's story with a disturbing question:

Eigenvalue made his single interruption: 'They [Godolphin and Vera Meroving] spoke in German? English? Did Mondaugen know English then?' Fore-stalling a nervous outburst by Stencil: 'I only think it strange that he 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 is the only time Stencil's narration is halted, reminding the reader that this is interpretation, not fact, that this is a third hand retelling, being related by one with an obsessive need to make the story work. Indeed, the narrator also remarks the degree to which Stencil invents the narrative, noting that in Mondaugen's telling "the tale proper and the questioning after took no more than thirty minutes. Yet the next Wednesday afternoon in Eigenvalue's office, when Stencil retold it the yarn had undergone considerable change: had become, as Eigenvalue put it, "Stencilized" (228). Material which has been "Stencilized" has been filtered through Stencil's consciousness, undergoing necessary transformations to fill gaps in information and create connections to form a whole narrative, similar to what we saw Quentin and Shreve doing to Rosa's story. Indeed, there is much in "Mondaugen's story" that Mondaugen could not

possibly have known to tell Stencil. Stencil's version of Mondaugen's story takes up 51 pages of the novel. Talking at a fairly normal pace, with no pauses or interruptions, this means Stencil was talking for approximately two hours. This is a clear indication of how much change the story has undergone. Eigenvalue's pertinent query and his pertinent observation cause us to realize just how much information we have accepted at face value and force us to cast back and reconsider the authority of Stencil's narration. What we discover is that the text is rife with assumptions and probable fabrications, including, but not limited to those mentioned above. It is at this point that our attention begins to be gradually and deliberately turned from the meaning behind V. to Stencil's treatment of his material and his mode of approaching "the Truth."

Stencil himself recognizes his tendency to force the information into a sensible pattern, and this makes him even more self conscious and anxious about the outcome of his quest. When we first meet him, Stencil is in an inactive phase of his quest, not searching for information, but sorting through what he has already collected. This leads him into the various discussions mentioned with Eigenvalue and Benny through which he tries to ferret out the history of V. Immediately preceding the first of his narrations, Stencil muses over his mode of questing:

Around each seed of a dossier, therefore, had developed a nacreous mass of inference, poetic license, forcible dislocation of personality into a past he didn't remember and had no right in, save the right of imaginative anxiety or historical care, which is recognized by no one. . . . He'd only the veiled references . . . in the journals. The rest was impersonation and dream. (62-3)

Later, before recounting another piece of the story to Eigenvalue, Stencil thinks of himself:

Civil servant without rating, architect-by necessity of intrigues and breathings together, he should have been, like his father, inclined toward action. But spent his days instead at a certain vegetation, talking with Eigenvalue, waiting for Paola to reveal how she fitted into this grand Gothic pile of inferences he was hard at work creating. (225-26, emphasis added)

Stencil, clearly, is aware of the "Stencilizations" of his text and he even to a certain degree accepts them. Such is the way, he believes, to erase the surrounding ambiguity and to allow the meaning or order of the narrative to reveal itself. A careful look at the language of this passage suggests Stencil's self-consciousness and his anxiety about this project. Stencil sees his task as a necessary one; he must act as interpreter to allow the information to coalesce into true meaning. He also recognizes, and to a certain degree takes comfort in, the enormity and complexity of his undertaking. His reference to himself as an architect, a builder, of a specifically Gothic structure indicates his awareness that V.'s history is multifaceted, but also re-

veals his faith in his ability to make it whole. It is also interesting to note that the language of this passage ("architect," "Gothic," "pile") causes the reader to image a Gothic cathedral, an elaborate, massive structure built in the service of God, that is in reverence to a faith in objective universal meaning. Stencil's faith in his ability to create such a narrative edifice--no matter how monstrous or how long it takes to complete (it has already taken him ten years to get just this far) compels him to engage in these efforts and to consistently devalue ambiguity. And it is this tendency, this closed belief that makes him particularly ill-equipped to understand V.'s (or any?) history.

Stencil is a conservative reader like Jack Burden, in Robert Penn Warren's All The King's Men, who reads history like a closed text in which meaning should be accessible to and reducible by the tools of analysis. Wolfgang Iser in The Act of Reading examines what happens when a reader (like Stencil or Burden or indeed a reader of a novel like V.) confronts a text which does not yield up its meaning and which refuses to be "sucked dry." Stencil and Burden are both confronting the text of historical experience with expectations of discovering a detachable, single, referential meaning. What they find they must accommodate is, in Iser's terms, meaning which can only be grasped as an image, where the text represents a pattern, a structured indicator to guide the imagination of the reader (9). Iser's related

discussion of the different styles employed in James Joyce's Ulysses (Implied Reader pp. 196-233) applies equally to V. in which the different versions, the "impersonations" constructed by Stencil, actually preclude any meaning directed toward integration, but create a "pattern of observation that contains within itself the possibility of a continual extension" (Implied Reader 226). Here we are surely reminded of Stencil's current method of questing: approach and avoid. Iser goes on to say that "The very abundance of perspectives [here all the perspectives are different versions of Stencil] conveys the abundance of the world under observation" (Implied Reader 226). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty, in Phenomenology, observes that texts which exploit various forms of presentation reveal a form of observation that underlies the very structure of perception. We have, he states, "the experience of a world, not understood as a system of relations which wholly determine each event, but as an open totality the synthesis of which is inexhaustible" (quoted in Iser, The Implied Reader 226). What Iser and Merleau-Ponty describe are not only systems of reading, but systems of history as well. Historical events present not a causally linked chain, but a structured indicator which guides our understanding. And the patterns which are observed may indeed be inexhaustible and variegated or completely unable to be synthesized. It is precisely this abundance, this "open totality" that Stencil rejects. And

the more data he collects, the more leads he pursues in his effort to hold this reality at bay, the more anxiously he also works to "create inferences" and turn veiled references into a narrative, even if it is a narrative available only through impersonation and dream. Stencil's nervousness at being questioned by Eigenvalue only emphasizes his discomfort with the unmanageability of such abundance and the tenuousness of his hold on his material.

Richard Patteson emphasizes the significance of the effect of Stencil's "impersonations and dreams." Patteson argues that by the time we read Stencil's seemingly objective account of "V. in love" in Chapter 14, an account ostensibly documented by Porcepic and police records, we the readers are no longer apt to put much faith in third hand stories. Patteson states that "Pynchon almost seems to place the most conventional chapter near the end of the novel to test just how greatly the reader's perception has been altered" (27). Indeed, I would go further to say that Pynchon overtly taunts us with the stance of objectivity by revealing to us that the lady in the story is V. (406) and by providing a paragraph which seems to verify her fetishistic and lesbian relationship with Melanie. Only as we read carefully do we realize that once again we are receiving "facts" which have been fed to Porcepic supposedly by V. herself (a most unreliable narrator) and that the motives and emotions attributed to V. are supplied by



Stencil alone (407).

Stencil, however, holds fast to his faith in a world where impersonation and dream and "forcible dislocations of personality" can reveal orderly pursuits and gentlemanly intrigues. He learns this in part from his father, Sidney Stencil, who was an agent of the government, working in Intelligence. The (what turns out to be false) lesson which Herbert appropriates from his father's experience is that plots and intrigues can be made understandable: reports are filed, information clarified, and situations resolved. His knowledge of his father's career leads him to conclude that through logic, research, and thought, questions can be answered and situations laid to rest. Hence, he has conceived of an end-oriented search, with a focus on answering a specific question and producing his aesthetically compact and coherent narrative. And the more he discovers about V. and the more he suspects his quest to be conducting him into larger currents of history, the harder he feels he has to work to discover meaning. Stencil, the "architect-by-necessity" of intrigues turns from a readerly to a writerly character as he tries to manage the increasing wealth of material. What Stencil will not allow himself to consider, what threatens him as much as the end of the quest, is precisely and ironically a precept which his father does come to realize before his death: a world which can outwardly appear orderly no longer exists. The world is too

big; the events of history, the elder Stencil is forced to admit, no longer accommodate efforts to make them understandable. His son's desperate refusal to stop and consider such implications in his own ever widening net of intersections transforms his "orderly intrigue" into a feverish pursuit.

M. M. Bakhtin, in The Dialogic Imagination, makes a useful distinction between authoritative and artistic discourse which helps illuminate why Stencil's approach to his material effects such a transformation in the quest.

Authoritative discourse cannot be represented--it is only transmitted. Its inertia, its semantic finiteness and calcification, the impermissibility of any free stylistic development in relation to it--all this renders artistic representation of authoritative discourse impossible . . . it enters artistic discourse as an alien body; there is no space around it to play in, no contradictory emotions. . . . For this reason, images of official-authoritative truth have never been successful in the novel. Authoritative text always remains within the novel a dead quotation, something that falls out of artistic context. (349, emphasis added)

Bakhtin argues that the novel--artistic discourse--rests on the notion of dialogue, dialogue between characters and author and between characters, author, and readers. The contemporary novel has increasingly exploited this dialogization in exploring the various perspectives which come to bear on a text's (or history's) interpretation. This ex-

ploitation is particularly noticeable in American literature, a literature which has focussed significantly on the problems of forming identity within an historical context. Stencil, however, is not in a dialogue with his material; instead he adopts a controlling role as he tries to make a living text into a still point. He regards the quest into the past as a practical search which can produce an authoritative document. His attitude does not allow him to engage the free flowing of perspectives or contexts which constitute the field of the quest, and his anxiety stems from his attempt to convert an artistic text into an authoritative narrative without fully realizing what it is he is attempting to do.

Stencil reads two documents in the course of his quest which chronicle just the type of exploration into historical material that the V. story demands: his father's journals and the Confessions of Fausto Maijstral. Both the elder Stencil and Maijstral have struggled with the slipperiness of history and ultimately accept its poetic nature and their responsibility as "artists" (Maijstral is a poet and Stencil as mentioned above is a government intelligence agent) to make an artistic text appear authoritative. But neither of them believe in the coherence they create. They do not regard history, as does the younger Stencil, as something to be transmitted, but as something to be represented. And both men became increasingly aware in the years following

World War I of their inability to coerce the material of history into a palatable, official form. Both Fausto's confessions (Chapter Eleven of V.) and Sidney Stencil's reflections in his journal and during his last assignment on Malta (reported in the Epilogue) show men struggling with the reality that they can no longer create the illusion of "still points."

Though Stencil reads Maijstral's confessions, he is so obsessively focused on clues concerning V. that he fails to engage Fausto's discourse on the nature of history and identity. Similarly, when he meets Maijstral on Malta, he only engages him on information regarding the Bad Priest, ignoring what Maijstral tries to teach him about conducting a quest in this world. Ironically, it is precisely the text of the confessions which could lead Stencil towards a truer understanding of V. and history. Ostensibly an apologia for his actions during the raids on Malta and the disassembly of the Bad Priest, the document also examines the fluidity of identity as it confronts the events of history. Fausto formulates his observations concerning identity in the opening of his confession:

We can justify any apologia simply by calling life a successive rejection of personalities. No apologia is any more than a romance--half a fiction--in which all successive identities taken on and rejected by the writer as a function of linear time are treated as separate characters. The writing itself even constitutes another rejection, another "character" added to the past. So we do

sell our souls: paying them away into history in installments. It isn't so much to pay for eyes clear enough to see past the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with "reason."  
 . . . Now memory is a traitor gliding, altering. The word is in sad fact, meaningless, based as it is on the false assumption that identity is single, soul continuous. (306-07)

Maijstral's discussion of identity bears a direct relation to what we have seen of V.'s successive identities. What Maijstral (in true postmodern fashion) is telling us is that such rejections and adoptions of identity are a fact of existence in a world which does not offer an underlying coherence and we should accept our selves for what they offer. Stencil, however, reads past this in his continued attempt to see in V.'s identities mere masquerade ("She is a master of disguise" he tells Benny) hiding the single, continuous soul.

Through his poetry, Maijstral has promoted a sense of stability and order; he has to a degree endorsed man's need of the fiction of a humanized history and it is for this too that he is in part apologizing. The distinction he makes between the poetic and practical mind reveals his growing discomfort with his role as romancer:

Living as he does much of the time in a world of metaphor, the poet is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function, that is a device, an artifice. So that while others may look on laws of physics as legislation and God as a human form with a beard measured in light years and nebulae for sandals, Fausto's kind are alone with the task of living in

a universe of things which simply are and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the "practical" half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie, confident that their machines, dwellings, streets, and weather share the same human motives, personal traits, and fits of contrariness as they. (325-26)

Fausto's confessions document his loss of faith in his poet's role and his preparation for an identity through which he can more honestly treat the events of history. "The present Fausto," he writes, "can look nowhere but back on the separate stages of his own history. No continuity. No logic. 'History, Dnubietna wrote, is a step-function.'" (331). The confessions, written in the present time of the novel (Paola receives them eight months before showing them to Stencil) reveal Maijstral as far better equipped to deal with the V. story than Stencil. He has confronted the notion that history and identity are more accurately studied as quanta, as discrete events that even metaphor is having a hard time controlling.

Stencil's father, Sidney, reaches a similar point of awareness through his own experience with textual manipulation. Many of Sidney's observations come to us through his son's reading of his journals; once again, however, Young Stencil glosses over such reflections to focus and build on the "factual" material concerning V. Sidney Stencil practices a form of artistry similar to Maijstral's, and his son's blindness to this is only too clear when he suggests

to Maijstral that his father had no imagination.<sup>5</sup> Yet Sidney has long realized that history has no internal logic but must be ordered by those in charge of making sense. As an agent of British Intelligence, his professional responsibility has been to encourage a belief in a unified reality, while knowing underneath all is amorphous, disconnected, and disparate. During the Vheissu Situation, the elder Stencil reflects:

Oh, the Situation. The bloody Situation. In his more philosophical moments he would wonder about this abstract entity The Situation, its ideas, the details of its mechanism. He remembered times when whole embassiesful of personnel had simply run amok and gibbering in the streets when confronted with a Situation which had refused to make sense no matter who looked at it, or from what angle. . . . He had decided long ago that no situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment. 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. Hence the success or failure of any diplomatic issue must vary directly with the degree of rapport achieved by the team confronting it. This had led to the near-obsession with teamwork which had inspired his colleagues to dub him Soft-shoe Sidney, on the assumption that he was at his best working in front of a chorus line. (189)

Sidney's language and observations resemble Maijstral's as he too approaches a suspicion that not only does no Situation have any objective reality, but it is possible that even a team of "writers" cannot make narrative out of sequence, something concrete out of the abstract. The image

of personnel running amok in the street is not so far from our vision of the younger Stencil caught in the grips of his own Situation at the end of the novel, running off to Sweden to pursue yet another "totalizing" clue. Sidney's "near" obsession with teamwork corresponds to his son's very real obsession with the idea of the quest's end; the crucial difference lies in Sidney's deliberate shaping of material only as long as it is willing to be shaped.

Sidney's training further enables him to understand the nature of all official reports. He knows that official documents are dedicated to the same purpose as he: to make situations tolerable and finite. At the time of the armistice, for example, Stencil sees no point in explaining his lack of enthusiasm for the new "peace."

Stencil muttered something about things not being stabilized. How could he tell Carruthers-Pillow of all people, who felt in the presence of the most inconsequential chit initialed by the Foreign Secretary much as Moses must have toward the Decalogue God blasted out for him on stone. Wasn't the armistice signed by legally constituted heads of government? How could there not be peace? It would never be worth the trouble arguing. . . . Let the poor innocent sleep. (458)

Sidney realizes that you cannot easily dissuade people from their faith in a world which makes sense; disillusionment cannot be transmitted, it must be learned.

Sidney's final disillusionment with his own ability to handle situations adequately comes when he is stationed in Valletta supposedly to quell an uprising which blossoms into



the "June Disturbances." Here characters and events converge, but their failure to coalesce shakes Sidney into a new awareness. This experience is not transmitted in the journals; it is only reported in the Epilogue. But Sidney's conclusions are available to his son if he could open himself to learn from his own experiences.

Critics have argued that by presenting a seemingly objective, if selective, account of V.'s history and of Sidney's death, the Epilogue to V. undermines a novel which has consistently reminded us that there is no objective reality and which has taught us to question the reliability of all sources. Susan Elizabeth Hendricks Davis, in A Counterforce of Readers: The Rhetoric of Thomas Pynchon's Narrative Technique, states that if the Epilogue is an attempt at thematic closure or reliable commentary, it fails because we have learned to suspect such "objective statements" as falsification. She further questions whether the Epilogue is a sign of a young writer's insecurity, an attempt to pull back from "true irresolution." Richard Patteson also discusses what happens when an omniscient narrator assumes control and offers what is supposed to be regarded as an unbiased view (29), and David Richter discusses how Stencil and Profane's trip to Malta provides an impetus for elements of closure (121-122). The Epilogue does indeed answer many questions and it closes the circle (through 1919) of V., Sidney Stencil, and Evan Godolphin.

However, it can and should be seen as consistent with the rest of the novel. For it is ultimately not the chasing of clues, the compilation of a dossier, nor the gathering of intelligence which matters here. Both Stencil pere and Stencil fils prove themselves exemplary spies or questers in this respect. What does matter, and it matters very much, is what you do with the information once you have it.<sup>6</sup>

Sidney's renewed contact with his old partner Demivolt and with Victoria Wren (so named by Sidney [486], though her identity on Malta is Veronica Manganese) and Godolphin on Malta brings into sharp focus the "chaotic and situational forces at work in Florence 20 years ago" (470) and he devoutly hopes that their appearance does not signal a reactivation of the same. But he does find himself facing a Situation run amok; and, realizing that even his "soft shoe dance" can no longer control it, he honestly looks to adjust his approach. Sidney must confront the idea that accident and coincidence are more potent choreographers than either intellect or artistry. And it is Demivolt who helps him to face this:

The Situation is always bigger than you, Sidney. It has like God its own logic and its own justifications for being and the best you can do is cope. . . . Don't act as if it were a conscious plot against you. Who knows how many thousand accidents--a variation in the weather, the availability of a ship, the failure of a crop--brought all these people, with their separate dreams and worries all to this island and arranged them into this alignment? (483)

Stencil's experience on Malta shows him that what he had thought was an end (V. in Florence) was only a 20 year stay, indeed that Situations have no end; no amount of teamwork or cooperation will close the book. And he recognizes the correctness of Demivolt's assessment that all we can do is cope; history is not a "conscious plot." As Stencil muses over the Valletta and Florence situations, he realizes that the world has gotten too large and too complicated for men of (or in) intelligence to manage. The arena has changed, and the new game cannot be played in the same way as the old. Hence the June Disturbances erupt and dissolve in their own way and no official report is (or can be) created. As Sidney himself realizes, he has outlived his time. The currents of history have shifted and the complexities of this "new world" need a different kind of understanding. He even suspects, as does his partner, that they have been sent "out to pasture" in Valletta. Only days after the June Disturbances Stencil leaves Valletta and meets his death. How fitting it is that it comes at the hands of a freak, random accident at sea, an intrusion of deliberate, unaccountable disorder, reminding us that not all events have determinable links to other events.

Young Stencil remains closed off from the "truth" his father faced 37 years earlier. Although he faces the same experience as his father, his fear of the idea that history is random, is built on accident both paralyzes him and

compels him to continue his mad search for V. even when he knows surely of her death on Malta. Stencil's trip to Valletta leads him into a series of coincidence and accident similar to that experienced by his father. But the idea of such massive coincidences frightens him; in a conversation with Benny, we see that he is not able to cope:

V's is a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth, whose emissaries haunt this century's streets. Porcepic, Mondaugen, Stencil pere, 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. (450)

Stencil's expectations of history--that it has nothing in common with coincidence, indeed that history and coincidence are in conflict--clearly would leave him appalled at the notion that he is living in a world governed by accident, a world in which the entire history of V. may only add up to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects. He pursues his quest in an effort to stave off any confirmation of this reality. He leaves Valletta, knowing that V. is dead, because "he must be sure." He follows leads of her dismemberment desperate to find a logic both to her movements and actions and to her connection to his father, his country, himself. Stencil's anxiety about history and his own identity does not allow him to be selective in his pursuit, a pursuit which is exhaustive as well as exhaust-

ing. He exists in a "fever dream: the kind where one is given an impossibly complex problem to solve, and keeps chasing dead ends, following random promises, frustrated at every turn, until the fever breaks" (471). But Stencil's fever does not break; he is caught in his obsession and his fear and he cannot see beyond it. As Fausto Maijstral observes:

Mounting crisis in the Suez, Hungary and Poland hardly touched them. Maijstral, leery like any Maltese of the Balloons' least bobbing, was grateful for something else--Stencil--to take his mind off the headlines. But Stencil himself, who seemed unaware each day (under questioning) of what was happening in the rest of the world, reinforced Maijstral's growing theory that V. was an obsession after all, and that such an obsession is a hothouse: constant temperature, windless, too crowded with particolored sports, unnatural blooms. (448)

Stencil leaves Malta in a feverish state: he fears abandoning the quest; he fears achieving the quest; and he fears any suggestion that the quest will ultimately expose the inability to accommodate or account for all his data, leaving him with the truth that he can know or create nothing absolutely.<sup>7</sup> Stencil's notion of quest--and by extension his notions of history--prohibit him from managing the fluidity and ambiguity in which his search for V. immerses him. He is caught between his anxiety about material which does not seem to respond to his attempts to order it and his anxiety that the material will cohere and

the quest will end. Indeed, his response to his quest only emphasizes his complete inability to contemplate a world which does not bend as he expects to the intellect.

It is in Benny Profane that we see a character's beginning attempts to accommodate a notion of relative history and experience; in his "quest" we find an exploration of the middle ground, the ground which refuses to be categorized or calcified and which so frightens Stencil. Benny's experience compels him to reconsider his fundamental assumptions about human behavior, human relationships, and man's ability to survive. And though he discovers things he clearly does not understand and which he never fully appreciates, he leads us in a more helpful and healthy direction than does Stencil.

Benny Profane's character has provoked much discussion among Pynchon scholars, yet all seem to agree that he is the schlemiel that he insists he is. Tony Tanner ("V and V-2"), Douglas Mackey, and David Richter all accept that Benny is a weak, passive man who flees commitment and is easily buffeted around by the people and pressures which surround him. In addition, they regard Benny as a counterpoint to Stencil, one being active and the other passive; one being directed, the other aimless; one committed, the other irresponsible. Where Stencil is seen as having a purpose, Benny is seen as purposeless, gradually becoming as inanimate as the material world by which he feels so

threatened.<sup>8</sup> But this view of Benny's character is completely inaccurate. Benny Profane deliberately and emphatically promotes his image as a schlemiel, yet it is clear from the beginning of the novel that in fact he is a compassionate, concerned man who is quite anxious about the sickness he perceives in his society. Benny provides the focal point for the prevalent theme of the encroaching inanimate which in many ways dominates V. He keenly feels the threat of the inanimateness which he sees all around him, and his primary activity throughout the novel concerns his search for clues to explain not only the onslaught of this deadness, but also the fact of his own awareness in the face of everyone else's seeming apathy.

Benny's first hint that something is wrong with his world arises from his relationship with Rachel Owlglass, a woman who both captivates and horrifies him. What turns Benny off is Rachel's attachment to material objects, especially her red MG. Benny comes upon Rachel late one evening as she is washing her car, and what he sees is a woman making love to a machine. This sight scares Benny and provides the first shock of recognition that something breathed beneath the surface of "normal life" which, though he did not fully understand, he knew had dangerous consequences.

He never got beyond or behind the chatter about her world--one of objects coveted or valued, an

atmosphere Profane couldn't breathe. The last time he saw her was Labor Day night. . . . There she was washing her car. In the middle of the night yet. Moreover, she was talking to it.

'You beautiful stud,' he heard her say, 'I love to touch you.' Wha, he thought. "Do you know what I feel when we're out on the road? Alone, just us?' She was running the sponge caressingly over its front bumper. 'Your funny responses, darling, that I know so well. The way your brakes pull a little to the left, the way you start to shudder around 5000 rpm when you're excited. And you burn oil when you're mad at me, don't you? I know.' There was none of your madness in her voice; it might have been a school-girl's game, though still, he admitted, quaint. . . . She had climbed in the car and now lay back in the driver's seat, her throat open to the summer constellations. He was about to approach her when he saw her left hand snake out all pale to fondle the gearshift. He watched and noticed how she was touching it. . . . He didn't want to see any more. (28-29)

One year later, Benny tells Rachel that "I only started to think about being a schlemiel, about a world of things that had to be watched out for, after I saw you alone with the MG. I didn't even stop to think it might be perverted, what I was watching. All I was was scared" (384). Benny adopts the identity of a schlemiel, a person unable to live in a world of things, as a defense against his own capacity for feeling and desiring connection. His shock and confusion when he comes upon Rachel sends him on a reeling search for something to explain the growing decadence and inanimateness to which his encounter has sensitized him: "To Profane, alone in the Street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine" (40). His con-



scious retreat into schlemielhood and his insistence on his worthlessness shields him from the danger he perceives in relationships (taking Rachel and her car as a model of love): the danger of a loss of selfhood, of absorbing the inanimate. But in his search he reveals himself as extremely aware and intelligent, one who wishes to make significant contact with others, who holds back and represses his desires only out of the fear that by contact with the disease, he will hasten "his own disassembly." He wishes to understand, but avoid, the encroachment of the inanimate. Benny, like Stencil, is fighting for a coherent sense of identity, a way to safely place himself within an historical and social context. But Benny's energies are continually directed outwardly, and thus he reaches a tentative agreement with his world.

Our first sign that Benny is a more caring character than he is willing to admit is precisely his recollection of the scene with Rachel and her MG. Benny reflects on the scene and his response to it when he comes upon a similar scene between his former shipmate, Pig Bodine, and Pig's motorcycle.

The enigma or sinister vision of Pig and that Harley-Davidson alone in an alley at three in the morning reminded Profane too suddenly of Rachel, whom he didn't want to think about, not tonight in the bitter cold, with a headache, with snow slipping into the room. (22)

Benny's reaction to this scene suggests that he is a reflective, sensitive person. Just because Benny does not want to think about Rachel does not mean that he has forgotten or even successfully repressed the memory. Indeed, the long flashback which follows the encounter with Pig (quoted above) indicates the degree to which Benny is still disturbed by Rachel's actions.

Benny's relationships with Paola Maijstral and Fina (relationships curiously ignored in all critical assessments of his character) further reveal his inherent humanity. Paola and Benny run into each other at the Sailor's Grave (they had met before in Malta), and Paola, currently separated from her husband, develops a growing dependence on and trust in Benny. This is significant not only in itself, but also in the fact that Paola becomes one of the most positive and compassionate figures in the novel. Paola carries a message of commitment and love, and her relationship with McClintic Sphere and her decision to return to her husband have been repeatedly cited as the only positive relationships in the novel. It is interesting, therefore, that she attaches herself to Profane, seeking in him protection, guidance, and love. Benny appears to shun Paola's dependence and her desire to love him because he fears that it is love's possessiveness which makes people regard others as objects. We must remember that the most striking model Benny has of "love" is his relationship with

Rachel, a woman who cannot distinguish between love for man and love for machine. But despite all of his protests that he is no good, Benny does continually protect Paola and serve as her friend.

Benny is also a careful observer of the Whole Sick Crew, the group of intellectuals and artists who revel in decadence. Benny remains outside of this group, a sign of personal strength since he is friends with several group followers. Benny's strength is noted by Paola, Rachel, and Stencil, though he himself denies it. He is convinced that he is a hopeless case because of his inability to accept his world as he finds it. Therefore, he continually derides himself and claims himself unfit for "real" relationships, preferring to be left alone to drift along the Street.

Rachel confronts Benny with the notion that his attitude (or from the reader's point of view, his quest) isolates him not only from the decadence, but also from his own humanity. She attacks his pose as a schlemiel during their last reported argument. After Benny gives his standard defense for why their relationship can't work: "I don't change. Schlemiel's don't change," Rachel counters with: "Oh that makes me sick. Can't you stop feeling sorry for yourself? You've taken your own flabby, clumsy soul and amplified it into a Universal Principle" (383). Importantly, Benny can only respond to her attack by revealing his own insecurities about loving in a world dominated by the inani-

mate and by telling her that his pose as a schlemiel is a form of protection against people like Rachel who get off on material objects. Yet as Benny pursues his course of exploration and avoidance, of set and drift along the street, his actions continually belie his words and we, like Rachel, should see that he is not a schlemiel at all.

It is when Benny saves Paola from Pig's attempted rape that we see the conflict in him most clearly. In an exchange following Pig's departure we see Benny faced directly with the warring sides of his character. He tells Paola:

'Anyway I say it is nasty. But I'm not looking for any dependents, is all.'

'You have them' [Paola] whispered.

'No, he thought, she's out of her head. Not me. Not a schlemiel.'

'Then why did you make Pig go away?'

He thought about that one for a few weeks. (378-79)

Indeed, Benny has at least four dependents: there are Rachel, Paola, and Fina, all of whom claim to love him and with whom he tries to reach some sort of accommodation which will not compromise his quest to understand and avoid the creeping inanimate. And there is Stencil, who latches on to Benny precisely because of his ability to escape the clutches of the Whole Sick Crew (which, interestingly, Stencil refers to as "that machine," p. 387) and because of his relationship with Paola. Stencil recognizes in Benny a fellow isolate, but also he sees in him a person with com-

passion and a sense of what it means to be a friend. Stencil confides in Benny the story of V. in Love and his fear of Malta (Benny being the only person he confides in outside of Eigenvalue), and ultimately coerces Benny into accompanying him to Malta. Though Stencil uses Benny to get to Paola, there is a need on Benny's part to use Stencil, to confide in someone about his problems with Rachel. Stencil may not be the best audience (the fetishistic and sado-masochistic love story he tells Benny is not exactly comforting), but Benny's need to talk reveals how troubled he is about the false role he is playing with Rachel. Benny agrees to go to Malta "not unwilling, not anticipating, not anything, merely prepared to float, acquire a set and drift wherever Fortune willed" (367). Benny will continue as he has, burying himself in the protective covering of schlemielhood, fearing connection with Rachel, and searching for some accommodation with his place in history.

But if Benny is more sensitive than at first appears, he is also significantly more anxious. His passivity and cultivation of schlemielhood barely masks a deep fear and paranoia about his world. He is skittish, untrusting, and desperate in his self enforced isolation. It is this anguish, as Tony Tanner points out in Thomas Pynchon, which causes him to seek coherence and answers in unlikely places. When Benny encounters an alligator in the sewers of New York he locks eyes with it and seemingly waits for it to communi-

cate with him. It is as if he almost expects a transcendent message of some kind. Similarly, his interest in Father Fairing and his conversion of the rats reveals a pained desire to grasp coherencies which he believes have worked for others. Even his attraction to Fina is in part attributable to his need to place himself among those who have, in Tanner's words, "solved the problem of salvation" and who may be able to teach him how to safely make a human gesture (49). When these fail to communicate any significant message at all, Benny feels all the more isolated.

Out of his anxiety and his need to understand his world and his self are born his "talks" with SHOCK and SHROUD. SHOCK and SHROUD are "synthetic human objects"--dummies--used in simulated car accidents and radiation accidents who reside at Anthroresearch Associates, where Benny works as a night watchman. Benny feels an immediate kinship with SHOCK, "the first inanimate schlemiel he'd ever encountered," (285) though SHROUD somewhat intimidates him. Yet as he makes his nightly rounds, he stops for long conversations with both objects, probing the realities of life as an inanimate being. "What's it like" Benny asks SHROUD. "Better than you have it. . . . Me and SHOCK are what you and everybody will be someday. . . . If someone else doesn't do it to you [referring to fallout and road accidents] you'll do it to yourselves" (286). Thus begins Benny's first interrogation of SHROUD, whom he feels can help him to

discover the reason(s) for man's condition. Their discussions cover, in general terms, religion and the future of man. Yet Pynchon gives us ample reason to view Benny's conversations with SHROUD and SHOCK as the outward expression of his inner turmoil, a point which critics have curiously overlooked. Benny is projecting onto SHOCK and SHROUD his own anxiety and his own views on the matters under discussion. Both SHROUD and SHOCK use Benny's language (SHROUD uses his signature "wha?"), and like Benny they are extremely cynical. And most importantly, they provide no answers. This Benny must do for himself. Benny's first conversation with SHROUD ends with the following exchange:

'What do you mean, we'll all be like you and SHOCK someday? You mean dead?'  
 Am I dead? If I am then that's what I mean.  
 'If you aren't then what are you?'  
 Nearly what you are. None of you have very far to go.  
 'I don't understand.'  
 So I see. But you're not alone. That's a comfort isn't it? (286)

Benny does not understand the meaning of what he has observed--Rachel and the MG, Pig and his motorcycle, gang rapes, the mechanical (heroic) love of Mafia Winsome--he does not understand why no one else is alarmed by man's capitulation to the forces of the inanimate, giving themselves over to it as do the members of the Whole Sick Crew. And it does not give him any comfort to know that he is not alone in his confusion, because he is alone in his awareness

and concern.

In a later scene, we are told that "Benny listened with half an ear to the coffee percolating and carried on another imaginary conversation with SHROUD. By now, that had become a tradition" (295). Here we are clearly informed that Benny is playing SHROUD's role as well as his own: SHROUD's observations and conclusions are Benny's. The very fact that Benny is able to hold such conversations shows the degree of his awareness, intelligence, and fundamental concern. Benny is not a passive schlemiel; he has merely adopted the part of a passive schlemiel while trying to seek out some answers, and his actions, his thoughts, and his concerns substantiate this at every turn.

It is further instructive to note the placement of Benny's talks with SHROUD. Each discussion is framed by scenes in which the inanimate is seen to dominate man. The first encounter is preceded by scenes between Esther and Slab discussing his theory of "catatonic expressionism," and a scene between Rachel and Rooney Winsome depicting his slow decline into the grips of the Crew. It is followed by the weekend party at which Benny refuses Mafia's invitation to "heroic love": sex for sex's sake. The second conversation is preceded by an encounter between Esther and the plastic surgeon, Schoenmaker, in which he proposes to resculpt her whole body (thus making her half synthetic) and is followed by yet another discussion of "catatonic expressionism" while



Slab paints "Cheese Danish #41." Benny's connection with these events is clear: Esther is Rachel's roommate and Benny hears of all her and Rachel's experiences through Rachel. Clearly the substance of these confidences disturbs Benny, so much so that he carries them to SHROUD, who helps him deal with the content of his life. The last conversation is preceded by Benny's nightmarish run-ins with things inanimate (alarm clock, shoes, razor, turnstiles, subways) as he has a morning when absolutely everything goes against him. Interestingly this is the most "productive" conversation. SHROUD actually gives Benny some advice: "Keep cool. Keep cool, but care. It's a watchword, Profane, for your side of the morning" (369). This is the same conclusion uttered only a few pages earlier by McClintic Sphere, the jazz musician who is Paola's lover: "Love with your mouth shut, help without breaking your ass or publicizing it: keep cool, but care" (365-66). Benny probably picked this up from Paola. But wherever or however he learned it, it does have a clear impact on Benny. It becomes his direction to himself, a mantra for living in his confusing world. In the scenes immediately following this exchange Benny takes some of his most active (and I would argue, natural) steps: he agrees to look for a steady job; he saves Paola from Pig; he visits his parents; and finally, he helps Paola reunite with her husband.

We last see Benny, like Stencil, on Malta. He has con-

tracted a literal fever (in contrast to Stencil's psychological fever) which confines him to bed for several days.

Paola has returned to the States to wait for her husband and Stencil has abandoned Benny to chase another V. clue. But Benny significantly recovers from his fever and takes some small steps forward in his quest to find a place for himself.

Coming out of his illness, Benny cleans himself up and dresses to go out in search of "amusement." What he finds is Brenda Wigglesworth, a college girl from America with whom he connects. His is no grand connection with Brenda, but it is a significant and courageous step from his relationships with Rachel, Fina, and Paola. Here we see that SHROUD's advice has penetrated to some degree. Benny reaches out for some connection on Malta and accepts Brenda's return gesture on their second evening together. And the last image we have of Benny is surprisingly peaceful, even in its movement.

The street was level and clear. Hand in hand with Brenda whom he'd met yesterday, Profane ran down the street. Presently, sudden and in silence, all illumination in Valletta, houselight and street-light, was extinguished. Profane and Brenda continued to run through the abruptly absolute night, momentum alone carrying them toward the edge of Malta, and the Mediterranean beyond. (455)

Benny and Brenda run hand in hand maintaining a human bond of affection. And though he still keeps to the street, a

place of no commitment, of openness, he is now carried by momentum, not set and drift, and he is running with another, toward something. Benny's wide, clean street represents something ongoing, an "open totality" strikingly different from Stencil's inward, rarified notion of the Situation. Benny's run towards the wide, open unknowing echoes Huck Finn's run for the territory at the end of Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Like Benny, Huck knows that he must escape the paralyzing forces of "Civilization" (or History), and achieve something more authentic, more fluid, more accommodating to his own understanding of process. Though neither Huck nor Benny know precisely what they are fleeing towards, they are going and that movement has its own value. The tensions resulting from Benny's struggle between isolation and connection make his no hothouse or inward quest, but rather an embryonic, if tortured, model of understanding.

Pynchon's central characters are all involved in a search for identity similar to Stencil's and Benny's and, like these two early figures, find that this search brings them up against a fundamental question of historical process: are we links in a chain of ongoing causally-related phenomena or are we points on a line of discrete, random unrelatable phenomena? Pynchon's continued exploration of man's relation to his historical position reveals his concern with modes of forging a consistent sense of identity

in a relative world. His treatment in V. of the dual quests is a significant beginning, noteworthy both because of the way in which the duality emphasizes the tensions Pynchon must balance to succeed and because of his development towards a quintessentially American treatment of character.

Though V. takes its title and its major plot line from Stencil's quest, Pynchon shapes our response to the entire narrative by focusing the reader on Benny at the beginning of the novel and before the Epilogue. Examining this structure clearly reveals that Benny and his story function separately from Stencil and the V. puzzle. Though Benny and Stencil share acquaintances and Benny accompanies Stencil to Malta, he does not become involved with the mystery of V.; he becomes involved with the people surrounding him: Fausto Maijstral, Paola, and, as much as he is allowed to, Stencil. Benny's actions provide a clear contrast to Stencil's, which show a lack of involvement with anything outside of V. Stencil uses Paola to get to her father; he uses Benny to take care of Paola.<sup>9</sup> Most markedly, Stencil abandons Benny in his fever, leaving him to Fausto to "dispose of." These people have served their purpose and Stencil needs them no more. His misdirected search leads him only further inward to more anxiety, fear, and trepidation. His dash from Malta to Sweden only supports Fausto's observation that the quest has become an unhealthy obsession. Stencil will not allow himself to engage his data honestly. He never engages the

difference between a coherent romance world and the contingent historical world: in the historical world, the quest can never end and what one must do is learn to accommodate its presence.

Benny, however, approaches a recognition of the truth of living within history. Once he encounters Rachel and her MG and he becomes sensitized to the different currents of the world, some frightening, some puzzling, some comforting, he voluntarily pulls back from significant relationships or significant action, allowing history to buffet him about as he examines the phenomena around him. Benny, like Stencil, consciously affects a role, but his is more passive; he goes from encounter to encounter with no predetermined direction, processing data as it comes. But there are two crucial elements of Benny's character which make him more than a passive adventurer and which tie him both to Stencil and to other characters in American fiction. First, he is concerned, as Stencil is concerned, as Quentin Compson and Jack Burden are concerned, with how or if the past connects with the present and how/if his own actions affect history. His awakening need to understand his own and his age's place in history mirror similar tentative steps taken in American literature. Second, and significantly different from Stencil, Benny cares about the people he sees affected (and infected) by this world. This is a concern which carries one outside the self to try to help others make any possible

steps toward the accommodation of identity within history.

But Benny's approach is not tenable as a long-term stance. Benny has the potential for successfully coping with the realities he has glimpsed, certainly more than does Stencil; but his anxious commitment to his schlemiel identity shields him from evaluating the data he collects. Unlike Stencil and unlike characters like Quentin Compson and Jack Burden, he does not try to make his story into a coherent narrative History; he accepts what he observes as single symptoms in a larger, amorphous disease which is causing man's steady decline into the inanimate. Benny does not want to become a part of what he sees, and he hopes to avoid it through withdrawal and observation. He does not reach enough of an understanding to know how to survive within it, though we do see him taking a step toward accommodation. His attention to McClintic/SHROUD's watchword, a watchword for "living in the middle," for tolerating a world predicated on coincidence and accident, attests to his serious desire to succeed in his quest. We see Paola accept it in her return to her husband and, even though Benny denies that he has learned anything, we see in his run with Brenda an attempt at defining himself which is completely absent in Stencil's run to Sweden.

Critical responses to V. have been much more inclined to address problems of the text's structure and ordering of events than questions of character and identity. Most

critics examine the novel's structural and thematic coherence and pride themselves on learning the lesson Stencil presumably avoids learning: that chronology does not necessarily lead to causality. Even writers who have specifically addressed the novel's treatment of ambiguity, have done so at the expense of the characters.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most prevalent criticisms of Pynchon's novel, both in early reviews and later scholarship, concerns the overwhelming number of false clues and false leads contained within the text. Many feel that this is the extravagance of a young, inexperienced writer who has lost control of his material at several points throughout the book. However, this is far from accurate. True, Pynchon does saturate us with information and possible connections, little of which bears fruit. But as most writers on Pynchon eagerly address, our very frustrations with his narrative reveals our own attitudes towards reading, history, and the need for plot making.

Many critics have noted in Pynchon "a failure of completeness" and by this they are not just referring to the tendency of his novels to remain open-ended, but to the "fact" that there is no clear narrative or thematic line embedded within the text. Early reviews of V. focus primarily on a perceived failure on Pynchon's part to pull his story lines together and on the amount of "irrelevant material" in the novel. Christopher Ricks, in his review "Volu-

minous" in The New Statesman claims:

The one thing that could hope to hold [V.] together, the quest for V., doesn't. It leads to disquisitions on Venezuela, Venus, Vheissu, Veronica, Valletta, etc., none of which is without interest and none of which has such centripetal force as would demonstrate a real centre. (492)

Whitney Balliett in The New Yorker criticizes Pynchon for his failure to supply the reader with the missing links which would "solve" the novel:

[Pynchon] supplies just enough information [some of it red-herring], innuendo, and implication to enable the reader to supply his own guesses. The book in fact resembles one of those Add-a-Part phonograph recordings, in which one instrument is omitted, leaving a hole to be filled by industrious amateurs. (The next logical step would be the Add-a-Part novel, in which one or more suggested characters are omitted, to be filled in by the industrious reader-writer). (113)

And Irving Feldman, in his review "Keeping Cool," manages to reduce Pynchon's complex novel to the expression of a single idea, and then faults Pynchon for writing a simplistic work with little to interest the reader.

The theme of the inanimate is explained and commented on throughout the novel--necessarily for it constitutes the ground of seriousness that the characters themselves lack; when the whirling balls finally come to rest, they tumble into the great fosse of the theme, the sea level into which all of the novel drains. (260)



Later studies of V. largely continue this examination of structure, looking for a way around or through the mass of material in the novel. David Richter in his book Fables End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction, sees V. as seriously flawed because Pynchon's vision is not clear; he concludes that the book's elements do not work together to communicate its vision. Richter's first step in his treatment of V. is to arrange the events of the novel chronologically, to determine the connections and movements from year to year. Tony Tanner, in his book length study of Pynchon, takes the same approach, as do a multitude of Pynchon readers. In doing this, these writers are looking for the same relationships, the same kind of causal patterns, which Stencil seeks. They are victims of the same trust in logic as Stencil, yet they reach very different conclusions. Richter finds that Pynchon "purposefully distorts temporal sequence and both naturalistic and literary probability to achieve an intended sense of 'formlessness'" (103). He faults Pynchon for a "purposeful ambiguity" and for having a "loose paratactic structure which is not pulled together" (129). But he is really faulting Pynchon for not meeting his expectations. Readings of V. which rest on a chronological view of the novel are reductive and misleading; they are essentially readings of a wholly different novel. Once Richter rearranges V., he determines that the thrust of the novel is "a picture of the

course of western civilization in the twentieth century and a prophecy of its fate" (103). He can then go on to draw conclusions such as the following:

V. is not a simple novel, because Pynchon refuses to draw parallels and connections for us; he provides the evidence, but the work of ordering and evaluating it we must do for ourselves. The lack of narrative juncture, for the most part, between the 'historical' and the 'contemporary' chapters at the novel's outset forces us to find coherence in terms of the only important link between them: Pynchon's thesis. (120, emphasis added)

Richter's findings here are based on one central faulty presupposition. All that forces us to order the material and to provide a juncture between the novel's plots is our own a priori expectations of what a novel (and by extension history) should do and what our job is in relation to its function. A careful study of the novel, allowing it to exist in its own form, shows that to attempt to link elements or to arrange them in the "correct" order (such as Tanner and Richter do) is to fall prey to Stencil's "disease": a need to demystify data in order to continue functioning. And, to reduce the novel's elaborate structuring to only one important link, to one thesis, is to destroy its complexity and reap no benefit.

Instead of simply dismissing what doesn't fit our idea of what a text is "about," as such responses suggest (see also David Richter's evaluation cited below), we should ask why a writer includes such material in such a structure.

Certainly a writer of Pynchon's "achievement" wouldn't be as careless as Richter (and others) suggest. And indeed, if we study V. (and Pynchon's other novels, which are subject to many of the same criticisms) with this in mind we find a carefully constructed portrait of two minds struggling with an absence of coherence. Pynchon does, clearly, play on our expectations as novel readers that the material of his story will cohere. But as Davis, in A Counterforce of Readers, argues, if we are responsive to the dynamics of the reading process, Pynchon's works will not allow us to adopt such a unilateral frame of mind, but will teach us to tolerate ambiguity. This is a view shared by many recent critics of Pynchon. Indeed, as this view makes clear, even if we do approach V. chronologically, we cannot find coherence, we cannot force a juncture between the plot elements.

Davis draws some interesting comparisons between Dickens and Pynchon regarding such expectations of juncture (37ff.). In Dickens, Davis argues, coincidence always becomes meaningful. At some point in a Dickens novel, chance meetings and overlapping plot lines take on significance for the larger plot. And even the smallest, seemingly unrelated details become absorbed into the fabric of one primary plot structure. But Pynchon operates on an opposite principle: expectations of coherence are almost never realized. Pynchon is constantly orchestrating scenes in which coincidence is merely coincidence; chance meetings are provocative, but

remain ambiguous as clear linking elements.

One such scene has several characters from previously unrelated plot lines converge on Schleissvogel's beer garden. Hugh Godolphin arranges a meeting with his son Evan at 10:00 p.m.; the Gaucho tells Mantissa and Cesare to give him an answer about the plot to steal Botticelli's Venus by 10:00 p.m. the same evening: he will be at Schleissvogel's; later it is revealed that the Gaucho usually meets his lieutenant at Schleissvogel's to discuss the "revolution" that Stencil is investigating. Eventually, we the readers are taken to Schleissvogel's to see the expected intersection of all these characters. In fact, even Victoria Wren appears in the company of Evan Godolphin. Naturally, we expect this to become a pivotal scene, one in which several questions will be resolved. Our expectation of synthesis and completeness sets us up for frustration when we discover that nothing of import happens in this scene. There are no significant recognitions, connections, or resolutions. The characters are, simply put, merely all on stage at one time conducting their separate business. All that comes out of this scene is an interesting configuration of characters, not plot clarification.

Pynchon here is exposing the reader to the same information or inference gathered by Stencil, and our response to the failure of the information to cohere coerces us to compare our responses to Stencil's. The reader, then,

unlike Stencil, should come to accept that leads are not going to be followed up, that coincidences do not lead to breakthroughs, that seemingly insignificant facts remain insignificant. How accidental is the broken staircase in Godolphin's apartment house? How important is Vheissu? Does Mantissa's plan have any relation to Stencil's quest for V.? Such questions should become unimportant as we realize that this is not how we are to read this text. And the more we see Stencil's desperation and isolation, the more we should reject his way of seeing.

If we fail to be responsive to the dynamics of the novel, we tend not only to overvalue chronological linearity, but to devalue nonlinearity. This leads to a response such as Richter's final position on the novel:

What partially saves Pynchon and his novel from the obscurity into which his obsession with technique might have driven him is the law of Pragnanz, that rule of Gestalt psychology that predicts the tendency of any mental form or structure towards meaningfulness, completeness, and relative simplicity. As we read the novel, the false clues, red herrings and learned trifles which would lead us astray tend to be forgotten as the pattern of Pynchon's thesis shapes the rest into a meaningful picture. Annoyed as we may be at the distractions the author has placed in our path, we cannot fail to be impressed by his achievement.  
(132, emphasis added)

Richter's suggestion that we simply dismiss material which does not contribute to "Pynchon's thesis" reveals an intolerable bias for texts which resemble the closed, "authoritative" works discussed in Bakhtin more than novels

or artistic texts. But readers who remain open to the novel's dynamics gradually become more amenable to nonlinearity than do either Stencil or Benny. In putting the reader in exactly the same position as Stencil and Benny, Pynchon begins to explore how accepting received myths of historical process can stifle our ability to form identity. The information overload, then, is motivated as the reader is led to reject Stencil's approach and to marvel at Benny's survival. The question that remains, however, is how to reconcile our understanding of fluidity with our need for identity.

The forays of Benny and Stencil into questions of identity and historical process are tentative and rough. Neither has the capability to tolerate what they encounter and neither successfully reconciles a need for a coherent identity with the reality of an incoherent world. But Pynchon's treatment of their attempts reveals a conflict which indeed is at the heart of much American literature: a confusion between the impetus toward a coherent, unified, even deliberately romanticized past and the actual indiscriminate data of history. And where V. introduces the terms of the conflict, it is in The Crying of Lot 49 that the conflict is first examined specifically and penetrated. Oedipa Maas struggles with the same questions as Stencil and Benny, but is quite a different character. In her determined confrontation of the past, present, and future we see a meld

of Stencil and Benny. And for this exploration of accommodation, Pynchon turns to a more specifically focused, more specifically American context.

## NOTES

1. The early reviews of V. focus primarily on revealing its themes and on unravelling its chronology, ignoring the significance of Pynchon's characterizations. Irving Feldman's comment: "The characters turn out to be mere instances of the inanimate, all the dizzy details of their careers reduced to the prosaicism of the author's intention . . . his characters are themselves worthless" (258) is representative of the responses to Benny and Stencil. Later critical works follow the course of pursuing theme over character, as I discuss in greater detail below

2. In considering the responses to Pynchon's text, it is necessary to keep Forster's distinction between "story" and "plot" as defined in Aspects of the Novel clearly in mind. "Story" according to Forster is the telling of events arranged in a time sequence. A story relates life in time. "Plot" is a relating of events emphasizing causality (23). Seymour Chatman makes a similar distinction between "story-events" and plot (the arrangement of events or incidents) in Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film: "It has been argued, since Aristotle, that events in narratives are radically correlative, enchainning, entailing. Their sequence, runs the traditional argument, is not simply linear, but causative" (45). Throughout this book, I will also be using the term "narrative" as an equivalent to "plot." A narrative emphasizes totality, coherence, and a perceived causality.

3. The Epilogue of the novel will be treated separately, apart from the quest stories contained in the novel. The Epilogue does not directly concern Stencil or Benny, but serves as a comment on the actions of the characters. In talking about the "story" here, I am referring to the paired quests.

4. Jim Addison, in his article "The Morphology of the Middle English Metrical Romance" argues for a three-part structure in romance, a structure whose essence lies in the idea of identity. Addison's discussion (12-15), outlined below, illuminates much of what happens to Stencil, Benny, and other Pynchon questers as they strive to form a coherent identity.

Addison outlines three basic structural units of (quest) romance: (a) The hero lacks his/her true identity or an



acceptable one. This can be because the hero is a foundling, the hero's quest is cloaked in secrecy, or the old identity has been called into question or rendered unacceptable. (emphasis added); (b) While seeking to find his/her true identity or a new and acceptable one, the hero symbolically loses his/her old identity. This can happen by the hero adopting a disguise, the hero exchanging clothes with another, or the hero assuming a different name; (c) The hero finds either his/her true identity or a new and acceptable one and his/her marriage to the intended signifies the new state of identity.

In Pynchon's writing, we repeatedly see all three functions of losing and seeking identity. Though in contemporary quests, there is rarely a resolution in the form of marriage, we do see tentative, positive attempts to integrate back into society to test the new identity.

5. On Malta, Stencil has the following exchange with Maijstral:

"One feels her in the city," [Stencil] cried.

"In the city."

"In the light. It has to do with the light."

"If the soul," Maijstral ventured, "is light. Is it a presence?"

"Damn the word. Stencil's father, had he possessed imagination, might have used it." (447)

6. Thank you to Professor Douglas Day for pointing out that Standard Intelligence School doctrine holds that "no single datum is any more or less relevant or important than any other. It is only the data that matter--what one makes of the assembled pieces of intelligence."

7. Patteson (30) states that a true understanding of his father's death would leave Stencil knowing only that he could know nothing. I question the use of the word "only." Knowing this is, indeed, all Stencil needs to know to release him from the fever and move him towards a clearer understanding of history and identity as essentially contingent.

8. Tanner ("V. and V-2" 9-30) states, "If Stencil is trapped in the hothouse of the past, Benny Profane is astray in the streets of the present. . . . He is a rootless wanderer." Tanner continues to characterize Benny as part picaro and

part schlemiel, one who belongs with the Whole Sick Crew, a position I argue against in this chapter. Mackey characterizes Benny as "a schlemiel and a yo-yo, a fat, horny, pig-eyed ex-navy man who drifts from place to place . . . a curious neutral character" (12-13). And Richter feels that Benny is "in a sense too inanimate himself" to be a true hero" (114).

9. Though Paola does first bring the reference to Sidney and the Bad Priest in her father's confessions to Stencil's attention, once he connects with Fausto, he shows no concern with Paola's motivations for coming to Malta (her struggles with her own past and marriage). Paola, in keeping with her character, is the one who shows concern for Stencil's endeavors through the mere act of sharing the confessions with him.

10. Though this claim holds true for virtually all of the works consulted in this study, see specifically Davis, A Counterforce of Readers; Schaub, The Voice of Ambiguity; Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon; and New, "In Search of V."

## Chapter Three

## Oedipa Maas's Journey Into America

Oedipa Maas, the troubled quester at the center of Pynchon's second novel, The Crying of Lot 49, finds herself unexpectedly confronting questions of historical process and historical reality, questions which had never assumed significance in her experiences before those narrated in this novel. Oedipa's progressive struggle to locate an historical context in which to place herself provokes a more intense treatment than either of the quests in V.

Many critics see The Crying of Lot 49 as simply a more compact and unified version of V.<sup>1</sup> However, Oedipa's story pushes much further in its treatment of history, character, and identity. Manfred Putz characterizes the development accurately when he states that Benny Profane ultimately reveals an inability to successfully mediate between himself and the present, tense he finds himself in and Stencil unsuccessfully tries to control and shape the chaos of the past by reconstructing the history of V., hoping in turn to give shape to both his past and his present. But, Putz argues, Oedipa combines the quests of Profane and Stencil in her concern for both the present and the past (147 ff.). Indeed, in Oedipa, we see more than a complicated focus; we see a quest into the functions of history which significantly conjoins the attitudes of Benny and Stencil. Oedipa, like Stencil, works to connect events and phenomena

into a coherent chain, but as her search leads her further and further into the complex web of the Trystero and the underside of America, she becomes increasingly flexible and open to the diversity around her. Oedipa does not abandon herself to "middleness" as does Benny; she retains much of her rigor as a researcher while forcibly reevaluating her faith in inherent continuities and correspondences which drives characters like Stencil. Like Jack Burden and Quentin Compson, but unlike Stencil, Oedipa admits that "facts" do not always lead to "Truth" or coherence, but unlike these questers, Oedipa pushes through the despair and terror of this discovery to stumble toward a rudimentary understanding of historical process.

Oedipa begins her adventure with very definite notions of how history works, but at the novel's close we see a woman approaching a reconciliation between the reality of historical contingency and the desire for a stable personal and national identity. Oedipa's discoveries are not easy ones; indeed her very ability to face the fluidity beneath the facts of her quest leads her to depths of terror which Stencil and Profane successfully avoid through active defense mechanisms ("approach and avoid" and "yo-yoing"). But Oedipa survives the terror to acknowledge the possibilities in diversity, and, in so doing, she comes much closer to a successful accommodation of her world than most figures in American literature.

When the novel opens, Oedipa Maas is living a rather mundane, but seemingly content, existence in suburban California. Her days are taken up with unextraordinary pursuits: tupperware parties, shopping, homemaking. But even in these activities, we see a woman of some depth and reflection. Her reading of choice is Scientific American, and the letter she receives from San Narciso announcing that she has been named executrix of her dead lover's will sends her on a thoughtful look back on the relationship and her life since its conclusion. In these opening pages, we see the elements of Oedipa's character which function most prominently in her quest and which in the course of the quest develop to enable her discoveries: an analytical mind, a proclivity for puzzles and mysteries, an intense curiosity, and a keen, almost obsessive desire to understand how things connect. The job before her now is to determine the role she plays in the seeming continuity which was/is her lover's life.

We are first led to evaluate Oedipa's character and her fitness for the task before her upon observing her response to being named executrix of Pierce Inverarity's estate. Her reaction reveals the degree to which she has sublimated her strength and the degree to which she has abandoned her pursuit of a freedom which she perhaps no longer even believes in. The letter catches her by surprise and makes her feel "exposed, finessed, put down. She had never

executed a will in her life, didn't know where to begin, didn't know how to tell the law firm in L.A. that she didn't know where to begin" (12). The letter, however, also serves as a "call to action," forcing Oedipa to reexamine her relationship with Inverarity and her own (past) desire to escape the "buffering insulation" which is her life. Her panic is only slightly offset in the passage by her calm, methodical, even controlled review of her days since the affair with Inverarity as she searches for a reason for this intrusion. But, as observers, we still focus on her fearful reluctance to admit her inexperience and her feeling that she is being personally persecuted. Her response seems out of proportion to the stimulus.

Admittedly, Oedipa has led a relatively sheltered existence. We see this particularly in the description of her day in the opening pages of the novel and in her memories of the past year when she is searching for a cause for Inverarity's act.

Oedipa had been named to execute the will in a codicil dated a year ago. She tried to think back to whether anything unusual had happened around then. Through the rest of the afternoon . . . she wondered, wondered, shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn't she be the first to admit it?) more or less identical, or all pointing the same way subtly like a conjurer's deck, any odd one readily clear to the trained eye. (10-11)

But the predictability of her life, alone, cannot explain her response of helplessness and terror. Oedipa herself is

clearly aware of and troubled by the sameness of her days; it is she who first introduces a critical stance towards the monotony in the self-reflective statement above. But though she has long been aware that her life lacks a vibrancy and of her own dissatisfaction (her awareness predates her relationship with Inverarity), she has also clung to the notion that she cannot alter the fabric of her life without help.

There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix. And had also gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair. (20)

When she meets Pierce Inverarity, she believes he will be the one to lead her out of the insulating tower which encapsulates her. However, Pierce (in life anyway) does not succeed in helping her break out of the tower or confront what awaits her on the outside. On their trip to Mexico, Oedipa sees the Remedios Varos painting of the frail girls imprisoned in a tower embroidering a tapestry which fills the void of the world. They are creating their own story, their own version of history to help account for their imprisoned existence. Coherence in this world is created, personal. Gazing at the painting, Oedipa begins to cry, and sadly realizes that "what she stood on had only been woven

together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower" (21). Pierce had rescued her from nothing; "all that had then gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of [Rapunzel's] tower" (20). Oedipa's interpretation of the painting is consistent with her attitude toward her own situation: she desires someone to reveal to her an essential coherence underlying her existence and rejects the necessity of or potentialities in regarding history as something created, something within her scope of understanding, something other than a transhistorical structure of cause and effect..

On this trip to Mexico Oedipa realizes that there is something from which she desires escape, though she cannot articulate it beyond the developed image of the maiden trapped in the tower. The Remedios Varos painting surely suggests this image to Oedipa and seems fitting for one so locked within her own preconceptions. Oedipa also realizes, however, that Pierce "had taken her away from nothing. There had been no escape," and she returns to Kinneret to contemplate her tower and her fear.

Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes . . . that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. Having no apparatus except fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight



of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (21-22)

Oedipa marries the disk jockey, Mucho Maas, as a stay against the formless magic which holds her. She marries largely out of her perceived need for a protector and a helper, someone to shield her from the malignant magic which is frustrating her desire for understanding. With Mucho, Oedipa believes she is not alone and has little to fear from the formless force. She is trapped, however, not by any mysterious and omnipotent force working against her, but by her own inability to recognize the truth about the tower and her available options. We see here the same fear and sense of helplessness as when she receives the letter regarding the will. She denies her own ability to confront or understand her tower; her lack of confidence in the efficacy of fear and female cunning leave her stranded in the marriage to Mucho and uncomfortably caught between a tenuous faith in an unrevealed coherence and fear of the force which she believes is denying the revelation.

The letter concerning the will taps into Oedipa's sense of helplessness, but it also reveals her strength. Indeed, the reverie which covers the first several pages of the novel shows us that it is Oedipa who in fact helps the men she continually turns to for help herself. She comforts Mucho in his defeats, shielding him from the demons which fill the tapestry of his life. She works hard to hold him

together, lending him her strength and demonstrating her own abilities to cope with the tower, abilities she never stops to evaluate.

. . . he might have forgotten sooner than whatever it was about the [car] lot that had stayed so alarmingly with him for going on five years. Five years. You comfort them when they wake pouring sweat or crying out in the language of bad dreams, yes, you hold them, they calm down, one day they lose it: she knew that. But when was Mucho going to forget? She suspected the disk jockey spot . . . was a way of letting the Top 200, and even the news copy that came jabbering out of the machine--all the fraudulent dream of teenage appetites--be a buffer between him and that lot.  
(15)

Oedipa credits the disk jockey job with holding Mucho together, but we ultimately see that it is Oedipa herself who has sustained her husband. When she leaves Kinneret to pursue the invitation of Pierce's will, Mucho crumbles, turning more profoundly into himself through sex with teenagers and LSD. Oedipa does not recognize her own role in Mucho's life or the degree to which he depends on her to protect him. But when Oedipa returns to Kinneret in the midst of her quest, she finds that Mucho has deteriorated to the point that she can no longer communicate with him, and she cannot successfully bring him out of himself.

Mucho has consistently brought his "defeats" home to Oedipa to fix with her understanding and martinis. But on the day Oedipa receives the letter about Pierce, she asks for his support. Significantly, he turns her down cold.

Too concerned with his own problems, he refers her to their lawyer, but only after she has listened to his tales of the day.

"Mucho, baby," she cried, in an access of helplessness.

Mucho Maas, home, bounded through the screen door. "Today was another defeat," he began.

"Let me tell you," she also began. But let Mucho go first. (12)

She showed him the letter from Metzger. Mucho knew all about her and Pierce: it had ended a year before Mucho married her. He read the letter and withdrew along a shy string of eyeblinks.

"What am I going to do?" she asked.

"Oh, no," said Mucho, "you got the wrong fella. Not me. I can't even make out our income tax right. Execute a will, there's nothing I can tell you, see Roseman." Their lawyer. (16)

In the gap between these two passages lies the truth about Oedipa's relationship with Mucho. For several pages of text, we are treated to her struggles to understand and help Mucho through this particular defeat and similar, earlier, sufferings. Oedipa displays a reflective and sympathetic concern for Mucho, whereas he dismisses her in a line. He denies his support or his sympathy, turning her to another. Oedipa accepts his advice, failing to realize that in the scene which has just passed it is not she who has demonstrated helplessness and weakness.

Oedipa's relationships with her lawyer and her psychiatrist reveal the same pattern: she is the figure of

strength and support for those to whom she looks for help. It is clear from early in the novel that Oedipa works harder to control her therapist's fantasies than he does to control hers. Dr. Hilarius' middle of the night phone call, coming significantly on the same day as the letter concerning Pierce's will and reminding Oedipa of Pierce's habit of strange phone calls, succinctly shows us that he will be of no more help to Oedipa than was Mucho. Hilarius, indeed, is not nearly as interested in helping Oedipa as he is in using her as a subject in his various experiments on LSD and the suburban housewife. Oedipa, however, resists being dragged in or dragged down by Hilarius and does not even take her current problem to him.

When Oedipa goes to see Roseman, she clearly desires him to offer to take over the responsibilities of the will, releasing her back to the security, if disturbing insulation, of her tower. Roseman refuses the task, but is significantly more helpful than either Mucho or Hilarius. Like these other potential guides or protectors, Roseman is himself engaged in a rather distorted and bizarre dance of imagination and reality, his involving the preparation of "a not-so-hypothetical indictment" of Perry Mason. His "fierce ambivalence" toward the T.V. lawyer's success and his own failure to emulate that success, leads him dangerously close to the one way "bridge inward," the bridge so heavily endorsed by Hilarius and so feared by Oedipa. But Roseman

still has enough contact with his professional responsibilities to recognize Oedipa's needs. Roseman outlines for Oedipa the tasks involved with executing a will, tasks which both overwhelm and do not particularly interest her. But in response to her plea "Can't I get someone else to do it for me?" Roseman poses the question which launches Oedipa on her quest and which opens the door to possible escape from her tower.

"Me," said Roseman, "Some of it, sure. But aren't you even interested?"

"In what?"

"In what you might find out." (20)

And so Oedipa embarks, alone and confused, but also intrigued and curious as she answers Roseman's challenge to find something out. Oedipa leaves Roseman's office with a strong suspicion that her execution of this testament may provide her an opportunity to examine her place in the larger web of Inverarity's extensive interests, leading not only to a better understanding of Inverarity but perhaps also of herself and her tower. Her immediate departure for San Narciso attests to her awakening sense that perhaps there is indeed something out there after all that Pierce can offer her.

In the descriptions of these encounters, which come in the novel as in this discussion on the heels of one another, we see dramatically the degree of Oedipa's isolation from those who surround her. Though she continues to seek solace in these traditional protective figures--husband,

psychiatrist, and lawyer--their inadequacies are abundant. Many readers accept Oedipa's perception that she becomes increasingly isolated as she pursues her quest into the meaning behind Pierce's legacy and the Trystero system she discovers encoded within his assets. Perceiving a traditional development of quest narrative, readers see Oedipa's "helpers" gradually stripped away from her, leaving her in the end to face the quest's unravelling "panicked" and on her own. However, the novel's first chapter clearly shows that Oedipa is an isolated figure from the beginning, a woman who needs to recognize her own strength and intelligence. And Pierce's act, far from instigating Oedipa's awareness, reawakens her desire to explore the limits of the tower and exposes her isolation. Perhaps this accounts for her panic at the message of the letter; Pierce is sending her out alone to confront a certain set of realities, and Oedipa is not yet equipped to recognize her own competence or embrace her own strength.

Roseman's inability to accompany Oedipa or to replace her as executor releases her from insulation and into history. She has shown the reader that she is stronger and more effective than the men she has previously relied on, and it is this strength she carries to San Narciso and which she must ultimately reveal to herself. Pynchon suggests her success as the novel moves from the prologue of Chapter One into the more developed, chronological presentation of

Oedipa's experience with Pierce's legacy. At the end of the opening chapter, the narrator reveals Oedipa's qualified success in a statement curiously overlooked in most writing on this novel. Following Roseman's question about whether Oedipa wasn't interested in what she might find out, the narrator tells us:

As things developed, she was to have all manner of revelations. Hardly about Pierce Inverarity, or herself; but about what had remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away. (20)

Here we are thrown forward in time and asked to focus on the fact that Oedipa does indeed find something out, something significant about the sense of buffering insulation she became aware of before she met Pierce and from which she believed he could help her escape. This brief flash forward violates the otherwise strict chronology of the novel, revealing in advance a partial "end" to Oedipa's impending quest. As readers, then, we seem to be comfortably involved from the beginning as we settle back to witness not only what Oedipa discovers, but how the discovery is effected. Pynchon here lulls us into a false security, close to Oedipa's willing but unsuspecting acceptance of Roseman's challenge. But our comfort is short-lived as we quickly become complicit partners in the convolutions of her quest. The straightforward narration belies the complexity of its revelations, and we, along with Oedipa, find ourselves in unmarked territory, alone and unequipped to handle the

shifting data which continually confronts us. Oedipa's discovery dictates the shape and progress of The Crying of Lot 49, a novel which focuses the reader directly on demythifying the historical process and on the terrifying struggle of one woman to understand America.

Richard Pearce, in his article "Where're They at, Where're They Going?" discusses three kinds of plotting that are "ingeniously confused" in The Crying of Lot 49: chronological, political, and historical. The chronological plotting, as we have seen above is not quite the straightforward "simple plotting of the novel's action and the protagonist's development--the rational plan, sequence" Pearce would like us to see. The narrator's jump forward informs the reader of Oedipa's revelation, thereby making the novel's structure not quite as innocent as it pretends. A careful reading of the novel will increasingly show that the belief in a simple chronology is in itself a trap, a trap which Oedipa and the reader must learn to be careful of. In V. and in Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon's suspicion of chronology is foregrounded through the structures of his plots. The disjunctive shifts in focus, the interpolated scenes, the conjunction of "unrelated elements" which assault the reader from their opening pages emphasize a distrust in causal analysis. The Crying of Lot 49 and Vineland--both novels focused on the quests of women--however, are structured upon a seemingly strict chronology



which only gradually reveals a radical questioning of what these two novels suggest is a patriarchal insistence on the relationship between sequence and causality.

Pearce's argument tries to separate the chronological plotting from historical plotting in The Crying of Lot 49, looking at the novel as an amalgam of approaches; however, viewing the novel as an examination of a consciousness confronting historical process clearly reveals that historical plotting is more closely connected to the concerns of an ideology of chronology than Pearce's discussion allows for. The three kinds of plotting are not so much confused as they are deliberately intertwined.

Pearce states:

As Oedipa picks up fragments of information that lead from her present to the past, she is driven by a stronger and stronger compulsion to connect the fragments into a rational order--to plot a causal sequence of events that would explain the present in terms of the past. But the more Oedipa learns the more difficult it is for her, and for us, to make connections. The main reasons for this difficulty are the increasing amounts of data and their increasing similarity. If we could only discriminate and define the opposing forces, we could discover what led to what. But the central problem for Oedipa, and for the reader who is limited to her perspective, is in defining--or plotting direction. And we come to discover that historical or causal direction depends upon our ability to define values--or to plot ideological direction. (221, emphasis added)

Pearce rightly introduces the question of historical concern into the discussion of Oedipa's experiences, but he incorrectly identifies the effects of her experience and the

difficulties it presents. Oedipa's difficulty in "discovering" historical or causal connections has far more to do with the nature of her data and her presuppositions about historical process than with her ability to define a set of values through which to contextualize her discoveries. Pearce states that Oedipa, as she advances through the chronology of her quest, is driven by a stronger and stronger compulsion to connect the fragments into a rational order. However, a close reading of Oedipa's character shows exactly the opposite to be true. She approaches an understanding that the Trystero, indeed history, is a more open "system" whose chronologies when examined closely begin to unravel and fall apart and that a definite discovery of what led to what is not an inherent guaranteed probability. By the end of the novel, Oedipa has led herself and the reader to more readily accept the "indiscriminateness" of her data and to suspect chronologies as false constructs and false, political ideologies. Pearce's "if only" phrasing reveals his own discomfort with the indiscriminate data with which we are confronted and his own inability to accept Oedipa's perspective at the end. For Oedipa does begin to ponder the possibility that a too careful discriminating and defining is dangerous. What she does with this glimmer is what distinguishes her so significantly from her two predecessors, Herbert Stencil and Benny Profane, who so actively resist the notion of sequence

without causality.

Although Oedipa insists that when she leaves Kinneret she had no idea she was moving toward anything new, her actions and reported perceptions from the moment of her departure show she is poised for discovery. Her response to her first glimpse of San Narciso reveals the degree to which she is predisposed to see patterns and potentialities unfurling all around her. She is interested, we note here, not only in organizing and settling Pierce's estate, but also in organizing and defining what lies beyond Pierce, his business, his self, and the world in which they both exist(ed). We are objectively rooted by the narrator who describes San Narciso to be "like so many places in California . . . less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts--census tracts, special purpose bond districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (24). This is immediately followed by Oedipa's response as she parks her car at the top of a hill and gazes contemplatively at the city. As she looks down on the grouping and the sprawl of houses, she sees an attempt to communicate a message which if properly understood would systemize or explain her existence in the tower, causing the entrapment to come to an end. At this moment, Oedipa's true quest is born. To decode San Narciso is a key to escape.

She looked down a slope . . . onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a

well-tended crop, from the dull earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. . . . There were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she'd tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of understanding. . . . She and the chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. (24, emphasis added)

It is interesting to see that within one sentence a "vast sprawl" of houses is converted through Oedipa's perception into an "ordered swirl" promising revelation. Unlike her experience with the transistor radio, however, this time Oedipa will try to find out what the swirl can tell her. Indeed, the attempt to convert discrete data into ordered informants will characterize Oedipa's mode of assimilation with each piece of Pierce's estate. Oedipa's compulsion to connect fragments into a rational order is not, as Richard Pearce suggests, thrust upon her by the nature of her data, but is a product of her own reawakened desires, and it is precisely because we are not limited to her perspective that we can recognize this.<sup>2</sup>

If we look back, once again, at Oedipa's relationship with Pierce Inverarity, we recall that its significance lay in Oedipa's perception that Pierce would be the one to lead her from a buffered existence to a pure clarity of vision.

Although in life Oedipa believes Pierce failed her, leaving her only to marry a disk jockey, her interest in him as a "liberator" is rekindled by his curious act of naming her executor of his will. That, even before arriving, she expects San Narciso to have "an aura" about it is not surprising. Being the location in which Pierce had begun his land speculating ten years ago, being that he had laid the groundwork for the entire city, being that San Narciso is substantially Pierce's creation, Oedipa's response is not significantly out of line once we accept her perception of Pierce's role in her life. So when she immediately begins attaching significance to everything she comes across--the "unnaturally" high address numbers, the Oedipa lookalike at Echo Courts, and the "impossibly handsome and suave" Metzger, her co-executor--we see Oedipa not as a pathological paranoid, but as a woman already embarked on a search for meaning. It is no surprise then, either, when Oedipa's "investigations" motivate an attachment to the Trystero, a preexisting, if vast and mysterious, "system" with links to Pierce's estate. Oedipa becomes convinced that the Trystero is the vehicle through which she can penetrate the meaning of the hieroglyphics which surround her. For Oedipa, a lover of puzzles and a believer in System, Meaning, and Truth, a mystery like the Trystero is irresistible. The task of deciphering it seems concrete and precise, and revealing its meaning and connection to Pierce

promises a release into the clarity she so longs for. If only such clarity and systemization were indeed objectively possible.

The reader is first sensitized to the significance of the Trystero through another narrative flash forward, once again complicating the seemingly smooth sequencing of the novel. The first mention of the Trystero in the novel sets us up to view it as the key to Oedipa's "release":

If one object behind her discovery of what she was to label the Trystero System or often only The Trystero (as if it might be something's secret title) were to bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower, then that night's infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it. (44, emphasis added)

The narrator gives us the name Trystero before experience provides it to Oedipa, thus creating a context for revelation. We are keyed on the term and an expectation is created regarding its power. Though we do not need to accept the equation posited by the narrator regarding the motivation behind Oedipa's discovery, the narrator does insist that we accept the significance and force of the Trystero and the fact that Oedipa makes a deliberate, not an accidental, discovery. Indeed, what precisely motivates her suddenly shifts away from the center of our attention through the very vagueness of the narrator to be replaced by an interest in the Trystero itself. This response is reinforced when the name Trystero is supplied to us in a later

scene, again before the word is a part of Oedipa's lexicon. We are told of her visit to the Scope, a bar frequented by Yoyodyne employees--Yoyodyne being a company in which Pierce was a major stockholder--that here "began the languid, sinister blooming of the Trystero" (54).

The scene in the Scope serves two functions: first it specifically reveals Oedipa's mode of interpreting and ordering data; second it leads Oedipa to the word we have but she needs to shape her investigation of the estate. At the Scope, Oedipa meets Mike Fallopian, a Yoyodyne employee. He tells her about the Peter Pinguid Society, a society established to honor the first casualty of the "very first military confrontation between Russia and America" (50). The Society seems dedicated to disseminating a "true" rendition of the past, a version not documented in standard texts, but which society members believe redefines the history of Soviet-American relations. Fallopian describes the encounter between Pinguid's ship, *The Disgruntled*, and the fleet of ships under the command of Rear Admiral Popov of Czar Nicholas II's military on 9 March 1864 in the San Francisco Bay, an encounter in which the shots of both ships missed their targets, but according to Fallopian "the ripples from those two splashes spread, and grew, and today engulf us all" (50). This account links the confrontation directly to the maneuverings of the Civil War (Pinguide was a confederate commander trying to open a western front for the

South and Popov was trying to keep Britain and France from aiding the Confederacy). The Peter Pinguid society offers a specific, alternate view of history. It is Oedipa's first encounter with a group which feels the need to promulgate a system outside of those accepted by Society, but she is not quite prepared to dismiss Fallopian. Although she recognizes him as marginal, he is distantly an employee of Inverarity and, since all data connected to Inverarity are significant, she is interested in pursuing his insistence on an alternate version of history. Before she can proceed with her questioning, however, another intrusion of the seemingly marginal occurs.

Oedipa and Metzger witness a private mail delivery to Yoyodyne employees. Admittedly they are not supposed to see the mail call; this is an underground system set up in opposition to the Federal mail system. Though there is no overt connection to Fallopian's story, this is the second marginal system set up against an "official" system Oedipa encounters, and she does not fail to see a connection. This sense of linkage between Fallopian, Inverarity, and alternate systems is furthered when Fallopian reveals he is working on a book linking the Civil War to the postal reform movement. Fallopian, ideologically out of sympathy with the feeding, growth, and systematic abuse emblematic of large power structures and monopolies, focuses specifically on the suppression of independent mail routes in 1861. On a trip



to the ladies room, Oedipa notes a peculiar symbol etched on the wall: a muted post horn. She copies it down, along with the letters underneath it, WASTE, and it later becomes for her the emblem of the Trystero--the marginal and alternate.

It is not until several days later that Oedipa has the word to link her experience of Fallopian, postal movements, alternate systems, and odd symbols. The first step towards this integration comes on a picnic with Metzger and a group of teenagers they have befriended. They go to a housing development, another of Inverarity's assets, and Oedipa hears a bizarre tale about soldier's bones being turned into charcoal for cigarette filters from an old friend of Metzger's, Manny DiPresso. The story prompts one of the teenage girls to tell the group about a similar plot in The Courier's Tragedy, a play being staged at a local theater. Oedipa sees further linking here as the cigarette company using the charcoal filters and the local theater are both Inverarity interests, and so she attends a performance of the play. For Oedipa the production is a frightening and revelatory experience because it brings together all of the themes and ideas which have been intruding on her since her arrival in San Narciso--monopolies, illegally harvested bones, mail delivery systems, power, abuses of power, and secret, alternate systems operating outside of sanctioned society. But the production also provides a word to Oedipa (a word we already have), a word to link all of this data

into one single system: Trystero. All she (and the reader) needs to do is probe its mechanism and its secrets to be initiated into the revelations it promises. And so blooms for Oedipa this entity she names the Trystero System, a System into which she believes she can incorporate all that Pierce has left her and which she believes provides the means for her escape.

The treatment of the Trystero in The Courier's Tragedy encourages Oedipa's response to the "System" as something vast, mysterious, and undeniably significant. As the play approaches its climax, the evil Duke discovers the true traitorous identity of one of his couriers and orders his murder, but not at the hands of his own men. Here a narrative voice (Oedipa?) tells us, "As the Duke gives his fatal command, a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance. Certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage, though it is difficult to imagine, given the excess of the previous acts, what these things could possibly be" (71). No one will mention the name of the murderers, though it becomes clear that even the doomed courier recognizes his killers. All he can do in their presence is stutter; he does not name. These passages clearly establish the power of the party responsible. This is a force before which even the ruling groups bow down, so pervasive and frightening, so revered that its name cannot

be uttered. Indeed at the moment that the murder is suggested we are told that the mode of communication which characterizes the drama changes.

Secondly, the passages reveal a new dimension to Oedipa's voice. The reader has been treated to a detailed summary of the play's plot, but only slowly do we realize that these passages are being narrated by one observing this performance of the play (we hear of events between scenes and of remarks made by the audience, as well as of expressions on the actor's faces), and the only observers we know are Oedipa and Metzger. The remarks concerning the play's excesses are made in a language we have come to associate with Oedipa. The shift from straight forward plot summary to the sharp editorializing signals a shift in our perception about our informer. Similarly, the perceptions concerning patterns of communication and discomfiture over naming suggest Oedipa as our conduit. Oedipa has already been established as a careful observer and one who seeks connections and meaning. Sensitized to the possibility of revelation as she has been since the moment she parked her Chevy above San Narciso, it is not surprising that she would be particularly attentive to the clues the play may provide. The summary presents a story focused on the dispossessed and the mysterious, themes she has absorbed from the conversations with Fallopian and the group on the picnic. Therefore, when the good Duke, in a shocking move (we are

told that these lines had not been uttered in any of the previous performances), names the murderers in the last line of the fourth act, when he names that which we and Oedipa have come to regard as unnameable, the effect is devastating.

"No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,  
who's once been set his tryst with Trystero."

Trystero. The word hung in the air as the act ended and all lights for a moment cut; hung in the dark to puzzle Oedipa Maas, but not yet to exert the power over her it was to. (75)

For Oedipa, the play seems to end here. She pays little attention to the fifth act, which she summarizes in a short statement. Oedipa has been given a word, an identity to ponder and pursue. Her response is not yet fully formed; as we are told the word does not yet exert its full power over Oedipa. But it certainly does exert its full power over the reader. Through the narrative mode of the novel, we have been teased with this word and its promise of ultimate meaning. We are early encouraged to endow the word with a significance and revelatory ability. The brief and subtle flashes forward discussed above have prepared us for this moment and cause the reader to urge Oedipa on in her investigation. If the shock felt by Oedipa is one of fear and puzzlement, the shock felt by the reader is one of recognition. Here we finally encounter the name in a specific context. At the end of this fourth act, the reader and

Oedipa come together; both now have the word and feel its overwhelming significance; neither has the Meaning.

Oedipa's first step toward ferreting out this Meaning is to try to understand what she has seen. Immediately upon the play's conclusion, she urges Metzger to accompany her backstage to talk to the Director, Randolph Driblette. However, Driblette refuses to discuss the Trystero, or any aspect of the play, with Oedipa. The reluctance to discuss the specifics of his script mirrors the ritual reluctance Oedipa observed on stage; Driblette even uses the same look, the same smile as that practiced on stage, all of which further alarms Oedipa and focuses her more on the word.

She couldn't quite let it go. "What made you feel differently than Wharfinger [the playwright] did about this Trystero?" At the word, Driblette's face abruptly vanished back into the [shower's] steam. As if switched off. Oedipa hadn't wanted to say the word. He had managed to create around it the same aura of ritual reluctance here, offstage, as he had done on. (79)

Oedipa seizes the notion that the Trystero System (and remember, she is the only one who labels it a System) is a significant ordering system despite the protests of Driblette. Driblette ridicules her attempts to make of his decision to speak the word more than a director's prerogative to do with language what he wishes. When she continues to push him about the word, he replies testily:

"You don't understand. You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. You know where that play exists, not in the file cabinet, not in any paperback you're looking for, but--" a hand emerged from the veil of shower-steam to indicate his suspended head-- "in here. That's what I'm for . . . The reality is in this head. Mine. I'm the projector at the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also. (79)

"You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several, about why characters reacted to the Trystero possibility the way they did. . . . You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth." (80)

For Driblette, the word is free floating; it can be inconsequential or all-encompassing, depending on one's mood or the context of the moment. One performance can name the Trystero, the next not, and the reasons for his decision, while potentially interesting are ultimately idiosyncratic. But to Oedipa, the word is fixed and unvarying and the question of why Driblette included it in the performance she attended becomes the only significant question. Her needs, her assumptions about language and the world do not allow her to acknowledge the legitimacy of Driblette's response.<sup>3</sup> And she twists Driblette's analogy to provide a framework for her task. Driblette described himself as the maker of meaning in the closed little universe of the stage; Oedipa assigns herself the task of "bestowing life on what had persisted." It is her duty, as she sees it, to be "the dark machine at the centre of the planetarium, to bring the

estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning all in a soaring dome around her" (82).

Oedipa engages the mystery of the Trystero both eagerly and with trepidation. Eagerly because she believes that Trystero will reveal its meaning to her. With trepidation because she does not know what that meaning will signify. But Oedipa's faith, particularly her faith in the word to hold a single fixed Meaning, a way to create an aggregate out of diversity, motivates her attempt to hold firmly the slippery Trystero. Her conversation with Driblette provides her a way to articulate her activities; his word and his analogy make her task concrete. Before attending the play, she feels helpless, lost. After the play, she has direction; she has a word, an umbrella under which she believes she can bring all the concerns of the estate and out of which she can decipher the message she suspects Inverarity has left for her. And it is precisely her commitment to this task and to the word which is gradually eroded, leaving her to face the terror of history.

Oedipa's pursuit of the word, through several editions of The Courier's Tragedy, through Mike Fallopian, through Inverarity's will leads her to a Yoyodyne stock holders meeting, during which she meets Stanley Koteks, a Yoyodyne engineer. Oedipa is drawn to Koteks when she notices him doodling the sign of the muted post horn, the symbol she associates both with the underground mail system and now

with the Trystero "System." Oedipa's interest in his work causes Koteks to suggest that she look up John Nefastis, an inventor in Berkeley. Oedipa only pursues this suggestion when she discovers that the address Koteks gives her is a W.A.S.T.E. address, the same "code" accompanying the graffiti in the ladies room at the Scope. The coincidence is too much for Oedipa; the acronym, the post horn symbol, and Yoyodyne have all conjoined to spur her faith that something is seething beneath the surface. Indeed, since her conversation with Driblette, revelations "seem to be crowding in exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Trystero " (81). Cause and effect blurs here; Oedipa by her own admission is seeking clues to elucidate the meaning of Driblette's and Wharfinger's text. She is predisposed to find connections in her desire to bring the estate into pulsing meaning. On the other hand, the legitimate clues do proliferate, suggesting a thriving, mysterious system. She herself becomes racked by questions which also preoccupy the reader: to what degree is she merely projecting, creating, or fantasizing a world; to what degree is she merely a paranoid neurotic; and to what degree is she discovering an alternate way of understanding America?

Oedipa's search into the meaning behind The Trystero brings her into contact with several different underground



systems of accommodation operating within American society. The underground mail delivery system, W.A.S.T.E., appears to act as a conduit for many of these groups or individuals. We have already seen it at work in the Scope and between Koteks and John Nefastis. Oedipa's search also reveals to her the Inamorati Anonymous, a group of people who, having been betrayed by love, have rejected the idea of love; they, not surprisingly, use the underground system to keep in touch. The system also seems to be involved with the circulation of corrupt stamps, stamps with contorted figures and forgeries. Several of these stamps show up in Pierce's extensive stamp collection, a collection which forms a cornerstone of his estate. One even finds its way to her on a letter from Mucho. She also comes across the post horn symbol on city buses, notebooks, store fronts, and street signs. All somehow seem to be connected to the marginal, the hidden, the dispossessed.

Concurrently, Oedipa pursues the history of the word "Trystero." She researches an historical marker at Fangosa Lagoons (one of Inverarity's developments) which references a mysterious disappearance of post riders; she visits Mr. Toth, who presumably owns a Trystero ring; she learns more about corrupt stamps; and she pursues the texts of Wharfinger's play. Everywhere she turns, she finds evidence of the Trystero. Saturated by the persistence of the evidence and the cumulative effect of her post horn sightings, yet

still unable to satisfactorily link all of the clues together, Oedipa reaches a point of exhaustion, desperation, and terror. "Faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts . . . with coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them all together" (109). And here we see the crux of Oedipa's situation. She has indeed stumbled upon something, something historical, something interesting, something persistent, and perhaps even something significant. She has also stumbled upon much that is unusual and disjunctive, but not necessarily historical, interesting, or significant. Yet in her desire to decode Inverarity's testament and, she hopes, to free herself, she is desperate to find or forge the link which will bring everything together. If it all does not go together, then, to her none of it is significant. Oedipa is unable to value the fragments she has collected or to appreciate the possibilities they suggest. By her own admission she transmutes the word Trystero into a System, into a Concept, because only a coherent, unified System brings Clarity and Meaning. The problem, however, is that she can not make everything fit. Oedipa is the weaver of the Trystero tapestry, much as she was the weaver of the Mexico tapestry, but when it begins to unravel she is left not even with a Disk Jockey.

Hoping that sheer distance will help her sort rationally through her emotions and her information and

maybe even make the whole problem of Trystero and coherence disappear, Oedipa allows herself to be propelled into San Francisco. There she drifts randomly through the night, "assured" that nothing will happen, yet it takes her less than an hour to first sight the post horn symbol, and so begins a nightmare proliferation of clues. At an Inamorati Anonymous gathering, in a window in Chinatown, on the sidewalk, on a bus, in her dreams, in the park, and at the airport Oedipa sees or thinks she sees the post horn or other references to Trystero or W.A.S.T.E. The repetition of the symbol and of the efforts to communicate and connect is both demoralizing and compelling. And Oedipa, horrifically fascinated, pushes on, searching for the key to unite all the parts of her System. It comes to her that perhaps she is meant to remember only the separate clues, a possibility which at this point she can only entertain with dread and despair.

She tested it, shivering: I am meant to remember. Each clue that comes is supposed to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike "clues" were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (118)

Again we are reminded of the force of the Word for Oedipa. The clues, even those containing clarity and a certain beauty of their own are not enough. The possibility that the clues (independent, discrete, isolated) will glimmer

only as potentialities, suggestions of what lies behind but unable to reveal what lies behind is frightening and dangerous for Oedipa. She quickly refocuses on her faith that if she pursues diligently and hides from nothing, Trystero, the direct word, will crystallize, and the course of its history--and by extension History--will become clear. Oedipa continues her haunting of San Francisco, then, only gradually giving in to a paralyzing fatalism concerning this endeavor.

Battered and exhausted by her night's experiences, Oedipa takes a surprisingly clear accounting of her situation. What she finds reveals a new depth to her fear and her needs:

Where was the Oedipa who'd driven so bravely up here from San Narciso? That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from highbound cops' rules, to solve any mystery.

But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on. The night's profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication, was their way of beating up. . . .

For here were God knew how many citizens deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. . . . This withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?) there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (124-25)

Oedipa is disturbed by the complicated networking of the Trystero and her inability to conclusively name a System,

but here she is more deeply threatened by the notion that there exists a separate world operating under its own rules and modes of communication. The lengthy passage cited above shows Oedipa's dependence on the idea of System in forming her own personal and national identity, a dependence characteristic of figures in American literature. First, in the equation of Oedipa as private eye, a conventional figure of heroic individualism working in the service of a strictly defined social construct, we see the peculiarly schizophrenic attitude in American culture which both privileges and restrains the individual. Oedipa's faith in Pierce as builder and herself as revealer further demonstrates the degree to which the individual is empowered in this culture, though the underlying assumption is that this power is complicit with the goals and structures of "The System." Oedipa has consistently believed that she has stumbled upon a new dimension of this larger American system, but she never doubts until her night in San Francisco that it is a part of the larger structure. Her faith in the objective reality of a singular System is underlined by her reference to the U.S. Mail. She is incredulous that this vast, unified System, representative of all that is official and coherent should be consciously denied. Note the puzzlement in the tone as she contemplates a calculated withdrawal, a withdrawal kept private, not a public revolution. Clearly Oedipa is at a loss to understand what these citizens care

to withdraw from. Even more confusing and threatening, however, is the fear that creeps into this passage: if there is a "they" that exists completely apart from the Republic System, then the notion of System itself is fraudulent. To discover a separate world, operating smoothly, suggests the potential existence of several alternate systems, all operating concurrently and, if revealed, exposing the lie of a united History or Nation. Significantly, in Oedipa's eyes, this is not a system set up in opposition to a larger system. If it were, then it could be comprehended as a part of the larger system. It could still be defined in relation to that system. But she sees something pure, something independent, something awful.

Late in her journey through San Francisco, Oedipa comes upon the drunken sailor who asks her to mail a letter to his wife by W.A.S.T.E. and now she confronts consciously and honestly the notion of an isolated history. She helps him to his grubby mattress and envisions it burning around him in a "vikings funeral"; in this destruction of life comes too the destruction of History. Just as Driblette's version of The Courier's Tragedy has no life beyond the singular production, so when the mattress burns, "the coded years of uselessness . . . the set of all men who had slept on it, whatever their lives had been, would truly cease to be, forever" (128). Oedipa is once again frightened by the perception that events, lives, even systems can be cut off,

isolated, and individual. Driblette's play disappears after its run, the sailor ceases to be, and Oedipa falters. "It astonished her to think that so much could be lost, even the quantity of hallucination belonging just to the sailor that the world would bear no further trace of" (128). Confused and desperate, with the stable ground of her investigation almost completely eroded away, she returns to Kinneret-among-the-Pines, specifically to seek out Dr. Hilarius and to be comforted that she is merely delusional, that there is no Trystero, and that the world is whole. Oedipa no longer trusts the ability of the Trystero to deliver meaning; it now menaces and frightens her, frustrating rather than satisfying her need for coherence. What happens in Kinneret, however, leaves her both more confused and more determined to confront the fragments and diversities of Trystero.

Oedipa approaches Dr. Hilarius to have her obsession explained and laid to rest, but what she finds upon pulling into his parking lot is a man in the throes of a deeper psychosis and paranoia than she can imagine. Hilarius has completely succumbed to his guilt about his past activities in Nazi Germany; unable to find a way to deal effectively with history and his own role in its complicated curves, he has turned more and more completely inward until it has consumed him. What has specifically triggered his breakdown is unclear, but even Oedipa recognizes that he has lost his

ability to handle a relationship with reality and has retreated totally into the fantasy that he is being pursued by Israelis with submachine guns. Oedipa, in a move which reminds us of her strength and will, an important reminder here as we have been steeped in her feelings of terror, inadequacy, and weakness, penetrates Hilarius' defenses (both physical and emotional) and makes a valiant effort to counsel him before the police arrive. Hilarius confesses his war crimes to her, suggesting that his breakdown is in part a result of a failure to acknowledge and confront his past. He has tried to escape the consequences of his activities, hiding in a mundane psychiatric practice in suburban California, protecting himself with a fantasy which ultimately destroys him. As he tells Oedipa:

Yes, you hate me. But didn't I try to atone? If I'd been a real Nazi I'd have chosen Jung, nicht wahr? But I chose Freud instead, the Jew. Freud's vision of the world had no Buchenwalds in it. Buchenwald, according to Freud, once the light was let in, would become a soccerfield, fat children would learn flower arranging and solfeggio in the strangling rooms. At Auschwitz the ovens would be converted over to Petit Fours and wedding cakes, and the V-2 missiles to public housing for the elves. I tried to believe it all. I slept three hours a night trying not to dream, and spent the other 21 at the forcible acquisition of faith. And yet my penance hasn't been enough. (137-38)

Hilarius hasn't succeeded in his atonement precisely because he has pursued it through avoidance and denial.

Interestingly, Nurse Blamm, Hilarius's sometime



assistant, comes close to correctly identifying the problem when she tells Oedipa that "Too many nutty broads, that's what did it. Kinneret is full of nothing but. He couldn't cope" (133). But actually what Hilarius couldn't cope with was his belief that in order to survive he had to repress and deny what he had engaged in during the war. His immersion into the problems of "nutty broads" was a part of his denial, but his past and the unreconcilable lessons of man's brutality kept creeping in, even as he tried to suppress them. Projects like Die Brucke, his lapses into Face Therapy, and his middle-of-the-night phone calls to Oedipa are all eruptions of the conflict and turmoil plaguing his attempts to neutralize history into some officially acceptable version of events through the "fantasy of Freudianism." But Hilarius' "fantasy" that Freudianism can make sense of history, that it can accommodate horror and manage the unconscious breaks down. The pressure of history destroys his tentative equilibrium and Oedipa witnesses what happens when one holds too tightly to a need or a dream of coherence and "sense making."

Oedipa has come to Hilarius precisely to be reassured that her discovery of The Trystero, of an alternate reality, is little more than a psychosis which can be exposed, explained, and erased. If he can talk her out of her "fantasy," out of the Trystero-saturated world she has begun to believe in, if he can reveal its cause like a good

Freudian, then she will know that Trystero and all that it menacingly suggests is not real. What she encounters, however, is a raving Hilarius who denounces the authority of Freud or the authority of anybody to transmute our visions into a socially acceptable form.

"Cherish [your fantasy]" cried Hilarius fiercely. "What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don't let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be. (138)

Oedipa, however, does not want the Trystero to remain real; she wants or believes she wants to be told to come home and rest and reality will realign itself in an acceptable and meaningful way. Yet her response to Hilarius provides an important measure both of how far out of the tower her "gut fear and female cunning" (21) have actually led her and how impossible it is now for her to find refuge through escape. In a significant reversal, she becomes the deliverer, turning Hilarius over to the police. She takes a decisive action in defiance of his solipsistic advice, an action which stands out against his self-destructive desire ("You aren't going to shoot?" Hilarius asks her, disappointed.)

Indeed, the whole episode of Oedipa's meeting with Dr. Hilarius reveals a dramatic transformation in her character. From the confused and tentative patient seeking comfort in the authoritative discourse of her (male) psychiatrist, she

becomes the composed and authoritative figure who seizes not only Hilarius' rifle, but control of a volatile situation. When Oedipa arrives at Hilarius' office, Nurse Blamm is panicked and unprepared; Oedipa immediately offers to step in and takes over. Though she questions her abilities and her motives, she does not waver in her attempt to reach Hilarius. In her discourse with him, she becomes the authority, he the patient, as he unburdens himself and looks to her for advice. Her new position is revealed further in relation to the incompetence and confusion of the police who, arriving ostensibly as rescuers, seem completely baffled by a locked door. Indeed, Oedipa's speech and actions are markedly more assertive and more confident than those of the "professionals" who surround her. Oedipa's forcefulness in speech (she "yells" and "roars") and actions (going to Hilarius, seizing the gun, not shooting him, leaving the building) are emphasized by the absence of such in the other characters. Nurse Blamm calms down, but is ineffective in the scene, offering to make tea, Hilarius is weakened and defeated, and "a number of nervous policeman approach Hilarius, holding up straight jackets and billy clubs they would not need" (139).

In successfully responding to Hilarius' situation, Oedipa has been temporarily released from her anxiety about the Trystero. She carries this attitude and this strength into the parking lot where she runs into Mucho who is

covering the event from his mobile radio unit. Oedipa quickly discovers that her idea of Mucho, too, must be radically revised. Having enrolled in Hilarius' LSD experiment "broadened to include husbands," Mucho has gradually withdrawn further into himself and further away from any concern for or ability to interact with others. He never asks Oedipa why she has returned to Kinneret, and Oedipa again finds herself in the position of caretaker, rather than of one cared for. They spend a brief evening together, the talk dominated by Mucho's story. Oedipa never even remembers to ask him about the peculiar cancellation mark on the first letter he sent her in San Narciso, a cancellation she now believes to be connected to the Trystero. Though the reader is not wholly unprepared for this scene--Oedipa and Mucho's mode of interaction had been established in the opening of the novel--it is only now that Oedipa realizes the degree to which he has been the dependent, weaker one and she the supporter. Alone in her car, forehead resting on the steering wheel, an exhausted Oedipa acknowledges that Mucho is gone, that Hilarius is gone, and that neither has and probably never had the ability to help her. Though Oedipa did not receive the comfort or advice she was seeking, she does begin to understand her own strength and the significance of Hilarius' advice. She now embraces the Trystero as a necessary fantasy--necessary somehow to her own psychic health--and

knows that she must return to San Narciso and the tangle which awaits her. Her return signals her final departure from dependents and dependence and the initiation of her quest's final phase, when Oedipa alone must plumb the significance of Trystero.

Oedipa leaves Kinneret resolute in her decision to pick up her investigation. Indeed, she is only momentarily stunned when she returns to San Narciso and finds that Metzger has run off with a young girl, Driblette has committed suicide, and Zapf's bookstore (her source for the Wharfinger text of The Courier's Tragedy) has burnt down and Zapf himself has vanished. Her response to these defections reveals a determination previously repressed by her more conventional modes of response. "She should have felt more classically scorned," we are told about Oedipa's response to Metzger's elopement, "but had other things on her mind" (148). Similarly, her discovery about Zapf is incidental (she drives past his store) and completely overshadowed by her aggressive and violent response to Tremaine, the swastika salesman next door. "She left wondering if she should've called him something, or tried to hit him with any of a dozen surplus, heavy, blunt objects in easy reach. There had been no witnesses. Why hadn't she?" (150). And the news of Driblette's death is only temporarily distracting. When Emory Bortz tells her of the suicide, she does experience a moment of panic and paranoia, but it is curi-

ously short-lived as she moves immediately to drill Bortz and his students about Wharfinger's final couplet. The conjunction of the passages cited below reveals this crucial transition in Oedipa's perception of herself, a transition concretized in Kinneret, but immanent in the reader's perception all along.

They are stripping from me, she said subvocally--feeling like a fluttering curtain in a very high window, moving up to then out over the abyss--they are stripping away, one by one, my men. My shrink, pursued by Israelis, has gone mad; my husband, on LSD, gropes like a child further and further into the rooms and endless rooms of the elaborate candy house of himself . . . my one extra-marital fellow has eloped with a depraved 15-year-old; my best guide back to the Trystero has taken a Brody. Where am I? (153)

Bortz, sensing Oedipa's confusion and despair offers a simple "I'm sorry," carefully watching her. But Oedipa, instead of focusing on her final question ("Where am I") and giving into the paranoia of being manipulated and abandoned, follows her meditation with a hard, focused questioning of Bortz and his students: "'Did he use only that,' pointing to the paperback, 'for his script . . . the night you saw the play . . . how did he end the fourth act? What were his lines, Driblette's, Gennaro's, when they're all standing around at the lake, after the miracle?'" (153). Oedipa has accepted the necessity of pursuing the Trystero on her own. She does not deny her ability in light of the disappearances, she does not allow herself to be overcome by

despair. She takes her fear, her cunning, and her will to fight for a release from her tower; the pursuit of her Trystero is necessary for her intellectual and psychological survival. Oedipa here enters upon a phase of investigation and evaluation which forces a terrifying and liberating assessment of what she discovers to be an array of responses to her not so simple query, "Where am I?"

When Oedipa returns to San Narciso, she rededicates her energies to tracing the text of The Courier's Tragedy in order to pin down the historical Trystero. Somehow, she hopes, a more concrete focus on the known history, instead of renderings in written and oral literatures, will enable her to weave her fragments into a preexisting fabric, hence validating her investigation. What she finds astounds and alarms her. The historic material seems ample and available and through discussions with Bortz and his students Oedipa is able to create a very respectable history of a Trystero. Indeed, she shapes her information into an 800-year tradition of postal fraud carried out by an adversarial group which terrorized established mail routes and carriers. This group originated in Italy and moved to the U.S. in 1849-50, having some vague connections to a violent Puritan sect known as the Scurvhamites, which also has a vague connection to Wharfinger. The Trystero, according to Oedipa, was motivated by a desire to mute all established systems of communication, and, as reported in the testimony

of Diocletian Blobb--a survivor of a Trystero attack--they were violent, vindictive, mysterious, and much feared. All of these "facts" are remarkably consistent with the portrayal in The Courier's Tragedy, the information supplied by Fallopian, and with the associations Oedipa has built up around the muted post horn. Oedipa concludes that The Trystero is therefore still very much active in 20th century America and could even be a threat to her.

Questioning her own safety and sanity, she begins to back off from her pursuit. Interestingly, at this point, the clues seem to seek her. Bortz and Cohen (the stamp expert) begin contacting her regularly with new leads, and the history seems to be falling together with suspicious ease. Oedipa now feels harassed, not merely by the proliferation of clues but by the easy way the information unearthed by Bortz and Cohen is assimilated. Where previously nothing fit, now nothing is extraneous. Prompted by Mike Fallopian and her own unexpressed anxiety, Oedipa slows down, actually refusing new information and instead examining her data and the validity of her sources. Fallopian suggests and Oedipa is forced to ponder the possibility that the Trystero and the rich patterning of clues is all a hoax, set up by Pierce deliberately to provoke her. Now she must face the answers forming themselves in response to her question "where am I?" And so, "stalking around the room, waiting for something truly



terrible, unavoidable" (170) Oedipa faces her options. Either she has "stumbled, indeed, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream . . . maybe even onto a real alternative to the existlessness, to the absence of surprise in life, that harrows the head of every American" (170)--the image of herself in her tower--or she is hallucinating or an elaborate and expensive plot has been mounted against her, or she is fantasizing a plot and is crazy. Oedipa studies these four alternatives, which remain poised in front of her, symmetrical and pure. The more she tries to choose, the less any one stands out as logical or even possible, and caught in the middle, a scared Oedipa verges on collapse.<sup>4</sup> She sits in her room for hours and then days, paralyzed, "too numb even to drink," assaulted by wave upon wave of nausea, cramps, headaches, misery. Oedipa is facing the possibility of a world without System, without stability, without answers, preparing herself to live in what she terms "the void." Her isolation is penetrated only by Genghis Cohen, the stamp expert, who continues to hound her with evidence regarding Trystero's emigration to America and its supposed activities since 1850 and by her own consultations with Emory Bortz who adds a scholarly perspective on Cohen's information. Oedipa's depression, however, deepens as she remains firmly caught among the four alternatives, still unable to choose and still committed to choosing.

We, as readers, sympathize with her situation because

we too are caught. Pynchon provides no clear signposts regarding the Truth about Pierce or the Trystero. By this time, we, like Oedipa, are reassessing the text, searching for clues regarding the reality of Trystero. And our inability to definitively determine if the elaborate patterning we have been subject to is real or plot or hallucination, or merely the creative construction on the part of our heroine leads to a frustration and impatience and even a gnawing fear akin to Oedipa's. Our "privileged position" collapses and we, too, must face the question of how to accommodate narrative openness and absence of narrative system. As the reader begins to doubt the outcome of this story and increasingly partakes of Oedipa's nervousness, a final development pitches us to a level of expectation at which it is hard to remain poised.

Genghis Cohen phones Oedipa to inform her of an auction at which Inverarity's stamp collection will be sold and of the mysterious bidder interested in the lot containing the Trystero forgeries. Oedipa and reader alike are completely saturated at this point, but equally pose the question about the bidder's identity and allow the expectation to form that this "breakthrough" may provide a significant and revealing piece in the Trystero puzzle. Either this bidder is an emissary from Trystero or this is another false lead or cruel joke on the part of Oedipa's cohorts. Once more the alternatives line themselves up and Oedipa (and we are right

with her) finds herself beset by between definite questions without definite answers. Clearly, there is only one way to get an answer--to attend the auction--but this act would take enormous strength and courage, and Oedipa is not yet prepared for the potential finality of this step. As uncomfortable as she is being ensnared in the symmetry of her stated options, she is equally threatened by having choices ruled out.

Oedipa responds to the news of the auction by downing an unspecified amount of Bourbon and driving along the freeway with her car's headlights out. Finding herself in an unfamiliar, desolate district of San Narciso, which curiously, however, does contain a pay phone, she makes a significant effort to seize control of her situation. She calls the IA member she met during her night in San Francisco and pleads for an explanation of his purpose in telling her his post horn story. He is unable or unwilling to help her, and she is once again alone. Oedipa stands in this desolate place between the public phone booth and her rented car completely unanchored. She is in a vast, undifferentiated landscape with no landmarks to orient her. She looks for the sea and for the mountains, emblems of clear, concrete borders which define our place in the world, but having "lost her bearings" she finds neither. She is truly lost. And at this moment, frightened and isolated, Oedipa has the epiphany, the breakthrough, the revelation "hardly

about Pierce Inverarity or herself" promised by the narrator. Oedipa sees something about the nature of history, continuity, and America which empowers her to continue. She stands in the middle of this landscape,

As if there could be no barriers between herself and the rest of the land. San Narciso at that moment lost (the loss pure, instant spherical, the sound of a stainless orchestral chime held among the stars and struck lightly), gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American continuity of crust and mantle. Pierce Inverarity was really dead.  
(177)

As Oedipa stands here, her middleness, both physically and intellectually, ceases to be threatening. She embarked on her investigation into Pierce's estate certain that he had left behind some unique, special message that would imbue her world with Meaning. Just as she had believed that their trip to Mexico would somehow release her from her tower, she believed that San Narciso would offer a unique understanding of Existence. She needed to believe in Pierce that much, and standing in the desolate spot, she realizes that San Narciso, like Mexico, is just a place in a great continuity of places, Pierce Inverarity is just another man. Neither can offer a stelliferous gloss on History, because none exists. As San Narciso loses its urgency as a locale of transhistorical revelation, so does the urgency melt away from the need to choose among the alternatives Oedipa has formulated. Indeed, the alternatives themselves are

revealed as mere constructions, mere conveniences for Oedipa; there is no objective validity limiting us to these "symmetrical four."

In her passage from epiphany to reevaluation, we see a major shift in Oedipa's thinking, a shift which illuminates much about the cultural attitudes which encouraged Oedipa's (and our) original faith in Systems of Meaning. Oedipa's experience reveals to her another, truer sense of continuity, a truth Stencil feverishly avoids and which Benny Profane stumblingly approaches.

San Narciso was a name; an incident among our climatic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight. . . . There was the true continuity. 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. (178)

The true continuity, then, falls between the alternatives; it suggests that there is no unique shining constellation which everything can be interpreted in light of; there is no entity which bestows meaning. The Trystero, the lady V., Oedipa herself are simply incidents within our historic records. "What had remained, yet what had somehow stayed away" was the ability to allow for this perspective on continuity. Oedipa had looked on her world in the same way that she constructed her options: either-or, either the insufferable lack of intensity or Revelation; either

overarching Meaning or absence of all meaning; either Pierce (or some equivalent Deliverer) or emptiness. The ones and zeros, Oedipa realizes, have been choking her and her culture.

For it was like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeros and ones twined above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. (181)

And between the ones and zeros rest the "excluded middles," "the bad shit" to be avoided (181). But Oedipa's experience has revealed that the excluded middles, those people and possibilities by necessity eradicated "in the cheered land she lived in" are indeed everywhere. Once our eyes are opened, possibilities multiply and diversity prevails.

If San Narciso and the estate were really no different from any other town, and any other estate, then . . . she might have found The Trystero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she'd looked. (179)

San Narciso is not unique; Oedipa's early assumptions about it, however, define a culture dedicated to promoting a sense of History which ignores or erases incongruities or uncertainties. Oedipa is raised to respect a Continuity of History, never suspecting that which may be at odds with or which may even defy the larger picture in which she, and indeed we all, are asked to put our faith.

Oedipa's revelation causes a significant reevaluation

of her relationship with Pierce and of her own goals in executing his will. She finds a new compassion for his empire building, seeing in it a desperation similar to her own desperation to decode the Meaning of the empire.

Pierce, like her, was perhaps only trying in his own way to reveal a Continuity: "his real need to possess, to alter the land, to bring new skylines, personal antagonisms, growth rates into being" (178) emblematic of his own need to escape the cul-de-sac of received versions of History. But was Pierce working to reveal design or create design? This is the new question which confronts Oedipa. "Keep it bouncing," he once told Oedipa, "that's all the secret, keep it bouncing." She failed to understand him when he shared this with her, but now the directive seems to suggest that she should not focus on choosing amongst her alternatives, but that diversity and fragmentation, that the middle ground, is the only ground we can definitively "know."

It would be vastly misleading to suggest that Oedipa's revelation causes her to willingly accept the idea of a world without Meaning or pattern; however, her reexamination of her quest does open her up to the possibility that the data will not and perhaps should not add up to one complete Story. There are questions remaining, and Oedipa's new perspective allows her to be more comfortable with these uncertainties. Though she still believes the Trystero can be known, she is no longer demoralized by the symmetry of her

alternatives; indeed, she is even willing to allow the alternatives themselves to fragment and suggest new possibilities and to allow herself to more confidently assume the role not of revealer but of namer. Like Pierce, she finds some solace in what she has built, in her construction of the Trystero as a symbol of all the dispossessed who are waiting for recognition, for power, for the symmetries to break down. She has taken a step toward empowering herself by admitting the limitations of historical construct and truth and by remaining active in the face of these limitations. The Trystero fades as an historical principle bringing all into its sphere, and assumes the proportions of a human entity, a "human enemy" (165), with all the incoherence and irrationality that something merely human implies. Similarly, Oedipa too becomes merely human and not a prophet bringing Revelation to all around her.

Oedipa decides to attend the auction clearly more serene about whether she departs knowing the identity of the mystery bidder or empty handed. She attends, if significantly less certain of her goal, significantly more confident of herself, seeking knowledge not Truth.

She had only some vague idea about causing a scene violent enough to bring the cops into it and find out that way who the [bidder] really was. She stood in a patch of sun, among brilliant rising and falling points of dust, trying to get a little warm, wondering if she'd go through with it.  
(183)



This last scene in the novel curiously blends the deeply sinister and the tranquil. Oedipa enters the auditorium populated by men in black mohair with "pale, cruel faces" who all seem to be focused on her coming in. The auctioneer smiles a "practiced and relentless" smile. But Oedipa, with a new serenity and confidence, warmed by the first "brilliant sun" we have felt in the novel, "settles back" almost comfortably to attend and wait.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of V., a feverish Herbert Stencil races to Sweden to follow a lead concerning the Lady V., desperate to find an Answer about V. and to reveal the Continuity of his life and of History. And we have seen similarly anxious or desperate attempts to wrestle a clarifying order out of disparate data in much American literature. At the end of The Crying of Lot 49, however, Oedipa has come through a fever and has defined options Stencil and other heroes similarly placed could never admit. She considers the possibility that Trystero is not a mythic force which if understood will explain the currents and forces of History, but that if it exists in contemporary America at all, it is only part of the shapeless fabric, one small corner in a patchwork which may never go together. Oedipa bravely attempts to maintain her relevance and her sanity in a world which seems to provide only middles, no ends. And she does this by suspending her faith in clear choices and revealed Truth. As Oedipa settles back in her chair to await the

crying of lot 49, we can only ask if we as readers are as ready to accept the contingencies, the impossibility of resolution as our heroine appears to be.

At the close of The Crying of Lot 49, the reader has no more definitive information about the Trystero than does Oedipa. We rest with her in the middle, unable ourselves to piece together the Meaning of the clues by which we have been saturated. A reader's first response may be one of betrayal and confusion. The underlying structure of the novel, resting so firmly as it does on traditional quest narrative, and the straightforward, chronological unwinding of the plot, punctuated by the narrator's promises of revelation, lead us to expect resolution.<sup>6</sup> But it is precisely only revelation and not resolution that we are promised. And it is only the reader's presuppositions, mirroring Oedipa's own, about narrative and history and the culminating force of conventional revelation which causes confusion. Indeed, as Molly Hite argues, the quest form provides a lure of totality, a promise of coherence.<sup>7</sup> The act of questing, Hite states, is a teleological act of ruling out middles. So, in effect, Pynchon has set us up, prompting an exploration and examination of our own approaches to literary form and historical process. Thomas Schaub in The Voice of Ambiguity carries the point further, arguing that Pynchon's novel "teaches us the value of being in the middle" and that uncertainty is the condition of our

experience in the world.<sup>8</sup> Schaub focuses primarily on the notion that Pynchon's characters are specifically responding to the threat of increased entropy within the system we refer to as the world. However, this is just a fragment of what ultimately concerns Pynchon and of what Oedipa comes to face, a question originally framed by Eliade in The Myth of the Eternal Return and echoed by Hite: how can modern man survive the terror of history?

Eliade argues and Hite briefly reminds us that our longing for unity is a cosmic nostalgia to return to an original "pre-historic" state. Both discuss how the disintegration of the "original center," the zone of the sacred, marks the beginning of history and how all of our interpretive efforts are aimed at reaching centeredness. Eliade shows how archaic man resisted the pressures of history by transforming historical events and persons into mythical archetypes which mirror or symbolize the original unity or Meaning. This is precisely how we see both Stencil and Oedipa (and other characters) responding to phenomena such as V. and Trystero. They have literalized the myth that History has a center which, once revealed, would annul the pressures and confusion of living within time. Many characters in American Literature work to counter the indeterminacies of historical process with an insistence on cause and effect analysis, an enterprise both human and cultural.<sup>9</sup>; Pynchon deals exclusively with different

responses to the struggle between archetypal and historicist approaches to history. As existence grows more and more perilous, cyclical and archetypal theories will persevere, revealing a continued desire to find a transhistorical justification for events. Accepting history provides a terrifying brand of freedom from which those who are "imprisoned within a mythical horizon of archetypes" are shielded (Eliade 156). But what happens when the archetype breaks down? When V. and Trystero fail to reveal a pulsing, stelliferous meaning, when the possibility of a transhistorical Meaning becomes doubtful and we are forced to loosen our grip on received myths of coherence and causality, what will protect us?

Oedipa is forced to face this question through Pynchon's systematic demystification of the Trystero. Oedipa latches on to the word "Trystero," uttered in Driblette's production, and oversees its rather quick metamorphosis from an innocent, single reference to a mythic, almost sacred entity. The Trystero becomes a type of grail which must be made to yield up its meaning and heal the wound Oedipa carries. The reluctance to name it throughout the production of The Courier's Tragedy, to speak of it, even to openly acknowledge it which Oedipa encounters early in her quest contributes to the power which accrues around the Trystero. But throughout the second half of the novel, as Hite brings to our attention, the Trystero is

continuously and variously defined and concretized, moving it from the mystical center to the periphery.<sup>10</sup> Our focus is subtly shifted from a concern with Trystero as a system to Oedipa's response to the historicization of the mythic. We watch her struggle in the bleak landscape of San Narciso; we watch her struggle in the confused landscape of her mind as Pynchon carefully and deliberately reveals the Trystero as an historical system, preparing Oedipa for her moment of revelation. And the "epileptic sounding" ironically reveals that the Coherence she seeks is impossible within history. Oedipa's attendance at the auction signals her nascent acceptance of fractal understanding. She attends because she wants to know about the Trystero as a discrete historical entity; she no longer expects it to tell her about History.

Molly Hite argues that Pynchon's demystification of Trystero and the conclusion of The Crying of Lot 49 is to be read as a satire of quest romance, a form which promises but which can never fulfill the promise of revelation or resolution. The fact that we as readers trust its promise indicates the degree to which we have not learned the truth about the reality of grails. Oedipa and the reader, in this view, are pathetic dupes (Hite calls us "tragic schlemiels"), repeating an exercise of disillusionment. Hite is not alone in this view; several critics read the text as the attempted manifestation of the sacred or as a

romance.<sup>11</sup> But Pynchon is not writing a romance; he is writing a novel, and the distinction is crucial if we are to understand his adaptation of quest narrative to the contemporary novel.

Traditional quest romance may not make the moment of revelation public; as Hite argues, narrative may indeed not be "large enough" to contain an ultimate Truth or to deliver a "blinding utterance." However, romance is based on a faith in the existence and power of a grail and a successful quest hero may be literally carried away by Revelation. The reader may not "see" the grail itself or him/herself be transformed, but we understand that the hero is transformed and that such transformation is possible. The Revelation, if it is acknowledged, may be diminished from the reader's perspective, but not from the hero's or from that of his/her community. Pynchon, however, does not hesitate, indeed repeatedly utters "the word." It is Oedipa who early in her quest endows the Trystero with a sacred significance which the narrative relentlessly diminishes through repetition and revelation of its origins. Gradually, for Oedipa and the reader, Trystero becomes a part of the contingent world and, therefore, incapable of delivering a culminating insight. But this is not motivated by satire or nihilistic attitudes.

The Trystero is revealed precisely to diminish it and to make Oedipa see it as part of the historic world. Oedipa's journey is not concluded at the end of the novel;

she must still struggle with the uncertainties her new perspective contains. As Tony Tanner states, Oedipa stumbles into the possibility of diversity and dubiety, taking us as readers along with her. He continues, "Oedipa [at the end of the novel] is mentally in a world of 'if' and 'perhaps', walking through an accredited world of either/or. It is a part of her pain, her dilemma, and, perhaps, her emancipation" (73). Tanner specifically states that Oedipa stumbles into her revelation; I would argue that where she perhaps stumbles into the motivating situation, she gradually wakens to its meaning.<sup>12</sup> She is a more active, less vulnerable character at the novel's close, a woman who has come far in understanding and relying on her own strength. Indeed, it is significant that the greatest amount of uninterrupted historical background we receive concerning Trystero's emigration to and activities in America comes after Oedipa's moment of revelation in the San Narciso night. She has begun a new and more focused journey into history, a journey which indeed may never be resolved, but which will continually enrich her understanding and her ability to see what surrounds her.

Once Oedipa "lets go" of the need to Systematize, the systems are free to reveal what they can about the world in which we all have to live. Oedipa's composure and comfort at the crying of Lot 49 signals her continued exploration not of System, but of contingency, a faith not in a single

History, but a willingness to allow the fluidity of process. Oedipa and the reader both partake of Trystero's historization and of the revelation; we are all released back into the terror of history.



## NOTES

1. See, for example, Hunt, "Comic Escape and Anti-vision"; Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49"; and Mackey, The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon. In addition, several reviews of The Crying of Lot 49 make this comparison.

2. My argument about Oedipa's proclivity to seek patterns is supported by critics like Tony Tanner who states "Oedipa has the capacity to suspect plots before Trystero" (V and V-2, p. 39), though I disagree with his use of the word "plots" here. This suggests that there is a connected, coherent movement afoot. Others like Mendelson ("The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49, 308) argue that Oedipa is made attentive to significances she never recognized before. But this does not account for her response to the letter, Roseman, or San Narciso.

3. The text itself calls into question the stability of the word "Trystero" and its meaning long before Driblette's conversation with Oedipa. As readers, we cannot help but note that from its first mention, the spelling of the word varies from "Tristero" to "Trystero," with little apparent significance. Any attempt to make sense of the variations proves difficult and is deliberately frustrated, even mocked, in the final pages of the novel when the spelling shifts with each use, violating any pattern we may have "perceived."

4. Interestingly, most critics discuss this scene as Oedipa's bouncing between only two alternatives, either there is or there is not a Trystero. See for example, John W. Hunt "Comic Escape and Anti-vision: V. and The Crying of Lot 49" (40). Olderman and Hite also mistakenly narrow Oedipa's choices to two. It is significant, however, that Oedipa herself poses four options--already she moves towards escaping pure dichotomies, the one and zero mentality.

5. Olderman, in his book Beyond the Wasteland, says that Oedipa here is "simply waiting" as George and Martha at the end of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf wait for another onslaught, made passive by external forces, waiting for death or another alternative. Oedipa, though, is no longer despairing or passive. Her waiting, as suggested by the sunlight and the manner in which she settles back, is focused, attentive "active" waiting. We are reminded here of Kate Brown in the opening scene of Doris Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark "waiting" for her life to change.

6. We can look at the novel in part as a model quest as laid out by Joseph Campbell in A Hero With A Thousand Faces: Oedipa, the innocent uninitiated, receives the call to the quest to solve a mystery which (she believes) will save her world. She crosses a threshold into San Narciso, an unfamiliar, magical place which seems to operate under different rules from the daylight comfort of her placid existence in Kinneret. Oedipa has the required guides--Roseman, who leads her over the threshold; Metzger, who receives her; Bortz, Driblette, and Cohen. But as Oedipa herself tells in a panic, one by one they are taken away from her, and she is alone, the true state of the true quest hero. There are the proliferation of clues, a dark nightmare journey through San Francisco, and repetition of deferred revelations. All that is missing is a clearly recognizable return.

7. Molly Hite in Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon, p. 8.

8. In Chapter one, "Pynchon's Projects," Schaub discusses how Pynchon places his characters between chaos and unity and teaches them the value of thought in holding off entropy. He concludes by stating that the ordering pursuits of Pynchon's characters are valuable for the moral alertness they encourage and the energy they produce.

9. See my Chapter One for a full discussion of this tendency. In addition, it is interesting to note the recent response to such cultural events as the release of Oliver Stone's film JFK. The nagging doubts about Kennedy's assassination continue to fester precisely because we do not and most likely can never know the whole story. William Manchester, author of The Death of A President, cogently comments on our "need to know" in a letter to the Editor, The New York Times, Feb. 5, 1992:

If you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for something. A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely.

10. Hite, page 79, discusses the historicization of the Trystero.

11. See, for example, Edward Mendelson's "The Sacred, The Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49 and James Nohnberg's "Pynchon's Paraclete," both in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Mendelson.

12. George Levine, in his essay "Risking the Moment," makes a similar argument to Tanner that unless we (the readers) take the risk of the intensity of uncertainty along with Oedipa, we are doomed to yo-yoing, LSD, or cooption by the "They" which in Pynchon stands for the purveyors of a conventional, mythified history.

## Chapter Four

Journeys Out of History:  
Deconstituted Selves in Gravity's Rainbow

The primary critical treatments of Thomas Pynchon's largest work, Gravity's Rainbow, themselves signal the difficulties of codification and understanding as Pynchon again addresses the issue of individual action and individual alignments in the face of collapsing notions of History. One approach looks at Gravity's Rainbow as an historical novel, an artifact relying heavily on documented facts and personalities in a fictionalized ordering of past events. This approach traces the roots of events described and the backgrounds of major figures who appear in the novel, and reviews the "true" conditions throughout Europe in the ten months of the novel's primary action. Indeed, Gravity's Rainbow has inspired two reader's guides--Douglas Fowler's A Reader's Guide to Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (1980) and Steven Weisenburger's A Gravity's Rainbow Companion (1988)--much like The Bloomsday Book, to help readers find their way through the fiction. Such treatments of the novel try to systemize it, to make sense of its movements and disjunctive narrative by rooting it more firmly in an "accepted" historical context.<sup>1</sup> The clear problem with this approach lies in its very effort to align itself with an ideology which the novel itself rejects. Gravity's Rainbow, like Pynchon's two earlier works,

provides a careful critique of our accepted notions of history and our accepted understanding of historical events. To view the novel, therefore, as one promulgating a specific interpretation of history is to force it into a System to which it denies validity. We are reminded here of the attempts to order V., a novel with similar kinds of dislocations and discontinuities, and must remember that the impulse to approach the material in this way responds not to what the text asks of us, but to the reader's own still intact faith in and reliance on system building. Indeed as Richard Poirier argues, Pynchon would not like being called an historical writer; his work carefully presents history as a form of neurosis, a record of the progressive attempt to impose human will upon the movements of time. History in this sense, Poirier continues, is a product of bureaucratic, not individual, need ("Rocket Power" 11).

A second approach calls the novel "encyclopedic narrative" and focuses not on the novel's relations to historical fact, but on the breadth of perspectives brought to bear on the historical material in the novel. Examinations and discourses on economic, religious, mystical, musical, political, humanist, sexual, scientific, and philosophical ideologies, to name only some, abound as characters struggle to understand or order their experience of a world gone awry.<sup>2</sup> As Gabriele Schwab (citing Gregory Bateson) argues in her treatment of Gravity's Rainbow, a basic operation of

the human mind is to segregate areas of experience in order to comprehend one's total experience. However, if we actually perceive our categories of order as "real" subdivisions, not merely alternate perspectives on events or sense-making constructs, then we are merely perpetuating the very modes of thinking that we set out to transcend ("Creative Paranoia and Frost Patterns of White Words" 99-100). Alan Friedman (in "Science and Technology" 69) also shows that demonstrating causal links between events has been a paradigm of civilized thought, but the doctrinaire acceptance of this or any such practice will prove sterile.

Yet, by carefully and closely explicating the novel in terms of one or more of the ideologies mentioned above, much of the scholarship on Gravity's Rainbow tries to gain control over the novel by definitively establishing a clear context for meaning. This approach, in the end, proves enlightening in only a limited way; it does help to carve out pockets of understanding within this vast text, but we must acknowledge that the diversity of material defies any single systemization. Once again, the approach is critiqued by the text which suggests it. As Schwab states, in order to transform our reading of Gravity's Rainbow into an experience which makes sense, we may take refuge in the protecting shape of any of these established systems, but then we would be setting ourselves up as targets of the text's criticism ("Creative Paranoia and Frost Patterns of

White Words" 111).

A third approach to the novel is one clearly established by Tony Tanner in his book on Pynchon. Tanner deals in a direct manner with the multiplicity of the novel, arguing that Gravity's Rainbow has no stable discourse holding everything together. In Tanner's view the novel is continually assembling and disassembling patterns and we as readers are caught in the middle of the text trying to find a way to hold it together while becoming increasingly aware that reducing the cacophony to a single harmony, to win away one narrative System, is to pledge allegiance to an official, confining, and ultimately false System of History. We must, Tanner argues, make our reading paranoid and anti-paranoid, registering order and disorder, determinate and indeterminate, pattern and randomness (82). Placing ourselves, in this way, on the interface is the only way to release ourselves from the System/non-System bind which paralyzes so many characters within the novel and so many readers outside the novel.<sup>3</sup>

Though Tanner's approach strikes us as eminently reasonable, it does not move us much past our position at the end of The Crying of Lot 49. We are still left with the central questions plaguing Oedipa Maas: what does it mean to place ourselves on this interface? And, how can we--or can we--connect meaningfully with others and with the past once we are so situated? A careful examination of the characters

in Gravity's Rainbow who struggle against the system makers, individually and collectively, leads us precisely into evaluating just this: the potential for meaningful action in establishing a place on the interface.

# I

In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon sets up a clear dialectic between the System makers or System purveyors--The Firm--and those outside of or questioning the System--the preterite and the counterforce. These named entities are more thoroughly defined than are their counterparts in either V. or The Crying of Lot 49, in which the intimations of something beneath the surface never erupt in any clearly delineated way. In Gravity's Rainbow, however, the preterite and the counterforce are named, motivations are examined, and their actions are described and affect the course of the narrative. This striking difference from the earlier novels and stories significantly shapes our response to the "System/non-System bind" Tanner so accurately describes.

Discussions of the dichotomized perspective in Gravity's Rainbow most often focus on the relationship between Ned Pointsman and Roger Mexico. Pointsman, the Pavlovian researcher, is a model player for the Firm. Though not very highly placed in this bureaucratic organization, he comes to stand for the ideology of the Firm: an insistence that experience be viewed as ordered, rational,



and stable. Pointsman indeed passionately believes in an inherent order in the universe and in human and animal behavior; he is even unwilling or unable to entertain the idea that such an order would need to be constructed or fabricated for political ends. This is what makes him less dangerous than his "employers" but also keeps him from advancing up the ladder. Pointsman, indeed, strikes us as a less intelligent, less capable version of Sidney Stencil in V., a man who clearly understood what it was he was being called on to do.

Pointsman remains narrowly focused on one of the central questions of the text, the causal connection between American Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop's erections and the V-2 rocket strikes during the London blitz, a question which he is determined at all costs to answer. Pointsman is particularly attracted to Slothrop because he sees in him "a truly classical case of a perfect mechanism" (48). His intense desire to crack the mystery of Slothrop blinds him to the larger needs of the System he is supposedly feeding, and he ends up in a marginalized position, only a shadow playing meaninglessly with the data fed to him. His rigidity and his science are questioned by several of his colleagues, but Pointsman ardently defends his belief that certainty can be revealed scientifically through strict analysis--an approach to the Slothrop question which eventually proves ineffectual.

Pointsman is assisted by Roger Mexico, a young statistician who is wary about even the possibility of certainty. Mexico, indeed, is only one of several figures in the book who question Pointsman, suspecting that "cause and effect may have been taken as far as it will go. That for science to carry on at all, it must look for a less narrow, a less . . . sterile set of assumptions" (89). But Roger is also drawn to Pointsman. His surety attracts Roger and creates a strong ambivalence in the younger man. The debate which ensues between Roger Mexico and Pointsman regarding Slothrop and the ability to predict rocket strikes in London provides a clear ground for understanding the dialectic the novel sets up.

The narrator of Gravity's Rainbow, Mexico, and even Pointsman himself share the perception that the two researchers make strange partners:

If ever the Antipointsman existed, Roger Mexico is the man. Not so much, the doctor admits, for the psychical research. The young statistician is devoted to number and to method, not table-rapping or wishful thinking. But in the domain of zero to one, not-something to something, Pointsman can only possess the zero and the one. He cannot, like Mexico, survive anyplace in between. Like his master, I.P. Pavlov before him, he imagines the cortex of the brain as a mosaic of tiny on/off elements. Some are always in bright excitation, others darkly inhibited. The contours, bright and dark, keep changing. But each point is allowed only the two states: waking or sleep. One or zero. . . . But to Mexico belongs the domain between zero and one--the middle Pointsman has excluded from his persuasion--the probabilities.

(55)

Here we are reminded of Oedipa Maas, walking through the matrices of the great digital computer, trying to choose between the zero and the one (or between the four symmetrical alternatives). Oedipa senses, by the time she attends the auction of Pierce Inverarity's stamps, that there may be another choice. Mexico it seems already understands that the choices are indeed practically unlimited. When Pointsman pushes him to accurately predict the pattern of rocket strikes ("Can't you . . . tell . . . which places would be the safest to go into, safest from attack?" (55)), Mexico answers in frustration, feeling himself surrounded by "statistical illiterates": "No. There's no way, not as long as the mean density of strikes is constant . . . every square is just as likely to get hit again. . . . Each hit is independent of all the others. Bombs are not dogs. No link. No memory. No conditioning" (55-56). This is an intolerable situation for Pointsman, not only in light of his own experimental and philosophical bias, but because of his entire understanding of history. Theories like Mexico's undermine the whole notion of certainty and pattern, predictability and shape.

Pointsman continually engages Mexico in such debate in fascinated horror, hoping to find a flaw in the younger man's thinking so that he can reassert his own sense of "progress" and History:

. . . He goes in to Mexico each morning as to painful surgery. Spooked more and more by the choirboy look, the college pleasantries. But it's a visit he must make. How can Mexico play, so at his ease, with these symbols of randomness and fright? Innocent as a child, perhaps unaware--perhaps--that in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself. What if Mexico's whole generation have turned out like this? Will postwar be nothing but "events," newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?  
(56)

In Pointsman's questions we see the crucial dialectic posed by the text. In Pointsman's terms if there is no cause and effect, there is only randomness; if rigid analysis is ineffectual in producing determinancies, there is only play. And if there is only randomness and play, then history, if it can be said to exist at all, becomes chaotic, unpatterned, unpredictable. Pointsman cannot accept discrete events with no links and he fervently rededicates himself to the Slothrop question in the belief that explaining the connection between erections and rocket strikes will reassert a concrete, ordered, determinate theory of History.

When we find [the explanation], we'll have shown again the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul.

. . . You can see how important a discovery like that would be. (86)

Pointsman is desperate to keep the furnishings of his "elegant rooms of history" in place; his need blossoms in his pledge to convert Roger and even to sacrifice Slothrop

("It won't be easy to send [Slothrop] into any of the three phases. We may finally have to starve, terrorize, I don't know. . . . But I will find his spots of inertia, I will find what they are if I have to open his damned skull . . .") (90)). As Steven Weisenburger most clearly argues in his article, "The End of History?" Pointsman's concern about the end of History is severely critiqued in the ground of this novel. The fragmentary scraps out of historical time (Pointsman's "elegant rooms") are ultimately shown to have no formal composure aside from that which the act of human intellection may provide. This realization, far from presaging the end of history, Weisenburger states, should free us from "the tyranny of prewar historicism, the old dispensation which cannot account for contingencies such as erections and rocket strikes" (154). Pointsman's blind faith in a "stone determinacy" is perilous, putting him in the clutches of abstraction and eventually beyond his own humanity.

The intellectual and ideological differences between Pointsman and Roger Mexico are further underscored by their personal relationship, a relationship that leads directly to a conflict between the Firm and the counterforce. As Pointsman tries to pull Roger toward him by demonstrating the efficiency of his science, others work to pull Roger toward a more "human" understanding of his own endeavors. And although most treatments of the novel deal in depth with

the relationship between Roger and Pointsman, none have sufficiently addressed the presence of other, competing influences on Roger or the very significant choices Roger makes in response to these influences. Indeed, a careful look at Roger's responses and his movement out of the Firm leads us closer to an understanding of what it means in this novel to successfully place oneself and attempt to forge an identity on the interface.

When we first meet Roger he is acting primarily as a courier between Pirate Prentice, another in the employ of the Firm later to become a key counterforce figure, and Brigadier Pudding's unit, PISCES (Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender). The information being conveyed concerns Lt. Slothrop's curious map which seemingly documents the correspondence between the locations of his sexual encounters and rocket strikes. Pirate keeps a close eye on Mexico, noting his level of professional and personal involvement with the Firm's activities. And it seems as long as Roger remains "on the fringes," not totally committed, Pirate remains only a concerned and observant friend. But as Pirate himself moves away from the Firm and as he sees Roger becoming more entrenched, he does take action to open his friend's eyes to the emerging counterforce and to pull him into its network.

Another mediating influence on Roger is his wartime girlfriend, Jessica Swanlake. Roger, beaten down by six

years of the war, made passive and numb and insensitive, is confused and delighted by his feelings for Jessica; here amidst the horror he has somehow found something "real." Jessica's optimism, her ability to envision a world beyond the war buoys him and keeps him in touch with what is human. She, for instance, is the first one who makes him look beyond the statistical curiosity of Slothrop's sexual couplings and the location of the rocket strikes to the fate of the girls with whom Slothrop has had sex. With Jessica, Roger believes he can momentarily forget his own loneliness and isolation and reconnect with something more meaningful than abstract psychology. For Roger, as Prentice has already noted and as Jessica, too, observes, is somewhat out of place among those at PISCES: "It's an open secret that he doesn't get on with the rest of his section. How can he? They're all wild talents--clairvoyants and mad magicians, telekinetics, astral travelers, gatherers of light. Roger's only a statistician. Never had a prophetic dream, never sent or got a telepathic message, never touched the Other World directly" (40). He does not fully understand or support the activities he nonetheless participates in and he clutches at Jessica with a poorly hidden desperation for love and "normalcy." Jessica provides Roger both a safe haven from war's abstractions and a new perspective on his own involvements.

It is at the moment of his greatest distress, when he

is racked by a paranoia about the role he plays at PISCES, wondering if he himself is being observed, controlled, and even programmed, that he also realizes how much Jessica has helped him to view the war and its progress in a new way, how even the possibility of such a relationship in such a time itself defies and denies the suffocating grasp of the war. If he loses Jessica, Roger believes, he loses the possibility of true life. Roger is able to defy the war's power over him through his love for Jessica, and this to him is the miracle.

His life had been tied to the past. He'd seen himself a point on a moving wavefront, propagating through sterile history--a known past, a projectable future. But Jessica was the breaking of the wave. Suddenly there was a beach, the unpredictable . . . new life. Past and future stopped at the beach: that was how he set it out. But he wanted to believe it too, the same way he loved her, past all words--believe that no matter how bad the time, nothing was fixed, everything could be changed and she could always deny the dark sea at his back, love it away. And (selfishly) that from a somber youth, squarely founded on Death--along for Death's ride--he might, with her, find his way to life and joy. He'd never told her, he avoided telling himself, but that was the measure of his faith, as this seventh Christmas of the War came wheeling in another charge at his skinny, shivering flank.  
(126)

Roger's exuberance is more than just being in love; Jessica has broken the linear, predictable path of his life and has introduced an idea of historical contingency and a certain sense of energy. Roger's response to Jessica reminds us of



Oedipa's belief that Pierce Inverarity would be the one to release her from her tower. Both Roger and Oedipa overlook their own inner resources in their desperate desire to escape the undefinable source of their confinement and look to others as potential "saviours." As we saw with Oedipa, however, Roger will soon have to serve as the engineer of his own escape.

Always rather confused and mildly irritated by Pointsman and the rest of the group at PISCES, Roger starts to become more critical and more distant the closer he and Jessica grow. Just as he feels about science, that "the next breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some new angle" (89), Roger begins to feel about history. Slowly he starts to look more carefully at the "truths" handed down by the Firm and questions their validity and their convenience. But Roger still has a deep ambivalence; he wants to believe that what he has with Jessica can deliver him to a new ground, yet he is not prepared to plunge unknowing into this new reality. His uncertainty is most clearly expressed after Pointsman, in a rare moment of humanness, reveals his own weakness and pleads for Mexico's help in the continuing Slothrop case. Roger struggles with his response:

I can't help anyone, Roger thinks. Why is he so tempted? It's dangerous and perverse. He does want to help, he feels the same unnatural fear of Slothrop that Jessica does. What about the girls?

It maybe his loneliness in Psi Section, in a persuasion he can't in his heart share, nor quite abandon . . . their faith, even smileless Gloaming's, that there must be more, beyond the senses, beyond death, beyond the Probabilities that are all Roger has to believe in. . . . Oh Jessie, his face against her bare, sleeping, intricately boned and tendoned back, I'm out of my depth in this . . . (91)

Roger's ambivalence, however, cannot persist; it is too dangerous to Pointsman and too attractive to the burgeoning counterforce. Roger indeed will be forced to act.

When the war ends and the activities of PISCES are being evaluated for future support, Pointsman becomes more obsessive and, indeed, paranoid about his projects, particularly his continued probing into Slothrop. He fears losing funding, manpower, and respect and acts to keep his staff loyally about him. One of his targets is Roger, and Pointsman recognizes Jessica as a destructive distraction and a possible peril to his plans. So he arranges to have her transferred, conveniently closer to her prewar love, Jeremy (the Beaver), and to bury Roger under work to "give him the proper direction" (277) and remind him of his true function and necessity.

Roger's last significant conversation with Jessica before her departure reveals a tension in their relationship brought about by their very different attitudes towards Jessica's transfer, the war, and the peace. After the war, Roger begins to feel a sense of responsibility towards Slothrop, a sense that he shouldn't be abandoned out in the

Zone. But Jessica, embracing her "freedom" from the war state, no longer understands Roger's concern or motivation; she finds his continued interest in Slothrop "creepy." In response to his "I can't just leave the poor twit out there, can I? They're trying to destroy him--" (627) Jessica breezily replies "Roger . . . it's spring. We're at Peace" (628). And here Roger realizes that Jessica has not a glimmering of the realities about the Firm and the war--about the nature of the System--over which he has been agonizing. What Jessica here understands to be the System is that which will help restore order; what Roger has come to regard as the System is that which works to promote a sense of order while continuing the economic and political mentality of War continuously, behind the scenes with no one noticing, with only the occasional visible eruption into violence to reestablish the sovereignty of the Firm. Roger bitterly responds to Jessica,

No. we're not [at peace]. It's another bit of propaganda. Something the P.W.E. planted . . . no, he sees only the same flows of power, the same impoverishments he's been thrashing around in since '39. His girl is about to be taken away to Germany, when she ought to be demobbed like everyone else. No channel upward that will show either of them any hope of escape. There's something still on, don't call it a "war" if it makes you nervous, maybe the death rate's gone down a point or two . . . but Their enterprise goes on.

The sad fact, lacerating his heart, laying open his emptiness, is that Jessica believes Them. "The War" was the condition she needed for being with Roger. "Peace" allows her to leave him. (628)

When Jessica willingly leaves, Roger realizes the full force of the Firm's power to manipulate lives and history.

Recognizing how easily the Firm has been able to control him, Roger begins his struggle to find a place to survive as he watches his belief in the constructs created for the public slip away with his love.

Roger is unable to counteract his despair and confusion as Pointsman wishes by burying himself in the pile of work dropped on him. He finds himself thinking more and more of Jessica and less and less of Slothrop, while remaining ignorant of how to act in the context of his growing understanding. Roger feels even more isolated than when PISCES was in full operation; there is no one with whom he can share his sense of what is happening and he does not know how to seek sympathizers or even, perhaps, suspect that they may exist.

This changes when Milton Gloaming visits his office and drops information that links Slothrop and Pointsman together even before the War. It does not take Roger long to realize that Pointsman has been involved in Slothrop surveillance for far longer and for purposes other than he has had any knowledge of. He also realizes that "nothing is beyond Pointsman," including arranging the transfer of Jessica, in his maniacal need to achieve his own ends. "Delivered from his unmovable" by Gloaming and by his own anger at being so easily used, Roger makes a choice and acts to separate

himself from Pointsman and the Firm. His sudden appearance at Clive Mossmoon's office (where Pointsman and other representatives of the Firm are meeting) signals the definitive statement of his position on the operations of which he has been a part. Not only his actions--he urinates on the shiny table, the papers, the ashtrays, and on the men themselves--but his words mark him as one like Benny Profane, like Oedipa Maas, like the other members of the counterforce he is about to "join" who have recognized another possible way of understanding and living within history. No longer a pawn, but an individual willing to put himself on the line to regain and promote a vision other than one handed him by the Firm, Roger sets himself in direct opposition to the Firm and warns them that his kind will not disappear, but will assert their visions against those of official propaganda until someone takes notice:

"Pointsmen," the cock, stubborn, annoyed, bucks like an airship among purple clouds . . . "I've saved you for last. But--goodness, I don't seem to have any urine left, here. Not even a drop. I'm so sorry. Nothing left for you at all. Do you understand? If it means giving my life . . . there will be nothing anywhere for you. What you get, I'll take. If you go higher in this, I'll come and get you, and take you back down. Wherever you go. Even should you find a spare moment of rest, with an understanding woman in a quiet room, I'll be at the window. I'll always be just outside. You will never cancel me. If you come out, I'll go in, and the room will be defiled for you, haunted, and you'll have to find another. If you stay inside I'll come in anyway--I'll stalk you room to room till I corner you in the last. You'll have the last room, Pointsmen, and you'll

have to live in it the rest of your scum,  
prostituted life." (637)

Roger achieves his desired effect--Pointsman will not meet his eyes--and he is free to leave PISCES and his life in service to the Firm. Roger has asserted himself against the Firm; he has demonstrated his readiness and his ability to disavow its power. His relationship with Jessica, his persistent ambivalence about Slothrop, and his ability to make such a choice against the Firm (even if pushed) deliver him to the counterforce, confused, but ready to fight.

The counterforce is closely related to those who populate the underside of America--those who Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49 labels the Trystero, those who glimmer dimly in Benny Profane's consciousness in V. But in Gravity's Rainbow, what has remained amorphous is named, peopled with specific characters, and marked by specific action against the dominant system purveyors. The counterforce is not organized as a group, but as a coalition of individuals in contact with other individuals willing to plug away at the Firm, little by little undermining or exposing it. This clearly reminds us of Oedipa's impressions of Trystero and those who had willingly dropped out of America's "mainstream." Here, however, a shape is provided to her suspicions; the counterforce is real, and we are invited inside. This is a significant step in Pynchon's work precisely because the opponents are not couched in

shadows or capable of being dismissed as hallucination, dream, or fantasy. The Firm and the counterforce are visible and visibly engaged adversaries, and, as we shall see, the counterforce neither disappears nor is it vanquished, providing a further significant development in Pynchon's exploration into legitimating diverse structures of identity and history.

After Mexico urinates on the Firm, he goes to Pirate Prentice's and is indoctrinated into the modes, methods, and ideologies of the counterforce, as explained by Prentice and Osbie Feel.

"Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary--but it's only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. In our case, there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system."  
(638)

Of course, the use of the term "system" is deliberate and deliberately qualified. All systems, as Pirate points out, are delusional, officially defined. Questions of reality or unreality are irrelevant, one only talks of systems out of a sense of expediency. The danger, by implication, comes when anyone takes his/her system too seriously as a true representation of reality, when an imposed or created order becomes confused with an inherent pattern. Roger, still a novice, betrays this type of "System-ized" thinking when he asks why We-systems don't interlock in a "reasonable way" as

They-systems do. Osbie replies to this by reminding Mexico of his own act: "That's exactly it . . . They're the rational ones. We piss on Their rational arrangements. Don't we . . . Mexico?" (639).

Prentice has gathered around him several individuals in service to the counterforce. Aside from Osbie Feel, there is Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, who was in charge of tutoring Slothrop on the A-4 Rocket in an attempt to uncover the link between the Rocket and Slothrop's erections. Dodson-Truck was pulled off the project when he began to involve himself too personally with Slothrop and actually, in a moment of friendship and sympathy, told Slothrop about the interest in his erections. As we have already seen, such human responses have no place in the distinctly powercentric Firm. Thomas Gwenhidy, a cohort of Pointsman's also appears, as does Katje, one of Pirate's operatives.

Katje's progressive alliance with the counterforce provides an interesting counterpart to Mexico's story. Katje, too, was in the employ of the Firm, first gathering data in Holland on Major Weissman (Blicero) and his rocket involvement and then with the surveillance of Slothrop. When Katje fails to come through and pinpoint Weissman's rocket site, the Firm abandons her. In her confusion--a confusion reminiscent of Mexico's confusion--about her role and the response to her failure, Katje has a glimmering realization which later blooms and leads her to the



counterforce. She realizes the "real conversion factor between information and lives," and more importantly the War's (and the Firm's) need for information to keep the spectacle going, blinding people to the prevailing mechanisms which permanently operate. Her revelation echoes Roger Mexico's that "War" and "Peace" are only convenient labels to perpetuate the illusion of cause and effect, but which really only segment off different phases of the same process:

The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War. It provides raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violence, battle after battle, and be more prepared for the adult world. . . . The true war is a celebration of markets. Organic markets, carefully styled "black" by the professionals, spring up everywhere. Scrip, Sterling, Reichmarks continue to move, severe as classical ballet, inside their antiseptic marble chambers. But out here, down here among the people, the truer currencies come into being. (105)

Katje bows out of the game and in the process abdicates some of her position in the Firm. We are never told definitively why she abandons Weissman/Blicero; all we have is Pirate's tentative analysis which also echoes his response to Mexico and to himself: "Now and then, players in a game will, lull or crisis, be reminded how it is, after all, really play-- and be unable then to continue in the same spirit" (107). Waking up, Katje, like Mexico, no longer finds the routine sheltering and preserving, but horrible, a game eroding her

humanness and making her more and more like the Machiavellian monsters she works under. Though she feels escape is desirable, she has no built-in support system and can only make provisional stabs at rescuing herself. Katje contacts Prentice, who has her returned to London and assigned to PISCES the "safest" place he can think to have her placed. Here she is used to seduce and monitor Slothrop and in a masochistic scenario aimed at undermining Brigadier Pudding.

Katje, again like Mexico, Stephen Dodson-Truck, even Prentice, experiences qualms over what she is asked to do, and this is what ultimately makes her unsuited for the Firm's work. Indeed, it is directly after she shows her human side to Slothrop, and acknowledges his human side, too, that she disappears from his "case" and is taken back to PISCES. Like Dodson-Truck, when she begins to see Slothrop as more than a personified penis, as more than a "subject," she loses what is to the Firm a "necessary" objectivity.

Roger walks out on Pointsman and PISCES when he is forced to face the degree to which he had been used and abused. Only when he realizes how Pointsman has appropriated his feelings for Jessica in order to control him and only when he suspects that he was being used to subjugate another human being (Slothrop) does Roger find the courage to act out. Katje must be similarly awakened to her role

before she can clearly evaluate her options. Katje finds all the clues she needs (some planted by Prentice) to assist in her awakening and to suggest the degree to which Pointsman and the Firm order (or falsify) reality for their own purposes within the PISCES compound. Her realization of her own continued complicity in the Firm's games strikes at her underlying humanity (much as Mexico was affected when he finally realized the degree to which he and Jessica had been manipulated for "Their" purposes) and enables her to walk out on Pointsman in an attempt to reclaim something of herself.

Katje is extremely vulnerable, and though she takes a step that again places her in Pirate's hands, she does so warily, hardly trusting her own perceptions.

Is this what she thinks it is? Wakened from how many times and pushed away because it won't do to hope, not this much? Dialectically, sooner or later, some counterforce would have had to arise . . . she must not have been political enough: never enough to keep faith that it would . . . even with all the power on the other side, that it really would . . . (536)

Her need and her hesitation are both clearly expressed in these thoughts. The depth of her hope is revealed in her very inability to voice a definitive faith in a counterforce. The repeatedly unfinished sentences and her tendency to frame her thoughts in questions reveal her reluctance to be betrayed or to betray herself. This

inability to form one single declarative perspective emphasizes her extreme trepidation as she leaves PISCES. She arrives at Pirate's and finds Osbie Feel waiting for her, he ready to accept her into the counterforce, she seeking reassurance about its existence and its effectuality. Osbie replies to her (after her hundredth version of the question): "In the Parliament of Life, the time comes, simply, for a division. We are now in the corridors we have chosen, moving toward the Floor . . ."

(536). What is important is that, like Mexico, Katje has chosen and she must now commit to an active role in redeeming a new notion of history for herself and for the counterforce. Interestingly, Katje's situation and its narrative correspondence to Mexico's story are completely overlooked in the other writing on this novel. Katje is treated, when at all, as a pawn of the Firm, one whose interactions with and effects on Slothrop and Pudding provide the only interest. Her significance as a character, a multi-dimensional figure seriously caught in the ideological webs of the text, is not addressed. But Katje's response to her positioning provides a crucial correlative to Roger's counterforce initiation. Her experience with the Zone Hereros, discussed below, further reveals her importance, for it is through her that we most fully come to understand and appreciate what it is that brings people to the counterforce.<sup>4</sup>

The counterforce movement seems to get its impetus from Pirate Prentice. Prentice's friendship with and concern about Roger, his response to Katje's message concerning her desired escape from Weissman, and his concern for Slothrop in the Zone all point to a humanity which the Firm is unable to neutralize, making him a logical force behind counterforce activities. From the first pages of the novel, we notice that people tend to gather around him, or that he tends to gather others to himself. The banana breakfast he routinely sponsors is not an isolated incident of wartime camaraderie, but emblematic of the scene we often find at Pirate's maisonette. A meeting point, a kind of haven, Pirate's place seems to be always open. And Pirate cares about the people who come to him there. Pirate Prentice is perhaps the only character in Gravity's Rainbow, indeed the only character so far in any of Pynchon's novels, to use a specific language of friendship. He is the only one to refer to others as "friends" or to be so concerned about the rightness of their activities. Given the wartime context, such concern may appear absurd--what can be decent in any of their activities?--but the fact that a character can even be thinking along the lines of friendship and another's welfare is deeply suggestive. The fact that his actions and feelings strike us as extravagant or out of place only indicates the degree to which the perverted ideologies of the Firm permeate this text.

Pirate does not take his responsibility of friendship lightly. His decision to send Katje to PISCES when he brings her out of Holland, for example, is an anxious one because he knows he must find a place for her where her defection will not necessarily be known or held against her, yet he knows enough of PISCES to be concerned over what she might be used for. His conversation with Osbie Feel following his decision reveals his discomfort, but he is not adverse to responsibility, as he makes clear to Katje and to Osbie: "'All right . . . it's a lapse of character then, a crotchet. Like carrying the bloody Mendoza.' Everyone else in the Firm packs a Sten you know. The Mendoza weighs three times as much, no one's even seen any 7mm Mexican Mauser bullets lately . . . 'Am I going to let the extra weight make a difference? It's my crotchet, I'm indifferent to weight, or I wouldn't have brought the girl back, would I" (107). Indeed, Pirate takes on the weight of responsibility for other beings quite willingly. He continues to "watch over" Roger Mexico and Katje throughout their tenure at PISCES, and in the postwar phase of their activities seems especially attentive. Pirate's continued interest in Katje causes special alarm to Pointsman, who ironically wonders what afterlife the Firm has found this side of V-E Day and what they have planned for Katje (and himself?). It never occurs to Pointsman that a counter movement could be forming or that anyone would have any interest in another being

except to use them in some way.

The counterforce as an entity does have some organization, but it is characterized primarily by individual actions aimed at consistent goals rather than a defined bureaucracy with the trappings of hierarchy and stratagems which more accurately characterizes the Firm. We must remember Pirate's and Osbie Feel's conversation with Roger when he is being "indoctrinated" that rational arrangements and coherent systems is what the counterforce is set up to oppose. What brings characters to the counterforce is shame. Though they are literally summoned to Pirate's maisonette, it is shame for the activities carried on in the name of the Firm which enables their defection and participation. As Mark Siegel argues: "The counterforce is composed of characters who have served Them in one way or another, and the first task of each member is to overcome shame for having aided Them. . . . The members of the counterforce want to recover that which is most important to most of us--a sense of everyday reality that is not debased by Their touch" (117). The shame, and confusion, which is felt over the wartime and postwar activities is another reminder of the essential humanity of those tapped by the counterforce. Indeed, in the novel's section on the counterforce, the reader is surprised to see how far reaching the group is; names pop up throughout that we may not be expecting. Aside from Pirate, Katje, and

Roger, there are Osbie Feel, Teddy Bloat, Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, Pig Bodine, Carroll Eventyr, and even Brigadier Pudding, from the other side. The list embraces many of those who had been deeply involved in the machinery of the war and/or the activities at PISCES.

Initiation into the counterforce begins with acknowledging and learning how to handle the shame over the actions taken for the Firm which have motivated the "defection." Pirate's initiation--described as a journey through a kind of purgatory--instructs all of us about what it means to align oneself with the "unelect." His experience specifically establishes what all members of the counterforce must learn to be "successful." On his journey, Pirate first encounters a Jesuit Priest who, acting as the Devil's Advocate, sets forth the argument that "They" will not die, that Death has been appropriated by the Firm as one more means of terror and manipulation. If They are only pretending that Death is Their Master too, then it is "within the state of Their art to go on forever--though we, of course, will keep dying as we always have" (538). The Priest urges that rather than maintaining faith that They (and therefore Their System) will die, the preterite should instead fight for their own immortality, to learn to withhold their own fear of death from the Firm. "They may not be dying in bed anymore, but maybe They can still die from violence. . . . To believe that each of Them will



personally die is also to believe that Their system will die--that some chance of renewal, some dialectic, is still operating in History. To affirm Their mortality is to affirm Return" (540). This is a new and more active way to regard the division between preterite and Elect, counterforce and Firm. What the Priest is advocating is concerted action against the power source of the Firm; disavow your fear, relinquish your fear and you gain power.

Pirate is also schooled in what it means to be a "double agent." He is told that having come to the counterforce, he cannot escape a double role; once in the Firm one cannot get completely out, a lesson both Roger and Katje will also have to accept; one remains now in both worlds, with no choice but to live, in Pirate's words, under a shadow, forever. With this recognition comes fear. Pirate realizes he is indeed in the middle, the Firm knowing everything and expecting his loyalty, he having glimpsed another way and pledging his allegiance to the counterforce. Only at this point does Pirate suspect how truly difficult it is to help another; he sees the risk and the very real possibility of dying in obscurity without love, respect, or trust, "his honor lost, impossible to locate or redeem." In pursuing his initiation, he provides an image for the step we do not see Oedipa Maas actually take; he visibly enters the middle ground; he voluntarily engages the terror of history. Pirate, now knowing that there is no going back,

looks upward through the levels of his purgatory and finding Katje, takes her to dance. He accepts his new state, his new place:

. . . they feel quite in touch with all the others  
as they move, and if they are never to be at full  
ease, still it's not parade rest any longer . . .  
so they dissolve now, into the race and swarm of  
this dancing Preterition, and their faces, the  
dear, comical faces they have put on for this  
ball, fade, as innocence fades, grimly  
flirtatious, and striving to be kind  
. . . (548)

Here we see Prentice and Katje absorbed into the counterforce, a provisional sense of community and shared action. We also see a reverse view of the dance Oedipa stumbles into in a San Francisco hotel during her night of wandering. She is confused and threatened by a swirl of deaf dancers who seem coordinated despite their literal inability to connect with the music.

But how long, Oedipa thought, could it go on  
before collisions became a serious hindrance?  
There would have to be collisions. The only  
alternative was some unthinkable order of music,  
many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in  
which each couple meshed easy, predestined.  
Something they all heard with an extra sense  
atrophied in herself. She followed her partner's  
lead, limp in the young mute's clasp, waiting for  
collisions to begin. But none came. . . . Jesus  
Arrabal would have called it an anarchist miracle.  
Oedipa, with no name for it, was only demoralized.  
(The Crying of Lot 49 131)

Oedipa, significantly, has "no name" for the dance. It is

not something she can fully comprehend. At this point, she believes this is because of something she has lost; in Pirate and Katje's rendition of a similar dance, we see that actually Oedipa has not yet gained what is needed to accept the dance. Pirate and Katje have moved beyond the need to codify, to name, their experience. They dance, feeling in touch with those around them and ready to accept their preterite status: serious and grim, but calm and ready to move to the next phase. Far from being demoralized, they are strangely energized as this dance reveals the kind of choreography not only possible, but necessary for a viable counterforce articulation. This is not our traditional notion of community, rather it is one that remains caught between its desire for crystallization, its suspicion of System, and its still very real ties to the Firm. But the struggle to act against the Firm and to establish its own definition of coherencies, though a difficult step, is seen as far better than remaining at "parade rest," still and unredeemed.

The actual counterforce gathering that we later observe at Pirate's maisonette is to establish what is ostensibly a prime counterforce objective: the rescue of Slothrop from the Zone and from further manipulations by the Firm. But its motivations go much further than this. The counterforce is dedicated to putting the Firm on notice, to making things a little more difficult, a little more unpleasant, to alert

the powermongers that they are being observed and that opposition is forming. The success of the counterforce in this text is difficult to measure, but Pynchon's vision of the potential power of the disaffected is considerably brighter than in his earlier novels. Here, characters work together and find a voice. This is strikingly different from both the invisibility in V., where characters fear to admit the existence of a counterforce or their own powerlessness in the face of the System and the tentativeness, silence, and isolation we see in The Crying of Lot 49, where the underground figures take no overt action.

Katje and Roger are both immediately involved in this effort to locate Slothrop. Katje is sent to meet with Oberst Enzian, a leader of the Schwarzcommandoes, a group of Zone Hereros who may be able to lead her to Slothrop. But Katje is not prepared for what she will feel when she meets Enzian, also a former lover of Weissman/Blicero, a powerful man who instructs her on freedom and, to a certain extent, on responsibility. In meeting with Enzian, Katje must, finally, deal with her relationship with Weissman and with Slothrop, choosing how to redeem herself for her Firm-mandated activities with both men.

Enzian helps Katje to acknowledge that what she can't get past is her desire to be held responsible for what she has done. The more she talks with Enzian, the more she realizes that her "salvation" rests on her being able to act

for herself and to accept the consequences of her acts. Though Enzian tells her, "You don't have to come into this any further than locating Slothrop. . . . All you have to do is tag along with us, and wait until he shows up again. Why bother yourself with the rest?" Katje rejects the "easy survival," the reward of pleasant passages and easy choices, responding "I feel that 'the rest' is exactly what I ought to be doing. I don't want to get away with some shallow win. . . . Don't I have to know why he's out here, what I did to him, for Them? How can They be stopped? How long can I get away with easy work, cheap exits? Shouldn't I be going all the way in?" (662). And so Katje chooses to stay with the Hereros, not just to find Slothrop, but to learn about the operations of the Firm. Katje becomes increasingly absorbed in the task of understanding her relationship with the Firm and groping for a way that They can be stopped. She loses touch with other counterforce figures, including Prentice, and we lose sight of her. Though we never know if she receives the knowledge and the redemption she seeks, we do know that she chooses a preterite identity, a choice against the Firm and towards a legitimate alternate mode of understanding and processing history.

While Katje is with the Schwarzcommando, Roger Mexico is sent to Cuxhaven to pursue leads of Slothrop, and here he meets again with Jessica and Jeremy. Jeremy decides to deal

with the Roger problem--quickly recognizing his still strong love for Jessica and his hostile aggression towards himself --by inviting him to an informal dinner party which would place Roger firmly in the center of the Opposition. Roger immediately recognizes the danger here of placing himself in the midst of people who must know of his reputation at PISCES and of the urinating incident in Clive Mossmoon's office. And indeed Jeremy's goal is to humiliate Roger and render him and by extension other counterforce figures impotent. He is looking forward to an exercise of The Firm's power and Sovereignty. But Roger, and his invited guest Pig Bodine, turn the tables on the evening and on the Firm, rendering the novel's one indisputable counterforce victory.

The Firm is counting on Roger's inability to act in the face of its power. The belief that people can be easily manipulated and disarmed makes for great sport; no one ever suspects that anyone would have the ability to stand up to the Firm and survive. We must remember here what Pirate is told during his initiation: "no one has ever left the Firm alive, no one in history--and no one ever will" (543). But when Roger walks into the dinner party, he has a moment of blinding clarity in which he realizes that this evening will provide for him a defining moment.

They will use us. We will help legitimize Them, though They don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical . . .

. . . in the middle, he has to walk right into the interesting question, which is worse: living on as Their pet, or death? It is not a question he has ever imagined himself asking seriously. It has come by surprise, but there's no sending it away now, he really does have to decide, and soon enough, plausibly soon, to feel the terror in his bowels. Terror he cannot think away. He has to choose between his life and his death. Letting it sit for awhile is no compromise, but a decision to live, on Their terms . . . (713)

The terror which Roger feels here in the bosom of the Opposition reminds us of the terror Oedipa felt as she was forced to weigh the alternatives concerning the Trystero System. They both come face to face with a fundamental question of how one chooses to live. And Roger, like Oedipa, has a revelation sparked by a terror and fear about continuing to live as a "doomed pet freak" of the System. Pig Bodine experiences a simultaneous moment of terror when he realizes the monstrosity of the plot levelled against him and Roger and the larger implications for them personally and for the counterforce: "They are grinning at each other like fools. Their auras, for the record, are green. No shit. Not since winter of '42, in convoy in a North Atlantic gale, with accidental tons of loose 5-inch ammo rolling all over the ship, the German wolf pack invisibly knocking off sister ships right and left . . . not since then has Seaman Bodine felt so high in the good chances of death" (715). Like Oedipa, they choose to take an aggressive action, an action which so takes the Opposition by surprise that it results, for now, in neither life "on

Their terms" nor death, but a third alternative, a temporary victory which leaves them free to pursue their goals of disrupting the Operations of the Firm. We are reminded here of the Priest in purgatory exhorting Pirate to disavow his fear and gain power. When Roger and Pig turn on their hosts, they are in effect withholding their fear of death and asserting their strength.

Literally faced with their own ritualized execution in the vision of what appears to be facsimiles of their dismembered selves being barbecued and prepared meticulously for the evening's main course, Roger and Bodine effect their disruption by engaging in a repulsive, verbal revision of the night's menu. They attack, loudly reciting a list of disgusting alliterative hypothetical foods ("clot casserole," canker consomme," etc). In taking the party's symbolic gesture and making it real, they appropriate their enemy's terms to their own and manage to reduce the guests to gagging, vomiting, fainting, seizures, and other forms of prostration--the Opposition diminished--while they gaily carry on calling out their disgusting delectables. Pig makes the linguistic assault and its purpose explicit, "c'mon ya little rascals, vomit for the nice zootster . . ." (716). The scene ends with the dining room in disarray, having disgorged itself already of a number of its would-be diners. And Pig and Roger depart under their own power, a battle won, leaving behind one converted guest, Connie



Flamp, gaily calling out her own cunning concoctions ("Oh I see," sez Connie, "it has to be alliterative. How about . . . um . . . discharge dumplings?") and taking with them the string quartet which was the evening's official entertainment.

We do not see Roger again; like Oedipa and like Katje, once he achieves a certain clarity and effectiveness of action, the text closes on his future. What is important here, as in The Crying of Lot 49 and as in Benny Profane's last appearance running down the seaward street in V., is the fact of a step forward out of fear and terror and toward effective action and identity. Only with such individual steps and the steps of newly formed individuals like Oedipa, like Benny, like Katje, like Roger, will the preterite or the counterforce even potentially be able to have enough voices to stop "Them" and their manipulations and perversions of history. We are left with as positive a feeling as is possible here about the effectuality of Roger and Pig's act; as they leave, "The last black butler opens the last door to the outside, and escape. Escape tonight. 'Pimple pie with filth frosting, gentlemen,' he nods. And just at the other side of dawning, you can see a smile" (717). The butler's participation, like Connie Flamp's participation earlier, like the quartet's defection, suggests the potential community and strength of the counterforce.<sup>5</sup> As Oedipa disavows her fear and attends the auction, asserting

her own power over the Trystero, we see Roger and Pig wielding their power in a striking performance. Here too, we see the result of this action, rather than being left on the threshold as we are in the earlier novels. This scene suggests that we can connect meaningfully and create a viable space outside of the Firm. When one gives voice, many may follow.

## II

Tyrone Slothrop, the American Intelligence Officer who is the focus of so much interest and the concern of so many, himself learns significant lessons about history and control, which like those in the counterforce, eventually enable him to stand against the Firm. Indeed, having never been a part of its formal apparatus, Slothrop more successfully than Roger, Pirate, or Katje is able to discern and ultimately reject the perversions of the Firm's structures.

Shortly after the connection between Slothrop's erections and the German rocket strikes is revealed, late in 1944, Slothrop is transferred to PISCES where interest in him would be obvious. Slothrop himself is oblivious to the reason(s) he has been brought to PISCES, and this passive frame of mind characterizes his stay there. He is observed and probed without complaint; he is used in various schemes

without questioning or even seeming curious about everyone's interest in him. Indeed, he doesn't even begin to suspect anything all that unusual until he is summarily dismissed with no explanation and let loose back in London. He has been "released" to be observed in the "laboratory of the war." Slothrop feels his release is odd and suspects that he is being followed; his office and surroundings begin to feel more and more like a trap. This is the beginning of the sensitization of Slothrop. Like Oedipa, he is being led into a new awareness of the way in which things operate around him and he begins to feel at the center of a conspiracy.

While the surveillance of Slothrop in London is being carried out, PISCES, under the direction of Pointsman, is preparing a much more systematic mode of probing the connection between the American Lieutenant and the rocket. Pointsman initially words his concern over Slothrop in humanistic terms, but his rhetoric quickly takes on a manic paranoia of its own as he prepares to launch a bizarre series of experiments on Slothrop calculated to "keep him in control."

When one event happens after another with this awful regularity, of course you don't automatically assume that it's cause-and-effect. But you do look for some mechanism to make sense of it. You probe, you design a modest experiment. . . . Even if the American's not legally a murderer, he is sick. The etiology ought to be traced, the treatment found.

\* \* \* \*

If only in fairness . . . in fairness . . .  
 Pointsman ought to be seeking the answer at the  
 interface . . . oughtn't he . . . on the cortex of  
 Lieutenant Slothrop. The man will suffer--perhaps,  
 in some clinical way, be destroyed--but how many  
 others tonight are suffering in his name? . . . He  
 must seize now, or be doomed to the same stone  
 hallways, whose termination he knows. . . .  
 "Whatever we may find, there can be no doubt that  
 he is, physiologically, historically, a monster.  
We must never lose control. The thought of him  
 lost in the world of men, after the war, fills me  
 with a deep dread I cannot extinguish . . ."  
 (144)

The progress of Pointsman's thought, marked by hesitation, repetition, and questioning reflects the degree to which he is beginning to take Slothrop personally. Slothrop becomes more than an interesting case in conditioning; as we have already seen, he becomes a deliberate challenge to Pointsman's understanding of experimentation and result. But what is most significant is his overt fear of Slothrop as expressed at the close of the above passage; he believes that Slothrop is an affront not only to science, but to History. Pointsman's fear of Slothrop loose in the world is a fear of any uncontrolled or uncontrollable, contingent, unpredictable force in History.

In an effort both to contain Slothrop by removing him from the arena of rocket strikes and to reveal the relationship between erections and rockets, Pointsman provides Slothrop with an extended leave in France, accompanied by his colleague and close friend Tantivy Mucker-Maffick and

his friend (and PISCES operative) Teddy Bloat. Here, through a tangled plot involving Katje and the conditioned octopus Grigori, Slothrop is to be set up for an extensive deprogramming regarding his knowledge of the V-2 rockets, which turns out to be shockingly limited. But Slothrop, already sensitized by his experience after being transferred from PISCES, is no longer the completely innocent dupe Pointsman needs to accomplish a successful probing of the subconscious. Even before the bizarre encounter with the octopus and Katje, Slothrop begins to suspect that all is not what it seems. Slothrop senses that Bloat is "rather nervous" and that when he talks to him, he seems patronizing. He wonders a little about Bloat, who is "supposed to be oldtime pals with Tantivy." And in the episode with the octopus, he quickly reads the signs of a plot: Katje's face a mixture of recognition and sudden shrewdness; Bloat's possession and presentation of a crab with which to lure off the octopus; and Bloat's insistence that Slothrop not kill the octopus lead Slothrop to more than mere speculation.

So it is here, grouped on the beach with strangers, that voices begin to take on a touch of metal, each word a hard-edged clap, and the light, though as bright as before, is less able to illuminate . . . it's a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia, filtering in. Pale lines of force whirl in the sea air . . . pacts sworn to in rooms since shelled back to their plan views, not quite by accident of war suggest themselves. Oh, that was

no "found" crab, Ace--no random octopus or girl, uh-uh. Structure and detail come later, but the conniving around him now he feels instantly, in his heart. (188)

And though other characters, including the narrator, try, indeed, to pass this octopus encounter off as an "element of Slothropian paranoia" Slothrop himself actually dismisses this possibility: "Paranoia's ass. Something's up a-and you know it" (192). Of course, the text bears this out and despite an insistence to the contrary and even Slothrop's own intermittent doubts, Slothrop is no paranoid.<sup>6</sup>

What Slothrop suspects and what he later confirms is that They are after something; what he does not know is what They are after and why. His suspicions and fears mount as the Firm systematically isolates him, making him completely dependent on Katje, the only familiar face who remains. His friend Mucker-Maffick is "removed" after telling Slothrop he suspects Bloat of double dealing and warning Slothrop to be careful of Katje. Bloat disappears after his cover is blown, and Slothrop himself is effectively erased as well when all his clothes, personal belongings, and identification documents are mysteriously spirited away. He arrives, distraught over the disappearance of his friend and of himself at Katje's door, not in the throes of paranoia, but in a real existential nightmare, saturated and terrified by how quickly everything has turned against him, realizing he is in a struggle for his soul: "It's the only place I knew

to come," he tells Katje.

Through the subsequent intensified relationship with Katje, the sudden appearance of Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, and the aggressive probing of his rocket knowledge, Slothrop appears to remain resigned, more an observer than either a victim or a real participant on any level. But gradually--like Katje, like Mexico--he overtly begins to take control of the situation, first assessing, then probing the motivation behind the attention he is receiving. It begins, significantly, with him thinking in more or less conventional cause and effect terms. He believes that there must be a single clear line of explanation for what is occurring and if this can be understood, he will be freed, existentially if not physically. As he thought when he was confronted with the octopus, "structure and detail" will fall into place. In this he thinks like Oedipa and Stencil. Though things seem vague, imprecise, and muddled at the moment, a little good detective work will clear everything up.

Slothrop begins, logically, with the problem of Katje and Dodson-Truck, only skirting the possibility that this Game goes well beyond the principal players.

There are times when Slothrop actually can find a clutch mechanism between him and their iron-cased engine far away up a power train whose shape and design he has to guess at, a clutch he can disengage, feeling then all his inertia of motion, his real helplessness.

. . . it is not exactly unpleasant, either. Odd thing. He is almost sure that whatever They want, it won't mean risking his life, or even too much of his comfort. But he can't fit any of it into a pattern, there's no way to connect somebody like Dodson-Truck with somebody like Katje. . . .

Seductress-and-patsy, all right, that's not so bad a game. There's very little pretending. He doesn't blame her: the real enemy's somewhere back in that London, and this is her job. . . . But now and then . . . too insubstantial to get a fix on, there'll be in her face a look, something not in her control, that depresses him, that he's even dreamed about and so found amplified there to honest fright: the terrible chance that she might have been conned too. As much a victim as he is--an unlucky, an unaccountably futureless look . . . (207-08)

His thinking and observations goad him to corner Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck in a drinking game designed to weaken the man's defenses. Slothrop's investigation succeeds in stripping away one layer of information, and he learns of the surveillance, the probing of his knowledge and reaction to the rocket, and the intense interest in his erections. Dodson-Truck provides Slothrop with new and disturbing information about himself, and thus begins Slothrop's own active pursuit of Rocket information--no longer a pursuit for information about the Firm, but a quest for self displaced onto technology. Slothrop discovers information about Imipolex G, "a sinister new plastic"; about a suspicious military-industrial project concerned with the use of this new plastic in propulsion systems and for rocket firings; and about Rocket 00000, a number not documented in any official



information, which contains a device coded "S-Gerat," probably made of Imipolex G. Realizing that "There is even more being zeroed in on him from out there than he'd thought, even in his most paranoid spells," Slothrop launches his own quest for the underlying connection between himself and the military-industrial mystery of Imipolex G and Rocket 00000.

Slothrop flees to Nice where Blodgett Waxwing, an underground figure, has directed him for protection and assistance. Though he still does not have a grasp on what it is he is in the middle of, he still does believe that there is a singular Plot, and the pursuit of information regarding that Plot for the moment defines him. But in Nice, Slothrop begins to be sensitized further and the Plot becomes definitely more murky. Waxwing's people in Nice provide Slothrop with a new identity--that of British war correspondent Ian Scuffling--and instructions to proceed to Zurich. When Slothrop begins asking why these people are helping him, they respond: "Who knows? We have to play the patterns. There must be a pattern you're in right now" (257). This is the first intimation that Slothrop/Scuffling receives as to the fluidity of the world he is about to enter. Up to this point, his life has been clearly delineated and defined. His education, his military role, even the tests, manipulations, and peculiar surveillance have all seemed linear. He has been willing to play along to

see where the road leads, fairly confident of his own ultimate safety. But now the tables are turning; Slothrop's "quest" has landed him in an "under world" of multiplicity and diversity and of conflicting and intertwining interests. It is a realm of contradiction, cooperation, and surprise. Indeed on the train trip to Zurich, Slothrop is struck by what appears to him a new eradication of boundaries and labels:

. . . never a clear sense of nationality anywhere, nor even of belligerent sides, only the War, a single damaged landscape, in which 'neutral Switzerland' is a rather stuffy convention, observed but with as much sarcasm as 'liberated France' or 'totalitarian Germany,' Fascist Spain,' and others. . . .

The war has been reconfiguring time and space into its own image. The track runs in different networks now. What appears to be destruction is really the shaping of railroad spaces to other purposes, intentions he can only, riding through it for the first time, begin to feel the leading edges of . . . (257)

Slothrop has believed in the conventions of Country, Nationality, and measurable difference; now he is "for the first time" experiencing a new sense of reality, but this does not necessarily mean that the categories and conventions have literally changed or disappeared. Rather, what we are witnessing here is Slothrop's changing perception of the world around him. What at first seems "damaged landscape," that is a preexisting entity which had been destroyed, becomes "what appears to be destruction" and

then "the shaping of spaces to other purposes." What Slothrop begins to realize is that there may be more than one shape to reality; one space can hold many intentions or purposes.

Waxwing's people have introduced the idea of multiple reality; the train trip becomes the objective correlative of this ideology. Slothrop begins to perceive an "order" of patterning and swirl rather than of neat delineations and marked linearities.<sup>7</sup> Once again Gravity's Rainbow directly echoes The Crying of Lot 49. Slothrop's train trip recalls Oedipa's first perception of San Narciso from the hilltop as an "ordered swirl of houses and streets." Her feeling that the swirl offers a concealed meaning is similar to Slothrop's that the railroad tracks are attempting to communicate to him. Whereas in Oedipa this recognition is presented as a reawakening (she had had a similar response to her first glimpse of the printed circuit in a transistor radio), this provides Slothrop's first serious encounter with fractal understanding, as he faces a possible order in the unrelated fragments. Both Oedipa and Slothrop, however, are at the beginning of their respective quests and misread the kind of meaning held out to them.

Early in the postwar phase of his search, Slothrop believes that even the shiftings of the Zone can accommodate a linear quest such as his. His faith that the information can and will arrange itself into a coherency which will

definitively illuminate the Plot against him, though shaky, remains.

Well here he is skidded out onto the Zone like a planchette on a Ouija board, and what shows up inside the empty circle in his brain might string together into a message, might not, he'll just have to see. But he can feel a sensitive's fingers, resting lightly but sure on his days, and he thinks of them as Katje's. (281)

Though on the one hand, Slothrop is willing to allow the messages to remain incoherent, on the other he grasps a hope that someone or something will prevail and endow his endeavors with meaning. This ambivalent attitude is reenforced by his action immediately following his perception (cited above) that clues may amass themselves without "stringing together." Slothrop turns to his great sheath of papers and begins combing them again for a clear direction of pursuit. His file on Imipolex G points to Nordhausen and Franz Pokler, a rocket engineer at the Mittelwerke, an underground factory run by the SS. There has been no sign of Pokler since the Nordhausen evacuation, but Slothrop feels confident that "Ian Scuffling, ace reporter, will be sure to find a clue down in the Mittelwerke." The fact that he is confident in his ability to locate and trace clues is not nearly as significant as is his continued belief that these clues will eventually form a completed picture. Here Slothrop reminds us of Stencil, resolutely pursuing clues about V. Stencil never overtly

abandons the notion that the story of V. will come together eventually--he just has not yet found the missing piece(s) of his puzzle. Slothrop, early in his zonal experience carries the same faith with him. Though his perspective and approach will radically shift, at this phase he trusts that finding Pokler, finding the Rocket, finding the S-Gerat will unlock the power They have over him and reestablish the centered life that has been so severely shaken by his discovery of Their interest in his erections.

Slothrop encounters several guides in the Zone and most provide him with the same advice about how to maneuver within this unique postwar reality. He is consistently encouraged to follow the patterns presented rather than trying to shape his experience along any predetermined lines. The Zone, it is suggested, is what we would all find if we could only let go of our inherited notions of History and coherence. The construct of Nations, Industries, Policies, and even History, are revealed to be a carefully promulgated Fiction, a System nurtured to enable citizens to believe in progress and coherence, a System under which They are able to do whatever they want, protected by "our" faith in the objective reality of an achieved unity. The Zone is an equivalent reality to what Oedipa glimpses "underneath America"; a flowing, seemingly chaotic "counter culture." But here, the "underground" surfaces; it dominates the consciousness of the characters moving through it and also

fosters its own understandings of how to live within historical flow. Slothrop is advised not to believe too strongly in individual events and their ability to illuminate and eventually cohere, but to enter the flow and go where it takes him. Letting go of strict notions of linearity is the only way to survive in the Zone.

Slothrop's first significant meeting in the Zone is with Oberst Enzian, the Schwarzcommando leader also on his way to Nordhausen to find out about the rocket. Enzian's response to Slothrop/Scuffling's story is to warn him of his freedom; the Zone, he suggests, is not the familiar questing ground the reporter may be expecting. Postwar geography and psychology are anomalous grounds which need to be played carefully.

Slothrop receives a similar warning from Geli, the witch girlfriend of the Captain Tchitcherine, another seeker after the Rocket in the Zone. Like Waxwing's people, she tries to explain to Slothrop that he must play the pattern of the moment and not worry too much about its connection to the next pattern:

"It's an arrangement," she tells him. "It's so unorganized out here. There have to be arrangements. You'll find out." Indeed he will--he'll find thousands of arrangements, for warmth, love, food, simple movement along roads, tracks, canals. Even G-5, living its fantasy of being the only government in Germany now, is just the arrangement for being victorious, is all. No more or less real than all these others so private, silent, and lost to History. Slothrop, though he doesn't know

it yet, is as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these days. Not paranoia. Just how it is. Temporary alliances, knit and undone . . ." (291)

And Geli tells him again during a later encounter: "Forget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions. There aren't any . . . You'll learn. It's all been suspended. You only have to flow along with it" (294). The shift from Geli's voice to the narrator's in the long passage cited above both prepares us for Slothrop's physical and psychological progress through the Zone and gives credence to Geli's point of view. The assertion that indeed Slothrop will find arrangements, that even governments are mere arrangements, provides an "objective" confirmation on zonal and historical reality. All systems are convenient arrangements, with only as much reality as we are willing to grant them. The constructed nature of these arrangements becomes clarified during a period of war and immediate postwar precisely because there is more upheaval and institutions are more easily laid bare. This leaves "Them" more vulnerable to infiltration or weakening, such as the small inroads we have seen by the counterforce. Between wars the seams stitched together by Them are harder to penetrate. As Tchitcherine himself comments, "politics between wars demands symmetry and a more elegant idea of justice, even to the point of masquerading, a bit decadently, as mercy. There are arrangements [we] can't see, wide as Europe, perhaps as the world, that can't

be disturbed very much, between wars" (350).<sup>8</sup>

Slothrop's encounters with Enzian and Geli are only the first step in his orientation into these zonal realities. Through his conversations he learns that he is not the only one concerned with Rocket 00000 or its hardware. Though for different reasons, the Schwarzcommando, the Americans, the British, and the Russians are all searching for information regarding rocket assembly and rocket propulsion and guidance. The conglomeration of motives and means adds to the confusion of the Zone, but the flow of different plots, groups, and loyalties typifies zonal strategies, and this information triggers Slothrop's first reevaluation of his presence in the Zone. As Slothrop pursues Rocket 00000 he indeed discovers that it is only his precise connection to the Rocket, not his pursuit that is unique. And, in his pursuit, he learns as much or more about the other searches and other modes of searching as he does about his own relationship to the Rocket.

The Rocket, indeed, has become a grail emblem in the Zone. It is felt, by far more than Slothrop, that the Rocket holds Answers, that within it resides Revelation. Of course, an underlying assumption here is that Revelation is a possibility. As Khachig Tololyan argues in "War as Background in Gravity's Rainbow" (52), Pynchon is suggesting here that cultures have always had a canonical text that they produce and interpret and war or other violent



struggles tend to generate gigantic objects capable of violence that can be "read" as a culture's text. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Rocket becomes the focus of so much attention. "Holy Center Approaching," the name given to the zonal activity of searching for the Rocket, expresses the need to believe that the Center can be reached, that it will hold a transcendent or revelatory Meaning, and that some accommodation with its message can be achieved.<sup>9</sup>

The two more prominent, but by no means exclusive, quests Slothrop tangentially influences or is influenced by are that of the Schwarzcommando and that of Captain Tchitcherine. The Schwarzcommando is actually comprised of two factions, each with a different agenda. The "Empty Ones" advocate a program of racial suicide, to bring themselves and their collective History to the Final Zero, erasing all remembrance of their horrors and their existence. The Erdschweinhohle (led by Enzian), on the other hand, advocate a road to transcendence, an overcoming of the past and a reemergence in cyclical understandings of time. Their wish to recreate the first firing of Rocket 00000 is the mere outward expression of a ritual repetition asserting the value of cyclical philosophies of history. Both, however, view the Rocket as somehow connected to their destiny.

What Enzian wants to create will have no history. It will never need a design change. Time, as time is known to the other nations, will wither away inside this new one. The Erdschweinhohle will not

be bound, like the Rocket, to time. The people will find the Center again, the Center without time, the journey without hysteresis, where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place. . . .

He has thus himself found a strange rapprochement with the Empty Ones: in particular with Josef Ombindi of Hannover. The Eternal Center can easily be seen as the Final Zero. Names and methods vary, but the movement toward stillness is the same. (319)

What Enzian realizes here is very much what Slothrop comes to learn. The activities of everyone in the Zone are similar in kind if different in motivation or objective. Each desire to find a stillness, a new dispensation on which to base one's life, whether it be via a transcendent inception of a new culture or a ritual suicide of an entire existing culture. Enzian later expresses the search in terms which help to illuminate the significance of an emblem like that of the Rocket to the searchers in the Zone. The existence of the Rocket literally concretizes the quest; it is an actual piece of hardware, a text, to be interpreted.

How the Rocket came to be regarded as this text and how it gathered such a following also reveals how history works in the Zone. As more and more people became interested in it for their own purposes, it indeed became a "center" of attention, soon growing to mythic proportions. Everywhere, people were talking of the rocket and its accompanying hardware and this aggregate of interest evolved into a kind of worship and pursuit. If everyone wants it, it must have something to say. Enzian suggests this in an early

conversation with Slothrop when the Rocket's existence is called into question. At first Enzian expresses doubt that there is a Rocket 00000, yet when Slothrop asks if the probability of its existence is zero, Enzian responds, "I think it will depend on the number of searchers. Are your people after it?" (363). If the Rocket is needed by enough people, it may, indeed, be called into existence. And, as Enzian later speculates, if the needed text is found not to reside in the Rocket, then he must lead his people to discover what form it has adopted.

. . . say we are supposed to be the Kabbalists out here, say that's our real Destiny, to be the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed of its last drop . . . well we assumed . . . that this holy Text had to be the Rocket . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

. . . And if it should prove not to be the Rocket, not the IG? Why then he'll have to go on won't he, on to something else--the Volkswagen factory, the pharmaceutical companies . . . and if it isn't even in Germany then he'll have to start in America or in Russia, and if he dies before they find the True Text to study, then there'll have to be machinery for others to carry it on . . . (520, 524)

The need for a Text to believe in is clear here. A holy Text bestows meaning in a void, it provides a rationale for one's life and we have to believe in its immanence. The assumption that Enzian operates under here, however--and the assumption which Slothrop at this point shares--is that

there is only One Text. There may be multiple interpretations of the Text or motivations in seeking it, but there is only a Single Text and part of our burden is to identify and locate it. Nowhere does the discussion of Holy Center Approaching suggest that there could possibly be more than one Text or that Text may depend on context.

Tchitcherine's approach to the Rocket signals a shift in zonal attitudes towards Holy Center Approaching. As a young man he journeyed to find the Kirghiz Light, a journey both real and spiritual which promised to reveal the meaning of life--in all its awfulness--to the worthy. Tchitcherine proves "not worthy"; he successfully reaches the spot of Revelation, but does not achieve his rebirth. Tchitcherine is drawn to the Rocket out of the same need and in the same way as to the Kirghiz Light. He searches for the Rocket as a way to find Enzian--his hated Black half brother--and resolve the conflict in his life by removing what he believes is his nemesis: his brother and all Blacks. But this later search takes place in the Zone, within a different psychology as the search for the Light and rebirth. And Tchitcherine is unknowingly being guided by Geli, his witch girlfriend, who advocates the positive energies of flexibility and love. In his zonal wanderings, Tchitcherine has experiences which mirror Slothrop's encounters with the boundary-less fluidity of zonal reality. And, Tchitcherine, with the help of Geli, becomes more

accommodating of this fluidity and more readily accepts his condition of living within the search as opposed to being focused merely on the release he believes awaits him at its end. Indeed, while under a spell of Geli's, Tchitcherine meets his brother (whom he does not recognize) and they have an amiable encounter.<sup>10</sup> That Tchitcherine could have such an encounter and let it pass, not recognizing it as the culminating discovery of his quest is a testimony not only to Geli's magic but to his own willingness to accommodate the fluidity and diversity of the Zone. This is not "another failure," but rather a significant success. Tchitcherine chooses to turn away from his mission of hate, a quest founded on negative energies of categorization, codification, and rigid notions of Truth and Revelation. Indeed, as he turns from Enzian, he turns towards Geli and the promise of her love. Tchitcherine's experience of brotherly and romantic love within the Zone shows the interface to be a legitimate, and perhaps the only, ground for successful existence.<sup>11</sup>

Slothrop similarly adapts to conditions in the Zone and adjusts his notions of the kind of quest he is on. He is still vitally interested in the connection between himself and the Rocket, but as he moves more deeply and freely through the Zone, his interest in the ebb and flow of other searchers and their arrangements and, ultimately, questions about the possibility of ever being able to satisfactorily

put together his story take precedence.<sup>12</sup> Slothrop's own observations--and the advice of others--awakens him to the fact that he has been "playing the wrong game, an "evil" game, the linear game so prized by the Firm. "The Schwarzgerat is no Grail, Ace. And you are no knightly hero," Slothrop tells himself in an effort to effect a release from the conventional understanding of quest under which he has been operating. He must learn a new game of survival within a history which must be dealt with in its immediacy and terror. We see here a significant movement from a character like Stencil who resists the "meaning" that the ordered swirl may reveal, feeling threatened by information which does not cohere in a way sanctioned by the History texts. Slothrop's willingness to juggle the reality of uncertainty with the desire for certainty suggests a more equanimous relationship with his self and his context.

Slothrop's encounter in the Zone with the young boy, Ludwig, who is searching for his missing lemming, Ursula, provides a crucial moment in his continuing struggle to more clearly define and negotiate this landscape. Ludwig insists, against Slothrop's "rational" protests about documented lemming behavior, that Ursula is making her run for the sea alone, and he wants to rescue her before she mistakes an inland lake for the Baltic. Slothrop's encounter with Ludwig leads to a long meditation on his own Puritan ancestor's views on Election and Preterition and the

miracle of the successful loner. Slothrop's ancestor, William, was driven out of Massachusetts for his heretical view about the holiness of the "second sheep," the preterite without whom there would be no "elect." Slothrop now wonders--in light of Ursula's odd singular run for the sea and other seemingly inexplicable individual actions he has witnessed--if William indeed perceived something which could eventually erode the boundaries which have so constrained our interactions with others and with history. William Slothrop's contention that Preterition can be grace, that the things--or in the terms of my discussion the fragments--which do not fit bear witness to the inability of a providential or linear scheme to account for everything, is clearly central to the position Pynchon's narrative adopts.

Slothrop himself is one of the preterite who do not fit--As Molly Hite reminds us, he cannot be enclosed within his conditioned reflex (Katje has to abandon her idea that Slothrop is only a "personified penis") or any totalizing structure. Pointsman's failure to reduce Slothrop to a stone determinacy, in William's theology marks him for grace. What is necessary, however, is a context in which we can see and recognize his value. Like Byron the Bulb, the "impotent" prophet condemned to know the truth, but powerless to change anything, Slothrop may have to wait for a time in which an understanding of lived (diverse) experience can be given a viable language within a viable

context. Slothrop indeed wonders if his ancestor saw such a chance to create such a world and if this Zone in which he wanders is a second chance for such a creation.

Could [William] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? . . . It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back--maybe that anarchist he met in Zurich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up. . . . Such are the vistas of thought that open up in Slothrop's head as he tags along after Ludwig. (556)

That Slothrop is able to think in these terms is a positive development in his fitness for the Zone and the more fluid identities it allows.

Significantly, as Slothrop begins to grasp the nature of his search within the Zone, he also begins to examine the stability of his own identity. Remembering his experience in France, where his identity was stolen from him, and Waxwing's bestowal of the new identity of Ian Scuffling, Slothrop begins to realize that even personal identity is mere arrangement, another convention with no inherent stability. Slothrop realizes that he has been able to accommodate identities with surprising ease, maneuvering between Scuffling, Rocketman, Max Schelping, and the pig hero Plechunizga to great effectiveness. Indeed, Slothrop



is surprised not only by his own ability to adopt identities but by others' ready acceptance of his identities.

Slothrop's search has been a search to find himself--both his connection to the Rocket and, more mundanely, the papers which will reassert his identity and his ability to return home to America. But his experience in the Zone has necessitated a reconception of both aspects of the search: not only does the Rocket blur as an object of Revelation, but his sense of a stable Slothrop identity gradually erodes. As he seriously faces the need to reconstruct his self in a viable way--no official papers are forthcoming and his adopted identities are proliferating beyond his control --Slothrop begins to question the possibility of (re)constructing any singular self successfully.

Others in the Zone respond to his erosion of self in the same way: Tchitcherine, pursuing Slothrop in the hope that he will lead him to the Rocket and, therefore, to Enzian and the Schwarzcommando, is puzzled by the fact that Slothrop, "one of the faithful" scavengers following the routes of the Rocket out of Holland, seems to report to no one. This isolation is peculiar. Slothrop is a part of no bureaucracy, his search for the rocket is not defined in terms understandable to Tchitcherine. Later he refers to Slothrop as "that Englishman, or American, or whatever he is," underscoring the fluid and confused state of Slothrop's identity, as it would be understood, of course, in

traditional terms and with reference to established, boundary-oriented constructions of identity.

As Slothrop becomes more adept at travelling the Zone, as he more easily accommodates "the great frontierless streaming," and as he gets deeper and deeper into the Imipolex G and S-Gerat question, his sense of identity continues to thin. Two crucial moments in this process are tied directly to his increasing awareness of his own contingency in the Plot he suspects has been mounted against him. The first comes on board the ship Anubis, just after Greta Erdmann tells Slothrop of her last days with Weissman/Blicero, who was indeed responsible for the design and implementation of the mysterious S-Gerat in the unauthorized Rocket 00000. After her story, Slothrop realizes that the Imipolex information was planted for him to find way back in France to spur him to the search he indeed undertook in the Zone. Following Slothrop would lead "Them" to the vital information everyone seems to be after regarding Rocket 00000. But when he tries to search back in his memory to determine how They knew he would take the bait and unwittingly make himself a pawn, he finds he cannot access any appropriate memory.

. . . some kind of space he cannot go against has opened behind Slothrop, bridges that might have led back are down now for good. He is growing less anxious about betraying those who trust him. He feels obligations less immediately. There is in fact, a general loss of emotion, a numbness he

ought to be alarmed at, but can't quite . . .  
Can't . . . (490-91)

What is happening to Slothrop here is both positive and negative. On the one hand, he is clearly rejecting the self that could be played so successfully by Pointsman and others in the Firm. He has learned several lessons of the Zone and has become more comfortable with fluidity and indeterminacy. He has indeed eluded the Firm's surveillance and control in the Zone quite successfully, and truly is acting alone, for and in the interest of himself. (Indeed, back in London, Pointsman is catching hell for having lost control of Slothrop and the Slothrop project.) He is feeling everything less immediately, which has several advantages in this new reality in which he finds himself.

But Slothrop seems to be simultaneously losing his humanity. He has not found a way to maintain his human integrity while losing his bureaucratic shell. He is feeling his connection to other people--people who need him and whom he needs--and to his past fade, and without meaningful human contact and a workable relationship with the past, one cannot remain psychologically whole. According to Mondaugen's Law "Personal density is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth": the more you dwell in the past and the future, the more solid your persona; the narrower your sense of the Now, the more tenuous you are. Slothrop has been progressively thinning, progressively focused on the Now, to the point where he soon cannot

remember even what he was doing or saying only moments earlier. The narrator tells us that now things "flicker only briefly across a bit of Slothropian lobe-terrain, and melt into its surface, vanishing" (509). And though Slothrop himself seems aware of what is happening, he seems equally incapable of knowing how to take action to protect his self. "Forgive him," the narrator pleads, "forgive him his numbness, his glozing neutrality. . . . Better days are coming" (510). This plea reminds us of Slothrop's underlying humanity, his small acts of caring that we have witnessed along the way and forecasts a day when he will be able to successfully reconstitute himself and make viable arrangements for his persona. Indeed, as Steven Weisenburger aptly points out, one's grasp of the links between past, present, and future is a willed action. There is no compulsion to make the effort. The choice to live 5 minutes at a time can be reversed and one can reclaim one's humanity and compassion ("The End of History?" 149). And it is just such a reversal in Slothrop which is foretold.

Slothrop continues through the Zone, though his purpose has become significantly muddled. At one point he literally has to pause and make an effort to remind himself what he is ostensibly up to: "Yeah! yeah what happened to Imipolex G, all that Jamf a-and that S-Gerat, s'posed to be a hardboiled private eye here, gonna go out all alone and beat the odds, avenge my friend that They killed, get my ID back and find

that piece of mystery hardware but now . . . you're supposed to be planning soberly now, weighing your options, determining your goals at this critical turning point . . ."

(561). Slothrop here is caught between his pre-zonal need for singular identity (here defined as the "hardboiled private eye") and expectations of the way information should accrue and his growing confusion about his self. Slothrop's conception of himself as the private eye--a self-image shared by Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49, reminds us of both characters' expectations that the search is linear. Once again, we see Pynchon's specific concern over the psychological and cultural fallout from our need to order and demystify experience. When Stencil, Oedipa, and Slothrop discover that the role of detective, meaning one who uncovers ultimate causes and answers, is an empty one, they are left with the task of reinventing themselves to fit "new" realities. This accommodation they achieve, clearly, to different degrees.

Slothrop's dilemma reaches its climax in the second moment crucial to his own thinning when he goes to Cuxhaven to meet Gerhardt Von Goll ("Der Springer"), the underground agent who has "promised" to arrange discharge papers for him. What he finds, however, is Pointsman's men who have been sent to take Slothrop and castrate him--Pointsman wanting an up close look at Slothrop's testicles. For Slothrop, the coincidence is just too much: where he thinks

he has a rendezvous with Springer, the cops show up instead identifying him by his "real" name, to which he responds. As long as Slothrop, indeed, still acknowledges a singular slothropian identity, he is capable of being victimized by Them. He must abandon his strictly constituted self in favor of a more fluid self to escape Their notice and successfully release himself into history.

Slothrop does make a run for it, with the help of Pig Bodine and ends up at Putzi's, a bathhouse, bar, casino, and whorehouse, where Bodine fixes him up in the baths with a prostitute named Solange (whom we have previously met as Leni Pokler). The very facts of the house with several functions/identities, the woman with at least two identities, the underground agent with the multiple names, and the reappearance of Pig underscore the kind of conversion Slothrop is about to experience. To survive, he must join the ranks of those who/which shift identities to meet their context. He must let go of the idea of an inherent identity as he must let go of the notion of an inherent historical process. In response to Bodine and Solange's help Slothrop asserts, "This is some kind of plot right?" Bodine answers that everything is some kind (emphasis mine) of plot. What happens next is a type of culminating epiphany for Slothrop. In his own experience of the Zone, he now sees or understands what his "guides" were preparing him to accept. Now he can integrate their advice

into his own experience and develop his own mode of "defining" his own arrangement. Solange immediately adds a comment to Bodine's: "And yes, but, the arrows are pointing all different ways." This triggers Slothrop's release:

[This] is Slothrop's first news, out loud, that the Zone can sustain many other plots besides those polarized upon himself . . . that these are the els and busses of an enormous transit system here in the Raketenstadt, more tangled even than Boston's--and that by riding each branch the proper distance, knowing when to transfer, keeping some state of minimum grace though it might often look like he's headed the wrong way, this network of all plots may yet carry him to freedom. He understands that he should not be so paranoid of either Bodine or Solange, but ride instead their kind underground awhile, see where it takes him . . . (603)

The language here echoes that of Waxwing's people ("play the patterns"), Geli, Enzian and others. But now it is Slothrop's own. He is now more willing and more able to be carried along and more willing to entertain the idea that freedom will come to him when it comes to him, and less focused on one single course. He can give up the notion that he is at the center, that his identity is a matter of importance or protection. Indeed, his grasp on his identity has proven a liability by making him accessible to the Firm. He has to let go and let himself move without preconceptions, trusting that he will know the paths to follow. He must release his hold on a need to operate within The System, and recognize that operating within systems--

managing the fragments and the ordered swirl of his existence--releases him from whatever power The System wishes to wield.

What happens to Slothrop after this experience has been the subject of as much and as various interpretation as there are interpreters. That Slothrop "disappears" is for the most part undisputed, but the meaning of his disappearance and the outlook for his future is much disputed indeed. Whether his scattering is real or symbolic, literal or metaphoric is one question which Pynchon demands each reader confront. Either interpretation is upheld by the text, a text which exhibits fluidity and flexibility in its shifting of narrative modes, and so it is not unlikely that we are being moved from realistic to symbolic, from descriptive to spiritual to mystical modes as we read of Slothrop's scattering.

The final "scattering" of Slothrop takes several pages to achieve. The first stage of the final movement toward fragmentation is characterized by Slothrop's gradual conscious shedding of a socially recognizable persona. He has isolated himself in the mountains, grown a beard, grown his hair, and--when dressed at all--wears nondescript jeans and a tee shirt. He openly acknowledges preferring being naked (his choice to doff his clothes is in marked contrast to the times when they have been stolen from him, forcing him to assume alter identities), with the ants and



butterflies moving on his body. And, he has been reunited with his harmonica--a symbol of spiritual health--lost early in the narrative when he comes under the influence of the Firm.<sup>13</sup> But, he significantly still also holds on to his primary social bond to his home and country. He still plans on one day making another go at obtaining his papers and returning to America. He himself recognizes his "strange" obsession with the papers, documents which would secure a visible place for him in the world. So, though, as we are told by the narrator, he is changing, he still entertains an increasingly thinning strand of hope that his experience will cohere, producing a clear narrative line to explain his relationship with Jamf, the Firm, and the Rocket, and return him home, like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, enlightened, whole, and secure in the new knowledge of himself.

Yup, still thinking there's a way to get back. He's been changing, sure, changing, plucking the albatross of self now and then, idly, half conscious as picking his nose--but the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by is America. Poor asshole, he can't let her go. . . . One day--he can see a day--he might be able finally to say sorry, sure, and leave her . . . but not just yet. One more try, one more chance, one more deal, one more transfer to a hopeful line. (623)

The significant language in this passage is the referral to the "albatross of self." This is a phrasing belonging to the narrator, not to Slothrop, and it contains a crucial understanding of the idea of self. The self which Slothrop

has been picking away at is a burden; it is an entity which has been defined by others--the military establishment of which he has been a part, the Firm, his "friends" (Bodine, Geli, Katje, etc.), and his country. Though all of these incarnations are not identical, they share socially recognizable traits and are legitimate responses to the person named Slothrop. This is the "self" that is disappearing. While isolated in the mountains, with no one to define him, Slothrop faces his self by himself and these interpretations of him begin to separate and to fall away.

Slothrop finds himself faced with the rather conventional psychological task of needing to integrate these selves into a Self, but he no longer trusts processes of integration. If there is one lesson he has learned in the Zone, if there is one conclusion that his quest leads him towards, it is that trust in System, Coherence, and Integration is unfounded, that more truth lies in the fragments than in false efforts to turn fragments into wholes. He comes to this realization moments before the culminating experience of his scattering.

. . . picking up rusted beer cans, rubbers yellow with preterite seed, Kleenex wadded to brain shapes hiding preterite snot, preterite tears, newspapers, broken glass, pieces of automobile, days when in superstition and fright he could make it all fit, seeing clearly in each an entry in a record, a history: his own, his winter's, his country's . . . [but] instructing him, dunce and drifter, in ways deeper than he can explain, have been faces of children out the train windows, two

bars of dance music somewhere, in some other street at night, needles and branches of a pine tree shaken clear and luminous against night clouds, one circuit diagram out of hundreds in a smudged yellowing sheaf, laughter out of a cornfield in the early morning as he was walking to school, the idling of a motorcycle at one dusk-heavy hour of the summer . . . (626)

Slothrop realizes here that the images from his road work days (echoing Benny Profane's similar experience with roadwork and Mucho Maas' experience with used cars) had to be made to fit together. And he realizes further that a defining trait of preterition is one's cooption, through fear and fright, by the Firm, the System. Those who have been "bullied" into believing that only in such Coherency do we find value and meaning are reduced to the "glozing neutrality" the narrator earlier suggests Slothrop can/will escape. The passage describes Slothrop's recognition based on his zonal experience that fragments alone can instruct; they do not have to be forced into a coherency to hold value. Indeed, it is the fragments, like the preterite, which official History has denied and which somehow must be (re)affirmed. As Slothrop allows this idea to take root in him, he simultaneously experiences the final stages of his scattering, his own fragmentation. But he, and we, are prepared by this point to recognize the necessity and the reaffirming nature of this transformation.

Following his most remarkable realization that superstition and fright have made him the puppet of the

Firm, Slothrop relinquishes this fear (in a gesture reminding us of Roger Mexico and Pig Bodine's feat at the Krupp dinner party) and releases his self. Laying down, spread eagled at his ease in the sun, he becomes himself a crossroads, a "living intersection" where the judges will come to set up a gibbet and hang a common criminal. The imagery here reminds us of Oedipa Maas before she enters the auction hall in The Crying of Lot 49. Oedipa, too, finds herself almost smiling in a rare quiet moment in the sunshine. As I remarked earlier (see page 158), this is almost the only sunshine in the novel. A similar observation can be made about Slothrop's journey. Though the image is not overly positive, we must remember that this is Slothrop's language, his perspective. Slothrop believes that his attachment to his identity is, indeed, rather tainted or criminal. We are not meant to take this as an objective judgement on Slothrop as Being, but rather as his own willingness or desire to shed (kill?) the slothropian aspect of himself, that aspect which has allowed the Firm to feed on its fear. The crossroad image is not meant solely as an image of execution, but is also to be seen as a point of transmutation. Slothrop is undergoing a change, plucking the albatross of self and choosing his own re-creation. His ritualistic act is successful: " . . . and now, in the Zone, later in the day . . . after a heavy rain he doesn't recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow

cock driven down out of public clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural . . ." (626). Slothrop clearly here has been reborn, but in an image, in a concept of self which is not yet visible to others, including the reader.

Slothrop qua Slothrop does not reappear in the narrative again, though we do hear rumors of his movements through the Zone. Eventually, he seems to disappear forever, waiting perhaps for that time when his new arrangement will be visible to other wanderers in history. In our more conventional terms, Slothrop has "dropped out" of the arrangements around him and is forging his own existence apart from the System and invisible even to the counterforce which searches the Zone for him. He is waiting for a time when his understanding of his experience may be able to jive with others visibly, effecting a less boundary determined understanding of life and history.<sup>14</sup>

Slothrop has successfully removed himself from the System so bent on codifying, categorizing, and analyzing him as they do every entity which seems anomalous. He has refused, consciously or unconsciously, at every turn, to behave as he has been "expected" to behave, and in accepting and embracing his own unrootedness he eludes the Firm. To say that Slothrop loses his identity is to accept a narrow, System-ized view of identity and, by extension, of personal

and cultural history. Slothrop has merely undergone a transformation, not an extinction, enacting the dictum of Werner Von Braun which opens the text of Gravity's Rainbow: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation." What is left is something not detectable by the System, something which does not match our need for conventional coherence; but to say, therefore, that it does not exist or is not viable is to align ourselves firmly with the blindness, the narrowness, the coercion of the Firm.<sup>15</sup>

Most critics writing on Gravity's Rainbow have had a very difficult time looking at Slothrop's transformation in any but such final terms. Whether they view it as transcendent or apocalyptic, it is final and Slothrop has mysteriously disappeared from the text. Mark Siegel, in his book, Creative Paranoia, argues that though Slothrop has abandoned the ego that caused him to play Their game, he fails in his quest for wholeness, disintegrates into selflessness, and disappears. He claims that Slothrop's disintegration leaves us with a dire view of the possibilities of successful selfhood in this culture. Lance Schachterle, in his article "Bandwidth as Metaphor for Consciousness in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow", claims that in disappearing Slothrop, Pynchon is robbing us of the one messenger who can "solve the puzzle of the narrative" (113). He claims that Slothrop cannot handle the rate of information which surrounds him and he becomes the victim,

not the interpreter of the flux around him. Schachterle does allow that Slothrop remains as a spiritual presence, which is a significantly higher degree of survival than that allowed by Siegel. Molly Hite in The Idea of Order in Thomas Pynchon, dodges the whole question of Slothrop's fate by claiming that it cannot be encapsulated in a totalizing explanation. But to admit that there can only be a "totalizing explanation" or no explanation is a clear statement of Firm-oriented ideology, inappropriate to Slothrop's situation. Finally, Michael Seidel, in "The Satiric Plots of Gravity's Rainbow," simply claims that Slothrop is destroyed; and Craig Hansen Werner suggests that Slothrop's disintegration symbolizes Pynchon's insistence that his characters (and his readers) cannot resolve the experience of the novel.

Edward Mendelson and James W. Earl are two critics, however, who come much closer to the mark concerning Slothrop. Mendelson, in "Gravity's Encyclopedia," says that Slothrop is situated in a condition of "alegality": neither in revolt from nor in concord with social organization. He correctly places Slothrop in absolute separation from all systems of organization whatsoever. And Earl, in a reading based on Norman O. Brown, Husserl, and Edmund Wilson goes further in claiming that the kind of freedom Slothrop has achieved can only be achieved at the price of total social alienation. Slothrop must step outside the social order to

escape the mechanistic controls over him.<sup>16</sup> Katje and Prentice, Earl continues, also must face the lack of conventional community in the counterforce and accept that their new situation alienates them forever. He reminds us again of the image of Katje and Prentice dissolving into the race and swarm of the dancing preterition and of the caution received in purgatory that liberation literally makes of one an outsider.<sup>17</sup>

What these readings do not allow, however, is any future reconstitution of Slothrop or any future in which his fragments may become visible. Indeed, Slothrop does not disappear from the text; there are several reported sightings of him, and Pig Bodine has a verifiable encounter with him in the final pages of the narrative. There is even the suggestion that Slothrop has been reconstituted in part as the harmonica playing Steve Edelman in the final sequence of the novel. The disruption caused by Edelman's harmonica concert outside of the Orpheus theater certainly has the ring of a slothropian (or perhaps a counterforce) event. He is living an isolated, alienated existence, certainly outside of any visible system, but his visibility is only contingent on our notions of system. The idea that one can "live" outside a conventional notion of form is underscored here by the reference to Orpheus, the mythical musician whose voice was saved by the goddesses, even though his body was torn to fragments.



As our understanding of identity, history, and coherence transform, as Pynchon repeatedly urges us to reevaluate our faith in linear, causal History and exhorts us to play the patterns and value the fragments, "Slothrop" will again become visible and valuable; he continues to exist much as Byron the Bulb continues to live, as much as we imagine Roger Mexico and Katje and even Pirate Prentice living, outside a clear System of explanation. We are moved away from the need to understand Slothrop or any "counter character" within a System--even the Tarot so beloved by most characters in this novel only reflects what Society regards as "healthy" or "feeble"--and moved toward the visibilization of fragments.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, we must think here as well of Pierce Inverarity, the absent center of Oedipa's quest. He continues to survive in the fragments of information he leaves to the visible world, and the novel's suggestion that he may be "alive" and active in the plot only attests further to the effect and validity one can have while remaining outside of the System. If Pierce has "simply" dropped out or adopted a form we cannot recognize and has not died in the conventional sense, then he may be our most successful counterforce figure.<sup>19</sup>

And what has happened to the counterforce which had reportedly set itself the task of rescuing Slothrop from the Zone and from the further investigations by the Firm? The counterforce, too, in most writing on the novel, has been

treated as a failed movement, a "force" which cannot stand up to the Firm. Disorganization will always lose to organization, the novel seems to argue.<sup>20</sup> The most cited evidence favoring the view that the counterforce has failed is the interview in The Wall Street Journal with the counterforce spokesman. But, by his own admission, this spokesman is a traitor, one who has gone over to the Firm, perhaps (though we surely cannot know) out of an inability to relinquish traditional ways of sense making. Indeed, the very fact and place of the interview constitutes this person's attempt to make sense of counterforce activities in terms of conventional notions of coherence. We must remember that we were told at the time of Pirate and Katje's "initiation" that all counterforce figures are double agents, one cannot completely escape the Firm. Therefore, confusions and "defections" should not be surprising. By the end of the interview, the spokesman has worked himself into a less cold and more desperate account of the counterforce, and bitterly blames the Firm, here represented by the Established and Establishment media, for turning it in upon itself and destroying ties within the counterforce. "The true sin was yours: to interdict that union. To draw that line. To keep us worse than enemies, who are after all caught in the same fields of shit--to keep us strangers" (739). But we need not take this as a final dissolution of the counterforce or its movements against the Firm; we have

no concrete evidence that it has failed. To the contrary, it is suggested that counterforce activities continue and may gain a legitimate ascendancy in a world which can recognize more fluid idealogies of history. The counterforce, in parallel to Slothrop, does not have a socially recognizable form by the end of the novel, but it continues to make its impact in small ways. Like Roger and Pig's disruption of the Krupp dinner party, Steve Edelman successfully disrupts the organized queue at the Orpheus theater and seems to send all into chaos simply by playing an unauthorized chord progression on the harmonica.<sup>21</sup>

Pynchon exhorts us, as Gabriele Schwab aptly emphasizes, to reach beyond linear and totalizing conceptions of history and to respond to the "alien voices" scattered all over this text and all over contemporary America. Indeed the very interruptions of expected System and Coherence which we witness consistently remind us of this "alien" counterforce existence; and, with Slothrop and Oedipa and even Benny, as our understanding of history and value ceases to require equivalency with coherence and totalizing explanations, we will be released from constricting, mechanistic, and dehumanizing manipulations of reality. Fragments and diversity--other modes of perception, other modes of communicating--will become visible and valuable.

## NOTES

1. Khachig Tololyan, in his article "War as Background in Gravity's Rainbow" provides a particularly detailed accounting as well of the historical context of the novel and of the characters' movements across the geography of the Zone.
2. Edward Mendelson in "Gravity's Encyclopedia" is only one writer who classifies Gravity's Rainbow as encyclopedic narrative.
3. Others who advocate this approach to the novel are George Levine, Richard Poirier, Molly Hite, and Gabriele Schwab. Levine, in his review "V-2" (181) argues that insofar as we demand a resolving order at the end of the novel we become either the victims of destructive systems or dehumanizers. Pynchon, he continues, challenges us to let go of the "destructive myths" which have supported us. Poirier, in his review "Rocket Power"(12) states that any summary of the novel is only a product of a creative paranoia induced in the reader. Hite draws a distinction between "providential" and "secular" history, claiming Gravity's Rainbow favors the latter, a history which refuses to establish a hierarchy of voices, but which acknowledges the presence of multiple patterns and the impossibility of reconciling patterns in any Authorized version. And Schwab calls Gravity's Rainbow "ecological fiction," a narrative which shows only the interrelation, not the dependence, of experiences in time (99).
4. For a representative sample of how critics treat Katje, see Hite, Schaub, Earl, Clerc, Seidel, and Siegel.
5. Here I disagree with Mark Siegel's contention that the possibilities for action in Gravity's Rainbow seem unlikely to succeed and the strategies of Bodine and Mexico "only seem good for laughs and for buoying their own spirits" (118). The very fact that the two affect three "conversions" (Connie Flamp, The Butler, and the musicians) argues most effectively against this limited view.
6. My reading of Slothrop's "paranoia" is supported not only by the textual evidence, but by other scholarship as well. Richard Poirier in "Rocket Power" points out that Pynchon's extended concern with Slothrop's Puritan ancestor, William, and with the Puritan categories of elect and preterit is in part to remind us that Slothrop's mode of

thinking is not a unique form of 20th century paranoia (20). Puritanism has conditioned us to look for visible signs of election and damnation, categories whose validity and usefulness are harshly questioned by William and Tyrone Slothrop and Thomas Pynchon. Thomas Schaub also presents an interesting discussion of what he calls "operational paranoia": the act of discovering actual connections in reality which challenges the discernment of purpose behind the appearance of chance (88ff). Also citing the episode of Slothrop and the octopus, Schaub looks at the connections between operational paranoia and the persistence of a Puritan frame of mind.

7. Slothrop's response to the need to play the patterns is strikingly and significantly different from Pointsman's response to the same need. Pointsman's fear and his refusal to accept the idea of "patterns" as compared to Slothrop's willingness to consider a new way of seeing underlines the difference between Firm and Counterforce.

8. See James W. Earl, "Freedom and Knowledge in the Zone" for a discussion of the Zone as a singular, temporary point of freedom. Khachig Tololyan in "War as Background in Gravity's Rainbow" also emphasizes the special nature of the Zone, pointing out that only from May 8 to August 6, 1945, was the Zone without boundaries, providing only a glimpse of all that is possible.

9. Here again we have echoes of Mircea Eliade's discussion of the draw of the eternal center, the zone of the sacred and a point of transcendence outside of time and history. See Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return and my own discussion above in Chapter Three, p. 160.

10. The narrator makes a crucial distinction in this scene that what enables Tchitcherine to pass Enzian is magic, not fantasy (735). In this novel, the role of magic and the occult is so demystified that Geli's spell, a spell that as Mark Siegel points out is truly the magic of love, is a believable, natural mode of helping someone (Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow 113).

11. Tchitcherine's experience recalls the relationship between McClintic Sphere and Paola Majistral in V. McClintic's advice "keep cool, but care" provides what many regard as a watchword for a viable way of navigating the middle.

12. Tololyan in "War as Background in Gravity's Rainbow" (52) makes a related point that as Slothrop journeys through the Zone, the reader's attention is turned away from the mystery of the erections to a concern about the Rocket. He

does not, however, acknowledge the change in Slothrop's perspectives on his quest.

13. Mark Siegel (49) also makes the point that Slothrop recovers his harmonica only after he has accepted the communalism of the Zone. Slothrop has been able to "find peace" and abandon his obsession with interpretation.

14. We are reminded here again of Jim Addison's three-part structure of quest romance and the forming of identity, a process which clearly applies to Slothrop: he lacks a true or acceptable identity, he loses his old, singular identity as he searches for (or is compelled to search) for a new one, and he moves towards finding a new, viable identity. For a fuller discussion of this approach to quest, see note number 4 in Chapter 2, p. 101.

15. I am indebted to Professor David Mascitelli for sharing this observation and this understanding of Slothrop's scattering with me.

16. Mark Siegel (122) makes a similar point in his discussion of Slothrop's final form. Citing Robert Penn Warren, Siegel states that the loss of a positive sense of self which occurs when one's individuality is sacrificed to a "rational conformity" has led to the rise of the antihero or "schlemiel" hero in contemporary American literature. This places the characters of the counterforce, Slothrop, Oedipa Maas, and Benny Profane clearly outside of an established social System.

17. To review all of the arguments on Slothrop's scattering here would be overwhelming, but other scholars who have written on it include Thomas Schaub, Tony Tanner, Frederick R. Karl, Raymond Olderman, and George Levine.

18. Again, I am indebted to Professor David Mascitelli for sharing this observation.

19. This approach to Pierce Inverarity also calls into question the status of all of those who have crossed to the other side in Gravity's Rainbow. Perhaps Carroll Eventyr, Thomas Gwenhidy, Brigadier Pudding, and the other characters who communicate with members of PISCES and the counterforce are not "dead," but reconstituted in an audible, but as yet invisible form.

20. For one such approach to the counterforce see Thomas Schaub pages 57-61. Schaub argues that the dialectic of routinization asserts itself, undermining even the counterforce. Although the counterforce achieves a temporary victory at the Krupp dinner party, by the end of

the novel it has become "routinized." According to Schaub, the counterforce has succumbed to the dialectic of "we" and "them" demonstrating that we have not transcended our delusional systems and that our only choices are indeed, in Roger Mexico's words, cooption or death. Michael Seidel takes a similar view, suggesting that characters who resist dehumanization can only resist to a point. Mark Siegel also argues that the counterforce's strategy is destined to fail and that it is destroyed in part by an institution's tendency to rationalize. And Edward Mendelson ("Gravity's Encyclopedia") writes extensively of the "failure of the counterforce," bleakly arguing that the world is never altered.

But in asking for a "Final" alteration these readers themselves deny the book's thrust away from either/or codifications. The counterforce's moments of success should not be so easily dismissed.

21. Lance Schachterle, in "Bandwidth as Metaphor for Consciousness in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow," argues that these evidences of counterforce activity throughout the novel, up to and including Edelman's action, show its vitality and carries the message that the Firm can break up but not silence the counterforce. Of course, the notion that the counterforce can be "broken up" suggests that it is a constituted organization, again asserting an us/them, "rational" mentality, rather than the less structured, more fluid collective it appears to be.

## Chapter Five

Constituting Selves: Contexts for Coherent  
Identity Within Fractal Realities

In Vineland, Pynchon's fourth and most recent novel, we are moved right into the heart of a community made up of "grown up" 1960s counterculture figures. Although the opening of the novel is not strikingly different from the openings of the earlier works, the novel quickly establishes several key departures which announce a new direction for Pynchon's concerns with History, identity, and constructions of identity within history. We remember that V. opens on New Year's with the description of a fairly raucous party. This scene, however, helps to establish the intensity of Benny Profane's isolation and sense of separateness from all those around him. Though Benny is at the party, he remains detached, an observer. The party does not carry the full weight of a social or communal scene. The opening provides a desperately failed attempt to bring people together. This is underscored by the narrative's shift to Stencil and his solitary quest, a quest already firmly established, even in Stencil's own mind, as inward and isolating.

Similarly, Gravity's Rainbow opens with a kind of party: Pirate Prentice's banana breakfast. The communal, social feeling established here is presented in stark contrast to the war environment, an environment which intrudes in the midst of the breakfast and breaks it up with



the announcement of a V-2 rocket strike. The novel develops this pattern of interrupted connections, as seen in Roger Mexico's relationship with Jessica Swanlake, and even in Slothrop's intermittent friendships. People come together either to get torn apart or unfixably separated, suggesting an inability for counterforce or counterculture figures to connect without somehow violating their opposition to those who side with the System. Indeed, as discussed earlier, one of the main thrusts of the novel is the exploration of the counterforce as an operating group which tries to maintain its connections without becoming an "Organization." The disappearance of main counterforce figures from the text (or their shedding of recognizable forms) suggests that conditions are not suitable for a visible non-rationality to be recognized, but that the figures must wait in the wings for their time.

Both of these novels open with group scenes which are used primarily to highlight the agonizing and unavoidable isolation of their characters. Similarly, in The Crying of Lot 49, we are faced immediately with the isolation of Oedipa Maas. Although she has just returned home from a Tupperware party, we do not feel the energy which usually accompanies one's return from a successful afternoon. Oedipa clearly does not have anything in common with the women with whom she spent her day; their activities, their conversation, their names are never referred to in the

novel. Instead, we are given a sense of Oedipa's loneliness as she contemplates the rhythm of her days and of her vulnerability as she is confronted with the news that she has been named executrix of Pierce Inverarity's will. Oedipa's isolation is emphasized in the following scenes which depict her relationship with her husband, Mucho, a representative figure of all of the men in the novel who back away from her situation and her needs.

All of Pynchon's central characters are essentially lone quest figures searching for an image of community which makes sense, desiring to connect and make sense of themselves and history. And all of the quest figures, despite the fact that their searches bring them into contact with a number of people, remain essentially alone; they are solitary figures who wander strange landscapes and who are constantly being reminded that they are physically, existentially, emotionally isolated. The counterforce in Gravity's Rainbow mounts the most successful effort to exert itself visibly and effectively against the Firm.

In Vineland, however, we have a very different perspective on the quest and the effectiveness of a counterforce type collective of individuals. Vineland reverses the movement toward isolation and self-definition and leads us towards a sense of cooperation, community, integration, and palpable triumph over the dark forces of the novel. Though Vineland is structured similarly to the

other novels, there are marked differences which alert us immediately to the fact that this novel is going to treat its characters quite differently, not the least of which is its faster pace (characters travel in fast cars and airplanes), lighter tone, and interpolated gags. If the counterforce in Gravity's Rainbow is suspected of inevitably succumbing to the dialectic of we-them and becoming a part of the system it eschews, then what we observe in Vineland both paradoxically plays with the notion that we cannot transcend our delusional systems and vigorously supports the courage and vitality of characters as they persist in searching for a viable, visible, valuable, and enduring mode of living within the fragments.

Typical of Pynchon's novels, Vineland focuses the reader primarily on one questing figure; here that character is Prairie Wheeler, who is searching for her mother Frenesi Gates. But Prairie is neither the only character looking for and trying to understand Frenesi, nor is she an isolated, frantic, or alienated character. This provides a significant shift from the mood and approach of Pynchon's earlier novels. Prairie's quest, similarly to the others we have examined, may alienate her from officially recognized America, but it brings her more firmly into an alternative community of supportive and understanding helpers.

The quest for Frenesi Gates, the 60s radical turned government informer, the mother of Prairie, the wife of

Zoyd, and the lover of Justice Department officer Brock Vond, is not undertaken by just one character or for one reason. Though most critics read this as another Pynchon quest novel, in which Frenesi's daughter Prairie searches for her mother in order to understand her self, Vineland is both more simple and more complex. Its complexity comes not from convoluted plots or multifaceted narration, but from its approach to the quest and its depiction of a more developed, more visible underground. Significantly contributing to the overall communal feel of this novel, no character is ever alone. Prairie is searching for her mother, but she is doing so in concert with Zoyd and Hector Zuinga, the DEA agent, and even Brock Vond. To a lesser extent, but still somewhat active, Frenesi's mother, Sasha, and her ex-lover, Weed Atman, are also searching for her.

The novel's less nuanced tone and more benign mood arises from the fact that, unlike Stencil, Oedipa, and Slothrop, neither Prairie nor any of the others interested in Frenesi's whereabouts and activities is treated by the text with suspicion, irony, or skepticism. The narrative fully allows that Frenesi exists as a figure with a problematical past, and validates the attention being paid by her family, friends, and government officials. The searchers for Frenesi help each other: Hector approaches Zoyd; Zoyd approaches Sasha, and Prairie finds her mom's old running mate, DL Chastain. Though Pynchon's other quest

figures have had helpers, they have been itinerant figures who abandon the quester. In Vineland, however, Prairie's main helpers, DL and Takeshi, guide her, support her, introduce her to other key figures, and lead her back home. They remain together until the culmination of the quest: the return of Frenesi and Prairie's readiness to face her mother.

This leads to another major departure in this novel: the high degree of contact between the individual "marginalized" figures and the irreconcilable forces which oppress them. We have seen a pattern in Pynchon in which the dispossessed (or newly dispossessed such as Oedipa, Stencil, and Slothrop) struggle both within and against the System which menaces them. The people who comprise the System remain invisible and unknown, and therefore threatening. Here, representatives of the System are singularly visible and active figures themselves. Not only are we involved with counterculture characters such as Prairie, Zoyd, DL, Takeshi, and Sasha, but we are also involved with the needs and motivations of both Hector, the DEA agent, and Brock Vond, the closest we come to a representative of the technologized, autocratic, fascist Other depicted in the earlier novels. In an unprecedented approach in Pynchon, Vond is given his own section in the novel, enabling the readers to hear his voice and to gain his perspective on Frenesi and his own activities. Hector is also permitted to speak for

himself, and both are seen interacting with their nemeses. This very fact of being known and visible makes them less powerful and terrifying. The further significance of their voices to the novel's thematic development will be discussed in more detail below.

This leads to what is for many readers the most striking and most difficult development in the novel: its positive and integrative ending. We seem to have an unqualified success at the end; Frenesi arrives at her family's reunion and brings together her mother, her daughter, her ex-husband, her current husband, and her son; Hector seemingly gives up his anti-drug project and ends his pursuit of Frenesi, happy to see her with her family; Brock is conveniently (too conveniently for most readers) spirited away by the Thanatoids in their ultimate revenge; even Weed Atman, an early victim of Frenesi's revolutionary confusion who has hovered in a Thanatoid state seeking recompense for his murder, settles down, gives up his need for needling Frenesi, and contents himself with a new found friendship with Prairie.

What enables this sense of integration and completion? What gives rise to the sense that for the first time, Pynchon's characters are a part of a social world? Many critics, never completely satisfied with Pynchon's lack of resolution and the tenuous places characters find themselves in at the "end" of their stories, are here confused and

unsatisfied by the apparent closure of Vineland.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Vineland is a confusing novel for readers of Pynchon. It provides an unexpected and disturbing turn in Pynchon's writing--if not in his thematic pursuits, certainly in his style. Working against his still serious exploration of characters' places within mythified History and fractal or fragmented realities is a failure to realize a sense of urgency, of real consequences for these characters. These characters--even those on opposing sides--seem too comfortable with each other. And where Pynchon's style has always included puns, jokes, slapstick, and black humor, in Vineland the snappy comebacks, the odd friendships, the increased use of dialogue and repartee strike the reader as more self-conscious and stale than witty or thoughtful. This is clearly not what we have seen in the earlier novels, where characters' movements and conversations are marked by confusion, paranoia, suspicion, and terror. The clearer chronology of the novel--with a stable sense of beginning, middle, and end--also surprises readers looking for narrative complexities. As readers, we do not feel the weight of the quest, the true psychic terror of the characters as unexpected possibilities reveal themselves and certainties dangerously unravel. The characters' actions here are situated in a less charged context which tends to deflect our attention from the novel's significant explorations into fractal realities and detracts from their impact and effect

for many readers.

# I

The fact that the conflict in Vineland occurs on a vastly different level from that in the earlier novels is very quickly made apparent. In his first three novels, Pynchon specifically explores the confusion and terror of characters who find themselves no longer able to live contentedly within a System which they have come to regard as a constructed, manipulated version of history aimed at control. In each novel, the image of "Them"--the ominous power mongers who thrive on their forged constructions and manipulations--becomes larger and more omnipresent as individual characters struggle to devise ways to assert themselves against such control. From V. and her possible connections to international power structures, intrigues, and government systems (all established from Stencil's perspective to hide something from Stencil) to the Trystero and Pierce Inverarity (structures Oedipa perceives as perhaps constructed to reveal something to her) to The Firm (the most overtly bureaucratic and controlling force in Pynchon's early work) characters are initiated into direct opposition to a developing panoramic of manipulated, mythified History. As the purveyors of control become more pronounced and visible, so too does the opposition. From a paranoid and fearful Stencil and an unconfident, tentative



Benny, to Oedipa's confused individuation, to the carefully stealthy movements of the counterforce, Pynchon provides us images of consciousness awakening to the darkly significant questions concerning the real relationship(s) between received History and studied events.

In Vineland, however, the opposition between "Them," specifically the DEA and the Justice Department, and the counterculture, specifically 1960s radicals, is clearly defined from the opening pages and even appears resolved. The antagonists seem to have found a way to coexist; the counterculture members live within a rather self-contained community within Vineland, California, and they seem to be free from further disruptions by bureaucracy or bureaucratic manipulations of history. They have fought their fight, won a version of victory, made their arrangements with the official structures of control. They live their own patterns, their own time, their own rhythms, taking in those who choose to similarly "drop out" of the Establishment System and leaving the rest of America to play its own warped games of temporal, historical, and political manipulation. Here we begin by observing a possible version of the counterforce become visible and viable, a group dedicated to following their own course and remaining only a small thorn in the side of "Them."

But our first glimpses reveal something disturbing and potentially problematical. This marginal collective itself

seems too calm, too regular, too routinized to maintain its marginality or its disruptive effect on the centers of control. And the bureaucratic forces themselves seem to have fallen too far into the background to be truly threatening. Aside from somewhat regular, but largely ineffective drug raids, the antagonists rarely interact at any level. An accommodation seems to have been reached which leaves both in what appears a stagnant, almost inoperative mode. It is into this eerily (for Pynchon readers anyway) calm California landscape that Brock Vond, an officer of the Justice Department and Hector Zuinga, an agent of the DEA, individually, yet contingently, descend, reminding its unprepared citizens that the forces of power and control do not rest and neither should they. Vond and Zuinga both abruptly (though quite separately) reacquaint the family and friends of Zoyd Wheeler with the System's machinery of power and intimidation. Like Oedipa being sensitized to the "fat deckful of days, all more or less the same," Zoyd and his community suddenly awaken to how comfortable and complacent they have become.

The reminder that "They" are always working, even when you think they have been dismantled or neutralized, catapults Zoyd into a frenzy of action and into a renewed contemplation of his past and present. And the experiences of Zoyd and his fellow Frenesi-seekers brings us to a new perspective on this kaleidoscope we think of as history and

the need to remain diligent and watchful as we maneuver within it.<sup>2</sup>

Vineland opens with a carefully detailed description of Zoyd Wheeler's preparations for his annual feat of jumping through a picture window at a local business. Zoyd fled to Vineland, a politically and socially agreeable community, fifteen years before this with his then infant daughter Prairie. His "flight" was precipitated by a deal he made with Vond, his government nemesis, a deal in which he agreed to disappear and not pursue or in any way contact his ex-wife or allow her any access to their daughter. In a struggle over Frenesi, one in which the power, muscle, and urgent need for control seems to be all on Brock's side, Zoyd is fairly easily maneuvered into the deal which takes him and then infant Prairie to Vineland. In true government fashion, the way he was to affirm his continued complicity in this rather shady arrangement was to perform once a year an outrageous act which would earn him a government issued mental disability check. In this way, Brock Vond, who has seduced and recruited Frenesi into questionable underground government service, can keep track of Zoyd's location and general activities. The deal, Zoyd feels, both humbles and frees him. He is humbled and humiliated by having to deal with Brock at all, but the freedom he believes he has to "disappear" and establish a past-free existence, the mythical new American beginning, does attract and seduce

him.

When he arrives in Vineland, described as, "a Harbor of Refuge to vessels that may have suffered on their way North from the strong headwinds. . ." (316), Zoyd embraces the belief that he and Prairie have escaped their involvement with official America and can now relax and trust that "this had been the place to bring [Prairie and] himself after all, that for the few years anyway, he must have chosen right for a change that time they'd come through the slides and storms to put in here, to harbor in Vineland, Vineland the Good" (322). From Zoyd's perspective the once-a-year stunt allows him freedom for the other 364 days of the year, a freedom to live outside proscribed notions of time, history, past, present, and other official versions of reality. Yet, his very compliance with Vond and the regularity with which he performs the jump, along with the yearly embellishments he adds in props and costume, suggests that he has not achieved the marginality he has been cultivating. Conversely, he apparently consciously and willingly enters the systemized, routinized bureaucracy which he believes he has otherwise shunned. Indeed the jump through the window has become a jump right into authorized America; it has become a much anticipated event, like fireworks on the fourth of July. News crews have gathered; a crowd has formed, there are even commentators and experts to analyze the jump and compare it to previous years' efforts. On this occasion, the owner of

the chosen bar for the jump has even had his plate glass window temporarily replaced by a stunt window made of a candy substance which will break, but not cut. Zoyd has entered a constructed, official, protected realm in his very desire to remain outside of such control.

Zoyd himself does not realize, however, the degree to which his life in Vineland has been compromised, compromised not just in the recent celebrity of his window antics but compromised by the very nature of his original agreement with Brock and the System he represents, until another of his nemeses appears at the scene of this year's jump: Hector Zuinga, the DEA agent who had been one of Zoyd's most persistent followers in his earlier drug days. When tipped off about Hector's presence in Vineland, Zoyd panics both because Hector reminds him of the past he had hoped to leave behind and because of what his reappearance signals. It signals another attempt by the agent to bring Zoyd out of the somewhat radical "drop out, ex-hippie" community of Vineland and into some kind of "meaningful" life; only "meaningful" here means aligning oneself with the oppressive forces of the government, much like aligning oneself with the Firm. Zoyd does not know what form the pitch will take, only that it is coming and that he must continue to assert himself against it:

Hector had been trying over and over for years to develop him as a resource, and so far--

technically--Zoyd had hung on to his virginity. But the li'l fucker would not quit. He kept coming back, each time with a new and more demented plan, and Zoyd knew that one day, just to have some peace, he'd say forget it, and go over. Question was, would it be this time, or one of the next few times? (12)

Zoyd had begun to believe in his new life, but when Hector arrives and begins talking about the "old arrangements" and the situation surrounding Frenesi, he begins to wonder if he can ever really fashion a life free from the constraints of official America. Hector has come to announce his interest in locating Frenesi and to seek Zoyd's cooperation in his search. He tells Zoyd that for some reason (which remains characteristically mysterious throughout the novel)

Frenesi's funding has been cut off and that all records of her have been deleted from the government computers. Frenesi is being forced to resurface from her rather questionable underground position, and this leaves her vulnerable to further exploitation by various forces, including Hector, Zoyd, or Brock. Hector comes to Vineland convinced that once "free," Frenesi will try to reconnect with her daughter and Zoyd will be in a position to deliver her to him. He wants her, "a legendary observer-participant" of the 1960s, as a spokesperson in his yet-to-be-funded, yet-to-be-scripted anti-drug movie. To make Zoyd feel the urgency of his request, however, Hector also tells him that Brock Vond is on his way to Vineland, also to find Frenesi, perhaps following Hector, perhaps convinced himself

that Frenesi will try to come home, or perhaps believing that Zoyd has contact with her in direct violation of their earlier "arrangement."

Hector's intimation that Brock has reinvolved himself with this case as well as his own actual appearance spooks Zoyd and forces him to reevaluate the ground of his life in Vineland. Indeed, as Zoyd continues on some routine errands about town that morning, he notices that his friends and associates are beginning to avoid him and treat him suspiciously. At first, he attributes this to Hector's presence--the citizens of Vineland do not take kindly to the DEA--but finally someone tells him that there are other presences in town which pose a danger not only to Zoyd, but to everyone. Zoyd finds himself increasingly isolated as friends back away, unwilling to participate in any kind of showdown with the seemingly omnipotent, omnivorous, oppressive government. And as he gradually awakens to the fact that it is not Hector who is causing everyone to avoid him, finally being told that "This ain't [Hector], Blood, it's, uh, somebody else. . . They're federal, but it ain't Hector" (45), he engages in a crucial reevaluation of his assumptions and attitudes toward his life since Frenesi left him for Vond and he set about making a new life in Vineland.

. . . he must really have thought, as he and the baby were making their getaway, that that was it,

all over, time to go to commercials and clips of next week's episode. . . . Frenesi might be gone, but there would always be his love for Prairie, burning like a night-light, always nearby, cool and low, but all night long. . . . And Hector, in his actorly literalness and brown shoe conformity while also being insane, would never trouble his environment again. Damn fool Zoyd. Sent so gaga by those mythical days of high drama that he'd forgotten he and Prairie might actually have to go on living years beyond them. (42)

Zoyd begins to realize here his own complicity in a culturally condoned attitude toward the past (and history) which deliberately promotes a belief that we can dispose of unwanted parts of our pasts or parts which have not fit "correctly" and begin with a new version of events out of which we can fashion a coherent life. Brock activated in Zoyd a naive belief that he could essentially erase the mess with Frenesi, take his daughter and begin again. Now Zoyd finds himself face to face with his past and he realizes that he must find a different way of associating with it; living in the margins, living outside of sanctioned systems of oppression, Zoyd learns, does not mean severing yourself or severing others from the past. That is, indeed, a peculiarly System-ized way of thinking and Zoyd realizes both the degree to which, even in his dropping out, he has been coopted by the System and the lengths he will have to go to give himself and his daughter a viable way of accommodating the fragments of their past, a mode which will not place them or the community of which they have become a part in danger of further cooption.



The hippie/drug counterculture which Zoyd so fervently counts himself among is a contemporary version of the counterforce, a loose collective of people who set themselves against "the Establishment" and its version of order. Indeed, much of the language Pynchon uses here echoes that found in Gravity's Rainbow when talking about the counterforce. When Mucho Maas, who reappears from The Crying of Lot 49 as Zoyd's ex-recording producer, reminisces with Zoyd about the heyday of the 1960s, their most powerful recollection recalls the escapade of Roger Mexico and Pig Bodine:

"Well, I still wish it was back then, when you were the Count. Remember how the acid was? Remember the windowpane, down in Laguna that time? God, I knew then, I knew. . . ."

They had a look. "Uh-huh, me too. That you were never going to die. Ha! No wonder the State panicked. How are they supposed to control a population that knows it'll never die? When that was always their last big chip, when they thought they had the power of life and death. But acid gave us X-ray vision to see through that one, so of course they had to take it away from us." (313-14)

Like Roger and Pig, Zoyd and Mucho and countless other counterculture individuals saw through Establishment manipulation and were able to relinquish their fear. This imbues them with a sense of power and control, a condition that the System, in this case the Government, fights at all costs to take away or to compromise; the System thrives on imprisoning its subjects within a circumscribed, boundaried

set of historical beliefs and myths. And Mucho goes on to warn Zoyd, after Zoyd expresses his belief that They cannot take away what "we found out," that Their mission is precisely to reinstate fear:

Easy. They just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it's what the Tube is for, and though it kills me to say it, it's what rock and roll is becoming--just another way to claim our attention, so that beautiful certainty we had starts to fade, and after a while they have us convinced all over again that we really are going to die. And they've got us again. (314)

"I'm not gonna forget," Zoyd vows in response, but as the next fifteen years between this conversation and the novel's present time show us, and as the progress of the present narrative establishes, he does forget and he must fight back to repossess his knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Zoyd's vow to never forget is in a large part motivated by his experience with Brock Vond and the operational mode of the particular system victimizing him. The problem rests in how Zoyd has chosen to define his life in Vineland; as he realizes at the time of the present narrative and as he wails to Hector, he had come to believe that he could successfully drop out of history:

It took me a long time even to get where I am on the whole subject o' her, now you want to post me right back down into it again, but guess what, I don't want to go back 'n' waller in all 'at. (30)

In his innocence, he had believed that his escape with Prairie to Vineland and his willingness to play by the rules of the established game had absolved him of further involvement with these particular players. But what this novel argues most strenuously for is not dropping out or thumbing your nose at history and the System, but continued and concerted opposition to the System, an opposition that once established, as was also suggested in Gravity's Rainbow, can never be escaped.

When Zoyd returns to his house after his window jump and conversation with Hector, he finds that it has been taken over by government forces and that, indeed, Brock has already arrived in town. His truck, earlier impounded at a local grocery store parking lot, his possessions, his home, his friends have all been effectively stripped away. And Zoyd is left to face the real threat he feels upon being called back into history, back into the responsibility of renegotiating a relationship with the events surrounding his marriage. Zoyd accepts his responsibility and in refamiliarizing himself with the last fifteen years of his life he faces not a singular, but the many truths of he and Frenesi, and their "revolution." What he feels most keenly, however, is the probability that he may no longer be able to avoid acquainting Prairie with this past and his own ineptitude in helping her face her unsuspected and full blown initiation into the tangles and fragments of time and

history.

Zoyd acts quickly to remove Prairie from the arena of confrontation which has begun to engulf him, desperate to try to save her from a story she is most eager to know. Prairie reacts to the news of Frenesi's surfacing with excited expectation along with trepidation. She would like to partake in Hector's search for her mother, a mother she has longed to discover and understand. However, when his house is seized, Zoyd panics and arranges for Prairie to accompany her boyfriend and his band on an out-of-town wedding gig, out of the way of Vond, Frenesi, Hector or anyone else who he believes may try to hurt her with the past. Ironically, the trip he sends her on places her precisely in the one place and time where she meets the person most capable of conducting her into her mother's and her own history, Frenesi's old friend, DL Chastain.

If Zoyd moves towards an accommodation with his past and with his present responsibility in a rather static mode --by remaining in Vineland to watch over and try to reclaim his house and by engaging in an elaborate attempt at remembering (three sections of the novel are narrated from Zoyd's perspective and cover the years of and following his marriage to Frenesi)--Prairie occupies the place of the more recognizable Pynchon quester. Out on the road, she has the chance meeting which puts her past within reach. Prairie is the character who plays the role of active quester,

searching out information on Frenesi in the same way as Oedipa did on the Trystero or Stencil on V. As Elizabeth Hinds suggests, Prairie seeks her mother not out of a desire only to know, but out of a need to confront history, to confront the past in an effort to "ascertain her position within a system which seems closed against her" ("Visible Tracks," 92). How closed the system in truth is, and how Prairie's attitude towards this system evolves becomes the thematic focus of this quest in much the same way that similar concerns come to dominate the quests of earlier novels. Like the earlier figures, Prairie also believes in the efficacy of her search and in the possibility of its ultimate healing resolution. Yet, though Prairie is the more characteristic Pynchon figure, we must remember that she is not the only significant figure here; Pynchon works with a large cast, each of whom finds his/her way back to a Vineland, a Vineland which becomes not a refuge, but a base. The family reunion scene at the close of the novel, as we shall see, is the only appropriate culmination for such quests, an event which resolidifies the notion of connection, accommodation, and fractal realities as the gathered reassert themselves against the System and rededicate themselves to the struggle to reclaim a part of themselves and a viable relationship with the pieces of the past. Prairie's meeting with DL at the wedding opens up for her the real possibility of finding her mother. And she is

placed in an unusual and unique situation for a Pynchon character: she is provided with a true guide to her mother and her mother's past. DL does not simply tell Prairie the story she knows; rather she puts her in possession of large amounts of data to help Prairie piece together her own story of her mother, and we realize that we are in a completely different landscape from the earlier novels as Prairie negotiates witnesses, friends, commentators, film footage, and computer files all who/which are more than willing to acknowledge and discuss Frenesi. Though Prairie would like to simply sit somewhere quiet with DL and chat or be taken directly to Frenesi, she quickly learns what other Pynchon characters have struggled to grasp, that no real understanding can be delivered whole, only constructed or narrative History. As the Head Ninjette at the Kunoichi retreat tells Prairie: "Only the first of many kunoichi disillusionments--right, DL?--is finding that the knowledge won't come down all at once in any big transcendent moment. . . . Here it's always out at the margins, using the millimeters and little tenths of a second, you understand, scuffling and scraping for everything we get" (112). And so Prairie begins her trip through the computer files, the film archives of 24fps (the revolutionary film collective Frenesi belonged to), and the memories of DL and 24fps member Ditzah Pisk, gradually piecing together a version of her mother, which though not overly flattering, does lead her to a more

complete understanding of her own past.

Interestingly, where Prairie's initial concern is to literally find her mother--it is this she asks DL's help for at the wedding--and to find her before Brock Vond does, her pursuit becomes less one for the actual Frenesi and more one for the historical Frenesi. As DL realizes, Prairie needs to understand the historical, emotional, and political forces which encircle Frenesi before confronting Frenesi herself. And the understanding Prairie reaches must be her own, no one else's. Surprisingly, for this is Pynchon, Prairie realizes her goals, and we receive an unusually developed and articulated "end" of a character's quest and release into history.

Prairie's search leads her to a perspective which allows her to establish her own relationships with the various figures involved. Not only does Prairie find her mother and rediscover her father, but she also confronts and befriends Weed Atman--the "movement leader" Frenesi set up and had killed--and confronts and stands up to Brock Vond. What enables Prairie to achieve this is precisely the method of her quest. As discussed above, unlike any other Pynchon character in this situation, she is not alone or in danger of doubting the existence of the pursued object. She encounters very few dead ends and those she does meet she has help maneuvering out of. This places the emphasis not on the mode of discovery or on what Prairie learns about

discovering but specifically on what she learns about her object and how she acts upon it. Where Oedipa's, Stencil's, and even Slothrop's stories call into question the stability of information and the entire process of history, Prairie's experience does not question the "accuracy" of her sources or focus on the urgencies of the quest, which is really a rather uninteresting enterprise here due to the absence of articulated mystery.

We are never definitively told whether the story Prairie constructs of her mother is "True," whether the way in which she has combined data represents an accurate picture of Frenesi's life, and for the first time in Pynchon this question does not even seem important. We are presented with information not all that differently than in the earlier novels, but our attention is not focused on the questions of how much is real and how much "hallucination." Indeed, due to the peculiarly conventional narrative structure and shifts in perspective, this novel appears to be providing an objective account of Frenesi's past activities. Only occasionally are we reminded that no story has any objective reality and that Prairie is the one trying to piece together fragments to form a picture. The novel images this most explicitly in the scenes in the kunoichi computer room, in which Prairie tries to see underneath the computer dots to the real Frenesi, and at Ditzah Pisk's house where Prairie again "sees" her mother on film:



So into it and then on Prairie followed, a girl in a haunted mansion, led room to room, sheet to sheet, by peripheral whiteness, the earnest whisper, of her mother's ghost. She already knew about how literal computers could be--even spaces between characters mattered. She had wondered if ghosts were only literal in the same way. Could a ghost think for herself, or was she responsive totally to the needs of the still living, needs like keystrokes entered into her world, lines of sorrow, loss, justice denied? . . . But to be of any use, to be 'real,' a ghost would have to be more than only that kind of elaborate pretending. . . . Prairie found that she could also summon to the screen photographs, some personal, some from papers and magazines, images of her mom, most of the time holding a movie camera. . . (114)

At some point Prairie understood that the person behind the camera most of the time really was her mother, and that if she kept her mind empty she could absorb, conditionally become, Frenesi, share her eyes, feel, when the frame shook with fatigue or fear or nausea, Frenesi's whole body there, as much as her mind choosing the frame, her will to go out there, load the roll, get the shot. Prairie floated, ghostly light of head, as if Frenesi were dead but in a special way, a minimum-security arrangement, where limited visits, mediated by projector and screen, were possible. As if somehow, next reel or the one after, the girl would find a way, some way, to speak to her. . . . (199)

What both of these passages emphasize, but without the anxiety or paranoia of Oedipa, Stencil, or even Slothrop, is the degree to which Prairie is provided with only images of her mom, only pieces of a history which she must seam together or let lie as she chooses; as willing as her helpers are to provide her with information, none will actively participate in creating a whole out of the parts; each contributes the parts for Prairie to manipulate. As DL

states late in the narrative, not even the participants in the events know everything; they know much of what happened, but no one knows why Frenesi ultimately went with Brock.<sup>4</sup>

DL and Ditzah Pisk, the only members of Frenesi's old film collective who we hear from in the novel, share the surprise and the residual fear and paranoia we saw in Zoyd. Believing to a large measure that their interactions with Brock and the related Government agencies had come to an end with Frenesi's "defection" fifteen years earlier, both had negotiated an existence which kept them outside of the System, but outside any counterforce or counterculture collective as well. DL, like Zoyd, has invested much energy and effort in avoiding her past history with Frenesi and Brock Vond. Where Zoyd has been trying to hide himself within a community setting, however, DL has avoided all manifestations of community or connection. Following Frenesi's defection of 24fps for Brock Vond, a defection Frenesi admits to after DL "rescues" her from one of Brock's detention camps, DL drops Frenesi and takes to the road. The confusion, pain, and betrayal she experiences as a result of failed friendship, failed love (there is some suggestion in the text that she and Frenesi were sometime lovers), and failed revolution, makes it impossible for her to settle anywhere or on anything. While she is on the road, Frenesi disappears into her marriage with Zoyd and Brock Vond tries to forget her by immersing himself in an

all out offensive on the illicit drug trade in America.

Through a bizarre set of circumstances, DL is targeted by the mob, fearing for their drug business, to ferret out and kill Vond. Known for her Ninja training and for her skill with the Ninja Death Touch, as well as for her rage which would lead her to use her powers for revenge, DL is, indeed, a likely candidate for this crime. In the confusion of a dark room, however, she puts the touch on the wrong person (a decoy Brock sets up) and she suddenly finds herself responsible for the karmic and physical health of her soon to be partner, Takeshi Fumimota. The Ninjettes at the Kunoichi retreat where DL takes Takeshi for a "cure," subject DL and Takeshi to an elaborate stratagem for redemption--redemption for Takeshi's body and DL's soul, an integral part of which is the formation of their partnership. They cannot separate until the karmas are squared. DL agrees to this, but adds a crucial clause to the arrangement: there is to be no sex during their affiliation. The no-sex clause emphasizes DL's need for control and her continued fear of connection.

DL and Takeshi have spent the past 15 years travelling America, engaged in several unexplained and uncategorizable enterprises while trying to make life out of death. These travels with Takeshi had largely been a whirlwind effort to avoid facing what happened between her, Frenesi, and Brock. As she later tells Prairie, "I had enough trouble just

accepting that she did it, I never figured out why. Just as well, it could've ate up my life. Maybe it did" (266). But over the years, DL and Takeshi have gradually forged a real partnership, including a recent renegotiation of the no-sex clause. DL's willingness to connect with Takeshi is important because through it is suggested her own realignment with history, a realignment which helps Prairie understand her own quest. DL relinquishes her need for certainty and revenge,

in a penthouse suite high over Amarillo, up in the eternal wind, with the sun just set into otherworld transparencies of yellow and ultraviolet, and other neon-sign colors coming on below across the boundless twilit high plain, she was watching [Takeshi] now with newly cleansed attention, her light-bearing hair, against the simplicity of the window, a fractal halo of complications that might go on forever . . ."  
(381).

This passage tells us much that is important about DL, but also much which is central to the development of this novel. DL, here, enters an "other world," not just of sex, but of a true freedom. She is free of fear, newly cleansed of the rage and demands of politicized time. Though she continues her travels with Takeshi, they are no longer marked by the desperation to escape something, but become her mode of entry into the middle, that ground where connections are not coequal with manipulation, where one can exist successfully within history. In the middle, fractal complications may go

on forever, but this is welcome and liberating, especially when compared to the constrained end-oriented life she had been pursuing. The coupling of the two terms "fractal" and "halo" further emphasizes this response. Only within the continual complications of history can DL achieve a seemingly contradictory transcendent completion; only through accommodation of the fragments comes a paradoxical wholeness. DL learns what the Ninjette's had hoped to lead her to: "that [her] Brock obsession, appearing like a cop cruiser in the dark sooner or later down every roadway her life took, had also been afflicting [her] spirit, acting as a major obstacle, this time around, to fulfilling her true karmic project," a project itself which is never fully articulated (382).

When DL meets Prairie at the wedding, she takes her to meet Takeshi and to consult with him about the search for Frenesi. The two quickly agree to accompany her, not only to be helpful, but also to settle their own karma with Brock and Frenesi. DL's meeting with Prairie and the news that Frenesi and Brock are circling once again forces her to reevaluate her stance, and her willingness to help Prairie provides a first crucial step back toward accountability and perhaps the fulfillment of that karmic project. DL also takes a constructive step in visiting Ditzah, again not only a visit to aid Prairie, but also a visit to reconnect and reconstruct relationships within her new ground. In bringing

news of the resurfacings to Ditzah and in bringing Prairie to view the 24fps films, DL allows herself to revisit the past in a new context. As the women view the films, imparting to Prairie a view of her mother and the events that led to her alliance with Brock Vond, DL and Ditzah (who has remained a film editor for alternative film and is the keeper of the archival 24fps material) both are reintroduced to the history and see a new urgency in accommodating the threads and fragments as they forge a strategy to deal with the newly awakened "enemy."

Prairie's response to the films she views and to Brock's interest in her is one more of curiosity than fear or anxiety. She does not possess the context for fear that DL, Ditzah, or Zoyd do, not having directly experienced the methods and perceived power of Brock. But DL and Ditzah, as they relive the films, begin to take very seriously Brock's recent activities, especially in light of the eerily timed phone call from another 24fps member announcing that the planets have recently realigned and some kind of showdown seems imminent. As DL and Ditzah ponder the meaning of this, Prairie reviews her own experiences, most notably the actions taken against her father and Brock's very public helicopter reconnaissance of the Kunoichi retreat in an effort to locate Prairie, his hoped for pawn in his rebid for Frenesi. Prairie's serious consideration of the turn her life has taken leads her to a more pronounced counterforce--

or counterculture--perspective on oppression and opposition. DL and Ditzah's conversation following the phone call and their discovery of wire taps around the studio helps solidify this perspective as Prairie learns of the real force those in power will employ to reach their ends and of the real dangers inherent in deliberate perversions of history.

"We're probably just being paranoid," Ditzah a shade too brightly. "It only begins to assume some nationwide pattern here, right? Tell me I've been watching too much old footage tonight. Tell me this isn't what it looks like." Prairie saw how they were both breathing, the deliberated way you were told to when otherwise you might want to panic.

"In the olden days we called it the last roundup," DL explained. "Liked to scare each other with it, though it was always real enough. The day they'd come and break into your house and put everybody in prison camps. Not fun or sitcom prison camps, more like feedlots where we'd all become official, nonhuman livestock." (264)

DL, Ditzah, and Zoyd are all equally unprepared for this new assault by Brock, an assault which is personal, political, and historical. Personal in that he wants to snatch Frenesi away from her family once more, political in his possible desire to use her again in some scheme, historical in his desire to rewrite the past: "It's the whole Reagan program, isn't it--dismantle the New Deal, reverse the effects of World War II, restore fascism at home and around the world, flee into the past, can't you feel it, all the dangerous childish stupidity--'I don't like the way it came out, I

want it my way.' If the President can act like that, why not Brock?" (265), DL surmises. Though they have joked about such subjugation and calculated rearrangements in the past, that this farfetched scenario has become a reality provides a jolting shock. For Prairie the shock comes from her burgeoning discovery of real oppression and her mother's real role within the structures of oppression; for DL, Ditzah, and Zoyd the shock comes from acknowledging their unwitting complicity in the oppression, a complicity born from a desire to escape the past and from their complacency within their assumed safety zones.

Significantly, the 24fps films have all been viewed and information and perspectives have been shared and processed through each woman's specific filter before Vond's forces actually show up and destroy the material. Again, the threat of Vond here is very real; unlike the assumed threat of Trystero or of V., Vond, like the Firm, is a known and active oppressor. We are not surprised when his people actually show up at Ditzah's and burn the films; what is surprising given Pynchon's earlier work is that the material of the films has already been imparted and absorbed by characters and reader alike. This is strikingly different from the earlier novels in which data assumed to be significant usually disappears or is destroyed before it can be passed on. The developing thematic structure of this novel, however, continually forces us to consider the modes



by which characters readmit their pasts and reconfigure their relationships to it rather than to consider the validity of the actual search or of the information the search may produce.

What Prairie sees and hears in the documents regarding Frenesi, her family, and her friends are continual attempts to counter official America, to catch it, reveal it, stop it. Prairie's grandmother and her family have long been adamantly strong union supporters and Frenesi, since her childhood, had been schooled in the dialectic of victims and victimizers, and what a "victim's" responsibilities are when there is a need to strike back at oppressors. Growing up with both her mother and father deeply involved in the union struggles in Hollywood, it is not surprising that Frenesi adopts for herself a role of revolutionary film maker in the 1960s or that she firmly believes in her and her camera's ability to squash the political oppressors of America.

Frenesi and the 24fps, indeed even the union organizers of the 1940-50s film community to which her parents belong and the radicals of the 1960s were desperate to make people aware of what was happening right under their noses: the exploitation, the manipulation, the deliberate falsification and shaping of history for political purposes. As Sasha tells the young Frenesi:

History in this town [Hollywood] is no more worthy of respect than the average movie script, and it

comes about in the same way--soon as there's one version of a story, suddenly it's anybody's pigeon. Parties you never heard of get to come in and change it. Characters and deeds get shifted around, heartfelt language gets pounded flat when it isn't removed forever. By now the Hollywood of the fifties is this way-over-length, multitude-of-hands rewrite--except there's no sound, of course, nobody talks. It's a silent movie. (81)

And as Frenesi laments to DL after the failed College-of-the-Surf "revolution":

"Feel like we were running around like little kids with toy weapons, like the camera really was some kind of gun, gave us that kind of power. Shit. How could we lose track like that, about what was real? All that time we made ourselves stay on the natch? might as well as have been dropping Purple Owsley for all the good it did." She shook her head, looked down at her knees. "And it wasn't only Weed who got offed, story going around the camp is there were others, and the FBI covered it up? So what difference did we make? Who'd we save? The minute the guns came out, all that art-of-the-cinema handjob was over." (259)

Both Sasha and Frenesi, though several years apart, come to acknowledge the perverting power of those who seem to be in charge of molding history into agreeable shapes for consumption. They clearly feel that their efforts at resistance have proven amateurish and ineffective when stood against the vast resources of government control.

Frenesi's mother and father both faced disillusionment over collapsing efforts to uphold the unions and the labor demands in Hollywood, efforts which they believe had been buried under numerous rewrites designed to make the tale innocuous and safe as determined by the powerful elite. To

different degrees, they both gave up their political struggles out of desperation. Frenesi's mother, Sasha, dropped out of active involvement, but maintained her "leftist" leanings, remaining connected to and interested in the activities designed to keep people thinking about the real meaning of power and history. Her father, Hub, feeling his responsibility towards wife and child, and suspecting that it doesn't really matter what one does, joined the opposition, worked for a short while under their auspices, and then retired to work with lights as his own boss, in his own way, avoiding the political aspects of life. As he tries to explain himself to Frenesi:

[Sasha'd] think these things all the way through, politically, but I'd only be trying to get out of the day in one piece. I was never the brave Wobbly her father was. Jess stood up, and he was struck down for it, and there was all of American History 101 for her, right there. How the hell was I gonna measure up? I thought I was doing what was necessary for my wife and my baby, freedom didn't come into it the way it did for Sasha . . . Then there was Wade, my ol' canasta partner and picket-line buddy, fighting shoulder to shoulder all those years, one day he went over, and we stayed friends, and finally you saw what'd it matter who'd be taking those dues off the paycheck, Al Speede's people, th' IATSE, whatever. It'd been over a long time anyway, though we'd had to pretend otherwise, and what was it for . . . I let the world slip away, made my shameful peace, joined the IA, retired soon's I could, sold off my only real fortune--my precious anger--for a lot of got-damn shadows. (288,291)

Hub here has resigned himself to the fact that his efforts have amounted to nothing, the films still got made, people

still got hurt, and history is still being manipulated and revised. Anger and action were overcome by the omnipotence of the power elite. As DL later explains it to Prairie," . . . unless you can call on troops in regimental strength, and the hardware that goes with 'em, best not even think about messing with [Them]. Ain't just that [They're] monomaniacs and killers, but there's nothing holding [Them] back. [They're] allowed to do anything you can imagine and worse" (266). Faced with such opposition and overwhelming odds, Hub saw nowhere to turn but to himself.

Frenesi's disillusionment with "revolution" or effective opposition is the most specifically delineated in the novel and becomes a significant aspect of this story when considered in relation both to her heritage and to her past with Weed Atman. Clearly Frenesi comes out of a family (on her mother's side most especially) dedicated to the principles of opposition and "clear seeing." Sasha's father, Jess Traverse, did not back down when attacked by the "bosses"; even when made an example of at a company picnic by having a redwood dropped on his legs, he continued to militate against oppressors and their attitudes toward history. Jess continues into the present time of the novel to urge his descendants to continue the struggle and to remain thorns in the side of the bureaucrats. And Sasha and Hub may feel used up, but they still maintain a clear counterforce perspective which they impart to their

daughter. And Frenesi picks up the ball willingly and idealistically. Her involvement with 24fps, the underground film collective, is motivated precisely by her desire to catch and "kill" the representatives of power and manipulation. Until the end of the revolution, she believes completely in what she is doing and in the efficacious power of her camera.<sup>5</sup> As DL remembers from their first meeting:

Frenesi dreamed of a mysterious people's oneness, drawing together toward the best chances of light, achieved once or twice that she'd seen in the street, in short, timeless bursts, all paths, human and projectile, true, the people in a single presence, the police likewise simple as a moving blade--and individuals who in meetings might only bore or be pains in the ass here suddenly being seen to transcend, almost beyond will to move smoothly between baton and victim to take the blow instead, to lie down on the tracks as the iron rolled in or look into the gun muzzle and maintain the power of speech--there was no telling in those days, who might unexpectedly change this way, or when. (117-18)

Frenesi's dream of oneness and cooperation clearly has some roots in the talk she hears around her childhood home. The successes, few as they may be, for Sasha and Hub, her own successes in film, and the stories of her grandfather, all contribute to her vision. But her vision seems about to take on the dimensions of reality when she comes upon the College-of-the-Surf and its impending revolution. Students at College-of-the-Surf are planning a secession from the state of California to form their own republic (The People's Republic of Rock and Roll) dedicated to just the kind of

transcendent oneness Frenesi images. She quickly takes herself and 24fps to the college to partake in this revolution and to record it on film, thus plummeting herself into the debilitating and disillusioning situation that leads to the loss of her daughter, her self-respect, her identity, and her past.

As Prairie watches the films from the events at College-of-the-Surf, even she can feel the "liberation in the place that night, the faith that anything was possible, that nothing could stand in the way of such joyous certainty. She'd never seen anything like it before" (210). Clearly, this is also what Frenesi felt upon coming into this particular scene of revolution. She entered into it believing in the real possibilities of change it represented, and only slowly came to realize how she herself had been coopted into contributing to its ultimate failure. Her already established alliance with Brock Vond, begun in earlier 24fps days and motivated perhaps by the belief that even he may one day transcend his official self and be led "toward the best chances of light," DL's otherworld of fractal complications, leads her into a web of deception, manipulation, and betrayal, which she can rationalize or justify only so far. The information she provides to Brock and her continuing relationship with him leads to her direct involvement with the set-up and murder of the revolution's spokesperson, Weed Atman, and to her tortured

disillusionment. But we also see something else here; we see most directly the psychology and the philosophy of the opponents as they clash and we achieve some tentative understanding of why two such adversaries may never be able to achieve a "single presence," "a will to move smoothly."

Brock views the events on this campus as a laboratory experiment in control and subjugation. He makes no secret of his agenda, explaining himself to Frenesi as well as to his co-bureaucrats:

"It's a . . . Marxist ministate, product of mass uprising, we don't want it there and we also don't want to invade--how then to proceed?" His idea was to make enough money available to set them all fighting over who'd get it. It would also, as Brock pitched it, have a value as a scale model, to find out how much bringing down a whole country might cost. (212)

But not only does Brock wish to use this scene as an experimental ground in "democratic takeover," he also views it from a personal perspective. He cannot tolerate any defects in control and this population in his view is clearly out of control. He wants something to bring these radicals back into the fold of official America, into officially sanctioned modes of understanding and response. His is a decidedly rigid and authoritarian approach, designed to bring, in his own words, lost children back into the family:

Brock Vond's genius was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep--if he'd allowed himself to feel it, the sometimes touching--need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family. . . . Children longing for discipline. (269)

What is most interesting and significant here is the way in which Brock's plan works so smoothly. For if he sees the burgeoning People's Republic of Rock and Roll as a microcosm of defeated revolution, we are led to see it as a microcosm of counterforce action. What then leads to its failure? The answer lies in the words of Gravity's Rainbow once again. The students at College-of-the-Surf modeled their revolution on traditional structures of control and hierarchy. They themselves became an organization complete with a charismatic leader (Weed Atman), expressed principles, and organizational tactics. But organization, as we have already seen and see here with tragic results, makes one vulnerable, vulnerable to the same breakdowns, the same manipulations, the same need to shape others' views of history and motive as the Organization one may be opposing. Where we are led to expect a message of counterforce opposition and disruption, we also see that it cannot survive or succeed if it adheres to the same functionary modes. The secession of the People's Republic of Rock and Roll fails, not only because Frenesi participates in the



framing of the leader, but also, and even more importantly, because there was an institutionally constituted leader and organization to take down.

Frenesi's disillusionment and shock at her own role in Weed's death and the fall of the revolution, her realization, too late, that the games she was playing with Brock and her camera were deadly serious, leaves her perfectly vulnerable to Brock's further manipulation. Directly after the catastrophic events at the college, Frenesi is taken along with hundreds of other "detainees" to a government camp to be, again in Vond's words, reconditioned and examined for snitch potential. But Frenesi is rescued from the camp and Brock's clutches by DL and released back into the world.

Once on her own, Frenesi does not pick up the banner of revolution or opposition; instead, she tries to retreat into an innocuous, normal life where people like Brock and Weed will not bother with her. She meets and marries Zoyd, and Prairie is born. This she believes provides the perfect cover:

[The baby] made her something else, a mom, that was all, just another mom in the nation of moms, and all she'd ever have to do to be safe was stay inside that particular fate, bring up the kid, grow into some version of Sasha, deal with Zoyd and his footloose band and all the drawbacks there, forget Brock, the siege, Weed Atman's blood, 24fps and the old sweet community, forget whoever she'd been, shoot inoffensive little home movies now and then, speak the right lines, stay

within budget . . . Prairie could be her guaranteed salvation, pretending to be Prairie's mom the worst lie, the basest betrayal. (292)

What Frenesi wants to be safe from is history. She wants to escape the implications and consequences of her actions and her involvement with Brock. She also wants to escape the need for further action or responsibility by immersing herself in what she views as the nonpolitical, nonhistorical role as mom. She wants to forget the past, ignore it, revise it and escape it. But fate, and narrative, do not make it easy for Frenesi to fade into a mainstream America; they do not make it easy for her to take a path she mistakenly believes her mother has taken. Instead, she is taken through a grueling course in counterculture or counterforce attitudes toward history, responsibility, and community. From the idealistic, naive crusader to distraught, disillusioned, seemingly beaten girl, Frenesi is wrenched once again out of the role she believes she is playing and into a very real version of historical manipulation as once again Brock Vond finds her, coopts her, takes her from her family and deposits her in a cold and hellish underground, a void where there is no history, "no time but underground time, time that could take her nowhere outside its own tight and falsely deathless perimeter" (293). Brock plays on Frenesi's disillusionment with herself and his own need for control and power and coerces her into serving in a series of government sting operations.

In the employ of the opposition, Frenesi learns all she needs to about perverse and perversive contrivances of time, history, death, and community.<sup>6</sup>

When Hector appears in Vineland with the news that Frenesi has been purged from the government program that has been using her, he provides a fairly vivid glimpse of her life for the past 15 years. He tells Zoyd:

"Your ex-old lady, up till they terminated her budget line, was livin in a underground of the State, not like th' old Weatherpeople or nothin, OK? But a certain kind of world that civilians up on the surface, out in the sun thinkin 'em happy thotz, got no idea it's even there. . . ." Hector was usually too cool to be much of a lapel-grabber, but something in his voice now, had Zoyd been wearing a jacket, might have warned of an attempt. "Nothin like that shit on the Tube, nothin at all . . . and cold . . . colder than you ever want to find out about. . . ." (31)

The comparison here to the Weatherpeople is a significant one; here we see the difference between underground groups, one in the service of opposition and disruption and one in the service of the Government oppressors. Though both are outside the recognized System of Time and History, one provides us with a sense of burgeoning collective and purposeful action, a new mode of approaching time and history, the other suggests a half life, void of all time and history, a frozen existence in the service of something perverted and invasive. Frenesi herself describes these years as her travels through "Midol America, because it

always felt like her period" (354). She accepts, even seizes Brock's usurpation of her because she believes it will offer her the same cover that she wanted in being Prairie's mom. In one of her many moments of reverie, she muses:

She understood her particular servitude as the freedom, granted to a few, to act outside warrants and charters, to ignore history and the dead, to imagine no future, no yet-to-be-born, to be able to go on defining moments only, purely, by the action that filled them. Here was a world of simplicity and certainty no acidhead, no revolutionary anarchist would ever find, a world based on the one and zero of life and death. Minimal, beautiful. (72)

The certainty that Frenesi craves, clearly, does not really exist. Her desire to live for the moment only without heeding the way in which moments and actions within moments are related is not a world of simplicity, but a fragile world of denial that is destined to collapse. As Oedipa learned in The Crying of Lot 49 and as Frenesi will have to learn here, there is more than the one and zero, the either-or, life or death, there are infinite patterns and possibilities in between which we must accommodate and live within; we cannot sacrifice the fragments for the illusion of a few "simple" wholes.

When Frenesi is unexpectedly kicked out of the System and erased from the government computer, she is released back into a society which has no shape and meaning for her.

Believing herself still subject to officially-ordered separation from her family and still subject in some tangential way to "Their" rules, she floats on the surface of America not a part of the System, but not able to return to any vestige of her previous life, merely existing in a kind of nightmare state reminiscent of Oedipa after she discovers that she has no place in this society. Alienated from everything she once believed to be safe and just barely becoming aware of her options, Oedipa belongs nowhere, but struggles to create a context for herself. Frenesi does not even know how to begin to create such a context for herself primarily because she believes herself to be locked out of every conceivable option. Brock has apparently forsaken her and kicked her out of his sphere, DL has disappeared, and her family (Sasha, Zoyd, Prairie) are closed off to her. And it is with growing panic that she realizes that her "escape" fifteen years earlier has at best been temporary and illusory, that time and history are waiting for her and she must still make an accommodation with them. While trying to cash an invalid government check, Frenesi awakens to what has always been her reality:

It was there, gazing down a long aisle of frozen food, out past the checkout stands, and into the terminal black glow of the front windows, that she found herself entering a moment of undeniable clairvoyance, rare in her life but recognized. She understood that the Reaganomics ax blades were swinging everywhere, that she and Flash were no longer exempt, might easily be abandoned already

to the upper world and any unfinished business in it that might now resume . . . as if they'd been kept safe in some time-free zone all these years but now, at the unreadable whim of something in power, must reenter the clockwork of cause and effect. (90)

If at this moment, she is no longer exempt from history, she later realizes that she was never exempt from her past. She had been content to "go along in a government-defined history without consequences, never imagining it could end, turn out to be only another Reaganite dream on the cheap, some snoozy fantasy about kindly character actors in FBI suits . . ." (354) because to a large extent it relieved her of responsibility. When she is released, however, she must face the reality that she is responsible and that she must act on those responsibilities. This is not something that Frenesi faces easily. Upon her surfacing, she continues to try to hide, uncertain what her position is in relation to Brock or the government. She lays low, waitressing in Las Vegas, waiting perhaps for another official proclamation or seizure which may save her from taking her own action. Instead what she receives is a visit from Hector, eager to recruit her for his movie, to lure her back to Vineland, and to see her reunited with her family. But Hector does not strong arm her or exert the kind of force she has come to expect; instead he gives her information, information on which she will have to act. He tells her that the deal between Brock and Zoyd (and herself) is void, that Brock has

violated the terms and she is free to return to her family. Of course, we must remember that Brock, being in control has never really been bound by any terms, he is free to do whatever he wants, as DL tells Prairie (266), and Hector's spin on the situation is purely self-serving. He also gives her a photo of Prairie. The decision concerning what to do with this information, however, he leaves to her. Hector trusts in Frenesi's deep seated need to confront her past and to reconcile it with her present. So he leaves her airline tickets to Vineland and a way back to herself, if she so chooses.

Hector is not the only one who has faith in Frenesi's ability to make such a choice. DL, in a conversation with Prairie before their own return to Vineland, states:

I never believed your mom ever sat down and deliberately chose anything. Same time, I always believed in her conscience. There were days when my personal ass was depending on that conscience. You don't just put that on Pause and walk away, sooner or later, when you don't expect it, it comes back on, hollerin' and blarin' at you.  
(266)

Now, at this point, Frenesi must choose and DL, Prairie, and Hector are all dependent on her reawakening conscience to lead her in the direction of Vineland. Frenesi's entry back into history, back to a redeemable perspective on organization and opposition is crucial not only for her own future, but also for her daughter's, and is significant for

the image it helps to build of a viable, living, working, counterforce within an established society.

Frenesi indeed finds herself returning to Vineland attending the annual family reunion in the mountains, accompanied by her current husband, Flash, and their son, Jason. Here she has the opportunity to reconnect with her family; she mingles and merges with aunts, uncles, cousins, and with Sasha, Zoyd, and Prairie. The Traverse-Becker reunion provides the perfect setting for the rebuilding which is necessary, precisely because it enables Frenesi to view and understand the legacy of her family and her time from a distinctive perspective. Fighting her whole adult life for the kinds of freedom from manipulation, oppression, and government history making as she has, has indoctrinated her in the harsher realities of the "Us-Them" game and has left her practically drained of illusions or faith in any better world. She feels beaten up and deflated much like Oedipa at the crisis of her quest or like Stencil or Slothrop when they realize the weight of the forces acting against them. She returns to Vineland, then, not as a crusader, but as a numbed victim still being pursued, pursued by Brock, pursued by Hector, pursued by memories of her lost family. And what she finds up there in the mountains is an open community, prepared to accept her back into its swirl and peculiar definition of order.

The reunion itself, though at first a rather surprising



conclusion for a novel and novelist so dedicated to the difficulty of making coherent stories out of narrative fragments, actually brings us to an apt and interesting perspective on the experiences of Zoyd, Prairie, and Frenesi. What we are left with is positive in an unprecedented way, as Prairie becomes the first Pynchon quester to actually come face to face with the ostensible object of the quest, and the reunion becomes an image of order within chaos, an image of a preterite, counterforce, counterculture collective operating successfully as it eludes the structures of control and manipulation represented by Brock Vond's last-ditch attempt to kidnap Prairie. The ending seems to present the legacy of America that Oedipa courageously fought to reveal so many years ago.

Prairie returns to Vineland with DL, having discovered her mother. Through the films, the files, and the memories, she has put together a remarkably thorough picture of her mother's actions, desires, motivations, and mistakes. She returns, not certain anymore that she wants to meet Frenesi, somewhat disillusioned and confused herself. But before reaching Vineland itself, DL takes Prairie to Shade Creek, a Thanatoid village just outside of the city. Here Prairie receives yet another perspective on her mother's past and on the different ways of handling history. The Thanatoids are a community of souls, neither alive nor dead, unable to proceed on to the next world until they have settled scores

and reached a kind of peace in this world. They are another image of counterforce or preterite beings who have assigned themselves the task of disrupting people's worldly lives to remind them of the wrongs done to those who have tried to reach less power-structured relationships with events in history. Thanatoids feel little beyond the need for revenge and spend their "time" waiting for the data necessary to enable them to pursue their aims among the still living (170). This is an established community, with its own rhythms, culture, and ritual. They have regular meetings (The Thanatoid Roast), their own radio frequencies, their own shrinks (or karmic adjusters), and their own villages established in forgotten ghost towns and logging camps in the California hills. They support each other's strikes against the System and the paths which have brought each to a Thanatoid existence.

Each year the community chose to honor a Thanatoid old-timer whose karma had kept up a suitably steady rhythm of crime and countercrime over the generations . . . no resolution of even a trivial problem in sight. Thanatoids didn't exactly 'enjoy' these long resentful tales of injustice modulating, like a ballpark organ riff, to further injustice--but they honored them (219).

Not ready to cross completely to the other side until they have wreaked whatever revenge or disruption they have planned or until they have achieved whatever accommodation they need to with their past, Thanatoids live a truly

marginalized existence outside of all officially recognized systems. But, the Thanatoids are not completely isolated. They maintain contacts with the counterculture figures who, in the terms of this novel, can recognize their karmas. Zoyd's band plays at a Thanatoid dance at a Thanatoid bar, DL and Takeshi meet regularly with Thanatoids, Vato and Blood, two tow truck drivers, routinely help Thanatoid victims out of their particular disasters.

It is no surprise, then, that when taken to Shade Creek, where DL and Takeshi run a "karmic adjustment business," Prairie meets Thanatoid Weed Atman, "still a cell of memory, of refusal to forgive" (365). Weed explains to Prairie the life of a Thanatoid and the kind of malicious acts he has committed against her mother, but admits that with the help of Takeshi and DL it has become easier: "Still a danger of collapsing into a single issue, turning into your case, obsessed with those who've wronged you, with their continuing exemption from punishment. . . . Sometimes I lose it, sure . . . But lately, I've just been letting her be . . . figuring, maybe forget, but never forgive" (365). Prairie and Weed become close friends, becoming an item around Shade Creek, rarely talking about Frenesi, but clearly offering each other something necessary.<sup>7</sup>

The perspective Prairie receives here is important, both for her and for the reader. Beneath the official America promulgated by those in power and arranged so as not

to be too disturbing, lies a growing and vocal and visible counterculture dedicated to revealing the manipulations, the distortions of reported reality. As this "group" becomes increasingly strong, it becomes vulnerable to the weakness of organization and its own politics. Beneath it, however, lies a further underground, which seems dedicated to keeping their more visible counterparts "honest." The Thanatoids, hovering in their not-life, not-death continuum, indeed, can be viewed as a kind of communal version of the scattered Slothrop in Gravity's Rainbow, disrupting the surface, but not visible to those locked into the System. Pynchon, here, plays off of both sides of his narrative, showing us the dissolution of a counterculture community done in by its own tendency to organize and the resolution of a new reconstitution with no specific shape, only a continuing agenda of resistance to oppression.

The reality of such a network is imaged at the Traverse-Becker reunion in the hills of Vineland, a reunion which draws together all the major characters of this novel; at its center stands, not Frenesi, but Prairie, the one who gathers the fragments to her--Frenesi, Zoyd, Sasha, Hub, Weed, Flash, Jason, Brock--and who does not bring them together in peace and harmony, but who allows each to remain in his/her own orbit, coming together and separating at will, while still making a provisional kind of sense out of it all. In attending the reunion, Prairie in effect

announces not her completed quest for her mother, but her completed quest for her own place in history and her relationship vis-a-vis this history and her family, and the forces which wish to repress both. Prairie has learned not merely a set of facts about her mother and grandmother, but has absorbed a spirit integral to both. She has received a legacy from the women around her, a legacy which leads her to the reunion, to resistance, to a respect for the middle which she can now more fully understand and into which she can more confidently place herself. Prairie, in the terms of David Porush, has transcended the ontological and the epistemological in acceptance of the deeper truth of experience and the ineffable over any cooption or coercion by System. Prairie is not, as Elizabeth Hinds suggests, "lost, unable to make the necessary connections to resolve her history" (98), but has recognized that such constructed or political connections are not conducive to meaning or authentic community. She chooses the reunion, she chooses Weed as her friend over any easy cooption by Brock.

The descriptions of the reunion all suggest flow, random but ordered movement, and communication. The following section portrays the kind of chaotic organization the reunion promotes, an image of "community" resisting organization and keeping itself invulnerable to the tactics and strategies of control.

[Prairie] followed them to a beer and soda cooler beneath an oak tree, where [she and Frenesi] would sit and hang out for hours, spinning and catching strands of memory, perilously reconnecting--as all around them the profusion of aunts, uncles, cousins, and cousins' kids and so on, themselves each with a story weirder than the last, creatively improved over the years, came and went, waving corncobs in the air, dribbling soda on their shirts, swaying or dancing to the music of Billy Barf and the Vomitones, while the fragrance of barbecue smoke came drifting down from the pits. . . ." (368)

Prairie and Frenesi, significantly, do not sit and create a history for themselves, they do not "catch up on the past," they spin and catch strands, tentatively learning each other, and they do this in the midst of constant movement, noise, and narrative. They do not lose each other in this, however; they are each discovering a new way to relate to history and each other in the middle of the profusion of people, music, flow. It is an effort undertaken without pressure to resolve or solve, but only to connect and to recognize the "perilousness" of the connection. As Walter Slade states, the Becker-Traverses form "a loose and quarreling federation that cherishes its own chaos, the only kind of community, Pynchon implies, that is worthy of the name" (132).

Indeed, Vineland takes a large step towards answering the question which Gravity's Rainbow poses about how to connect meaningfully with others on the interface, and the answer lies precisely in this image of "loose federation" committed to renewed and continual struggle as it gropes

towards an accommodation of the fragments and a new definition of legitimate history.<sup>8</sup> And the sense of purpose and connection achieved at this gathering renders the opposition impotent; indeed it seemingly kills it, for now at least. Brock Vond's attempt to disrupt this gathering and rapture Prairie away, reimprison Frenesi in some new perverted scheme, and stick it once more to Zoyd and now to Flash as well, is itself disrupted. Brock, with all his hardware and all his supposed power, cannot infiltrate the reunion, a "structure" which does not partake in segmentation, linearity, system, perversion, or vague myth. Its very resistance to conventional notions of organization makes it invulnerable to the tactics of Brock and all he represents. Indeed, it seems the collective has found "regimental strength enough" to "mess with Them" and remain standing. As Brock's funding and helicopter lines are simultaneously reeled in, he yells: "Asshole, they're all together, one surgical strike, we can't just let them get away. . . ." (377), but it is precisely because they are all together that he cannot reach them.

True, his last minute loss of funding and the order to turn the helicopter back to the hanger strikes us as an authorial copout, a resolution based on a most convenient invocation of *Deus ex Machina*, but this "solution" proves only provisional. After being so preemptively removed, Brock commandeers another helicopter and tries to return to

the scene, but he suffers a mysterious accident and we see him escorted to "the other side" by Thanatoid tow truckers Vato and Blood. Brock's final demise is a Thanatoid victory, but also a victory for those in the pasture. We even see a similar victory, a similar tentative peace for DL and Takeshi, who have remained in the Thanatoid village of Shade Creek. Though the renegotiation of the no-sex clause and their movement from death to life to love may not guarantee permanent invulnerability to the "unrelenting forces" which pursue all who opt out of the System, it does allow them an edge, an edge carved out of their connection to each other and a dedication to defiance:

But at least on the night Brock Vond was taken across the river, the night of no white diamonds or even chicken crank, the foreign magician and his blond tomato assistant, out stealing a couple innocent hours away from the harsh demands of their Act, with its imitations of defiance, nightly and matinees, of gravity and death, only found themselves slowed to a paranoid dancer's embrace at the unquiet center of the roadhouse party crowd, with scarcely a 'Toid here in fact noticing them, so many kept pouring in, so much was going on. (383-84)

DL and Takeshi, like the diverse collective at the reunion suggest the possibility of a successful negotiation of America as long as one accepts and respects time and uncertainty and as long as one's attention does not lull beyond the justified hour or two.

DL and Takeshi's dance "slowed to a paranoid dancer's"



embrace at the unquiet center of the roadhouse party crowd should be viewed on a continuum of dances in Pynchon: from Oedipa's confusion and discomfort in the middle of the deaf-mute dance in San Francisco, to Pirate and Katje's tentative dance as they are being brought into the preterite community, to this dance of true partners who define a silent, almost calm center in the middle of Thanatoid celebration, we are increasingly brought into a delineated middle. Alan Wilde argues that Vineland offers little in place of the rhetoric of possibility in The Crying of Lot 49. Where the earlier novel provided a hedged promise of an alternative world hanging behind the constellated ones and zeros, here, he states, we are given conflicting, equivocal messages, an evasion of the tensions created ("Love and Death In and Around Vineland, USA" 180). However, a close look at this reunion scene and at DL and Takeshi reveals the degree to which we are taken beyond the suggestion of an alternative world and into its midst. We have entered a world of fractal complications, of people's best chances for light. We, like Prairie, become initiates and are invited to witness a direct image of collective viability.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the keynote of the reunion enforces this and reminds us of the novel's and its very purpose: to celebrate the bond of Sasha's parents Jess and Eula and their continuing struggle against those who oppress. Jess delivers his traditional speech, a quote from Emerson in support of the

principles which keep them all together:

"'Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil.' . . . "And if you don't believe Ralph Waldo Emerson," added Jess, "ask Crocker 'Bud' Scantling" the head of the Lumber Association whose life of impunity for arranging to drop the tree on Jess had ended abruptly down on 101 not far from here when he'd driven his week-old BMW into an oncoming chip truck at a combined speed of about 150. It'd been a few years now, but Jess still found it entertaining. (369)

Whether Thanatoid, counterforce, counterculture, preterite or loose federation, Jess' speech supports the notion that the dispossessed--even despite themselves--will continue asserting themselves against a System which wants to ignore the fragments which constitute the fabric of its life or reconstitute them in a constructed narrative presented as History.

The newest initiate, Prairie, enters this pursuit fully armed with a respect for people's stories, a suspicion of easy answers and those who hold out promises of immediate transcendent revelation, and a relinquished fear of what people like Brock can do to her. Not only has she resisted his first helicopter advance, repelling him back into the sky, but she herself returns to the grove and calls him back to her. Like Roger Mexico at the Firm dinner party, Prairie

walks into the arms of the opposition and shows her strength. Prairie returns to her sleeping bag in the grove and calls Brock to her, tempting and tantalizing him, "You can come back," she whispered, waves of cold sweeping over her, trying to gaze steadily into a night that now at any turn could prove unfaceable" (384). But the reunion gathering continues to spin and flow, and the Thanatoids act; all is in confluence as Brock is neutralized forever. Other Brocks, to be sure, will attempt their own controls, but at least on this night this novel gives us a glimpse of the kind of grouping, the kind of opposition which may prove stronger, a chaotic organization within which individuals can live and act and survive the terror of history.

What we see in Vineland is a logical development of Pynchon's concerns with history, understanding, and the ability to place oneself within a coherent context on the interface. Through saturation, need, real possibility, or fantasy, Pynchon has brought the once dispossessed, his earlier images of counterforce to a point where they are able to provide a certain force of their own and the invisible has been made visible. Vineland does have formal closure which distinguishes it clearly from the other works; nevertheless, it remains thematically unresolved, making it a part of Pynchon's ongoing explorations. If we feel that we have received answers, it is only because these characters' have achieved a degree of comfort with their less

defined realm, a realm which allows them to see and to act in a less rigid, more constructive (not constructed) way.

Prairie's quest is concerned with history and causality as much as Stencil's, Oedipa's, or Slothrop's; her impulse is consistent with theirs, and yet we are faced with a significantly different outcome. What allows this is what we must pay attention to in Vineland. Examined from the perspective of Pynchon's other works and once again with careful attention to his handling of character, we can see a newly crafted but equally powerful statement on fractal history, one which enables us to understand how we can forge meanings and even be content in the middle.

## II

The characters in Pynchon's early works are frightened, threatened, and terrorized as they are unable to specifically locate or definitively name the forces which have destroyed their notions of history, historical process, and their own historical place. Though names are assigned--V., Trystero, The Firm--they have no social or intersubjective context. They are themselves constructs, established to temporarily relieve the characters of their developing sense of contingency in an even more contingent world. But what Stencil, Oedipa, and Slothrop to different degrees come to realize is that history is a pressure upon us which cannot be relieved through naming or conventional scholarly means. The narratives they try to construct,

themselves deconstruct, and V, Trystero, the Rocket, the self Firm increasingly become recognized as created entities, the construction of which are not essential for exploring or understanding the fabric and fragments of history.

Vineland provides a large step towards such a serious exploration. Underneath its humor, energy, and humanity lurks a conscious, pulsing drive to learn how to live with and within the realities of history while constantly guarding against the tendency to place events, people, or actions in calcified, analyzed terms. Like Zoyd's last jump through the window and the burning of the 24fps film archives, like Slothrop in the moments of his scattering, each of these characters is released out of a defining frame and into a piece of a pattern, a symmetry, they may never--or may never need to--understand. The force of Jess Traverse's speech and of the novel as a whole, is to suggest that there are or may be interior symmetries, symmetries that can provide support, friendship, even meaning if we can accept them without worrying about their place in any larger System.

Indeed, we may not even be able to see or recognize the interior symmetries until the need for, the belief in, linear symmetries is abandoned. The surviving characters in this novel do not need to torture themselves to create a Story, a Pattern, a Whole; they do not need to sit up nights

over letters, journals, historic documents, memories, or even films trying to wrest an acceptable coherency in order to continue living. They do not need to fear time or avoid time or even value time if they accept the patterns they are playing now and "simply" wait for the next set of patterns to come along. The best we can do, this fiction suggests, is to grope within the fragment we are in and to resist efforts to devalue the contingent by systematizing it.

"History" is merely its own discrete pattern, not a machine for manipulation, and once the characters begin to achieve a glimmer of this, they relinquish their fear and can re-create themselves. Again, we return to Eigenvalue's evaluation of history in V. discussed above on page 39. Being able to play the fragments, to accept symmetries without struggling for Symmetry is similar to being situated in your own gather of the rippled fabric. We can speculate, if we want, that there are other gathers even if we cannot measure them or see into them, and each gather assumes its own importance outside of any imposed continuity.

In Thomas Pynchon's most recent novel we are presented with a network of people all moving towards the same point, but more in a way which images chaos--calculated acts which intersect, build, and disintegrate in unpredictable but nonetheless logical ways--than of any organized effort to join forces for a common goal. Indeed, as we have watched the characters struggle with the task of finding Frenesi and

as we have watched how they gather at the reunion, we are reminded of the wild hairspray can in The Crying of Lot 49, which seems to bounce uncontrollably without a clear path or method, yet is also strangely regular or methodical in its release of energy. The counterforce has always eschewed rationality and order ("They're the rational ones. We piss on their rational arrangements" [639], as Osbie Feel tells Roger Mexico in Gravity's Rainbow), and collectively Thomas Pynchon's novels move American literature towards a ground from which non-narrativized non-mythified histories, fractal realities, and characters who play the patterns rather than play the Pattern Makers can be recognized and valued.

## NOTES

1. Alan Wilde, for example, states that Vineland's insistent suggestion of possibly redemptive dimensions beyond the 2-dimensional world represented lacks context or support. He goes on to argue that the move toward reconciliation and resolution defies the narrative movement of the novel and defies the mood Pynchon works to create in his fiction. He unconvincingly examines the end of the novel to discover evidence out of which the unity suggested can be denied. Elaine Safer calls the end of Vineland an "absurd" end of a quest, and examines why Pynchon would want to encourage the reader that the book ends positively. N. Katherine Hayles claims that due to the suggestion of recovery, Vineland operates on a diminished scale.

2. David Cowart, in his essay "Attenuated Postmodernism," compares this to the situation in The Crying of Lot 49. If Oedipa's is a story of consciousness being raised, he argues, then Vineland reveals how America has allowed an "earlier passion for justice to go dead, to be coopted by a conservative backlash and an attendant dissipation of liberal energy" (74).

3. The same conclusion is offered by Prairie's boyfriend in the final scene of the novel:

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

4. Elizabeth Hinds makes a similar point about the way in which we are lured into reading Prairie's narrative of her mother as fact:

"Narrative transitions into [the histories of Frenesi and Sasha] are seamless. Even though Prairie has told the computer "goodnight," the recounting of the history proceeds until, some 30 pages later, there is Prairie again, sitting in front of the computer screen. No "frames" indicate moves from one story to another; they are simply placed alongside



one another, at such distances that we forget we have left Prairie behind looking at a picture. With this technique, Pynchon reaches beyond the use of film-(or photo-) narrative, which requires the black space between individual frames, to a typological and seamless rendering of events as occupying not contiguous but identical space and time" (99).

What Hinds argues coupled with Prairie's own response to her film viewing further supports a view that the desire to see Prairie's interpretation of these films as "Story" or History is more felt by the reader than by Prairie herself. Prairie recognizes the nature of the "limited visits mediated by the projector and screen" to a greater degree and more willingly than the reader who wants to fill in the black space between frames with narrated History.

5. David Porush suggests that for Frenesi the film commune itself represents "the best of the sixties, the one perfect instant where sorority, transcendence, a righteous cause and art collaborate" ("Purring into Transcendence" 100).

6. N. Katherine Hayles offers a slightly different perspective on Frenesi's return to Brock. She makes a distinction between "the kinship system," networks of family and friends that connect, and "the snitch system," networks of government agents that seek to gain information and control the population. These two systems, she argues come together in Frenesi's relationship with Brock. Frenesi's continued (or renewed) seduction "marks her slippage from the kinship to the snitch system. . . . Attempting to re-establish connection with a history she has lost, Frenesi tries to reenter the kinship system by leaving Brock, marrying Zoyd, and giving birth to Prairie." Her inability to be really a mom "makes it virtually certain that she will return to the snitch system" ("Who Was Saved?" 80-81).

Hayles' analysis is helpful and apt; however, as we see most particularly in this novel, the kinship system is viewed more appropriately as an unsystematized network, a looser confederation which would not be prone to the calcification, the linearity, the cooption associated throughout Pynchon with the term "system." Networks may not be vulnerable, where systems most certainly are. The distinction between these two terms is an important one.

7. N. Katherine Hayles argues that Weed Atman's conversion to Thanatoid marks an ambivalence in the novel's recuperative spirit. Weed's spirit like the spirit of the 1960s, she claims, is irrecoverable ("Who Was Saved?" 88). But this is strongly disputed by the narrative. Weed himself says he is beginning to let go of his need for revenge, thanks to DL and Takeshi's karmic adjustment, and

his friendship with Prairie suggests that he is able to and will pass on the spirit of his time--much as she also learned this spirit from the various data available to her--and that his spirit is certainly recoverable and redeemable.

8. The term "legitimate history" refers again to Elizabeth Hinds and her discussion of historical method in which she reviews Hayden White's and Roland Barthes' definitions of "legitimate history" as "story" or narration, that which can and is given narrative closure and can be shown to have had a plot all along. ("Visible Tracks, Historical Method, and Thomas Pynchon's Vineland" 95).

9.. These images of provisional victory and of possibility are further reinforced by the return of Prairie and Zoyd's dog, Desmond, who was driven away early in the novel by Vond when the house was repossessed. Desmond comes to Prairie in the grove in the very last scene of the novel after Vond's and Prairie's third attempted encounter (see my discussion below), "his face full of blue jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes" (385). On the opening page of the novel, Blue Jays are associated with the unrelenting forces which control Zoyd:

Zoyd Wheeler awoke . . . with a squadron of blue jays stomping around on the roof. In his dream these had been carrier pigeons from someplace far across the ocean, landing and taking off again one by one, each bearing a message for him. . . He understood it to be another deep nudge from forces unseen, almost surely connected with that letter that had come along with his last mental-disability check. . ." (3)

The closing image of the vanquished blue jays clearly correlates to the vanquishment of Brock Vond and forces unseen.

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But if anything is certain it is that no story is ever over, for the story which we think is over is only a chapter in a story which will not be over, and it isn't the game that is over, it is just an inning, and that game has a lot more than nine innings. When the game stops it will be called on account of darkness. But it is a long day.

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