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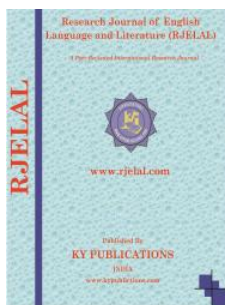
VISION OF LIFE IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF THOMAS PYNCHON

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Pynchon (1937-), the author of eleven highly imaginative and intellectually suggestive fictional works of the post-war era and recipient of Faulkner Award (1964), Rosenthal Memorial Award(1967), National Book Award (1974), and American Academy Howels medal (1975), is chiefly known as the teller of tales of the psychotic underground of modern imagination.

Pynchon's complex novels feature enormous casts of strange characters whose interrelated misadventures and parody signify the chaos and indeterminacy of modern civilization. The remarkably reclusive author of *V* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *vineland* (1990), and *Mason & Dixon* (1997) has established his reputation as the most important American novelist now writing.

In presenting his themes Pynchon shows himself to be unusually ingenious in technique, though this ingenuity is not widely appreciated. Intermingling of historical elements with the purely fictitious, keeping obscure the identity of the narrator, willful disruption or narrative consistency, use of multiple points of view, impersonation of real characters, intellectual and emotional interference of automata in human life are some of the techniques that Pynchon employs. Though ostensibly a novel of quest for meaning, the author has employed here methods calculated to defeat his characters lest they should succeed in seeing too clearly.

In *V*, Pynchon controls meaning, by keeping obscure the connections between events, and by placing his narrator in competition with his characters. The characters, in their own right, take an ambivalent attitude toward learning the meaning of their experience. They are at once yearning to make connections and afraid that they might make them.

The novel *V* might be understood as an elaboration of Pynchon's spy-thriller "Under the Rose", a short-story published in 1961. In the novel, the author has recast the unitary omniscient point of view of "Under the Rose" into over elaborate multiple points of view, which accentuate the

difficulty of separating historical incidents from the purely fictitious ones.

The narrator's trustworthiness is consistently destabilized by dream, disguise, and poetic license. Towards the end, the observer's identity is totally wiped out and he becomes merely a possible vantage point. Acquaintance with the apparent structural pattern of the novel is therefore essential for a better grasp of the themes of the novel and the author's unique vision.

The treatment of *V*'s structure becomes awfully difficult owing to its vastness and intricacy. The labyrinth in *V* is the gigantic one of European history since the First World War some of the events

of the novel took place years before the birth of the quester. For example, Herbert Stencil was born two years after the events in Egypt in connections with the Fashoda crisis (1898 – 1899). Stencil really began the quest several years after the major events had taken place. A serious perusal of his dead father's journals spurs Stencil to involve in an unending quest for sorting out the mystery behind V. and V. herself, though ultimately unknowable, appears in disguise on several occasions in history, before her final grotesque epiphany in Malt during the World War II. Stencil's tiresome meandering and futile groping through the labyrinthine network of the novel's streets can be read as a representation of everyman's pursuit of truth.

Pynchon maintains severe tension, not only within the characters but also between the characters who try to grasp meanings by making connections. And the narrator is calling these meanings in to question, not by denial, but by comic multiplication of connections. In critics perspective, justification of this tension lies in the vision the novel is trying to suppress (21). The darkness, complexity, and extensiveness of the secret subterranean passages as well as the conspiracies can dishearten the reader. Yet, throughout the dimly lit walls of the underground sewers along with the dirt and filth of modern life, Pynchon presents also hardly legible hieroglyphic messages, which might point to the possibility of an escape for the modern man.

Three narrative strands can be traced in V. two of them – Benny Profane's and Herbert Stencil's are in the present tense, while the third, focusing upon Victoria Wren, is over by 1942, and consequently in the past tense. The Profane and Stencil cycle alternated with each other, setting the tempo of the novel. Initially the two present tense stories appear to have little to do with each another. It is the manner in which the three story lines are woven together which gives V. its special character as a novel of comic discontinuity.

Pynchon employs the first story-line, which apparently narrates the meanderings of Benny Profane, to depict the aimlessness and lethargy of the younger generation of the post war period.

Benny's wandering from Norfolk to New York City and finally to Malte, has a very important role to play in relating characters to each other and in establishing the novel's themes.

In V. the second label of yo-yo draws the reader's attention to the peculiarity of his movements. In fact Profane is one of Pynchon's typical "preterite" figures who are so much at the mercy of chance. He involves in a lot of absurd activities: "But things do what they do, and this is why Profane was pissing at the sun" (26). He makes a minimal effort to resist this by travelling backwards and forwards on the Time Square Grand Central shuttle in New York, and later on the Staten Island Ferry, one of the examples of Yo-Yoing. "He is a Yo-Yo, Jose said" (38-39). Since Profane has no goal and directions, he Yo-Yoes. Benny Profane's aimless wandering is an indication of the threatening hopelessness pervading in the modern society. Pynchon is especially concerned with modern man's conviction of his lack of identity he is terrifyingly aware that he has no real self, no real authenticity and no real creative life in the midst of the conflicting tensions of the urban life that surrounds him.

After Benny's expulsion from the navy he gets employment as an assistant salad man at Schlozhauer's Trocadero, nine miles outside Liberty, New York. Soon he loses his job, and wandering becomes his occupation. He is not on an obvious quest, as he has no apparent direction and goal. He does not make any effort to seek out or to avoid a group of friends from his old Navy destroyer *The Scaffold*, or another group known as the Whole Sick Crew.

The members of the Whole Sick Crew are lazy and irresponsible youngsters who sprawl about New York City, and spend their time leisurely in a bar, the Rusty Spoon. A typical figure would be Fergus Mizolydian, the Irish American Jew who claims to be the laziest living creature in New York. He has become an extension of his TV set by connecting its switches to his forearm. Pynchon uses absurd names for the members of the crew, and the other minor characters. The names might personify a function like that of Stencil. Or represent a

commercial product like Teflon, or reflect the character of the person holding the name like Slab suggesting inertia.

The general tendency of these grotesque names is to push all the characters back into their environment so that they become animated extensions of their surroundings with very little of humanity in them. Terry Caesar points out that Pynchon seems to parody the very act of naming; making it virtually impossible to believe that there is an identity behind them. The grotesque behavior of his New York characters, their absurd names and roles, only seem absurd if we expect the human and the natural. Pynchon uses absurd names, works through absurd images, and specializes in negative effects, to depict what has degenerated in modern man. The characters dialogue and actions reflect images of cultural decadence and moral atrophy of humanity. In fact, Pynchon moralizes using parody and burlesque as his weapons.

The New York characters are filled with references to images, which are indicative of the fact that humanity is doomed to be reduced to inert matter. The gradual atrophy and prosthesis of humanity are suggested by Pynchon's repeated comparison of human to mechanical processes and by his sarcastic demonstration how inanimate objects overpower characters and reduce them to objects. Profane, the schlemiel, drifts through the mechanical and inanimate landscape of contemporary society, a world in which "millions of inanimate objects are being produced brand-new every week" (148). In compliance with the underlying theory of entropic drift, Pynchon presents a rare and apparently absurd kind of human interaction with an automaton. He seems to condemn human cruelty and pokes fun at man's indiscriminate LISC of scientific knowledge. The new York characters in general reflect the tense atmosphere of temptations, infidelity, violence, monotony of sexual life, and moral degradation in the western society.

As a committed novelist of the contemporary era, Pynchon is particularly clever in demonstrating the ways in which popular art forms, films and advertisements can invade, dominate and

degenerate the society. Pynchon's New Yorkers engage in constant imitation of the images projected by the American media and consequently reduce themselves to objects. He pokes fun at the adverse impact of consumerism and the harmful influence of the media by making his characters constantly imitate the images projected by the American media. The Crew, who do not appear to possess any authentic identity of their own, are presented as the ultimate examples of their process. At one point Rooney Winsome, a New York record agent reflects indignantly on the current Davy Crockett Craze, which is sweeping the country.

Stencil and Profane, the two streams of narrative material mingle frequently throughout the novel and finally flow together in chapter Sixteen ("Valetta"). Their relationship continues until Stencil absconds to Sweden leaving Profane marooned on Malta. In the course of the story, Stencil gathers a great deal of information about V. But when it appears that he might discover the meaning of what he seeks, he begins to doubt the sense of his quest and comes very close to acknowledging that Fortune has more to do with it than anything. Obsession and drunkenness submerge his doubts; however, he remembers the dossier he has read.

The trio reach Valletta after comic adventures against obstacles typical of a mythic hero's quest. In any case, Paola too has desired to reach there to find her destiny. Within the framework of allusions, Malta provides some safety like the 'red rock' in the first section of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In the wake of the Suez Crisis of 1956, Malta could be compared to a fuming volcano.

In Malta, Stencil gathers some information on V. from Paola's father Fausto Maijstral. 'But Pynchon presents always the quest and the goal of the quest as absurd and disconnected. He uses the quest as a background to project the present predicament. Through the words of Fausto he describes the contemporary world as a physically and spiritually broken world. "A street we are put at the wrong end of, for reasons best known to the agents who put us there... But a street we must walk"(324). In these words of Fausto, the author projects the helplessness, the skepticism and the

uncertainties that haunt and baffle man the decadence of the age. V. is killed by the falling of a beam in an air raid during the siege of Malta. This sinister figure is constantly associated with death and the description of her death is one of the most grotesque scenes of the whole novel. Fausto finds the Bad Priest in a cellar being literally taken to pieces by a group of children. He gives a detailed account of the process of dismantling. The figure retains only a horrifying resemblance of humanity. The hat, glass eye with the iris in the shape of a clock, intestines of parti-coloured silk, gay balloons, a rococo heart, ivory comb, the artificial limbs and teeth are associated with V. The sinister figure had even physically incorporated lifelessness / inanimateness to the extent possible. The presence of the inanimate signifies the dominance of the powers of evil.

In the third narrative strand V. appears under a number of assumed names and disguises. The six sections of the novel dealing with V. varies great reliability. The author highlights here the experiences of uncertainty and the quotidian. The narrative is through reconstructions of Stencil has gathered various evidences that at least partly unravel the mystery.

In the context of V.'s love affair, Pynchon explores the different manifestations of the theme of decadence both at the individual and at the societal level. Besides being a victim of incest, lesbianism and narcissism, Melanie, becomes a fetish or sex object. Her perverted love with the mysterious woman V. leads to her unfortunate death during the performance of a dance at Theatre Vincent Castor in Paris. She died the very death she was supposed only to act on the stage. When it was time to perform the scene of the sacrifice of the virgin, two of the male dancers brought a long pole pointed at one end. Two of the others held the struggling virgin and pierced her with the pointed end of the pole. The entire male part of the company joined together to raise her on the pole while the females bewailed below. As the pole was erected, a terrible silence enwrapped the audience.

Perversion of love to sadistic sexuality, a server for of cultural decadence in the context of

Euro colonialism, gets a superb treatment in the entitled "Mondaugen's story".

At the outset of the story a further structural pattern within the Stencil/V. Chapters begins to emerge as it sketches the appearance of V. in South-West Africa as Vera Meroving in 1922. Rather than a thoroughly objective reporting of facts, Pynchon moves into the minds of characters involved in the action. In this subplot, Pynchon treats perversion of love to sadism and sadomasochism as the horrifying consequences of colonialism and racial discrimination.

Kurt Mondaugen, formerly and engineering student of the Technical University of Munich doing research on some mysterious radio signals, went to South-West Africa while it was under siege for two and a half months during a revolt of the native Bondels. South West Africa was one of the German colonies. Mondaugen set the information that Abraham Morris, the Bondelwaarts leader returning illegally from exile, had crossed the Orange. He reported the fact to Foppl, a rich expropriate farmer and true epicurean with a sadistic bent of mind. A party was in progress at Foppl's palatial villa, the best: fortress in the region, strong and easily defended (234). Foppl's villa resembled a typically closed system prone to develop entropic tendencies. Like the whole Sick Crew they closed themselves off from external experiences by the mindless activity of the party.

Pynchon describes the agonies of the African woman who were subjected to abominable slave labour and sexual exploitation under the German colonialists. There was a severe shortage of men. So the whites had to rely primarily on female labour, The white masters also sexually abused them. Physical labour as well as sexual labour exhausted them.

The themes already discernible in the historical sections of V. are colonialism, totalitarianism and violence. These themes are explicitly signaled by references to Germany. With the backdrop of Stencil's quest for V., Pynchon uses "Mondaugen's story" to depict the atrocities which the natives of South West Africa had to suffer under an oppressive Gennan regime as a result of colonial

usurpation. In fact he directs the beams of a blazing torch into the murky recesses of the "Dark Continent" to expose the cruelties of the whites. The very choice of the name 'Mondaugen' which literally means "moon eyes" is strikingly relevant in this context.

Like Stencil, throughout the novel Mondaugen in South West Africa is more an observer than a participant. Wondaugen asked himself: "was I being that successful a voyeur?" (258)). In fact, he realized that he was surrounded by decadence, a soul depression which must infest Europe.

The novel ends with an epilogue that defies the formal expectations like closure, summing up or resolution but rather relates the encounter of Sidney Stencil with Veronica Maganese in Malta in 1919, agitation in Malta, and finally Stencil's death. Sidney Stencil is found travelling on a xebec whose figurehead was Astarte. Through the epilogue, the author delineates some of Sidney Stencil's experiences, beliefs and above all his pessimistic vision. He had believed in social progress in youth, but grew cynical at sixty, as he could find only dead ends for himself as well as for the society. He even likened the human endeavor to ameliorate the society to painting the side of a sinking ship. He has alluded to the horrifying experiences of the First World War by referring to it as "the Armageddon which had brought no blessings and no gift of tongues" (461). The gist of his pessimistic vision is expressed in the notion of the world as a sick person who has contracted a fatal disease.

The reader, who associates himself with Herbert Stencil's quest, becomes conscious that the quest is simultaneously epistemological as well as metaphysical, though he does not ultimately reach anywhere. Besides making Stencil's search a quest for a metaphysical absolute, the narrator functions like a historian who crams everywhere with the "V" element defeating the meaning which Stencil tries to build up. He makes V, mean everything and thus nothing. The mysterious letter seems also to stand for the "V" of perspective. Lines made by lights on a receding street, the "V" of spread thighs, the V-note where the whole sick crew listens to jazz, Veronica

the sewer rat, the Venus of Botticelli's painting, the Virgin Mother, and so on. Besides, the bewildering multiplicity of V-words such as Vheissu, Via, Ponte Vecchio, Vaporetto, etc. catches the reader's eye. Mehemet's remark on Mara; "she shows up as a number of goddesses, minor deities. Disguise is one of her attributes" (462), is pertinently applicable to V. also. Like Stencil's father, the quester himself is found confronting dead ends both on the streets and in the underground sewers that have labyrinthine structure.

V. remains an insoluble riddle and Stencil's quest continues incessantly as the author leaves the work open ended, defying interpretation. But her presence in each place is associated with a state of war, riots, chaos, sieges or other political disturbances. Sidney Stencil recalls: "Riots was her element, as surely as this dark room, almost creeping with amassed objects" (487).

Despite the pervading atmosphere of darkness and pessimism depicted throughout the novel owing to the omnipresence of entropic maladies like aimlessness, laziness, drug abuse, drunkenness, deception, debauchery, infidelity, sexual assault, persecution, wars, and murder, one can trace at least a few stray instances of optimistic note strewn within it.

In fact, some of Pynchon's characters function like "local enclaves", against the general tendency of decadence. It seems that they disperse positive insights, which give meaning and purpose to life. Though a schlemiel, Benny Profane, is one who can also none, though rare, acts of compassion performed by Pynchon's characters. Chapter sixteen of the novel opens with the description of an act of sympathy by sailors going on liberty. The focus is on Pappy Hod, whose companions are worried about his mental health now that he is over intoxicated. They are in Malta, where Pappy had met and married Paola. Two of the Sailors accompany Pappy from bar to bar to take care of him.

Pynchon's depiction of Paola's regeneration from her fallen state of a whore's life to that of a lover and wife is a sign of salvation and hope in a world wallowing in the mire of transgression. In a society where age-old values are losing their

significance and savour, she keeps them. She cannot be cheated, and will not stoop to cheat her husband. She is calm and composed her father had prayed for her: "May you be only Paola, one girl: a single given heart, a whole mind at Paola, one girl: a single given heart, a whole mind at Peace"(314). By putting her through trails and tribulations of different sorts, Pynchon implies that she can lead others out as well, a Beatrice in truth. In *Thomas Pynchon*, Joseph Slade's view, "she is a frail bearer of redemption for the waste land" (103).

When Pappy Hod's mates get him back to the Scaffold's dock, Paola is waiting. She offers love to her husband, vows to be faithfully waiting for him an ivory comb as a token of her love. It is a relic of V., which Paola has obtained as she assisted the children disassemble the Bad Priest, the machine-woman. Probably Pynchon intends to say only that Paola is merely human, which is more than can be said for most of the other characters. She approaches life optimistically.

Among Pynchon's women characters, Rachel Owlglass is the one who cares for the downtrodden and helps them. She loves Profane with the deepest feelings, and even wants him to settle down in life with her. She criticizes Profane for being afraid of love, and sheds light on his behavior. She also helps the masochistic Esther who is sexually misused by Dr. Schoenmaker and the Whole Sick Crew.

In the midst of German perpetrators of cruelty in South West Africa, Mondaugen emerges as a benevolent character. Though he is from Munich, he does not like to have a share either in the decadence or in the soul-depression, which most of the European characters partake. He does not appreciate the excitement, which the other guests at Foppl's villa experience watching he cold-blooded butchery of the poor and the deprived.

It is significant that Mondaugen, rather than remaining a passive observer, or voyer makes a positive gesture of rejection of Fascism by leaving Foppl's villa. "Mondaugen this time withdrew, preferring at last neither to watch nor to listen"(278). After his escape from Foppl's villa, Mondaugen interacts sympathetically with the

Bondels. His journey with a Bondel who lost his wife, children and right arm, illustrates his commitment to the cause of the downtrodden: "As the sun climbed, he dozed on and off, his cheek against the Bodel's scarred back" (279).

Towards the end of the novel, Pynchon seems to disclose his vision of life indirectly through the mouth of Mehemet, the wise old captain of the xebec on which Sidney Stencil sailed to Malta. The epilogue of the novel opens with Mehenlet's story of a sailor painting the side of an abandoned sinking ship. Though the ship was becoming smaller as it sank gradually into the sea, the sailor never slackened his pace. He was not even distracted by howls and shouts of sailors travelling in other ships. "He never answered, merely continued dipping the brush in his earthen jar and slapping it smoothly on the Peri's creaking sides" (460). The message of Mehemet's story can be compared with Camus's vision as revealed in *The Plague*, where the members of the medical corps continue their mission relentlessly in spite of the pervading gloom and hopelessness. Exactly like the sinking ship, the world, with its human beings is also in a state of constant degeneration. Invariably the life of each human being is a movement from cradle to tomb. "Early and late we are in decay, "said Mehemet" (460). The image of a sailor, involved in the conscientious discharge of his duty despite desperate circumstances presents Mehemet's (Pynchon's) distinctive vision of optimism.

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