The Myth of the Mechanical Man in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*
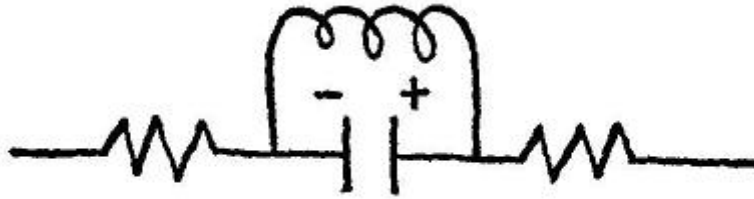
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The reader of Thomas Pynchon's first novel *V.* is forced into a process of categorizing characters and events in order to form a cohesive story out of the seemingly chaotic narrative. In doing so the reader mimics the human search for meaning in the real world: countless answers present themselves and occasionally some have to be abandoned. However imperfect, this process is necessary in establishing coherence. Qualities must be ascribed to the endless aspects of one's life. Like a novel each life has a beginning and an end but besides such basic facts it is all up to interpretation. *V.* demonstrates that the act of interpreting human life results in simplifications. If human behavior could be understood by a coherent system then that system would predict behavior. Humans would only fulfill the expectations of that system, like mechanisms. In the novel the above image of a mechanical man suggests that this may be where society is headed (Pynchon 436).

The image is the schematic for a band-pass filter, a tool that limits electronic signals to a useful midpoint. For instance, in radio technology a band-pass filter reduces high treble and low bass to remove static from a signal. The narrator in *V.* claims that the schematic is the origin of Kilroy, a graffiti image that was popular during World War II. During and after the war countless artists chose to secretly reproduce Kilroy all over the world, and it became legendary for showing up in unexpected places. The schematic is the lifeless product of some engineer. It achieves no greater significance when people reproduce it. Although each individual who paints a Kilroy is compelled by a separate

identity, full of convictions and compulsions that are purely his or her own, the marks

these artists leave on their world communicate pure cliché; in a sense passing their own

identities through a popular cultural filter. Name, nationality, personality; all are lost.

The image communicates nothing, and it is derived from coincidence. In *V.* Kilroy

represents a society that has come to rely upon superficial representations of self. That

society has also begun to resemble its own superficiality. Characters resemble

mechanisms when they fulfill the expectations of these superficial reductions.

The plot of *V.* is difficult to summarize. It is most easily divided between the

paths of Herbert Stencil and Ben Profane. Stencil is a quick change artist who searches

for the origin of "V." Stencil discovers the mark in his dead father's journal and decides

that it is significant. The portion of the novel that follows Stencil is entirely concerned

with his fruitless search. Profane is an ex-navy man spends his time drinking and

womanizing. Throughout the novel he is intent upon accomplishing nothing, and he is

pretty successful.

Part of the reason that the plot of *V.* is so difficult to grasp is that although the

setting is always in motion the focus remains on the individual. The author's style

imitates literary conventions, that direct action toward conclusion, while creating a

world that mimics the complexity and chaos of our own. Robert Newman mirrors this

assertion, writing that "[Pynchon] attacks the empirical determinacy that dominates the

western world view through his satire of characters that rely on it and through his own

violations of narrative convention" (Newman 8). The result is a story that seems to

bounce around arbitrarily while constantly hinting at some unspoken order, which

wears a number of disguises; among them V., WWII, cultural and literary theory.

Themes like these can all be written off as demonstrative of the false determinacy that

the author is satirizing. Although each thematic element contributes to a questioning narrative tone, "[. . .] Pynchon expresses the epistemological aspects of his theme chiefly through narrative technique and the manipulation of plot in the preceding Stencil/V. chapters" (Pearce 20). In order to grasp the author's thematic intent it is necessary to view these inborn conceits in terms of their ability to effectively characterize the structure of the novel.

The narrative structure of *V.* necessitates reductive logic, as the plot jets between decades and continents, introducing scores of characters and settings without losing momentum. Historical facts mix with fictional elements to produce a complex narrative detritus that conceals thematic significance beneath a considerable number of loose ends. Pynchon accompanies all of this with poetic flourishes and a sharp and ever present sense of humor. The critic Peter O'Connor describes the difficulty of grasping Pynchon's style: "*V.,* for the most part, is written in a straight-forward enough fashion, but one is constantly forced to wonder what anything has to do with anything else" (O'Connor 50). Indeed there are few indications of the connectivity between individual characters and events; at least few that survive analysis.

V. complicates critical analysis by manipulating popular literary conventions. This is apparent when the novel begins to imitate various genres. Kenneth Kupsch compares the narrative form of *V.* to a detective novel, writing that Pynchon intended "[. . .] to challenge basic assumptions and formulae of detective and historical fictions, while at the same time adhering to their most traditional demands [. . .]" (Kupsch 428, 249). This imitation is used to draw attention to the process of analysis, as Molly Hite explains: [the novel] "invites criticism that in its aims and methods is analogous to sleuthing" (Hite 49). The complexity of the novel causes the reader to become a

detective as such; discovering and assigning significance. This critical process tends to reduce characters and events until they seem to be pure literary mechanisms whose unveilings reflect "clues" of the author's intention (49). Pynchon parodies this sort of reductive analysis by naming characters after their most salient and reliable attributes. Moreover, such characters demonstrate awareness of their perfunctory tendencies. They consider and lament their nature as it causes them to resemble mechanism (as I will show when I analyze individual characters). These characters blend with the impalpable literary form as they simultaneously occupying roles as subjects and object signifiers.

The novel compares itself to a spy novel when Stencil decides to emulate his father's history in espionage, though he debases the practice: "cloak for a laundry sack, dagger to peel potatoes" (Pynchon 62). The story picks up a generation too late; the spy and the detective have simple direction, and though Stencil mimics the detective's search he does so without a clear goal. V. may not be something that he can discover at all. It may be nothing. From the beginning he wonders whether V. is something that he has created, "an adventure of the mind" (Pynchon 61). Marshall McLuhan discusses the introduction of internal identity into the classic detective novel in his book *From Cliché to Archetype:*

> "[. . .] the narrative is scrambled in the detective story; it is deliberately interrupted and lacking in important connectives that the psychological novel relies upon to reveal character. When character is pushed to a conventional extreme and provided with an inclusive bounding line that contains all facets of the character at once, the narrative function is displaced" (McLuhan 89).

V. combines the uncertainty of a "scrambled" narrative with equally questionable "connectives" to demonstrate complex characters within a plot with a faltering

foundation. Doing so it mimics reality, where details of one's life can be enjoyed without their adding up to a universal truth. Thus, W. T. Lhamon, jr. suggests that the author intended to emphasize "the need for radical breaks with edifying discourse and customary modes of understanding" (Levine 72). Those narrative qualities which persist in the disjointed world of the novel and make it comparable to a quest are pure intimation; mimicry of the imagined systems of logic that we all use to direct our lives. David Cowart suggests that Stencil's search is the product of motivations that are far more complex than the positivism of the detective form: "Literary quests, with the exception of detective stories, tend naturally to reflect the great and traditional questions about the human condition: whatever the religious certainties of the cultures that produce quest literature, it tends to express man's existential anxiety" (Cowart/*Pynchon* 100). Stencil searches for something greater than any single person or theme. Although V. remains unknown, his quest is metaphysical. Stencil is human because his quest lacks concrete definition. He cannot be described as an objective correlative. He resembles the mysterious appearance of a symbol and hovers in the moment of non-understanding.

The novel is equally ambiguous where it depicts the onset of a technological culture. Pynchon drew much of his understanding about the interaction between humans and technology from the writings of Norbert Wiener, the man that coined the term "cybernetics." In his book *The Human Use of Human Beings* Wiener discusses communication, comparing people and machines in the practice of transferring information, as Joseph Slade explains: "Cybernetics/systems theory studies the interactions and relationships between parts of systems. Nearly all can be understood as communications systems because communications—as information or even

transportation—binds the parts of the systems" (Slade 57). Wiener's writing illuminates the understanding of Kilroy as a unit of information. According to Wiener "it is possible to interpret the information carried by a message as essentially the negative of its entropy, and the negative logarithm of its probability" (Wiener 31). This means that if messages are ordered information, than the less information a message carries the greater entropy (or potential for disorder) it contains. Empty communication causes social disorder by pushing people further from one another. Tony Tanner points out that the onset of this sort of disorder has already been realized in *V.*: "most of the characters avoid confronting the human reality of other people, and of themselves, by all manner of depersonalizing strategies" (Mendelson 23). The absence of such "human reality" creates social chaos. What remains are unrelated interactions between superficial representations of individuals.

The breakdown of communication that produces Kilroy is the tendency toward a society that increasingly makes empty statements. Norbert Wiener predicts such a trend in terms of entropic decay: "…the more probable the message, the less information it gives. Clichés, for example, are less illuminating than great poems" (Wiener 31). Kilroy is one such cliché in the novel, but there are many others. Human identity becomes more and more the exception; like in the post war Harlem described by the jazz musician McClintic Sphere: "Everything got cool – no love, no hate, no worries, no excitement. Every once in a while, though, somebody flips back. Back to where he can love…" (Pynchon 293). In the novel the Kilroy image is the ideal loss of identity in communication. Kilroy's seat of power is contingent on the likelihood that he will continue to be painted. The image is the product of a culture that Pynchon treats like

one of Wiener's closed systems, but these systems do not describe individuals, as Joseph

Slade explains:

> "[. . .] systems appear to be explicable by the laws of thermodynamics, whereas
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> structures are not. Some sort of paradoxical dynamic governs the relationship;
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> order can persist in the midst of disorder. Systems and structures seem
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> incompatible.
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> The seeming incompatibility between systems and structures presumes
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> considerable distance between human beings and their tools and, further,
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> appears to give credence to those critics who have assumed that Pynchon is
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> indeed saying that man is not a machine" (Slade 58).

An understanding of humans requires intimate knowledge, since each is a

structure unto itself. The dynamic between individual chaos and systematic order is

illustrated in chapter sixteen by the placement of a Kilroy image amid a chaos of wild

sailors (Pynchon 436). The narrator's treatment of this setting demonstrates the effect

of a cultural filter, as a great many characters unite into one single source of madness;

the Trivial struggles between navy men and MPs. If the graffiti is understood to be a

symbol of faltering communication and the loss of identity it is in its element. Drunken

sailor scenes are interchangeable in *V*. Characters stream through the narrative focus in

a succession of comical acts. Some of the names are familiar and some are not. Pynchon

forces us to ignore some information by the pure volume of it all. It is the same action

that surrounds the Sailors Grave in the first chapter, where Ben Profane seems

insignificant standing next to hundreds of fools, each capable of taking his place in the

story.

Kilroy is at home among the ranks of these sailors, who party like machines. The graffiti is briefly treated as a character and called "Inanimate. But grandmaster of Valetta tonight" (436). For the sailors, chaos is as familiar and mechanical a state as the rank structure that governs them. When, in the midst of a brawl, an officer named Dahoud succeeds at getting the sailors to get into formation the graffiti takes on a personified presence: "Kilroy looked on deadpan" (441). The personified Kilroy is not surprised by the sudden shift to structure. His appearance predicts it. His message: chaos is their structure. From the reader's perspective, Kilroy and the sailors are like mechanisms so long as they act according to the structure that the narrative creates for them. They are only human when they act alone. Lila Graves indicates the necessary distinction that separates the characters in *V.* from a conceit that compares them to mechanisms: "Ultimately, Pynchon distinguishes between the forces which shape human behavior and those which determine the course of the physical universe (Graves 72). But this distinction is not easily discerned, and applying the novel's own animate/inanimate distinction to characters can be inviting. When attempting to understand chaos it is easy to project limits upon individuals. The anthropologist Claud Levi-Strauss universalizes the perspective of such chaos in a criticism of government process: "We cannot adopt a rationalist definition of freedom—thus claiming universality—and simultaneously make a pluralist society the place of its flowering and its exercise" (Levi-Strauss 285). Although the Kilroy image has underscored the chaos of drunken navy men with a mechanical order, the belief that such order is tantamount to the limitations of man is faulty. These drunken navy men only seem mechanical when they behave the way that one would expect. They are human always.

A number of critics have argued that the novel *V.* implies red herring patterns to persuade readers to interpret the story according to philosophical conceits that fall short of explaining the complexity of the narrative. One such critic is Peter Cooper, who suggests that the author attempts to tether the audience to an insurmountable contradiction: "Observation is not only deficient but actually disruptive, and yet some version of reality must be fabricated to fill the yawning void of the unknown [. . .]" (Cooper 153). This statement should not be taken to suggest that the novel is devoid of meaning. *V.* is full of meanings. It presents a vast plurality of perspectives and narrative loose ends that can be explored to reveal various esoteric depths. But it does not contain an analytical path that results in a complete universalizing philosophy, and none can be proven to represent the author's own perspective; in other words, "The surfaces of [Pynchon's] fiction have depth but remain impenetrable" (Schaub 139). The novel is a construction of "surfaces" so complex that it is difficult to determine the underlying form. Richard Patteson comments on the necessity of these surfaces: "[. . .] knowledge itself cannot exist without form. Formlessness implies meaninglessness, as Pynchon knows" (Pearce 21). For author and reader to convert a text into something meaningful ("knowledge") both must rely on forms. Pynchon constructs the form of *V.* out of smaller suggestions of form. For the unprepared reader these almost act as traps.

The narrator communicates these traps so that they will seem "to order the flux of life, to make sense of a shifting array of signs to derive meaning" (Newman 5). These words by Robert Newman refer to the act of naming. It is only one example of a process of understanding that Pynchon enacts to construct preconceptions in the mind of the reader. For example, adjectives like "schlemihl" and "profane" become interchangeable with the narrator's descriptions of Ben Profane. These adjectives reduce the character to

a flatness that predicts his actions. One expects a schlemihl to do foolish things; it is no surprise when he gets drunk, and throws away opportunities at romantic involvement. If the reader trusts these predictive character portrayals they end up with a flat understanding of the entire narrative. If Profane is only a schlemihl and Stencil is only the protagonist in a search than the story is allegory. The characters would simply navigate an authorial preconception, and their actions would serve as commentary. Allegory employs mechanical constructs rather than round characters. Each character is one component of a structure that works to demonstrate preconceived commentary. Thomas Schaub writes that Pynchon had the opposite intention: "These satiric exaggerations are an expression of outrage against a culture which habitually sought control over the world and the world's manifold variety" (Schaub 142). But Ben Profane complicates this conclusion. He acts exactly as he is described. Likewise, Stencil's unyielding search for V. indicates that his identity is comparable to mechanism. They must act this way, or what Schaub writes would not be true; if either character were to completely betray the definitions that the narrative imposes than they would only be allegorical constructs; mere reflections of Pynchon's "outrage." The novel does not seek to disprove systems theory or rail against it. *V.* is a world where systems are questioned. If the novel can be reduced to pure commentary on systems theory than the author's method is akin to that of the scientific philosopher Karl Popper:

> "It is a theory of reason that assigns to rational arguments the modest and yet important role of criticizing our often mistaken attempts to solve our problems. And it is a theory of experience that assigns our observations the equally modest and almost equally important role of tests which may help us in the discovery of our mistakes. Though it stresses our fallibility it does not resign itself to

skepticism, for it also stresses the fact that knowledge can grow, and that science can progress—just because we can learn from our mistakes." (Popper vii)

Popper's proposition of method reflects the way that Pynchon employs theoretical assertions in his novel. Popper famously proposed a scientific method in which theory is not considered the conjecture of truth; it is the presentation of a hypothesis which is useful until it proves faulty. Similarly, Pynchon's novel creates a fiction in which theory is useful, though unproven.

In *V.* the term "mechanical" is a limit that reduces characters to the titles and functions that they serve. Robert Newman writes that Pynchon uses his novels to belittle such regulative logic: [Pynchon] "attacks the empirical determinacy that dominates the western world view through his satire of characters that rely on it…" (Newman 8). One such character is Herbert Stencil, who dedicates his life to the search for the source of a single initial. The search for V. is a self-conscious plot making device that reduces Herbert Stencil to a mechanical urge for fulfillment, but that urge is very human. He chases V. like an "obsolete, or bizarre, or forbidden form of sexual delight" (Pynchon 61). Sexual desire is comparable to mechanism but Stencil searches for something specific. If the search is "obsolete" than it is impossible. It is "bizarre." But "forbidden" is vague and suggests a force that attempts to keep V. from being found. The idea that Stencil and the critical reader search for something "forbidden" indicates the self-importance that underlies systemic reasoning and faith in universals. If you are searching for a particular form of logic you are likely to find it everywhere. Stencil does.

Richard Patteson compares Stencil to the reader: "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" (Pearce 21). In recognition of this

parallel the reader develops two incomplete channels of understanding, regarding Stencil. On the one hand, clues to the identity of V. seem to appear even when Stencil is not around; a false suggestion that some complete understanding may be ascertained. On the other hand, clues to the purpose of Stencil in a literary structure are equally plentiful.

In chapter three Stencil dreams that he awakens to the realization that he is engaged in a purely scholarly pursuit (Pynchon 61). When he awakens the second time he is forced to face the harsh reality that his journey is more than an intellectual conceit. This double awakening suits the metafictional awareness of the character. He is both man and conceit. He addresses himself in the third person as a tool that dislocates him from his identity. Really he has trouble remaining someone other than himself. His search for V. may only be an imitation of his father, but he also imitates his own function: he practices what he calls "Forcible dislocation of personality" in order "To keep Stencil in his place; that is the third person" (62). This is his place because he is a plot device. Pynchon self-consciously indicates that the character is meant to be discussed and placed in the third person. "He wished it could all be as respectable and orthodox as spying" (62). A spy has direction and purpose. Stencil acts alone. It is possible that he is only looking for some esoteric validation of his suspicions about the mysterious initial. He might also be looking to connect with his dead father after neglecting to write to him before his death (63). There is no final answer. Either prospect is equally likely. There is sufficient evidence throughout the novel that the reader may come to any number of conclusions about the existence or nonexistence of V. In understanding Stencil the endless search is all that is important.

The letter "V" appears throughout the book in particularly salient names, images, and structures. It is unclear whether these things contain "V" because they are significant, or they only seem significant because they contain V. The letter might suggest a theme, a clue, an impression, but the appearances add up to nothing; any number of systems of logic might be imagined to encapsulate each occurrence within a single meaning. William Plater argues that the act of searching is important: "Though Pynchon relies heavily on parody and satire in *V.*, the forms of paranoia are too important merely to be ridiculed" (Plater 192). Searching for V. gives the book structure as it gives Stencil his quest, and as the story draws toward the end it causes the reader and Stencil to intersect in the idea that perhaps there is no coherence to the search after all. With this consideration it is significant to realizing that the chronology of the book is all mixed up, and most of the plot has no affect on the results. One expects a conclusion and there is none, as Kenneth Kupsch notes, "[. . .] since the author has asked the question "Who is V.?," is it not reasonable to expect, to demand even, that he answer it?" (Kupsch 428). The end is as bewildering as it is frustrating. The two central characters, Ben Profane and Herbert Stencil, merely wander off on their respective journeys. But where Profane is not interested in conclusions, proclaiming that he "[had not] learned a goddamn thing," Stencil continues on searching for V. (Pynchon 454) William Plater explains Stencil's motivation: "[. . .] the pursuit is all there is to Stencil's life. It keeps him animate and therefore he must take it seriously [. . .]" (Plater 191). Plater presupposes Stencil's metafictional self awareness. "[H]e must take it seriously" because he takes the narrative into consideration, and reinforces his own assumed critical definition as a searching protagonist. His literary description relates only to the narrative structure, just as Wiener's physics relate only to closed systems. At the same

time Plater indicates that the aging Stencil is literally made animate by his search. So long as he is uncertain he maintains the same level of activity as the reader. To continue searching is to retain the potential for fulfillment. Stencil's search does not springs shut like a metal trap. His humanity derives from his imperfect animation.

Ben Profane's humanity is equally obscured by convoluted and contradictory logic. I differ from Tony Tanner's view that Profane is "as unaware of clues and indifferent to patterns as Stencil is obsessed with them" (Mendelson 29). The first chapter relates the tract of biases and suspicions that make up Ben Profane's personal journey. For instance, Profane's views about others characters—often communicated by the narrative voice--demonstrate that he has principals of order in his consideration of society. He applies a redefinition of the word "inanimate" to distinguish some objects and people from others despite whether they move or live. The sun is called an inanimate object when Profane attempts to piss on it to put it out (Pynchon 26). The fatalistic nature that drives Profane throughout the novel is demonstrated in this moment, as his urine stream reaches up toward that shining beacon of irritation. All morality and pretense is discounted as the narrator relates Profane to the inanimate, [Narrator]: "…things do not want; only men. But things do what they do, and this is why Profane was pissing at the sun" (26). The last sentence deserves a second look: "But things do what they do, and this is why Profane was pissing at the sun." There are two opposing impressions in this statement. Either Profane is inanimate or he is not. By unnecessarily beginning the sentence with a contraction Pynchon creates parallelism, which suggests that it is a rational statement. First it presents a model, and then it follows with an application. Therefore, Profane is a thing and pissing is what he does. But the word "thing" refers to the previous parts of the thought. Here is the entire

thought as it is written within the enclosure of parenthesis: "Inanimate objects could do what they wanted. Not what they wanted because things do not want; only men. But things do what they do, and this is why Profane was pissing at the sun" (Pynchon 26). If Profane does not want than he is a "thing," and is therefore inanimate. The immediate significance of his action is that Profane resents the sun for controlling itself when he cannot. He is aware that he cannot reach the sun and that if he did he could not have possibly drank enough beer to put it out, but the symbolic action is "somehow important to him" (26). Yet again, "things do not want." Nothing is important to an inanimate object. An easy solution to this problem could be that the narrator is asserting everything that I have said with an omniscient sarcasm, and he or she is, but I think that Profane's frustration is directed at the difficult terms that I have described above. As a human he is forced to compare his power with the power that inanimate objects cast upon him. He may desire and he may manipulate the inanimate in order to realize his desires, but he cannot control his desires. As a result he is inanimate so long as he is not; so long as he desires. He emanates desires that are as constant as the rays of the sun. In this case he desires a particular woman named Rachel whom he cannot have, and throughout the book he will emotionally shun all other women in a symbolic display of consistency. The sun gives him life, and he will drink until he has pissed it out.

Profane is mainly a mascot in the novel. Like any mascot his is a simplified visage that everyone can cheer for outwardly; even those that quietly feel bad for him. Thus Pynchon labels him "the schlemiel." There are a lot of schlemiels in *V.* but Ben Profane earns his title, serving as an archetype for the human/inanimate dialectic which plays out in the plot. He questions determinism while maintaining a predictable lifestyle. In this way he occupies a complex commentary on the mechanical man conceit. His name

is not his definition but "the equivalent of a snapshot view of experience" (Newman 5). Profane is a human within a mechanism. His ideas make him conscious and yet he maintains the schlemiel identity unwaveringly. He believes that he is in control of himself, and witnesses clues that he is not. You might say that his self is in control of a passive man. Something about him betrays even his own faulty principals. He admires Rachel because she is human and yet he reduces her to a mechanism so that he can feel that he understands her. His faulty analysis is revealed when his spite leaks into the narrative.

Profane avoids intimacy with women by considering them inanimate. The description of Rachel's lifestyle is filled with Profane's own spite. The language is cynical: "She talked about Bennington, her alma mater. She talked about herself" (Pynchon 25). Although a description of Rachel's background follows these words, it is a biased summary of her story. The passage is full of details that demonstrate invective subjectivity. She is first dehumanized within a social class, and then that class is over simplified and berated. Racial stereotypes are inserted to indicate a racist culture of exploitation, describing "Negro maids" and "Orientals." It is only part of a larger cheap shot which intends to depict Rachel as the product of a mindless American family machine.

There is particular attention to the dating habits of girls in this society: "…a certain parity has always obtained in the Five Towns whereby a nice boy can be predestined for husband as early as age sixteen or seventeen" (25). This sounds like a rumor, and it tells us nothing about Rachel. Profane uses these validations to save face. He wants the reader to believe that he could not have married Rachel, because she was only a marionette sent down by her parents to allow her "the illusion at least of having

'played the field' –so necessary to a girl's emotional development" (25). In this case there is an emotional motivation which causes the narrative to create a mechanical character. It is revenge. When Rachel finally loves Profane he leaves her. At this point he judges himself: "I don't change. Schlemihls don't change" (Pynchon 383). His reaction angers Rachel, but in the end nothing can persuade him. Profane has accepted inanimate status to mask his self destruction. If it is already set in stone than one way or another he was right all along.

Profane's search for emotional validations causes him to makes deterministic reductions. Tony Tanner compares Profane's understanding of women to Stencil's search for V.: "...Profane might not like a world in which people treat themselves and each other as objects and in various ways replace the animate or human with the inanimate, but he does not or cannot resist it, and it could be said that he is a part of it... another of the century's children (Tanner48-9). The surface of Profane's devaluation of Rachel's character renders her inanimate. But, even in the faulty introduction that she is given, she demonstrates complexity in her actions. She drives dangerously, she refuses the advances of men, she asks Profane to write to her so that she may know a more complete life than her own, and finally she moves to the city (Pynchon 24, 25, 27, 45). The invective description of Rachel's lifestyle is overturned when she escape: "only the brave escape" (25). Rachel is ushered into the story through Profane's memories, though he would rather forget (22). Her entire appearance in the first chapter is subject to his nostalgic biases, and demonstrative of his own tendency toward bestowing deterministic limitations. Catharine R. Stimpson considers Rachel one of the few admirable female characters where male characters "provide point of view." (Bloom 86). "Rachel Owlglass has promise [. . .] She offers Benny, whom she pursues, the chance to experience the

comminglings of love. She projects a physical desire stronger than ego" (Bloom 85). As a social critic Profane manipulates the conditions of his own philosophy, assigning "inanimate" status to Rachel in order to validate his own emotional situation.

Profane's bias is also present in the presentation of Paula in the first chapter. Paula is an enigma: "That young wife, Paula. She'd said sixteen, but no way of telling because she'd been born just before the war and the building with her records destroyed, like most other buildings on the island of Malta" (Pynchon 14). These simple facts weave a complex mystery. Paula's age is the only unknown aspect of her that is pointed out by the narrator, but nothing is really known. It is unclear whether she was born on Malta; that obscure island in the Mediterranean. The destruction of her records cannot be the complete story. If her parents were alive after the bombing they could communicate her age. Therefore, she either grew up without parents, or her history was covered up deliberately. Either way, she has a salient interest in getting close to Ben Profane. When the two encounter at the "Sailor's Grave" Paula has just left her husband: Pappy Hod (14). The prefix "Pappy" suggests that Paula's husband was older. She tells Ben that Hod was abusive and committed infidelity, but the narrator hints at a deeper misunderstanding between the spouses: "He [Profane} soon gave up trying to decode her several hankerings" (18). Mind you, "…Profane wasn't getting any" (18). Paula was hankering for something emotional, and she was talking to the wrong man. Could she have known Profane without knowing that? Whether she sought emotional abuse (perhaps a second marriage with an unattractive navy man) or was some kind of double agent sent to spy on drunken freeloaders, she knew something about Profane that the reader has no immediate access to, except perhaps through her.

Profane does not seem to care. Or perhaps half of him cares. "Half because [he believes] a woman is only half of something there are usually two sides to" (Pynchon 18). His indifference is simultaneously summarized and validated within that sentence. This peek into Profane's thoughts is characteristically unreliable. He uses a functional statement, one of measurement, to split all women into half: that is, half of a man. Paula is not inanimate. She sings in French, plays guitar, responds to lust, and bad relationships (19). These are not the actions of a girl that dreams of "a man-of-no-politics" (19). That is only Profane dreaming of himself, and in the same stroke discrediting his admirer as only "half" aware. By limiting Paula to a sexist ideal Profane assigns her a determining title: woman. Tony Tanner argues that Profane uses such simplifications to avoid intimacy: "Instead of the recognition of love, there are only the projected fantasies of lust" (Mendelson 23). But Profane is only peripherally aware of his pattern, and he continually searches for love. When he finds it again and again he reacts badly, as if he were a mechanism. His philosophy of the inanimate has drags him in, and he becomes its subject. Profane is not a machine. It is difficult to watch him interact with women because he is constantly capable of making a better choice, though his free will is obscured by mechanical behavior. His devaluation of the human spirit causes him to resemble the inanimateness that he describes, and yet his complex subjectivity is constant evidence that he is a prisoner of his own fallacy.

The narrative structure of *V.* and its characters reflect the elusive nature of the world they inhabit and, by analogy, the world its readers inhabit. As the reader attempts to make sense of what lies before them in the text they illuminate a worldly correspondence: though Pynchon's novel teases the reader to make meaning, a specific, definitive conclusion never emerges. Instead, the novel ends with a description of

surfaces, "any of a million flatnesses which should catch thereafter part of the brute sun's spectrum," all of which show "nothing at all of what came to life beneath" (492). In this sense, the novel's characters mirror the reader, a sort of mechanistic producer of meaning who draws finite interpretations from literal utterances, always driven by the desire to define things, most notably the nature of the self. Although the growing resemblance between man and mechanism is an aspect of that self that the novel interprets, it does not define the novel's characters any more than any other single aspect of the story. The emotional self remains a motivating force in a world of superficiality and deterministic theorizing. Characters that retain a sense of emotional self convey Pynchon's ideas and purposes within the shifting environment of the novel because they are each small images of the larger narrative form: indefinable, unpredictable, contradictory, and uncertain. Definitive identifiers form a partition between reader and character as terms of definition reduce those characters to flat facets. Each character peeks out of (or over) their identity, and all that it might ever
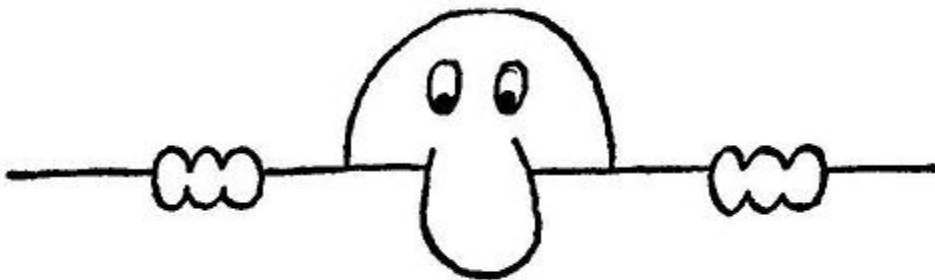
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