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**THE WHITE GODDESS RESTORED:  
AFFIRMATION IN PYNCHON'S V.**

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Critical investigation of Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, generally depicts it as apocalyptic, even nihilistic.<sup>1</sup> Accepting Pynchon's major philosophical assertion as the primacy of accident has enabled critics to locate *V.* within a twentieth-century literary trend which denies deterministic continuity. Indeed, Weissman, monitoring sferics with Kurt Mondaugen in German-occupied Southwest Africa in 1922, decodes the recorded impulses to yield Proposition 1 from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist" (The world is all that the case is).<sup>2</sup> With no objective reality, any connective plots become paranoid inventions. The answer is that there is no answer, or that it is too horrible to see. Hence, the approach-and-avoid tactics of Benny Profane, and ultimately of Herbert Stencil, confirm the anti-visionary sense of the novel that has dominated the criticism of it to date. I contend that within his framework of inanimate totems and inert decadence, Pynchon implants an alternative to the death wish. Through the character of Paola Maijstral, he offers a Pentecostal affirmation that, while not negating the dark humor of *V.*, suggests an ascent after the fall.

Affirmation of human values is evident in Rachel Owlglass, McClintic Sphere, Fausto Maijstral, and his daughter, Paola. Furthermore, this affirmation is rendered especially poignant due to their experience with the inanimate values represented by the incarnations of *V.* and their subsequent rejection of these values.<sup>3</sup> Of these four characters, Paola is ultimately the most important. As a foil to the religious parody that *V.* exhibits, Paola emerges as a figure of salvation. Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, to which Pynchon specifically alludes (p. 50), calls for the reestablishment of a humanistic mythology to reverse the technological corruption of the modern world. By investing Paola with the qualities of the White Goddess, a tri-fold goddess of Aegean beginnings who presides over birth, love and death, Pynchon offers a repudiation of the decadence fostered by *V.*<sup>4</sup> With the crucifixion of the Bad Priest, the final incarnation of *V.*, the novel presents the possibility of a rebirth of humanistic myth through Paola.

Not accidentally, *V.* begins on Christmas Eve, for there is a need to restore faith in the principles of a humanistic tradition which are embodied in myth. Myth has given way to sinister disguise as an attribute of *V.*, a testimony to a new consciousness which invokes the laws of science to replace those of men. Disguises are indications of the multiplicity of chaos and of degeneracy into the inanimate, and the death force is active in their rainbow mockery. Faith in any possibility of a conversion from the void to the animate is invested in Paola, whom we first encounter as a barmaid named Beatrice (as are all the barmaids) at the Sailor's Grave. In *The Divine Comedy*, Beatrice is the idealization of wisdom through faith who guides Dante through Paradise. In *V.*, she has left her husband, Pappy Hod, and is undergoing a protean quest for a sense of unity and peace. She tells Benny Profane, "isn't that what we all want, Benny? Just a little peace. Nobody jumping out and biting you on the ass" (p. 8).

Paola's relationship to a Paraclete, a transcendent and unifying figure in the Trinity, is immediately hinted at: "She could be any age she wanted. And you suspected any nationality, for Paola knew scraps it seemed of all tongues" (p. 6). The idea of tongues becomes a recurring motif in *V.*<sup>5</sup> Early in the book, we encounter *V.* in a bierhalle as "the triangular stain [which] swam somewhere over the crowd like a tongue on Pentecost" (p. 79). We later see the Bad Priest speaking in tongues at her crucifixion. The significance becomes more apparent upon referring to Acts 2:1-4:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

This Pentecostal wind is reflected in Paola's last name, *Maijstral*, which is a Maltese wind. Furthermore, it is a wind which blows once every three days, thus underscoring the relation to the Trinity. Sidney Stencil refers to a Third Kingdom emerging in apocalyptic fashion as well:

The matter of a Paraclete's coming, the comforter, the dove; the tongues of flame, the gift of tongues: Pentecost. Third Person of the Trinity...The Father had come and gone. In political terms, the

Father was the Prince; the single leader, the dynamic figure whose virtù used to be a determinant of history. This had degenerated to the Son, genius of the liberal love-feast which had produced 1848 and lately the overthrow of the Czars. What next? What Apocalypse? (p. 444)

A restoration of moral considerations in human actions and, therefore, a reestablishment of the tension between good and evil may be gained through Paola's apocalyptic gift. To a century which has sought the entropic void of the "V," she offers redemption through the necessary mutuality of the two legs.

V.'s transformations from Victoria Wren to the Bad Priest signify a parody of religious metamorphoses in their tendency toward the inanimate. In *The Grim Phoenix*, William M. Plater offers an excellent account of the religious development of V.,<sup>6</sup> and her incarnations have been summarized in much of the critical literature concerning V. as well. They have not been traced in terms of a descent that is mirrored in the ascent of Paola, however, nor have the possibilities inherent in Paola's role as a Paraclete figure in opposition to V. been considered. Paola does not descend into the realm of the inanimate: "The girl lived proper nouns. Persons, places. No things. Had anyone told her about things?" (p. 40). As Victoria, V. acquires the name of the queen, the practitioner of divisive colonialism, who marks the evolution of the female counterpart to man ruling over decadence.<sup>7</sup> She whimsically obtains an ivory comb, the teeth of which are in the shape of five crucified British soldiers (V. is, of course, the Roman numeral for five). Graves speaks of an ivory comb as an accessory of the White Goddess,<sup>8</sup> and we will see the comb restored to its rightful owner when it is passed to Paola at the death of the Bad Priest.

The sinister negation that V. represents is most grimly implied when V. appears in Paris in 1913 at the age of thirty-three (the age of Christ when crucified) as a Lesbian fetishist in love with Melanie (black) l'Heuremandit (the cursed hour). Their lovemaking takes place through mirrors so that V., Melanie and the mirror image create a trinity in which "dominance and submission didn't apply; the pattern of three was symbolic and mutual" (p. 385). In this inert parody of the Paraclete, V. exists in direct opposition to Paola. Whereas Paola learns to offer caring and comfort, V. makes fetishism a totem and brings the death drive to the act of love: "Dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other. Loveplay until then thus becomes an impersonation of the inanimate, a transvestism

not between the sexes but between quick and dead, human and fetish" (p. 385). The relation of the "W" in "womb" to a double "V" acquires horrific connotations in this context and can only be offset by Paola returning to her mother country, Malta (the "M" an inverted "W"), where the powers of the comb which she procured there can be realized in the service of a myth which is part of her father's legacy.

Fausto perceives the need for unity through myth, for a "resurgence of humanity in the automaton, health in the decadent" (p. 316). He takes temporary solace in the rock of Malta but, for him, the metaphor of Malta is part of the "Great Lie," a necessary misology to preserve sanity. Fausto is too tainted with V., who presides over the hothouse of his room as a dark grey stain on the ceiling (p. 285), to partake wholly in a humanistic mythos. Although as Fausto IV. his "curve is still rising" (p. 286), his role is to preside over the void and, as a priest, transfer the destructive energies of V. to a source of potential unity.

Fausto writes and sleeps in the sewers of Malta during the raids and, whereas Stencil and Profane both fail to gain knowledge from their experiences in the sewers, Fausto, by immersing himself in the metaphor of Malta and investing the matriarchal rock with human qualities, is able to emerge from his period of incubation capable of presiding over the death of the Bad Priest as a priest himself and of allowing death to take place through "a sin of omission" (p. 324). In *The Great Mother*, Erich Neumann refers specifically to this archetypal situation in Malta:

We have repeatedly referred to the spiritual aspect of the feminine transformative character, which leads through suffering and death, sacrifice and annihilation, to renewal, rebirth, and immortality. But such transformation is possible only when what is to be transformed enters wholly into the Feminine principle...as in Malta long before the days of healing in the Greek shrines of Asclepius, the sick man undergoes a slumber of 'incubation,' in the course of which he encounters the healing godhead.<sup>10</sup>

Fausto's transformations project into those of Paola. His prayer for her heralds her eventual grasp of a unity that exists beyond the Great Lie, a unity that depends on a resurgence of humanity for its existence: "May you be only Paola, one girl: a single given heart, a whole mind at peace" (p. 294). Fausto emerges as a modified John the Baptist figure who does not proclaim, but quietly hopes for the possibility of a whole person to issue from the rubble of the cellar in which

the Bad Priest lies and from the ashes of his world: "Myself: what am I if not a wind, my very name a hissing of queer zephyrs through the carob trees? I stand in time between the two winds, my will no more than a puff of air" (p. 291). Later, we learn that records of Fausto III.'s return to life are indecipherable except for "sketches of an azalea blossom, a carob tree" (p. 323). It is noteworthy that carob is referred to as St. John's bread in Mark 1:6, hence underscoring Fausto's role as a forerunner of a figure of salvation.

This potential salvation occurs through the crucifixion of the Bad Priest, *V.*'s final incarnation, which leads to a rebirth through Paola. The Bad Priest attempts to convince Elena to abort Paola, but is foiled when she accidentally meets Father Avalanche. As an opposing force to the Bad Priest, Father Avalanche is referred to as "A," an inverted "V," in Fausto's journal.

Although Elena sees the mouth of Christ in the sinister Bad Priest, she also notes her even teeth.<sup>11</sup> Recurring references to teeth in relation to *V.* project the sterility image of the vagina dentata which Neumann documents as teeth inhabiting the vagina of the Terrible Mother: "the hero is the man who overcomes the Terrible Mother, breaks the teeth out of her vagina, and so makes her into a woman."<sup>12</sup> The children do overcome the Bad Priest and remove, among other things, her false teeth, thus permitting her transference to a woman in the person of Paola.

In a sense, the children of Malta resemble Fausto II. in decline, "being poets in a vacuum, adept at metaphor" (p. 318). To these children who grow up playing RAF games, "the combination of a siege, a Roman Catholic upbringing and an unconscious identification of one's own mother with the Virgin all sent simple dualism into strange patterns indeed" (p. 317). Like Herbert Stencil, they pursue a Manichean quest designed to eradicate evil which is ubiquitous in the form of the Bad Priest. They keep her under surveillance for, significantly, three years. Paola is among them.

On the Day of the Thirteen Raids, the Bad Priest is discovered in the basement of a ruined building pinned by an accidental cross. From holes in the roof, Fausto watches the children dismantle her. When her hair is removed, a two-colored Crucifixion is discovered tattooed on her bare scalp. When her feet, the star sapphire sewn in her navel, false teeth, and glass eye follow, Fausto wonders how long the disassembly might endure: "Surely her arms and breasts could be detached; the skin of her legs be peeled away to reveal some intricate understructure

of silver openwork. Perhaps the trunk itself contained other wonders: intestines of parti-coloured silk, gay balloon-lungs, a rococco heart" (p. 322).

During the course of the dismantling, the ivory comb is passed to Paola who will bear it with her during her protean quest for fruition until, as an avatar of the White Goddess, she may employ its powers as an expression of trust and comfort necessary for the resurrection of a humanistic myth. Further evidence for Paola's psychic succession of V. may be found by referring to Graves's explanation of the tanist, or twin, who succeeds the leader of orgiastic rites. The leader is first bound to an altar stone in a "five-fold bond" and then hacked into pieces.<sup>13</sup> Aside from the grisly correspondences of bodily disjunction, we should note that the comb is in the shape of five crucified British soldiers, a five-fold bond which, given V.'s transmutative powers, provides ample grounds for linking the two situations.

As twin, Paola stands in mirrored opposition to V. V. injects black parody into the animate, adorning what Fausto finds to be a young, healthy body with inert objects so that she becomes a microcosm of the twentieth-century death wish. The two-color Crucifixion which embellishes her skull demonstrates a further attempt to supplant humanistic myth with a multiplicity which would render it chaotic and sterile. However, her lamentations, spoken in tongues at her death, insure the completion of the transference to her mirror self. Through her mournful confession, reminiscent in sound of the Maijstral wind, the Paraclete can emerge: "she must have been past speech. But in those cries—so unlike human or even animal sound that they might have been only the wind blowing past any dead reed—I detected a sincere hatred for all her sins which must have been countless; a profound sorrow at having hurt God by sinning; a fear of losing Him which was worst than the fear of death" (p. 322).

In his own priestly preparation of the Bad Priest for death, Fausto symbolically confirms the transition from the realm of the inanimate to that of the animate. Instead of using oil from a chalice to anoint her sense organs, Fausto dips blood from her navel. Out of the wound, caused by the removal of the inert star sapphire, comes the latent healing impulse which marks its return from the province of the plastic to the dominion of the human.

According to legend, the apostle Paul was shipwrecked on Malta in 60 A.D. where he converted the inhabitants to Christianity. Paola is Italian for Paul and it is her own conversion to the role of Paraclete

that offers the possibility for recovery from the inertia that has been sustained since the crucifixion of the Bad Priest. Paola undergoes several transformations in *V.* including that of the black prostitute, Ruby, which permits her to acquire the philosophy of McClintic Sphere—"keep cool, but care." Her capacity to love permits a temperance which resolves the polarity of indifference versus fanaticism prospering in *V.*'s realm. In caring, she also represents the literal translation of Paraclete—comforter.

Returning to Malta, the place of her birth and of the Bad Priest's demise, Paola reaches the culmination of her psychic quest and, perhaps, of the psychic history of *V.* as well. Malta is the hub of fortune's wheel "where all history seemed simultaneously present" (p. 452). Here the dynamo of the twentieth century focused its assault on the Virgin as sex and death conjoin in this "immemorial woman. Spread to the explosive orgasms of Mussolini bombs" (p. 298), Malta is also the source of a metaphor which offers salvation. As a matriarch, she passively accepts these incursions while incubating life beneath her streets.

In entrusting the ivory comb to Pappy Hod, Paola assumes the role of the White Goddess unifying the marriage bond once more and offering her comforting spirit to a disjointed husband and, through him, to a disjointed world. As a hod is a receptacle used for carrying supplies to builders at work, Pappy becomes a carrier of a symbol of unification to the builders of a humanitarian world. Paola, as Penelope faithfully spinning at home, offers them a myth in which to believe until their voyage ends and their work is completed which, Pappy says, ought to occur, as we might expect, in December.

As Paraclete, White Goddess, and myth incarnate, Paola offers an affirmative alternative to the decadence of *V.* Although *V.* concludes without the fulfillment of this alternative having yet occurred, we are given cause to hope, like Pappy Hod (p. 417), that we'll be soberer when we reach the other end of our walk across the long brow of the twentieth century.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although the critical works that fall into this category are too numerous to list here, the reader might refer specifically to the following: R.W.B. Lewis, "Days of Wrath and Laughter," *Trials of the Word: Essays in American Literature and the Humanistic Tradition* (New Haven, 1965), pp. 228-234; Joseph W. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York, 1974), pp. 48-124; Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970* (New York, 1971), pp. 153-180; William M. Plater, *The Grim Phoenix* (Bloomington, 1978), pp.



64-180; Don Hausdorff, "Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," *Con L*, 7(1966), 258-269; James Dean Young, "The Enigmatic Variations of Thomas Pynchon," *Crit*, 10(1967), 69-77; John W. Hunt, "Comic Escape and Anti-Vision: The Novels of Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon," *Studies in Recent American Literature*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Chicago, 1968), pp. 87-112.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (New York, 1964), p. 258. All subsequent references to this book appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Robert O. Richardson, "The Absurd Animate in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*: A Novel," *St TCL*, 9(1972), 35-58; and Catharine R. Stimpson, "Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism: Thomas Pynchon's Early Fiction," *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Richardson (Boston, 1976), pp. 31-48. Although Richardson does point to Rachel Owlglass, McClintic Sphere, Fausto Maijstral, and Paola Maijstral as potentially affirmative characters, he uses Paola primarily as a transition to more elaborate discussions of Sphere and Fausto. Furthermore, he does not discuss any of the characters' relationship to a religious, archetypal, or mythic realm within the novel. While Stimpson does allude to the mythic, the focus of her discussion is to denounce the simplicity and conservatism inherent in Pynchon's depiction of his female characters. Although Stimpson does mention that Rachel Owlglass has affirmative potential, her discussion of Paola is brief and fails to recognize the central role which Paola plays in the wider thematic framework of *V.*

<sup>4</sup> Roger B. Henke, "Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," *MFS* 17(1971), 207-220. Although Henke fails to link the White Goddess to Paola, a connection which is of crucial significance to understanding the affirmative aspects of *V.*, he does offer some important insights which relate Graves' book to Pynchon's. In particular, he relates Herbert Stencil's fantasies of *V.* to the decline of the White Goddess as the dominant myth in western European culture.

Stimpson, *Mindful Pleasures*, also discusses *The White Goddess* and specifically mentions the ivory comb worn by the White Goddess in association with Paola.

<sup>5</sup> W. T. Lhamon, Jr., "Pentecost, Promiscuity, and Pynchon's *V.*: From the Scaffold to the Impulsive," *TCL*, 21(1975), 163-176. Lhamon sees tongues functioning thematically in *V.* as representing the difference between entropy and Pentecost.

<sup>6</sup> *The Grim Phoenix*, pp. 142-149.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, amended and revised edition (New York, 1959), p. 453. Graves refers to Queen Victoria as a secular, debased White Goddess.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 438ff.

<sup>9</sup> The cult of the White Goddess is thought to have achieved its highest and most intricate form in Malta. Cf. Jacquetta Hawkes and Sir Leonard Woolley, *Prehistory and the Beginnings of Civilization* (New York, 1963), p. 338.

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<sup>10</sup> Enrich Neumann, *The Great Mother* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 291-292. For purposes of discussing *V*, Neumann's book is especially rich in its documentation of mythic feminine sources for ritual transformation of the human personality.

<sup>11</sup> References to teeth pervade *V*. Indeed, the action at the Sailor's Grave begins with a description of Ploy who, in revenge for the Navy's decision to remove his teeth, spent two months trying to kick officers in the teeth and who now amuses himself by sinking his newly filed dentures into the swaying buttocks of the barmaids.

<sup>12</sup> Neumann, p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> Graves, pp. 145-146.