

METAFICTION AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT IN PYNCHON'S *V.*

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The title of this paper may strike the reader as paradoxical since metafictional practices have been usually regarded as the fullest expression of narcissistic artistic creation. In the twentieth century, narrative modes have evolved towards artistic forms which very often try to use inner reflections about their own processes in order to present their themes. They show a predilection for the contents which are directly or metaphorically related to the creative process, usually with the purpose of proving how narratives create worlds independent from reality and therefore reveal themselves and reality as human constructs (Waugh 1984: 49). This conclusion often leads critics to consider the texts either the last shelter for order in a degrading, chaotic world, or the best proof that the outside world is no longer reliable, a threat which is extended to them in their foregrounding of their narrative mechanisms. The assumption that the world is decaying is in itself an implicit social commentary, but some narratives show a more explicit position towards the role of literature in the modern world, some of them even adopting a revolutionary stance.

In her *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* Linda Hutcheon argues that metafiction does have a social side as it explicitly establishes links with reality. For her, metafiction, apart from flaunting its creative methods, constantly forces the reader to perform activities very similar to those required of him/her in the perception and understanding of real life. It is a vital genre which can even lead into political action:

Reading and writing belong to the processes of "life" as much as they do to those of "art." It is this realization that constitutes one side of the paradox of metafiction for the reader. On the one hand, he is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the "art," of what he is reading; on the other, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity

to those of his life experience. In fact, these responses are shown to be part of his life experience. In this light metafiction is less a departure from the mimetic novelistic tradition than a reworking of it. It is simplistic to say, as reviewers did for years, that this kind of narrative is sterile, that it has nothing to do with "life." (1991: 5).

If self-reflecting texts can actually lure the reader into participating in the creation of a novelistic universe, perhaps he can also be seduced into action--even direct political action. (1991: 155).

This idea implies a conception of the processes of the human mind and of literature as effective interpretive methods. It assumes that both can establish valid links between life and the subject and, what is relevant here, that literature is a reliable tool for the analysis of reality. In this paper I will try to show how *V.* provides an original view of social commitment in literature, and how this view is based on a different notion of literature as method of analysis which the novel introduces. In order to do this, I will study *V.* as a parody of reflexive literature and its mechanisms. *V.* therefore transcends reflexivity, proposing a return to social commitment and a rejection of reflexivity's self-indulgence.

At a fabulaic¹ level *V.* presents two distinguishable lines of plot which take place in the 1950s in North America and whose main characters are Stencil and Profane. Stencil is the son of a late member of the British Foreign Office who was a witness to important historical events at the turn of the century. His son is engaged in the search of a pattern of development which would connect several historical facts, and would therefore explain them as part of a general conspiracy. The only clue he seems to have is the presence of the letter *V* in all the cases he investigates. The letter seems at times to stand for a woman (Veronica), at times for a mysterious country (Vheissu), even for a comb; but he never succeeds in finding a link between the different examples of *V* he encounters. In the process of his investigation he contacts several people who offer him the hope of a meaning for *V* and therefore for the end of his search. The clues these different characters provide are presented in the form of narratives, stories usually dealing with past events. Stencil's quest will be a failure as he faces too many examples of a possible clue, but not a single one that can invest all the others with meaning. The last chapter is a narrative introduced by the narrator of the novel dealing with Stencil's father's stay in Malta at the beginning of the century. It seems to offer the possibility of a final conclusion and clarification of the son's quest,

but it ends when the father drowns in the Mediterranean, possibly suggesting a mythical answer (of regeneration = meaning through death by water) but never confirming it.

The second line of plot shows Profane, an unemployed young man (formerly a sailor), in his purposeless ramblings. He moves along the American East Coast doing odd jobs and sleeping in his friends' houses, without showing the least interest in staying anywhere. He constantly reminds us he is Jewish and claims to be a schlemiehl at odds with society. He fails to commit himself to anything or anybody because he always feels the urge to continue his journey, even though he does not know where he is going or what he wants to find. Several women try to make him stay but they never really manage to persuade him to do so. He spends the time in bars and parties, getting drunk in the company of The Whole Sick Crew, a group mixture of ex-sailors and trendy artists, who do not seem to have any aim in their lives apart from trying to get laid as often as possible. Profane and Stencil's lines of plot meet when Stencil comes to New York after a clue. In the end Profane will accompany Stencil to Malta, where the clues seem to be leading them; but, after checking the clue is no good, Stencil flies away leaving Profane on his own, in the same place where Profane's plot had started (he had previously been in Malta as a sailor). Profane is back at the starting point but without the least idea of what he is doing there. Both lines of plot emphasise the uselessness of the characters' search and development, and leave the reader with a massive collection of stories and references whose obscurity does not allow him/her to form a coherent story.

One of the main themes of the novel is its discussion of history as a valid tool of knowledge and analysis of reality. The conclusion several characters reach is that history cannot be an objective account because it is a human construct, which is always inaccurate because men try to impose a human design or development on events which lacked it. This idea is explicitly mentioned by Fausto Maijstral² in one of the framed narratives:

The writing itself even constitutes another rejection, another "character" added to the past. So we do sell our souls: paying them away to history in little 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." (V. 306).³

History is therefore only the record of the human desire to find a valid structure in reality, one that can help man understand what is illogical or irrational by nature. In this sense, the novel also refers to literature as one more construction which does not manage to apprehend reality and bring it closer to us for inspection. *V.* is a self-parodying text as its reflexive hints in fact emphasise the novel's incapacity to completely shape its material and bestow a truthful meaning on it. The novel is presented as a self-contained game where the clues for its understanding are to be found in itself, but the huge amount of information which the novel offers in fact prevents the reader from apprehending those clues, in a clear parodic reference to literature's universally acknowledged claim to be a link between the reader and external reality. *V.* is an instance of imitative form, a work of art whose form imitates its contents, both pointing at the same conclusions.

In a similar fashion, the narrator is parodied in its alleged role of intermediary with the world of referents. The novel constantly presents elements which help to build up an extradiegetic narrator, which flaunts its being in control of all the different narratives inside the text. But, again those references, once put together, do not allow the reader to construct a clear thesis or development. The reader is not in the end offered an unambiguous account of events which s/he shares with the narrator. So, on several occasions we find references to various revelation scenes which take place at different times: first, Profane believes to be before a revelation while he works in New York when, in Father Fairing's sewer crypt, he sees a light flickering; only we, the readers, will know through the extradiegetic narrator that the light was in fact a torch Stencil carried in his ramblings along the sewers, also adding a great deal of irony to Profane's hope of a revelation. Later on, during one of their usual binges, Profane and his Puerto Rican friends attend an Italian party in the street, and the scene is rendered as a "tourist's confusion of tongues" (*V.* 140). Again a reference to Pentecost, which in this case is described as a denied revelation. There are no tongues of flame which bring understanding and knowledge, but a confusion of tongues which derives into incommunication. In the final chapter there is another reference: "Spring had descended with its own tongue of flame. Valletta seemed soul-kissed into drowsy complaisance as Stencil mounted the hill southeast of Strada Reale toward Fairing's church" (*V.* 485). Here, an event which happened in 1919 contains the same reference to revelation and Pentecost that we found in the chapters devoted to Profane and placed in the 1950s. In all the cases the revelation and the knowledge which it promises never take place and the characters continue to face an impenetrable reality.

A similar example is the appearance of the word *outlandish*, both in the main narrative and in one of the narratives-within-the narrative. It appears in the account of the events in Florence, a story which is supposedly narrated extradiegetically by Eigenvalue, in a reference to Vheissu: "Vheissu, of course. A summons he couldn't ignore, Vheissu. He understood. Hadn't it been their only nexus for longer than Evan could remember; had it not stood preeminent in his catalogue of *outlandish* regions where the Establishment held no sway?" (*V.* 157) (*italics mine*). And it also appears in the accounts of Profane and the Whole Sick Crew, which are narrated by the extradiegetic narrator: Winsome's record company is called *Outlandish* Records. In both cases the reference is to elements which are supposed to be different and independent from the general trends, either political or musical. The narrator appears as all-controlling and therefore points to its own artificial activity by putting together apparently disconnected themes. But in general it is not a guarantee for development in the narrative or a progressive configuration of meaning, as John W. Hunt says:

Within the first few pages a special relationship between the reader and the narrator is established by the latter's mode of direct address; ... (certain passages) indicate that what we are being given here is something in the nature of a report, an attempt to put data before us from any and all points of view by a narrator who refuses commitment to any specific meaning or set of meanings the material might suggest. (1981: 34).

V. parodies language's supposedly direct relationship with reality. The use of intertextual references reveals the existence of a certain amount of polysemic material in the novel. The text presents many elements which link it with T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but the presence of this text within *V.* does not transform any component of the novel into a clear reproduction of any element in the poem. There is always room for uncertainty and hints of parody. Profane's story explicitly parallels the development of the poem, especially with respect to its concern with the decay of love, replaced by sex. This development is presented in the form of a mythical progress towards regeneration, with the implied rebirth that myths (after all accounts of the passing of seasons and of man's communion with nature) inevitably offer. Profane's affairs with Paola and Rachel Owlglass are empty experiences where he is unable to respond to the women's demands or to commit himself to any. His fear of the inanimate has a correlate in the second section of the poem, in a reference to cosmetics as something which distracts from the

object, drawing attention to themselves. At the end of the poem the Fisher King is left alone, in a similar way Profane is alone in New York at the end of the first chapter of the novel. On the other hand, many references point to the absence of development in Profane throughout the narrative. At the end of chapter one he says that he has not learned a single thing, something he will repeat in chapter sixteen in his last appearance. How are we to interpret this character then? Is he a mythical figure and then all his "yo-yoing" has a sense because it is the expression of endless renewal, or is he just a drifter and his life lacks a purpose? Or is yo-yoing the perpetual state of the seeker, always hoping for a meaning in the outside? In any case, the novel sets loose this complex set of inferences but it refuses to present one of them as the most plausible and valid. It foregrounds language's complex relationship with reality by making the novel refer to another literary form, and by showing that even a linguistic reference to another product of language is problematic and uncertain.

The metaphorical and metonymical functions of language are also parodied. The relationship of language to reality is symbolic. Language offers a certain number of signs which stand for something they cannot offer: the thing itself. These signs can appear in many different instances, one of the assumptions on which language is built being that the meaning of a sign is kept even when it is displaced from the original context in which it was created. A sign is therefore created by opposition to the different signs which surround it but, after it abandons this initial context, it keeps the same original meaning in all the instances in which it appears. It has a particular birth but it can be applied in the general context of language. Derrida has proved that this basic assumption of Saussurean linguistics is not true because, if the sign depends on its context to acquire its meaning, then a change of context will inevitably lead to a change in the meaning of the sign. What is true in a particular instance cannot be automatically assumed to be true in all the possible instances, and the same sign cannot be assured to always refer to the same referent (Brunette and Wills 1989: 179). A sign cannot reproduce reality and it cannot keep the same metaphorical relationship with reality in different contexts, but both the metaphorical and the metonymical functions must nevertheless be maintained in order to create at least the illusion of a coherent system of communication, always conveying relationships and never truths. It is this state of affairs that *V.* attacks.

In *V.* mises-en-abyme are examples of textual reflexive mechanisms which offer the illusion of a link between a particular part of the text and the whole of it, or another part, but which in the end are revealed not to

contribute to the final definition of the novel. They are examples of the text's parodying the metonymical side of language. The clearest example of *mise-en-abyme* is the confessions of Fausto Maijstral, where we find most of the textual and thematic elements which constitute the frame narrative. Fausto refers to himself in the third person, he says that history can only be made by dissecting an event or a character into its components, and this must be obviously done from the outside. He plays at referring to himself as if he were a compendium of different personalities. He is the equivalent of the extradiegetic narrator we find in the frame narrative and makes explicit what the latter only says implicitly: the role of poets and poetry is to use metaphors in order to make the world believe that its products and organisations are ruled by the same rules as man. The task of poets is to lie, to pretend that their metaphors have value apart from this deceiving function:

Living as he does in a world of metaphor, the poet is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice. So that while others may look on the laws of physics as legislation and God as human form with 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. (V. 325-326)

Fausto quotes other texts and transforms them in the process because he inscribes them in a different context, the context of his confessions. Precisely, what the frame narrative is doing with these confessions is to transform them, as they are presented to Stencil who will distort them in his search for an all-informing meaning. Stencil will try to find in them a metaphoric or metonymic meaning which may help him understand the rest of the clues he has come across. This framed narrative also includes the theme of the fight between the animate and the inanimate in the introduction of the Bad Priest, a figure who represents the advance of the inanimate until the final disassembly, suggesting a reversal of Jesus Christ's death. She (the priest is revealed to be a woman, linking her with other appearances of V.) is killed by a group of children, as if she were the negative side of a mythic figure (is Christ not one?). It is therefore suggested that a regeneration and rebirth may be expected, but there is no certainty of it as, similarly, there will be no

certainty of the development of the characters in the frame narrative, or that their quest for meaning will be rewarded in the future. This is so because the characters are looking for a pattern of development in their realities whose existence nobody can assure, the pattern is only the expression of man's desire to find it, to find a human logic in life. The parody lies precisely in that what these confessions contain can be metonymically applied to the frame narrative, but that this move does not mean the meaning of the text is clarified at all.

The metaphoric side of language is object of parody through the workings of *doppelgänger*s, another reflexive strategy (Stonehill 1988: 30-31). The text is peopled by characters which are a reduplication of others: Stencil is a reduplication of his father, Profane of Stencil (and viceversa) and both Profane and Stencil are surrogates for the reader. But none of the alleged originals can control its copies, none of the copies can be said to be exactly like the originals. Stencil's father's investigations about some examples of V. are of no help to his son; Profane is a Stencil whose consciousness is too broad to comprehend everything that happens to him, while Stencil has adopted the narrow scheme of the V. and tries to accommodate the whole of his reality to this pattern (Tanner 1982: 42). Both perform similar activities but neither of them can be said to be the original which controls the other. They are the readers in the text, they try to decode all the available information in a similar way to the reader, who strives to find out the hidden clue to the understanding of the whole novel and never manages to get it. *Doppelgänger*s are in fact parodying the reader's useless search, because they reproduce the different attitudes the reader may adopt towards the massive information the text contains: the reader may look for a single clue which clarifies everything as Stencil does, or s/he may search for a development which provides a meaning in the way Profane faces his predicament. In the end we, like them, are left with only a collection of data and our subjective pattern imposed on them, which is nothing but the hope, the desire, the faith that those data have such a pattern. The discussion on history which the text performs throughout shows a certain concern with the relations between reality and the accounts written about it, between reality and fiction, which is parallel to the discussion the novel performs about itself (another reflexive element). The already mentioned concept of original and copy is at the bottom of this dispute, the incapacity of the original to rule its copies and of the copies to be identical with the original because they appear in different contexts. The conclusion of the text's reflections about history, and implicitly about itself, is that the records of an event are always distorted by the new

context in which they are reproduced. The parody resides in the fact that the text acknowledges this, its being a metaphor, but in the end seems to refuse even to provide us with a clear knowledge of what the imaginary pole of the metaphor is, of what the text is saying, independently of what it stands for. As Richard Pattenon says:

Metaphor itself is, as Fausto Maijstral realizes, a kind of disguise, and the plot centering on the murder of Porpentine may be nothing more than an elaborate system of impersonation and speculation whose purpose is to disguise the truth: that there is no pattern, no cause and effect sequence, no recoverable story, no history. (1981: 22).

The reflexive novel has been traditionally understood as a mirror of consciousness, as a narrative mode which, by pointing to its own artificial nature, presents a new insight on the relationship of man with reality. The human being is a creator of constructs, human consciousness is also an artificial creation because it is based on systems of reference, like language, which are nothing but illusions of presence, of knowledge. The Wittgensteinian idea of the I constitutes a strong defense of reflexive literature. The I, the self, cannot observe and examine itself unless it adopts a detached position from which to apprehend the system to which it belongs. The I requires a mirror in which to analyse its reflected image (Kawin 1982: 8-12). Reflexivity in literature is an attempt of the work to explore its own nature and possibilities. At the same time, this construction of a mirror in which the subject becomes simultaneously object is very close to the idea of myth. As Richard Wasson points out, myth in modern theory works as a mode of perception which provides the unstable subjective self with a world order that transcends individuality. Myths function to get the subject beyond himself/herself. They turn history into a drama which can be incorporated into the self, they expand consciousness allowing it to include the drama of the world:

In this sense myth is a perceptual device for including the other within the self; but for the process to work the individual personality must discipline itself by playing roles, by becoming other than self. (1981: 14-15).

This hope of integrative meaning both the reflexive novel and the idea of myth as metaphor of life promise is nevertheless contradicted in the novel because, as we can see, the reflexive mechanisms are refused the capacity to

provide a definite knowledge about the meaning of the novel. Many references in the text to processes of observation (Profane is described as an observer on several occasions) which do not lead to knowledge are therefore unveiled now as mises-en-abyme of the more general process the novel undergoes. *V.* represents an attack on any idea of knowledge which involves distance from the object of analysis: language and empirical observation are doomed to failure because they are distanced from what they try to analyse. The novel is a reflection on rationality's inability to apprehend what is not directly present for its analysis. *V.* therefore inscribes itself in a tradition of irrationalism which has been promoted in the 20th century by several philosophers, Jacques Derrida being the most representative and best-known among them. The text shows how this alleged capacity of rationality and language to apprehend consciousness of the self and external reality has also been traditionally used by the dominant classes in order to oppress the rest of society. In our novel this capacity is denied and this fact is foregrounded by its resistance to clearly present its meanings, making explicit that all attempts at codification are in fact attempts at manipulating information.

Some characters exemplify this theme, mainly those belonging to Profane's section. The Whole Sick Crew and Profane live in the paradox of being actual resistance to the codifying activity of society, refusing therefore to create stories, and of requiring at the same time those stories in order to go on living. They are never creative, but they keep using second-hand views about people and art in their everyday conversations. Winsome, a member of The Whole Sick Crew, seems to be most aware of it as he despises his wife's Mafia's pretensions to be a writer:

He'd had another fight with Mafia in the afternoon, over playing tapes of McClintic Sphere's group in the parlor while she was trying to create in the bedroom.

"If you ever tried to create," she yelled, "instead of live off what other people create, you'd understand."

"Who creates," Winsome said. "Your editor, publisher? Without them, girl, you would be nowhere." (*V.* 348).

The progress of the inanimate is one of the great themes of the novel: the advance of technology, the substitution of machines for human beings appears as related to the decay of this world. The inanimate is at times presented as the representative of codification, of pattern imposed by the system of society. Profane is threatened by the inanimate, empty love of Rachel Owlglass. On one of the many occasions on which they get close, Profane asks himself

whether she can be human at all in these terms: "Only a general desire to find somebody for once on the right or real side of the TV screen? What made her hold any promise of being any more human?" (V. 359). The inhuman or inanimate is on the side of the TV, real people are on the right, real side. The inanimate is all that contributes to the creation of history, which is built up by the powerful in order to oppress the poor. To this, the animated humans must oppose by making those constructions impossible to be effected, by changing all the time, by moving, escaping the threat of definition which the bourgeoisie will impose on them if they stop moving and accommodate in a static position. But at the same time stories (also patterns) give Profane the illusion that his yo-yoing will lead him to a destination, while knowing that to reach his destination is to submit to the inanimate, to allow being rewritten by history and the bourgeoisie. Profane's presence in the novel is constantly punctuated by what seem to be dim references to a mythic progression. His problems with women, his inability to respond to the demands of the different women in his life, link him with *The Waste Land*, where the same theme of the decay of love related to the absence of a religious faith appears (Eliot 1952: 47-72). His stay with the Puerto Ricans and his job killing alligators in the sewers of New York reminds of the death of the Fisher King in Eliot's poem, and might be read as a temporary death common to so many classical fertility myths. Myths where for instance the goddess stays under-ground for six months (corresponding to the autumn and winter) and comes back to the surface in spring, bringing regeneration. Profane returns to street level and resumes his rollicking in a scene which echoes a mythic call: he bumps into a negro who brings the mail to the office where he is waiting to be interviewed for a job, which would mean his definite submission to the establishment; outside the wind blows, he suddenly changes his mind about the job and walks out of the office and into the street. But what promises to be some kind of renewal, of rebirth once he resumes his previous life as a yo-yo does not in fact take place. Profane will keep rollicking for the whole of the novel, always suggesting some kind of development or hope that his predicament is the previous stage for a regeneration and a meaningful life, a hope which will remain unfulfilled. In a similar way the text seems to follow a mythical development in the alternation between Profane's sections and Stencil's. The Whole Sick Crew and Profane provide stages of apparent decay in all respects (morality, religion, culture, etc...), and the constant reappearance of Stencil seems to offer the hope that our "private eye" will reach a definite and meaningful answer to his quest, one which will invest the rest of the material with meaning. This hope will not be fulfilled, but the ending will present us

Stencil's father being engulfed by the waters of the Mediterranean sea, a clear mythical reference which again demands that the reader should use his/her faith if s/he is to confer a dimly unambiguous meaning to *V*.

In the same chapter where Profane and Rachel get friendly Winsome, a member of the Whole Sick Crew, considers suicide as a way of putting an end to a world where stories enslave him by jumping from a storey, the story which "holds" him alive:

Winsome came awake from a dream of defenestration, wondering why he hadn't thought of it before. From Rachel's bedroom window it was seven stories to a courtyard used for mean purposes only: drunks' evacuation, a dump for old beer cans and mop-dust, the pleasures of nighttime cats. How his cadaver could glorify that! (*V*. 359)

He defines the members of the Whole Sick Crew, ascribes them his story, his version of them, and then goes on to jump but... Pig Bodine grabs him just in time. In the end the whole neighbourhood open the window and become an audience for their performance (story), even Elvis Presley sounds in the background, rounding off a perfect spectacle. Winsome's attempt to stop being just a story is in the end frustrated because he is too noisy and accidentally awakes the neighbours' curiosity. By becoming an object of observation he and Pig Bodine become part of a story again. They are again under control, in the hands of the narrator.

McClintic Sphere seems to provide the answer to such a predicament. In his talk with Paola he reaches the conclusion that the only answer to the pair cool/crazy is to keep cool but care: "Love with your mouth shut, help without breaking your ass or publicizing it: keep cool but care. He might have known, if he'd used any common sense. It didn't come as a revelation, only something he'd as soon not've admitted" (*V*. 366). Being cool seems the right attitude to survive in an increasingly inhuman world, but this attitude contributes to inhumanity by the denial of love, concern. The opposite, being crazy, is too dangerous because it contains a tremendous destructive potential (Tanner 1982: 49,50). He proposes to love without letting anybody know one loves because then it is impossible to remain cool. He sees in incommunication the answer to his personal problems with Paola (his girlfriend), in what seems to be a hint at an answer for a larger issue. He proposes a way of life in which one is aware of the process of inanimation which is going on through the spreading of stories, and at the same time one attempts to fight it by not becoming stagnant, by moving all the time. This

constant movement may lead the individual to become incommunicated from the outside, but this must be avoided, the individual must do both things at the same time: to be aware and concerned. This attitude must not be publicised because it would mean being ruled by stories, the individual must not let anybody know that s/he cares because they will want to engulf him/her into a comfortable, dead life; the individual will become part of history, will be manipulated and falsified. McClintic's proposal is ultimately to maintain a social awareness but at the same time to avoid publicising attitudes because this means creating a discourse and discourses are always distorted by the system. This conclusion may help to explain why Pynchon has always refused to appear in public, why his novels are so obscure and perhaps why he stopped writing for a fairly long spell after the publication of *The Crying of Lot 49*.⁴ *V.* proposes to escape and transcend the traditionally dual way of thinking by proving how it is in fact a false duality, because thought is based on language and one may add a further way out, namely to stop using language.

Thomas Pynchon's *V.* contains many and obvious metafictional devices but its implicit notion of social awareness or social commitment is somehow different from Hutcheon's. The text makes the reader's comprehension, the creation of a heterocosm in the mind of the reader, very difficult, far more than his/her everyday processes of understanding. It finds in this activity the subversive function of metafiction: the novel avoids being easily interpreted, patterned and therefore falsified. *V.* sees in pattern the opposite of truth because truth is never logical and patterns are formed according to logical premises. Truth never follows the human logic, logic is a human construct. It therefore attacks the activity of literature itself because literary forms have always striven to be communicative and clarity is implicitly demanded in all communication. It suggests that only literature which obstructs its comprehension will be socially committed: obscure literature, literature which does not publicise its aims directly. *V.* goes beyond Hutcheon's idea, it acknowledges literature's capacity to study reality but only within its own subjectivity and restricted one-sidedness; because literature cannot apprehend reality as it is, it can only offer an illusion of presence, never the thing itself (Derrida 1988: 5-6).

Actually, Linda Hutcheon mentions a similar kind of metafictional practice in her book. The writers gathered around the journal *Tel Quel* attempted an obscure narrative mode where words were generated according to an artificial logic which they did not usually explain to the reader. This challenge to representation ran the risk of becoming non-representational if

the reader failed to understand the internal logic of the text; in that case the text would stop being metafictional (Hutcheon 1991: 120-125). Its political effectiveness is therefore in direct proportion to its clarity, denying non-representational instances any subversive power. Committed writing usually presents the reader with a text which on the one hand embodies in its textual mechanisms a challenge to its own comprehension (assuming that dominant processes are devoted to the perpetuation of a bourgeois society) and on the other reveals that its effectiveness, as in all fiction, resides in its capacity to offer a clear meaning. *V.* is not explicit because it suggests that explicitness is precisely the worst political strategy, as it enables the establishment to dominate and falsify subversive attempts; and I would say that this is the more truthful and applicable to a text like *V.*, whose only political intention is to unmask the theoretical workings of oppression, not the actual ones. *V.*'s textual and thematic metafictional components build up a novel which refuses to allow the reader to decode it completely, always leaving a certain amount of the text which escapes our comprehension. This attitude is explicitly attacking the activity of the critic too, because what criticism aims to do is to codify every text, to interpret it completely. *V.* argues that criticism also falsifies the text, as the critic distorts it according to his/her already acquired knowledge. The novel is therefore a criticism on rationality and ultimately on the text itself; this is the reason why it strives to be unusually obtrusive and obscure, in order to posit a new way in which the novel can be political and literary at the same time. Besides, *V.* is a constant commentary on itself by means of reflexive mechanisms which ultimately parody the workings of the text at organising and clarifying thematic stuff, at conveying truth (reality). The final answer is provided by the obscurity produced through the accumulation of much more information than the reader can process. *V.*, like any other text, cannot guarantee to provide reality as it is. It chooses to flaunt the reader's recourse to faith in the link between signifier and signified in order to point out that the text is the only thing the reader has (an illusion of presence), and in order to make it difficult for the establishment to distort the novel. The massive accumulation of information ultimately points to the novel's attempt to destroy the idea that the conventional systems of language or rationality are the only possible ones. This social commitment may be understood as a reaction to the specific situation of the USA among post-industrial societies. The United States' lack of a long historical past has created the idea that only the present can be known, while the past (e.g. the Vietnam War) is constantly rewritten and accommodated to the country's necessities. It may also be a reaction to the absence of a progressive political

force which might control the traditional conservatism of most USA governments. This absence has enabled those in power to impose social structures without acknowledging before the country that they were doing so. American people have therefore got the impression that only what is apparent and present exists. *V.* is precisely an attempt at showing that what is apparent does not usually make sense if we reflect about it.

V. proposes the abandonment of language because it only offers dual structures, either/or alternatives which are always presented as excluding ones; the novel proposes the absence of language as a further alternative. This proposal may seem a mere metaphysical stance without any traces of social commitment, therefore introducing the issue of the political capacity of literature. I find it very difficult to imagine a kind of literature which can be considered socially committed nowadays if we do not accept that metaphysical stances are signs of social commitment. Literature of the kind Pynchon writes is not precisely well-known among non-academic people, and it is therefore very difficult that it may change public opinion to the extent of influencing its decisions. The only chance for literature to approximate such commitment is by creating metaphysical attitudes which manage to throw light on the power relationships at work in society. Social commitment is therefore only implicit, never explicit, in texts like *V.*

NOTES

1. I am here adopting Mieke Bal's terminology and concepts (1985).
2. Fausto Maijstral is the narrator and main character in what perhaps is the most illuminating framed narrative in the novel. It deals with Fausto's account of his own life in a recent past in Malta. His interest for literature and the concern with the state of Malta (oscillating between the influence of Britain and Italy) work as excuses for long discussions and reflections on language and history.
3. The edition of the novel I will be referring to is: Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (1963); London: Picador, 1975.
4. The fact that Pynchon returned to literature after such a period of silence, he has since written *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*, might be an implicit recognition that he no longer shares the views he exposed in *V.*

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