

POSTMODERNIST NOSTALGIA AND THE FANTASIZATION OF THE HISTORICAL IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *V*

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A nostalgia for the historical has permeated assiduously both postmodernist fiction and key critical texts which reflect theoretically on the nature of the postmodern itself. At the same time, that the unease with the postmodernist demise of traditional conceptions of the historical should take the form of nostalgia, signals the difficulties in breaking with a linear, teleological historical sense. The nostalgia which laments the disappearance of a traditional notion of historical process, the nostalgia which is always a retrospective or belated narrativization of the past, can be seen as a reification of a determinate concept of the historical rather than a *truly* historicizing gesture itself. In turn, postmodernist texts such as Thomas Pynchon's *V* employ the nostalgic impulse self-parodically to point to the inescapable fictionalization implicit in any historical recreation.

Thus, in the case at hand, we find what the perhaps most historically-minded theorist of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, would conceivably call «nostalgia freaks» inhabiting the fictional historicizations of Thomas Pynchon's *V*. So much so that Jameson's notion of a postmodernist «nostalgia mode» can be applied, with a critical awareness of Jameson's own nostalgic leanings, to the novel's structural interrelation of what it terms the «mirror worlds» of past and present. Jameson views the nostalgia mode's «random cannibalization of all styles of the past» (1984, 65-66) as a negative sign of postmodernism's suppression of historical time. Concentrating especially on postmodernist film, he sees the nostalgia mode as a stylistic recreation of the past through the projection of a simulacrum image of a historical period, rather than initiating the historicizing exploration of its «factuality.» This reflects for Jameson the postmodernist predominance of what he calls the «spatial logic of the

simulacrum» (66) or the mass-and-informational-media-influenced conversion of the world and its history into image.

In Pynchon's novel *Herbert Stencil*, of course, is pre-eminent amongst these nostalgia «freaks,» though by no means alone in exercising what the narrator calls the unacknowledged «right of imaginative anxiety or historical care» (62). He inherits this obsession with the past, in appropriately textual form, from the paternal precedent of Sidney Stencil. We find other forms of historical concern in the dangerous «hothouse» nostalgia of the self-simulating, ontologically blurred textual presence of V. herself, and the more wary reconstruction of the past textually practiced by Fausto Maijstral. The ultimate recipient of these specifically textual reconstructions, the reader, runs the risk of being converted into a connoisseur of the nostalgic were it not for the thematic foregrounding which the notion undergoes. Indeed the narrator, in one of the few direct, apparently but not conclusively authoritative intrusions to be found in the novel, questions this mode of historical consciousness:

The spring wore on, large currents and small eddies alike resulting in headlines. People read what news they wanted to and each accordingly built his own rathouse of history's rags and straws. In the city of New York alone there were at a rough estimate five million different rathouses. God knew what was going on in the minds of cabinet ministers, heads of state and civil servants in the capitals of the world. Doubtless their private versions of history showed up in action. If a normal distribution of types prevailed they did. (225)

Taken at face value, such a generalization, which can also be extended to the reader's creation of his or her own interpretive «rathouse,» aligns itself with Fredric Jameson's denunciation of what he considers postmodernism's dehistoricizing employment of the nostalgia mode. On the other hand, if the passage were true to its own narrative logic, epistemological relativism would also invade the fictionalized «private versions» of this unidentified narrator, as the contradictions and ambiguities of other narrative episodes would seem to confirm and ironically foreground. Thus the passage implicitly reveals the discursively *situated* nature of any historical representation by explicitly stressing the evaluative hierarchies and relations of force which underlie what it calls the «normal distribution of types» of historical agents and their investments in determinate historicizations. In this respect, we can detect the beginnings of a postmodernist reading of the textualized historicity which is manifested in such forms as nostalgia. Furthermore, if nostalgia can be considered a species of historical voyeurism, especially in the case of those who, like Stencil and the reader, can only recreate textually a past in which they did not participate empirically, then the whole notion of historical representation, fictionally highlighted in this case, succumbs to the self-distancing ambiguities of the voyeuristic gaze. Of course, Pynchon's novel makes the point that such a «voyeuristic gaze» may constitute the very nature of all acts of historical memory, whether the «voyeur» is a historical participant or not. *Gravity's Rainbow* will go on to draw out the full,

somewhat sinister implications of such a vision of history with both their epistemological and political consequences.

The bone of contention in the case of Jameson's critique with respect to other theorists of the postmodern lies in his assumption of an ultimately non-representational historical reality underlying its contingent representations and supposedly serving as an authoritative guideline for the «objective» reconstruction of, in his words, a «putative real world» (71). Jameson's view, which is itself belied somewhat self-consciously by the suggestion of a doubt in that adjective «putative,» is fictionally contradicted in Pynchon's novel by Fausto Majjstral's assertion that the «facts are history, and only men have histories» (305). Read in a postmodern light, Fausto's comments and their exhaustive elaboration in the novel's eleventh chapter can be seen to presage the discursively-oriented conceptions of a postmodern historical consciousness. In response to Jameson's increasingly dubitative rejection of postmodernist forms of historical representation, Linda Hutcheon proclaims in her analysis of postmodernist «historiographic metafiction» that:

Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present. (1988, 97)

Implicit in Hutcheon's discourse-conscious reflections we may detect a wavering adherence to a *reality principle* which is jeopardized by the affirmation that the real, in this case the historical real, only exists as a representation. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth puts it, «the debates about postmodernism come down to discussion about what, if anything, provides a reality principle for any construct» (1992, 59). If postmodernism seriously unsettles the idea of a grounding principle for ontological distinctions, then the field of discursive constructions becomes ripe for the textual irruption of such representational modes as the fantastic. The real, however, and the historical real are not textualized out of existence in postmodernist fiction, though their explicitly textual nature may be foregrounded. Indeed, the ambivalent *subversiveness* of postmodernist fiction seems to arise out of its self-conscious complicity with the representational structures of the *real* itself. Its ultimate aim is not the breakdown of representational distinctions, such as the real and the fantastic, but a questioning, never an impossible banishment, of representation itself through the fictional disjunctions of divergent modes of representational discourse. Hence, the *parasitical* relationship with respect to the discourses of the real of the fantastic, one of the favoured modes of this questioning. The *real* in postmodernist fiction, as distinct from conventional, consensually-accepted representations of reality, is often figurally –that is, non-mimetically– presented as that which resists representation, albeit through the interstices of representation itself. For postmodern writing to merely assert its own reality as a consciously fictional construct –and then to imperiously transfer this affirmation to the whole of the *real*– would not be to escape

the insistence of the *real* but to self-consciously allude to the latter's pervasive yet representationally *absent* presence.

One may need to represent the world in textual form but this tends to open out the problematic notion of *text* rather than flattening the dissonances of *world* (Wilde 1987, 4). The internment within the «hothouse» of textual self-reflexivity, as the fictional parallels of *V* suggest, becomes a form of representational imprisonment. The «prison,» in this case, as the character Fausto Maijstral muses, exists not so much to enclose as to shut out all that remains unrepresented or beyond the bounds of discursive articulation. In other words, all that traditionally has pertained to the realm of the fantastic in fictional narrative. For Fausto, his confessional «room» seals off the insistence of the unrepresentable present so that the paradigmatically absent presence of the past can be dealt with:

Why use the room as introduction to an apologia? Because the room, though windowless and cold at night, is a hothouse. Because the room is the past, though it has no history of its own. Because, as the physical being-there of a bed or horizontal plane determines what we call love; as a high place must exist before God's word can come to a flock and any sort of religion begin; so must there be a room, sealed against the present, before we can make any attempt to deal with the past. (305)

This may seem to run against more postmodern conceptions of historiography, as well as Fausto's own practice and comments elsewhere, which explicitly take into account the discursive and temporal situatedness of historiographical texts or the mutual imbrications of past and present. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth claims: «For postmodernism, historical time is a thing of the past in more than one sense. History now is not just the convention that uses the past to hold the present in a controlled pattern of meaning; history now takes up the interesting position of confronting its own historicity» (43). History, then, is not banished as a thematic concern in postmodernist fiction; rather, it must now be understood as a textual or *textualizing* activity whereby «facts» are submitted to a process of narrativization whose end-result is the production of «histories.»

The novel's covert self-reflexivity is provided with a thematization in the shape of its «mirror worlds» of past and present. The metaphorical conceit of the «mirror,» however, as it is employed structurally and thematically, comes to seriously unsettle the hierarchical relationship between past and present. The relationship between past and present is never symmetrical, neither in a purely temporal nor in a structural sense within a textual construct. The unavoidability of the textual representation of the past unhinges the «V-shaped» relations between past and present which promise mutual illumination. As a textual construct, the past enters the domain of interpretation rather than conforming a complementary relationship according to which the past unproblematically *explains* the present, as Herbert Stencil sets out to do. Indeed, the present, once represented, becomes the past, as the modernists realized to their despair in their aesthetic attempt to capture a timeless *now* and *here*. The present is that which

eludes *re-presentation*; the past may be represented because it is irremediably absent. Within a representational context, then, we all live in the past, for to make the present *present* is to condemn it to the absence implied in representationality. For the present to appear or manifest itself as the *present* is already to fall into the realm of representation, hence to become a represented *past*.

This is the paradox with which all the «artist-historians» of *V.*, including the reader, are faced. The «mirror» worlds of past and present are made to bear out the literal connotations of the metaphor of the mirror: an inverse symmetry obtains, not a hierarchical subordination of one temporal domain to the other. This produces a temporally uneven textual landscape but it also foregrounds the *fantasy* of historical reality. The belatedness of the past with respect to the present destabilizes any simple linearity which might be established between the narrative's dual strands, the skewed vectors forming its V-structure, the quest and anti-quest of Herbert Stencil and Benny Profane respectively. Ironically, the text's laboured explorations of historical causality through the figure of Herbert Stencil tend to find their (ir)resolution in an acausal convergence with the casual nihilism of Benny Profane. The latter, indeed, concludes with the avowal, shared by the more disconcerted readers of Pynchon's fiction, that «offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddam thing» (454). If Stencil's search for origins transforms itself into the origin of the search, likewise the exhaustive depiction of narrative and historical causality breeds its acausal antithesis through the paranoid proliferation of hypothetical causalities.

If the past can be considered the mirror in which the present seeks its identity-conferring reflection, as Fausto sets out consciously to do and as Stencil fearfully contemplates as a solipsistic dead-end, the inversions and dimensionless distancing which this *mirror* imposes align its effects with the supplementary projections of the voyeur. In other words, this particular textual mirror is self-reflexive, not reflective of a historically-unified self, and thus it participates in the ambiguities, both epistemological and ontological, of fictional self-reflexivity. If the mirror motif traditionally belongs to the domains of the fantastic, Pynchon's novel also extends the textual ambivalence of the fantastic to other scenarios. The «mirror» in Pynchon's text, both thematizes the otherness of the fantastic and figures forth the ambivalence of the textual. In the case of *V.*'s mirror-worlds of past and present, it also *reflects* the fantastic textualizations which render *history* suspect.

Appropriately it is Malta, the point of convergence of the text's narrative strands, which will function emblematically as a metaphorical «hub» for the temporal «spokes» which constitute the historical time of the text: «in Malta where all history seemed simultaneously present, where all streets were strait with ghosts» (481). On Malta, indeed, the «one-way and ongoing» (481) vector of historical time which establishes the irreversible flow from past to present is seriously displaced through the island's physical foregrounding of history as a series of textual remains or ruins. What the island lays bare in its enigmatic muteness is the notion that history is a narrativization of *traces*, traces which are condemned to an inanimate «textual stillness» (474) if they lack interpretive animation. Yet their silent dependence on interpretation also shows up, in Fausto Maijstral's words, «the fiction of continuity,

the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with 'reason'» (306).

Fausto's is not the last word on the nature of the historical in *V*, though, in many respects, his denial of intrinsic meaning in the historical process, indeed his denial that there is anything like *history* or *process*, seems to be supported by thematic parallels throughout the text, as well as by the noncommittal detachment of the extradiegetic narrator. At the same time, it is precisely this detachment, together with the ambivalence contained in the insistence on the textual nature of historical constructs, that postpones the possibility of determinate resolution. Fausto's comment above fits in more clearly with this line of thinking if for «humanized» we substitute the idea of a *textualized* history. By doing so we are merely making explicit what both Fausto and Herbert Stencil, whether forced to do so or not, admit is both cause and condition of their respective *historical* quests. If Herbert Stencil's appears to be the more *textual* of the two, constrained as he is to lead a surrogate existence through the diaries of his father. Fausto in turn can only make *sense* of his lived experience by converting it into a textual artifact, though what sense is forthcoming depends, as Fausto recognizes, on the interpretive light which is cast on his confession. The description of Malta sums up the enigmatic status of a textual history:

But Valletta seemed serene in her own past, in the Mediterranean womb, in something so insulating that Zeus himself might once have quarantined her and her island for an old sin or an older pestilence. So at peace was Valletta that with the least distance she would deteriorate to mere spectacle. She ceased to exist as anything quick or pulsed, and was assumed again into the textual stillness of her own history. (474)

If detachment produces «stillness», nevertheless the «textual» nature of history also solicits the restlessness of hermeneutic effort. With this effort comes the possibility of the disruption of unilinear conceptions of historicity and a concomitant *fantasization* of the historical. In this context, the voyeuristic gaze of Stencil can be compared with the character *V*'s nostalgic recreations of the past, in contrast to Fausto's more openly textual approach. Within the text's own terms, the former approach the status of static or inanimate *fetish* constructions whereas the latter, Fausto, moves between the two poles to end up assuming the self-consciously reconstructed nature of the historical *archive*. Fausto makes explicit the *textual* knowledge or awareness of textuality which Stencil tries to shun. Nevertheless, from the very beginning Herbert Stencil has had to confront the specifically textual origins of his quest. *V* first appears as a text, an obscure piece of writing in his father's diary, which can only be explicated in an equally textual form. Stencil's own «writings» attempt to enclose *V* within the clarifying frame of a narrativization of these textual traces. Yet the interpretive multiplicity of these narratives, their promise and postponement of meaning, their multiplication of narrative voices, their teasing habit of overlapping with ostensibly non-Stencilian narratives and their explicit processes

of textualization, all of this confirms the impossibility of producing any conclusive «official report.»

At the same time, this emphasis on the textual should not be seen as a strategy of interpretive reductionism which ironically produces a determinate (anti-)meaning in the shape of a meaningless (textual) void. Stencil, badgered by Fausto, admits the literal textuality of his quest: «Stencil sketched the entire history of V. that night and strengthened a long suspicion. That it did add up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects» (445). But this, which as such does appear reductively determinate, is immediately contradicted by the authoritative yet ambivalent scenario traced out in the novel's Epilogue and also contrasts with Stencil's own practice elsewhere. The recurring initial and «dead» objects are specifically textual remains which, as such, only exist within the interpretive construct of a *history*. This should not be seen as a way of avoiding the ontological ambivalence of such elements but, quite the contrary, as the only means of fully respecting the complexity and intractability of the ontological. As Stencil reflects earlier: «Stencil would rather depend on the imperfect vision of humans for his history. Somehow government reports, bar graphs, mass movements are too treacherous» (388). In other words, history or the real only exist as, in Jacques Derrida's words, an «interpretive experience» (1988, 137), an experience which is always multiple or «imperfect» from the point of view of those modes of representation, such as those delineated by Stencil, which presume objectivity or transparency. Textuality, then, does not banish the ontological density of the real but, rather, opens it out in its full irreducibility.

V.'s relentless textualization of the relationship between past and present brings into view those fantastic projections or *nostalgia* visions which conform *history*, whether personal or collective, but also reveals their nature as simulations, thus undermining their cognitive and ontological status. This points to a more adversarial use of the fantastic in its disruption of established historical modes of representation, an effect which is heightened by the explicit fictionalizations of the historiographical impulse in works like *V*. The textual *mirror* of history is fragmented when *archival* remains are used indistinctly as *fact* and *fiction*. Indeed, the novel's processes of textual embedding and sedimentation render such a dichotomy suspect by revealing the fictionalization which underlies any determination of the factual and hence the surprising factuality of the fictional.

At this early stage in Pynchon's oeuvre, the probing of the textual / historical «underground» does not produce a full-scale irruption of ontological heterogeneity but the narrative signs are there to indicate a movement in this direction. The interpretive authority of the text's thematizations is ironically subverted by their very authoritativeness when contrasted with the denial of authority elsewhere in the text. The very arguments of unavoidable textuality which serve to cast in doubt Stencil's and Fausto's historical reconstructions also infiltrate the apparently authoritative accounts of the narrator, aided by the latter's self-distancing tactics. The undermining of the text's «hothouse» narratives opens on to the fantastic panorama of the «Street's» noisy silence. The reader, forced to explore this textual realm of indeterminate ontological and epistemological status, ends up self-consciously enacting the highly unself-conscious position of Benny Profane:

The stories, by the time Profane heard them, were pretty much apocryphal and more fantasy than the record itself warranted. At no point in the twenty or so years the legend had been handed on did it occur to anyone to question the old priest's sanity. It is this way with sewer stories. They just are. Truth or falsity don't apply. (120)

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