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Truth, Reality, and Pynchon's *V*: From Aestheticism to Dissemination*

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Indeterminacy, along with the traces of the unknown identity V, plays a crucial role in building a new possibility in the narrative *V*. While the characters search for the single identity of V, Pynchon never lets readers and critics reach any final destination or goal in analyzing the novel. Exploring the multiple possibilities and meanings of life, the characters merely keep traveling and searching, without ever reaching any final conclusion or destination. The journey without ever reaching a final destination equals going beyond the boundary and embracing the margins of various possibilities. It concerns *the Others* and breaks off the hierarchy of Western metaphysics, which is quite similar to what the theorists of deconstruction seek to do. The search without ever reaching a final destination not only designates the multifarious aspect of truth, but it also suggests the possibility of the multiple meanings of words that the characters create. Just as their stories are abundant, the meaning that they produce with their stories can be open-ended. The notion of indeterminacy and broadness in this text, which can be well explained by Derrida, makes it possible for one to search for something other than the fixed meanings or truth claims. The text becomes multifarious in meaning as well as in structure, thus rejecting any kind of singular signifying act.

[postmodern literature/multifarious aspect/indeterminacy]

I. INTRODUCTION

The false historicity, the violence of materials on human existence, and the literature of exhaustion or used-upness are probably some of the most popular issues that critics would be interested in investigating in the analysis of *V*. The text introduces characters who are so much accustomed to these familiar situations, suggesting various ways to reconsider and

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correct their insensitivity. First of all, the text *V* is designed to promote the criticism of false historicity, bringing out some straightforward discussions on various historical and political issues. A series of hierarchization and differentiation have produced the twentieth century nightmares of mass violence, and Pynchon criticizes the addiction to current trends that are insensitive to the fear of the historical and political tragedies. Then the text deals with the overwhelming power of inanimateness by highlighting the antithetical battle between the human existence and the unknown identity V. As many critics agree, presentation of the encroachment and violence of the inanimate world on the animate is a part of what the text delivers throughout the whole textuality. For example, V as an unknown object imposes its mystic power upon an animate being like Stencil by making him struggle to find this inanimate existence throughout the whole story. Naturally, "the predominance of human attributes applied to the inanimate" brings a severe tension into the textual reality of *V* (p. 337). The text vividly dramatizes the way humans meaninglessly search for the mysterious existence and highlights the tension resulting from the obsession with the alleged truth.

Critics say the narrative *V* corrects the false historicity and criticizes current trends that mystify inanimate objects, but, most of all, it should be read as a rebellious work against conventional literature, in that it defies the characters' intention of aestheticizing meanings and truth claims. The texts that participate in the traditions of western Metaphysics normally valorize such values as truth and reality that are founded on dualistic ideology or dichotomy. The narrative *V* may well be considered as a challenge against the traditions, since it is designed to discourage readers to settle for a single truth or reality in their literary analysis. In fact, a plenty of postmodern writers tend to see the traditions as a worn-out legacy that no longer goes along with contemporary thoughts and trends. For many postmodernists, literary conventions such as bourgeois realism and modernism might be considered exhausted and need to be disseminated.

The exhausted form of literature might lead to a type of literary sickness, because once something becomes exhausted and worn-out, it no longer works productively. Just as a vaccination immunizes people against a disease such as smallpox, a postmodern literary vaccination is likely to immunize readers and/or writers against the sickness of traditional literary devices like totality, closure, and textual autonomy. Thomas Pynchon, prescribing his own postmodern vaccines like rupture, instability, and incoherence, criticizes the literary devices that the western traditions have cultivated in the world of literary production. The traditions of Western Metaphysics have been helplessly trapped in the old regime of dualism, still cling to the familiar dichotomy like *truth* and *nontruth*. Therefore, all they could come up with in any signifying act are two sets of *signifieds* and *paroles*. On the other hand, post-structuralists/postmodernists understand that the old regime of dualism has already run its course and therefore does not work productively any more. While the

old school of Euro-centric traditions is trapped in the worn-out system of dichotomy, postmodernists seem to realize that each *signified* (or *parole*) produces its own differences, thus creating a multi-set of *signifieds*. It can be seen that postmodernity fertilizes a rich multiplicity of semantic possibilities that undermine the dualist authority of the western ideal of truth and reality. Pynchon presents the multifarious nature of contemporary knowledge, the way it is constructed as an expanding series of meanings and possibilities that can never allow a complete description of reality or of truth. The result is that the switch from the singular or unitary to the multiple is celebrated.

II. FROM AESTHETICISM TO DISSEMINATION

First of all, the vast historical and political scale of the text should not be overlooked, since the book at least partially belongs to the genre of literary history. As Neil Schmitz (1975) points out, the text *V* is designed to promote the criticism of false historicity:

> As it appears in *V* and *Lot 49*, history is, if anything, a vile invention specifically designed to interfere with the random exhaustion of human energy. By constantly devising (through its lesser demons) totalitarian systems of mediation, institutionalized versions of the Demon, it seeks to keep the social world of men going. History is not natural, but an imposition of human will, a rebellion. The Hegelian Idea of Freedom that ostensibly answers our questioning gaze when we turn from the "slaughter--bench" of history reveals itself in *V*. (p. 118)

The criticism of false historicity relates to straightforward discussions on various historical and political issues such as "British colonialism" (p. 309), "the Jewish" (pp. 45--48), "liberty or slavery" (p. 162), "Anglo-Indians" (p. 479), "the fear of the bomb" (p. 318), "immunization to everything" (p. 324), and "Mussolini bombs" (p. 318). Among them, the image of immunization might be the most problematic issue that runs through the whole textuality. Not all kinds of immunization work positively, and there are certain immunizations that make people insensitive to serious issues affecting human lives. Once people become immune to violence, for instance, they are unable to realize its potential danger. The text *V* warns readers and critics that being insensitive to the power of violence can be a serious problem. With its postmodern devices, the narrative criticizes the very insensitivity, pointing out the danger of violence that the twentieth century has produced so far. In short, the text warns readers that being addicted to the twentieth century nightmares can be a serious issue:

> One dose and the "Generation" were immune for life; immune to the fear of death, hunger, hard labour, immune to the trivial seductions which pull a man away from a wife and child and the need to care. Immune to everything but what happened to Fausto one afternoon. . . . (p. 324)

What Pynchon attempts to do here is criticize decadent and pessimistic cultural trends that lie in the contemporary mechanical world. The fact that the novel *V* is intended to deliver the message of the twentieth century nightmares of mass violence, however, does not necessarily mean that it is ready to celebrate the exhaustion of values like many other postmodern narratives.

Dealing with a number of frustrated characters with various types of exhausted values, quite a few postmodern narratives explore one of the universal problems in the contemporary age, the exhaustion of values. The characters never realize, until they find it is impossible to reach an exit and too late to get out of the catastrophe, that their values have already been exhausted, and are obsolete and useless in confronting any type of dilemma. The characters' pretense to rationality and belief in immortality plays a crucial role in making the novels part of the literature of exhausted values, which John Barth, for instance, frequently introduces through his characters who dwell in fake intellectuality and false identity.

The characters of the literature of exhausted values are also immune to the fear of death, probably because everything starts withering in the world of exhaustion and dehumanization, and even death does not seem so unusual. The typical characterization of death in that kind of literature is that death is abrupt and violent, since death is a type of violence. It is situational violence that no one expects until the last minute when he or she falls a victim of it. It plays a demonic role, after all, in destroying a protagonist's superiority and integrity, and breaking the pretension to rationality and pompous intellectuality.

The power of death never allows anyone to be what he/she really wants to be or to have what he/she really wants as far as values are concerned. A series of fantastic idealogical stances, such as the pretense of behaving always consistently, being always clear and certain, shooting oneself to act upon her or his own will, and even acknowledging suicide, emotionally collapsing at once, turn out to be a collection of miserable human masks. Usually, the characters do not realize a crucial fact that they can never be what they really want themselves to be not because of their own fault but because of the unexpected situational violence of their lives. In fact, they are not supposed to make any attempt to build useless structures of values of their own. No matter how glorious or fantastic those values may seem, they are bound to be exhausted sooner or later, because the absurdity of this world often discourages them to make any rational or reasonable decisions.

The literature of exhausted values considers human beings as mere animals characterized by mating and struggling to survive in the biological food chain. No matter how glorious their values may seem, they lose their light sooner or later by the unexpected violence of absurdity. No matter how hard they try to be superior, the characters get reduced to the state of Pavlov's dog that is conditioned only to the most basic animal instinct. They are suffering from a chronic illness, and their disease involves the death of values. Is there any treatment? Characters find, after wrestling with the entire strangeness of the world, that they have to stop thinking and asking reasons, but to continue living with blind eyes. The absurdity never allows them to ask why, and so they have to get lost while laughing. Not being able to act upon their will forever, they are not even allowed to prevent their own decay and death, since all of their will is frustrated and all of their values are exhausted.

Unlike the novels of exhausted values that have been discussed so far, the narrative *V* approaches the idea of exhaustion in a slightly different way, suggesting that people should participate in restoring and replenishing values. As we discussed earlier, the text is a literary history that warns readers of the twentieth century about the nightmare of mass violence. The text urges that mass violence was indeed problematic and therefore should not be easily forgotten. Michael Vella (1989) points out:

> What most animates Pynchon's writing is a reaction to war and technologically efficient mass violence. *V* is an experience of what it is about human consciousness, history, indeed knowledge, that yields war and destruction. But *V* is not an antiwar novel as, say, T*he Enormous Room*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Jonny Got His Gun*, or *The Naked and the Dead* are. Pynchon is less concerned with realistically portraying the ravages of war in order to provoke revulsion in his readers, and far more concerned with at least momentarily altering the reader's very consciousness, redirecting it, as it were, from its usual destructive course. (p. 135)

The text *V*, unlike many other narratives that focus only on the fatality and destructiveness of war, does not lead to a typical conclusion that war is fatalistic and leaves humans without any values. Although the text is full of images of exhaustion, extinction, dehumanization, and decadence, it by no means produces emotional frustration or numbness for its readers. Rather, it seems to help readers to awake from the long and tiresome dream of nothingness, correcting false historicity and totally shaking their consciousness, which has been anesthetized for a long period because of witnessing too much violence of the twentieth century. Its analysis sounds serious:

> Perhaps history this century, thought Eigenvalue, is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated, as Stencil seemed to be, at the bottom of a fold, it's impossible to determine warp, woof or pattern anywhere else. By virtue, however, of existing in one gather it is assumed there are others, compartmented off into sinuous cycles each of which come to assume greater importance than the weave itself and destroy any continuity. (p. 155)

False historicity, however, is not the only significant issue in the criticism of Pynchon's *V*. Lots of criticism on the text has to do with the violence of the inanimate and materialistic world. To win the battle against the overwhelming power of inanimateness, people might have to declare and practice humanistic ideologies. Therefore, Pynchon suggests, "To have humanism we must first be convinced of our humanity" and "as we move further into decadence this becomes more difficult" (p. 322). The tension between the inanimate and the animate might well describe where humans are located in the world of mass technology. Once the text deals with the violence of materials on human animals, it naturally becomes a critique of excessive capitalism that the past century has promoted under the name of progress or comfort. Pointing out the violence of immense capitalism that naturally subordinated humans to technology, Fredric Jameson (1991) declares:

> Rather, I want to suggest that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. (p. 38)

With the image of violence of materialistic culture on human animals, readers are able to picture the various effects of revolutionary technology occupying today's society. People, enjoying all kinds of materialistic comforts thanks to modern technology including hyperreality, ironically suffer from its overshadowing impact and live behind the shadow. The text *V* suggests that the human psychology has been damaged by the encroachment of materialism and therefore should be restored into another alternative. Living in an environment where the animate has been highly repressed by capitalism, Stencil might be suffering from a type of insanity, and this may be the reason he is so much obsessed with the inanimate existence, the mystic identity of V.

It can be said that excessive capitalism promotes a type of insane psyche, which triggers another psychological emptiness for humans; no matter how hard Stencil attempts to search for the mysterious identity, his efforts are doomed to failure. He keeps searching for the inanimate anyway, without ever being able to get out of the repeating chain of failure. The individual seems to fade away, while the unknown inanimate keeps reviving. Fredric Jameson seems to agree:

> Postmodernism presumably signals the end of this dilemma, which it replaces with a new one. The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego--what I have been calling the waning of effect. But it means the end of much more--the end, for example, of style, in the essence of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). (p. 15)

As we have seen, the narrative *V* picks out the false historicity and criticizes current trends that mystify inanimate objects, but, most of all, it should be read as a rebellious text against conventional literature, in that it defies the characters' intention of searching for meanings and truth claims. Interestingly enough, critics say a major motif in this text is paranoia, which is a symptom of obsession with the unknown identity, V. W. T. Lhamon (1975) says, "Paranoia is another indication in Pynchon's work of an alternative world beyond the customary one, for paranoids read signs of mystery and force that philistines never suspect" (p. 167), and Tonny Tanner (1974) also argues that paranoia "is a recurring theme in all Pynchon's work" (p. 80). The main character, Herbert Stencil, attempts to organize a vast array of seemingly unconnected clues to undertake his significant mission. In fact, his attempt to undertake the project results from the *absence* of the unknown identity V. His paranoia, then, could be interpreted as obsession with the myth of presence, the very notion that Jacques Derrida seeks to deconstruct in his criticism of Western metaphysics. Reacting against the tradition that privileges the spoken word, Derrida creates his own interpretation of spoken and written language. This does not necessarily mean that he merely focuses on the significance of the written language. Rather, his critique points to the notion of immediacy or presence that the metaphysics seeks to valorize.

In the Derridean world, presence is a false belief; it exists neither in the written word nor in the spoken word. If we assume that the notion of presence is a myth, it becomes possible for us to argue for the spontaneous relationship between the reader and the text. As soon as a writer starts working on a project, the meaning of his/her presence fades away; nobody knows what is really happening to the psychology of the writer and what part of his/her circumstances affects the writing, and, eventually, nothing is left except the text created by the writer. Derrida (1974) points out that there is no valuable world outside the text:

> There is nothing outside of the text (il n'y a pas de hors-texte). And that is neither because Jean Jacques's life, or the existence of Mama or Therese themselves, is not of prime interest to us, nor because we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation. . . . , there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations. . . . (p. 158)

When there remains "nothing outside of the text," the authority of the writer and the myth of his/her presence becomes an illusion: there is nothing significant about the writer himself/herself. In short, what remains is not the writer but the text that he/she created. A number of postmodern writers, including Pynchon, vigorously present, in their works, the disorganized process of their writing. They acknowledge the very imperfection and self-contradiction (or *difference* in Derrida's term), believing that writers are, after all, human and no human work is ever flawless or complete. The writers take self-contradiction as something that naturally exists in every single human literary product. E. P. Walkiewicz (1986) also examines the issue, pointing out that "self-consciousness makes one aware of the inviolable level that enables the illusion of a tangled hierarchy to come into existence; self-awareness makes one conscious that what the mirror sees is funny and that 'He' offers but a 'poor sort of immortality'" (p. 96).

As I (2004) pointed out several years ago in relation to the school of coherence and structure, however, we have seen a number of literary theorists around academia who vehemently discredit the play of *differance* in every literary product and doggedly cling to the worn-out infatuation with textual autonomy, consequently refusing to scrutinize other alternatives in the world of criticism (p. 178). M. H. Abrams (1953), for instance, contends that "the criterion" of "a good critical theory" is "the scope, precision, and coherence of the insights that it yields into the properties of single works of art and adequacy with which it accounts for diverse kinds of art" (pp. 4-5). Promoting "the formal structure" of literature (p. 218), Cleanth Brooks (1947) also states: "The Question of form, of rhetorical structure, simply has to be faced somewhere. It is the primary problem of the critic." As literary analysts, according to Brooks, we "are compelled to deal with" the rhetorical structure" sooner or later (p. 222). What he highlights in *The Well Wrought Urn* is a totalized form of literature, which discredits the play of self-contradiction and merely aspires for the closed structure of words. Supporting the familiar pattern of analysis of coherence, Northrop Frye (1957) identifies myth in literary criticism with "a structural organizing principle of literary form" (p. 341). As the title *Anatomy of Criticism* might reveal, his project is after all a sublimation of the alleged coherence of language as well as an indication of his obsession with the unknown structure of words. Therefore, this school of structure and coherence vigorously glorifies the existence of an authoritative writer and searches for such concepts as the absolute truth and the textual autonomy.

Post-structuralists believe, however, the notion of a "self-consistent," "applicable," and "relatively adequate" literary material these theorists valorize is a complete myth and therefore will result in a failure of the exercise of structure and coherence that a *good* literary work is designed to represent (p. 5). Dismantling the "bourgeois consciousness," Derrida (1978) also disseminates the stability of language and states, "The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure . . . but above all to make sure that the organizing principles of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure" (p. 278). Deconstructing "a fixed origin," "the coherence of the system," and "the totality," Derrida points out, "Even today the notion of a structure lacking any canter represents the unthinkable itself." According to his standpoint, "classical thought concerning structure" becomes "contradictorily coherent" (p. 279). Destabilizing "the closure of ontology" and focusing on the play of *difference* in terms of "the trace of what exceeds the truth of being," Derrida (1982) contends, "The trace . . . which can never be presented, the trace which itself can never be presented . . . Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself" (p. 23). Roland Barthes (1993) also detotalizes the notion of structure and textual autonomy, introducing some brand-new alternatives (namely, "neutral modes of writing," "the zero degree of writing," or "colorless writing") to the exhaustive regime and expediting "the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness" (p. 5). Thus, these theorists severely criticize the alleged operation of structure while acknowledging the destructive force of language. Therefore, it can be seen that scrutinizing the notion of self-contradiction in a literary product might be the most efficient way to highlight the issue of self-consciousness. Pynchon explores the very issue of imperfection that every literary product is supposed to have and therefore represents his whole generation's self-consciousness. Relating this theory to the narrative *V*, we realize that the characters' failure in identifying V symbolizes the idea of the original failure of a writer. No matter how serious his/her attempt is, the writer is supposed to fail in establishing a coherent identity of V: the identity is never to be revealed, and we, as readers and critics, cannot but face an absence of identity.

When there remains "nothing outside of the text," it creates a whole new ground where the reader is allowed to respond to his or her text without ever being interrupted by the conventional structures of interpretation. The readers are allowed, on the basis of their own interests and experiences, to interpret texts in a way that is quite different from the traditional regulations. This leads to an idea that there is no final resting place, in Derrida's world, of interpretation that might be called absolute truth or reality.

I would like to emphasize here the dialectical swing between fictionality and reality in the narrative *V*. It can be seen that the characters are totally lost in the middle of their search, not realizing what is really happening in the whole situation. The world they live in is one in which the distinction between the fictional and the real has disappeared. Pynchon

would be interested in the way reality and fictionality are deconstructed and disseminated in terms of the relationship between truth and nontruth. The dialectical swing between fiction and reality is actually one of the strategies practiced by the whole school of self-consciousness or self-reflexivity. The antithetical dynamic between fiction and reality is one of the problems that the contemporary writers have to address. D. M. Thomas (1984), for instance, is one of those contemporary writers who like to deal with the antithetical swing between reality and fiction, the artistic and the pornographic, the lyric and the narrative, or originality and plagiarism. *Swallow*, one of his representative works, shows a literary competition among improvisationists at the Olympiad, where several judges appear to evaluate the literary works of the competitors. The first criterion that interests them in each improvisation is whether or not the literary work is *realistic*. The judges are not the only ones that are interested in the criterion; after hearing the project of an Italian improvisationist Corinna Riznich, the son of the judge Matsushita says, "Listening to you, I have become crazed with love. Like the lovers in your improvisation" (p, 13). Like most of the audience, he completely identifies reality with fictionality, never grasping what the artist is really up to—the dynamic swing between reality and fictionality. There is also "a group of women," who interpret Corinna's project as an advocacy of "the rights of women," and show "shrieks of approval" by shouting, "No more patriarchy! No more Shit!" (p, 20). Corinna's intimate friend Cesare also shows his interest in her project's reality by saying, "And to have to sit and hear you describe our relationship, or non-relationship rather, to everyone" and "That was our Russian trip—you know that. I'm not an idiot," which show his obsession with the close relation between reality and fictionality as a traditional reader. When she says, "Oh, I see! . . . But completely ridiculous" (p, 22), Cesare questions "what had happened between her and Markov," and says, "No! And I'm not even sure you're telling me the truth now," and declares, "You're a swallow." Corinna simply responds, "You're right. I'm a swallow" (p, 29). She does not appear to resist his accusation, but Thomas seems to argue that it is time for us to stop chasing the images of genuine truth as well as absolute reality. A plenty of postmodernist texts are designed to make readers explore various possibilities, and the writers' mission is far way from caring about whether or not their readers believe what they create. The project of realist writers was to make their readers suspend disbelief by making things believable, while that of postmodernist writers is to let their readers present disinterest in reliability by creating a dynamic swing between fictionality and what people would normally call reality.

The judges' reaction to Corrina's project "The Seven Veils" reflect the conventional image of critics. When an Anglo Argentinian judge complains about the Italian improvisation, thinking it is "a coarse, muddled, seemingly endless, feminist polemic," the Russian judge complains of "the work's Cold War tones, its anti-Sovietism" (p, 34). Another judge named Senora Menendez, however, seems to sympathize briefly with her

improvisation, pointing out, "We needn't argue too much about details. It's all pretty crude. That scene in the sex club, especially! My stomach churned. But I didn't find the whole improvisation so objectionable. There were, as I said just now, even lyrical moments" (p, 61). Therefore, it can be seen that writers should not believe in themselves too much, since they are after all a set of mocking birds that merely imitate what others have already said: the words that writers produce everyday are in fact the ones that have already been created by others. A part of the writing process, in which a writer struggles to find right words for his/her text, is revealed through what the narrator in *Swallow* discusses in regards to the insignificance of an authoritative author by dealing with the issue of plagiarism.

Realist writers tended to credit the significance of an authoritative author in order to make themselves sound *complete*. This trait is far from what interests postmodern writers, because their main purpose is not to hide their vulnerability, but to expose the very process of chaos and conflict in their writing process. Interestingly enough, they are eager to reveal their chaotic writing process as one of their writing strategies. Revolutionizing the literary conventions, the text *V* mocks the traditional way people approach literature and invites various ways to reach multiple possibilities; it asserts that chasing a coherent identity and meaning becomes almost useless in a study of literature. In search of the unknown identity V, the characters attempt to follow the way the literary conventions suggest, but it takes them forever to solve the case of the mysterious identity. It does not seem so valuable. Do we need to spend forever just to solve the unknown identity or truth? Even if time is valuable, we still have to wonder what finding the genuine V would do to our reading of Pynchon. Just because we would like to believe that the identity is the genuine Pynchon's V, why should the V be the *real* V? Not only this, what do we want to do with the V identity that we may have found? What does it have to do with our reading of the text after all? Again, the only thing that matters in the process is the textuality in general, not the existence of the single identity. Finding a *genuine* V demands time, but no matter how hard we try to examine the single identity of the mysterious existence, it always turns out to be of little worth, because, as we have seen, there remains "nothing outside of the text."

Pynchon contrasts the energetic character named Stencil with the lazy whole Sick Crew (the passive one) as a part of textual dynamics. Some critics have pointed out that Stencil's desperate efforts to organize his clues reflect conventional readers' preoccupied efforts to interpret fictions. Robert Martin Adams (1977) contends that "the deciphering of novel by reader parallels the persistent, paranoid effort of the 'characters' (but they are transparent cutouts, not true characters) to decipher the twisted and tormented face of Europe" (p. 176). As the line such as "You are wanted for questioning" (p. 185) presents, what Stencil mainly does is question for V's mysterious identity. The obsessed readers participate in deciphering the complicated textuality as Stencil frantically gathers his information in undertaking his mission. Their efforts, however, are doomed to be fruitless, probably

because the search for a single identity or hidden meaning belongs to what John Barth (1984) would call the “literature of exhaustion” (p. 64). The narrative *V* is designed to tease this old-fashioned approach to literature and invite various ways of appreciating literary materials. In other words, what Stencil and characters perform in the story is a conventional act that falls into the category of the literature of exhaustion, and the text *V*, with its postmodern literary devices, seems to mock such old habit. After all, the text *V* lets critics and readers feel free to appreciate the unknown identity of V. The journey, however, is not always pleasant, because the deeper the characters go in, the more complicated the search becomes. The journals of old Stencil read:

> There is more behind and inside *V* than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report. (p. 53)

Also significant in *V* is the story of Benny Profane, an interesting character who hangs around with a group called "the Whole Sick Crew," which is thought by some critics to represent the decadence in American culture. It seems that this character is full of experiences, while Stencil merely investigates as a detective. At the end of the novel, however, Profane reveals, "Offhand, I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing" (p. 454), thus proving his experiences do not work, either. So it becomes clear that the search for V is in vain, since every single attempt the characters have shown turns out to be fruitless. Their tragedy is to mistake *an* identity for *the* identity, another name for absolute truth or reality. No matter how hard one tries to decipher a single identity, there always remain confusion and lack of coherence, which reflects one of the most important characteristics of postmodern literature. The postmodern confusion and incoherence, however, appear to be different from those of modernism. Steven Connor (1989) explains:

> Typically, in the works of Woolf and Joyce, who provide Wilde with his instances, radical incoherence is not 'resolved' or 'unified' in the manner imagined by I. A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks, but controlled by being projected in the form of binary conflicts (flesh and spirit, self and society). Paradox and disconnection are thus not resolved, but delimited within a recognizable aesthetic shape. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* provides an example of this aestheticizing. (p. 115)

"Who then is V?" (p. 155). Perhaps the characters have to ask a question like, "What is V?," because they do not even know whether or not it is human. It could be a nineteen-year-old from Yorkshire, Miss Victoria, or the Venus, or even the mythical land of Vheissu. The text deals with people who have escaped from stuffy spaces to enjoy the infinite

possibility of the new world. Its interest does not lie in what happened in a limited place, but in what is going to happen in the broad stage. The various possible identities, carefully analyzed, can be seen as a type of metaphor that pictures the unlimited characteristic of *truth*. The truth, like flying blind, reaches no final resting place that claims fixity. This idea of unlimited truth is quite similar to what Nietzsche seems to present in the context of social construction. According to his philosophical standpoints, what counts as true and good is originally a linguistic construction built on the manipulative use of language for the purpose of enforcing oppressive social rules and regulations. He discusses the way the rules and regulations are related to what society calls absolute truth. The rules and regulations that society considers true trigger an effect of epistemic violence by putting too much emphasis on rationality and reason, which is why Nietzsche constantly rejects the Cartesian notion that philosophy and science search for and find truth. By accusing rationalism of creating a false belief in positivism, Nietzsche (1990) discusses the various types of binary oppositions, including rationality versus irrationality, "intuitions" versus "concepts (or abstractions)," and "the intuitive man" versus "the man who is guided by concepts and abstractions" (pp. 895-96). The society, according to Nietzsche, has totally ignored irrationality and intuition, while celebrating rationality and inartistic abstraction too much. He points out:

> What is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. (p. 891)

He discusses here an arbitrary relationship between truth and what society considers true. What society defines as truth is not necessarily true, he argues, "for so far we have heard only of the duty which society imposes in order to exist: to be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors" (p. 891). As Christopher Norris (1982) points out, "what Nietzsche provides is a style of philosophic writing which remains instantly skeptical of all claims to 'truth'" and "which thus opens up the possibility of liberating thought from its age-old conceptual limits" (p. 57). This new notion of literature can also be supported by various types of contemporary entities such as *Jouissance*, *petit narrative*, and *the subject-in-process*. Roland Barthes (1996) sees some major distinctions between the "text of pleasure" that allows "a comfortable practice of reading" and the "text of jouissance" that acknowledges instability and rupture in reading. J. F. Lyotard (1996) also suggests that the "Grand Narratives" of Western Culture that systematically produce a totalizing effect in intellectual fields should be replaced by "Petit Narratives" or micronarratives that resist the totality and closure. In the context of identity formation, Julia Kristeva (1996) also

contrasts the Cartesian transcendental ego with the “subject-in-process.” It seems that the text *V* is about a description of *an* identity, not of *the* identity, something that can never be pinned down to a single, authoritative existence.

The notion of indeterminacy and broadness in this text, which can be well explained by Derrida, makes it possible for one to search for something other than the fixed meanings or truth claims. The text becomes multifarious in meaning as well as in structure, thus rejecting any kind of singular signifying act. Barbara Johnson (1981) points out:

> The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or generalized skepticism, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. This, of course, implies that a text signifies in more than one way, and to varying degrees of explicitness. (xiv).

The searching without ever reaching a final destination equals going beyond the boundary and embracing the margins. It concerns the others and breaks off the hierarchy, which is quite similar to what the theory of deconstruction seeks to do. As Richard J. Bernstein (1993) points out, Derrida "is always concerned (obsessed) with the question of the otherness of the other, with the differences that are presupposed by self-identity," and "he is always working on the margins, fascinated with the 'logic of supplementarity'" (p. 215). The journey without a destination not only designates the multifarious aspect of truth, but it also suggests the possibility of the multiple meanings of words that the characters create. Just as their stories are abundant, the meanings that they produce with their stories can be open-ended. As Derrida argues, for instance, we might want to come up with more than one interpretation of a sentence like, "But who's talking about living?"; when we stress the word "who," the question emphasizes "the identity of the speaker, "while the question means "Who can really speak about living?" if we stress "talking about living" (p. 78). This is just a short example of the multifarious characteristic of language showing the presence of micronarratives.

In short, the notion of indeterminate textuality does not belong to a gifted few. Rather, practically everybody is entitled to their own interpretation. It definitely opposes and deconstructs the literary conventions that force readers to yearn for fixed meanings or truth claims. In addition, it attempts to halt any historical movement that favors the conventions of Western metaphysics. The text *V*, a critique of literary conventions, is sure to be a complicated wok, because Pynchon never lets us clearly detect what he is really up to in his textuality.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the text *V* may be a type of literary history that teases false historicity and constructs a new paradigm of ideology. Then the text may be a critical review on current trends that mystify the potential power of inanimate materials and their overwhelming influences on human animals. Most of all, the text *V* is a rebellious form of narrative that defies any used-upness of literary conventions and invites a plenty of micronarratives to a brand-new ground of literature. The realist tendencies make it seem as if the single identity is somewhere, inside the textuality, but this is simply a lure of strategy that makes us mistake a possibility for absolute truth or complete reality. Describing characters who merely cling to the search for a single authority, Pynchon seems to mock the conventional literary devices and frames that almost force readers to be obsessed with deciphering hidden meanings in the textuality.

Unlike realist and some modernist tendency that was supposed to solve its textual incoherence with aestheticizing, a very postmodern text like *V* attempts to describe its confusion as something natural, unavoidable, and even necessary. The incoherence becomes inevitable, because the mystic identity of V is likely to be multiple and disseminated. Although we might think we know what/who the unknown identity is, the existence V can be anything and anyone. Questioning the validity of an authoritative identity of V, we have to ask, "Is it the only 'V'? Or is it 'one' of many?" In short, we are interested in exploring the multiple identities of V and appreciating their existence in the textuality. The narrative *V* is sure to be a detotalizing work, because it provides readers with a postmodern vaccine that will prevent the literary disease of conventional reading habits and practices.

Indeterminacy, along with the image of the unknown identity V, plays a crucial role in building a new possibility in the narrative. In relation to human life and existence, the text refuses to suggest any type of finite definition or conclusion. While the characters search for the mysterious identity, Pynchon never lets his readers and critics reach any final destination or goal. The characters merely keep traveling and searching, without ever reaching any final conclusion of the story. Thanks to Pynchon's refusing to set up any final goals or itinerary timetables, the characters experience unexpected happenings and inexhaustible events. The human identities that frequently shift and change are understood as natural characteristic parallel to the indetermination of human life, rather than as vice or guilt. The identities can never be related to such trait as coherence or structure, and as long as the story continues without ever reaching a final destination, the identity keeps changing its face and shape whenever it has to.

Could anyone be able to find the *real* identity of V? A very well-known postmodern text by Julian Barnes (1990) ends with one of my favorite lines, "Perhaps it was one of them"

(p. 190). Perhaps truth (the real identity) can be any one of them, or all of them. We may as well refuse to take any one of them as *truth*, because we naturally accept the crucial fact that truth can be anything and anywhere. By revealing indeterminateness, readers are invited to deconstruct and disseminate the conventional ground in which a writer used to be proud of his/her authority. Postmodernity makes it possible for readers to approach literature more spontaneously than they used to, because all that is left for them is their indeterminate/arbitrary relationship with the text.

The text *V* presents a revolutionary way of narrative that acknowledges such traits as rupture, instability, and incoherence while deconstructing the worn-out legacy of literary conventions like totality, closure, and textual autonomy. Introducing characters who are obsessed with the search for the mystic identity of V, Pynchon seems to disseminate the literature of exhaustion or conventional academia that leads readers to aestheticize hidden meanings and identities. In fact, perhaps truth (the real identity) can be any one of them, or all of them. Just as everybody is entitled to their own interpretation of truth, every single V can be the *genuine* one that Pynchon wanted to create for his readers. It is pointless to attempt to search for a single genuine truth, because truth is multifarious and produces plural responses.

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