

# “She hangs on the western wall”: Breaking the Myth of the Renaissance in Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*

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**Abstract** Since the time of its publication in 1963, Pynchon’s first novel *V.* has been triggering an intense and still ongoing critical debate upon the function of history and tradition in contemporary literature. As a specimen of postmodern historiographic metafiction, *V.* enacts complex intertextual strategies, directed at debunking the Western literary tradition, thus questioning its significance in contemporary society. The present contribution aims at extending previous scholarship on the problem of tradition in Pynchon’s fiction, by focusing on the use of the Renaissance in the seventh chapter of *V.* selected as a case study. Far from marginal, Pynchon’s parodic references to the Italian Renaissance tradition and its cultural artifacts, whether through the artistic productions, or the idea of the Renaissance seen as a pivotal moment of the socio-historical development of the Western world, testify to the process of deconstruction of the paradigmatic role of the Renaissance for the American literary field in the late twentieth century, also in its global and transnational dimension.

**Keywords** Thomas Pynchon. American literature. Postmodern fiction. History. Renaissance.

**Summary** 1 Pynchon’s Foundations: Fiction, History, and Myth. – 2 Tradition and Repetition: Constructing the Myth of the Renaissance. – 3 Parody and Simulacrum: Deconstructing the Myth of the Renaissance.



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## 1 Pynchon's Foundations: Fiction, History, and Myth

Widely considered as a masterpiece in contemporary literature, Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V.* (1963), can be labeled as a specimen of "historiographic metafiction" epitomizing postmodern aesthetics (Hutcheon 1988). Indeed, Pynchon's way of dealing with history has been one of the most debated features of his novel, as well as a landmark of his whole fiction (Coward 2011). At the same time, intertextuality proves a key dimension characterizing Pynchon's aesthetics, ranging from tourist guides in *V.* to eighteenth-century literary works in *Mason & Dixon* (1996), from Jacobean drama in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) to popular dime novels in *Against the Day* (2006): as David Seed has pointed out,

Pynchon's works juxtapose sections from different sign systems in order to evoke not history itself but rather the texts that collectively go towards our formation of history. (Seed 2012, 112)

Thus, such intertextual connections contribute in defining Pynchon's novels as palimpsests especially in the form of the pastiche (Genette 1997). By using this representational strategy, Pynchon questions the possibility of history as a tool for acquiring a univocal and meaningful knowledge of the past (Thompson 2003, 174). Through the accumulation of details and the multiplicity of narrative features, Pynchon's novels challenge the conventional modes of literary and ideological representation (Bellin 2012, 293-4).

In *V.*, the peculiar blending of history and intertextual relations will be investigated by focusing on Pynchon's use of the Renaissance as emerging in the seventh chapter of the novel, whose overall structure features two storylines. Intertwined in the main narrative section, set in New York during the fifties and revolving around the misadventures of Benny Profane and the group of characters known as Whole Sick Crew, are six historical sequences, based on Herbert Stencil's quest for an elusive and mysterious character named *V.*, whose identity is unknown (Seed 1988, 71-111). Stencil's pursuit takes place throughout different places and times, which discard any chronological order in the novel: in a time span of forty-five years from 1898 to 1943, the action moves from Egypt to Florence, from Southwestern Africa to Malta and Paris. Being it one of the historical sequences, the seventh chapter can be considered as an example of "little narrative", according to the well-known definition given by Jean-François Lyotard (1984).

Due to the interrelation of history and myth featuring its whole structure (Fahy 1977), the novel has also been compared to the Renaissance romantic epics of such authors as Ariosto and Tasso (Henkle 1971, 216). Pynchon's handling with Renaissance tradition is tes-

tified by textual evidence especially in this chapter, rich in quotations and allusions to Renaissance artworks and culture, as Niccolò Machiavelli's political treatise *The Prince* and Sandro Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus*. Set in 1899, the chapter partly revolves around a bizarre and failed attempt at stealing Botticelli's masterpiece from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, enacted by one Signor Mantissa and his accomplices.

As Pynchon himself explained in the Introduction to the 1984 short story collection entitled *Slow Learner* ([1984] 1995), both Victorian works and Machiavelli's treatise are among the source material for "Under the Rose", a short story first published in 1961, later reworked and incorporated in *V.* as the third chapter of the novel. More to the point, Machiavelli's *The Prince* constitutes the foundation of the tale and, more broadly, of the whole novel to the extent of addressing the problem of history and its processes of construction and representation: "is history personal or statistical?" is the key question posed by Pynchon ([1984] 1995, 18). In fact, Machiavelli's influence resonates through *V.*, *The Prince* being more than a simple literary allusion, since it contributes to Pynchon's reflections on the psychological effects brought about by history as a form of construed cultural system (Rossi 2015, 106-7). Through the close examination of the intertextual references related to *The Birth of Venus*, as well as its representation in the novel performed by means of the literary device known as ekphrasis, the analysis of Pynchon's aesthetic strategies underpinning his fiction will be developed by addressing the processes of cultural construction and deconstruction, respectively. Also, from a transnational point of view, Pynchon's references can be reframed as part of the process that Stephen Greenblatt has termed "cultural mobility", which is based on the transformation and adaptation of works and artifacts (Greenblatt et al. 2009, 4); in turn, Pynchon's "cultural artifacts" may also address what Wai Chee Dimock (2006, 3-4) has defined as "deep time", thus making it possible to rethink both the chronological and spatial borders of American literature, to widen its boundaries in time and place through "irregular duration and extension".

According to this socio-historical and transnational perspective, then, the pretended authentic tradition addressed in *V.* directly involves Botticelli's *Venus* to the extent that the painting may be read as an emblem of the 'myth' of the Renaissance - that is, an ideological construct of an era considered as a pivotal moment in the development of Western culture. By means of a fictional employment of Botticelli's masterpiece, and using irony as a stylistic device, Pynchon debunks the myth of the Renaissance, thus questioning the reliability of history itself, its modes of representation, and the idea of tradition as based on a set of repeated, cohesive, and authoritative cultural practices (Hobsbawm 1983). This crisis in the possibilities of

a monolithic knowledge and of giving reality a fixed meaning based on a univocal interpretive paradigm exemplifies the well-known process defined by Brian McHale (1987, 9-10) as a peculiarity of postmodern literature in its turn from episteme to ontology. In other words, in challenging the function of the novel as a means to reach knowledge and to engage successfully with reality, Pynchon, like many mid-twentieth-century authors have done, exposes the arbitrary and illusory nature of reality itself (Levin 1965, 153), and at the same time uncovers the phenomena of discontinuity resting underneath the unifying purpose of traditions (Foucault 2002, 6). Therefore, both history and fiction result in construed discourses, inevitably having their origins in previous traditions, but from such traditions, in turn, these discourses part dramatically, since

Pynchon's novel invites its readers to see history and other forms of system-making as necessary fictions, product of the collective human need for pattern. (Coward 2011, 56)

As argued by Dudley Eigenvalue in the first section of the seventh chapter in *V.*,

Perhaps history this century [...] is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated [...] 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* [...]. *We are accordingly lost to any sense of a continuous tradition.* (Pynchon [1963] 1995, 155-6; emphasis added)

## 2 Tradition and Repetition: Constructing the Myth of the Renaissance

Immediately after Eigenvalue's thoughts, the narrative turns to the historical digression, the Lyotardian "little narrative" which constitutes the most part of the seventh chapter of Pynchon's work:

In April of 1899 young Evan Godolphin, daft with the spring and sporting a costume too Esthetic for such a fat boy, pranced into Florence. (Pynchon [1963] 1995, 156)

The opening line of this section immediately suggests the overlapping between the fictional and the historical dimensions. The events refer to some fifty years before the main narrative line, when Evan Godolphin is a young man arriving in a turn-of-the-century Florence in or-

der to meet his father, Hugh, who is involved in the facts related to the mysterious V. At the same time, the term "Esthetic" stands as a verbal fragment triggering an entangled set of intertextual references, through the ironic allusion to one of the works that have played a defining role in constructing the myth of the Renaissance during the nineteenth century, that is *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) by Walter Pater. As far as Evan Godolphin

belonged to a generation of young men who no longer called their fathers pater because of an understandable confusion with the author of *The Renaissance*, and was sensitive to things like tone. (Pynchon [1963] 1995, 157)

Pater has been representing a most authoritative standpoint in the nineteenth-century view of the Renaissance as a pivotal moment in the socio-historical development of Western culture – as an era that had helped defining the modern age. Pater has contributed to building this myth by considering the Renaissance also in its aesthetic value, since the primary aim of his work "was to establish, as well as reinterpret [...] a literary and artistic canon" (Titlebaum 1987, 83).

Yet, Pater is the heir to a long-established Western tradition on the Renaissance, whose beginning might be traced back as far as the sixteenth century at least. Whereas the cultural construction of the Renaissance as a mythology has been shaped especially by a number of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century European historians and critics (Bullen 1994), one of the first testimonies to the foundation of this myth lies in Giorgio Vasari's treatise *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, whose original Italian edition was published in Florence first in 1550 and then in a revised edition in 1568. As Vasari himself argues, his main purpose in creating this literary work is that

of writing the lives, describing the works, and setting forth the various relations of those who, when art had become extinct, first revived, and then gradually conducted her to that degree of beauty and majesty wherein we now see her. (Vasari 1850-52, 1: 1; emphasis added)

Vasari's influence on nineteenth-century aesthetic thought in Europe as well as in the United States has taken the shape of the two literary subgenres indicated by Pascale Casanova as the most useful means of fostering a cultural identity – that is, translation and literary criticism (2004, 12-23). Indeed, the first complete English version of Vasari's *Lives* was issued in five volumes in London between 1850 and 1852 – this translation forming the basis for a number of subsequent late-nineteenth century editions published in the Unit-

ed States (Shields 1931, 112, 131-2). Also, in a 1862 review of Vasari's work, the American art critic James Jackson Jarves identifies in the Italian Renaissance masters a model to which American art should conform in order to raise the quality of its aesthetic standards; in so doing, Jarves draws a parallel between the two contexts: as «Italian art is born of a highly imaginative and intellectual race, whose faith and passions glow with aesthetic desire» (Jarves 1862, 67). So the

American mind [...] possesses much aesthetic feeling. It is expansive, inquiring, impressible, and sympathetic, prone to investigation, and [...] gladly welcomes truth under multifarious forms. (65)

Thus, the tradition standing behind Pynchon's quotations of Pater results in a chronological development connecting centuries of history, which has ideologically shaped the mutual mechanisms of cultural construction and reception.

In *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater focuses on the profiles of key Italian Renaissance artists and intellectuals – among them, Sandro Botticelli, whose *Venus* is presented as follows:

At first, perhaps, you are attracted only by a quaintness of design, which seems to recall all at once whatever you have read of Florence in the fifteenth century; afterwards you may think that this quaintness must be incongruous with the subject, and that the colour is cadaverous, or at least cold. (Pater 1873, 47)

The light is, indeed, cold – mere sunless dawn [...] and you can see the better for that quietness in the morning air each long promontory as it slopes down to the water's edge [...]. An emblematical figure of the wind blows hard across the grey water, moving forward the dainty-lipped shell on which she sails, the sea 'showing his teeth', as it moves in thin lines of foam, and sucking in one by one the falling roses, each severe in outline, plucked off short at the stalk, but embrowned a little, as Botticelli's flowers always are [...]. [H]is predilection for minor tones counts also. (48-9)

Color, background, and foreground are the compositional elements of the picture upon which Pater centers the description. Yet, the critic does not limit his analysis to these formal features, but he also involves the viewer's response: in so doing, Pater employs a rhetorical and ideological strategy centered on the importance given to the individual and the self

constructed as a consciousness – a temperament responsive to outer events only as they affect the perceiving intelligence. (Bullen 1994, 275)

This peculiar function, or rather, the fundamental role of the viewer's personal and active involvement in creating a meaningful interpretation of the artwork and its moral qualities provides a cornerstone of Pater's thought: as the critic himself argues in the Preface to his *Studies*,

in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly [...]. The aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do [...] as powers or forces, producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar and unique kind. (Pater 1873, viii-ix)

In Pynchon's novel, Pater's aesthetic criticism is employed first as an ironic background reference for the characters. As the hint at the "tone" in Evan Godolphin's connotation suggests – being Evan an inexperienced, clumsy young man just "sensitive to things like tone" –, Pater's rhetoric and aesthetic tenets are called into question, their authority and functionality in producing a valuable set of cultural standards ironically challenged.

### **3 Parody and Simulacrum: Deconstructing the Myth of the Renaissance**

Pynchon's use of irony in the short description of Evan Godolphin marks further passages in the chapter, involving also the cultural artifacts. This outlook on artworks takes place thanks to parody, through the subversion of the canons of representation conveyed by the literary sub-genre of ekphrasis, whose function, according to Linda Hutcheon (1988, 121), is central especially in historiographic fiction. Indeed, Pynchon's description of *The Birth of Venus* may well be considered as a typical contemporary ekphrastic work, to which the author adds a comic tone. As James Heffernan points out, twentieth-century ekphrasis is still characterized by the recurrent representational features connoting this genre since its origin in ancient Greek literature, while its function proves greatly transformed, turning "from incidental adjunct to self-sufficient whole, from epic ornament to free-standing literary work" (Heffernan 1993, 137). To some extent, this work is detached from the traditional conventions, and indebted to contemporary cultural practices, which are external to the literary text: these practices partly match the mass tourism dynamics, since the underlying reference is to

the experience of the museum and all the apparatus of institutionalized art in our time – especially reproductions and art-historical commentary. (Heffernan 1993, 138)

Along with this kind of standardized, or, at least, more general response, modern and contemporary examples of ekphrastic works also derive from the subjective interpretation given by the author (Hollander 1988, 210).

Similarly, in *V.* the description of *The Birth of Venus* is performed through the words and perception of one of the characters involved in Mantissa's plot, the Gaucho, whose appreciation of the painting sounds as a parody of the traditional conventions, as set forth especially by Pater:

They caught up with the Gaucho finally in the Uffizi. He'd been lounging against one wall of the Sala di Lorenzo Monaco, leering at the Birth of Venus. She was standing in half of what looked like a scungille shell; fat and blond, and the Gaucho, being a tedesco in spirit, appreciated this. But he didn't understand what was going on in the rest of the picture. There seemed to be some dispute over whether or not she should be nude or draped: on the right a glassy-eyed lady built like a pear tried to cover her up with a blanket and on the left an irritated young man with wings tried to blow the blanket away while a girl wearing hardly anything twined around him, probably trying to coax him to bed. While this curious crew wrangled, Venus stood gazing off into God knew where, covering up with her long tresses. No one seemed to be looking at anyone else. A confusing picture. (Pynchon [1963] 1995, 177-8)

Even more revealing is the fact that the Gaucho's perception of the *Venus* as a "confusing picture" directly recalls the "quaintness of design" addressed by Pater as an eye-catching quality of Botticelli's painting: the uncultivated Gaucho casts an unexpected 'art critic gaze', thus ironically questioning the authenticity and reliability of tradition, as well as the aesthetic standards proper to high culture. Whereas the "quaintness", according to Pater, reveals a superior quality - that is, the power which is concealed under the mere form -, in Pynchon's perspective the same quaintness remains a sign without any further reference. The Gaucho's personal involvement seems far from taking into consideration the Pateresque "pleasurable sensations" that the artwork should give to the art critic's trained eye; in Pynchon's fictional world, the nineteenth-century viewer's response has rather become a practice of "consumerist postmodernism" (Urry, Larsen 2011, 120), because the visual perception of the individual enacts a remarkable reversal of a traditional interpretive framework. Using irony as a verbal strategy, Pynchon applies a contemporary bias towards art criticism and thus debunks the monolithic authority of its rhetoric, according to a "stylistic hallmark" through which the existing

elements of high culture are mass-produced and no longer signify a single style. This is an architecture of surfaces and appearances, of playfulness and pastiche. (Urry, Larsen 2011, 120)

This postmodern outlook has led previous criticism to underline the touristic aspect of Pynchon's novel. In fact, as far as the presence of Botticelli's painting in *V.* may suggest a reading based on the background of the tourism studies thanks to the references to popular tourist guides such as the Baedeker, this kind of "tourist gaze" (Urry, Larsen 2011) may rather be reframed as a wider version of a post-modern cultural practice, based on the oxymoronic notion of "staged authenticity" pervading every type of social interaction in the contemporary age (MacCannell 2011, 13-14). The characters in the chapter move around Florence engaging in a set of tourist activities which range from walking through the historical areas of the city to resting and drinking, from sightseeing to visiting museums. In fact, the tourists/characters come to term with a sort of artificiality that links their own expectations and projected views with the real thing, a process resulting in the construction of a kind of reality which is only "made perceptible by the artful representation of knowledge" (Plater 1978, 65). On this account, tourism itself fits into the historiographic method characterizing the novel, because both tourism and history may be conceived as systems imposing an ordered structure, systems that "create objective patterns, and create correspondences, where none existed previously" (Smith 2005, 28).

A similar perspective informs further passages in the novel, and can be found elsewhere in Pynchon's canon. For instance, in the third chapter of *V.*, set in Egypt in 1898, a disguised Stencil finds himself in the confusion of "an almost perfectly arranged tourist-state" (Pynchon [1963] 1995, 71), a kind of artificial world on whose stage everyone plays an unconscious role:

How he had come to Alexandria, where he would go on leaving, little of that could matter to any tourist. He was that sort of vagrant who exists, though unwillingly, entirely within the Baedeker world - as much a feature of the topography as the other automata: waiters, porters, cabmen, clerks. Taken for granted. (Pynchon [1963] 1995, 70)

Analogously, the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas, shows a postmodern viewer's response that dramatically levels the traditional difference between high and low culture. Oedipa's visual perception is directed at both artworks and commonplace objects, playfully blurring the lines between aesthetic appreciation and mass-culture experience. First, Oedipa recollects her former visit to a painting exhibition, remembering the effect given to her by one pic-

ture in particular - namely, *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle* by the Surrealist Spanish artist Remedios Varo:

in the central paintings of a triptych, titled 'Bordando el Manto Terrestre', were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. No one had noticed; she wore dark green bubble shades. For a moment she'd wondered if the seal around her sockets were tight enough to allow the tears simply to go on and fill up the entire lens space and never dry. She could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry. (Pynchon [1966] 1996, 10)

Then, while traveling to Southern California as the executor of the estate of the enigmatic Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa's attention is drawn to a motel sign, in a scene described as follows:

Still, when she got a look at the next motel, she hesitated a second. A representation in painted sheet metal of a nymph holding a white blossom towered thirty feet into the air; the sign, lit up despite the sun, said 'Echo Courts'. The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker's but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either. Oedipa pulled into the lot, got out and stood for a moment in the hot sun and the dead still air, watching the artificial windstorm overhead toss gauze in five-foot excursions. (14-15)

However, Pynchon's ironic "tourist gaze" on the Renaissance is far from being an isolated case in American literary history. In this sense, Mark Twain's ekphrasis of another Renaissance painting, *The Last Supper* by the 'Old Master' Leonardo da Vinci in the 1869 travelogue *The Innocents Abroad*, is a parodic description of what is conventionally viewed as a masterpiece of Western art; by assessing and connoting *The Last Supper* as a mere relic, Twain ironically inverts the long-established, authoritative tradition of the masters of Italian Renaissance art. Indeed, the narrator states that

Here, in Milan, in an ancient tumble-down ruin of a church, is the *mournful wreck* of the most celebrated painting in the world – ‘The Last Supper’, by Leonardo da Vinci. We are not infallible judges of pictures, but of course we went there to see this wonderful painting, once so beautiful, always so worshipped by masters in art, and forever to be famous in song and story [...]. ‘The Last Supper’ is painted on the dilapidated wall of what was a little chapel attached to the main church in ancient times, I suppose. It is *battered* and *scarred* in every direction, and *stained* and *discolored* by time [...].

I recognized the old picture in a moment – the Saviour with bowed head seated at the centre of a long, rough table with scattering fruits and dishes upon it, and six disciples on either side in their long robes, talking to each other [...].

The colors are *dimmed* with age; the countenances are *scaled* and *marred*, and nearly all expression is gone from them; the hair is a dead blur upon the wall, and there is no life in the eyes. Only the attitudes are certain. (Twain 1869, 190-2; emphasis added)

Twain’s reversed ekphrasis simultaneously challenges the cultural conventions related to the aesthetic appreciation of the artwork, and applies a tourist gaze which reifies the painting, as Leonardo’s *Last Supper* is viewed as an *object* – still retaining its original reference, in spite of the comic description provided by the narrator. In *V*, instead, Botticelli’s *Venus* turns from object into *simulacrum*, a mere sign void of specific meaning (Baudrillard 1994), that, in the novel’s metafictional dimension, can also stand as a blank symbol referring to one of the many shifting identities of *V*, insofar as

whoever she was, might have been swallowed in the airy Renaissance spaces of that city, assumed into the fabric of any of a thousand Great Paintings. (Pynchon [1963] 1995, 155)

Since Pynchon’s strategies of representation of the artwork (the *Venus*) allow the transition from the fictional to the metafictional level of the novel, *V*’s identity may stand as the last emblem of a decaying European – that is, Western – humanist tradition (Henckle 1971, 215): on the stylistic level, Pynchon performs this “crisis of historicity” by using the pastiche as a so-called “blank parody”, as defined by Fredric Jameson (1991, 17-22), denying the existence of any coherent extra-textual standard beneath the textual surface.

The Jamesonian blank parody features also in the concluding scene of the chapter, which describes Mantissa, Evan, and Hugh Godolphin escaping from Florence after the failure of Mantissa’s plan. As their attempt at stealing the *Venus* has grotesquely proved unsuccessful, the only thing that is literally left of the original plan is the excavated trunk of a purple-flowered Judas tree, abandoned in the gallery

in front of the *Venus* and inside which the robbers were supposed to place the painting in order to make it disappear without being noticed. To some extent, the idea of “quaintness” connoting Botticelli’s artwork may be considered a refrain, this time applied to the final image of the chapter: in a disordered and fragmented reality, nothing does retain any fixed meaning, as

things and people can be found in places where they do not belong. For example, out there on the river now with a thousand liters of wine are a man in love with Venus, and a sea captain, and his fat son. And back in the Uffizi [...] [i]n the room of Lorenzo Monaco [...] before Botticelli’s Birth of Venus, still blooming purple and gay, there is a hollow Judas tree. (Pynchon [1963] 1995, 212)

The “postmodern condition” described in the final image is further highlighted by the use of the symbolism related to the flowers, and its subsequent reversal. Traditionally, the color purple is linked to the idea of transformation and regeneration (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1982, 1020-1). However, the weird image of the tree laying in the museum gives the color purple a reversed connotation, in which the very idea of regeneration seems to come into question; as history itself lacks any ideological coherence or teleological function, so the physical dislocation of a purple-flowered tree may once again textually represent the arbitrariness of reality, to which any effort to give a significant interpretation proves illogical as well as farcical.

Over than fifty years after its first publication, *V.* still remains a landmark in contemporary literature. From a formal point of view, Pynchon’s way of dealing with the transnational mythology of the Renaissance is twofold. On the one hand, Pynchon’s intertextual strategies involve the direct quotation of key literary works on the Renaissance (Pater’s *Studies* above all); on the other, Pynchon’s ekphrastic description of artworks produced *during* the Renaissance (Botticelli’s *Venus*) results in a kind of intersemiotic translation bridging not only visual and verbal representation, but also different times and places (the modern and contemporary Anglo-American world and the late fifteenth-century Italian culture). In both cases, the functional use of these cultural artifacts implicitly refers to their active role in shaping the Western literary tradition. And at this very point Pynchon’s writing goes one step farther. By deconstructing each layer of the construed discourses of history, society, and identity into which the whole of the human experience is arranged, Pynchon engages with a keen observation and a thoughtful consideration of our times; drawing from the traditional literary tool of the ekphrasis, and beneath the surface of an apparently naïve irony, Pynchon compels us readers to face the semeiotic complexity of a collective historical consciousness and the ontological issues concerned, thus

questioning the possibility of any ultimate and stable meaning of the manifold realities which surround us and that by us are constantly being built.

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