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Bright Lights Fade Fast: The Beat Influences of Thomas Pynchon's *V.*

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In the preface to his collection of stories, *Slow Learner* (1984), Thomas Pynchon discusses the effect that Beat writers had upon him in the mid-to-late 1950s when he was an undergraduate at Cornell University. Pynchon argues that an opposition between the newly canonized mythopoetic high modernists and the subcultural or countercultural Beats arose in English departments in the late 1950s. Pynchon describes his attraction to Beat writings: "It was actually OK to write like this! Who knew? The effect was exciting, liberating, strong positive. It was not a case of either/or, but an expansion of possibility" (*Slow Learner* 7). Despite the mountain of criticism that has been published about Pynchon over the last thirty years, there has been very little written about Pynchon's connection with the Beat writers. Biographically, Pynchon's affinity for the Beat lifestyle seems apparent in his own early, restless wanderings. Pynchon joined the navy (as did Jack Kerouac) in 1955 after his first two years at Cornell and briefly rejoined after his college graduation. Subsequently, Pynchon lived in Greenwich Village in 1958, right around the apex of Beat publications and the subsequent emergence of Village Beat-style bohemianism. After a two-year stint as an engineering aide at Boeing in Seattle, Pynchon resumed his travels in 1962, dividing his time between the two famous Beat locales of California and Mexico (Chambers xiv). The next year, Pynchon would publish his first novel, *V.*, in which the Beat influence can most clearly be seen.

Criticism on *V.* is ample and covers such varied influences as Vladimir Nabokov (one of Pynchon's

teachers at Cornell), the French surrealists and spy novels, Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Heller, and William B. Yeats.[1] Yet, despite Pynchon's own admission that Beat writers played a formative role in his development as a fiction writer, no critic has fully explored the connections between the early Pynchon of *V.* and Beat writers. Typical is Judith Chambers' book-length study of Pynchon in which she devotes only three sentences to the Beats, most of which are quotes from *Slow Learner*. In *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon*, David Seed likewise devotes a scant two pages to the influence of the Beats upon Pynchon. However, Seed does cite a personal letter he received from Pynchon in which Pynchon writes, "Of all the influences I remember then [while at Cornell], his [Jack Kerouac's] was the most glamorous" (8). Yet Seed lumps together the Beats with Saul Bellow and Philip Roth as equal but all ultimately minor influences upon Pynchon. Seed does admit that Kerouac might have acted as a catalyst for Pynchon, "opening up his sense of narrative possibilities" (11), but he never explores this thought any further. In *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, Robert Newman only devotes a page to Pynchon and the Beats, but he does claim, "In his depiction of the social misfits of 1950s America and the idea of yo-yoing as travel for its own sake, Pynchon is clearly influenced by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, a novel that was at the height of its popularity during the period that he came of age" (50). While Christopher Ames has touched on some Beat threads running through *Gravity's Rainbow* in his essay, "Calling for Ketchup in Burroughs and Pynchon,"[2] elsewhere there are only brief references to Pynchon's potential debt to William Burroughs. Evidently, there is a gap in Pynchon scholarship, which this essay seeks to fill.

I want to argue that *V.* shows evidence of a writer both fascinated and repulsed by Beat ideology. While Pynchon praises the original, life-affirming, positive values of the Beats, *V.* can be read as a critique of the social Beat movement, as immature, unrealizable and unproductive. Essentially, Pynchon believes that the Beat style of life is admirable in theory but doesn't work in practice. Here is Pynchon's entropy at work: the life-affirming, positive values of the Beats become petered out, stale, and fruitless almost as quickly as they are introduced into society and adopted by the mock-beatniks, The Whole Sick Crew. Therefore, what Pynchon criticizes is not the Beat ethos itself but the transference from philosophy to practice, the co-option of the Beat movement by the media, and the misguided attempts of image-conscious, bohemian followers, who aimlessly follow trends that the media glamorizes. In addition, I want to argue that Pynchon adopts certain writing techniques and subject matter from the Beats, while critiquing misguided appropriation of Beat ideals by "beatnik" followers.

Pynchon, more than any other American novelist, with the possible exception of John Barth, is known as a quintessential postmodern writer. Conversely, the Beats occupy a strange, liminal space in American literature; they are somehow suspended between modernism and postmodernism. Certainly, there is a huge amount of variance within the Beat movement: from the Buddhist-inspired poetry of Gary Snyder to the dystopian, allegorical novels of Richard Brautigan. In addition, there is much within the Beat canon that might be described as postmodern, especially exemplified in the writings of William

Burroughs. With his emphasis on textual cut-ups and epistemological indeterminacy, Burroughs could be considered more radical a postmodernist than Pynchon. Pynchon does claim that the late 1950s and early 1960s, the time in which he wrote *V.*, was a period of significant literary change in America: "We were at a transition point, a strange post-Beat passage of cultural time, with our loyalties divided" (*Slow Learner* 9). Still, the division between Beat writings and postmodern writing is fuzzy. Although in many ways he is not as radical a postmodern writer as some of the Beat writers, it was Pynchon who helped commercialize postmodernist writing with his astute but restrained voice, containing much that one could find disturbing but little that one could find offensive (as with Burroughs) or life-affirming (as with Kerouac). Ultimately, it is not the ideals of the Beat movement that Pynchon effectively critiques but the adaptation of those ideals by foolish followers.

In this essay, I will examine the influences of two seminal "Beat" novels, Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957) and to a lesser extent William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959), upon Pynchon's post-Beat *V.* (1963). I have chosen these two novels because I feel that their influence can most clearly be seen through a close reading of *V.* In *Slow Learner*, Pynchon specifically cites *On The Road* as a shaping influence on him (12). I choose *Naked Lunch* because it appears to be linked thematically to *V.* To a key extent, Pynchon describes a "beat" world in *V.*, a world that seems exhausted, sliding towards a violent apocalypse or towards a nihilistic or vapid cybernetic age. The male characters in *V.* (Herbert Stencil, Benny Profane, and Hugh and Evan Godolphin) are borderline obsessed searchers who, in the Beat tradition, religiously seek something to frame or shape the chaos of their lives. That the searchers never find what they are looking for or cannot articulate the meaning of their searches comprises Pynchon's ultimate critique of the Beat movement. He might admire the instinctual passion of the Beats and their innovative praxis, but he feels that neither offers intrinsic advantages and produces no meaningful or practical results. For Pynchon, the Beat movement is a very brief pocket of time in the 1950s, which was swept away by an ongoing and ultimately more powerful technological movement that stretches back to the Industrial Revolution. Pynchon argues that the Beats' primal passion cannot compete with technological advancement. Consequently, the machine ethos supplants the fleeting romantic ethos of the Beats, leaving its followers lost and confused, subject to the increasingly violent aftereffects of technology run amok.

Structure and Substance of *V.*, *Naked Lunch*, and *On The Road*

While the structure of *V.* is not outlandishly postmodern by today's standards, it was a bold departure from most novels that were published during the early 1960s. Aside from Pynchon, the only well-known American novelists who were pushing literary boundaries during the late 1950s and early 1960s through their use of bold and radical structural forms were Vladmir Nabokov,[3] William Burroughs, and, to a lesser extent, Jack Kerouac. While Nabokov's influence appears in Pynchon's use of alliteration and wordplay, Burroughs' and Kerouac's

influence can be seen more clearly. Many of Burroughs' textually bold and daring novels were published during the late 1950s and early 1960s.[4] *V.*'s structure is peculiarly similar to Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. Like *V.*, *Naked Lunch* jumps globally from location to location and through time and space (from Paris to Germany to Mexico to Italy to North Africa to America). While *V.*'s geographical and chronological shifts are clearly demarcated by chapter breaks, *Naked Lunch*'s geographical moves are more haphazard, occurring frequently in the same chapters with the only notification being a new paragraph or a cinematic "fade out." Pynchon and Burroughs utilize a similar technique of character overload by including a huge number of characters, most of which are not fully developed. These purposeful distortions aim to evince that most people one encounters in real life are fleeting and two-dimensional, leaving the individual to fill in the lack of information with his or her own necessarily artificial constructs. Both novels include incomplete, insubstantial and frequently ridiculous characters as a means to reflect reality more accurately.

The names of the characters in *Naked Lunch* and *V.* are typically playful, functional, and mechanistic. Pynchon's The Gaucho, Teflon, and Stencil mirror Burroughs' The Pusher, The Vigilante, and The Gimp. This comic utilitarian naming establishes an atmosphere of existential insubstantiality and emphasizes that human free will is an illusory concept. While Pynchon may have adopted Burroughs' method of naming, he concurrently distorts central Beat ideals with his creation of Benny Profane, the schlemiel. Benny Profane is an inversion of Kerouac's romantic narrator-hero in *On The Road*, Sal Paradise. "Benny" in 1950s Beat circles was a slang word for Benzedrine, a substance that Kerouac used heavily during his marathon writing sessions of *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans*. In *On The Road*, Sal's only writing advice to aspiring writer Dean Moriarty is, "after all what do I know about it except you've got to stick to it with the energy of a benny addict" (6). Sal and Benny do have many situational features in common: both drift aimlessly from odd job to odd job (both were in the navy, both work as nightwatchmen, Sal briefly works as a cotton picker in California while Benny briefly works as an alligator hunter). However, while Sal is starry-eyed, idealistic, and passionate, Profane the schlemiel is despondent, clumsy, and aloof, a hollow simulacrum of Sal Paradise.

Both *V.* and *Naked Lunch* explicitly detail encroaching mass violence in their different global settings. Both writers disturbingly portray a world in significant decline. In *V.*, random, chaotic violence reverberates in the Fashoda Crisis of 1898 in Cairo, the chaos at the Venezuelan embassy in Florence in 1899, the violent rebellion of the Bondelswarts in German-occupied South Africa in 1922, and in the desecration of Malta during the Second World War. *Naked Lunch* reflects a similar sense of concurrent, random global violence and chaos. Much of the violence occurs in Burroughs' mythical Interzone, where shady, criminal organizations terrorize people through brainwashing, drugs, and physical torture. Just as Pynchon's Foppl's crew mercilessly tortures and murders while colonizing in southwest Africa, Burroughs' Africa-based Islam Incorporated is devoted to aimless torture and murder for sadistic pleasure. Heading Islam Incorporated is Hassan i Sabbah, who stages shows of sodomy

and execution in front of jeering, bloodthirsty crowds. Other members of Islam Incorporated are similarly prone to violence: A. J. decapitates American girls, while Dr. "Fingers" Schaefer (The Lobotomy Kid) performs lobotomies upon unwilling victims. Burroughs and Pynchon take us into the bleakest corners of humanity, leaving the reader shuddering with disgust at human beings' horrifically destructive and violent tendencies, which are exaggerated by technologically advanced Western culture.

Sickness, Madness, and Addiction

The main narrative of *V.* revolves around a group of disaffected New Yorkers who call themselves The Whole Sick Crew. Sickness is a key thematic device in seminal Beat writing. The state of sickness is the starting point for both *On The Road* and *Naked Lunch*. *On The Road* begins with: "I [Sal] met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead" (3). Similarly, *Naked Lunch* begins with Burroughs' account: "I awoke from The Sickness at the age of 45, calm and sane and in reasonably good health except for a weakened liver and the look of borrowed flesh common to all those who survive The Sickness" (xxxvii). Although Burroughs defines "sickness" in *Naked Lunch* as "drug addiction," sickness seems inherent and ineradicable in Burroughs' vision of humanity. Burroughs claims that a "naked lunch" is a moment of revelation in which "a man realizes his cannibalism, his predatory condition and his necessary parasitism and addictive nature." According to Burroughs then, humans are biologically predisposed towards "sickness," characterized by their inherent capacity and desire for violence. One doesn't necessarily have to be a drug addict in order to be "sick." By Burroughs' definition, humans are inherently cruel, selfish, and aggressive. Nevertheless, some people are "sicker" than others. That is, there is a contemporary, perverted American sickness.

Burroughs attacks this "civilized" sickness in *Naked Lunch* through his sarcastic and gruesome portrayals of racism, sadism, and homophobia. For instance, a white girl from Texarkana predicates the murder of a young black male in East Texas for "looking at me so nasty" and because "he's give me a sick headache" [sic] (176). Similarly, a racist southern county clerk tests a stranger from an unnamed city by asking him what he thinks of "The Jeeeews." Burroughs uncovers the motivating sexual insecurities of these pathetic characters. A stranger passes the county clerk's test by responding: "The only thing a Jew wants to do is doodle a Christian girl. . . . One of these days we'll cut the rest off" (177). In the trial of *Naked Lunch*, Allen Ginsberg (originally Jewish, although he would later convert to Buddhism) defended Burroughs to the Massachusetts Supreme Court, which considered this passage, along with many others, to be obscene. Ginsberg argued that the passage uncovers the inane narrow-mindedness of American bigots: "He is making a parody of the monstrous speech and thought processes of a red-necked Southern, hate-filled type, who hates everyone —Jews, Negroes and Northerners" (quoted in *Naked Lunch* xxxi).

While Kerouac and Burroughs detail societal sickness within Eisenhower America in their novels, they don't celebrate its existence as The Whole Sick Crew does in *V.* Many of the Beats, especially Kerouac, set up a dichotomy between sickness and madness. According to the Beats, sickness is a weariness, cruelty, and paranoia engendered by society or civilization. In contrast to societal sickness, the Beats extolled their own visions as an illuminating form of Rimbaudian madness, derived from passionate excess. For Kerouac and many of the Beats, there is a special kind of madness that allows an individual to experience life more authentically or passionately. This form of madness encourages expression of primal instincts, thereby liberating the individual from the sterile repression of Western civilization. As Sal Paradise emphasizes in *On The Road*, "the only ones for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue center light pop and everyone goes 'Awwh!'" (8). Ginsberg dedicated his seminal Beat poem, "Howl" (1956), to Burroughs for "an endless novel which would drive everybody mad" (quoted in Mottram 12). However, the Beats acknowledge that while "madness" is a more authentic, creative state, it can lead to destruction in contemporary society, which represses and perverts the natural expression of emotional impulses. Indeed, "Howl" begins on a note of destruction begot by madness: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" (Ellmann 976). Society thwarts the natural expressions of humans, driving the individual seeking emotional authenticity to "madness."

As mentioned earlier, many of the Beats used drugs to help liberate their inhibitions and to pursue alternative states of consciousness. Pynchon mainly satirizes the Beats' extreme use of drugs with The Whole Sick Crew's predilection for alcohol. Only when he is drunk does Benny Profane have heroic aspirations. Another of Pynchon's characters, Pig Bodine, who is perpetually drunk and aspires to be a pornographic film star, seems clearly modeled after one of Burroughs' atavistic characters, for whom only violence, sex, and drugs have any meaning. Likewise, Mafia Winsome's obsessive overemphasis on sex, evidenced in her practice of "Heroic Screwing," which to her is "screwing five to six times a night with many wrestling holds thrown in" (87), appears to be a parody of Kerouac's Dean Moriarty, to whom "sex was the one and only holy important thing in life" (4).

Pynchon's The Whole Sick Crew embraces the urbane civilized sickness that the Beats reject and joyfully awake from, without reaching the illuminating (but potentially destructive) state of the Beats' visionary madness. Essentially, The Whole Sick Crew completely misinterprets Beat philosophy. In *V.*, Roony Winsome describes sickness as "a lack of morality, rejecting morality for personal aggrandizement, insanity, accomplishing nothing" (338). This is a deterioration of the Beats' concept of glorified madness, which was a countercultural response to a sickness that they saw in "healthy" society. In *On The Road*, Sal Paradise becomes "sick" by leading a normal civilized life that has become spiritually barren and insubstantial. Consequently, he and Dean look for an alternative form of healthy life untainted by civilization, somewhere in

America and beyond its borders. This possibility is noticeably lacking in Pynchon's cold, technologically advanced world, which offers little or no hope for personal redemption.

The Beat Generation, The Whole Sick Crew, and Decadence

In coining the term Beat Generation, Kerouac described it as "a generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way" (*Portable Kerouac* 559). For Kerouac, beat meant "down and out but full of intense conviction." The Beats invented their own alternative morality. It is important to recognize that the word "beat originally meant poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways." The neo-hobo Beats, especially Kerouac, identified with the disenfranchised, the outsiders, and ethnic others. In his deification of the musical form of jazz and social alienation, Sal Paradise expresses Kerouac and the Beats' rejection of America's white dominated culture: "I wish I were a Negro . . . anything other than a white man disillusioned" (*On The Road* 180).

Essentially, Pynchon's The Whole Sick Crew is a group of Beat posers who misguidedly attempt to emulate a bohemian lifestyle through their mechanical and passionless forays into drunkenness and casual sex. They are readers and theoreticians while the Beats relied upon and emphasized the need for empirical firsthand experience. Whereas the Beats eagerly roamed across the country and world in search of higher truths and higher pleasures, The Whole Sick Crew "lived half their time in a bar on the lower West Side called the Rusty Spoon" (26). Unlike the Beats, most members of The Whole Sick Crew never leave the confines of New York City. In essence, they are aesthetes or simulacra of the Beats. They base their behavior on the pseudo-philosophy of popular culture forms: "Most of them worked for a living and obtained the substance of their conversation from the pages of Time magazine and like publications" (46). As Rachel Owlglass explains, The Whole Sick Crew, "does not create, it talks about people who do" (356). The Whole Sick Crew is closer in philosophy to the artistic dandies and critics whom Oscar Wilde endorsed in the late nineteenth century than to the Beats. The Beats emphasized the creation of art through empirical or personal experience. Whereas the Beats were heavily influenced by nineteenth-century American Transcendentalists such as Whitman and Melville, in addition to Russian and French existentialists, "anything properly English went over with The Whole Sick Crew" (361).

Opposed to the energy or vitality of the Beats is The Whole Sick Crew's lethargy, exemplified in Fergus Mixolydian, "the laziest living being in Nueva York" (45), who connects himself electronically to the television set. Pynchon emphasizes, "The rest of the Crew partook of the same lethargy." Their ideas are decadent abstractions of theories that are themselves abstractions of personal experience, distorted through the crooked lenses of magazines and television. This sort of quirky popular-culture decadence appears in Slab (presumably based on Andy Warhol), who paints cheese danishes and claims he is revolting

against Catatonic Expressionism. Whereas Kerouac describes the Beats as kind and generous, Roony Winsome describes the minds of the Crew as "vile" (*V.* 387). While Pynchon does not implicate or directly critique the philosophy and practice of the original Beat writers, he does appear to argue that the Beat style of life is doomed as a movement, as are most lifestyles when applied to a large body of people. That is, once any philosophy leaves the hands of its original members, it can be misinterpreted, bastardized or misrepresented by those merely interested in gaining a portion of the power and glory achieved by the original members.

The Whole Sick Crew's misguided appropriation of Beat-style bohemianism results in puerile, doltish characters who are frequently inane and insubstantial. Whereas Sal and Dean are jazz aficionados who eagerly detail jazz performances in lucid musical metaphor, Pig Bodine drunkenly mentions: "There is nothing I love more than good shit kicking music" (117). The Whole Sick Crew attends the jazz concerts of McClintic Sphere merely to solidify its simulated bohemian images. When Sphere plays, they sit silently and oblivious — "None of them were saying anything" (48) — whereas Dean and Sal become passionately animated when they hear jazz. While the parties of *On The Road* are long Dionysian celebrations, lasting up to three days at a time, the parties of The Whole Sick Crew are mechanical and passionless: "The party, as if it were inanimate after all, unwound like a clock's mainspring toward the edges of the chocolate room" (41). The Whole Sick Crew attends jazz concerts and holds parties presumably because it is the "in" thing to do, according to the magazines The Crew reads. Rather than a spontaneous celebration of joy, The Crew's actions are hollow and calculated.

The Road Becomes the Street

In *V.*, Pynchon repeatedly uses an image of a yo-yo to describe various members of The Whole Sick Crew and their activities. Profane feels the closest thing to an animate yo-yo in the sense he, like it, "has a path marked out for it over which it has no control" (201). Pynchon, in fact, describes Benny Profane as a human yo-yo. Yo-yoing in *V.* parodies the frequent boomerang trips that Sal and Dean take in *On The Road*, which are supposed to be an expression of extreme free will and romanticism. The idea behind yo-yoing, conversely, is determinism and control — after all, someone or something holds the string of a yo-yo. For Pynchon, the hand that holds the yo-yo string may be the invisible, deterministic hand of genetic predisposition that motivates people to travel as a form of territorial expansion and/or territorial appropriation. Profane and other members of the Whole Sick Crew are described as yo-yos who travel back and forth, mostly within in New York City, typically on the subway. Benny yo-yos from Norfolk to New York, then within New York, and ultimately to Malta. Similarly, Kerouac's Sal Paradise might also be described as a human yo-yo in the sense that he continually boomerangs back to his aunt's house in Paterson, New Jersy,J after his successive trips across the country with and without Dean Moriarty.

Whereas The Whole Sick Crew's yo-yoing takes place almost entirely within the confines of New York City, Sal and Dean's traveling takes them all across America and into Mexico. Furthermore, yo-yoing becomes an abstract game for The Whole Sick Crew. The Crew sets up a contest of yo-yoing up and down the subway where "Slab is the king with 69 cycles over a week-end" (277). Similarly in *On The Road*, traveling is sometimes done excessively as a kind of sport. At one point, Sal mentions, "We had come from Denver to Chicago via Ed Wall's ranch, 1180 miles, in exactly seventeen hours . . . for a mean average of seventy miles per hour across the land, with one driver. Which is a kind of crazy record" (237). Unlike The Whole Sick Crew, Sal recognizes that it is crazy to keep numerical records when the journey and the destination are infinitely more important than the distance traveled. Furthermore, The Whole Sick Crew rarely has a destination when it travels. While Sal and Dean find a new kind of freedom in their travels, Pynchon represents Profane as aimless in his wanderings, which themselves appear to be determined by chance rather than an act of free will.

The Whole Sick Crew's universe has condensed from the Beats' worldwide expansiveness to New York City, just as Kerouac's expansive Whitmanian open road has been reduced to a street. Profane has "nightmares of a single abstracted street" (2), whereas Paradise has dreams and visions of "the holy road" (23). Pynchon denies mysticism and transcendentalism as ways "out" of the limiting human condition or as alternatives to escalating world violence. Unlike Sal, who grows through his travels by acquainting himself with different people and different ways of life, "[s]treets had taught him [Profane] nothing" (27). In *V.*, romantic dreams of the road and America have disappeared as the world has grown steadily more sterile and mechanized. The individual's imagination has become constricted by urban and technological sprawl: "This was all there was to dream; all there ever was: The Street" (31). While Kerouac uses the image of the road as lifeblood for the new American romantic, in *V.*, Pynchon connects the dreamer with the bleak urban street. The heavily industrialized, technologically advanced environment limits the dreamer, who is described as "only an inconsequential shadow of himself in the landscape, partaking of the soullessness of these other masses and shadows. This is the Twentieth Century Nightmare" (303). In *V.*, the technological/inanimate world invades the human psychological realm that perceives concepts in crude cybernetic binaries (the hothouse and the street, the underground and the street). The street is also described as "the kingdom of death" (47), whereas Kerouac's road itself is "life" (211). In part, Pynchon's direct inversion of Kerouac's thematics is ultimately an attempt to denigrate his romantic idealism as unfeasible in and not pertinent to the world of the late 1950s and early 1960s, in which the world hangs in a delicate balance of power, seemingly ready to crumble at a moment's notice.

The Quest or Search

On one level, both *V.* and seminal Beat works are updated twentieth-century stories about searchers and quests. *V.* can be interpreted as the story of the quest of Herbert Stencil to find the woman V., whom he at least initially

believes to be his mother. V., in her various forms, links the novel together even though the narrative moves somewhat haphazardly from country to country and person to person. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* has a similar global focus. Instead of being linked by various versions of V., "the world network of junkies" links *Naked Lunch* together (6). Junkies themselves are linked to one another (dealer to user and vice versa) by need. Burroughs calls this "the algebra of need" (178). In Burroughs' nightmarish vision, humans are reduced to running on "the silent frequency of junk" (31). Like the various incarnations of V., drugs become semi-mystical totems for the addict: "Junk is surrounded by magic and taboos, curses and amulets" (5). While *Naked Lunch* is populated by a number of addicted drug searchers, *V.* contains only one main searcher, Herbert Stencil. While the search for V. gives Stencil a purpose, he approaches his search coldly, much like an empirical scientist. In contrast, in *On the Road*, the search itself provides mystical revelations and transcendence for Sal and Dean.

In *On The Road*, Sal and Dean search for a similar undefined object, which they call "IT." Their idea of "IT" involves a vision or insight into the nature of existence, or a lost Eden that they naively or romantically believe to be recoverable. At one point, Dean tells Sal, "Now man, that alto man last night had IT — he held it once he found it" (206). Like V., IT is a concept that can take many forms. At times, IT is the sound of a jazz musician hitting the right notes. IT can also be a feeling of joyful abandonment that Sal and Dean get while on the road. When Sal asks Dean what "IT" is, Dean cannot explain. He says, "now you're asking me impon-de-rables" (206). Their Tao-like search for IT leads them towards artistic nonhuman forms that they hope can transcend their own human mortality.

Before his first trip, Sal claims, "Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me" (*On The Road* 11). Sal Paradise sets off for the West confident that he will find hope in a particular place. He wants to emulate Dean Moriarty, whom he describes as a "sideburned hero of the snowy West" (8). Pynchon parodies Sal's desire for heroism in Benny Profane. The only times that Benny aspires towards heroism are when he is drunk. At one point, Pynchon details a drunken Benny attempting to piss on the sun: "It went down; as if he'd extinguished it after all and continued on immortal, god of a darkened world" (17). Pynchon debunks the idea of heroism as a drunken and deluded illusion of human grandeur, whereas Kerouac tried to resuscitate the American hero for the post-World War II generation. Benny, more of an everyman figure than Dean or Sal, tells Mafia, "Nothing heroic about a schlemiel. . . . Somebody who lies back and takes it from objects, like any passive woman" (268). While Sal strives towards heroism, there appears to be no possibility for heroism in *V.*

While Stencil is the primary searcher in *V.*, other characters also hunt for meaning. Hugh Godolphin, the explorer, looks for the mythical land of Vheissu. One of his explorations takes him to the South Pole, where he sees the corpse of one of Vheissu's spider monkeys encased in ice. He tells Signor Mantissa, "It was Nothing I saw" (188). He continues to describe his vision as "a mockery, you see: a mockery of life." Godolphin's romantic quest ends in the ironic perception that the surface is all there is; beneath it lies only nothingness.

Likewise, at the end of *V.*, "Stencil sketched the entire history of V. that night and strengthened a long suspicion. That it did add up to only the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects" (419). As David Seed argues, "Whereas in the fiction of Kerouac, the quest pattern gives the narrative impetus, Pynchon's ambivalence about meaningful goals renders his characters' quests ludicrous" (8).

Indeed, in *On The Road*, the road appears to lead to a real visionary place just as Godolphin believes that his searches would lead to the holy land of Vheissu. When Sal and Dean go to Mexico, they believe, "We had finally found the magic land at the end of the road and we never dreamed the extent of the magic" (*On The Road* 276). However, similar to Godolphin's disillusion at realizing his vision of Vheissu to be misguided, the magic of Mexico wears off quickly, as Sal succumbs to another physical sickness in Mexico, mirroring his original sickness before the book begins. Still, Sal's trips affect him, change him for the better, and while he seems to reject Dean as a hero figure, he regains an almost neo-Catholic belief in the basic goodness of humanity and the sacred nature of the land itself. While Pynchon's *V.* ends with little hope for the future, Kerouac sees promise in America. Indeed, the Beats thought that the people and the world itself could be changed for the better, but Pynchon holds no such hope in *V.*

Written during the gloomy heights of the Cold War, *V.* displays a world that creeps towards a kind of technological Armageddon in its increasing brutality and inhumanity. At the epilogue of *V.*, Sidney Stencil ruminates that "sometime between 1859 and 1919, the world contracted a disease which no one ever took the trouble to diagnose because the symptoms were too subtle — blending in with the events of history, no different one by one but altogether fatal" (433). In *V.*, the human world is ultimately unexplainable and illogical, where even the "logic" of the inert universe is a false human construct. Benny Profane's last words are symptomatic of his continual ignorance and the seeming pointlessness of knowledge: "Offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing" (454).

This is not to suggest that Pynchon's vision in *V.* is completely apocalyptic, but he does argue that the Beat approach, favoring the emotions over the intellect, while romantic, is not practically sound. He veers more towards esteemed jazzman McClintic Sphere's dictum, "Keep cool, but care," which seems like pointed advice to both Beat writers and followers, who feel that coolness, or a lack of emotional response, is repressive and morally suspect. For the Beats, one cannot truly care and keep cool or distanced at the same time. In order to care truly, one must project the self outwards. This gets us back to one of Kerouac's initial meanings of "beat" as "beatific" or giving and generous. Allied with Kerouac's neo-Catholic vision is his emphasis that the imagination can somehow surmount or counteract human frailties or weaknesses. Whereas Pynchon nullifies or reduces the dreamer's imagination to the mechanical representation of the street, Kerouac leaves us with the image of "all the people . . . . dreaming in the immensity of it [America]" (*On The Road* 309). Perhaps the dreamers will be left as Sal is, to dream on "the old broken-down river pier," but

the hope remains of dreaming themselves into a better future or world. For Pynchon, this notion is ridiculous as humans have already sowed the seeds of their doom through rampant technological advancement.

While Kerouac emphasizes the expansion of the imagination and personality as alternatives to general meaninglessness, these are empty constructs for the quintessentially postmodern Pynchon. This leads everyone — the characters, the author, and the reader — towards a feeling of worthlessness and inertia. Pynchon may initially have been attracted to Kerouac's romanticism, but *V.* is anything but romantic. For Pynchon, the Beats' romanticism is only admirable in theory. Yet Pynchon does not adequately prove that the Beat lifestyle is unrealistic, only that it has been misappropriated by misguided followers. If The Whole Sick Crew cannot live the intense, passionate lifestyle promoted by Beat writers, it is not because this lifestyle is impossible, but because The Crew's commitment to life is minimal and self-interested. While Pynchon's vision of entropy veers closer to Burroughs', Pynchon lacks Burroughs' sense of social agency. While Burroughs reels with disgust at the horror he witnesses in the contemporary world, Pynchon appears resigned to its increased presence and to the ultimate death of humanity in *V.* With all its postmodern doom and gloom, *V.* revels in cynical intellectual word play and allusion. The ultimate joke of *V.* is on all of us, when we realize that we are all in Benny's position of having not learned a goddamn thing. According to Pynchon, the historical pattern of entropy dominates human free will. Even Burroughs' emphasis on the supremacy of the author/creator in disordering narrative or form is no real alternative to Pynchon.

That Pynchon grew more comic and less cynical in his subsequent *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) shows his gradual abandonment of his doom-ridden vision of future. For in *V.*, written in the early 1960s, but set largely in 1956, Pynchon seems not to have anticipated the countercultural movement of the mid-to-late 1960s (which he lampoons brilliantly in *The Crying of Lot 49*) and the subsequent positive movement towards civil and social rights. Unlike Allen Ginsberg, who later became the most public of the Beat writers, playing a significant role in countercultural movements during the 1960s, Pynchon stayed in the shadows during the 1960s (and continues to do so today). In a way, Pynchon's mission was more admirable: to identify the forces that lie underneath cultural change throughout the past several hundred years of Western history. Still, Pynchon's contention that these submerged forces were largely violent and obsessional and that they have increased and will continue to increase leaves the reader with little hope. Furthermore, Pynchon's reluctance to become a public figure or make clear his political and moral views during the 1960s helps make him appear significantly more detached from the world than the Beats and their followers. Nevertheless, almost forty years after the publication of *V.*, Pynchon's critique of Beat followers or beatniks seems telling. Indeed, the unexpected fame and subsequent pressure from becoming the media-appointed "King of the Beatniks," helped lead Jack Kerouac into the seclusion and severe alcoholism that sent him to an early grave. If there is a lesson that Pynchon wishes us to learn from his critique of the Beat followers, it is that what is admirable and romantic in pinciple can often turn formulaic and even dangerous when it becomes a real-life movement.

Notes

1. See Van Dedlen; Bertesseian; Vella; Seed, "Comparison"; McCarron; and Mesher.

2. See Ames.

3. For a in-depth study of Nabokov's possible influence upon Pynchon in *V.*, see Mesher.

4. Aside from *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs published *The Exterminator* (1960), *The Soft Machine* (1961), and *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962) while Pynchon was working on *V.* Burroughs' first novel, *Junky* (1953), predates his others by several years.

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