The Influence of Present over Past: Imagination and Rhetoric in *V.*

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Introduction

It is impossible to cognize the real world objectively. For, we can only grasp its surface at a time, which does not help us to reconstruct objective reality as long as the process of gathering and connecting fragments of the world demands logic that ultimately and essentially falls into illogic called imagination. Besides, we tend to interpret the world by using rhetoric. Therefore, connected with imagination is rhetoric, which further expands the gap between subjectivity and objectivity. This series of cognitive mechanisms brings about the following contrast: Although Fausto Maijstral IV is strongly obsessed with the mechanism, Herbert Stencil is not at all.

Section I proves that what is recognized as the past is not an objective reconstruction of what actually happened in the past but a subjective construction brought forth under the influence of the present. Herbert Stencil exemplifies this topic by his excessive assimilation into some characters in his imaginative world, and this technique is defined as "[f]orcible dislocation of personality" (58) in chapter three of *V.*

Section II discusses to what extent, in terms of the cognitive mechanism, we can become free from rhetoric and imagination. In chapter eleven of *V.* Fausto IV grapples with this question, and shows that rhetoric and imagination are necessary conditions for not only the cognition of the present but also the reconstruction of the past.

I : The Total Absorption in Imagination

This chapter deals with Herbert Stencil's imaginative world. "[T]he pursuit of V.", which is the main topic of the world, is "merely a scholarly quest after all, an adventure of the mind, in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*" (57). According to J. Kerry Grant, "[t]hese 'adventures of the mind' have in common their attempts to discover and articulate large-scale systems by means of which human history can be brought into some kind of ordered form" (37). Stencil's strong desire for order is mentioned in *V.* by Dudley Eigenvalue: "[W]e have men like Stencil, who must go about grouping the world's random caries into cabals" (159). In addition, the definition of "stencil" and "stencilling" is very helpful: "The O. E. D. defines a stencil as 'a hole in a card which when washed over with colour leaves a figure'; 'stencilling' is defined as 'a process by which you can produce patterns and designs'" (Tanner 164). However, such a pattern or a design is not objective or universally approved but only a product of Stencil's imagination. If so, one of the important roles of imagination in *V.* is the subjective production of a covering called pattern or design for the total chaos of the present world. In chapter three of *V.*, the omniscient narrator says that the chapter is based upon Stencil's "impersonation and dream" (59), and his quest for V. fires his imagination.

Although this causality between his quest and imagination is certainly effective at first, it gradually loses its validity, as his pursuit of V. advances. "No facts on the mother's disappearance" (48) are left behind for him, so he "quickly suggests that the V. figure he seeks is at the very least his mother" (Brownlie 17). In addition, his "father died under unknown circumstances in 1919" (48). Then, his quest certainly began with approaching V. and trying to solve the mysteries concerning his parents, but he always avoids arriving at the goal by ingeniously warding off

"the island Malta, where his father had died, where Herbert had never been and knew nothing at all about because something there kept him off, because it frightened him" (58). Though this "[a]pproach and avoid" (51) is his tactics for the pursuit of V., it does not answer his original purpose. Instead, his exhaustive imagination, which was originally a means of the quest for V., now, in itself, becomes a kind of purpose, as the omniscient narrator of the New York chapters says:

> Finding her: what then? Only that what love there was to Stencil had become directed entirely inward, toward this acquired sense of animateness. Having found this he could hardly release it, it was too dear. To sustain it he had to hunt V.; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. (50-51)

In short, he believes that the pursuit of V. keeps him animate, so he regards this chasing as pleasurable, on one hand. However, on the other hand, "[w]ork, the chase. . .far from being a means to glorify God and one's own godliness (as the Puritans believe) was for Stencil grim, joyless" (50). If so, his quest can be paradoxically defined as pleasurable and unpleasurable.

Why does his quest, based upon the absorption in his imagination, become unpleasurable? Imagination and its product, from the outset, should not be so, because they rest upon the performer's freedom to be self-satisfied and to feel a sense of the hothouse. It is certain that, if the imaginative world demands its objectivity, as the case of Fausto IV exemplifies, it inevitably becomes unpleasurable, but Stencil is not obsessed with any objectivity. Indeed, in his conversation with Eigenvalue, he readily admits that "[m]ost of what he has is inference" (161). Then, what is it that makes his imagination unpleasurable?

It is V. His father leaves to Stencil the following description of her: "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she" (49). Young Stencil cannot answer the question. For him, she is always unidentifiable, chaotic, and patternless, and his imaginative world tends to prefer a pattern to a randomness. V. is consequently the primary element of making his imagination unpleasurable, but it is essential that V. should be the goal of his quest. Nevertheless, because "to find V. would mean the loss of everything" (Patterson 27), V. must never be reached. This mechanism makes her mystery permanently unsolved and leads him to nowhere, as Molly Hite suggests: "[T]his reconstructed 'plot' does not add up to any climactic revelation" (58). Moreover, the endlessness of his quest can be explained by the fact that even he himself does not know why it has to be V. that is pursued. He, for the time, thinks that "Stencil has been lonely and needs something for company" (50). The fact that "Stencil has been lonely" is noticeable. He still insists that the Whole Sick Crew, who he admits are what Stencil was before 1945, are "not alone" (52) and that they can share "a hothouse sense of time" (53). This insistence represents his strong persistence to the difference between him and the Crew. As a result, instead of communicating with them, "Stencil opts for narcissism, acting safely within his own mind" (Brownlie 17). He does not like to live in the real world or to be involved in the inanimate matter, so that, for him, the unpleasurable absorption in his imaginative world is more pleasurable than the reversion to his "prewar self" (51) and the disappearance of a difference between him and the Crew.

However, despite his desire for such a difference, his adherence to V. paradoxically makes inevitable the similarity between him and the Crew. For, a blind absorption in something incomprehensible to anyone except the person in question is applied to

them as well as Stencil. As a result, he cannot understand them and, of course, vice versa, as their comments on him suggest: "'I don't believe any of it,' said Pig. 'Stencil is a fake'" (451). As to this topic, Hite suggests that "[m]ajor and minor characters remain absorbed in the ostentatiously trivial activities that absorbed them when they first appeared" (59). Then, it can be thought that, though Stencil regards the Crew's characteristic as despicable, he also becomes inanimate.

Now, let us begin to analyze the contents of chapter three of *V.*, which is divided into eight sections along with the preface. Richard Patterson explains that "Pynchon's use of multiple point of view . . . underscores the difficulty of piecing together historical truth and separating it from the purely subjective" (21). Though Patterson's explanation might be partly true, Stencil actually does not investigate any scene by letting more than one of his personae simultaneously join it. Instead, different sections deal with different occasions, and this division is presumably connected with Stencil's choosing to impersonate what he likes best in each section. For, all his seven personae in the chapter show the same voyeurism and use their imagination, which he grudgingly does in the real world. In the case of Aieul, when he voyeuristically hears "a grand party at the Consulate tonight" (60), he speculates: "What consulate? All Aieul could distinguish were names. Victoria Wren. Sir Alastair Wren (father? husband?)" (60). On the other hand, having heard Bongo-Shaftsbury reply, Max wonders: "Now what was this. . . . An Egyptologist was he, or only reciting from the pages of his Baedeker?" (71). Lastly, in Hanne's case, she comes to be obsessed with "[i]magination" (88) about Fashoda, though "[s]he'd always been a practical girl, not given to fancy" (88). It is noticeable that she is normally "a practical girl," but here she is naturally one of Stencil's personae who stretch their imagination. Fashoda gives

rise to her imagination that is quietly replaced by obsession, but this replacement is a bit strange because, although, throughout this section, Fashoda is unidentifiable to her at all, it is, from the beginning, "a word to give pale, unspecific headaches" (89) to her. The contents of this section do not explain the reason for her obsession with Fashoda. This case is seemingly a typical one of Stencil's own obsession being reflected in his imaginative world, and Fashoda obsesses Stencil rather than Hanne. Although he did not directly or indirectly experience Fashoda, he "volunteered his services" (50) in the Second World War and saw one of the two "kingdoms-of-death" (50). That experience tortures him, and he, not Hanne, can associate Fashoda with "jungle, and outlandish micro-organisms, and fevers which were not love's (the only she'd known, after all, being a healthy girl) or anything human's" (89). Moreover, Fashoda is abstracted into a stain on the plate: "Hanne scrubbed, then examined the plate again, tilting it toward the light. The stain was still there. Hardly visible. Roughly triangular" (89). It "had fissioned, and transferred like an overlay to each of her retinae" (90). This description of the stain whose form is triangular is associated with the form of the letter V. that is Stencil's obsession. Based upon this discussion, I agree with Hite's idea that "[t]hroughout *V.* Stencil remains oblivious to the resemblances between the facts that he unearths and the actions taking place around him" (51). Whether he is conscious or not, his vicarious character in the imaginative world reflects his experience and obsession in the real world.

Here again, Stencil's obsession should be discussed. Before he witnesses the massacre in the real world, "[t]he passage on V. was never noticed" (50) to him, but, after that, "the sentences on V. suddenly acquired a light of their own" (50). Witnessing the massacre is painful to him, so that he subjectively connects V.

with "the mass deaths" (309). Besides, "[s]he always seems more a symbol than a character" (Hite 58) in his imaginative world, and the letter V. gives rise to various metaphors. A typical example is Vheissu, which is itself "a gaudy dream. Of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation" (217). It is clear that Vheissu exists only in the complicatedly Stencilized world.

Indeed, in his imaginative world appear various symptoms of mass destruction or mass death. In addition to Vheissu, "Vernichtungs Befehl" (259) in Mondaugen's story can be raised as another such example, "whereby the German forces were ordered to exterminate systematically every Herero man, woman and child they could find" (259). It is also the association with the letter V., and it is presumably a product of Stencil's imagination, or what reflects the real world. For, Stencil knows that "he [Mondaugen] had worked, yes, at Peenemunde, developing Vergeltungswaffe Eins and Zwei. The magic initial!" (241). This quotation makes it clear that Mondaugen has something to do with the letter V. in the real world.

Finally, Stencil's "[f]orcible dislocation of personality" (58) should be discussed here: "Herbert Stencil . . . always referred to himself in the third person. This helped 'Stencil' appear as only one among a repertoire of identities" (58). This explanation certainly indicates the difference in one respect between him and the Crew, who never forcibly exile their own selves or refer to themselves in the third person. They rather stick to a single object or behavioral pattern, but Stencil's following explanation of this technique paradoxically deconstructs such a difference:

> "Forcible dislocation of personality" was what he called the general technique, which is not exactly the same as "seeing the other fellow's point of view"; for it involved, say,

> wearing clothes that Stencil wouldn't be caught dead in, eating foods that would have made Stencil gag, living in unfamiliar digs, frequenting bars or cafes of a non-Stencilian character; all this for weeks on end; and why? To keep Stencil in his place: that is, in the third person. (58)

This citation shows that, in spite of his quick change, once he decides what he impersonates, he is sadomasochistic about becoming as close to it as he could. His total absorption in his own imaginative world is very similar to that of Slab, because they both utilize any things or people around them for their absorption. For example, in the case of Stencil, though he strongly persuaded Profane to go to Malta with him, his letter, written after the quest in the island had been deadlocked, says: "Dispose as you will of Profane. Stencil has no further need for any of you. Sahha" (487).

The motives for his impersonation have already come to be the avoidance of the Crew and inanimateness. If so, "all his techniques of self-duplication and self-extension may be construed as protective screens for avoiding direct engagement with reality" (Tanner 164). However, such avoidance is impossible, as the next section of the article testifies by focusing on Fausto Ⅳ, who not only declares that he can be completely free from the real world, but also tries hard to exclude rhetoric from his pseudo-objectively reconstructed past.

II: The Inevitability of Rhetoric

In the eleventh chapter of *V.*, "Confessions of Fausto Maijstral", as in Herbert Stencil's sections, some past events are narrated by Fausto IV along with the journals of Fausto I and II. According to David Seed, "[f]or the first time he [Stencil] is presented with a ready-made text, whereas all the three earlier

chapters have undergone a process of 'Stencilizing'" (99). The process is strongly connected with his subjectivity, and the most important difference between him and Fausto IV consists in their attitude toward objectivity. In the case of Stencil, the absorption in his own imaginative world and the avoidance of communication in the real world are a matter of the highest priority, so that he is not at all concerned with the objectivity of his imaginative world. However, Fausto IV tries hard to reproduce his past experience as objectively as possible, because of his aspiration to answer the following question: "[W]hy did he not stop the children: or lift the beam?" (371). Unlike Stencil, who mistakes the means for the end, Fausto IV firmly has a specific purpose of reconstructing the past, and he consequently adopts a far more exhaustive and original way to exclude rhetoric and imagination than Stencil's.

The originality of this exclusion partly stems from his realization that the slightest relation to the modern world inevitably makes him unconsciously follow the world's value system and distort the truth about his past experience. His statement indirectly suggests that he is well aware of the powerful influence of the outside world upon the reconstruction:

> Why use the room as introduction to an apologia? Because the room, though windowless and cold at night, is a hothouse. Because the room is the past, though it has no history of its own. Because . . . as a high place must exist before God's word can come to a flock and any sort of religion begin; so must there be a room, sealed against the present, before we can make any attempt to deal with the past. (325)

However, despite such awareness, it is doubtful that he can avoid the influence of the modern world. He certainly insists as

follows: "Hermetic: for who can hear the Dockyard whistle, rivet guns, vehicles in the street when one is occupied with the past?" (327). Nevertheless, his confession includes many metaphorical phrases that are associated with phenomena within the New York chapters of *V.* The Bad Priest's "glass eye with the iris in the shape of a clock" (369) can be raised as an example, and, according to Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "the literal longing for a 'simple clockwork' of self... reaches its crux in V. herself and her intimate, libidinal connection with objects" (97). The simple clockwork is suggestive of the repetition, or yo-yoing, which is the behavioral pattern of the Crew. Besides, her false teeth and star sapphire "'seem like displaced parts from earlier sections of the novel' (Campbell 61), linking the teeth to Ploy's and the sapphire to the golden navel-screw of Profane's recalled story" (Grant 161).

In this way, the metaphorical connotations of V.'s bodily parts combine the imaginative world with the real world, while her bodily status, namely a complete mixture of animateness and inanimateness, presumably echoes SHOCK, which is "entirely lifelike in every way" (304). Moreover, her gradual self-mechanization, the process of which is narrated by either Fausto IV or Stencil, synchronizes the gradual progress of scientific technology in the real world of *V.*:

> In the eighteenth century it was often convenient to regard man as a clockwork automaton. In the nineteenth century, with Newtonian physics pretty well assimilated and a lot of work in thermodynamics going on, man was looked on more as a heat-engine, about 40 per cent efficient. Now in the twentieth century, with nuclear and subatomic physics a going thing, man had become something which absorbs X-rays, gamma rays and neutrons. (302-03)

This citation indicates that the way of comparing a human to a machine gradually becomes elaborated as time passes, but that such comparison proves to be always a highly common way. If so, it might be possible to interpret the description of the Bad Priest as Fausto IV 's rhetoric about a phenomenon common in the age of Fausto III. Nevertheless, because the Bad Priest is the last persona of V. and the closest one of her personae to inanimateness, it can be concluded that he is what reflects the modern world that is peerlessly dominated by inanimateness.

It might be true that the withdrawal from the outside world into his room makes Fausto IV free from the influence of the world, but he cannot be always inside the room. Once he goes outside, he does not have any choice but to live in the modern world. Nevertheless, he does not explain at all how he governs his thought and excludes from it the elements that belong to the world. Accordingly, in spite of Fausto IV's above suggestion, it is appropriate to think that, even if he stays inside the room, he is influenced by the present world. In short, like Stencil, Fausto IV no more than weaves and presents a history whose contents are subjectively and arbitrarily decided in the light of the present world where he lives.

The withdrawal from the outside world is not enough for him to achieve the objective reconstruction of his past experience. This is why, as Judith Chambers says, he "has fractured into Fausto I, II, III, and IV" (83), which "signal[s] his shift from the animate to the inanimate" (83), and, by way of this fracture, he tries to observe calmly and objectively each stage of himself. In doing so, he depends upon the journals: "The journals, I mean, of Fausto I and II. What other way can there be to regain him, as we must?" (327). Nevertheless, because "[t]here are no records of Fausto III except for indecipherable entries" (371), the reconstruction of Fausto III's experience by quoting those journals

does not work well. The reason why Fausto III's entries are indecipherable is that "Fausto III is the closest any of the characters comes to non-humanity" (326), namely inanimateness.

In fact, the journals of Fausto I and II do not make sense to Fausto IV, either. This is because they are "the mixing of metaphors, crowding of detail, rhetoric-for-its-own-sake" (328). The following citation is a part of the journal of Fausto I, from which his comment on rhetoric derives:

> How wondrous is this St. Giles Fair called history! Her rhythms pulse regular and sinusoidal — a freak show in caravan, traveling over thousands of little hills. A serpent hypnotic and undulant, bearing on her back like infinitesimal fleas such hunchbacks, dwarves, prodigies, centaurs, poltergeists! Two-headed, three-eyed, hopelessly in love; satyrs with the skin of werewolves with the eyes of young girls and perhaps even an old man with a navel of glass, through which can be seen goldfish nuzzling the coral country of his guts. (327-28)

Indeed, Fausto IV himself admits the rule of rhetoric over these two journals by explaining that "Fausto's kind are alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor" (349). Therefore, it is not so strange that his journals are full of rhetoric, and "little more than 'impressions'" (346). In addition, Fausto I and II use rhetoric on the assumption that at least they themselves can understand the meaning of it. However, such an assumption is true only when "identity is single, soul continuous" (327), and when either identity or soul changes, "[t]he word is, in sad fact, meaningless" (327). Fausto IV himself thinks that his own self has been drastically changed three times, and, although he "can look nowhere but back on the

separate stages of his own history"(355), "[n]o continuity" (355) and "[n]o logic" (355) can be found between them. As a result, he cannot understand Fausto I, II, or III at all. This mechanism, which can be directly applied to Stencil and the Crew, makes it dangerous for them to stick to their own imaginative worlds. For, when the self in question changes, the worlds suddenly become unstable ones, the contents of which disclose their excessive arbitrariness and subjectivity based upon the unconscious abuse of rhetoric.

In *V.* rhetoric even destroys the minimum requirements for communication, and works only to block cognition and understanding. Indeed, according to Stefan Mattessich, "Pynchon's rhetoric . . . erodes its own use value, heaping words on words by way of exhausting signification itself" (29). In other words, *V.*'s rhetoric does not have any systematic or coherent function, and it only mass-produces uncertainty. On the basis of this mechanism, Shawn Smith defines it as "anti-systemic rhetoric" (20). However, it is curious that Fausto IV, who can no more get out of the skepticism about rhetoric and imagination again, thinks highly of Fausto I and II, who are completely free of it. His comment on the contents of their journals shows it: "Could we have been so much in the midst of life? With such a sense of grand adventure about it all?" (328). That is to say, Fausto IV tries to exclude as much rhetoric as possible from his confession, but a terminus of the trial is the state of inanimateness, which Fausto III, who is presumed to be completely free of rhetoric and imagination, exemplifies. However, from inanimateness, nothing decipherable can be extracted. This dilemma is unavoidable, when a man is faced with the desire to reconstruct his personal experience objectively.

The unavoidability of such a dilemma is connected with a limit to the epistemological ability of mankind. In other words,

regardless of his will or effort, he can recognize "only part of the over-all 'relationship'" (354). If so, the rest of the relationship comes to be easily influenced by rhetoric and imagination. Indeed, though he declares an elaborate method of confession, like the fracturing of self, and at first strictly eliminates imaginary things or what he does not know or remember clearly, in the latter half of his confession what should be called a product of his imagination appears in the form of metaphorical expressions. In the scene of the Bad Priest's disassembly that he strongly desires to reconstruct, "the ambiguity of the metaphor is laid bare" (Chambers 88). "At her navel was a star sapphire" (369), and she also had "a glass eye with the iris in the shape of a clock" (369). These inanimate parts are metaphorical elements, and it is noticeable here that "he [Fausto IV] is cloistered in a 'hothouse' (325)" (Chambers 84). Because the definition of the hothouse in *V.* is an imaginative world, it can be concluded that the fact that he regards "the room" as a "hothouse" (325) ironically destines him to be a resident in such an world, even though he admits that "[r]eports of him [the Bad Priest] were confused" (366).

V.'s disassembly can be widely interpreted. For example, Dwight Eddins asserts that "[h]er dismemberment by children . . . symbolizes the sterile crucifixion of a false god, a violent death without hope of resurrection" (61). If V. functions as a symbol of the unknown, her disassembly can be regarded as rhetoric about its vanishing point, which Fausto IV is strongly eager to reach. In addition, because her last persona is a symbol of the lost golden mean between animateness and inanimateness, the disassembly of the Bad Priest presumably means Fausto IV's quest for the golden mean that he now regards as necessary to the objective reconstruction of his past experience. However, at the same time, his imagination, that it is "[t]he children . . . adept

at metaphor" (365) who disassemble V., exposes his consciousness that for the quest he needs rhetoric. For, it can be thought that the scene of the disassembly indicates that only by metaphor is disclosed the sole objective reality, namely the blurred border between animateness and inanimateness. The children have "a certain fondness for the Manichaean" (364). Then, in this case, they might metaphorically symbolize people, including Fausto IV himself, who have lost the golden mean in the modern world. In the first place, "Fausto II's return was most violent of all. He dropped away from abstraction into Fausto III: a non-humanity which was the most real state of affairs" (339). This "abstraction," including rhetoric, seemingly needs to be excluded for the acquisition of the objective reality, but in *V.* such exclusion leads to the state of complete inanimateness, which then makes cognition itself impossible. Therefore, the scene of V.'s disassembly presents Fausto IV's dilemma about rhetoric, namely the inevitable power to destroy objectivity. It also shows his quest for the golden mean between animateness and inanimateness, which might assure him of the objective reconstruction of his past experience.

In the meantime, like the case of Stencil and the Crew, his confession represents the modern world whose lost golden mean triggers the rule of inanimateness over animateness. Stencil, Slab, and Profane are all absorbed in their own imaginative worlds based upon subjectivity and arbitrariness, while Fausto IV tries to exclude these two elements, and he instead sticks to objectivity. However, neither way has the necessary golden mean between subjectivity and objectivity for the lowest level of proper cognition and communication being formed. As a result, mutual understanding has been lost, and Fausto IV retrospectively describes:

Malta, and her inhabitants, stood like an immovable rock in

> the river Fortune, now at war's flood. The same motives which cause us to populate a dream-street also cause us to apply to a rock human qualities like "invincibility," "tenacity," "perseverance," etc. More than metaphor, it is delusion. But on the strength of this delusion Malta survived. (349)

This citation indicates that rhetoric could function as a means of survival under the destructive power of inanimateness, and "Confessions of Fausto Maijstral" totally testifies that objectivity, logic, and continuity inevitably come to be only delusion. Then, the value of rhetoric and imagination, from which we cannot become completely free, must be revaluated in the modern world ruled by a fabrication of logic and objectivity. However, at the same time, it is important to cherish the idea that the abuse of rhetoric easily leads to Stencil, Profane, and Slab, who can be defined as inanimate in the real world of *V.*

Conclusion

V. shows not only that the imaginative world inevitably reflects the present world but also that imagination and rhetoric function as means for a grasp of the real world because the objective reality is beyond cognizance. Nevertheless, rhetoric, which is a system of arbitrary order or style of metaphorical expressions, makes the imaginative world incomprehensible to anyone but the person in question. Besides, rhetoric tempts him to be totally absorbed in his imaginative world, and he falls into the lost golden mean between the past, the present, and the future. Neither Stencil or Fausto IV tries to connect all of the three fields of time organically, and their total absorption in the past lessens the value of the present.

V. shows that the present is illogical, random, and chaotic to all of the protagonists, but the novel simultaneously suggests

that, despite such unpleasurable elements, the present should be thought as valuable as the past and the future. On the other hand, *V.* demands that we should keep the difference between the three fields of time. For, the eternal repetition of the past, the present, or the future means stasis of the world, and stasis is characteristic of inanimateness.

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