

# Fantasia on a Nexus: Robert Graves, Igor Stravinsky, and Thomas Pynchon's *V.*

**Sarah Penicka-Smith**

If one were to imagine a strip-tease in which a woman took off her arms and legs and replaced them with decorous plastic, Stravinsky's music would make a good accompaniment.<sup>1</sup>

J'aime mieux une boîte à musique qu'un rossignol.<sup>2</sup>

It is a peculiar nexus that brings together Robert Graves, Igor Stravinsky and Thomas Pynchon; the lynchpin of this uneasy *ménage à trois* is Pynchon's 1963 novel *V.* The fantastic *V.*, apparently Pynchon's representation of Graves's notorious White Goddess,<sup>3</sup> claims as her protégée the young prima ballerina destined for sacrifice in the premiere of a ballet clearly based on the riotous 1913 premiere of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (henceforth *Le Sacre*). This paper will explore the possibilities around why Pynchon chose this particular moment in time to introduce *V.* in her most human form to his readers, examining notions of Frazerian sacrifice, the combined horror and love of the relationship between artist and muse, and the problematic differences between the creative *modus operandi* of Stravinsky and Graves.

*V.* is a peculiar and complicated novel, which oscillates between two stories. The first, that of full-time *schlemil* (sic) Benny Profane, is of no concern here. It is instead the story of Herbert Stencil and his father which leads to the chapter on *V.* in love. Stencil senior first encountered the mysterious figure *V.* while working as an agent in the British secret services, and his son spends the novel desperately tracking her as she moves through a variety of times and places. In some stories she is the ingénue Victoria Wren,

---

Sarah Penicka-Smith is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney, where she has tutored since 2006. She is the Book Review Editor of the *Australian Religion Studies Review*.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Albright, *Stravinsky: The Music Box and the Nightingale* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1989), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> 'I prefer a music box to a nightingale', Igor Stravinsky quoted in Albright, *Stravinsky*, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Fahy first made this claim in his 1977 article 'Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and Mythology', *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1977), pp. 9-22. Other scholars have pursued it since, including David Seed in *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988) and Judith Chambers in *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

in another the autocratic Vera Meroving, and in her final incarnation, the enigmatic Bad Priest of Malta. In the fourteenth chapter, 'V. in love,' V. is identified only by her initial, and she is intimately connected with the premiere of a ballet modelled on *Le Sacre*. Pynchon's placement of this fictional, almost archetypal character within a well-documented historical event has led some critics to categorise his novel as a particular kind of fantasy: fantasy as an interrogation of the real. Lance Olsen and Rosemary Jackson both place *V.* in this genre. Jackson's book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* describes *V.* as amassing cultural waste; with all its erudite allusions to art, history and science, Pynchon's novel is culture expressed as waste on the page. Jackson writes: "he parodies apocalyptic visions, refusing transcendent solutions, despite the quest for final answers, for a key that will bring us back lying lost somewhere among the wastes of the world."<sup>4</sup> The connection with a human quest for a transcendent solution aligns *V.* with Graves's *The White Goddess*, yet never manages to be a similar myth-building exercise. Instead, Jackson claims it is transgressive fantasy, fantasy which attempts to remain open, dissatisfied, endlessly desiring. In such works, she says, the fantastic is at its most uncompromising in its interrogation of the nature of the real.

And *V.* does indeed interrogate the nature of the real, beginning with reality as Robert Graves perceived it. For the poet-scholar, the figure of the White Goddess was so real that he saw her incarnated temporarily in a series of beautiful women. Yet although the White Goddess walks, undeniably, through Pynchon's novel, he uses her in the opposite way to Graves. In *V.*, the White Goddess's presence highlights the futility of myth, the lack of end to all mythical quests, and the absence of a key to all answers.

David Cowart claims that examining *The White Goddess*'s influence on Pynchon formed part of the earliest studies of his work.<sup>5</sup> Critic Joseph Fahy was the first to explore this connection. Fahy suggested that V. herself was a version of Graves's own personal muse, the White Goddess of inspiration, the deadly beloved of all true poets. No doubt Fahy found his key to this riddle in Pynchon's description of Stencil's quest as a quest after the fashion of *The White Goddess*:

As spread thighs are to the libertine, flights of migratory birds to the ornithologist, the working part of his tool bit to the production machinist, so was the letter V to young Stencil. He would dream perhaps once a week that it had all been a dream, and that now he'd

---

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 8.

awakened to discover the pursuit of V. was merely a scholarly quest after all, an adventure of the mind, in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*.<sup>6</sup>

This is a promising opening gambit. Fahy, however, like many a scholar dedicated to pursuing a new train of thought, made tenuous connections following this, chiefly in connection to the White Goddess's physical appearance compared with V.'s. How the White Goddess looks is actually rather hard to pin down. In many ways, Graves's book is a compendium of goddesses, all of whom fall under the auspices of or provide a face for the White Goddess. Out of these myriad descriptions, Fahy fastened on one brief paragraph, in which Graves described the sea-goddess Marian: "a beautiful woman with a round mirror, a golden comb and a fish tail."<sup>7</sup> Fahy seized on this image, no doubt relying upon Graves's connection of it with Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, an artwork which forms part of the cultural waste amassed in one of V.'s earlier chapters. While V. at no time has a fish tail, her first incarnation Victoria Wren does wear a comb, an ivory one depicting five Crusaders being crucified, and most later incarnations of V. wear this item also. The symbolic mirror is most prominent in our chapter, 'V. in love,' where V. and her lover make a fetish of observing each other in them. The ivory comb and the mirrors, however, make a tenuous connection to *The White Goddess*, considering the range of other accoutrements Graves's goddess sports in her various incarnations. For example, as Cardea the White Goddess's emblems are door-hinges and hawthorn; Io "was a cow that changed her colour from white to rose and then to black"; the Morrigan is "big-mouthed, swarthy, swift, sooty, lame, with a cast in her left eye"; Freya in her May-Eve aspect "has a black face, long hair, a raven flying overhead, a hare running ahead, a hound at her side, a fruit to her lips, a net over her and a goat under her."<sup>8</sup> *The White Goddess* is peppered with such physical descriptions of the White Goddess and lists of her attributes. That Fahy can find a mirror and a comb within V.'s 492 pages does not prove effectively that Pynchon deliberately used Gravesian iconography.

The closest reference to the White Goddess is in V.'s final chapter, in which Sidney Stencil has an affair with V. as Victoria Manganese on the island of Malta. Stencil's passage to Malta is on the *xebec* of the Muslim Mehemet, and the skipper, who claims to have been transposed to Stencil's era from the Middle Ages, tells him of a woman named Mara. Although Mehemet claims historicity for Mara, the stories he tell of her reek of legend, including her

---

<sup>6</sup> Fahy, 'V. and Mythology', p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 386.

<sup>8</sup> Graves, *White Goddess*, pp. 68, 70, 143, 403.

captors the Turks lashing her to their bowsprit so that she enters Constantinople as a living figurehead. (A figurine of the goddess Astarte, another manifestation of the White Goddess, claims this position on Mehemet's own craft). Mehemet's description of Mara:

Now she never was pictured as a raving beauty. She shows up as a number of goddesses, minor deities. Disguise is one of her attributes. But one curious thing about those images: jar ornaments, friezes, sculptures, no matter: she's always tall, slim, small-breasted and bellied. No matter what the prevalent fashion in females, she remains constant. In her face is always a slight bow to the nose, a wide spacing of the eyes, which are small. No one you'd turn to watch on the street. But she was a teacher of love after all. Only pupils of love need be beautiful.<sup>9</sup>

This image has more in common with Graves's key description of his White Goddess than Fahy's weak connection of ivory comb with gold and tenuous mirror. The lynch-pin is the hooked nose. Graves gave one description of the White Goddess as he envisaged her, and she is predictable in most ways – lovely and slender, long golden hair, blue eyes, red lips, pale skin<sup>10</sup> – but the bow to Mara's nose is unusual against the great Western ideal of snub-nosed beauty, and marks her out as Graves's personal construction. It is just such a nose which Pynchon's colourless Esther Harvitz has remodelled into snubness.

David Seed suggests that instead of using Graves's images, Pynchon was parodying them. As Seed points out, Graves and Stencil share an unshakeable obsession, Stencil with a passage in one of his father's journals, Graves with the notion of the displaced Goddess that struck him as he pored over an admiralty map in order to discover the route of Jason and the Argonauts.<sup>11</sup> Both men trace and map their subject's metamorphoses and movements; both are obsessed with letters (Stencil with all things beginning with V.; Graves with alphabetical secrets which reveal the Goddess's presence – are not these things one and the same?) Yet whereas such comparisons led Fahy to argue that Stencil's quest is entirely consistent with Gravesian mythology, Seed argues that Pynchon uses these comparisons not just to reference mythography, but to parody it. Pynchon borrowed enough from Graves for V. to resemble the White Goddess, yet the novel's overall thrust is parodic, and myth is not exempt from Pynchon's ongoing allegations of absurdity, decline, and inanimacy. While Stencil pursues his mythic quest, a 'proliferation of V-shapes' mocks his search for connections and analogues,

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (London: Picador, 1975), p. 462.

<sup>10</sup> Graves, *White Goddess*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1995), p. 88.

even mocks metamorphosis. Instead of providing clarity, Stencil's search ultimately leaves him unclear even of V.'s gender and nature – person, thing, or place?<sup>12</sup> The White Goddess only walks through Pynchon's novel to be deconstructed piece by piece, as the Bad Priest of Malta demonstrates with her untimely end. Before she dies in her incarnation as the Bad Priest, however, the White Goddess appears in her most fearsome form: the queen of love and death, alongside one of the twentieth century's greatest composers.

Igor Stravinsky appears in disguise in 'V. in love,' the fourteenth chapter of *V*. The scene is Paris, July 1913, and the young prima ballerina Mélanie L'Heuremaudit<sup>13</sup> has been recalled from boarding school to star in a new ballet, *L'Enlèvement des Vierges Chinoises*. Impresario Itague, choreographer Satin and composer Porcepic introduce her to the company's mysterious patroness, a wealthy milliner who rapidly begins a torrid love affair with the much younger ballerina. The heat in Paris mounts as the curtain opens on the ballet's premiere, where the brutality of the music and the dance inspires a riot in the audience. In the final scene, Mélanie is impaled at the crotch on a pointed post, but, as she has forgotten to wear her protective belt, the dance kills her. The curtain closes on her corpse and V. disappears.

Fahy connected this incarnation of V. with Graves's White Goddess based on her apparel in one scene. He suggested the raiment of bright birds' feathers in which this V. first appears is a symbol of the goddess, although he was unable to make a similar claim for any of the other lavishly depicted apparel in which V. appears in this chapter. While this is again a tenuous clue, a firmer connection with the White Goddess lies in V.'s noted coldness towards the men she patronises, and in the undisputed connection between love and death which her presence invokes. This is Graves's one true poetic theme, "Life and Death... the question of what survives of the beloved," borrowed from Welsh poet Alun Lewis.<sup>14</sup> Seed notes that the chapter on V. in love is preceded by the chapter in which V. dies, further highlighting the great theme of love and death.<sup>15</sup>

The events of *Le Sacre du Printemps*'s premiere are well known and have been carefully documented, especially by Truman Bullard and Thomas Kelly.<sup>16</sup> David Cowart has demonstrated that Pynchon follows *Le Sacre*'s

---

<sup>12</sup> Seed, *Fictional Labyrinths*, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Mélanie's surname may be translated as 'time of the damned' or 'the cursed hour,' indicative of the untimely death which awaits her.

<sup>14</sup> Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Seed, *Fictional Labyrinths*, p. 107

<sup>16</sup> Truman Campbell Bullard, *The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky's Sacre du Printemps* (Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1984); Thomas Forrest Kelly,

premiere so closely that the end of chapter fourteen becomes a miniature *roman à clef*.<sup>17</sup> Cowart claims that Pynchon systematically alters “even the minor details” of the scene, including the month and venue of the performance.<sup>18</sup> Yet this is not just an alteration of minor details, but a deliberate fictionalisation of them.

Cowart alleges that “the ballet-riot in *V.*, while indubitably modeled on the *Rite of Spring* premiere, differs from the historic event in almost every detail.”<sup>19</sup> Cowart’s choice of words here is both excellent and misleading – it is only in the details, the absolute *minutiae*, in which Pynchon’s ballet differs from Stravinsky’s, details such as the date, the occasional word in a movement’s title, the real death of the prima ballerina as opposed to her death enacted. Other than that, even the imagery contained in the reviews of *The Rite of Spring* and ‘*V. in love*’ is the same, from the sticky heat pervading the atmosphere to the mechanistic choreography. It is probable that Pynchon maintained as much of the original event as possible without opening himself up to libel. Cowart highlights the likelihood of this by suggesting Pynchon may have changed Stravinsky’s name to Porcepic to avoid a lawsuit, as Pynchon’s character has a penchant for black masses which the devout Orthodox Christian composer would have abhorred.<sup>20</sup> Whereas in *V.* the character Herbert Stencil discovers the events of the ballet premiere from police records, what happened at Stravinsky’s premiere is available to us mostly from reviews. These show some interesting points of comparison with the scene which Pynchon sets. In ‘*V. in love*,’ the weather is consistently hot, in keeping with Linor’s review of the Stravinsky premiere – “the evening was hot in every sense of the term.”<sup>21</sup>

The audiences at both Pynchon’s fictional ballet and Stravinsky’s real one censured the performances before they even began. One reviewer of Stravinsky’s premiere noted that there was noise in the audience before the curtain lifted,<sup>22</sup> while in *V.* there was “loud argument in the audience” as the orchestra tuned up.<sup>23</sup> Pynchon’s description of a three-way wrangle – one faction catcalling and making “uncouth gestures,” another defending the work,

---

*First Nights: Five Musical Premieres* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Seed, *Fictional Labyrinths*, p. 106.

<sup>18</sup> Cowart, *Art of Allusion*, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> Cowart, *Art of Allusion*, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Cowart, *Art of Allusion*, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Pynchon, *V.*, p. 412.

and a third calling for silence – is also in keeping with records. Linor’s review of *Le Sacre* describes part of the audience disturbing the ballet with laughter, with protests and even with “chut!” [“Hush!”] while another group countered this with every bit as much racket and in terms equally out of place.<sup>24</sup>

Reviewer Gustave de Pawlowski claimed that Stravinsky’s music was “drowned out equally by its defenders and its adversaries.”<sup>25</sup>

While both Pynchon and Stravinsky’s ballets include the sacrifice of a virgin, the context differs. Stravinsky subtitled *Le Sacre du Printemps* ‘scenes from Pagan Russia’ and the virgin in question was sacrificed to the sun god Yarilo to secure a good harvest. Pynchon’s ballet sacrifices a Chinese virgin at the hands of invading Mongols. Cowart asserts that Pynchon changed the ballet’s subject matter as vernal proliferation was unsuited to his theme of Western decadence sliding into war. Instead he suggests that Pynchon’s choice of Chinese theme could perhaps be a nod to Stravinsky’s *Le Chant du Rossignol*.<sup>26</sup> This opera, based on the Hans Christian Anderson story ‘The Nightingale’ and set in China, features music for a mechanised bird, an automaton, in competition with a live nightingale. The cross-over between Pynchon’s Chinese maidens and Stravinsky’s Russian ones is highlighted by one reviewer of Stravinsky’s premiere, describing the dancing of “these Mongolian virgins with their braids stiffened with bear grease.”<sup>27</sup>

The juxtaposition of the natural versus the artificial as seen in *Le Chant du Rossignol* is also a feature of the staging of Porcepic’s ballet, where the living Mélanie is surrounded by automated handmaidens. Many of the words used in *Le Sacre*’s reviews echo the words Pynchon chose to describe his automated Chinese maidens, perhaps themselves echoes of Stravinsky’s puppet hero Petrushka or his mechanised nightingale. *Le Sacre*’s critics seemed obsessed with Vaclav Nijinsky’s choreography, and when they were not calling it barbaric, they described the dancers as “puppets on wires,” “mechanical” or “not simply electrified... but electrocuted,” moving with “puppet-like automatism”.<sup>28</sup> My favourite description: “little old wobblers who look like a handful of puppets shaken in little jerks by an unseen operator.”<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to the automated maidens is the sacrificial virgin’s closing dance. Mélanie’s final agonies do not seem that far adrift from the dancing of

---

<sup>24</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Cowart, *Art of Allusion*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>27</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, p. 170.

<sup>28</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, pp. 183, 19, 170, 195.

<sup>29</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, p. 196.

Marie Piltz, the ballerina who survived playing Stravinsky's Chosen One. One critic described her as performing

with a painful and tragic passion, and the studied *grotesquerie* of her movements does not impinge upon her gracefulness which is infinite.<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, Mélanie “knew the dance by heart, had perfect rhythm, she inspired the whole troupe.”<sup>31</sup> Piltz, the only member of Diaghaliiev's troupe almost universally acclaimed by critics whether they enjoyed *Le Sacre* or not, echoes Mélanie in her composure, her “marvellous precision in her interpretation of very complicated rhythms.”<sup>32</sup> All these parallels suggest that Pynchon did a significant amount of reading into *Le Sacre du Printemps*'s premiere, and most likely from the reviews themselves, as to my knowledge no compendium of them was published until Bullard's 1971 thesis.

*Le Sacre* and its composer provide a perfect allegory for Pynchon. With his own obsession with the inanimate, Stravinsky is an ideal composer to connect with V. As Daniel Albright notes;

The fables that most attracted Stravinsky were those that let him express... the objectivity of music – its construction of its own world of things. Therefore he liked puppets, liked machines, liked musical-instrument stage-props (such as the Goat's *guzla* in *Renard*, the Devil's violin in *The Soldier's Tale*, or, in *Orpheus*, the lyre that lives on, even after Orpheus' death). The stage-pieces continually work to stifle, suppress the human subject, as if musical instrument and tangible note-intervals, dangling down in their own private space, were glad to be rid of those who played them.<sup>33</sup>

Stravinsky's self-association with the inanimate and mechanical provides a perfect backdrop not only for the demise of V.'s only true love affair, but for the events which precede her period of complete obsession with artificiality. *Le Sacre* itself provides the perfect scenario to demonstrate these themes due to its plot of inevitable death; the Chosen One stumbles in a dance and henceforth is unable to avoid her fate. Albright says of *Le Sacre*;

Dancing is an act that pertains to death... Not only the girl of the sacrifice, but all the characters of the ballet are effaced, dehumanized, by the obliterating music of Stravinsky's score.<sup>34</sup>

Juxtapose this with Stravinsky's description of his original vision of the ballet:

---

<sup>30</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> Pynchon, *V.*, p. 413.

<sup>32</sup> Bullard, *First Performance*, vol. 2, pp. 97-98.

<sup>33</sup> Albright, *Stravinsky*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> Albright, *Stravinsky*, p. 15.

I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring.<sup>35</sup>

Now imagine Mélanie, dancing herself into a frenzy surrounded by the middle-aged men who have exploited her talents on stage. In her ballet, dancing does not merely pertain to death, it leads there directly. If Mélanie is a sacrifice – to the White Goddess, to the Sun God in Frazerian style, to the riotous Parisians thirsty for uproar on a hot July night – her death propitiates nothing. Europe is thrown into chaos by the First World War. The world winds closer down towards final entropy. The appropriateness of Pynchon's choice becomes more apparent the closer we investigate Stravinsky, and watch the American author turn the composer to his own ends; the destruction of our hope for answers, our joy in the quest, however violent, our belief in the salvific power of the White Goddess.<sup>36</sup>

Several critics including Seed have suggested that Mélanie's impalement refers to notions of Frazerian sacrifice in which wrens were impaled on the ends of poles. Seed connects Mélanie's grisly fate and the name of V.'s earlier incarnation Victoria Wren,<sup>37</sup> while Pynchon himself provides a connection between his work and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.<sup>38</sup> Certainly Frazer's description of the wren ritual seems to evoke Mélanie's impalement:

... the custom of annually killing the wren has prevailed widely both in this country and in France. In the Isle of Man down to the eighteenth century the custom was observed on Christmas Eve... On the twenty-fourth of December, towards evening, all the servants got a holiday; they did not go to bed all night, but rambled about till the bells rang in all the churches at midnight. When prayers were over,

---

<sup>35</sup> Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: M. & J. Steuer, 1958), p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Albright's investigation into Stravinsky reveals further possible parallels between the composer and Pynchon. For example, Albright claims that Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex* deconstructs language so it is nothing more than 'dead syllables.' Stravinsky chose Latin for his libretto because a "corpse language... does not resist further decomposition... Latin was even better than nonsense, in that its decline into meaninglessness, pure sonority, was exciting"; Albright, *Stravinsky*, p. 36. A reader of Pynchon will immediately think here of entropy, the winding down of civilisation, to which Stravinsky is party in his dissection of a classical language. Furthermore, in Albright's examination of Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*, he claims that Baba the Turk, obsessed by her collection of oddities, "cannot understand any human emotion except the lust for objects, the lust to become an object"; Albright, *Stravinsky*, p. 67. In this way, Baba is a parallel of V. and her constant quest to incorporate objects into her flesh.

<sup>37</sup> Seed, *Fictional Labyrinths*, p. 107.

<sup>38</sup> Pynchon, *V.*, p. 61.

they went to hunt the wren, and having found one of these birds they killed it and fastened it to the top of a long pole with its wings extended. Thus they carried it in processions to every house... When they had gone from house to house and collected all the money they could, they laid the wren on a bier and carried it in procession to the parish churchyard, where they made a grave and buried it “with the utmost solemnity, singing dirges over her in the Manks language, which they call her knell; after which Christmas begins.” The burial over, the company outside the churchyard formed a circle and danced to music.<sup>39</sup>

Frazer noted that the wren is called many things, including “the Lady of Heaven’s hen,” connecting it with that part of goddess worship overtaken by Marianism, as well as various titles based around kingship: “the hedge king,” “king of the birds,” *et cetera*.<sup>40</sup> Frazer claimed that the killing of a “worshipful animal” once annually with great solemnity, and the parading of its corpse from door to door, allowed everyone to receive a portion of the virtues emanating from the dying god substitute. Yet there is no virtue to Mélanie’s public death: the front row audience members’ dreams will be disturbed by years for her agonised face; V. becomes hysterical before disappearing from Paris; Porcepic, Itague and Satin must live for years with their memories of that night.<sup>41</sup> Is this another chance to parody myth? A brutal tradition meant to bring comfort, healing and protection to its witnesses and participants instead leaves them only with trauma. The sacrificed maiden is sacrificed in vain; there is no glory, only grotesquery.

Perhaps Pynchon did not create this brutal scene for purely parodic purposes. Joseph Fahy would be proud at how well it exemplifies one vital aspect of the White Goddess: the combined love and horror of the relationship between artist and muse. V. recognises it even if her young lover is oblivious:

As for V., she recognized – perhaps aware of her own progression toward inanimateness – the fetish of Mélanie and the fetish of herself to be one. As all inanimate objects, to one victimized by them, are alike. It was a variation on the Porpentine theme, the Tristan-and-Iseult theme, indeed, according to some, the single melody, banal and exasperating, of all Romanticism since the Middle Ages: “the act of love and the act of death are one.”<sup>42</sup>

Seed has a very particular interpretation of this part of *V*. He claims that:

---

<sup>39</sup> James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*, abridged edition (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 703-704.

<sup>40</sup> Frazer, *Golden Bough*, p. 703.

<sup>41</sup> Pynchon, *V*., p. 414.

<sup>42</sup> Pynchon, *V*., p. 410.

Pynchon here conflates Frazer and Stravinsky to produce a work which travesties both and which contains neither mythic meaning, solemnity nor transcendence. It simply breaks down into chaos... Mélanie dies in a multiple travesty of the sexual act, mythic elevation and romantic apotheosis. She dies in a grotesque *Liebested* where the act of death and the act of love have literally become one.<sup>43</sup>

This interpretation connects with Jackson's idea of fantasy as literature which expresses desire, either by manifesting it, or by expelling it. This is expression in the sense of "pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force."<sup>44</sup> By satirising and destroying the fantastic desire for transcendence and the mythic quest, also by literalising the violent love-death connection, Pynchon places his novel in the realm of Jackson's dialectic of fantasy as a genre which transgresses or subverts our desires, rather than providing us with a utopia. Pynchon uses Graves's archetype of the White Goddess to depict a reality in which all quests for ultimate truths are fruitless, desire and worship bring death and destruction, inspiration results in expiration, transcendence and utopianism are denied, and all things are caught in entropy, no matter how fiercely we desire otherwise.

Yet if Graves's heart's darling can be used in the service of entropy, what role does the art of Igor Stravinsky play? Cowart claims that, in Pynchon's work,

Musical references seem always to hint at the extra dimensions of experience that we miss because of the narrow range of frequencies – physical or spiritual – to which we are attuned. Thus Pynchon often refers to those... composers who have forced music out of old patterns and sought to go beyond fixed musical scales.<sup>45</sup>

Although Cowart specifies "serial and electronic" composers, he could just as well be talking about *Le Sacre du Printemps* as an example of music going beyond any fixed pattern and hinting at something beyond its audience's limitations. Certainly the limitations of *Le Sacre's* audience in Paris 1913 caused the ensuing riot. As we have seen, Pynchon uses a parody of Stravinsky's music to herald the destructive First World War; in his novel, the ballet represents a world hovering on the verge of chaos, the winding down of civilisation and humanity which the pervasive aroma of entropy suggests. Similarly, the presence of V., whom Stencil will never find but whom he continues to pursue on his fruitless quest, renders all equivalent mythical

---

<sup>43</sup> Seed, *Fictional Labyrinths*, p. 107.

<sup>44</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Cowart, *Art of Allusion*, p. 9.

quests devoid of meaning and of end. Our desires are expressed, purified, made redundant in this fantasy.

With all this talk of love and death, and of Mélanie's grisly fate, comes the final connection between V. and the White Goddess. The White Goddess is a cruel mistress and a lover of violence, and so, Cowart notes, is V.:

The riot that took place (at the *Rite of Spring*) would, in view of the affinity for such violence we have remarked in V., attract her – less moth than salamander – to its flame.<sup>46</sup>

Here then is the clearest reason for connecting Graves and Stravinsky; Pynchon mocks Graves's cruel goddess who requires death as her price for creativity by juxtaposing her with Stravinsky's ballet. Instead of heralding creation, for Pynchon this heralds death:

The *Rite of Spring*, considered a byword of musical distortion in 1913, seems made to order as an emblem of both violence-inspired and violence-inspiring music. The fact that the ballet celebrates the vernal quickening adds to the irony of Pynchon's travesty. With these sardonic variations on love-and-death, Pynchon introduces us to the war, in which every kind of love... would find its courted annihilation in a ten millionfold death.<sup>47</sup>

Stravinsky joined the ranks of misunderstood artists ever since his infamous claim that "music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all."<sup>48</sup> The composer is miscast yet again in Seed's previously cited claim that:

Pynchon conflates Frazer and Stravinsky to produce a work which travesties both and which contains neither mythic meaning, solemnity nor transcendence.<sup>49</sup>

Implicit in this statement is Seed's notion that Pynchon's exclusion of mythic meaning, solemnity and transcendence travesties Stravinsky's artistic intentions for his *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Yet is this really the case? Stravinsky robustly denied his ballet had any mythic meaning at all; it was an architectural creation, a piece of artisanship. *Le Sacre* certainly neither depicts nor inspires transcendence. So if Seed's theory about Pynchon's intentions in conflating Frazer and Stravinsky is faulty, where can we seek a correct hypothesis?

In fact, the scholar who pays careful attention to Stravinsky's personal aesthetic rather than romanticising him will find that no composer could be a better match for V., queen of the inanimate. Stravinsky preferred the sound of the pianola to a live performance on piano, due to the former's ability to

---

<sup>46</sup> Cowart, *Art of Allusion*, p. 74.

<sup>47</sup> Cowart, *Art of Allusion*, p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup> Seed, *Fictional Labyrinths*, p. 107.

reproduce the composer's intentions without a performer adding his or her own interpretation.<sup>50</sup> Daniel Albright argues that Stravinsky also revealed this particular aesthetic in his *Chant du Rossignol*, where;

the real nightingale's music is at once flashy and slightly sodden, colourful in a bleary, Rimsky-Korsakov sort of way; while the mechanical nightingale's music sounds like the dry, learned Stravinsky of years to come. *The Nightingale* erects a theatre of automata in order to show how smeared and faded the old operatic expressivity of the bird sounds by contrast.<sup>51</sup>

Pynchon's theatre of automata, more uncontrollable than the animate dancer (one of the handmaidens begins to malfunction during the performance), contrasts with Mélanie's perfection and reliability, even as she dies an agonising death. The Bad Priest of Malta is a further example of inanimacy's triumph over the animate. This is V.'s final incarnation, the one in which she meets her death on Malta at the hands of a pack of unruly children, before a fascinated Fausto Maijstral. V. is recognisable in the Bad Priest by the objects attached to her: a star sapphire in her navel, the ivory comb, a glass eye with an iris shaped like a clock. These things attend V. in several of her earlier incarnations. Yet she has since added to their ranks a long, white wig, artificial feet, false teeth. Fausto wonders what else will be revealed: "intestines of parti-coloured silk, gay balloon-lungs, a rococo heart."<sup>52</sup> Albright, speaking of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, said, "The most vital spirits are those that incarnate themselves in things."<sup>53</sup> Thus is V.; Pynchon's anti-heroine adds more objects to her body as she re-incarnates, in a constant process of reinvention towards inanimacy.

This paper has explored a range of possibilities as to why Pynchon included Paris in 1913 in *V.*, and the significance of V.'s resemblance to Graves's White Goddess. The moment *Le Sacre* premiered is widely regarded as one at which art in the Western world moved forward. Does Pynchon's inclusion of a *roman à clef* from this time signify that he thought *V.* would have the same effect? Or did Pynchon theorise that in order for such a moment to happen, a V. figure is required? In truth, probably neither of these things. There is a reasonable chance that Pynchon is merely pointing out the futility of a true moment of *Liebestod*. I cannot imagine that Porcepic's infamous ballet would ever be revived after impaling a teenage ballerina, and thus the moment of great artistic integrity, the consummation of the artistic relationship, falls

---

<sup>50</sup> Albright, *Stravinsky*, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> Albright, *Stravinsky*, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> Pynchon, *V.*, p. 343.

<sup>53</sup> Albright, *Stravinsky*, p. 11.

into predictable entropy – loss of the work, loss of the lover, chaos. If we could know more about Pynchon, we could do as so many Gravesian scholars have done, and ask what Pynchon’s fantasy reveals about himself. Who was Pynchon’s personal muse, stalking through his life as V. does through his first novel? Yet without background detail on Pynchon’s life, we cannot do what we so love to do for Robert Graves; we cannot read his own life into his stories and claim we have found the key to both the man and his art. Instead, as Herbert Stencil learns, we must come to learn that there is no key, although the quest is eternal. ‘V. in love’ is the climax of Pynchon’s first novel, where Graves and Stravinsky combine to form part of the complex web of cultural allusion through which Pynchon desecrates our idols as deftly as Stravinsky once did, although with fewer ripples through history.