

## RISE OF THE LIVING DEAD IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *VINELAND*<sup>1</sup>

FRANCISCO COLLADO-RODRÍGUEZ  
University of Zaragoza  
fcollado@unizar.es

**ABSTRACT.** *Oedipa Maas's anti-categorical revelation that middles should not be excluded in Pynchon's **The Crying of Lot 49** is understood by its author in more debatable terms two decades later, once it is clear that the 1960s struggles for revolution have come to a stop. In 1990 the literary space of **Vineland** is revealed as a failed refuge where Pynchon ironizes on the notion of balance by portraying a living dead icon represented by the **Thanatoids**. As predicted in **The Crying of Lot 49**, all sorts of simulacra have taken over 1980s California to propitiate a coming back to conservative ideology. In **Vineland**, the new icon is cunningly associated to magical realism, a hybrid mode that points to the writer's concern with anti-categorical middles but also with the ultimate impossibility to fulfill Oedipa's alleged revelation. Thus, the iconic living dead become a bleak intratextual response to the purportedly optimistic social views of Pynchon's second novel.*

*Keywords:* Categorical thinking, excluded middles, Pynchon, *Vineland*, living dead, **Thanatoids**.

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## LA ECLOSIÓN DE LOS MUERTOS VIVIENTES EN *VINELAND*, DE THOMAS PYNCHON

**RESUMEN.** *Este artículo ofrece una revisión de la viabilidad que la revelación contra el pensamiento categórico que recibe Oedipa Maas en la segunda novela de Pynchon adquiere en Vineland. Tras dos décadas, la búsqueda del medio excluido se adivina ya como muy problemática en un contexto en el que las revoluciones sociales de los años sesenta han sido derrotadas. Para cuestionar tal viabilidad Pynchon ironiza en Vineland sobre la noción de equilibrio a través del popular icono de los muertos vivientes (los Thanatoids). A la vez corrobora que, como predijo en su segunda novela, el simulacro ha invadido la California de los años ochenta, propiciando la vuelta de ideologías conservadoras. Su nuevo icono se complementa con el uso del realismo mágico, potenciando aún más las dudas sobre la posibilidad de alcanzar la revelación anti-categorica. Así, los muertos vivientes se convierten en un icono intratextual que pone en duda las esperanzas de cambio social existentes en la segunda novela de Pynchon.*

*Palabras clave:* pensamiento categórico, medio excluido, Pynchon, *Vineland*, muertos vivientes, *Thanatoids*.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: CALIFORNIA, DREAMING AND THE SIMULACRUM

In 1990, *Vineland* recaptures some relevant motifs that Pynchon had used reiteratively in his first three novels. One of the central ideas in the author's universe had been, so far, to warn readers about the proclivity of Western societies to understand life in binary terms, an impulse or necessity that he had already metaphorized in different fields of knowledge, basically physics, religion and information. These fields were the three main pillars sustaining the impressive architecture of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), the difficult novella he published while still writing his magna opera *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), also built in similar but more complex terms. However, while his first three books represented a continued effort to denounce and dismantle the mechanisms of our binary approach to life by resorting, among others, to the modernist (and mythic) strategy of mixing opposite elements, his fourth novel *Vineland* offers his first paradoxical attempt to question the ultimate validity of the integrating concept which, at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa finally understood as revelatory answer for her plight.

*Vineland* is Pynchon's second novel set entirely in California, a setting that some critics connect to an authorial conceited optimism in the face of historical events (see Miller 2013: 225-227), but it is also the first book in which the

iconography of the living dead becomes a central motif in the development of the story. This paper evaluates some of the reasons which connect both issues in the writer's fictional world, traditionally understood by critics as the grounds of a highly metaphoric interpretation of American life and history, of its democratic project, and of the efforts of unknown rulers to impede the flourishing of real democracy and liberty in the United States (Coward 2011: 5-23).

*Vineland* shares many things with the writer's first California novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. But it also offers a distanced critical recapitulation of how things stand two decades after the social struggles of the 1960s shattered the conservative structures that ruled the country at the time. However, if *The Crying of Lot 49* was written at a moment in which attempts at social revolution were still going on and its results were not yet clear, as Schaub contends (2008: 31; see also Coward 2011: 134), in his fourth novel the writer's temporal proximity to the period and events related in the story does not appear any longer. *Vineland* offers a clear indication of Pynchon's detachment from the tense of his story: at the moment the novel was released the 1960s struggle to guarantee equal rights and a real democratic society had come to a stop and *Vineland* offers a reflection, nostalgically sad while exposing the American counter-subversive tradition (Willman 2010), of those events from different narrative tenses located in the 1970s and early 1980s. It should be added that Pynchon's detached reflections on the conservative period that crushed down many of the expectations of the counterculture and the Civil Rights Movement are offered along a story line that is, from a narratological viewpoint, rather complex. There is an abundance of temporal jumps, stories framed within the main story, a multiplicity of characters whose focalization leads to the telling of new stories, dreams reported with clear beginnings but no clear ends and, in short, an overall condition of textual uncertainty. Apart from being a frequent strategy in postmodernist fiction, in Pynchon's fourth novel textual uncertainty also combines, as happened in *The Crying of Lot 49*, with the author's consistent use of themes and techniques that impede a superficial or one-sided categorical understanding of his stories. Accordingly, *Vineland* also brings to mind echoes from Jung's notion of *coincidentia oppositorum*, a principle strongly associated to the Jewish Kabbala (Drob 2000), to Derrida's denunciation of phonocentrism (1967) and, as explicitly informed in the novel, to the oriental notion of karma (see Rando 2014), most of them strategies that also resemble the comprised but complex literary architecture of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Even if frequently underrated by Pynchonian criticism, the writer's use of Jung's theories on mythic integration is gradually becoming recognized as an important source in the construction of his literary universe (from Coward 1980: 99, 124, to Collado-Rodriguez 2015). In *Symbols of Transformation*, the influential Swiss psychiatrist affirms that "The Self, as a symbol of wholeness, is a

coincidentia oppositorum, and therefore contains light and darkness simultaneously” (Jung 1968, vol. 5: 576), an integrative notion that implicitly connects with Oedipa Maas’s famous epiphany in the last pages of *The Crying of Lot 49*, when she finally realizes that “excluded middles were bad shit” (125). Thus, Pynchon’s Oedipa confronts the same Western categorical propensity to understand life in binary terms that Derrida was to denounce as responsible for linguistic and social hierarchies a few months later, in *De la grammatologie* (1967). Oedipa refuses to accept Aristotle’s Law of the Excluded Middle in her realization that such pervasive binary Law is at the core of violence and human conflicts (see Palmieri 1987: 985-996).

However, if in 1966 Oedipa Maas had become aware of the negative effects that categorical thinking represented for human happiness and proclaimed the necessity of the middle or coincidentia oppositorum, in 1990, Thomas Pynchon already questions the validity of some “middles” which, although not being excluded from his pages, do not seem to bring about any enjoyment for his protagonists. *Vineland* becomes Pynchon’s first novel to show his disenchantment with Oedipa’s epiphanic answer, which demanded the incorporation of the traditionally excluded middle. As the following pages attempt to show, the writer now warns readers that even notions that apparently celebrate anti-categorical thinking and hybridity may already be used by a system that, although frequently ruled by an unknown “They” in previous Pynchonian works, in this fourth novel is openly associated to President Reagan and the New Right. In this sense, the novel’s sharp relish on popular iconicity becomes a device that seeks to denounce the assumption that the Republican party effectively used the mass media and political paranoia to take ideological control of the country along the 1970s and 1980s (see Willman 2010: 198-199). In the 1980s, California – the land that symbolizes the ultimate American Dream – has already fallen in the grips of the image, in what Baudrillard associates to the final stage of simulation (1995: 6). With the flow of ideological information being already saturated by the mass media, and TV as the ultimate addiction to take control of the human being, the traditional frontiers between fantasy and reality disappear for the total benefit of the first term in the binary; delusive fantasy takes control of human perception. From beginning to end, the world depicted in Pynchon’s fourth novel is mediated by a multiplicity of mainstream films and popular TV programs that addicted characters believe to be the authentic reality, and by the shopping mall as the new center of culture and social life (see Cowart 1990: 71; Mathijs 2001: 68). Irreversibly, TV and other mass media have replaced religion (still one of the three basic paradigms in *The Crying of Lot 49*) as the new opium of the people. In order to build his denunciation of both the new (simulated) reality and the control exerted through it by the conservative American Government (cf. Gramsci 1985: 389-390),

Pynchon resorts, among other devices, to the creation of the living dead. In *Vineland*, the horror creature becomes an ironic and grotesque critical “middle” that the writer uses as reiterative symbol also in later novels. However, although located in a non-excluded middle between life and death, the living dead icon does not bring with it any expectations of a better future but the ironic realization that middles in discourse can also become an easy prey for the status quo when not a result of its neoliberal policies.

## 2. THE THANATOIDS: A QUEST FOR KARMA UNDER THE RULE OF THE SIMULACRUM

In *Vineland*, to convey his sociopolitical evaluation of the country Pynchon develops a story where the Eastern notion of karma, so popular among young people since the 1950s, becomes one of its central symbols. Old crimes demand the restoration of ethical grounds in a process of karmic adjustment, which becomes the specialty of two of the main protagonists in the book, female martial artist DL and her earlier victimized detective boyfriend Takeshi. Although the main storyline in *Vineland* centers on a favorite topic in Pynchon’s universe – the quest for the missing mother – it is along DL and Takeshi’s secondary storyline that Pynchon’s concern with middles and balance takes shape.

These two characters’ adventure unfolds when the female ninja realizes that she has made a mistake which brings with it a clear unbalance in her life: she has erroneously applied the deadly technique of the Vibrating Palm to Takeshi, mistaking him for the arch-villain in the novel, Federal Attorney Brock Vond. An amendment is needed to restore Takeshi’s health and following the realization of her mistake DL becomes his protective companion. Eventually the couple sets up a firm of “karmic adjustment” (1990: 172), one more obvious – and comic – indication of the writer’s concern about the categorical issue which, in addition, takes readers to a magical-realist geography of narrative middle grounds where fantasy, exaggeration, and realist episodes belong to the same ontological level (see Zamora 1989: 25-75; cf. Bowers 2004: 20-65, and Manzananas & Benito 2002: 125-159). The couple settles in Vineland, a little county in California that, thanks to Pynchon’s intertextual strategies, mixes in its name echoes that come both from the legendary landing of Red Erik and from the Californian grapes turned sour of Steinbeck’s masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, by drawing on an

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<sup>2</sup> It should be pointed out that, although the California setting has been invented by Pynchon, Vineland is also the name of an actual county in New Jersey, which symbolically extends the book’s implications to encompass the whole USA.

imaginary cartography, Vineland is defined by the narrator as a “Harbor of Refuge” (316). In effect, it is an actual refuge because it serves as a safe harbor from storms but it also offers emotional protection for different generations of dissenting political voices. However, its condition of political shelter is in the process of changing by the early 1980s, following the invasion of the rapacious federal forces sent by President Reagan and the New Right, at the time involved in a neoliberal crusade against the remaining reds and hippies who had struggled for equal rights in the 1960s – at the moment of Oedipa’s adventure. It is in this new context, in what remains of the epitomic American Promised Land, that DL and Takeshi will help to reestablish karmic balance to the Thanatoids, a peculiar breed of living dead whose contradictory characteristics are already an indication that middles are not necessarily good. Interestingly, the Thanatoids do not appear till the story has come to its physical middle in the book. Before that, readers have known from *Prairie* – the daughter questing for her missing mother, Frenesi Gates – that the past was “the zombie at her back” (71), an expression which seems to condense the young girl’s preoccupation for her missing mother and her increasing suspicion that Frenesi, despite her liberal beliefs and social compromise, was the Federal Attorney’s treacherous collaborator and even lover. Thus, the first occasion in which a living dead creature – this time a zombie – is mentioned in the book, it is somehow associated to one of the most reiterative traits of the creature in its representations in popular culture: usually zombies are aggressive; they bite, as your past may also bite you in a metaphoric but insistent way. Besides, before the Thanatoids appear in the story, the narrator also puts the emphasis on the categorical correlation supposedly existing between the binary life/death and the digits one and zero. Intratextual echoes coming from Oedipa Maas’s incident with the hairspray can in the bathroom (*Lot 49*: 23–24), can be heard in *Vineland* when the narrator informs his readers that Frenesi Gates is also trapped in categorical thinking. As happened to Oedipa, Frenesi has drawn the connection between religion and technology in her interpretation of the powerful binary life/death:

We are digits in God’s computer, she not so much thought as hummed to herself to sort of a standard gospel tune. And the only thing we’re good for, to be dead or to be living, is the only thing He sees. What we cry, what we contend for, in our world of toil and blood, it all lies beneath the notice of the hacker we call God. (1990: 91, emphasis added)

However, despite Frenesi’s gloomy (and posthuman) understanding of life and death, the story progresses to contradict her categorical interpretation of it: there is also a middle in between life and death, one and zero: the Thanatoids.

They are beings that, as anticipated by Prairie's affection for a computer machine (1990: 115), stand in between life and death, one and zero... provided there is a TV set nearby.

Although, as stated above, the first reference in the book to a living dead being is to Prairie's metaphor of her past as a (biting) zombie, it does not mean that all creatures which stand in between worlds in popular representations of the living dead are necessarily aggressive. In effect, Todd Platts, by quoting Dendle's path-breaking *Encyclopedia* on zombies, remarks on an important distinction affecting this wretched creature:

Whereas slow zombies delve into issues of "social control, individual self-direction, and conformity" and the cause of zombification is often mysterious or supernatural, fast zombies represent "uncontrollable, impersonal, insatiable rage" where "the individual is reduced to unchecked desire for consumption and domination" and the cause of zombification is often viral or biochemical. (2015: 18)

Pynchon's Thanatoids unquestionably fall into the first group, as they are slow beings, usually targets of living people's aggressive feats, and ghostly entities that are totally exposed to the most pervasive instrument of mass control of the last decades: TV. Social conformity is one of their most distinctive marks.

The first Thanatoid to appear in the pages of *Vineland* is Ortho Bob Dulang, a hitchhiker who introduces himself to DL and Takeshi hoping to taste some spareribs even if, as he reveals, "food within the Thanatoid community never bein' that big a priority" (1990: 170). Ortho Bob also remarks that Thanatoid is short for "Thanatoid personality" and, in a new Pynchonian paradox, he adds that "'Thanatoid' means 'like death, only different'" (170). Takeshi tells DL that this strange breed of the living dead live in their own villages in houses which are basically modular and under-furnished, and that they do not own many things, a characteristic that contrasts with the average middle-class American family of the time, immersed in a wave of hyper-consumerism which, as mentioned above, Pynchon also denounces in the book by resorting to the reiterative spatial symbol of the shopping mall. However, within his complex and perplexing analysis of American society, the invisible author anticipates in this first description of the Thanatoids what seems to be the main reason for the conformist breeding of this new passive species: TV, the most powerful mass medium existing in the 1980s. If in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as portrayed in Pynchon's 2013 novel *Bleeding Edge*, computers, cellular phones, and the Internet are responsible for the new breed of posthuman beings who, in this new technological era, become easily controlled by the system, by the 1980s TV has already become the big

provider of a simulated reality where everything is framed and reframed in a multiplicity of movies and programs that impede any possible approach to the reality beyond the simulacrum. In *Vineland*, Pynchon centers his political attention on the ways Reaganomics allegedly exerted a tight control on the lives of American citizens: by means of attracting and herding consumers to shopping malls, and developing intense political surveillance with the help of TV and film. His new breed of living dead cannot escape from the addictive technological spell, in a powerful suggestion that perhaps the whole country is already exposed to share their Thanatoid condition. In effect, Ortho Bob defines his species as people who “watch a lot of Tube” (170), a device whose cathode rays seem to be one of the causes responsible for their grotesque and passive condition but which also emulates the new posthuman theology in which God, as perceived by Frenesi, is a computer-hacker. Grotesquely, the narrator informs readers,

[W]hile *waiting for the data* necessary to pursue their needs and aims among the still-living, Thanatoids spent at least part of every waking hour with an eye on the Tube. “There’ll never be a Thanatoid sitcom”, Ortho Bob confidently predicted, “‘cause all they could show’d be scenes of Thanatoid watchin’ the Tube!” (170-171; emphasis added)

However, the real aim of this breed of stupefied living dead is not to watch TV eternally but something apparently more worrying: to “advance into the condition of death” (171). By contrasting early Pynchonian sources, we may imply that from a mythic perspective, as happened to bleeding King Arthur in the legends of the Grail and to Eliot’s narrator in *The Waste Land*, the Thanatoids are stuck in between life and death, at the symbolic moment of twilight, in an attempt to progress towards a liberating total death, which is here impeded by reasons of sociopolitical imbalance. Within the parameters of a Jungian or Eliotian mythic understanding of life, then, the stoppage of the cyclical movement represents a big problem because death is a necessary condition to reach a new life (see Frazer 1955: 308-376).

The Thanatoids cannot sleep and therefore they cannot awake either. Clearly, their condition resembles, as happens to the novel’s non-linear narrative structure, the middle grounds that thematically also characterize the story’s magical-realist orientation, but with no promise of ultimate mythic revelation. As happened to García Márquez’s Macondo characters in *Cien años de soledad* (1967), the Thanatoids are affected by insomnia, “la enfermedad del sueño”. In addition, the Thanatoids’ lack of living energy reinforces another well-known Pynchonian concern, with its attached symbolism, which he started to deploy in his early short stories: the notion of entropy. From the perspective provided by thermodynamics,

this Pynchonian breed of living dead are stagnant beings, trapped in the grips of entropy in a condition of residual activity that is taking them to the absolute thanatic zero. In this sense, even if they are located in the middle between life and death and still believe that their condition will be solved when they find the adequate balance – the karmic adjustment the Thanatoids request from DL and Takashi – such “balance” would only advance them paradoxically into the final entropic condition of death. In fact, for the couple of karmic adjusters the wretched creatures are already ghosts (1990: 173) even if they manifest as if they were alive; they have their own village, by Shade Creek, and seem to integrate smoothly in the multiracial geography of the fictional Californian county.

### 3. REASONS FOR THE THANATOID IMBALANCE: THE DOUBLE TRAUMATIC GASH IN 1980s USA

Although briefly, Pynchon provides readers with some clues to understand the Thanatoids as a metaphoric representation of two of the most important American collective traumas of the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Drezner 825-826). Again, it is Ortho Bob's condition that provides the first hint to evaluate the metaphoric meaning of the living dead creatures:

Ortho Bob came lurching over, looking as awful as the night he must have spent, wanting to talk some more about his case. He had been damaged in Vietnam, in more than one way, from the list of which he always carefully—though if might only have been superstitiously—excluded death [...] “Fuck the money, rilly”, Ortho Bob had stipulated, “just get me some revenge”. (174)

Thus, marking another paradoxical moment in the story, Thanatoids who were Vietnam veterans invoke traditional Western revenge to recuperate their Eastern karmic balance. In addition, at certain moments revenge is invoked by the main protagonists of the story, including the arch-villain Brock Vond, as textual warning that a deep social resentment has taken over the role of justice. Frenesi's Aunt Claire, “credited in the family with paranormal abilities” (320), remembers how her niece had already perceived years ago the way Vineland landscape was changing: “It was those Thanatoids, of course”, Claire said, “they were just beginning to move into the county then, and if it scared her at all, being up there amid so much human unhappiness, why, she never mentioned it” (320). In the same page the narrator confirms that since the end of the Vietnam War “the Thanatoid population had been growing steeply” in the area and that – authorial irony is back again – they built a shopping and residential complex in what now was the Thanatoid Village of Shade Creek. Pynchon's ironic description mixes,

thus, the traumatic effects that the US defeat in Vietnam had on the American collective imaginary, the biased official answers given to justify the military failure and erase the role of the Vietnamese as victims of the war, and the way Vietnam veterans were treated when they returned home (see Storey 2012: 176-183). Whether all Thanatoids have survived the war or been actually killed in it remains an undecidable factor in the novel, but the collective trauma of Vietnam emerges in this living dead icon as the Freudian return of the national repressed and as one of the two main unresolved social concerns of Pynchon's historical approach.

Vineland has become a refuge for those worthless creatures, actual casualties or ghostly Vietnam veterans who do not fit in the country's self-created image of brave defenders of democracy and freedom (cf. Willman 2010: 200-203). Furthermore, along with the Thanatoids, the fictional county has also offered a shelter, even if only a provisional one, to a second group of marginalized and defeated Americans, excluded from the wealth and self-complacent image of the country and even deprived from their own democratic rights. Intratextually, they fit in the social margins still remaining from Oedipa's realization of the categorical condition of American society twenty years earlier (*Lot 49*: 86-91). They belong to different generations of Americans. The oldest one is represented by the American "reds" who fought for social liberties in the 1930s. Their children became the generation prosecuted by McCarthy in the post-war period. They were followed by the generation who, in the 1960s, demanded equal civil rights for everybody. Finally, Pynchon focuses his political attention on the generation of the 1970s, represented by Prairie, who despite her short age eventually feels that the cause of their social failure, generation after generation, might reside in their own incapacity to resist the lure of official totalitarian discourse represented by people like Vond. In a sense, all these generations of politically defeated American citizens are also a class of political living dead, even if by the end of the story something – but not much – stirs in them.

The story also features another type of Thanatoid creature, more explicitly associated to violent political repression and represented by somebody actually murdered for political reasons: Weed Atman, a professor connected to the counterculture – a character who recalls the historical figure of Tom Leary (Leonard 1990: 281). After being killed and turned into a Thanatoid, Atman is described by the narrator as a creature that "rated consistently low on most scales, including those that measured dedication and community spirit" (218). When still a living being, the narrator also describes him as opportunistic and a slave to passions. He had a relationship with Frenesi before he was killed in a plot devised by Brock Vond as part of his tactics to put an end to social democratic aspirations

in California. Then, a surprisingly treacherous Frenesi cooperated with Vond to bring about Alman's tragic end, which condemned him to wander the county as a Thanatoid. But, what could have induced Frenesi to fall in Vond's arms and commit such a dreadful act of treason to her own and her family's beliefs?

It is not easy to understand the authorial logic behind the reasons why Frenesi Gates was addicted to official power and uniforms, became attracted to Brock Vond, and cooperated in Atman's death. However, some clarification is at hand if we evaluate the events in the light of the writer's earlier mythology and the role female protagonists frequently play in it. As suggested earlier, the Pynchonian living dead also have their roots in the second law of thermodynamics, which connects them to the forces of History.

#### 4. THE MANIFESTATION OF ENERGY AFTER THE 1960s: FRENESI GATES AND THE END OF POLITICAL INNOCENCE

A comparison of the roles of Oedipa Maas and Frenesi Gates may shed some extra light on the interpretation of the iconography of the living dead in *Vineland*. Such comparison requires a revision of the influence that some chapters of *The Education of Henry Adams* have in Pynchon's metaphoric understanding of American society and history.

As pointed out by early critics (in particular by Tony Tanner) and as the writer himself has indirectly acknowledged in the Introduction to his collection of stories *Slow Learner* (1984: 13), from his literary beginnings the invisible author has had as one of his main literary targets the evaluation of American society following the intertextual lead provided by American historian Henry Adams in his *Education*. References to the manifestation of social energy embodied as a mysterious character denominated "Lady V." are very recurrent in Pynchon's early mythology (especially in one of his short stories and in the novels *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*) till his female protagonist starts to go one way and the capitalized "V." is applied metaphorically to other names and places that represent the symbolic condition of social energy. In effect, Henry Adams is the first American scholar who, in his autobiographical *Education*, starts to ponder about the impact the thermodynamic Law of Entropy might have for the understanding of American society. Interestingly, he conceives of society as a playground for forces in terms of energy or its lack, transposing into his historical analysis of society the laws that physicists had deployed for the study of thermodynamic systems in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is not difficult to find the intertextual connection existing between the historian's concern to integrate entropy in his dynamic conception of history and the quest for a mysterious V. in Pynchon's early fiction. Such connection has a key passage

in Chapter XXV of Adams's *Education*, "The Dynamo and the Virgin". While pondering about the impressive electric power generated by the new dynamos exhibited at the Paris Great Exposition of 1900, the historian concludes that the machines are "as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross" (857). Thus, Adams builds a social metaphor that Pynchon will centralize from his first to his latest novel so far. In the metaphor, the historian draws a connection between the creative social force represented in the sexual power that he associates to Venus in ancient times and the spiritual power that he associates to the Virgin in medieval times; such force becomes actualized or mutates into the electric power generated by the dynamos the historian sees at the Exposition. How the sexual and spiritual energy represented in Venus and the Virgin could become physical and electric is something that remains unclear in the American historian's autobiography. However, he foresees clearly the nature of his task ahead, "he would risk translating rays into faith":

Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man's activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done; the historian's business was to follow the track of the energy; to find where it came from and where it went to; its complex source and shifting channels; its values, equivalents, conversions. (859)

With this indication in mind, it is not farfetched to understand the ambiguous figure of the Lady V. – that features in "Under the Rose", *V.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* – as the incarnated manifestation of the Adamsian "track of [social] energy" along a period that extends from the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the Second World War (see Tanner 1982). Progressively turned into an evil doer and eventually associated to the dangerous radioactive power that Adams also perceived as the newest manifestation of energy in his visit to the Paris Exposition, the Lady V. is eventually destroyed by her own faction in Pynchon's encyclopedic third novel. But by then, this female manifestation of Adamsian social energy had also appeared in the writer's second novel as Republican housewife Oedipa Maas, a personage of the 1960s cunningly associated by the narrator to Venus and the Virgin in a number of occasions (*Lot 49*: 23, 40-41, 87, 128). However, morally distant from her unethical predecessor the Lady V., Oedipa progresses along an epic internal journey that takes her, as mentioned earlier in this paper, to understand the necessity to fight back categorical thinking and to reinstate the importance of the balancing social middle.

Thus, in consonance with her revolutionary times, Oedipa Maas plays the role of a former Republican voter capable of moving from the right to the political left to demand a social middle space once she has realized the existence of the marginalized minorities of American society. Symbolically, she waits till the last page of the little book for the release of new social energy, the spirit of the 1960s represented in the virginal birth of a new America which, however, twenty years later in the new V. novel – the letter this time associated to the spatial metaphor of Vineland – never comes to be fulfilled.

As already mentioned, Oedipa is also the first main character devised by Thomas Pynchon who, following Adams's impulse to mix different fields of knowledge, develops a connection between religion and digital technology in the relevant incident of the hair spray can in the bathroom – “The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel” (*Lot 49: 24*). In *Vineland*, an analogous association between categorical ways to understand religion and science – the deity and computer binary technology – is ascribed to two of its female protagonists, Frenesi and her daughter Prairie. Therefore, in Pynchon's look back to evaluate the social effects of the 1960s, Adams's V. symbol for social energy is again associated to the female, even if alphabetical Vs have been displaced this time to the two main political contenders: Vineland, the place which is still a refuge for the underprivileged, and the arch-enemy Brock Vond, who epitomizes the totalitarian repression of Reagan's America. Thus, in Pynchon's symbolic split of social forces, the latter is a political corruptor of democracy, that is to say, of free-flowing social energy. Meanwhile, Vineland, the other symbol of the condition of social energy, represents the space of liberty. It is a refuge against the status quo, although it seems on the verge of being lost forever, as suggested by the growing number of Thanatoids. Frenesi's treacherous behavior, resulting in Alman's murder, symbolically marks Pynchon's understanding that the 1960s social attempts at revolution have come to an end: Weed Alman is now only a ghost, a pathetic Thanatoid as representation of an epoch whose attempts at changing the world failed. As such, the living dead icon becomes only a grotesque symbol of the politically repressed now returned. However, even as symbol, the icon has become trapped by TV commodified power in a society of simulations and mass culture where the old values can only be remembered nostalgically by a few, if at all.

Thus, in Pynchon's *Vineland* the collective trauma experienced after the defeat in the Vietnam War – another entropic manifestation of V. – and the political repression exerted against the people who intended to create a better and fairer

society in the 1960s lead only to the symbolic centralization of a new race of passive living dead. The Thanatoids are victims but also conformist participants in the New Right American society of the 1980s, a space where reality has finally vanished to be replaced only by simulated addictive representations controlled by the status quo. The Adamsian social energy symbolized in the female is, like the Jungian anima, both protective mother and dangerous nixie, virgin and siren alike, a manifestation of *coincidentia oppositorum* that can only alternate her two faces according to circumstances<sup>3</sup>. If the Lady V. ended up being the evil Bad Priest in the 1940s, Oedipa Maas recuperated the spiritual force of American democracy in the 1960s. However, only a few years later, in the 1970s, Frenesi gave up her dissenting political energy and offered herself to the prototypical servant of the status quo, a hyper-villain marked by the new V. of the counter-subversive New Right. Not surprisingly, a politically disillusioned Pynchon chose to update his mythology by giving a centralized role to the new breed of the living dead as grotesque representatives of a stagnant, entropic society.

In a typically ambiguous Pynchonian ending, evil seems to come to an end when Vond's helicopter crashes and he is taken to the magical-realist country of the dead. Besides, Prairie meets her mother, and even her lost dog Desmond reappears, apparently to wake her up from a dream. Following the annual reunion of the left-winged Beckers and Traverses, even the Thanatoids of Shade Creek are able to wake up because "the entire [Thanatoid] population actually slept the night before" (1990: 324). However, in his failed attempt to kidnap Prairie, Vond has told Frenesi's daughter (the youngest symbolic embodiment of Adamsian energy) that he is her real father, a bleak possibility that Prairie had already counted for. Her last words in the novel become an invocation to her alleged father that resounds again with treachery and suggests that the Thanatoid colony will grow inescapably bigger, trapping in it also the young protagonist and perhaps all America: "'It's OK, rilly,' Prairie invokes. 'Come on, come in. I don't care. Take me anyplace you want'" (384). Prairie's mother, Frenesi Gates, stood symbolically in the middle of the political crossroad of the 1970s. However, despite her commitment to produce film documentaries of the still-going fights for social liberties, she was coopted into the system by way of Vond. In the 1980s, her (and Vond's?) child Prairie expects and passively accepts a similar future of assimilation into conservative and media-controlled America. The entropic living dead have come to stay in Pynchon's universe.

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<sup>3</sup> "To the men of antiquity the anima appeared as a goddess or a witch, while for medieval man the goddess was replaced by the Queen of Heaven and Mother Church" (Jung 1968, vol. 9.1: 29).

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