The Role of Conspiracy in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*

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**Introduction**

Reading Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*, the reader never fails to notice the impact of conspiracy in the novel since there are the references to conspiracy, especially Herbert Stencil’s attachment to the connection between *V.* and a large-scale conspiracy. Though there are a plenty of hints, what the conspiracy really is, or even whether it really exists is kept mysterious. Therefore, the reader tries to figure out what the conspiracy is. While reading this novel that way, the reader integrates it with Stencil’s conspiracy paranoia as key. Stencil also unites fragmented things with *V.*’s conspiracy as key. Moreover, since both the reader and Stencil do the same thing, integrating fragmented things by figuring out conspiracy, conspiracy juxtaposes the reader and Stencil. In *V.*, conspiracy plays the role in integrating or uniting in many senses.

**Part 1**

In *V.*, conspiracy does not reveal itself clearly. What is certain is that Herbert Stencil is obsessed by conspiracy; he believes or at least tries to believe in a grand conspiracy which is in progress on a global scale. And he firmly believes that the conspiracy is closely connected with *V.*. What prompts Stencil to travel in quest for *V.* is a passage of his father’s journal: “There is more behind and inside *V.* than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report” (49). His search for *V.* is a *search for search’s sake*, and Stencil tries to keep his eyes away from the nature of his quest, while becoming vaguely aware, as follows:

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-onsciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid. (50-51)
The search for V. has become his identity: “Stencil had all the identities he could cope with conveniently right at the moment: he was quite purely He Who Looks for V.” (239).

In Chapter 7, all of a sudden, it is mentioned that in Stencil’s idea, V. has something to do with the grand conspiracy. The omniscient narrator says:

He had discovered, however, what was pertinent to his purpose: that she’d been connected, though perhaps only tangentially, with one of those grand conspiracies or foretastes of Armageddon which seemed to have captivated all diplomatic sensibilities in the years preceding the Great War. V. and a conspiracy. (161)

What this quotation makes clear is that the idea of V.’s relevance to the grand conspiracy is pertinent to Stencil’s purpose. Seemingly to gather clues in order to reconstruct V.’s image, Stencil tries rather to adapt her to his expectation; he projects his idea of the grand conspiracy on her. In other words, he subordinates the reality to his illusory desire that V. is closely connected to the grand conspiracy. Therefore, he shapes the image of V. by connecting fragmented clues suitable to his purpose, as the omniscient narrator says:

To go along assuming that Veronica the girl tourist and Veronica the sewer rat were one and the same V. was not at all to bring up any metempsychosis: only to affirm that his quarry fitted in with The Big One, the century’s master cabal, in the same way Victoria had with the Vheissu plot and Veronica with the new rat—order. (240)

Many critics agree on this point. For example, Molly Hite says:

In making V. a historical fact [who] continues active today, he tries to establish a link between himself and his dead father. But the most important connection between Stencils pere and fils is a shared tendency to construe order as conspiracy and to read information as if it veiled or disguised a single malevolent intention. (51)

Stencil, “connects this sewer with one in Paris in which he interviewed a man who recalled seeing a woman who might have been V. and busies himself inventing connections that he can incorporate into his larger plot” (18-19), according to Alan W. Brownlie. He makes a beautiful contrast with Benny Profane who accepts what he hears as a story without thinking deeply. It is appropriate to think that Stencil supposes or even desires that there is a conspiracy on a global scale, even before starting to consider V. as “the century’s master cabal.” In Chapter 14, describing V.’s possible connection with the conspiracy which turns the animate world into the Kingdom of Death, the narrator says: “Then this might justify the opinion held in the Rusty Spoon that Stencil was seeking in her his own identity” (443). What this explanation makes clear is that Stencil gets obsessed by V. since she answers to his desire by making him able
to believe that there is a grand conspiracy. Accompanied by his desire for the grand conspiracy, which already existed before his search for V., the search for the grand conspiracy functions to establish his identity.

Part 2

In this novel what the grand conspiracy is like is not made clear, while for Stencil, it seems to be a big issue. Except in the description of Stencil’s idea, the world scale conspiracy goes no further than being deduced from fragmented clues. And, most of these clues may have been dramatized by Stencil: Stencilized. Some chapters describe past events which presents the idea of the conspiracy progressing on a global scale. Herbert Stencil can never ever have observed the past events described in these past chapters with his own eyes, since they are happen before he is born. Nevertheless, those past chapters, except for the epilogue, have deeply affected on Stencil in regards to his search for V. Let us examine the past chapters one by one briefly chronologically and trail them to their sources rationally.

2.1

Chapter 3 can be easily considered as Stencil’s imagination. Prior to the eight episodes of 1898 Egypt, where the Fasoda crisis breaks out, the omniscient narrator describes Stencil’s unique tendency: identifying himself with other people at the same time, referring to himself in the third person. Then, mentioning the murder of Porpentine, one of Stencil’s father’s colleagues, the omniscient narrator concludes the prologue of the chapter by saying:

Stencil had often thought; but if death did come like some last charismatic bestowal, he’d have no real way of telling. He’d only the veiled references to Porpentine in the journals. The rest was impersonation and dream” (59). Therefore, it is no difficult to consider the following eight episodes as Stencil’s impersonation or dream. In those stories of 1898 Egypt, where conspiracies are going on, represented by the Fashoda Crisis, Victoria Wren shows herself.

2.2

Chapter 7 is about Victoria Wren’s next appearance, Florence in April of 1899. As pointed out above, what moves Herbert Stencil to search for V. is his father’s journal. And it is revealed that the journal’s date is “Florence, April, 1899” (49). In the prologue of Chapter 7, just before the story of Florence in April of 1899 in which Sidney Stencil appears, Herbert Stencil talks about his own obsessive attempt to make clear who V. is: “She’s (V.) yielded him only the poor skeleton of a dossier. Most of what he (Herbert Stencil) has is inference. He doesn’t know who she is. He’s trying to find out. As a legacy from his father” (161). Therefore, it is seems rational to consider the following story of Florence in April of 1899 as Herbert Stencil’s creation inferred from Sidney Stencil’s
journal. In this story of Florence, the gradual change of Victoria Wren’s character is described in a decisive tone:

Somehow at age nineteen she had crystallized into a nunlike temperament pushed to its most dangerous extreme. Whether she had taken the veil or not, it was as if she felt Christ were her husband and that the marriage’s physical consummation must be achieved through imperfect, mortal versions of himself. (174)

What is implied here is that Victoria is moving toward the inanimate world; for her, animate people are imperfect, and are a kind of tentative being.

2.3

There is no reference to V. in those past chapters which have been examined so far. Neither is there no argument whether Victoria Wren is V. or not: the reader has no way of knowing whether Stencil is dealing with V. or not. Among those chapters, only Chapter 14, titled “V. in Love,” clearly deals with V. whom Stencil is searching. Moreover, V. clearly appears only in Chapter 14; only in that chapter, V. is identified as a living woman. The source of this chapter is clear: “Stencil’s dossier has it on the authority of Porcepic himself, to whom V. told much of their affair. He repeated none of it then, neither at L’ Ouganda nor anywhere else: only to Stencil, years later” (441–42). And Stencil’s idea of V. is described from the third person point of view. Judging from this, it is rational to think that this chapter describes how Stencil reacts to the story of ‘V. in love’ told to him by Porcepic. And the omniscient narrator knows about ‘V. in love’ more than Porcepic does since the narrator also talks about Porcepic’s attitude from the third person point of view. In Chapter 14, a lady is referred to as V. after the narrator declares, “If we’ve not already guessed, ‘the woman’ is, again, the lady V. of Stencil’s mad time – search” (439). Therefore, this chapter becomes the standard against which the reader can judge the connection between V. and those ladies whose name’s initial is V like Victoria Wren. In this chapter, talking about V., the narrator even says, “If she were in fact Victoria Wren” (443). These words convince the reader that Victoria Wren of Chapters 3 and 7 is V. This chapter describes V.’s becoming inanimate literally, while the other chapters merely imply it. Describing V.’s fetishistic lesbian love of Melanie, which is the way of completing her ideal identity, the narrator says:

As for V., she recognized—perhaps aware of her own progression toward inanimateness—the fetish of Melanie and the fetish of herself to be one. As all inanimate objects, to one victimized by them, are alike. . . . Dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other. Love-play until then thus becomes an impersonation of the inanimate, a transvestism not between sexes but between quick and dead; human and fetish. (442)
This description of V.’s love corresponds with Victoria’s nun-like idea of love in Chapter 7, which has been seen above. V. denies usual marriage by insisting that it must be achieved through an animate male: imperfect, mortal version of her real husband, Christ. She subordinates animate human beings to inanimate objects. Her love of Melanie is to transcend physicality by turning Melanie and herself into inanimate objects. Moreover, here V. is connected to the conspiracy which makes the world inanimate. And the idea of V. as the cabal of the conspiracy helps Stencil to establish his identity:

If V. suspected her fetishism at all to be part of any conspiracy leveled against the animate world, any sudden establishment here of a colony of the Kingdom of Death, then this might justify the opinion held in the Rusty Spoon that Stencil was seeking in her his own identity. (443)

Under the condition that V. is really Victoria Wren, the narrator also says, “Victoria was being gradually replaced by V.” (443). The narrator defines half V.’s life, which is described step by step in each of the past chapters discussed so far, as part of a larger scheme:

It would have meant, ultimately, V.’s death: in a sudden establishment here, of the inanimate Kingdom, despite all efforts to prevent it. The smallest realization—at any step: Cairo, Florence, Paris—that she fitted into a large scheme leading eventually to her personal destruction. (443)

Cairo and Florence are the settings of Chapters 3 and 7, while Paris is this chapter’s setting. Therefore, here Victoria and V. seem to converge into one figure who has something to do with a big conspiracy. Later, V.’s turning into an inanimate object is described as Stencil’s imagination: “Stencil even departed from his usual plodding to daydream a vision of her now, at age seventy-six: skin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic; both eyes glass but now containing photoelectric cells…” (444). This description functions to connect this chapter to Chapter 11 by identifying V. with the Bad Priest. It is mentioned clearly in Chapter 14 that in 1913 V. is thirty-three years old according to Stencil’s calculation, and the Bad Priest’s appearance in Chapter 11 is in 1956. Therefore, it makes sense that V. is seventy-six years old when she becomes the Bad Priest by turning her own body into an inanimate object.

2.4

Chapter 9 titled “Mondaugen’s Story” is the story of Kurt Mondaugen’s youthful days in German Southwest Africa in 1922. The chapter seems to be narrated by an omniscient narrator. However, due to the structure, it is quite reasonable to consider that the omniscient narrator is Stencil. At the end of Chapter 8, it is mentioned that Mondaugen talks about his youthful days in German Southwest Africa to Stencil, as the omniscient narrator says:

Stencil listened attentively. The tale proper and the questioning after
took no more than thirty minutes. Yet the next Wednesday afternoon at Eigenvalue’s office, when Stencil retold it, the yarn had undergone considerable change: had become, as Eigenvalue put it, Stencilized. (241)

In “Mondaugen’s Story,” there is a description of the conversation between Stencil and Eigenvalue, which begins with the indicative passage: “Here Eigenvalue made his single interruption” (264). Therefore, it is logical to think of the story of German Southwest Africa in Chapter 9 as a Stencilized story: Mondaugen’s story retold by Stencil to Eigenvalue, whose narrator is Stencil. It is reasonable to suppose that since those historical events described in Chapter 9 have been dramatized by Stencil’s interpretation, what can be inferred from “Mondaugen’s Story” is Stencil’s inclination of interpreting. What is supposed to be the omniscient narrator’s words is Stencil’s idea of Mondaugen’s experience in German Southwest Africa. Veronica Meroving appears in Chapter 9. What functions to identify Veronica with the other possible incarnations of V. are her wearing the clock-iris as a false eye which turns out to be the same as the Bad Priest’s eyes, and the fact that she knows about Vheissu. In this chapter, Stencil implies the conspiracy which turns the animate world into an inanimate one by referring to the bloody events which take place in German Southwest Africa. He defines them as the omen of the catastrophe of human history. For example, referring to the extermination of 60,000 natives, Stencil says, “This is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good” (259). It is obvious that “six million” refers to the number of Jewish people killed in Nazi death camps. Stencil refers to the escalating tragedy which leads to the “Kingdom of Death” (290). According to David H Richter, the reference to the number of Jewish people killed in the Holocaust is “anything but accidental: V. is associated with all the horrors that the twentieth century is to produce” (110).

2.5

Chapter 11 describing the Bad Priest’s death on 27 August 1956 in Valletta is Fausto Maijstral’s journal except its epilogue in which Stencil’s reaction to the journal is described. As mentioned already, Stencil strongly suspects that the Bad Priest is V.’s transformation. Though it is not made clear why he comes to identify the Bad Priest with V., there is a remarkable description of the Bad Priest’s preaching, as follows (at that point, the Bad Priest is referred to as he):

The girls he advised to become nuns, avoid the sensual extremes—pleasure of intercourse, pain of childbirth. The boys he told to find strength in—and be like—the rock of their island. He returned, curiously like the Generation of ’37, often to the rock: preaching that the object of male existence was to be like a crystal: beautiful and soulless. (366)
It is quite possible that this preaching reminds Stencil of what V. or Victoria Wren has insisted in Florence or in Paris: the denial of fleshly love, or turning animate human beings into inanimate objects. Therefore, it is not surprising that Stencil suspects that V. becomes the Bad Priest as the conspiracy develops; it might be better to say that the Bad Priest fits into his belief in the conspiracy which Stencil believes surrounds him. After reading the journal, Stencil is caught in a dilemma of whether to go to Malta and ascertain the Bad Priest’s death and put an end to his quest, or to stay away from Malta:

This he still could choose to do and continue on in calm weather. He could go to Malta and possibly end it. He had stayed off Malta. He was afraid of ending it; but, damn it all, staying here would end it too. Funking out; finding V.; he didn’t know which he was most afraid of, V. or sleep. (372)

Stencil’s search for V. is one of “approach and avoid,” since the purpose of his search is the search itself, and the search helps to establish his identity. The dilemma in which he is caught is perfectly explainable in terms of the characteristics of his search—approach and avoid.

2.6

In this way through these past chapters, weaving fragmented events into a story of a grand conspiracy of V., Stencil establishes the identity of the person who looks for the conspiracy. Four of those past chapters, Chapters 3, 7, 11, and 14, converge into the story of V. with the narrator of Chapter 14 as clue. I have pointed out that some of those chapters might have been narrated by Stencil while seemingly narrated by an omniscient narrator. Those past chapters describe how Stencil tries to identify V. as a figure who is a part of the grand conspiracy. Even Chapter 14, which is the only clue to connect those past chapters, might be narrated by Stencil himself in reality. In that chapter the narrator refers to Stencil in terms of third person narration. However referring to himself in the third person is Stencil’s way of talking. If the narrator is Stencil, it turns out that Stencil clearly has realized his obsessive desire for the conspiracy hidden behind his search for V.; he intentionally shows that he is obsessed by the idea of conspiracy. Moreover, the woman who is in love with Melanie might not be V. or Victoria Wren, if all of Chapter 14 is narrated by Stencil in reality. That question does not, however, make a big difference concerning the discussion of Stencil’s idea of conspiracy. As pointed out above, Stencil is aware that his search’s real purpose is for the search itself, not V. but the search for V. Therefore, being afraid to clarify V.’s secret, he hesitates to go to Malta, and finally goes to Stockholm. And whether the narrator of Chapter 14 is himself or not, it is at least certain that Stencil has an idea of V. as a grand conspirator. Gathering fragmented clues from the wide range of areas and periods, and
Stenciling them, Stencil identifies V. as the conspirator which suits his idea of a grand conspiracy whether really believing in that idea or presenting it self-contemptuously.

3

Suspecting that a grand conspiracy is threatening the world, Stencil also wishes for the conspiracy. His attachment to conspiracy is surely paranoid. OED defines paranoia as “a tendency to suspect and distrust others or to believe oneself unfairly used.” Stencil suspects and believes that the world including himself would be unfairly used by the conspiracy. However, concerning Stencil’s attachment to conspiracy, that definition is just partial. Stencil wants to keep searching for the conspiracy, so that he can sustain the identity of “He Who Looks for V.” Therefore, he keeps his eyes away from the possible definite clues to the conspiracy of V. He even makes use of conspiracy positively.

Some critics talks about the desire for conspiracy which is the other side of conspiracy paranoia. For example, from the viewpoint of agency panic, Timothy Melly says that as people becomes unsure of their own individual autonomy, they come to want to believe in a conspiracy which has controlled them. By doing so, people can ascertain the individual autonomy as the cause of their own activities. As the result, causality, which has been the foundation of the modern world governed by universal rationality, is assured. In the modern world, people have considered their own actions as the result of their own will without any doubt. Suffering from the doubt of individual autonomy, people become uncertain that what controls themselves. Then, according to Melly, considering the cabal which is supposed to run the conspiracy, which controls their actions instead of their own will, people can ascertain the causality and the existence of individual autonomy:

In addition to these primary anxieties about individual autonomy, agency panic usually involves a secondary sense that controlling organizations are themselves agents – rational, motivated entities with the will and the means to carry out complex plans. . . . In moments of agency panic, individuals tend to attribute to these systems the qualities of motive, agency, and individuality they suspect have been depleted from themselves or others around them. (12-13)

However, it is Martin Parker whose definition of conspiracy paranoia most suits Stencil’s one. According to Parker, conspiracy is the product of conspiracy theorists:

The role of the seemingly ubiquitous conspiracy ‘theorist’ is to connect things which were previously unconnected—to posit causes, motives, plans and plots. . . . A conspiracy theory creates and ties together a series of events in relations of cause and effect. (192-93)

Parker insists that people create
conspiracy out of events by finding or even creating causality among them. His definition of conspiracy suits the conspiracy described in V.. Seemingly to find the conspiracy, Stencil actually creates it by gathering information which suits his idea of conspiracy, and by Stenciling the information. What the grand conspiracy is really like, whether V. has really something to do with the conspiracy, whether all the women and the Bad Priest are one figure, or even whether there is really the grand conspiracy or not, is not made clear. As has been seen above, all these things converge into the conspiracy of V. just according to Stencil. And the search itself helps him to establish his identity. Martin Parker also discusses this aspect of conspiracy paranoia. Parker says that the attempt to find out the riddle of conspiracy can be compared with the fight against the devil which hides truth:

So, plots, schemes and conspiracies imply some kind of agency which is preventing us from discovering the truth, from connecting events and causes in a correct manner. Now, this sounds rather like the old problems of being tricked by the devil. (194)

Parker also says, “So the search for explanations can be posited as a heroic one. The more ‘we’ know, the less ‘they’ can control us. This is the ‘quest’ for knowledge” (201). After all, Parker says that the search for conspiracy, which is actually to create conspiracy, can become a kind of heroic activity. This definition of the search for conspiracy also suits Stencil’s quest, since the identity of ‘He Who Looks for V.’ reminds the reader of a hero searching for the Holy Grail-like solution.

Having established his identity as ‘He Who Looks for V.,’ Stencil tries hard not to finish his quest. Therefore, it is natural to think that he used to have no identity before his starting the quest. About Stencil’s treatment of himself in the third person, or his newly-established identity, Tony Tanner says, “The definition may mean that he is in fact a vacancy, filled with the colours of his obsession, not a self, but in truth a stencil” (59). The following is the passage of V. on which Tanner’s statement is based: “Herbert Stencil . . . always referred to himself in the third person. This helped ‘Stencil’ appear as only one among a repertoire of identities” (58). Stencil’s multiple identities and referring to himself in the third person reduce him to nothing more than one of many people. Stencil becomes a kind of tabula rasa on which any identity can be stenciled. Therefore, he has been in an identity crisis; the only identity he has is nothing better than one of provisional identities. The idea of conspiracy provides Stencil with goal which he will never reach.

4

Stencil creates a conspiracy out of fragmented things on purpose. Since it is the only way to establish his identity, he is obsessed by conspiracy. However, the reader also makes use of conspiracy. By considering the past chapters as Stenciled
history, the reader can integrate this novel with Stencil’s conspiracy paranoia as center. The reader weaves the past chapters into a story of V. and Stencil’s conspiracy paranoia. It is not irrational at all to think of those chapters as Stencilized history. There are sometimes implications of the source of the past story at the end of each previous chapter, as already seen. Therefore, it makes sense to think that those chapters are the outcome of Stencil’s conspiracy paranoia. Many scholars also consider the past chapters as Stencilized history. Especially, John Dugdale defines Stencil as fiction-maker, and attributes his fiction-making to conspiracy paranoia:

The growth of his paranoia in the course of the quest is transmitted into his fictions . . . . He is a “true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself” . . . he invents an imaginary system that explains everything in the world, described in the case history as a myth. (115)

Robert D. Newman also discusses the past chapters on the assumption that they are created by Stencil’s hothouse mentality, and attributes the hothouse mentality as a general human endeavor:

His obsession generates a paranoid theory that seemingly random events are actually parts of a malevolent conspiracy over which V. presides. His attempt to translate history into a liner and fixed pattern reflect a “hothouse” mentality, one of the extremes between which the twentieth century is caught . . . . Hothouse interpretations become a series of fictions, costumes in which to dress segments chosen from the flow of history in order to cloak them with meaning. Yet these constructs of meaning are necessary part of human endeavor to make sense of the world. (36)

However, this kind of reading is nothing better than inference. It is the reader’s idea of Stencil’s conspiracy paranoia read into the novel. That reading is the reader’s attempt to make an integrated story out of this novel.

As mentioned already, the omniscient narrator says abruptly that Stencil believes in the grand conspiracy which V. is involved in, without explaining what the conspiracy really is or why Stencil becomes obsessed by the conspiracy. The omniscient narrator even declares, “Yet we have men like Stencil, who must go about grouping the world’s random caries into cabals” (159). Little by little, the reader comes to cling to conspiracy, obsessed by the idea that there must be clues to Stencil’s idea of V.’s conspiracy in the novel. As a result, the reader also becomes conspiracy paranoid. Supposing that the grand conspiracy or Stencil’s obsession is the main theme of the novel, which a large part of this novel is about, the reader weaves the past chapters into Stencilized history. Like Stencil interprets and connects events suitable to the idea of V. and conspiracy, the reader interprets and connects the past chapters suitable to the idea of Stencil’s
conspiracy paranoia.

This novel consists of sixteen chapters and an epilogue chapter. At a glance, the sixteen chapters seem disintegrated since the past chapters are likely to be inconsistent with the others. To consider the novel as a rationally integrated one, it must be explained why the past chapters are added to the story of Stencil and Benny Profane. As I have discussed, there are hints of the source of the past chapters, which inspires the reader to consider those chapters as Stencil’s imagination. This interpretation is to establish causality between those two kinds of chapters; the conspiracy paranoia of Stencil, who lives in the present day, is the cause of the past chapters.

As seen already, Stencil’s attitude toward V.’s conspiracy is approach and avoid; suspecting that the elucidation of V.’s mystery makes him unable to believe in the conspiracy, he tries not to make the mystery clear while trying to elucidate it at the same time. It is necessary for him to be able to believe in it. That means he needs to be able to maintain his conspiracy paranoia. Stencil’s conspiracy paranoia is the lifeline for both Stencil and the reader who requires the novel to be an integrated and coherent one.

Conclusion

The same as Stencil’s attempt to figure out V.’s conspiracy, the reader’s attempt to consider the past chapters as Stencilized history can be considered as the manifestation of conspiracy paranoia in Martin Parker’s theory seen above. Motivated by the belief that the novel is integrated by rational causality, the readers including many critics interpret those chapters that way. And the assumption that there should be coherence or integrity in the novel also accords with the idea that there is a conspiracy which organizes this world; both of them believe in order.

The reader’s attempt to make a coherent story out of V. coincides with Stencil’s search for V.’s conspiracy since both of them are to make order or coherence out of fragmented things. In that sense, interpreting Stencil’s search or attachment to conspiracy, the reader of this novel reads themselves. The conception of conspiracy not only enables both Stencil and the reader to unite chaotic things but also unites Stencil and the reader.

Works Cited


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