

*"Who claims the Truth, Truth abandons. History is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power,--who need but touch her, and all her Credit is in the instant vanish'd, as if it had never been. She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry Radius, Masters of Disguise to provide her the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government." (Mason and Dixon, 350)*

## **The People Could Fly: Existence Between Remembering and Oblivion**

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### Hitting the Wall

*"the wall that separates two worlds is an iconostasis....Iconostasis is a vision a manifest appearance of heavenly witnesses" (Ikonostasis, 62)*

*"The book says we may be through with the past, but the past isn't through with us." (Magnolia)*

*"You know what a miracle is another world's intrusion into this one." (The Crying of Lot 49, 98)*

Postmodernism, in many ways, is a response to a perceived spiritual upheaval in the twentieth century--a contemporary kinesis. This upheaval is linked to the failures of modernity as a social and political structure and of Modernism as an aesthetic. Ever in the forefront is concern over finding meaningful ways of confronting the question and the mystery of life, of whether, in fact, any meaning exists.

Fredric Jameson maintains, for example, that

We must ponder the anomaly that it is only in the most completely humanized environment, the one most fully and obviously the end product of human labor, production, and transformation, that life becomes meaningless<sup>1</sup> [1]

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<sup>1</sup> [1] Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 251.

In a time when the individual is freest to create his or her own identity and see whatever meaning he or she chooses, commodification and mass produced images seem to destroy any human ability to make or find meaning in life.

Daniel Bell describes a mass society characterized by undifferentiated number, mechanization, bureaucracy, uniformity and the elimination of difference, aimlessness, alienation, and the failure of integration.<sup>2</sup> [2] The result, he argues, is a society in which there is a "radical disjunction" between the social structure, ruled by efficiency and functional rationality, which requires greater and greater interdependence and a culture founded on atomization and individual desire in which "the self is taken as the touchstone of cultural judgments."<sup>3</sup> [3] As in Jameson's description, life is about "I", the enhancement of the self, the search for individual fulfillment in sense impressions. Technology makes this search possible. Choice and possibilities seem limitless. At the same time, however, modernity "disrupts coherence" in life and renders experience an unending and unintelligible series of *divertissements*.

The European post-structuralists's rejection of totalizing, essentializing, foundationalist concepts is a reaction to the same experience described by Jameson and Bell. The Modern Project brought the western world tremendous intellectual, technical, and economic progress. It also appears responsible for tremendous amounts of alienation, disorientation, oppression, and death. The post-structuralist diagnosis of the modern kinesis laid responsibility at the door of modernity's tendency to create "binary oppositions" and "privilege" one part of the pair. They

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2 [2] Daniel Bell. *The End of Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1960), 22-25.

3 [3] Daniel Bell. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 37.

argued that privileging one aspect of the pair over the other resulted in oppression and exclusion of the non-privileged. Humans are subjects, the product of language, desire, and the unconscious. Reality is material, fragmented and the product of language. Thus, language is power. We are totally determined by systems of power that use language to privilege one group, position, set of meanings over another.

Overall, postmodernism is an outgrowth of crises in representation, meaning, and epistemological method. It seeks to be anti-foundationalist, anti-representationalist, and anti-essentialist. We need to eliminate the idea of the Other--any distinctions between mind and body, fact and value, subject and object, literature and philosophy--in order to decrease the power of oppressive systems and empower the excluded. Because there is no truth to be found "out there," we must listen to lots of stories and discover which one or ones represent our personal experiences well. We also must remember that what happens in any story is mostly the product of chance. History is illusive at best and a lie at worst. It emphasizes facts and objectivity, when facts and objectivity are chimeras. Instead, we must acknowledge the historicity (situated, tentative, contingent character) of any meaning we find in our stories. And, because reality is purely material, there can be no wall between visible and invisible worlds.

The question is: "What do we do when we hit that supposedly non-existent wall?" What happens when primary experience affirms the miraculous and the transcendent? Do the stories told by postmodern philosophers, poets, playwrights, and novelists allow us to break with the derailment in which we find ourselves caught, and which our culture both consciously and unconsciously promotes, to forge different, less deformed stories that will take us to "a

modernity after the end of modernity?<sup>4</sup> [4] What kinds of stories will allow us to see most accurately and live more meaningfully? This paper argues that most postmodern philosophy and many postmodern authors cannot give us the vision we need to chart a new and more reliable course through the modernity after modernity and that the reason post-structuralism fails is that it denies the reality of the wall. It argues that what is needed in the contemporary world are more mystic philosophers, such as Voegelin, and more mystic mythopoeists such as Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon. Further, the paper suggests that these two authors incorporate many of the reflections concerning spiritual realism, reason, the Beginning and Beyond, the search for the ground, and universal mankind that appear in Eric Voegelin's work. Finally, it argues that if we took them seriously, the people could fly--could break the old paradigms and imagine visions of better ones. In some ways their stories remain, like most of us, caught between remembrance and oblivion. But it is inaccurate to classify them as purely postmodern authors. Unlike the postmoderns both Morrison and Pynchon appear to believe that the world is in God, that it should be approached with wonder, and that It-Reality may become luminous for its truth at any moment if we are awake, aware, and open to the ground of being.

Given this argument, analyzing them strictly within a postmodern framework takes a reader only as far as the wall when it seems these authors might wish us to go further. One example is Cyrus Patel's excellent study of Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon, *Negative*

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4 [4] Eric Voegelin. *History of Political Ideas VII: The New Order and Last Orientation*. Ed. Thomas Hollweck and Jurgen Gebhardt. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 25* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

*Liberties*.<sup>5</sup> [5] There Patel argues that human progress occurs only when constricting paradigms can be broken or reimagined. In the contemporary world, Patel suggests, certain novelists do a better job of engaging and reimagining the dominant social paradigm of American liberalism than do many philosophers.<sup>6</sup> [6] Thus, the work of authors that aim directly at countering official social and cultural narratives, our myths about ourselves, may be the best catalysts for change. He focuses on Morrison and Pynchon because they are overtly political and "dramatize the fact that the story of individualism that has arisen from Emersonian liberalism in the United States has become a form of Bad History, a coercive narrative that serves to impose the will of a dominant culture."<sup>7</sup> [7] This paradigm rests on ontological individualism. The individual exists prior to society.

Ontological liberalism has certain methodological implications, however. If the individual is prior to society, then all social, economic, and political phenomena can be explained as the results of individual actions and desires. Humans are homo economicus. We are what we own. We use politics to pursue our individual self-interest. The rational human being is the one who accumulates things. Political rights are one more set of things to be accumulated in order to gain economic advantage and protect our possessions. As the dragon in John Gardner's *Grendel* maintains, we must "seek out gold and sit on it."<sup>8</sup> [8]

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5 [5] Cyrus R.K. Patel. *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

6 [6] Patel, xv.

7 [7] Patel, 10-11.

8 [8] John Gardner. *Grendel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 74.

Ultimately, Patel argues, all forms of liberalism imbedded in the official narrative exalt negative liberty. The free individual has an inherent dignity that is protected

through the possession of certain rights that have the effect of creating a sphere of privacy over which the individual is master, free from constraints, protected from the incursions of others. To be deprived of these rights is to be subject to the will of others, in essence, to be a slave.<sup>9</sup> [9]

This construction of negative liberty gives us the individual Michael Sandel refers to as the unencumbered self. <sup>10</sup> [10] Not only is negative liberty the essence of individuality, but it also leads to positive liberty--"freedom to achieve self-expression, self-realization, and self-mastery as well as freedom to participate in government and political life" <sup>11</sup> [11] Negative liberty is the precursor to and requirement for positive liberty. It "not only fosters individuality, self-expression, and self-fulfillment but also enables such communal ideals as family, community, and nation to develop and flourish." <sup>12</sup> [12] In short, individualism not only ensures our self-interest, without it we are able to develop and maintain only impoverished social ties.

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<sup>9</sup> [9] Patel, 14.

<sup>10</sup> [10] Michael Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self." *Political Theory* 12 (1984): 81-96.

<sup>11</sup> [11] Patel, 14.

<sup>12</sup> [12] Patel, 19.

Morrison and Pynchon, Patel suggests, counter this official narrative in several ways. Their works demonstrate how difficult it is to move from negative to positive liberty--to integrate "self" into community without doing damage to either. In addition, they understand the temptations of power and how family, community, and nation may use power to control and deform--to become oppressive institutions even if seemingly benign ones. Finally, they employ a magical realism that vividly portrays "the ways in which Reason proves inadequate as a way of accounting for the world."<sup>13</sup> [13] Their use of the miraculous, Patel argues, helps reveal the limitations of Emersonian liberalism and the oppressiveness of the Enlightenment's conceptualization of reason. Ultimately they seek to "imagine a new cosmopolitanism able to promote the ideals of self-autonomy and self-expression and to expose *and* defeat slavery and oppression wherever they exist."<sup>14</sup> [14]

As insightful as his analysis is, Patel does not go far enough. Pynchon and Morrison appear to be doing more than writing counter-narratives about the possibility of finding a situated self living between Emersonian liberalism's unencumbered self and the radical communitarians' radically situated self. In their own ways, each seeks the ground of existence. They describe life as if it were an adventure in decision on the edge of freedom and necessity. Their stories exemplify the importance of a theory of consciousness in bridging the gap between one part of the paradox of consciousness and the other. They seem to tell us to face the world with wonder and understand that we live always on the edge of revelation. What one sees in their books is not really magical realism. It's the wondering of spirits open to the ground of existence, the

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<sup>13</sup> [13] Patel, 83.

<sup>14</sup> [14] Patel, 196.

experienced reality of a transcendent nature toward which one lives in tension through faith, hope, and love. They recognize that we all "experience our own existence as not existing out of itself but as coming from somewhere even if we don't know from where."<sup>15</sup> [15] Past and present, beginning and beyond, come together in the middle--human life. It is this enormous sense of wonder that makes them theorists in the sense of Plato and Aristotle.

Their books, like Heb. 11.1, express "the adventure of the spirit in the realm of existential uncertainty?"<sup>16</sup> [16] In the works of these two authors, human beings keep searching for something that will unlock that revelation and give us something concrete to believe in. We see coincidences; we see the miraculous. But because we have no vision, no framework, in which to put them when we find ourselves at the wall we become murderers, fools, or paranoids. Sometimes we run off on wild goose chases in the hope that meaning will reveal itself out of all the coincidences and accidents. Those attempts never seem to work and leave us as empty as before. But it's not that revelation isn't there. And it's not that meaning doesn't exist. And it's not that experience doesn't show us that transcendence is all around. We hit the wall and can go no further because we cannot let go of the past. Every book read for this paper is haunted by the past. So too is the contemporary world. We cannot give up modernity's miserly definitions of reality and reason. Instead we close off even the evidence of our senses. This evidence seems too irrational. Yet we adopt a life that is no more rational, but does fit the social paradigm. We

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<sup>15</sup> [15] Eric Voegelin. "In Search of the Ground." Ed. Ellis Sandoz. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 11: Published Essays 1953-1965* (University of Missouri Press, 2000), 230.

<sup>16</sup> [16] Eric Voegelin. "Anxiety and Reason." Ed. Thomas Hollweck and Paul Caringella. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 28: What Is History? and Other Late Unpublished Writings* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1990), 69.



become embedded in second realities. Pynchon and Morrison are struggling to overcome the eclipse of reality and illuminate a possible shared spiritual substance. The pull of all-encompassing reality requires a response but our lack of openness to the ground does not allow us to respond. So not only do we remain alone in the world, we also see all others as our enemies. The works of Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon do not tell us that we can reconstitute the ancient and medieval community of being; they do tell us that an all-encompassing It-Reality is reality and that we must look for clues beyond modernity in order to formulate some genuine spiritual substance that will bind us together.

#### Beyond the Wall: The Quest for the Ground

*"Somewhere further along, she'd been given to understand, she would discover that all souls, human and otherwise, were different disguises of the same greater being--God at play." (Vineland, 121).*

*"When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise." (Paradise, 318)*

Beyond the wall is the world of the spirit. For Voegelin, the crisis of the age was the loss of the spirit.<sup>17</sup> [17] Underlying this loss of the spirit was the disappearance of sin--an exit from the paradox of consciousness. By both rejecting the paradox of consciousness and refusing to accept that consciousness is located both in the comprehending reality and in us, humanity lost contact with the ground of being and, thus with the reality of what human beings are and what their place in the cosmos is. Voegelin saw humanity's "unwillingness to accept the stature of

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17 [17] Jurgen Gebhardt and Thomas Hollweck, "Editor's Introduction." Eric Voegelin. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 25: History of Political Ideas Volume VII, The New Order and Last Orientation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

merely being a man existing between the poles of perfection and imperfection."18 [18] Life no longer would be lived in the middle, the metaxy. There would be no ground of existence to which humanity could attune itself. There only could be existence and non-existence.

As always in Voegelin, we must begin with the questions of existence and essence--the Beginning (why things are as they are and not different) and the Beyond (why things exist at all). The Beginning and the Beyond engender the questions that jump start our quest for the ground of being, the questions whose answers, if we knew them, would anchor human beings to the world and allow them to find meaning. These questions are the result of the awe and wonder produced as we look at the world and the cosmos and are found in every civilization. The problem is that because human beings are not outside the story of reality, but instead participants within it, they are confronted with mystery rather than answers. As Florensky puts it in *Ikonostasis*, "the spiritual world of the invisible is not some infinitely far off kingdom; instead, it everywhere surrounds us as an ocean; and we are like creatures lost on the bottom of the ocean floor while everywhere is streaming upward the fullness of a grace steadily growing brighter." 19 [19] But even though the spiritual world is all around us, it eludes our grasp. Revelation seems to wait for us around every corner, but revelation rarely comes and then only for an instant. "The process of history, and such order as can be discerned in it, is not a story to be told from beginning to its

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18 [18] David Walsh. "Editor's Introduction." Eric Voegelin. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 26: History of Political Ideas Volume VIII, Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 22.

19 [19] Pavel Florensky. *Ikonostasis* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 64.

happy, or unhappy, end; it is a mystery in the process of revelation."<sup>20</sup> [20] Reality encompasses the Beginning, the Beyond, and this middle place (metaxy) in which human beings find themselves. We strain for understanding; we ache for the solid ground that can explain and order our lives. But we never find it, even though it is all around us.

Transcendence is not a thing; it is an experience--the experience of opening the soul to the Ground of existence. The Beyond is "the experienced presence, the Parousia, of the formative It-reality in all things."<sup>21</sup> [21] We all experience the pull of transcendence because we "all experience our own existence as not existing out of itself but as coming from somewhere even if we don't know from where."<sup>22</sup> [22] We participate in Divine Being because we feel a tension, a pull, toward the Beyond, a mysterious attraction that only can be love. Reason, as well, pushes us to participate and becomes both our tool and our guide in the quest for the Ground. Rational action is action that pushes us to our ultimate purpose--participation in the Ground of existence. The rational life is the one that accepts the mystery of an unknown all-comprehending reality and jointly participates with transcendence to make It-reality luminous for itself in the physical world. This participation is the source of our humanity because it is what we share in common, our species life, if you will. Our awareness of the ground and love for transcendent Being, which is not a being at all, is what allows our noetic self to "have love for

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<sup>20</sup> [20] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History, Volume 4: The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 6.

<sup>21</sup> [21] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume 5: In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 30.

<sup>22</sup> [22] Eric Voegelin. "In Search of the Ground," 230.

other men."23 [23] It is what creates Universal Mankind, which is "not a society existing in the world, but a symbol which indicates man's consciousness of participating, in his earthly existence, in the mystery of a reality that moves toward its transfiguration."24 [24] Universal mankind is the symbol expressing our concrete experience that every human being's daily life, as unique as it may be in some ways, is the same.

Still, anxiety surrounds existence because we will never know the TRUTH, never see the entire story laid out for us all at once. The "one and only thing certain about existence remains the uncertainty about its ground."25 [25] We don't know our origin and we can't research it as we would our family's genealogy. We weren't "present at the creation," thus the anxiety of being rootless, of existence out of nothing, is how we experience our world and uncertainty produces anxiety in most human beings.26 [26] It symbolizes our desire for some certainty, some solid ground, a rock of ages. In response to the anxiety of existence we search for the ground through mythopoesis and philosophy.

Both mythopoesis and philosophy are concerned with the questions of existence (Beyond) and essence (Beginning). Both rely on reason because "seeking, finding, and giving

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23 [23] Eric Voegelin. "In Search of the Ground," 231.

24 [24] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History* 4:305.

25 [25] Eric Voegelin. "Anxiety and Reason." Ed. Thomas Hollweck and Paul Caringella. *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 28: What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 69.

26 [26] Eric Voegelin. "Anxiety and Reason," 71.

the ground of things" is reasoning, as is "the act of relating things to a ground."<sup>27</sup> [27] In other words, both see life as joint participation in faith, hope, and love. Both recognize the ground as divine and thus both are theology.<sup>28</sup> [28] For, "where love toward Divine Being is experienced; where hope for fulfillment in relation to such a Being is experienced as the point of orientation in life; where these experiences are present, there is that openness of the soul in existence that is an orienting center in the life of man."<sup>29</sup> [29] Both understand the paradox of the complex consciousness-reality-language and know that reality is not an object of consciousness. Rather it is "the something in which consciousness occurs as an event of participation between partners in the community of being."<sup>30</sup> [30] Both are evoked by the concrete circumstances of their period, especially perceptions of disorder and of attempts to divinize man. Mythopoesis and philosophy seek neither fantasy nor immanentization. Both are works of imagination in the sense that "man can find the way from his participatory experience of reality to its expression through symbols."<sup>31</sup> [31] It is, in fact, this imaginative responsiveness that makes man a "creative partner in the movement of reality toward its truth."<sup>32</sup> [32] Thus mythopoesis and philosophy are "interacting forces" rather than "rival or alternative sources of knowledge."<sup>33</sup> [33] Both are

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<sup>27</sup> [27] Eric Voegelin. "Anxiety and Reason," 74.

<sup>28</sup> [28] Eric Voegelin. "Anxiety and Reason," 106.

<sup>29</sup> [29] Eric Voegelin. "In Search of the Ground," 230.

<sup>30</sup> [30] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History* 5:15.

<sup>31</sup> [31] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History* 5:37.

<sup>32</sup> [32] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History* 5:38.

<sup>33</sup> [33] Eric Voegelin. "The Beginning and the Beyond," 227.

inherent and essential aspects of the human search for order. Mythopoesis focuses on beginnings, on the pneumatic inrush into the soul and "fills the area of mystery by Thaumasia."<sup>34</sup> [34] Philosophy responds noetically to the pull of the Beyond and exercises the discipline not to respond to the mystery. Instead, its focus is the noetic illumination of the ground.<sup>35</sup> [35]

The images of myth "emerge as the exegetic symbols from a divine-human encounter, specifically from a meditative 'rise' toward the Beyond"<sup>36</sup> [36] Voegelin, using *Phaedrus*, expresses the experience as a 'rise' to the transcendent "pole of the quest" which is "colorless, formless, and impalpable," but nevertheless "visible" to the mind" in such a way it can be "denotable by language" and the encounter with the human mind.<sup>37</sup> [37] Pavel Florensky put it a little differently. "At the crossing of the boundary into the upper world, the soul sheds its outworn clothes--the images of everyday emptiness. At the point of descent and re-entry on the other hand, the images are experiences of mystical life crystallized out of the boundary of two worlds."<sup>38</sup> [38] This moment produces the images to which the artist seeking to write a true human story must attend. Pynchon and Morrison are masters of the true human story. Other examples include Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* and Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. This is the place where sometimes truth may be

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<sup>34</sup> [34] Eric Voegelin. "Anxiety and Reason," 106.

<sup>35</sup> [35] Eric Voegelin. "The Beginning and the Beyond," 211.

<sup>36</sup> [36] Eric Voegelin. "The Beginning and the Beyond," 217.

<sup>37</sup> [37] Eric Voegelin. "The Beginning and the Beyond," 217.

<sup>38</sup> [38] Pavel Florensky. *Ikhnostasis*, 45.

made luminous for itself. This is the place where a face becomes a countenance--not an image of reality, but reality itself shining through the icon. And the reality that shines through is that of the Ground. The icon has metaphysical as well as physical reality, and so it "mediates between our act of comprehending and that which we comprehend in the sense that it opens for our speculative sight the essence of that which we are seeking to comprehend."<sup>39</sup> [39] It does not explain the mystery of existence; it awakens "a perception of the spiritual that not only affirms that such seeing is possible but also brings the thing seen into immediately felt experience."<sup>40</sup> [40] In other words, an icon opens up the mystery to those of us stuck in the world of immanent things who must be prodded and reminded of the true nature of the reality in which we exist.<sup>41</sup> [41] In "The Beginning and the Beyond" Voegelin expressed a similar experience when he wrote: "In the meditative event, the Beyond is analytically inseparable from the act in which it becomes visible,' as well as from the language symbols by which the act and its result will be expressed."<sup>42</sup> [42] That is a moment of parousia (presence) of the divine beyond, of opsis (vision) where we "reach the limit at which language does not merely refer to reality but is reality emerging as the luminous word' from the divine-human encounter."<sup>43</sup> [43] It is the moment in which it is possible to experience the Beyond's presence in the human soul.<sup>44</sup> [44]

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<sup>39</sup> [39] Pavel Florensky. *Ikonostasis*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> [40] Pavel Florensky. *Ikonostasis*, 71.

<sup>41</sup> [41] Pavel Florensky. *Ikonostasis*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> [42] Eric Voegelin. "The Beginning and the Beyond," 218.

<sup>43</sup> [43] Eric Voegelin. "The Beginning and the Beyond," 231.

<sup>44</sup> [44] Eric Voegelin. "The Beginning and the Beyond," 232.

The best stories provide the symbols that allow us to experience the presence of the Beyond in our souls.

Parousia and opsis, however, are easily missed as we will see in examining the works of Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon. The moment of parousia or ikonostasis is a response to both the push and pull of reality. And it begins with an experience of disorder. To write a true story, the artist must begin

with the resistance aroused in him by the observation of concrete cases, of his experience of being drawn into the search of true order by a command issuing from It-reality, of his consciousness of ignorance and questioning, of his discovery of the truth, and of the consequences of disorder unrestrained by regard for the order he has experienced and articulated.<sup>45</sup> [45]

Thus, vision takes the artist, as it does the philosopher, beyond the complex of consciousness-reality-language to that of reflective distance-remembering-oblivion. Here yet another paradox emerges. In order to develop the images required to transfigure the human search for order and help make the truth luminous for itself, the artist/philosopher must resist the disorder of her time. As Voegelin put it, the artist's resistance to the existing order is evoked by her response to the pull of the Divine reality. It is very easy to mistake self-assertion for assertion of the Ground and, thus, to move from imagination to imaginative oblivion.

The choice between assertion of the Ground or self-assertion, between imagination and imaginative oblivion, between the recognition of reality or its denial, between the celebration of reason or its eclipse is made at the wall. What will we do there? Will we fail to respond to the

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<sup>45</sup> [45] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History* 5:25.



Ground and deny the wall's existence, insisting that all reality is immanent? Or will we perhaps accept its existence but refuse its vision? Or will we accept the push of reason and the pull of transcendence and see the wall as a semi-permeable border along which the comprehending reality makes itself known in the physical world? To Voegelin, non-responsiveness to the ground is the mark of folly (anoia).<sup>46</sup> [46] The fool may not be an atheist. She does exist "in a state of spiritual dullness that will permit the indulgence of greed, sex, and power without fear of divine judgment."<sup>47</sup> [47] Self-assertion, almost by default, will lead to non-responsiveness and the denial of Reality. With that denial of reality, with its elimination of any ultimate purpose for human action, comes the eclipse of reason and the triumph of fantasy over imagination. For Voegelin, this produces the "contracted self" for whom

God is dead, the past is dead, the present is the flight from the self's non-essential facticity toward being what is not, the future is the field of possibles among which the self must choose its project of being beyond mere facticity, and freedom is the necessity of making a choice that will determine the self's own being. The freedom of the contracted self is the self's damnation not to be able not to be free."<sup>48</sup> [48]

This is the state of alienation--the fear of a reality that seems to not want to reveal itself. Truly human stories cannot come from that place. Instead, human beings will deny their humanity and "insist he is nothing but his shrunken self; he will deny ever having experienced the reality of common experience; he will deny that anybody could have a fuller perception of reality than he

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<sup>46</sup> [46] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History* 5:43.

<sup>47</sup> [47] Eric Voegelin. "The Beginning and the Beyond," 200.

<sup>48</sup> [48] Eric Voegelin. "The Eclipse of Reality." Ed. Thomas Hollweck and Paul Caringella. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 28: What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990), 111.

allows his self; in brief, he will set the contracted self as a model for himself as well as for everybody else."<sup>49</sup> [49] If this contracted life seems unendurable, or if we are not strong enough to break out of it, or if access to truth is by the all pervasive social pressure of the dominant social paradigm, then "he has to fall back on the resources of his animal vitality if he wants to gain a mode of life he can experience as real."<sup>50</sup> [50] The only reality left him will be deformed and self-destructive--"libertinism, hedonism, the cult of violence, destructiveness, vandalism, or outright criminality."<sup>51</sup> [51]

What, then, does it take to tell a true human story--a story rooted in search for the ground of existence? Eric Voegelin spent a great deal of his life trying to help us puzzle that out. There is a passage from *In Search of Order* that summarizes well the characteristics of a true human, or truly human, story. In such a story the storyteller would:

1. Be conscious of his state of ignorance concerning true order;
2. Be aware that a consciousness of ignorance presupposes the apprehension of something knowable beyond his present state of knowledge;
3. Experience himself as surrounded by a horizon of knowable truth toward which he can move;
4. Sense that he is moving in the right direction when he moves toward the Beyond of the horizon that creates the horizon;
5. Be conscious of his participatory role in the process of experience, imagination, and symbolization;

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<sup>49</sup> [49] Eric Voegelin. "The Eclipse of Reality," 112.

<sup>50</sup> [50] Eric Voegelin. "The Eclipse of Reality," 155-156.

<sup>51</sup> [51] Eric Voegelin. "The Eclipse of Reality," 156.

6. Remember his experience of movements and countermovements in the metaxy as the reality from which his assertive insights into true order have emerged; and
7. Express his remembrance through such reflective symbols as the tension of the metaxy, the poles of the tension, the things and their Beyond, thing reality and It-reality, the human and the divine, intentionality and luminosity, the paradox of consciousness-reality-language, and the complex of participation-assertion-self-assertion.<sup>52</sup> [52]

Stories true to concrete human experience begin with understanding that the Logos of being is the object of philosophical inquiry.<sup>53</sup> [53] But the Logos is the word, the tale--the home of the artist. The artist at his best responds to the pull from the Beyond which brings true freedom. It is this radical freedom that allows her to create worlds where men can fly and where there are ghosts and magical creatures that can be seen. The experience of a world outside that of subjects and objects enables the storyteller to use imagination to create language that in some way replicates the entire range of reality experienced by the full paradox of consciousness, including its mystery. The artist is playing--and enjoying--his part in the story told in God. And a really good story, like those of Morrison and Pynchon, draws the reader into the story itself until those stories become almost appendages to It-Reality with its message of mystery, suffering, grace, and redemption through unmerited love.

Truly human stories, then, arise from the metaxy. The stories that match the concrete experiences of human beings in the metaxy are stories that do allow for a meta-narrative. One theme is privileged. One story is heard again and again in two or three different forms that "go

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52 [52] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History* 5:40.

53 [53] Eric Voegelin. *Order and History, Volume 1: Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), ix-xiv.

on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years."<sup>54</sup> [54] That theme is that the world is in Divine Being, whatever it is called, however it is experienced, and whatever it wants to call itself. We will never be without some uncertainty or anxiety of existence. Dogmas and doctrines that attempt to encapsulate and ossify truth will not assuage the anxiety. We cannot categorize transcendence in some nice, intellectually elegant fashion. At some point we must recognize that just as the world of things (even when most attuned to the order of existence) often is cluttered, messy, and ambiguous, so to is the quest of the Ground. And every generation in every society must conduct that quest for itself. We will never have "it." We can never hold "it." Our understanding of It-reality will continue to change and evolve, whether we like it or not. Answers will always be partial; fragmented truth is our lot. Human beings always will experience awe and wonder at the mystery of reality. In the face of that mystery we will long to fly--either into the mystery and the wall and towards the Ground or away from them and back into ourselves--our shrunken selves.

Students of the inter-relationship of literature and philosophy often argue that literature explicates certain aspects of human experience better than does philosophy (see Patel, Booth, Murdoch, Nussbaum, Ruderman). I think that is very true of postmodernism. At least some postmodern novelists "see" more than do postmodern philosophers and their visions seem truer to human experience of joint participation of the human and the divine in the metaxy. They may be able to provide clues that can direct us to the modernity beyond modernity. In that sense, they

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<sup>54</sup> [54] Willa Cather. *O Pioneers!* In *Willa Cather: Early Stories and Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 196.

are closer to Voegelin than to Foucault, Jameson, Rorty or Lyotard. In the end, postmodern philosophers tend to tell us inauthentic stories about contracted selves. So too do many postmodern authors. Some contemporary authors, however, tell much bigger stories. Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon are two of the best examples of this kind of storyteller. As mythopoets they tell us alethinós logos--true stories of what can and does happen at the wall. In their stories we can catch glimpses of what the modernity after modernity might look like.

### Turning Face into Countenance: Responsive Participation in the Story Told by the Gods

*"The reality of the cosmos, thus, becomes a story to be told by the man who participates responsively in the story told by the god." (Ecumenic Age, 13)*

*"You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched." (Sula, 168).*

*And wherever you may stand, given the Convexity, each of you is slightly pointed away from everybody else, all the time, out into that Void that most of you seldom notice. Here in the Earth Concave, everyone is pointed at everyone else,--ev'rybody's axes converge,--forc'd at least thus to acknowledge one another,--an entirely different set of rules for how to behave." (Mason and Dixon, 741).*

What happens if human beings choose to respond to the pull of the invisible at the wall? Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon explore experiences at the wall as if each character's story was a puzzle that both the character and the reader need to put together from odds and ends of clues. Their stories are always about the "drama of being" and transcendence is an essential character in that drama. Beginning, present, and beyond are linked. Further, we are not allowed to "watch" the drama of being from some exterior vantage point. Reality is bigger than the physical world we see and that larger reality will invade our nice, neat, rational spaces when and where it (not we) sees fit. They write their stories backwards and inside out (from our point of view) because they don't want to give us the comfort of being outside the story. They drag us into their stories and make us live them along with the characters and in the same way the characters must live them--with partial knowledge of the "facts," with incomplete understanding

of the big picture, with whatever strengths or weaknesses we bring to what happens to us in this world that seems random or weird or unexplainable.

Their stories are imaginative and mythical. Each story though seems to take us to the same conclusion. If we recognize life as metaleptic participation in the metaxy, then, despite the anxiety of existence and the eclipse of reason by the contemporary world, we remain open to the ground and able to participate in life. At that point faces become countenances responsible for one another. In their books characters often begin by seeing others as "faces," flat, two-dimensional, cardboard cut-out figures. These others go unnoticed, the alien, unannounced and disconnected enemy in some binary opposition. Over the course of the story these "Others" acquire depth and substance. They begin to become luminous and to exert a pull on the character. They radiate the reality of the ground of existence and pull us toward that ground. The others become transformed from "faces" into countenances--"the appearance of some reality and, as such, it mediates between our act of comprehending and that which we comprehend in the sense that it opens for our speculative sight the essence of that which we are seeking to comprehend."<sup>55</sup> [55] Then the character begins to become human. She feels the connection with that other and through the other a connection to It-reality, to the ground. This connection becomes the basis for a reunion with herself and with humanity and produces at least a tentative movement toward an understanding of universal mankind.

A number of observers have noticed that the works of Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon often assume the form of the detective story. But Pynchon's and Morrison's detective

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<sup>55</sup> [55] Florensky, 53.

stories are a little out of the ordinary. They are detectives of the metaxy. Like detectives, their characters exist outside the social mainstream. They have their own code of ethics, their own way of approaching the world and their place in it, their own consciousness. They are not necessarily "nice" people who exemplify the preferred civic virtues. They generally are quite odd by "normal" standards. Wherever they are, Morrison's and Pynchon's protagonists do not quite fit. Sethe, Sula, Milkman, the convent women, Zoyd, Sasha, Takeshi, D.L., Mason and Dixon, Oedipa, Prentice, and Slothrop--not one of them lives at ease within the dominant social paradigm. They see things others don't always see. The past is always with them, whether they want it to be or not. They cannot avoid seeing the wall between the visible and invisible worlds and attempting to acknowledge it and incorporate it into their lives. They are awake to the numberless coincidences and paradoxes of the cosmos. They often don't understand what they see and as a result make any number of mistakes. They are caught between remembering and imaginative oblivion.

However, these characters genuinely are different from the usual detective. Morrison's and Pynchon's characters see the eclipse of reason all around them and reject it. Each character's story originates in the mystery of existence and essence. Each is engaged in a search for meaning in the metaxy in ignorance of where it may take them and even of who they are. They begin, and sometimes remain, unknown to themselves. The dominant mood of the eight novels considered in this paper is paranoia in the face of the anxiety of existence. Morrison and Pynchon seem to tell us this is the response of the reflective person to the disorder of the contemporary world--a world in which there is no ground of being and we are forced to exist out of nothing. But they see the paradox of consciousness and their stories involve them trying, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully, to find the balance of consciousness. The

plots of their books are multiple and complex. Their characters are strange. The fantastic abounds. But there is one constant. Ask the question: "What are they about?" and there is only one answer. They are about the paradox of consciousness surrounding life in the metaxy.

These authors's novels are mythopoetic searches for the ground. They want to "relate existent things to a ground that will endow their existence with meaning."<sup>56</sup> [56] That ground seems to have something to do with death. In book after book by these authors we are told that "nothing ever dies."<sup>57</sup> [57] The dead inhabit us and demand something from us: the first Macon Dead, Hagar, Plum, Hannah, Chicken Little, Rebekah, Ruby, Delia, Scout, Easter, Haven, Arnette's baby, Merle and Pearl, Save-Marie, the convent women, Inverarity, Triplett, Beloved, and Halle. In some way death illuminates the meaning of life and must be treated with respect. At the same time, memory must be honored, not because it keeps us in old stories and paradigms--some of which may be horrific or oppressive--but so that redemption can be found (and disorder overcome) through faith, hope, and love. Competing grounds are shown as fictitious. Fictitious grounds flood their novels, but are unable to satisfy the emptiness and longing. The same can be said of guilt and regret. The death of the spirit affects Morrison's and Pynchon's characters keenly, even if like Mason and Dixon they define themselves as scientists and their time as the Age of Reason. In the experience of these characters it is the world of the spirit (or at least of spirits) that seems most real--the very world society, culture, and politics tell them is most unreal. Religion offers them no solace. At some intuitive level they understand the difference between religious dogma co-opted by power and the inrush of the spirit into the soul.

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<sup>56</sup> [56] Eric Voegelin, "Anxiety and Reason," 74.

<sup>57</sup> [57] Toni Morrison. *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 36.



In such circumstances, paranoia may be the most genuinely rational response. But these novels also seem to demonstrate the destructive consequences that follow if paranoia makes us try to justify contracted selves.

Human beings have eclipsed reason in its attempt to end the anxiety of existence. One very explicit theme in *Mason and Dixon* is that the power to define boundaries, to draw lines on maps, is the power to determine reality and to define the reasonable, the rational. The drawing of straight lines and the definitions of reality imposed by them close off a truer understanding of reality and truncate and deform reason. Take away the surveyor's chains and that same theme can be seen in all eight books. Power comes from the ability to define boundaries whether those boundaries are between pieces of real estate, the self and others, or good and evil. Truncated, deformed reason leads to irrationality and willful blindness. We unify and ossify Truth and label counter-narratives unreasonable, superstitious, and unreal. We no longer rely on the evidence of our experiences in the physical world. The stories we produce are of shrunken selves condemned to be free and alone in the world. These stories heighten, not reduce, the anxiety of existence. They lead to building second realities in order to fend off the "frictions" inevitable when facing reality with a shrunken, or contracted, self.<sup>58</sup> [58]

Because it is impossible in the space of a conference paper to provide the plot summaries of each of the eight books, I will focus on two examples: Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (set in the 1980's) and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (set in the early 1970's). The themes discussed can be found in all eight of the books by these two authors read during the preparation of this paper.

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<sup>58</sup> [58] Eric Voegelin, "Eclipse of Reality," 112.

*Vineland* juxtaposes the real and the fantastic so well that it's hard to tell what is and is not real. It begins with an experience of disorder. Zoyd is about to earn his monthly mental disability check (and in the process inform the federal government he's still in the same place) by his annual jump through the window of a local bar. Immediately apparent is the surface disorder of his life as an individual and as a parent. Zoyd is about as far as one can get from being a poster child for family values as they are conceived in contemporary America. He appears to be nothing but a middle-aged hippie unable to give up a failed lifestyle and about 60% brain dead from drug abuse. But the reader recognizes very quickly that his thoughts and actions are a model of good order and reason compared to those of the country at large and especially its government.

The story then moves to his ex-wife, Frenesi Gates, a sixties radical co-opted by the government, and the effects of her life on a host of characters. A woman who has never been able to take responsibility for anything (58), her life is a paradigm for the lives of all the other characters.<sup>59</sup> [59] All are afflicted by some "major obstacle" to fulfilling their "true karmic project" (382). That true karmic project turns out to be "the usual journey from point A to point B." (382) It turns out that all the main characters have spent most of their lives paying attention to the wrong things (380). Instead of learning from their mistakes and concentrating on the real point of the journey, they let the past own them. Frenesi's dad appears to her in a dream and tells her straight out: "Take care of your dead, or they'll take care of you" (370). They become obsessed with distractions of one sort or another instead of the real journey. To borrow from *The Crying of Lot 49*, instead of doing the work at hand, they tried to "project a world" from their

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59 [59] All citations are from Thomas Pynchon. *Vineland* (London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1991).

own "mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also" (62). But projecting a world from themselves left each only with regret or the desire for revenge, maybe itself a form of regret. The Thanatoids, for example, were individuals caught between life and death. Slaves to the anxiety of existence, they lingered on after death waiting for some adjustment of the karmic balance, some balancing of the scales that would bring them a sense that the wrongs unjustly done to them had been redressed. And "What was a Thanatoid at the end of the long dread day, but memory" (325)? Instead of participation, *Vineland's* characters sought control, and in the process of seeking control each became a contracted self in a land of contracted selves. But something in each of them couldn't just repress or mollify the uneasiness of living that contracted life. At some level each character recognizes the world as "spilled and broken" (267)--with everyone "locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra-good behavior, maybe a cookie" (222). There is a spark telling them reality is more than this and they need to find out what that "more" is.

*Vineland*, ultimately, is a story about coming to terms with the anxiety of existence and the paradox of consciousness in a way that recognizes the reality of both the visible and invisible worlds, of turning faces into countenances by opening oneself to the ground and taking responsibility for self and others. Most of the characters in the story have to decide whether to recognize reality beyond the wall. Frenesi's friend, D.L., has almost killed the wrong man and, as penance, must become his partner. She made the mistake because she acted hastily and saw only a face--a face she hated. But her ninja training is founded on spiritual as well as physical discipline. By separating the spiritual from the physical, she has violated the discipline and contracted her soul. She has experienced a failure of participation and responsibility. As the

mother superior of the ninjettes tells her, "all we see's somebody running because if she stops running, she'll fall and nothing's beyond" (155). The death of the spirit has left her dissatisfied, unhappy, and full of regret.

The renegade tow truck drivers, Blood and Vato, may be the spiritual center of the work. Not only do they operate a somewhat-shady business in the physical world, they also ferry the dead to the underworld. They are at ease with mystery and acknowledge few boundaries between the physical world and the spiritual one. They know what D.L. did not--that "acts, deeply moral and otherwise, had consequences" (132). They are at home in a vague, foggy landscape through which runs a river the Yuroks "had always held exceptional, to follow it up from the ocean was also to journey through the realm behind the immediate. Fog presences glided in coves, dripping ferns thickened audibly in the gulches, semivisible birds called in nearly human speech, trails without warning would begin to descend into the earth, toward Tsorrek, the world of the dead" (186). Shrouded in ambiguity themselves, they remind us that truth and justice exist even if they are contingent and fragmented and that the Beginning and the Beyond connect in the middle.

After piling seemingly fantastic occurrence on top of fantastic occurrence, the book ends with a profound platitude. Prairie, Zoyd and Frenesi's daughter, wakes at her campsite "to a warm and persistent tongue all over her face. It was Desmond, none other roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home" (385). A simple scene of reunion, criticized by some reviewers as banal, becomes the vehicle for a contingent metaphysical truth about faith, hope, and love.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* begins with the ultimate disorder, murder.<sup>60</sup> [60] But a closer look reveals that disorder reigns supreme in the most orderly town in Oklahoma, a town without a "slack or sloven woman" (8)--at least not until those women showed up at the convent. It seems that once upon a time there were two twin brothers, Coffee and Tea, who lived in Louisiana. They were free blacks, but that made little difference because to settle the presidential election of 1876 the Republicans had agreed to end military Reconstruction. The move to disfranchise and dispossess African-Americans began almost immediately. One day a group of drunk white men stopped Coffee and Tea and wanted them to dance. Tea did. Coffee would not and hobbled home after being shot in the foot. He never spoke to Tea again. He gave himself a new name, Zechariah, from one of the prophets. And he collected all his family and some others, who also happened to be very dark (8-rock dark, like coal), and they began the exodus west.

Their journey was difficult and dangerous. They headed for one of the all black towns that already existed. In 1890 they reached Fairly, Oklahoma and asked for help. They were "disallowed." An all black town refused to help or take them in because the travelers were too black and too poor. An apparition seen only by Zechariah, his son Rector, and some children, guides them to the place they are to settle. It took years of labor to pay the Indians for the land. But they made a town. They called it Haven and they made it work. The first thing they did, before building real houses, was to construct an oven that became the community's focal point. Baptisms were carried out there. Meals were cooked. Deliberations were conducted and

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<sup>60</sup> [60] All citations are from Toni Morrison. *Paradise* (New York: Plume Books, 1997).

ecisions were made there. The oven had words engraved on it. But what were they? Maybe "Beware the furrow of his brow." Maybe not.

In 1910, Zechariah and some of his sons made a grand tour of the all-black towns to find out what was good, what was bad, what had to be avoided at all costs. They used this information, and an immense amount of plain hard work, to make Haven successful. It even did all right during the Depression. But the rest of the world caught up and when the soldiers came back from World War II they knew Haven was dying. So in 1949 Rector took his sons on a second, and final, grand tour. They found the place they wanted and bought the land. Carefully, devoutly, they dismantled the oven and brought it with them. Their final settlement place they called Ruby, after one of Rector's daughters who died shortly after arrival when no white doctor would treat her. The guiding principle of Ruby was "May God bless the pure and holy and may nothing keep us apart from each other nor from the One who does the blessing" (205). Somehow, Ruby has cornered the market on truth.

Surely order prevailed in Ruby. Or did it? It was clean, safe, religious, and prosperous. No one died in Ruby. No one was in need. Was not Ruby paradise? The town was its inhabitants' pride and joy and they sought to keep it that way through marriage, through education, through religion. Everything in Ruby revolved around the founding myth of the exodus. But was it orderly? *Paradise* touches the same questions as does *Vineland*: How should human beings deal with the anxiety of existence (here made even worse by the history of slavery), remain open to the ground of existence, participate in the drama of being, and turn faces into countenances? How can we tell order from disorder? How can we isolate the origin of any disorder we see?

By the early 1970's Ruby's peace and perfection seem less assured. There is a new preacher in town--one committed to the civil rights struggle. That doesn't go over well in a town that prides itself on isolation and self-sufficiency. The oven, no longer the site of baptisms and town meetings, is the gathering place of the younger people who do not accord it (at least in the eyes of their elders) the proper respect. They even want to argue about the motto. Maybe it really says "Be the furrow of my brow." And then there's the convent. It used to be a school for Indian girls run by nuns. Now it's inhabited by five women who seem to arrive from nowhere and, in the eyes of the town father's, to have no morality and no sense.

Each of these women experiences the anxiety of existence in the extreme. Each has been hurt and scarred by life. Each begins her stay at the convent as a completely isolated, alienated, and contracted self. Each begins a process of healing whose foundation is a turning toward the ground of existence. Connie, who began life as an unwanted child on the streets of a Brazilian city, understands how their lives have become poisoned by "disorder, deception, and drift." Her message is simple:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again. Twice she saves it. When her body sickens I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (263).

Body and soul are one. Responsibility toward oneself and others can only be achieved by openness to both. The world of the spirit is just as true and real as the world of the body. Life requires understanding the paradox of consciousness. Living in the metaxy is an exercise in faith, hope, and love.

This is a message that Ruby, for all its religion, has rejected. Most of its citizens see outsiders as faces, not countenances, and hate the difference they see. For the new minister, Reverend Richard Misner, the cross is the symbol of this paradox of consciousness. God is love and the world is in God. But that is not the way most of Ruby sees things. In the end, the disorder of Ruby is far greater than any disorder at the convent where anyone in need can seek shelter and comfort. Anxiety of existence brought first Haven and then Ruby into existence. It pushed Steward and Deacon, the two living sons of the founding father, to accumulation and the desire to control everything and everyone within their reach. Dovey Morgan muses that the more her husband, Steward, acquired, "the more visible his losses" (82). It created, and edited, the town's official narrative of itself in the Christmas Pageant. Truth is unified and flattened with a concomitant loss of texture and complexity. Forget the fact that the official story changes over time in increasingly exclusive and not-so-subtle ways. And, ultimately, it led to the determination that anything that was uncertain and could not be controlled must be destroyed, even, and especially, if they were unarmed and harmless (except to) themselves) women. For, "everything that worries them" comes from women (217). It was a godly town; it was an orderly town. It was a town totally devoid of faith, hope, and love. The town's motto holds no ambiguity. The town's leaders know what they mean. After all, they've never forgotten anything that's happened to them (13). The men of Ruby use the convent women as scapegoats for any problems that occur. The eclipse of reason and reality in Ruby nearly was perfect.



The lesson of Ruby is summarized best by one of its inhabitants, a woman herself isolated from the mainstream of town life because she is too light in color: "How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it" (306). The search for control of rather than participation in the drama of being leads to disastrous results. Here was a place "ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who had seen in lively, free unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of the." (308). A group of the town leaders goes to the convent and murders the women. But by the time the mortician arrives to remove the bodies, there are none. Where are they?

At the end of *Paradise*, the Reverend Misner and Ana Flood go out to the convent to try to make sense of the several different stories they've been told. They find little physical evidence that can help. But on the way out they stop in the garden. And there, for only a second, they see in the midst of the overgrown plants a door or a window. What can it be? And "whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?" (305). The answer, of course, is nothing on earth and everything on earth. The message, I think, is that the paradox of consciousness is real. We do live both within Thing reality and It-reality. The world is in God. If we are open to participating in the drama of being we will finally live in the real world, see the anxiety of existence for what it is--a push into the search for meaning, and accept the uncertain and mysterious in our lives. Then we will be able to move beyond fantasy worlds and use imagination to build an order based on universal mankind.

Conclusion: The People Could Fly

*"If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it." (Song of Solomon, 337)*

*"Emerson was right, Jeremiah. You were flying, all the time." (Mason and Dixon, 689)*

In her compilation of African-American folk tales, Virginia Hamilton writes that "The People Could Fly" was "first told and retold by those who had only their imaginations to set them free."<sup>61</sup> [61] Perhaps there is a lesson in that story for today's world as well. Once we become enslaved to anything, only imagination can set us free. Truly imaginative stories fire our imaginations and help us stretch ourselves further than we ever thought we could. Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon demonstrate our need for such stories and, through their illumination of It-reality, offer us glimpses of what we need to construct a modernity after modernity--one that reflects a spiritual substance.

Modernity's denial of the spirit meant that the self no longer was a predicate in the comprehending reality; instead it was a subject in a world of objects, autonomous, a law unto itself. But in denying the reality of sin, mankind also denied the reality of the other side of the wall, the Epekenia and the pulls from "It" which alone constitute our humanity. In other words, humankind denied there is any story, any comprehending reality, in which to take part except the one we write in our isolation for ourselves. Western man, at least, decided she made her own stories. In modernity those stories were optimistic. Life was what an individual made it. Human beings could use calculation and technique to make more perfect people and worlds. Mankind could write a story of universal human progress that would overcome the fact that as individuals we stand alone in the face of the void of non-existence.

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<sup>61</sup> [61] Virginia Hamilton. The People Could Fly (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 173.


But the concrete experience of the twentieth century suggested caution and pessimism were more realistic. Calculation is difficult in a random, frightening world in which a person feels little or no control and everything seems to happen by accident. Calculation seems perverse when its sole goal appears to be the creation of corpses. It appeared that not only did human beings face the void alone, but that almost all other human beings sought to push them into it. There would be no universal human story. There is no overall comprehending reality. There is no overarching story. Any such meta-narrative could only be an instrument of power and oppression. All stories were individual ones. All stories were contingent products of accident in which each alone struggled to build a personal metaphor--not a story, just a metaphor.

Neither Toni Morrison nor Thomas Pynchon gives their readers answers to the questions posed by their books. There is no tying up of loose ends or even actual endings. Instead, there is a glimpse of light, often offered in the most prosaic of ways, which leaves us standing in the middle of the story with a head full of questions. Moments of illumination of the ground abound: Frenesi's moments of understanding, quickly forgotten, in the supermarket and a Kansas City motel room, Pilate's visions of her father, Connie's teaching about the unity of body and soul. Even Thanatoids experience moments of revelation. The works of Morrison and Pynchon are in some ways acts of meditation on existence and essence. In general, their works include a moment of turning and end with opsis, with a glimpse of It-reality's attempt to break into the world of material things. Thus, we get snatches of what a truly human life might be like even though we see no characters that can fully live such a life--not even Pilate in *Song of Solomon* who comes the closest. Their characters begin by searching for answers, but end by facing, and coming closer to accepting, mystery.

What would their modernity beyond modernity look like? What do these mythopoeists offer us as the gifts of their imaginative exploration of the ground? Thinking about these questions results in an interesting paradox. I think that many readers who like their books would not like where Pynchon's and Morrison's imaginations take them. Their message is a very difficult one that requires use of our own imaginations to break the bonds of the eclipse of reason. We must accept the paradox of consciousness, ikonstasis, and engage in metaleptic participation. As Charles Mason says at one point in *Mason and Dixon*, "sometimes you're the Slate, sometimes you're the Chalk." (442) The world of the spirit is real and mysterious. No matter how many "facts" we have, we will never have answers. We must be willing to give up certainty, for

Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers,--Tops and Hoops, forever a-spin◆. Alas, the Historian may indulge no such idle Rotating. History is not Chronology, for that is left to lawyers,--nor is Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other,--her Practitioners, to survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy and Taproom Wit,--that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forbears in forever,--not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,--rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common. (*Mason and Dixon*, 349).

Truth may be contingent and fragmentary, but it does represent the inrush of It-reality into our world. If we are open to It-reality, there will be moments of revelation for us to reflect upon and incorporate into our lives. There will be "turnings" of the Soul s, like those described by Jeremiah Dixon. "We spoke of it as the Working of the Spirit within◆It abides,--◆tis we who are ever recall'd from it, to tend to our various mortal Requirements◆And so another such visit soon becomes necessary,◆.Howbeit, ◆tis all Desire,--and Desire, but Embodiment in the World, of what Quakers have understood as Grace◆.?" (101) And, Morrison and Pynchon

suggest, the odd thing is that openness to the ground will allow us to see the ground in each other. When we do that we can take responsibility for ourselves and each other and, as Pilate did. "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more." (336) Giving up what weighs us down allows us the freedom to act ourselves, instead of just admiring Jeremiah Dixon for his bravery in freeing the slave coffle in Baltimore. This wasn't the kind of bravery they had shown when their ship was attacked by the French, "where they'd had no choice. Nor quite the same as they'd both exhibited on the Warrior Path. Here in Maryland, they had a choice at last, and Dixon chose to act, and Mason not to,-- unless he had to,--what each of us wishes he might have the unthinking Grace to do, yet fails to do, To act for all those of us who have so fail'd." (698) Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon are spiritual realists. They give us the imaginative tools that, when combined with Eric Voegelin's noetic vision, could result in a politics founded on metaleptic participation and universal mankind.

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