CHAPTER V

MYTH: THE DEMYSTIFIED IDENTITY

V. is a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth.

THOMAS PYNCHON. V.

My life’s a failure. I’m not a mythic hero. I never will be.

JOHN BARTH. CHIMERA

5.1.0 Barth’s Mythotherapeutic-doctors and Pynchon’s Cybernetic-machine controllers fail to control the identities of their cosmoptic and entropic patients because they lack a sense of myth in the backdrop to give themselves unity and integrity. In this way, they are in sharp contrast to their modernist-controllers who played their games in accordance with the archetypal rules. The modernist-controllers offered a connection between Man and God and the survival of the individual spirit through a consciousness governed by myth. Having ruled out the connection between Man and God, Barth and Pynchon, do not give contingency to myth trying to give identity. They deem consciousness to be determined solely by language. Only that which finds articulation can be known. Thus these writers believe that inherited languages, and the social/mythical world built upon them, are not to be trusted. If no semiotic system can offer essential meaning, none can claim privileged or authoritative status. Myth is known because it was articulated, read, transcribed or translated like any other story. Consequently, Barth and Pynchon’s study of humanity’s effort to establish a meaningful world is conducted most frequently through the analysis of how language is used in personal and collective discourse, but not through archetypes underlying the subconscious. That is why, they
revise, subvert and then rejuvenate the received notion of myth as an ordered faculty to structure reality. In this manner, Barth and Pynchon are true representatives of the postmodernist conception of myth.

5.1.1 In trying to contra-distinct the term postmodernism from modernism, critics are of divided opinion. Therefore some contend that modernism has been superseded by postmodernism while some others consider modernism an extended/replenished phase of postmodernism. Andreas Huyssen opines that “while the postmodern break with classical modernism was fairly visible in architecture and the visual arts, the notion of a postmodern rupture in literature has been much harder to ascertain” (1990, 237). “The different accounts of postmodernist literature and its relation to modernist fiction that have been offered by Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, and John Barth, among others,” in Joel Black’s opinion, “harshly constitute a consensus, and none of these views has yet succeeded in becoming a definitive critical statement on the subject” (1986, 96). Chris Baldick’s definition seems to give an equitable view as he takes the modernist’s use of myth as a major point of difference from the postmodernists. In his opinion:

Postmodernism may be seen as a continuation of modernism’s alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world: in very crude terms, where a modernist artist or writer would try to wrest a meaning from the world through myth, symbol, or formal complexity, the postmodernist greets the absurd or meaningless confusion of contemporary
existence with a certain numbed or flippant indifference . . . (emphases added) (1996, 175).

5.1.2 Crucial to modernist conception of myth is T. S. Eliot’s enunciation of the mythic principle in “Ulysses, Order and Myth.” He explains:

In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method . . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history (qtd. Wasson 1981, 13-14).

In Yeats’s adumbration, myth structured poems, but it was also a form of spiritual discipline indispensable to the understanding of the self, of history, of the self’s place in history (14). Whereas, for the postmodernists, with a fractured sense of self/personality, there is barely any hope of significant social change that might alter the beliefs or social conditions of culture. And certainly there is no developed conception of historical progress. Rather, it is entirely within the framework of socialised behaviour—humankind’s self-projected semiotic manifestations of private and collective consciousness that postmodernism explores. Therefore, in the words of David Cowart, “One can sometimes differentiate modernists from postmodernists in their treatment of myth—where modernists exploit myth as a universal, instinctual truth, their successors either deconstruct myth as an unreliable “metanarrative” or examine it as a language that, like all language, speaks its speakers rather than the other way around” (1990, 72).
Thus if the modernists toil to find a meaning in coherence with myth, postmodernists puncture the mytho-centric-meaning by undermining the much vaunted authenticity/authority attributed to myth to structure reality. There is a significant absence of any faith in, or even appeal to, an existent and more valid realm of being beyond the quotidian social order. As Charles Russell comments: “There is no saving myth, no sustaining sacred belief, no valorization of the subconscious that can be asserted as more than a temporary expedient” (1988, 253). Myth, no longer “served to explain,” as M. H. Abrams defines it, “why the world is as it is and things happen as they do; and to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives” (1971, 102). Linked with this distorted vision of myth is also the sense of perception of reality: “if modernism asks, how can we know reality (a reality whose existence is, ultimately, not in doubt), then postmodern asks, how can we know what is real? How can we read the signs and (social) codes that tell us what is real, but in such a way that we are not trapped within the constraint of those codes?” (Madsen 1991, 125). Postmodern fiction, then, expresses a reality we might call relative, discontinuous, energetic, statistical, subjective, uncertain, or contingent. Similarly, in the postmodern era, it no longer makes sense to differentiate literature and life based on a distinction between fiction and reality. Instead reality and the imaginary are equivalent simulacra that endlessly mirror each other in the domain of the hyperreal. In this perspective, Pynchon and Barth give their readers a subversive experience of myths through their works, mostly by reversing noted examples from the Classical and the Biblical myths.
In the spurious lecture scroll of Part Three, of *Chimera*, Barth summarises some of his personal comments on mythology made in actual interviews. This clarifies Barth’s idea of approaching myths directly or as part of reality. He premises:

Since myths themselves are among other things poetic distillations of our ordinary psychic experience and therefore point always to daily reality, to write realistic fictions which point always to mythic archetypes is in my opinion to take the wrong end of the mythopoeic stick, however meritorious such fiction may be in other respects. Better to address the archetypes directly (CH 199).

What Barth has done by grabbing the “other end” of the mythopoeic stick is to treat myths realistically, instead of treating “reality” in accord with archetypal patterns. Barth converts myth to fictional reality and ritual to daily reality.

For Barth, myth, unlike in the case of Eliot and Pound, has no thrust toward either the transcendent or the immanent. In this regard, Vickery opines:

The past-haunted nobility of Pound’s vision and the syncretistic and teleological spirituality of Eliot’s convictions are replaced by a bawdy comic unpredictability of nature and action. Myths are self-reflexive or non-reflexive rather than reflexive of values and events outside themselves; they are fortuitous and combinatory in their origin rather than culturally, spiritually, or psychologically determined and anonymously generated; and they reflect the mundanity and more than slight tawdriness of human motives and behavior rather than preserving what some scholars have
called “the memory of glorious deeds,” “a desire for glory” and “noble models for emulation” (430)

5.2.2 To demystify modernism’s mythopoeia Barth uses tactics which are either deflationary or arbitrarily ordinary or both. In his concern with the “reality” of the Chimera myth, Barth uses the elements of the myth that comment on daily experiences of the individual. Barth’s mythic heroes talk like self-deceiving adolescents or middle-aged, henpecked husbands. Subsequently, Perseus, in his novel Chimera, awakens one day in a desert, “sea-leveled, forty, parched and plucked . . . and beleaguered by the serpents of [his] my past” (CH 60); Bellerophon, on the eve of his fortieth birthday, finds the “Perseid,” the novella, floating on an ebbing tide and he stops to read it: “By the time he got to its last words he was forty and too tired” (CH 145). Barth has reduced the mythical hero to middle-aged man, so that one recognises oneself in Scheherazade, Perseus, and Bellerophon—the three demystified protagonists of his Chimera. But perhaps the most succinct and self-revelatory embodiment of this process of demystification occurs at the end of the book where Bellerophon who has aspired to commingle with the divinities by riding Pegasus to Olympus is about to crash to earth in Dorchester Country, Maryland (America). He recoils from the myth he is about to become: “I hate this, World! It’s not at all what I had in mind for Bellerophon. It’s a beastly fiction, ill-proportioned, full of longueurs, lumps, lacunae, a kind of monstrous mixed metaphor—” (CH 308).

5.2.3 Even the stories themselves defy our expectations and our prior knowledge of them in ways that contradict, thwart, or deflect the originals. Thus, Perseus’s triumphing over Medusa by cutting off her head develops its own contradiction when he learns while
preparing for his second round of adventures that she has been restored to life by Athene. Later, he is saved from drowning by his new Medusa whom he comes to love and who has the capacity to rejuvenate him by looking at him but at the cost of turning herself into a Gorgon again unless he should truly love her in which case "the two of them would turn ageless as the stars and be together forever" (CH 107). In like manner, Scheherazade is a radical feminist who envisages castration rather than adroit and complaint story-telling as the ultimate solution to the problem confronting her and the virgins of her country. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind Philonoe's final observation that "as between variants among the myths themselves, it's in their contradictions that one may seek their sense" (CH 194).

5.3.0 Pynchon's method of blurring the boundaries of myth and reality is by attributing mythical status to contemporary figures. In this regard, Albert Piela III's comment on the postmodernists jocular use of myth is pertinent to Pynchon's device. He remarks: "One of the reasons some Modernist authors appropriated myths for their works was that myths provided writers and readers a shared way of speaking about and understanding the world. While Modernists informed their works with classical and Biblical myths, their successors tend to be more playful" (1990, 125). In Vineland, Pynchon evokes the myths of popular culture, especially those shaped by television.

5.3.1 Television programmes function mythically because they compose a body of stories, characters, and symbols that give expression to the aspirations and values of American culture. Further, as Brad Leithauser notes, a television mythology assists communication among Vineland's characters. In a review of the novel, he writes:
"Whatever the disparities in their outlooks, Pynchon's characters are united in having television serve as their communal well of learning, from which they draw their humor, morality, locutions, analogies" (qtd. Piela III, 125). But even more important, Pynchon and his public share a television mythology, and the author dips into this reservoir of myths to communicate with Vineland's readers.

5.3.2 Pynchon subverts privileged myths by demonstrating the capacity of television programmes to provide a shared language between author and readers. Rather than needing to recognise a number of specific allusions to Odysseus or Oedipus, readers of Vineland need to identify such mythic figures as Mr. Spock, Jaime Sommers, and Oscar Goldman who are renowned television celebrities. Much of the time Pynchon employs television references to make readers laugh, as when Hector Zuniga tells Baba Havabananda, "you sound like Howard Cosell" (VL 52), a comment that underscores Baba's verbosity and compares him with a ludicrous television sports commentator. But, to laugh, one must know the mythical Cosell. Similarly, only those readers who are familiar with the Star Trek and with its Lieutenant Uhura—the Enterprise's Communications Officer and the only black character in the series—can appreciate Pynchon's parodic version of the myth in which "all the actors were black except for the Communications Officer, a freckled white redhead named Lieutenant O'Hara" (VL 370). But in this example, while employing Star Trek to speak to his readers, Pynchon simultaneously offers a competing version of the myth. Subsequently, The Odyssey and The Bible do have an oblique role here: Prairie, Pynchon's questor, undertakes a reverse Telemachiad, a search for the mother—who proves to have been the fallen Eve of the
edenic 1960s. Thus Pynchon subverts the idea that one myth may be privileged as “true,” and demonstrates the multiplicity of versions of a story. The point is that, as Piela III observes, “by recognizing the mythopoeic qualities of television programs and characters, Pynchon upsets a hierarchy that privileges classical and Biblical myths as those appropriate to a high-cultural activity like literature” (125).

5.3.3.1 As well as facilitating communication between author and readers, myths also allow a writer to comment on the culture that values those myths. By appropriating artefacts like The Brady Bunch, CHiPs, The Bionic Woman, and Hawaii Five-O, Pynchon emphasises certain cultural values that figure prominently in contemporary American society. Piela III gives an excellent analysis in this regard. According to him, The Brady Bunch reflects and asserts the importance of family integrity, harmony, and prosperity. This myth, however, does not go unchallenged by Pynchon, who introduces a competing version of family at the Becker-Traverse reunion at the end of the novel. Unlike the Brady family (in which the father is an architect, the mother a housewife, and the children a nearly symmetrical group of three girls and three boys), the motley Becker-Traverse clan is composed of “choker setters and choppers, dynamiters of fish, shingle weavers and street-corner spellbinders, old and beaten at, young and brand-new” (VL 369). Pynchon offers another version of the American family and undermines the exalted status of the Brady myth.

5.3.3.2 Television myths like CHiPs, The Bionic Woman, and Hawaii Five-O illustrate the importance of law and order in American Society. The heroes of those programmes are motorcycle policemen, a government agent and a group of detectives, respectively.
Each episode retells a similar story: the proponents of law triumph over the opponents of law. Without fail, the heroes restore order. Pynchon, however, allows the myth to be deconstructed by dramatising the tension between law and lawlessness in a way which does not subscribe or conform to the pattern of television myths. The agents of law (Brock Vond and Hector Zuniga) appear evil or laughable, while those who break the law (Zoyd Wheeler, who smokes marijuana; Vato and Blood, who steal automobiles) go unpunished. Pynchon upsets a traditional hierarchy asserted in the television police dramas that constitute one type of cultural myth (126-127).

5.4.0 Barth too is fond of upsetting the privileged myths by fabricating them to his fictional ends. While writing his Lost in the Funhouse, Barth has in mind both Homer’s tale of Odysseus’s epic voyage and James Joyce’s adaptation—with the difference that at one level of the story’s statement Barth is satirising his modernist predecessor. Echoes of Ulysses abound in the stories of Lost in the Funhouse. “Anonymiad” epitomises the parodic comparisons Barth is making. Max F. Schulz opines:

Whereas Joyce and his generations of writers had mistakenly added ancient myth as a layer to their stories in the hopes of thereby ordering and enriching their experience of immediate reality with an overlay of the universal, Barth contends rather that myth is the direct reflection of reality and therefore (a) the ongoing product of the writer’s attention to “actual people and events,” and (b) the universal stuff of human experience that ever bears direct reexamination and retelling.15 (1990, 11-12)
The crypto-Ambrosian/Barthian minstrel of "Anonymiad" accordingly "abandons myth"--that is, stops drawing on the hexametered language of pseudo-mythic import and the epic verses of "no particular generation" (LFH 175)--to pattern his "fabrications on [the] actual people and events" (LFH 186) of his life--the Trojan War, Agamemnon, Menelaus, Helen, Aegisthus, Clytemnestra--which he ambitiously retells in one final document, from ultimately the "only valid point of view, first person anonymous" (LFH 192).

5.4.1 Consequently, Barth presumes that his own fictional characters may be as good as any archetypes and draws references and allusions from them. So Barth's LETTERS is a pastiche of all his previous works and characters assembled in reference to the present creative endeavour. In the words of Bradbury:

In 1979 appeared a novel called LETTERS, written by but also to an author, John Barth. Functioning according to a complex alphabetical code, it sought over 772 pages to put together, through epistolary means, the central characters of all Barth's previous books and stories. Breaking down the discreteness of the fictions Barth had already written, it took the form of a self-disfiguring monument, while revealing that there was a monument there to disfigure, the existence of his own writings (1985, 181).

The "monument" has been given a mythical status through Barth's overt use in the novel.

Further to stretch this subverted notion of creating personal myth, Barth relates all his mythical creations to his own personality.

5.4.2 As a gloss by Barth on Barth, the novel reveals much about the earlier works, frankly indicating Barth's identity with all his earlier protagonists. Each character here
takes on full three-dimensional status as a separate history and separate consciousness, yet
Barth very clearly lets us know that each is a piece of himself. Roemer observes:

In the author’s second letter, addressed to Whom It May Concern, he
describes “three concentric dreams of waking.” The letter begins: “I woke
half tranced, understanding where I was but not at once who, or why I was
there...”7 This line is repeated in variant form three times in this letter
and several other times in the book. Each time it identified another Barth:
first Ambrose Mensh, identified here as a “dreamer of sub-sea-level
dreams,” then the Burlingame/Cook self, “all bravura, intrigue and daring-
do,” and third, “faint-bumbling B, most shadowy of all... a blind, lame
vatic figure,” Jerome Bray. “This introductory letter serves to affirm the
splitting and projection which are certainly part of the creation of this
fiction. The point is amply confirmed by Barth himself in an interview
published in Granta. He says there, “Not only is Madame Bovary Flaubert,
but Flaubert is Madame Bovary. That’s certainly true in the case of
mythology characters.”8 (1987, 40)

5.5.0 But the fact that Pynchon makes myth out of contemporary tele-serial
characters and Barth exhausts out the same probability from his fictionality and personal
history does not mean that these writers negate the mere use of myth in a literary context.
Yet they use myth in order to parody them and their users and thereby show the vacuity of
them in the postmodern milieu. One of the myths that is put to task by Barth and Pynchon
is the Oedipus myth and as it is interpreted by Sigmund Freud in terms of a complex.
5.5.1.1 Analysing the satiric plots of Pynchon, Michael Seidel contends that the descent or degeneration of character is a defining feature of the satiric narrative. And Pynchon has chosen the Oedipal model for his plot in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Plot as paranoia is at the heart of Oedipus story, a situation in which an individual life is plagued by desires that mock choice. The Oedipal dilemma, the unravelling of a series of knots only to tie other, larger, knots tighter, is a pattern in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Like Oedipus, Slothrop is born into a condition that determines him. He tries to know, to choose, to change, but he succeeds only in revealing things essentially uncanny, things, according to Freud, once known but forgotten. In the Oedipus story, the presumed historical and rational accomplishments of the hero are implicitly connected to a mythic system conceived before the hero was conceived. Oedipus is a descendant of the Theban spartoi, earth-born men, earth monsters whose wants are primal and whose characters contentious. He circulates in an antithetical world where paranoia, an interface of personality and plot, makes all action pathological. Oedipus’s search leads to the womb where he has sown his own seed.

5.5.1.2 In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop’s search leads him to a satirically inflated version of his own penis, the Rocket. In both cases, an unfortunate destiny is the only available choice. As the behaviourist Pointsman knows, “in the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul” there “will be precious little room for any hope at all” (*GR* 86). When characters are stone--determined, monstrously deformed, swollen, or as Pynchon says of his Oedipal Slothrop, “genetically predisposed,” their quests for information reveal a strange personal course. Attempts to understand their “plots” are
analytic nightmares—as characters, they break down, digress, swerve, and, finally, submit. The difference between a tragic and a satiric rendering of circumstance has more to do with the attitude taken toward the victim than with the essential nature of victimisation.

Siedel explains:

In the Oedipus story, Oedipus is the sickness of his plague-ridden city. A human life becomes a human institution. Oedipus, honored among men for his greatness, is, in a horrifying way, greater than he knows, greater than he fears. He is more than one man. In Gravity's Rainbow Pynchon provided a satiric version of the story, not only in Slothrop, but in the strange man at the White Visitation who actually thinks he is the Second World War—he plans to die on V. E. Day. He, too, is greater than one man. But the absurdity of the situation makes him satiric, someone who has lost his senses in a senseless situation (1978, 202-3).

5.5.1.3 In Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon lampoons Freud by exaggerating Oedipal conflicts and enlisting them in the service of paranoia. Tyrone Slothrop's father steals his "Radiant Hour," presumably his son's opportunity for illumination, his chance to see Creation as and whole, literally sells him into bondage to and rationalized, industrialized, secularized system, and thereby forestalls his charismatic function in the Zone. The "Father Conspiracy" betrays children to western misconceptions of the world by conditioning them to misperceive reality. "Fathers are carriers of the virus of Death, and sons are the infected" (GR 723), says Blicero, whom the narrator calls "the father you will never quite manage to kill" (GR 747). Joseph W. Slade comments: "Freud was right in
one respect: no matter how much the son hates the father, he will end by becoming like him. It is a terrible cycle” (1977, 32). Thus, even if Stencil does not have any close relationship with his father, he closely follows his father in his quest and the quested. The quested V., doubted to be his father’s mistress, throws the possibility of being Stencil’s mother and makes the Oedipal entanglement complete.

5.5.2.1 Likewise, Barth’s Todd Andrews, though he does not approve many of his father’s characteristics, impersonates his father in order to know more about him. The motive of writing his Inquiry is to discover why the elder Andrews hanged himself. The discovery of that answer, Todd realises, involves coming as close as possible to his father, learning how his father’s mind worked, reading the books his father read—in short, merging with, becoming, his father insofar as possible. But this spirit of “inquiry” is also typical of the Oedipus myth. Barth highlights this in Giles Goat-Boy where the protagonist’s thirst for self-knowledge is analogous to that of Oedipus. In a mise en abyme scene in the novel, Giles, as a student of New Tammany College, attends a performance of The Tragedy of Taliped Decanus: an irreverent translation of Sophocles’ Oedipus, the King into the story of Taliped (swellfoot in Latin), ancient dean of Cadmus College. The tale of Taliped-Oedipus fulfils almost completely the archetypal phases of the hero myth, as codified by contemporary anthropological and myth studies. But Oedipus is transcendentally the tragic hero of rationalism, the man whose downfall is a function precisely of his insistence upon understanding and controlling his own performance as hero. In watching the tragedy of Taliped, George watches a supremely
appropriate metaphor for the tangled elements of his own drama, of his own rationalisation.

5.5.2.2 The book is the primal myth of the saviour, of the monster slayer, of the hero in all his primordial inconclusiveness--the plot of the book is not so much the recapitulation of the myth at this first level of reading, but rather out, and the hero's, very realisation that "recapitulation of primal myth" is the very activity in which he is engaged. George Giles, a boy raised among goats, as a goat, sets out for the main campus of the University--which is the world in the science-fiction locale of the novel, in order to become a "Grand Tutor--to become, that is, the latest in a long line of saviors and civilizing heroes whose history he has learned by heart and whose cyclic careers he will attempt to follow. The story of Giles Goat-Boy is the story of his frustrated attempts to live up to the great cycles of ancient mythography, failing each time to attain their completion until at last he completes them by the simple and shattering expedient of learning their ultimate mendacity, their terminal fictiveness.

5.5.3.1 Pynchon's equivalent for the Oedipus-rationalisation figure is, ironically and subversively a female: Oedipa, in The Crying of Lot 49. In this novel Pynchon seems to propose a complete reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex. Freud and Sophocles had studied the problem from the son's angle, laying stress upon the father-son conflict. As Maurice Courturier observes:

Here, the problem is viewed from Jocasta's angle: She is a castrating woman who wants to keep her men under her power and exacts endless proofs of admiration, love, and submission from them. She is basically
sterile. Oedipa had known men carnally, but has had no child. It might have been a relief to her if she had really been pregnant. Oedipus is a projection of her unfulfillable desires: he is not the agent but simply a victim. Hence the name Oedipa coined by Pynchon: She is the model, and Oedipus is only the pale reflection of her desires and frustrations" (1987, 28).

5.5.3.2 But the most significant detail one should note is Pynchon’s fondness for using trick names like Oedipa. "How are readers supposed to react to a woman named Oedipa?" wonders Alfred Mac Adam. He finds that Pynchon uses tricknames as a device with a specific purpose in mind. Since the Sophoclean or Freudian association to the name Oedipa is inevitable, and baffling, only an understanding of the device as a device and not as the knot which, once unravelled, opens the way to some deeper meaning, can make Pynchon’s aesthetics more comprehensible. The reader’s task is to understand the device, not to decipher it.

Pynchon’s onomastic punning produces a kind of Brechtian “alienation effect,” reminding the reader that what he is reading is a fiction, that the words here are only words. And words point, as inevitably as Oedipa points to Oedipus, to other words: it is the act of postulating an interpretation for those words, the act of conferring a particular meaning on them that, once again, defines the reader’s dilemma with regard to the text. The interpretation will, of course, tell more about the reader than it will about the text" (1978, 560).
5.6.0 Nevertheless, one obvious interpretation for the postmodern reader is that Pynchon might be pointing towards the ambiguous nature of versions of mythical hero/ines that makes the biological differences arbitrary and hinting that the original hero/ine is bound to be an androgyny. Subsequently Oedipa is not the only protagonist who carries an androgynous insinuation. Pynchon’s most popular heroine V. throws many such connotations.

5.6.1.1 Roger Henkle points out that: “Though Pynchon’s V. is female, the use of that initial coyly reminds one that the narrator of Nabokov’s The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941) is called simply ‘V.’” (1978, 98). As observed by him, V. in Sebastian Knight engages in an elaborate posthumous investigation of his half-brother’s secret life and in the process discovers that the half-brother’s last lover assumed several identities, just as Stencil’s father’s mysterious woman does. V.’s assuming of various identities too has got a mythical background, for, “‘V.’s a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth” (V 450). Woven into the opening sentences of chapter three of V. is a reference to Robert Graves’s The White Goddess, a thread which, if we pull it, seems to unravel much of the pattern of the V. episodes. For V. is Western man’s conception of woman. She is even more than that; she is, as Graves’ Goddess becomes, a symbol of the European humanist tradition.

5.6.1.2 Graves’s thesis is that the White Goddess in her many manifestations became the prevailing myth of most ancient European cultures. She represented fertility and the mysteries of femininity; she was the source of the power of early rulers and the mistress of the culture’s fortunes by reason of her influence over the seasons. The myth was
elaborated, Graves contends, in later Western religion and philosophy and became, in a sense, part of Western society’s “cultural unconscious.” As in V., Graves attributes a myriad of names and titles to his Goddess. And like V., who transforms into a sewer rat, the White Goddess “will suddenly transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag. Her names and titles are innumerable” (qtd. Fahy 1977, 8). If V. in its Roman numeral representation stands for number five, it is interesting to note that “the number five was sacred to the White Goddess. . . . Five represented the color and variety which nature gives to three-dimensional space, and which are apprehended by the five senses” (9). The White Goddess was often a love goddess of the sea; Venus (V-ness) was such a one, and the Florentine episode revolves around an abortive attempt to steal Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus” from the Western wall of the Uffizi. Venus, Graves notes, traditionally wore a five-figured comb, and such a comb is worn by V.

5.6.1.3 Though Stencil does not know “what sex V. might be, nor even what genus and species” (V 226), “Venus, we should not be too surprised to learn after reading Thomas Pynchon’s novel V. had hermaphroditic origins,” says Alvin Greenberg. He further explains that not only was she both the morning and the evening star, but she was once known as Lucifer. Hence as the two-faced guardian of our submergence into and emergence out of the dark, she took on a threateningly dual sexual stance before the singularity of man’s vision. Perhaps it was just a case of too much temptation for a man to bear twice a day: the recognition that following the celestial model meant that in order to be himself—at one with the unity of stars, planets, earth—he had to be herself too.
(1969, 58). The ideal of the androgyny expresses one of the most ancient concepts of western civilisation, that of the original, harmonious, sexually integrated constitution of the person before being divided into the artificial, externalised opposites of male and female. Thus the ideal of the androgyny vivifies humanity's yearning to return to that primal state of perfect interior balance. In M. H. Abram's words, it is the concept of "primordial man as a cosmic androgyny, who has disintegrated into the material and bisexual world of alien and conflicting parts, yet retains the capacity for recovering his lost integrity" (qtd. Bram 63).

5.6.2 Barth's version of the androgyny myth is through making his males and females sexually collaborate to produce a work of art which may recover for them their "lost integrity." Sexual collaboration to produce a new fiction began in Giles Goat-Boy when the Goat-Boy enjoys final passage inside both computer and Anastasia and she becomes not only his principal disciple, but the keeper of his faith advertised in the Revised New Syllabus. Bi-gendered team composition continued in Lost in the Funhouse, where the narrator/writer of "Life Story" engages in critical commentary with his wife regarding the success of his efforts. In Chimera, however, Barth places special emphasis on the creation of fiction as collaborative effort, drawing the parallel between sexual and imaginative congress. The stories of Chimera are all products of couples' conversational interaction, beginning with Scheherazade and the Genie's, and Dunyazade and Shah Zaman's story about making stories. The bulk of the "Perseid" is the product of dialogue between Calyxa and Perseus and Medusa and Perseus, and "Bellerophoniad" consists in large measure of talk between Bellerophon and Philonoee and Bellerophon and Melanippe. In
the later novels, as in *Lost in the Funhouse*, the oral voice is paramount. Marital and multigendered co-authorship is the leit motif of *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*, where couples write books and Scheherazade visits the twentieth-century Chesapeake tidewater region to save the day for a Barth-surrogate writer, just as the Genie does for her. In *LETTERS* Lady Amherst contributes to Ambrose's efforts in the formal process of novel writing, as well as inspiring him and in the process writing more pages of *LETTERS* than he.

5.7.0 The purpose in which Barth and Pynchon offer a demystified version of the received myths is for "the hierophany," that is as Charles Hollander defines, "the manifestation of the sacred in the profane, or every day, or 'waking world'" (1990, 51). This concept is pushed to an extreme when Barth and Pynchon bring down the sublime to the ludicrous through their sportive subversions. Funnily enough Pynchon uses rats as images of abject physicality to subvert the spiritual/physical hierarchy maintained in traditional Christian thought. In Keith Booker's opinion:

> Institutionalized religion has not fated well in modern literature. While some prominent modern writers (most notably T. S. Eliot) have been strong proponents of the civilizing virtues of organized religious belief, most have viewed religion as an oppressive social force and as an insult to human dignity. Writers involved in identifiably emancipatory political projects have consistently used the church as a prime symbol of the authoritarian structures they seek to subvert (1989, 21).
5.7.1.1 Pynchon’s deconstruction of hierarchies is especially clear in the conflation of rats and religion in the story of Father Fairing in V. During the dark depression years of the thirties, this priest became convinced that human civilization was in its last days, and that the world would soon be ruled by rats. “This being the case, Father Fairing thought it best for the rats to be given a head start . . . which meant conversion to the Roman Church” (V 118). So the good father descends into the New York sewer system, catechism and breviary in hand, to begin the conversion of the city’s rats to Catholicism. Fairing is supposedly working for the salvation of his rodent congregation, but he in fact quite literally feeds off them, killing and eating three of them, a symbolically appropriate number, per day for his own sustenance while in the sewers.

5.7.1.2 Finally, Pynchon even hints of a possible sexual relation between Father Fairing and the rat acolyte Veronica, undermining religious dogma with insinuations of an underlying sexual motivation. This also serves to deconstruct the hierarchical opposition between the physical and the spiritual upon which so much Christian doctrine is based. Rats represent the precise antithesis of the purely spiritual existence privileged by the Church. Rats suggest the physical aspects of human life that are often quite repressed and to which the spiritual Father finally succumbs. Succumbing thus, the Father dies unceremoniously under the sewer.

5.7.2.1 Death is also something real and physical as opposed to the spirituality of religion that offers hope against death in the form of resurrection. Hence, Pynchon’s (Gravity’s) “Rainbow” does not offer hope of renewal as it did once for the Biblical Noah. Nor does it indicate the mythical holy grail or a pot of gold at its end. It simply is a
premonition of the entropic descent. In the last paragraphs of the book, as the missile descends over Los Angeles, the light that burns out in the film projector freezes the frames of history. The end of Gravity’s Rainbow readies the ground for a final burial, this time not only for the older orders of Europe, but for all humanity. Michael Seidel opines:

Anticipated by the rocket falling on London in 1944 at the beginning of the book, fictionally realized by the launching of the V-2 from Nordhausen at the end of the book, and historically “collapsed” with the eschatological coming of the nuclear missile, the final page of Gravity’s Rainbow reveals the satirically entropic order. There is no holy grail, no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, only a parodic transcendence, a direct hit, and the strains of William Slothrop’s seventeenth-century hymn for the preterite.

The concluding dirge of Gravity’s Rainbow is the “crying” of everyone’s “lot” (1978, 210).

5.7.2.2 Everyone realises only in the end that the rocket is only a symbol of a false grail. Throughout the novel, the Schwarzgerat is viewed a kind of grail object for which the hero Slothrop and a number of others wander in quest. The precise nature of the device is never made clear but it is apparent when Slothrop finally meets Pokler that the designer himself has become disillusioned and even disinterested in the crown of his labour. Slothrop has undergone all sort of high adventure in his search for the Schwarzgerat, including near castration by the villainous Pointsman, and it seems somewhat odd at first when the besotted Pokler shakes him off with so little explanation. His only piece of real information is that the device is an “aromatic polymide” (GR 576), which Slothrop already
knew. But elsewhere there are repeated similar intimations that the quest is anticlimactic, the plastic grail in this anatomy of the Age of Plastics is indeed no more mysterious than its now disinterested maker indicates. Speer Morgan says,

It is clearer now why the Imipolex G "shroud" (751), which surrounds the passenger Gottfried in the rocket, is an aspect of the false "grail" for which Slothrop and others have searched—because it is synthetic, a product of aromatic chemistry, which every bit as convincingly and effectively as the old myths, rituals, and Marchen depicting intersections between this world and the other, promises to carry man beyond the rule of nature, beyond gravity, and if not to deny death then at least to make of it a spectacle beyond belief (1976, 210).

5.7.2.3 Pynchon undercuts the myth of Orpheus by relating the hero to Slothrop. As Slothrop "moseys" down to the mountain stream to retrieve his harmonica, he is linked with Orpheus. Orpheus made such enchanting music with his lyre that he charmed the wild beasts and made the trees and rocks move. He even opened the gates of Hades when he descended into the underworld to bring back to life his wife Eurydice. But failed in his attempt he lost all interest in women, and charmed the Thracian men with his music. In revenge the women of Thrace tore him to pieces. After the sub-section titled "Strung into the Apollonian dream," the novel's contemporary Orpheus has put down his harp. In the Orpheus myth, although Orpheus has been torn to pieces, his head rests in a cave where it sings day and might until Apollo himself asks it to be silent, taking the lyre to heaven to become a constellation. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop lays the harp aside just before the
rocket’s launch and his eventual dismemberment. Pynchon uses the Orpheus myth very much like the modernists when he tries to find a sort of parallel for the dismemberment of Slothrop, yet he is a typical postmodernist in his subversive use of the myth of Orpheus’s descent into the underworld. While Orpheus went to the underworld in search of his wife Slothrop gets into the sewage tunnels through the toilet in search of his harmonica. Thus Pynchon makes the sublime ludicrous. Whereas Orpheus was dismembered by women in their excessive and unreciprocated love for him; Slothrop exploits women for his sexual gratification but gets fragmented owing to his excessive, and in a sense, unreciprocated love for the rocket that is emblematic of the ultra modern technology that governs the present life.

5.8.0 Pynchon and Barth rewrite the stories of Biblical heroes in a technically advanced world. The name of Isaiah 2: 4 given by him by his hippie parents, in Pynchon’s *Vineland*, because of the passage’s prophecy of peace, takes on an ironic slant interpretation that he is trying to borrow money from Zoyd to set up a violence amusement park. Barth gives a revised version of the Christian hero in his *Giles Goat-Boy*. As embodied in the mythology of nations and tribes around the world, the story of the hero begins with virgin birth. The mother of the hero is a royal virgin, his father a king or god, and the circumstances of his conception unusual. At his birth, his father or maternal grandfather attempts to kill him, often because of a prophecy of the hero’s eventual displacement of the father. Abandoned in the wilds or set afloat on a basket or box to die, the infant hero often has his leg injured in some way before he is discovered, spirited away, and raised by foster parents in a far country.
5.8.1 Giles's mother is in name and fact a virgin, Virginia Hector, the unwed daughter of the Chancellor of New Tammany College at the time, Reginald Hector. "Seduced" by the lustful automatic computer WESCAC, she is impregnated by osmosis, as it were, without so much as a kiss. The maternal grandfather is fearful of Giles's Prenatal-Aptitude-Test phrase "Pass All Fail All" and abandons him to die in WESCAC's tape lift, where, in that box--and basket--like cage, his leg is "bunged up" by the tape cans, resulting in a permanent gimp. A negro assistant librarian discovers the infant hero there, rescues him, and carries him to Max Spielman at the goat barns, where he is raised as a goat.

5.8.2 John Tilton argues that the name GILES has a deeper significance in the meaning of the acronym which stands for "Grand-Tutorial Ideal: Laboratory Eugenical Specimen." "Since the semen constituting the GILES was "taken from all New Tammany males between puberty and senility" (321), Giles' true father is not WESCAC, merely the instrument of impregnation, but collective man, with whose seed WESCAC infused Virginia Hector. Almost literally, then, "Giles" mean "son of man."(1970, 96). Tilton further observes that essentially, Giles' learning to accept himself is a process of humanisation. Conceived in mythological terms, it is a process of rebirth; and in this process Anastasia figures prominently. He explains:

The name Anastasia is Greek for "resurrection," an apt characterization of her function in the parody of the hero myth as the Earth Goddess in union with whom the hero is reborn. In the hero myth, the Earth Goddess is the world creatrix, magna mater, source of life; and the hero's meeting with
the goddess is a test of his ability to win the boon of love, *amor fati* or love of life itself. Their sacred marriage represents the hero’s total mastery of life: it is a union of opposites signifying the attainment of wholeness and completion and constituting regeneration and rebirth.” (101-102).

5.8.3 Further, the novel *Giles Goat-Boy* or *The Revised New Syllabus* as it is subtitled, dealing with the heroic history of Goat-Boy resembles that of Christ’s as said in *The New Testament*. And the scape-goat archetypal figure is subverted in the goat-boy prototype. As Zack Bowen observes:

We are invited to entertain the idea that the computer tapes from which the text of the book is purportedly set are the Revised New Testament, an account of Giles’s life, just as the New Testament is an account of Christ’s. Both documents are of doubtful authorship; both have their challengers; both have been worked over, rearranged, and revised by scholars; and both have generated their own disciples—all with their own variations and interpretations of the stories, as we learn from the posttapes. By replacing the scrolls with his own history, the Revised new Syllabus, Giles has given campus scholars and hagiographers a whole modern realm of data to draw upon for their reformulation of the monomyth (1994, 46-47)

5.9.0 Pynchon through his parodic use of myth offers his criticism on the contemporary American society. In this respect, Pynchon achieves the dark humour of the absurd by evoking nostalgia for the American dream and turning it into a nightmare. The myths associated with a new Garden of Eden decline to urban legends that connect man to
the machine and this world to hell instead of heaven; the pastoral scenes of the New World and the frontiers are converted by modern American entrepreneurs (like Donald Trump) into shopping malls; the desire for freedom and peace (which caused many of the New Age movement to seek Nirvana or "absorption into the supreme spirit") is transformed by New Age enthusiasts into a pattern of insular existences and materialistic and technological interests; the quest for family unity—the "little commonwealth," so important in the history of England and America— is treated casually, especially by characters like Frensi, who leaves husband and daughter.

5.9.1 Pynchon also uses the concept of entropy as a figure of speech to describe the running down, as Oedipa discovers, of the American Dream. By naming the town Pierce founded "San Narciso..." Pynchon's direct evocation of the Narcissus myth is a clear statement that Pierce's estate and what it represents is a culture in love with a dream—image of itself. In the myth, Narcissus spurned the love of Echo, who was doomed to repeat only the last words of other voices. Pierce, like Narcissus, prefers the "deep vistas of space and time... allegorical faces that never were"—colored windows of mute stamps—to Oedipa's spoken love. The Echo Courts where she stays become the scene of her first adultery, and—it is suggested—the beginning of her escape from the image of the tower which defines her at the end of chapter one. She will no longer be an Echo, but will try to say first things about real facts.

5.9.2 Pynchon's use of Narcissus myth is very much influenced by McLuhan's interpretation of it. McLuhan establishes the identity between closed systems and narcissism by relating the myth to its root meaning:
“Narcissus” is from the Greek word *narcosis* or numbness. The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system (1964, 5).

5.9.3 Pynchon incorporates this interpretation of the myth as social metaphor into *The Crying of Lot 49*. When Oedipa drives into San Narciso, she feels she is in the other side of the soundproof glass in a radio station; and the businesses are silent and paralysed. The road along with which San Narciso stretches Oedipa fancies is a “hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain and whatever passes, with a city, for pain.” In the Echo Courts themselves, “nothing moved” (CL 26-27). As Thomas Schaub comments:

> American culture, in short, is numb and addicted to what protects it from pain (and, ultimately, death). In McLuhan’s terms, our culture has become addicted to the material forms which the American Dream has assumed. Of course, the dream and the culture, like Narcissus and his image, are inseparable; and it is in this convolution that Oedipa finds herself. In the spray can caroming off the walls of the motel bathroom we have both an image of entropy—a region of fast molecules within the can exhausting
itself within the confines of the bathroom—and an image of human life threatened albeit comically, by the systems it has created (1981, 54)

5.10.0 To sum up, embodying the postmodern sensibility, the use of myth by Barth and Pynchon differ from that of the modernists like Pound, Eliot and Yeats. Where myth can structure and order a chaotic reality for the modernists, the postmodernists question the very mode of perception of reality through myth and by deflating the authority/authenticity they equate the status of myth with reality. In this way, Barth exposes the self-reflexive, realistic version of myth. Pynchon does the same by giving mythical status to contemporary figures. For this, he evokes myth of popular culture, especially, the television. Though Barth shows fondness for capsizing privileged myths by fabricating them to his fictional ends, he prefers to reject them and substitute them by his own creations and narratives. Of course, these fictionalists, do make use/abuse of the classical/biblical myths of Oedipus, Orpheus and Narcissus. But they are used in such a manner to parody the contemporary American society that has perversely become narcissistic. It was also suggested in this chapter that Barth and Pynchon puncture myth owing to its unreliable, metanarrative aspect of it. The following chapter holds this premise for discussion in terms of textual fluidity.