

## FLESHING OEDIPA OUT

### *How to Read “The Crying of Lot 49” (and How Not To)*

*The Crying of Lot 49* is Thomas Pynchon’s shortest book, and some of its flaws probably result from its compactness. The jokey names, for instance, a feature of all of his books, can annoy some readers more here; I think it is really the sketchiness of the structure that grates—though less obtrusively to an average reader’s consciousness, perhaps, so that the names are what seem to cause the annoyance. The book’s shortness is probably what, with Pynchonian irony, attracts a certain type of reader who is less than prepared to contend with anything but the surface.

The problem that Pynchon did not quite solve (though he is in my opinion too hard on himself in his retrospective comment<sup>1</sup>) is that while the book needed to be concise and is in fact the right length, the patented Pynchonian unraveling of the plot was harder to achieve in so short a space. The reader can become, like the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, “saturated” (177—all references to the first edition), overwhelmed by detail. Among other lapses, the concision leads to several clunky topic sentences (“Things then did not delay in turning curious” [44]). The introduction of an (imaginary?) postal service that has maintained itself for centuries in a shadowy parallel existence outside official history, is especially clumsy, and evokes sentences rankly amateurish, for example: “So began, for Oedipa, the languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero” (54; I will use this spelling throughout, not *Trystero*). Neither the nifty metaphor nor the internal rhyme of *sinister* with *Tristero* suffices to counteract the lameness of the sentence,

and the floral image is in any case immediately dropped. The trope that is quickly slipped into place, of an ultimately equally sinister striptease, is so well developed in the rest of the paragraph, however, that one may forget how badly it started: the magician flubs the opening flourish but then pulls the trick off with the panache one wants and expects. (A certain kind of critic might be tempted to find intention here; more likely, I bet, Pynchon was conned into publishing, as a follow-up to the success of *V.*, a story that needed work. He apparently told his agent that he hoped she could find “some sucker” to take it.<sup>2</sup>)

Yet the narrative voice successfully catches the tone of a fable immediately with “One summer day” (9)—appropriately for a story on this small (for Pynchon) a scale about someone named Oedipa; it also seems right, though unlike a traditional fable, that the narrator apparently knows only what Oedipa knows—it is more in keeping with the sort of modern fable that tells of the quest of such knights errant as Philip Marlowe. As a friend pointed out to me,<sup>3</sup> the narrative structure is like that of Raymond Chandler’s novels, built around a series of meetings of the protagonist with others, most of whom then drop out of the story.

Before going further, I want to say that this essay seeks to situate itself among the “preterite” of the Web, as opposed to the academic “elect.” It records one person’s (admittedly critically informed) responses to one of Pynchon’s books. Some of its perceptions are unoriginal and well established in the academic literature, but as was noticed almost from the start, the nature of Pynchon’s writing, both his “message” and his methods of conveying it, conduce to a cultic approach. Many of the fans—of varying levels of cleverness, but some very high ones—expend their energies in involuted sleuthing and elaboration of the cult, but seem largely uninterested in what the academic *quasi*-cultists (who are protected to a degree by the discipline imposed by their discipline), engaged in what you might call “parallel play,” have learned. For example, the

name Pierce Inverarity still absorbs much brain power when as early as 1975 the late Richard Poirier had discovered that there was a well-known philatelist by the name of Pierce and that *invert rarity* is a term of art in the world of stamps.<sup>4</sup> (Poirier actually got the first word slightly wrong, as “inverse,” for which this most plausible of the theories proposed is heaped with scorn, as only an academic can, by the author of *A Companion to “The Crying of Lot 49”*—who proceeds to find a connection with St. Peter/*petrus* to be on “surer footing.”<sup>5</sup>)

So yes, “play.” One of the main aims of this essay is to enact *playfully* the kind of quest that Pynchon invites and then lampoons: the pleasures of reading him include giving play to the desire to seek the hidden message; the danger, as with most intense pleasures, is that it can become an end in itself.

Positioning myself outside the academy (he said, as if he had a choice) gives me the luxury of limiting my close reading mostly to the first chapter. For perfectly legitimate reasons, this would be frowned on in an academic essay. Not that I will ignore the rest of the book, but an academic is usually expected to keep the whole work in view as much as possible and to aim at being definitive. But if anyone’s work calls definitiveness into question, it is Pynchon’s; in any case, however this comes off, I have neither the ability nor the desire to make a defining statement about *The Crying of Lot 49*. I believe, maybe fondly, that since one of my goals is to leave the reader the wherewithal to read the rest of the book, enriched and thus enabled by very detailed testimony about my own adventure, I am justified in leaving it at that.

As in most of Thomas Pynchon’s books, what I called the “unraveling” of the plot of *Lot 49* actually moves in opposing directions, and one of the book’s beauties is how his customary strategy is made thematic. In the end, Oedipa is left waiting (and so is the reader, naturally) to find out if the motion of the plot will find its focus on a single point or expand to include the

entire world—will it end with a tight close-up or an all-encompassing long shot? Its indeterminacy could make it *both* (like the two endings of Metzger/Baby Igor’s movie *Cashiered*, the happy one that Oedipa knows belongs to the movie’s Hollywood genre [34] and the surrealistically tragic one that her perverse drunken bet seems to call into existence [42–43]). These *superimposed* alternatives might bring to mind both the gyre structure of Yeats’s mythology—there are resonances of “A Second Coming” in *Lot 49* (the essays in Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* are exactly contemporaneous, though the title essay came out after Pynchon’s book)—and also, for once appropriately outside the realm of science, the Heisenberg principle.

A portion of the critical literature (by fans and academics alike) seems to use the book as fodder for some theory or other—Pynchon’s exemplary refusal to cooperate in the literary mosh pit has, as I say, not prevented his cooptation by academia, where it may seem to some that like other dangerous fauna, his stuffed effigy is kept in a locked glass case—so one is grateful for anyone who treats the book as in itself worthy of discussion.

A case in point, Stefan Mattessich’s *Lines of Flight*<sup>6</sup> presents a reading of *Lot 49* that I find quite convincing (naturally, it’s quite similar in its broad outlines to my own). Unfortunately, even so thoughtful an academic treatment of the book has to resubmerge its critical insights in a system of discourse based on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s work, especially *Anti-Oedipus*. The problem is not that the philosophical system in question is bogus (a conclusion easy to come to from its style, and very tempting) or that it is completely uncongenial to me; its mere resistance to our state of being is by itself of value—and its critique comes from a direction generally similar to Pynchon’s. But Mattessich seems unaware that it has set up a parallel alternate structure to the one it critiques—not unlike various “Satanist” traditions’ relation to

Christianity, and especially ironically, not unlike the Tristero's relation to the visible power structure of conventional history in the fictional world of the book. It can be argued within Mattessich's framework that the Tristero alternative provides no escape because its evasion of the conventional power structure only establishes another road to the same goal. What's especially troubling is that by clothing his critical insights in the language of a priestly cult (no matter how rebellious or perspicacious its vision), Mattessich desecularizes the knowledge. It is deposited like a relic behind a veil at the top of a tower. If not correctly or fairly, but still excusably, someone might suspect that the aim is to preserve the sacred knowledge from dissemination to the great majority of people. Pynchon's aim has always been the opposite, however difficult most readers find it to read him.

One nonacademic Pynchonian, Charles Hollander, states the key assumption that governs his reading of *Lot 49* and others of Pynchon's works, and if not the most common critical stance, it is (as the various websites show), unfortunately, a prevalent one:

Misdirection has worked this way in Pynchon's fiction since his first short story, leading us from something in the text to something outside the text.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of *Lot 49*, according to Hollander, what is "encoded" is the Kennedy assassination. (Oh dear.) I strongly suspect that this approach is pretty close to what Pynchon aims to expose (as exemplified by the post-Kennedy assassination milieu, with its kudzulike growth of conspiracy theories, such that we could no longer see not only the forest for the trees but the trees themselves); to state it baldly, that at the very least, the epistemological problem is an inescapable condition of modern mass society. Pynchon may even think it is a condition of

human life in general, but his focus on the twentieth century (with an excursion to the transition to modernity/U.S. hegemony in *Mason & Dixon*) better supports the tighter frame. His abiding interest in information theory (not to mention popular culture, which is—dare I even suggest such a thing?—intended to be taken largely at face value) suggests to me that coded (“mediated,” as we say now) communication would be something he wants us to get past if he is indeed a Luddite, as he once suggested<sup>8</sup>; or if that’s not possible, that we need to become more deeply aware of the ways in which information is lost to noise in transmission. To that end, he has contributed greatly to our sense (still not adequate) of our epistemological and thus economic/political predicament.

That the inside narrative of Oedipa Maas comes to no conclusion Hollander takes as evidence for his own view: it must point outside itself. But one wonders whether he started with that perspective and as a result overlooks some pretty obvious internal evidence that points to an *unspoken* internal conclusion. He is certainly a close reader (if a tad myopic), and seems to appreciate the significance of the final sentence of the striptease paragraph:

Or would [The Tristero] instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked to Oedipa’s, smile gone malign and pitiless; bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear?  
(54)

But when the final “terrible nakedness” is revealed (an event that truly is outside the narrative), Oedipa and the reader will be left *inside* the conundrum, for the one thing that

will *not* happen is that “its smile, then, [will] be coy and . . . it [will] flirt away harmlessly backstage . . . and leave her [and us] in peace” (54).

Hollander’s work sometimes has more value than I have been giving it credit for. In a talk given at a conference in Tours,<sup>9</sup> he reads through all of early Pynchon and shows that far from being a “slow learner” (the self-effacing title of Pynchon’s collected early stories), Pynchon had his themes and tropes in high school—actually, as one would have expected. But early in that useful essay, Hollander takes time to muse about whether McClintock Sphere is, as some have thought, based on Ornette Coleman, because both Sphere and Coleman play white saxophones. Hollander thinks the sax might be a “red herring” that Pynchon deliberately inserted into *V.* to mislead readers from the true ID (i.e., Thelonious *Sphere* Monk). Accept for the sake of argument his given, that Pynchon plants false leads in his books; Hollander never considers the obvious possibility that “Sphere” is the “red herring”—for Hollander there is always a code to be cracked. But Pynchon’s sleuths, from Herbert Stencil, through Oedipa, to Larry Sportello and Maxine Tarnow, all fail to crack any code, and we are meant to take seriously the possibility that there is none to crack; the concluding pages of *Lot 49* are quite explicit on this score.

It is a mistake to think that the riddle that occupies Oedipa is identical to the one the reader has to answer. Maybe in the end—or “after” it—the two are related in that they both concern Oedipa, but if people didn’t seem to confound them so thoroughly, one would think it too obvious to mention that her “Who am I?” and the reader’s “Who is she?” are not the same question. We’re told early on that we will learn little more about either Pierce or Oedipa, “but [only] about what remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away” (20). If the process of revelation in the book resembles a striptease, Oedipa’s putting on all her clothes in the attempt to

forestall Metzger's seduction (36) is a comical and, naturally, futile act of resistance—but to what? to her “destiny”? That is the language of fable and myth.

So who is Mrs Oedipa Maas (née . . . )? The narrative voice, while third-person, has a tic that we learn to associate with Oedipa's point of view, a quick correction of statement; for example, it introduces Dr Hilarius as “her shrink or psychotherapist” (16). This can be understood to represent on the surface the thematic uncertainty of the story, its hesitancy to be definite.

Because Oedipa's is the sole point of view we have access to, we know quite a lot about her. But Pynchon takes seriously the fact that a person doesn't go around indulging in exposition about herself; he rejects the sort of pat conveyance of information through memory that we accept as a convention of third-person but nonomniscient narrative, so there are huge gaps in what we know about her, as well. We don't even know whether we don't know because Oedipa doesn't happen to think of these bits of information or because she herself doesn't know them. For example, if she is like her namesake, does she know who her parents are? We sure don't. In fact, we don't know much about her before the present, aside from some memories of her affair with Pierce Inverarity and her recalling having once been a giggly girl like the teenyboppers that her husband has flings with (45–46). (We do know that probably unlike the underage girls her husband risks jail with, she went to Cornell sometime around her giggly period [10].) We know she is 28 years old—Pynchon's age in 1965–66—because she thinks to herself that when the seven years of bad luck brought on by the can of hairspray breaking the bathroom mirror at Echo Courts are over, “I'll be 35” (41). But the momentary terror at not seeing herself in the mirror before she recalls what happened also links with the cartoonlike image of the “silvery, reticulated bloom of glass [left] to hang a second before it fell jingling into the sink” (37) to suggest that our



fragmentary knowledge of her may not be unlike her own. (But how can it be that she never finds out how or even when Pierce died?)

What else do we know about Oedipa? She is cultured enough for a Bartók tune to go through her head (10). (Hollander gets this entirely wrong because of his external focus: what matters is not the provenance of the tune nor its political meaning for Hungarians of the composer's generation but that it is played by the woodwinds—Pynchon's adjective *disconsolate* is exactly right, as he unusually for a word person usually is about music.) We know she is very attractive because practically every male she meets wants to have sex with her; she was the girlfriend, or mistress, of a very rich man, so of course she's good-looking. Some have proposed that her married name plays on "ma [my] ass," which it is averred could relate to how her good looks cause men to view her; seems like a bit of a stretch. It is true that an excerpt published separately was called "The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity." Aside from referring to her in her bodily aspect—and note that near the end she says of herself, maybe even intending the pun, "I'm only being a busybody" (182)—the title of the excerpt calls up the question, who does that make Pierce? (At least his testament is the initial source of her *bedevilment*.)

Oedipa is highly intelligent; she reads book reviews in *Scientific American* (10) and she catches on quickly when someone is trying to put something over on her. Her thinking in the later stages of the book is impressive, and it is noteworthy that her anxiety about what she is closing in on (or is closing in on her) only sharpens her intelligence; she can still hold opposing ideas in her mind at once—four of them, in fact (170–71). So while she entertains thoughts that could be considered paranoid, we are fairly certain that she isn't simply suffering from paranoia. Anyway, in Pynchon, paranoia can be the most rational response to reality.

Her implicit initial question about her role as executor (“or she supposed executrix” [9]) of Pierce’s estate—“Why me?”—evolves or, rather, is elaborated by Oedipa, but in its initial form it is still at the core of her concerns at the end (170ff), and it remains for the reader a primary question. Yet the Chandlerian dropping away of those on whom she would like to rely (Mucho, Metzger, Driblette—even Hilarius—and first of all, of course, Pierce Inverarity) means that her view of her situation can’t change much from the image of the “captive maiden” in the tower first evoked in connection with her seeing the painting “Bordando el Manto Terrestre” (Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle) by Remedios Varo when she was in Mexico City with Pierce (21). The description of the painting is the climax of the first chapter, and I will discuss it at length later on (the painting is reproduced on page 20, below).

Like Oedipa, who identifies with the young women in the painting who embroider the tapestry of the world (as Pynchon interprets it [21]); like English professor Emory Bortz, who, as his name suggests, gains deeper knowledge by wearing away at the surface of historical memory, an approach that also involves *shaping* but one different from Oedipa’s embroidery (or, as she comes to suspect—and as the chiming of *Emory Bortz/embroidery* may suggest—not that different); the reader, too, is expected to run the risk of outright invention in hopes of discovery.

So the random-seeming memories that flash through Oedipa’s mind, in the book’s first paragraph, when she has received notice of her appointment as executor, and after trying “to feel as drunk as possible” (9) doesn’t work—

a hotel room in Mazatlán whose door had just been slammed, it seemed forever; a sunrise over the library slope at Cornell University that nobody out on it had seen because the slope faces west; a dry, disconsolate tune from the fourth movement of

the Bartók Concerto for Orchestra; a whitewashed bust of Jay Gould that Pierce kept over the bed on a shelf so narrow for it she'd always had the hovering fear it would someday topple on them (10)—

can, with a willingness to allow one's fancy free rein, become scenes in Oedipa's relationship with Pierce: the end, when Oedipa stormed out of their hotel room (what did Pierce do? what did he say?); then, back to the beginning when the middle-aged rich man first seduced the co-ed and they spent the night on the library slope to be away from the prying eyes of her roommate; the music they had been listening to in her room the evening before when, seeing the sadness in her face, he took her hand in his . . . and then the black comedy of the bust that personified ruination; that his fortune, built on making shady deals, "keep[ing the ball] bouncing" (178), relying on chance, was subject to that same blind force; that the affair's days were always numbered. Wondering from the last memory if Pierce "died, among dreams, crushed by the only ikon in the house," Oedipa laughs, "out loud and helpless: You're so sick, Oedipa, she told herself, or the room, which knew" (10).

As has been widely noted, the narrative calls attention from the start to words as collections of letters (Oedipa's nickname, Oed, as in the dictionary; her husband's radio station, KCUF; Hilarius's LSD; the closeness of *sinister* to *Tristero* mentioned previously; and maybe even the distant echo of *Oedipa Maas* in *such a captive maiden*, not to mention *demon*—they needn't have been conscious for Pynchon) so that "heavy" themes like *waste* and *death* come to be neutralized and naturalized as acronyms. (In the present era of acronymic organizations, phone numbers, and even federal legislation, this seems less noteworthy than it still might have in the sixties.) Usually an acronym is devised to put a memorable word at the service of more complex

information. But suppose the primary meaning of the words is *not* as acronyms but as themselves: Let's take Pynchon at face value for a change. As with the Tristero forgeries (which are "rarities" but not "invert rarities"—they do, however, involve a *transposition error* in the word *potsage*) that hide their slight differences from other stamps in plain sight, DEATH is not *primarily* an acronym of DON'T EVER ANTAGONIZE THE HORN (121). The book is set in motion by a death, after all—and say, isn't it odd that Oedipa laughs at the thought? She then "[tries] to think back"—to when, she is informed, she was named executor in "a codicil dated a year ago"—"to whether anything unusual had happened around then" (10); she "wondered, wondered, shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn't she be first to admit it?) more or less identical" (11), and the theme of *waste*—maybe even the sound of the word: "**wondered . . . days . . . first**"—emerges just below the surface. (The pervasive motif of shuffling/sorting has long been remarked.)

Once the reader becomes attuned to words as such, the names cease to annoy and add instead to an ever more resonant narrative fabric; the law firm handling Pierce's estate, for example:

Warpe           Immediately following Oedipa's comment about being "sick," this suggests that Pierce also had a *warped* sense of humor, and it is confirmed once Oedipa remembers the phone call from Pierce "last year at three or so one morning" (11), but *warp* may also be a thread that is picked up in the reference to Varo's painting.

Wistfull       Oedipa's mood during the day as she shuffles through her memory.

Kubitschek,  
and  
McMingus     The first two dialects Pierce does in the phone call are Transylvanian and Negro: the first of those names is actually Czech, but the best-known possessor of that



name, president of Brazil from 1956 to 1961, who among other things shared with Pierce Inverarity an interest in land development, might have suggested a famous Transylvanian by his appearance; the second name, beyond recalling a well-known African American musician, may signal that one should expect the narrative to adopt the playful, improvisatory quality of jazz).

It's not hard to imagine Pierce coming up with the comic conceit of calling (in the middle of the night) from the offices of the law firm that represented him: "I'll be Kubitschek first; then McMingus will get on the phone. . . ."

But see how easy it is to get diverted to things incidental to the story? Pynchon intends that the reader experience the compulsion to make connections as a kind of centrifugal force but not that the reader get lost in the process.

Motifs in Pynchon can be more straightforward than some of those mentioned; the main elements of the book's title have all attracted some attention as verbal motifs. (Maybe it goes with the territory, but for some reason, the common, slightly substandard expression *a lot* has surprisingly great significance for a number of those who pursue this train of thought.)

*Crying* is what one would expect Oedipa to be doing when she hears of Pierce's death, so it's notable that she in fact laughed helplessly and only later "cried in an access of helplessness"

(12)—note that *cry* means not “weep” but “speak with some emotion” here—and that this crying is ostensibly over her feeling at a loss as to how to fulfill her duties as executor. (Just as the sense of *cry* is allowed to shift from *weep* to *speak with emotion*, she may well be displacing for her husband’s benefit, whether consciously or not, her genuine sadness into this more acceptable channel.) She is next described as crying (weeping) in response to the Varo painting—wondering if her tears could be trapped by her bubble shades so that she will continue to see reality mediated (“refracted” [21]) by them. With a characteristically Pynchonian linkage by shape—in this case, a “spherical cap,” that is, a section of the surface of a sphere bounded by a circle—the tears filling the bubble shades are connected with the embroidered fabric in the painting spilling out the windows, “seeking hopelessly [echoing *helpless*] to fill the void,” (21) which falls into the shape of part of a globe:

for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth  
were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (21)

The filling up of the sunglasses would mean she “could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever . . . from cry to cry” (21), into the future. Though described at the end of chapter 1, crying in front of the painting is chronologically her first cry, and thus should be considered the initiation of the series that eventuates in the crying of lot 49 that Oedipa awaits at the end, suggesting that the ultimate cry is not merely the offering of something at auction but a catharsis as well.

The first cry mentioned, at Oedipa’s approach to her husband, Wendell “Mucho” Maas, is interrupted, however, by the first reference to the used-car *lot* where he had formerly worked.

(The structure of the first chapter consistently uses the narrative nodes formed by digression or diversion to introduce key ideas, as we shall see.) Though well in the past, this job still haunts Mucho because, as Oedipa says, he's "too sensitive" (12), not only about the generally bad reputation of used-car salesmen, once a watchword for the worst kind of huckster, but also because of the inherent sadness of the stories that he either hears or imagines about what brings people to sell their cars (13–14). Later in the book, he tells Oedipa this was summed up for him in the image of the creaking sign of the National Automobile Dealers Association (N.A.D.A., i.e., *nada*, or nothing) (144). Oedipa, comparing her role to that of a combat veteran's wife, has to comfort him after the bad dreams he still has about the lot (15). This intense digression encourages the reader to expand the simple concept of *lot* (a piece of real estate) to encompass its wider connotation of destiny or fortune.

The word that sums up the sad process in which people trade in vehicles that sum up their sad lives, their lost hopes and their defeats, in exchange for vehicles that sum up other people's lives in the same way may give the reader pause: "To Mucho it was horrible. Endless, convoluted *incest*" (14; my italics). This seems somehow connected with what we see throughout the book: Oedipa either arouses sexual interest in most of the men she meets or (at least with Metzger, the lawyer from Warpe, Wistfull who is co-executor) has sex—but this is not the case with Mucho. Even her sexual relationship with Pierce is quite vividly evoked by her worry over the bust of Jay Gould falling on them—despite Oedipa's fantasy of Pierce's death in his sleep, the more likely cause of the bust falling would have been its being jostled by sexual activity in the bed. She does dream about "Mucho, her husband [note the tic] making love to her on a soft white beach that was not part of any California she knew"—that's the complete description—much later (101), when their relationship seems to be over; maybe that's why, because it's over. It's

almost as if they are more like sister and brother. There might be some residual guilt on Oedipa's part, maybe also some jealousy on Mucho's about Pierce (16)—or is that only Oedipa's guilty imagination? Only later does Oedipa allow her true anger over Mucho's teenyboppers to show (144). Nearly the sole evidence of a physical relationship is her holding him to comfort him after his bad dreams about the used-car lot (15), as one would with a child. When Dr Hilarius calls in the middle of the night, he awakens “both of them” (16), but then Mucho disappears completely for the remainder of chapter 1; when she leaves for San Narcisco at the beginning of chapter 2, he is “enigmatic . . . sad, but not desperate” (23).

The digression into Mucho's history also establishes for the first (and pretty much the only) time a clear chronology of events in the book, and the use of the number 7, its multiples, and of its square, 49, are introduced in the course of it. Recall that we will soon learn that Oedipa is 28. Mucho worked at the used-car lot for 2 years; even though this is almost 5 years in the past (the time he has been a disk jockey), he is still having those dreams. So he started working at the lot 7 years ago. He had been at KCUF for 2 years when he married Oedipa, so they have been married 3 years; her affair with Pierce ended a year before her marriage to Mucho, so that was 4 years ago. (One commenter on such elements as Miles's haircut and getup [27], and the reference to “I Want to Kiss Your Feet,” by Sick Dick and the Volkswagens [= “beetles”] [23], wants to place the action in 1964, that is, at the height of Beatlemania, but then Oedipa and Pierce would have been in Mexico City in 1960, *before* the Varo triptych was completed [1961] and put on view. In fact, if the affair ended 4 years before, then the book is set slightly in the future, in 1967–68, because the Varo was not exhibited till after her death in 1963. For what it's worth, 1967 is divisible by 7.)



What we don't have is any clear information about when Oedipa's affair with Pierce started; if it started when she was at Cornell, it was not likely to have lasted *less* than 3—meaning it started at least 7 years ago, when she was 21 (and presumably about to graduate). After the clear, if diffusely introduced, chronology, the description of Oedipa's state of mind (20) when the affair started in fact involves (once you notice it) a weird fudging of temporality. As one finds frequently in Pynchon, the comedy of the description of Pierce climbing the tower in this passage indicates its seriousness and significance.

Some later uses of 7 and its multiples (none of any great significance) are: Mr Thoth is 91 years old, as was his grandfather (91); the period covered by the forgeries in Pierce's stamp collection is rounded off as 70 years by Oedipa, and the time from the founding of the Thurn and Taxis to the most recent forgery (*c.* 1290–1954) is about 665 years (which Genghis Cohen rounds off to “an 800-year tradition” by mistake—his or Pynchon's?) (both 98); after the war, Dr Hilarius slept three hours a night and “spent the other 21 at the forcible acquisition of [the Freudian] faith” (138); Bortz tells Oedipa that the account of being waylaid by Tristero brigands is “around Chapter Seven” of Dr Diocletian Blobb's *Peregrinations* (157); Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera waged his guerilla war against Jan Hinckart for seven years, 1578–85 (159)—and does the “300 years of the house [of Tristero]'s disinheritance” (180) stand for a *mistaken* “280” years (really 380, 1585–1965)?

The next interruption in chapter 1 is another “three-in-the-morning” phone call, this time from Dr Hilarius (who sounds “like Pierce doing a Gestapo officer” [16]—again [see 11].) Oedipa's half-waking first thought seems to be that it's Pierce calling, but beside their telephonic habits, the accented syllables of their names, *Inverarity* and *Hilarius*, link them. True to his name and like Pierce, he is another joker in the deck, and he is calling to ask punningly if she

will be “a hundred-and-fourth for the bridge” (17)—*Die Brücke*—an experimental program of giving LSD and other hallucinogens to suburban housewives like Oedipa, the “bridge inward” (17). (I suspect that the arithmetic progression, LSD-25 [17], Hilarius’s face number 37 [18], and the title’s 49, if not mere coincidence, is just a bit of authorial funnin’—if intentional, it may be the sort of thing Pynchon came to dislike [37 was also the unchanging temperature in his early story “Entropy”]. Then again, the next term, 61, is the year of Varo’s triptych and when Emory Bortz got to see the unbowdlerized version of the *Courier’s Tragedy* [151], a-and 1861, the year that Tristero refugees from the 1849 reaction are well established in the U.S. [171] . . . Sorry.)

Hilarius introduces the theme of “seeing things” when Oedipa objects that there are “half a million” other housewives who might participate and he responds,

“We want you.” Hanging in the air over her bed she now beheld the well-known portrait of Uncle that appears in front of all our post offices [NB], his eyes gleaming unhealthily, his sunken yellow cheeks most violently rouged, his finger pointing between her eyes. I want you. She had never asked Dr Hilarius why, being afraid of all he might answer.

“I am having a hallucination now, I don’t need drugs for that.” (17)

The theme soon undergoes a Pynchonian bifurcation into seeing things that aren’t and that *are* there. This puts some readers on a seesaw that they never get off.

Oedipa can’t get back to sleep after Hilarius’s call because Uncle Sam is replaced in her mind by Hilarius’s “truly alarming” “Fu-Manchu” face (number 37), so she is thoroughly wasted for her meeting the next morning with the family lawyer, Roseman, who she hopes will help her

with being an executrix (or even do the work). Roseman (like the other lawyers in the book, he has only a surname), wants to be a successful trial lawyer like Perry Mason but can't, so he spends his free time (such as the minutes before Oedipa arrives unexpectedly) working on an essay that he hopes will destroy the fictional lawyer's popularity. They go out to lunch and Roseman tries to play footsie, but Oedipa is wearing boots and ignores it; then she easily dismisses his plea for her to run away with him; back at the office he describes her duties as an executor.

Roseman, as the foregoing summary tries to show, serves largely as comic relief between Hilarius's call and the climactic passage of chapter 1 that revolves around the Varo triptych, though the joke is thematic, a lawyer's inability to deal with reality. And his meeting with Oedipa does end with his pointed and—because we know that this is exactly why she's reluctant to get involved with Pierce's estate but Roseman doesn't—unconsciously ironic question. Sensing her reluctance, he asks (Pynchon likes to end scenes with questions, or questions and answers), “But aren't you even interested . . . in what you might find out?” (20).

The centerpiece of the Varo triptych, shows six golden-haired young women sitting in a tower, creating the world in the form of embroidery on the basic stuff of the earth's surface, which they feed through slits in the tower's outer wall (they cannot see outside). They are supervised by an older figure, dressed like the Virgin (though the first panel suggests that she is something like a mother superior), who holds open a book and with her free hand stirs a Boschque alembic from which flows the thread that the young women use to make their embroidery. There is another cloaked female playing a medieval-looking wind instrument in the background.



Oedipa had already seen herself in the “curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair” (20). Seeing the Varo painting brings the realization that though she was standing in Mexico City,

what she stood on had only been woven together . . . in her own tower . . . and so

Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there had been no escape. . . . Such a captive

maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes . . . that what keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. (21)

First tragedy, then farce: In chapter 2, when Oedipa fortifies herself against Metzger's siege with layers of clothing, she in effect turns herself into a tower that ironically cannot stand. And far from her being *impregnable*, this would seem to be the occasion when her later possible pregnancy begins (171; we don't know if she is literally pregnant because she doesn't go back for the test results). Metzger's seduction is connected to Pierce several times—Echo Courts, indeed: when he mentions (several times) the fact that Inverarity owned some business that is advertised on the television, after the last of which Oedipa threatens to wrap the TV tube around his head . . .

“What the hell didn't he own?”

Metzger cocked an eyebrow at her. “You tell me” (39);

when, earlier, Oedipa had wondered “if this were really happening in the same way as, say, her first time in bed with Pierce, the dead man” (35); when, in the end, she discovers that Metzger is executing Pierce's will in a different sense:

“What did he tell you about me,” she asked finally.

“That you wouldn't be easy.”

She began to cry. (43)

To return to the centerpiece of the Varo triptych, in another non- or perhaps semi-academic essay on the Web, Bill Brown seeks to show that Pynchon gets most of what he describes (21) in the painting wrong. Brown usefully quotes Janet A. Kaplan, author of *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys*,<sup>10</sup> about when Pynchon probably saw the painting as well as information about the artist and the work. Unfortunately, Brown's article gets much of what he claims Pynchon got wrong wrong. I will adopt the numbering of his points in my response to them.

1. First, Brown makes the mistake of forgetting point of view, which is Oedipa's throughout. However you read what's going on in the painting, whether Oedipa gets it right is far less important than what it means to her. The Rapunzel/captive maiden trope, it is clear, preceded seeing the painting for Oedipa. She makes a connection between that idea about herself and the painting—she can't be wrong to do so. So Brown's statement that "nothing [in the painting] suggest that the girls . . . are prisoners" is hardly to the point. And then, seeming to reverse himself, he adopts the idea (from Varo, by way of Kaplan) that one of the girls—though supposedly not a prisoner—"escapes." . . . Next, while Brown is right that the tower in the painting is not circular, it is not indisputably octagonal, as he thinks. The floor pattern has eight sections, though they are grouped in four, 3 + 1 + 3 + 1; each of the six embroidering maidens may have a side of the tower to herself, which with the front and the back does make eight; note, however, that the small tower in the foreground, which seems to be a miniature twin of the main tower, is hexagonal. (The roofs of all the buildings in the painting follow perspectival convention and show half their sides, four-sided roofs showing two, six-sided three, and so on.) Finally, of the two embroiderers' faces visible, Brown says that they are "clearly smiling." For me, one of them has a very slight smile, and one looks merely neutral, as if concentrating on her work.

2. I don't understand what Brown finds wrong with Pynchon's term "slit windows." (It's not patent that someone in the room couldn't see out of them if the fabric of the mantle of the earth wasn't also being fed out of them. One couldn't see much, true, because they are slits, but that doesn't make them not windows. If Kaplan is referring to the slits, as Brown suggests, when she mentions "battlements," that is a misnomer, although it's not clear whose error it is. (Battlements are those notches in top of a medieval castle tower, whose function was to allow people to look out (!) from behind a protecting wall as well as to be able to shoot arrows down at a surrounding enemy.) Brown does notice the echo of the shape of the alcove in the background with that of the imaginary window that allows us to see inside the tower. Though his point that the window is "dream-like" rather than simply a visual convention may seem strained applied to the painting, the sense of receding, echoing frames is alluded to later in the book, when Oedipa meets Genghis Cohen (94), and in the book it does acquire a dreamlike quality. But I'm afraid much of Brown's discussion of the windows seems designed to score points against Pynchon. (Someone I know with a very high IQ admitted to feeling a surge of competitiveness when learning that Pynchon's was once measured at 192; in a more general way, his intelligence and wide knowledge seem to evoke a need in some very smart people to find fault. The negative reviews of Pynchon's books on amazon often take this form.)

3. Brown doesn't see the fabric spilling out of the slits as " 'filling' any void, nor does it manage to 'contain' the whole world"—another tendentious reading. The black clouds that form the background of the painting surely could represent "the void"; the fact that the embroidered fabric falls away from the tower into a spherical shape suggest that the world is being pictured. Anyway, the title refers to the "earth's mantle" (*el manto terrestre*)—what is the mistake in assuming that the "earth" is the "world"? (Brown cites the other meaning of *bordando*,

circumnavigating, but though intriguing, this seems a non sequitur.) His reading the bodies of water as filling gaps in the embroidery is not the only way to see them: If the young women are embroidering all of the features that elaborate the plain stuff of the mantle (buildings, people, trees, etc.), the bodies of water could also be their work. If the young woman on the left can plot her escape by embroidering an image of herself reunited with her lover, she could be doing more than sending him a message: she could be *creating* the world in which she will rejoin him, as in the last panel of the triptych. (The houses and trees embroidered by the young woman on the right emerge from the slit as “mere embroidery” on fabric, but as the material flows down, they become real houses and trees.)

4. Brown is correct that Pynchon doesn't mention the other two figures in the painting, but this is because Oedipa identifies with the embroiderers. (By the way, he is wrong that the instrument the figure in the background plays is a recorder. It could be either a shawm or a cornett, the first, a medieval ancestor of the oboe, the second, a kind of trumpet made of wood covered with leather.) Pynchon's description doesn't mention any number of other details; it doesn't describe the other panels of the triptych. Not to belabor the point, but what's most important to the reader is what's most important to Oedipa. Brown could be right that there is some reason why the spooky central figure isn't mentioned, yet he can do no more than speculate. Yes, Pynchon's writing invites this kind of speculation, and one accepts that Brown, as a student of Derrida, is going to look for what's left out as much what's there. (Brown's concern for things that aren't there brings us back to the Hilarian theme of hallucination; great authors have a way of including in their books those of us who write about their work.)

Overall Brown's conclusion seems both hyperbolic and wrongheaded: “None of this [the detail of the painting] is adequately captured, [and] indeed, most of it [is] changed to *the*



*opposite* of what it had previously been, by Pynchon’s recollection” [italics in the original]. My sense of what Derrida says is that the author’s intentionality has little to do with the text; in all fairness, that ought to restrain any attempt to deride the putative inadequacy of the author’s description of the painting, even if it was as inaccurate as Brown claims.

Throughout the book Oedipa continues to embroider the world, though the “anonymous magic” has begun to take on the features of the Tristero. The painting, it must be kept in mind, presents a myth of the creation of the fabric of *reality*, so it would be a mistake to assume that the world that Oedipa embroiders is not real. Unlike the Fates of Greek mythology or the Norns of the Germanic tribes, who wove the destiny of all, Oedipa can only weave her own—but the alternative is to resign herself to the malignity of external forces. She will know them even if the only access to knowledge is *invention*:

Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works . . . , she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (21–22)

She does take up embroidery (in a figurative sense: you could say she had taken it up long since); she does marry a disk jockey; is, then, the Tristero “superstition”?—again, note the anagrammatic relationship between the words. And must we therefore say she goes mad in the end? (And if so, what would that mean in a “mad mad mad mad world”?—the movie was from three years before.)

Apart from its thematic resonances for Oedipa, the painting is a visual source for the Tristero's symbol of a muted post horn in two ways, one obvious: the instrument played by a cloaked figure in the background has a flared bell. But the Italianate roofs of the buildings that the six young women in the painting embroider onto the mantle of the earth also suggest the triangle of the bell and the trapezoid of the mute—and thus, rotated ninety degrees, a previously unnoticed alternate interpretation of the sigil of the Tristero's W.A.S.T.E. system: the roof of Oedipa's tower, with her banner flying from its staff!



As I said, I believe that the reader, too, is invited to invent.

Near the beginning of this essay, I suggested that there may be an unspoken clue to the story. The one thing I want to be clearly understood about it, however, is that having “solved” the “riddle” (and really, even *the* ought to be sporting scare quotes there), one must realize at the same time that it makes no difference; the structure of the book, from its very fine grain to its rather elegant overall shape works with the clue left unsaid. This is both an esthetic and a moral assertion. For this reason, I have intentionally left it to the end, where the revelation, such as it is, can only seem anticlimactic.

I may have seemed to be posing throughout as a reader who sees deeper than others do—to the core (and in some sense the narrative demands that we adopt that role). If there is a lesson in Oedipa's story, however, it is that although we have little choice but to assume such a role—and more, that it may be the only stance appropriate to our situation, as it seems to be to Oedipa's—

the pursuit is doomed to failure even if it succeeds on its own terms; success *is* failure. In his memoir *Elsewhere* Richard Russo nicely says<sup>11</sup> that Raymond Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe pursued the truth to the point where not only was it revealed but it became clear that everyone would have been better off or happier had it remained hidden: a modern ironic variation on the Oedipus myth. *Lot 49* pushes this further into added ironies, the postmodern ones that not only can we never come to the ultimate truth (the final nakedness of the stripper—truth in Greek being *alētheia*, the *unforgotten* or *unhidden*) but also that we have no choice other than to stay till the end of the show.

So here we are. The deep dark secret of the narrative, which is too obvious for anyone to have taken seriously and is, anyway, ultimately beside the point, is that either Pierce told Oedipa he was her father or he actually is—recall Mucho's description of the transactions at the used-car lot as “incest” and that, though from a previous time, it was part of the passage that interrupted Oedipa's telling him about the letter she had received.

To digress a moment, back to one of the global motivations for this essay (so then, maybe the rest of it has been the digression . . .), note this example of how Pynchon gives you just enough information to support several conflicting conclusions equally: The fact that the news of Pierce's death comes in a *letter* suggests that *if* the Tristero is a paranoid fantasy, its content, the alternative mail system and so forth, could have been spun out from its source. Dr Hilarius, after all, seems to believe that Oedipa is mentally ill—but then, do we really trust his judgment? . . . And so on, into another orbit, like the rest of the academic and amateur literary satellites of Thomas Pynchon. It can't be stressed enough that it is highly doubtful he intends this; rather, as I said, he wants the reader to feel the force of the *fall*—by identifying with Oedipa, who much of the time seems to be bounced around by the men in the story, not unlike the “photographer from

Palo Alto [in her group therapy car pool] who thought he was a volleyball” (19), or a “beach ball with feet” (39)—but *not* to go into the unending fall of what Pynchon calls “orbiting ecstasy” (182). In fact, at the end, as she “settle[s] back to wait for the crying of lot 49,” our impression of Oedipa is that she is at last the still point about which everything else orbits.

Pynchon may well have not “intended” this literally incestuous interpretation with full consciousness; the multiplicity of convincing interpretations of the book (never mind the unconvincing ones) shows that Pynchon succeeded in creating a field whose lines of force could be drawn in many different ways. I want to be understood that I disagree with Mattessich that the indeterminacy is the point (even if that was what Pynchon had in mind); I believe, rather, that multiple *true* interpretations can occupy the same space at the same time—interpretations are not physical objects, after all.

The parallels with the myth of Oedipus suggested to one reader of my first draft that Nabokov, one of Pynchon’s teachers at Cornell and a clear influence, and Nabokov’s *Lolita* may have been in Pynchon’s mind. It’s not necessary for the artist to be aware of these things; for some artists—Pynchon, so obviously conscious of so much of what he does may be of this type—it’s better if they’re not.

An interesting paper by James R. Wallen,<sup>12</sup> which finds Oedipa to be an “absurdist” figure because “authentic tragedy” is no longer possible in our world, though without directly referring to the earlier tragic figure, strongly implies the connection by the contrast.

I suppose whether you think Pierce “really is” Oedipa’s father depends on just how warped you think he is. But what gives so many readers difficulty with Pynchon’s books is that they want to know the *truth*; Pynchon harnesses this desire to lead the reader to the unwanted conclusion that the desire must remain unfulfilled, because stories that give us what we want lie

to us. (There's the dirty "secret" that the striptease may end with some of the viewers coming in their pants, but the even dirtier secret is that they'll be back in a few days, hoping yet again to be satisfied *once and for all*. When Oedipa tells the *room* that she's sick [10], the room, which with its "greenish dead eye of the TV tube" [9] seems to symbolize the encompassing "system," as it was called in the sixties, of commodity capitalism, does indeed "know.") Oedipa's attitude toward Pierce seems to suggest more that she has come to see this putative claim of paternity as one of his jokes, but then among her first thoughts of him in the book is to imagine his death by being crowned by the bust of Jay Gould. Seeing this in the context of the original Oedipus story makes the bed the crossroads at which Oedipus clubbed his father—the story takes Oedipa from one crossroads to another.

I'd be terribly surprised to learn that Pynchon didn't know about Robert Johnson and whom *he* met at the crossroads. (Recall the unspoken third term in the title of the published excerpt.) So Oedipa has some mythic relation to Eve, too. Bob Dylan, whom Pynchon was one degree of separation [Richard Fariña and Mimi Baez] away from, was in 1965 writing, of the "Gates of Eden," that "there are no truths outside" them. California may be a nice place, but Paradise it isn't (postcards to the contrary notwithstanding). In this "purest product of America," Pierce has maneuvered Oedipa into eating of the tree of knowledge.

The late A. D. Nuttall, in his study of Marlowe, Milton, and Blake, *The Alternative Trinity*,<sup>13</sup> unpacks some of the internal contradictions that drive *Paradise Lost*, including that Adam and Eve had to have had the potential to fall; Satan's arguments could not have affected Eve if she were perfect and thus immune to them, so they were created in some sense *already fallen*. As a belated mythographer, Milton inevitably had to contend with contradictory strands in the Christian tapestry (Gnostic, Calvinist); Blake took the lesson by founding his own myth. The

paradox Milton was unable to resolve was that the Creator, being outside time, could know of but not prevent the actions of his time-bound creations; Milton struggled with the paradox, but seems to have finally felt most strongly that without free will, which made the fall possible, their perfection would have been hollow. Thus the devil becomes God's necessary instrument of salvation (as Blake saw).

Pierce is now outside time and he turns Oedipa, in effect, into a PI—his initials—literally (in a figurative sense), by turning the *ip* already in her name. She becomes her own “knight of deliverance” (20) from the tower. (*P* and *I* are the only nontrivial letters their names share—*E* and *A* are trivial, together representing almost 20 percent of the letters in a text in English; with *T*, the second of the top three, about 29 percent.)

We may guess that Oedipa will discover that her lot is to inherit Pierce's *estate* (fallen), meaning both his worldly wealth and the whirlwind of the knowledge of the shady ways he got it, his *testament*. (The list of her duties as executrix ends with a suggestive ellipsis, “distribute legacies . . .” [20].) The Shadow—Pierce doing his Lamont Cranston voice—calls (11; then Pynchon makes the punning connection on p.12 with the “shadow” of Oedipa's unwanted responsibility) and the sunny California skies are already darkening like those of Slothrop's Calvinist New England: that one's high economic status in this world showed that one was saved in the next always was in part a means to disguise how lucre, always “filthy,” is created—whitewashing it (like the bust of Gould). It should be no surprise when Pynchon brings in the theme of salvation/damnation jokingly, in the parodic farewell speech of Baby Igor's father in *Cashiered*: “Your little eyes have seen your daddy for the last time [NB]. You are for salvation; I am for the Pit” (43). Like Oedipus, Oedipa inherits, but unlike her namesake, she sleeps with and murders (in thought) the *same* parent, so the locus of both crimes is the same.

Hilarius, twinned with Pierce, wants Oedipa to take LSD so as to have hallucinations, though the aim is presumably to gain knowledge of the inner world (is his insistence that he specifically wants her because of her *name*? and is it only because he is a Freudian or is it his sublimated response to her seemingly universal sexual attraction?); Pierce, by contrast, lures Oedipa from her tower into knowledge of the outer world instead. (To take the pills Hilarius gave her to help her sleep would be to be “literally damned” [17], that is, hooked on them, which in the context may suggest hooked into the flesh or fallen in a different but parallel way to what Pierce lures her to. Instead of LSD, Oedipa gets Miles and the Paranoids: Leonard, Serge, and Dean.)

Hilarius, twinned with Oedipa, goes nuts (132ff), maybe from sampling the drugs himself (though he denies that)—he becomes literally paranoid; Oedipa’s “paranoia” about the Tristero, by contrast, is, we come to feel, not mere embroidery—remember the mysterious connection between what the maidens in the Varo stitch onto the fabric and reality. Compare Oedipus’ self-inflicted blindness: Oedipa’s focus on the Tristero—seeing it everywhere—could be a kind of blindness, but the irony may be, rather, that she can really see for the first time.

Is the Tristero her *sadness* that she can no longer get a message to Pierce? (*To pierce the what . . . ?* Maybe she never could communicate with him, but now even the mail system itself seems to have withdrawn into inaccessibility, thwarting her desire.) The congeries of vague connections with the 1958 film *Bonjour Tristesse* (Pynchon/Oedipa were 21) has been more than exhaustively explored online; for my money, especially given what Pynchon has written about Donald Barthelme’s cut-ups,<sup>14</sup> the loose associations cannot be dismissed, but the problem is, as always, where to draw the line. Father/daughter plot similarity, okay; Miles’s name leading to *Kind of Blue*, which connotes sadness and thus *tristesse*, um, I dunno—why not get to Miles Davis and his muted horn by way of erstwhile girlfriend Juliette Greco (who sings the theme

song and appears in the movie), which seems about as convincing? (This being Pynchonland, I feel compelled to make explicit that I mean not very.)

But the pun on the French *tristesse*—like the one on the Italian *triste*, *not* meaning “depraved,” pace Bortz, but wretched in the sense of very sad (102, with the wave to college pal Kirkpatrick Sale)—does have significance. For it would seem that whether Oedipa is Pierce’s daughter/heir in the real world of the novel, in a larger sense, the sense in which Pierce’s “legacy was America” (178), she is, like Hernando Tristero, El Desheredado—like us all—*disinherited*. In the morass of ones and zeroes, in the cul-de-sac of mutually exclusive alternatives, in what could have been diversity, the middle terms are excluded, and “excluded middles . . . [are] bad shit” (181).

But maybe Pierce didn’t disinherit her. Maybe he didn’t leave a trap in which she would end up getting hopelessly, helplessly lost. Maybe he left her all he could of the possibilities “too elaborate for the dark Angel to hold at once, in his humorless vice-president’s head” (179), by “devising” a “plot” that would lead her to knowledge. For, quite unlike Judith, the young bride in Bartók’s *Bluebeard’s Castle*, Oedipa doesn’t demand but rather seems, at least for most of the story, to want to refuse Pierce/Bluebeard’s offering of the keys to the seven doors.

By the way, there is no mystery, really, about who the “mysterious bidder who may be from Tristero” (176) is. We’re told in a typically Pynchonesque way: a joke about writing—it’s “hidden” in plain sight. Oedipa is standing, talking with Genghis Cohen (who will shortly offer his arm and lead her to a seat beside him):

“Your fly is open,” whispered Oedipa. She was not sure what she would do when the bidder revealed himself. (183)



When Oedipa settles back to wait (for what would be chapter 7), there is a hint of lying-in; what she is pregnant with is Pierce's knowledge ("Your gynecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with" [175]; this is why Metzger's seduction is twinned with Pierce's). She went to the doctor not because she missed a *period*—like Pierce she is more and more outside time—but because of symptoms, such as morning sickness, which "strike her at random, cause her deep misery, then vanish as if they never had been" (171). All the overwhelming series of events, historical or imaginary, she has learned, like the symptoms, seem to lose their meaning; she is moving toward a timeless singularity, the present, but she is already there. That is the deep—I wish I could say "the piercing" without seeming to make a bad joke here—and the unsolvable mystery. How can Pierce be both present and absent?

Recall that a *pregnant pause* is full of meaning. The knowledge, Pierce's unwanted but unavoidable fatherly gift, is of her lot—and ours (you could cry . . .): that there are crucial things you can't ever know with anything like certainty, that all endings are open, that all attempts to tell the truth end as lies.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Pynchon (TP, hereafter), *Slow Learner: Early Stories*, Introduction (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 1–23. The stories are not bad—though if you’d written the novels, you might well be a bit embarrassed by them. Pynchon’s sense of what the flaws are is exact (not so common, even for great writers), but he tends to underestimate the good qualities. Even “Entropy,” “overwritten” (15) intellectual construct that it is, can move the reader.

When Pynchon says in reference to *Lot 49* that he “seem[s] to have forgotten most of what I thought I’d learned up till then” (22), you can see how the features that flaw the stories come back in the novel, but they come off to better effect there. Dizzy Gillespie says somewhere in his autobiography that you have to keep trying to play something that’s too hard for you, because ultimately you find that you can play it (*To Be or Not to Bop: Memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie*, with Al Fraser, New York: Da Capo, 1985).

It has been suggested to me by a reader that issues of influence are at play in *Lot 49*, which, if true, might also make Pynchon more ambivalent about it.

2. TP, 1965 letter to Candida Donadio, quoted in Mel Gussow, “Pynchon’s Letters Nudge His Mask,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1998; cited in Wikipedia article “Thomas Pynchon.”

3. Susan Barnett, personal communication, October 7, 2013.

4. Richard Poirier, “The Importance of Thomas Pynchon,” in *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, George Levine and David Leverenz, eds. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 15–29; reprinted from *Twentieth Century Literature* 21, 2 (May 1975), 151–62.

5. J. Kerry Grant, *A Companion to “The Crying of Lot 49”* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 7. That is a good joke, though.

6. Stefan Mattessich, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), chapter 2, “Ekphrasis, Escape, and Countercultural Desire in *The Crying of Lot 49*,” 43–70.
7. Charles Hollander, “Pynchon, JFK and the CIA: Magic Eye Views in *The Crying of Lot 49*,” *Pynchon Notes* 40–41 (Spring–Fall 1997): 61–106. Available online at [www.ottosell.de/pynchon/magiceye.htm](http://www.ottosell.de/pynchon/magiceye.htm). “Misdirection”? Hardly—but *indirection*, yes. A work that I read too late for it to have any impact on this essay is David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), which has much to say on Pynchon’s often overlooked subtlety as a writer (among many other things). A former student of Richard Poirier’s, Cowart resembles his mentor both in his ability to write clearly, memorably, and more as a human being than as an academic (without stinting on meaningful scholarly context) and in his willingness to contend with the writing on its own terms, evading the trap of viewing it as exemplary of critical or philosophical concepts (of which he is, however, well informed): “I have profited from my reading of Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, de Man, Lyotard, Serres, Žižek . . . but I have learned more from Pynchon” (xiii). He more than fulfills his ambition to be a “critical cicerone.”
8. TP, “Is It Okay to Be a Luddite?” *New York Times Book Review*, October 28, 1984: 1, 40–41. Available online at [www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon\\_essays\\_luddite.html](http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_essays_luddite.html).
9. Charles Hollander, “Pynchon’s Juvenilia and *Against the Day*.” Conference notes from a one-day conference organized by G.R.A.A.T, Tours, France, July 1, 2007. Available online at [www.vheissu.net/articles/hollander\\_ATD.php](http://www.vheissu.net/articles/hollander_ATD.php).

10. Bill Brown, "Playing the Post Card of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Not Bored!* (online journal), February 27, 2004: [www.notbored.org/crying.html](http://www.notbored.org/crying.html); Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988).
11. Richard Russo, *Elsewhere* (New York: Random House, 2012), 154.
12. James R. Wallen, "The Absurdist Heroine: A Wildean Critique of Pynchon's Uncertain Aesthetic." Available online at [www.themodernword.com/pynchon/papers\\_wallen.pdf](http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/papers_wallen.pdf).
13. A. D. Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; reprint, 2006), 71–191.
14. TP, introduction to Donald Barthelme, *The Teachings of Don B.*, Kim Herzinger, ed. (New York: Turtle Bay, 1992), 1–8[?]. Available online at [www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon\\_essays\\_barthelme.html](http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_essays_barthelme.html).