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The Word, the Self, and the Underground Estate of Pierce Inverarity in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

Not least among the possible forms of dichotomization to which Pynchon's fiction lends itself is the division into the "overground" realm of the visible and various forms of the underground. Thus in *V.*, Benny Profane, tired of the street, the spurious alternative to the hot-house of paranoid speculation and a metaphysical *cul-de-sac*, is offered a chance to try his luck under the arid thoroughfares of the West: he literally climbs down under the streets of New York, and his peregrinations in the sewers of this city are not free of anticipatory desire for some sort of soteriological revelation. On a less literal level, Malta, with its supposedly rich deposits of myth and ancient wisdom, stands in opposition to the superficiality of a civilization where people tend to oscillate between self-induced mindlessness and self-created façades. Godolphin makes his terrible discovery *under* the gaudy skin of reality, and Stencil's quest centers upon a conspiracy whose alleged aim is to undermine the metaphysical foundations of the West. In all cases, whether they are imagined or real, and whether their message appears to be hope-inspiring or frightening, Pynchon's murky underworlds lure with the promise of transcendence, of going beyond the predictable mendacities of daylight.

In Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, the possible existence of a mysterious underground is also pitted against the outward appearance of things, and again the reader's picture of events is mediated through the mind of a protagonist. The mind at the centre of the story (the mediation in this case is complete, and the reader is not allowed even such ambiguous ventures outside the subjectivity of a particular consciousness as in the case of *V.*) is that of

a young Californian, Oedipa Maas. One day she learns to her surprise of having been named the executrix of the estate left by her dead lover, the billionaire Pierce Inverarity. The news arrives in the form of a letter from a law firm in Los Angeles and, as the narrative begins, Oedipa can be seen standing in the living room alone, “stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube” (*Lot 49*, 1),¹ trying to come to terms with such unwelcome surprise. The TV set which communicates nothing, the letter which communicates something, its addressee, helpless, alone, and trying to feel more drunk than she really is – all of these suggest that the novel may have something to do with the problems of communication and information, perception and loneliness. And indeed, what immediately follows bears this assumption out. The image of Oedipa deliberately attuned to the sounds of Muzak – music to do things by and forget; her recollection of the last telephone conversation with Inverarity when, phoning her from some distant place at three in the morning, he tried to communicate something but failed; the way in which she and Mucho, her disc-jockey husband trafficking in worthless babble of pop, “throw” at each other bits of information concerning their most recent respective disasters; the pathetic inadequacy of Oedipa’s attempt to console her oversensitive spouse (“Yeah, there was so much else she ought to be saying also, but this was what came out” (3)): the interwoven threads of communication and isolation quickly establish themselves as a dominant motif in the story, finding, at the end of the first chapter, a symbolic expression in two poignant images of solitude and confinement. These two images come from Oedipa’s most private iconography. The first of them, a likening of her own making, shows Oedipa 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” (10). This image of a girl anxiously waiting for a Knight of deliverance conflates in her mind with another, a painting by the Spanish artist Remedios Varro, showing

[...] a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out of the slit windows and into the void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: 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. (10)

The second image is especially important, as it shows human isolation to be the consequence of the inability to face the world directly, viz., without the dubious mediation of the self. In the picture by Varro, the world is almost

¹ All page numbers in parentheses refer to Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

entirely a product of man who, faced with unfathomable vastness, keeps imposing on it patterns of the mind's invention. In effect, instead of being confronted with unmitigated truth, man deals with the elaborately embroidered tapestry produced by his consciousness: we are back in Baedekerland of Pynchon's first novel. In Oedipa's case, however, the irony directed against "tourism" as a mode of evasion is missing, and the stress is laid upon the tragic inevitability of distortion in all cognitive acts, as they can lead to an acute feeling of separateness from other beings – human or otherwise. Unable to leave the lonely tower of her mind, Oedipa is nagged by "the sense of buffering, insulation, [noticing] the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix" (10). Not that she never tried to escape; her affair with Inverarity was nothing if not an endeavour to put an end to her isolation. However, "all that had gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of that tower" (10), and on a trip to Mexico (where they happen upon the Varro exhibition) Oedipa is unexpectedly reminded that people can travel to the end of the world and yet remain prisoners of their selves. Standing in front of the picture, she breaks into tears.

And yet, dismayed at the prospect of life-long confinement, Oedipa nevertheless toys with the idea of preserving that particular distortion of vision which has come about in consequence of her tears coming in contact with the lenses of her sunglasses:

Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. No one had noticed; she wore dark green bubble shades. For a moment she'd wondered if the seal around her sockets were tight enough to allow the tears simply to go on and fill up the entire lens space and never dry. She would carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry. (10)

One can detect that same ambivalence on the part of Oedipa with regard to the ideal of unmediated perception. The prospect of willfully and permanently settling in a particular "mindscape" is tempting indeed – particularly for someone groping for the elusive truth in the darkness of an underground.

This temptation keeps growing as Oedipa's amateurish attempts to execute Inverarity's will develop into a Pynchonian quest, the latter initiating a series of apparent encounters with a secret system whose essential concern seems to be the same as hers: communication. The coincidence is striking, and it soon occurs to Oedipa that the Tristero, the mysterious postal organization at the centre of her quest, might be the result of Inverarity's elaborate plan, an intrigue set up in order "to bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower" (28). If so, the task must have been enormous. As Oedipa gathers more and more information about the organization, the proofs of its shadowy existence appear

to crop up everywhere, stretching back to the 16th century, when Tristero, its alleged founder, began violently challenging the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly in Europe. By the middle of the 19th century the Tristero seems to have already infiltrated into America; once there, it continued in its alternative function, a rival of the Pony Express, determined to spread subversion in the “overground” channels of communication. In the 1960s (when the action of *Lot 49* takes place) it appears to be still very active, signalling its presence to those in the know through the sign of the muted post-horn and two acronyms: *death* and *waste*. As night (blackness) constitutes its ambience and death part of its image, the Tristero seems to be standing for something silently sinister. However, it is also an anti-establishment force, inimical to everything official and superficial, a system belonging to and serving the needs of those who have withdrawn from the American society.

The ambiguous nature of the Tristero (perhaps a message in its own right, a sign to be deciphered) adds to the central ambiguity of the story, that which concerns the dubious epistemological status of Oedipa’s discovery. Not only is she uncertain about the true meaning of the Tristero, but, right through the end of the novel, she remains confused in regard to the question of its very existence. But whether it is in fact a real organization, a performance staged by Inverarity, or only a hallucination, Oedipa’s experience is not a trap in the sense Stencil’s V. manifestly is.

In this respect, Oedipa differs not only from Stencil, but also from some other characters she meets or hears about, notably the members of the Peter Penquid society and the Scurvhamites: allegedly an extreme right wing organization, and a radical puritan sect adhering to a Manichean worldview. In either group, the idea of an adversary “fixes” the minds or believers. It is particularly true of the sectarians in question. Is the Scurvhamites’ belief “in the brute Other, that kept the non-Scurvhamite universe running like clockwork (117) (the Other, it should be added, identified by them with the Tristero) to be construed as an instance of bad faith? Can the true purpose motivating this “Godly and purposeful society” (116) be seen as identical with their determination to put an end to the continuous process of becoming and assume a stable identity – first by defining themselves in simple contradistinction to their arch-enemy and then, fascinated with “a brute automatism that lead to eternal death” (116), by defecting to the Other side? It would seem so inasmuch as what the Scurvhamites are really interested in is this “brute automatism,” the state of forgetfulness of man’s true ontological status. The defections point to their desire to belong and obey; it is the splendid unequivocalness of “being for” or “being against” that matters – morality has nothing to do with it.

The way in which Oedipa herself, in an unguarded moment, flirts with the idea of succumbing to the Tristero’s attractive power betokens the strength of the temptation. For her, confronted with so many indications of its existence,

this jump into faith would be tantamount to a jump into death. Not the real death, certainly, but the rigor mortis of *the in-itself*:

She was meant to remember. She faced that possibility as she might the toy street from a high balcony, roller-coaster ride, feeding time among the beasts in the zoo – any death wish that can be consummated by some minimum gesture. She touched the edge of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to it [...]. She tested it, shivering: I am meant to remember. (87)

However, as there is always something to make her wonder when she appears ready to do so, Oedipa never jumps. She never dwindles into a mere “she who looks for the Tristero” and, staying open to various interpretations of the revelations which come her way, intrigued and confused, hopeful and despairing, never stops trying to get behind the screen separating her from the “central truth itself” (69).

In her quest, Oedipa is acutely sensitive to the presence of the ocean – a mysterious force always felt behind the pathetic actions of Californians. In its hugeness and power, the Pacific dwarfs the “irrelevance” of the life on the coast, and the two realms seem to be completely apart. And yet Oedipa can “feel” the ocean before it can be seen, heard, or smelt:

Somewhere beyond the battering, urged sweep or three-bedroom houses rushing by their thousands across all the dark beige hills, somehow implicit in an arrogance or bite to the smog the more inland somnolence of San Narciso did lack, lurked the sea, the unimaginable Pacific, the one to which all surfers, beach pads, sewage disposal schemes, tourist incursions, sunned homosexuality, chartered fishing are irrelevant, the hole left by the moon’s tearing-free and monument to her exile; you could not hear or even smell this but it was there, something tidal began to reach feelers in past ears and eardrums, perhaps to arouse fraction of brain current your most gossamer microelectrode is yet too gross for finding. (36–37)

The Pacific seems to be sending out signals which can still be received by means of some primeval faculty capable of rousing sensations “banned” by the “official” senses and, unexpectedly, Oedipa restores a bind which seems to have been lost forever. The sensation, however, is short-lived and immediately followed by a feeling of uncertainty as to its true character:

Oedipa had believed, long before leaving Kinneret, in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California, [...] some unvoiced idea that no matter what you did to its edges the true Pacific stayed inviolate and intergrated or assumed the ugliness at any edge into some more general truth. Perhaps it was only that notion, its arid hope, she sensed as this forenoon they made their seaward thrust, which would stop short of any sea. (37)

Not only does Oedipa remain awestruck in the presence of “that vast sink of the primal blood the Pacific” (122); to her, all intimations of transcendence, of going beyond the façade of boredom and predictability, are possessed of a distinctively religious flavour, so that on her quest she feels “as if [...] there were revelation in progress all around her” (28). Sometimes the revelation seems to be lurking under the thick layer of meaningless informational noise; sometimes it is the intriguing layout of Californian settlements that promises salvation. Driving into San Narciso, Inverarity’s headquarters, Oedipa recalls the moment when, having opened a transistor radio, she saw a printed circuit for the first time:

The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There’d seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her /if she had tried to find out/; so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. (13)

Although San Narciso, “like many named places in California,” is “less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts” (12), the pattern of its buildings and streets seems, nevertheless, to contain an important message. In her uncertainty vis-à-vis its puzzling “swirl,” the causal relation between the demise of the Cartesian Guarantor of True Knowledge and the feeling of being always apart from reality is particularly evident. As the divine order, “the deep structure” formerly present in the human mind and shaping all its products, no longer obtains, the words (if any) “spoken” by San Narciso cannot reach her. In the implied contrast to the inhabitants of the older, especially European cities which, always built around centre, reflected the confidence of people living in a God-centered, comfortably totalized comprehensible reality,² Oedipa is left entirely to herself.

In *Lot 49*, the problem of language, of the true relationship between words and things, constitutes an important aspect of the human predicament; Oedipa strains her ears in order to hear mysterious, transcendent words spoken on some other frequency; for Driblette, words are but “rote noises,” not so much a means of communication as a trigger for sollipsistic fantasies. Words are often useless and misleading, empty of meaning (Oedipa *speaking* the name of God), or pointing to a reality which cannot be contained within a name (“many named places in California”). Language and reality seem to exist hopelessly apart, the

² Cf. Johan Huizinga, *Jesień średniowiecza*, trans. Tadeusz Brzostowski (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974), p. 30.

latter ignoring the former despite human efforts to bring them together. Coming in between man and the world, words contribute to man's encapsulation insofar as the human mind operates through language. This repeated emphasis on the role of language in the process of "projection of worlds" indicates the marked influence of Wittgenstein's ideas on the concept of man's confinement as put forward in *Lot 49*. For to see things through language, claims Wittgenstein, means to remain within unbreachable bounds; it means to exist inside a closed system, whose boundaries coincide with the boundaries of the formalized system of communication that one has adopted: "The world is *my* world; this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of *my* world. The world and life are one. I am my world. (The microcosm)."³

In this system there is no place for metaphysics: "All Wittgenstein's doctrines are related to his idea that language has limits imposed by its internal structure [...] and he places religion and morality beyond the limits because they do not meet the requirements of what can be said."⁴ This is exactly what Oedipa cannot and will not accept. Aware of the powerlessness of language in the situations which demand bursting its limits ("With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Tristero, to hold them together" (80)), she wants to express her intimations not by means of ordinary words, but through the power of the lost, although – (she hopes) recoverable "direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (87).

In her hope, Oedipa exhibits a poetic sensibility. What she shares with poets is the characteristic belief which David Daiches attributed to all versifiers of genius: the conviction that language is "not only expressive but cognitive and exploratory" and that "the nature of reality could be probed by the very fact of rendering it in poetic speech."⁵ Poetic, visionary, or simply mad; Pynchon (apparently recording Oedipa's thoughts) makes his own list of those who speak in order to express the unspeakable:

The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe the ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. (95)

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. Mc Quinness. Quoted in William M. Plater, *The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), p. 6.

⁴ David Pears, *Wittgenstein* (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 12.

⁵ David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2 (London: Secker and Warburg, 1971), p. 307.

“The act of metaphor,” Oedipa realizes, may be but “a thrust at truth and lie,” a strenuous effort to transcend, “a trembling unfurrowing of the mind’s plow-share” (95). But though in her quest for the Word she is to remain “unfurrowed,” sometimes a peculiar phrase, the double meaning of an expression can facilitate a peek through the veil. Thus holding an old sailor who suffers from delirium tremens, Oedipa is suddenly made aware of the uncanny potential lying in the fact that the abbreviation DT’s is liable to more readings than one: “She knew that the sailor had seen worlds no other man had seen if only because there was that high magic to low puns, because DT’s must give access to dt’s of spectra beyond the known sun, music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright.” (96)

For Oedipa, however, this is not enough. The direct Word she is after, the cry which she is unable to utter, hold out the hope of doing away with all forms of mediation, once and for all. The tower in which she is imprisoned can also be described as The Tower of Babel, the many languages spoken by humanity being but poor substitutes for the one sacred language capable of piercing into the heart of being. On such religious longings, “the yearning after a lost linguistic paradise,” Leszek Kołakowski offers the following comment:

We find in many civilizations evidence of a nostalgic belief in an intrinsic, essential kinship between word and meaning and of an unending quest for the “true” meaning and the “true” language spoken at the beginning of time. Linguistically this is nonsense, to be sure: the meaning of words is determined by convention and historical accidents and, apart from actual usage, there is no “genuine” tongue, no veritable meaning and no mysterious affinity between things and names. Yet the myth of Babel is deeply rooted in our linguistic consciousness; we want to recover the lost, original, God-given speech in which things are called by *their* names, their celestial proper names. This belief and this quest manifest themselves and can be traced in magic, in rituals, in Cabbalistic explorations, in the entire esoteric tradition, in the very concept of the holy language.⁶

Oedipa’s hopes for finding that one revealing Word which would free her from confinement do not seem to have much to do with the Word in its traditional Christian sense: she is not interested in the message contained in the Gospel and incarnate in Jesus Christ. Instead, her hopes point to an intuitive grasping of some Fundamental Truth concerning the nature of reality. That Oedipa’s expectations are not oriented towards the integrating vision of the sort which Christianity used to provide is further suggested by Pynchon’s recourse to overtly Eliadean phraseology, such as for example: “Some immediacy was

⁶ Leszek Kołakowski, *Religion: If there is no God ...* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1982), p. 183–184.

there again, some promise of hierophany" (18). The character of her anticipatory desire signifies a tendency toward the mystical and the archaic, the lost capacity for what Rudolf Otto called the "numinous" experience,⁷ the hope for the rediscovery of the Sacred in the wasteland of the Profane. The Word of the Puritans, like that of the literary critics (117), is not her game; rather than impose totalizing patterns on reality she would *become* reality. The attainment of this goal seems within reach: if she could only be incited by someone or something possessed of the Information she needs, if she could only find "the trigger for the unnameable act, the recognition, the Word" (136), Oedipa would "get through" at last.

Throughout the story, the Tristero seems to be fulfilling the function of such a trigger, a fearful depository of negentropic surprise. It penetrates easily through the walls of the Tower of Babel: its milieu consists of the "nameless" of the American society (136) and the language it speaks is that of silence. The blackness of the clothes worn by its emissaries melts with the blackness of "their exile: the night" (120), and the black deeds they commit accumulate into "dark history" which remains "unseen" (122). In the Tristero the medium (silence plus indistinctiveness of contour) appears to constitute at least part of the message, a wordless communication from "the separate, silent, unsuspected world" (92), whose very existence requires that it remains beyond language and out of sight. In *Lot 49*, whiteness and light tend to connote aridity of the modern world (not unlike in *V.*: Weissmann, but also Antarctic Vheissu with the terrifying absence of colour under its skin), and "the fluorescent bulbs [which] seemed to shriek whiteness" (90) stand in contrast to the silent darkness of "ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth." If the Tristero has in fact been set up by Inverarity in order to let Oedipa attain a higher state of consciousness, then a reevaluation of blackness – together with the heightened awareness of death – may have been among his objectives.

One can advance such speculation even further: is the blackness of the Tristero a sign pointing to the richness of vision directly opposite to what Heidegger calls "the metaphysics of light" – a mistaken concept, based on the assumption of the transparency (or manifestness) of truth understood as continuous presence, and of the *separate* existence of the human consciousness vis-à-vis that ultimately disclosable presence?⁸ For it is in the philosophy of Heidegger that the Cartesian dichotomy, still present in the ontology of Sartre, is finally invalidated, and the concept of human Dasein, the primary openness making the mind/world dichotomy possible, is put forward as the true mode

⁷ Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1983), p. 49.

⁸ Cf. Krzysztof Michalski, *Heidegger i filozofia współczesna* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1978), p. 205.

of man's being in the world.⁹ Does the Tristero point the way to the recognition of man's true ontological status, something beyond the conceptual framework of the West and therefore "unnamable"? Is the awaited Word, possibly "a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life" (128), to be understood as the Heraclitean Logos which "speaks the most surprising message" and "says that all beings are one, all beings happen together in Being"?¹⁰

For the reader to answer these questions in the affirmative would be tantamount to deciphering the Tristero's message, and thus attaining what Oedipa cannot attain. But the Tristero, in spite of the fact that some of its characteristics provoke such Heideggerian interpretation, eludes all attempts to reduce it to a coherent pattern. What, for example, is one to make of the repeated references to its cruelty and malevolence? The Tristero may, after all, be an evil force, threatening an even worse form of imprisonment, and thus confirming Oedipa's suspicions about the supernatural provenance of her encapsulation. In *Lot 49* blackness can also denote exitlessness: the Word Oedipa keeps looking for is to abolish *the night*. And while suggestions to this effect may sound somewhat perfunctory (in the entropic world populated by prisoners for life, the mysterious organization offers at least a *chance* for change), this aspect of the Tristero cannot be ignored.

Not only is the character of the Tristero open to various contradictory interpretations. Underlying all ambiguities is always the key question of its existence: dream or reality, transcendence or nothingness? But, perhaps, a question formulated in this way cannot be answered. Near the end of her quest Oedipa gives vent to her frustration over the necessity of always having to select one of the two mutually exclusive possibilities. Faced with the entropic non-choice of an either/or situation, Oedipa would rather not choose at all:

She had heard all about excluded middles, they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity? For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth. (136)

When we see her for the last time, Oedipa is anxiously awaiting an auction to begin. It is an event which might result in the final disclosure of the Tristero's true identity meaning and intent. With her quest approaching its end, Oedipa, deserted by everybody, feels even more isolated than before. Nothing has been solved – no exit from the tower of her mind has been found.

⁹ Cf. Michalski, pp. 120–126.

¹⁰ James L. Perotti, *Heidegger on the Divine* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1974), p. 78.