

*Individual  
and Community*

VARIATIONS ON A THEME  
IN AMERICAN FICTION

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THE SACRED, THE PROFANE, AND  
THE CRYING OF LOT 49

I

Thomas Pynchon's first two novels (a third has been announced at this writing) are members of that rare and valuable class of books which, on their first appearance, were thought obscure even by their admirers, but which became increasingly accessible afterwards, without losing any of their original excitement. When *V.*, Pynchon's first novel, appeared in 1963, some of its reviewers counselled reading it twice or not at all, and even then warned that its various patterns would not fall entirely into place. Even if its formal elements were obscure, *V.* still recommended itself through its sustained explosions of verbal and imaginative energy, its immense range of knowledge and incident, its extraordinary ability to excite the emotions without ever descending into the easy paths of self-praise or self-pity that less rigorous novelists had been tracking with success for years. By now the published discussions of the book agree that its central action, repeated and articulated in dozens of variations, involves a decline, both in history broadly conceived and in the book's individual characters, from energy to stasis, and from the vital to the inanimate. *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon's second book, published in 1966, is much shorter and superficially more cohesive than the first book. Its reception, compared with *V.*'s almost universal praise, was relatively muted, and it has since received less critical attention than it deserves. Yet a clear account of its total organization is now becoming possible. *Lot 49* clarified many of the issues of *V.*, by inverting and developing them; Pynchon's new novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, will probably help to sort out many of the difficulties of *Lot 49*. This paper is an at-

tempt at an interim progress report, with new observations, on the reading of Pynchon's second novel.

Both of the novels describe a gradual revelation of order and unity within the multiplicity of experience, but the kinds of order that the two books discover are almost diametrically opposed. Despite its cosmopolitan variety of incident and character, *V.* develops around a unifying principle that is ultimately constricting and infertile. The book's central metaphor is the thermodynamic concept of entropy, which for the moment may be defined loosely as the slowing down of a system, the calcifying decay of life and available energy on a scale that may be minute or global. Entropy is the principle within irreversible processes, the principle that, in Freud's words, opposes the undoing of what has already occurred. By extending this principle one may speculate that the universe itself must eventually suffer a "heat-death," reduced and simplified to a luke-warm system in which no energy may be used for any purpose. Pynchon used "Entropy" as the title and theme of one of his first published stories,<sup>1</sup> and the concept recurs, in a significantly different form, in *The Crying of Lot 49*. In Pynchon's hands entropy serves as a metaphor of exceptional range and emotional power, and in this Pynchon is not alone. The concept of entropy, whether or not it is named as such, has informed much fiction and philosophy for centuries: it is a central motif in satire, and is the historical principle behind Plato's account of four types of unjust society in the *Republic*.

*The Crying of Lot 49*, although slighter in scale than *V.*, finds the intrusive energy that is needed to reverse the process that *V.* describes. In *Lot 49* a world of triviality and "exitlessness"<sup>2</sup> becomes infused with energy and choice, and Pynchon seems to be demonstrating that he can balance the 500 pages of decline recounted in *V.* with some 200 pages of possible recovery in *Lot*

1. In *The Kenyon Review*, 20 (Spring, 1960), 277-292.

2. *The Crying of Lot 49* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), p. 170. Further references to this novel are inserted parenthetically into the text. To find page references in the 1967 Bantam paperback edition, subtract 8 from the reference given and multiply the result by four-fifths.

49. The ostensible subject of the latter novel is one woman's discovery of a system of communication, but the system refers to something far larger than itself: it fosters variety and surprise, and offers a potential access to "transcendent meaning" and "a reason that mattered to the world" (181). Extend the world of *V.* beyond the book's final chapters, and you eventually intrude on the unlit, motionless world of the later Beckett. Extend *The Crying of Lot 49*, and you soon come in sight of Prospero's island and the seacoast of Bohemia. The processes of *V.* isolate; those of *Lot 49* create community.

Almost all the incidents in *V.* enact a decline of available energy, a hardening of living beings into artificial ones, a degradation from vitality to mechanism, a transfer of sympathy from human suffering to inanimate, objective existence. In the world of *V.* there can only be few alternatives to decline, and those few are weak: some understated temporary acts of escape and love, a sudden dash into the sea as all the lights go out in a city, the reconstruction of a marriage. All the rest leads to stasis—although the book's scale and exuberance suggest that mass decline is a principle of existence in the novel but not in its creator. The central plot from which the book's various historical fantasies—Egypt in 1898, Florence in 1899, Paris in 1913, Malta in 1919 and again in the 1940s, South-West Africa in 1922, and glimpses of a score of other settings and moments—involves the search made by one Herbert Stencil for traces of the woman *V.*, who may have been Stencil's mother, as she moves through Europe and the twentieth century, becoming ever less vital and more artificial as she grows older. In her final manifestation as "the Bad Priest" at Malta during the Second World War, *V.* advises young girls to become nuns, to "avoid the sensual extremes—pleasures of intercourse, pain of childbirth"—and to prevent the creation of new life. To young boys she preaches "that the object of male existence was to be like a crystal: beautiful and soulless."<sup>3</sup> And before her death she gives up much of her own

3. *V.* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), p. 340. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

body to inanimate surrogates: a wig, artificial feet, a glass eye containing a clock, false teeth. A jewel is later found sewn in her navel. Increasingly lifeless and crystalline, finally killed by the mechanical engines of war in the sky over Malta, the woman V. is the most vividly realized victim of the book's pandemic processes of inanition and decline. The other victims include a ruined product of failed plastic surgery, a man with a knife-switch in his arm, a synthetic body used for radiation research, a girl reduced to a fetish, a character named Profane constantly victimized by hostile objects. The book implies a conclusion that lies beyond itself: an ending where all life and warmth have declined and disappeared, an apocalypse that arrives in total silence.

"There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she," asks Stencil's father in his diary (V., 53). The novel V. is an elaborate gloss on an earlier account of a woman whom history replaced with an object: the chapter on "The Dynamo and the Virgin" in *The Education of Henry Adams*. Pynchon's Stencil, who like Adams talks of himself in the third person, searches for a symbol even more inclusive than Adams's; V. is the virgin who *became* the dynamo. The woman V. is Stencil's reconstruction of scattered and ambiguous clues and symbols, gathered into episodes told by narrators—often obviously flawed and unreliable—whom Stencil creates for the occasion. Half the novel consists of Stencil's indirect narration of the life of V., who is seldom central to the story, but slips in sideways when she is least expected. Stencil's reconstruction of V.'s fragmentary signs—an enactment in reverse of her physical disintegration—is a paradigm of Pynchon's reconstruction of twentieth-century history, a reconstruction which establishes the novel's "ground." The woman V., like Pynchon's history, is put together by design. In his Spenglerian sweep through the century (Stencil, born in 1901, is "the century's child"—V., 52—as well as V.'s) Pynchon invents coincidences and patterns which suggest historical design in the novel's world. "If the coincidences are real then Stencil has

never encountered history at all, but something far more appalling" (V., 450).

This suggestion of will and design in history is analogous to Stencil's own "design" of V., but Pynchon makes the analogy even more complex and suggestive than a simple equation can be. To begin with, V. is not entirely a product of Stencil's reconstructions. The frame of the novel V. is a narrator's direct account of events in 1955 and 1956, events which include Stencil's indirect narrations of the life of V. (Pynchon makes certain that Stencil's narratives, compelling as they are, are taken as speculative and suspect: people speak and understand languages which they could not understand "in life," and characters in the book occasionally remark on such difficulties.) The direct framing narrative is apparently reliable, unlike Stencil's, and it gradually and increasingly provides its own, un-Stencilled, evidence of V.'s existence. "The Confessions of Fausto Maijstral," another apparently reliable narrative written by the last person who saw V. alive, has a chapter to itself, unmediated by Stencil, with a plausible account of V.'s final moments. And a relic of V., an ivory comb which in Stencil's invented narrative she had perhaps acquired decades earlier, later appears both in Maijstral's confessions and, in the hands of Maijstral's daughter, in Pynchon's direct narrative. The comb serves as a kind of optical proof that V. once existed in the world of the book. But by the time the evidence appears in the direct narrative, Stencil has gone off to Stockholm to pursue other and more tenuous threads, and the authentic clue eludes him, presumably forever. The moment when the comb reappears is a heartbreaking one, not only because the reader knows then that one neat and satisfying conclusion to the novel—a reasonably successful conclusion of Stencil's search—has been irrevocably denied, but also because the incident makes a faint and reticent suggestion about the limits of human knowledge: a suggestion that, perhaps because of its reticence, rings true.

This leads back to the matter of historical design. For the characters in the direct narration of the book, V.'s existence is

never more than speculative: their evidence of her is always partial. It is only the narrator, who has no *use* for it, who has thorough knowledge of the evidence and the "truth." The characters have only partial knowledge of what in the book "in fact" exists. Now the book's Spenglerian speculation on historical design is also a reconstruction from partial evidence, for even the narrator's historical knowledge is severely limited. But by analogy with the "real" coherence of the woman V. (and the book softly but insistently presses the analogy), there may, the book suggests, be a real order and coherence to history in the world of phenomena that lies outside fiction's garden. But, as the genuine signs of V. elude Stencil—though they do exist, and Stencil has partial knowledge of some of them—so there may be a genuine transcendent coherence in the world's history, although the signs of that coherence either refuse to cooperate with our preconceptions, or elude us entirely. V. is finally a tragedy of human limitation, and like all tragedy it points towards the larger frame in which the tragic action occurs. The contradiction between human ignorance of the frame, and the frame itself, is tragedy's ultimate source, its mode of being.

## II

In contrast with the absconded signs of V., the signs that appear throughout *The Crying of Lot 49* are not elusive at all. They intrude iteratively on the book's heroine until they entirely supplant the undemanding world with which she had once been familiar. In *Lot 49* the systems of interrelation and commonality that inform the book's world have consequences entirely different from the superficially similar systems in V. To participate in the processes of decadence in V. you have only to become passive, inanimate and selfish; history, which simplifies V.'s world, will do the rest. But in *The Crying of Lot 49* the revealed pattern offers "maybe even . . . a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life that harrows the head of everybody American you know" (170), an alternative to physical

crowding and ethical vacancy, an alternative that reveals itself quietly but persistently to the passive listener, yet will not allow that listener to remain passive for long. In this second novel, published only three years after *V.*, a hidden order reinfuses Pynchon's world with energy, adds to the world's complexity, and demands not acquiescence but conscious choice.

Described briefly, in the sort of the bare outline that makes any serious plot sound ridiculous, *The Crying of Lot 49* recounts the discovery by its heroine, Mrs. Oedipa Maas, of an ancient and secret postal system named the Tristero. The manifestations of the Tristero (an alternate spelling), and all that accompanies it, are always associated in the book with the language of the sacred and with patterns of religious experience; the foils to the Tristero are always associated with sacrality gone wrong. As every person and event in *V.* is implicated in the general decline into the inanimate, everything in *Lot 49* participates either in the sacred or the profane. A major character in *V.* is named Benny Profane; in *Lot 49* there are wider possibilities (including someone named Grace). As Pynchon's work avoids the weightlessness of Nabokovian fantasy, so it avoids the self-important *nostalgie de la boue* of the social and psychological novels that occupy most of the fictional space in postwar America. Oedipa has "all manner of revelations," but they are not in the manner of most recent fiction, and certainly not the kind of revelations that her name might suggest: they are "hardly about . . . herself" (20). Pynchon writes at the end of an era in which the Freudian interpretation of an event served as a more than adequate succedanium for the event itself: it was an act of courage to name his heroine Oedipa (I shall have more to say later about the courage to risk facetiousness), for the novel contains not even a single reference to her emotional relations with her parents or her impulses towards self-creation. The name instead refers back to the Sophoclean Oedipus who begins his search for the solution of a problem (a problem, like Oedipa's, involving a dead man) as an almost detached observer, only to discover how deeply implicated he is in what he finds. As the book opens,

and Oedipa learns that she has been named executor of the estate of the "California real estate mogul" Pierce Inverarity, she "shuffl[es] back" in her memory "through a fat deckful of days which seemed . . . more or less identical" (11). But as she begins to sort out the complications of Inverarity's estate she becomes aware of moments of special significance, repeated patterns of meaning, that had not previously been apparent. Driving into the town where Inverarity's interests had been centered, she looks down from the freeway upon "the ordered swirl of houses and streets" and senses the possibility of a *kind* of meaning that is, for the moment, beyond her comprehension:

she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity . . . [T]here were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. . . . [Now,] a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding . . . [She] seemed parked at the centre of an odd religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. (24-25)

At this point Oedipa's revelations are only partly defined. In the next paragraph the narrator dismisses Oedipa's experience by placing it in distancing quotation marks: "the 'religious instant,' or whatever it might have been."

But a few pages later an "instant" of the same kind occurs, but this time more clearly defined. Oedipa sees in a television commercial a map of one of Inverarity's housing developments, and is reminded of her first glimpse of the town in which she is now: "Some immediacy was there again, some promise of hierophany" (31). This "promise of hierophany," of a manifestation of the sacred, is eventually fulfilled, and her "sense of concealed meaning" yields to her recognition of patterns that had potentially

been accessible to her all along, but which only now had revealed themselves. In the prose sense, what Oedipa discovers is the Trystero, "a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty"—that is, everything profane—"for the official government delivery system" (170). But across this hidden and illegal network information is transmitted in ways that defy ordinary logic: often, the links in the system cross centuries, or move between the most unlikely combinations of sender and receiver, without anyone in the world of routine ever recognizing that something untoward has occurred. The Trystero carries with it a sense of sacred connection and relation in the world, and by doing so it manifests a way of comprehending the world. By the end of the novel Oedipa is left alone, out over seventy thousand fathoms, left to decide for herself whether the Trystero exists or if she has merely fantasized, or if she has been hoodwinked into believing in it. On that all-or-nothing decision, everything—her construing of the world and the world's construction—depends:

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. . . . Ones and zeroes. . . . Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Trystero. For there was either some Trystero behind the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America . . . . (181–182)

As in all religious choices, no proof is possible: the choice of ones or zeroes presents itself "ahead . . . maybe endless," and the watcher is left alone.

Pynchon uses religious terms and hieratic language not simply

as a set of metaphors from which to hang his narrative, not merely as a scaffolding (as Joyce, for example, uses Christian symbols in *Ulysses*). The religious meaning of the book does not reduce to metaphor or myth, because religious meaning is itself the central issue of the plot. This creates difficulties for criticism. The Trystero implies universal meanings, and since universal meanings are notoriously recalcitrant to analysis, it will be necessary to approach the holistic center of the book from various facets and fragments. I hope the reader will bear with an argument that may, for a number of pages, ask him to assent to resolutions of issues that have not yet been discussed.

The book refers at one point to "the secular Tristero," which has a plausible history and a recognizable origin in ordinary human emotion and human society. During one of the few areas of the narrative in which nothing extraordinary happens—a "secular" part of the book—Oedipa compiles, with the help of one of the book's prosier characters (an English professor, alas), a history of the system that is somewhat speculative, but more plausible than the mock-theorizing in *V*. The history of the Trystero intersects with authentic history in a manner taken from historical novels like *Henry Esmond* or *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, where an extraordinary, fictional pattern of events, one that almost but not quite alters the larger course of history, is presented behind the familiar, public pattern. The Trystero, then, began in sixteenth-century Holland, when an insurgent Calvinist government unseated the hereditary postmaster, a member of the Thurn and Taxis family (here Pynchon blends authentic history with novelistic fantasy—the counts of Taxis did hold the postal monopoly in the Empire), and replaced him with one Jan Hinckart, Lord of Ohain. But Hinckart's right to the position, which he gained through political upheaval, not through inheritance, is disputed by a Spaniard, Hernando Joaquín de Tristero y Calavera, who claims to be Hinckart's cousin and the legitimate Lord of Ohain—and therefore the legitimate postmaster. Later, after an indecisive struggle between Hinckart and Tristero, the Calvinists are overthrown, and the Thurn and

Taxis line restored to postmastership. But Tristero, claiming that the postal monopoly was Ohain's by conquest, and therefore his own by blood, sets up an alternative postal system, and proceeds to wage guerrilla war against the Thurn and Taxis system. The rallying theme of Tristero's struggle: "disinheritance" (159-160).

So far, the story, though a fantasy, is still historically plausible, requiring only a relatively slack suspension of disbelief. However the word Calavera (skull, Calvary) in Tristero's name already suggests some emblematic resonances, and the theme of disinheritance joins the Tristero's history to Oedipa's discovery of it while executing a will. Later in the history, the Trysterero system takes on, *for its contemporaries*, a specifically religious meaning. Pynchon invents a severe Calvinist sect, the Scurvhamites, who tend toward the gnostic heresy and see Creation as a machine, one part of which is moved by God, the other by a soulless and automatic principle. When the Scurvhamites decide to tamper with some secular literature (specifically, the play *The Courier's Tragedy*, of which more shortly) to give it doctrinal meaning, they find that the "Trysterero would symbolize the Other quite well" (156). For Thurn and Taxis itself, faced with the enmity of the anonymous and secret Trysterero system, "many of them must [have] come to believe in something very like the Scurvhamite's blind, automatic anti-God. Whatever it is, it has the power to murder their riders, send landslides thundering across their roads . . . disintegrate the Empire." But this belief cannot last: "over the next century and a half the paranoia recedes, [and] they come to discover the secular Tristero" (165). The Trysterero returns from its symbolic meanings into a realm that is historically safe and believable. In this passage Pynchon offers an analogously safe way to read his own book: the Trysterero is a symbol for a complex of events taking place on the level of a battle in heaven, but it is merely a symbol, a way of speaking that has no hieratic significance in itself. But the novel, while offering this possibility, does so in a chapter in which nothing strange happens, where the world is Aristotelian and profane,

where the extraordinary concrescences of repetition and relation that inform the rest of the book briefly sort themselves out into simple, logical patterns. The book offers the possibility that its religious metaphor is only metaphor: but if the book were founded on this limited possibility, the remaining portions of the book would make no sense, and there would be little reason to write it in the first place.

The potted history near the end of the novel describes the discovery of the "secular Tristero" behind the demonic one; the book itself describes the progressive revelation of the sacred significance behind certain historical events. It should perhaps be mentioned that the frequent associations of the Trysterō with the demonic do not contradict the Trysterō's potentially sacred significance: the demonic is a subclass of the sacred, and exists, like the sacred, on a plane of meaning different from the profane and the secular. When Pynchon published two chapters from the book in a magazine he gave them the title, "The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity":<sup>4</sup> it is through Inverarity's will that Oedipa completes this proverbial equation, and finds her own devil in the agonizing ontological choice she has to make as the novel ends. The revelation of the sacred gets underway when Oedipa sees in the map of one of Inverarity's interests "some promise of hierophany." The sense of the word "hierophany" is clear enough—it is a manifestation of the sacred—but the word itself has a history that is informative in this context. The word is not recorded in the dictionaries of any modern European language (the related "hierophant" is of course recorded, but "hierophany" is not), and it appears to have been invented by Mircea Eliade,<sup>5</sup> who expands most fully on the word in his *Patterns in Comparative Religion* but gives a more straightforward definition in his introduction to *The Sacred and the Profane*: "Man becomes

4. *Esquire*, 64 (Dec., 1965), 171. This title is noted on the copyright page of the novel, while the title of another excerpt published elsewhere is pointedly omitted.

5. Reinvented, actually: the word seems to have had a technical meaning in Greek religion.

aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term hierophany. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, *i.e.*, that something sacred shows itself to us. . . . From the most elementary hierophany . . . to the supreme hierophany . . . there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world."<sup>6</sup> This latter condition, that the objects in which the sacred manifests itself be part of the natural world, is central to *Lot 49*, because everything in the novel that points to a sacred significance in the Trystero has, potentially, a secular explanation. The pattern and the coherence may, as Oedipa reminds herself, be the product of her own fantasy or of someone else's hoax. She is left, at every moment, to affirm or deny the sacredness of what she sees.

When, as she begins to uncover the Trystero, Oedipa decides to give, through her own efforts, some order to Inverarity's tangled interests, she writes in her notebook, "Shall I project a world?" (82). But her plan to provide her own meanings, "to bestow life on what had persisted" of the dead man, soon confronts the anomaly that more meanings, more relationships and connections than she ever expected begin to offer themselves—manifest themselves. And these manifestations arrive without any effort on her part. When, by the middle of the book, "everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Trystero" (81), she tries to escape, to cease looking for order. "She had only to drift," she supposes, "at random, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced that it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix" (104). But when she drifts that night through San Francisco

6. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959, p. 11. Eliade's italics.

she finds more extensive and more varied evidence of the Trystero's existence—evidence far more frequent and insistent than she found when she was actually looking for it. Like the mystic whose revelation is dependent on his passivity, Oedipa's full discovery of the Trystero depends on her refusal to search for it. In the last chapter even the most surprising events leave her only in expectant passivity: "Even a month ago, Oedipa's next question would have been 'Why?' But now she kept a silence, waiting, as if to be illuminated" (152).

Recent criticism has devoted much energy to finding detective-story patterns in fiction, and *The Crying of Lot 49*, with its heroine named after the first detective of them all, lends itself admirably to this method. However, Pynchon's novel uses mechanisms borrowed from the detective story to produce results precisely the opposite of those in the model. Where the object of a detective story is to reduce a complex and disordered situation to simplicity and clarity, and in doing so to isolate in a named locus the disruptive element in the story's world, *The Crying of Lot 49* starts with a relatively simple situation, and then lets it get out of the heroine's control: the simple becomes complex, responsibility becomes not isolated but universal, the guilty locus turns out to be everywhere, and individual clues are unimportant because neither clues nor deduction can lead to the solution. "Suppose, God, there really was a Tristero then and that she had come on it by accident. . . . [S]he might have found The Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she'd looked" (179). What the detective in this story discovers is a way of thinking that renders detection irrelevant. "The Christian," Chesterton writes somewhere, "has to use his brains to see the hidden good in humanity just as the detective has to use his brains to see the hidden evil." This, in essence, describes Oedipa's problem: she never discovers the alienation and incoherence in the world—those were evident from the start—but she stumbles instead across the hidden relationships in the world, relations effected through and manifested in the Trystero.

Near the middle of the book Oedipa stops searching. From this point on she becomes almost the only character in the novel who is *not* looking for something. While hierophanies occur all around her, almost everyone else is vainly trying to wrench an experience of the sacred out of places where it cannot possibly be found. As everyone in *V.* worries constantly about the inanimate, everyone in *The Crying of Lot 49* suffers from some distortion of religious faith, and almost everyone in the book eventually drops away from Oedipa into some religious obsession.<sup>7</sup> Their examples demonstrate the wrong turnings that Oedipa must avoid.

Mucho Maas, for example, Oedipa's husband, who works as a disc jockey, suffers "regular crises of conscience about his profession[:] 'I just don't believe in any of it'" (12). This sounds at first like a suburban cliché, but the religious language soon develops in complexity and allusiveness. Oedipa's incomprehension during her first "religious instant" reminds her of her husband "watching one of his colleagues with a headset clamped on and cueing the next record with movements stylized as the handling of chris, censer, chalice might be for a holy man . . . [D]id Mucho stand outside Studio A looking in, knowing that even if he could hear it, he couldn't believe in it?" (25). His previous job had been at a used car lot, where although "he had believed in the cars" he suffered from a nightmare of alienation and nothingness (which also provides Pynchon with a send-up of Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place"): ("We were a member of the National Automobile Dealers' Association. N.A.D.A. Just this creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky. I used to wake up hollering" (144). His escape from a nihilistic void takes him into the impregnable solipsism granted by LSD, and he leaves Oedipa behind him).

The drug had previously been urged on Oedipa herself by

7. One character who drops away from Oedipa, but without any religious significance to the action, is her coexecutor, the lawyer Metzger, who goes off to marry a sixteen-year-old girl. Metzger, who never takes the slightest interest in the other characters' preoccupations, seems to serve in the novel as the representative of the entirely profane.

her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, who was conducting an experiment he called the Bridge—not a bridge across to community but "the bridge inward." Oedipa, who seems to merit her revelations through her knowledge of what does *not* lead to revelation, knows that she "would be damned if she'd take the capsules he'd given her. Literally damned" (17). Hilarius himself distorts the purpose of faith. In an attempt to atone for his Nazi past he tries to develop "a faith in the literal truth of everything [Freud] wrote. . . . It was . . . a kind of penance. . . . I wanted to believe, despite everything my life had been" (134-135). The strain finally sends him into paranoia and madness: fantasies of vengeful Israelis, a wish for death.

Randolph Driblette, who directs the play in which Oedipa first hears the name Trystero, suffers from the nihilistic pride that thinks itself the only possible source of order in the universe. In the play he directs, "the reality is in this head. Mine. I'm the projector in the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also" (79). (It is from Driblette that Oedipa borrows the metaphor of her notebook-question, "Shall I project a world?") In directing plays Driblette "felt hardly any responsibility toward the word, really; but to . . . its spirit, he was always intensely faithful" (152). (The logical response to a world where one creates, alone, the only order—where one ignores the *data* of the word—is nihilistic despair.) And the logical culmination of an exclusive devotion to the spirit is the sloughing-off of the flesh: Driblette commits suicide by walking into the sea.

John Nefastis, the inventor of a machine which joins the worlds of thermodynamics and information theory (of which more later) through the literal use of a scientific metaphor known as Maxwell's Demon is "impenetrable, calm, a believer"—in whose presence Oedipa feels "like some sort of heretic." Nefastis, the book's fundamentalist, believes his scientific metaphor is "not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true." His language recalls similar moments in the rest of the book

when he refers to the visible operation of his machine as "the secular level" (105-106), and the photograph of the physicist James Clerk Maxwell that adorns the machine is, oddly enough (though the narrator does not remark on the oddity), "the familiar Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge photo" (86). Nefastis's unbalanced science is endorsed, shakily, by the language of belief.

At least one character, however, has something of the enlightenment that Oedipa is approaching. A Mexican anarchist whom Oedipa meets on her night of drifting, and whom she and Inverarity had first met in Mexico some years before, is named Jesús Arrabal. When he talks politics his language quickly shifts to the language of religion:

You know what a miracle is . . . another world's intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there's cataclysm. Like the church we hate, anarchists also believe in another world. Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort. . . . And yet . . . if any of it should ever really happen that perfectly, I would also have to cry miracle. An anarchist miracle. Like your friend [Inverarity the real-estate mogul]. He is too exactly and without flaw the thing we fight. In Mexico the privilegiado is always, to a finite percentage, redeemed, one of the people. Unmiraculous. But your friend, unless he's joking, is as terrifying to me as a Virgin appearing to an Indian. (120)

The intersection of two worlds in miracles is a theme we shall return to. For the moment, it should be noted that Arrabal admits the possibility that the "miraculous" Inverarity may be "joking"—just as Oedipa has to admit the possibility that the miraculous Trystero may be a hoax, a joke written by Inverarity into his will.)

Compared with the obsessions and confusions that surround most of the other characters, the religious language associated

with Oedipa herself is on a different and clearer level. The word "God" occurs perhaps twenty times in the book (it appears hardly at all in *V.*), and on almost every occasion the word hovers near Oedipa or her discoveries. In her very first word, on the first page of the book, she "spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible." When she first encounters the Trystero's emblem, a drawing of a muted post horn, she copies it into her notebook, "thinking: God, hieroglyphics" (52)—a double iteration, through the prefix *hiero*, of the Trystero's sacrality. In an early passage that anticipates the book's later, culminating reference to "a great digital computer [with] the zeroes and ones twinned above," Oedipa tries to elude a spray-can gone wild: "something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel" (37). When she sees the Trystero symbol in one more unexpected place she feels "as if she had been trapped at the center of some intricate crystal, and say[s], 'My God'" (92). Faced with the choice of ones and zeroes, of meaning or nothingness, she thinks, "this, oh God, was the void" (171). And there are other examples. What would simply be a nagging cliché in another kind of novel becomes here a quiet but insistent echo, a muted but audible signal.

## III

*The Crying of Lot 49* is a book partly about communications and signals—Oedipa's discovery of the Trystero involves the interpretation of ambiguous signs—and, logically enough, its central scientific metaphor involves communication theory (alternately called Information Theory). It is through information theory, in fact, that Pynchon establishes in this novel a richly imaginative logical link with the world of his first novel, *V.* The two novels share some superficial details on the level of plot—one minor character appears briefly in both, a Vivaldi concerto for which someone is searching in *V.* is heard over muzak in *Lot 49*—but their deeper connection lies in *Lot 49's* extension and

transformation of *V.*'s central metaphor. *V.* describes the thermodynamic process by which the world's entropy increases and by which the world's available energy declines. But the equations of thermodynamics and the term "entropy" itself were also employed, decades after their original formulation, in information theory, where they took on a wider and more complex function than they ever had before. By using information theory as a controlling pattern of ideas in his second book, Pynchon is in one way simply extending the metaphor central to his first book: but the extension also adds immeasurably to the complexity and fertility of the original idea. Thermodynamic entropy is (to speak loosely) a measure of stagnation. As thermodynamic entropy increases in a system, and its available energy decreases, information about the system increases: the system loses some of its uncertainty, its potential. In the language of information theory, however, entropy is the measure of uncertainty in a system. As you increase thermodynamic entropy, therefore, you decrease information entropy.<sup>8</sup> In information theory, also, the *entropy rate* of a system is the rate at which information is transmitted. Entropy increases in *V.*, and the world slows down; in *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa receives more and more surprises, more and more rapidly, and entropy still increases—but now it is information entropy rather than thermodynamic, and the effect of the increase is invigorating rather than stagnating.

Metaphorically, then, the two meanings of the term "entropy" are in opposition, and it is precisely this opposition which John Nefastis tries to exploit in his machine. Oedipa finds Nefastis's account of his machine confusing, but

she did gather that there were two distinct kinds of this entropy. One having to do with heat-engines, the other to do with communication. The equation for one, back in the '30's, had looked very like the equation for the other. It was

8. This usage conforms to that of the founder of the theory, Claude Shannon, but is disputed by other scientists. For a full discussion see Leon Brillouin's *Science and Information Theory* (New York, 1956), to which I am deeply indebted.

a coincidence. The two fields were entirely unconnected, except at one point: Maxwell's Demon. As the Demon sat and sorted his molecules into hot and cold, the system was said to lose entropy. But somehow the loss was offset by the information gained about what molecules were where.

"Communication is the key," cried Nefastis. . . . (105)

When Maxwell's hypothetical "Demon" (a received term that fits neatly into Pynchon's hieratic language) sorts hot and cold molecules, he can apparently raise the temperature in one part of a system, and lower the temperature in the other part, without expending work—thereby *decreasing* the system's thermodynamic entropy, in violation of the second law of thermodynamics. But the decrease of thermodynamic entropy is balanced by an increase in information entropy, thereby supposedly making the whole thing "possible," when a person whom Nefastis calls a "sensitive" transmits information to the Demon that Nefastis believes is actually in his machine.<sup>9</sup> Nefastis mixes the language of science with that of spiritualism. The "sensitive" has to receive data "at some deep psychic level" from the Demon; the "sensitive" achieves his effects by staring at the photo of Maxwell on the machine; and so forth. The whole effect is one of Blavatskian mumbo-jumbo, but Nefastis also uses the language of belief that Oedipa is learning to understand. Feeling "like some kind of heretic," she doubts Nefastis's enterprise: "The true sensitive is the one that can share in the man's hallucinations, that's all" (107). But the implied question, raised by Oedipa's doubt, is whether Oedipa's sensitivity to the Trystero is also the product of hallucinations.

The Nefastis machine is based on the similarity between the equations for information entropy and those of thermodynamic entropy, a similarity which Nefastis calls a "metaphor." The machine "makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true" (106). Pynchon has much to say elsewhere in

9. The real scientific problem behind this fantasy is described by Brillouin (ch. 13).

the book about the relation between truth and metaphor, but Nefastis's error is based on the confusion of language and reality, on an attempt to make two worlds coincide. Nefastis, the "believer," has faith in his metaphor, and believes that the truth of that faith can objectively be demonstrated and confirmed. Oedipa, on the other hand, receives no confirmation. Faith, wrote Paul to the Hebrews, is "the evidence of things *not seen*."

Besides using the association of entropy and information theory, Pynchon also exploits the theory's rule of concerning the relation of surprise and probability in the transmitting of data. Briefly, the rule states that the more unexpected a message is, the more information it contains: a series of repetitive messages conveys less information than a series of messages that differ from each other. (Of course there must be a balance between surprise and probability: a message in language the receiver cannot understand is very surprising, but conveys little information.) In *The Crying of Lot 49* there are *two secret communications systems*: the Trystero, and its entirely secular counterpart, the system used by the right-wing Peter Pinguid Society. Both circumvent the official government delivery system, but, unlike the Trystero, the Pinguid Society's system cares less about transmitting information than about nose-thumbing the bureaucracy. Oedipa happens to be with a member of the Society when he receives a letter with the PPS postmark:

*Dear Mike, it said, how are you? Just thought I'd drop you a note. How's your book coming? Guess that's all for now. See you at The Scope [a bar].*

"That's how it is," [the PPS member] confessed bitterly, "most of the time." (53)

The Pinguid Society's letters, bearing no information, are empty and repetitive. With the Trystero, in contrast, even the stamps are surprising:

In the 3¢ Mothers of America Issue . . . the flowers to the lower left of Whistler's Mother had been replaced by

Venus's-flytrap, belladonna, poison sumac and a few others Oedipa had never seen. In the 1947 Postage Stamp Centenary Issue, commemorating the great postal reform that had meant the beginning of the end for private carriers [of which the Trystero is the only survivor], the head of a Pony Express rider at the lower left was set at a disturbing angle unknown among the living. The deep violet 3¢ regular issue of 1954 had a faint, menacing smile on the face of the Statue of Liberty. . . . (174)

This delicate balance of the familiar and the unexpected (note, for example, that there are enough surprising poisoned plants, on one of the stamps, to indicate that the even more surprising ones which "Oedipa had never seen" are also poisonous) produces a powerful sense of menace and dread—a sense no less powerful for its comic aspects—while the secular Pinguid Society messages are capable only of conventionality, of repetition without a sense of the numinous.

The unit of information in communication theory is the *bit*, abbreviated from *binary digit*. Theoretically, all information can be conveyed in a sequence of binary digits, i.e., ones and zeroes. By the end of the novel, in a passage quoted above, Oedipa perceives the dilemma presented to her by the possible existence of the Trystero in terms of the choice between one bit and another (Pynchon always provides the possibility that the Trystero is "only" Oedipa's fantasy, or that the whole system is a hoax written into Inverarity's will): ("For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above . . . Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth" (181)). The signs themselves do not prove anything: the streets are "hieroglyphic"—an example of sacred carving—but behind the sacred sign *may* lie what is merely profane, "only the earth." The religious content of the book is fixed in Oedipa's dilemma: the choice between the *zero* of secular triviality and chaos, and the *one* that is the *ganz andere* of the sacred.

In Pynchon's novel, as in life, there are two kinds of repetition: trivial repetition, as in the monotony of the Pinguid Society letters, and repetition that may signify the timeless and unchanging sacred. In *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade writes that "religious man lives in two kinds of time, of which the more important, sacred time, appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of mythical present that is periodically regenerated by means of rites" (70). Oedipa's first experience (in the book, that is) of trivial repetition occurs when she encounters a debased version of Eliade's "circular time, reversible and recoverable." In the second chapter, before she has any evidence of the Trystero, she watches television in the Echo Courts motel (the name is a grace-note on the main theme), with her coexecutor Metzger—a lawyer, once a child actor. The film on the screen turns out to star Metzger as a child, and when the film-Metzger sings a song, "his aging double, over Oedipa's protests, sang harmony" (31). At the end of the book, Oedipa wonders if the Trystero system is simply a plot against her; here, at the beginning, she suspects that Metzger "bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this[:] it's all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, *plot*." Time, on this occasion, seems to become even more confused and circular when one reel of the film is shown in the wrong order: "Is this before or after?" she asked.

In the midst of the film Oedipa glimpses a more significant form of repetition: in a passage discussed above, a map in a television commercial reminds her of the "religious instant" she felt on looking over the town where she is now. But this significant repetition occurs in the midst of reports of other, sterile ones. For example, Metzger, an actor turned lawyer, describes the pilot film of a television series on his own life, starring a friend of his, a lawyer turned actor. The film rests isolated in its own meaningless circular time, "in an air-conditioned vault . . . light can't fatigue it, it can be repeated endlessly." Outside the motel room, a rock-music group called the Paranoids, who all look alike, seem

to be multiplying—"others must be plugging in"—until their equipment blows a fuse.

In contrast, the reiterative evidence of the Trystero that Oedipa later discovers suggests that something complex and significant has existed almost unaltered for centuries, in Eliade's "mythical present that is periodically reintegrated." Many of the events, linked with the Trystero, that occur in the Jacobean Courier's Tragedy that Oedipa sees early in the book, recur in the midst of the California gold rush, and again in a battle in Italy during the Second World War. The Trystero's emblem, a muted post horn (suggesting the demonic aspect of the system: it mutes the trumpet of apocalypse), recurs in countless settings, in children's games, in postmarks, lapel pins, tattoos, rings, scrawled on walls, doodled in notebooks—in dozens of contexts which cannot, through any secular logic, be connected (Each of these repetitions, each evidence of the Trystero's persistence, seems to Oedipa a link with another world. As the Nefastis machine futilely tried to link the "worlds" of thermodynamics and communications, Jésus Arrabal talks of a miracle as "another world's intrusion into this one" (120). Those who joined the Trystero, Oedipa thinks, must have entered some kind of community when they withdrew from the ordinary life of the Republic, and, "since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum . . . there had to exist the separate, silent, unexpected world" (92). To enter the Trystero, to become aware of it, is to cross the threshold between the profane and sacred worlds. "The threshold," Eliade writes in *The Sacred and the Profane*, "is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those two worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible" (25). (Oedipa wonders if she could have "found the Trystero . . . through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations" (179).

Yet in the middle of the fifth chapter of the book the entrance-

ways, the alienations ("Decorating each alienation . . . was somehow always the post horn"—123), suddenly disappear: the repetitions stop. For perhaps thirty pages Oedipa receives no immediate signs of the Trystero, nothing more than some historical documents and second-hand reports. Until the middle of the fifth chapter (131, to be exact) Oedipa consistently sees the post horn as a living and immediate symbol, actively present in the daily life around her. From that point on she only hears about its past existence through documents, stamps, books—always second-hand. (This distinction is nowhere mentioned in the book, but the clean break after 131 is too absolute to be accidental.) And at the same time, all her important human contacts begin to fade and disperse: "They are stripping from me, she said subvocally—feeling like a fluttering curtain, in a very high window moving . . . out over the abyss. . . . My shrink . . . has gone mad; my husband, on LSD, gropes like a child further and further into the rooms and endless rooms of the elaborate candy house of himself and away, hopelessly away, from what has passed, I was hoping forever, for love; . . . my best guide to the Trystero [Driblette] has taken a Brody. Where am I?" (152–153). Without signs, without the repetition that all signs embody, she is left to her own devices. Until now, the repetitions *told* her of the Trystero ("the repetition of symbols was to be enough . . . *She was meant to remember. . . .* Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence"—Pynchon's italics), but the simple reception of signs is insufficient for the revelation she is approaching: ("she wondered if each one of the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (118).

Pynchon's reference to epilepsy recalls its traditional status as a sacred disease. A few pages earlier, Oedipa had encountered another repetition of one of the book's motifs: the destruction of a cemetery for a freeway. When she hears the cemetery and freeway mentioned again, "She could, at this stage of things, recog-

nize signals like that, as the epileptic is said to. . . . Afterward it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers." She had been given a glass of wine made from dandelions picked once from the destroyed cemetery. "In the space of a sip of dandelion wine it came to her that she would never know how many times such a seizure may already have visited, or how to grasp it should it visit again" (95). The "message" of the epileptic seizure, the sacramental content of the wine, the persistence of mythical time behind the profane world, becomes explicit when she receives the wine once again:

He poured her more dandelion wine.

"It's clearer now," he said . . . . "A few months ago it got quite cloudy. You see, in spring, when the dandelions begin to bloom again, the wine goes through a fermentation. As if they remembered."

No, thought Oedipa, sad. As if their home cemetery in some way still did exist, in a land where you could somehow walk, and not need the East San Narciso Freeway, and bones still could rest in peace, nourishing ghosts of dandelions, no one to plow them up. As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine. (98-99)

This splendid passage combines almost all the book's central motifs: the alternate world "where you could somehow walk," the persistence of the world of the sacred present, the tristesse of the illumination that accompanies the Trystero.

The Trystero's illuminations are conveyed through miracles, sacred versions of what Oedipa thinks of as the "secular miracle of communication" (180). The one traditional miracle most closely involved with communication is the miracle of Pentecost:

When the day of Pentecost had come, [the Apostles] were . . . all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. . . .

[T]he multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. . . . And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2)

Pynchon names Pentecost only once, in the play-within-the-novel *The Courier's Tragedy*, where the novel's use of the Pentecost motif is parodied darkly. The gift of tongues is perverted, amidst a scene of Jacobean horror, into the tearing out of a tongue. The torturer gloats:

*Thy pitiless unmanning is most meet,  
Thinks Ercole the zany Paraclete.  
Descended this malign, Unholy Ghost,  
Let us begin thy frightful Pentecost. (68)*

The feast of Pentecost is alternately called Whitsunday, after the tradition that on that day baptismal candidates wear white. The final scene of the book—a stamp auction held, surprisingly, on a Sunday—is a parody of Pentecost: "The men inside the auction room wore black mohair and had pale cruel faces. . . . [The auctioneer] spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel. The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of Lot 49." And the book ends. The auctioneer prepares to speak; Oedipa awaits the forty-ninth lot of the sale, a lot whose purchaser "may" turn out to be from the Trystero, thus forcing the system to reveal itself. But why the forty-ninth lot? Because Pentecost is the Sunday seven weeks after Easter—forty-nine days. But the word Pentecost derives from the Greek for "fiftieth." The crying—the auctioneer's calling—of the forty-ninth lot is the moment before a Pentecostal revelation, the end of the period in which the miracle is in a state of potential, not yet manifest. This is why the novel ends with Oedipa waiting, with the "true" nature of the Trystero never established: a manifestation of the sacred can only be

believed in; it can never be proved beyond doubt. There will always be a mocking voice, internal or external, saying "they are filled with new wine"—or, as Oedipa fears, "you are hallucinating it . . . you are fantasying some plot" (170-171).

Oedipa's constant risk lies in that nagging possibility: that the Trystero has no independent existence, but is merely her own projection on the world outside. The center of Pierce Inverarity's interests is a town named San Narciso, and the name insistently mocks Oedipa's quest. (There is a Saint Narcissus in *The Courier's Tragedy*, so the narcissism in question is not limited to mid-century America.) The novel describes, however, Oedipa's progress away from the modes of narcissism. At the end of the first chapter Pynchon writes that Oedipa was "to have all manner of revelations[, h]ardly about Pierce Inverarity, or herself." Oedipa recalls, a few lines later, a past moment with Inverarity in Mexico when she saw an emblem of solipsism to which she responded in kind. They had

somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by . . . Remedios Varo; in the central painting of a triptych . . . were a number of frail girls . . . prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a 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.<sup>10</sup>

(Driblette's vision of himself as director is a later version of this image.)

Oedipa . . . stood in front of the painting and cried. . . . She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she had stood on had only been woven a couple thousand miles away in her own tower,

10. Some critics have invented pedigrees for this painting out of English literature, but Varo was a Spanish painter, and the painting exists. For a reproduction see *Remedios Varo* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1966), plate 7.

was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape.

The tower of isolation, though an expression of the self, is not a product of the self, but one of the conditions of this world:

Such a captive maiden . . . soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are *like her ego only incidental*: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. . . . If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (20-21)

With this gesture towards hopelessness the chapter ends. But to its final question, the remainder of the book—with its partial revelation of what the Trystero might stand for—offers a tentative answer.

Near the end of the novel, when Oedipa stands by the sea, "her isolation complete," she finally breaks from the tower and from the uniqueness of San Narciso. She learns, finally, of a continuity that had been available, but hidden, from the beginning:

She stood . . . her isolation complete, and tried to face toward the sea. But she'd lost her bearings. She turned, . . . could find no mountains either. As if there could be no barriers between herself and the rest of the land. San Narciso at that moment lost (the loss pure, instant, spherical . . .), gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American continuity of crust and mantle. (177)

At this point the uniqueness of her experience matters less than the general truth it signifies: "There was the true continuity. . . . If San Narciso and the estate were really no different from any other town, and any other estate, then by that continuity she might have found The Tristero anywhere in her Republic. . . . if only she'd looked" (179). Her choice now is either to

affirm the existence of the Tristero—through which continuity survives, renews, reintegrates itself over vast expanses of space and time—or to be entirely separated, isolated, an “alien . . . assumed full circle into some paranoia” (182). San Narciso or America.

## IV

Like every sophisticated work of fiction *The Crying of Lot 49* contains within itself guides to its own interpretation. The book offers synthesizing critical methods which are integral with the very material the methods propose to organize. Certainly this is a book that needs a *vade mecum*: its reader finds himself continuously in a dilemma analogous to its heroine's. Both are given a series of clues, signs, interconnecting symbols, acronyms, code words, patterns of theme and variation which never demand to be interpreted, but which always offer themselves as material that is available for synthesis and order.

The play-within-the-novel, *The Courier's Tragedy* “by Richard Wharfinger,” offers in concentrated and often inverted form the main concerns of the novel as a whole. The plot of the play is quite as elaborate as that of any genuine Jacobean tragedy, and any summary here would be almost as long as Pynchon's account in the novel (q.v.). One or two points, however, call for special attention. As on every occasion when a work of art appears within another, Pynchon offers his readers the possibility that their “attendance” at the novel is analogous to Oedipa's attendance at the Wharfinger play. In the performance that Oedipa attends, and, it later develops, *only in that performance*, the director, Driblette, alters the text to conform with the version produced by Scurvhamite tampering (as discussed above), the version which actually names the Tristero. (The other editions of the play, all discussed later in the book, omit the name altogether.) The implication of this is that the naming of the Tristero on one particular night may have been directed at Oedipa—that the production was not simply made available

to whomever happened to buy a ticket. Underneath this suggestion (and the implications are developed in another passage which I shall discuss shortly) is the implied possibility that the relationship of a reader and a work of art may perhaps not be simply an aesthetic relationship—that the work has, potentially, a purposive effect.

In the action of the play itself one event casts special light on the meaning of the Trystero system within the rest of the novel. The eponymous hero of the tragedy, a rightful prince deposed (disinherited, like the founder of the Trystero) and now disguised as a courier at the court of his enemy, is sent by that enemy with a lying message to another court. But this enemy then sends out agents—from the Trystero, in Driblette's production—after the disguised prince, with orders to murder him. Later, the lying message is found on the dead body, but "it is no longer the lying document . . . but now, miraculously, a long confession by [the prince's enemy] of all his crimes" (74). In an unexplained manner the Trystero has been associated with a miracle: though murderers, they have somehow produced the miraculous transformation of lies into truth. And this transformation, in which a message is miraculously different when sent and when received, is a version of the miracle of Pentecost—which the play has already named. The patterns of the novel are here sketched for the novel's heroine.

But how is she—and by analogy the reader—to construe these patterns? Is Oedipa to interpret the signs she discovers merely as she would interpret a play in performance—or do the signs have a meaning that "mattered to the world"? The performance of *The Courier's Tragedy* which she attended *may* have been directed specifically at her: her relationship with it was either potential or actual. Pynchon elaborates on these two possibilities in another metaphor derived from theatrical performance, this time strip-tease:

So began, for Oedipa, the languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero. Or rather, her attendance at some unique per-

formance . . . something a little extra for whoever'd stayed this late. As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration . . . would fall away . . . ; as if a plunge toward dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before The Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage . . . and leave her in peace? Or would it instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked on 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)

Pynchon here uses a metaphor from performance to describe the demands that may be made by the Tristero, and the metaphor thus transfers the problem of belief to one of its analogues, the problem of literary meaning. Pynchon joins the problem posed by the novel's content—the meaning of the Tristero to Oedipa—to the problem posed by the book's presentation—the meaning of the novel to its reader's nonliterary experience. What the passage delineates, in a version of the one-zero alternative that pervades the book, are two different concepts of art. In the first, according to which art's function is *delectare*, a novel is a superior form of entertainment which never intrudes into the world of decision and action, and whose structure and texture aspire to illuminate nothing but themselves (one might think of the later Nabokov or the stories of Borges's middle period). According to the second concept, art's purpose is *monere*, and a novel offers to its reader an example of coherence and order that rebukes the confusion of life and offers an alternative example: "the dance ended," its meaning taken out of the aesthetic realm, it offers to a reader "words [he] never wanted to hear."

These two extremes suggest a scale along which any work of fiction may be placed, a scale that measures the degree to which a work illuminates (at one end of the scale) the nature of the

world outside the work, or (at the other end) the nature of the work's own language and structure. At the latter extreme is that which may be called *subjunctive fiction*, works concerned with events that can occur only in language, with few or no analogues in the phenomenal world. At the other extreme is *indicative fiction* (which includes *imperative fiction*), works that transmit, through no matter how elaborate a transformation, no matter how wide or narrow a focus, information about the emotional and physical world of nonliterary experience, including, but not limited to, the experience of language. Of course all indicative fiction has subjunctive elements, or it would be formless and not "fiction"; and all subjunctive fiction has indicative elements, otherwise it could not be understood at all.<sup>11</sup>

Read superficially, *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to fall near the subjunctive end of the scale. One often finds the book compared with Nabokov or Borges, and Pynchon's invention of an alternate "world," an alternate system of organization revealed through the Trystero, appears to justify these comparisons. If Van Veen can live in Anti-Terra, then Oedipa can find a Trystero. But a "subjunctive" reading accounts for too few of the novel's details and complexities, and is finally insufficient. Where Nabokov and Borges create a novelistic equivalent to *poésie pure*, Pynchon strives to remain as *impure* as possible. His novel insists on its indicative relation to the world of experience; and its proposal of "another mode of meaning behind the obvious" is not a tentative aesthetic proposal, but "words [one] never wanted to hear."

A story by Borges, from which Pynchon may have jumped off into the deeper themes of his novel, offers a subjunctive version of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Borges's "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim," in *Ficciones*, poses as a review of a novel published

11. This issue is related, of course, to the issue of probability and surprise in information theory. But while subjunctive fiction *apparently* has more "surprise," and indicative fiction more "probability," the matter in fact is far more complex. Information theory is not in any way concerned with the *value* of information—only with its quantity and the clarity of its transmission. Information theory and aesthetics are indeed related, but only tangentially.

in Bombay (and described with the usual Borgesian panoply of sources, analogues and scholarly commentary). The "reviewers" of the novel point out its "detective-story mechanism and its undercurrent of mysticism." The central figure of this novel, a student, goes in search of a woman whom he has heard about, vaguely, from a particularly vile thief. In the course of his search the student takes up "with the lowest class of people," and, among them, "all at once . . . he becomes aware of a brief and sudden change in that world of ruthlessness—a certain tenderness, a moment of happiness, a forgiving silence." The student guesses that this sudden change cannot originate in the people he is among, but must derive from somewhere else: "somewhere on the face of the earth is a man from whom this light has emanated," someone for whom he now begins to search. "Finally, after many years, the student comes to a corridor 'at whose end is a door and a cheap beaded curtain, and behind the curtain a shining light.' The student claps his hands once or twice and asks for al-Mu'tasim [the object of the search]. A man's voice—the unimaginable voice of al-Mu'tasim—prays him to enter. The student parts the curtain and steps forward. At this point the novel comes to its end."<sup>12</sup>

The structural analogies to *The Crying of Lot 49* are clear. The hero who sets out in search of one thing, as Oedipa sets out to give order to Inverarity's legacy; the discovery of something else entirely, as Oedipa begins to be made aware of the Trystero; the revelation of happiness and forgiveness, informed by and originating from a semi-divine object; the "detective-story and [the] undercurrent of mysticism"—all these are common to Pynchon's novel and Borges's novel-within-a-story. But Pynchon inverts the playful superficialities in Borges to create a pattern of greater intellectual depth and one deeper in emotional resource. In Borges, for example, the student *hears* his evidence

12. The translation quoted here is the one by Borges and Norman Thomas di Giovanni in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1970), pp. 45-52. An earlier translation appeared in *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962). I am indebted to Professor Frank Kermode for pointing out this story.

of love and coherence amidst a scene of evil and degradation. In a corresponding episode in *Lot 49* Oedipa herself *enacts* the love and charity that Borges's hero can only witness. Oedipa's action occurs when she sees, on the steps of a dilapidated rooming house, an old sailor with a "wrecked face" and "eyes gloried in burst veins," who asks her to mail a letter bearing a Trystero stamp. After a night in which she has seen scores of signs of the Trystero, she is now flooded by a vision of the old man's whole experience of suffering, futility and isolation. She pictures to herself the mattress he sleeps on, bearing the "vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost."

She was overcome all at once by a need to touch him. . . .

Exhausted, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held him, gazing out of her smudged eyes down the stairs, back into the morning. (126)

Here Oedipa performs an act in which she takes personal responsibility for the patterns of correlation and coherence which she has found in the world outside. Her embrace of the old sailor is a tangible manifestation of the unlikely relations for which the Trystero is an emblem. Through the Trystero Oedipa has learned to comfort the book's equivalent of that helpless figure to whom all successful quest-heroes must give succour.

But the Trystero is not simply a vehicle by which unseen relationships are manifested. Its name hides not only the unseen (and, to the secular world, illicit) relationship of the *tryst*, but also the *tristesse* that must accompany any sense of coherence and fullness. For if even the smallest event carries large significance, then even the smallest loss, the most remote sadness, contains more grief than a secular vision can imagine. When Oedipa helps the old sailor upstairs she imagines the enormous loss that must accompany his death (which she imagines as

occurring when a spark from his cigarette will ignite his mattress):

She remembered John Nefastis, talking about his Machine, and massive destructions of information. So when this mattress flared up around the sailor, in his Viking's funeral: the stored, coded years of uselessness, early death, self-harrowing, the sure decay of hope . . . would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. (128)

The final metaphor, borrowed from information theory and thermodynamics, here becomes a compelling metaphor of an aspect of human experience.

"She knew," Pynchon continues, "because she had held him, that he suffered DT's. Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens . . ." The metaphor itself is a delirium, a violent dissociation of what it describes. Oedipa recognizes now how deep and how complex is the indicative power of language, how much deeper than she imagined. Remembering a college boyfriend studying calculus, she forms a pun on the man's disease: "'dt,' God help this old tattooed man, meant also a time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself as something innocuous like an average rate; . . . where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick." For Oedipa the possibilities of seriousness have now multiplied: each moment, each event, "had to be confronted at last for what it was." The movement from one element of a pun to the other is at once a comic slide and a movement towards real relation: "there was that high magic to low puns." And metaphor is at once a verbal trick and a way of talking about the truth of the world: "The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was" (129). The problem of metaphor is here

transferred in part to the reader. Metaphor—carrying over, across—is a way of signifying the true but not immediately accessible relations in the world of experience: “a thrust at truth.” But metaphor acts this way only when one is “inside, safe,” joined to the world in which moral and metaphoric connections, links of responsibility across time and among persons, endorsed by a hieratic vision, actually exist. If one is “outside, lost,” damned to isolation and incoherence, then metaphor is nothing but a “tie,” a yoking together by violence of heterogeneous concepts. Yet metaphor is, potentially, both a thrust and truth and a lie: the one-or-zero choice remains.

As metaphor can have either a subjunctive or an indicative meaning, so the Trystero will either leave Oedipa in peace or compel her to decision. Pynchon's novel points outside itself: the act of reading it (to use terms from communications and thermodynamics) can be either adiabatic or irreversible, either locked in the unchanging garden of fiction, or open to the shifting and uncertain world of choice, emotion, and community, either a verbal spectacle that leaves its reader in peace, or words you never wanted to hear.

The achievement of *The Crying of Lot 49* is its ability to speak unwanted words without a hint of preaching or propaganda. The book's transformation of the impersonal language of science into a language of great emotional power is a breathtaking accomplishment, whose nearest rival is perhaps Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. Equally remarkable is the book's ability to hover on the edge of low comedy without ever descending into the pond of the frivolous. The risks Pynchon takes in his comedy are great, but all the “bad” jokes, low puns, comic names, and moments of pure farce that punctuate the book have a serious function: the book, through its exploration of stylistic extremes, constantly raises expectations which it then refuses to fulfill. Its pattern of comic surprises, of sudden intrusions of disparate styles and manners, is entirely congruent with the thrust of its narrative. As Oedipa is caught unaware by the abrupt revelations that change her world, and is thus made attentive to

significance she never recognized before, so the variations in the book's texture alert a reader to the book's complexity. High seriousness is difficult to sustain—nor, clearly, would Pynchon ever want to do so. A serious vision of relation and coherence must include comic relationships, and recognize comic varieties of attention.

Pynchon recognizes the limits of fiction—his comedy is in part a reminder of the fictional quality of his world—but he never lets his book become therefore self-reflective. Although he shares the painful knowledge wrought by modernism of the limits of art, and although he knows that no work of quotidian fiction—neither social nor psychological—can ever again persuade, he devotes himself to the effort that leads from pure fiction to a thrust at truth. The effort is difficult and complex, and most of the modes in which the effort has previously been attempted now seem exhausted. Pynchon's search for a new mode of indicative fiction is a lonely and isolated one, but it leads to a place where fiction can become less lonely, less isolated than it has been for many years.

#### POSTSCRIPT

*Gravity's Rainbow*—all 760 pages of it—has now appeared, and tends to confirm this essay's reading of Pynchon's earlier work. The themes and methods of *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* also animate this third novel, yet they do so with far greater profundity and variety. *Gravity's Rainbow* is eight times as long as *The Crying of Lot 49*, and it includes at least three hundred characters, all joined to a plot that on a first reading appears uncontrolled, but which, on a second reading, reveals an extraordinary coherence. I have attempted elsewhere (*Yale Review*, Summer 1973) to suggest ways of reading this enormous novel, and will limit these remarks to the briefest conceivable account of the book, as well as to some further general observations on Pynchon's work as a whole.

It is now possible to state that Pynchon's subject is the re-

sponse made by men and women to their recognition of the connectedness of the world. In *V.* the decline into entropy is the universal norm. But the central issue of the book is not this decline *per se*—if it were, the book would be little more than an ingeniously articulated conceit—but the possibility of a transcendent coherence and connectedness by which the same process of decline occurs in everything and at every scale. What Stencil finds “appalling” at the end of *V.* is the possibility that there is a design to history, that the world functions according to processes that lie outside the comfortable parameters of science or the humanistic arts. Similarly, in *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa recognizes the continuity that informs the apparently disconnected elements of the world, a continuity of which the Tristero is the emblem, as the woman *V.* was the manifestation of the earlier book’s continuity. Both novels, however, oppose to their “real” connectedness the alternative possibility of false or merely mechanical relationships: in *V.*, the relations between human beings and machines, or the international conspiracies imagined or created by the people among whom *V.* moves; in *Lot 49*, the possibility that the Tristero is Oedipa’s fantasy or an elaborate practical joke. In each case the false continuity is a symptom or cause of paranoia.

*Gravity’s Rainbow* is reticulated by more systems and genuine conspiracies than one likes to imagine, ranging from an electrical grid to the bureaucracy of dead souls. Paranoia is the book’s endemic disease, but Pynchon writes that paranoia “is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation.” The book’s examples of debased or mechanical connections, the analogues to the possibility of conspiracy in *The Crying of Lot 49*, involve international cartels and spy rings, even the cause-and-effect networks established by behaviorists and Pavlovians. Yet the book’s final coherence, like that of the earlier book, is religious. The focus of all relationships in *Gravity’s Rainbow*—its *V.*, its Tristero, its Rome to which all hidden catacombs and public highways lead—is the V-2 rocket. The process enacted through-

out the book, the analogue of entropy in *V.*, is the process (described by Max Weber) through which religious charisma yields to economic and psychological pressure to become rationalized and routinized, to become reduced to bureaucracy. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a book about origins, and, in Weber's account, charisma in its pure form exists only in the process of originating. This process Pynchon describes most vividly in terms of the first few moments of the rocket's ascent, the originating moments through which its entire trajectory is irrevocably determined. The action of the book takes place in 1944 and 1945 (it is remarkable that the finest novel yet written of the Second World War should be the work of an author whose eighth birthday occurred on V-E Day), the originating and perhaps determining moments of contemporary history. The moral center of the book is the difficult but required task of recognizing the secular connectedness of the present scientific and political world—and the even more difficult requirement to act freely on the basis of that recognition. The secular patterns of the present, Pynchon indicates, are the product of originating moments in the past, but free action must take place here and now. The book's one-or-zero choice is the choice whether to live in the contingency and risks of freedom, or to remain trapped by the same determinism that binds the inanimate (though charismatic) rocket. The V-2 is the real descendant of the woman V.

*The Crying of Lot 49* has a story by Borges as its concealed and unacknowledged source; in *Gravity's Rainbow* Borges's name at last surfaces, and it appears often. Both Borges and Pynchon write fantasies, but while Borges's fantasies are built upon curiosities of language or mathematics, Pynchon's are extensions of man's capacity for evil and for love. Borges's language is one that is triumphantly capable of delight and astonishment, but Pynchon writes from the knowledge that language can also hurt and connect. *Gravity's Rainbow* cataclysmically alters the landscape of recent fiction, and it alters the landscape of our moral knowledge as well. It is a more

disturbing and less accessible book than its predecessor, and demands even more intelligent attention, but its difficulties are proportional to its rewards. *The Crying of Lot 49* is an exceptional book, *Gravity's Rainbow* an extraordinary, perhaps a great one. The enterprise of Pynchon's fiction, its range and profundity, remain unparalleled among the novelists of our time.

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