

## ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

*The Crying of Lot 49* (1966)

Thomas Pynchon

(1937- )

### 1

The title is obscure, teasing the mind: What is Lot 49 and why is it crying? Then we learn that the title refers to a stamp auction. Throughout the novel we are misled to expect that the auction will be a climax, but it never happens, an implied parallel to anticipation of an ultimate revelation of an afterlife. In the story by Katherine Anne Porter called “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” the disillusionment of Granny at her moment of death is ironic because Porter implies that in fact she has earned salvation, whereas the Atheist Pynchon implies that Oedipa is pursuing a fantasy.

The novel opens with a pastoral evocation of the orderly, secure, complacent, leisurely, affluent, middle-class life of a representative American housewife that will become a paradise lost: “One summer afternoon Mrs Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue...” Maas suggests mass. Mrs Maas represents the mass of housewives with nothing worse to complain about than the fondue at shopping parties for cookware. She is playing the traditional gender role that Feminists scorned in the 1960s. As a woman liberating herself, Oedipa remains sympathetic because she is not polarized against men like the radical Feminists, she is humane.

Realists choose commonplace names to make characters representative and to evoke the illusion of real life. Pynchon puns. Realists do not choose odd names like Oedipa, especially for a protagonist. Nor do they open a story with a long periodic sentence that calls attention to the literary prowess of the author—his style. That is a characteristic of Postmodernists, especially the Academic Expressionists epitomized by Pynchon. Realists in general try to narrate so that readers forget they are reading and enter into the lives of the characters. Pynchon keeps us aloof, thinking about his names and allusions, trying to figure out what he means. The name Oedipa is even more distracting because it is a *double* allusion: To the famous ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* and to the Oedipus Complex in the modern psychiatric theory of Sigmund Freud. Pynchon is locked in his head like Oedipa in her tower. Like his title, his first sentence addresses the abstract mind rather than the concrete imagination. To understand the pertinence of the name Oedipa requires an education that readers no longer receive in American schools.

The feminizing of Oedipus the King is a gender role reversal, a common response by male novelists to the women’s liberation movement getting underway in the 1960s. *The Crying of Lot 49* is an allegory of women’s liberation: The King is dead, long live the Queen—except that the Feminist paradigm of gender roles absolutely replaces the Victorian paradigm. Since men are no longer Kings, women can no longer be Queens, the domestic ideal affirmed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Victorian American women including Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott and Emily Dickinson, whose model was Queen Victoria. Pynchon symbolizes the destruction of the Victorian paradigm at the end of his first novel *V.* (1963).

As a Feminist new woman, Oedipa (1) “kills” her mother, traditional womanhood; (2) takes on the male role of her “father,” her older lover Pierce Inverarity; (3) she has no children and no evident desire for any; (4) is married to a weak disintegrating male, Mucho, who is not macho; (5) has affairs; (6) learns that society is a conspiracy of males in a sinister capitalist Patriarchy personified in Pierce Inverarity, whose first name evokes masculine penetration and whose last name connotes in-veritas, invalid. Inverarity is the name of a town in Scotland associated with the Puritan leader John Knox, with the rise of capitalism (see Max Weber) and with a term in stamp collecting, the central thematic motif in the novel; (7) Oedipa was a lover of Pierce, who embodies the System; (8) she joins the System to “execute the will” of Pierce; and (9) she becomes an isolated paranoid like a man. That Inverarity is dead prefigures the imminent death of capitalism and his replacement by his “executrix” is evidence of entropy in America.

Oedipa “sorting it all out” is the plot of the novel, modeled on detective fiction. She is not sure she wants the burden of her new role: “Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible. But this did not work.” She may be looking at the TV when she speaks the name of God, as if TV or technology has replaced God, one of the major themes in Pynchon and DeLillo. In this novel, like the TV with its “dead eye” God too is dead, but the TV can be turned on again. Oedipa finds nothing to help her in religion, technology, drugs, or sex—she is on her own—liberated into a Void.

She recalls the door of her hotel room down in the romantic getaway of Mazatlan, Mexico slamming “it seemed forever,” so loudly it woke up “two hundred birds down in the lobby,” apparently when Pierce slammed the door on their affair—angrily it seems. This suggests that naming her his “executrix” was an act of revenge. With 200 birds in the lobby, their “love nest” was a virtual Wilderness, the archetypal setting of transcendent experience, often imaged as birds. Rather than flying in the Sky, however, Oedipa’s birds awakened out of sight and confined below, associated in Pynchon—obviously in “Entropy”—with the body and “mindless pleasures.” This is a woman who goes to a market to listen to Muzak. When later her husband Mucho the disc jockey plays the Top 200, by implication the exact parallel reduces Oedipa’s individuation into liberation to an insignificance as transitory as her birds. Likewise, the Cornell students on the library slope—an image of bookish alienation from Nature—do not see the sunrise because they are facing west—the capitalist West—rather than toward the spiritual East. Of course, this applies to Pynchon himself. The consequence of all this is a mood expressed by “a dry, disconsolate tune” from Bartok, the atonal Postmodernist composer.

Pynchon’s reductive view of capitalism is embodied in the bust of “Jay Gould that Pierce kept over the bed on a shelf so narrow for it she’d always had the hovering fear it would someday topple on them. Was that how he’d died, she wondered, among dreams, crushed by the only icon in the house? That only made her laugh.” As if she too is feeling the gratification of revenge. This is the only suggestion in the novel as to why Pierce died—comic symbolism prefiguring the destruction of capitalism by greed, as Pynchon has predicted. Pynchon’s shelf is just as narrow as Inverarity’s: He cherry-picks Jay Gould, the most infamous example of greedy unregulated capitalism from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pynchon implies that Gould is the role model of Inverarity, that all capitalists are Jay Goulds, and that the bust of Gould is “whitewashed,” in reference to the argument that big capitalists such as Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan, and Ford—however unscrupulous—built the strongest economy in the world, made the country a magnet for immigrants, raised the standard of living and gave America the capacity to defeat fascism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pynchon is an elitist in ignoring the positive effects of the capitalist system on the masses—including the liberation of women—an example of the “excluded middles” in his thinking. Not only has his prediction not come true, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism reduced poverty worldwide by 80%.

Oedipa is already feeling paranoid: “You’re sick, Oedipa, she told herself, or the room, which knew.” Now that she has replaced Pierce, perhaps she too will be crushed. The comic book tone continues with the law firm of “Warpe, Wistful” and so on, followed by a reference to the “Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto, Boyd Beaver, soloist.” In “The Waste Land” (1922) T. S. Eliot’s incongruities, such as the Shakespearean Rag, lament the degradation of culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereas Pynchon delights in pop cultural decadence. He is the literary equivalent of the Postmodernist painters who depict a crucifix inverted in urine and the Madonna covered with dung, though he is more subtle. In *V.* as Profane he identifies with “The Whole Sick Crew.” In *Gravity’s Rainbow* he drops a nuclear rocket on the head of conservative President Nixon and as his horny hero Slothrop he abandons America and disappears into the waste land of post-WWII Germany, choosing to live among the Nazis, the ruins and the dead.

Though she has a taste for Muzak and shallow affairs, Oedipa also reads book reviews in *Scientific American* and understands Pynchon’s scientific metaphors. Once traditional enough to prepare dinner for her husband, she got bored like Bette Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), said by the media to have initiated the women’s liberation movement. Oedipa thinks about her affair with Pierce, a capitalist in business and in bed, a trickster who speaks in many voices like *The Confidence-Man* by Melville and Rinehart in *Invisible Man* by Ellison. Inverarity has no integrity, he is a Postmodernist who includes the voice of a Nazi in his repertoire. He is so insensitive he wakes her up at three or so in the morning with a

phone call to make stupid jokes—with her husband right beside her in the bed and overhearing! Rather than object, Mucho—not macho—“suggested sensibly” that she hang up on her lover.

Oedipa ignores Mucho and listens to one of Pierce’s seductive voices, “the one he’d talked in all the way down to Mazatlan.” He becomes “The Shadow,” a detective on the radio. Pynchon later refers to Jung, in whose psychology the Shadow is an image of repressions that must be confronted and reconciled for individuation toward wholeness to proceed. Oedipa’s affair with Pierce is her confrontation with her Shadow—impelled by her dissatisfaction with her marriage and her love of what the wealthy and powerful Pierce Inverarity represents. The capitalist exploits her, of course. Her union with her Shadow is superficial and leaves her feeling “exposed, finessed, put down.” She speculates that Pierce made her execute his will “because of her annoyance and Mucho’s indifference.”

Gender roles are reversed when Mucho calls his wife Oed (Ed) and she says “You’re too sensitive.” Unlike her, Mucho is also honest. When he was a used car salesman, contrary to type he was distressed by the dishonesty that prevails among car dealers and by the vulnerable mental states of the customers who came into “the lot,” introducing the motif of one’s “lot in life” that leads to the crying of Lot 49. “Yet at least he believed in the cars.” To the sensitive Mucho, the used cars in the lot symbolize their owners, who suffer from despair like a “gray sickness”: “Each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else’s life.” Having made a car a projection of himself, a dissatisfied owner becomes a Shadow who tries to exchange his persona for somebody else’s—like Inverarity changing voices.

Pynchon once considered becoming a disk jockey like Mucho, who works for KCUF—an obscenity spelled backwards—a radio station sponsored by “the lot.” The lot represents the capitalist System. “He had believed too much in the lot, he believed not at all in the station.” He says, “I don’t believe in any of it, Oed.” He plays the Top 200, feeding “the fraudulent dream of teenage appetites.” When he is awakened again at three in the morning by a telephone call for Oedipa, this time it is her psychotherapist Dr. Hilarius, who sounds “like Pierce doing a Gestapo officer.” This equates capitalism with other systems represented by Hilarius and Nazism, ironic because Hilarius is a Freudian and Freud was Jewish. Comparisons of people in authority to Nazis became a standard liberal tactic in the 1960s. Hilarius tries to seduce Oedipa into joining his experiment on effects of LSD, “mescaline, psilocybin, and related drugs on a large sample of suburban housewives.” Except for the Gestapo comparison, Hilarius resembles Dr. Timothy Leary from Harvard, the goofy flowerchild guru of LSD in the 1960s who had his ashes launched into space by a rocket. Hilarius is as much out of touch with reality as he is with the time of night. Previously he had tried to “cure” Oedipa by making faces at her. “But she would be damned if she’d take the capsules he’d given her. Literally damned. She didn’t want to get hooked in any way.”

Oedipa and her lawyer Roseman “often went to the same group therapy sessions, in a car pool with a photographer from Palo Alto who thought he was a volley ball.” Roseman too is dissociated from reality, obsessed with destroying a fictional rival, Perry Mason on TV. At lunch he plays footsie with her under the table but Oedipa is “insulated,” wearing boots, “and couldn’t feel much of anything.” The name *Rose*-man is ironic because he is not romantic, he is predatory. Oedipa is so insulated from feeling that, combined with Pynchon’s comic book characterization and consistently ironic tone, she never elicits much feeling in a reader. She is a product and expression of the emotional poverty common to Postmodernists. Satire distances a reader from those satirized. In this novel, in contrast to Realism, no one gets close to anyone. “There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus...”

Oedipa “was to have all manner of revelations.” The word “revelations” gives her quest for information a possible religious import, by implication raising the question of whether God exists. She “had also conned herself into 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.” She was not forced by the “Patriarchy” as Feminists would have it, she “conned herself” into the traditional Victorian gender role of housewife. Now as a housewife she feels like a maiden in a medieval romance or a fairy tale “imprisoned” in a tower and waiting to be rescued. When the knight turns out to be a rich guy with a sense

of humor she immediately lets her hair down in a “dainty avalanche.” Playing his traditional role, Pierce takes hold of her hair and starts climbing. But women have changed.

Oedipa has experienced what Feminists call “consciousness raising,” which may happen all at once like an epiphany. Her long hair associated with traditional womanhood turns out to be a wig. “And down he fell, on his ass.” She no longer believes in her role. As a rich guy, “perhaps using one of his many credit cards for a shim,” Pierce is able to slip the lock on her tower door. Oedipa gives him credit because he has plenty of money—a capitalist herself. Then he climbs “the conchlike stairs.” Spiraling like a conch is a motif of the individuation process, as in the poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Chambered Nautilus.” However, as depicted by Pynchon, individuation no longer happens. No character grows spiritually in this novel. In fact, they shrink. Though her consciousness is “raised” Oedipa must try to escape her tower by coming down. But even then, she never really escapes: “all that had gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of that tower.”

The tower is vertical consciousness with the rational mind on top, comparable to the apartment house in Pynchon’s story “Entropy.” As a Postmodern solipsist with an insulated heart, dissociated from the soul, Pynchon is confined to his mind like Oedipa: “The tower is everywhere.” On the contrary, most people are not paranoids locked into vertical consciousness. His symbol implies that Pynchon and Oedipa both are incapable of transcendence through trust, charity, empathy, love, self-sacrifice, or religious experience. They are sociopathic. For them “There’d been no escape... Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, 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.” This is a Gothic vision comparable to Poe and Thomas Hardy: There is no free will really, all is determined. Hence, we victims are not responsible for our actions—a premise of liberal politics. For all his emphasis on science, Pynchon here attributes ultimate authority to “magic”—inexplicable almighty power that, ironically, resembles the Calvinist God in relation to the damned, the Preterite, except that without God there is no accountability. According to Pynchon, you can do anything you want to in life and whatever bad happens to you is the universe’s fault.

Oedipa is moved to tears by a painting she saw in Mexico City: Girls with “heart-shaped faces” and “spun-gold hair” like Rapunzel were “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.” The “void” is a world without God, an Existentialist world in which all meaning must be created within oneself. Later Oedipa asks herself “Shall I project a world?” like they do in the Planetarium. “Build therefore your own world,” advised Emerson in *Nature* (1836). But unlike atheistic Existentialists, who are materialists, Emerson believed your ability to transcend the world comes from the Spirit, the power of God—the “Oversoul” within the human psyche. Emerson is a Neo-Platonic Transcendentalist: There is no Void, quite the opposite, the universe is *all* Spirit.

2

San Narcisco is the headquarters (*head-quarters*) of Pierce Inverarity, a metaphor of the entire capitalist System. The place name is apt, ironic and plausible in California. It rhymes with San Francisco, with connotations of narcissism and narcotic—as in Saint Narcissus. Pierce built himself towers here, aspiring “however rickety or grotesque, toward the sky.” Oedipa arrives “on a Sunday” and sees the city from above laid out like a printed circuit with a “hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning.” She felt a revelation tremble “just past the threshold of her understanding,” just as she does at the end of the novel—“at the centre of an odd, religious instant.” But she is like Mucho playing records for “all the faithful.” Even if she could hear the words of a revelation she “couldn’t believe in it,” which applies to any revelation she might receive after the end of the novel, making her quest a waste.

She drives past a division of the Yoyodyne aerospace corporation, modeled on Boeing in Seattle where Pynchon worked for awhile. Pierce is called “a founding father,” implicitly equating a predatory scoundrel with the virtuous men who risked their lives to found the United States. This is Marxist cartooning. Pynchon implies that the Founders are responsible for the evils of urban capitalism, which Thomas

Jefferson in particular opposed. Far from being predatory capitalists, Jefferson and John Adams and other Founders were farmers. George Washington gave up his power and Benjamin Franklin gave away all his patents. Most Americans were farming people until 1919. Pynchon falsifies history by equating agrarians like Jefferson with their urban enemies, a slander of the Founders characteristic of Leftists.

The yoyo in Yoyodyne is a Marxist metaphor of the capitalist economy manipulated up and down for their own profit by financiers and cartels. An urban toker himself, Pynchon describes the interstate as a “hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain...” In his vision, America is addicted to oil like a junkie on heroin, as well as to vacuous pop culture (which Pynchon loves himself but does not believe in) and to capitalism. Despite her vow, Oedipa is hooked. She registers at the Echo Courts motel with the face of a nymph on its sign that “was much like Oedipa’s.... She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker’s, but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either. Oedipa pulled into the lot...” She associates the sign with her anticipation of some revelation, which could be that she may end up like the illuminated nymph.

Echo Courts is managed by a teenage drop-out with a Beatle haircut who sings an adolescent pop tune of the 1960s (composed by Pynchon), echoing an English accent—a member of “The Paranoids.” At the time so many people were smoking marijuana in defiance of authorities that paranoia was indeed a common feeling, though not enough to inhibit the smoking. “The Paranoids” evokes not the pastoralism of The Beatles or the Woodstock Festival in the 1960s but the protest marches, arsons, bombings and murders that give an ominous import to the countercultural Tristero in this novel. The *dominant* mood of the young 1960s Counterculture was optimistic, naïve, peaceful, euphoric, utopian and righteous. Pynchon identified with it as anarchistic liberation and great fun but he did not believe in it any more than Mucho believes in the adolescent pop culture he promotes on the radio.

The hip teenage motel manager is another capitalist who immediately makes a crude move on Oedipa, an illustration of Echo Courtship, but young Miles does not get far—not an inch actually. He offers her his “smooth young body” saying “I thought you older chicks went for that.” Oedipa does not appreciate being seen as a desperate older chick. The next male she encounters is the lawyer Metzger, who “turned out to be so good-looking” he must be an actor. Though a lawyer, Metzger is also a wine smuggler—“a rollicking lawbreaker”—whose eyes smile “wickedly.” Of course she lets him in, much as she had let Pierce. Oedipa “had let her hair all the way down.”

Over 20 years ago Metzger was a child movie star with the screen name Baby Igor. Here in Echo Courts, the name Igor echoes the stereotypical name of the deformed creature who opens the huge creaking door of the castle in horror movies. Looks deceive, especially in the movies. The handsome Metzger is inwardly malformed in that he has no identity—no authentic Self. It is common for an actor to say in an interview that when he is not playing a role he is not sure who he is. Conditioned by playing immature roles, Metzger never developed into an adult. He is all persona: “I live inside my looks, and I’m never sure.” He is like many a beauty queen. Baby Igor had a domineering stage mother who turned him into a kind of monster like the child movie star who thinks he is Frankenstein in *The Day of the Locust* (1939) by Nathanael West, a surrealist of the grotesque like Pynchon. *Locust* also includes a capitalist scammer named Know-All Pierce-All, a precursor of Inverarity. Both novels end in paranoia.

Oedipa turns on the TV and there is baby Metzger in a movie with long feminine curls and, ironically, a big hairy St. Bernard, the dog most associated with saving people. “That’s me, that’s me,” cried Metzger, staring, “good God.” Oedipa’s response is a joke—“Which one?”—as if Metzger might be the dog. As if he might save her, as Pierce failed to do. She might also be asking which God. Juxtaposed to a question about God, Metzger’s reference to a movie called *Cashiered* is a comment on religion, suggesting that capitalism and pop culture as represented by movies have replaced faith in God.

Metzger is now the “aging double” of Baby Igor, singing along with himself about being a baby war hero. The handsome lawyer shrinks into an infantile narcissist. Oedipa cannot decide whether this movie came on by coincidence or Metzger bribed the engineer at the local TV station to show it. This prefigures

her uncertainty at the end of the novel as to whether everything is coincidental or a sinister conspiracy. Here she jumps to the conclusion that “It’s all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, *plot*.”

A television commercial for Fangoso Lagoons, one of Inverarity’s housing developments in the west, features an artificial lake with restored galleons at the bottom imported from the Bahamas, real human skeletons from Italy, and so on—“all for the entertainment of Scuba enthusiasts.” The artificiality of American culture is a theme imported from Sinclair Lewis, in particular from *Babbitt* (1922), where Lewis implies that American *high* culture is imported. It is ironic that in his ridicule of American culture Pynchon satirizes traits in his own work—imitation, artifice, vulgarity, pretense, triviality.

The movie *Cashiered* depicts a submarine named Justine “after the dead mother,” setting out to sea. By analogy this refers to the “dead mother” of Oedipa—to traditional womanhood. In Latin the word *justine* means just and honest. The Greek fisherman’s daughter is analogous to Oedipa and to the girl on the sign of Echo Courts, “a leggy, ringletted nymphet who, should there be a happy ending, would end up with Metzger.” Oedipa learns from Metzger that Pierce “wrote off” their affair down in Mazatlan as a “business expense.” The different roles of Metzger parallel the different roles of Pierce, and when he begins to kiss her palm, “She wondered then if this were really happening in the same way as, say, her first time in bed with Pierce, the dead man.” Well, this *is* Echo Courts.

When they play “Strip Botticelli,” Oedipa goes into the bathroom and insulates herself some more with layer upon layer of clothing. She becomes a comic opposite of the naked Venus, the goddess of love in the most famous painting by Botticelli. Seeing herself in the mirror Oedipa laughs so violently she falls over and knocks an aerosol can of hair spray onto the floor. This gives Pynchon an opportunity to illustrate scientific concepts, including chaos theory, randomness, the uncertainty principle, and the Second Law of Thermodynamics—entropy, as the energy in the can is exhausted.

Metzger rushes into the bathroom, speaks in the voice of Baby Igor and is almost struck by the rocketing can. The scene in the bathroom echoes the movie on TV: “Metzger hit the deck and covered with Oedipa” as “from the other room came a slow, deep crescendo of naval bombardment, machine-gun, howitzer and small-arms fire, screams and chopped-off prayers of dying infantry.” Becoming aggressive, Oedipa bites Metzger “through the sharkskin.” They are on the floor in the smashed glass of the mirror when the four Paranoids peer through the doorway—more echoes in Echo Courts: “She couldn’t tell them apart.” One girl thinks they are doing something kinky. Another asks, “Is that a London thing you’re doing?” As if Americans even imitate when it comes to having sex. Echo Courts is pop culture.

The Paranoids go outside and play. Metzger echoes Pierce when his eyes “pierced her,” then Oedipa reverses gender roles again as she “fell on him, began kissing him.” Their nearly unconscious sexual intercourse—getting “plugged in”—is echoed by the adolescent Paranoids at play. “Her climax and Metzger’s, when it came, coincided with every light in the place, including the TV tube, suddenly going out, dead, black.... The Paranoids had blown a fuse.” This prefigures the end of her “fuse” with Metzger. Humans becoming machinelike due to conditioning is such a major theme in Pynchon and in Postmodernist fiction overall that it became a new genre—“Cyberfiction.”

The parody of sentimental Hollywood movies ends with a reversal of expectations that calls attention to mechanical stock responses and satirizes the reader for expecting a conventional happy ending. The doggie *drowns!* And Baby Igor gets “electrocuted, thrashing back and forth and screaming horribly.” Pynchon makes us feel sadistic for laughing. Having predicted disaster, anticipating her own, Oedipa wins her bet with Metzger: “‘You won me,’ Metzger smiled.” The superficial nature of her “plugging in” with both Metzger and Pierce is clear when she learns that the two men had talked about her in terms of conquest, which makes her cry. Nevertheless, feeling like a Barbie doll she continues her affair with Baby Igor. After all, what attracted her to *them*? Money and looks.

The Tristero is the Counterculture against the Capitalist System represented by Pierce, who seems to own everything. *Tax the rich!* Among its other connotations “Tristero” evokes a lover’s tryst, the French word for sadness--hence the “crying” of Lot 49--and a hip secular alternative to the Trinity, as secular

liberals replace religion with politics. Oedipa thinks that if discovering the existence of The Tristero will “bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower, then that night’s infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it.” She hopes that getting drunk and having sex with any handsome Igor who walks in her door will liberate her. Oedipa is a hedonist of the 1960s who senses “revelation in progress all around her,” but in the end she never has any herself. Infidelity with Igor does not contribute to her spiritual development. Feminists would advise her to avoid all men as Igors, but Oedipa is his equal. Her quest originates in lack of faith and Pynchon’s satirical tone throughout the novel conveys his own lack of faith in loving relationships and in any significant Counterculture—including Feminism—let alone any supposed revelation from God. “I don’t believe in any of it, Oed.”

Pynchon repeats the word “revelation” to emphasize that Oedipa’s quest has a religious connotation. Her search for the Tristero echoes a search for salvation. “Much of the revelation was to come through the stamp collection Pierce had left, his substitute often for her.” His stamp collection is a metaphor of his holdings. Oedipa is like a stamp he added to his collection. The other stamps are like “ex-rivals, cheated as she by death, about to be broken up into lots on route to any number of new masters.” Further, as to any romance beyond Mazatlan she was “cashiered”—merely a business tax deduction according to Igor. In a larger sense, the stamp collection represents the world. Oedipa had “No suspicion at all that it might have something to tell her.”

She and Metzger go to a bar called The Scope, calling attention to ironic limitations of perception. As for she and her husband, they have tacitly agreed not to notice each other’s affairs. As Oed gets ever more independent, Mucho’s insecurity is evident in his seduction of teenage girls. For a moment Oedipa actually feels something for her husband, “call it a tenderness she’d never go quite to the back of lest she get bogged.” Caring bogs her down. She avoids caring just as Pynchon avoids sentiment, a characteristic of Postmodernist fiction criticized by David Foster Wallace before he hanged himself in 2008. Traditionally, women wanted men to “get in touch with” their feelings and be more communicative. Now Feminists want men to shut up. In becoming more like a man Oedipa is suppressing her feelings like a man: “Like all their inabilities to communicate, this too had a virtuous motive.”

The Scope is near the Yoyodyne aerospace plant. Oedipa and Metzger go there to escape from getting scoped out in their motel room by teenage voyeurs with passkeys who burst in “at whim on any bizarre sexual action.” The plant workers in the bar are “engaged in a nose-picking contest, seeing how far they could flick it across the room.” This is Pynchon’s view of national defense, paralleling boogers to rockets. He seems to have had no respect for his co-workers at Boeing in Seattle. These workers are so conditioned by the System they listen to electronic instead of live music. They are conservatives. They are right-wing types like the Peter Pinguid (sounds like penguin) Society, more conservative than even the real John Birch Society, their “left-leaning friends.” Like Pierce Inverarity, his echo Peter Pinguid got rich speculating in California real estate. Conservatives are depicted as fools and are represented by an advocate with sterile ideas named Fallopian. Pynchon equates the North and the South in the Civil War by calling industrial workers in the North “wage slaves” and by lumping all conservatives together as defenders of slavery in one form or another. With apparent sympathy for Marxism he contrasts America unfavorably to Russia, where the czar freed the slaves in 1861.

On the wall of the ladies’ room Oedipa notices an invitation to swingers: “Get in touch...through WASTE only.” Below it in pencil is the first muted post-horn she sees--a recognition sign of the WASTE communication system. The racetrack post-horn is muted, indicating secrecy and a countercultural stifling of the competitive capitalist society. Fallopian confirms that WASTE mail is a secret communications system within Yoyodyne: “We use inter-office delivery...only inside our San Narcisco chapter.” Ironically, Fallopian and his Peter Pinguid conservatives are so backward they are subversive Luddites and hence part of the Counterculture opposing industrial capitalism, symbolized by Yoyodyne and Fangoso Lagoons. As Metzger says later, “You’re so right-wing you’re leftwing.”

On an island in Lake Inverarity the social hall is a “reconstruction of some European pleasure-casino. Oedipa fell in love with it.” She falls in love with a casino, not a man. There are “pleasure boats strung like piglets along the pier.” This is the playground of capitalist pigs in cahoots with Cosa Nostra. This is Fangoso La-goons. The lawyer Manny Di Presso is depressed because the mob is watching him. Oedipa,

Baby Igor and the Paranoids are now criminals too, having stolen a boat called Godzilla II. *Whee!—*a crime spree! “Dean, the Paranoid at the helm,” is named after Dean Moriarity (Neal Cassady) in Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), one of Pynchon’s favorite novels. Di Presso perks up when he tells Igor he is going to sue the estate of Pierce Inverarity on behalf of his mob client. “All the time Cosa Nostra is watching.” This introduction of the menacing Mafia sneaking around is an easy quick fix for suspense but it does not really work because we are reading a comic book.

The bone charcoal story is Pynchon’s indictment of what he sees as the corruption and inhumanity of the whole capitalist system. His implications are absolutist generalizations common to cynical liberals since the 1960s: All government is corrupt: “No bribes, no freeway.” All business is corrupt, supposedly illustrated when Inverarity acquires bones from the mob. In this Marxist fantasy the bones of American soldiers from WWII were imported from Italy and used to decorate the bottom of Lake Inverarity for scuba divers—disgusting capitalists—and as charcoal to filter cigarettes. The impiety of this capitalistic atrocity is emphasized with irony and with Igor’s exclamation “My God” when we learn that the bones came to Lake Inverarity from Lago di Pieta—invoking the famous statue by Michelangelo.

The bones were salvaged by Di Presso’s mob client, who had been an Italian soldier in alliance with the Nazis during WWII. His sordid exploitation of the dead was motivated by a hope of using the bones as a morbid tourist attraction to Americans such as Senator Joseph McCarthy “and others of his persuasion”—conservatives who exposed Communists in the government—“in those days having achieved a certain ascendancy over the rich cretini from across the sea.” Conservatives who resisted Communism are here equated with cretins, the evil rich, the Mafia, and the Nazis. Pynchon in effect sides with the Communist Party against the people of the United States, as he does by implication in his next novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). Since Stalin signed a pact with Hitler in 1939 allying Communism with Nazism, it is Pynchon himself who identifies with Nazis and desecrates the American dead.

American culture is so decadent according to Pynchon that, as one of the Paranoids says, it “all has a most bizarre resemblance to that ill, ill Jacobean revenge play we went to last week.” He thinks the decadence in the 1960s is due to capitalism rather than to the self-indulgence, fanaticism and drug use by the Counterculture. Now the Paranoids light up joints and the Mafia is closing in—*paranoia!* Oedipa cons Igor into taking her to see the revenge play *The Courier’s Tragedy*, a clever and accurate parody of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Gothic drama by playwrights such as John Webster. Pynchon’s revenge play was written by Richard Wharfinger (war-finger)—his way of giving the finger to the Vietnam War against Communism underway when his novel was published. His parody is enjoyable as literary entertainment, full of funny names, puns, jokes and ironies. However, as a critique of capitalism it is as Baby Igor says, “like a Road Runner cartoon in blank verse.” This paradox applies to most of Pynchon’s work.

“The Thurn and Taxis family, who at the time held a postal monopoly throughout most of the Holy Roman Empire,” are capitalists like Inverarity, depicted as brutal, incestuous, thieving, and murderous like the Borgias. The Church is totally corrupt of course, represented here by “Saint Narcissus.” The first act ends with an invocation of the “Unholy Ghost,” and the fourth ends introducing a mysterious “tryst with Trystero.” The reference to “Pasquale’s planning to marry his mother” echoes Oedipus and all the orgies and torture and gore top the Marquis de Sade—“too awful to talk about.” The Lost Guard of Faggio are paralleled to the American soldiers of WWII when their bones are “made into charcoal.” The comparison of decadent 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italy to 20<sup>th</sup>-century America is a forced parallel between Pynchon’s two fantasies and has no dramatic or persuasive force.

When Baby Igor accuses Oed of being one of “these lib, overeducated broads with the soft heads and bleeding hearts,” Pynchon is able at the same time to insult Feminists and to dissociate Oedipa from Igor’s stereotype: “‘Metzger,’ Oedipa whispered, embarrassed, ‘I’m a Young Republican’.” This contradicts our expectation that the liberated woman must be a liberal and it explains why she likes men and is “executing the will” of Inverarity. In 1966, according to liberals being a Republican was an embarrassment and a sign of ignorance but not yet a punishable offense as it became under academic Political Correctness in the 1980s. Now that he has established that Oedipa is a Republican and not a liberal, Pynchon is free to ridicule her as much as he likes without offense to liberals. Her politics give away the ending, since it is unlikely that a Republican will receive a revelation.



The director of the revenge play cast himself as the winner of the bloodbath, Gennaro, who wears gray flannel like the ironic businessman from the 1950s “the man in the gray flannel suit.” His name Randy Driblette suggests a lack of potency, one of the men in the novel who shrinks and disappears as entropy proceeds into the gender war. He believes like Pynchon that reality is subjective and projected by the mind: “I’m the projector at the planetarium.” He knows the play he projects is no better than a gory horror movie and he has become a cynic. Driblette has spider eyes waiting “at the centres of their webs” and his defeatist cynicism is a web he spreads like paranoia. Oedipa asks him about “the Trystero assassins.” For now, everything “would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero.” This sustains the weaving metaphor introduced in the first chapter by the girls in the painting who are imprisoned in a tower and embroidering a tapestry that represents the world.

4

Oedipa decides to project a world like Driblette, “the dark machine in the centre of the planetarium, to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning.” Pynchon’s comparisons of people to machines is a characteristic of Postmodernists that emphasizes conditioning, extending a theme of Naturalists such as Norris and Dreiser. However, Postmodernists reduce the humanity of characters and distance themselves with irony and parody, whereas the Naturalists evoke sympathy for their characters. Pynchon especially hates Republicans: In *Gravity’s Rainbow* he drops a Rocket on the head of a surrogate for the Republican leftists hated most for exposing Communists--President Nixon.

At the Yoyodyne songfest, instead of singing “The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi,” a traditional favorite and “the tune of Cornell’s alma mater,” the shareholders and company officers turn the love song into a hymn to making warheads, led by company president “Bloody” Chiclitz (a brand of chewing gum). They sing praises to other defense companies building warheads, then bitch about favoritism in awarding contracts. Pynchon never mentions the Soviet Union or the nuclear arms race or the need for national defense during the Cold War. Instead he gives the impression that the warheads are being built for no reason but profits. Capitalism is the evil, not Communist imperialism. Pynchon makes all the American shareholders and workers in all the national defense plants evil warmongers eager to kill people. This is the satirical tone of the popular movie *Dr Strangelove; or, How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* (1963), a Communist propaganda vehicle for the movement to disarm America. Pynchon borrowed the ending of that movie and revised it for the ending of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Oedipa gets lost and begins a mock quest, not into the wilderness of Nature but into the mechanized aerospace plant—a Postmodernist inversion. The archetypal quest leads to some enlightenment. But here, Oedipa continues to insulate herself: “All she could think of was to put on her shades for all this light, and wait for somebody to rescue her. But nobody noticed.” She experiences the loss of the Victorian paradigm of gender roles and the isolation of the liberated paradigm. On her own now, she wanders, or follows “subliminal cues in the environment to lead her to a particular person.” That person is an engineer who is rendered infertile by the capitalist System, hence his name, Stanley Koteks (Kotex, a sanitary napkin). The frustrated creator is doodling a muted post horn. Oedipa identifies herself as a stockholder invested in the System. Koteks complains that he had to sign away the patent rights to any inventions he might come up with. “This stifles your really creative engineer,” Koteks said, adding bitterly, ‘wherever he may be.’” Pynchon may have had this experience working at Boeing in Seattle. Ironically, contrary to his Marxism, he resents the frustration of his own capitalism.

Koteks tells Oedipa about the Nefastis Machine, which is based on the theory of scientist James Clerk Maxwell, who invented a *metaphor* to illustrate the Second Law of Thermodynamics, called Maxwell’s Demon. Nefastis has supposedly created a *literal* “honest-to-God Maxwell’s Demon.” The nefarious Nefastis is pulling a fast one. Supposedly his “Demon” sits in a box and will sort molecules perpetually in violation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. But the process depends upon spirituality and “Not everybody can work it, of course.” Only sensitives. Koteks advises Oedipa on how to be sensitive: Stare at a picture of James Clerk Maxwell on the wall in order to fill the “honest-to-God” Demon Box with hot air. The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge photo, showing Maxwell in right[wing] profile, seemed to work best.” Here Pynchon mocks Christianity and *all* “spirituality.”

Koteks tries to cover up evidence of the countercultural WASTE mail system as a woman might cover up evidence of a tampon. Fallopian confirms to Oedipa that Koteks “is part of some underground,” implicitly The Tristero. A fictitious historical marker commemorates a stagecoach robbery in 1853 in which a band of marauders in “mysterious black uniforms” murdered a dozen Wells Fargo men. Pynchon suggests that the “cross” traced in the dust by a dying victim was actually “the initial T” for Tristero. This puts these killers of the past century in the same gang with the disgruntled engineers of today like Koteks and it makes the Tristero—criminality--an alternative belief-system to Christianity.

At Vesperhaven House, connoting Catholicism, Oedipa interviews Mr Thoth, named for an Egyptian god of communication and much else. Thoth is reduced to watching Porky Pig cartoons. Pynchon implies that the gods, or God, are just as infantile to believe in as a cartoon. Old Thoth remembers the cartoon about Porky Pig and the anarchist...dressed in black.” This identifies Porky with capitalist pigs and the Tristero with anarchism. Thoth shows Oedipa a ring adorned with “the WASTE symbol.” Sunlight pours in “as if she had been trapped at the centre of some intricate crystal, and said, ‘My God’.” This is a kind of revelation and the crystal is a common symbol of wholeness, but Oedipa’s crystallization is ironic. The Tristero has become the equivalent of her God—yet it may not even exist. This is emphasized by contrast with senile old Thoth who says he feels God close to him—“my God.”

Genghis Cohen is employed to inventory and appraise Inverarity’s stamp collection. His incongruous names suggest that the desire in one way or another to control and rule the world—symbolized by the stamps—transcends ethnicity. Oedipa finds the philatelist with his fly half open, as it is again at the end of the novel. We know Cohen is a Bad Guy because he is “wearing a Barry Goldwater sweatshirt.” So out of touch he can’t even button his fly. Two years before this novel was published, in 1964 Goldwater was the Republican candidate for President of the United States, known as Mr. Conservative. “Oedipa felt at once motherly.” How reactionary of her. Cohen tells her a post horn was the Thurn and Taxis coat of arms when they had a postal monopoly in Europe. The names Thurn and Taxis—historically accurate--sound like urn and taxes, that is, death and taxes. The Tristero wanted to “mute the Thurn and Taxis post-horn” and perpetrated “an 800-year tradition of postal fraud.”

5

Oedipa heads up north to Berkeley. Throughout the novel she yoyos up and down—emotionally and geographically—north and south like the stock market, ending down in San Narcisco for the crying. She notices that Metzger like Mucho “did not seem desperate at her going.” At her hotel up in Berkeley there is a convention going on of deaf mutes—an echo of the muted post horn. When the desk clerk makes sign language at her, “Oedipa considered giving him the finger,” a recurrent impulse in fiction by Pynchon. Her room has a reproduction on the wall by Remedios Varo, who painted the girls in the tower embroidering a tapestry that made her cry down in Mexico with her dead lover Pierce. This reminds us that Oedipa is like them in “projecting a world,” undermining her theory of a great conspiracy by the Tristero.

Her research leads to “no clear meaning for the word *tristero*, unless it be a pseudo-Italianate variant of *triste* (wretched, depraved).” Oedipa feels out of date on the Berkeley campus of the 1960s, having been educated back in the 1950s when the country was conservative with “pathologies in high places only death had the power to cure.” This refers to efforts to stop Communist spying in the government, in particular by Nixon and “Senator Joe” McCarthy. Conservatives led by McCarthy tried unsuccessfully to prevent U.S. atomic secrets from being stolen by spies for the Soviet Union who were given high-level government jobs by liberals. In calling this effort “daft,” Pynchon sides again with the Communists. Unlike Oedipa, Pynchon fit in at radical Berkeley just as he did at Cornell.

The crewcut of John Nefastis indicates that he lives off the Berkeley campus in every sense. Uncool. He lives in a pseudo-Mexican apartment house and wears a Polynesian shirt “dating from the Truman administration,” details suggesting that he is a fake, a square, and even more behind the times than Oedipa. He brings out his Machine and explains how it works to overcome entropy: “The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind... At some deep psychic level he must get through. The sensitive must...feed back something like the same quantity of information. To keep it all cycling.” He makes his Machine a metaphor of the psyche. The effort of the sensitive to communicate with the

Demon is a parody of prayer as an effort to communicate with God. Nefastis is a “believer” who is nefarious in preaching Satanism: “Leave your mind open, receptive to the Demon’s message.”

Oedipa fails of course. Nefastis tells Oedipa how to be sensitive but he is more in heat than the Demon, his scam to lure women. After his sensitivity training as to how to communicate as a sensitive he does not communicate with her as a person at all before he directs her to his couch to submit to intercourse while he watches TV. Multi-tasking. Nefastis is the fastest. “I like to do it while they talk about Viet Nam, but China is best of all. You think about all those Chinese. Teeming. That profusion of life. It makes it sexier, right?” Overpopulation is pro-life, hence Politically Incorrect. To Pynchon, having too many babies is a perversion encouraged by right-wing scammers with values “dating from the Truman administration.” Apparently he thinks all governments should rigorously enforce infanticide.

Nefastis reacts to Oedipa’s scream of disgust with the fake indifference of a hipster in a “fashion he had doubtless learned from watching the TV also.” Oedipa like all of Pynchon’s characters expresses what he too had doubtless learned from watching TV. All his characters are shallow and flat. Flatness of character is typical in Postmodernist fiction as it is in Abstract Expressionist painting, a result of dehumanization. In general, Postmodernist art eliminates God, Nature, and people.

Oedipa flees “down Telegraph” in Berkeley, ironic in a novel dramatizing lack of communication and the corruption of data according to information theory. Her review of what she knows about Trystero expands its theoretical composition to include “those of unorthodox sexual persuasion” and possibly “her own husband, Mucho Maas.” If so, her husband is her secret enemy. “Either Trystero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasized by Oedipa, so hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man’s estate.” Perhaps she is a wife fantasizing that her husband is unfaithful because she is so liberated she is paranoid. She knows Mucho has mucho sex with teenagers, but now she suspects him of having a tryst with Trystero.

That night Oedipa tries to escape her obsession by drifting at random around San Francisco, hoping to convince herself that she is fantasizing a conspiracy. “But it took her no more than an hour to catch sight of a muted post horn. A tourist pins a name badge on her indicating that her name is Arnold and she is “Lookin’ For A Good Time!” She accepts the male name and Pynchon has already shown that she is looking for a good time with anybody who has enough money or good looks. She allows herself to be herded into a gay bar where she encounters somebody wearing a Trystero post horn pin. “Mute and everything.” Turns out he belongs to Inamorati Anonymous, “isolates” who believe that love is the “worst addiction of all.” He adds, “I was lucky. I kicked it young.”

Oedipa learns from the isolate that the post horn symbol was invented by a suicidal executive who got “automated out of a job.” This ends the legend that it is centuries old. After witnessing his wife having sex with the efficiency expert who cost him his job, the pathetic victim of capitalist technology founded the society of isolates, “a whole underworld of suicides who failed.” Oedipa spends the rest of the night seeing the post horn all around the city. Postmodernist fiction often blends reality and dream: “What fragments of dreams came had to do with the post horn. Later, possibly, she would have trouble sorting the night into real and dreamed.” She wonders if all the “clues” are a psychological compensation for her loss of faith in God, “for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night.”

The children in Golden Gate Park tell her they are dreaming and that “the dream was really no different from being awake.” Like liberal voters, they “Went on warming their hands at an invisible fire. Oedipa, to retaliate, stopped believing in them.” In a café she encounters Jesus Arrabal, an anarchist revolutionary in exile she met during her romantic trip with Pierce down to Mexico. His name implies that the salvation of Mexico is in the redistribution of arable land from the rich few to the mass of peasants: Jesus (savior) Arrabal (arable). He sees Inverarity the rich capitalist as exactly “the thing we fight.” In Mexico he worked for the CIA, but there the CIA is a revolutionary organization identified with the muted post horn. Jesus Arrabal needed Inverarity as an enemy to provoke and inspire him. Oedipa now sees the muted post horn everywhere: on the jackets of gang members, in the doodles of a poker game loser, in a laundromat in a black neighborhood, in an ad for a death cult Satanist group—that should tell you something. Pynchon here implies that Mexican revolutionaries--followers of Jesus--are deluded losers no different from followers of

Satan. A lonely deluded Mexican girl traces post horns and hearts “in the haze of her breath” on a bus window. By now the muted post horn, the Trystero, has been identified with virtually everybody who is unhappy—both good and evil. How such diverse and contradictory groups could ever be organized has yet to be demonstrated. And to what end?

The cynicism of Pynchon is expressed in his ridicule of environmentalists, represented by the boy who believes dolphins will “succeed man” (after growing legs?). The young world savior is “kissing his mother passionately goodbye, using his tongue.” He has been perverted by conditioning to waste his time on the passionate futile causes of his mother: “‘Love the dolphins,’ she advised him. ‘Write by WASTE.’” Oedipa encounters still more alienated people in withdrawal from the System symbolized by the U.S. Mail (male), all “decorated” by the muted post horn. “She grew so to expect it that perhaps she did not see it quite as often as she later was to remember seeing it.” She is “projecting a world.” Paranoia exaggerates, again subverting her conspiracy theory. At least she is able to recognize her previous naivete: “That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops’ rules, to solve any great mystery.”

Oedipa concludes that the “profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication” is compelling evidence that a malignant Trystero exists. Now she feels like Manny Di Presso that “They” are out to get her. “They knew her pressure points, and the ganglia of her optimism, and one by one, pinch by precision pinch, they were immobilizing her.” Pynchon reduces “miracles” from spiritual revelations to mechanical cause and effect: “a kiss of cosmic pool balls.” So who is taking the shots? When she comes upon an old sailor “shaking with grief she couldn’t hear,” she is fascinated by the post horn tattooed on his *left* hand. The left hand is identified in psychology and literature with the metaphors left brain and heart. The old sailor shows her where to mail his letter to his wife for him through the WASTE system—“under the freeway.” Oedipa is moved to comfort him and “took the man in her arms, actually held him.” She becomes “sensitive” in the best sense. She has a heart after all, but “‘I can’t help,’ she whispered, rocking him.” It is maternal instinct, “as if he were her own child,” reminding us that she has no child. In the end her maternal generosity is rewarded with an insult: “‘Bitch,’ said the sailor.” Pynchon’s cynicism nullifies the only tender moment in the novel, indicating that he belongs to the society of isolates.

Pynchon is Postmodernist in disbelieving in love and in metaphor: “The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was.” Metaphors are “thrusts” at truth in science. In literature metaphors *are* truth—of feeling, perception, and vision. Such metaphors transcend vertical consciousness—literalness and dissociation—unifying the hemispheres of the brain in images: sense and sensibility, material and spiritual. Pynchon cannot transcend dissociated rational consciousness. He is locked in the top of his psyche like one of the girls in the painting embroidering a tapestry—like Oedipa.

Oedipa mails the old sailor’s letter, follows a WASTE mail carrier and ends up back where she started at the apartment house of John Nefastis. Back in her hotel the deaf mutes at their convention are all drunk and wearing party hats copied from “Chinese Communist jobs made popular during the Korean conflict.” They are like literally muted post horns. Oedipa is pulled into the ballroom where deaf mutes are dancing, each couple to their own music. As she is danced around by a partner she wonders how the deaf couples avoid collisions. This is Pynchon’s political ideal, the utopian communal dream that prevailed in the 1960s Counterculture: (1) anarchy, each person free to dance to his own tune; yet somehow at the same time (2) social harmony; and (3) life as a party. Oedipa is “demoralized” at the spectacle of this “anarchist miracle.” Ah, life would be perfect if we all were deaf and dumb. In his fiction Pynchon repeatedly puts on his Communist party cap and plays deaf and dumb to facts, dancing solo to his own tune.

Oedipa goes to consult Dr. Hilarius, whose name foretells more futility. Having established that there is indeed a WASTE mail system she jumps to the conclusion that there must also be a malignant Trystero. There was a time when smiley faces were as everywhere as post horns but that did not mean there was a smiley face conspiracy to overthrow the government. Just then, as if confirming the worst, Oedipa hears gunshots—“she was a clear target.” But the shooter turns out to be Hilarius, whose assistant is “close to hysteria.” Her name is Blamm like a gunshot. Like Di Presso and Oedipa, Hilarius “thinks someone’s after him.” Blamm blames “nutty broads” who made him feel terrorized. “He couldn’t cope.” We learn that

Hilarius interned at Buckenwald concentration camp, where he was a “humane” liberal who rendered Jews catatonic rather than gassing them. After the war he did penance by becoming a Freudian.

In his suicidal mania, Hilarius is most concerned about whether he has been a “good enough Freudian.” His own contribution to psychiatric technique is making faces. Trying to cope with his female patients has caused him to lose faith in his god: “Freud’s vision of the world had no Buchenwalds in it. Buchenwald, according to Freud, once the light was let in, would become a soccer field, fat children would learn flower-arranging and solfeggio in the strangling rooms. At Auschwitz the ovens would be converted over to petit fours and wedding cakes, and the V-2 missiles to public housing for the elves.” In turning against Freud the Jew and seeing Israelites as his enemies, Hilarius reverts to being a Nazi. As police sirens wail close, he threatens to make a face of mass destruction with an effective radius of a hundred yards.

It turns out Hilarius never took LSD himself, that he did not need a drug to go insane: “I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are.” He does not even recognize Oedipa. Ironically, hilariously, she urges Hilarius to “accept the reality principle,” though she herself cannot determine what reality might be. Their roles reverse as Oed again becomes an ineffectual therapist. Turning him over to the police, she calls him “Hitler Hilarius,” which might have given Don DeLillo the idea for “Hitler Studies” in *White Noise* (1985).

Mucho interviews Oed on KCUF as an eyewitness to the Hilarius event, calling her Edna Mosh to allow for “distortion.” Mucho has been distorted by LSD and neither he nor Oed are the same people they were before she got distorted by paranoia. At the radio station the program director tells her Mucho has become less so: “He’s losing his identity, Edna, how else can I put it? Day by day, Wendell is less himself and more generic.” In the 1960s Feminists were beginning to characterize all men as generic misogynists and rapists. Mucho is sensitive to everything in the air. Withdrawing from his wife, he regresses to dating giddy teenagers. He and Oed go to a pizzeria where he grooves on the generic Muzak.

Mucho now comes on “like a whole roomful of people”—the Mucho Maas masses. This is a parody ridiculing not only (1) excessive drug use, but also (2) all religious and mystical experience transcending ego; and (3) spiritual democracy as experienced and celebrated by Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Cather, and others in the American tradition. All the saints and all the messiahs--Pynchon thinks they were all hallucinating. Feeling at one with another and with others is to experience what Melville called “our divine equality.” In China traditionally the individual self is communal and divisible into various selves, as illustrated by Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Locked up in his tower of vertical consciousness, Pynchon denies the possibility of escape, depicting transcendence of ego as a permanent loss of identity. LSD must have scared the hell out of him.

Of course, Mucho consumes much too much. He is depicted as fragmenting and regressing through adolescence to infantilism. Oed now calls him her “Baby”—like Baby Igor—and feels “afraid for him.” He tells her of his nightmares about the sign on his lot that said nada—N.A.D.A. for the National Automobile Dealers Association. He is overusing LSD to escape Nothingness, the existentialist Void confronted by Atheists. The day Oed left him and took on her masculine role “was the day she’d seen Mucho for the last time. So much of him already had dissipated.” The Tristero stamp cancellation on his letter to her places Mucho in the WASTE system. Never macho in the first place, Mucho represents the shrinking of male identity in America as women become like men. Mucho and Metzger both shrink to babies, Hilarius is a shrink, and Randy the director is a Driblette.

Oedipa returns to Echo Courts and learns that Metzger has run off with Serge’s “chick” to get married, an echo of Mucho with teenagers. In response Serge of The Paranoids sings a song referring to his date with “an eight-year-old, and she’s a swinger just like me...so far only imaginary,” but “he was hanging diligently around playgrounds.” Pynchon claims to be an anarchist, yet his satire here suggests that it occurs to him that swinging with an eight-year-old is going too far, that anarchism is harmful to children. In Metzger’s goodbye note there is “No word to recall that Oedipa and Metzger had ever been more than co-executors. Which must mean, thought Oedipa, that that’s all we were.” Their personal relationship

meant as little to him as it did to her, apparently. Or is she disappointed? That sexual anarchism hurts and may kill in at least an emotional sense is implied by the pun “co-executors.”

The gun dealer at the government surplus outlet is a stereotype of right-wing capitalist redneck racist Nazism. His nickname is Winner. Pynchon does not credit Americans with *defeating* the Nazis in World War II because he sees Americans as Nazis. The gun dealer sells Nazi SS uniforms and claims to be selling so many swastika armbands he ran short. Pynchon makes him a crude uneducated lowlife who advertises in girlie magazines and uses the N-word routinely. He names him Winthrop to suggest degeneration from John Winthrop the Puritan leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Pynchon makes the Nazi gun dealer the personification of America. As she leaves Oedipa wonders why she did not call him a name or hit him with a heavy blunt object. Feeling righteous, she converts to liberalism. Oedipa is Pynchon’s politically correct stock response, anticipating the intolerant liberals in higher education after the 1960s: “This is America.” Really? America is a right-wing capitalist redneck racist Nazi?

A few years before publishing this novel, Pynchon wrote an article about the Watts riot of blacks in Los Angeles. His implicit agenda in this scene in *Lot 49* is gun control, again contradicting his claim to be an anarchist. The gun dealer is EVIL because he sells guns. Somebody should hit him with a blunt object. Pynchon tries to legitimize his hatred by making the brute a racist, which is incidental to the issue of gun control. He tries to evoke increasing paranoia in Oedipa the more she learns about her hostile environment, yet he believes Americans should not be allowed to defend themselves against the hostile environment--rioters, criminals, terrorists, the Tristero or our own heavily armed Government. Pynchon wants to disarm us so people who agree with him can hit us with blunt objects.

Oedipa calls herself a chicken for not hitting the gun dealer with a blunt object. Apparently, to save America from America, she should have vaulted the counter and attempted to clobber the gun dealer with a blunt object before getting shot. Apparently, a woman living alone should protect herself by clobbering all the gun dealers with blunt objects before one of them breaks into her home in the middle of the night with a gun. “This is America,” she says, “you live in it, you let it happen.” Oedipa “let” the country turn into a right-wing capitalist redneck racist Nazi? How ever did she do that? Oh, of course. By voting Republican. Fantasy allows Pynchon to propagandize. As to racism, for starters, Republicans freed the slaves from the other party. As a deaf and dumb propagandist, Pynchon avoids mentioning the Vietnam War against Communists going on during the time he wrote the novel because it was not started by a Republican and he is wearing his Communist party cap.

Her research leads Oedipa to Emory Bortz the Berkeley professor of English whose house is “in the style of Fangoso Lagoons,” identifying him with the corrupt capitalist system. Ironically, he is obsessed with corrupt texts. His wife Grace Bortz does not appear to be a right-wing capitalist redneck racist Nazi. Grace asks Oedipa how she got away from her children: “I don’t have any.” Nevertheless, Oed has the “certain harassed style” of a woman with kids, indicating that liberation has not been so free after all. She learns from Professor Bortz that Driblette the director had walked into the ocean and drowned himself wearing his gray Gennaro suit, driven to suicide in despair by capitalism and the Void. Oedipa’s reaction to the news is paranoid: “they are stripping away, one by one, my men.” Who is “they”? Driblette walked into the ocean. No conspiracy pushed him. Placing the concept of predestination in historical context, Pynchon summarizes the beliefs of the Puritan Scurryhamite religious sect in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. To them, the Tristero symbolized “the Other quite well”—some opposite Principle, something blind, soulless; a brute automatism that led to eternal death.” Here the Tristero represents malignant Nature in the pessimistic Naturalism of Pynchon following his model Henry Adams.

Bortz tells Oedipa about an attack centuries ago by Tristero bandits who murdered travelers, quoting their leader, whose speech is Pynchon’s parody of the U.S. Postal Service oath. Tristero was founded in 1577 by “Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera, perhaps a madman, perhaps an honest rebel, according to some only a con artist.” After he lost his Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly to a cousin, he called himself The Disinherited, started attacking couriers and “added to his iconography the muted post horn and a dead badger with its feet in the air.” Oedipa wonders if they murdered Driblette: “If they got rid of you for the reason they got rid of Hilarius and Mucho and Metzger.” However, there is no evidence that “Tristero” had anything to do with Driblette walking into the ocean nor with Hilarius going mad—his assistant blamed

“nutty broads”—nor with Mucho shrinking from her nor with Metzger running away with a “chick.” Now a representative Feminist, Oed does not consider that rejection of her by Mucho and Metzger may reflect upon her as much as upon them, she blames a conspiracy against her.

Pynchon dismisses (1) the possibility of a conspiracy against Oedipa by emphasizing how elaborate it would have to be, which drains suspense from the last scene in the book; (2) therefore her fear of a plot against her is paranoid fantasy, which increases the satire at the end; (3) at the same time, Pynchon has established the existence—metaphorically—of a secret Tristero communication system and has scattered around so many post horns that he has already proved she is not hallucinating. The WASTE mail system is implausible in the real world, making the novel more fantastic. Using waste disposal containers is an unreliable communications system because it is so vulnerable to garbage collectors and theft, a negative reflection on government by the anarchistic Counterculture. Ironically, the competing mail system of the Marxist Counterculture is capitalism turning a Big Government monopoly into a free market. (4) Now somewhat wasted herself, Oed sees the “official government delivery system,” the capitalist System, as “spiritually” impoverishing. This from the most spiritually impoverished American novelist. Putting on his Communist party cap again, Pynchon implies that nobody in America likes their job (that is why the immigrants keep flooding in). He thinks workers would be so much happier deaf and dumb and choking to death on pollution in Communist China.

In the end, “Every access route to the Tristero could be traced also back to the Inverarity estate.” This suggests that even the Counterculture is controlled by the capitalist System. The narrator recasts a popular expression in saying “Pierce Inverarity only knows,” suggesting that capitalism has replaced God, a theme also in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Oedipa is a Republican converted to righteous liberalism by seeing America as Pynchon does, as personified in the right-wing capitalist redneck racist Nazi gun dealer. Like the antiwar radicals in the street during the 1960s Pynchon polarizes the Counterculture against the Establishment, reducing enormous diversity to two monolithic forces of Good and Evil and reducing people to abstractions in a comic book cosmos. He demonizes with the crudity of war propaganda. Pynchon is not even a good Marxist since he sloppily equates American workers with evil capitalists.

The worst that Pynchon can say of capitalism in this chapter is that it is dull. He whimpers about “the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of every American you know, and you too, sweetie.” Most people would prefer a job to surprises. *The Crying of Lot 49* has been seen as a hip representation of the 1960s, yet Pynchon denies the cultural diversity of the 60s exploding all around him. His novel itself renders the women’s movement and a great diversity of other groups, yet he rests his argument on obvious nonsense. He is a typical liberal in claiming that everyone agrees with him—“you too, sweetie.” On the contrary, most Americans in the turbulent 1960s were not “harrowed” by boredom.

What most harrows Oedipa and Pynchon is Atheism. Oedipa invokes God but then rejects faith: “For this, oh God, was the void.” This voids in advance the pretense of religious import in the last scene of the novel. Pynchon fills his void with angst and subversive politics—“opposition masquerading as allegiance.” Pynchon could be one of the con-artists in Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* along with Poe. This attitude was characteristic of the Communists in the 1930s and of the anarchists in the 1960s. Pynchon’s dislike of mothers is also consistent with the leftist program enforced especially by Feminists of discrediting the traditional family. In one of Tristero’s stamps in the “Mothers of America Issue, put out on Mother’s Day, 1934, 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 has been identified metaphorically with Lot 49, now revealed as “forgeries,” a further comment on her romantic folly down in Mexico. Genghis Cohen tells her to expect a mysterious bidder who “may be from Tristero.” For the first time, this seems to establish that Tristero is more than a mass movement of the disgruntled with a secret communication system, that it is some kind of entity. However, the narrator continues to refer to its existence as still uncertain. The news that she will probably have to confront the Tristero at the stamp auction renders Oedipa suicidal, though it is difficult to understand why. “Then she went out and drove on the freeway for a while with her lights out, to see what would happen.”

In weepy desperation, she calls The Greek Way in San Francisco and gets the “fuzz-headed Inamorato Anonymous she’d talked to there” on the phone, identifying herself as Arnold Snarb and confessing her inability to maintain her identity as Oed in a male role. “‘I was in the little boys’ room,’ he said. ‘The men’s room was full’.” According to Pynchon, homosexual anarchy includes little boys. Arnold confesses to defeat and begs for information: “they’ve saturated me. From here on I’ll only close them out. You’re free.” But he cannot help her/him. He also has failed as an isolate. Apparently he fell in love while in the little boy’s room, a gay version of Mucho and Metzger with their teenagers and Serge with his dream of an eight-year-old swinger. American males are regressing and inverting.

“She stood between the public booth and the rented car, in the night, her isolation complete, and tried to face toward the sea. But she’d lost her bearings. She turned, pivoting on one stacked heel, could find no mountains either.” Suicidal, she is “pivoting” on a single “stacked heel” like a machine without “bearings” out of control and near falling to pieces like V. Oed is alienated from Nature, its power of spiritual renewal represented by the sea, an archetypal symbol of the unconscious, and from the potential spiritual elevation and transcendence represented by mountains. The sea did not renew Driblette because he brought no more to it than Oedipa does. She acknowledges her alienation from her own nature when she identifies herself as Arnold Snarb. Though she is on a “quest,” she cannot “find” a mountain range—transcendence—because “Pierce Inverarity was really dead.” Like God. She has lost faith in love, God, America, and herself. “She walked down a stretch of railroad track next to the highway.” This parallels her to a train, ironically a traditional symbol of Progress and aptly also a symbol of mechanistic determinism in the tradition of Dreiser and Norris and other Naturalists.

“She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America.” This makes the allegory explicit: Inverarity is the capitalistic American spirit of conquest, the drive “to possess, to alter the land, to bring new skylines, personal antagonisms, growth rates into being.” Inverarity joins the other representative self-made businessmen in American literature—Silas Lapham, Frank Cowperwood, Magnus Derrick, George Babbitt, Jay Gatsby, Thomas Sutpen. Unlike his predecessors, however, Pynchon attacks the capitalist economic system that built America, deeming it Inverarity—invalid. He includes in his embodiment of Inverarity a simplistic Marxist metaphor of the capitalist economy as manifest in the stock market: “‘Keep it bouncing,’ he told her once, ‘that’s all the secret, keep it bouncing’.” Supposedly, one individual is able to control the whole economy like a yoyo. This metaphor has since cracked apart because the elitist stock market is no longer connected to the economy that includes the working class.

The question raised about Inverarity—invalid America—is whether Oedipa will “yet be his heiress,” whether the woman’s movement will lead to a matriarchal government like that of Malta in *V*. Pynchon suggests that Inverarity turned over America to Oed because he was “so cynically sure of being wiped out.” Fantastically, Pynchon is predicting that all the hundreds of thousands of capitalists, business people and shareholders in America—of both genders—who are embodied in the one Pierce Inverarity are going to impoverish themselves in unison and hand over all their assets to liberated women as a cynical gender war revenge joke because by 1966 they have all of them already destroyed America. The yoyo economy is now a sinister Patriarchal plot to make liberated women the fall guys. Feminists should note Pynchon’s lack of faith in women, though he blames men for female paranoia. Oedipa is not up to the challenge. The destruction of America is prefigured in “the stripped shells of wrecked Plymouths”—in reference to the founding colony at Plymouth in 1620. “What was left to inherit?”

Oedipa has swung so far left from Republican to Socialist that she welcomes the redistribution of wealth in America: “What would the probate judge have to say about spreading some kind of a legacy among them all, all those nameless, maybe as a first installment?” Now she considers “joining Tristero.” In his comic book world, Pynchon reduces her choices to absolutes of either/or: either participate in society or subvert and destroy it. No compromises. “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?” Again Pynchon denies that the most diverse country on earth is diverse. In putting everybody who has a job in the same capitalist bag with Inverarity he is blind to diversity. He compares his thinking to a digital computer. As machinelike as Oedipa on her one stacked heel, Pynchon says excluded middles are to be avoided and then he excludes middles. Everything is “Ones and zeroes.”



Yet the alternatives he poses as either/or are not at all computerlike, not objective nor logical, they are subjective, arbitrary and demonstrate nothing. For example, “the bones of the GI’s at the bottom of Lake Inverarity were there either for a reason that matters to the world, or for skin divers and cigarette smokers.” In the end Oedipa feels so alienated from evil patriarchal America that if there is no true Counterculture, no Tristero, she will be paranoid forever. She will have no tryst, will remain forever “unfurrowed” and will never have a baby, unlike Grace Bortz. By now some readers may think it better for the country if Oedipa Maas does not reproduce. Feminists will notice the implication that a woman needs to have a baby to attain grace and feel fulfilled, even if “harassed.” On this point Pynchon is a Victorian.

Oedipa comes to the auction hoping for a revelation. “I’m only being a busybody.” This makes it hard to feel that she is in any jeopardy and it is not a religious attitude. As it turns out, the only revelation she gets is that the gross Genghis Cohen may succeed the slick Inverarity in bed with her—more echoing. “‘Your fly is open,’ whispered Oedipa. She was not sure what she’d do when the bidder revealed himself.” It is worth reading the novel just for this joke. Oedipa is referring to the Tristero bidder, whoever he is, whereas Pynchon is referring to the penis of Cohen as a bidder for relations with Oedipa, who may or may not accept—“she was not sure what she’d do.”

The fly puns on the famous line from Emily Dickinson, “I heard a fly buzz when I died.” The audacity and resonance of this obscene joke determines the tone of the ending and renders the religious atmosphere merely an evocation of Oedipa’s paranoia in a parody of faith. Pynchon is also implicitly comparing himself with Dickinson as a recluse in an ironic contrast of beliefs and values. The speaker in Dickinson’s poem is *dead!*—in imagination, theory, or “fact.” Although the poem is about experiencing doubt on the verge of death, that the speaker can speak of it afterward is ironic affirmation, even “proof,” of an afterlife—of Immortality. Pynchon’s pun on “fly” is likewise an anti-climax, but he is an Atheist satirizing the Christian anticipation of ultimate revelation, whereas Dickinson is a Christian recanting occasional doubt. Pynchon’s punning allusion promotes a perception of himself as a shy reclusive genius comparable to Dickinson, of equivalent literary stature. But he is the fly.

The stamp auction is held on a Sunday, culminating the religious motif sustained throughout the novel—“an odd, religious instant”; “revelations”; “quest.” The auctioneer Loren Passerine “spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel.” A passerine is an order of bird including the raven. The metaphorical angel here is the black angel of death that Oedipa feels descending upon her like the fly in the Dickinson poem. The death she anticipates with terror is spiritual, that she will end up Arnold Snarb, or in relations with Genghis Cohen become like the artificial nymph on the sign of Echo Courts with a face “much like Oedipa’s.”

The auction room scene is very Expressionistic in style, as her paranoid perceptions are projective. All the people in the room are males, all wearing black mohair, and all with “pale, cruel faces.” This is all a male conspiracy against her. Passerine is “like a puppet-master,” embodying the themes of (1) people in general becoming dehumanized by capitalism and the Patriarchy; (2) determinism in the traditions of Calvinism and literary Naturalism; and (3) Oedipa’s feeling manipulated by malignant conspiratorial forces beyond her control. A paranoid Feminist, she interprets Passerine’s “smiling” look as ominous, as if he is saying, “I’m surprised you actually came.” She looks around for her “target, her enemy.” She is focused outward on identifying a representative of Tristero, never inward on any spiritual dimension, and she has already rejected faith in God. The final irony in the novel is anti-climax. This is merely a stamp auction. The ending of *The Crying of Lot 49* is a parody of faith in religious revelation paralleled with faith in political salvation by a countercultural revolution. Double parody of paralleled belief systems—Christianity and Capitalism—likewise ends *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Michael Hollister (2014)