

## A Child Roaming the Night: Oedipa's Dead Issue in *The Crying of Lot 49*<sup>1</sup>

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There have been few cogent attempts to interpret Oedipa's night-walk in San Francisco in *The Crying of Lot 49*.<sup>2</sup> This ramble, during which Oedipa seeks knowledge of the occult Tristero that might endow her world with meaning, has been plausibly construed by critics like Edward Mendelson and James Nohnberg as a journey of religious discovery.<sup>3</sup> Such readings, for all their sensitivity to the allegorical resonances of the text, do not yield an adequate understanding of the walk, one of the most revelatory passages for understanding the novel. They need to be supplemented by a more literal reading of the scenes most often repeated during the night, encounters with children who are intimately associated with the Tristero's secrets.

Frank Kermode, in his discussion of the interpretive openness of *The Crying of Lot 49*, points out that "Oedipa doesn't unambiguously believe in the patterns to which the evidence is apparently pointing" during "her wild San Francisco night" (164); neither do I. However, I do not so much doubt that the patterns exist as that they mean something as redemptive, as night-abolishingly revelatory, as they sometimes seem to. The significance of the walk lies elsewhere in the novel's symbolic order, and my excursion here suggests a possible site in the compromised parent-child relations Pynchon obsessively inscribes at every level in his work. In San Francisco, Oedipa steps into a sequel to *The Courier's Tragedy*, a play about the murder of the heir Niccolò and other youth by the Oedipal father, Duke Angelo.<sup>4</sup> The show the city stages also concerns the abuse of children, and in the sequel it becomes clearer that parents are, as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the chief perpetrators.

Though the importance of "the betrayal, especially of children by parents" (Leverenz 235) in Pynchon has been recognized, the central role of the afflicted family in Pynchon generally has been little studied. That is surprising, since abusive or negligent parents and their children appear both centrally and peripherally in all the novels: Mélanie's abusive father and Stencil's absent mother in *V.*; Slothrop's Pernicious Pop and the murderous mother Greta in *Gravity's Rainbow*; Prairie's criminally distant mother in *Vineland*; the guilty father (and disappointed son) Mason in *Mason & Dixon*. Among critics who have been interested

in this subject, Catharine R. Stimpson has discussed the families of *V.*; Marjorie Kaufman, David Leverenz and Strother Purdy have discussed those of *Gravity's Rainbow*; and N. Katherine Hayles and Terry Caesar have discussed those of *Vineland*. These are among the few extended considerations of Pynchon's children and families, and they rarely extend beyond discussions of the particular novels to generalize about Pynchon's interest in families.

It is also surprising that the families of *The Crying of Lot 49* have been overlooked since children are at the heart of the mystery of the Tristero. For example, Oedipa is initiated into the occult nature of Inverarity's estate through Metzger's screening of the story of a child, Baby Igor, killed through parental recklessness. And *The Courier's Tragedy* shows that the ubiquitous muted post horn stands not only for the Tristero but for the dead child Niccolò. Moreover, the evidence of the Tristero that Oedipa detects consists largely of the reliquary repetition of Niccolò's murder via a series of children associated more or less comically with danger and death, and sometimes with parents who are at least potentially infanticidal, like the harried Grace Bortz (148). Most of these children appear during Oedipa's walk.

The walk at first promises to reveal not death but a metaphysical redemption of all that is hushed and nocturnal. The "repetition of symbols was to be enough" to help her "remember" and reconstitute some insight that might compensate for having lost "the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (118). Yet ironically, the symbols repeatedly appear as records of nearly abolished or stifled cries from the cradle, as instances of that dead letter inscribed so often in Pynchon's texts: the child perilously isolated from adult protection and sometimes, like Mélanie and Bianca, exposed to mortal danger. It is this message, moreover, that the Tristero communicates at least as much as the liberatory one Oedipa desiderates in her attempts to remember. If signs of the Tristero like the WASTE system tell her that a "separate, silent, unsuspected world" (125), a counterculture "deliberately choosing not to communicate by U. S. Mail" (124), exists beyond the reaches of what becomes in *Vineland* the "Nixonian Repression" (VI 71), these remain, finally, deadly silent, unable to cry. And if those Tristeroic outcasts who have spoken to Oedipa "carefully, scholarly, as if they were in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in" (180) seem to promise "another set of possibilities" (181) to replace an alienating present, they remain disinherited children like Niccolò, in permanent exile from a spooky land that is never more than a beyond, an underground, a land of the dead in the novel.

Thus Oedipa detects in the Tristero a series of silencings, not articulations, and quite often it is children and the childlike or youthful—a vulnerable drifter, an idealistic revolutionary, an avant-garde director—who speak only to be silenced. Such imperiled youth, not metaphysical or utopian inflections of the Word, convey the Tristero's message to Oedipa in San Francisco. If "[n]othing of the night's could touch her" but symbols (117-18), those of unparented offspring touch her deeply, disclosing a possible cause of her own isolation after the death of the paternal Pierce. By surveying the youths she encounters, we can gain a sharper sense of how important the betrayal of the promise of childhood (the silencing or deadening that blocks the inheritance of the future naturally promised to the young) is for Oedipa and for the novel's symbolic code, and so interpret the walk more comprehensively.

Significant for conveying Oedipa's communion with various symbols of the child's isolation are the kids she happens upon in Golden Gate Park early in her ramble. These figures have an evanescent quality that casts doubt on their substantiality. The children seem instances of the dream phenomena that, throughout the novel, Oedipa can't sort from the real (117). Uncannily mirroring her own dreaminess and insulation from the social, they might be understood as projections of her own psyche:

[S]he came on a circle of children in their nightclothes, who told her they were dreaming the gathering. But that the dream was really no different from being awake, because in the mornings when they got up they felt tired, as if they'd been up most of the night. When their mothers thought they were out playing they were really curled in cupboards of neighbors' houses, in platforms up in trees, in secretly-hollowed nests inside hedges, sleeping, making up for these hours. The night was empty of all terror for them, they had inside their circle an imaginary fire, and needed nothing but their own unpenetrated sense of community. (118)

The narrator construes positively the never-never-landish isolation of these fey children from the adult day-world. It is as if Pynchon so wants to believe that children can live unmolested by adult dereliction that he reinscribes the would-be parent-free zone of the adult-outwitting boys in "The Secret Integration" here as a materialized utopia.

Moreover, since Oedipa is, like each of the children, a dreamer in search of community, we may imagine that she too wants to believe that the imaginations of such playmates alone can produce a sustaining hearth in a hearthless world governed by insensitive and naïve adults, so much so that *she* may be dreaming the gathering. Such a self-sufficient circle, a secret fellowship, like the realized society of

underground communicants she never sees, must seem alluring to the would-be self-sufficient, world-projecting heroine. Though she “stopped believing in them” at once, “to retaliate” (119) for their inability to tell her more about that larger circle than the children, playing in a post horn, synecdochize, her rejection implies an intensity of belief that will brook no uncertainty. When they tell her they have never heard part of their jump-rope song, “Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three, / Turning taxi from across the sea” (119), pronounced “Thurn and Taxis”—as in the *Courier’s Tragedy*, where she first hears of the Tristero—they are no longer plausible for her, because they no longer signify self-sufficiency but derivation from an earlier generation of children whose message they have not understood. Her admiration turns to disappointment when their community is penetrated by an unknowable past.

However bewitching her co-communards seem (Pynchon makes us want to believe in them), Oedipa’s initial admiration of these children is open to doubt, like so much else in the novel. Though the idealizing tone here muffles it, we can hear in the presentation of their dream life the full gravity of a plight as empty of meaning and chances for nurture as it is empty of terror. The children seem pitiable and deluded, seeking merely magical release from days in which their exhaustion and detachment are ignored. They try to dream an escape from an empty existence in which dreaming, “no different from being awake,” is pervaded by the expenditures of independence that exhaust life. But since both their dreaming and waking require the vigilant maintenance of their community, night offers no escape from their restlessness. Moreover, behind their generationally uniform reliance on one another stands, as for the latchkey children of *Vineland* and the Maltese war-children of *V.*, implicit adult negligence—unthinking mothers—they must turn from, conspire against, and believe themselves unpenetrated by.

Just before this passage, Pynchon qualifies Oedipa’s admiration by associating childhood with a breakdown in transmission between generations like that Oedipa assumes has occurred with versions of the children’s song. On the street she spots two post horns signaling the Tristero’s presence and “[b]etween them a complicated array of boxes, some with letters, some with numbers.” Musing on their significance—“A kids’ game? Places on a map, dates from a secret history?” (117)—she cannot determine whether the signs are for kids or grownups. As in the heir-apparent Niccolò episode, the Tristero functions here to prevent communication from the past to the future through children. Though the Tristero often teases Oedipa with spokesmen who promise to clear up puzzles about information from the past—whether about a corrupt text (spokesman Bortz) or a corrupt society (spokesmen Koteks

and Arrabal)—it fails to deliver that clarification. The Tristero itself remains infant, speechless. It operates with death and against tradition to keep history secret, as if the ancestral carriers of tradition were children who could not speak well enough to be intelligible. Historical communication is blocked by symbols at the site of these enigmatic games, much as communication is blocked between the dreaming children and their parents, by means of ambiguities about which little can be determined except that they concern the indistinguishability of generations. These signs threaten Oedipa's entire project of remembrance, since they indicate that the past's meaning may not be communicable. The ambiguous menace of the signs on the street is reinforced by the appearance of a man "in a black suit . . . watching her" (117) as she copies the signs. Does he signify, like other men in black in the novel, the suppression of significance? Or does he signify what she wants at this moment, significance itself? Furthermore, such uncertainty about signification carries over to make it easy for us to doubt the meaning of the children, who, born under the unfortunate, indecipherable sign of the Tristero, may represent community or the breakdown thereof.

Hence, to inspire her quest for a redemptive, meaningful community independent of any disastrous ancestry, Oedipa projects her hope for it onto these Tristero-touched children. That hope is challenged again by the hopelessness of the next children she meets, similarly detached and ghostly—like her this night. After getting from Jesús Arrabal, a bathetic effigy of the Christ-child's second coming, his bad news about the molestations of the world's political parents, on the city beach she comes among more of those parents' offspring, a nightmare community or gang: "she walked unmolested through a drifting, dreamy cloud of delinquents in summer-weight gang jackets with the post horn stitched on in thread that looked pure silver in what moonlight there was. They had all been smoking, snuffing or injecting something, and perhaps did not see her at all" (121). Using drugs to withdraw into themselves after who knows what Tristeroic molestations, they seem to have found a way to neutralize whatever might menace them. Like the Playboys and the Maltese gangs in *V.*, they treat the adult world as invisible.<sup>5</sup> Though Oedipa remains unseen (if we take the "perhaps" lightly, as an obligatory Pynchonian dubitation), we can see an aspect of Oedipa herself in their obliviousness, their Oedipal blindness to what has just passed them by: the reality of an adult world in which parents can abandon their children.

The gang's narcotized state corresponds to the narcissistic "sense of buffering, insulation" that has hitherto kept Oedipa ignorant of the presence and meaning of "what remained yet had somehow, before

this, stayed away" (20), of what she comes to call the Tristero. As narcotics induce forgetfulness, narcissistic buffering allows one to forget the very parental loss that leads, as psychoanalysis has it, to a defensive narcissism. As Oedipa becomes less narcissistic, she becomes more concerned with remembering, though she never remembers her own childhood. (The first major assault on her insulation coincides with the televised abreaction of Oedipal material in Baby Igor's death in the womb of a submarine named for his mother and piloted by his father [42-43].) It is as if her narcissism deletes the memory of a particular past that might teach her unpleasant things about her family history. Her insulation keeps her from seeing, we might speculate, that the fates of Baby Igor and Niccolò attract her because they recall a parental betrayal that never appears as a pre-Oedipal memory. Thus, when narcissism begins to fail, and the world she projects corresponds more than before with the outside world, full of reminders of the past that had stayed away, Oedipa becomes obsessed with the persistence of the past and her inability to summon it into presence.

Yet her narcissism also persists as an inability to see what she is seeing, the broken connection between children and adults portrayed in her encounter with the delinquents. If they fail to see her, she is blind to the meaning of their blindness. The gleaming post horns here betoken a lack of the real contact between generations that guarantees future community, betoken the detached self-sufficiency of youth that promises only the moonshine of isolation. Like *The Courier's Tragedy*, the activities of the circle of children, and Oedipa's quest itself, this separation of the delinquents from the adult world signifies the failure to remember the older generation's dereliction, its failure to see—to recognize and care for—children.<sup>6</sup>

Oedipa presently happens upon signs of the street art that can be understood as the indirect attempts of such juveniles, or of grownups with adolescent verve, to make the suffering of the young visible to adults who have eyes to see. These strokes of youthful vigor further demonstrate that the energies of childhood serve death in the novel. The surfaces of the city are covered with graffiti and other writings belonging to the Tristero's repertoire of child-haunted and ill-boding signs. Besides the post horn that keeps recalling Niccolò's death, especially menacing are three acronymic puns whose black-humorous awkwardness illustrates how the child's creative voice is strangled by the inky hand of death. In a latrine, often a site of living death and childish humor in Pynchon, someone has posted "an advertisement by AC-DC, standing for Alameda County Death Cult," a group that regularly chooses "some victim from among the innocent . . . using him

sexually, then sacrificing him" (122-23). Here the electrocuted Baby Igor's ghost is revived in the association of electricity, juvenility and death. Another acronym communicates its deadliness more openly: "DEATH," standing for "DON'T EVER ANTAGONIZE THE HORN" (121), warns Oedipa in breezily adolescent tones that the Tristero menaces youth with the threat of certain death. The writer of that motto seems to understand the warning to rebellious youth implied in the muting of the young courier's instrument and to want to spread the warning to all children riding the bus in which the acronym is marked. And the recurrent acronym WASTE communicates clearly, not least through its association with the dying sailor's dead letter, that the youth movement that uses it is doomed to destruction. The identity of the "WE" who "AWAIT SILENT TRISTERO'S EMPIRE" (169, 174) is not divulged until Oedipa's inquest concerning the past has been aborted and the messages about a possible social rejuvenation sent to her by WASTE have proven to be effectively indecipherable. Part of the joke of the stamp forgers who create the explicit WASTE stamp "'in their youth'" (174) is that they are revealed (too late to save Oedipa from a waste of time) as nothing but pranksters. The promise of the WASTE system leads Oedipa to the dead end of adolescent gags: "In the 3¢ 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" (174). The juvenilia of the Tristero are no longer threatening but merely trivial. Oedipa explores a world in which youth's energy is wasted either fending off or indulging in the deadly, in both cases signifying nothing. The masters of the youthful art of illicit inscription are finally as silent as the murdered Niccolò, deliverers of dead letters.

Necrophiliac Pynchon, in his element here, keeps inventing resonant patterns of death imagery. Three more children testify to what Oedipa is persistently meant to remember, that Pynchon's vulnerable young ones are *memento mori*. On a bus, Oedipa observes as a "Mexican girl" listens to one of the songs "that would never become popular," would never mature in the charts, "would perish as if they had never been sung." Nevertheless, with a child's hope that what she loves will last, the girl "hummed along as if she would remember it always" (122). Thus she becomes for Oedipa an emblem of the vain idea the Tristero-inscribed world conveys only to demolish: that youth's powers can make messages that last (WASTE as underground mail in San Francisco, capital of underground news) in the face of universal perishing (wasting). This Latina, by virtue of her innocence and probable religion a version of Mary, waits in joyful hope for a fulfillment of radio annunciation: the immortality of remembered lyrics. Yet her

hope is to be disappointed, Pynchon prophesies. For that fresh Word cannot long be heard in the roar of the message the recording industry never ceases to send to children, that the sounds that bring them alive all die young. Arrabal's gospel of anarchist miracle keeps giving way to the bad news of infantine Passion, as child after child bears tidings of death. Along this Tristeroic *via dolorosa*, beginning with Niccolò's murder and ending with the sailor's collapse into infantilism, Oedipa serves as the afterimage of the Mexican girl, the mother lamenting her child's death—a pietà.<sup>7</sup>

The parental cause for the failure of the songs of childhood to move up the charts to become the oldies of adulthood becomes explicit in Oedipa's ensuing visit to the airport. There she sees "an uncoordinated boy" leaving for Miami, where he "planned to slip at night into aquariums and open negotiations with the dolphins, who would succeed man." Oedipa sees this parodic figure of the failure of human communication and generation "kissing his mother passionately goodbye, using his tongue" (123). The jarring crudity of the image reinforces the message from Metzger's and Niccolò's tongues, that the world is full of malevolent relatives who do not nurture. The parent-child separation necessary for benign connection is so undeveloped here as to bring Oedipal forces out of the character's mind (he intends to slip into the water that signifies the mother, in the dark that signifies sexuality, to achieve a certain intercourse) into action.<sup>8</sup>

The mother responds with Jocasta aplomb to her Oedipus's expression of mixed feelings about leaving for the dolphin underworld (how often children depart from parents, and vice versa, in Pynchon). She accepts the tongue silently, and answers his "'I love you, ma'" with motherhood-mocking instructions to "'Write by WASTE'" and "'Love the dolphins'" (123). Thereby she intimates that he should keep any healthy love for her buried; communication between generations must remain, like the sailor's WASTE mail to Fresno that Oedipa never sees properly delivered, incommunicado. And he should cultivate a secret, substitute relation with those who, heirs of the future though they be, cannot communicate love to the future through reciprocating nurture in any mother tongue. The boy's mother seems to protect him from what in Pynchon's idiom can be understood as paternal hostility—he should write secretly or the "'government will open it'" (123)—but actually she abandons him to the uncaring of the mute and inhuman, to the deadly in the novel's associative code. She demonstrates that, in Pynchon's conception of parenting, mother love offers no counterforce to the hostility of government or persecutory father (earlier embodied as Duke Angelo) representing the death instinct that works to ensure that no boy will succeed man. Love, she advises, must be silent—a soul

kiss, an occulted letter—hence nothing her boy can coordinate his spirit with in the light of day. Thus within a typical Pynchonian joke about underground communications lies the cruel message that the primary human connection is routinely severed not by maturation but by a movement toward extinction that irresponsible parenthood encourages.

In another collocation of childhood and extinction, the childishly vulnerable roamer Oedipa meets a “child roaming the night who missed the death before birth as certain outcasts do the dear lulling blankness of the community” (123). This child has taken to heart the Tristeroic world’s behest that children cast themselves from the circle of interpersonal connections that could allow tradition to inscribe life on that blankness. His orphan’s anti-nostalgia suggests that for children lacking families through which to inscribe themselves on history, any imaginable community is confused with death (whether in womb or tomb). The outcast, unnurtured child considers both death and community desirable states of rest. For the novel’s roaming, homeless children, the past and life among others are one: a non-existent utopia for which loving parents have dearly departed.

Thus, her young acquaintances all signal in different modes to Oedipa, the “voyeur and listener” (123) who communicates with them by both word and imaginative sympathy, that the regeneration the child betokens is impossible, however sorely missed.<sup>9</sup> The impossibility finds a final pre-dawn embodiment in a black woman who is both a kind of ruined child—she has “an intricately-marbled scar along the baby-fat of one cheek”—and an anti-mother “who kept going through rituals of miscarriage . . . deliberately as others might the ritual of birth, dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of interregnum” (123). This childish parent carries out the roaming child’s death-wish, repeating religiously a real signifier of aborted generation. In her anti-Marian rituals of child-denunciation, we can read the desire for a blanking out of community characteristic of the Tristero’s domain of discontinuity. Like other Pynchonian parent-figures from V. to Frenesi, this scarred relic of babyhood is an executrix of terminations. In her we see an author dedicated to portraying infanticide, fulfilling artistically a ritual-murderer’s wish to conquer inevitable death through murder.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the night’s symbols, then, communicate more than the pathos of dying. If the mere repetition of symbols were truly enough to communicate the complete Word about death’s dominion over all God’s children to and through Oedipa, then any signs of death would serve. In fact, the symbols are chosen so the parental rulers of death’s dominion might be cryptically named and blamed (the absent mothers of the night-circle and of the delinquents, the dolphin boy’s Jocasta, the miscarrying anti-mother, even Oedipa’s and Jesús’s dead *padrone*,

Pierce). This intimate association of death and parentally betrayed childhood touches all Oedipa's encounters with children. From the Baby Igor whose submarine womb becomes a tomb to the enfeebled sailor who becomes a baby in her arms, those figures demonstrate that for Pynchon, unmaker of Bianca and Gottfried, there is no escape from the deadly suffering that afflicts childhood in the forms of exposure, disinheritance, orphanage, abortion and corporal abuse. And they demonstrate further that infantile mothers and fathers are implicated in that suffering. To walk with Oedipa is to realize that the primary content of the textual world she projects is the murder of the child and that the Tristero functions both to hide and to expose the parental involvement in that content.

Much like Oedipa, who cannot decide what the Tristero means, postmodern critics have recently found it most interesting to allow the function and significance of the Tristero to remain undecided. Representatively, Hanjo Berressem theorizes that the Tristero, rather than communicating any particular meaning, enacts a loss of meaning. During Oedipa's search, "the anchor points of her symbolic network vanish" (99), since increased awareness of the possibility of meaning seems only to reveal the functioning of dispositions of the intermittently meaningful (for instance, the post horns that seem both portentous and nonsensical). From the postmodern perspective, to learn about problems in understanding equals understanding itself, and the vanishing of a symbolic network equals the appearance of an indeterminacy that substitutes for and indeed proves truer than the unquestioned network. Such skepticism about meaning is certainly Pynchonian, and my own reading has suggested that the Tristero works to prevent the transmission of particular meanings. But Pynchon himself seems less to celebrate indeterminacy than to deplore it. Like Slothrop, Pynchon would always "rather have that *reason*" (GR 434), however illusory. Thus in failing to examine the meaning of Pynchon's skepticism, this critical approach is incomplete. The loss of meaning, undecidable meaning, and meaninglessness are all, at least in a work of fiction, meanings that demand interpretation. It seems more interesting, at least in Pynchon's case, to respond to that demand with an interpretation congruent with the letter of the text than to describe the rhetorical problems leading to the need for interpretation, which Pynchon does well enough himself by thematizing ambiguity.

Thus the problems of signification in *The Crying of Lot 49* might fruitfully be interpreted as results of the anchoring of Pynchon's symbolic network in a pervasive, if internally questioned, hostility (of which parental hostility is the chief representation) against characterological, and hence narrative and symbolic, development—and

not against meaning as such. We fail to understand the Tristero, for example, less because it is by nature incomprehensible than because we are prevented in various ways from understanding it; its meaning fails to develop because it resists revelation much as a memory of child abuse might. As I have suggested, it is not that the meaning of the Tristero cannot be decided, but that the concept "Tristero" signifies precisely that breakdown of communications which renders an otherwise clear meaning ambiguous. The post horns are ambiguous because Pynchon, functioning much as does the Tristero, fails to explain them fully, fails to allow them to mature into fully developed symbols with more than negative content.<sup>11</sup>

The full history of the undeveloped child in this strenuously grownup novel remains to be investigated. For instance, it would be important to consider the childishness of the major adult characters (Oedipa, Mucho, Metzger, Hilarius, Cohen, Nefastis, even the cartoon-watching old Mr. Thoth) and its relation to the harm they cause and suffer. Such a history might reveal that *The Crying of Lot 49* is as committed to representing the future-annihilating aspects of the contemporary family as are the more family-filled *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*. Indeed, the insistent representation of the fact and the origins of child-killing may be Pynchon's chief narrative concern; the stories he most likes to tell, Oedipa's projections remind us, concern endangered children.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it may be that this concern works against him by preventing a counterbalancing representation of adulthood. Though his characterization carries a large burden in his work, insofar as his fictional zones *are* largely the characters, in the psychological sense, of figures like Oedipa or Stencil or Slothrop, that characterization is often enough crudely executed and abortive.<sup>13</sup> It may seem weak precisely because Pynchon is devoted to foregrounding moments when character is most in danger of remaining unformed. There is truly no way, his second novel intimates, for Pynchon himself to remain untouched by the night in which children walk unguided.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I thank D. M. Brown and Thomas Jackson for their helpful editorial advice on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>2</sup>Besides those of Edward Mendelson and James Nohrnberg mentioned below, an especially illuminating reading of the walk is that of Thomas Schaub (62-65), who finds the night's revelation less metaphysical than psychological. Also penetrating is the chiefly linguistic analysis of Maureen Quilligan (188-89, 200-02).

<sup>3</sup>Mendelson sees Oedipa benefiting from "hierophanies" that "occur all around her" while "almost everyone else is vainly trying to wrench an experience of the sacred out of places where it cannot possibly be found" (124). Nohrnberg's Oedipa is an even more religious figure, faced not so much with "a metaphor of God knew how many parts" (Pynchon, CL 109) as "with a metaphor of God" (Nohrnberg 149), who manifests himself Pentecostally throughout the night in signs whose correspondence with Christian symbols Nohrnberg suggestively reveals.

<sup>4</sup>Duke Angelo has murdered Niccolò's father, and Niccolò, while attempting to avenge that crime, is killed by agents of Angelo, who means to take the good father's place (through his ally, the good father's wicked, illegitimate son, Pasquale). Thus Angelo stands, as does Claudius the Dane, for the malevolent father of Oedipal fantasy.

<sup>5</sup>The Paranoids in *The Crying of Lot 49*, a group of young people who do interact with the adult world, demonstrate the dangers of such interactions in the Pynchonian universe. With reason, they see adults as sexual predators. Miles suspects that "'older chicks,'" like Oedipa, may lust after his "'smooth young body'" (28), and Serge complains in his song about the unfairness of Metzger's seducing his girlfriend: "For me, my baby was a woman, / For him she's just another nymphet" (147). Oedipa's husband, Mucho, who acts like a big kid and shows a sexual interest in teenagers, exemplifies the confusion of generations about which the Paranoids are suspicious. Thus Pynchon stacks the deck against nurturing relations between adults and children; separation from adults, for all its dangers, becomes a means of survival.

<sup>6</sup>The gang of unchaperoned children appears often in Pynchon's fiction: for example, the Junta in "The Secret Integration," the Playboys and the Maltese orphans in *V.*, the Zone-waifs and the Rocket-City urchins in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the mall rats in *Vineland* and the undisciplined Vroom sisters in *Mason & Dixon*. Pynchon's fascination with children leading other children in parentless or childishly parented communities, like his fascination with families in general, has not received the critical attention it deserves. What does it mean that one of contemporary fiction's chief critics of social relations should insist on the band of children as the most important yet the most endangered alternative community? Do these children represent, as they often seem to do by virtue of their freedom and affability, a model for human interaction? And do they also represent, as their frequent imperilment suggests, a warning against too much childishness? The difference between the liberated Geli Tripping and the enslaved Bianca Schlepzig/Erdmann seems to correspond to a deep ambivalence about children in American society that closer examination of the novels' ambivalence might help us understand.

<sup>7</sup>Nohrnberg (153) and Stimpson (43) have seen that Oedipa and the dying sailor form a pietà (CL 126-27). They help us see that Oedipa's constant

condition is one of lamentation as she visits the stations of the cross marked by the Tristero's T.

<sup>8</sup>Pynchon's mother-child relations tend to regress to erotic relations, notably sadomasochistic relations between mothers and daughters like Margherita Erdmann and Bianca, and surrogate mother V. and Mélanie. Stimpson discusses the regressive character of the latter relation. For her, both figures have regressed to an infantile stage of object relations; they are "narcissists, substituting self for others as objects of love, and fetishists, substituting things for persons as objects of love" (37). She does not, however, call attention to the way the child's narcissistic relations with a parental object are repeated between them.

<sup>9</sup>The idea of negated generation is constantly played out and upon in the novel, for example, in the short circuit and the blown fuse in chapter 2, and in the languishing of a 1904 edition of "the anarcho-syndicalist paper *Regeneración*" in the dead letter office of Arrabal's backward-looking revolutionary project (121).

<sup>10</sup>This figure resembles not only the in-loco-parental V. whose fetishization of Mélanie seems to contribute to the girl's death and the Frenesi who becomes a deadbeat mom and a murderer's accomplice but also Metzger's putatively soul-murdering (and figuratively "kashering" or ritually butchering) mother and the avatar of Greta Erdmann implicated in the murder of her daughter and the ritual murder of other children. It is curious how often Pynchon's texts occult these lethal progenitors, either through limiting them to bit parts like this miscarrier and Metzger's mom or through mystifying their deeds, leaving murders like Bianca's offstage and casting narratorial doubt on their commission. Bernard Duyfhuizen persuasively argues that such occultation is part of a postmodern strategy of anti-mimesis. To read Greta "mimetically" as Bianca's murderer thus "misses the postmodern narrative function of Bianca's decharacterization to the level of a cipher and trap for readers who want teleologically to complete her story by a represented death scene" (21). Yet we need not read mimetically to wonder why Pynchon attempts to lure readers into thinking that parental figures in particular and not, say, jealous siblings or social forces are the prime suspects in child-murder. Perhaps the occultation serves not only to resist mimesis but also to mimic our cultural reluctance to imagine parents as murderers. The ease with which the reading eye passes over the puzzling "deliberately" that suggests the miscarrier is in some sense an abortionist imitates the ease with which we pass over signs of child abuse, unwilling to see that a child's suffering may have been deliberated. In any event, literal, figurative and suspected infanticide are common enough in the novels, in both comic and tragic inflections, to warrant the conclusion that we can derive something like a critique of parenthood from reading Pynchon.

<sup>11</sup>The correspondence between such resistances to meaning and resistances to the understanding of particulars about child abuse in Pynchon

(cf. Mélanie's and Bianca's mysterious deaths) is a complicated and not insignificant one that deserves analysis. See Brian McHale and McHoul and Wills on Oedipa's mode of knowing for other provocative postmodern interpretations of the indeterminacy of meaning generated by the Tristero.

<sup>12</sup>In light of this thematic obsession, it is interesting to consider recent reports that Pynchon has become the father of at least one child in the past ten years (Sales 63). Since parental misdeeds are imagined with more sympathy and intimacy in *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* than before, especially through forgiving portrayals of the neglectful parents Zoyd, Frenesi, and Mason, we might attribute the change in characterization to a shift in the author's critical perspective as he has come to understand better the challenges of parenthood. Although the parents after *Gravity's Rainbow* are more exculpably bungling than murderous, Pynchon is still much concerned to narrate the effects of their dereliction. He may now be a family man, but Pynchon has still not become, in Prairie's words, "'totally familied out'" (VI 374).

<sup>13</sup>The charge that Pynchon's characterization is poor and unrewarding to critical examination has been such a commonplace of Pynchon criticism that scholars have devoted their inquiries most often to his thematic and stylistic virtues. Only fairly recently have deconstructively inclined critics like McHoul and Wills and Duyfhuizen begun to find his characters' sketchiness valuable as a complex instance of textual intersubjectivity. Pynchon himself apologizes for the puerility and poverty of his portraits of humanity, for the way "some of my adolescent values were able to creep in and wreck an otherwise sympathetic character" in his early fiction (SL 9). Yet these technical weaknesses (developmental arrests, perhaps), if considered in light of the unrelenting childishness of the major characters, may be more rewarding than they have seemed. We may be able to understand our culture's problematically childish character structures better through Pynchon's juveniles and juvenility than through more typically mature childish characters in American fiction, say, Bellow's Tommy Wilhelm or Updike's Rabbit Angstrom. That is, it may be helpful to give more attention to Pynchon's weaknesses (and to their relation to his strengths) than we have so far. Like many strong artists', Pynchon's powers flow from his reflective responses to the ineptitudes he calls adolescent values.

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