

# The Form of the Conspiracy: Ricardo Piglia's Reading of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

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The mysteriousness to me . . . of one fellow standing at the beginning of a century, and stretching out his hand as an accomplice towards another fellow standing at the end of it, without either having known of the other's existence,—all *that* did but sharpen the interest of wonder that gathered about the general economy of Secret Societies.

—Thomas De Quincey, "Secret Societies"

In an 1847 essay on "Secret Societies," Thomas De Quincey speaks of the curious effect produced by any story about a secret society or conspiracy of individuals. By referring to the "wonder that gathered about the general economy of Secret Societies," he expresses both the fascination and confusion often produced by conspiracy narratives. In effect, De Quincey's essay presents the following problem: What would it mean to tell a story about the invisible relationships that constitute a secret society? That is, what would it mean to relate the unrelatable, to tell the untellable, to create a narrative that could link together the accomplices of a secret society? Furthermore, to what extent can we say that a conspiracy narrative produces a specific effect, such as the effect of wonder that De Quincey describes?

To answer these questions within the context of twentieth-century American literature, it is useful to turn to the most emblematic voice of conspiracy fiction, Thomas Pynchon. In fact, his 1966 novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, can be read as a commentary on what it would mean to tell a story about secret societies. As in De Quincey's description, Pynchon's Trystero<sup>1</sup> is constituted by invisible relationships that reach across large expanses of space and time in order to accomplish a secret communication or to tell a secret story. Of course, a large part of the mystery of the Trystero has to do with its secrecy, or more precisely, its strange invisibility, the way it continuously withdraws from the scene. While this secrecy is certainly a thematic element in Pynchon's novel, I would like to argue that it also signals a storytelling practice that *Lot 49* shares with other conspiracy novels from the Americas. In what follows, I will suggest that the mysterious structure of the secret society is not only a theme in *Lot 49*, but it also describes Pynchon's storytelling technique. Furthermore, it is precisely this

storytelling technique that constitutes the political effect of conspiratorial writing.

Whereas many studies have usefully drawn attention to the importance of conspiracy theory for a reading of American culture,<sup>2</sup> I would like to enlarge the scope in order to include texts outside of American culture. In fact, for writers such as the Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia, this position outside of American culture makes possible a critical reading of the various conspiracy theory traditions within the United States. While Piglia is most famous for writing such “paranoid” novels as *Artificial Respiration* (1980) and *The Absent City* (1992), his critical work points to the way Argentine literature shares with the United States a certain fascination with secret societies. In a series of essays and interviews, he suggests that the conspiracy narrative produces particular effects that are important for political writers in these two countries. Piglia’s work can therefore serve as a theorization of the political form of novels such as *Lot 49*. By reading Piglia’s theory of narrative in relation to Pynchon’s novel, we will see that De Quincey’s sense of wonder is, in fact, a mark of the political effect of conspiracy narratives.

In the “Afterword” to the English translation of his 1992 novel *La ciudad ausente*, Piglia puts forward the theory that politics takes place in contemporary fiction as conspiracy. He briefly notes that his theory could be applied to both American writers (such as Don DeLillo and Philip K. Dick) and Argentine writers (such as Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Arlt). However, he also briefly alludes to *Lot 49*, though without naming Pynchon’s novel explicitly:

[P]olitics enters the contemporary novel through the model of a conspiracy, through the narration of an intrigue—even if this conspiracy is devoid of any explicitly political characteristics. The form itself constitutes the politicizing of the novel. The conspiracy does not necessarily have to contain elements of a political intrigue . . . for the mechanism of utilizing a conspiracy to be political. It can be a conspiracy involving the delivery of mail . . . or any other invention. (145-46)

In this suggestive remark, Piglia insists that what defines the politics of a conspiracy narrative is not necessarily a certain theme or ideological content, but rather its form. He locates this form in, among other places, the postal conspiracy that lies at the center of Pynchon’s novel: “a conspiracy involving the delivery of mail.” Certainly, one of the central “themes” in Pynchon’s novel is the possible existence of the Trystero, the postal conspiracy that Oedipa Maas stumbles upon while executing the will of her former lover, Pierce Inverarity. However, rather than view the Trystero as a theme, Piglia suggests that it is more important to view the secret society as a figure of the novel’s political structure. Although Piglia’s theory might certainly refer to Pynchon’s 1966 novel, he does not further develop this allusion to *Lot 49*. For this reason,

it is important to follow the traces of this reading in texts that seem to have nothing to do with “paranoid fiction.” An unlikely place to begin this analysis is Piglia’s two essays on narrative theory collected in his *Formas breves* (2000): “Theses on the Short Story” and “New Theses on the Short Story.”<sup>3</sup> These two complementary essays do not theorize conspiracy theory per se, but rather focus on the conspiratorial structure that Piglia finds in the *cuento* or short story. It is therefore important to turn to these texts in order to develop a reading of conspiracy as the effect of a political form that potentially takes place in all stories.

In the first essay, “Theses on the Short Story,” Piglia emphasizes the way every *cuento* is a double structure that contains two stories: a visible story and a hidden or secret story. He begins his theory with a diary entry in one of Chekhov’s notebooks, which tells the story of a man who goes to a casino, wins a million, then returns home and commits suicide. In this undeveloped story, Piglia focuses on the paradoxical nature of its intrigue: “The anecdote tends to disconnect [*desvincular*] the story of the game from the story of the suicide” (105). Rather than the conventional story of a man gambling, *losing* a million, and going home to commit suicide, this story introduces a strange fork in the narrative: the man *wins*. By focusing on this split between two stories, Piglia defines the double character of the *cuento*, and states: “a *cuento* always tells two stories” (105). In this case, the visible story would be the story of a man who wins money while gambling, whereas the secret story would be the surprising story of a man who commits suicide.

Chekhov’s diary note is therefore an emblem of the double structure of the *cuento*. However, Piglia offers a second thesis that troubles this double structure: “The *cuento* is a story that encloses a secret story. . . . The strategy of the story is placed in the service of the hidden story: How to tell one story while another story is being told [*mientras se está contando otra*]?” (107-08). The second story is therefore not simply another story narrated in the *cuento*, but rather something “other” that subsists as a secret, something that is never fully told. The challenge is then to tell a visible story that nevertheless also tells a second story (without ever really telling it). Although the visible story must, in some sense, lend itself to the insinuation that another story is present, Piglia also emphasizes the antagonistic relation between the two stories: “Each of the two stories is told differently. To work with two stories means to work with two different systems of causality. The same events enter simultaneously into two narrative logics that are antagonistic” (106). Piglia therefore significantly revises his notion that a *cuento* is simply a narration with two stories. By stating that the same events are told simultaneously, but antagonistically, Piglia emphasizes the radical split that constitutes the structure of the *cuento*. Strangely, the two stories that constitute the *cuento* are in some sense repetitions of each other, and this kind of repetition produces an antagonistic difference. Previously, we saw that the first or visible tale can be figured as the

story of a gain (winning a million), whereas the second or hidden tale is the story of a total loss (committing suicide). However, Piglia now says that the second story is in fact an antagonistic repetition of the first story; that is, it is told simultaneously and uses the same material but according to a different logic, an antagonistic logic. If in the first story the man wins, in the second story that logic is not only symmetrically reversed (he doesn't simply lose the game). Rather, in the second story the man kills himself, thereby enacting an essential loss that cannot be recuperated in the game told in the first story. In this way, Piglia suggests that the two stories are radically antagonistic: one story cannot be *simply* negated and assimilated by the other story. Piglia's theory avoids the speculative machine that would allow one story to be "eaten up" by the second story. Instead, the two stories are irreducible: a radical split divides the two stories into antagonistic logics. Piglia suggests, therefore, that the *cuento* is only constituted in the very incommensurability of the two stories that give rise to the narration in the first place.

One of the reasons for the antagonistic structure of the *cuento* has to do with the way the second story "appears" in the *cuento* as completely other. In Piglia's second essay, "New Theses on the Short Story," he first talks about this secret element as a hidden figure: "The sense [*sentido*] of a tale has the structure of the secret (which goes back to the etymological origin of the word *se-cernere*, to place apart): there is something hidden, separated from the totality of the story, reserved for the end and in some other part [*en otra parte*]. It is not an enigma; it is a hidden figure [*es una figura que se oculta*]" (127). Strangely, Piglia places these two seemingly contradictory phrases together: the secret is reserved for the end *and* in some other part. On the one hand, he seems to suggest that the secret is indeed a textual figure, only that it is hidden until the end of the story. But precisely right at the end of the story, when it appears, it appears not there, at the end where you would expect it, but rather somewhere else, in an unspecified elsewhere, *en otra parte*. For that reason, Piglia refers to the secret in paradoxical terms: it is indeed a figure, but it is a hidden figure, a figure that hides itself away. The second story only "appears" in the *cuento* as disappearance, as a hidden figure that in some way disrupts the visible story. The antagonistic structure of the *cuento* is therefore due to this incompatibility between two different orders of appearance: on the one hand, a visible story; on the other hand, a secret story that never fully appears.

This structural antagonism is essential to the form of the *cuento* and defines its unique *effect*. In Piglia's theory, this effect takes place as a "voice" that suddenly comes to the surface towards the end of the first story. This voice has an artificial and mechanical quality; it is a "machination" that ends up controlling the *cuento* as a whole. Piglia further writes in "New Theses on the Short Story,"

This kaleidoscopic and double-bottomed structure [of the *cuento*] is sustained by an imperceptibly small machination [*una pequeña maquinación imperceptible*].

The intimate voice that . . . has marked the tone and verbal register of the story is identified and comes to the fore; this voice defines the tale from the outside and concludes it. The arrival of this voice is the very condition of the ending. It is that which has plotted the intrigue [*el que ha urdido la intriga*] from the other side of the frontier, beyond the closed circle of the story. Its appearance, always artificial and complex, inverts the meaning of the intrigue and produces an effect of paradox and conspiracy [*un efecto de paradoja y de complot*]. (133-34)

The voice that suddenly appears at the end of a *cuento* is therefore not the storyteller's voice, but rather an "imperceptibly small machination," a set-up that has been operating since the beginning of the tale. In fact, the very appearance of this machinated voice stands as the "unique effect" of the *cuento*: it is the effect of paradox and conspiracy. In this way, Piglia personifies the structural antagonism that defines the form of the *cuento* as an internal agent—a "voice"—that controls the narrative. The sudden appearance of this voice produces a paradoxical effect, since the second story ends up reconfiguring the first story completely, although the second story never appears as such. For that reason, the second story is not only incompatible with the first story; rather, the second story ends up machinating against the first story, undermining and inverting it even as the first story reaches its end and goal. This antagonistic battle then retroactively posits the existence of a voice or "imperceptibly small machination" that seems to have plotted the intrigue from the beginning. In this way, the antagonistic relation of the two stories produces a prosopopeia: the structural antagonism is given a voice and an agency. In Piglia's theory, the antagonistic relation constitutive of the *cuento* is figured as the voice of the enemy, a "secret agent" who threatens the stability of the first story. If the conspiratorial effect of the *cuento* produces an image of the enemy, then ultimately the form of the *cuento* tells the story of an internal relation between two enemies engaged in a conspiratorial struggle.

In this way, Piglia theorizes conspiracy as an effect produced by a certain kind of narrative: a double story that encloses a destabilizing secret. Although he calls this narrative "*el cuento*," in fact this structure can take place in any narrative that has this double structure. Most importantly, the constitutive trait of this structure is the formation of an antagonistic frontier between two discourses. This antagonism is not thematic, but rather structural: an official or visible discourse is steadily undermined by an *other* discourse that cannot be assimilated by the first discourse. The two discourses are therefore irreducible, in part because the *other* discourse is never "there" as such, but rather takes place as a kind of internal "virus" that brings about the subversion of the official discourse. In Piglia, this overturning is figured as "suicide," as in the story by Chekhov, but also as a "hidden figure" that disrupts the very visibility of the first story. The effect of this disruption is the "voice" of the *cuento*: the constitutive antagonism produces the effect of paradox and conspiracy.

With Piglia's theory in mind, we can now turn to *The Crying of Lot 49* to see how Pynchon's novel is constructed on the basis of this conspiratorial structure. However, the point now is not simply to apply Piglia's theory to *Lot 49*, but rather to show how Pynchon's novel theorizes, in turn, this same kind of mechanism in the (non)figure of the Trystero. By calling the Trystero a "(non)figure," I am emphasizing the way the secret society appears as a name with the promise of meaning (thus a figure), but at the same time the Trystero disfigures itself through a continual withdrawal from the scene (thus a [non] figure). The Trystero, as secret society, is a hidden figure that operates within Pynchon's text as a disruption, not only in terms of the plot that concerns Oedipa Maas, but also in terms of the narrative effect that Pynchon's novel produces through its very form.

In a sense, my argument follows a very traditional line that would emphasize the way *Lot 49* is based on a series of metaphors from which is derived the essential plot mechanism of Pynchon's novel.<sup>4</sup> However, "metaphor" has a very specific meaning within the context of *Lot 49*. In fact, a close reading of Pynchon's definition of "metaphor" is also an approach to the question of what it would mean to construct a novel on the model of a secret society. In an often-quoted passage in the book, "metaphor" appears as a way to theorize both the Trystero and the Nefastis Machine. The latter is named after its inventor, John Nefastis, whom Oedipa Maas finds while pursuing a lead in her search for evidence of a postal conspiracy that seems to be communicating outside of the US Mail system. The Nefastis Machine refers to a utopian device that allegedly can sort hot from cold molecules without expending any energy, with a little help from an invisible "Demon." A friend of Nefastis's, Stanley Koteks, explains that the Demon is "a tiny intelligence" that sorts fast molecules from slow molecules, thus creating a heat differential, since the fast molecules have more energy and thus more heat (68). Because the Demon is doing all the work, the machine violates the Second Law of Thermodynamics, "getting something for nothing, causing perpetual motion" (68). The Demon is therefore a non-human element that exists within the machine as a sorting mechanism. In this way, the Demon produces a rupture in a theoretical "law": the machine can produce a pure gain without any corresponding loss. It is the model of a perfectly ordered system in which loss is never needed in order to produce a gain.

The Nefastis Machine is made possible, therefore, by a certain belief in the existence of a non-human sorting element, the Demon. In fact, Nefastis insists that the Demon is not simply a fiction. Without the Demon, the machine is only held together by an accidental event that happened in the 1930s, when it was discovered that the equation for heat entropy happens to look like the equation for information entropy. Nefastis explains that his machine was made possible precisely because of this mere coincidence, but that this coincidence—which he calls a "metaphor"—is literalized, so to speak, by the existence of the Demon. He explains: "Entropy is a figure of speech, then . . . a metaphor. It connects

the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The Machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true" (85). The important point here is not the way Pynchon's novel puts into play these conflicting theories of entropy (or how they are "resolved" in the fictional Nefastis Machine), but rather the way Nefastis theorizes "metaphor." Traditionally, this term in rhetoric has come to mean a figure that mediates between a literal meaning and a "figural" meaning: a word normally used in one context (its literal meaning) is now used in a foreign context (its figural meaning), in order to transfer some of the literal meaning into a new context. For example, to say that "the world is a stage" is to take a certain aspect of the meaning of "stage" and transfer it (*meta-pherein*, to bear across) to "world," which is now thought of as similar to a stage. However, in Nefastis's explanation of what makes his machine possible, the literal-figural content is emptied out, and instead what is emphasized is the mechanism of transference that takes place within the figure. Metaphor is therefore a general structure that connects two dissimilar elements, in this case, two equations that refer to two incompatible "worlds." If the Nefastis Machine is a sorting machine, then there is also a prior sorting mechanism that makes this sorting machine possible: the metaphor that transfers heat entropy to information entropy and vice versa. In this founding metaphor there is no distinction between a literal and a figural content; rather, what defines the metaphor is simply this transfer or connection between two different worlds. Regardless of the existence of the Demon, the Nefastis Machine is therefore made possible because of this *metaphorical* connection between two equations.

However, what is indeed strange about this metaphorical connection is that the Nefastis Machine posits the existence of a tiny intelligence that allows this connection to function in reality, and not just as a metaphor. As Nefastis notes, "the Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true" (85). There are, therefore, two connections taking place through the Nefastis Machine: if the Demon allows a connection to take place between heat entropy and information entropy, then this metaphorical connection also produces a relation between the world of fiction or rhetoric and the real world. What should be emphasized about the Nefastis Machine is not only the supposition that this machine breaks a law of thermodynamics, but also that it produces incomprehensible connections. As many critics have noted in exasperation, Pynchon's use of two theories of entropy in order to model his Nefastis Machine is confusing at best.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, the point is not simply that entropy seems to be a confused and therefore meaningless concept in Pynchon's novel, but rather that the confusion about Pynchon's use of the term "entropy" is in fact a transposition of the constitutive non-relation that enables the Nefastis Machine to "work."

In this way, the Nefastis Machine not only models a certain notion of incomprehensible relations, but also stands as a figure for the

incomprehensible relations that constitute the postal conspiracy that lies at the center of *Lot 49*. In fact, the narrator explicitly compares the Nefastis Machine and the Trystero—both are constituted by incomprehensible relations that come together by coincidence:

For John Nefastis . . . two kinds of entropy, thermodynamic and informational, happened, say by coincidence, to look alike, when you wrote them down as equations. Yet he had made his mere coincidence respectable, with the help of Maxwell's Demon.

Now here was Oedipa, faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway. With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together. (87)

Thus, Pynchon's minimal definition of conspiracy is that it is a device that makes possible an impossibility: it allows a transfer to take place between "accidental" events that should have nothing to do with each other. Conspiracy—or secret society—is therefore a metaphor, in Pynchon's sense of the word: it forges a contingent relation without uniting the two (or more) parts in a unity. The only thing holding together the accidental parts of the conspiracy is a name, the "Trystero." This name refers to the agent or "Demon" that invisibly ties everything together and keeps the machine running. At the same time, this demonic agent also lends its name to the organization as a whole: the Trystero is both the invisible demon and the structure of incomprehensible relations held together by the demon. Conspiracy therefore takes place precisely as a metaphor; however, this phrase ("as a metaphor") no longer means a merely linguistic reality that has no relation to "nonverbal" reality. Rather, "metaphor," as we have seen, designates a connection that is *really* produced through an incomprehensible relation between dissimilar elements. This real connection happens because of a name: in the case of the Nefastis Machine, this name is the "Demon," and in the case of the postal conspiracy, the name is "Trystero." In each case, the name stands as something like an "empty signifier" that allows an equivalent logic to occur between completely dissimilar elements.<sup>6</sup> In the Nefastis Machine, the Demon connects the unrelated fields of thermodynamics and information flow; in the postal conspiracy, the Trystero connects a series of heterogeneous elements that normally would not constitute a "community." The Nefastis Machine is therefore not simply an example of bogus science, but rather functions in the novel as a model for the structure of conspiracy.<sup>7</sup>

What complicates this scheme is that the Trystero is not simply a metaphor that connects dissimilar elements but also seems to be a postal delivery service that sorts messages. Oedipa notices the structural similarities when talking to Stanley Koteks about how it is not necessary to introduce work into the Nefastis Machine because of the Demon's sorting mechanism.



Oedipa asks, "Sorting isn't work? . . . Tell them down at the post office, you'll find yourself in a mailbag headed for Fairbanks, Alaska, without even a FRAGILE sticker going for you" (68). Although Koteks insists that mental work is not the same as work in the thermodynamic sense, Oedipa's point is clear: there is an analogy between the operations of the Nefastis Machine and the operations of the Trystero, in that both operate as a system of communication between heterogeneous elements. However, the Trystero is not just another postal delivery service, just as the Nefastis Machine is not just another heat engine. In the latter, the completely unrelated equations that constitute its structure do not simply join together around the full presence of a name (the Demon), but rather come together as an oppositional configuration, pitting themselves against a common enemy: they are against the law that says it is "illegal" to get something for nothing. The second law of thermodynamics sets up an economy of loss and gain: for a thermodynamic engine to work, energy must be introduced into the machine from the outside. This means that energy must first be lost in order for any gain to be possible. The two types of equations within the Nefastis Machine bind together, not because of their coincidental resemblance, but rather because of the way they go against the economy of loss and gain. The intervention of the Nefastis Machine—the innovation that would define it as an "invention"—is that it articulates the possibility (never realized within the novel) of an energy gain without any corresponding loss. In other words, the Nefastis Machine posits itself as an anti-economy that is not simply different from an economy of loss and gain, but rather disrupts the possibility of economy as such.

Therefore, the Nefastis Machine only models the structure of conspiracy insofar as both "machines" are *criminal* machines: they constitute themselves through an antagonistic relation to an official economy. After all, the Trystero mail conspiracy is by nature a secret or clandestine system: the transfers that happen within the Trystero system are mysteriously clandestine and operate outside the law. The Trystero is explicitly not the official sorting machine; it is rather a criminal machine that operates against the official sorting machines (the U.S. Mail, the European Thurn and Taxis system, etc.). For that reason, the Nefastis Machine is again the model for the Trystero: "Nefastis" is not just a name; it is also the etymology of the word "nefarious": "*ne-fas*" means "unlawful." Both the Nefastis Machine and the Trystero are therefore criminal economies that oppose an official economy.

However, the similarities end here, since Nefastis would like his machine to produce a kind of pure presence (a "gain"), even if that presence is momentarily absent for the time being, since it seems that no one can actually get the machine to work. Nefastis, then, is "a believer" in the full presence of his machine (85). The Trystero, on the other hand, shows that this momentary absence of pure presence is actually the condition of its structure. Even in the case of the Nefastis Machine, the fact that the "metaphor" that connects

disparate elements is “objectively true,” as Nefastis says, does not mean that its existence can be proven without a doubt (85). The incomprehensible relations put forward by the name (“Demon” or “Trystero”) prevents “the metaphor of God knew how many parts” from being verified with certainty. This unverifiability is not a lack that would conclusively argue against the existence of a conspiracy. Rather, as Oedipa finds out, the apocryphal nature of the conspiracy is constitutive of the Trystero’s structure. After all, Oedipa’s access to the Trystero always happens in the novel by means of apocryphal texts and counterfeit objects. The central “clue” is the stamp collection that Pierce Inverarity left behind after his death, and which is, therefore, part of the estate that Oedipa was originally assigned to execute. Within Pierce’s legacy are the stamps that Genghis Cohen, the philatelist, finds are filled with “irregularities” and which he judges to be “counterfeit” (75, 78). However, “counterfeit” in Pynchon’s novel does not mean a mere fiction that posits itself as true or believable. Rather, as Genghis Cohen notes, each stamp has a visible error, “a deliberate mistake . . . laboriously worked into the design, like a taunt” (78). Oedipa finds that these counterfeit products are not simply part of a systematic postal fraud (a trick or sleight of hand), but rather connect to a generalized strategy of counterfeiting (a taunt).

But what does it mean for these counterfeit stamps to act “as a taunt”? It helps to notice that the counterfeit in *Lot 49* is defined as a particular kind of relation: there is a “counterfeit” object only in relation to an original with which it does not quite coincide. The counterfeit object posits a relation to an original that is based on similarity (the stamps look the same at first glance), but which in fact are completely opposed to the original (there are deliberate errors). In the case of the first stamp found by Genghis Cohen, the error takes the form of an anarchist attack: “The picture [on the stamp] had a Pony Express rider galloping out of a western fort. From shrubbery over on the right-hand side and possibly in the direction the rider would be heading, protruded a single, painstakingly engraved, black feather” (78). This black feather represents the mysterious Trystero agent who would attack any official postal carrier throughout history. The counterfeit stamp therefore offers this scene of potential violence “as a taunt.” This taunt is not only an innocent addition to the stamp, but rather intervenes in a particular relation of power. After all, the power of the state is not only represented by a stamp but rather *happens* as the capacity to authorize written statements (stamps) that, in turn, attest to the power of the state. The counterfeit object interrupts this self-replicating process, but not through simple resistance or even by violent uprising. Rather, the counterfeit disrupts the economy of state power through a kind of false repetition: the counterfeit stamp establishes an antagonistic relation to the official “writing” of the state and therefore interrupts this economy-power. The counterfeit is thereby defined as a relation to a more official artifact that it disfigures and disrupts.

In this way, the conspiracy of the Trystero establishes itself as a counterfeit discourse that antagonistically relates to the official documents that certify the power of a centralized form of communication.

Unlike Nefastis's belief in the full presence of his machine, the Trystero is constituted only insofar as it takes place as a counterfeit replication of the official economy. The conspiracy of the Trystero does not simply set itself up as a parallel economy that impossibly produces gain without loss, but rather inserts itself into the official economy as counterfeit. At the same time, the Trystero is not only a loss that the official economy suffers; after all, an economy is defined as this relation between a loss and a gain. Rather, the Trystero constitutes itself as a total loss—a kind of "suicide"—that disrupts the loss and gain of the official economy. This shift in the definition of the Trystero occurs within an appropriately speculative history of the Trystero system, in which the secret society is theorized precisely in terms of this strategy of the counterfeit. Oedipa learns that, as the US Postal Service began to crack down on alternative mail delivery, the Trystero decided to "stay on . . . in the context of conspiracy," which meant a new "emphasis now toward silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance" (143). The Trystero conspiracy is therefore defined not only as a strategy of counterfeiting; rather, the secret society *only takes place* as the counterfeiting of any kind of official discourse that authorizes itself as power. Although this might seem a strange way to construct a conspiracy, in fact Pynchon suggests that this structure defines the very form of any kind of conspiracy. A conspiracy does not take place through the negation of power by means of power, but rather through the interruption of the economy of loss and gain that structures political power. A true conspiracy, it would seem, is one that forges a counterfeit economy: by definition, this kind of economy interrupts the official economy and therefore cannot be reappropriated by the official economy as simply another negative moment to be assimilated. In fact, Oedipa realizes that if she ever dreamed of trying to produce a settlement in a court of law between the United States government and the Trystero, she would be laughed out of the court (149-50). Between the Trystero and the US Mail there is an incommensurable divide that cannot be resolved through a differential logic, that is, as if the Trystero were a recognizable and isolated group that differed from other distinct groups. The Trystero is therefore not a concrete party wishing to take power; it is rather a non-conceptual event that takes place as an interruption of the normal networks of power.

Throughout Pynchon's novel, the interruption that constitutes the Trystero is figured as a strange kind of absence. This interruption is not thematized as a violent explosion, but rather as a withdrawal, as a silence. Oedipa begins to notice the Trystero's strange mode of "appearance" as she wanders around San Francisco in the hopes that she would certainly not find—by coincidence—any more signs of the Trystero. However, everywhere

she goes she sees references that seem to indicate the postal conspiracy, especially the muted post horn and the letters WASTE. As the narrator notes during Oedipa's meanderings around San Francisco: "Decorating each alienation, each species of withdrawal, as cufflink, decal, aimless doodling, there was somehow always the post horn" (100). The counterfeit nature of the conspiracy, therefore, begins to articulate itself as a kind of "visible" withdrawal. The narrator, filtered through Oedipa's consciousness, notes:

If miracles were . . . intrusions into this world from another, a kiss of cosmic pool balls, then so must be each of the night's post horns. For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (101)

The post horn and the withdrawal that this emblem figures are therefore not simply signs of the conspiracy, but rather real intrusions into the machinery of the Republic. Paradoxically, these intrusions take place as a withdrawal into a kind of silence. However, "withdrawal" here does not mean an absolute disappearance. Rather, within the context of conspiracy, withdrawal means opposition masquerading as allegiance. This counterfeiting strategy can be seen in the very emblem of the Trystero, the post horn, which resembles the sign of the official European postal service, Thurn and Taxis, except for the introduction of an almost imperceptible mute within the horn's opening. This imperceptibly small mechanism, to paraphrase Piglia, is itself the mechanism of withdrawal: it stands as an intervention into the power of the centralized or official economy of the post. To "withdraw" from the life and machinery of the Republic is to remain behind and endure within the context of conspiracy, as an oppositional force that feigns a kind of loyalty or faithfulness. Yet this very impersonation is thought in terms of an impossible community: just as the Trystero was figured previously as "a metaphor of God knew how many parts," the postal conspiracy is now figured as "God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail." The basis of their community is precisely this antagonistic relation to the power of the official economy, here figured as the US Mail. Conspiracy therefore is not a full presence that can be known or understood, but rather *takes place*, as an event, as the intrusion of a total loss that cannot be recuperated at the level of an economy of loss and gain. The conspiracy takes place in every moment of withdrawal, for instance, in the "rituals of miscarriage" that one "member"

of the “community” continuously enacts, “dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of interregnum” (100). Conspiracy is this intervention into the reigning power—an interregnum, an event that takes place by not taking place.

We can now summarize the structure of conspiracy as it is narrated in Pynchon’s novel. The Trystero is a way of organizing the social field as a kind of positive negativity: it *takes place* as withdrawal, secrecy, waiting, or silence. This positive negativity means that the Trystero operates according to the logic of the counterfeit by repeating the official system in an antagonistic way. The Nefastis Machine still stands as the figure of this metaphorical structure, only not in terms of the belief that characterizes Nefastis’s relation to the machine, but rather in terms of Oedipa’s own relation of waiting. After all, her experiment with the machine exactly corresponds to her attempt to find the Trystero: as the experience of a withdrawal. In terms of the Nefastis Machine, Oedipa sits, “waiting for the Demon to communicate” (85). In relation to the Trystero, Oedipa is left at the end of the novel at the auction of Pierce’s counterfeit stamp collection (as lot number 49), hoping that a Trystero agent might appear: “Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49” (152). Therefore, at the end of the novel, Oedipa herself is inscribed in this experience of withdrawing and waiting, that is, the very experience that constitutes the (non)relation between every member of the WASTE postal conspiracy. Waiting is both the sign and the enactment of conspiracy; one of the emblems of the Trystero, the acronym WASTE, stands for: “We Await Silent Tristero’s Empire” (139). Oedipa steadily finds herself inscribed within this WASTE system, not because she formally joins some sort of official community, but rather because of the experience of withdrawing or waiting for something to appear. We can see this process begin towards the end of the novel, when her “investigation” into the conspiracy slowly turns into something else: “Even a month ago, Oedipa’s next question would have been, ‘Why?’ But now she kept a silence, waiting, as if to be illuminated” (125). The expectation of an illumination gradually loses its revelatory aim and becomes a kind of empty structure of waiting. She begins to reply to any sign of evidence with a version of the silence that we have come to associate with the Trystero: she begins to be marked by a reluctance (“Having begun to feel reluctant about following up anything” [137]) or a waiting (a feeling that she is “waiting on something truly terrible” [140]; “[t]he waiting above all” [150]). As with the Trystero in general, Oedipa’s “silence” does not refer to a lack of communication; instead, it points to another mode of communication, a mode that is characterized as withdrawal and waiting. Her silence is therefore not simply a negative response, but rather the positive announcement of negativity: she is marked by the *expression* of silence. This positive negativity is what defines the Trystero as a secret society or hidden figure. As we have seen, the conspiracy only takes place as withdrawal or silence, as a counterfeit

object or counterfeit experience. At the same time, to become a member of this secret society is not to enter into a consensual agreement, but rather it happens at the moment of becoming the WASTE of America, that is, those who await Trystero. The waste of America are therefore not only those who have been left behind, which is perhaps a constituent feature of any economy of loss and gain. Rather, Pynchon's novel points to an experience of community based on a radical loss or withdrawal that cannot simply be recuperated by the official economy. The WASTE are constituted not by any kind of positive appearance, but rather by the experience of waiting for something other to appear.

"The art of narration," Piglia notes, "is the art of sensing the unexpected [*lo inesperado*], of knowing how to wait [*esperar*] for what comes, clear and invisible" ("Nuevas," 137). Pynchon's narration of the secret society takes this kind of waiting as a structural principle. This principle is what Pynchon calls a "metaphor," a structure that produces unbelievable relations and takes place only as absence. The model for this kind of metaphor is the Nefastis Machine, but the structure of the Nefastis Machine can present itself at any moment, as long as there are two movements: first, a conjunction of incomprehensible relations; second, an antagonistic repetition of an enemy discourse. This antagonistic repetition is not thematic, but rather structural: an official or visible discourse is steadily undermined by an *other* discourse that cannot be *simply* assimilated by the first discourse. The two discourses are therefore irreducible, in part because the *other* discourse is never "there" as such, but rather takes place as a kind of internal "virus" that brings about the subversion of the official discourse. Pynchon's novel figures this overturning as the counterfeit repetition of the official discourse; this antagonistic relation comes together in a voice or name—the Trystero—that serves as the retroactive ground of the conspiracy. In fact, however, this "voice" is continually produced by the antagonistic relation and therefore stands as the "unique effect" of the conspiratorial figure. Pynchon's novel, therefore, tells the story of a secret, counterfeit voice that takes place as a constitutive absence.

In this way, Piglia and Pynchon suggest that the story about a secret figure is in fact a story that contains two incommensurable stories: a visible or official discourse that is steadily undermined by a secret or counterfeit discourse. Thus, when Piglia says that the conspiracy narrative is the form of the political, he is focusing specifically on the conspiratorial effect produced by the narration of a secret society (the narration of a *cuento*). This effect is that minimal mechanism or small machination that forms an antagonistic relation with an official discourse. In contemporary political theory, especially in recent discussions of populism, this minimal mechanism is called the underdog. For instance, Ernesto Laclau points out the significance of the underdog, not only for populism, but more generally for an understanding of the political:

Populism means putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as an historical agent—i.e., an agent which is an *other* in relation to the way things stand. But this is the same as politics. We only have politics through the gesture which embraces the existing state of affairs as a system and presents an alternative to it (or, conversely, when we defend that system against existing potential alternatives). That is the reason why the end of populism coincides with the end of politics. We have an end of politics when the community conceived as a totality and the will representing that totality become indistinguishable from each other. (“Populism” 47-48)

A full analysis of the relation between Laclau’s theory of politics and conspiracy narratives will have to wait for another occasion. For now, we can merely point to the structural similarity between populism and the form of conspiracy. In both, the narration of a destabilizing element—the “underdog”—defines the condition for any kind of political experience. Politics does not depend on a prior ideological content, but rather takes place as an effect of narration: as the narration of a legitimate discourse that is undermined by a counterfeit or illegitimate discourse. Therefore, when De Quincey marvels at the mysteriousness of secret societies, he is in fact amazed by the strange economy that rules any kind of political narrative. To read a narrative about secret societies is to enter into that mysterious relation called the political.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pynchon uses two spellings to refer to the postal conspiracy: “Trystero” and “Tristero.” Because I begin my reading of the postal conspiracy from the narrator’s comparison of the Nefastis Machine and what is called the “Trystero,” I will use this spelling throughout, except for those cases when the narrator explicitly uses “Tristero.”

<sup>2</sup> Two insightful studies on the relation between conspiracy narratives and American culture are Mark Fenster’s *Conspiracy Theories* and Timothy Melley’s *Empire of Conspiracy*. Fenster’s study is especially useful in the way he relates conspiracy theory to Ernesto Laclau’s theory of the discursive structure of politics, a relation I begin to develop towards the end of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> The first essay, “Tesis sobre el cuento,” (Theses on the Short Story), was originally published in the 1986 edition of *Crítica y ficción*. The second essay, “Nuevas tesis sobre el cuento” (New Theses on the Short Story), was originally given as a lecture in 1998. They were first published together in *Formas breves* (2000). Because of the specificity of the subject, I will use the Spanish term whenever referring to the “cuento” (tale or short story). Whenever I refer to a “story,” I am referring to Piglia’s term “historia” or “relato.” All translations of Piglia’s essays are mine.

<sup>4</sup> For example, N. Katherine Hayles's essay on *Lot 49* asserts that metaphor is the "engine" that drives the novel. However, Hayles's approach relies on the definition of metaphor presented by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whereas my study will focus on the way Pynchon's novel provides its own idiosyncratic definition of metaphor.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kerry Grant provides one of the best overviews of the critical reaction to Pynchon's use of the term "entropy" (Grant 81-95).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the "empty signifier," see Ernesto Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" According to Laclau, an empty signifier takes place when all differences become equivalent insofar as they all belong to one side of a frontier of exclusion: difference still exists between each element, but this difference is suspended by entering into a system of equivalence. This system of equivalence—the empty signifier—takes place as the exclusion of a threat, which means that all differences are the same insofar as they all antagonistically oppose an enemy: "the various excluded categories have to cancel their differences through the formation of a chain of equivalences to that which the system demonizes in order to signify itself" ("Empty Signifiers" 39). In terms of a political movement, all partial struggles, despite their individual differences, must be "seen as related to each other, not because their concrete objectives are intrinsically related but because they are all seen as equivalent in confrontation with the repressive regime. It is not, consequently, something positive that all of them share which establishes their unity, but something negative: their opposition to a common enemy" ("Empty Signifiers" 40-41). Laclau goes on to develop the notion of the empty signifier in relation to populism in his book *On Populist Reason*.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Schaub notes that the metaphorical connections described in the Nefastis Machine also pertain to the description of Oedipa's search for the conspiracy "Trystero": "Many of the connections which Oedipa establishes are bogus. Like the metaphor of 'entropy' in the Nefastis machine, the links created by her on the basis of 'sound' . . . often join realities which bear no literal relation to one another. On a metaphorical level, however, they do. . . . Language, as metaphor, becomes the source of connection; and the connection has reality only in the language itself" (98). While I agree with Schaub that the metaphorical structure defines the way conspiracy is presented in Pynchon's novel, I do not find that this structure only obtains at the level of Oedipa's search, or that the connections only take place at the level of language (if language is, as he suggests, in opposition to "reality"). Rather, conspiracy—as a structure that produces and is produced by incomprehensible relations—happens in "reality"—that is, as a political fact—precisely because of its linguistic nature.

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