

Echoes of Narcissus: Classical Mythology and Postmodern Pessimism in *The Crying of Lot 49*

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The Crying of Lot 49 ends on a seemingly hopeful note. Lot 49 may reveal the existence of an energy source beyond the cultural and existential inertia Oedipa Maas has discovered since she left Kinneret for San Narciso to execute her late lover's will. Shortly before the auction begins, Oedipa anticipates this revelation:

And the voices before and after the dead man's that had phoned at random during the darkest, slowest hours, searching ceaseless among the dial's ten million possibilities for that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word. (180)

The capitalized "Word," culminating as it does the catalog of chaotic din that constitutes Oedipa's world, underscores the desire for transcendence and a return to the coherence and order embodied in the ordinary Logos.

The hope for transcendence implied in Oedipa's thoughts grows in part from her uneasiness with the binary structuring of her world built on difference and either/or choices. She would prefer that the crying of lot 49 reveal "another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land to accept any San Narciso among its most tender flesh without a reflex or a cry," but she would settle "at the very least . . . for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew." Thus, once and for all, she would know: "Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth" (181). A string of Christian allusions underscores this hope:

"It's time to start," said Genghis Cohen, offering his arm. . . . Loren Passerine, on his podium, hovered like a puppet-master, his eyes bright, his smile practiced and relentless. He stared at her, smiling, as if saying, I'm surprised you actually came. Oedipa sat alone, toward the back of the room, looking at the napes of necks, trying to guess which one was her target, her enemy, perhaps her proof. An assistant closed the heavy door

on the lobby windows and the sun. She heard a lock snap shut; the sound echoed a moment. Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel. The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49. (183)

Edward Mendelson notes that 49 is the Pentecostal number (135). It signifies the festival commemorating the moment when the Holy Spirit is said to have descended upon Jesus's disciples—a moment analogous to the infusion of energy from an outside source that reinvigorates an entropic system, a source so many of *Lot 49's* characters hope for, theorize about, fantasize about, and despair of ever finding. The auctioneer, Loren Passerine, is at once priest and descending angel, who seems to read Oedipa's mind. His name likewise refers to an order of birds that includes the Passerine ground-dove (Watson 69), further reinforcing the Pentecostal allusion, the dove being the symbolic form of the Holy Spirit.

Yet the novel stops short of this revelation, holding Oedipa and reader alike in suspended anticipation, perpetually on the brink of revelation without ever quite reaching it. Hence Tony Tanner's observation that "Pentecost" derives from the Greek word for fifty, forty-nine thereby leaving us just shy of satisfaction (185).

The portentous climax of the novel could just as likely prophesy a foreclosure of the promise held out by the Tristero. Just as the Pentecostal Passerine is about to spread his arms, the doors are locked, and the sun is blocked out, as if to belie the promise. When a sliver of sunlight does shine on Oedipa, outside the auction room, it reveals her standing "among brilliant rising and falling points of dust" (183) swirling about in the very entropic randomness the upcoming moment is supposed to transcend. Pynchon's insistence on indeterminacy itself closes off possibility by erasing the stability of binary opposites that would provide for a clear-cut inside/outside dichotomy. And the foregrounding of entropic dynamics throughout the novel suggests that no revelation Oedipa might receive could possibly lift her out of the cultural malaise she inhabits.

The deconstructive/postmodernist notions embedded in the novel have received a fair amount of attention. Less sustained examination has been devoted to the way allusions to classical mythology function throughout *Lot 49* to buttress the novel's argument that culture and indeed literature are closed, entropic systems. Oedipa's world is relentlessly intertextual. This fact forces the conclusion that redemption as a return to an ideal, originary Word is impossible. As the novel shows, the more we recycle any originary moments, which themselves

as Word are inevitably text, the more they contribute to the very chaotic proliferation of unstable meanings their recovery was meant to forestall. The interpolations of the myths of Oedipus and Narcissus, and even Odysseus, throughout the novel serve double duty in this regard. First, the Oedipus and Narcissus stories have thematic resonance. Second, the presence of all three myths as part of the thematic framework of the novel drives home the incestuous/narcissistic nature of all textual/cultural productions, which even in the attempt to create anew merely recycle from what is already present in the closed signifiatory matrix of the culture—literalizing Derrida’s famous proclamation that there is nothing outside the text. The new work of art, the new movement in art, which attempts to be the outside force that revitalizes the system soon discovers that it is inexorably part of that system, simply adding to the growing instability of signifiers. The resulting din culminates in an unvarying gray mass of cultural entropy as indeterminacy degenerates into chaos.

The web of allusions is most effectively understood as it relates to Oedipa Maas. The primary debate over her name revolves around the question of whether the name is meant to resonate or is just a joke.¹ Among critics who see a deliberate appropriation of the Oedipus myth, there is a split between those who foreground the Sophoclean tragedy and those who interpose Freud’s appropriation.² Many have pointed out the parallel between Oedipa and Oedipus as solvers of riddles. Debra Modellmog, for example, identifies other significant parallels in the trajectories of their stories:

Despite cosmological variances between their worlds, the general pattern of Oedipus’s and Oedipa’s lives is identical: during their investigations, both characters move away from absolute positivism to relative indeterminacy; the “crime” that both find so appalling is that they were so self-absorbed that they never saw the danger of the former position. (248)

Modellmog also notes that, when Oedipa decides to go driving at night with her headlights off, she is, in effect, driving blind. Later on the same page of the novel, Oedipa’s tears “build up pressure around her eyes” (Pynchon 176; Modellmog 245). But the relation between Oedipus and Oedipa is richer still, as Tanner suggests implicitly when he rejects any connection whatsoever: “Oedipus’s riddle has to do with parents, parricide, and incest,” which “in no way applies to Oedipa” (178). Tanner’s literalism points to the possibility that Oedipa’s quest is, in fact, about incest.

Pynchon’s appropriation of the Oedipal myth in his protagonist’s name is itself an incestuous borrowing from Greek myth. Whether

borrowed straightforwardly, metaphorically, ironically or parodically, her name and story are variations on a much older story already circulating in the culture. The Oedipal myth, already thoroughly worked and reworked from classical times on, is recycled yet again. Both ancient Greek text and postmodern American text are just parts of a larger textual web full of similarly recycled motifs, myths and story patterns.³ In short, the entire process of meaning-generation in the culture occurs within a master text whose diachronic and synchronic elements engage in incestuous couplings and recouplings with one another. Nothing has penetrated this system of signification from the outside; the culture merely weds constituent pieces of itself to itself, adding to the accretions of meaning that continually multiply within it as a result of such couplings. Given the novel's emphasis on the degenerative consequences of such a process, it is difficult to read hope or promise in the novel's relentless indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is a symptom of the very disease the novel describes. (The incredible proliferation of critical responses is implicated in this process of meaning-multiplication. Embedding such an inscrutable name in an already inscrutable text makes the point about textual indeterminacy that much more vivid. Modellmog and Terry Caesar [see note 1 above] are right to suggest that the joke is on us.)

The subject of incest is raised explicitly at least twice in the novel, and in each instance the context also develops the concept of entropic closed systems that informs so much of the story. The first mention of incest occurs in relation to Oedipa's husband, Mucho, who is haunted by his former job as a used car salesman:

But the endless rituals of trade-in, week after week, never got as far as violence or blood, and so were too plausible for the impressionable Mucho to take for long. Even if enough exposure to the unvarying gray sickness had somehow managed to immunize him, he could still never accept the way 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. As if it were the most natural thing. To Mucho it was horrible. Endless, convoluted incest. (14)

Incest here refers to consumer culture and the subjects it reduces to Marcusean one-dimensionality. The economy—in fact, the culture—of which they are a part is entropic, an unvarying gray sickness. The automobiles become part of a signifying system of identity formation: floating signifiers, prone to breakdown, with no stable signifieds. Whether recycling used-up consumer goods or used-up literary motifs, any kind of cultural reproduction dissipates the whole system in a

process of endless, convoluted incest. Late in the novel, Mucho reveals to Oedipa what made selling cars so horrifying, the dim recognition that terrified him:

“It was only that sign in the lot, that’s what scared me. In the dream I’d be going about a normal day’s business and suddenly, with no warning, there’d be the sign. We were a member of the National Automobile Dealers’ Association. N.A.D.A. Just this creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky. I used to wake up hollering.” (144)

The second reference to incest occurs in *The Courier’s Tragedy*. Here incest finds literal expression both in the relation between Francesca and her brother, Angelo, and in Angelo’s plot to marry Francesca to her son, Pasquale (66–67). This Oedipal plot (yet another incestuous recycling) woven into an already convoluted story plays an important role in Oedipa’s search. *The Courier’s Tragedy* provides her with a number of tantalizing clues about the Tristero, which is itself concerned with the circulation of texts. Oedipa’s attempts to have these clues explained lead her into disputes over the authority of texts. “‘Why . . . is everybody so interested in texts?’” asks an exasperated Driblette (78) when Oedipa first probes him for information about the Tristero. In this conversation, she learns that the production of the play she has just witnessed has been adulterated by Driblette himself (79). Later, discovering through the paperback she buys from Zapf and especially through Professor Bortz that the text has been altered several times over the centuries, Oedipa proves unable to fix the text’s true content or meaning. The original, authoritative edition—the originary Word—proves unrecoverable; attempts to fix it have only multiplied variations and disputes. The play’s textuality is continually foregrounded this way, with emphasis on its multiple meanings and appropriations, and its frustrating indeterminacy. Such indeterminacy, of course, characterizes Oedipa’s whole world, which helps explain Mucho’s despair and Oedipa’s growing feelings of urgency.

The repeated references to incest in the novel suggest that incest is precisely what Oedipa’s quest will unveil. She will discover that her whole identity, culture and discourse—her only available frameworks for making meaning out of her world—are incestuous cobblings together of previously recycled fragments. There is no Other, or outside, to speak of. The system reproduces itself by plundering itself, eventually reducing itself through entropic inbreeding to a sickening gray mass signifying nada. Oedipa’s attempt to make connections, weave them together, and transcend them is quixotic by the novel’s own logic. Oedipa’s name and the repeated references to incest drive this point

home again and again. It is worth remembering that her namesake's revelation was not a happy one either.

Allusions to the Narcissus myth fortify such a reading. Like the Oedipa story, this borrowing is (inevitably) complicated, invoking late Classical, early Christian and Freudian subtexts. All are relevant. Ovid's retelling of the story of Narcissus and Echo, the church historian Eusebius's account of the miracles associated with St. Narcissus, and Freud's essay "On Narcissism" offer "competing paradigms" within or against which Pynchon's manipulation of symbolic possibilities can be read (Palmeri 987). These possibilities are applicable both personally, for Oedipa, and culturally, through the city of San Narciso.

Oedipa figures doubly in the Narcissus myth, first as Echo, then, more significantly, as Narcissus. On arriving in San Narciso, Oedipa checks into the Echo Courts Motel. The burlesque allusion to the mythological nymph is unmistakable:

[W]hen she got a look at the next motel, she hesitated a second. A representation in painted sheet metal of a nymph holding a white blossom towered thirty feet into the air. . . . The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. 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. (26–27)

This resemblance between Oedipa and Echo is suggestive. Hanjo Berressem argues that the resemblance, among other things, "implies that . . . Oedipa's language is never her own but consists of cultural fragments she merely reflects" (95).⁴ But this identification proves unstable, for Oedipa grows, if anything, more substantial throughout the story, transforming from self-effacing suburban housewife to active, engaged participant in the larger world, possibly about to expose the existence of an entire underworld. Nonetheless, her dawning awareness comes at the cost of recognizing that her own identity is itself fragmentary and borrowed.

She is also Narcissus. Parallels with Narcissus, culminating in her fear of paranoia at novel's end, are much more consistent but no less destabilizing. The first hint of the connection between Oedipa and Narcissus is dropped in the description of the motel swimming pool, "whose surface that day was flat" (27), evoking the pool in which Narcissus sees his reflection (Palmeri 986).⁵ The flat surface of the pool further echoes Oedipa's recurring encounters with mirrors, beginning with "a half hour in front of her vanity mirror" at the beginning of the

story (16). At Echo Courts, a punctured aerosol can runs amok, caroming into the bathroom mirror, “leaving a silvery, reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second before it all fell jingling into the sink” (37). Later, having forgotten about the accident, “she went into the bathroom, tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn’t. She had a moment of nearly pure terror” (41). The moment of terror is revealing. Here the mirror not only suggests Narcissus, but serves as a metaphor for Oedipa’s own fragmentary identity: she is already Oedipus, Echo, Narcissus and Oedipa.

Lois Tyson draws on Jacques Lacan to explain the significance of the fragmented subject and the terror it causes: Oedipa’s “looking in mirrors can . . . be read as a desire to capture the stable, unified version of herself she once knew, a desire to return to the safety of the Imaginary Order” (20). The use of Lacan here makes sense given the novel’s poststructuralist emphasis on the instability of meanings and identities (recall Mucho’s used-car consumers) and on the impossibility of coherence or wholeness for a subject whose identity is immediately split in its own recognition and fractured further by the language through which it comes to know itself. Oedipa’s moment of terror at her reflection’s absence suggests a narcissistic fear that the object of desire—the unique, unitary self—has been lost. Toward the end of the novel, Oedipa literalizes her split identity when she addresses her reflection in the vanity mirror (170–71).

Perhaps even more striking than the shattered-mirror image is Oedipa’s dream:

She fell asleep almost at once, but kept waking from a nightmare about something in the mirror, across from her bed. Nothing specific, only a possibility, nothing she could see. When she finally did settle into sleep, she dreamed that Mucho, her husband, was making love to her on a soft white beach that was not part of any California she knew. When she woke in the morning, she was sitting bolt upright, staring into the mirror at her own exhausted face. (101)

At first, what seems significant is the sense of foreboding the mirror gives her that interrupts her sleep. Her apprehension suggests Oedipa’s subconscious realization that she is stumbling onto an elaborate underground network tantamount to an alternative world—the mirror recalling *Alice in Wonderland’s* alternative universe. But when Oedipa finally does fall asleep, she dreams of lovemaking and wakes up to her own reflection in the same mirror. Maurice Couturier infers that “the moment suggests . . . that she has been making love to herself in the mirror, like Narcissus” (26). As in the bathroom scene, then, the mirror

does double duty here. It hints at another world beyond her own closed system while it reinforces the theme of narcissistic self-absorption embodied in Oedipa.

Both possible meanings of the mirror are held in tension right up to the end of the novel. By this time, the threat of narcissistic self-absorption is acute for Oedipa, who struggles to discern whether her growing belief in the Tristero is well-founded (opening a window on an alternative world) or mere self-deluding paranoia (narcissism):

Oedipa fears that, if she believes in the Tristero, she will prove to be Narcissus, mistaking the creations of her own confused perceptions for external reality. But if she refuses to believe in it, she risks discovering that it is a version of Echo, a real warning from an all-too-real creature which she . . . fails to heed. (Watson 70)

This anxiety manifests itself in her chronic fear that Pierce set the whole thing up as an elaborate joke, or worse, that she is merely being paranoid, reading too much into the proliferating coincidences she encounters:

Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (182)

The novel never reveals the resolution explicitly, and could not, lest it belie its own logic. Yet the answer is implicit in the narrative and is borne out by the novel's broader appropriation of the Narcissus myth.

San Narciso is Pierce Inverarity's monument to narcissistic self-love. It dawns on Oedipa as the story progresses that Pierce may have contrived the whole Tristero mystery and then drawn Oedipa into it as a strategy for immortalizing himself by turning himself into yet another textual puzzle or legend available for circulation and recirculation (179). Her growing suspicion helps develop the same themes articulated through the novel's preoccupation with entropy and the incestuous nature of textual production. The name of the city is an obvious play on "narcissism," with all the overtones of self-love, fragmented identities and unstable significations already elaborated. However, "Narciso" also has another cognate that bears directly on the idea of America as a high-entropy closed system. Peter Abernethy identifies this broader

layer of resonance by citing Marshall McLuhan's association of "narcissus" with "narcosis," or numbness:

The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. (McLuhan qtd. in Abernethy 28)

The ultimate incest, narcissism likewise leads to dissolution. Hence the emphasis on "stillness," "paralysis" and "silence" in descriptions of San Narciso (26). The city is often described as a community in which life is stagnant, the state of a system when maximum entropy has been reached.

Grafting the Narcissus myth, with its sundry connotations, onto the concept of entropy serves the same purpose as the Oedipal connection by making explicit the relevance of entropy to the understanding of American culture. From its first mention, San Narciso seems less a place in itself than a microcosm, as is clear from Oedipa's first impression: "But if there was any vital difference between [San Narciso] and the rest of Southern California, it was invisible on first glance" (24). Over time, connections between San Narciso and the rest of the United States emerge, as Oedipa begins to appreciate the elaborate interconnectedness of everything in her world. By novel's end, these connections grow overwhelming, culminating in Oedipa's recognition that San Narciso is America:

San Narciso at that moment lost . . . gave up its residue of uniqueness for her; became a name again, was assumed back into the American continuity of crust and mantle. . . . San Narciso was a name; an incident among our climatic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight, a moment's squall-line or tornado's touchdown among the higher, more continental solemnities—storm-systems of group suffering and need, prevailing winds of affluence. There was the true continuity, San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America. (177-78)

Not just San Narciso, but American culture is exhausting itself in entropic enervation, as Mucho's experience at the used car lot intimated. Incestuous, self-absorbed, fragmented, it desperately requires

the infusion of energy from an outside source that lot 49 and the Tristero seem to promise.

Of course, the Tristero is an ambiguous, polyvalent entity itself. On the one hand, as an organization committed to resisting power, it is potentially liberating. Somewhere within it may lie the energy needed to infuse the system, in the form of an alternative worldview. On the other hand, it is potentially menacing. Many people Oedipa speaks to about the Tristero die or disappear mysteriously. In fact, the organization is shrouded in a history of treachery and foul play. The acronym WASTE, for “We Await Silent Tristero’s Empire,” hints further at its possible dark side. Since the organization seems to have played pivotal roles in the economics and politics of Europe and America, the answer to the question of its nature is crucial. As a circulator/disseminator of texts, the Tristero may be of greater concern, for it will reveal whether a cultural/textual Maxwell’s Demon exists to counteract the entropic decline of the cultural system. All of this is what Oedipa seems at the threshold of discovering as the crying of lot 49 begins.

Despite the narrative’s effort to keep this question open, the conclusion begins to look foregone. The physics of entropy continually invoked in the novel alone works to foreclose hope. Despite Maxwell’s postulation of a non-energy-consuming agent that can maintain dynamism by sorting molecules, and despite John Nefastis’s attempt to build a machine that applies Maxwell’s principle, the law cannot be broken. Oedipa herself notes that the Demon is constrained by the laws of physics when she asks, “‘Sorting isn’t work?’” (86). There is no getting outside the laws of physics, because no outside exists. If, as the novel hints, Oedipa is poised to assume the role of Maxwell’s Demon for her culture, she faces the same problem.

Other images further argue against an optimistic interpretation of the novel. For example, the Varo painting which depicts maidens in a tower embroidering the tapestry of the world emphasizes not only the fabrication of reality, but the entrapment of those who do the fabricating. Though seemingly outside the tapestry, they are yet linked inextricably to it, locked in the tower with no apparent hope of escape. Should they stop embroidering and escape, the world itself would presumably cease to exist, as history would come to an end. The political dissident Jesús Arrabal is caught in the same bind. The Spanish word “arrabal” means “a region on the outskirts of a city” (grant 102–03), which suggests marginality, not exteriority. The name reminds us that even putatively radical efforts to transform the cultural system emerge from within it, since there is no outside to speak of. Like everything else in the novel, Arrabal’s movement promises transformation, but the logic of the novel suggests that the movement too is

implicated in the system it would overthrow. This idea has great relevance to the Tristero, as discussed below.

Yet the optimists still have a trump card to play. Among the evidence cited in defense of the view that Oedipa is on the brink of a revelatory experience, besides the accumulation of Pentecostal and other Christian imagery, are the Narcissus allusions themselves—that is, the allusions to St. Narcissus, the third-century Bishop of Jerusalem, renowned in his day as a miracle-worker. These allusions are as unmistakable as those to the Narcissus myth, and here is where the historical accretions seem to constitute a defiantly indeterminate text that nonetheless manages to hold out hope for an out. The fact that “San Narciso” is Spanish for St. Narcissus demands that we take this layer of cultural and textual resonance seriously.

Early in the story, Mucho whistles a popular tune called “I Want to Kiss Your Feet” (23). Besides parodying the Beatles’ song “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” the title anticipates *The Courier’s Tragedy* (Grant 27), in which the Duke of Faggio had been murdered by a rival who poisoned the feet of an image of St. Narcissus in the court chapel, feet the Duke always kissed during Sunday mass (Pynchon 65). This murder activates the elaborately complex plot of *The Courier’s Tragedy*, which reveals secrets about the Tristero to Oedipa.⁶ The third allusion occurs when Oedipa visits the old sailor’s room,⁷ where hangs a “picture of a saint, changing well-water to oil for Jerusalem’s Easter lamps” (127), which J. Kerry Grant identifies as a picture of St. Narcissus (110). This detail is striking, for it depicts the saint performing a transformative miracle, apparently lending weight to the apocalyptic imagery at the end of the novel. Herein lies a key source of the novel’s alleged hopefulness, for we have already seen that San Narciso, named for the saint, is a microcosm of the culture at large. Surely the correspondence allows for the possibility that Arrabal’s “anarchist miracle” (Pynchon 120) can be brought about through an agency like the Tristero.

Frank Palmeri sides with Mendelson in seeing the subtle but pervasive presence of St. Narcissus as a paradigm that competes with the classical myth, setting the “potency of miracle” against “sterile self-love” (986). Yet Palmeri also points out that the miracles of St. Narcissus were appropriated by the church through Eusebius’s official history, thereby routinizing their charisma in the name of institutional necessity (986–87). The picture is then grimly ironic, suggesting a Foucauldian process wherein the cultural system will absorb and appropriate any putative Maxwell’s demons, which, of course, arise from within it in the first place (the Tristero, Arrabal’s CIA). Thus the allusions to St. Narcissus again confirm the impossibility of getting outside the system, or of the system’s being penetrated. Even if some

outside energy source existed and *could* be accessed and brought into the system, it would soon succumb to the entropic dynamics of the system. The Tristero's imperial ambitions betray exactly this sort of inevitable complicity. Any defiance of entropic dissipation, coming as it must from within the system, will prove short-lived and illusory. Loren Passerine will not be revealing any miracles to Oedipa.

Paradoxes abound. For one, this reading of the novel falls into the classic postmodernist trap of trying to fix meaning in making the claim that meaning cannot be fixed. The novel itself, at best, fixes undecidability as a decided fact even in its studied effort to avoid that trap. Then there is the novel's existence as a cultural artifact that simultaneously participates in and comments on supposedly degenerative cultural and linguistic processes while revealing itself as enriched and enriching for having done so.⁸ But the present consideration of *Lot 49* does not try to argue that the novel's cosmology is correct, only that it has a certain logic. One need not subscribe to theories of postmodernity to engage them, and this novel's critical reception need not confirm them. Let it suffice to say, then, that from this admittedly situated position, the novel points to a hopeless conclusion despite its own efforts to remain agnostic, and the efforts of kindred critics to find emancipatory potential in the epistemological prisons they too have built around themselves.

That said, the myths of Oedipus and Narcissus combine powerfully in *The Crying of Lot 49* with the theory of entropy and with deconstructive critiques of language and culture to forge a decisively pessimistic text. The religious imagery, suggestive as it is, cannot overcome the novel's postmodernist cosmology. Oedipa's hope is in vain. Indeterminacy does indeed reign at the end of the novel. But here—as in postmodern social theory in general—indeterminacy cannot lead to liberation or transcendence, but is the trap all are caught in. Indeterminacy stems from the randomness and energy loss characteristic of high-entropy closed systems. Maxwell hypothesized his demon to sort random, unpredictable molecules; its job is to create order and certainty, which, according to the theory, are necessary to sustain dynamism. Conversely, indeterminacy is deadening; it confounds clear, unambiguous distinctions that might revitalize Oedipa and her world. The novel's use of entropy as its central metaphor alone denies any hope for renewal. The pervasive interpolations of classical myth and contemporary language theory reinforce and illustrate this sense of hopelessness. The enclosure of incest as personified in Oedipus reaches its logical extreme in the complete self-absorption of Narcissus. Echo, the potential outside source of renewal, does not exist, except as a tantalizing voice calling out from what may seem

another realm—until we realize that the voice is merely our own, an echo of our own cries reflected back at us.

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Notes

¹Debra Modellmog, for example, asserts that the name is a trap set for critics tempted to read too much into names (240). Terry Caesar, who cautions that Pynchon's naming is often whimsical, suggests that "Oedipa Maas" is a pun on "Oedipus, My ass": "this Oedipa is no Oedipus, or only one at the earnest reader's peril" (5).

²For example, Maurice Couturier claims that Oedipa's understanding of herself as the woman in the tower makes her a "castrating mother" who emasculates Oedipus by feminizing him (22). David Cowart plausibly notes that "Oedipa" is "a suitably neurotic name" (20).

³This reading is reinforced by some suggestive readings of Oedipa's last name. Critics have noted that "Maas" is the Dutch/Afrikaans word for "web," "net," "mesh" or "stitch" (Chambers 101; Davidson 43), meanings which echo the novel's emphasis on webs of meaning as well as Oedipa's conception of herself as a woman in the tower in the Varo painting, who embroiders the tapestry of the world.

⁴Frank Palmeri speculates that the white flower Echo holds could be a Narcissus (986).

⁵The pool's "stillness" is emphasized again later (47), which, along with phrases like "unvarying gray sickness" (14), helps lay stress on the energy loss characteristic of entropy. The myth, in conjunction with other textual layers, drives home the broad theme of systemic cultural enervation.

⁶The play itself is both parody and pastiche of a number of conventional story patterns and motifs from the Greeks down through the Restoration. If an analysis of these patterns does not already exist, it would make for an illuminating study.

⁷The sailor with DT's has been identified as an Odysseus figure: "'My wife's in Fresno,' he said. . . . 'I left her. So long ago, I don't remember. Now this is for her.' He gave Oedipa a letter that looked like he'd been carrying it around for years" (125). According to Bernard Duyfhuizen, the contemporary appearance of Odysseus in such guise in itself amounts to a critique of the culture: "Odysseus has become the decrepit old sailor Oedipa encounters on the rooming house steps, a seaman who will never make it home to his wife in Fresno" (86). It is as if to say that, as entropy increases in the culture, its constituents lose their value.

⁸Christopher Lasch, one of postmodernism's chief critics, sees the novel otherwise, of course. In *The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self*, he argues that postmodernism's maddening self-referentiality and irony are

themselves symptoms of the cultural lassitude *Lot 49* represents. In *The Minimal Self*, he takes *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Lot 49* to task for their nihilism: "Pynchon implies [that] the only feasible alternative to paranoia seems to be a resigned acceptance of irreversible decline: the gravity that pulls everything irresistibly down into nothingness" (157).

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