

## This is Not a Novel: *The Crying of Lot 49*

Wail Hassan

Yet what did Zarathustra once say to you? That the poets lie too much?—But Zarathustra too is a poet.  
—Nietzsche

Near the middle of *The Crying of Lot 49*, which for the time being I shall call a “novel,” Oedipa Maas encounters the word “Trystero,” which, also for the time being, I will agree with Molly Hite in describing as “a center to the interwoven references” (75) that yield themselves as clues (signifiers) in Oedipa’s search for revelation. This encounter with the Word, itself a minor revelation, is soon stripped of significance by none other than the one who spoke it, Randolph Driblette. In the oft-quoted passage spoken from behind “the veil of shower-steam,” Driblette lashes out against the basic assumption that words have meaning, undermining our very notions of what constitutes literature, textuality and signification: “‘You guys, you’re like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. . . . The words, who cares? They’re rote noises to hold line bashes with’” (79). At its structural center, the “novel” seems to undermine its ontological status as “literature” and its privilege as a “text.” A “novel” belonging to a “novelistic tradition”—the notion is dribbled away, dunked into an epistemological loophole. The novel “speaks,” in the sense in which Michel Foucault uses the word in reference to what he calls “modern fiction” (MB 9). Its “neutral space” is a degree zero of speaking at which “the ‘subject’ of literature (what speaks in it and what it speaks about) is less language in its positivity than the void language takes as its space when it articulates itself in the nakedness of ‘I speak’” (12). Nietzsche’s autocritique does not quite achieve this nakedness of language; how do we know, Foucault might ask, Zarathustra is not lying about lying? Pynchon goes beyond the self-referentiality of Nietzsche’s discourse and of modernist fiction to question, not simply novelistic form, but the elements of form, the vocabulary of narrative, what it signifies and what it communicates.

Nevertheless, we could still say that the novel has a plot, setting and characters, and that some of its major thematics are communication, religion, selfhood. We could also assume that the novel “belongs” to (or, more accurately, comes out of, departs from)

the traditions of quest narratives, detective stories and the *Bildungsroman*, and that Pynchon's, like other stories, is made up of words and uses certain narrative techniques like suspense, foreshadowing, symbolism. Indeed, the formal similarities between *this* novel and *other* novels are at first glance bewilderingly numerous, even though reading *Lot 49* is an entirely different experience, a particularly unsettling one. For example, to say that detective stories are, in Barthes's erotisthetics, *plaisir* texts that confirm the reader's positivist assumptions and expectations does not allow us to say that *Lot 49* is a *jouissance* text because it challenges those assumptions and expectations. Pynchon's novel is too kinky—almost painful; it deprives us of that orgasmic revelation which it half promises, half denies, not in a flirting manner, engaging us in a courtship game, but with complete indifference. Like Oedipa's twenty-four-hour ramblings in the Bay Area, where she is bombarded with "clues" about the Trystero but ends up where she started, at John Nefastis's apartment, the site of her failure to communicate with Maxwell's Demon, the novel itself seems to yield up narrative clues (familiar techniques) which the reader compulsively follows, only to be confronted at the end with the failure of reading. "To the methods of reading and criticism which the past two centuries have developed in order to domesticate romantic and modernist literature, the work of [postmodernist] writers is almost opaque and impermeable" (Mendelson, P 2).

I would like to suggest a new ontological description for *The Crying of Lot 49*. The word "novel" is unhelpful, since the work does not do what a novel does. "Anti-novel" would be naive, because the work employs many elements of the novel and thus does not stand in the simple, polar opposition to it that the prefix "anti-" postulates. Besides, "anti-novel" has been used to designate the work of a particular group of anti-realistic writers (Robbe-Grillet, Duras, Butor, Sarraute) which has little formal affinity with Pynchon's. "Meta-novel" more appropriately refers to novels about novels or the writing of novels (for example, Gide's *Counterfeiters*), which is clearly not the case here. The problem with those (and other) substantives is their *arrogance*: each lays an ontological claim to the thing described, as if the thing is *only* a novel, *only* an anti-novel, *only* a meta-novel, thereby imposing on it an epistemological monopoly. Let us, therefore, reject the tyranny of nouns in favor of non-totalitarian adjectives, each of which claims one property of the thing. *Lot 49*, then, is "meta-critical." That is to say, it is *beyond* traditional criticism, as well as *about* the inutility of such criticism. Let us not forget that Oedipa is a former student of literature, that she encounters the word "Trystero" in a literary work, and that she seeks the help of a literature professor

in trying to interpret the word. "Meta-critical" reminds us of Driblette's admonition, and suggests that a conventional reading can only suggest that this is *not* a novel, that the relation between a traditional critic and *this* novel is dialectical in the extreme: the presence of the novel requires the absence of the critic, and the presence of the critic obscures the novel.

Debra A. Castillo expresses a similar idea when she asks, "what happens if we as readers conceive of the narrative as a progressive and strictly uninterpretable distortion rather than as a jumble of zeroes and ones from which the critic, like Maxwell's Demon, sorts true from false, inside from outside, hot from cold, relevant from nonesensical?" (39). Oedipa, however, is that logocentric critic for whom signifiers stand to be decoded in order to yield a precise meaning. That is why she is fascinated by hieroglyphics and by the post horn symbol. Consequently, her dilemma is rooted in the problem of reading. As Peter L. Cooper (143) and Robert D. Newman (69), for example, have suggested, the link between Oedipa and her Greek namesake is that both are unsuccessful questers for meaning. Oedipa's failure to interpret the signs that multiply around her occurs at the point where the theme of reading intersects with that of selfhood, and where the latter intersects with that of religion.

Oedipa's world abounds in modes of communication, none of which, however, seems to be successful, and (like Oedipus) she finds herself at the end totally isolated: "For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world" (171). The modes of communication include the media (radio and television), the telephone, print (books and articles), mail (the official U.S. Postal Service and the underground W.A.S.T.E. system), and, of course, face-to-face verbal communication. Other modes of communication (let us call them "mystical," for lack of a better word) also exist, albeit for select groups, namely the "sensitives" who can communicate with Maxwell's Demon, and the deaf-mute who are able to tune in to an "unthinkable order of music" (131). These last two force Oedipa "to experience in emptiness and destitution the presence of the outside and, tied to that presence, the fact that [she] is irremediably outside the outside." She is not "attracted," however, in Foucault's sense of the word, by those two modes of communication:

[A]ttraction . . . does not depend on any charm. To be attracted is not to be beckoned by the allure of the outside; rather, it is to experience in emptiness and destitution the presence of the outside and, tied to that presence, the fact that one is irremediably outside the outside. Far from calling on one interiority to draw close to another, attraction makes it

imperiously manifest that the outside is there, open, without intimacy, without protection or retention. (Foucault, MB 27)

Consequently, she is "demoralized," as a believer in the Word "with no name for it" (CL 132) can only be. But she has a name for the underground mail system and the world it betokens, and she has "clues" that promise a revelation. Being logocentric, she is attracted by that promise, especially since conventional modes of communication, which technology has multiplied, paradoxically accentuate her sense of isolation.

This failure of communication, however, is itself a cluster of signifiers Oedipa is unwilling to, or cannot, understand. Immediately after she learns she has been made executrix of Inverarity's estate, she feels the presence of a monster—unthreatening because dead, but silently ominous nonetheless, presaging the communicational void that will characterize her entire quest: "Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube" (9). The "[f]ilthy machine," Mr. Thoath calls it (91). In the Strip Botticelli game with Metzger, Oedipa is seduced through the complicity of the TV. Her eagerness to know what will happen next is mocked by the switching of the reels, and after her two-fold seduction (literal: she submits to Metzger's sexual scheme; metaphoric: she cannot resist the promise of knowledge), the TV comes on again to let her know she has won the bet but lost the game. Radio is not more helpful than TV. The hyper-sensitive Mucho "believed not at all" (15) in KCUF, where he works as a DJ, although that is where Oedipa loses him to LSD at the end. But long before the end—in fact, right in the middle of her quest, after her meeting with Driblette—she rides with Metzger "for two miles before realizing that the whimsies of nighttime reception were bringing them KCUF down from Kinneret, and that the disc jockey talking was her husband, Mucho" (80).

The telephone rings twice at three a.m., the first time bringing her Inverarity, who in a ridiculous array of voices tries to communicate an incomprehensible message, and the second time Dr. Hilarius, asking her again to join his LSD experiment, the bridge, die Brücke. Oedipa hangs up both times. She later makes two phone calls, one to Driblette when it is too late to reach him, and another to "the acned, fuzz-headed Inamorato Anonymous" (176) when she is ready to kill herself. "'Help me.' . . . 'It's too late,' he said," and hangs up on her (177). As for books, Driblette tells her that in perusing them she "'could waste [her] life . . . and never touch the truth'" (80). The anthologies she searches for turn out to be corrupted, pirated, or lacking a footnote. Articles and rare books in Bortz's Wharfingeriana provide nothing more than

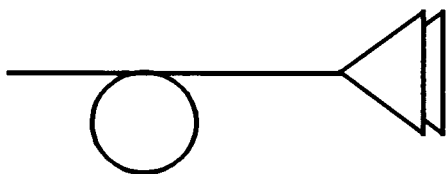
historical background. Face-to-face conversations throughout the book are futile. Abandoned in The Greek Way, Oedipa thinks, "Story of my life . . . Mucho won't talk to me, Hilarius won't listen, Clerk Maxwell didn't even look at me, and this group, God knows" (116). Mucho is "the wrong fella" (16); Roseman, her attorney, is too busy with the case against Perry Mason, and even though he tries to play footsie with her under the table, she was "insulated" in her boots and "couldn't feel much of anything" (19); Nefastis would have sex with her while watching TV; and Metzger runs away with a fifteen-year-old, leaving a note that has "no word to recall that Oedipa and Metzger had ever been more than co-executors" (148).

Mail, however, *promises* to be the medium for genuine communication. It is through a letter that Oedipa gets involved with W.A.S.T.E. and the Trystero. The clandestine mail system, moreover, seems to fulfill a socio-political function for the outcasts of society:

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. (124-25)

That, however, is another broken promise. The mail sent by W.A.S.T.E. may indeed be "waste," empty of content. Some of it arrives sixty years late, and some (the old sailor's letter), having been carried around for years, may be addressed to recipients who are dead by now. Oedipa knows by "intuition" that Mucho's letter, apparently sent by W.A.S.T.E., "would be newsless" (46), a dutiful response to her dutiful notes, much like the letter Mike Fallopian receives through PPS: "*Dear Mike, it said, how are you? Just thought I'd drop you a note. How's your book coming? Guess that's all for now. See you at The Scope*" (53). The idea is not so much that social rejects ("those of unorthodox sexual persuasion" [109], would-be suicides, compulsive gamblers, death cultists, people trying to communicate with dolphins, the black and Mexican poor of southern California) can communicate, but for them to *use* the medium of communication. That renders the medium analogous to TV, radio, telephone and the other modes of "official" communication. The entire society is trapped in the same void. *That* is a clue Oedipa fails to understand. She is fascinated by the *idea* of an alternative mode of communication and attracted by the

mysterious word "Trystero," the acronym W.A.S.T.E. and the muted post horn symbol. Like Foucault's Sirens, however, these are "the elusive and forbidden form of the alluring voice . . . what are they in their very being if not pure appeal . . . if not attractiveness, if not an invitation to pause?" (MB 41). And pause she does. She is attracted enough by the drawing in the ladies' room to copy it, and is not far wrong when she thinks at first it represents "something sexual" (52), sexuality and the mail system symbolized by the horn both being a *promise* of communication, broken as soon as made. Pursuing W.A.S.T.E. proves to be a "waste" of time, and the Word Trystero means nothing in itself (besides being [spelled "Tristero"] the name of one who is "perhaps a madman, perhaps an honest rebel, according to some only a con artist" [159]). Its significance is external and incidental: it was thought to "'symbolize the Other quite well'" (156). Had René Magritte and Foucault been characters in *The Crying of Lot 49*, they would probably have seconded Driblette's message in answering Oedipa's inquiries (perhaps via W.A.S.T.E.) with this drawing:<sup>1</sup>



This is not a post horn.

The Word, then, identifiable with the Other, is what cannot be grasped, like Maxwell's Demon or the "unthinkable order of music." The quest for the Word, for identification with the Other, for meaning and communication, is also a spiritual and metaphysical quest. Religious references abound in the book, as has been amply documented (see, for example, Mendelson, S; Newman 74-76). The first word Oedipa utters is "the name of God" (9), and the last thing she sees is "a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel" (183). Forty-nine in the title, and the last word of the text, has been construed as a reference to the Pentecost, which comes seven weeks—forty-nine days—after Easter (see Grant 140-41). Pentecost, of course, celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples of Jesus, who then experienced the miracle of "speaking in tongues." That miracle, a sort of redemption from the after-Babel human condition of broken communication and the consequent multiplication of the other, is an assertion of the transparency of the Word of God. The Word brings

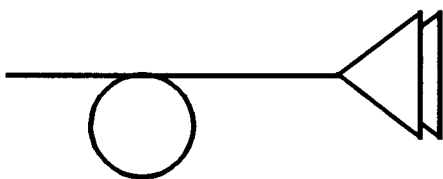
humans together in the communion of truth and meaning, thus achieving the intrusion of one world into another—Jesús Arrabal's definition of "miracle" (120).

Oedipa's is a quest for the repetition of the Pentecostal miracle in the secular, empirical world. She may not be a devout Christian, but the secular world she lives in and where she receives her intellectual training is one where the religious episteme has prevailed since the Middle Ages, transformed though it may be by nineteenth-century scientific positivism and what Nietzsche calls the "death of God." There is meaning behind signs, and it can be deciphered. Oedipa is not a mystic, however, and that is why she feels "like some kind of a heretic" when Nefastis, "impenetrable, calm, a believer," asserts the existence of *his* god, Maxwell's Demon, while Oedipa sits "waiting for the Demon to communicate" (106), like an agnostic who thinks that, if God exists, He will reveal himself to her. But she believes, nevertheless, that the "ordered swirl of houses and streets" of San Narciso and the printed circuit of a radio are "both outward patterns [with] a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate," and that makes her feel that she is "at the centre of an odd, religious instant" (24). When a map of Fangoso Lagoons flashes onto the TV screen, "[s]ome immediacy was there again, some promise of hierophany: printed circuit, gently curving streets, private access to the water, Book of the Dead" (31). She is a Puritanical critic who sees the world as text, and longs "to bring [Inverarity's] estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning, all in a soaring dome around her" (82).

The preceding passage contains a striking paradox: on the one hand, Oedipa is, or believes she is, in search of absolute meaning; on the other hand, that meaning is centered around herself, isolating her from others and from the world around her in a closed, subjective circle of signification where the communicational void she wishes to escape is filled with an illusion of communication. She is trapped in interiority. Driblette tells her, "'I'm the projector at the planetarium, all the *closed little universe* visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also'" (79; emphasis added). Afterwards, she writes in her memo book under the muted post horn drawing, "*Shall I project a world?*" (82). Such a world is bound to be in her own image, "owing to this . . . growing obsession, with 'bringing something of herself'—even if that something was just her presence—to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity. She would give them order, she would create constellations" (90).

The problem is that the order she tries to impose, the world she tries to project, is too limited for what Derrida calls "the overabundance of the signifier[s]" (290), the clues "which now seemed to come

crowding in exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into *The Tristero*" (CL 81). The overabundance of the signifier signals its *"supplementary character"* and is "the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*" (Derrida 290). The psychological tension of the narrative arises from Oedipa's doubts about the existence of a transcendental meaning behind printed circuits and what she takes for hieroglyphs. She begins to doubt the epistemological value of signifiers and hence the validity of her "reading": "Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (118). But her doubts do not go far enough to question the ontological being of those clues qua signifiers: if clues take on the character of supplement or compensation, it is because Oedipa has lost "the epileptic Word" that imbues them with meaning, not because the Word and meaning are illusory projections. In other words, she does not realize that the trouble with her conceptual framework is that it is logocentered, and that what she needs to do is not so much to discover its lost "central truth" (95) as to deconstruct that framework. That is the reason she continues on her quest for meaning, but modifies her strategy. She no longer "press(es) the argument. Having begun to feel reluctant about following up anything" (166). There is no point in collecting clues if the ordering principle, the center of her cognitive structure, is missing, and that is precisely what she starts searching for now. The object of the quest changes, but it is still a (metaphysical) quest—which is the reason she attends the auction. "The 'cry' that might have ended the night is replaced by a 'crying' that can only extend it" (Tanner 64). This adds a religious dimension to her "waiting" for the auction to begin, thus intensifying the religious aura of the scene; she awaits Revelation, the second coming of the Word. This waiting recalls the waiting of social rejects encoded in "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire" (169). Both are "waste" because



This continues not to be a post horn.



Oedipa's quest for meaning constitutes a point of intersection between the theme of religion as the source of a secularized epistemic structure for the production of signification and interpretation, and the theme of the self as the actual site for their production. The Word is central to the religious (Christian) concept of the meaning and purpose of life. The Word emanates from God, and although we are made in *His* image, He remains the absolute Outside, the absolute Other, a metaphor for everything *beyond* our ken, to be praised, feared, addressed with hymns and prayers, but never identified, defined or perceived. When mystics speak of "knowing" or even of "being one" with God, they often also speak of "losing themselves in God," that is to say, giving up their identity, their selfhood, and being "empty" of themselves. This is opening oneself up to and being absorbed by the Outside, while remaining on the outside of the Outside. The center of being is, therefore, in the Other. Communication need not be established, since the decentralization of the self makes it an aspect of being. For Oedipa, the opposite is true. Wishing to be like Driblette, "the projector at the planetarium," she is the center of her world, and her world is made in her image. If everything she sees, smells and dreams becomes "woven into the Tristero," that is because the Tristero is in her—an obsession, an *idée fixe*. She looks for clues and hieroglyphs, so that is what she finds—or rather, projects. In that sense, the Tristero is not "the center to the interwoven references" (Hite 75) or clues that crop up everywhere Oedipa turns, but she is herself that center, and in so being she confirms Emerson's maxim that "What we are, that only can we see," and Harold Bloom's reformulation of it as "That which you are, that only can you *read*" (Bloom 96).

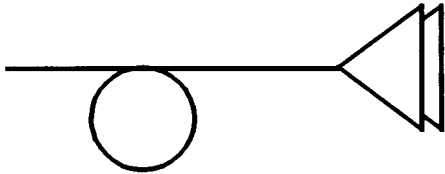
Oedipa's dream in the Berkeley hotel is exemplary. She "kept waking from a nightmare about something in the mirror, across from her bed. Nothing specific, only a possibility, nothing she could see. . . . When she woke in the morning, she was sitting bolt upright, staring into the mirror at her own exhausted face" (101). Closely linked to narcissism, the mirror motif signals at once Oedipa's egocentric reading of her surroundings and the peril posed to her ability to communicate by her continual acts of projection. Her quest begins in San Narciso, where she stays at Echo Courts—with its sheet metal "nymph" whose face "was much like Oedipa's" (26), holding a white blossom (genus *Narcissus*?). Oedipa has "a moment of nearly pure terror" when she tries "to find her image" in the shattered bathroom mirror and cannot (41). Shortly afterwards, she is seduced by Metzger—an event which constitutes a *promise* of communication and hence demands the breakdown of the self's enclosure. Her terror at not

finding her image in the mirror parallels her nightmare later when she can see “nothing specific” in the mirror: she is afraid of losing her grip on reality if she discovers that the world is not made in her image. We can imagine her relief the next morning at seeing her own face, exhausted though it may be, in the mirror.

The Trystero, then, fascinates her at first because to her it represents a *promise* of communication, even though we know communication is beyond her ability. She seeks it because of her loneliness, but is paradoxically ready for it only insofar as she can achieve it within the realm of interiority. Once the Trystero reveals itself as the outside, the uncompromising other that threatens to overthrow her monopoly on experience, she rejects it, albeit by then she cannot quite extricate herself from its grip: “she wanted it all to be fantasy—some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles. She wanted Hilarius to tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest, and that there was no Trystero. She also wanted to know why the chance of its being real should menace her so” (132). The chance of its being real bespeaks the menace of the outside, but by the same token, the chance of its *not* being real can be construed only as a grand conspiracy—“Bortz, along with Metzger, Cohen, Driblette, Koteks, the tattooed sailor in San Francisco, the W.A.S.T.E. carriers she’d seen . . . all of them were Pierce Inverarity’s men? *Bought?* Or loyal, for free, for fun, to some grandiose practical joke he’d cooked up, all for her embarrassment, or terrorizing, or moral improvement?” (170)—or as a paranoid fantasy thereof. Hilarius cannot cure that fantasy (he tells her to “Cherish it!” [138]), being even more paranoid himself. Paranoia, for him, preserves the identity of the self, as opposed to LSD, which is supposed to “bridge” the self and the Other: “with the LSD . . . the distinction begins to vanish. Egos lose their sharp edges. But I never took the drug, I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are. Perhaps that is why you also refused to participate, Mrs Maas?” (136). Personal, private and interior, fantasies are for Hilarius the sanctuary of the self: “Whatever [the fantasy] is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be” (138).

It is at this point that Oedipa yells for the police to come in, but when she meets Mucho right afterwards, she “panic[s]” (143), unable to accept his new (schizophrenic) sense of selfhood either, which is the opposite of Hilarius’s. A parody of mystic notions of identity, Mucho’s artificially induced intersubjectivity isolates him from others, makes communication with them impossible, and is ultimately ruinous. Mucho may be “a walking assembly of man” (140), and may feel like “an

antenna, sending [his] pattern out across a million lives a night," and identifying with them as if they are his lives too (144), but such a "flipping miracle" (143) of communication occurs only in his own mind, unshared by others. That is his fantasy. Between the two extremes of paranoia and schizophrenia, among the different shades of loneliness and isolation, Oedipa finds no escape from her tower, where she remains the self-conceived captive maiden, waiting for "the knight of deliverance" who will turn out to be "no proof against its magic" (22), like all the men who have tried and failed, and whom she has lost.



This is Oedipa Maas.

From a literary point of view, Oedipa's dilemma is due to her being a character in the wrong novel: she is a logocentric human being in a decentered world. She would have done well in a detective story, a traditional quest narrative, or a *Bildungsroman*, where she would certainly have resolved a mystery, discovered the meaning behind the Trystero, W.A.S.T.E. and the post horn symbol, or come to a better understanding of herself. *Lot 49* does not allow her any of those things. If anything, she understands herself less at the end than at the beginning, since the doubts she experiences about her sanity and her ability to interpret the world around her do not give way at the end to a revelation concerning her place in that world—even though we would have expected the "novel" to lead her on a Hegelian path from innocence to alienation to disalienation. Far from being able to resolve the mystery, she remains in doubt whether there *is* a mystery at all, but she goes to the auction anyway, just in case there is a mystery and an explanation. By the same token, we as readers are not sure either. The crying of lot 49, which provides the title of the "novel," takes place (if at all) *outside* of it, thus denying rather than affirming it, just as Magritte's "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" denies the drawing of the pipe above it, in a bold declaration of a definitive rupture between signifier and signified. The relation between the two in Magritte is one of paradox rather than correlation, and in Pynchon the relation is of both paradox and postponement—*différance*. The event announced by the title will take place *after* the end of *this* "novel." That event is only

(and another) *promise* that will not be fulfilled, another alluring song of the Sirens. There is (can be) no revelation about the Trystero, W.A.S.T.E. or the muted post horn, except (maybe, maybe not) on the unbridgeable outside, beyond the epistemological end of knowledge. The trinity of mystery at the center of the "novel" is a void, an emptiness, a *promise* of logos, a substitute center of structure. The "novel" has exploded itself. What remains exposed at the end is the failure of the positivism that informs reading and interpretation in their effort to "make sense" of the text.

Pynchon's text defies that effort. A moment in *The Courier's Tragedy* is emblematic of the way the "novel" as a whole functions. At one point in the play, we are told, "things really get peculiar, and a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words. . . . [A] new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance" (71). "Ritual" is the primacy of tradition over the individual will, the structuring and determination of motion, gesture and utterance; "reluctance," on the other hand, is the hesitation of the individual will that asserts itself vis-à-vis tradition in the very act of hesitating. So what can "ritual reluctance" mean, if not the hesitation and self-questioning, even the self-negation of ritual? This seems to be what Pynchon allows the narrative to do. The "novel" is reluctant to do what its "novelness," established by tradition and criticism, presupposes. The ritual reluctance of a writing that denies the essential character of writing as a means of fixing text and meaning, a "novel" that demonstrates the futility of the novel, reading that undermines reading—such is the narrative that affirms nothing but its own existence as language in excess of signification. Like the letter Fallopian receives by PPS, that language communicates nothing but its own communicability, and will continue to do so until the emergence of a new, non-logocentric mode of expression. We too have to await that new empire of signs.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup>This and the drawing on page 93 are adaptations of Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* and *Ceci continue de ne pas être une pipe*, respectively, which are reproduced in Foucault's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* 16, 91. The drawing on page 96 of this essay is my elaboration on Magritte.

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