TELEGRAMMATOLOGY PART I:
LOT 49 AND THE POST-ETHICAL

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" . . . are not the goddesses of Destiny also the goddesses of the human Lot, of allotment--the Moirai, the last of whom is the Silent One, Death?"

--Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse
(London: Cape, 1979) 145.

[This paper is part of a larger project called "Telegrammatology." That project is, in turn, embedded within a larger one: the production of a collection of papers by myself and David Wills on the work of Thomas Pynchon and its relations with the grammatological concerns of Derrida and others. In particular, Telegrammatology sets out to address some of the questions raised in David's paper called "PLS RECORD BOOK BID LOT 49 STOP J DERRIDA." In that paper, he draws together some of the mutual concerns of Lot 49 and Derrida's Envois with respect to postal systems and the question of destination. Its title is an imagined construction of what Derrida's telegram would look like were he to be the Mysterious Bidder who arrives at the crying of the Lot. This first reply, Telegrammatology I, looks at the question of how to read Pynchon and takes an arbitrary slice through Lot 49. Prior to that, however, it considers some of the questions critics have raised in regard to Pynchon's contribution to the "morality" of the 20th century. A concept of the post-ethical is generated to deal with this, drawing on Derrida's deconstruction of the origin/destination opposition. In Part II of the Telegrammatology, I turn to more obviously Derridean questions while remaining within the general question of how to read. If one can take an arbitrary slice through Lot 49, the same approach might work with, say, Of Grammatology. By deconstructing the distinction between the correct and the erroneous, Part II shows how a collection of errors in the Derrida text can generate a positive reading, leading to a concept of the unrhetorical (on the model of the "unconscious").]

Oedipa, the mass of America, is left with four possibilities: "Those symmetrical four. She didn't like any of them, but hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was" (130).[1] Mentally ill, then: that's one. The other three: (1) a true network of Americans, really communicating, a real community; (2) she is hallucinating; (3) there is a plot, most likely set up by Inverarity, to place post-horns and such like in her path. The four finally dwindle, over the last few pages of the book, down to two: a real Other, a Word (137) behind the obvious; or else only that latter itself, the humdrum empirical bits and pieces of everyday life. The essential or the

contingent?   The Platonic form or the inessence of its mere
filling-in? And this real, if it exists, is a community, a real
America behind its "crust and mantle" (135), behind its mere
"name." Put bluntly: is the Word behind the word? A hideous
excluded middle, which Oedipa knew was "bad shit, to be avoided"
(138).

      To find anything behind the name, the inscription, is to be
paranoid—in America all the more so because it could mean
community, and we all know how the first six or seven letters of
that word can be used.   It fractures the American dream of
independence, of atomisation, of self-security, of what the
Germans called, in reference to both writing and the development
of the independent self, bildung:

            . . .   they'd call her names, proclaim her
            through all Orange County as a redistributionist
            and pinko . . . (137)

Not much choice here: you crack up inside or else lose all
possibility of a real outside. If the world is together, I'm
mad; I am only sane if it is fragmented. And so we are (or it
is) left, awaiting the crying.

      This was how we diagramatised this in "Gravity's Rainbow
and the Post-Rhetorical":[2]

      a (⌒   ) b
            ⁓‿‿‿‿‿‿/ look here
        ¢X¢ d1¢

Accordingly: a and b might be a number of things or signs. For
example, we could say that Oedipa has to exist uncertainly
between signifier and signified, between, for example, the
signifying post-horns and their meaning, the Tristero. If she
veers too close to the signifier alone, she is left with a
meaningless array of figures. On the other hand, to veer the
other way—towards meaning—induces paranoia. She lives in a
world where there is no longer any correspondence between Sr and
Sd—and so she can't take the option—it's not there for the
taking—of bringing the two together.

      Again: a and b might be literal and metaphorical forms of
signification.   In this case, Oedipa cannot veer too close
towards a literal reading of what she sees and hears—and neither
can "the reader." Nor can she get lost in the mise-en-abyme of
metaphoric connections because that would lead nowhere but to her
own insanity.

      We could probably also plunder a number of other valencies
for a and b, other dualisms in which Lot 49 abounds: the real
and the fake postal systems, the odd politics, for example, of
Mike Fallopian which cannot be situated as left or right (65-66),
the animate and the inanimate, the humane and the mechanical, the
"transcendent meaning" or "only the earth" behind the
"hieroglyphic streets" (138):

> For it was now like walking among matrices of a
> great digital computer, the zeroes and ones
> twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right
> and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. (138)

As a matter of fact, Lot 49 does not tell us if or how
Oedipa "resolves" all this--she is simply left to await the
"crying" of the lot, of the mass perhaps, the not-too-critical
mass. But plainly, the extremes are not recommended. The
excluded middle, somehow (but how?), has to be excluded,
cancelled, and a space opened (if you'll excuse the syntax)
parenthetically up. The novel says "look here"--but won't tell
us where "here" is and what can be found there.

At such a point of interpretation as this, it is difficult
to distinguish the supposedly pure, almost linguistic, problem of
signifying practice and a whole range of moral/ethical problems.
In the same way, a purely logical paradox becomes a practical
double-bind when it ceases to be a mere proposition in a textbook
and becomes instead an order or command. For example, the army
barber is ordered to shave all the men except those who shave
themselves and is on a charge whether or not he shaves himself.
The semiotic becomes ethical, however, at the point where we ask:
how to live in a world where the side of the signifier and the
side of the signified cannot be conjoined and where neither alone
is to be trusted: neither pure materiality (Sr) nor absent or
continually deferred meaning/spirit (Sd): neither substance nor
phantom?

So what is Oedipa's problem at the semio-ethical level?
Perhaps it could be formulated as follows: while the middle is,
in some sense, officially perhaps, excluded, Oedipa finds
herself in a middle of some sorts. At the very least, she is in
media res. She is caught between Origin (being) and Destination
(purpose), between "because" and "in order to."[3] She is caught
like a dead letter, WASTEd communication, left in trash-can
rather than post-box. She is--or is manipulated into being--
exactly where the binary system will not let her be.

So she is in more than a double-bind in the classical sense
analysed by Bateson, Laing and others.[4] For: in the double-bind
proper, neither term can operate. It is prevented by the other
term. One cannot, for example, be either loved or unloved by
one's mother, and one cannot be both. In excluding a and b, the
double-bind's logic excludes "both a and b" and "either a or b."
There is, after all, something definite, literal, logical, or
non-modal, about the double-bind as we know and love it. No
doubt that is why Bateson thought it could be resolved by
"metacommunications."

On the other hand, for Oedipa, both terms can, at least
potentially, at least in principle, be operative at once. The
trouble is that she can't tell if, and if so which, or if both.
If Origin points to Truth and if mere presence (experience) is
paranoid, then Oedipa is prevented from finding a further truth:
the truth of the relation between Truth and experience--or Origin

and presence. That truth would tell her "what-to-do." It would
signal destination, somewhere and something to be.

Thereby: even the metaphysical conception of Truth (as
Origin) is displaced for Oedipa.   (While, for the one who is
merely doubly-bound, two over-arching, terribly obvious, and
contradictory truths run amok.)   Something has to be sought.   But
this truth lies in a relation between two terms, one of which is,
itself, Truth and that is, by definition, unavailable.   If our
end is indeed our beginning (and Lot 49, it should be remembered,
does end with "lot 49"), then there is no comfort when the
beginning is just as obscure(d) as the end.   If you like—and you
probably won't—Oedipa is, if anything, doubly-unbound.   She is
in a double-bind.   There may be something comforting in that
which is binding, in the legal sense, because one can know where
one is with it.   But this comfort is unavailable to Oedipa.   Even
the binding contract of the will seems indifferent to her.

Where I want to go from here, then, is to draw together two
things: (a) the idea of beginning and end as ethical terms or
termini and (b) the idea of beginnings and ends as textual points
or puncta.   Two ideas.   The first involves us initially in the
problem of Origin/Destination that Oedipa faces and the ways in
which a deconstruction of that opposition might yield us a post-
ethical ethics—a way of dealing with, though not necessarily
"solving," Oedipa's dilemma.   The second will be picked up once
we have worked through the first section which could be
considered on its own and called

Labyrinths

The paper PLS RECORD BOOK BID rightly refuses some of the
possibilities which other readers of Lot 49 have taken to be
positive ways for avoiding binaries: the psychic insights of the
old sailor's dt's and the sensitivity of conspiring with
Maxwell's Demon, to mention only two obvious ones.   But somewhat
in their place, there is a turn towards "the flip-flops of
prosthesis," "a perpetual switching," "perpetual motion between
sensitivity and diabolism."[5]   Prosthesis, then, separates a space
between a and b, an infinite series of delta-t discontinuities.
It prizes apart signifier and signified so that neither one seems
to be satisfied.   And in the spectrum or rainbow which the two
terms make, what we are and what we make of ourselves, now has
infinite play rather than being fixed to the two terms (Sr/Sd)
themselves.   The solution is not, I think, unlike some readings
of Gravity's Rainbow, readings in which the straight-laced lines
of gravity (seriousness) are split through a prism into play
(unseriousness) creating an infinitely expanding bandwidth.
Gravity's Rainbow, then, would not be unlike "Limited inc
. . ."[6] with its infinite ways of being spilled on the page.

In and through these labyrinths, I want to suggest another
way—not necessarily incommensurate with BOOK
BID/Pynchon/Derrida.   It takes a new theme, however, in relation
to a/b: that of refusal rather than splitting.   I begin in the
present tense but, as will shortly become evident, the past may
be more appropriate . . .

What are we all looking for?--the religious, the theoretician, the person (like Oedipa so often) in the street? For want of yet another metaphor, what I think we're looking for is origins. In trying to find who we are, individually and collectively, there is a very strong will to origin. Perhaps especially for those of us in the New World(s) where, ultimately, past a certain point, history is always elsewhere. It is as if the finding of origins were the method we could all agree on as the correct means of self-knowledge. If, we think, we know from whence we derive, we will know ourselves. The two terms are now almost synonymous. So firm is the grip of the discourse on origins among us. The theorist of human nature, with all her stories of primeval humanity, and the man in the office of the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths, looking up family history, or else Oedipa on the trail of Pierce's will: all are on the same quest.

One problem with this dominant method--the search for and will to origin--is that we do not know where to stop. Because everything seems to us to derive from what we call origins, so too does our knowledge of where to stop. Only when we have found our origins, only, that is, when we have learned, among other things, how to stop, will we know how to stop searching. The process is obviously self-defeating and makes our "advanced," "technological" societies seem backward by comparison with those that have strong origin myths and non-linear conceptions of both historical and conceptual time.

In its potential for endlessness, the search for origins is like a labyrinth. Except that we are apt to use the wrong picture of a labyrinth when we think of it. Most of the mazes we are used to have definite starting and ending points. The starting point is "here," on the outside. The ending point is "there," usually in some as-yet-unknown-but-projected centre. And this indeed shows the strong connections between our notions of origin and centre. But anyone who has ever got to the centre of a large garden maze will know that the centre contains nothing special. It is an almost arbitrary point in the general landscape. Its hedges, seats, pathways and so forth are pretty much identical with hedges, seats and pathways to be found in any other byway of the labyrinth. Centres, then, are arbitrary and are simply places we imbue with special significance.

Another version of the labyrinth is Oedipa's view of the streets of Southern California: well laid-out, mainlining to the heart (17). And, in BOOK/BID, there's the idea that a joy or pleasure might be derived from the infinite moves to be made around this maze of circuits and lines.

Mythically, however, we have tended to populate our maze-centres. Usually with monsters or treasure. That is, we imagine our origins as being either hideously natural or corruptingly cultural. And, as we follow mazes, it is certainly a motivating force if we can clearly imagine things of this kind. Trepidation or fortune is certainly more attractive than aimlessness--yoyoing perhaps. The monsters to be killed and the gold to be won keep us on our track to the empty, arbitrary centre. We know, though

we rarely think of it, that the centre is no centre. The goods
there are no good.

So, if we chance upon some possible centre, we feel always
as if we have reached nothing. And then we want to return to our
exploring because at least the exploring gave us a sense of
purpose. So the search continues, even if we have discovered the
centre to be empty. But now there is a continuous feeling of
having been let down. It's the same feeling we get on the
journey home. It always passes quicker than the outward journey.
The freshness, the newness of the scene, the hope of an end in
sight: all of these have been removed.

Even if the physical, common or garden labyrinth has some
sort of central point, this is no more than any other
psychological way-station. The regress still looms--the regress
which is perhaps identical with the infinite flip-flop of
prosthesis and, in itself, a source of pleasure. Whether we feel
pleasure or anguish, our search for origins is still
unsatisfiable. It is no more and no less than an addiction--much
like the old sailor's addiction in Lot 49. Like all addictions,
it has no purpose except for the satisfaction of the addiction
itself. The way in and the way out are equally baffling. They
provide the same kind of puzzle. And so every point along the
way becomes a potential centre--and end.

Our problem is not "too few origins." It is not scarcity.
Rather it is "too many origins." Over-abundance. War, love,
god, self, man, wealth, nature, truth . . . We can't see "the"
point because there are too many points, not too few. The will
to origin and its pluralism constitute a central contradiction in
our lives--and so we live in the eternal chasm between dogma and
aimlessness, uneasily, always tending to one side, carving a
"middle way" between with the aid of various tools which often
have the titles "religion," "ideology," "belief," and so on. We
feel sometimes that we can never reach the, or a, goal.

But what we get wrong is: the idea of a goal.[7] Goals,
perhaps, are like goals scored in football: there can always be
another quite different in character. There is no ultimate goal.
If so, then it makes no more sense to say we can't reach it than
it does to say we can. And the myth of "the" goal is, for us and
perversely, the origin. We have turned our ends into mythical
beginnings. We will them to be so.

Here is the mistake: we want to stop--but we think that
stopping means reaching for the origin/end while, in fact,
stopping means stopping either to search or to feel hopeless in
the absence of anything to search for. I want a morality which
refuses both. A post-ethical ethics. For: the two sides of the
mistake are sides of the same coin--and the coinage as a whole is
debased. We should continue (if I may be permitted to prolong
this dogmatic fragment) to want to stop--but in another sense
entirely. This different sense of stopping is: refraining from
the hope for a definite origin and refraining equally from the
hopelessness of the absent origin.

If the origin/end is—by some miracle—to return (and I doubt it), then it will do so without our going out and looking for it. Like some lost souls deserted by their mothers or their spouses, we go searching in the night through all the likely, and some of the unlikely, places. What we don't see is that our quest actually prevents any return. Refraining will not guarantee it either but, unlike the search, it won't prevent it. That is the odd paradox: there is more hope in abstention from hope. But this is as far as hope can be allowed to go.

The positive search for an origin is associated with the concept of "same"—all things must have the same origin. A life lived on the concept of sameness (despite the empirical plurality of candidate origins) is a life which valourises "mystique" in Péguy's sense.[8] To believe, on the contrary, that the origin cannot be attained is to live a life on the concept of difference—the bases of life, in the absence of an origin, one believes, must be plural, fragmented, differentiated, one-for-each-of-us or each-group-of-us. Here the origin is, too, deferred. It is continually put off. Such a life, again in Péguy's sense, valourises "politique." Here: the origin is absent and condemns us to this world, to politique. While, with the former course, the positive origin is _never_ of this world—hence mystique.

But "same and different," "mystique and politique," in themselves, constitute another order of difference. The division between them is, therefore, on the side of politique. We need to see _this_ difference as the difference which will give us a clue as to how to refrain (from the search for origins and also from fears of the goal being absent). The mystical dogmatist sees only a uniform world in which even the unbeliever has her origins in one central and primordial form. The unbeliever sees a multitude of worlds, including among them the mistaken beliefs of the mystic. But the "higher order" difference is that the world is both uniform and plural—or else it is neither, for its essential energy derives from _relations between_ same and different, mystique and politique, uniformity and plurality, just as physical energy comes neither from a single indivisible sub-atomic particle, nor from the plurality of such particles but instead from the relations between them. (And what has been said up to this point is not very far from the prosthetic opening of the gap between a_ and b_ in BOOK/BID.)

The mistake is to go looking in the properties of objects (e.g., the will, the Tristero, etc.) instead of cancelling the object domain and focusing instead on the domain of relations. (And, once again, I may be pointing to the non-binarity of a/b, to its status as a triple term: a-slash-b—but need I say that my "look here" is more than simply that, for it points to a way of refraining from reading the slash in a definite way—e.g., as exclusion.) In physics, relations can be represented mathematically—as relatively pure writing. In the "human" domain we have no exact equivalent of mathematics. The relations can only be shown. That is, they can only be lived. Living becomes a form of writing-living. Life becomes identical with

its representation. (And that is why I want to get to a literary theory which looks, to invoke the symbolism of material typonymy, as follows: The novel/Death of the Novel //Writing.) Attempts at representation of the relations--which can be called psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and so on--are doomed because they over-value the analogue with physics. They are all, whatever their protestations, positivistic, in this sense: in the sense that they hold life to be representable in some other form than life. The difference which gives human life meaning(s) is different from the difference which creates physical energy. And so the attempt which Oedipa makes at contact with the Demon, through the representation of Maxwell on the box cover, is always doomed; the two differences cannot be treated as the same. There is no equivalent of a mathematics to which we can turn (though many have mistaken logic for such a technique).

If I want to be happy with my life, or you with yours, or Oedipa with hers, then that will never eventuate as long as we demand an origin (the ultimately "same") or as long as we think of the origin as unattainable (the ultimately "different"). Yet, in these times, it is certainly probably easiest to take the latter option: "No Future," "God/Man is Dead," etc. In our present circumstances, it's very easy to distrust the route of sameness and origin which served well for our pre-nuclear ancestors. Yet we seem only to have gone so far as to replace it with its antithesis, its inverted image. The point would then be: to remove either image and not to mistake the removal of the first for the currently popular ideology of mere difference and hopelessness.

One beginning was the search for secular forms of "same" and "origin"--and some have made this move under the rubric of "humanism." That may be an important initial corrective--and it shows the historical importance of movements such as existentialism--yet it is only on a par with adolescent impersonations of adulthood. Our age of humanism is effectively over now. But we have mistaken the new impersonality for hopelessness instead of seeing it as a possible freedom--albeit a freedom within the vestigial constraints of same and different.

So it may be true: one does not know the way ahead. But it is as important as ever to find out what its limits are. All of the beliefs we have relied on in the past are either beliefs which will get us into the labyrinth or beliefs which will get us out. What we need, then, are counter-beliefs which will prevent us from entering at all. But this is like saying "Stop crying!" to one who is interminably disturbed. It is no good simply saying "Don't enter!" We have to find not only reasons but also motivations for not entering. This is a burning project--in both senses.

I'm talking here like a child who has had enough of the maze game. But I have no idea how I can persuade you--some mythical you who wants to continue playing--that we should move on to another game. Maybe I simply have to complain loudly and long

enough. I'm not sure. But one thing is obvious: there's no
going it alone. We have to give up together for it to make
sense, even if the new game is not well formulated in my mind. I
cannot give anything like rational reasons for wanting to cease
and to begin in a new way. My only strategy is this: to tell
you stories—stories about what we might do when we cease.

Here, then, is a story. As it happens, it's a story about
stories. Once upon a time we used to tell stories of morality in
which there were quests. Chrétien de Troyes almost single-
handedly invented the Grail legends. The Bible tells us nothing
of it. In de Troyes' story and in many quest stories right up to
Tolkien and Pynchon and beyond, a young man is born, the last of
a noble line. He is kept sheltered from the world of chivalry,
often by his mother, in a country (or a country retreat) far from
civilisation. But one day, by accident, he wanders and meets a
knight on the road—or hears/reads of rumours of knights. Torn
between his seemingly lowly origins and chivalry, he chooses the
latter and goes off on his quest—unsure of his, or its,
authenticity. Often the Grail, or its equivalent, eludes him at
a crucial moment. For example, he may fail to ask or answer a
simple question properly.

His lowly origins extend to common insecurities about
language in formal situations. We simply go wrong, against our
own better judgment and capacities—as the common phenomenon of
esprit d'escalier (knowing just what to say after the event)
shows. The young man does, however, despite this and other
failings, turn into a great king or leader in some new zone. But
he is always insecure about his "natural" ability. His success
seems more a matter of luck than of ability in any true or
ultimate sense. This is especially so in the light of his
failure in the face of the Question. But he makes wise laws,
keeps in touch with the people and often dies or disappears,
childless. But he does return from time to time—shadowy and not
quite material. Sometimes this is in the prefigurement of other
legends. Sometimes it is in later stories. And sometimes it is
in the works we call "scholarship," "criticism," or "mythology"
(in the disciplinary sense). The scholar's quest for the hero is
often just like the hero's own quest. And of course the hero—or
the Grail—can turn out to be a monster or a treasure.

Today, the quest is unpopular. We see no point in
searching. Nothing seems to be worth it, to have any value to us
either in terms of the destruction of evil nature (the monster)
or in terms of the value of goods (treasure). Essentially we
have lost what used to be called a "model of man," a conception
of human nature. But the denial of the quest, the refusal of a
theory of human nature, our very hopelessness, is an ethos in
itself. The absence of a "model of man" assumes a "model of man"
from whom the model is absent. We think we have gone without (in
the sense of "lack" and/or in the sense of "beyond")—but the
pull of the origin, one would like to say the form of the origin-
quest, for all its inversion, holds us still in our very anguish,
aimlessness and despair.

The one who goes on a quest--Oedipa, Quixote, Percival--is
like the paranoid. The "model of man" for the quester is
paranoia; for the paranoid can see pattern and purpose in
absolutely everything. The hand of God is visible in the
configuration of cigarette butts/ends around the library steps.
The windmills are giants. Whatever John, Paul and George may
say, the sect are after Ringo's ring (cf. the comparisons between
The Paranoids and The Beatles and between Lot 49 and Help in
particular). Old milk bottle tops are (real) gold and silver.
Ring-pulls thrown away at random are rings which guarantee
invisibility. But the anti-quester is simply the anti-paranoid.
She is hebephrenic. The hebephrenic is one who can see no
patterns in anything--can make no sense of the most significant
events or objects (data, experiences, etc.). The quester is
relation-ful and the anti-quester is relation-less.

Both of these extremes are a kind of illness. Some of us
perhaps want to strike a balance--to manage the tightrope between
the two. The world is full of agnostics of this kind. No one
seems to have the fortitude to embrace out-and-out atheism--to
prolong the metaphor. Atheism, here, would mean that both the
quest for origins and its antithesis are pointless--both of them
requiring an initial conception of origins. But that would not
mean that life is pointless. Atheism would be like a kind of
environmentalism. It would show us that there is a landscape
outside the labyrinth and that we hardly know that landscape, let
alone how to live in it, or at one with it.

We can learn from Western philosophers how to use balls of
string to trace our way back to the entrance of the labyrinth.
But they can no longer help us once we get out. Getting out, as
I have said, is no different from the quest itself--even if it is
an anti-quest. we need to turn elsewhere to find out details of
the counter-quest, of the cancelled quest.

What I have been writing so far might be reduced--by someone
who was not sympathetic to my ideas--to a simple distinction
between the universal and the particular. After all, the idea of
a quest for origins is rather like a kind of universalism, and
the idea of purposelessness does make it look as if we're stuck
with the particular minutiae of the moment, behind which no
universal light ever shines. And then, if one accepted this
reduction, it could be said: "Well, he's looking for a path
between universalism and particularism, only in the area of the
ethical--and particularly with regard to morality."

To some extent, that's a reasonable summary. But this is as
far as I would want to go with these doctrines: universality and
particularity I see as being bound up with the question,
ultimately, of signification--which is where we started our
investigation. They are a game with signification. Our times
are surely ones in which people have come more and more to think
about language and how it signifies, "the ways in which it
means." (So much so that we can--as I just did--use "surely," or
"certainly" to mark a kind of reservation.) Ours is, if
anything, the age of the signifier. Before we began to think

about the signifier, in its modern sense, before perhaps the work
of de Saussure, words and other bits and pieces of language were
thought to mean something by being attached to non-linguistic
things: to cats and dogs, but also to love, happiness, anger and
so forth.   Rather in the way that a label is attached to a
parcel, or a postage stamp to a letter. (Now, of course, we can
collect just the labels or the stamps without that to which they
were attached having much importance.)   This "being attached"
which was so important gave us the doctrine of unum nomen unum
nominatum--which sounds quite particularistic but was in fact
quite the opposite in its effects.   Once you have an idea that
signifiers, particular signifiers, never shift their meaning
because they are attached in this way, you begin to believe that
each has a universal, once-for-all meaning.   So this was the age
of the universal signifier--as if it were hard currency, fixed to
some kind of gold standard, and when you cashed in your
signifier, you always got the same thing (object, image) in
exchange for it.

        Now there has been something of an end to this. We have
come to accept the sliding around of meaning--the fact that words
and other linguistic paraphernalia are not fixed to a central
meaning. We've come off the gold standard.   The currency of
signification is floating in a basket of related currencies. And
here we can see perhaps why the word "meaning" itself is used in
different ways: for example, sometimes it can be considered as
"linguistic meaning," sometimes as "significance" in the sense of
"the meaning of life," sometimes as "intending," sometimes as
"leading to" ('x means y) . . . and so on. It floats around in
a way that we could consider as a metaphor for, or at least an
instance of, the problem of meaning generally and its instability
in our age.   Just as we have the Old and the New Penny, we might
talk about the old and the new signifier.   The new one involves a
lot more free play. Its value is by no means fixed. But we have
not yet learned--like many people who introduce new currencies--
to find our way with this new signifier.   We keep trying to
attach it to the value of the old. We keep making translations.

        So our relativism has extended to or perhaps even derived
from our conceptions of language--and the old, universal,
signifier is now very much out of date (and, therefore, sought
after?   a relic?   an antique?)--for all the new, playful,
signifier keeps on being referred back to that shadow. (And the
very act of referring, in this case, is a technique hanging over
from our ways of utilising the old currency.)

        Again we seem to be faced with a choice between fixed
origins and the abyss of unreason.   But here too it need not be
so. The mistake, I think, is of the order of the other mistakes
I've dealt with here.   It involves actively looking for some
quality called "the meaning" and then either finding that quality
fixed or finding it hopelessly free.   In place of this, we can
think of meaning as other than "the meaning"--as an activity,
like bathing and so forth.   Then it would be as odd to ask "What
is the meaning of a word?" as it is to ask "What is the bathing
of a person?"   This does not mean that we have to come down on

the side of universalism or particularism. It means that we can
avoid asking that kind of question about our language. Perhaps
this means refusing the whole problematic of Lot 49:

(I don't know how to put the mark of erasure under erasure,
except by intensifying it.) This may be where we find our
postern where once there were only post-horns—for look how the
slashes make a // /, an Un-Lot perhaps, my final two letters.

The day of the fixity of language may be over: but equally
the free play of language is by no means infinite—as the
prosthetic reading might have it. There are indeed many sorts of
activities we can undertake with, and as, language, and no one
feature seems to bind these activities together. There is no
"language in general," then. So ought we to despair? Perhaps
not. Take the example of a greeting and a sermon. They are as
unalike as lawn mowing and heraldry. Yet it is always quite
clear that if one of these is to be done, then we can tell from
the language and its accompanying activities whether or not it
has been brought off. And we can "decide" these matters quite
easily without worrying about fixed meanings or sliding
signifiers. If the pathways, the shufflings from a to b (from
"eh?" to "be!"?) are flip-floppy, then the ways in which we
actually move, the language-games we undertake, are important.

Aimless wanderings through the streets or circuits are not
the necessary upshot of the tangled variety we have available.
Often it's very difficult to keep our hands out of this trap,
though. But that is what we must do if we are to retain any kind
of equilibrium: refuse! And what is WASTE if not refuse?
Things must be fused again—re-fused—both in the bomber's and
the welder's sense. Blown up. Brought together. The material
is there. The point now is to use it rather than to sit
contemplating its (present or absent) origin.

* * * * *

This marks the end of my labyrinths. They have left us with one
important question for the reading of Lot 49: how to refuse the
lot? How to make it an Un-Lot? This is how I would begin to
answer that question, an answer which will take us into the text
of Lot 49 and eventually into Telegrammatology II. The first
thing would be to face the problem of selecting analytic examples
from the text. All literary analysis takes its examples.
Usually, you get a critical theme and select passages which fit
it. The "entropy" readings of Pynchon, for example, have done
this with aplomb (a lead?). And so does BOOK/BID.

What this procedure (theme first, text second) achieves is a
low degree of failure in literary studies. To increase this
degree and thereby to add, in Popperian terms, an element of
falsifiability to literary ideas: suppose we were to take our
text-bits first. This would also mean that we were facing up to
the materiality of the text. For example, we could take those
parts of a text which held the same structural positions. This
would constitute a new form of "identification" with the text.[9]
What then could we mean by "the same position"? Lot 49, for a

start, is made up of six chapters. Each chapter has to start and
finish.   It has to start and finish with particular units:
words, sentences, paragraphs. . . .   So, in a purely structural
way, we could take the first sentence of each chapter.
Interestingly, when we do this, we get a not-too-bad summary of
the plot:

> One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home
> from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put
> perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that
> she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she
> supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce
> Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had
> once lost two million dollars in his spare time
> but still had assets numerous and tangled enough
> to make the job of sorting it all out more than
> honorary. She left Kinneret, then, with no idea
> she was moving toward anything new. Things then
> did not delay in turning curious. Though she saw
> Mike Fallopian again, and did trace the text of
> The Courier's Tragedy a certain distance, these
> follow-ups were no more disquieting than other
> revelations 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. Though her next
> move should have been to contact Randolph
> Driblette again, she decided instead to drive up
> to Berkeley. When she got back to Echo Courts,
> she found Miles, Dean, Serge and Leonard arranged
> around and on the diving board at the end of the
> swimming pool with all their instruments, so
> composed and motionless that some photographer,
> hidden from Oedipa, might have been shooting them
> for an album illustration.

Doubtless, a range of literary-critical remarks could be made
here which would, I suspect, be as cogent as anything written on
Lot 49--certainly as comprehensive.   It would be tempting to
analyse the patterns of contact Oedipa makes, to map her
journey--as one may map Slothrop's arc-journey through the Zone.
It's all here, in the selected text--most of the major moves. So
are many of the main characters, with some important exceptions--
though, again, they could be brought in with a few skilful moves
and connections. Thematically one could point to: alcohol,
wills, money, town-city moves, the build-up of clues, the
pointlessness of them despite their temptation as jig-saw
material, the textuality of The Courier's Tragedy and therefore
the relations between Oedipa's and the critics' searches for
interpretations, the mathematical nature of the enterprise, the
60's/Beatles connections, the hidden narratorial hand in the
shape of the photographer, the inter-textual connections with
cinema and so on. And so on. The point is not to do that but to

refuse and to show how plainly it could be done from these
structurally culled and essentially random bits.

Now we could turn to the final lines of each chapter. Doing
so, we get a very different text—one might even say the "other
side" of the lot. And here I have arranged the sentences a
little differently. The last lines:

> - If the tower is everywhere and the knight
> of deliverance no proof against its magic,
> what else?

> - After awhile she said, "I will." And she
> did.

> - She got in and rode with him 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.

> - As if the dead really do persist, even in   a
> bottle of wine.

> - But by then it was too late to make any
> difference.

> - Oedipa settled back, to await the crying
> of lot 49.

This is a markedly different text from the first. If the first
was—even using a difficult test for narrative such as
Prince's[10]—an astonishingly narrative text, this one is much
less so. It uses fewer declarative, propositional utterances.
It kicks off, for example, with an interrogative, moves on to
reported speech, invokes a plot-tangential coincidence, makes a
gnomic remark, becomes resigned, and finally, reports an event,
but an ultimate one. The tone now is poetic—philosophical even.
The themes do not have to be wrung by implication from the
narrative events—they are there (for all their vagueness) as
plain as day.

If the first text was from a nineteenth-century novel of the
event-reportage, chess-game type, this is now from the post-
modern philosophical novel, the novel of ellipsis and existential
crisis, invoking Oedipa's dilemma: she cannot escape like the
romantic heroine from the tower. She, only by fiat, random and
impulsive choice, is able to bring her words (I will) and her
deeds (She did) together. Only the "whimsies" bring her into
touch with those closest to her in any "official" capacity (her
next of kin, her husband, Mucho). And the line about the dead
may well refer back to Mucho whom she discovers changed, almost
to the point of disintegration:[11]

> They are stripping from me . . . one by
> one, my men. My shrink, pursued by Israelis, has
> gone mad; my husband on LSD, gropes like a child
> further and further into the rooms and endless
> rooms of the elaborate candy house of himself and

> away, hopelessly away, from what has passed, I was
> hoping forever, for love; my one extra-marital
> fella has eloped with a depraved 15-year-old; my
> best guide back to the Trystero has taken a Brody.
> Where am I? (116)

The dead may persist, in a bottle of wine, too, given Oedipa's
glimpse of escape in the dt/DTs.   And, of course, death will
always mean that it's too late to make a difference.   Its
meaninglessness cuts across all difference. And so on, to the
point of waiting for the crying.

But it's always just too paranoid, or too aimless: either
to search for textual patterns or to recommend, as do the
Reader's Liberation Movement, the free play of interpretation.
You can do it with, and between, these two faked passages. But
the point would be, after all of this, not to do it. Not to put
one's hand into the traps I have just put mine into.

If Derrida is indeed the Mysterious Bidder (though it may be
Genghis Cohen[12] who does apologise to Oedipa for showing up,
after all—and I admit it could be an apology merely for showing
up and not for being "He"—I just wanted to sound a note of
caution about reading the text such that it's definite we don't
know who "He" is)—if it is Jacques, I'll give you one guess who
I think Loren Passerine might be.   Again, beginnings and ends
will give you a clue, as will syllables.   —Murdoch University

Notes

[1] Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966;
Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).   All bracketed
references are to this edition.

[2] Alec McHoul & David Wills, "Gravity's Rainbow
and the Post-Rhetorical," Southern Review 19.2
(1986):194-227.

[3] The distinction between "because" and "in order
to" motives originates in the work of Alfred Schutz.
See his Collected Papers, Vol. 1 (The Hague: Martinus
Nijhoff, 1962) 69-72.

[4] Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind
(London: Paladin, 1973). R. D. Laing & A. Esterson,
Sanity, Madness and the Family, (Vol. 1: Families of
Schizophrenics) (London: Tavistock, 1964).

[5] The quotations are from page 19 of the   .
manuscript of PLS RECORD BOOK/BID.

[6] Jacques Derrida, "Limited inc: a b c
. . . ,"Glyph 2 (1978):   162-254.   J. L. Austin,
"Three Ways of Spilling Ink," Philosophical Papers, 2nd
ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970) 272-87.

[7] This argument is close to that of Wittgenstein
in Zettel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) #693. It also

owes much to the position taken by Mark Deitch in his
unpublished paper "Wittgenstein and Derrida: No
Contest."

[8] Charles Péguy, Notre Jeunesse, Oeuvres Complètes
1873-1914, Tome IV (Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle
Revue Française, 1916) 39-254.   (Also: Geneva,
Slatkine Reprints, 1974).

[9] Here I'm thinking of Barthes' argument that the
unloved lover, for example, "identifies" with anyone of
the same ilk regardless of other differences.   See
Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse: Fragments,
(London: Cape, 1979) 129.   The identification is no
longer psychological or subjective but structural:
"The subject painfully identifies himself with some
person (or character)   who occupies the same position
as himself in the amorous structure."

[10] See Gerald Prince, Narratology: The Form and
Functioning of Narrative (Berlin: Mouton, 1982).

[11] As often happens, more text has to be dragged
into the fray once the process of critical
interpretation is underway.

[12] NB: The Penguin edition blurb says "the
eminent philatelist Genghis Cohen, who likes his sex
with the news on"--thereby confusing him with the
telesexual Nefastis (80).   The only other textual error
I can find is on page 89 of the same edition where a
non-speech passage begins with a quote-mark: "'They'd
never heard it that way . . . ."   This and other
errors (and their importance as structural points for
text selection)   are taken up in Telegrammatology
Part II.