

The Rhetoric of Death
in The Crying of Lot 49

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Translated by Margaret S. Langford

A sentence from Pynchon's novel will define the scope of this paper. It appears on page 116 of the Bantam edition.¹ One of the characters, Professor Bortz, is projecting for the heroine some slides he took secretly in the Vatican library. They are slides of engravings illustrating the pornographic version of Wharfinger's play, The Courier's Tragedy.

We will come back to that imaginary tragedy and its imaginary author later. For the time being I will mention only the comments--or rather only a few of the comments--Bortz makes as he shows the slides: "Notice how often the figure of Death hovers in the background."

What the quote underscores as characteristic is, first of all, an insistence: the multiplicity of references to a figurative theme (how often); secondly, it reveals the special way the theme appears: it appears in the background, discrete and yet persistent.

It seemed to me that above and beyond any immediate literal meaning it had in context, this statement about Death called our attention to the whole text. This is the hypothesis I will attempt to prove.

But first, perhaps it will be useful to summarize The Crying of Lot 49. Here is a first, provisional summary: one suggested by the given name of the character the story centers around.

She's a young woman. Her name is Oedipa Maas. Oedipa: the feminine form of Oedipus. The modern

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American feminine counterpart of the Greek hero. At the same time a narrative agenda is stated: an investigation, the search for and discovery of a hidden truth. Moving from not knowing to knowing. Sophocles' drama is based on this model, which is the archetypal model for our detective novels and films--so it has often been said. An attempt is made in The Crying of Lot 49 to imitate the detective genre. In the novel, Oedipa (ironically) compares herself to the private detective in the old radio shows:

That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules, to solve any great mystery.

But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on. (91)

A mystery. Attempts made to solve it. The unveiling of truth. If necessary, we can find this pattern in the novel we are considering. Let us note, however, that Oedipa, unlike Oedipus or the traditional private detective, does not confront a clearly circumscribed problem stated in precise terms and having only one possible solution. Perhaps there isn't even a problem, or there isn't an answer, or there are many answers. . . . The narrator notes that the young woman doesn't know exactly what she's looking for and what she wants.

Thus, in the dialogue with the producer, Driblette, we read: "They seemed to know what she wanted, even if she didn't" (they: refers to the eyes of Driblette), and, "She didn't know what she was looking for, exactly" (54). In short: less a problem than an uneasy feeling: "It just has me uneasy" (53).

A string of disquieting coincidences. A diffuse enigma experienced intuitively rather than recognized and thought out.

A few lines to illustrate these remarks. Oedipa visits San Narciso, the imaginary California town where the action takes place, for the first time. Looking at the tangle of streets and houses, she is reminded of the printed circuit of a transistor

radio: both images suggest the same possibilities of hidden meaning, of hieroglyphics to be deciphered.

. . . there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate [. . .]; so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. (13)

We find the word revelation used explicitly just when she is about to have one. Thus, "As if (as she'd guessed that first minute in San Narciso) there were revelations in progress all around her" (28).

A revelation can be no more than a startling encounter with something unexpected. It can also be the eruption of a supernatural truth into consciousness. Our text often plays upon the hesitation between these two values. The paradox of revelation taken in the most literal sense of the word is that the subject, because of the extreme violence of that explosion of truth, forgets it, just as an epileptic forgets what happened during his attack and remembers only the warning signs. There are times when the heroine isn't at all sure she hasn't found and then lost what she was looking for in this manner: "the direct, epileptic word, the cry that might abolish the night" (87; my emphasis).

To give the investigation a motive, the story provides the investigator with a variety of facts which she interprets as mysterious signals designed to interest her, to warn her.

There is a word (WASTE) and a design (a combination of a loop, a straight line, a triangle and a trapezoid) that Oedipa notices on the wall of the ladies' room in a bar and that she soon begins to find just about everywhere. . . .

There are stamps and cancellation marks like those used by the official mail service except for a few anomalies--anomalies which show they are counterfeit: transposition of two letters, POTSAGE instead of POSTAGE.

Finally, a proper name TRYSTERO is slipped into the Elizabethan play I've already mentioned, the play

Oedipa goes to:

No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,
Who's once been set his tryst with Trystero.

The narrator comments:

Trystero. The word hung in the air as the
act ended and all lights were for a moment
cut; hung in the dark to puzzle Oedipa Maas. . .
(52)

The function of the secondary actors is to help or hinder the investigation--in essence, to give or refuse to give information to the principal actor. Each one has the special competence which his function as helper or preventor requires. To understand the counterfeit stamps we need a very skilled philatelist: thus Genghis Cohen appears. To follow the fate of a seventeenth century tragedy through its various editions we need a learned specialist: Our specialist will be Professor Bortz, author of a critical edition of Wharfinger's play, etc.

The information collected in the course of the investigation seems to show that a private postal system exists in California and that it keeps in contact with one another those initiates who have agreed to not use the official system.

This clandestine system is supposedly several centuries old, and was created in Europe to oppose Thurn and Taxis--the family that in effect monopolized the postal service under the Holy Roman Empire. Supposedly their adversary was a man called Trystero: supposedly he led a vicious, secret fight against them. His followers, his couriers, attacked and massacred the couriers of the rival system. The design that intrigues Oedipa--the circle, the triangle, the trapezoid--is supposed to be the symbol of the Trystero system--(a post horn with a mute). Translation: the will to silence Thurn and Taxis, whose emblem was the post horn that we find on some of their stamps.

Tristero presumably had its own stamps, which initiates could recognize by certain deliberate anomalies.

Presumably it had its own mailboxes resembling public trash cans. Their covers carry the misleading label WASTE, which should be read as W.A.S.T.E., initials, for those capable of understanding, standing for this motto: We Await Silent Tristero's Empire. (Here we perceive a thread in the labyrinth: the text submits to the rule of ambiguity.)

Here, then, is the hypothesis which invades Oedipa's mind; there are many pieces of substantiating evidence to confirm it.

Nevertheless the very abundance of this evidence makes it all suspect, just as the police are likely to suspect a perfect alibi.

These puzzle pieces that fit together perfectly: nothing says they could not be fitted together to form a different, equally satisfying pattern. Doubts arise, or rather the narrator raises them, or has his character begin to have them. From the beginning of Chapter 3, Oedipa is astonished by the extremely logical way the facts she has at her disposal fit together. "That's what would come to haunt her most, perhaps; the way it fitted, logically, together" (28).

Much later, someone conversing with her formulates a new hypothesis, which Oedipa rejects even though it has already occurred to her:

"But there's another angle too.[. . .] Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax. . ."
(125-26)

Of course everything did fit into place to create a meaning. But perhaps it wasn't the only possible meaning: other signifieds could just as well be matched with the same signifiers.

The same facts can take on a different meaning depending on our perspective; like certain paintings (de Vasarely's for example) which change according to the spectator's position and his angle of vision.

(A second, more distrustful reading would find food for thought in the protagonist's words and deeds, moments of hesitation, sudden silences, moments when she is embarrassed or irritated.)

A disturbing thought: the entire system as it now exists might collapse. The character would stop being a subject. The character would become an object: no longer running the game but being run by it. Trapped by an immense put-on--and perhaps metaphysically trapped by fate disguised as freedom.

Two concurrent series thus fall into place depending on which of the two hypotheses we accept, when neither is guaranteed to be more plausible than the other. This isn't a case of a false trail being contrasted with a real one, but of carefully induced hesitation between two trails, each seeming to be as genuine as the other.

It is possible, at this point in the analysis, to be somewhat more precise in comparing Pynchon's novel to the genre to which it seems related.

The detective story forms a closed and therefore reassuring system, which convinces the reader with the certainty of its irrefutable deductions. By the last page there is nothing more to wait for, nothing more to learn.

To the contrary, The Crying of Lot 49 acts like a machine for producing uncertainty.

If we can accept this as the basic goal of the author, then clearly he forbids the story to end. (Just as in Pinget's Inquisitoire.) The narrative ends, not the story. The word END marks the end of the text, not the end of uncertainty, ambivalence and doubt.²

The hypothesis about Trystero is therefore to be counterbalanced by the hypothesis that Oedipa has been the victim of a joke.

The author of this joke could have been one Pierce Inverarity. To make the joke complete I refer once more to a quotation already cited:

"Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something Inverarity set up before he died?"

It had occurred to her. But like the thought that someday she would have to die, Oedipa had been steadfastly refusing to look at that possi-

bility directly, or in any but the most accidental of lights. (126)

Oedipa was--in the past--Pierce Inverarity's mistress. At the beginning of the story, and the start of the investigation, we find Inverarity's will--the enigmatic gesture of a living man who attempts to keep his hold on other people even after death.

This gesture sets the wheels in motion. From a letter Oedipa learns that, before he died, Pierce designated her as executrix for his will. Although she knows nothing about such matters, Oedipa leaves the city where she's living, her husband, Mucho, and sets off for San Narciso where we've seen what awaited her.

To make the Inverarity hypothesis plausible, three of the traits associated with the testator are stressed in particular:

- a) The fantastic fortune the story credits him with (all of San Narciso belongs to him, factories, stores, theater, university, etc., and he has his finger in every pie);
- b) His talent for mimicry and acting allow him to play many parts and hide his true personality in the bewildering crowd of characters he assumes;
- c) The philosophy of a man of action, which can be summed up in a single formula: don't stop.

"Keep it bouncing," he'd told her once, "that's all the secret, keep it bouncing." (134)

To sum it all up, Inverarity believes he has the power to orchestrate a huge posthumous hoax--this would satisfy both his dynamic character and his temperament.

If we accept this, then these revelations must have been set up in advance; these clues must have been cleverly laid so that Oedipa would enter an endless labyrinth. The actors she expects to help her would become willing or unknowing accomplices in the plot.

This hypothesis does not seem any less plausible to our character than the other. Or rather it leaves

her completely perplexed: "Who knew?" (136).

Pierce's death both starts up the investigation and puts obstacles in its path at the same time. The trail comes to a dead end: ". . . she could never again call back any image of the dead man to dress up, pose, talk to and make answer . . ." (134).

Furthermore, as if an invisible hand were removing parts of the puzzle, some actors are eliminated. Here again, death plays a part. Death or whatever resembles it most: physiological debility (the old sailor, Mr. Thoth), madness (the psychiatrist Hilarius), drugs (Mucho is addicted to LSD: "So much of him already had dissipated" [108]).

The death of Driblette, the producer of The Courier's Tragedy, is especially important. He was the one who put Oedipa on the track of Trystero. She thinks he is the only one who could have led her to Trystero. But he committed suicide shortly after their one and only meeting. And his death adds to the list of other mysteries the mystery of an act whose motives the young woman tries vainly to understand.

I won't insist on the role death plays in the working out of a romantic plot based on doubt. That role is apparent enough. I will devote my attention now to following this theme as it threads its way through the very texture of the text:

1. The word itself, first. DEATH: hidden within a proper name: Mr. Thoth, probably an allusion to the German TOD; hidden behind the initials ACDC (translated as "Alameda County Death Cult" [90]); substituted for WASTE, placed beside a post horn.

Like WASTE, it can be treated as an acronym: D.E.A.T.H., initials that a bus passenger translated as this warning: "Don't Ever Antagonize the Horn" (90).

We should also point out, for those who like to discover words within other words, that all the letters in Death as well as in Trystero can be found in the title of Wharfinger's play, The Courier's Tragedy. I don't know whether this is intentional or not.

2. Traditional substitutes for the word, taken mostly from religious iconography.

- The spectre: "He must have known, writing the will, facing the spectre . . ." (134).

- The death's head, in the Spanish name of the secret association's founder: Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera (calavera = skull); also on the cover of the anthology of Revenge Tragedies (pages 55 and 65: "'There was a skull on the cover,' Driblette said." Later, in the bookstore: "The skull on the cover watched them, through the dim light").

- The angel of death: "angels of death" (102), (in the plural, in lower case letters); "dark Angel" (134), "Angel of Death" (136), (in the singular, in upper case letters); "a descending angel" (138). Undoubtedly these variants deserve careful examination.³

Here I add an example showing the angel's presence/absence, its anonymous passage through a sentence: Oedipa is going to learn about Driblette's death:

"Hadn't you heard?" They all looked at her. Death glided by, shadowless, among the empties on the grass. (114)

3. A dominant chromatic theme: black. It's the color Tristero's men wear, agile assassins with black capes and masks. These assassins dressed in black, who appear and reappear on several occasions in the story, always work at night: "He [. . .] fashioned a livery of black for his followers, black to symbolize the only thing that truly belonged to them in their exile: the night" (120).

We know that black and night (the poet's "massive night") are commonly associated with the idea of death and the rites of death. After Randolph Driblette's funeral, Oedipa comes back to his grave that evening: "There was no moon, smog covered the stars, all black as a Tristero rider" (120-21).

Many details in the text call up these images--sometimes a bit furtively. A few examples:

- On the counterfeit stamps, to distinguish them from other stamps, there is an almost imperceptible

mark: a black feather (71), a tiny figure in deep black (94).

- In a group of pop singers we see a graceful girl in black jersey leotards (43). She's the one who brings Wharfinger's play, a celebration of violent death, to Oedipa's attention.

- In a San Francisco street at night: "When she [Oedipa] looked up, a man, perhaps a man, in a black suit, was standing in a doorway half a block away, watching her" (86); panic stricken, Oedipa jumps on a passing bus.

- In the auction hall, where the collection of counterfeit stamps, lot 49, is going to be auctioned off: "The men inside the auction room wore black mohair and had pale, cruel faces" (137).

- In Vesperhaven House, an old folks' home, the very old Mr. Thoth dozes before his television set and confuses in his dreams the anarchists on the screen (dressed all in black) and the memory of his grandfather who was an "Indian killer," who fought false Indians recognizable by their black feathers-- the feathers of the real ones were white (67).

- A black fly settles on the man's pate and resists the admonitions of the nurse armed with a spray can of "bug spray." But doubtless that fly is black only because we expect it to be black--- (66).

4. In one case the relationship between black and death is concrete and technical as well as symbolic: it is an animal-type, organic black. It is produced, as we well know, by burning bones. In The Crying of Lot 49, it is produced by burning human bones.

For example, we find the bones from a company of G.I.'s who died from unknown causes in Italy and whose bodies were thrown into a lake. Later, their remains are recovered by a clever business man. They travel from continent to continent, from firm to firm, from warehouse to warehouse, and end up at the Beaconsfield cigarette company which uses animal charcoal in the production of anti-cancer filters.

In the wharfinger tragedy which the narrator analyzes in a separate brief insert we find an analogous metonymic route. The wicked Duke Angelo, as he writes a letter, makes rather abstruse comments about the ink he uses. We understand later that they are allusions to the ink's origins: it is prepared from an animal charcoal which he has made for him by burning his victims' bones: "Later on their bones were fished up again and made into charcoal, and the charcoal into ink" (52).

5. Allusion, which the ancient treatises on rhetoric classed with the "figures of expression through reflexion," is not reserved by Pynchon for the character of Angelo exclusively: the narrator uses it frequently. Several of the preceding examples serve as allusions.⁴ Here is another: Oedipa goes to Professor Bortz' place (112) for the first time. She is met by a little girl who brings her up-to-date on the latest family happenings: her sister has just been thoroughly spanked. That wasn't enough, however, according to the little girl who states: "'If she was mine I'd drown her.'" The mother says: "'Never thought of doing it that way.'"

Amusing dialogue. I won't say decisively that this is all it is, or whether it is a dialogue that also expresses a deep-seated death wish. Let's say that death lurks in the background. I only note that this short scene comes just before news of Driblette's suicide (he drowns in the Pacific Ocean). In retrospect, this seems to be a warning--a disguised hint about what the text will come to mean later.

The information concerning Driblette's suicide also reminds us of, especially reminds us of, a remark attributed to the actor: "'If I were to dissolve in here, [. . .] be washed down the drain into the Pacific . . .'" (56). Other pieces of information fall into the same category as this one: the (fictional) death of the characters in the film Oedipa watches on the television screen: the father, the son and the dog--the Saint Bernard!--drowned; the death of the G.I.'s drowned in an Italian lake; the artificial lake Inverarity creates with authentic skeletons at the bottom for amateur scuba divers ---

Thus we see series being created. Details from various parts of the text fit together--they announce themselves, get ready, take on meaning in relationship to one another, form a network of signifiers and unifiers.

The text that was distributed--the old sailor sequence--allows us to make similar observations. From this sequence I will first quote ten lines which seem to me characteristic of Pynchon's writing:

What rich soils had he turned. [. . .] What voices overheard, flinders of luminescent gods glimpsed among the wallpaper's stained foliage, candlestubs lit to rotate in the air over him, prefiguring the cigarette he or a friend must fall asleep someday smoking, thus to end among the flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost? (93)

Here the metonymic drift of the discourse results in a double disjunction:

a) Spatial disjunction. A place imagined by one of the two actors (the old sailor's room, the patterned wallpaper) stands in opposition to the place where they are at the moment (the stairway).

b) Temporal disjunction. An anticipation or premonition (prefiguring). An imaginary future (someday) in opposition to the present where the actors are.

Oedipa imagines what the old man's death will be like, his disappearance in a fire caused by negligence: the cigarette smoked while going to sleep.

Comment: a descriptive detail at the beginning of the episode can now be seen as an allusion. The old man's hands as he hides his face as he meets Oedipa are smoke colored. ("Both hands smoke-white, covered his face" [92].)

I now turn to the part of the sequence where the actors come into the old man's room, a room no longer imagined, but perceived by Oedipa.

A brief descriptive statement--or rather an inventory--from which I quote this portion. "Another bulb, dead. The bed. The mattress, waiting" (94). It is clear that the terms used in this list take on their full meaning only when we refer to the segment previously cited. The adjective dead, commonly used to describe a burned out light bulb, is more than just a cliché here: it makes the reader think about the old man's death. Furthermore, the phonetic analogy between dead and bed, the juxtaposition of the two words in the statement, helps put them in the same perspective: here the bed is not so much the article of furniture we sleep in as the article of furniture we die in.

Where we will die. The word mattress reinforces the allusion. In the scenario, the mattress acts as agent in the old man's destruction. It not only is a functional part of the setting but also has a role in the actantial system. It is already on stage, ready to play its part--waiting.

The old man's mattress with its stuffing permeated with the sweat and nightmares of a lifetime is compared to the "memory" of a computer, "like the memory bank to a computer of the lost." A little bit later, the same analogy is used again; the comparison is contracted into a remarkably condensed metaphor: "That stuffed memory" (94).

Other metaphors in that same sequence deserve our attention for a moment. But also it will be useful to determine how Pynchon or his characters interpret the word metaphor. I will cite several instances. On page 77, the inventor Nefastis is speaking to Oedipa, who has difficulty in following the explanations he gives about the notion of entropy and Maxwell's Demon:

"Entropy is a figure of speech [. . .], a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. [. . .] The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true." (77)

Two aspects, then, of metaphor: an ornament of speech and an ornament of truth.

An important word in Nefastis' remarks: "it connects." Many words belonging to the same lexical group appear frequently.

"I want to see if there's a connection. I'm curious." (54)

Oedipa might have made the next connection by herself. (68)

To hold them together. (80)

The dead man, like Maxwell's Demon, was the linking feature in a coincidence. (89)

Oedipa's investigation is an effort to find a link, a relationship among the pieces of information which come to her either in complete disorder or else linked by disturbing coincidences. "Now here was Oedipa, faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway." (80). All this is on the story level, where the narrative act consists in the construction of a system of fascinatingly complex relationships.

The definition of metaphoric activity as Nefastis defines it: "It connects the world of --- to the world of ---," isn't applicable to the physical world alone. We can see in the old sailor sequence, to which I now return, how it applies to states which are either pathological or regarded as being pathological.

The character is afflicted with delirium tremens. The word delirium is a metaphor itself: it comes from the word delirare, to leave the furrow, the straight furrow that normal people plow so "righteously." "DT's. Behind the initials was a metaphor [. . .] a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare" (95).

The crises the old sailor experiences allow him to enter inconceivably wonderful worlds:

She knew that the sailor had seen worlds no other man had seen [. . .] because DT's must give access to dt's of spectra beyond the known sun, music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright. (96)

Various interpretations of the words delirium tremens allow the narrator to represent by one meta-

phoric term the miracle, the paranoia and the dreams of sleep.

The utilization of scientific discourse in literary discourse is one of the most salient traits of Pynchon's novel. Along the way we have encountered examples of figures of analogy that I have cited, in which the comparative term is most often chosen from the physical sciences (particularly from data processing). Doubtless we could regard this as a way of rejuvenating, of up-dating the stock of comparisons available to literature at a given time. But there is also another possibility: an as yet unexplored relationship between man and the world. A world where man is less sure of his rights. Where he feels he is being watched by things made for him to watch: "Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube" (1).

According to Pynchon's vision, the non-human is not always evaluated in reference to what is human. The relationship is reversed: human competency and performance are measured according to computer performance standards--human competency, and even divine competency.

Describing the mad trajectory of a can of hair spray in a bathroom, the narrator comments:

The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel. (23)

As for human performance, I will refer to the adventure of an executive in the Yoyodyne company. When he loses his job, the only solution he can come up with is to kill himself. Just when he is about to do this, his wife and her lover come in. The lover observes:

"Nearly three weeks it takes him [. . .] to decide. You know how long it would've taken the IBM 7094? Twelve microseconds. No wonder you were replaced." (85)

(The IBM 7094 is already an obsolete model at the time. According to specialists, the models have been improved since.)

I will add to those examples already given some instances where the scientific metaphor is used to describe death.

a) The destruction of a mental universe: Oedipa is shocked when she thinks of all that will be obliterated when the old sailor's mattress burns up with him. So many things that belong to him, his hallucinations, will be lost without a trace. Then Oedipa remembers what Nefastis told her about massive destruction of information: "'[. . .] that massive complex of information, destroyed over and over with each power stroke'" (77).

b) The powerlessness of the living to communicate with the dead: Here again, a reminder of Nefastis. He is the inventor of a machine mentioned several times in the story. According to Nefastis, right in the center of the system sits a real Maxwell's Demon who can communicate with the human psyche and, when the machine is operating, he can transform information into movement and energy. Oedipa uses herself as a guinea pig, but all in vain.

For fifteen minutes more she tried; repeating, if you are there, whatever you are, show yourself to me, I need you, show yourself. But nothing happened. (79)

The episode can be compared to the episode where Oedipa, sitting on Driblette's grave, attempts an impossible dialogue. "If they got rid of you [. . .] because they thought I no longer needed you. They were wrong. I needed you" (121). (The same word as in the other statement, and the same outcome):

Driblette, she called. The signal echoing down twisted miles of brain circuitry. Driblette!

But as with Maxwell's Demon, so now. Either she could not communicate, or he did not exist. (122)

c) The uncertainty of a mind trapped between symmetrical hypotheses: That is Oedipa's adventure. Here's a metaphoric expression of what she experiences:

For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeros and ones

twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless.
(136)

The computer uses a binary system: 1 or 0. The image evolves:

Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth. In the songs Miles, Dean, Serge and Leonard sang was either some fraction of the truth's numinous beauty (as Mucho now believed) or only a power spectrum. Tremaine the Swastika Salesman's reprieve from holocaust was either an injustice, or the absence of a wind; the bones of the GI's at the bottom of Lake Inverarity were there either for a reason that mattered to the world, or for skin divers and cigarette smokers. Ones and zeroes. So did the couples arrange themselves. At Vesperhaven House either an accommodation reached, in some kind of dignity, with the Angel of Death, or only death and the daily, tedious preparations for it. Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. 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.
(136-37)

Three comments:

- This passage sums up the heroine's successive experiences. (We have noted these episodes in passing.)
- In the telling of these experiences we find several allusions to death. The death we await (Mr. Thoth), that we give or receive (the G.I.'s), that we use (Inverarity), that we avoid (Tremaine).
- The terms listed are divided into two series articulated around the same conjunction (either/or). In fact the same alternative is repeated throughout this accumulation of equivalents. In this passage it is formulated precisely and abstractly: Another mode of being behind the obvious, or none.

With this formula the book ends, not with an answer but with infinite questioning. And not only about America: about society, History and Man . . .

It would be an error to treat it as a secret message we could attempt to decipher. Its trick is to proceed by using allusions to lead the reader to believe there is a key, to offer him several and then take them away from him soon afterwards.

An example, in my opinion, of a procedure fairly characteristic of the modern novel, a procedure which Roland Barthes, who calls it "a deceptive treatment of meaning," defines in these terms:

What do we mean by a deceptive treatment of meaning? We mean that the writer goes about proliferating meanings without either filling them up or closing them off and that he uses language to place them in a world forever signifying but, in the end, never signified.⁵

Notes

¹ All subsequent quotes appear in the Bantam edition.

² Here we obviously depart from the position held by several critics who "stop" the story just after the tale ends with a mystic revelation. The decision would lie between a profane and a "sacred" (correct) reading of the text. For Mendelson, the parodied use of the word "Pentecost" in The Courier's Tragedy, as well as the enigmatic number "49" in the title which refers us to the final scene, are (along with others) signals that make the denouement possible: the Sunday the auction is to take place Oedipa has come to the brink of an intelligible revelation (fifty days after Easter the apostles receive the gift of tongues).

For Thomas Hill Schaub, that revelation could only be the one that Oedipa has always avoided "facing up to" (Lot 49, 126): the revelation concerning her own DEATH. Cf. Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49," in Individual and Community: Variations on a Theme in American Fiction, ed. Kenneth H. Baldwin and David K. Kirby (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), 182-222; Thomas Hill Schaub, "Open Letter

in Response to Edward Mendelson's "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49," Boundary 2, 5 (1976), 93-101.

³ Pynchon (page 50) distinguishes between the literal and metaphoric meaning of the name and its esoteric meaning ("a new mode of expression[. . .] certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud"). The example of the angel illustrates his thesis:

literal meaning: "the dark angel," "the Angel of Death" (opposition Death/death-power/absence).

metaphoric meaning: "Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel" (138).

⁴ One of the most interesting examples is the proper name THO'IH, which we showed as being related to the German word TOD earlier. Another possible relationship: THO'IH/THOT. The Egyptian god of hieroglyphic writing, who is also guide for the dead, associated with funeral rites.

In the text, the lay-out of the San Narciso streets and the lay-out of transistor circuits are compared to hieroglyphics (13 and 136). The ancient Egyptian's Book of the Dead is mentioned (18) in the course of an associative listing of items ("printed circuit, gently curving streets, private access to the water, Book of the Dead . . .").

⁵ "Litterature et Signification," in Essais Critiques (Editions du Seuil, 1964), 265.