

The Crying of Lot 49:
Pynchon's Heart of Darkness

Martin Green

Recent studies of Thomas Pynchon have demonstrated that allusion is one of the central premises of his art.¹ His works are a thicket of references to music, painting, scientific theory, pop culture, and other literature. Among writers who have influenced Pynchon, according to David Cowart, Thomas Schaub, and others, Conrad figures prominently. Schaub, for example, discussing V. and Gravity's Rainbow, asserts that Pynchon's writing "integrates Conrad's view of civilization as a white force mining the southern darkness, trying in this way to domesticate the black unknown which threatens our conscious lives."² Specific Conradian echoes in V. and Gravity's Rainbow underscore Pynchon's debt to the early modernist master in those two books which see colonialism as a central burden of modern Western man. While imperialism and colonialism are not central concerns of The Crying of Lot 49, Pynchon's second and shortest novel, it too has its Conradian dimension.

"And this, also, has been one of the dark places of the earth"; the portentous words of Marlow, narrator of Conrad's short novel, Heart of Darkness, might provide as fit an epigraph for Pynchon's exploration of the paranoia and cultural decay of mid-twentieth century life as the report of Kurtz' death provides for Eliot's "The Hollow Men." Marlow's journey from England to the Congo brings him to an awareness of the darkness that lies at the heart of modern civilization. Oedipa Maas' more circumscribed journey from the sunny and comfy world of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines through the night-time world of California traverses a landscape filled with intimations and shadows of the darkness that is the underside of the bright and plastic landscape of America.

That The Crying of Lot 49 and Heart of Darkness should be so closely akin in metaphoric terms is a testament to the archetypal quality of both fictions. Both Conrad and Pynchon have addressed themselves to an examination of the essence of modern man's nature,

and to do so, they have employed one of the most durable of fictional plots--the journey of the innocent to awareness.⁴ Beyond this parallel, however, a close reading of the two novels juxtaposed against each other, and an examination of some of the key techniques by which Conrad and Pynchon convey their thematic concerns, indicate a still closer affinity between them. That affinity is illuminating in and of itself, but it also suggests something about Pynchon's place in the history of fiction. Despite the contemporaneity of his references, the occasional hip-glibness of his style, and the playful inventiveness of his plots and digressions, Pynchon occupies a place on the line of fictional vision that descends from Conrad. At the same time, Pynchon's position in the latter part of the twentieth century provides him with an ironic awareness that calls into question some of the premises of the early modernist novel and that leads to a re-definition of what constitutes the heart of modern man's darkness.

On the level of technique, both novels operate primarily through a dense and evocative style packed with symbol and implication. Neither author spells out his theme in explicit terms. Indeed, the narrator of the frame section of Heart of Darkness calls Marlow's experience "inconclusive" (70)--a characterization literally true of Pynchon's fable. But both authors provide passages of description that contain the essential clues to the unraveling of their themes. This is particularly true near the beginning of both works, where descriptions of landscape--Brussels in Heart of Darkness and San Narciso in The Crying of Lot 49--establish key thematic metaphors. These metaphors are woven into a network of implication and hints, into structures of images that are built of repetitions and echoes.

In Heart of Darkness, Brussels reminds Marlow of a "whited sepulchre," a veritable graveyard of narrow streets "in deep shadow, [with] high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones . . ." (73). By the time Marlow reaches Kurtz' hideout deep in the Congo many months later and sees the skulls surrounding it, he has passed through a landscape marked with the

images of death Brussels prefigures. Dying blacks in groves, wrecked machinery lying moldering and rusting, a colonial administrator whom Marlow describes as a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" (93), among other things, evoke the landscape of Hell. Africa is literally and figuratively an inferno, and Kurtz, the presiding genius at his inner station "at the bottom of there," as Marlow puts it, is "an animated image of death carved out of old ivory" (135). The imagery of death and hell carries over beyond Marlow's trip up and down the Congo River. When he returns to "the whited sepulchre" to confront Kurtz' "Intended," he is received in a gloomy drawing room in which "a grand piano stood massively in a corner: with dark gleams on the flat surface like a sombre and polished sarcophagus" (153).

Oedipa has her first glimpse of San Narciso from a hillside; she squints in the sunlight and smog down at an "ordered swirl" of streets and houses "which had grown up all together,⁵ like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth." The pattern, like that of a printed circuit, suggests to her "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate"(13). As she drives along the main drag, "the silence and paralysis" of a Sunday morning greet her. Oedipa's subsequent journey from San Narciso to San Francisco and back is less straightforward than Marlow's journey from Brussels to the Congo, but her meandering journey on the California freeways in her attempt to solve the puzzle of Pierce's will and the mystery of Tristero is filled with constant reminders of the difficulty of interpreting the hieroglyphic. At one point she wonders "whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she . . . might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself . . ."(69). While "the central truth" remains elusive, subsidiary truths do, nonetheless, confront her. Chief among them is the reality of an America peopled with drop-outs and sexual deviants, anarchists and right-wingers, and paranoids of all stripes. The landscape they populate is littered with the trash and detritus of modern society--the bones of G.I.s killed in World War II, used car lots, burnt-out shopping malls, instant housing tracts, slums, and skid-rows--the literal and

figurative embodiments of waste and death, or W.A.S.T.E. and D.E.A.T.H., the acronyms of Tristero.

In both novels, in addition to the metaphoric landscapes, a map and a painting foreshadow key thematic concerns and are the nodes of complex nets of connecting images.

In Heart of Darkness, the map that fascinated Marlow as a child (71) appears prominently in the anteroom of the company office in Brussels, "a large shining map with all the colors of the rainbow"(73). The colors are the sign of Europe's dominance over Africa and they are indirectly connected to Kurtz himself through the character of the man in motley, that strange figure who considers himself to be Kurtz' protege, and whose suit of patchwork reminds Marlow of the pattern of the map. This connection of motifs serves to link Kurtz to both Africa and Europe, to define, in other words, the dialectic of colonialism that Kurtz embodies. "All Europe went into the making of Kurtz," says Marlow late in the novel (122). commenting on Kurtz' mixed parentage. This statement is metaphorically true of Africa, which, through colonialism, has been made by "all Europe." Kurtz, the emissary of light, truth, and civilization, has sunk into barbarity and cruelty, and his lack of restraint, his rapacious greed and savage violence, are as much a product of his own nature and European culture as they are of the savage environment he has set out to tame. The two poles of Kurtz' nature--the European and the African--are embodied in the two women of Kurtz' life--his European beloved and the African warrior woman who tries to prevent Marlow from reaching Kurtz. Both of these women are foreshadowed in Kurtz' painting of a "woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch" which throws a "sinister" shadow on her face (92).

In The Crying of Lot 49, the painting by Remedios Varo, "Bordando el Manto Terrestre," which Oedipa recalls seeing in Mexico City with Pierce (10), establishes the key chain of echoing images. Its haunting depiction of "frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows . . . into a void,

seeking hopelessly to fill the void," brings tears to Oedipa's eyes as it summarizes at the outset Oedipa's quest not only to fill the void of her life without Pierce, but to weave a tapestry out of the threads of evidence she discovers about Tristero. The tapestry's intricate patterns prefigure the hieroglyphic pattern of the streets of San Narciso and echo through the novel in the "complex web" spun by the out-of-control hairspray can in Oedipa's motel (23), "the helix of roads" leading to Lake Inverarity (37), the communications networks--both official (TV sets, radios, telephones) and underground (Tristero's W.A.S.T.E. boxes)--that are scattered through the novel, and finally, the railroad tracks on which Oedipa muses in the penultimate scene (135). As important as these physical networks are all the social networks Oedipa encounters--the Peter Pinguid Society, the Inamorati Anonymous, the Conjuración de los Insurgentes Anarquistas (CIA), and all the other groups linked together in the web of Tristero's vast, dark and secret empire. All these networks, webs, and tapestries double back on themselves in their endless convolution, and in her attempt to disentangle them, Oedipa is like Maxwell's Demon sorting cold from hot molecules, or the mythical Psyche sifting chaff--or more precisely, the mythical Echo.

The direct allusion to the myth of Echo and Narcissus in the place names of The Crying of Lot 49 (San Narciso, the Echo Courts Motel) explicitly calls attention to the artistic method of The Crying of Lot 49, a method that is implicit in Heart of Darkness. More important, it is central to Pynchon's preoccupation with the narcissism of twentieth-century America embodied in its cultural structures. Pierce Inverarity is the preeminent representative of the way in which Pynchon sees twentieth-century American man imposing an image of himself on his world. Whatever else Pierce may have been, he is the embodiment of the metaphor of the projector that Driblette and Oedipa discuss after the performance of The Courier's Tragedy--a man of wealth and power who has imposed his image on every aspect of life in San Narciso, and more importantly on Oedipa's life. He seems not only to have been a man capable of creating a giant industrial corporation and a town, but also to have had the power

and wealth to create the vast practical joke that the Tristero seems to be to Oedipa in her more lucid moments. Significantly, Pierce's ubiquitousness is expressed in a map flashed on Oedipa's TV screen at the Echo Courts Motel, just as a map prefigures Kurtz for Marlow.

In a way, all the strands of imagery in The Crying of Lot 49 lead to Pierce, just as all the strands of imagery in Heart of Darkness lead to Kurtz. Like Kurtz, Pierce seems to have been a devouring ego, trying to incorporate into himself "all the air, all the earth, all the men before him," as Marlow says of Kurtz (135). Both men represent a fundamental mystery which Marlow and Oedipa have to unravel. For Marlow, the mystery is how someone of Kurtz' potential, a man of "universal genius," could become so utterly savage and brutal. At the end of Heart of Darkness, Marlow is still confused about what his experience of Kurtz ultimately means. What he may not consciously see is that Kurtz is part of himself, a secret sharer of his consciousness, a pre-Jungian shadow side of his European psyche. At the end of The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa is no more capable than at the beginning of deciding what her experience has amounted to: whether the Tristero exists and she has accidentally stumbled on its traces; whether it is all a vast practical joke arranged by Pierce as some sort of revenge on her; or whether she is paranoid in imagining either of the former possibilities. She is left with the pieces of a puzzle or the elements of a vast metaphor for which she must supply the missing piece or missing connection. As David Cowart suggests: "Oedipa seeks the Word that will order all words and all things, but while the words and things mockingly show forth their intricate and increasingly remote concatenation, the key to their connectedness continually eludes her."⁶ What Oedipa fails to see, the clue she always seems to miss, is that the Word that will "order all words" might be the name of her former lover.

Pierce "appears" only once in The Crying of Lot 49, and significantly, only in Oedipa's recollection of their last telephone conversation. In that phone call, Pierce put on his "Lamont Cranston" voice--the voice of the alter ego of The Shadow of the old radio program. Pierce is indeed a shadow cast over much of

Oedipa's life and over all the clues to Tristero; but he is also, as Kurtz is to Marlow, an alter ego to her, a shadow in a Jungian sense.⁷ It may be coincidental, or it may be an elaborate allusion on Pynchon's part, but the radio Shadow's famous motto, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?" is a paraphrase of Conrad's title. Having that knowledge, she might be able to penetrate (pierce) the mystery she confronts.

But if Kurtz and Pierce occupy central positions in the structure of their respective fictions and share a boundless ego and a certain malevolence, the different roles they play in the novels point to a fundamental and important difference between Conrad's and Pynchon's views of the ultimate nature of the heart of darkness. Despite the fact that Kurtz is off-stage for most of Conrad's novel, when he does appear--and even before he appears--he is a presence; like a memento mori in a Renaissance painting, he is an emblematic warning of the inner darkness of the soul of man that can erupt through the thin veneer of civilization we have erected to protect ourselves from that truth. Conrad's moral vision is a vision of psychological and social dimensions: psychological in its grasp of the contending forces within the psyche that lead to personal disintegration; and social in its recognition of how these psychological forces lead to the social sickness of Western man expressed in imperialism. Pierce, on the other hand, is never on-stage at all in The Crying of Lot 49; he is an absence rather than a presence, and he embodies in his absence the ultimate ambiguity that for Pynchon is the heart of darkness. While The Crying of Lot 49 has its social vision, Pynchon's concerns are primarily metaphysical rather than psychological. Kurtz' famous final words, "the horror, the horror," express the recognition of the chaos that lies within man; Mucho Maas' nightmare of the N.A.D.A. sign swinging in the void outside his used car lot is one expression in the novel of the "howling emptiness," to borrow a phrase from Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, that confronts late twentieth-century man. Pierce's testament (in contrast to Kurtz'), as Oedipa recalls, is the ironic and elusive "keep it bouncing."

Ambiguity is as fundamental to Heart of Darkness as it is to The Crying of Lot 49. Half way through his narrative, Marlow wonders whether he is conveying

his meaning to his audience on the yacht and concludes that it is "impossible to convey the life-sensations of any given epoch of one's existence--that which makes its truth, its meaning--its subtle penetrating essence"(95). His narrative is thus filled with tentative formulations and metaphors ("I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or a menace" [94]). These perceptual ambiguities reflect the kinds of moral ambiguities modern life offers. But for Conrad, despite the breakdown of civilized values, there are still moral certainties--honor and loyalty, for example, and the preserving of the thin veneer of civilization (the butcher and the policeman; protecting women)--and his literary technique, despite the ambiguous texture of Marlow's narration, locates Conrad's art in the tradition of moral parable through which those who have eyes may see the meaning through the ambiguities. His art rests on the assumption that there is a common ground between author and reader on which meaning may be erected.

For Pynchon, none of Conrad's certainties--as fragile as they may be--exists. In the novel, Oedipa finds nothing or no one to which she can anchor herself: her husband slips deeper into LSD-induced schizophrenia; her sometime lover, Metzger, runs off with a teenybopper; her former lover, Pierce, is dead; and her shrink flips out in paranoia. All she has left are the myriad clues leading to a possible alternative reality. But that reality is either a malevolent one--a net of conspiracy and paranoia stretching back nearly 400 years--or it is a figment of her own obsessions, and her ultimate confirmation of its existence eludes her as she stumbles deeper into the minutiae of textual criticism and the lore of postage stamp forgeries. Pynchon's art is ultimately an ironic inversion of Conrad's fundamental assumption of artistic communion between author and reader, for at the end of the novel, the reader is in the same position as Oedipa. The ambiguities of the novel remain ambiguities, and the full implication of the meaning is never fully graspable.⁸

Notes

¹ See David Cowart, Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), passim.

² Thomas H. Schaub, Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 148. See also Cowart, 16, 97, 98.

³ Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness. References to Heart of Darkness are to the Signet Classics edition, Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer, with an introduction by Albert J. Guerard (New York: New American Library, 1950). Subsequent page references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

⁴ See Cowart, 100, on Pynchon's use of the quest plot.

⁵ Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 13. Subsequent page references to this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

⁶ Cowart, 98.

⁷ I have not had the opportunity to see Carol Pearson's "The Shadow Knows: Jung, Pynchon, and The Crying of Lot 49," Higginson Journal 20 (1978), 29-45, or John Guzlowski's "'The Shadow' and The Crying of Lot 49" (unpublished paper delivered at the Midwest Popular Culture Conference, October 1981). See the bibliographic section of Pynchon Notes 7 (October 1981), 56 and 58.

⁸ A very brief version of this paper was read on the panel, "Teaching Pynchon to Undergraduates," at the annual College English Association meeting, April 1981. My thanks to Beverly Lyon Clark, moderator of the section, for her comments on early versions, and to my colleague Walter Cummins for his suggestions on the present version.