

The Birth of the Female Subject in *The Crying of Lot 49*

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Oedipa Maas is not, in the traditional sense, a “character.” But, as Hélène Cixous observes, the notion of character is based on the concept of a single, unified self or identity (Conley 24)—the very ideological/cultural assumption Pynchon’s novel calls into question. The concept of character is, in Cixous’s opinion, an outmoded literary convention, to break up which is “a political gesture necessary to bring about social change” (Conley 24, 25).

Since the notion of self or character is tied in with the notion of an essential femininity, applying feminist critical theory to *The Crying of Lot 49* to examine Oedipa-as-woman’s process of interpreting her culture may illuminate the parallels between those interpretive mechanisms and the current debate in feminist theory between essentialism and constructionism. Essentialism can be located in arguments for a “pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of the social and thereby untainted (though perhaps repressed) by a patriarchal order.” Essentialism also underlies claims “for the autonomy of the female voice and the potentiality of a feminine language (notions which find their most sophisticated expression in the much discussed concept of *écriture féminine*)” (Fuss 2). Constructionism, on the other hand, insists that essence itself is a historical construction, and rejects the idea that “any essential or natural givens precede the processes of social determination” (Fuss 2). In other words, if men and women exist, “they do so only within the symbolic” (Jardine 48). It is a “complex system of cultural, social, physical, and historical differences, and not a set of pre-existent human essences [that] position and constitute the subject” (Fuss xii). In *Lot 49*, Oedipa is caught in the conflict between essentialism and constructionism, between “the predominantly American feminist’s ‘know thyself’ (your *true* self versus ‘false images’) and the modern discovery that there is no more self” (Jardine 39).

The object of Oedipa’s search is analogous to Cixous’s for an essentially feminine written discourse. For the very nature of the

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Tristero is that it eludes representation, is willfully silent. Its members are secretive, unwilling to disclose exactly what the Tristero is, just as women have historically kept silent, not representing themselves within the dominant discourse of history. Oedipa's desire to find some authoritative way of interpreting or defining the Tristero parallels Cixous's postulation of an *écriture féminine* while still claiming that woman is outside representation. Although it may at first seem that the concept of a specifically feminine mode of discourse or writing assumes an essential femininity that can after all be represented, Cixous argues otherwise: "Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing" (S 72). Thus an *écriture féminine* could create the feminine, not merely represent what it supposedly is. Although Oedipa, still stuck in her tower, in one sense makes a crucial mistake in trying to find some abstract link that will pin down the meaning, or origin, of Tristero, perhaps her employment of essentialism (attempting to essentialize the Tristero) is strategic. For by making connections among what she sees as the various elements of the Tristero, Oedipa creates the subjectivity she has previously been denied by her culture's system of representation. She creates a new text, one to take the place of Pierce Inverarity's will and at least keep her from waking up to see "only him; him in place of everything, all-him" (Cixous, S 66).

In the very first sentence of the novel, Oedipa is defined by a series of linguistic tags: "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" (9; emphasis added). "Oedipa" is a female variation of "Oedipus," as "hostess" is the feminine form of "host," and "executrix" is of "executor." Although Oedipa does not seem fully conscious of being defined as merely the opposite of the masculine, and more or less accepts it as just another part of her everyday existence of Tupperware parties and Muzak, her scrupulous modification of "executor" to accommodate her sex suggests some small suspicion on her part that she is defined by something outside herself. She does not yet, however, fully apprehend that she has been named, defined and represented as a woman in virtually every respect by her relation to a man, by what Cixous defines as an endless series of hierarchical binary oppositions that always in the end come back to the fundamental "couple" of male/female (Moi 104).

Oedipa's immediate response to being named executrix of Pierce's estate is to try to numb herself: "Oedipa stood in the living room,

stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible" (9-10). Noteworthy here is that it is Oedipa being stared at by the television (and not vice versa) and by the reader, who is staring at Oedipa being stared at, which emphasizes Oedipa-as-woman's lack of subjectivity.

Her attempt to feel as drunk as possible is in character: her life prior to hearing of Pierce's death has apparently been muffled and dreamy, almost as if she were in a deep sleep from which she is reluctant to awake. Cixous points out, in glossing the plot of "Sleeping Beauty," that the story ends, significantly, before Sleeping Beauty wakes up: "He leans over her . . . Cut. The Tale is finished. Once awake (him or her), it would be an entirely different story. Then there would be two people, perhaps" (S 66). Cixous sardonically calls this story "so satisfying," questioning whose it actually is.

Luce Irigaray similarly argues that "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine,'" thus subjecting woman to "objectivization in discourse," that the masculine subject sustains itself precisely by "bouncing back off some objectiveness, some 'objective.'" And so if there is no object to represent, "no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains for the existence of the 'subject'?" (133). But this would be possible, of course, only if the object started to speak, which also means to "see" (135). Woman, Irigaray claims, is the negative required by the male subject's "specularization," whose double meaning Toril Moi explains as, not only "the mirror image that comes from the visual penetration of the speculum inside the vagina," but also the "basic assumption underlying all Western philosophical discourse: the necessity of postulating a subject that is capable of reflecting on its own being" (132). Moi goes on to say that it is this kind of specu/(lariz)/ation Irigaray has in mind when she argues that Western philosophical discourse is incapable of representing femininity/woman other than as the negative of its own reflection (132). This theory of specularization stems from Irigaray's critique of Freud, who, when he looks at woman, apparently sees nothing (Moi 132). His theorization of *the gaze* as phallic, Irigaray argues, keeps woman in the position of object, for if she hasn't the phallus, she cannot in fact "see," reflect on herself, the masculine, or "truth," and since she is unable to "see," she is also unable to see the subject seeing (constructing) her as object (Irigaray 53).

Oedipa, however, is beginning to "see," though clearly she is trying not to. Because she is so accustomed to being seen, the "pleasure of self representation" (Moi 135) seems ominous to her. And so *Lot 49* begins with the disruption of Oedipa's mundane existence, a "fat

deckful of days which seemed (wouldn't she be first to admit it?) more or less identical, or all pointing the same way subtly like a conjurer's deck" (11). But being named executrix of Pierce's will causes Oedipa to shuffle back through this deck to take a closer look at her life for some connection linking Pierce's death, his will and her own reality.

The beginning of the novel marks the beginning of Oedipa's quest. What was initially a casual curiosity about her identity metamorphoses into a conscious effort to understand her relation to what Pierce has left behind, to sort out his "numerous and tangled" (9) assets. When trying to feel as drunk as possible does not work for her, Oedipa remembers a phone call during which Pierce had modulated among various voices and identities, from Transylvanian and "comic-Negro" to Pachuco and "his Lamont Cranston voice" (11). Oedipa's last (and the reader's only) encounter with Pierce is with a fragmented Pierce, an identity or self constructed of personalities as numerous and tangled as his assets, illuminating the risk "that the subject (as) self will crumble away," "multiple, plural, sometimes di-formed . . . [however] still postulate itself as the cause of all the mirages that can be enumerated endlessly and therefore put back together again as one" (Irigaray 135).

After Pierce's death, Oedipa is left with reminders of him that are indeed mirages, the telephone voices she remembers, media representations of his assets (in every commercial she sees on TV with Metzger in her Echo Courts motel room), and, of course, his will. Oedipa will come to see Pierce more and more as the cause of this endless repetition of mirages. Alice Jardine reminds us that the "tools of representation exist only at the level of the fantasies that have entrapped us," and that to analyze endlessly these fantasies is to ask for repetition (59). Given initially to attempts to numb herself, Oedipa is reluctant to re-member Pierce, to sort out all his property, checking that reality (the wealth to be distributed) conforms with the description in the will (Couturier 11). When she first meets Metzger and he asks her if she wants to know what Pierce had told him about her, Oedipa says simply, "'No'" (29). This defense mechanism is again apparent in her response to Metzger's "'Inverarity owned that too'": "'Sadist . . . say it once more, I'll wrap the TV tube around your head'" (39). Oedipa is no doubt trying to protect herself from the repetition Jardine refers to, from whatever implications might follow. Near the end of chapter one, Oedipa expresses this same reluctance to Roseman, her lawyer, when he outlines for her what she is "in for": "'Hey,' said Oedipa, 'can't I get somebody to do it for me?'" (20).

Oedipa has probably spent most of her life having "it" done for her, having herself represented by something she does not yet fully understand. Roseman's surprise that Oedipa seems not to be "even

interested'” in what she “‘might find out’” sets the tone for the following commentary on her predicament:

As things developed, she was to have all manner of revelations. Hardly about Pierce Inverarity, or herself; but about what remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away. There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix. (20)

Oedipa's revelations can be about neither Pierce nor herself, for the realization she has been attempting to forestall all along is that “somebody else” has been “doing it,” representing herself for her, with her passive cooperation. It is almost as if Oedipa seems to intuit that reading Pierce's will, sorting out its numerous tangles, will force her to look closely at representation itself, to confront and question those endless repetitions and mirages. Jardine stresses that the process which “moves beyond, behind, through these fantasies” that determine the tools of representation “is attached to no self, no stable psychological entity, no content” (59). It is important to note here that Oedipa does ultimately move beyond the fantasies inherent in the representations of Pierce she is left with, beyond what Pierce comes to represent for her. For Oedipa's reading of Pierce's will focuses on what has been left out; she finds that the reality represented there does not correspond to her own.

What Oedipa has been attempting to avoid all along is, not only that she does not know her self, but also that the self may not in fact exist in any essential form. “What had somehow before this stayed away” is precisely this disconcerting possibility. The “projectionist” can thus refer both to the culture that has led Oedipa to believe in a unified self and essential truth (tricks of representation), and to Oedipa herself, who, it can be assumed from her bland existence at the beginning of the novel, has “refused to fix” the focus despite her inklings that reality is subjective (we create it and vice versa).

Oedipa's most profound intuition that she may be a construct of her culture's approved version of reality comes at the end of chapter one in a flashback of her viewing *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*:

In Mexico City they somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych, titled “Bordando el Manto Terrestre,” were a number 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 and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (20-21)

Oedipa reads the painting as a parable of her own condition, her sense of insulation or isolation from the world (Madsen 54). According to Deborah L. Madsen, Oedipa is "distressed less by this image of the subjective creation of the world than she is by the prospect that the web of embroidered threads itself creates the human figures. The suggestion that the self is constituted by the world, with its powerful cultural/ideological determinants, evokes her sense of 'magic, anonymous and malignant' that 'keeps her where she is'" (54-55).

What Oedipa does not perceive, however, is that embroidering, which we all do, is not necessarily bad; as David Cowart suggests, "The question is only how freely we do it. Are we forced, unawares, to weave or embroider some approved version of reality?" (28-29). Oedipa's despair seems to stem from her realization that she has not been in charge of her own tapestry, that "what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all" (21). She seems to sense that this magic is what has been hindering her from reading what Madsen calls "the social text" (55), is perhaps the projectionist who refuses to fix the focus. Oedipa's "instinct" to identify this formless magic (Madsen 55) comes from her realization that she must become the projectionist, fix the focus so that it includes her own experiences of reality rather than those her culture has led her to believe are hers.

Occurring just after Oedipa has been confronted by Roseman with her apathy about executing Pierce's will—"aren't you even interested?" (20)—the flashback to *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* recontextualizes the first chapter of the novel. We see that Oedipa has indeed been suppressing what she first began to suspect while standing in front of the Varo painting. But we sense that she will decide to create her own subjectivity. This decision is difficult and painful, one that she had in fact explicitly considered that day in Mexico:

Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. No one had noticed; she wore dark green bubble shades. For a moment she'd wondered if the seal around her sockets were tight enough to allow the tears simply to go on and fill up the entire lens space and never dry. She

could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry. (21)

Oedipa's bubble shades function here as another means of keeping her from seeing the subject seeing—and thus constructing—her as woman. Although, after seeing the Varo painting, Oedipa has managed for a while to keep those shades on, her musings on what might happen if she kept them on forever point to her impending decision to discard them and look squarely at her "creator," to see it see her in all her culturally determined subjectivity.

Oedipa's awareness of this impending decision is evident:

Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (21-22)

Oedipa ends up doing all of the above. She marries Mucho Maas, a disk jockey, and falls back on the superstition that she can be defined by her relation to the masculine, which involves a great deal of suburban numbing, not to mention metaphorical sun glasses. Pierce's death and her appointment as executrix of his will, however, foil her avoidance: when "Oedipa stood in the living room . . . [and] tried to feel as drunk as possible," "this did not work" (9, 10). Oedipa's failure to suppress what she glimpsed that day in front of *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* seems to trigger a chain reaction of similar failures which ultimately cause her to discard her tinted glasses as obsolete, unravel the tapestry embroidered for her, and risk what her culture considers madness as she undertakes the embroidering of her own tapestry, the projecting of a world (cf. Cowart 29).

Both actual mirrors and the mirroring action of the text of *Lot 49* reflect Oedipa's confusion between fictions of the feminine and who she thinks she might be underneath them. Her confusion, however, is not solely the result of having no subjectivity and not being able to see the subject constructing her out of inverse fictions of itself; it results also from the male subject, the formless magic symbolized by Pierce's will, blurring those lines in order to keep her "where she is" by use of the male/female binary opposition which presupposes an essential femininity. Although Oedipa becomes aware of the representational structures that have determined her identity as a woman, to create her

own subjectivity she must first also become aware that her acting them out implicates her in that very system, a realization which occurs as the Tristero encompasses more and more of her reality, until finally she suspects she may in fact be the Tristero herself.

The mirror as a symbol of Oedipa's quest for her self, her identity as a woman, is both a subtext and a concrete image. Getting ready to go see Roseman, Oedipa spends "a half hour in front of her vanity mirror drawing and having to redraw dark lines along her eyelids that each time went ragged or wavered violently before she could take the brush away" (16). As an image, the vanity mirror itself alludes to culturally ingrained definitions of woman. However, "we may question whether woman has a choice of being or not being vain about her body if she is to correspond to the 'femininity' expected of her" (Irigaray 113-14). The lines Oedipa attempts to draw on her eyelids as she looks in the vanity mirror seem to foreshadow her confrontation with representation, or the question of whether to be seen or to see. Her difficulty in drawing those lines indicates the struggle that must necessarily accompany the feat of defining a subjectivity of her own in a culture where "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'" (Irigaray 133).

San Narciso is, appropriately, the locus for most of the mirror imagery in the novel. When Oedipa first arrives there, she stays at the Echo Courts motel. The motel's sign is a simulation of the mythological Echo with a face "much like Oedipa's." The description of this nymph reveals Oedipa's growing distrust of representation:

A representation in painted sheet metal of a nymph holding a white blossom towered thirty feet into the air; the sign, lit up despite the sun, said "Echo Courts." The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker's but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either. (26-27)

Oedipa seems aware, on some level, that the sign, aside from its general tackiness, embodies the identity crisis she has only begun to experience. Because the face of the nymph resembles Oedipa's own, it acts as a mirror for the culturally sanctioned femininity with which she is growing uncomfortable. That the sign is "lit up despite the sun" suggests the masking quality of her culture's representations of the feminine, as does the "lipsticked and public smile" of the nymph.

As the novel progresses, Oedipa is confronted with more and more (mis)representations of woman, such as Metzger's confiding to her that his mother "'was really out to kasher me, boy, like a piece of beef on the sink, she wanted me drained and white. . . . You know what mothers like that turn their male children into'" (29). Metzger evokes the myth that links homosexuality to the ever-present mother (Cixous, L 261). The title of the movie *Oedipa and he watch*, in which Metzger appears as child-star Baby Igor, mirrors Metzger's assertion that his mother was out to kasher him. Ironically, however, the mother in *Cashiered* is altogether absent. She is signified only by the "little submarine, named the 'Justine' after the dead mother" (31). *Cashiered* is blatantly the product of a culture in which the subject is "father, mother, and child(ren). And the relationships between them. What mockery of generation, parody of copulation and genealogy, drawing its *strength* from the same model, from the model of the same: the subject" (Irigaray 136).

Earlier, when Metzger initially discovers that the film is one of his own, and Oedipa, noting its title, guesses it is about Metzger and his mother, Metzger comes back immediately with "'About this kid and his father'" (30). The myth that the too-present mother engenders homosexuality in her son is wishfully inverted in *Cashiered* so that the only traces of the feminine, besides the *Justine*, are the old fisherman's daughter, "a leggy, ringletted nymphet who, should there be a happy ending, would end up with Metzger; an English missionary nurse with a nice build on her, who would end up with Metzger's father; and even a female sheepdog with eyes for Murray the St Bernard" (32). This male fantasy of avoiding homosexuality is more reality than fiction, for excluding the feminine from our social and cultural schema results precisely in homosexuality: "in our society representation, and therefore also social and cultural structures, are products of what [Irigaray] sees as a fundamental *hom(m)osexualité*. The pun in French is on *homo* ('same') and *homme* ('man'): the male desire for the same" (Moi 135). The economic system by which Pierce accumulated his estate is, of course, founded on a system of exchange modeled by this "desire for the same," in which women become commodities, spoils of war for "*my daddy, my doggie and me*" (31). That Oedipa's frustration culminates at the unceasing repetition of advertising representations of Pierce and his property—"say it once more, I'll wrap the TV tube around your head"—suggests that on some level she is beginning to feel the indignation necessary to reject male myths and begin creating her own.

Oedipa still, however, cooperates with some aspects of her culture's fictions of the feminine. In preparation for the game of Strip

Botticelli, she puts on several layers of distinctly feminine articles of clothing: "six pairs of panties in assorted colors, girdle, three pairs of nylons, three brassieres, two pairs stretch slacks, four half-slips, one black sheath, two summer dresses, half dozen A-line skirts, three sweaters, two blouses, quilted wrapper, baby blue peignoir and old Orlon muu-muu. Bracelets then, scatterpins, earrings, a pendant" (36). When she is finished, Oedipa finds in the mirror, not herself, but a "beach ball with feet," an image which makes her laugh "so violently she fell over, taking a can of hair spray on the sink with her" (36). In her wager with Metzger about the film's conclusion, Oedipa has bet, though she does not say so explicitly, her sexuality, and appears to do everything possible to forestall its unveiling.

Oedipa's laughter at the multi-layered version of herself she sees in the mirror is, interestingly, what induces its shattering: "The can collided with a mirror and bounced away, leaving a silvery, reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second before it all fell jingling into the sink" (37). Her laughter is perhaps analogous to what Cixous calls "The Laugh of the Medusa," a subversive action whose purpose is "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (L 258). But Oedipa still has a long way to go before she will be able to shed the layers of thought and behavior her culture has dressed her in.

The game of Strip Botticelli is a metaphor for the primary way she, a product of her culture, has been trained. As Alec McHoul puts it, "In trying to find who we are, individually and collectively, there is a very strong will to origin" (43), or to the idea of "Truth (as origin)" (42). Similarly, Jardine points out that "the stripping of veils, the ascendant 'striptease toward the Idea,' ordered by Man-in-command, is what Heidegger tells us has led to the twentieth century's dominantly pragmatic, when not imperialistic, posture towards knowledge" (148).

Oedipa begins asking Metzger questions about the plot of *Cashiered*, few of which she gets right. When Metzger, amused, asks her, "'Another earring?'" Oedipa responds, "'If I answer that, will you take something off?'" Metzger's enthusiastic "'I'll do it without an answer'" (40) illustrates that the game is an elaborate fiction set up to veil Oedipa's desire for him. Indeed, her impatience with the game is soon evident: "Oedipa removed a bracelet. So it went: the succession of film fragments on the tube, the progressive removal of clothing that seemed to bring her no nearer nudity. . . . Oedipa . . . [grew] more and more certain, while a headache began to flower behind her eyes, that they among all possible combinations of new lovers had found a way to make time itself slow down" (41). The game, however, fails for Oedipa. Because she has put on so many layers of clothing for the

game, its fiction can never be acted out to its logical conclusion; she cannot pretend to lose the bet and so remain passive in the culturally constructed fiction that she (woman) has no desire. The reader, as well as Oedipa herself, is aware all along that she wants Metzger. But "in ordinary existence, woman does not announce, does not begin things. It is agreed that she will not go after the object of her desire" (Cixous, S 117).

Exactly what causes Oedipa to act on her desire? She may initially have had no intention of doing so. Indeed, her response to learning that she had in fact won the bet with Metzger but given away the prize anyway expresses her confusion at having taken the wheel: "Oedipa had leaped to her feet and run across to the other wall to turn and glare at Metzger. 'They didn't make it!' she yelled. 'You bastard, I won'" (43). Oedipa is confused and frightened at realizing she no longer corresponds to the fiction that she has no desire. Earlier, just after the description of the game's slow and frustrating progress, things grow "less and less clear" for her: "At some point she went into the bathroom, tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn't. She had a moment of nearly pure terror. Then she remembered that the mirror had broken and fallen in the sink" (41). Although she then takes "the occasion to blunder, almost absently, into another slip and skirt, as well as a long-leg girdle and a couple pairs of knee socks," she begins to worry "that if the sun ever came up Metzger would disappear. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to" (41). When she leaves the bathroom, she finds him "wearing only a pair of boxer shorts and fast asleep with a hardon and his head under the couch" (41). Oedipa rushes to Metzger, throws herself on him and begins "kissing him to wake him up" (42)—an interesting reversal of the myth of Sleeping Beauty and all it implies about subjectivity. Perhaps Oedipa is able to acknowledge her desire precisely because she "tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn't." Perhaps the shattering of that mirror allows Oedipa to begin to cease seeing a distorted reflection of herself as a woman because as a woman she is (was) that very mirror. As Virginia Woolf says, "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35) so "he will see himself as he wants to be" (Cixous, S 69). Oedipa must step out of the looking glass and stop being Echo to Narcissus.

Oedipa's narcissistic culture, using as it does the feminine as a mirror, sees (constructs) ultimately only a fiction it mistakes for an essential reality. A narcissistic culture can thus never see itself, but only a wishful image of what it wants to be, which it then represents over and over as mirages to sustain the illusion that it is the first cause,

in which "the silent allegiance of the one guarantees the autosufficiency, the auto-nomy of the other as long as no questioning of this mutism as a symptom—of historical repression—is required" (Irigaray 135). In *Lot 49*, such a culture is all too accurately exemplified by Pierce Inverarity's will and estate. Pierce's will is the patriarchal text Oedipa must attempt to read before she can stop echoing it and create her own subjectivity. Madsen finds "a suggestion, sustained throughout the narrative, that Oedipa, like the nymph, has been doomed to repeat endlessly the same words" (56). Oedipa must ultimately realize she has been in silent allegiance with the text that has ensured her historical repression, and begin to create her own text, one which allows her to speak, see and represent.

By acknowledging and acting on her desire for Metzger, Oedipa has taken a step in that direction. By acting counter to the fiction that she has no desire, Oedipa is on her way to killing "the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing" (Cixous, L 250). As Metzger points out, she does win him, which is, after all, what she wanted from the beginning, a realization that seems to give Oedipa the courage to ask Metzger what she had initially refused to hear, how Pierce had represented her to him:

"What did Inverarity tell you about me," she asked finally.

"That you wouldn't be easy."

She began to cry. (43)

Oedipa realizes here that she has done exactly what Pierce and all he is coming to represent for her said she would do, expected her to do: she has enacted his fiction of her. Thus when Metzger urges her to "Come back'" (43), her response does not clearly indicate whether she wants to or is merely resigned to being a creature whose actions are conditioned and so predictable by men: "After awhile she said, 'I will.' And she did" (43). McHoul, however, posits that Oedipa "is able to bring her words (I will) and her deeds (she did) together" (52). The reader, in any case, most likely gives Oedipa the benefit of the doubt; for in the remainder of the novel, Oedipa acknowledges her desire to know about herself, to actively read Pierce's will after having had to live it for longer than she could remember. She is becoming "*at will* the taker and Initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system" (Cixous, L 250).

Only after this experience at Echo Courts does Oedipa begin actively to think for herself, to read her own experience for further clues to how it fits in with the big picture, the culturally approved

version of reality exemplified by Pierce's will and estate. The connections she begins to make initiate for Oedipa

the languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero. Or rather, her attendance at some unique performance, prolonged as if it were the last of the night, something a little extra for whoever'd stayed this late. As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration that would fall away were layered dense as Oedipa's own street-clothes in that game with Metzger in front of the Baby Igor movie; as if a plunge toward dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before The Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage, say good night with a Bourbon Street bow and leave her in peace? Or would it instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked to Oedipa's, smile gone malign and pitiless; bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear? (54)

The connections Oedipa is beginning to make are the result of her glimpsing what perhaps lies beneath the G-strings of historical figuration, the culturally sanctioned version of history and thus reality. The key characteristic of Tristero, or so Emory Bortz speculates later in the novel, is their emphasis "toward silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance" (174), a description akin to the position women have been forced into in our culture. Oedipa, after all, has apparently spent most of her life submitting to fictions of herself, mimicking them so perfectly she forgot she was acting out man's projects, projections and productions of her desire (Irigaray 53). Her image of the terrible nakedness that might lie beneath the layers of historical figuration—that Tristero would either flirt harmlessly and say good night with a Bourbon Street bow and leave her in peace or begin to speak words she never wanted to hear—indicates her reluctance to choose between a "true" femininity that might turn out to be all the old clichés of it and its mere displacement into the realm of culture. Oedipa somehow knows that in neither case would she be able to discover anything about herself. For Oedipa, postulating either a completely constructed femininity—a possibility she has in fact already considered—or a biological, essential femininity free from social and historical determination means regressing into the very binary opposition rooted in the male/female couple she has begun to try to escape. She seems to realize that getting to the bottom of what the Tristero (feminine) is means working "both sides of the essentialist/constructionist binarism at once, bringing each term to its interior

breaking point" (Fuss xiii). She suspects that making the Tristero speak, or represent, involves that same essentialist strip tease approach to truth, that, while it got her no nearer to nudity/truth/femininity, may help her at least see how the dominant historical version of femininity has determined who she is.

Ironically, to further her quest, Oedipa must do exactly as her culture has taught her to do so well through its adherence to the concepts of a unified self and thus an essential femininity. She must essentialize the Tristero and become Narcissus in a strategic move that will enable her, first, to see how her culture's inherited system of representational codes has molded her identity and, second, to realize that until now she has done absolutely nothing to stop it from happening—that she has in fact *been* the Tristero all along, silent and waiting.

As readers, and most especially as feminist critics, we can only hope that Oedipa will "go through with it" (183)—stand up and bid, exclude the excluded middle, and create an unexpected opening in which she can speak and thus perhaps write the birth of her subjectivity. By doing so, she can thus "affirm woman somewhere other than in silence. . . . May she get out of booby-trapped silence!" (Cixous, S 93). *Lot 49*, being about the birth of Oedipa's subjectivity, is also about the transformation of Oedipa's story into history. Because in her culture's system of representation "there are two things that cannot be represented: death and the female sex" (Cixous, S 69), her bidding, her "*seizing* the occasion to *speak*" (Cixous, L 250), cannot be represented within the confines of the novel. For "At the present time, *defining* a feminine practice of writing is impossible . . . for this practice will never be able to be *theorized*, enclosed, encoded, which does not mean it does not exist" (S 92). Thus Oedipa's bidding at the auction, if it does occur, marks her "shattering entrance into history" (L 250), her foreseeing and projecting "the unforeseeable." She is, "by her own movement," putting herself into the text (L 245), involving herself in the history we are still in the process of writing.

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