

## Re-reading *The Crying of Lot 49*: A Note on the *Oz* Connection

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"But I don't understand," said Dorothy, in bewilderment. "How was it that you appeared to me as a great Head?"

"That was one of my tricks," answered Oz. "Step this way, please, and I will tell you all about it."

— *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

A disembodied head floats in the shower steam in the dressing room scene of chapter three of *The Crying of Lot 49*. While Oedipa Maas interviews Randolph Driblette backstage after the performance of *The Courier's Tragedy*, "He stuck his head out of the shower. The rest of his body was wreathed in steam, giving his head an eerie, balloon-like buoyancy" (78). Just as "[s]omething came to her viscera" in recognition of Driblette's look of "deep amusement" (78), something danced in my viscera too in response to this visual image of Driblette's suspended head: the purely American fable containing the archetypal suspended head, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*,<sup>1</sup> "one of the most important cultural documents and fairy tales in American history" (Leach 1). Alluding to *Oz* by using the illusion of the floating head surrounded by steam is an apt way for Pynchon to introduce L. Frank Baum's nineteenth-century American trickster as a model for Driblette, trickster/director of *The Courier's Tragedy*.<sup>2</sup>

The *Oz* connection in *Lot 49* provides a mythic framework which helps define the roles and actions of both Oedipa Maas and Randolph Driblette. Pynchon's use of *Oz* imagery underscores both Oedipa's role as quester and Driblette's role as artificer. The implicit comparison of Oedipa and Driblette to Dorothy and the Wizard emphasizes the ambiguous and unsatisfying conclusion of Oedipa's quest in contrast to the thoroughly successful conclusion of Dorothy's. Edward W. Hudlin's study of *Oz* shows that its structure closely follows that of the heroic myth delineated in Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, and this connection of *Oz* and heroic myth is useful in analyzing the *Oz* imagery in *Lot 49*.

In examining the *Oz* connection, we should consider whether Pynchon draws directly on Baum's original story, published in 1900, or on MGM's film adaptation, released in 1939.<sup>3</sup> We are likely to think of the film first in relation to Pynchon's work, given his well-documented use of cinematic and pop-cultural images (see Marriott, Schaub, Seed, Simmon and Tate, among others). But while a great part of the cultural experience of *Oz* is the movie, the movie differs from the story in ways that are especially significant to *Lot 49*. Salman Rushdie compares the effects of the changes from story to film on the perceived message of the film: "In its most potent emotional moment, this is inarguably a film about the joys of going away" (97). Hudlin interprets the changes from story to film similarly: "the movie radically alters the theme of the original work and moves it from the realm of the heroic myth to that of escapist fantasy" (443n.1). Edward Mendelson, William M. Plater, Adrian Emily Richwell and Tony Tanner are among those who note that Oedipa's name associates her with the mythic, heroic quester Oedipus.<sup>4</sup> Such a conception of Oedipa's role points to the heroic myth of Baum's original rather than the escapist fantasy of the film.

Another connection with the original tale accounts for Oedipa's curious attachment to her green sunglasses, which figure significantly in the scene in which she views Varo's *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* (21), and just before she meets Stanley Koteks (84).<sup>5</sup> She uses her sunglasses symbolically to shield herself from the truth she both seeks and wishes to avoid. Green-tinted glasses are used similarly in *Oz* by command of the Wizard so the city in which there are no emeralds will appear emerald green to all its residents. Both the Wizard and Oedipa create and sustain illusions by altering perception through the use of green glasses. This detail is lost in the movie, thanks to the miracle of Technicolor, where the Emerald City is truly green, eliminating the need for tinted glasses. In the case of this motif, then, Pynchon's *Oz* allusions are not to the film but to the original story.

Hudlin's review of the subdivisions of myth helps elucidate Oedipa's visit to Driblette's dressing room.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Driblette assumes the role of authority figure for Oedipa; he possesses the power of illusion; and whether or to what extent Oedipa successfully supplants the authority figure remains, like the novel, open-ended.

Oedipa's entrance into Driblette's dressing room epitomizes the interview that follows. She "circled the annular corridor outside twice" (77), a phrase that also describes her circular approach to what will be revealed inside. Since Oedipa has come to learn about sources and analogues of plot elements and devices in Driblette's production of *The Courier's Tragedy*, she asks to see a script, which is kept in a

conspicuously out-of-place "file cabinet next to the one shower" (77). This misplaced file cabinet recalls the legendary origin of the name Oz, the letters O-Z on Baum's filing cabinet drawer (Rushdie 94). The script Driblette provides is merely a worn, dittoed copy, seemingly useless to Oedipa, who asks, "'Where's the original? What did you make these copies from?'" (78). (Later, Oedipa tries to track down the original at Zapf's Used Books, but she discovers multiple editions which blur the "reality" of the original text; Leach points out that there is also a profusion of Oz texts.<sup>7</sup>) It is while Oedipa is pressing Driblette about his source text that "He stuck his head out of the shower. The rest of his body was wreathed in steam, giving his head an eerie, balloon-like buoyancy." Pynchon underscores the image of the floating head on the very next page, this time adding more echoes of the Wizard. While Driblette is insisting that he is the informing spirit of the play, "a hand emerged from the veil of shower-steam to indicate his suspended head. . . . '[T]he reality is in *this* head. Mine. I'm the projector at the planetarium'" (79).

With a freeze-frame on the Oedipa/Driblette interview, it is easy to spot the parallels with the Dorothy/Wizard interview. In Baum's story, the Wizard first appears to Dorothy as an "enormous Head, without body to support it or any arms or legs whatever" (92). This head, surrounded by smoke, is an illusion, just like the illusion of Driblette's suspended head surrounded by shower steam. And both the Wizard and Driblette operate in much the same way. The Wizard creates reality—the Emerald City—while Driblette creates "reality . . . in [his] head"—the play. The Wizard rules by illusion—appearing in various guises—while Driblette rules by illusion—appearing as both actor and director, man and floating head. From behind a screen, the Wizard uses a projector to appear to Dorothy as a "great Head"; Driblette, claiming creative authority, calls himself "the projector at the planetarium." Like the Wizard, Driblette creates a world. Driblette, however, remains a shadowy and mysterious character by contrast with the Wizard, who, by the end of Baum's tale, is completely revealed and demystified.

Oedipa's conversation with Driblette prompts her to write in her notebook "*Shall I project a world?*"—the significance of which becomes apparent when we recall Oedipa's first impression of Driblette's eyes and connect it with her earlier reaction to the Varo painting. Meeting Driblette backstage, Oedipa is first struck by his eyes: "They were bright black, surrounded by an incredible network of lines, like a laboratory maze for studying intelligence in tears" (77). This description alerts us to pay heed to Driblette's effect on Oedipa because it points directly back to Oedipa's moment of partial insight in

chapter one that crystallizes with her viewing of *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*. There, she recognizes that the maidens in the painting are captive, and relating their captivity to herself moves her to tears, the tears her dark green bubble shades hide. She imagines seeing "the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry" (21). Connect Oedipa's "specific tears . . . [with] indices as yet unfound" to Driblette's eyes "like a laboratory maze for studying intelligence in tears . . . [which] seemed to know what she wanted, even if she didn't" (77): Driblette's lab maze can analyze Oedipa's tears.

Driblette already knows what Oedipa has yet to discover, and that is the same revelation Oedipa misses in her viewing of Varo's painting: the women in the tower are creating a world. Oedipa sees the tower only as captivity, when it can also symbolize elevation; she sees the homely activity of embroidery, when that activity is no less than creation itself. Making the connection to Driblette answers the hopeless, helpless question asked at the end of chapter one: "If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?" (22). The answer is for Oedipa to look inward and recognize that she already has the power to create as the women in the painting do, to create "reality" as Driblette does. She never understands the message of the painting, but because of the powerful impression Driblette makes, she partially internalizes his message of self-actualization. After the interview, she sees as "part of her duty . . . to bestow life on what had persisted, to try to be what Driblette was, the dark machine in the centre of the planetarium" (82).

Here is a point at which the novel could turn. If Oedipa could believe in her ability to pull the clues together, to assert the viability of a Tristero, the novel might not end in a whirling mass of innuendos and inconclusive evidence. At this point Oedipa might begin to grow from a passive clue-gatherer to an active and effective problem-solver. Alas, Oedipa cannot, does not, assert herself. She receives the message Driblette delivers, but translates it only into the tenuous question "Shall I project a world?" And in the very next breath, she equivocates: "If not project then at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among constellations. . . . Anything might help" (82). So Oedipa continues her search, never absorbing the message of the Varo painting or adopting the assertive posture of Driblette. Her half-enthusiasm leads her to Yoyodyne and Koteks, eventually to the Bay Area. The partial illuminations that occur there conclude with the miraculous choreography of the deaf-mute dance, where "they all heard [something] with an extra sense atrophied in herself" (131). But Oedipa "was only demoralized," "and fled" (132).

Dorothy, tireless quester, endures trial after trial so the Wizard will finally send her home to Kansas, only to discover that he is powerless to do so by magic and to find that his one attempt to take her home in a hot air balloon fails. Consequently, Dorothy recognizes that she already possesses all the power necessary to fulfill her wish herself. Both Baum's Wizard and Pynchon's Driblette are instrumental in redirecting the quester's search for power inward. Dorothy, of course, succeeds, exercising her power to send herself (and Toto) home. Oedipa, on the other hand, understands that she should "project a world," but her hesitant question never develops into sustained positive action. She continues on her quest, experiencing half-revelations through to the novel's inconclusive ending.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The original story by L. Frank Baum is titled *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The title was shortened for the 1939 MGM film adaptation to *The Wizard of Oz*. References to the original story are denoted here simply as *Oz*.

<sup>2</sup>For a study of the Wizard as a typical trickster figure in nineteenth-century American culture, see William R. Leach, "A Trickster's Tale" (Leach 157-88).

<sup>3</sup>Henceforth, all references to the film version are to the 1939 MGM adaptation.

<sup>4</sup>Richwell has pinpointed the source of the Oedipus model as *Oedipus at Colonus*.

<sup>5</sup>The glasses hide Oedipa's tears while she views the painting; she muses that she might "see the world refracted through those tears" (21). Before meeting Koteks, a possible agent of enlightenment, "All she could think of was to put on her shades for all this light, and wait for somebody to rescue her" (84).

<sup>6</sup>Hudlin points out that the Wizard is the "source of all power and illusion" (455), and that, according to Campbell, the authority figure possesses the power to transform himself and sustain illusions; the hero encounters the authority symbol and ultimately supplants the authority (457).

<sup>7</sup>Among other *Oz* adaptations are two film versions predating the MGM Technicolor classic, and a stage production in which "The Wizard from Nebraska was dumped for an Irishman; a snowstorm occurred in the middle of the show; and long lines of marching girls strutted on the stage" (Leach 159).

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