

Oedipa and the *Cristeros*

Edward Mendelson

"If they weren't Indians," Oedipa asked, "what were they?"

"A Spanish name," Mr Thoth said, frowning, "a Mexican name."

— *The Crying of Lot 49* (92)

[Credit where credit is due: I first heard about the *cristeros* from a French professor of English, whose name I neglected to write down, at a seminar on Pynchon in Paris in 1985. If he reads this note, I hope he will claim priority. I read about them a few years later in Ronald G. Walker's notes to his 1983 Penguin English Library edition of D. H. Lawrence's *Plumed Serpent*. Walker points out that Lawrence took the *cristeros* as the model for the fictional Knights of Cortéz in that novel.]

Readers of *The Crying of Lot 49* will not fail to notice the significance of the *cristeros*, a violent group of Roman Catholic peasants who fought against the Mexican government's attempts to reduce the power of the Catholic Church in the late 1920s. The *cristeros* were prompted to their brutal attacks by a series of events that began when the Church protested against the anti-clerical provisions of the revolutionary Mexican constitution of 1917. The government, under President Plutarco Elias Calles, responded by demanding loyalty oaths from clergy and by devising a plan for a Mexican Church that would be under the control of the Mexican government instead of the Vatican. In 1927, a few months after the Catholic clergy took the unprecedented step of going out on strike to protest the government's actions, the *cristeros* began their attacks on government institutions, including schools and railways. Their rebellion did not end until 1929. The *cristeros* themselves were mostly Creoles, although they were often referred to as Indians.

Like a certain fictional organization in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the *cristeros* left their mark in the form of initials that represented their slogan: VCR, short for *Viva Cristo Rey*. (The initials VCR had no special significance in English when Pynchon wrote his book.) The *cristeros'* acts were often grotesquely violent. For example, they tore out the tongues of teachers in secular schools—an atrocity similar to

one in Act III of *The Courier's Tragedy*. Their most spectacular attacks were made against trains. Early in their revolt, they seized the Mexico City–Laredo train, made off with government funds, and killed the train's federal escort. Shortly afterward, they killed a hundred people when they dynamited the Mexico City–Guadalajara train.

Both attacks perhaps helped to suggest an ambush against the Pony Express described in Chapter 4 of *The Crying of Lot 49*. The *cristeros'* counterrevolutionary opposition to the Mexican government perhaps found an echo in Pynchon's fictional nineteenth-century historical essay, quoted in Chapter 6 of the novel, about an organization whose members moved to America, "where they are no doubt at present rendering their services to those who seek to extinguish the flame of Revolution" (173).

Jesús Arrabal, the Mexican anarchist Oedipa encounters in Chapter 5 of the novel, perhaps takes his first name and his interest in miracles from the *cristeros*, although, unlike them, he is an anarchist who hates the Church. Both the *cristeros* and the Catholic clergy insisted that the revolt had no clerical support, that the uprising was entirely spontaneous, although priests were frequently reported to have accompanied or led the *cristeros'* attacks. Jesús Arrabal believes in "another world" where "revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless" (120); but his last remark to Oedipa is a decidedly non-anarchistic one: "The higher levels have their reasons" (121).

The story of the *cristeros* can be found in any history of modern Mexico. Pynchon may have found some of the details, especially the attacks on trains, in John W. F. Dulles's *Yesterday in Mexico: A Chronicle of the Revolution, 1919–1936* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1961).

Much recent criticism of *The Crying of Lot 49* attempts to trivialize the book by treating the Tristero as merely a linguistic problem, an undefinable abyss for interpretation. Yet it seems a bit hard on Oedipa Maas to let her suffer panic and isolation, make her endure the loss of all her human relations, cause her to face rifle fire, and induce her to tempt death by driving on the freeway with her lights out, only so she can confront linguistic problems everyone else encounters in kindergarten. The historical sources of the novel are a reminder of the life-and-death issues raised by the Tristero, their dense connections with violence and religion. Pynchon refers at one point to "the secular Tristero" (165). The *cristeros*—one of the sources accessible "through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she'd looked" (179)—call attention to a sacred and terrifying one.

—Columbia University