

"Words You Never Wanted to Hear":  
Fiction, History and Narratology in  
The Crying of Lot 49

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From the unnerving proliferation of critical responses to Pynchon's fiction in the seventeen years since the publication of The Crying of Lot 49, one of the more positive directions to emerge is traceable back to Edward Mendelson's Introduction to the Twentieth Century Views volume of essays. "To the methods of reading and criticism which the past two centuries have developed in order to domesticate romantic and modernist literature, the work of [Pynchon] is almost opaque and impermeable." Mendelson goes on to explain that one of the reasons for this perception of Pynchon's fiction as a radical, innovative and difficult project is the novelist's "refusal to dwell on psychological drama or domestic detail." He continues: "in its attention to the interior landscape, recent fiction has forgotten the density of the exterior one. Modernism prefers to speak of the world of politics and ethics in personal and aesthetic terms. Pynchon does the opposite. In his books, character is less important than the network of relations existing either between characters, or between characters and social and historical patterns of meaning."<sup>1</sup> Pynchon, then, is understood to have moved away from an interest in the individual and towards an interest in the systems, social, philosophical, economic or otherwise, which threaten the survival or autonomy of that hitherto safely assumed individuality. Mendelson's influence is felt across a range of subsequent readings, from

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\* First published in Tropic Crucible: Self and Theory in Language and Literature, ed. Colin E. Nicholson and Ranjit Chatterjee (Singapore: Singapore Univ. Press, 1984), 297-315; reprinted here for our readers' convenience by permission of the authors and editors.

<sup>1</sup> Edward Mendelson, in his Introduction to Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978, 2, 4-5.

the claim that "all of Pynchon's work to date is an examination of our current cultural problems, of their sources and possible resolutions" (Siegel 1978, p. 7), to the assertion that "Pynchon's books . . . reveal, and document the reality of history" (Schaub 1981, pp. 150-1).

In turn, this preliminary stance has been significantly extended in the first issue of Poetics Today, with Brian McHale's suggestion that Gravity's Rainbow is a text which challenges the competences and decorums learned from modernism, teasing the reader by introducing him or her not into streams of consciousness but frequently into streams of fantasy. Accounting for what he calls the ontological instability of Gravity's Rainbow, McHale explains that "having reconstructed a partial picture of the novel's fictive world, the reader learns that the episode on which he based his reconstruction never 'really' occurred after all." Such elusive modes of intelligibility lead the reader to feel "conned, bullied, betrayed," and this in turn suggests that "perhaps the question should be not so much what to make of [the novel], as what it makes of one." The conclusion offered is that "the effect of this troublesome novel is, finally, the salutary one of disrupting the conditioned responses of the Modernist reader (and we are all, still, Modernist readers), of de-conditioning the reader" (McHale 1979, pp. 91, 106-7). And as far as Gravity's Rainbow is concerned, the case is made, and made well. Naturally enough, Pynchon's big novel has tended to dominate critical discussion: the present paper seeks to establish that the challenges offered by Gravity's Rainbow to recently developed analytical procedures are posed also by The Crying of Lot 49, and that the unfolding of Oedipa's quest involves the reader in a similar scrutiny of the ways in which we interpret as we read; and in an analogous "deconditioning" of conventional assumptions about the relation between fiction and the wider world in which it is written and read.

The nature of criticism and of the interpretive act are, after all, occasionally subjects of The Crying of Lot 49. In his early Pynchon essay "Decoding the

Trystero" Frank Kermode refers to Oedipa's dilemma by suggesting that she is being confronted by a wildness of signifiers without it ever being clear, either to her or to us, exactly what structure can be discovered for those signifiers such that they could all be transformed into something whose significance is clear. "Making sense of . . . somewhat arbitrary symbolic universes, understanding their construction, is an activity familiar to all critics. . . . The activity of the critic . . . seeks order. . . . What Oedipa is doing is very like reading a book" (Kermode 1978, p. 163). The analogy is confirmed by a concern with deducing the significance, even the textual accuracy, of "The Courier's Tragedy," which forces Oedipa herself to become a literary critic of a sort. The play's director, Randolph Driblette, however, is dismissive of the validity of this role. "'You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. You know where that play exists, not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you're looking for, but'--a hand emerged from the veil of shower-steam to indicate his suspended head--'in here. That's what I'm for. To give the spirit flesh.'"<sup>2</sup> But then the director makes a remark which is destined to recoil upon Oedipa during her researches as it does upon the critic in his:

'If I were to . . . be washed down the drain into the Pacific, what you saw tonight would vanish too. You, that part of you so concerned, God knows how, with that little world, would also vanish. The only residue in fact would be things Wharfinger didn't lie about. Perhaps Squamuglia and Faggio, if they ever existed. Perhaps the Thurn and Taxis mail system. Stamp collectors tell me it did exist. Perhaps the other, also. The Adversary. But they would be traces, fossils. Dead, mineral, without value or potential.' (p. 54)

Driblette's dismissal of the possibility of any significance in the factual background to "The

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, 1966; rpt. London: Picador, 1979, pp. 53-4. All subsequent citations are to this edition and are given in parentheses.

Courier's Tragedy" constitutes a kind of anti-historicism which later appears more explicitly during Oedipa's subsequent encounter with Wharfinger's editor, Emory Bortz, but by that time it is already running counter to Oedipa's needs and expectations. "I would like to find out," she presently plunged, 'something about the historical Wharfinger. Not so much the verbal one.'

'The historical Shakespeare,' growled one of the grad students through a full beard, uncapping another bottle. 'The historical Marx. The historical Jesus.'

'He's right,' shrugged Bortz, 'they're dead. What's left?'

'Words.'

'Pick some words,' said Bortz. 'Them, we can talk about.' (p. 104)

Partly through such an encounter in the nineteen-sixties, Oedipa realises that her own education at an American university in the fifties had equipped her with a scholarly response to textual matters which obfuscates political or social understanding of the wider world in which texts belong--making her, as she says of herself, "a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts" (p. 72). As the novel progresses, Oedipa begins to learn the limitations of her conventional critical devotion to the word, and seeks instead, from Bortz and other sources, the sort of wider historical understanding necessary to contextualise the significance of word and text. The further possibility of rival, opposing and subterranean histories both increases her paranoid doubts while contributing to her partial enlightenment.

Much of the same diversion of interest from word and text onto history and background is experienced with Oedipa by the reader of The Crying of Lot 49, such participation being an inevitable consequence of the almost absolute congruence of the narrative point of view with Oedipa's own. Thus the reader shares Oedipa's uncertain attempts first of all to construe the implications of the novel's initial text, Inverarity's will, then of the textual variants of "The

Courier's Tragedy," and eventually of the whole bewildering miasma of cryptic signs, including acronyms and graffiti. Oedipa, in fact, is well named after Sophocles' solver of riddles, and the reader's complicity in her attempts to understand a world whose meaning is teasingly elusive bears further comparison with the detective genre, whose relevance to his own novel Pynchon indicates at several points, references to the radio detective character the Shadow being only the most obvious. Oedipa's detective work leads her through an unfolding configuration of historical clues to a conjectural conclusion of belief in the possibility of a subterranean organisation, the Trystero system, which may have played a significant part both within and as an alternative to the historical development of the world she inhabits. The reader, so generally confined to Oedipa's perspective, is in one sense singularly better equipped to assess and to attempt to validate the conclusions which Oedipa draws from the jungle of signifiers through which she moves. As readers, we are aware of the historical actuality of some of the novel's references in a way that Oedipa, part of the texture of the fiction, cannot be. Pynchon explicitly alerts us to this possibility in the passage quoted above where Driblette remarks that stamp-collectors had told him that the Thurn and Taxis mail system did exist. The stamp collectors are right, of course. Not only did it exist, but it delivered most of Europe's mail between 1290 and 1806. And this is far from being the only historical fact significantly reproduced in Pynchon's novel. Oedipa's unnerving descent into the historical penumbra of the Trystero closely parallels our own detection of a hidden history of actuality. If, as Driblette urges Oedipa to do with Wharfinger's play, we throw away the readily recognizable fictional elements in Pynchon's text, we do indeed find many residues "in fact," many things which Pynchon "didn't lie about"; things which, far from being dead, mineral, fossilized and inert, instead enshrine considerable value and potential. They are, in fact, vital clues for the ways in which we interpret our text.

The so-called "traces, fossils," because they do derive from the real world beyond the fiction, are

precisely what enable us to understand what Oedipa's experiences might signify better than she herself is able to comprehend them. One illustration of the importance of this possibility may be offered by considering its significant, if negative implications for an otherwise instructive approach made to the novel by the critic with whose counsel for caution concerning conventional approaches to Pynchon's fiction the present paper began. In his essay "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49," Edward Mendelson develops the engaging theory that "everything in Lot 49 participates either in the sacred or the profane." In this reading, the fact that the novel tells us that Oedipa has "all manner of revelations" (p. 12) suggests the centrality of religion in Oedipa's quest. And there is a persuasive structure of religious imagery running through the text to lend support to the notion that what we await at the end of the novel is a divine descent of the spirit of God to reanimate the despiritualised waste of shame which is the tale's California. It becomes crucial, in this schema, for Mendelson to determine precisely who in the novel is sacred, and who profane. The critic has this to say: "Metzger, who never takes the slightest interest in the other characters' preoccupations, seems to serve . . . as the representative of the entirely profane. His name, appropriately enough, is the German word for butcher" (Mendelson 1978, pp. 117, 124n). But it is also entirely typical of Pynchon's methodology that almost any of the stamp-collectors who helped Driblette might also have assisted Mendelson. Because of the peripatetic nature of their trade, German butchers in the Middle Ages were given letters to carry from village to village: Metzger hence came to signify "temporary postman." As mere notation this is slight, but it assumes considerable importance for a reading which proposes a sacred or pentecostal communication descending to earth to redeem the wasteland which the novel explores. Far from being an entirely profane character uninterested in the preoccupations of others, Metzger is the first person to "pierce" (p. 27) Oedipa, (the first lover after Pierce Inverarity, that is) before departing, and in that sense serves as annunciation. Moreover, as far as pentecostal imagery of tongues is

concerned, the novel describes Metzger taking Oedipa's hand "as if to shake on the bet and kissing its palm instead, sending the dry end of his tongue to graze briefly among her fate's furrows, the changeless salt hatchings of her identity" (p. 22). Tongueing her fate literally, and affecting her fate crucially.

In a contrary direction, John Nefastis is one of a long list of characters assembled by Mendelson as believers, members of the faithful in the novel, and religious rhetoric is extensively deployed to present him. The Latin etymology of his name, however, offers adjustment to this perspective. Nefas means unspeakable, and unpleasing to the gods; hardly grounds for attributing sacred functions to him as a character. It will be suggested later that there are excellent reasons for understanding Nefastis as a character whose experiments make him profoundly antipathetic to the ethos of the novel. (Some of his sexual proclivities might anyway have suggested that he is hardly a character to sanction affinities with the sacred.) Meanwhile, it is worth noting the significance for an understanding of Lot 49 of the things Pynchon "didn't lie about": of the small but suggestive historical or etymological clues he incorporates in his fiction. Mendelson's otherwise illuminating argument shows the peril of ignoring these. In the instances cited, his assignment to categories of sacred or profane may be exactly inverse to the text's implication.

The clues Mendelson might profitably have considered are merely examples, of course, of a very much wider suggestiveness created by Pynchon's complex system of reference to historical actuality beyond the fiction. Of itself, the appearance in fiction of the world as we know it is nothing remarkable: in many ways it is the stuff of novel-writing. What is remarkable in Lot 49 is the sheer density of such references and ATTUSIONS. Following the first paragraph's mention of Jay Gould, and on thereafter to densely-packed Californian contexts for Nazism generally, including the Gestapo and Hitler himself; to the exiled painter Remedios Varo, to Flores Magón, Zapata, and so on, there is a thronged layering of citations of what we recognise as the real world. And a particular feature

of these associations is that unlike Oedipa at the very beginning of her adventures, they are by no means confined to the contemporary world of the novel. Rather, they are recurrently and systematically historical. From the McCarthy era of Oedipa's student days, which is very nearly contemporary with the novel's own now, we return in Chapter 3 and the bones in the Lago di Pietà to episodes from the Second World War which themselves succeed what we have received about the Great War and the Gallipoli landings in Chapter 2. By the time we reach Chapter 6, the novel's historical references have taken us as far back as 1848, and in the history of Thurn and Taxis, far beyond that, back into the thirteenth century. Consequently, besides their particular historical character, the sheer profusion of these actuality references also begins to blur and dissolve the boundaries between what is real in the novel and what is not. For once having realized the historical accuracy of the established dominance of the Thurn and Taxis mail system between the years 1290 and 1806, we begin to wonder with increasing unease about the possible actuality of Wharfinger and even of the Trystero itself.

Yet when, after Peter Potamus and the Peter Pinguid Society, we encounter Rear Admiral Popov, with a name so redolent of the cartoon characters whom Pynchon loves to include or invent, we hardly give the possibility of his historical existence a second thought. Frank Kermode, in his book The Genesis of Secrecy, does not countenance the possibility, although he has, if somewhat nervously, historicised his earlier reading of Lot 49. So this episode, which "purports to describe an engagement between an American and a Russian war ship off the coast of California [in 1864]," is one which "admirably represents a modern skepticism concerning the reference of texts to events. . . . The only sense attributable to the naval engagement arises from the operation of coded fantasies in a lunatic group. And the impotence of that group, as we see from its account of the seafight, is such that their pseudo-history cannot supplant the official histories, which serve a different and much more successful ideology" (Kermode 1979, pp. 107-8). Although we have nothing to argue against the general development of



this reading, we do wish to suggest that Pynchon may be weaving further complexities around what Kermode now calls "a serious historiographical exercise," and that there are other possible ways in which sense may be attributed to it, so that when, after her traumatic night in San Francisco, Oedipa worries that she "would have trouble sorting the night into real and dreamed" (p. 81), the reader, too, feels a comparable uncertainty in the task of sorting the novel into real or imagined.<sup>3</sup> In the attempt to establish which of these multifarious references to what appear to be real history are in fact that, and which belong to some other realm in the author's imagination, the reader becomes a demon in Pynchon's world, struggling to sort the facts and developing a growing awareness that the history of the Trystero instructs us to understand the novel's final words, "the crying of lot 49," as something very different from a merely self-reflexive return to its title.

What we discover is that European refugees from the revolutionary ferment of 1848 begin to arrive in America in 1849, the year of the celebrated gold rush in California. And what then happens to those refugees is a discovery in turn of an American frustration of their political aspirations. In the reaction of Emory Bortz, "all the Tristero refugees from the 1849 reaction arrive in America . . . full of high hopes. Only what do they find? . . . Trouble . . . 1849-50 was no time for any immigrating Tristero to get ideas about picking up where they'd left off back in Europe!" (pp. 119-20). So the novel unravels the lot of those who drifted westwards to reach California, charting the subsequent corruption of the original forty-niners by

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<sup>3</sup> At a characteristically teasing level both of the possible sites for the mooted sea battle are geographically locatable off the coast of modern California. One of them is Pismo Beach--Pismo, the romanised form of the Russian word for letter. The alternative possible site recalls Mount Carmel where Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal: "Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God" (I Kings 18:24). Typically, in Pynchon's version either side may, or may not, have fired first.

the very urge which took them there in the first place. The open frontier has become "census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts" (p. 14) under the control of Moguls like Pierce Inverarity. In this way Pynchon intertextually translates to California in the west the terminal elegiac musings of Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway on America's eastern seaboard, where he is himself confronted both by the contemporary corruption of a dream, and by the still vivid sense of its once vital historical promise. So, as the crying of lot 49 becomes the crying or suffering of those who arrived in California in 1849, we are faced with another analogy between ourselves and the Oedipa who thought she was simply tracking down what Inverarity had left behind, "never suspecting that the legacy was America" (p. 123).

Neither did the unsuspecting reader expect such a slight novel about "a nutty American broad" to develop into a penetrating examination of the state of America, and more than that, an examination of how America came into being. Yet patently, the more we understand the book, the more continental its solemnity seems. For if Oedipa comes to realise, standing on the railroad track outside one of Pierce's factories, that San Narciso has lost its uniqueness, has been "assumed back into the American community of crust and mantle" (p. 123), then the reader experiences the concomitant revelation that the novel itself resists closure, gives up its own uniqueness, and is in turn assimilated into what we know about America, and the world outside the fiction. Those crucial years of 1848-9 resonate further through the text, and one way of tracking their significations is through one of Pynchon's early short stories, "Under the Rose," a phrase which occurs in Lot 49, and a title which plays with the idea of "sub rosa" meaning secret. Pynchon's narrator comments:

the events of 1848 and the activities of anarchists and radicals all over the Continent seemed to proclaim that history was being made no longer through the virtù of single princes but rather by man in the mass; by trends and tendencies and impersonal curves on a lattice

of pale blue lines.<sup>4</sup>

No longer amenable to manipulation by a single powerful will, or even to discrimination by an individual consciousness, history in this process becomes a mass phenomenon, perceptible only when reduced to a statistical performance projected onto graphs. In 1848 one aspect of resistance to this attenuation of freedom was rooted in the European movements of political anarchism. The notion of an anarchist resistance to a history that has somehow gone wrong is one which powerfully informs The Crying of Lot 49. "The Trystero drifted on," we are told speculatively, "reduced to handling anarchist correspondence; only peripherally engaged--in Germany with the ill-fated Frankfurt Assembly, in Buda-Pesth at the barricades, perhaps even among the watchmakers of the Jura, preparing them for the coming of M. Bakunin" (p. 119). In accordance with the kind of accuracy which we begin to suspect is characteristic of the book, we acknowledge that two of the people who did invite Bakunin to the Jura were in fact watchmakers. But Bakunin is mentioned twice in the text, and with Jesús Arrabal he may be said to appear a third time, in disguise, a use of coincidence which in this novel strongly suggests the possibility of deeper significance.

Michael Bakunin was condemned for his political activities to penal servitude in Siberia. To effect his escape he reached a port on Russia's eastern seaboard where he embarked incognito on a government ship, the Strelok. By chance, the Strelok took in tow the Vickery, an American sailing ship, and Michael was able to transfer to it and reach the Japanese port of Yokohama. There he boarded a ship bound for San Francisco, reaching America's western seaboard in 1861. It was a narrow escape, since the authorities knew of his whereabouts and, a Russian fleet being at that time in Yokohama preparing to sail for home, Bakunin was expected to return with it. The commander of the fleet, and in fact commander of the Russian fleet in the Pacific from 1854 onwards, was Alexandrovitch Popov (1821--1898). Given the ways in which

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Pynchon, "Under the Rose," Noble Savage, 3, 1961, pp. 227-8.

historical clues function in Lot 49, it is inevitable that the reader's attention is redirected to the account of the lunatic group, the Peter Pinguid Society, founded to celebrate the initial outbreak of hostilities between Russia and America; a state of hostility which survives into the now of the novel and also into our own present. But beneath this surface history of conflict Pynchon, as we see, subtly includes a sense of concord and conjunction; of illicit, "sub rosa" Russo-American cooperation. The idea that in apposition with various anarchist figures a miraculous sense of accord can be forged out of the disjunctions of received history is also powerfully present in the novel, with one suggestion of the way the idea presents itself to us emanating from Professor Bortz, as Oedipa pursues her own research. "But should Bortz have exfoliated the mere words so lushly, into such unnatural roses, under which, in whose red, scented dusk, dark history slithered unseen?" (p. 112). With this utterance we receive intimations of the phrase under the rose, and all its secretive connotations. But more intriguingly we are also given a description of what Pynchon himself is doing.

Beneath the pages of The Crying of Lot 49, constituting a sub-text to the novel's surface structure, dark history slithers unseen. Through the connecting presence of an historical anarchist, Bakunin, and his fictive counterpart, Jesús Arrabal, the novel achieves a secret integration as its surface account of familiar global discord, originating in this version in 1864, at first conceals and then reveals an opposing sense of cooperation in the Pacific. Clearly, the disorder which anarchism counterposes to superficial and orderly notions of rationality is very much a concern here. Such ideas of anarchy and of principles of order and disorder also require to be seen in the context of Pynchon's notoriously abiding interest: entropy, itself a thermodynamic version of disorder. Indeed, Pynchon's intimate familiarity with the pervasive use of entropy as an image of the apparent decay which seems to afflict any sense of the progression of events in the world in Henry Adams's version of history, is now a critical commonplace. And entropy in its thermo-

dynamic sense of disordered waste does intrude into the novel at several points.

But conversely, besides existing in that partially familiar thermodynamic usage, entropy achieves counter-active meaning in the field of Information Theory. As Nefastis tells Oedipa, "the equation, for one, back in the '30s, had looked very like the equation for the other. It was a coincidence" (p. 72). In the world of this novel the coincidence proliferates meaning. In Information Theory, entropy signifies the disorder within any set of possible communications or messages; a disorder which is necessary for communication to be viable or worthwhile. If a set of possible communications is entirely orderly and wholly known by the potential receiver of any message chosen from it, then nothing can be genuinely communicated in the sense that there is no prospect of the receiver's store of knowledge being enhanced or added to in any way. Communication, we know, figures largely in the book and there are, moreover, many examples of systems which fail because of their lack of entropy in the Information Theory sense: Mike Fallopian's reception of vacuous letters sent merely to exercise the system: the many, doubtless equally vapid "arid betrayals of spiritual poverty" (p. 118) which Oedipa begins to suspect any number of Americans are reserving for the official U.S. Mail. The important point in this respect is that entropy in its Information Theory context signifies something positive and worthwhile, a quality necessarily preconditional to the transference of information. Since it is communication which is the key to the redemption of the world of the novel, an inter-personalism which can rescue Oedipa and presumably others from a solipsistic "entrapment . . . in a tower," we recognise how functionally significant is Pynchon's linking of it to an idea of necessary disorder. The text rehearses once more its demonstration that anarchy, and disorder, far from being merely qualities that lead to the ultimate wasteland and heat-death of entropy in the thermodynamic sense, are potentially essential and regenerative qualities. This crucial aspect of the novel is revealed in one way through its peculiar linguistic adroitness--witness the punning on DTs/dt--to exploit superficial resemblances between different fields of knowledge. Moreover, in the

character of Nefastis, who explains one such resemblance to Oedipa, a further example is available of the very marked difference between the novel's own surface texture, and the latent, "sub rosa" aspect of its communication.

Nefastis's attempt through Maxwell's demon to extract mechanical energy by reducing a disorderly system to order, is anti-entropic in the Information Theory sense, therefore anti-communicative, negative; almost literally unholy in the novel's secular sense of redemption through communication. It is precisely because he is willing to exchange information for power that Nefastis is unspeakable to the gods; his machine swaps communication for a stultifying order. As the text expresses it, his machine implies a "'massive complex of information, destroyed over and over with each power stroke'" (p. 73). Later, after her waking nightmare in San Francisco Oedipa, too, "remembered John Nefastis, talking about his Machine, and massive destructions of information" (p. 88). Nefastis, by using the positive sense of entropy from Information Theory, and "wasting" it by trying to change it into thermodynamic order, assumes demonic proportions himself. Beneath the roseate exfoliations of Pynchon's style, we discover the hidden extent of its communications. Attentive reading of the historical sense and other clues which lurk beneath the semantic surface of the fiction not only rectifies such interpretations as Mendelson's, but also provides for an understanding of the novel as a whole and of the real significance of Pynchon's vision of Oedipa's unravelling of her Californian world.

The Crying of Lot 49 appears to demand, most unusually, that information and communication are preferable to order, and, Coleridgeans as we are, the strangeness of a work of art suggesting that what is required in life is not order registers as subversive indeed. Artistic advocacy of disorder strikes as perverse a readership trained to expect and seek out a fictive ordering of experience. Symptomatically, the way in which California is ordered within the novel intimates that disorder might be a healthy antidote. We read: "'the salvation of Europe . . . depends on communication'" (p. 113), a communication which may have to be achieved at the expense of the existing

order. If history has indeed become "impersonal curves on a lattice of pale blue lines," governed by reductive versions of actuality, then there is an obvious value in escaping from entrapment within that mass historical process by introducing to it a sense of anarchy; a sense of disorder. Such images function variously in the text. When Oedipa leaves Nefastis's house and seeks escape upon an appropriately named freeway, the freeway enhances her own sense of freedom by being itself disordered. "All the silence of San Narciso--the calm surface of the motel pool, the contemplative contours of residential streets like rakings in the sand of a Japanese garden--had not allowed her to think as leisurely as this freeway madness" (p. 75), where apparently random movement allows Oedipa a greater sense of herself. And such imagery is refined in the disorderly ordered dance of the drunken deaf-mutes in Oedipa's hotel. In perfect harmony with the free-floating discourse of her narrator, Oedipa muses: "There would have to be collisions. . . . but none came. She was danced for half an hour before, by mysterious consensus, everybody took a break, without having felt any touch but the touch of her partner. Jesús Arrabal would have called it an anarchist miracle. Oedipa, with no name for it, was only demoralized" (pp. 90-91). And it is doubly interesting that Arrabal, who introduces this notion of miraculous conjunction, and who is the novel's fictional anarchist, is himself firmly blended into historical fact in that the sixty-year-old syndicalist newspaper which he carries, Regeneración, is dated 1904. After the United States government attempted to suppress the newspaper by charging excessive rates for its postal delivery, 1904 was the year of its legitimate reissue.

Arrabal's acknowledgement that the "higher levels have their reasons" (p. 83), suggests that he is a character for whom history really does seem to flow unseen, and his reference to anarchist miracles follows the novel's second allusion to Bakunin. He explains to Oedipa what he takes the actual consensus which comprises an anarchist miracle to be:

'anarchists also believe in another world.  
Where revolutions break out spontaneous and

leaderless, and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself. And yet, señá, if any of it should ever really happen that perfectly, I would also have to cry miracle. An anarchist miracle.' (p. 83)

To read the novel religiously or sacrally, then, is to substitute Jesus Christ for Jesús Arrabal, and to envisage a pentecostal as opposed to the "mysterious consensus" of a secular, anarchist miracle; that anarchist miracle offered in the text as "a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know" (p. 118). Only by a disordering of this lack of potential for choice might a sense of freedom be reintroduced into the world of the novel. And finally, feeling as though she is "walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless" (p. 125), Oedipa, too, comes to examine the process itself by which she is forced to make order at all. Through her realisation that "excluded middles . . . were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity" (p. 125), she detects that what is at fault with her interpretation of experience is exactly her rigorous division of it into rigid categories, and that a literally more entropic approach to experience, a more anarchic sense of her world's possibilities is enabling. It is in this arduously achieved Keatsian state of uncertainty that Oedipa tremulously awaits "the crying of lot 49."

The novel's conclusion with this phrase, thereby refusing any resolving revelation of a unitary truth behind the ambiguities presented, requires to be seen not as an example of the self-reflexive negation of responsibility for the realworld beloved of the nouveau roman, but as a final deconditioning of the reader's expectations; a final indication of a proper methodology for interpreting his experience, which cannot be confined within any firm closure of the fiction itself. Oedipa's reflections when she meets the old sailor during her darkly epiphanous night in



San Francisco propose the sort of expansion in significance Pynchon seeks beyond the immediate context of the novel:

he suffered DTs. Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's ploughshare. The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreamer whose puns probe ancient foetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was. (pp. 88-9)

Fiction and metaphor bear an analogous relation to life and reality. Fiction can, at any rate, also be seen as a thrust at truth, an attempt to imitate and understand some of our experience of the world; or, simply and obviously as a story, an account of things which have not happened, a lie. By destabilising the relation between fiction and historical event in the ways indicated, Pynchon leaves the reader uncertain, like Oedipa, of whether he is "inside, safe, or outside, lost"; uncertain whether he is safely contained within an artefact created partly for the sense of order it brings to and imposes upon the randomness of experience; or "outside," reading a novel which directly reflects the threatening and unsatisfactory processes of American history, a real world of arbitrariness and contingency which has created the meretricious Californian contemporaneity which Oedipa encounters. Either way, the novel refuses any assimilation into a safely satisfying ending. These dual possibilities are only confirmed by the novel's "frustrating" conclusion. Throughout, the density and significance of Pynchon's habitual reference to facts and events in the real world beyond the literary artifice never allows the reader much of the security of an ordered and ordering fiction. It is in this way

that the novel presents us with "words you never wanted to hear," words which serve to connect our own experience with Oedipa's viewing with some horror her growing entrapment in the processes of discovery of the Trystero:

As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jewelled 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 towards dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before the Trystero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage, say goodnight 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? (p. 36)

Beneath the dense layerings of Pynchon's images and allusions lurks an aspect of his fiction which cannot be defined simply as performance, cannot be "flirted away" as only fiction, and which will not leave us in peace when we close the book. Pynchon's historical figurations compel the reader's attention onto a problematic historical reality from which fiction is never allowed to be a complete refuge. And we thereby see how carefully Pynchon "does the opposite," as Mendelson puts it, not only to the conventional "lisible" fiction which Roland Barthes maintains confirms readers in the bourgeois security of their complacent view of reality, but to the modernist work, which, whether or not we accept Lukacs' view of its deplorable irresponsibility to socio-economic actuality, certainly does retreat into individual consciousness and ahistoric memory as refuges from the exigencies of a collapsing European history around the time of the First World War.

If Lot 49 is thus distinguished by a novelistic strategy of opposition to much of the mainstream of twentieth century literature, it is likewise innovatory

in requiring and almost illustrating a critical strategy which does not fall back on the urge to "domesticate . . . literature" indicated by Mendelson. The reader can hardly fail to learn from the fate of a character whose interpretive dilemma is so close to his own. Like her namesake in Thebes, Oedipa discovers that a determination to reduce the riddling complexity of her experience to satisfyingly rational and unitary conclusions is one that only brings trouble on herself. Similarly, the readerly habit of reliance upon an explicative resolution of the symmetrical but antithetical possibilities the novel presents--"either you have stumbled . . . on to a secret richness and concealed density of dream. . . . Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you. . . . Or you are fantasizing some such plot" (p. 117-8)--is correlatively reductive and restrictive; a narrowing of focus which Oedipa learns to repudiate. She discovers that any possibility for redemption in the spiritless California she observes seems to lie with the potential of a secret anarchist community existing behind it, and yet able to dissolve its narrowness of choice, its "absence of surprise." So the text of Lot 49 reveals its own lack of interest in any conventional notions of fictional self-containment, committed as it is to an underlying world of historical actuality. This in turn requires a critical strategy prepared to look beyond the text towards such episodes as the "anarchist miracle" of Bakunin's escape. Odd though this requirement may seem, it is anyway, and obviously, fitting that a novel which so imaginatively asserts that communication can take place only if a set of possibilities exists sufficient to allow the element of surprise should itself communicate in surprising and unconventional ways. Then, a novel which proposes a semi-redemptive set of historical possibilities quite independent of, even antithetical to, the officially acceptable public history and actuality of America should communicate, itself, in a clandestine, sub-rosa manner.

This strange amendment of the conventions relating to the ontological status and communicative strategy of fiction, hardly recognised by critics of Lot 49,

has imperilled the validity of many of the novel's interpretations to date, illustrating what a recent reviewer calls "the manner in which Pynchon criticism regularly succumbs to a practical duplicity--talking about how Pynchon's works implicitly unfix interpretive authority while covertly advancing fixed interpretive viewpoints."<sup>5</sup> It is not the case that Pynchon unfixes interpretive authority to the point at which it is impossible to extrapolate meaning. What he does do, in The Crying of Lot 49, is to unfix the prevalent critical assumption that a literary text autonomously contains sufficient information for its own interpretation. Instead, Pynchon's concern with "social and historical patterns of meaning" requires the critic's own return to history, encyclopaedia, and other aids to the real, non-literary world in order to understand the full range of meanings and possibilities offered by the fiction. This is the best possible antidote to any literary version of the ivory-tower entrapment which threatens Oedipa at the end of the first chapter: a characteristic which makes Lot 49 such a responsible, and radical novel; never allowing the reader to remain "safe" inside the fiction, but directing him, rather, "outside" into engagement with the nature and origins of the threats of contemporary history. Pynchon's radicalism in this respect has been recognised in Gravity's Rainbow. In his second novel he similarly delivers his text from hermeneutic enclosure. Fifty days after Christ's crucifixion His spirit descended upon His disciples, confirming their mission and bestowing unitary significance upon their world. The digital aporia which ends, or rather extends The Crying of Lot 49 endlessly postpones such sacerdotal definition. Literary criticism has a lesson to learn.

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Ingraham, "A Practical Duplicity," Pynchon Notes, 12, June 1983, p. 52.

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