

## The Romance of the '60s: Self, Community and the Ethical in *The Crying of Lot 49*

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It is a subtle question as to whether a  
chimaera combining in a vacuum can  
sustain itself upon good intentions.

—Rabelais

Thomas Pynchon's literary production resides almost entirely within the imaginative dimension of romance, where the everyday is brought into close contact with what is wholly other and ordinary characters become protagonists of the romantic quest, confronting mysterious powers which threaten to take control of their lives. Romance permeates the life of consumer capitalism. Pynchon envisions the true democratization of artistic modernism, in which ordinary citizens—the engineer, the investor, the disk jockey and the housewife—all trapped in suburban solipsism, are driven to develop individual and fantastically elaborate schemes of power and transcendence. Comic reconciliation, in which these many quests might fold into one, is unthinkable. The society which could confirm its identity by such means seems to have disappeared. What remains is a vast productive system integrating its members according to a logic of its own, a logic which from the point of view of the individual appears alien and manipulative. *The Crying of Lot 49* is a late version of the quest-romance and an immanent critique of its form, measured against the historical situation of the mid-1960s with its special imaginative possibilities and limits.

Fredric Jameson has attempted to establish the practice of generic criticism on a historical basis.<sup>1</sup> In his account, genres like the romance are literary institutions which mediate between authors and readers. They emerge at critical junctures of history as imaginary resolutions of the historical contradictions felt in social life. Romance is the narrative manifestation of what Jameson calls the "ideologeme" of ethics, the binary division into good and evil. Following Nietzsche's famous argument, Jameson contends that the utility of ethics lies in the possibility of situating oneself in relation to that which is not oneself—evil, the unknown, the Other. The very form of the romance, in which the agents of good are set against evil and the unknown, is at its inception an ideological instrument designed to accomplish this goal.

Its original structure remains "sedimented" through later transformations "as a generic message which coexists—either as a contradiction or, on the other hand, as a mediatory or harmonizing mechanism—with elements from later stages" (141). The fantasy appeal of romance, however archaic in itself, is always at the service of new ideological functions, always available to be reinvested by the "political unconscious."<sup>2</sup>

Analyzing Northrop Frye's account of romance, Jameson distinguishes three basic operational elements of the genre which change over time: setting, or "world"; characters, or "actants"; and "semic organization," which in romance is the binary opposition good versus evil (111). By setting in historical contrast the "content" of each of these forms, as Jameson would have it, we can discern the particular structural limits of the historical situation in which Pynchon writes. In doing so, we can construct Pynchon's implicit critique of the romance itself, which is contemporaneous and in many ways coincident with Jameson's, and uncover the meaning of this version of the romance as the imaginary resolution of a real historical problem, postmodernism as the emptying out of the content of ethical thinking.

*The Crying of Lot 49* combines the aura of mystery, one of the most archaic features of the quest-romance, with the puzzle-solving element of the modern detective story, itself a late version of the romance. The object of the quest is an entity whose existence can never be established: The Tristero, a secret underground postal system connecting a heterogeneous community of Americans who are apparently communicating about all the things which are missing from the life of the heroine, Oedipa Maas. Whether the Tristero has any concrete historical existence at all, whether Oedipa has somehow dreamed it in the enchanted tower of self where she is imprisoned from the outset, whether it is all a conspiracy set up by her former lover, Pierce Inverarity, to gain revenge on her, to cheat death and live on as a paranoid fear in her mind, or whether she is dreaming even that, Oedipa, so far as we learn, never knows. The novel ends abruptly with these four symmetrical choices held out before her, and a frightening revelation perhaps about to descend.

Romance, in Frye's description, stages the meeting between good and evil, light and darkness, upper and lower worlds, here in "our world" (quoted in Jameson 111). Initiating a dialectical reading of Frye, Jameson argues that the "world" in which this confrontation takes place is not the spatio-temporal Cartesian world of realism we now inhabit. Rather, the settings of the events of romance—landscape, village, forest—are separate, discontinuous spaces, each with its own sense of time and "heightened symbolic closure."

Drawing on the phenomenological vocabulary of the early Heidegger, Jameson calls romance "that form in which the *worldness of world* manifests itself." In romance, the function of the characters as active agents diminishes. The hero becomes "something like a registering apparatus of transformed states of being, sudden alterations of temperature, mysterious heightenings, local intensities, sudden drops in quality, and alarming effluvia, in short, the whole semic range of transformation scenes whereby, in romance, higher and lower worlds struggle to overcome each other" (112). In modernist literature, the sense of "world" is typified by the epiphany, the empty moment marked by an expectation of revelation (135). Empty modernist epiphanies like those in Kafka, testifying to the "desacralization" and "constriction" of modern life, "draw their magical power from an unsentimental loyalty to those henceforth abandoned clearings across which higher and lower worlds once passed" (135).

We can see virtually the same analysis of the modernist romance Jameson performs occurring in practice in *Lot 49*. The sense of world has become part of the thematic content of the work, deprived of its position of authority, displaced from object into subject, as when, in an "odd, religious instant," Oedipa experiences a "hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning" in the similarity between the Southern California city-scape and "her first printed circuit."<sup>3</sup> The sense of "hierophany" (31) evoked in this scene—the term derives from Mircea Eliade<sup>4</sup>—can give rise to a properly religious reading of *Lot 49*. For Edward Mendelson, the "odd, religious instant[s]" embody a genuine experience, offering, if Oedipa could commit herself to them, "a sense of sacred connection and relation in the world."<sup>5</sup> This possibility is consistent with the motive of Eliade's analysis, to provide an analytic vocabulary for the religious experience that makes it intelligible to modern science while nevertheless permitting that experience to reflect upon the desolation of culture once religious experience has been explained away. But the use of a term like "the sacred" does set the religious experience at a diagnostic distance, rendering its appeal abstract and theoretical. And the world of the sacred, with the sense of revelation it promises, is only one of the worlds Oedipa glimpses. The Tristero turns out to be an impossible linking of heterogeneous worlds, and it is the very sense of the "worldness of world" which they offer in common. In moments of hierophany, Oedipa glimpses the world of Eliade's sacred savage, a life saturated in being. Seeking to gain access to this novel and precious commodity, she comes to realize that it is something entirely separate from the world she has known. "[T]ranscendent meaning," she wonders, "or only the earth" (181). By the end of her quest, Oedipa understands that "world" is always

embedded in a community. The narrator renders one of her meditations: "The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost" (129). Being inside depends on being able to enter a community with its specific forms of life, its world.

In *Lot 49*, then, the sense of "the worldness of world" has become a detached quality emanating from communities whose worlds are self-enclosed and impenetrable. Its philosophical equivalent is, not the Heideggerian sense of "world" as total "horizon," but a strong relativism like that espoused by Thomas Kuhn, for whom scientists in different historical periods live "in different worlds" constituted by different, "incommensurable" languages or "paradigms."<sup>6</sup> For as Oedipa strives to make contact with the hidden community of citizens who may have found a meaningful experience within the American chaos, she discovers that there is no longer a single America; there are now as many Americas as there are subcultures and countercultures, each speaking its own mysterious language, each with its own "special relevance to the word" (129). Wandering in Golden Gate Park, Oedipa meets a group of children who tell her they only dream of being gathered there; next morning they will wake up tired, as if the experience had been real: "The night was empty of all terror for them, they had inside their circle an imaginary fire, and needed nothing but their own unpenetrated sense of community" (118). Oedipa cannot enter the magic circle. She can come close to various enclaves of Southern Californians. She can even dance with them, as she does with the delegates to the deaf-mute convention, "waltzed round and round, through the rustling, shuffling hush." Yet she is nevertheless unable to detect the "unthinkable order of music, many rhythms, all keys at once," which somehow choreographs their dance and keeps them from colliding, "[s]omething they all heard with an extra sense atrophied in herself" (131). Without the extra sense that would take her inside the movement, Oedipa can only follow along limp and unmusical.

The customs, gestures and languages of other cultures transmit a utopian suggestion like that of poetry, for, like poetry, they offer a temporary abeyance of the habitual. Liberated from the fallibility of individuals, they emerge toward us, the relativized consumers of culture, with unself-conscious precision out of the matrix of metaphor at the foundation of culture. Our own "forms of life," to use Wittgenstein's phrase, could do as much for an observer to whom they were not familiar. *The Crying of Lot 49* represents the moment in which "American culture" has finally become just what these difficult words imply, one culture among many. It may be the first literary work

to render the experience of culture as such.<sup>7</sup> Here culture itself, the integrated sense of world, has been set at an absolute distance. Oedipa experiences what Eliade attributes to his sacred savage: an "unquenchable ontological thirst." "The world," Eliade writes, "becomes apprehensible as world, as cosmos, in the measure in which it reveals itself as a sacred world" (64). The "worlds" linked by the Tristero offer Oedipa the possibility of that total renewal of being which is the goal of romance. But the complete instrumentalization of the profane world in which she is trapped permits the perception of "worldness" only as an aesthetic phenomenon, an optical illusion. It can be attached only to a world which is not here.<sup>8</sup> In Oedipa's America, community and culture are imaginable only as the domain of another.

The element of scene in *Lot 49*, then, has undergone a radical transformation even from modernist versions of the quest. With this development comes a parallel transformation in the aspect of character. The problem of the constitution of the subject has now entered the text itself as the problem of Oedipa's detachment from all setting. Oedipa inhabits herself as a prisoner in an enchanted tower. The power that keeps her there she feels to be no part of her own world. Rather, her world is a creation of this force: "Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: 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). The problem of the subject generates one of Pynchon's central themes, paranoia. Paranoia is covalent with and opposite to hierophany, the sacred manifestation of world. In paranoia, the order of the world takes on an ominous prearrangement as the subject is gradually undermined by the suspicion that she and her very world are the creations of another. It signals the absence of any social or class situation that could be the basis of a sense of identity. Rather than finding herself in a community with its own world, defined by relations with other classes and the struggle with nature, Oedipa discovers herself to be part of a vast capitalist plot that keeps her from finding out where she is, what role she plays, or how she fits in. The dialectic of class struggle has given way to an experience of capitalist society as a great cybernetic system. Oedipa's search for community becomes an unwinnable game against this system in which the stakes are her own missing identity.

Jean-François Lyotard, for whom postmodern culture is a conglomeration of language games without general rules, has described the problem of the postmodern subject facing an economic system beyond its comprehension. The absence of any grounding

metadiscourse in society, according to Lyotard, does not prevent there being a general “cybernetic” system which governs the flow of information—the capital and life’s blood of the postindustrial economy—passing through the various “nodal” points of specific communication circuits—“young or old, man or woman, rich or poor”—at which are constituted our “selves.”<sup>9</sup> Lyotard observes that:

the trivial cybernetic theory misses something of decisive importance . . . the agonistic aspect of society. The atoms are placed at the crossroads of the messages that traverse them, in perpetual motion. Each language partner, when a “move” pertaining to him is made, undergoes a “displacement,” an alteration of some kind that not only affects him in his capacity as addressee and referent, but also as sender. These “moves” necessarily provoke “countermoves”—and everyone knows that a countermove that is merely reactionary is not a “good” move. Reactional countermoves are no more than programmed effects in the opponent’s strategy; they play into his hands and thus have no effect on the balance of power. That is why it is important to increase displacement in the games, and even disorient it [sic], in such a way as to make an unexpected “move” (a new statement). (16)

This description of paranoia and its agonistic hermeneutics finds a comic counterpart in Pynchon’s novel in a game of Strip Botticelli that pits Oedipa against Inverarity’s lawyer, Metzger. The seduction scene is played out against the background of a bewildering variety of media fragments, which Oedipa hopes to reorder into a stable framework in which to form a private bond with Metzger. To succeed, she will have to get him to play her game. But Metzger, incorrigible creature of the system, compulsively straitjackets every object of his attention into the terms of the Inverarity estate, starting with Oedipa herself. “Inverarity only mentioned you to me once,” he tells her. “Don’t you want to know what he said?” (29). Oedipa declines, not wanting to be cast in the role of Inverarity’s ex-lover. She wants to become involved with Metzger only on her own terms, to make the same romantic “move” as he does, but as part of a different game. The agonistic foreground to the act of communication has been established.

To keep Metzger from telling her Inverarity’s version of their romance, Oedipa turns on the television, which becomes the field of contest for the game of Strip Botticelli. Strip Botticelli is an unusually exciting form of literary criticism. Oedipa wagers, going against all the generic cues, that the movie *Cashiered*, starring Metzger himself in his earlier role as the child actor Baby Igor, will have an unhappy ending. If she is wrong, Metzger can have his way with her. Metzger turns out

to be a difficult opponent because he is virtually inextricable from the game itself, possessing an "extended capacity for convolution" (33). Having initially been skeptical of Metzger's Baby Igor story, which sounds like a sympathy line, Oedipa is now confronted with the image of Baby Igor himself "bloom[ing]" onto the screen. The very title of the film, *Cashiered*, echoes Metzger's account of his childhood with a mother who "was really out to kasher" him (29). The war-movie parody presents Oedipa with one of her first either/ors: "Either he made up the whole thing . . . or he bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this, it's all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, plot" (31).

The difficulty of making anything simple out of the incommensurable paradigms which converge in this scene becomes apparent when Metzger begins describing the scenes of the movie. Despite its absurd antics and artificial look, with backgrounds of "phony-Dodecanese process footage of a seashore at sunset" (30), Metzger narrates the action as if it had all actually taken place during the First World War—"Wasn't I there?" (32)—even supplying censored details: "For fifty yards out the sea was red with blood. They don't show that" (36). At the same time, the game of Strip Botticelli spreads out beyond the plot of the movie. Each commercial leads to the hydra-headed Inverarity estate, as charted by Metzger. Oedipa puts on so much clothing for this game to provide capital for her wild guessing that she looks like "a beach ball with feet" (36), and her contretemps with the hairspray can in the bathroom takes the scene down to the level of particle physics, while the noise of the film provides a background of naval ordinance. The strange mix-ups in the order of the film reels make Oedipa's interpretive task that much more bewildering. In the middle of this entropic spiral, the sight of Metzger's pot belly, the one humanizing blemish on his actor's facade, helps release Oedipa's passion, and even that is suspect: "Oedipa rushed to him, fell on him, began kissing him to wake him up. His radiant eyes flew open, *pierced* her" (42; emphasis added)—suggesting, as commentators on this scene have often noted, that Metzger has not triumphed in his own person. Oedipa winds up seduced and shocked to see that she has given in prematurely:

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."

"You won me," Metzger smiled.

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

"That you wouldn't be easy."  
She began to cry. (43)

Oedipa's very resistance has been anticipated and programmed into the system. The surreal fragmentation of setting and plot in this seduction makes it impossible for her to separate reality from manipulation. The medium of story itself, the film, even though it is already made and therefore seemingly reliable as an interpretive context and phenomenon to hinge a bet on (33-34), gets disrupted, confused, invaded by other orders of being, and finally mooted altogether. The fact that Oedipa's guess about the ending was correct is no consolation. Whether Inverarity planned this whole setup for Oedipa, or whether convolutions follow naturally from his being, he succeeds in keeping her "encapsulat[ed] in her tower" (44) long after his death. Inverarity is the consummate capitalist middleman, coming between Oedipa and anyone or anything she tries to touch. While Lyotard preserves a certain hope in the individual's inventiveness to cope with the demands of this pervasive system, a hope based on the creativity of our "performing selves" (as Richard Poirier puts it in a similar vein), Pynchon shows the self to be hopeless, indeed nonexistent, without a stable social context.

Oedipa's search for the grounds of genuine communication, an attempt to constitute herself as a subject, takes several further forms in the novel. She hopes her activity as a decoder of signs will eventually lead her to the source of the Tristero, but her intricate and arcane researches are so monotonously rewarding that her paranoia only increases. The more she investigates, the more agonizing becomes the difficulty of separating genuine revelation or communication from paranoid fantasy. Haunted by the metaphor of entropy, Oedipa comes to think of herself as a Maxwell's Demon, unable, as in the famous thought experiment, to generate energy by sorting. Indeed, as modern physics would lead one to expect, her sorting seems to make entropy increase. The more she investigates, the more of her companions drop away into suicide or madness—as if she were responsible.

As Oedipa's options narrow, her paranoia grows. Loss becomes her preoccupation, including the loss of self which comes of her separation. Mourning the death of Driblette, the theater director, she sits on the ground at his unorthodox wake:

wondering whether . . . some version of herself hadn't vanished with him. Perhaps her mind would go on flexing psychic muscles that no longer existed; would be betrayed and mocked by a phantom self as the amputee



is by a phantom limb. Someday she might replace whatever of her had gone away by some prosthetic device, a dress of a certain color, a phrase in a letter, another lover. (161)

As Wittgenstein put it, "the human body is the best picture of the human soul."<sup>10</sup> Oedipa's soul seems to be deteriorating and in need of prosthetic help as the world of Driblette, where she had begun to take on being, fades. The problems of subject and of world prove inseparable.

Metaphor is a kind of prosthesis, an extension of language to create a new "form of life." After a long night's journey into the netherworld of San Francisco during which she is driven nearly to distraction by signs of the Tristero, Oedipa meets an old sailor with delirium tremens, "a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare" (128), who has diffused the fantasy residue of his tormented being into the stuffing of his mattress, "like the memory bank to a computer of the lost" (126). Oedipa, suffering from an intense ontological thirst, fails to gain access or insight into this world rich with being. Instead, she fastens on the unsuspected similarity between the "DT's" which shake the sailor and "delta-t" from the symbolism of calculus (128-29). Instead of attempting to enter the sailor's world, as she did with Metzger, Oedipa integrates the sailor's world into a metaphoric scheme of her own. She becomes a Levi-Straussian *bricoleur*, gathering elements from different orders of being and, by virtue of a similarity in their previously unrelated characteristics, integrating them into a new order.<sup>11</sup> But it is now too late, it seems, for recourse to *la pensée sauvage*, nor can the modernist motif of time any longer provide convincing closure for a narrative authored by a character without a world, which is still Oedipa's condition as long as there is no one to share her metaphor. "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" (129). She remains on the horns of a dilemma, a dilemma which now seems to be inherent in the very process of thinking. This brings us to the third element of romance which undergoes transformation in *Lot 49*, the binary opposition which is the structure of ethical language and of the romance.

The third element in Frye's account of romance, to which Jameson gives a separate history, is semic organization, the thematic articulation of the text. For Frye, the romance deploys its forces in the categories of good and evil, the absolute ethical dichotomy on which all the other thematic registers—high and low, light and dark, and so on—depend. Jameson argues that the binary structure of good and evil is not a permanent potential of the human mind, as Frye implicitly takes it to

be, but a historically situated ideological apparatus, "a form without content which nonetheless ultimately confers signification on the various types of content (geographical, sexual, seasonal, social, perceptual, familial, zoological, physiological, and so on) which it organizes" (113-14). Ethics becomes a narrative system with a specific ideological function, the locating of the Other, that opposing social and economic group which permits the definition or reaffirmation of one's own class identity. Evil, as Nietzsche defines it, occupies the position of that which is fundamentally different (and other) from oneself. Jameson concludes that romance, unlike tragedy and comedy, cannot transcend good and evil. In *Lot 49*, romance does transcend the ethical, but only in witnessing the moment of its disappearance.

The ethical potential of romance, the situating of the Other, already appears greatly limited in modernism. Kafka raises the problem of establishing the ethical situation in an especially complex way. In *The Castle*, arguably the most powerful modernist version of romance, the hero confronts the Other, not in the obstacles keeping him from the goal of his quest, but in that goal itself, a situation which puts him necessarily in default even before he starts. The goal of the quest has itself become alien. In *The Trial*, the forms of judgment and punishment applied to the protagonist from this alien point of view may be absurd, but they are potent nonetheless, as the story's conclusion demonstrates. The perspective of Nietzsche's formula for ethics has been reversed. Good has been set at an absolute distance, a position from which it can still carry out its condemnation and vanquishing of evil. The place of evil is now occupied by the protagonist, whose ethical life is thereby made incomprehensible, completely other. The displacement of the protagonist into the position of the Other is literalized in *The Metamorphosis*, where Gregor Samsa finds himself unable to establish even his humanity from any point of view outside his own.

For our purposes, a better modern example of the functioning ethical narrative is the detective novel, which provides the format for *Lot 49*. The detective genre emerged as part of the same fragmentation of culture into high and low that generated modernism. Early versions, like Wilkie Collins's *Moonstone*, produced a form of class fantasy, involving in that novel the relations between the British ruling classes and their colonial subjects.<sup>12</sup> The violence in *The Moonstone's* narrative present is retribution for crimes of the colonial past, now situated at a gothic distance. The detective novelist's requirement for serviceable villains has notoriously fallen upon the exotic, the marginal, the servant class, or convenient middling types—the butler. But as the subgenre has been detached from its original

class function, its register has gradually narrowed to a single code, the code of detection. The investigator, operating in the Holmesian manner on scientific principles, reconstructs the characters' psychological, social, and economic dimensions purely as motives for crime. The characters thus become functionally interchangeable, an entropic leveling later detectives have tended to exploit: suspicion circulates across the whole system of characters, sometimes even including the narrator, thus heightening the anticipation of bureaucratic violence. With this level of semantic redundancy, the resolution can only seem unmotivated, an anticlimax. The *ante*-climactic "ending" of *Lot 49* is an ingenious formal solution to this problem, perhaps the only one possible for a form of writing whose initial class setting has been eclipsed. Without a credible goal to be reached or villain to be overcome, the postmodernist romance should go on forever.

The binary opposition which finds ethical thinking is suspect from the very beginning of *Lot 49*, when one object of Oedipa's quest is seen to have the duplicitous name Inverarity (in truth/untruth). Faced with such conundrums, binary thinking itself comes to seem an arbitrary formalism which generates its contrary, diversity. Diversity and homogeneity survive as the shadows of good and evil in a culture of "cultures." Value migrates into what Oedipa calls the "excluded middles" as she revives in memory the polar oppositions which have constituted her interpretive task all along:

She had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity? For it was now like 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. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth. (181)

Paranoia or emptiness, the Tristero or "just America" (182). Oedipa's binary interpretive dilemma—"inside, safe, or outside, lost"—is now embedded within every coded detail of the plot. The Tristero, whose opposite is just America, itself has a double nature, offering both the prospect of genuine communication and its opposite, silence, expressed in the Tristero symbol, a muted post horn, and in one of its legends, "DEATH" ("Don't Ever Antagonize the Horn" [121]). The Tristero is Otherness itself, which now contains both good and evil—in other words, the possibilities of real life and community which can found a world. The Tristero is the life that has been excluded from America. Its existence as a mere shadow standing alongside reality

signals the loss of contact with even the most naive and sentimental version of nature as Other, a loss Oedipa experiences at the end of the novel when she can no longer find "her bearings" (177) on the "unimaginable Pacific," which had once seemed to her a principle of "redemption for Southern California," a principle that could assume "the ugliness at any edge into some more general truth" (55). She even feels a sense of loss for the conquest of America once open to Inverarity, the last of the heroic capitalists. The mythic dimension of America as a sublime challenge of nature, evoked so often in American literature—still potent with nostalgia, for instance, at the end of *The Great Gatsby*—here shrivels with the eclipse of nature itself. The natural as a force against which the self can try its possession of culture, and against which culture can be tried at the behest of self, has moved out of view, and with it the situation of class opposition on which the sense of community, of social existence itself, is based.<sup>13</sup>

With no resistance to engage, no visible Other, the apparatuses of thought available to Oedipa seem to hang in empty opposition. But *Lot 49* is not a weightless postmodern writing machine like *Gravity's Rainbow*. In the upheavals of the mid-1960s, those things which seemed to have been excluded from American life took on a revolutionary dynamism of their own. The very idea of culture offered the possibilities of a transformation both political and personal. Throughout the decade, the radical Left defined itself by identification with Third World revolutionaries, first Cuban, then Chinese and Vietnamese. Life was elsewhere, but by a kind of sympathetic magic, it could be conjured, and often with startling results. The mere presence of other cultures, or "countercultures," in which ethical potential still seemed to exist, held a promise of life, of "authenticity." Protest came to seem as much a matter of style as of action. The aura of expectation pervading *Lot 49*, with its pre-apocalyptic ending, held together the excitement and fear of a new politics.<sup>14</sup>

Because *Lot 49* thematizes binarism in its functioning as a structure, there is no possibility of resolving its final conundrum: The Tristero, or just America. One cannot be negated without the other. And yet the hung ending does represent a potent solution, for the very failure to reveal the Tristero preserves the possibility of its existence. Each detail of the novel's own world, or its many worlds, hanging on the threshold of meaning, takes on the vibrancy of suggestion belonging to those gestures and forms of life whose meaning we do not yet understand:

She remembered drifters she had listened to, Americans speaking their language carefully, scholarly, as if they were in exile from somewhere else

invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in; and walkers along the roads at night, zooming in and out of your headlights without looking up, too far from any town to have a real destination. And the voices before and after the dead man's that had phoned at random during the darkest, slowest hours, searching ceaseless among the dial's ten million possibilities for that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word. (180)

Oedipa has come to the special nightmare of postindustrial capitalism and its culture of anticipation—to experience every particle of existence with the sublimity and strangeness of utopia.

It would be customary in the practice of Marxist criticism to offer at this point a dialectical treatment of Pynchon's pre-apocalyptic ending and its aesthetic effect. The novel's incompleteness would signal the unavailability of the ideological resources which permit closure, the gathering and discharging of all elements of the story in a satisfying imaginary resolution of the class contradictions engaged. The hung ending would be read as an effect of the limits imposed by history, more specifically of the process by which storytelling and the ethical life which depends on it have become commodities. At the same time, the novel would be seen to have achieved a kind of aesthetic closure, based not on the resolving of plot but rather on a determinate foreclosure of narrative possibilities. The resulting effect, equated above with the setting of culture itself at a distance, would be seen to have a utopian potential.

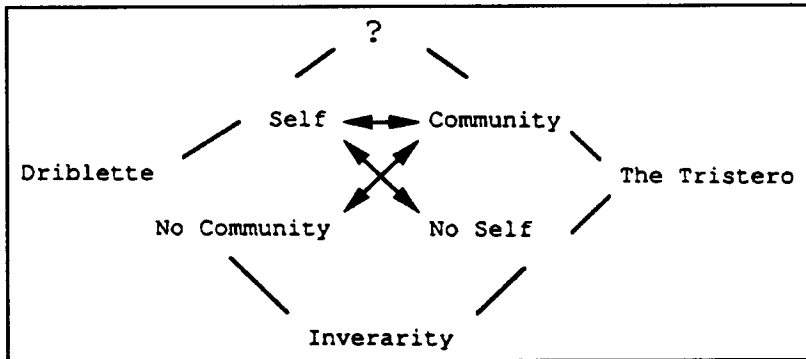
But at this point a special self-consciousness invades our analysis, as we experience an ominous prearrangement no different from Oedipa's paranoia. For the doubleness or dialectical quality that might be attributed to the novel as a whole is impossible to distinguish from the doubleness that attaches within the novel to the Tristero, and indeed to every word of the story, which may turn out to be either just a word, or "the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (118). Jameson himself calls attention to the fact that Marxism shares the ethical structure of romance, and that it has not succeeded in transcending the language of good and evil. Pynchon's form of the romance seems to have set the ethical at a utopian remove, leaving its potential to be "fulfilled" (if this word can be used in an ethically neutral sense) by an action or event outside ethical calculation. Jameson specifies the transcending of the ethical in some yet-to-be-invented collectivity in which occurs a decentering of the individual subject more authentic than the mere dispersal envisioned in the

various poststructuralisms. At this juncture, then, when the instrument of analysis, Jamesonian Marxism, and the object of analysis, *The Crying of Lot 49*, appear to stand in mutual reflection, one direction has been foreclosed, and this investigation may be doomed to imitate the hung ending of its subject. A question which cannot be pursued here is whether the operations of romance and ethics can be rigorously identified or whether their apparent identity is a mere product of the social disintegration we are trying to understand.

Having gone as far as possible in the attempt to unearth *Lot 49's* "content of form," we can now complete our analysis by turning to the "form of content," that is, set out the system of Pynchon's characters as an inventory of the possibilities and limits of a particular ideological fantasy (Jameson, PU 46-49). As we have seen, *Lot 49* as a vehicle of social desire stands over against a moment in which the situation of class has been eclipsed, the line between "inside, safe," and "outside, lost," now impossible to locate. As an aspect of form, this situation motivates the detachment of character from world. Restated in social terms, it is experienced as a separation of Self from Community. Oedipa Maas represents the classic American liberal; at one point she even imagines she could implement her vision of diversity by redistributing Inverarity's wealth (181). But she could attempt to do this only from within a community. Without a stable sense of reality shared with others, she has only paranoia left to her. *Self* and *Community*, then, are the two major poles of this ideological system, each of which, following Jameson's use of the Greimas rectangle, can be seen to generate its contradictory: *No Self* and *No Community*. Our system, as plotted below, will have four binary terms, each a different combination of these contrary poles and their contradictories. Thought of in this way, the division between Self and Community which sets Oedipa on her search is a historical contradiction presenting an antinomy to thought, an antinomy which can be rendered in the form of a question: Is it possible, at this historical juncture, to imagine a character in which are united these now contrary dimensions of existence, the Self and the Community?

Oedipa's sense of self is painfully unfastened; but the purest example of *Self Without Community* in *Lot 49* is Driblette, the director, the sole "'projector'" in his theatrical "'planetarium'" (79). Driblette inhabits the world of the solipsist and the Emersonian, a world entirely imaginary and self-sustaining. His suicide remains inexplicable, though it is the ethical correlative of his form of being. That part of Oedipa which was involved with him disappears with the world he takes back into nothingness. Opposed to Driblette, possessed of *Community Without Self*, are the members of the Tristero. Their existence remains

tantalizingly hypothetical. Oedipa can never even be sure she has met one, though the alcoholic sailor provides a suggestion of their intense collective being. The position of *No Self, No Community* is occupied by Pierce Inverarity, a man of many identities, an incarnation of the post-ethical logic of capitalism. Inverarity's conversation is a pastiche of American popular culture. After his death, he lives on as a paranoia in Oedipa's mind, which is to say he persists only by being ultimately indistinguishable from the effects of the contradiction he (capitalism) has created: the Tristero, or just America. All these characters, in their shadowy, one-dimensional modes of existence, make intelligible the ethical impoverishment of Oedipa's America.



Finally, the last position in the Greimas box is indeed occupied in the novel, though by a madman (madness functioning here as a kind of Freudian defense mechanism, a negation which permits this combination to appear). *Self and Community* come together in the unlikely person of Oedipa's husband, Mucho Maas, the used-car salesman turned disk jockey, who finds the solution to his crisis of conscience in LSD. At the beginning of the novel, "the impressionable Mucho" is described as having been pained by the sight of trade-in automobiles, "motorized, metal extensions" of their owners, and by the "actual residue of these lives" which he had had to remove from the cars, "a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash":

Even if enough exposure to the unvarying gray sickness had somehow managed to immunize him, he could still never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life. As if it were the most natural thing. To Mucho it was horrible. Endless, convoluted incest. (13-14)

The incestuous mingling of selves and commodities drives Mucho first into a new life as a disk jockey and adolescent-sex guru, then into a hallucinogenic mania. LSD opens the doors of perception. “[Y]ou don’t get addicted,” he tells Oedipa. “It’s not like you’re some hophead. You take it because it’s good. Because you hear and see things, even smell them, taste like you never could. Because the world is so abundant. No end to it, baby. You’re an antenna, sending your pattern out across a million lives a night, and they’re your lives too” (143–44). In Mucho’s mind, the ultimate ‘60s love-feast—America—becomes a single voice: “you’d have this big, God, maybe a couple hundred million chorus saying “rich, chocolaty goodness” together, and it would all be the same voice” (142). Mucho has made contact with that “magical Other” Oedipa has been searching for. It does not speak “the Word” Oedipa, unreconstructed Puritan and literary critic, expects. Rather, it is “the human voice . . . a flipping miracle” (143) that speaks, a voice infinitely amplified, an expansion and diffusion of consciousness from the older, literary forms of culture into the electronic collectivity. Its content is pure sensation: “rich, chocolaty goodness.”

Considered as a character, Mucho is mad. But as a form of social being, he prefigures the decentered practice of *écriture* that emerges full blown in the voice of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, with its voyeuristic detachment, super-irritable sensorium, and kaleidoscopic pastiche. Mucho’s transformation from guilty salesman to ecstatic media prophet mirrors the psychological adjustment made by the American economy as a whole in its transition from the work ethic of the 1950s to the explosive consumerism of the ‘60s. The antinomy of *Self and Community* has been resolved, but not without a metamorphosis in both terms. If the Tristero embodies the romance of Community set at an absolute distance from the desiring Self, Mucho Maas embodies the collapse of this distance into the absolute proximity of an undifferentiated social space in which Self and Community are indistinguishable. It is the balance between these contrary forms of social life, a balance both precise and incongruous, that permits the wit of Pynchon’s romance, its realism disguised as fancy, its grotesquery, nostalgia, and fright.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 103–50.



<sup>2</sup>Jameson's "micro-narrative" of the romance in its successive incarnations does not identify an essence of the genre which could permit a linear account of its accidental or historical modifications. Both the origins and the development of a generic mode are historical. Indeed, they are the mediated form in which history becomes available for analysis. History is the "limiting situation" which makes various elements present at the beginning of a genre no longer possible for the imagination. The effectivity of history can be gauged in a given text by the method of schematizing the formal elements of the genre itself in some immediately prior example, then seeing what drops out in the text at hand, which imaginary solutions to older problems are now no longer convincing enough to make for powerful storytelling, and what new possibilities for "symbolic action" may have emerged.

<sup>3</sup>*The Crying of Lot 49* ([1966] New York: Perennial, 1986) 24.

<sup>4</sup>*The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1959).

<sup>5</sup>"The Sacred, The Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978) 119.

<sup>6</sup>*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd Ed., Enl. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970). A discussion of Pynchon's understanding of Kuhn can be found in Frank Palmeri, "Neither Literally nor as Metaphor: Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Structure of Scientific Revolutions," *ELH* 54.4 (1987): 979-99.

<sup>7</sup>Just as the historical novel and romantic historicism provided the sense of socio-historical density which characterized the realistic fiction of the nineteenth century, so ethnography and its literary precursor, the utopia, have become the models for postmodernist fiction-writing. The many examples of "ontological" fiction compiled by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987) can be seen in this light. Ethnography is the only science that can make itself at home in the episteme of discourse. And, thanks to television, it is now a potent element of the popular imagination.

<sup>8</sup>Of course it is in the nature of utopias to be "not here." This fact is given special emphasis by Paul Ricoeur, who calls the functional structure of utopian thinking "the nowhere": "What must be emphasized is the benefit of this special extraterritoriality. From this 'no place' an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now opened beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living" (*Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. and trans. George H. Taylor [New York: Columbia UP, 1986] 16). Oedipa's special nightmare is to experience her own culture entirely from this utopian remove. For her the field of the possible and that of the actual have become impossible to distinguish.

<sup>9</sup>*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 15.

<sup>10</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The English Text of the Third Edition*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1953) 178e.

<sup>11</sup>Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1966) 16-22.

<sup>12</sup>The moonstone of the title is a priceless yellow diamond which had been stolen a generation earlier from an Indian temple by an evil forbear of the heroine, from whom it is re-stolen, presumably by members of the offended sect. The plot involves the attempt of a pious hypocrite lover to escape with the diamond, and his eventual and justified murder by the Indians, who return it to its traditional setting.

<sup>13</sup>This theme is developed throughout Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991).

<sup>14</sup>The language of epiphany was indeed part of the political currency of the time, as Todd Gitlin has observed. Figures of anticipation and apocalypse always lend themselves to political use, but here they became an especially potent form of self-dramatizing, when the political force of events depended on how they were taken up into the media. As Gitlin writes about a later stage in the evolution of the radical Left: "In that setting, the movement's rites became epiphanies. Confrontations were moments of truth, branded into memory, bisecting life into Time Before and Time After. We collected these ritual punctuations as moments when the shroud that normally covers everyday life was torn away and we stood face to face with the true significance of things. Each round was an approximation of apocalypse, in the original meaning: a revelation of the way things actually stand" (*The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* [New York: Bantam, 1987] 287).