

Oedipa Crisis: Paranoia and Prohibition in *The Crying of Lot 49*

Gregory Flaxman

Near the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas finds herself trapped in a stultifying “symmetry of choices” (181). In the process of executing her ex-lover’s will, she has seemingly stumbled upon the Tristero, a secret, perhaps anarchic, organization. But is the Tristero the sublime thread which might lead Oedipa out of her own suburban inertia, even out of the hopelessness of her America? Or is the Tristero instead the thread of an idea with which she weaves a sublime delusion? As Oedipa reflects, “Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth” (181). Indeed, this binary system is readily acknowledged, even thematized, in Pynchon’s novel, but the suppositions which ground the duality are not so clear. Ostensibly, discovering the Tristero *qua* reality would be tantamount to the validation of meaning, while acknowledging the delusion of meaning (which Oedipa considers paranoid) would be the acceptance of meaninglessness.¹ But if, at the level of its expression, paranoia is so quantified as to suggest its impossibility, then perhaps that implicit denial conceals another possibility: might an originary paranoid crisis have brought the symmetry—meaning or meaninglessness—to bear?

The very question of paranoia entails this problematic, so much so that Freud’s most fundamental definition of the disease seeks to distinguish it from its symptoms. Discussing the case of Dr. Schreber, Freud avouches that paranoia is not tantamount to delusion; rather, delusion is the defense against such a crisis, the attempted recovery of reality once paranoia—that is, the dissolution of reality—sets in (Freud 41). In other words, if delusion does conceal meaninglessness (“only the earth”), this is because meaninglessness is the crisis at the heart of paranoia. (We might even say paranoia is caused by the absence of cause.) With regard to those “hieroglyphic streets,” Oedipa’s deadlocked duality is symptomatic of precisely this crisis: unable to invest meaning (belief) in representational reality, she resolves a symmetry in which the world is either replete with meaning or devoid of it. Though the duality seems to account for paranoia, paranoia as such conditions the duality. And just as the very trace of cause (that is,

absence of cause) is effaced by the duality, so Oedipa searches for that meaningful something which might in turn efface the duality, something which is in effect “excluded” (181) by the duality but which might resolve its existential constrictions: the Tristero.²

The most curious aspect of this argument is admittedly that Oedipa’s search should be constituted as a search. Does the materiality of the search contradict its subjective dynamic? Are we to read the search as allegorical? These questions suggest, not surprisingly, a kind of readerly dualism which echoes Oedipa’s own “symmetry of choices.” Is the plot a matter of Oedipa’s imaginings, or is the truth really out there, as current cult paranoia would have it? On the one hand, Oedipa pursues the Tristero as pure exteriority; whatever revelations loom for her on the horizon, we are told they will be “[h]ardly about . . . herself” (20). On the other hand, as Oedipa comes to constitute the “eye of some whirlwind” (25)—or as she is configured as the center of the Tristero—it becomes clear that the revelations will be almost exclusively about her. It is as if the horizon of truth for which Oedipa searches were so exterior as to be, paradoxically, “in her more than herself,” for like the curvature of a Möbius strip, the Tristero seems to wend its way from the distant horizons into the most intimate recesses of Oedipa’s fantasies. Indeed, the novel is formulated like the inevitable intersection of exteriority and intimacy, and it is in this regard that Oedipa seems to foreclose the compromise-formation that constitutes reality, to experience the dissolution of paranoia. Consider that, for psychoanalysis, the subject is the product of prohibition which it was Lacan’s contribution to link to language (the signifier). Indeed, Lacan expresses as much in a notable pun: the subject is submitted to language *qua* the Name-of-the-father (*Nom-du-père*), but this name (*nom*) is also formally a “no” (*non*), a prohibition of illicit enjoyment (*jouissance*).³ Whence Oedipa’s crisis: she pursues the promised meaning of the Tristero at the cost of a fundamental transgression whose cataclysmic implications, mirrored in the Tristero’s own anarchic drive, paradoxically threaten to delude meaning altogether.

In terms of this fast-approaching intersection, the text begins as a kind of burgeoning chaos. From the novel’s first sentence, in which Oedipa returns home from a Tupperware party to find herself appointed “executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity” (9), this chaos percolates below the narrative surface. With the death of Pierce, her millionaire ex-lover, Oedipa’s mundane concerns—the hostess of the Tupperware party “had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue”—are utterly supplanted by a strange new set of priorities. Not only must she manage “assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary”

(9), but, as it turns out, she must wrestle with the meaning of Pierce's death and, eventually, her own.

Over the course of the first chapter, Oedipa finds herself "shuffling back through a fat deckful of days" (11). Superficially, she is trying to figure out when she last heard the voice—or voices—of Pierce, but the narrative playfulness occludes the full face of Oedipa's reflection. The flash-pan of thoughts and impressions, seemingly so incidental, so whimsical, yields suddenly to the admission that over the past "had hung the sense of buffering, insulation" (20). The first chapter is cluttered with references to this buffering. Oedipa's husband, Mucho Maas, uses his disc-jockey job as a "buffer" (15) against the terror which formerly beset him as a used-car salesman. Fretting over the hassles of her executorship, Oedipa has lunch with her attorney, Roseman, who tries "to play footsie with her under the table" (19); she doesn't bother to protest because, with boots on, she feels "insulated." Beneath these trifling instances, however, lies another, more strategic buffering. Oedipa indulges Roseman's flirtation, Mucho's sensitivity and her psychiatrist's idiosyncrasies (Dr. Hilarius calls at three in the morning to plead with her to participate in an LSD experiment) because each is itself a line of defense. Oedipa's hassles are preserved not against but in accordance with "the absence of an intensity" (20). She has systematically submerged herself in a myth in which, relative to these suburban problems, her passivity (she so often seems to *find herself* doing things) is fate itself. She had "gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret" (20).

Pulling back memories like so many veils, Oedipa appears, in these early pages, to be stripping herself of bufferings, approaching some kernel of truth. What lies behind the pretense of blithe domesticity? The trail of recollections leads her back to a vacation with Pierce some years before. At an exhibition in Mexico City, they had come across a triptych, painted by Remedios Varo, whose central panel depicted

a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in the tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (21)

A self-professed Rapunzel, Oedipa identifies with these embroiderers of the world (she cries upon seeing the painting). More than that, though, the diegetic ploy to cover over the void elicits a profound recognition

because to Oedipa the painting represents the very labor of representation. The nature of signification (the symbolic order) is such that it always falls short.⁴ Indeed, language always hinges on some point of nonsense because the ploy of language is not strictly correlative to the traumatic Real: the tapestry does not fill the void. Preceding all the text's premonitions of conspiracy, then, the passage describes the fundamental conspiracy of symbolic reality. (As Lacan once said, all knowledge is paranoid.) As Oedipa later reflects, "The act of metaphor" is both "a thrust at truth and a lie" (129).⁵

This lie is nonetheless subjectively crucial, for "the word is there, buffering, to protect us from" something (129). Within signifying reality, the subject maintains a distance from the Real, especially that which in the Real "suffers from the signifier," *das Ding* (Lacan, Seminar VII 118). As the void in the center of being, the Thing relates to the first other, which Lacan, following Melanie Klein, calls the body of the mother. The Thing is the locus of the drives, the locus of aggression and sexuality, but it is also the void, the death drive's empty referent, which signification renders as a beyond. As the exclusion of the Thing, then, the signifier constitutes the Thing's fundamental prohibition. In the simplest terms, if the Thing as the mother's body relates to the incestuous urge, then language, or the phallic law (name-of-the-father), is the reciprocal, superegoic "No." As such, the word is not the truth, but the means through which truth, or the *jouissance* (illicit enjoyment) which circumscribes the Thing, is mediated and, finally, evacuated. The truth of symbolic reality exists in its non-truth, in the contingency of representation.

In a sense, Oedipa's recognition is this contingency. The painting echoes a ritually suppressed notion of non-truth to which we find allusions in the novel's cinematic metaphors. In each of the first two chapters, the text makes analogies between the nature of Oedipa's reality and visual miscalculation. Oedipa's absence of intensity is likened to "watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix" (20). The blurriness is actually the normality, we might say the lie of reality, which Oedipa has gradually come to see. Later, when Oedipa makes love with Metzger, the lawyer assigned to co-execute Pierce's will, she awakes "to find herself getting laid . . . like a cut to a scene where the camera's already moving" (42). It is not just a cut Pynchon describes, but a jump-cut—a temporal distortion or discontinuity which, even more radically than the blurry focus, exposes a gap in the symbolic field.

The world—our world—is perforated by such gaps, though the subject is generally able to plug up the inconsistencies imaginatively (again, the lie). But Oedipa is increasingly unable to perform this

subjective operation. Interviewing Oedipa on the radio at one point, Mucho calls her "Edna Mosh"; when she asks why, he explains that he was "allowing for the distortion" (139). Everyone in the novel, with the exception of Oedipa, seems to allow for distortion.⁶ In contrast to the passivity which formerly allowed her to gloss over symbolic contingencies, Oedipa becomes increasingly, even seismographically, tuned in to the gaps in the symbolic field. As Slavoj Žižek writes, the paranoid "is precisely a subject who is not duped by the symbolic order" (LA 81); and this understanding informs another aural pun Lacan locates in the *Nom-du-père*: "*le non-dupes errent*." In other words, those who are not duped (by language, by the symbolic order) err. By virtue of this awareness, however, Oedipa is ineluctably compelled to confront the nature of reality itself as a conspiracy of sense, that is, a conspiracy to make sense. What do words mean? Can words mean? Though the questions are never explicitly phrased as such, their implications weigh heavily on Oedipa. At moments, she seems almost to grope for suburban trappings, for anything, to head off a wave of nihilism. When she first hears of Pierce's death, for instance, in quick order she turns to "the greenish dead eye of the TV tube," then speaks "the name of God," then tries "to feel as drunk as possible" (9-10). Each of these recourses—each clearly an attempt to restore buffering—is equally ineffectual, but more important than their failure is their devaluation. Both as options and as signifiers have they been relativized and thus stripped of their meaning: God is of no more value than TV or alcohol; God is a word, a shell, a referent of nothingness.

Nevertheless, by the time Oedipa leaves her husband and home in Kinneret to execute Pierce's will, something has changed. After her recollection of the Varo painting, the absence of intensity begins to give way to an excess or, as her residence in Echo Courts may suggest, a system of resonating intensities. Oedipa begins to feel herself undergoing an indescribable "sensitizing" (45), like the arousing of a sixth sense. Sensitizing refers not only to the perception of distortions but also to the reconfiguration of meaningfulness in the distortions themselves. If the distortions deny truth, then that denial, she seems to think, might be meaningful—that is, an intentionality might lie behind the distortions.⁷ So the contingencies are privileged, transformed into near recognitions, glancing revelations, perhaps, if one only knew how to decipher them, "odd, religious instant[s]" (24). Oedipa's task becomes that of deciphering signs, and so the cause of her paranoia becomes the very compulsion to find a cause.

The first such instant occurs on her arrival in San Narciso, the epicenter of Pierce's vast fortune. Looking down over the city, Oedipa

feels like a potential receiver of sorts, as if she might access a frequency on which secret messages are traveling. She recalls

the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. . . . [T]here were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. (24)

Later that day, Oedipa experiences this sensation of concealed meaning and "words . . . being spoken" (25) again. Her co-executor, Metzger, an actor-turned-lawyer, appears at her motel room with a bottle of Beaujolais and clear intentions of seduction. The two are sipping wine and watching television when Oedipa sees a commercial for Fangoso Lagoons. Like everything else in and around San Narciso, Fangoso Lagoons is one of Pierce's "interests," but what startles Oedipa out of the easy flow of the seduction is that Fangoso Lagoons recalls her vision of the printed circuit. Again, some "immediacy" or "promise of hierophany" (31) haunts her. The problem is that that is all it does. The buzz Oedipa hears underneath the workings of the world begs the question: is the buzz the distorted (and presumably correctable) transmission of pure meaning or merely the clicking of synapses as any hierophany fails to register? The meaning always falls away, remaining beneath the symbolic surface, leaving Oedipa to hope that this incomprehensibility is a measure of its profundity and that her powers of sensitization will ultimately prevail.

Her powers do prevail, but not as she desires. The most revealing episode in this sense is Oedipa's experience with the Nefastis Machine. Meeting a disgruntled engineer at Yoyodyne, a military contractor in which Pierce owned stock, Oedipa hears of an inventor, John Nefastis, who has constructed a machine said to contain "an honest-to-God Maxwell's Demon." In the nineteenth century, James Clerk Maxwell had "postulated a tiny intelligence" (86) which could sort fast molecules from slow ones; the Nefastis machine is aimed at harnessing the demon to counteract heat entropy with information entropy. Sorting information requires the expenditure of energy, but this expenditure would be "offset by the information the Demon gained about what molecules were where." The promise of such a machine for Oedipa is clear: the imaginary demon putatively passes the information along to a "sensitive," getting through "[a]t some deep psychic level" (105). In contrast to the symbolic order, the Nefastis Machine offers not only pure consensuality but also proof of purchase, so to speak: if the

sensitive can process the information, feeding it back into the machine, the resulting energy will be manifested in the form of a moving piston.

According to Nefastis, all the sensitive has to do is watch Maxwell's picture on the machine and concentrate on a cylinder. But when Oedipa does, nothing happens. The reason for her failure points beyond physical systems to psychological ones, to the opposition between Nefastis's sensitive and Oedipa's sensitizing. To overcome the physical obstacles, the sensitive supposedly communicates with the Demon at some deep psychic level. An inherent belief in the system is required to counteract its impossibility: the sensitive makes a leap of faith. But for the sensitized—Oedipa—the physical gaps, like the symbolic gaps, cannot be imaginatively caulked. As Lacan says, "The radical attitude of the paranoid, as designated by Freud, concerns the deepest levels of the relationship of man to reality, namely, that which is articulated by faith" (Seminar VII 54). It is precisely faith—this belief—that Oedipa lacks. Not only is she unable to operate the machine, but she pinpoints its inherent flaw. The Demon is the only intersection between the equations for heat entropy and information entropy; entropy itself is "a metaphor," which the demon supposedly makes "objectively true." When Oedipa suggests that the demon may exist only "[b]ecause of the metaphor," Nefastis balks: "He existed for Clerk Maxwell long before the days of the metaphor" (106). But he cannot convince Oedipa, who knows all too well that metaphor exists in any differential-symbolic system, and for whom that short circuit is a constantly experienced loss.

The hope created by sensitization is always played against its own contrapuntal loss; the duality of meaning and meaninglessness is implicit in every discovery. Even as Oedipa grows aware of the Tristero—the rigors of executorship invariably lead her to its surplus, its leftover, its clues—she is beset by doubts. Whatever the Tristero is, can its secret or truth be sustained within symbolic reality? Alerted to the referential failures,

Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. (95)

In this impossibility, likened to an epileptic seizure which is always wiped from memory, Oedipa describes the ultimate contingency of signifying reality. What is Real—specifically the hole in the center of the

Real, the Thing—is fundamentally beyond symbolization. Only in the distortions and failures of the symbolic, which Oedipa senses, can it ever be detected, retroactively, as that which originally structures the field of representation and so causes the distortions. But the more this contingency is experienced, the more Oedipa is convinced of an underlying, secret reality which might transcend the symbolic impossibility. Though, for instance, Oedipa sees through Nefastis's Machine, she nevertheless wishes she could "share in the man's hallucinations" (107). Unable or unwilling to believe the secret is that which creates its own impossibility, Oedipa increasingly seeks a kind of restitution in that Thing beyond signification.

Oedipa pursues the Tristero, then, largely because it is construed as a beyond. Her certainty of its value is based on the Tristero's being hidden or off limits: its secrecy becomes the assurance of meaningfulness. At a local bar, the Scope, Oedipa first detects the Tristero when she and Metzger witness a strange mail call among Yoyodyne employees. Almost simultaneously, in the ladies' room, Oedipa comes across a message "neatly indited in engineering lettering":

"Interested in sophisticated fun? You, hubby, girl friends. The more the merrier. Get in touch with Kirby, through WASTE only, Box 7391, L.A."

Beneath the message appears a muted post horn or scrawled "loop, triangle and trapezoid" (52). Both the symbol and what Oedipa learns later is an acronym, WASTE, are invitations to get in touch. But insofar as they are deliberately cryptic, the invitations are select: if you know about WASTE, you're invited; otherwise . . . When Oedipa returns to the bar, a right-wing fanatic, Mike Fallopian, voices this dim prohibition: "'You weren't supposed to see that'" (52), he says. Though Fallopian refers to the mail call, the warning confers a taboo on both the message and the symbol. Before Oedipa ever actually encounters the word Tristero (alternatively spelled Trystero), it has been formulated as transgressive, and yet this taboo serves only to excite Oedipa's curiosity.

Not long afterward, Oedipa attends a performance of *The Courier's Tragedy* at which a similar prohibition is laid down. She wants to see the seventeenth-century revenge tragedy because of a connection between one of Pierce's last real-estate projects and events described in the play: the bones of GI's now on the bottom of Lake Inverarity strangely correspond to the bones of the Lost Guard fished up from the bottom of a lake in the play. But this coincidence (yet another distortion?) assumes a secondary significance in the face of the

mysterious group possibly responsible for the Lost Guard's destruction and apparently responsible for the murder of the play's protagonist, Niccolò. Who or what is this vengeful group? A rival postal organization (Niccolò masquerades as a Thurn and Taxis courier)? As before, Oedipa's curiosity is piqued by a prohibition or "ritual reluctance." The group's name is among those things that "will not be spoken aloud" (71), and only with a desperate utterance—"probably for its original audience a real shock" (74)—does the name punctuate the final couplet of Act IV:

*No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,
Who's once been set his tryst with Tristero. (75)*

The word Tristero subsequently comes to "exert . . . power over" Oedipa (75), a power that stems from the promise of revelation "trembl[ing] just past the threshold of her understanding" (24). The Tristero's unknowability seduces Oedipa, inviting her to invest the cipher with her own fantasies. The question she writes in her memo book, "*Shall I project a world?*" (82), may not refer to the Tristero, but it indicates the imaginative mechanism at work. Her animating desire is inextricably implicated in what the Tristero means to her, or, more properly, how it means. That is, the questions concerning what the Tristero is or what it potentially covers up are more powerful unanswered; indeed, at this point, the Tristero's real power exists, not as a promise, but as a promise deferred. The prohibition or constitutive lack confers on the signifier Tristero an excess of meaning through which the symbolic field is (re)ordered. Thus the Tristero manages to quilt "all manner of revelations" (20)—all the gaps and discontinuities—to its metaphorical surplus, its potential to mean. As Oedipa eventually thinks of it, the Tristero is "a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway. With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Tristero, to hold them together" (109). Indeed, "That's what would come to haunt her most, perhaps: the way it fitted, logically, together" (44). Whatever the vagaries of the Tristero's real or imagined history—its rivalry with Thurn and Taxis, its transplantation to America in the nineteenth century, its insidious presence in contemporary California—its significance for Oedipa is that it foregrounds her life, if momentarily, in meaning again.

But the conditions of this structuration are tenuous, for the Tristero quilts meaning only insofar as its symbolic limitations are concealed. The dynamics of Oedipa's plight are not unlike those of young Stencil's in Pynchon's *V*. Like Oedipa, Stencil quests for the meaning of a certain

signifier (the letter V), but its discovery threatens to end the quest which provides his subjective meaning. Both characters must "approach and avoid" (V 52) real meaning, the dynamics of which, for Oedipa, become increasingly perilous. The Tristero exerts power over Oedipa only because she believes in the truth at its core—a truth which, as we will see, cannot exist, or, to be more precise, a truth with which one cannot coexist. Thus the disclosure of the Tristero's truth must be perpetually deferred, but the more it is deferred, the more power it accrues, and the more it draws Oedipa in. The peculiar logic here conforms to that of the line, generally attributed to Groucho Marx, "I would never want to belong to a club that would have me as a member." One would want to belong only to a club for which one is not good enough; rejection is a sign of the club's value. Oedipa values the club Tristero as long as it rejects her—that is, as long as its value is not disclosed, or as long as she can invest its enigma with a promise of "Sovereign Good" (Lacan, Seminar VII 97).

What is this Sovereign Good? The first clue is provided by the hint that Oedipa hopes "the object behind her discovery" might "bring to an end her encapsulation in her tower" (44). As the tower is "like her ego" (21), freedom means escaping the solipsistic prison; the object is the key to an imagined consensual reality. While Oedipa is in the Bay Area following up leads to the Tristero, her ambiguous desire crystallizes when she meets the anarchist Jesús Arrabal again. Years before, she and Pierce had met Arrabal in Mazatlán, and Arrabal had explained:

"You know what a miracle is. Not what Bakunin said. But another world's intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there's cataclysm. Like the church we hate, 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." (120)

Arrabal's "anarchist miracle" (120) designates a world in which perfect communication is possible, in which distortions and contingencies are extirpated from the social body because everyone is, in Nefastis's lingo, a sensitive, each soul tuned in to the same frequency so that not even speech is necessary.

The day after meeting Arrabal again, Oedipa experiences something like this miraculous perfection. When she returns to her hotel, where a convention of deaf-mutes is underway, she is swept by drunken delegates into the ballroom, seized "by a handsome young man . . . and waltzed round and round. . . . Each couple on the floor danced whatever was in the fellow's head: tango, two-step, bossa nova, slop."

Oedipa wonders how long this can go on without “collisions,” but then an alternative occurs to her: “some unthinkable order of music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which each couple meshed, easy, predestined. Something they all heard with an extra sense atrophied in herself” (131). Like Arrabal’s anarchist miracle, this dance is possible because of a perfect synchronicity. The choreography feels predestined, and even if the order of music is inaccessible to Oedipa—she limply follows her partner’s lead—she feels that some strange communication must permit the event.

In fact, Oedipa has already considered such an atavistic access to primal rhythms as a possible means to consensuality. On her way to Fangoso Lagoons one day, Oedipa is moved to meditate on the redemptive principle of “the unimaginable Pacific,” as “something tidal began to reach feelers in past eyes and eardrums, perhaps to arouse fractions of brain current your most gossamer microelectrode is yet too gross for finding” (55). The Pacific stirs something deeply instinctual—or so Oedipa thinks. That same day, she observes “a flock of not too bright seagulls who’d mistaken Fangoso Lagoons for the Pacific” (64); and later, at the novel’s end, she finds she can no longer “face toward the sea” (177). Again, the instinct has atrophied. But the very atrophy of the instinct subjects it to valuation; the atrophy is what makes the instinct, no less than Oedipa’s object, worthy of pursuit.

Let us try to grasp the logic of this valuation more clearly. Instinct, or drive in the Lacanian sense, atrophies with the introduction of the signifier.⁸ As Žižek explains, “the order of the signifier (the big Other) and that of enjoyment (the Thing as embodiment) are radically heterogeneous, inconsistent, and any accordance between them is structurally impossible” (SOI 122).⁹ The nature—or ethical valence—of the drive and its specific point of emanation, the Thing, are determined, retroactively, by the introduction of the signifier. Thus what constitutes the Thing as good, what constitutes it as an object to be sought—the signifier—is also what in its impossible homology to the Thing renders the search ultimately fruitless. At the level of the signifier, the pleasure principle and its dialectical correlative, the reality principle, strive for an equilibrium which is the perpetual avoidance of the Thing: “For according to the law of the pleasure principle, the signifier projects into this beyond equalization, homeostasis, and the tendency to the uniform investment of the system of the self as such; it provokes its failure” (Lacan, Seminar VII 119).

In this way, the signifier subjects the search for *das Ding* to a series of lures or representations which the desiring subject tries—and fails—to acquire. The consensuality for which Oedipa searches, her object, is

just such a representation, *le petit objet a*. As Lacan says, “the *a* elements, the imaginary elements of the fantasm come to overlay the subject, to delude it, at the very point of *das Ding*” (Seminar VII 99). The *objet a* is essentially the lack corresponding to the gap in the symbolic wherein we posit our lost *jouissance* which has receded into the Real. Consequently, each symbolic substitution for the *objet a* draws the subject into an encounter with disappointment, just as each symbolic stand-in for the secret of the Tristero—each clue—is, for Oedipa, “only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (118).

Oedipa is convinced that were it not for the epileptic process of signification, her object, this transcendent Word of consensuality, might be attainable. Its existence is assured by the fact Oedipa has lost it. As with the *objet a*, perceived as a refinding, Oedipa cannot believe she never had the Word to begin with; she cannot believe language itself opens up the void in which we forever posit a loss. Oedipa makes the mistake we all make in thinking the *objet a* precedes, indeed causes, desire, when the situation is really the reverse: the desire for meaning, founded on the failings of the symbolic, creates the illusion of a transcendent signifier or Word.

Aside from an imagined access to consensual reality or metalanguage, what is this Word-object? The Word, clearly, is not a word. Oedipa indicates as much by imputing materiality to it: the Word does not merely cause but *is* “the unnamable act, the recognition” (180). The Word, in biblical terms, is that it is: it signifies itself. Like the name of God, such a Word is unknowable within symbolic reality. Thus the Word describes a negativity, the hypostatization of its own impossibility. But in this hypostatization, the search for the Word derives a dialectically alternative meaning. If speech is the Thing’s prohibition, the Word is not only the search for the Thing but, simultaneously, a negativity: the search for that which would prohibit the search. This paradox can perhaps be better understood along the lines of the Lacanian master signifier (phallic law), which structures or quilts the signifying field. With the introduction of the master signifier, the subject establishes herself in relation to meaning; all other signifiers refer to the master signifier. But the master signifier is not a meta-signifier; rather, it is closer to a tautology, a signifier which refers to itself, which appears saturated with meaning but is, in fact, devoid of it. The master signifier fulfills the function of the subjectively essential lie, and in this context we grasp why the foreclosure of such a signifier is the condition of paranoia. Without such a signifier, without this law, there can be no belief. Similarly, the negativity of the Word describes

the negativity or lack of the master signifier, in which case the quest for the transcendent Word is also the quest for the law which would implicitly prohibit Oedipa's search for the Word as Thing.

Oedipa's pursuit of the Tristero is therefore ambiguous from the beginning. Though she wants to know its secret, the Tristero, as a beyond, might "speak words she never wanted to hear" (54). Along this axis of enjoyment and prohibition, her sensitization to the Word is initiated by "her peculiar seduction" (45). This phrase is doubly ambiguous. First, "peculiar" puts a neutral spin on seduction: how satisfying was it, if at all? Second, the referent of "seduction" is unclear: is it Oedipa's seduction by Metzger, during which she senses a promise of hierophany; or is it her appointment as executor, which makes her feel "exposed, finessed, put down" (12)—that is, seduced into the task and then abandoned?

We might see Oedipa's entire search as a series of attempted seductions. The terms of the search, revolving around the Word, lead her to test a variety of communicative/interpretive systems, each one linked, as John Johnston points out, to a specific man (54–55). Each man has his own peculiar system of communication with which Oedipa is tempted, from Nefastis's machine to Dr. Hilarius's radical fantasy to Mucho's pure linguistics. Though no system offers her the Word, each system's proximity to consensuality—each temptation—depends on illusion. Rather than evoke the Word as prohibition, each system, insofar as it has any appeal, links the Word to a state of radical fantasy or delusion. The law is never reinforced, and this can be seen at the most basic level of the text, the level at which the material search for the Tristero is a reflection—or even projection—of a subjective search.

At first, Oedipa encounters the textual labyrinth—a labyrinth within which the Tristero's possibility dangles—as the symbolic network in which the pleasure principle operates as a perpetual avoidance. Like so many images in the novel—the apartment/office that is a "succession or train of doorways, room after room receding" (94), the game of strip Botticelli, in which Oedipa peels off innumerable layers of clothing and yet is "no nearer nudity" (41)—the subject enmeshed in symbolic reality is the subject bound by the signifier to endless failure in the search for the Thing. The Thing remains unattainable. But as Oedipa delves beneath the field of signification to more interior realms, no author(ity) intercedes to stop the search. The search transcends prescribed limits, becoming, in a sense, the text's descent into anarchy. Oedipa's quest for the Word as the umbilical link to the Thing is taken to an extreme in which the Tristero suggests a tryst with her own subjective prohibition: in short, Oedipa searches beyond the pleasure principle.

At this structural level, such a tryst represents the collision of exteriority with Oedipa's own subjective quest—when, as Arrabal explains, two worlds touch. The tryst can take place only at the dire moment Oedipa seeks the Tristero as Thing, that is, as an exteriority which is interior. As Oedipa wanders aimlessly around San Francisco, encountering at each turn signs of the Tristero, she finally realizes that, however many signs she detects, they suggest only a lack, a symbolic erasure or empty space. Like the Thing, the Tristero has made a "calculated withdrawal" (124), and Oedipa's understanding of this condition ever so briefly draws the social (exterior) and subjective (interior) retreats into traumatic correspondence. Immediately thereafter, Oedipa glimpses, in an open doorway, "an old man huddled, shaking with grief she couldn't hear" (125). She instinctively knows the old man, a sailor, suffers from DT's, delirium tremens. (Might DT's be a transformation of the signifying epilepsy which so fascinates Oedipa?) But Oedipa's instinctive understanding is framed by a seemingly aberrant vision of the sailor's old mattress. Though Oedipa has yet to see the sailor's room, much less his mattress, she is riveted by its proximity (the text refers to the mattress five times in all of three pages). The sailor will die "among the flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream" (126).

When Oedipa helps the sailor up to his room, she does indeed find "[T]he bed. The mattress, *waiting*" (127; emphasis added). But waiting for whom? One assumes it waits for the sailor, though in these dank "beaverboard" recesses, in this foul space circumscribed by "wallpaper's stained foliage" (127, 126), this bloated bladder also waits for Oedipa. She encounters the mattress in all its grotesquery as the phenomenal intrusion of the Thing into reality. Irrupting into exteriority, the Thing pulsates and swells with all the fluids (vestiges) of *jouissance*. Oedipa stands in front of the mattress-Thing only to realize that the Real of desire is not desirable, that she has come face to face with the very antithesis of fantasized possibility or Sovereign Good. "[T]he sure decay of hope," the mattress is the very antithesis of life. Oedipa stares at it "as if she had discovered the irreversible process" (128) because, indeed, she has: the mattress as Thing is the referent of nothingness and loss, the zero degree of death.

Suddenly, Oedipa realizes that DT's has another meaning. Recalling what little calculus she knows, Oedipa remembers that dt is also

a time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself

as something innocuous like an average rate; where velocity dwelled in the projectile though the projectile be frozen in midflight, where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick. (129)

In this recollection, Oedipa constitutes a metaphor for metaphoric failure; the passage stands as a *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* for the relation of the signifier to the Thing, or death. At the very apex of gravity's rainbow, the projectile is motionless for an incalculably infinitesimal moment. As in physics, in signifying reality the moment has to be confronted as the point at which the signifier ceases to mean, at which we glimpse the purely differential nature of language: it is here that death dwells in the cell. The projectile's apex represents the subject's "dumb" understanding vis-à-vis the signifying chain that, in fact, he or she "may disappear from the chain" (Lacan, Seminar VII 295).

But in this realization of death as subjective reality lurks the possibility of a second or symbolic death. The inertial moment in signification is the equivalent of the death drive; indeed, using one of Pynchon's shibboleths, Lacan refers to the death drive as an "entropy" (Seminar VII 211). The death drive is radically opposed to the signifying network; as the drive toward the Thing, it potentially annihilates symbolic order, destroying the structure of subjective existence. In relation to this decimation, the paranoid reconstruction or delusion rigidifies meaning, filling in the symbolic lapses through which the dumb understanding leaks in. Pynchon describes such a reconstruction when, in relation to her notion of a "death-wish," Oedipa desires to touch a "voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to it; that not gravity's pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravaging, promised more delight" (118). The passage, apparently alluding to the originary death-wish (just as the inertial moment seems to refer to death itself and not the subjective awareness of death), also suggests that surrendering to the laws of ballistics—that is, sealing over the time differential, ossifying the rainbow—might eliminate, structurally solidify, the point of meaninglessness.¹⁰ In the process, however, subjectivity is forsaken: a second death occurs.

The loss of subjectivity is, we can now see, the subversion of the word by the rigidifying Word.¹¹ The threat of revelation, specifically the Word's revelation, is the threat of closure, of a ravaged symbolic system sealed off from the contingencies of the outside world. The outside world becomes the full-fledged projection of interiority—it becomes deluded. One way to understand this causality is to take the Word, as many critics have, as God's name, the biblical Word—the name-of-the-Father—for which the text's Pentecostal references are

often read as a kind of preparation. Such a Word coincides with judgment, the biblical end of the world. Whether we read it as the fulfillment of the Tristero's anarchic drive or just plain apocalypse, this Word marks the destruction of symbolic order. But as Freud explains, the paranoid's delusions of apocalypse are projections of an "internal catastrophe" (39–40). The apocalypse is the manifestation of a subjective collapse in which the word (symbolic order) has been torn apart and is reconstructed within the Word. Indeed, to have found the transubstantiated Word already presupposes the devastation of the word.

And yet, Oedipa not only fails to find the Word, but eventually recognizes the dangers that might have befallen if she had found it. Perhaps her dim understanding expresses a retreat from the Thing. Indeed, if we take the text as an intersection of lines—subjective and exterior—we might also suggest that those lines, having crossed, continue off into space. Once Oedipa leaves San Francisco, the Tristero's multiplicity of references begins to recede almost as if extimacy were being reconstituted. In a sense, it is, for soon we see that, while there may be a number of paranoids in the novel, Oedipa is not (or is no longer) one of them. In fact, her retreat from the Thing coincides with her discovery of madness in others. She stops in Kinneret on her way back to San Narciso, hoping Dr. Hilarius can provide a diagnosis that will explain away the Tristero, relieve her of worrying about it as reality. Instead, she finds Dr. Hilarius himself frightfully paranoid, armed, taking potshots from his office at passing strangers. Worse, once Hilarius has been hauled off by the police, Oedipa finds her own husband horribly deluded. Mucho has been inducted into Hilarius's LSD experiment, and now he lays claim to a pure linguistics, an ability to reduce speech or any tonality to "'pure sound'" (144). The upshot, reports Mucho, is that "'Everybody who says the same words is the same person if the power spectra are the same'" (142). The down side, Oedipa discovers, is that the edges of Mucho's ego have been worn away: Mucho may, at some level, groove with everyone, but at a subjective level, he is no one. Oedipa is dismayed, but her dismay pinpoints a significant change: once she passes the point of intersection, thereby distancing herself from that overwhelming encounter with deadly *jouissance*, representations of consensuality are no longer so idealized. Mucho provides a sobering antipode to Arrabal's anarchist miracle: he purchases the "soul's talent for consensus" with the loss of identity.

Though Oedipa continues to search for the Tristero, she increasingly undertakes to search on different ground. Enlisting a new ally, Professor Emory Bortz, an expert on *The Courier's Tragedy* and a

strict textualist, Oedipa signals a return to the signifier and symbolic order. Correlative with this shift, Oedipa becomes “anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point. Lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself” (166). The revelations of the Word no longer exert the same centripetal pull, the promise of metalanguage—an Other of the Other, that is, an Other responsible for the workings of the symbolic order—gradually slackening. For instance, in San Narciso again, Oedipa warily returns to the site of her first premonitions about the Tristero. At the Scope, she scopes out Mike Fallopian, the inveterate right-winger who first laid down the Tristero’s prohibition. Oedipa reports the sum of her adventures, but instead of suggesting new avenues of inquiry, Fallopian raises the most perverse possibility: “‘Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody’s putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something Inverarity set up before he died?’” (167). The notion of such a grandiose plot thrusts Pierce, even though or maybe because he is dead, into the potential role of Other of the Other. Is it possible that Pierce’s perverse humor has outlived him, that this escapade is really his will?

A number of references seem to suggest as much, to the reader as well as to Oedipa. A portion of the novel published in *Esquire* bore the title “The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity.” By the logic of this title’s sequence, Pierce would seem to be a devil—a signifying devil who screws with representation (Tanner 57). This devilish Pierce superficially recalls the Cartesian demon who potentially controls the world of appearances. But whereas Descartes’s demon causes the philosopher to doubt reality, the devilish Pierce potentially explains symbolic distortions and discrepancies. In this same vein and even more tempting is the notion of Pierce as Oedipa’s textual foe. If we take Oedipa to be a kind of detective—her name, as Tony Tanner points out, recalls the original detective, Oedipus (60)—might not Inverarity’s name recall Moriarity, Sherlock Holmes’s archenemy? The possibility lodged in the reference is clarified by our understanding that Moriarity is not just any criminal, but one whose brilliance and persistent malevolence serve to explain any and all symbolic distortion as deception.¹²

Still, as Oedipa rejects Fallopian’s suggestion only to place it scrupulously among other possibilities to explain—or explain away—the Tristero, an implicit doubt remains. Oedipa theorizes that the Tristero must be either a) a reality which represents “a real alternative to the exitlessness”; or b) the hallucination of such an alternative; or c) Pierce’s perverse, “grandiose practical joke”; or d) the fantasy of such a plot (170–71). These possibilities ultimately yield her the choice between “[o]nes and zeroes” (182)—meaning and meaninglessness.

But, while the duality was previously a permutation of unbelief, it is consummated here as the conscious source of Oedipa's certainty: the unbelief is transformed into a belief in not believing.

The conceptual reconciliation is clarified as the novel comes to a close. Among Pierce's assets, "the Tristero 'forgeries'" (175) in his stamp collection may provide an answer to the Tristero's mystery. The forgeries are to be auctioned as lot 49, and the philatelist Genghis Cohen tells Oedipa that a book bidder who does not wish his identity known has been refused permission to examine those stamps ahead of time. Because the bidder may show up at the auction in person, an answer to the mystery may be at hand. But the novel does not conclude with an identification; rather, it ends with Oedipa anticipating the start of the auction: the "crying" is deferred. Instead of settling on a theory, on meaning, Oedipa "settled back, to await the crying of lot 49" (183). The phrase conceals a final contradiction of Lacanian proportions. As Lacan repeatedly asserts, the psychoanalytic discovery demands the reformulation of reason and the subject: "I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am wherever I do not think I am thinking" (*Écrits* 166).¹³ In the same spirit, Oedipa realizes, at the novel's end, that the only possible certainty is the certainty of waiting and, at the limits of that horizon, the certainty of doubt. No longer invested in intentionality, Oedipa invests meaning in the uncertainty of Cartesian aporia. Her desire to know remains, though the fantasy of what might be known is, in a word, pierced.

—University of Pennsylvania

Notes

¹The "true paranoid" is defined in the text as one "for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself" (128-29); and Oedipa herself equates paranoia with a "'fantasy'" (138).

²Joan Copjec illuminates this retroactive erasure in her discussion of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. In questioning how a society of equals might have prevailed in prehistory, Freud suggests the existence of some primal father whose murder by the tribe brought about the present equality. As Copjec writes, "to call [this hypothesis] crackpot is to miss the point that if this father of the primal horde is preposterous, then he is objectively so. That is to say, he is unbelievable within the regime in which his existence *must* be unthinkable if relations of equality are to take hold" (RMD 12).

³Lacan returns to and refines this pun continually over the course of his career, but a particularly developed discussion of it can be found in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, where the question of paternity emerges in a discussion of the Bible and, especially, Moses (Seminar VII 142).

⁴It is at this point and on this subject that my understanding of Lacan (and, hence, Pynchon) most dramatically diverges from Hanjo Berressem's. While Berressem reads Lacan within an admittedly poststructuralist context, I would suggest that Lacan's emphasis on the real can be properly understood only as, in Copjec's words, "*anti*structuralist" (RMD 11). That is, Lacan's notion of the real emerges out of and against the structuralist underpinnings of his earlier work as the radical negativity in which structure coheres. To read this in poststructuralist terms would mean to elide not only the possibility of structure but also, by extension, the principally ethical nature of this structure (see my argument on prohibition below). While Lacan does celebrate the signifier in his own way, as style, the typically poststructuralist recourse to the (Nietzschean) ethics of signifying free-play *qua* Foucauldian self-fashioning runs counter to the entire psychoanalytic experience of the signifier as law.

⁵Oedipa's characterization of metaphor recalls the opening of Lacan's *Television*: "Words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the Real" (3).

⁶Earlier, having received a letter from Mucho, Oedipa is alert to the most minor of irregularities: in the cancellation blurb, "postmaster" has been misspelled "potsmaster" (46).

⁷The cinematic metaphors discussed above as describing Oedipa's relation to reality both ascribe intentionality. The projectionist "refused to fix" the blurry picture; and the jump-cut involves a directorial decision we typically see as the mark of an *auteur* (say, Godard), that is, one who controls every aspect of the film.

⁸I do not mean to assert that Oedipa's instinct and the drive ("instinct" is James Strachey's translation of the German *Trieb*) which circulates the Thing are synonymous, but the qualitative difference can be attributed to the signifier. The drive is without quality; it simply is. Nevertheless, the signifier, in redistributing and ultimately atrophying the drive, lends it valuation.

⁹Contrary to Arrabal's assertion, whatever the body is, according to Lacan, its traumatic conjunction with the signifier is hardly so automatic as to provide a consensus (even with the signifier *qua* social itself).

¹⁰For the paranoid—for whom the sentence, Lacan says, is always perceived as "interrupted" (Seminar III 114), as a code whose meaning (the latter part of the sentence) has been elided—the urge to fill in not only completes meaning but rigidifies it.

¹¹The Word may be "the cry that might abolish the night," but in that abolishing, not only is the time differential lost, but the differential nature of symbolic reality might be lost as well: as Lacan so often points out, night exists only in relation to day.

¹²"Whether or not the archcriminal ever enters the space of representation (usually he does not), the supposition of his existence is necessary to this fiction, whose initial premise is that the detective's knowledge is forcefully

challenged not by some physical conundrum, but by an act of deception—that is, by another subject, or mastermind” (Copjec, SN viii).

¹³The line is Lacan’s revision of Descartes’s “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore I am”) in the wake of Freud’s revolutionary “*wo es war, soll Ich werden*” (“Where it was, I shall come into being”).

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