

## **“Small Comfort”: Significance and the Uncanny in *The Crying of Lot 49***

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It looked as if the attitude of some literary folks toward the Beat generation was the same as that of certain officers on my ship toward Elvis Presley. They used to approach those among ship’s company who seemed likely sources—combed their hair like Elvis, for example. “What’s his message?” they’d interrogate anxiously. “What does he want?”

—Thomas Pynchon (SL 8–9)

“The story *won’t* tell,” said Douglas; “not in any literal vulgar way.”

—Henry James (TS 147)

Things then did not delay in turning curious.

—Thomas Pynchon (CL 44)

A reading of the uncanny modeled largely on Shoshana Felman’s work on *The Turn of the Screw* opens up *The Crying of Lot 49* in a way that is not possible through the periodizing transfiction of the “postmodern.” This essay is itself slightly transfixed by the strangeness of *Lot 49*, and it is this uncanny reading effect that I want to explore—the creeping ambiguity of the word and what Dorothy Kelly calls the “ghost of meaning.”

Oedipa’s quest begins as a chance event. When Roseman asks her why Inverarity should choose her to execute his will, she replies, ““He was unpredictable’” (19). Her search, however, seems to gain more and more significance the more “‘interested’” (20) she becomes. This significance is not so much the revelation of hidden meanings (as in a traditional detective story) as the occlusion of them. Tony Tanner points out that *Lot 49* seems to work in a “reverse direction”:

With a detective story you start with a mystery and move towards a final clarification, all the apparently disparate, suggestive bits of evidence finally being bound together in one illuminating pattern; whereas in Pynchon’s novel we move from a state of degree-zero mystery—just the quotidian

mixture of an average Californian day—to a condition of increasing mystery and dubiety. (56)

The American landscape seems to be yearning to tell of something, and it is that very yearning to communicate that becomes the goal of the quest: the status of communication itself. The investigation becomes a search for the possibility of that very investigation: “Normally the detective finds out the truth through communication, by talking with suspects and witnesses, but [in *Lot 49*] communication is the center of mystification” (Tani 94). Immediately upon Oedipa’s arrival in San Narciso, signs appear in the very configuration of the streets, yet the question of meaning *as such* appears to be the only “revelation”:

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. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. . . . [I]n her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. (24)

This liminal position of almost-meaning recurs throughout the text. Everything that falls within the scope of the detective becomes in some way suspect: misspellings on letters, graffiti in bathrooms of bars (ironically, *The Scope*), dying alcoholics, and so on, culminating in the almost-revelation of the buyer of lot 49. The reader of the text (the buyer of *Lot 49*) occupies this selfsame position of detection: “[I]f the signs in *The Crying of Lot 49* are haunting and ambiguous for its main character, they are no less uncertain for the reader, who must assume the position of interpreter” (Johnston 52).

This ambiguity centers on the significance of the Tristero underground, but, more broadly, Oedipa searches for the Word itself—that which holds the pattern together and explains all. This final revelation is, however, perpetually deferred and somehow just about to occur. The detective figure is no longer in control of the situation: the signs seem to have taken over. Oedipa begins to see or hallucinate the Tristero post horn everywhere, and her powers of interpretation lapse into “fatalism”:

Where was the Oedipa who’d driven so bravely up here from San Narciso? That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops’ rules, to solve any great mystery.

But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on. This night's profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication, was their way of beating up. (124)

And throughout all this seems to be the random figure of Pierce Inverarity. Although many games can be (and have been) played with this name, one resonance John Johnston points to is especially noteworthy: "Not accidentally, Pierce's name evokes the American founder of semiotics, C. S. Peirce" (56).

Peirce formulated the notion of "abduction," which he called an "inferential step," thus: "The surprising fact, C, is observed; but if A were true, C would be a matter of course. Hence, there is reason to believe that A is true" (151). However, the problem is to determine what A might be. As Peirce writes: "That there is any explanation of [an extraordinary combination of characters'] is a pure assumption; and if there be, it is some one hidden fact which explains them; while there are, perhaps, a million other possible ways of explaining them, if they were not all, unfortunately, false." He concludes that resolution is only possible by "piling guess on guess" (qtd. in Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 17). This does not, however, account for the undoubted discovery of "truth."

Peirce supposes there must be a human condition of "guessing correctly" about the nature of things:

It was not until long experience forced me to realize that subsequent discoveries were every time showing I had been wrong, while those who understood [that "of two hypotheses, the *simpler* is to be preferred"], as Galileo had done, early unlocked the secret, that the scales fell from my eyes and my mind awoke to the broad and flaming daylight that it is the simpler hypothesis in the sense of the more facile and natural, the one that instinct suggests, that must be preferred; for the reason that, unless man have a natural bent in accordance with nature's, he has no chance of understanding nature at all. (Peirce 156)

Peirce argues that we must understand things intuitively because our intuition is structured in similar ways to the nature of the phenomena we investigate.

Perhaps, then, Oedipa finds and stumbles over clues because she is somehow in tune with the conspiracy. For instance, she loses her way at Yoyodyne: "Then, by accident (Dr Hilarius, if asked, would accuse her of using subliminal cues in the environment to guide her to a particular person) or howsoever, she came on one Stanley Koteks" (84). Chance and fact come together inexplicably. But rather than

(like Peirce and Hilarius) ascribe a certain "sensitive" nature to the detective, Oedipa always seems merely to pose the question "accident" or "howsoever"? No single solution becomes available. But perhaps this has something to do with the order of "facts" and "clues" themselves, which are often deemed to be outside (and unaffected by) the frame of investigation and therefore unsuspecting.

In *Against Method*, Paul Feyerabend questions the autonomy of fact, arguing: "All these investigations use a model in which a *single* theory is compared with a class of facts (or observation statements) which are assumed to be 'given' somehow. I submit that this is much too simple a picture of the actual situation. . . . [T]he description of every single fact is dependent on *some* theory" (38-39). In other words, rather than there being an available natural, subliminal truth, the only "fact" that can ultimately be discovered is the theory with which one is working. When Oedipa tries to follow the route of the WASTE postman, she finds herself "back where she'd started, and could not believe 24 hours had passed" (131). The world of empirical facts turns back on itself, and detection results merely in self-reflection. (Plays on reflection and narcissism pervade the text.) Signs and words are now strange and suspect clues concealing a meaning that may not exist: "Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (118).

In the final sentence of that passage, one word appears to be loaded, therefore dangerous: the not-quite incongruous "epileptic." If we see how this word works its way through the text, we may understand the sorts of signification *Lot 49* generates. The word's almost-thereness imbues it with an almost sinister resonance. It erases its logical, rhyming counterpart, "apocalyptic" (apocalypse as the revelation of the Truth), while its own prosaic definition sends the trajectory of the word in a different direction. Epilepsy is "A disease of the nervous system, characterized by paroxysms, in which the patient falls to the ground unconscious, with general spasm of the muscles, and foaming at the mouth; the falling sickness" (*OED*). But *Lot 49* suggests some kind of secret connection between the vertigo of disease and the final Word: "She could, at this stage of things, recognize signals like that, as the epileptic is said to—an odor, color, pure piercing grace note announcing his seizure. Afterward it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers." Oedipa wonders whether she too might never remember "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). The signal is the only thing left. The voice that speaks in madness cannot come back into the world of reason.

Thus it is in delirium that the Word is revealed, and delirium is, as Michel Foucault (citing the *Encyclopédie*) reminds us, derived "'from *lira*, furrow; so that *deliro* actually means to move out of the furrow, away from the proper path of reason'" (99–100). When Oedipa holds the old alcoholic with DT's, she sees that "[b]ehind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare," and "[t]rembling, unfurrowed, she slipped sidewise" (128, 129). In the novel's last pages, Oedipa sees for herself only the possibility of this inscrutable delirium, this seizure: "For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia" (182). Oedipa finds only dizziness, and can find definition only in vertigo, which Foucault calls the "delirious affirmation that the world is 'turning around'" (100). It is in the interrogation of the system that this vertigo becomes the only stable, or rather, predictable fact (the "odor, color, pure piercing grace note" the epileptic remembers): "Again with the light, vertiginous sense of fluttering out over an abyss, she asked what she'd come there to ask. 'What was Tristero?'" (156).

This very "fluttering," this border state, marks the paranoid possibility of a deeper revelation, and it is this that Freud marks as the "uncanny." He writes: "To [other instances of the uncanny, Jentsch] adds the uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity, because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity" (226). Freud also mentions the frightening possibility of "secret powers": "The uncanny effect of epilepsy and madness has the same origin. The layman sees in them the working of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-men, but at the same time he is dimly aware of them in remote corners of his own being" (243). We recall the madness of Hilarius's Nazi paranoia, Inverarity's schizophrenic phone call, and the manic nature of Oedipa's entire discovery of the Tristero—all signs of "forces hitherto unsuspected." But what these forces might be is never revealed. All we are left with is the "signal" of such forces. The text itself comes to function as the precursor of the epileptic seizure, which "may already have visited," but "there [is] no way to tell" (CL 95). Yet the

ambiguity remains as uncanny effect: "Either you have stumbled . . . onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream. . . . Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you. . . . Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull" (170-71).

The acronyms and anagrams that make swaggering appearances throughout the text function on similar delirious principles. They are markers, signals, of other meanings, but it is almost impossible to imagine what, if anything, their other meanings might be: their import always seems to exceed any explanation (or decoding) of their literal meaning. DEATH (Don't Ever Antagonize the Horn [121]); N.A.D.A. (National Automobile Dealers' Association [144]); LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide, or even pounds, shillings and pence); WASTE (We Await Silent Tristero's Empire [169]). N. Katherine Hayles comments on Oedipa's pronunciation of WASTE as a word rather than an acronym, "since each can turn into the other and carries some of the other's values with it, the question cycles around, growing more complex and encompassing more tropes, without ever being definitively answered" (109). A vertiginous turning around occurs within every one of these signs (and even within the characters' names, which always seem to point elsewhere<sup>1</sup>). Thus Oedipa thinks of the "high magic to low puns" (129), and Hayles comments:

Puns have traditionally been considered "low" because they play on trivial or accidental correspondences. But what if the belief that these correspondences are trivial stems from an ideology that wishes to deny correspondences that puns reveal? In that case puns, far from being exercises in bad taste, become instruments of revelation, exposing what "they" want to keep hidden. (117)

The only revelation, however, seems to be that there *are* correspondences (an infinite number of them), but that their significance is never definitively determinable. Recall Feyerabend's argument that facts always rest on prior theories, yet there is no one, final theory which will encompass and explain all facts since these are themselves imbricated in the theory.

The name of Mucho Maas's radio station, KCUF, is exemplary. It functions as both crudely obvious anagram and never-explained acronym. Impossible to interpret "correctly," the sign functions rather as an *interruption*. Like the epileptic fit, it points toward some other, inaccessible meaning. Messages sent by KCUF must be scrambled in the hope that this compensation will dupe the interruption of communication. Oedipa is introduced on air as "'Edna Mosh,'" since

Mucho "was allowing for the distortion on these rigs, and then when they put it on tape" (139). Whether Oedipa emerges coherently on the other side of the communication is moot.

Chance and fact have become indistinguishable. Spelling errors on envelopes gain more and more dark significance; strangers in bars provide unhelpful illumination; children sing strangely relevant rhymes. The post horn decorates "each alienation, each species of withdrawal" (123) to the point that everything becomes abnormal and strange. Significance appears everywhere. As Jean Baudrillard writes, "art is now an infinite proliferation of signs, an infinite recycling of forms, past or present. This is the Xerox degree of culture" (10). This sinister proliferation of signs and inscrutable significance is the uncanny. As Hayles writes, "ambiguity is crucial to the developing design of the text, haunting it until the final page" (104).

Freud describes the uncanny as that which "excites fear in general" (219), and exploits the ambiguity of the German *heimlich* and *unheimlich* (the play on words also functions in English: "high magic"): "In general we are reminded that the word '*heimlich*' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (224-25). Thus the "*unheimlich*" is not only the strange and disquieting; it is also that which gives revelation and insight into the secret. Therefore, the *unheimlich* "is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (Freud 226). So the "homely" is the very origin of the uncanny, the strange, the unhomely. The uncanny is thus not so much the wholly other as the secret side of the self—the destabilization of the safe place. Freud himself does not go this far, preferring to rest the uncanny effect on castration anxiety. Hélène Cixous accuses Freud of "'jumping from one effect to another until he reaches the 'point of certainty,' or reality, which he wishes to present as a solid rock upon which he can base his analytic argument'" (qtd. in Jackson 67). Where Freud finds a final explanation of the uncanny effect, Cixous sees a more radical function within the uncanny. As Rosemary Jackson paraphrases it: "The uncanny . . . removes structure. It empties the 'real' of its 'meaning,' it leaves signs without significance. Cixous presents its unfamiliarity not as merely displaced sexual anxiety, but as a rehearsal of an encounter with death, which is pure absence" (68).

Oedipa's quest for the secret (the *heimlich*) results in a discovery of the *unheimlich* which is somehow also the homely (*heimlich*), the safe place. The space of the sign seems to unravel continuously through this aporia: the sign appears to have meaning, but that

meaning never reveals itself. It just intimates further meaning. Home is never reached. The *heimlich* and *unheimlich* weave through each other without allowing for an end other than death. "That night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead" (171).

In certain fairy tales, Freud observes, the uncanny is obviated by the assumption of animistic or supernatural conditions, but this "situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality" (250). The writer "can keep us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes about is based, or he can cunningly and ingeniously avoid any definite information on the point to the last" (251). Undecidability and ambiguity, as Hayles points out, are the ghost of a possible meaning that haunts the text of *Lot 49*. Jentsch, Freud writes, "ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one's way about in. The better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it" (221). In *Lot 49*, where one does not even know what chance is (121), this disorientation is all-encompassing.

This reading of *Lot 49* highlights some similarities with *The Turn of the Screw*. As Felman points out, James's tale plays on the uncanny effect of radical ambiguity and does not allow us a safe (homely) position from which to judge whether the governess is mad or whether ghosts are in fact present. The act of extracting a single meaning from the text, Felman writes, repeats the "scene dramatized in the text": critical interpretation "not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly *participates in it*" (148). This is the trap "to catch those not easily caught" James refers to in his 1908 preface to the story (AN 172; also qtd. in Felman 148).

More broadly, James's other fictions seem to have much in common with the paranoia of *Lot 49*. In the 1908 preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, James writes: "My scheme called for the suggested nearness (to all our apparently ordered life) of some sinister anarchic underworld, heaving in its pain, its power and its hate; a presentation, not of sharp particulars, but of loose appearances, vague motions and sounds and symptoms, just perceptible presences and general looming possibilities" (AN 76; also qtd. in Petillon 140). The possibility here of an incomprehensible system with another meaning intersects both with Freud's analysis of the uncanny and with



Pynchon's novel. Petillon makes this resemblance explicit: "As Oedipa steps across the tracks and into territory lying both beyond and beneath the official grid, the 'effects' produced on her as well as on the reader are just those James claimed he was working for, 'precisely those of our not knowing, of society's not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore what "goes on" irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface'" (140). Drawing on Richard Brodhead's *Hawthorne, Melville and the Novel*, Petillon goes on to make this claim for a much broader range of American literature (or, if we take Felman seriously, *all* literature); this does indeed seem to be the legacy of America Oedipa inherits:

[T]he unfolding of the story through time and space (the journey or quest) stops short for a static moment . . . where one is called upon to watch and decipher a cryptic sign, whether the "awful hieroglyph" of *The Scarlet Letter* or the doubloon nailed to the *Pequod's* mast. One is led to suspect that what might look at first glance like postmodern self-reflexivity and linguistic self-consciousness in Pynchon might be more generally ascribed to a larger American legacy—that of the hieroglyph or emblem. The result is that *The Crying of Lot 49* is "pierced" with lexical "black holes" that threaten to swallow the tale altogether. (147)

The destabilizing force of the uncanny seems to be present in the very functioning of the reading process. Meaning is never quite what it seems, and the chance misprint may hold the key to the opening up of the letter—but will probably just lead to more and more signs.

We encounter Oedipa Maas obliquely in Pynchon's *Vineland* when Zoyd Wheeler visits his old friend Mucho Maas: "Psychedelicized far ahead of his time, Mucho Maas, originally a disk jockey, had decided around 1967, after a divorce remarkable even in that more innocent time for its geniality, to go into record producing" (309). Bernard Duyfhuizen remarks: "Although hardly the continuation we may desire, at least we can infer that Oedipa got out of the auction room. Small comfort" (93). Small comfort, indeed. The uncanny process of reading allows no easy place to rest. Home is only ever a distant and permanently lost possibility. *Vineland* (and Pynchon, to date) ends on this uncanny note of almost-homeness: "Prairie woke to a warm and persistent tongue all over her face. It was Desmond, none other, the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe, roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home" (385). Chances are, home will only ever be that: a thought.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup>"Oed," for instance, is Mucho's nickname for Oedipa. *OED*ipa? The seeker of definitions? The maker of definitions?

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