

A Note on "Pierce Inverarity"

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In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon foregrounds the polemic involving the name as either an arbitrary or a motivated signifier most overtly in the case of Oedipa Maas, whose name helps the reader construct an order for her experience. Of course, since this foregrounding occurs in a novel that casts suspicion on such constructions because they may deliberately obfuscate whatever legitimate orders may exist, there is ample cause to be leery of any thematic significance the name seems to provide. This note helps to explicate Pierce Inverarity's peculiar name through a possible source in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce also overtly engages naming as both an arbitrary and a motivated act in the character of Stephen Dedalus, who, by the end of the novel, assumes the prophecy of his name to become an "artificer." Joyce, therefore, not only provides a source for the name Inverarity, but also serves Pynchon studies as a literary precursor through whom to better understand Pynchon's approach to naming.

Previous interpretations of Pierce Inverarity's name have generally attempted to reveal it as motivated by certain themes in *Lot 49*. Joseph W. Slade sees a phonetic parallel between "Inverarity" and "Moriarty" (of Sherlock Holmes fame). Slade, however, does not pursue how such a connection informs the novel. Certainly Oedipa is not as competent as Sherlock Holmes at deducing and reconstructing events to ascertain their significance, while the latter occupies an epistemological position *Lot 49* impeaches for being invested with the positivist assumption that deduction is a pure faculty not affected by the particular logician or scientist. In another attempt to explain Inverarity's name, Richard Poirier asserts: "Crazy names like Pierce Inverarity turn out, when we do a little investigation, to be a compound of a quite famous, real-life stamp collector named Pierce, and of the fact that if you should go to Mr. Pierce for the kind of flawed peculiar stamps so important in *The Crying of Lot 49* you would ask him for an 'inverse rarity'" (22). Poirier's interpretation reveals that he has been properly conditioned by *Lot 49* to eschew the most immediate and plausible referent for the name. The extent to which he has consumed the teachings of the novel is also evident in the phrase "if you should go," wherein Poirier couples the search for meaning with a physical

trip. Poirier fails to learn *Lot 49's* most compelling lesson, however, and is not at all suspicious of the veracity of the order he imposes on Inverarity's name.

The Mexican anarchist, Jesús Arrabal, provides some insight into Pierce's name when he refers to him as a "miracle" (119), which he subsequently defines as "another world's intrusion into this one" (120). For Arrabal, Inverarity is too perfect as the "rich, obnoxious gringo" (119), and thus pierces this mutable world of imperfect people to attain a transcendental quality. For Oedipa, Inverarity is able to pierce the barrier that separates life from death, through his will, to manipulate her: "Had something slipped through and Inverarity by that much beaten death?" (179).

A possible source for Pierce Inverarity's surname is found in Joyce's *Portrait*, and, although the name appears in only one passage in that novel, certain contextual and thematic similarities between Joyce's Inverarity and Pynchon's are worthy of note. Stephen Dedalus's copy of Horace's verse was previously owned by "John Duncan Inverarity and by his brother, William Malcolm Inverarity" (179). Through this volume of Horace, Stephen "had tried to peer into the social life of the city of cities through the words *implere ollam denariorum* which the rector had rendered sonorously as the filling of a pot with denaries" (179). Stephen feels another world's intrusion into his own through the "human pages" (179) of the book. Like Stephen, Oedipa is greatly affected by what an Inverarity has formerly owned, and just as the volume of Horace informs Stephen's view of Rome, so does Inverarity's will inform Oedipa's view of California, specifically, as with Stephen, of its social life. Both Horace's book and Inverarity's will codify a society simultaneously enjoying economic prosperity and suffering a crisis of indulgence. Significantly, the Latin phrase that so affects Stephen pertains to the concentration of wealth, while Inverarity's will testifies to a similar accumulation of capital.

Readers of Joyce and Pynchon will already be familiar with the problem of imposing versus perceiving order in the dense and difficult work of these two writers. Occasionally, however, Pynchon offers his readers a clue (or a bluff) in the names of his characters, allowing another book to pierce his own, opening *Lot 49* to varied levels of interpretation.

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