

Existential Subjectivity on Trial: *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Politics of Despair

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Can existential subjectivity¹ still constitute itself once the individual and the socius are symbiotically dissolved in the self-emptying commodity-signs of which contemporary American culture consists? This is the question posed by Thomas Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). Protagonist Oedipa Maas, as her name implies, is on the Lacanian Oedipal cusp between the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders. Upon leaving Kinneret-Among-the-Pines, California—where she has lived a one-dimensional life of Tupperware and fondue parties with her husband, Wendell “Mucho” Maas—she leaves behind the flat but stable referents that have defined her existence, and now she must find her way in a new and frightening semiotic domain. In San Narciso, where she goes to execute the will of her former lover, corporate entrepreneur Pierce Inverarity, and later in San Francisco, where she spends the night wandering alone, her experiences echo Kerouac's *On the Road*, with a twist: the America she discovers has become a proliferation of self-emptying commodity-signs circulating in an endless profusion that anticipates Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra and Umberto Eco's concept of the hyperreal. These signs—which sell themselves as fetishized abstractions, as non-threatening substitutes for, and thus protection against, existential experience—are cultural productions, and the novel is organized around Oedipa's desperate attempt to decipher them, not only so she can know the culture in which she lives, but so she can reconstitute her own selfhood. For in *Lot 49*, the collective escape from existential subjectivity is a cultural *fait accompli*, and, in the person of Oedipa Maas, the possibility of its reconstruction is put on trial.

In direct contrast to the minor characters' flight from existential inwardness, Oedipa becomes increasingly existentially aware and engaged over the course of the novel, seeking an alternative both to the American wasteland propagated by such corporate moguls as Pierce Inverarity and to the self-dissolution that is the minor characters' response to it. To this end, she searches for clues about the Tristero, which she believes is an organized, underground resistance mounted by the socioeconomically disenfranchised and the culturally marginalized against the dominant cultural mode of excess, artifice, and

"spiritual poverty" (170) of Inverarity's America. Oedipa sees, in increasing numbers, what she believes are signs of the Tristero's existence, but she cannot be sure she is not solipsistically assigning them the significance she believes they have. At the novel's close, she awaits the clue she hopes will tell her whether there "was some Tristero beyond the appearance of . . . America, or . . . just America" (182).

Like Oedipa's desire to make sense of her semiotic world, most critics' response to *Lot 49* is also organized around the attempt to decipher the profusion of cultural signs Oedipa encounters. And, despite the variety and ingenuity of that response, most analyses are informed by some version of one of the binary options Oedipa sets for herself: either there is a Tristero conspiracy, or Oedipa is imagining it; either there is some transcendent meaning behind the signs of our existence, or there are only the signs; either social reality can be known, or we are lost in our own solipsistic indeterminacy; and so on.² These options, however, rest on yet another binary opposition: the individual psyche and society.

Despite a focus over the last two decades on the social origins of subjectivity, an archaic notion of the individual's relation to society has continued to inform American literary criticism, which traditionally treats the individual and the socius as interactive *but discrete* entities. Indeed, the two are often placed in a polar opposition in which the individual is seen primarily as the victim of American society, without regard to the ways psyche and socius are dialectically related. That is, such criticism does not consider the ways the individual psyche and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect, and define each other in a dynamically unstable, *mutually constitutive* symbiosis. In this context, psychology is always cultural psychology, and politics are always psychological politics, not because, as poststructuralism would have it, the structures of consciousness are inscribed within the processes of social signification, but because both the structures of consciousness *and* the processes of social signification are inscribed within the same dialectics of desire. That is, both terms of the dichotomy are constituted by desires that neither originate in nor grant hegemony to either term, but collapse them within a cultural amnion that makes the separation of psyche and socius an untenable theoretical construct.

The poststructuralist view of subjectivity as nothing more than a collection of cultural identifications, while it has foregrounded the ways the notion of an autonomous subject is used to veil society's ideological operations, has merely swung the theoretical pendulum away from the modernist emphasis on free will to a postmodern social determinism, without radically altering the terms of the dichotomy or

undermining their influence. But theories of subjectivity grounded in social determinism can do little to undermine a victim model of the individual's relation to the socius. With the growing popularity of so-called ethical criticism—which seeks, among other things, to reestablish the autonomous subject—we risk continuing merely to swing back and forth between these two theoretical poles. The problem, however, is not our inability to choose between two extremes, but the narrowness of the competing models of subjectivity. Once we begin to see the ways the individual subject is neither wholly an autonomous agent nor merely a social product, the conceptual space opened makes room, not for a return to the autonomous subject the ethical critics want to construct, but for a return to and dialectical reformulation of the existential subject, arguably the richest and most useful notion of subjectivity available—one that was popularly misunderstood when it was initially disseminated and that has been largely neglected since the advent of poststructuralism.

As Walter Davis explains in *Inwardness and Existence*, existentialism, properly conceived, “transcends the social-individual dichotomy” (375 n12) that informs debates between deconstruction and traditional humanism, and between Marxism and psychoanalysis. According to an existential model, social factors may largely establish our initial identity, but they do not freeze us at that stage without our daily consent. Davis argues that the individual is a historically situated (Marxist) subject of (psychoanalytic) desire, “condemned” to his or her own (existential) freedom either to collude with social forces—consciously or unconsciously—or to resist. This subjectivity is informed by what might be called a destabilized Hegelianism: the dialectic between the individual and the socius—like that among the Marxist, psychoanalytic, and existential realities that constitute subjectivity—does not issue in some reified Hegelian *Geist*, but remains in a state of contingency and flux, anchored in the real world, utterly existentialized.³

If we replace the dualistic view of psyche and socius informing most readings of *Lot 49* with an existentialized dialectical model of subjectivity, a third option for interpreting Oedipa's vision of contemporary America becomes possible: there is no Tristero conspiracy in America—no organized, underground resistance rooted in the underclass—but neither is Oedipa hallucinating what she takes to be the signs of its existence. Because psyche and socius are mutually constitutive, micro- and macro-products of the same spiritual condition, the signs of that condition automatically proliferate throughout the culture. No group need put them there deliberately. The Tristero signs Oedipa sees—the muted post horns, the WASTE and

DEATH acronyms—are signs, not of a deliberate, organized conspiracy, but of the mute alienation, waste, and death that are, in one sense, the signs of America's underclass, and, in another sense, the signs of an increasing entropy rapidly paralyzing the whole of American culture. Unless, in some hypothetical beyond after the narrative ends, Oedipa can begin to think beyond the binary limits of her dualistic vision of psyche and socius, she will remain, despite her existential engagement, epistemologically paralyzed by the either/or dilemma in which she finds herself at the novel's close, unable to answer her question concerning the options for the individual within contemporary American culture because unable to formulate adequately the concept of psyche and socius on which an answer must rest. In such a state of paralysis, Oedipa will remain unable to act, which means she will be unable to assume a full-blown existential subjectivity; for, in existential terms, we are what we do. Thus *Lot 49* suggests that the fear of solipsism is the way consciousness undoes both itself and its awareness of cultural reality. For the opposition of solipsism and objectivity keeps both ontology and epistemology in the realm of the abstract and, therefore, outside history.

Given Oedipa's existential engagement, would an understanding of the dialectic of psyche and socius—which would take her beyond the binary limits of her epistemology—be sufficient to inaugurate the fully realized, existential subjectivity for which she seems primed? Or is the postmodern America revealed in *Lot 49* too overwhelming a burden for existential subjectivity to bear? That is, has the symbiotic desire of psyche and socius to escape existential subjectivity finally created a self-perpetuating culture of emptiness that has closed down alternative ways of being? *Lot 49* can be read as an attempt to discover the terms on which an existentially authentic subjectivity might still be constituted in a culture grounded in the collective desire to escape existential subjectivity. Given the America portrayed in *Lot 49*, such an attempt constitutes a nascent politics of despair, a testing of the psychological/ideological means by which one can authentically continue to explore possible alternatives to an apparently hopeless and exitless situation.

That the America portrayed in *Lot 49* is based on the collective desire to escape existential subjectivity is immediately evident in the similar rendering of the setting and the minor characters. The setting is a profusion of empty commodity-signs, signs that mark an absence rather than a presence—an absence of art, of history, of myth—and

therefore require no existential engagement. They are "safe," emotionally insulating, non-threatening. In *Kinneret-Among-the-Pines*, for example, art has been reduced to commodified pop music—exploited by a radio station that panders to "all the fraudulent dream of teenage appetites" (15)—and to the Muzak at the supermarket: a Vivaldi concerto played on kazoos. Utterly commercialized and trivialized, art is deprived of its power and therefore of its existential capacity to move us. It is thus converted into an empty sign, an abstraction, a signifier that valorizes the absence of the object signified by putting a non-threatening substitute in its place. At Echo Courts, where Oedipa stays in San Narciso, the thirty-foot sheetmetal nymph out front, with "a concealed blower system that kept [her] gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. . . . smiling a lipsticked and public smile" (26), is the empty sign of empty sex, the perfect wet dream of the existentially disengaged: an artificial woodland nymph on the outside and an artificial whore underneath. Yoyodyne, a giant aerospace plant complete with barbed wire and guard towers, denies and disguises its ominous function by painting its buildings pink, the empty sign of the usual mark of the patriarchal girl-child: castrated, passive, non-threatening, and perversely seductive. The utterly artificial Fangoso Lagoons, one of Inverarity's real estate projects, boasts an "ogived and verdigrised, Art Nouveau reconstruction of some European pleasure-casino" (56)—an imitation of an imitation—and a man-made lake with real human bones at the bottom "for the entertainment of Scuba enthusiasts" (31). Like every other empty commodity-sign in the novel, this one too offers a non-threatening abstraction in the place of an authentic experience: buyers can simply purchase the signs of old money and high adventure; they do not have to be anything or do anything but sign a check. As Baudrillard puts it—fifteen years after the publication of *Lot 49*—Western culture is no longer concerned with imitation: "It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double . . . which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (*Simulations* 4).

Characterization in the novel also suggests that postmodern American culture is based on the collective desire to escape existential subjectivity through simulation. Most of the minor characters feel threatened by an existential experience against which they try to defend themselves, and that defense constitutes their characterization. Indeed, the minor characters could be said to outline an architecture of contemporary cultural psychology by illustrating the kinds of avoidance behaviors facilitated by commodity culture, behaviors that form a

continuum from Mucho's successful flight from existential subjectivity to Dr. Hilarius's failed attempt to escape it. The existential experience Mucho wants to avoid is that pressed on him by the used car lot. Metzger wants protection against the existential contingencies underscored by the failed promise of his career as Baby Igor and by his insights into the convoluted nature of his own subjectivity as a former actor turned lawyer who still "acts," that is, simulates, in front of a jury. Miles wants to deny his boring identity as an ordinary American high school drop-out working in a dead-end job. Roseman wants to escape his sense of inadequacy as a lawyer, a sense revealed by his envious, obsessional hatred of Perry Mason. Hilarius wants to flee his past as a Nazi doctor at Buchenwald. Each character tries to dissolve his subjectivity into the proliferation of empty commodity-signs constituting contemporary American culture. Each grounds his subjectivity in a constellation of signs that have emptied themselves by proliferating at levels of greater and greater abstraction, becoming surfaces without interiors.

"A constellation of empty signs" is one way to define the parodic quality of each character. A parody is an abstraction whose exaggeration derives from its constitution as an exterior without an interior, a constellation of empty signs. Mucho is, by the novel's close, a parody of a disk jockey, groovin' to Muzak and LSD. Metzger is a parody of a Hollywood "personality," a narcissistic shell devoted to developing the capital returns of image creation/exploitation. Miles is a parody of a British rock-and-roll star. Roseman is a parody of a lawyer. Hilarius is a parody of a psychiatrist. Certainly the socius, because it is a proliferation of empty commodity-signs, in effect invites these characters to flee existential subjectivity in just this manner, but they all eagerly accept the invitation. Thus, America does not "necessitat[e] the insanity of its citizens if they are to survive in a meaningful way" (Kharpertian 106); rather, it offers them the means to do what they want to do: escape from meaning into meaninglessness.

In contrast to the minor characters, Oedipa moves from existential blindness and bad faith to existential awareness and engagement. In leaving Kinneret, she leaves behind a way of being—or, more precisely, non-being—she had hidden in her whole life. In Kinneret: "There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix. And had also gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs" (20). On leaving Kinneret, Oedipa first experiences the kind of paranoia many of the

self-dissolving minor characters do. Once one's experience becomes existential, there are no guarantees: anything can happen. Her suspicion that Metzger arranged somehow to have his old movie shown in her motel room the night they meet as part of a seduction plot inaugurates what will become her increasing awareness of the synchronicity that marks all the narrative events and her attempt to rationally order and explain the connections she sees. The attempt, however, is doomed to fail: the phenomena she observes do not fall into discrete, rational categories, but overlap and invade one another in a convoluted, multi-level manner that defies interpretation. Of course, with Oedipa's increasing frustration comes an increasing anxiety that matches or surpasses that exhibited by the minor characters. Yet Oedipa does not self-dissolve. She continues to undertake the impossible task of decoding the excess of data that inundates her.

Like her attempt to decode cultural signs, however, Oedipa's existential engagement is frustrated by its failure to provide concrete results. For example, her encounter with the troubled old sailor she tries to help is shot through with the hopelessness she expresses as she rocks the old man in her arms: "I can't help," she whispered . . . 'I can't help'" (126). Similarly, after Oedipa leaves the Swastika salesman's shop, she feels "she should've called him something, or tried to hit him with any of a dozen surplus, heavy, blunt objects in easy reach. There had been no witnesses. Why hadn't she? You're chicken, she told herself" (150). She realizes that she, that every American, is responsible for America—"This is America, you live in it, you let it happen" (150), she tells herself—but she takes no action.

Even her insight into the class structure in America—the only conclusion she draws about which she expresses no doubts—begins with existential engagement but issues in inaction. Having lost everyone she thought might help her—Mucho, Dr. Hilarius, Metzger, Driblette, Fallopian—Oedipa goes into a state of depression. She is, as she puts it, "'saturated'" (177), overloaded with signs whose meanings she cannot be certain of. Hitting bottom, she becomes a mass of physical and psychological symptoms. It is in this state of mind—with an utterly existential experience of herself and her world—that Oedipa's perceptions of America are most pointedly insightful. She realizes that the only true continuities in America consist of "storm-systems of group suffering and need," and "prevailing winds of affluence" (178). She realizes that Inverarity's great wealth and the corporate structure on which it depends are replicated throughout America, as is the underside of that world: the "immobilized freight cars" that house whole families; the "squatters who stretched canvas for lean-tos

behind smiling billboards . . . or slept in junkyards”; the “walkers along the roads at night . . . too far from any town to have a real destination” (180). As always, Oedipa’s first response to this realization is an existentially engaged one. She wonders, “What would the probate judge [of Inverarity’s estate] have to say about spreading some kind of a legacy among them all, all those nameless, maybe as a first installment?” (181). However, feeling powerless, she immediately abandons the idea: the judge would be “on her ass in a microsecond, revoke her letters testamentary, they’d call her names, proclaim her through all Orange County as a redistributionist pinko” (181). Thus, while her existential awareness and engagement increase over the course of the novel, she never reaches the point of taking the action that defines a full-blown existential subjectivity. Her inability to act is partly due to an epistemological paralysis based on her binary view of her situation.

Oedipa’s conception of her options—that either the Tristero is a real, underground organization or else she is having paranoid delusions about contemporary American culture—keeps her in the same spot waiting for an answer. She will remain in that spot until she discovers her third option, the excluded middle: namely, that the horror of contemporary America is exactly as she sees it whether or not there is some Tristero giving its alienated periphery a collective voice. Oedipa must realize that, in contemporary America, paranoia is no longer a mental illness; it is the response of a social realist.

This is the subjectivity the final scene seems to await, just as Oedipa awaits the Tristero. The description of the room where the auction of Inverarity’s stamp collection (including lot #49) is about to take place, and where Oedipa awaits what she hopes will prove a clue to the existence of the Tristero, has the unmistakable ring of an existential universe: “The men inside the auction room wore black mohair and had pale, cruel faces. They watched her come in, trying each to conceal his thoughts. . . . Oedipa sat alone, toward the back of the room. . . . An assistant closed the heavy door on the lobby windows and the sun. She heard a lock snap shut” (183). This passage could have come straight from Sartre’s *No Exit*: hell is other people, and there is no way out; we are locked together in a sunless room, each of us in a state of utter isolation, trying to conceal our thoughts. All that is needed to complete the picture is an existential hero—a Meursault or a Roquentin. Whether, at some imaginable point after the narrative ends, Oedipa may take some action in keeping with her existential engagement remains a question that raises an even more important question: is such a step still possible in contemporary America?

Can a full-blown existential subjectivity still be constituted in a land "conditioned . . . to accept any San Narciso among its most tender flesh without a reflex or a cry" (181) by a culture whose members increasingly resemble the empty commodity-signs they so eagerly annex? If existential subjectivity is measured by existentially authentic action, what, in Oedipa's world, should that action be? Oedipa believes there is nothing to do but wait, "if not for another set of possibilities to replace" the current ones, "then at least . . . for a symmetry of choices to break down" (181). Yet what hope is there that the "symmetry of choices" Oedipa has outlined—organized alienation or madness, wealth or poverty—will, of its own accord, break down? The prognosis seems especially dim since these binary oppositions appear so firmly established: "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" (181). Given this view of contemporary America, if *Lot 49* is a novel about the possibility of constituting an existential subjectivity in this nation today, then it must also be a novel about the politics of despair, about the ways one can continue to take meaningful action in a situation that is apparently hopeless and exitless. Despair is evident in the novel's overlapping social, philosophical, and psychological themes.

As Oedipa knows, "excluded middles" are "bad shit" (181), and *Lot 49's* America is a nation of excluded middles. As we have seen, on the one hand is the extreme wealth of the ruling class, represented by Inverarity's estate, for whom the American dream is the "need to possess, to alter the land, to bring new skylines, personal antagonisms, growth rates into being" (178); on the other hand is the extreme poverty of the homeless, "the squatters," the heirs to "300 years of . . . disinheritance" (180). Whatever middle ground there is in the novel is inhabited by such self-dissolving abstractions as Mucho, Roseman, Dr. Hilarius, Metzger, Miles, Fallopian, and Driblette, and thus that middle ground has a vanishing ontological status.

Paradoxically, in the semiotic domain, the entire cultural fabric of America is rapidly tending toward an entropic sameness that blankets the novel's landscape, denying and disguising the socioeconomic disparities of the class system much as the layer of pink paint covering the Yoyodyne buildings denies and disguises their sinister purpose. Many readings of entropy in *Lot 49* hinge on the contrasting definitions of entropy in thermodynamics and information theory.⁴ In thermodynamics, entropy is the tendency of hotter molecules to disperse their energy to colder molecules until a uniform temperature, or random sameness, is achieved. In information theory, entropy is a

measure of the amount of uncertainty in the information content of a message: the more possible meanings a message has, the more entropy, or ordered difference, it has. Thus, while an increase in thermodynamic entropy indicates an increase in sameness, an increase in information entropy, the argument goes, indicates an increase in differentiation. However, in the postmodern world of *Lot 49*, information theory's traditional model

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{INFORMATION} & & & & \text{NOISE} & & & & \text{INFORMATION} \\ \text{SENT} & & & & & & & & \text{RECEIVED} \\ \text{A} & & + & & \text{N} & & = & & \text{A or B or C or . . .} \end{array}$$

no longer obtains. According to this model, an original message (A) can, at least theoretically, be determined, against which received versions (A or B or C or . . .) can be measured. The model thus relies on the possibility of a stable, knowable original message. In *Lot 49*, there is no such possibility. As Bernard Duyfhuizen puts it, "neither source nor destination are finite and . . . the messages disseminate fragments of meaning across a culture that has lost any totalizing mythology" (81). Uncertainty therefore becomes a function, not just of choosing among numerous possible received messages, but of never knowing, even theoretically, that any original message ever existed. Perhaps none of the received messages is the "correct" one. Or perhaps the noise itself is the real "message." Information in *Lot 49* has thus reached a new plateau: all messages could mean anything; therefore all messages are, in effect, the same—unknowable. In this context, thermodynamic entropy and information entropy both lead in the same direction. Callisto's definition of entropy in Pynchon's short story "Entropy" reinforces the collapse of thermodynamic and information entropy in *Lot 49*. He describes it as a "tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos" (88). In the novel, then, entropy in either domain leads to sameness, diminished energy, and death.

Sameness, diminished energy, and death are desiderata in the world of *Lot 49*, as the minor characters' flight from existential subjectivity reveals. As Mucho happily explains: "No matter who's talking, the different power spectra are the same, give or take a small percentage. So . . . [e]verybody who says the same words is the same person if the spectra are the same only they happen differently in time, you dig? But . . . you can shuffle each person's time line sideways till they all coincide'" (142). Just as the novel's architectural landscape—the endlessly repeated freeways and suburbs, the Fangoso Lagoons

and Echo Courts and Yoyodynes—melts together in the ultimate coincidence of simulation, so Mucho wants to merge with “‘a million lives’” (144) and thereby lose himself. This is the same “fascination with senseless repetition” that haunts Baudrillard’s *America* (1) and Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality*. However, Pynchon suggests that the desire at work here, the desire for what Eco calls “the Absolute Fake,” is not, as Eco asserts, the “offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth” (31). Rather, it is the *desire for a present without depth*. The desire informing the flat postmodern landscape—Nature obliterated to make room for Fangoso Lagoons, in which natural objects are artificially reproduced—is the same desire informing the flat postmodern psyche. Psychological entropy—sameness, diminished energy, and death—finally makes Mucho’s face “smooth, amiable, at peace” (143).

This desire for psychological entropy, for existential insulation, is underscored by the contrast between the dry descriptions of sexual desire, which isolates rather than bonds partners, and the much more passionate descriptions of the desire for emotional insulation. The passes the male characters make at Oedipa are perfunctory, social rather than passionate. The only sexual encounter described in the novel, that between Metzger and Oedipa at Echo Courts, is impersonal, shot through with the two characters’ mutual isolation. Oedipa is passive, psychologically absent, and Metzger is turned on, not by sex, but by power: he reminds Oedipa of “some scaled-up, short-haired, poker-faced little girl with a Barbie doll” (42). The lovers’ isolation is underscored by the Paranoids’ serenade, in which the following words in the following order dominate: *lonely, lonely, still and faceless, ghost, shadow, gray, alone, alone, lonely, lonely, lonely, gray, dark, alone, lonely, lonely* (39–40). Finally, when Oedipa and Metzger achieve climax, “every light in the place . . . go[es] out, dead, black” (42). Yet this “love scene” is not presented as a disappointment to either character; indeed, it initiates their liaison.

In sharp contrast, the desire for existential insulation is described in passionate, sensual terms. During Oedipa’s night in San Francisco, she feels she has become invulnerable, beyond the reach of the dangers associated with night in the street, that is, beyond existential contingency:

Nothing of the night’s could touch her. . . . *She was meant to remember.* She faced that possibility as she might the toy street from a high balcony, roller-coaster ride, feeding-time among the beasts in a zoo—any death-wish that can be consummated by some minimum gesture. She touched the edge of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams

simply to submit to it; that not gravity's pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravening, promised more delight. She tested it, shivering: I am meant to remember. (117-18)

Note the sexually-charged language: *roller-coaster ride, consummated, voluptuous, lovely beyond dreams, submit, delight, shivering*. Note also how the phrase *death-wish* is linked to the notion of a determinate, essentialist reality. What Oedipa finds so attractive here is the psychological death, the release from existential contingency and responsibility, that results from believing that all that occurs is meant to occur; that she, like everything else, is merely fulfilling a purpose imposed from the outside; that she is not responsible. Although Oedipa chooses to remain existentially engaged, we see that, in contemporary America, the release from existential subjectivity, not sex, is the big turn-on.

That the constitution of an existential subjectivity in Pynchon's America requires a politics of despair is also evident in the novel's representation of limited epistemological resources. Most critics note the importance of uncertainty or indeterminacy for our understanding of the novel. Yet *Lot 49* does not invite us to "celebrate . . . our absolute inability to know" (Olsen 162). Rather, it illustrates the ways our "paradigms determine what we perceive" (Palmeri 980). Thus, at least in terms of the dialectical symbiosis of psyche and socius, Oedipa cannot make cultural meaning out of all the cultural data she accumulates because she limits herself to explaining it in terms that implicitly separate the individual and the society into discrete entities: either the innumerable "clues" she has found to the Tristero's existence are part of an elaborate hoax perpetrated by Inverarity, or they are placed there by an organized underground, or they are products of her imagination. She does not realize that, because psyche and socius are dialectically related in a mutually constitutive symbiosis, cultural meaning is diffused through all layers of culture. There is no conspiracy in the usual sense, just the synchronicity—the innumerable connections, doublings, coincidences—that results from the unconscious, pervasive, collective desire that saturates, constitutes, and reflects cultural reality at any given moment. Because cultural meaning saturates all agents and objects, it is constantly announcing itself, constantly producing the connections that can make one suspect a conspiracy.

The interconnectedness of all cultural phenomena is responsible for Oedipa's recurrent observation of what she believes are hieroglyphs that hold the key to some revelation, as when her first view of San Narciso reminds her of a printed circuit: "there were to both outward

patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" (24). And indeed, San Narciso—like Fangoso Lagoons, the L.A. freeway, and all the other cultural phenomena that seem to Oedipa to carry messages—is a hieroglyph that can communicate any number of insights into contemporary America. All the cultural phenomena in the novel are, in fact, hieroglyphs for one another because they are all manifestations of the same supersaturated solution that spontaneously diffuses its meaning, as a solution diffuses its molecules, throughout its material existence.

This synchronicity of cultural phenomena is emblematic of the interface of psyche and socius because it suggests we are all conspiring, albeit for the most part unconsciously, in whatever occurs in the socius. Because of these innumerable interconnections, the path of all inquiry, which is unavoidably grounded in the culture of the inquirer, leads, albeit circuitously, back to itself, back to the question and the questioner with which it began. Oedipa does not find an objective answer to her question about the Tristero on her labyrinthine pilgrimage to the heart of postmodern America because knowledge, at least knowledge about the nature of one's socius, consists of what one is able to articulate of one's diffusion within it, not of "objective" answers to "objective" questions.

Indeed, one of the novel's most successful projects is to undermine the belief in objectivity, the New Critical epistemology that, at the time the novel was published, had dominated academia for over two decades. As Randolph Driblette knows, a text exists, not in the words on paper, not as a New Critical, autonomous object that remains stable and inviolate over time, but in the mind of the creator of any particular version of that object, that is, in the mind of the interpreter. He tells Oedipa, "'You know where that play exists, not in that file cabinet [of scripts], not in any paperback you're looking for, but—' [his] hand . . . indicate[d] his . . . head—'in here'" (79). Driblette thus enunciates a kind of Reader Response theory: texts tell us, not about themselves, but about ourselves. Any act of interpretation that conceives of itself as a transparent, ahistorical, objective apprehension of words on paper—the text in itself—is absurd, impossible. The only real "conspiracy" in the novel, then, is that of the author to confound any attempt—Oedipa's or ours—to make New Critical sense of the narrative. The novel abounds in minor characters who remain little more than names dashing in and out, never to be heard from again, and in fictional historical trivia too numerous to be tied into an organic whole. Pynchon overloads us with data we cannot possibly process or even keep track of without laborious note-taking that does not repay our effort.

This view of cultural meaning as non-objective, as a diffusion in which psyche and socius are mutually implicated, is underscored by the text's references to Remedios Varo's *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*, in which "a number of frail girls . . . prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroider[ed] a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void . . . and the tapestry was the world" (21). The tapestry the girls create is also the tapestry that contains their tower. All reality is at once personal and cultural, the product of a personal projection that both creates and is created by the socius. The two cannot be meaningfully separated, and any question about the one always implies a question about the other. Without a dialectical conception of their relation, Oedipa's attempts to understand her culture and her place within it will remain mired in the epistemological limitations that lead her to the despair she experiences at the novel's close. However, there is no guarantee a dialectical understanding of psyche and socius will significantly lessen that despair because, while such an understanding provides a holistic sense of psycho-social reality and is the only meaningful place to begin inquiry, by its very nature it does not offer the kind of psychological assurances—epistemological closure, certainty, mastery—we have come to rely on.

Finding no sure answers in contemporary reality, Oedipa turns to history for an explanation that will help her make sense of her world and herself, that will lift her out of her growing desperation. With the help of scholar Emory Bortz, she looks for clues to the development of the Tristero from its origin in sixteenth-century Europe to its establishment and growth in America. By this point, the Tristero has become, not just an underground communication network for America's alienated nor even the European underground postal system it began as, but emblematic of the possibility of knowing anything. As it turns out, however, history's indeterminacy makes a politics of despair only more unavoidable. For, despite Oedipa's diligence in tracking down clues and the college training that seems to have suited her well for just such tedious scholarship, she keeps running into blind alleys. "Beyond its origins, the libraries told her nothing more about Tristero," and Bortz's educated speculations were useless, merely "a species of cute game" (162). Given the impossibility of acquiring sure knowledge about events occurring in the immediate vicinity of the perceiver, how can sure knowledge possibly be gained about events from which the perceiver is separated by both time and space? Oedipa realizes the impossibility of determining historical causes for trivial and important events alike: "Did she know why Driblette had put in those two extra lines that night? Had *he* even known why? No one could begin to trace it. A hundred hangups, permuted, combined—sex,

money, illness, despair with the history of his time and place, who knew. Changing the script had no clearer motive than his suicide" (162). She becomes angry when Mike Fallopian tells her to separate fact from speculation because she knows speculation is just about all she has. As Bortz and his graduate students point out: "'The historical Shakespeare. . . . The historical Marx. The historical Jesus. . . . [T]hey're dead. What's left? Words'" (151). In short, "historical figuration" is nothing but a seductive scam consisting of "breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings . . . layered dense" (54) over a proliferation of historical events whose complexities, as well as our temporal distance from them, make them virtually unknowable.

Perhaps the best metaphor for the complexity of historical events, both past and current, and for the impossibility of acquiring any sure knowledge of them can be found in the flying can of hairspray in Oedipa's bathroom at Echo Courts. The passage begins with Oedipa's looking in the bathroom mirror, itself a metaphor for the desire to comprehend or establish her identity, which, as we have seen, is part of what she seeks in seeking to understand postmodern America. Almost all the qualities imputed to the hairspray can in this passage—its high speed; the practical impossibility of predicting or even mapping "the complex web of its travel"; the destruction left in its wake; the difference between "its own whoosh" and the "distorted uproar" of the television in the next room (37), that is, of the media that pretend to report events—provide a model that illuminates the concept of history informing the whole novel. While history in *Lot 49* is not a function of total ontological chaos, it creates total epistemological chaos. History is a system of spiraling connections and reactions that bounce in any direction for any distance and at any speed for any number of reasons: obstacles encountered, angle of impact, speed of impact, and so on. History is thus a function of factors too numerous and complex to grasp with any certainty.

Significantly, the hairspray can shatters the mirror into which Oedipa is looking when the scene begins, betokening the relation between history and yet another avatar of the necessity for a politics of despair: nostalgia for the Lacanian Imaginary Order. Lacan's Imaginary Order, which dominates early childhood, is initiated and informed by what he calls the mirror stage, when our subjectivity is reflected back to us—through other people if not through literal mirrors—as a stable unity.⁵ This sense of self and world is then shattered by the Lacanian Symbolic Order or (more simply if not more precisely) by history. Initiation into the Symbolic Order, because it is an initiation into culture as it is inscribed in language, is intrinsically historical. We have seen that Oedipa's initiation into postmodern American culture is

Lot 49's pervasive theme. It is an initiation Oedipa resists as much as pursues, "anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point. Lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself" (166). As she muses over Driblette's grave, she "wonder[s] whether . . . some version of herself hadn't vanished" (161). This vanished version of herself is the buffered, illusory subjectivity she lived in Kinneret, before her initiation into the Symbolic Order of postmodern American culture.

Mirrors often appear in the text when Oedipa seems on the verge of yet another potentially threatening discovery: the morning she visits her lawyer concerning her executorship of Inverarity's will; during her first meeting with Metzger; during her first and only meeting with Driblette; the day she obtains Bortz's edition of *The Courier's Tragedy*; shortly after she learns that WASTE, which she believes is the name of the Tristero's underground communications system, stands for "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire" (169); and just before she learns that an absentee bidder for Inverarity's collection of philatelic forgeries might be from the Tristero. Her looking in mirrors can thus be read as a desire to recapture the stable, unified version of herself she once knew, a desire to return to the safety of the Imaginary Order. Her inability to find in mirrors the self-image she seeks—"she . . . tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn't" (41); "in the mirror [she saw . . . n]othing specific, only a possibility" (101)—underscores the unattainable, purely nostalgic nature of her desire.

Nostalgia for an Edenic experience of wholeness associated with the Imaginary Order occurs throughout the novel more concretely as well, as in Oedipa's attitude toward the Pacific Ocean: "Oedipa had believed, long before leaving Kinneret, in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California . . . some unvoiced idea that no matter what you did to its edges the true Pacific stayed inviolate and integrated or assumed the ugliness at any edge into some more general truth" (55). Here we have nostalgia for Nature as the source of Truth, a source that remains always whole and stable, "inviolate and integrated," capable of assuming all attacks against its wholeness "into some more general truth." This is nostalgia for Nature as the source and sign of the Imaginary Order, of a stable, unified self in a stable, unified world. The same nostalgia for a pristine, pre-Symbolic subjectivity occurs during Oedipa's all-night vigil in San Francisco. She wonders if all the clues she has found to the Tristero's existence are "only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (118). This is the same "epileptic" Word she associates with some "central truth"

hovering, throughout the novel, just beyond her ken, whose source lies in some earlier, Edenic wholeness she cannot remember: "Oedipa wondered whether, at the 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" (95).

Oedipa's haunting desire to return to some earlier, more stable order of being underscores her inability to imagine a future in postmodern America. It is at just this point—with all the traditional ego supports removed—that existential subjectivity based on a politics of despair must begin. On what ground is such a politics to be undertaken within the framework of this novel? Do we have anything left in *Lot 49* on which it can be built? No. We have an American culture consisting of a profusion of empty commodity-signs. We have a cast of characters, as "death-wishful" and "sensually fatigued" (65) as Wharfinger's seventeenth-century audience is said to have been, who dissolve their own subjectivity into those empty commodity-signs in order to flee existential subjectivity. We cannot even be sure why this should be so in America because contemporary culture, as well as our own history, has become little more than an overload of indeterminate data. And we have a protagonist, the only character in the novel willing or able to sustain existential subjectivity, who does not know what to do because she does not know whether she can trust her own perceptions.

Lot 49 asks, then, if an existential subjectivity can be constituted in a postmodern culture so horrifying that our only viable response to it must be a politics of despair. But, in keeping with the problematic it portrays, the novel does not provide an answer. Instead, the text explores the landscape of the despair in which an authentic postmodern politics—if it is to exist at all—must be grounded. If a postmodern American subject is to have an authentic politics at all, it must be a politics of despair because despair is the only existential reality left us. We are not told, however, what such a politics will do or even how such a politics can, with certainty, be recognized. If it tells us anything about the politics of despair, *Lot 49* tells us it is a politics with no certain, stable ground to stand on. It is a politics that asks us to look horror straight in the face with no sure hope of doing anything to change or escape it. And it is a politics that cannot even tell us whether we will survive the effort. Perhaps, like Mucho, Metzger, or Miles, we will become cultural "personae," types, empty commodity-signs of a bankrupt culture. Perhaps, like Dr. Hilarius, we will give ourselves over to hysteria. Perhaps, like Driblette, we will

commit suicide. Or perhaps, like Oedipa, we will wait for more information, knowing, as Oedipa knows, that we are all executors of Pierce Inverarity's will, yet unwilling or unable to shoulder that responsibility in some concrete way.

Will Oedipa's quest for the Tristero, her quest for knowledge of an alternative, become an end in itself, a function of the bad-faith desire to at once have a purpose in life and yet eschew the responsibility for taking action?⁶ Perhaps a politics of despair demands an existential subjectivity that will acknowledge uncertainty and take its best shot anyway because at stake is an America whose narcissistic death-wish threatens to drown us all in the refuse of our repressed collective psyche. For if Baudrillard is right that, in contemporary America, "death ha[s] found its ideal home" in the excesses of "a utopian dream made reality" (America 31, 30), surely it is because that dream is one of empty commodity-signs whose primary psychological attraction is that they insulate us against existential subjectivity, against life. If this is one of the stories *Lot 49* tells, then Oedipa's "you live in it, you let it happen" is an admonition Pynchon directs at us all. Existential awareness of postmodern horror—in its apparent boundlessness and with no guarantee of any escape—may not be a sufficient response to postmodern culture, but it is the necessary first step.

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Notes

¹Existential subjectivity might best be described as a working with and within existential anxiety, that anxious awareness of oneself as a creature "whose very being is at issue" (Heidegger 67) in an uncertain world. Financial worries, the fear of emotional pain, the possibility of accident or illness, and the inevitability of aging and death all number among the unforeseeable events—historical contingencies—that increase and complicate the anxieties inherent in being human, in having a consciousness that is aware of itself in a context of unanswerable questions: Why was I born? What is the purpose of life? What should I believe, and how should I behave? What will happen to me after I die? To escape existential subjectivity is to escape the awareness of historical contingency and the responsibility to respond to it conscientiously. To maintain existential subjectivity, in contrast, is to make decisions based on a responsible engagement with a life maximized by the knowledge that it is temporally limited.

²See, for example, John W. Hunt (40), Ferenc Takács (302–04), Lance Olsen (161), Maureen Quilligan (201), Thomas H. Schaub (58–59), Peter L. Hays (23, 32), and Martin Green (37). Annette Kolodny and Daniel James Peters sidestep the either/or dilemma, and perhaps the issue, by arguing that

“Tristero exists whether or not Oedipa is paranoid” because “[p]aranoia itself is . . . embraced by and embrac[es] the Tristero” (85). Among others, Molly Hite (80, 89) believes, as I do, that, while Oedipa’s view of her situation rests on a binary understanding of contemporary reality, the novel suggests her view is mistaken. In contrast, Frank Palmeri argues that Oedipa “declines the either-or choice that her time presses upon her” (995), and Richard Pearce suggests Oedipa finally transcends the emotional, if not epistemological, limitations of her binary world through her growing “commit[ment] to human connection” (147). For an excellent overview of *Lot 49* criticism since the novel’s publication, see Patrick O’Donnell.

³Of course there have been a number of significant attempts to account for the interaction of the individual and society in terms of the relation between psychology and ideology, among them Habermas’s *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Jameson’s *Political Unconscious*, Luhmann’s *Differentiation of Society*, and, earlier, Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*. However, such texts do not provide the kind of dialectical conception of psyche and socius necessary to a full understanding of their existential symbiosis. Such efforts have usually been circumscribed by their reliance on categories too discrete and static to illuminate the subtle ways the terms they separate overlap; or they have been limited by a teleology that inevitably issues in some form of reification reminiscent of Hegel’s *Geist*. These forms of reification include *a priori*, rationalist structures of communication, structuralist semiotics, psychological structures based on the hegemony of the ego, essentialist theories of human nature, and the like.

⁴See, for example, Theodore D. Kharpertian (102–04), Takács (297–99), Dean A. Ward (24–26), Schaub (51–58), and Tony Tanner (67). In contrast, Anne Mangel might be taken to agree with me that, in *Lot 49*, thermodynamic entropy and information entropy both tend in the direction of infinite disorder—which I read as utter randomness, non-differentiation, or sameness. Mangel does not distinguish the two kinds of entropy at all. Even “the nature of language itself,” she observes, “fails [in *Lot 49*] to differentiate and order” (206).

⁵For a complete discussion of the mirror stage, see Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I.”

⁶Mark Conroy argues, in his superb discussion of American consumer society, that Oedipa’s binary logic, itself an American cultural production, supplies throughout the novel the escape she seeks from the painful uncertainties of human connection. Similarly, John Dugdale suggests Oedipa uses the Tristero quest, like a religious quest, to escape the “repugnant aspects of her society” (129). I believe both critics, however, underestimate the degree and sincerity of Oedipa’s existential struggle.

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