

# Systemic Transgression and Cultural Rewriting in Pynchon's Fiction

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[Non-causal narrative] is one of the mind's most formidable methods of organizing the disparities of experience. It has the virtue of generating unforeseen connections, and is particularly useful in a time when traditional causes no longer seem adequate to account for observed effects. It may produce new systems of order when traditional ones no longer seem persuasive. Since it starts beyond system it is capable of including kinds of experience that given systems might exclude. . . . Non-causal narrative implies discontinuity and fragmentation reaching toward continuity and wholeness, which seems more appropriate to a time when mystiques and their processes are laid bare.

Ronald Sukenick (*In Form* 14–15)

Zoyd eyeballed himself in the mirror behind the bar, gave his hair a shake, turned, poised, then screaming ran empty-minded at the window and went crashing through. He knew the instant he hit that something was funny. There was hardly any impact, and it all felt and sounded different, no spring or resonance, no volume, only a sort of fine, dulled splintering. . . . On the Tube, Zoyd came blasting out the window, along with the dubbed-in-sounds now of real glass breaking.

Thomas Pynchon (*Vineland* 11–12, 15)

## 1. Maxwell's Demon: Postmodernism and the Critique of Narrative Systems

Pynchon's metaphor for an optimal process of narrative communication, we recall from *The Crying of Lot 49*, is Maxwell's Demon, the intelligent being (or a functionally equivalent device) hypothesized by James Clerk Maxwell in 1871 to test the strength of his second law of thermodynamics:

As the Demon sat and sorted his molecules into hot and cold, the system was said to lose entropy. But somehow the loss was off-set by the information the Demon gained. . . .

"Communication is the key," cried Nefastis. "The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind. There are untold billions of molecules in that box. The Demon collects data on each and every one. At some deep psychic level he must get through. The sensitive must receive that staggering set of energies, and feed back something like the same quantity of information. To keep it all cycling."  
(105)

Maxwell's original demon was supposed to work like a clever sorting machine, feeding "hot" and "cold" molecules through a trapdoor between two chambers in such a way that, in violation of the law of increased entropy, he would create a useful excess of energy in one of the chambers. But as Leo Szilard and others have shown since, the violation of the second law of thermodynamics is only apparent: the decrease in thermodynamic entropy through the negentropy of information fed by the demon into the system is matched by an increase in entropy at other levels (particularly the informational) as a result of choosing between fast and slow molecules and increasing the gradient. Pynchon's version of the Demon capitalizes on the *metaphoric coincidence* between the loops of energy and information, proposing to control the entropy resulting from the informational flow in a way similar to that imagined by Maxwell. The success of its undertaking depends on the existence of a sensitive medium at the other end, capable of sorting out "hot" and "cold" informational signs in order to reduce the spontaneous drift of the system towards entropy and "equivocation." With a receptive interpretant at the helm, reading creatively the Demon's communications and feeding back his/her own patterned responses to keep the cycle going, Maxwell's Demon can become a successful narrative machine, submitting the random flow of signs to new, imaginative narrative configurations. This narrative machine is continuously on the verge of breakdown, threatened by outside disruptions, interference, or the unpredictable dynamics of its own systems. Conversely, it draws new energy from its divisiveness, predicating subtle patterns of meaning on the random association of its fields.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa is unable (or unwilling) to sustain the "miracle" of Maxwell's Demon to the end. The intricate "message from the grave" she receives from Pierce Inverarity in the form of a testamentary puzzle overwhelms her powers of interpretation and ordering. As the novel's main puzzle-solver and structurer, she lacks

modernism's faith in the totalizing metaphor of narration. While modernism rallied behind an emancipatory, integrative concept of narration that reinforced, according to Charles Newman, "the positive socializing function of literature" (5-6), postmodernism seems more determined to expose, in Raymond Federman's words, "the metaphor of its own fraudulence" (8), the false totalizing claims and blind spots of the narrative machinery. Even as it creates elegant, abstract patterns out of disparate experiences, postmodern fiction turns its critical attention to the manipulative side of narrative articulations, foregrounding the many divisions and gaps that underlie its discourse. No single center of meaning, no dominant perspective, is allowed to emerge. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, neither Inverarity's will nor Oedipa's interpretation of it can control the forces of cultural entropy that threaten technological society. But both facilitate a complex transformative process that converts "waste" into new, extravagant patterns of meaning. "Trystero," the secret organization Oedipa discovers by accident as she tries to decipher Pierce's enigmatic legacy, is a good metaphor for postmodernism itself: Trystero lives off the entropy it creates, turning waste into new, insidious orders. Postmodernism similarly allows two different emphases to interact: a deconstructive, improvisational impulse with a recreative task; an interest in dissemination and divergence with a systematic examination of the master codes that govern the production of narrative texts.

Criticism, however, has often dissociated these two sides of the postmodern project, reducing narrative innovation to "slapdash invention" and deconstructive "game-playing." Three related criticisms are most frequently heard: a) that postmodernism discourages serious articulation, promoting a negative, self-ironic poetics that puts all categories of thought "under erasure"; b) that the self-reflexive focus on the processes of writing/reading reduces literature to narrow aesthetic concerns, preventing a rigorous exploration of the "conditions we live in"; c) that the revisionistic strategies of postmodernism have little sociocultural relevance outside the world of fiction. In Brian McHale's characteristic description, postmodern fiction is an ontological rather than epistemological genre because it has abandoned the "intractable problems of attaining to reliable knowledge of *our* world," resorting instead to "pure ontological improvisation" (PF 10, 20).

This narrow theoretical view of postmodernism is derived from a simplified understanding of Derridean deconstruction, and of Michel Foucault's and J.-F. Lyotard's critique of the falsely universalizing discourses of modernity. The role of postmodern theory and practice, as Lyotard sees it, is to challenge traditional epistemologies, laying bare

the comprehensive modes of assemblage and self-legitimation societies resort to in order to minimize risk and unpredictability. These explanatory models situate and legitimize "first-order" discursive practices of inquiry within a broader totalizing metadiscourse that makes "an explicit appeal to some grand narrative such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (xxiii). Postmodernism undercuts these powerful, homogeneous metanarratives with their seductive mechanism of self-legitimation, replacing them with a "discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical" order of *pétits recits* (60). These fractured, provisional, local stories promote experimentation, differentiation, conflict; but they prevent a comprehensive view of the cultural system they participate in. Therein lie both the strength and the weakness of the postmodern order envisioned by Lyotard. As his critics have readily pointed out, Lyotard's view of cultural discourses as heteromorphous and nontotalizable accentuates the fragmentation of contemporary culture, "de-theorizing" and depoliticizing them. In the absence of a comprehensive evaluation of local beliefs and narrative strategies, we are left with a fragmented and yet closely managed cultural scene, enslaved to its unexamined sets of norms.

At the antipode of Lyotard's anarchistic concept of knowledge and authority is a more recent position illustrated by cultural semiotics and feminist narratology that seeks to reconcile the subversive, deconstructive side of postmodernism with a critical-reformulative task. Feminism's challenge, according to Seyla Benhabib, is to articulate a gender-specific epistemology as a defense against male claims of "objectivism/universalism" on the one hand and self-denying relativism on the other. For this particular purpose, Lyotard's "agonistic theory of language and paralogistic theory of legitimation cannot serve as a basis" (122). Its tendency to put everything "under erasure" undermines important cross-cultural concepts like those of knowing subject, gendered agent, feminine experience. Feminism, as Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson argue, cannot simply give up these concepts, or its need for "large narratives about changes in social organization and ideology, empirical and social-theoretical analyses of macrostructures and institutions . . . critical-hermeneutical and institutional analyses of cultural production" (26). But what it can and should do is apply a postmodern critique of essentialization like Lyotard's to its own "large narratives," evaluating their plots, carefully contextualizing their cross-cultural categories. Postmodern deconstruction and feminist articulation can collaborate, in Benhabib's view, towards "an epistemology and politics which recognizes the lack

of metanarratives and foundational guarantees but which nonetheless insists on formulating minimal criteria of validity for our discursive and cultural practices" (125).

If in theory the two sides of the postmodernist project, deconstruction and rearticulation, are still largely at odds, in the practice of innovative fiction they have collaborated more successfully. Postmodern fiction, I would argue, is neither about "un-anxious fictionalization" nor about total deconstruction and "self-erasure," but rather about the tension between innovation and constraint, randomness and structure, the "aggregative" and the "divisive" impulses of narration. The *self-reflexive* novels of Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover and Pynchon simultaneously build and question systematic narration, carrying it to the point where its totalistic claims are undone by the underlying dialectic of articulation. In shifting from an earlier atomistic, causal, static model of narration to a new epistemology that emphasizes discursive heterogeneity and open dynamics, these novels undermine the stability of society's "grand narratives." The *surfiction* of Federman and Ronald Sukenick, and the new *feminist novel* upset the hermeneutic, totalistic economy of narration more profoundly, creating differential movements within it as a weapon against interpretive expropriations. At the same time, they pursue a more imaginative narrative dialectic that allows a transformed rapport with reality to emerge.

What is foregrounded in each case is the process of fiction-making as a whole, its conditions of articulation and its mastery models. Many recent novels problematize narrative/cultural construction, calling attention to the pervasive presence of narration and metaphor in a society's representation of itself. The self-reflexive focus on constructive and unifying devices allows these fictions to raise broader questions about the role self-legitimizing strategies and metaphoric orders play in all types of narrative, scientific and literary. Postmodern fiction is, in Gayle L. Ormiston and Raphael Sassower's view, an important locus where the relation between science, technology and culture is renegotiated and where claims of cultural authority are being reexamined (15, 16). The "classical-canonic" view of authority "governed by a metaphysics of representation" and a transcendental "correspondence between narrative and reality" (99) is superseded here by a model that highlights the open-ended, self-regulating mechanism of narration. The "construction and choice of one story over others" is shown to be governed less by a relation to truth than by "a will to power," "a desire not to hear certain other voices or stories" (Flax 195). Knowledge/legitimacy/power become interconnected, but in

ways that both affirm and call into question the mastery of a particular discourse.

## 2. Pynchon's "Dive Through the Window": Transgression, Dissonance, Rearticulation

The question of narrative/cultural *mastery* and its critique is central to what Tom LeClair has called the "systems novel." The richly layered, speculative works of Coover, Joseph McElroy, Ursula Le Guin and Pynchon are directly concerned with social macrostructures and discursive systems, submitting the personal and local to a systemic evaluation. By taking such an integrative approach, systems novels achieve, according to LeClair, a triple "mastery of the world in which they were written, mastery of narrative methods and mastery of the reader" (AE 5). At the same time, they foreground metanarratively the sources of their mastery, calling attention to the synthetic and structuring operations they perform. Instead of concealing the synecdochal mechanism of fiction, systems novels expose it with a vengeance. The "mastery" they possess is finally revealed as a metaphor, a synecdochal illusion that allows the "parts . . . selected, structured, proportioned, and scaled" to "suggest, not exhaust, the whole of discourse" (18). The result of this paradoxical dialectic of "excessive mastery" is a species of self-problematized process-text, a hybrid of a syncretistic form of realism and postmodern deconstruction. This type of text both illustrates and violates our deep-seated need for order and axiological stability, deforming "the conventions of the realistic novel in order to defamiliarize the world, not only to defamiliarize the text" (21).

An immediate problem with this kind of "systemic" novel is that its insistent focus on global cultural systems affects its own narration, encouraging extensive patterning and narrative integration. LeClair argues in fact that the power of cultural systems can be undone only through novelistic mastery, that in the presence of self-reproducing power institutions, "only extraordinarily knowledgeable and skilled works of literature—masterworks—have the kind of power that asserts the efficacy of literature and leads readers to contest and possibly reformulate the mastering systems they live with" (1). This approach is problematic, not only because it compromises the postmodern critique of mastery by returning us to a nostalgic, integrative notion of literary "masterpiece" (according to this line of thought, *Gravity's Rainbow* is more masterly than *The Color Purple* because it "masters a set of global conditions that *The Color Purple* does not address, conditions and systems in which all readers—black or white, female or

male, old or young—are imbricated” (3)],<sup>1</sup> but also because LeClair does not allow literary dissension to go far enough, reducing it to such procedures as *overload*, *excess*, *structural complication*. Systemic novels increase the entropy of the narrative process, creating an “informational density” that cannot be digested by the reader, but they do not significantly challenge “the power systems they exist within and are about” (6). By LeClair’s own admission, systems novels often arouse conventional expectations of plot, character and setting, even though they deform and rescale them subsequently. The reader is temporarily disoriented, but can still “reframe the text’s materials within systemic conventions,” recognizing a reassuring “correspondence between the novelistic system of information and systems of information in the world” (22).

A more significant systemic disruption can take place when fiction attacks, in Coover’s phrase, “the supporting structures themselves, the homologous forms,” making room for a “disruptive, eccentric, even inaccessible” narrative voice “peculiarly alert to the decay in the social forms that embrace it” (37–38). The best work of Coover and Pynchon moves in that direction, being concerned with both system analysis and system transgression, with both mastery and its undoing. Their fiction challenges inherited modes of narrative representation in at least two ways: a) by revising the referential system of traditional fiction, breaking down its norms of selectivity, unity and verisimilitude; b) by exacerbating (and at the same time questioning) our need for self-explanatory orders. *Gravity’s Rainbow* upsets these orders epistemologically and textually, denying the reader a controlling perspective. It engages, according to Brian Stonehill, two antithetical modes of reading: a “paranoid,” systemic reading that finds everywhere support for the idea of a “massive conspiracy envelop[ing] Tyrone Slothrop and the other characters”; and a ludic-deconstructive reading aware only of “perfect randomness, each point ideally independent of any other. . . . Like *Ulysses*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is both minutely mimetic and egregiously ludic; it amalgamates literary realism with surreal fantasy” (142, 146). In what amounts to a “cosmographic” rereading of modern Western history, Pynchon foregrounds the ubiquitous will-to-order that runs through it, detouring and partially redirecting it. His complex plots attempt, in Khachig Tölölyan’s description, “to direct sexual desire, ballistic missiles, and interpretation (among others)” towards some “privileged structure of meaning” (486); by the same token, they prevent this cultural semiotic from reaching closure, recuperating some of its excluded areas (forgotten histories, disaffected professionals, victimized children and women).

This process of recuperation/rearticulation is more economically illustrated in *The Crying of Lot 49*, where various disenfranchised groups participate in the arcane counter-discourse of the "muted horn," a secret postal "network by which X number of Americans [may be] truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system" (170). The history of "Trystero," the alternative postal organization Oedipa investigates, suggests that *rearticulation/rewriting* (in the form of textual insertions, forgeries, distortions of traditional iconic representations, garbled names) can play a subversive role in culture, enabling the marginalized to challenge the dominant discourse. In characteristic Pynchonesque fashion, this book leaves open the question of how successful Oedipa is at creating some room for femininity in the incongruous, male-dominated society of Southern California in the sixties. The W.A.S.T.E. or "muted horn" sign suggests both a breakdown in modern communication and a conspiratorial mutation of its discourse systems that allows the manifestation of dissonant, marginal voices like Oedipa's. Oedipa herself remains an ambivalent figure to the very end: an excluded, paranoid over-reader who vainly seeks to bring an existential and cultural void "into pulsing stelliferous Meaning"; but also a facilitator of intercommunication between disparate worlds, a "tryster" whose erratic drifting establishes tantalizing, dissonant connections between people and things.<sup>2</sup>

*Dissonance* (linguistic, cultural, symbolic) is an active principle of articulation in Pynchon's fiction. Rather than simply illustrate some form of cultural and textual anarchy, Pynchon seeks a provisional balance (creative dissonance) between the endlessly proliferating symbolic systems his work evokes. Each system is riddled by further discontinuity/dissonance between its iconic signs, enhancing the semantic divisiveness of the novel. *Gravity's Rainbow* proliferates numerous series of antithetical images: "gravity" and "rainbow," angels of God and angels of war, agents of order and "the Counterforce," "a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World's suicide, the two perpetually in struggle" (727). These images function as system markers and configurators (selective decisions are left to "some angel stationed very high, watching us at our many perversities, crawling across black satin" [746]), but also as semantic "excesses" in the text that suggest the "other," uncontrollable side of reality (fictional, metaphysical, libidinal).

Pynchon's work thus illustrates/enacts the idea of an "open system," not allowing either "ordered individuality" or entropic disintegration to prevail. The complexity of Pynchon's novels demands continual "rereading," complex operations of interpretive restructuring.



At the same time, as McHale argues, we are "invited to become metareaders, readers of our own (and others') . . . *misreadings*" in order to better understand our desire for mastery of meaning (MGR 113). (Mis)interpretation thus plays an ambivalent role in Pynchon's work, at once constraining and liberating, disrupting the linearity of any given system of "truths" and creating new, dissonant patterns of meaning within a culture's narratives. Oedipa Maas perhaps best exemplifies this process: in the course of her quest for "truth," she arrives gropingly at a performative notion of interpretation that turns her from a mere sifter of "clues" into an "executrix"-*"projector"* of worlds. By actively (mis)reading, "'bringing something of herself'— even if that something was just her presence" (CL 90) to the world of business interests and androcentric texts, she manages to partially alter the prescribed "plots" that solicit her (the plot of male seduction, the Trystero plot, the historical narrative of cultural disenfranchising), infusing them with her feminine desires and interests. Prairie Wheeler, her younger counterpart in *Vineland*, undertakes a similar rereading of recent history (from the psychological "revolution" of the sixties to the paranoid and benumbed eighties), mainly to understand her immediate heritage. This rereading breaks up the smooth, flat reality she has been fed on by computer videos, movie screens and TV tubes. At the same time, it manages to create, against the larger culture's inability to remember creatively, an imaginative bridge to the past. In the hypercoded, self-indulgent world of 1984, "cut into pieces" by the ubiquitous "Tubelight" (Vld 38, 71), Prairie embarks on a journey of self-discovery inevitably centered on her missing mother, Frenesi. In her effort to piece together the incongruous fragments of her mother's biography (daughter of a labor activist and a Hollywood "revolutionary," herself a member of the radical 24fps film collective, converted into a government informant in the Nixon years), Prairie triggers a process of narrative recollection in various characters associated with Frenesi: Zoyd Wheeler, her "hippie psychopath" ex-husband; former members of the 24fps collective; federal prosecutor Brock Vond, her former lover and employer. These emotionally charged private narratives create significant inroads into the "Tubemaddened" world of the eighties, disturbing its manipulative diegesis. Their role is thus twofold: psychologically, they purge Frenesi's generation of some of its guilty absorption in the past as "the enemy no one wanted to see, a mouth wide and dark as the grave" (71); they also give Prairie, the disinherited progeny of the Tubal Age, a sense of familial and cultural belonging. Politically, these oral-retrospective narratives function as a form of collective anamnesis, providing a much-needed critical reexamination of the myths and failures of the

postwar decades. Through them, the residents of "Vineland" can reconnect more freely with each other and with their shared past.

Two forms of order thus vie in *Vineland*: one is flat, soporific, controlled by digital technology and mass reproduction; the other is personal, interrogative, a form of recreative storytelling, constantly revised in the process of its articulation. As Jonathan Rosenbaum explains in a review of *Vineland*, "Implicit throughout is the notion that thanks to the dominance, ideology, and druglike powers of the Tube (as Pynchon calls it), disseminating . . . 'the ruling ideas of the epoch,' the recovery of even recent history has to be carried out through willful and sustained archaeological research into buried documents and testimonies." Truth is sought and relayed through "a kind of grapevine, word-of-mouth narration—a story-telling model that is explicitly contrasted with the corruptions and disassociations of various TV shows" (29).

Zoyd's annual "dive through the window" routine at the beginning of *Vineland* suggests metaphorically how storytelling works in this novel. Though Zoyd's dive is performed for the immediate benefit of TV cameras and "an ever more infantilized population" of "Tubeheads" (52), it triggers a process of narrative recalling of "years and miles in the past" (27) that breaks symbolically through the fake "mirror" to the truer, personal aspects of Zoyd's life. The slow, plodding narratives of the various witnesses in Frenesi's life perform a similar function: they break through the deceptive surface of the plot-driven "Tubal" stories, revealing a deeper layer of truths. With their vernacular richness and imaginative flights of phrase, these personal narratives resist, more or less successfully, situational and cultural stereotypes.

But Zoyd's "transfenestration" adventure also suggests the limitations of oral, personal narration in an age of electronic reproduction. Not just Zoyd's dive through the stunt window, but other, more significant events in *Vineland*'s recent history are submitted to media "rewriting" and absorbed back into the leveling "tubelight" that "finds no difference between the weirdness of life and the weirdness of death" (218). Rewriting itself becomes an ambiguous form of cultural reformulation in *Vineland*, often trivializing, distorting, fitting real-life stories to prescribed scenarios. As it is passed down from one generation to the next, *Vineland*'s history becomes a Hollywood movie script "pounded flat," anybody's property, a "way-over-length, multitude-of-hands rewrite" (81). In her effort to reconnect with her mother's history, Prairie has to settle for "watching" Frenesi on reels of film that are themselves the product of an ambiguous agenda: conceived initially as documentaries of a time

of daring civil action, "liv[ing] out the metaphor of movie camera as weapon" (197), these films become tools of political manipulation and framing, documents of Frenesi's own compromises. As she follows her "mother's ghost" (114) through computer files, film footage and newspaper clippings, Prairie has great difficulty extricating the human story from its many framings.

And yet, something does emerge from this "tale of dispossession and betrayal" (172): a new sense of familial, feminine history. The *Vineland* women challenge, more or less successfully, the male-dominated world of politics, reclaiming their right to articulate their own life-stories. Through Prairie, the brave new child of the "Tubal age" who can combine a rediscovered interest in oral narrative with a practiced flair for reading images, *Vineland's* personal histories recapture some of their original indeterminacy and open potentiality. At the end of the novel, Prairie is in possession of a truer, less gappy "mother story." Despite the strangeness of its plot, pitting well-meaning but faltering women like Frenesi against a world of paranoid anarchists, "Tube-crazed" federal agents, and shadowy international conglomerates, this story manages to recover in part the ignored, interpersonal aspects of culture.

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> a more effective form of systemic disruption and cultural "rewriting" can be found in "surfiction" and in the innovative work of feminist writers. Both types of fiction pursue a radical reformulation of the processes of narrative construction, using innovation and "frame-breaking" to open, in Sukenick's words, the self-contained "system of language up to experience beyond language" (11). In Pynchon's systems novels, such transgression and frame-breaking are not always apparent. As long as they follow the two courses described by LeClair, excess of "mass-produced and institutionally controlled information," and the burrowing "into specialized and alternative sources for information that . . . undermines the dominant culture's legitimation" (AE 16), systems novels remain trapped within the mastery models of modernism, transgressing them only superficially. This is particularly true of Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, and partly true of *Gravity's Rainbow*, narratives that manage to focus attention on how cultural information is disseminated and controlled through narrative channels, but that end by reinforcing synthesis, "showing how orders and forms in the world (and not just in the artistic text) can arise out of seeming chaos" (AE 21). *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*, on the other hand, employ disruptive and revisionistic strategies more successfully, allowing alternative modes of narrative articulation—more fluid, interrogative, multivoiced—to

emerge. Retelling/rewriting is an important means of self-actualization and cultural construction in these novels. Even if its efficacy remains problematic in *Vineland*, being offset by modes of electronic reproduction and simulation, the personal, recollective narration that forms the substance of this novel manages to break through discursive screens and “tubal” mirrors to the repressed, authentic data of experience.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In a later passage, after conceding that his “criteria for mastery have allowed into *The Art of Excess* only one woman and no Afro-American writers,” LeClair imputes to the excluded their own outsideness:

Inasmuch as women and members of ethnic minorities have often been deprived of full participation in American life, the writers who have emerged from these groups have certainly not had the white male’s luxury of examining the whole of American or multinational culture from within, from the perspective of full membership. Writing by women and members of ethnic minorities thus often concerns itself with definitions of the individual, her or his relation to the group, and the group’s relation to American culture. The outsider’s view is valuable to her or his group. (29–30)

LeClair feels thus justified in leaving Toni Morrison out because a book like *Song of Solomon* “does not examine how her people share with all people subjugation by various kinds of national and transnational power systems.”

<sup>2</sup>“Trystero” (also spelled “Tristero”) triggers a number of interesting phonetic associations: “tryst,” “tryster” (one who sets up a tryst), “trist” (trust), “triste” (sorrowful), and “three-star.” In the Tarot card system, from which Pynchon has drawn several symbolic references, the “Stars” card depicts “an allegorical image of a naked girl kneeling down beside a pool, as, from a golden jar, she pours a life-giving liquid into the still waters.” Above this figure are a bright star and several lesser ones. As Juan Eduardo Cirlot explains, “the ultimate meaning of this symbol seems to be expressive of intercommunication of the different worlds, or of the vitalization by the celestial luminaries of . . . the purely material Elements, of earth and water” (310). In ironic opposition to this possible association, Oedipa Maas’s name resembles not only Oedipus but also Maat, the Egyptian goddess of truth and righteousness, who admits into the region of Afterlife those who lie persuasively.

<sup>3</sup>See my “Postmodernism Beyond Self-Reflection: Radical Mimesis in Recent Innovative Fiction.”

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