

THE DEATH OF THE REAL
IN THE CRYING OF LOT 49*

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Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds
are, of course, those that seem unusual,
--Vladimir Nabokov¹

Few of the so-called postmodern novels have caused a great deal of discussion about the so-called referent, be it history or American society for example. Even when writers like Barthelme, Coover and Abish apparently depend so much upon good old "reality" to compose their fictions, only exceptionally do the critics (so far at least) focus their attention on the referent that is pointed to or torn apart. Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 is clearly an exception. Many scholars--taking their cue from Oedipa, who suddenly discovered "that the legacy was America"²--have been tempted to study the book as a reflection of media-maniac America and have experienced great difficulties in extricating themselves from the referential snare.

"Reality," a concept which sounded very suspicious to Pynchon's one-time professor, Nabokov, preoccupies Oedipa throughout her quest. She rarely mentions it directly but keeps referring to the "truth," explaining that the act of metaphor is a "thrust at truth" (89). She becomes gradually aware of what Jean Baudrillard calls the "agony of the powerful referents, the agony of the real and the rational,"³ an agony which is precipitated by the proliferation of the media and of the techniques of simulation. She would like to stop this proliferation, but, in order to do so, she must first rediscover the authentic text hidden beneath the surface of everyday reality. This crusade lamentably fails, because she keeps unearthing more and more texts which duplicate reality and make the "real" more elusive. Her quest is circular: the "real" she is looking for is of course her elusive self.

1: Communication

The California described by Pynchon in The Crying of Lot 49 extends between San Francisco and Los Angeles, a region which has become famous all over the world for, among other things, Silicon Valley with its computer labs and plants, and Bateson's invisible college of Palo Alto specializing in communication and

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interaction. The novel ridicules Californians' passionate desire for communication as a way to defeat the anxiety inherent in solitude.

On the first page, different systems of communication are evoked. Oedipa has been attending a Tupperware party, not only, presumably, to buy airtight containers, but above all to meet other lonesome women and have a good time with them. This is apparently what she got with a little help from her hostess's fondue (a highly socialized dish), which had providently been laced with kirsch. Back home, she finds a letter informing her that she has been named co-executor of Inverarity's estate. While she is trying to sober up from so much alcohol and excitement, she casts a glance at the television's dead screen and invokes the name of God as if help could only come from that quarter, that is to say, the media.

The Crying of Lot 49 can indeed be read as an elaborate textbook on communication in its various aspects: as a system of technical devices meant to convey information, goods, or persons from one source or place to another; as a set of rule-governed behaviors enabling people to interact; as an elaborate network of symbols and myths which weld together the members of a cultural group. These various forms of communication are not didactically exposed, of course; they are obliquely described and analyzed through their various failures to achieve their goal.

The whole story apparently began a year before the opening of the novel with Inverarity's phone call. While she is listening to the Huntley-Brinkley nightly news program, Oedipa remembers this long distance call at three in the morning from her erstwhile lover. Inverarity had tried to confuse her by changing his voice many times, finally adopting the voice of an actor, Lamont Cranston. This was Inverarity's last attempt to reestablish communication with her, but she hung up on him as her husband advised her. What shocked her most, apparently, was that she had no way to tell where he was calling from: "That phone line could have pointed any direction, been any length," she commented to herself afterwards (6). She could not fully understand his message because she didn't know all the deictic coordinates of his discourse (where he was, whom with . . .); the call naturally didn't have the same meaning, the speech act was different, if he was calling from far off Mexico or from a hotel next door.

The next phone call in the novel is again at three o'clock in the morning; it is from Dr. Hilarius, Oedipa's shrink. He also takes advantage of the fact that, with a telephone, you can drop in on anybody at any moment without any consideration for what the receiver is doing; he hardly apologizes, as if the telephone had the ability to abstract the interlocutors from the spatial and temporal continuum. In this case, the telephone has apparently pointed in the wrong direction: usually, it is the

patient who calls his doctor, not the contrary. He begs her, "We want you" (10). Later in the novel he will go mad and will confide in Oedipa the way a patient confides in his or her analyst. The multi-directionality of the telephone line has forced patient and doctor to change parts, as it were: the medium has manipulated those who wanted to use it.

The telephone plays an important part again in Chapter 6, when Oedipa tries to get in touch with Driblette, the director and actor whom she met earlier, after the performance of the Courier's Tragedy. An elderly lady answers her call: "I'm sorry, we've nothing to say" (102). Oedipa hasn't even had time to introduce herself; the elderly lady will only explain that she is "his mother" (102). Since Driblette's name has never been mentioned, this deictic phrase could have two different referents, one for the lady and the other for Oedipa. Later, the latter will discover that Driblette has committed suicide and that the news has been in the paper. The joker responsible for this communication failure is the "Shadow," death (6): it has simply removed the expected receiver.

The last important phone call occurs a few pages farther on. Oedipa, who is now desperately trying to make contact with the Tristero system, makes a last attempt: she calls the "Inamorato Anonymous" she met earlier at the Greek Way. Since she does not know his name, she must give a description of him on the phone to get him. Here again, the medium is imposing words upon her. When she gets him on the line, she gives her name as "Arnold Snarb" (122), the name given to her by a stranger (presumably named Arnold Snarb) who pinned his ID badge on her breast as he bolted from a tour group about to enter the Greek Way bar. In this telephone conversation, neither of the speakers knows the real identity of the other; the IA knows she can't be Arnold since this is a man's name, but he doesn't seem to care since his own sexual identity is not clearly defined. Yet this is the man Oedipa calls in the last resort: "Help me" (122). He hangs up on her, as she once hung up on Inverarity; the communication can't be restored because she has no coins left to operate the public telephone. The medium is again imposing its law, its logic upon the "helpless" user, firing her with a desperate longing for communication which she can't appease.

The media's chief function, therefore, is not so much to facilitate communication as to create an unfulfillable need for it. This is typically the case with television in two very important scenes. In Chapter 2, Metzger and Oedipa find themselves watching television in a motel room. There's a war movie on, with Metzger as the child actor Baby Igor. Gradually they get engrossed in the film, which is interrupted at regular intervals by advertisements celebrating the commercial achievements of Inverarity in San Narciso. Their relationship becomes more affectionate as the show develops, and as the various stories (the plot of the film, the shooting itself, and

their own story) get confused. In these various stories, they naturally play different parts, or put on different masks. Metzger is a specialist in this kind of game: he once was an actor, and now he is a lawyer; the story of his life as an actor turned lawyer has been made into a film in which his part is played by a lawyer turned actor, Manny Di Presso.

Pynchon is playing here with the mirror effects that television and the cinema allow, and he spells out the sexual fantasies that they arouse. Goaded, stimulated, by the show, Oedipa starts asking questions about what is going to happen next; Metzger teases her into making bets, a communication of a sort, and proposes a little game of his invention, "Strip Botticelli": for each new "bit" of information she gets from him, she must shed a piece of clothing. Though she cheats by putting on additional articles, the scene is still being run by the film in a way, as much as by Metzger himself. While she is putting on more clothes, she overturns the spray can and sends it ricocheting against the walls and mirrors of the bathroom, a trivial presage of what is going to happen to her in the course of the story. The erotic scene escalates to its happy climax, but at this very moment, the TV tube goes dead: "The Paranoids had blown a fuse" (27) with their electric guitars. However, it probably didn't take only the Paranoids, but also the television set, which had been fueling the two protagonists with sexual vitality. There is a teasing suggestion at this point that it was the violent explosion of their climax which blew the fuse and put an end to the TV show.

In this scene, Pynchon is demonstrating that the media can't function separately in complete isolation. Television is a medium which depends on another medium, electricity, to function. For the scientist, electricity is only an energy, and as such it can become so depleted that it becomes unable to fulfill its appointed task--providing "juice" to the television set and to the Paranoids' amplifier. Electricity, however, is not only a "utility"; it is also a medium, as McLuhan has explained in Understanding Media. As such it imposes its logic upon the community, allows certain technological or cultural developments. It is like a possessive mother who keeps her children forever dependent upon her. Most of the time, people are not aware of this situation; but when the medium breaks down, we pathetically beg the great goddess not to forsake us.

Would Metzger and Oedipa have made love without the benign complicity of electricity and television? Perhaps, and perhaps not! Oedipa was not particularly attracted to the man but rather to the type he represented: "He turned out to be so good-looking that Oedipa thought at first They, somebody up there, were putting her on. It had to be an actor" (17). Reality has been so transformed by the cinema and television, by the many techniques of simulation, that Oedipa can't trust her eyes; her hesitation is understandable since Metzger was an actor before he became a lawyer.

The second character in the novel to be infected by television mania is Nefastis, the scientist who is in charge of the Demon. Oedipa finds him on, of all streets, Telegraph Avenue. When she arrives, he is watching on television "a bunch of kids dancing some kind of a Watusi" (72). Like the other television maniac, Metzger, like the radio maniac Mucho, he is interested in "young stuff" (72), in children as sexual objects, the implication being, perhaps, that the media tend to have a debilitating influence on people and breed perversions of all kinds. Pynchon may have had in mind the Shirley Temple phenomenon which Nabokov exploited poetically in Lolita.

Nefastis invites Oedipa to "watch the picture" on the box so that she may receive the energy from the Demon and "feed back something like the same quantity of information" (72), while he continues to watch television. There is clearly a symmetry in the two situations: Oedipa is supposed to draw energy from an image and transform it into information; Nefastis, on the other hand, passively absorbs information and transforms it into sexual energy. When Oedipa, having failed to move the piston (!), returns to him, he invites her onto the couch to have sexual intercourse with him while watching television:

"Maybe there'll be something about China tonight. I like to do it while they talk about Viet Nam, but China is best of all. You think about all those Chinese. Teeming. That profusion of life. It makes it sexier, right?" (74)

The neutral shifter, "it," becomes gradually loaded with a great deal of "semantic energy" in this passage: in Nefastis's earlier statement ("We can do it there"), it stood for "love," but since the phrase "to make love" would probably seem objectionable to Oedipa, he paraphrases "it" as "sexual intercourse." In the last sentence, the two "it"'s have different meanings: "profusion of life," and "love" or "sexual intercourse."

Nefastis is translating into another medium or language the excitement he derives from making love in front of a television set. He is a poet, in a way: he doesn't care about the dreadful plight of starving Chinese, only about their swarming crowds. He is not a stupid materialist like some unimaginative scientists; he never mentions laws or principles when he talks about information and thermodynamics, but uses the word "metaphor" instead: "'Entropy is a figure of speech, then . . . a metaphor'" (73). In this case, the materialist is Oedipa; she takes his words too literally. She should have been aware of the poetic kinship between herself watching the Demon and him watching television. There is no relevant information to be drawn from either box except that inherent in the technology (real or imaginary), or that invented freely, artistically, by the beholder.

In both scenes, Oedipa is manipulated by the media. Metzger and Nefastis are both artists: they can turn television to their advantage without sticking slavishly to the normal use that normal people make of it. For them, the medium is not the message; for Oedipa, it is.

This weakness, which she shares with her fellow Californians, incapacitates her to deal with the chief medium in the story, the Tristero system. For all good Americans who have pledged allegiance to the flag at school, the postal monopoly enjoyed by the Federal government is a foundation stone of the American way of life: it doesn't only guarantee satisfactory communications among the members of the community; it also allows the government to censor offensive materials, like books and other publications. Besides, the post office is often the only Federal building in small villages and urban districts; that's where the "portrait of Uncle [Sam]" (10) and the pictures of "wanted" criminals are posted.

Oedipa is utterly unaware at first of what the system may imply, until it starts to break down. To her, a stamp is like a greenback: it is a standard of official value. If anybody could issue stamps or banknotes, there would be no order, no consensus, no nation. Since many of the so-called traditional values have disappeared through history, it becomes vital to preserve such artificial values to serve as ultimate standards around which societies structure themselves. Oedipa had never thought stamps could be more than the price to be paid for a letter to be carried to its destination; their cancellation by the post office implied that the only thing of value left was the content of the letter. Oedipa begins to have doubts about this principle when she receives Mucho's letter:

It may have been an intuition that the letter would be newsless inside that made Oedipa look more closely at its outside, when it arrived. At first she didn't see. It was an ordinary Muchoesque envelope, swiped from the station, ordinary airmail stamp, to the left of the cancellation a blurb put on by the government, REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POSTMASTER. (30)

It is the paucity of the tenor which draws her attention to the vehicle. The postal system, which is supposed to convey information, not generate it, has transgressed the law here; with the help of Mucho's stamp, it has reminded Oedipa of her conjugal duty. Mucho himself would never have dared!

The next important crisis for Oedipa takes place at the Scope when Fallopian explains about the parallel postal system which uses Yoyodyne's inter-office delivery and which, for all we know, may constitute the core of the nationwide WASTE system. It was not the necessity of delivering mail more quickly or more efficiently which encouraged the development of this system, but

a "principle": "To keep it up to some kind of a reasonable volume, each member has to send at least one letter a week through the Yoyodyne system. If you don't, you get fined" (35). As Fallopian litotically admits, the members are rebels: "It's not as rebellious as it looks," a half-hearted confession which Metzger reformulates as follows: "A little like copping out" (35). It is not a matter of exchanging information but of beating the monopoly and everything the monopoly stands for. This form of dissent is childish, as far as materialistic Oedipa is concerned; but it makes sense if one accepts McLuhan's theory ("The medium is the message").

The users of this parallel system gain nothing in terms of information but a great deal in terms of interrelation. Fallopian keeps saying "we" in his explanations, and he mentions that they are organized in "chapters," that is, small communities in which individuals accept their alienation in return for a little warmth and a sense of belonging. This community spirit comes out clearly in Stanley Koteks' reaction to Oedipa's bluff, "Kirby sent me" (58). She uses this name which she saw on the latrine wall at the Scope as a password. Koteks refuses to acknowledge the sign and rejects Oedipa into the cold world: "You're lost, huh?" This sounds like a description of Oedipa rather than a polite question. She has failed to penetrate the WASTE system again. Koteks will make a slip a little later in the same conversation: he will give her Nefastis's address in the WASTE code:

"Box 573," said Koteks.

"In Berkeley."

"No," his voice gone funny, so that she looked up, too sharply, by which time, carried by a certain momentum of thought, he'd also said, "In San Francisco; there's none--" and by then knew he'd made a mistake. (60)

It is Oedipa who unwittingly makes him realize his mistake. In her postal system, a box number is meaningless unless it is completed by the name of the post office or the city. We assume that in the WASTE system a box number is enough; they have drawn up a map where Federal post offices and city names have been supplanted by numbers, inventing a Shadow country as it were.

Oedipa acquires a first-hand knowledge of the WASTE system during her San Francisco trek. For instance, she overhears the following conversation:

"I'll write, ma," he kept saying. "Write by WASTE," she said, "remember. The government will open it if you use the other. The dolphins will be mad." "I love you, ma," he said. "Love the dolphins," she advised him. "Write by WASTE." (85)

The boy, who wants to "slip at night into aquariums and open negotiations with the dolphins," and his mother make a strange couple: like all true Oedipuses, he is passionately in love with his mother, but she wants him to give his love to the dolphins, a most un-Jocastian attitude. Here is the first indication that the WASTE system is being used to beat government-imposed censorship. Many of those who use it want to indulge in their "unspeakable practices and unnatural acts," as Barthelme would phrase it, without any interference by the authorities. So it is with Mucho, Metzger and Nefastis, who like "young stuff." Others, like Driblette, Arnold Snarb and the I.A., refuse to conform to the love code which is crammed with clichés, or even to the life code, prohibiting suicide, which breeds endless miseries. The members of the WASTE community inhabit another country: that of their uninhibited fantasies, desires, or dreams.

Oedipa eventually manages to penetrate the system with the help of a dying man who gives her a letter for his wife, who lives in Fresno; he asks her: "'Drop it in the,' and he held up the tattoo and stared into her eyes, 'you know. I can't go out there. It's too far now, I had a bad night'" (86). He responds to her flagrant longing to enter the WASTE world by entrusting her with the letter and telling her that she will find the box under the freeway. Here is a "monumental" metaphor: the WASTE system runs underneath the Californian freeway system and undermines it. A neat retribution, in a way, since the freeway system has been undermining the world of the dead, as Genghis Cohen points out when talking about his dandelion wine: "'I picked the dandelions in a cemetery, two years ago. Now the cemetery is gone. They took it out for the East San Narciso Freeway'" (65-66). It is perhaps because the freeways have killed the dead a second time, severing the symbolic link which existed between the living and the dead (the dandelion wine), that they must be "antagonized" like this. The WASTE system will redeem the dead from the materialistic curse.

Thanks to the old man, Oedipa finds herself inside the system, carrying a letter with a phony stamp on it. She is not interested in the content of the letter, only in the underground network. Her quest takes her back to Telegraph Avenue, and Nefastis: she has unwittingly been running in a circle. Perhaps the dying man, realizing that his condition would spontaneously gain Oedipa's trust, has set her up and sent her back to the lascivious scientist. No matter how hard she tries, she remains within the US postal system.

Genghis Cohen, who has told Oedipa earlier about the deliberate mistakes in Inverarity's stamps, invites her to have a look at an old American stamp "bearing the device of the muted post horn, belly-up badger, and the motto: WE AWAIT SILENT TRISTERO'S EMPIRE" (116). This renews her flagging interest in the stamps. She looks forward to the "crying of lot 49" now that a new "book bidder" has announced his intention of buying

the whole lot. She does not realize that Genghis Cohen is deliberately teasing her, kindling her paranoia. He is of course a member of the Tristero system, and he draws his pleasure from witnessing her hopeless attempts to penetrate the system.

The stamps, the muted horn, the badger have now become opaque signifiers for Oedipa despite all the background information she has gleaned about them. She had hoped that the vehicle would some day reveal its tenor, but she understands now that it won't. The money that will be bid on the stamps at the crying will define their value on the collectors' market; at the same time it will irretrievably cancel out their value as vehicles of a tenor since it will remove them from the postal system which guaranteed their exchange value.

The market appears eventually as the grave of communication. It normalizes and digests something that could have constituted a threat, transforming the badge of a rival state into a collector's item. As Barthelme has demonstrated in many of his fictions (especially in "The Balloon"), we are endowed with a tremendous capacity to naturalize disturbing phenomena and objects, to weave around them a "cocoon of habituation" (Barthelme's felicitous phrase again).⁴ The phony stamps, like the senseless balloon in the Manhattan sky, must be made to signify; otherwise, they threaten our sanity. The market, by assigning a money value to everything, normalizes the unknown; it is a device which abolishes the unpredictable and increases information entropy. It is the model for all the media, the telephone, television, the postal system, whose avowed goal is to improve communication: it precipitates an information hemorrhage.

2: The "Real Text" ,

Faced with this paradoxical situation, people like Oedipa devise all kinds of strategies to have a modicum of exchange with their fellow men; in most cases, unfortunately, these strategies succeed only in aggravating their frustrations and "disinheritance." A Tupperware party is one of these strategies: it is not the airtight containers which are really for sale but a little share of conviviality. No medium is being used, except money, the medium par excellence. Money is what prevents genuine exchange between the guests at such parties; it pollutes everybody's speech. The hostess must resort to an extreme solution to make her guests relax and buy goods: she gets them drunk on kirsch. This is not a real party, therefore, but a simulacrum of a party.

This extra-textual scene mentioned in the first line has an allegorical value in the novel: it shows that in our modern world people have completely lost touch with reality, with what Pynchon calls the "Real Text" in Gravity's Rainbow:

But, if I'm riding through it, the Real Text, right now, if this is it . . . or if I passed it today somewhere in the devastation of Hamburg, breathing the ash-dust, missing it completely . . . if what the IG built on this site were not at all the final shape of it, but only an arrangement of fetishes, come-ons to call down special tools in the form of 8th AF bombers yes the "Allied" planes all would have been, ultimately, IG-built, by way of Director Krupp, through his English interlocks--the bombing was the exact industrial process of conversion, each release of energy placed exactly in space and time, each shockwave plotted in advance to bring precisely tonight's wreck into being thus decoding the Text, thus coding, recoding, redecoding the holy Text . . . 5

In this passage, Pynchon explains that the war is not a tragic accident caused by antagonistic ideologies but a necessary process in our technological world: "It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology . . ."6 War is therefore part of the "Real Text"; the phony text is peace, political and economic order, what, in other words, is commonly held as normalcy.

In The Crying of Lot 49, Pynchon shows how the real is gradually supplanted by the text. The process begins with Inverarity's will, which names Oedipa as his executrix in its codicil. The codicil does not properly duplicate the will, but it adds a second executor, Metzger having been named chief executor in the body of the will. Inverarity has entrusted Oedipa (and Metzger) with the difficult job of "sorting it all out" (5), sorting out all his property, checking that reality (the wealth to be distributed) conforms with the description in the will. In such circumstances, one normally expects the items listed to correspond exactly with the reality of the estate. It is not the case here: Oedipa finds a great deal more, especially in the stamp collection, than was itemized. Her investigation consists on the one hand of rereading the will to discover what was "encrypted" (123) in it, and on the other hand of deciphering the estate more thoroughly to assess its true value or relevance. She is terribly disturbed at the end when she finds that the text (the prescription) won't match the estate (the referent), either because Inverarity deliberately fooled her, or because something had "slipped through" (124) in spite of him. Oedipa is behaving like an efficient grocer who compares the items listed on a bill to the goods delivered. She is an arch materialist: she insists on the perfect adequacy between the descriptive/prescriptive text and the referent.

The chief item on the list is a city, San Narciso. The name of the city probably points to the fact that Inverarity

founded it, invented it, in his own image. All the commercials which interrupt the TV show in Chapter 2 spell out this message. San Narciso is not a "real" city born of people's need to find shelter, warmth, happiness together, but a "group of concepts," as Oedipa learns when she arrives:

Like many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a group of concepts--census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway. (14-15)

The city is not real; it is textual: everything has been meticulously planned, projected, in advance. The city existed on paper before it found its way onto an actual tract of land and eventually onto a map of California. Spontaneously, Oedipa senses that there is something wrong about it:

and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. 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. (14)

Written language has contaminated the technological world, as we see in this passage: one speaks of "printed" circuits, of a circuit "card." Intuitively, Oedipa feels that there is a text which underlies this city, a text which shows as hieroglyphics through the surface of streets and houses, and which was authored by narcissistic Inverarity.

The new housing development called Fangoso Lagoons is a model text, a "mise en abyme" of San Narciso as it were:

It was to be laced by canals with private landings for power boats, a floating social hall in the middle of an artificial lake, at the bottom of which lay restored galleons, imported from the Bahamas; Atlantean fragments of columns and friezes from the Canaries; real human skeletons from Italy; giant clamshells from Indonesia--all for the entertainment of Scuba enthusiasts. (19-20)

The model for this project is obviously Venice. Nothing here is genuine; everything is borrowed: from the Bahamas, the Canaries, Italy, Indonesia, etc. Each borrowed item is meant to contribute to the exoticism of the place: Fangoso Lagoons must not be an ordinary place in California; it is supposed to look different. One could almost speak of an intertextual place, each item pointing towards an idealized representation of

another country, towards another text. Like Disneyland, Enchanted Village, Marine World in Los Angeles, it is not a real place inhabited by real people, but, to paraphrase Baudrillard, an imaginary power station, a power station which generates "de l'imaginaire" and whose chief function is to bolster the shaky reality of the world outside.⁷

The most troublesome item on the list is naturally the "real human skeletons from Italy." These skeletons, salvaged from Lago di Pietà, are those of American G.I.s who were mercilessly butchered by the Germans during the Second World War; they were bought by Beaconsfield to make cigarette filters, and filched by Inverarity, who immersed them in his Fangoso Lagoons. Neither he nor Beaconsfield had any particular cult for the dead; they were merely trying to draw financial profit from them. They would have congratulated Winthrop Tremaine for making money out of Nazi symbols: swastikas, SS uniforms, armbands, rifles, etc. (103). To recall what Pynchon wrote in Gravity's Rainbow, they are only following the "Real Text," playing their part in the theatre of war by converting the surplus symbols of the war and its garbage into marketable objects and goods. This tragedy, prefigured in Wharfinger's play, has a central function in the novel; it shows the process whereby death loses its magic and stops being the ultimate source of symbolic exchange, and is turned into a text. If the skeletons had remained in their watery tomb, they would have continued to live in the imagination of their country. Beaconsfield and Inverarity have killed the G.I.s a second time: they have robbed them of their symbolic value, to give them a commercial value instead.

Gradually Oedipa begins to realize the importance of death in the economy of her world. In front of the dying sailor, she is terribly shocked:

She remembered John Nefastis, talking about his Machine, and massive destructions of information. So when this mattress flared up around the sailor, in his Viking's funeral: the stored coded years of uselessness, early death, self-harrowing, the sure decay of hope, the set of all men who had slept on it, whatever their lives had been, would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. It astonished her to think that so much could be lost, even the quantity of hallucination belonging just to the sailor that the world would bear no further trace of. (88)

Because she feels sympathy for this man who is about to die, Oedipa realizes with a sense of panic the loss his death, like the going up in smoke of the mattress, is going to constitute. Her reaction is again that of a materialist: a man, like a

mattress, is no more than a text crammed with information. When the text is burnt, there is nothing left.

Oedipa's theory of information is close to Shannon and Weaver's. Information is somewhat like a physical quantity which can be measured in bits. It circulates within a communication system whose model is the radio in which a transmitter sends a message, a certain quantity of information, to an intended receiver. What is wrong with the theory is that there is little feedback, no interaction; hence the lack of communication with the dead for Oedipa and her fellow materialists, Beaconsfield and Inverarity. There is no text once the sender has gone.

The sad story of the symbolic death of the skeletons precipitates the multiplication of the texts in the novel. The Paranoids, who have been listening to Metzger and Manny Di Presso, mention that there is a similar slaughter in a Jacobean play they have just seen, The Courier's Tragedy: "'Bones of lost battalion, in lake, fished up, turned into charcoal--'" (42). Oedipa takes the hint and goes to see the play with Metzger. The theatre's name, the Tank, is ambiguous. It probably refers to the war, as does the playwright's name, Wharfinger. The theatre itself is "framed" between two firms involved in information gathering and broadcasting, "a traffic analysis firm and a wildcat transistor outfit" (43). We gather that all three institutions perform complementary tasks in this information-crazy society.

The play itself is crammed with references to Inverarity's California: Faggio sounds like Fangoso; Saint Narcissus, Bishop of Jerusalem, is the namesake of Inverarity's city; and there is the tale of the Lost Guard, "every one massacred by Angelo and thrown in the lake. Later on their bones were fished up again and made into charcoal, and the charcoal into ink" (50), which ink will be used by Angelo in his subsequent communications with Faggio.

It is immediately after this that Trystero (or Tristero) is mentioned for the first time in the story (though not in the book). Pynchon obviously exploits the time-honored technique of "mise en abyme," first named by André Gide in his discussion of Hamlet's play-within-the-play. The Courier's Tragedy is to the novel what the "Mousetrap" is to the tragedy: it reflects the main plot and contributes to quicken its pace. It also marks the true beginning of Oedipa's investigation. After the performance, she goes to speak to Randolph Driblette, the director and actor, and asks him if she can have a look at the script and the original from which the copies were made. The original, a paperback found at Zapf's Used Books "over by the freeway" (53), has been stolen. But there was another copy at the bookstore. Driblette is somewhat unnerved, however, by this interrogation, and he asks, "'Why . . . is everybody so interested in texts?'" (53). He does not care about texts, only

about the life his performance can blow into them. He is right, of course, esthetically speaking, but Oedipa is only interested in the original text and specifically in the reference to the Trystero. Later, she visits Zapf's Used Books to buy the paperback, but she is not satisfied; she also wants to see the hardcover and will go to Berkeley to get it from the publisher. She had every reason to doubt the authenticity of the reference, since the Trystero is not mentioned in the hardcover. Her next stop will be at Professor Bortz's, the editor of the book who now lives in San Narciso. He will briefly allude to another edition of the play, a pornographic version kept in the Vatican library.

Here, therefore, are the chief versions of the play:

- Driblette's performance
- the script
- the paperback
- the hardcover
- the pornographic version

Finally, Bortz shows Oedipa a book about one Dr. Diocletian Blobb (a name which sounds suspiciously like his own), in which a massacre at the Lake of Piety is described, and he tells her about the history of Trystero and its struggles against Thurn and Taxis. Oedipa gradually becomes aware that Bortz is making things up as he goes. History is nothing but a text, after all. She will never know the truth about Trystero but will continue to discover new texts referring directly or obliquely to it or him. Nothing can stop the process of textual proliferation. The Real Text as a mirage becomes ever more elusive, and the reality which was at the origin of it, death (the death of Inverarity, of the G.I.s . . .), fades into oblivion and is supplanted by all-out paranoia.

This process is accompanied by the proliferation of the WASTE and post horn graffiti. It all begins at the Scope. The name Scope--which comes from the Italian "scopo," meaning "aim, goal, purpose, object," and from the Greek "skopos," meaning "watcher, goal, purpose"--is loaded with meaning. Here Oedipa starts discovering a new text:

Interested in sophisticated fun? You, hubby, girl friends. The more the merrier. Get in touch with Kirby, through WASTE only, Box 7391, L.A. (34)

The message is accompanied by the symbol which, later, she will come to recognize as a muted horn. She copies all this in her memo book, which she will also use as an address book when Koteks tells her how to get in touch with Nefastis: "Oedipa took out her little memo book and opened to the symbol she'd copied and the words Shall I project a world?" (60). Unwittingly she is composing a text with the graffiti gleaned here and there plus her own thoughts; she is submitting the disturbing inscriptions to the law of her writing in an attempt

to make them less awesome. The first time she discovers the symbol in the watermark of one of Inverarity's stamps, she nearly blacks out: "'What is this?' she asked, wondering how much time had gone by" (66). She is scared by the discovery of this shadow world which appears in filigree through her own world, of this other text described or pointed at in the underground letters travelling through WASTE. She will never read these letters, not even the one handed to her by the dying sailor, but, gradually, she will begin to picture that other world through the imaginary text composed by all these unsealed letters.

In Chapter 5, these graffiti turn up everywhere, along with others like DEATH (which stands for DON'T EVER ANTAGONIZE THE HORN) and AC-DC (Alameda County Death Cult). San Francisco is teeming with them; Oedipa has the feeling during her visit of leafing through the pages of an utterly fantastic book. It is not only homosexuality which has set its "stamp" upon the city, but death as well, as the episode of the dying sailor testifies. Oedipa feels sorry for these people who are ultimately doomed to sterility. But she is mistaken, in a way, since they look a great deal happier than she is. She is actually reading the book with a code which does not suit it, the materialistic code:

With her own eyes she had verified a WASTE system: seen two WASTE postmen, a WASTE mailbox, WASTE stamps, WASTE cancellations. And the image of the muted post horn all but saturated the Bay Area. Yet she wanted it all to be fantasy--some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles. (91)

These are but opaque signifiers which terribly tax her imagination and sanity. San Francisco, like Joyce's Dublin in Ulysses, is an unreadable book which refuses to surrender its secret.

With the help of Genghis Cohen, in Chapter 6 Oedipa learns to read some of the signs, and particularly the word WASTE, which stands for "WE AWAIT SILENT TRISTERO'S EMPIRE"; but the text as a whole gets more and more enigmatic and disturbing. Whenever she thinks she is getting closer to its underlying significance, it immediately eludes her, as if the perverse puppeteer, Tristero, is teasing her to distraction. Her last hope is the book bidder, who, according to Genghis Cohen, could be from Tristero and might want to "keep evidence that Tristero exists out of unauthorized hands" (122). She has been unable to make sense of the proliferating text, but what if she could make contact with the keeper of the word through the book bidder! In the last scene, she reverently waits for the revelation in the company of the bidders, like the Apostles at the Pentecost waiting for the Holy Spirit.

The novel has turned into a parody of the Bible. It is framed by two testaments, Inverarity's will on the first page

and the New Testament on the last page. It is composed of a multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting texts which are like the relics left by the dead, texts which proclaim the advent of ultimate death and the collapse of reality as a lofty edifice of symbols. Oedipa belongs to the post-Saussurian and the post-Freudian world: her experience of reality has been undermined by the accumulation of grids, books, intellectual formulae. She is assailed by numberless representations which do not allow her access to the real. Biological necessity has lost its power over her; it has been supplanted by the text, as she recognizes near the end:

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. (126)

Now that the Tristero has revealed itself as a Text underlying or undermining the Real Text called America, Oedipa can't recover her pristine naivete. She has lost touch with the real, which is, as the French philosopher Clément Rosset puts it, "that which is without a duplicate."⁸ In her California, everything is duplicated, represented, "textified." The real has vanished, and only paranoia endures.

3: Oedipa-Narcissa

In nineteenth-century fiction, the protagonist was usually introduced to the reader at the beginning and then only gradually made to perform his or her part in the following story. In the twentieth century, many novelists, like Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, and Nathalie Sarraute, have refrained from describing their characters with stable identities, choosing instead to present them as "des êtres de papier" as Barthes astutely put it. Pynchon's stance in The Crying of Lot 49 is apparently more conservative: his protagonist is a plausible Californian housewife who attends Tupperware parties, has had her love affairs in the past, and is now burdened with a husband who lacks virility. She is the average woman, and the fact that she goes to a psychiatrist only confirms her normalcy.

The only disturbing fact, at the beginning, is that all the men around Oedipa badly need her assistance some way or another. First there is (or was) Inverarity, who called her a year before, apparently wanting her back; he has appointed her to sort out his "tangled assets." Then there is Mucho, her husband, who comes back from work utterly defeated and confides in her as he would in his mother or his shrink. When Oedipa asks him what she should do about the will, he answers, "'Oh, no . . . you got the wrong fella. Not me. I can't even make out our income tax right'" (9). In the middle of the night, her shrink, Dr. Hilarius, calls her: "'We want you,'" he begs,

forgetting his part (10). The next day, when Oedipa calls on Roseman, her lawyer, for legal assistance, he only answers, "Oh, go ahead then . . . don't let me keep you" (12-13), blatantly refusing to acknowledge her request. Immediately after this, he asks her to run away with him.

Being so badly needed by so many men makes Oedipa feel like a princess, the Rapunzel evoked in the following passage:

And [she] had also gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair. When it turned out to be Pierce she'd happily pulled out the pins and curlers and down it tumbled in its whispering, dainty avalanche, only when Pierce had got maybe halfway up, her lovely hair turned, through some sinister sorcery, into a great unanchored wig, and down he fell, on his ass. (12)

Since the whole novel is written in the form of "represented thought" (to borrow Ann Banfield's terminology in Unspeakable Sentences), the image is Oedipa's own invention. It is not only the fairy tale she has in mind here, but also, probably, Solomon's song:

7.4 Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes like the fishpools in Hashbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim; thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looked toward Damascus.

7.5 Thine head upon thee is like Carmel, and the hair of thine head like purple; the king is held in the galleries.

Her men's admiration has placed her on a pedestal: she is a goddess who benevolently looks down upon her despondent male worshippers and feels that the whole world is gyrating around her.

Until her own crisis really begins, Oedipa doesn't realize the ambiguous roles imposed upon her by her admirers. She is not only a benevolent goddess, of course, but also and above all perhaps the castrating mother, invented by the men, as she is described by Christopher Lasch in The Culture of Narcissism:

Fear of the devouring mother of pre-Oedipal fantasy gives rise to a generalized fear of women that has little resemblance to the sentimental adoration men once granted to women who made them sexually uncomfortable. The fear of women, closely associated with a fear of the consuming desires within, reveals itself not only as impotence but as a boundless rage against the female sex.⁹

Donald Barthelme has given a poetic representation of this castrating mother in his novel Snow White, published a year after The Crying of Lot 49:

Snow White let down her hair black as ebony from the window. It was Monday. The hair flew out of the window. "I could fly a kite with this hair it is so long. The wind would carry the kite up into the blue, and there would be the red of the kite against the blue of the blue, together with my hair black as ebony, floating there. That seems desirable. This motif, the long hair streaming from the high window, is a very ancient one I believe, found in many cultures, in various forms. Now I recapitulate it, for the astonishment of the vulgar and the refreshment of my venereal life."¹⁰

Oedipa is not as sexually greedy as Snow White, but she has been so loved and admired and entreated by her men that she now feels mightier than they. Hence the tower metaphor which occurs to her. Hence, also, the irony in the name of Mucho Maas (much more) and in her own name: by a strange process of poetic reversal (which Freud tells us is frequently present in dreams), she, the castrating mother, has been given the feminized name of her docile son, Oedipus. When the men look up at this impressive tower of ivory, they are reminded of their Oedipean identity and feel like helpless dwarves. Perhaps Inverarity realized that when Oedipa hung up on him, and he decided to work his revenge upon her by burdening her with an ego-destructive task, sorting out his estate, tracing the whereabouts of Tristero.

The tower image, however, as Oedipa found out in front of the Varo painting, is terribly ambiguous: it signifies both the inaccessibility of the castrating mother to the helpless male and the impossibility for the woman who is so idealized to step down and be free:

Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: and what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. (13)

Oedipa is a prisoner of the image the frustrated men have imposed upon her, with her benign complicity. From inside the tower, she is looking through the window at her despondent males, while they are looking at her from outside; what they see, in fact, is their respective images, reflections of their frustrated desires.

To defeat this inexorable logic, the members of the Inamorati Anonymous have completely banished love and decided to live as "isolates":

"Nobody knows anybody else's name; just the number in case it gets so bad you can't handle it alone. We're isolates, Arnold. Meetings would destroy the whole point of it." (78)

Though she has the feeling of being immured, encapsulated in her tower, Oedipa is not an isolate. On the other hand, she is hoping that, by cutting herself from the tyrannical desires of her men, she may in turn become an isolate in full possession of herself, with nobody to support, or depend upon, her. As we are going to see, she will fail in her quest: she lacks the autonomy and superiority of the Nietzschean superman.

The superman, in the circumstances, is naturally the Tristero, the absolute "Other" (108), whom, in the course of her investigation, she tries not so much to unmask as to master. This is again a typical representation of the Oedipus myth, Oedipa acting the part assigned to her by her "sons and lovers." She would like to rid the world of the archetypal father in order to be happy and free ever after. She doesn't realize, of course, that the father, though he is meant to be killed as Freud and Frazer have explained, never dies for good since he is the invention of the sons' unconscious. As Barthelme phrased it in The Dead Father, "When a father dies, his fatherhood is returned to the All-Father, who is the sum of all dead fathers taken together."¹¹

Oedipa behaves in a very predictable way, therefore, when she starts her revolution. She begins by being unfaithful to her husband. At first she seems to tease Metzger. She agrees to play "Strip Botticelli," but first puts on as much extra clothing as she can, allegedly to prevent Metzger from seeing her naked and making love to her. She is not thinking about her husband any more, but trying to protect herself against sexual aggression. She is attracted to this actor/lawyer, but at the same time she is afraid of sex. The second time she goes into the bathroom, she blunders "almost absently, into another slip and skirt, as well as a long-leg girdle and a couple of pairs of knee socks." She is only trying to buy time: "It struck her that if the sun ever came up Metzger would disappear. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to" (27). She is both defending herself against her desire and, in a way, kindling it. Eventually, she assaults him (as Lolita seduced Humbert) when she finds him asleep "with a hard-on" (27). She likes sex, but she doesn't want the man to know she does or to witness her surrender. Metzger has blacked out after drinking too much Beaujolais; later Oedipa will fall asleep while copulating with him: the important thing is that neither of them should be fully aware of what he or she is doing or being done to.

Oedipa is not absolutely sure of her sexual identity. She likes to seduce but is afraid of having sex. There is a strange passage describing Metzger's clumsy and drowsy struggle to undress her: "it took him twenty minutes, rolling, arranging her this way and that, as if, she thought, he were some scaled-up, short-haired, poker-faced little girl with a Barbie doll" (27). They both uncannily change sizes in Oedipa's mind, somewhat like Alice when she drinks from her bottle. He is a "scaled-up" girl, and she is an even more "scaled-up" doll. He is turned into a little girl, and she is turned into a sexless toy. These similes indicate Oedipa's lack of psychological or sexual involvement in what she is doing; sex is a kind of joke.

The freakish manipulation of the characters' sexual identities begins, in fact, at the beginning of the novel with the news that Oedipa has been named "executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity" (5). The letter apparently refers to her in the masculine and not in the feminine gender, and she resents it. The will, and Inverarity himself, has assigned her a task for which her sex is of no importance whatever. Later in the novel there are indications that she is either changing sex or discovering that her sexual identity is not so clearly defined as she had thought. There is first the incident where an unknown man pins on her breast an ID badge which reads "HI! MY NAME IS Arnold Snarb! AND I'M LOOKIN' FOR A GOOD TIME!" (76). The man, whose name we assume is Arnold Snarb, has a "cherubic face" (76); he is probably a homosexual, like most of the people Oedipa meets in San Francisco, and he gives his masculine name away to a woman. Oedipa could unpin the badge and throw it away, but she does not, so the member of Inamorati Anonymous, whose name she will never know, calls her Arnold. Later, when she tries to speak to him on the phone, she identifies herself as Arnold Snarb (122). This is more than a convenient way to open a conversation with the IA; she is acknowledging the fact that she has turned into a man in San Francisco among all the homosexuals. Except for Nefastis, none of them propositioned her: none acknowledged her sex. And when, in the same chapter, she finally contemplates the possibility of changing her name, only masculine names occur to her:

Change your name to Miles, Dean, Serge, and/or Leonard, baby, she advised her reflection in the half-light of that afternoon's vanity mirror. Either way, they'll call it paranoia. (117)

Oedipa is now one of the Paranoids, one of the boys.

This sexual mutation may have been brought about by the men who, each in his turn, got interested in her, Mucho, Metzger, and Nefastis in particular. All three had a preference for young girls, Nabokov's nymphets. Mucho was only interested in teenage girls, which Oedipa knew about and forgave him for, for she had "once been seventeen and ready to laugh at anything"

(30). Metzger teases her, before making love to her, as if she were a child, which may account for the Barbie doll image which occurs to her; later he runs off to Nevada with Serge's chick to get married. As psychiatrists kept telling Humbert Humbert, you have to be homosexual or impotent to be attracted to young girls. Nefastis, also, has a crush on young kids, either boys or girls; he even identifies with them, watching the television programs meant for them. It is right after this that Oedipa nearly has an accident on the freeway:

She drove more or less automatically until a swift boy in a Mustang, perhaps unable to contain the new sense of virility his auto gave him, nearly killed her and she realized that she was on the freeway, heading irreversibly for the Bay Bridge. (74)

The fact that a homosexual has just somewhat crudely proposed to make love to her has finally made her change sides sexually: she is heading the wrong way; she is a man, like the boy who is rushing towards her from the other side of the traffic-mirror. There is no accident because it is all happening in the "haze" of her over-wrought imagination. Oedipa is that boy and the cherubic Arnold Snarb; she is Narcissus.

Her narcissistic attraction to mirrors appears earlier in the novel, when she dresses up in the bathroom to cheat Metzger, who wants to seduce her:

She made the mistake of looking at herself in the full-length mirror, saw a beach ball with feet and laughed so violently she fell over, taking a can of hair spray on the sink with her. . . . The can collided with a mirror and bounced away, leaving a silvery reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second before it all fell jingling into the sink. . . . (23-24)

Oedipa tries to hide her feminine charms to protect herself from Metzger's sexual assault. As a result, she loses her sexual identity to become a ridiculous object which she does not recognize as her reflection and which makes her laugh. It is at this very moment that she sends the phallic spray can ejaculating all around the room, threatening to upset everything and breaking a mirror. Though she triggers the ejaculation, she has no control over it.

The close association between sexuality and mirrors appears again when Oedipa spends a night in a hotel in Berkeley and has a disturbing dream:

When she finally did settle into sleep, she dreamed that Mucho, her husband, was making love to her on a soft white beach that was not part of any California she knew. When she woke in the morning, she was

sitting bolt upright, staring into the mirror at her own exhausted face. (69-70)

The mirror may have induced the dream. Oedipa looks as exhausted as if she had actually been making love. The suggestion is, clearly, that she has been making love to herself in the mirror, like Narcissus.

Oedipa has grown utterly contaminated by the pervading narcissism which permeates everything in Inverarity's estate. San Narciso is a "closed system" conceived by a highly narcissistic person and which turns out narcissistic individuals, like the Paranooids and Fallopian. When she enters Echo Courts, Oedipa surrenders to the spirit of the place:

The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. (16)

The novel being written in the form of represented thought, it is Oedipa's mute comment that is given here: she recognizes her own face in the nymph's. At the same time, she is shocked by the exaggerated sexual attributes which her own apparently do not match. She likes being admired as a nymph, a Rapunzel, by her servile men, but she refuses to be considered as a whore or a castrating woman. It is during this scene that she discovers this duality of her ideal self, the nymph, and her degraded self, the whore whose sexuality her men admire and are afraid of not being able to satisfy.

Inverarity has planted a mirror for her at the entrance to San Narciso so that she may discover the discrepancy between the two selves. But she too easily rejects the degraded self, starting to develop an elaborate strategy to forget it. She projects the unbearable duality upon the world around her and professes that once the Tristero has been unmasked and destroyed the world will recover its order and unity and she will have regained her sanity. She is in exactly the same position as the governess in The Turn of the Screw, who naively believed that things would return to normal once Miles had confessed and proved that she was right. Oedipa behaves like Schreber, Freud's unfortunate patient, who became convinced of the imminence of a great catastrophe:

He himself was "the only real man left alive," and the few human shapes that he still saw--the doctor, the attendants, the other patients--he explained as being "miracled up, cursorily improvised men." Occasionally the converse current also made itself apparent: a newspaper was put into his hands in which there was a report of his own death; he himself existed in a

second, inferior shape, and in his second shape he one day quietly passed away.¹²

Like Schreber, Oedipa feels that she has been appointed by a superior power to save her homeland against the perfidious invasion of Tristero, the "brute Other" (108), and his army of the night. Gradually she abandons herself to a Manichean view of the world, turning Tristero into Lucifer in the same way the governess had come to hold Quint (her fantasy) to be the devil. She needs an enemy worthy of her exalted ego, and she thinks she is going to meet him or his envoy at long last at this parody of a black mass or of the Pentecost, the "crying of lot 49" at the end of the novel.

Oedipa's paranoia expands at the same rate as the men who have believed in her and contributed to build up her ideal self disappear. Inverarity is naturally the first to go. He is followed by Hilarius, who goes mad and confides his secrets to her, then by Mucho, who loses his identity and becomes "'less himself and more generic'" every day, as Funch phrases it (97). Mucho is evidently going to be a victim of the NADA principle. The next is Metzger, who runs away with his nymphet. Then comes the turn of Driblette, who commits suicide. Right after Oedipa hears about this death, she realizes her men are being stripped from her:

They are stripping from me, she said
subvocally--feeling like a fluttering curtain in a
very high window, moving up to then out over the
abyss--they are stripping away, one by one, my men.
(105)

This is the first and only time Oedipa's thoughts are quoted by an omniscient narrator, which may indicate that she is losing control over the narrative itself. Each time a man disappears, it is a "version of herself" (111) which vanishes, as if her men were so many articles of clothing, those she put on in Chapter 2 to cheat Metzger and protect herself from sexual aggression. Until they started to vanish, she was not aware that they were part of herself, part of her body and her unconscious. After Driblette's death, she comments to herself, "Perhaps her mind would go on flexing psychic muscles that no longer existed; would be betrayed and mocked by a phantom self as the amputee is by a phantom limb" (111). She experiences each new disappearance as a more damaging amputation; she too is vanishing. When she cries out to herself "Where am I?" (105), we understand that she means "Who am I?"

It is around this time that Oedipa begins to have doubts about her real name. Her husband, after interviewing her about Dr. Hilarius, who has just been arrested, thanks her on the air as "'Mrs. Edna Mosh'" (96). The name he gives her is reminiscent of NADA. When she calls on a doctor in Los Angeles to check if she is pregnant, she gives her name as Grace Bortz

(118). Finally, as we said before, she introduces herself on the phone to the IA as Arnold Snarb (122). She is indeed pregnant, but not with a baby: her hopeless quest has led her to discover that another person was hiding in her whom she didn't know, a foreign body as it were. She does not succumb to "information overload," as Molly Hite claims,¹³ but to psychosis: she herself generates information, wills it into existence, like the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, in an attempt to ward off the blows of insanity; but in the process she manufactures a new world which has little to do with the one she knew before. In the presence of her bedazzled shrink, she recovers a semblance of sanity for a while, enough at least to beg, "I came . . . hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy" (95). She is about to fall into the abyss and tries to cling to this rotting rope, her mad psychiatrist. Her request for help draws him out of his confusion for a brief moment; he answers, "Cherish it!" (95). As a psychoanalyst, however gone mad, he knows that reality is nothing but a fantasy that enough people believe in or adhere to.

As a born materialist, Oedipa had always believed in the compactness of reality. When she discovers cracks in it, her beloved tower starts to totter and collapse. The crisis develops from the moment she finds out, with the assistance of dreamers like Nefastis, that everything is a metaphor for something else. Tristero is itself/himself a metaphor of a kind (75). She tries to rationalize this, later, saying that the act of metaphor is nothing but "a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost" (89), but this does not really help her with her problem. For the poet and the philosopher, the act of metaphor is indeed a "thrust at truth," but for the psychotic, it is a dangerous lie which removes the individual from the "damned consensus" Barthelme writes about.

In this novel Pynchon seems to propose a complete reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex. Freud, and Sophocles, had studied the problem from the son's angle, laying stress upon the father-son conflict. Here, the problem is viewed from Jocasta's angle: she is a castrating woman who wants to keep her men under her power and exacts endless proofs of admiration, love, and submission from them. She is basically sterile. Oedipa has known men carnally, but has had no child. It might have been a relief to her if she had really been pregnant. Oedipus is a projection of her unfulfillable desires: he is not the agent but simply a victim. Hence the name Oedipa coined by Pynchon: she is the model, and Oedipus is only the pale reflection of her desires and frustrations.

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Notes

- 1 Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974) 118.
- 2 Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966: London: Pan, 1979).
- 3 Jean Baudrillard, Simulacres et simulation (Paris: Galilée, 1981) 70.
- 4 On this subject, see my analysis in Maurice Couturier and Régis Durand, Donald Barthelme (London and New York: Methuen, 1982) 61-63.
- 5 Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (1973; London: Picador, 1975) 520-21.
- 6 Gravity's Rainbow 521.
- 7 Baudrillard 26.
- 8 Clément Rosset, L'objet singulier (Paris: Minuit, 1979) 25.
- 9 Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism (New York: Warner, 1979) 346.
- 10 Donald Barthelme, Snow White (New York: Atheneum, 1967) 80.
- 11 Donald Barthelme, The Dead Father (1975; New York: Pocket, 1978) 178.
- 12 The Pelican Freud Library Vol. 9 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 207.
- 13 Molly Hite, Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 86.