Quest Avatars in Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49

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Translated by Margaret S. Langford

"How's your quest?"[1]

Posed to the protagonist Oedipa, this question invites the reader to consider what relevance the word "quest" has in a text which is a deliberate parody, where an obsession for reference (accurate or deliberately misleading) and the proliferation of parasitic abbreviations on the one hand, the repetitiveness of the narrative as well as the uncertain status of the speaker(s) on the other, and, last of all, rather cryptic symbolism, tend to obscure the finality of narrative. The grids traditionally used in stories as reference points--morphological, narrative, symbolic structures--are there, of course, but they exist simply as moving lines that crisscross and blend into one another. The interpretation of the reality described is continually jeopardized by the ambiguity concerning the characters' and the readers' perception. The linking up of intuited and logically understood experience which we find in quest novels is here constantly deferred.

The metaphor of Maxwell's Demon can be used to describe the reader's approach to the text. The reader as well as the Demon must separate fast-moving from slow-moving molecules; i.e., he must sort out movement and meaning in a fictional universe which is in a state of total flux.

At this time we should review the novel's plot briefly. A certain Oedipa Maas is named co-executrix for the estate of her deceased lover, Pierce Inverarity. In the course of her investigations, she discovers "by accident" the existence of an alternate

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• Originally published as "Les Avatares de la Quête Dans The Crying of Lot 49 de Thomas Pynchon," in Delta 8 (1979), 143-154, and published here by permission of Delta.

postal system--Tristero alias W.A.S.T.E.--which becomes the focal point of her effort and makes her forget her original function. A bit later, the dotted outline of this network blurs as the Tristero is placed in its historical perspective and Oedipa sets out to find the magic key which will unlock the secret door to knowledge. In following the plot's three phases the reader must choose one of these alternatives:

--the events are real but difficult to understand, and Oedipa's hallucinations distort them until they become almost unintelligible.

--or rather, like the heroine the reader is victimized by the author's creative maliciousness, and like the heroine he finds himself unable to untangle the plot and put everything in its place. In each instance all attempts at interpretation fail: we must accept both theses.

Oedipa's wanderings in the California of the 60's start the story and set off a perpetual motion mechanism which never stops. The book's last words " . . . the crying of lot 49 . . ." restate the title so that once the reader has finished the book he finds that everything begins or is ready to begin again. This justifies my own title, since traditionally the quest moves in circles (an event is described, then interpreted), and it obeys, as Todorov says, the principle of the Everlasting Return.

Lot 49[2] is an elaborate, learned work which proclaims its respect for the written word ironically. It teems with references to real and apocryphal texts, and to real or imaginary characters who assert themselves and destroy one another. The names Tourneur and Webster, associated with Wharfinger, make Wharfinger seem real. The Courier's Tragedy seems very like The Revenger's Tragedy or The White Devil and could be an unedited Jacobean text. Through these references Lot 49 takes its place in a historic and literary tradition which makes its presence known every once in awhile. I propose to show how it is presented.

I - The Presentation of the Quest in Lot 49

Lot 49 stands midway between the déjà vu and the jamais vu, and it anticipates future forms while

relying on traditional ones. "What will be the future of western iconography?" "What role will be assigned to machines and groupings in constructing a text?" are two questions which this novel raises. In many ways Pynchon's text is in the same tradition as biblical and sacred texts (the Egyptian Book of the Dead, for example), and as medieval stories or fairy tales which open the door to disquieting occult forces that must be controlled with magic spells. Inverarity's empire, easily enough acquired from his very first investment, resembles the Marquis of Carabas' empire: factories, universities, etc.--, everything belongs to him. The insignificance of the signs marking Oedipa's path (graffiti in the toilets, tattoos, etc. . . .) reminds us that Pynchon's text is already a parody twice removed. Don Quixote already passed this way, interpreting imaginary signs while pursuing a real quest.

Moreover, Pynchon sometimes refers to certain primordial images. Thus the tapestry painted on the central panel of Remedios Varo's triptych evokes a vaguely medieval work, a work no longer hanging in a chateau or a museum, but swinging back and forth over a cosmic void that it tries desperately to fill.

> . . . in the central painting of a triptych, titled "Bordando el Manto Terrestre," were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void. (10)

Doubt and anguish have seized the banner from the chivalric and humanistic faith that used to rule the world. The tapestry becomes an inner motif, a motif working in the tower/body, in the picture/consciousness. The inner void echoes the cosmic void.

In the same way, the image of Oedipa shut in the tower matches the image of the captive princess released from a spell by the prince or the knight whose reward she then becomes. But the picture doesn't match the copy exactly. The lady's long hair, which should allow the knight to climb up to her, comes off like a limp wig, thus turning the chivalric quest into

surrealistic mockery and striking it dead. The tower is a moveable, invisible prison erected by malevolent powers which can't be rendered harmless because they have no counterpart as they do in the Manichean universe where good exists to wage war against evil. The heroine's (not the hero's) deliverance will be a self-deliverance--deliverance from the very forms that our heritage is made of.

Repeated references to Tristero or the Tristero and its emblem, the muted post horn, tend to sensitize the reader to the mysterious object of the quest. Keeping everything in its proper perspective, (the) Tristero (masculine and neuter) has this in common with the Graal: it is both subject and object of the quest. (The) Tristero could be the knight Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera or a shadowy soldier; Tristero is also a secret code. The muted post horn, drawn just about everywhere, bears witness to the impossibility of communicating, to the non-existence of any type of community.

These deformed or cryptic representations translate the silence of the heroic voice.

If both the reader and Oedipa turn away from this glorious heritage to look only at the present and future, can they find a salvageable whole in all this psychological and technological paraphernalia? The heroine's name is Oedipa. She finds herself confronting an enigma that her name-sake never had to confront in quite the same terms. "Does Tristero exist?" "In what identity?" "Am I mad or sane?"

Pynchon never thinks of following the legend point by point. At most he outlines the cynical and loving paternal figure to remind us that Oedipa finds herself in a constantly changing filial dependency role vis-a-vis her author, her lover/testator father, her psychoanalyst, the two old men (the tattooed sailor and the resident of the old folks home), all those alive or dead from whom she seeks information about the immense past that preceded her. About the last will and testament and the journey's end per se, there is never any doubt. Oedipa and the reader must find out what they are through narrative techniques that are sometimes didactic, as well as through mathematical proofs. Both the reader and Oedipa must evaluate the worth of

the inheritance. At any rate, the donor (Inverarity) is absent or a practical joker (the author) or remains silent (Hilarius), as in psychoanalysis, which is one of the modern archetypes of the quest.

Pynchon's novel is a new genesis in the course of which new forms, called urban industrial complexes or electronic groupings, spring from the earth, and, if we turn to strictly human material, so do societies, associations, results of cellular divisions in the social tissue. Oedipa is recruited by the Paranoids, the Pinguid Society, the IA^3, etc.--- At every turn we discover evidence of the quest for self.

What James termed "The architectural hare" in "The Jolly Corner" hops about continuously in Lot 49, with each of its hops corresponding to a new proliferation of forms. Pierce Inverarity's motto (keep it bouncing) is not devoid of irony.

James felt the man who devotes himself to financial speculation, who invests his money in tangible structures rather than the castles in the air Hawthorne talks about, ends up resembling a brute and a monster. Can we still say the same in Lot 49? For here nature is almost totally absent--only the still unconquered ocean appears like a mirage.

Man has already established a system which parallels nature's system and has its own growth rhythms, its own heartbeat. He finds he is wedged between these two different systems which spin at two different speeds.

(Nature = living tissue made up of living beings; science = life-like tissue consisting of machines, things, etc. . . .).

The figurative world in Lot 49 brings to life an old dream described by Leonardo da Vinci, Jules Verne, and Wells. Machines and things are mutants, quickly evolving to technical perfection, which begin to compete with men. Oedipa, alarmed by the trajectory of a hair-spray can which appears to be pre-programmed, feels like the sorcerer's apprentice who can't find the right spell to gain control of forces that seize control over him--forces that keep hands from opening doors, feet from walking up the stairs, voices from speaking up.

These kinds of things (TV--car--phone) all belong to the war-machine because they constantly intrude into human life and are not so much prostheses as surrogates. Cars in particular are their owners' doubles.

Subverted forms of the traditional quest, rites for passing power from generation to generation to help the last descendent claim his identity, futuristic power circuits: all coexist in a constant state of war in Pynchon's text; hence a palpable tension in the narrative which is not resolved at the end, since Pynchon redistributes his formal structures and symbols in the mongrel lot which is Lot 49.

II - Narrative Structures of the Quest, or the Quest for Narrative

No one can deny that the story springs from realistic soil and that it moves geographically through a strictly urban space (San Narciso--Los Angeles--San Francisco). The displacement and the metamorphosis of tangible reality follow the pattern of the voyage of initiation as it appears in The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man or in Ulysses, for example. They pave the way for the potential but constantly postponed revelation in Lot 49.

Perception in questioned here. It is hallucinated because the spectacle is hallucinogenic. The subject's eye is dazzled, and the reality perceived is no longer assimilated and stabilized through a personal alchemical process. Even more importantly, roles are reversed: the object observes and the subject sees itself being observed; soon the latter, composed of flesh and consciousness, is no more than a tiny hallucinogenic drop; witness this strange citation:

> What the road really was, she fancied, was this hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain, or whatever passes, with a city, for pain. But were Oedipa some single melted crystal of urban horse, L.A., really, would be no less turned on for her absence. (14)

Every step of the way the story takes detours; there

are no absolute ruptures, but lateral and/or vertical openings to new terrain, which delay the final revelation.

On the other hand, the narrative technique is often analogical or pseudo-analogical, and by placing several stories in the same equation the author attempts to redistribute the characters' roles and expand or reduce what we are forced to call the plot. In fact, we find a continual narrative and semantic slippage from plot to PLOT, that is to say from plot to conspiracy, and vice versa, to such an extent that we cannot say which, the plot or the conspiracy, has priority. The fictional work within a fictional work technique (movie--drama--comic songs) hides first one then the other. The Hollywood film showing the tragi-comic adventures of Baby Igor pushes the story over the borderline into the grotesque. All this suggests that we see before our eyes a carefully planned coup, a little conspiracy; on the other hand, Wharfinger's play gives credence to the theory that all is real historic truth and great conspiracy.

Two of the characters, the actor/lawyer and the lawyer/actor, function on both the first and second levels in the work. Oedipa, depending on her degree of involvement, is both witness/actor or victim/conspirator. She can believe she is persecuted by Inverarity or that she has a sinister influence on his entourage.

The songs ease the glide of story from one mode to another. They are stereotypical transitions which pull the various parts of the text together by shifting it back to neutral position. Indeed, the hymn praising the glory of industrial competition, or Serge's song, saturates the story, bringing it to the level of appearances, i.e., to the level of official or dissident ideologies.

The introduction of Wharfinger's apocryphal text creates a new juncture, one that will allow the story to unfold, to deploy itself anew. The juxtaposition of these two texts casts Lot 49 into the lower depths. The Courier's Tragedy is a drama of the dispossessed, overflowing with cruelty: usurpers and victims alike perish.

How are these two texts joined together? First, through the intuiting of a revelation which isn't verbalized in either one, through the elusive surfacing of the unconscious in the conscious, and finally through the introduction of the key word in the story's margins, the term which is at the same time the thesis and the symbol of Lot 49: Tristero.

If we adopt a tautological argument, we can establish the following pseudo-equation: The Crying of Lot 49 = The Courier's Tragedy = The Revenger's Tragedy. Therefore, The Crying of Lot 49 = The Revenger's Tragedy. In its turn, Pynchon's text becomes a possible term of reference. At this point in the narrative, the story that emerges becomes impossible to deny: the motif of the tapestry which is woven from all the stories coming down through the centuries reveals a principle (with a variable quantum) governing the destruction of humanity. Genocides can be superimposed on wars and the two seen as one. The roles of victim and executioner become interchangeable, and Tristero fights either in one camp or another--against Thurn and Taxis (the principal stockholders of the postal monopoly) or against their usurpers. The War between factions in the Lowlands under the Holy Roman Empire, the Hungarian uprising around 1848, the California Gold Rush episode or the Second World War, all placed in the same equation form already appeared in The Wasteland as a salute to the large brotherhood of victims.

In Lot 49, the same story is repeated three times: the disappearance of the Duchy of Faggio's guards (in the play), the disappearance of the Wells Fargo men, the disappearance of the G.I.'s near Lago di Pieta during the Second World War. The story describes three genocides and the great conspiracy which weighs heavily on all of our lives.

The Everlasting Return of the story to its beginning reveals future vistas reminiscent perhaps of the many blank pages which follow the text.

The denouement's silence, or the ambiguity of any given moment in the story, does not allow us to provide a categorical solution to our narrative. "Ritual Reluctance" describes the hesitations, the shilly-shallyings of a narrative shying away from any new

developments. Just as the doers of great deeds are not named in Wharfinger's play, so Pynchon's text gets lost in the end among preparations for an estate auction sale--lost in ambiguity. Who are these men in black or these black men seated, behind closed doors, around Oedipa? Are not all the corpses in the story, the pluralistic incarnation of Death which is never called by name? Pynchon chooses a narrative technique quite different from the one used by detective story writers who point out each clue and prepare us for the big scene when the mystery will be solved. His technique is more like James'. James always puts the solution off until later. Lot 49's binary rhythm: question/incomplete or irrelevant answer, new question/new incomplete answer, etc. is what really forms the reader's quest--all the more so because the book switches from one thing to another, and the work is only open to interpretation once the book is closed. The auctioneer raises his arms and opens a ghostly session where the reader can make his bid.

III - The Quest for the Word and the Metaphoric Hypothesis

Pynchon's text, therefore, has no final word; it begins and ends in silence. While the writing and reading process is going on, electrically charged words vibrate; they energize one another. The "word" is electrified; it has sound as well as meaning. Thus word currents surge through the high tension wires Pynchon creates:

> . . . squatters who . . . spent the night up some pole in a lineman's tent like caterpillars, swung among a web of telephone wires . . . untroubled by the dumb voltages flickering their miles . . . (135)

Undoubtedly Pynchon's greatest originality lies in this effort to modulate language through processes reminiscent of sound-mixing. He takes shop-worn sophisticated language off the shelf, puts it in new circuits where it hob-nobs with slang, technical terms, abbreviations.

Indeed, many of the characters talk like computers. Their words seem to be surrounded by invisible balloons just like in a comic strip; it seems that it

isn't the words which burst to the surface, but the balloon which, responding to external stimuli, automatically expels its contents.

Moreover, the media have so distorted language at this point that the speaker must say Edna Mosh into the microphone so that the electromagnetic waves will transmit Oedipa Maas at the other end of the circuit. This example recalls the "Serious Pleasantries" created at Berkeley or Princeton which all revolve around the "Paradoxical Number."

> Ex.: Caesar's last breath
> "Are we still breathing some of the same molecules of air that Julius Caesar breathed out when he was assassinated? The answer is, according to a very simple calculation, "Probably yes, a few tens of them every time we breathe in."[4]

This slipping from the hypothetical to the probable seems to characterize Pynchon's gait: how then shall we talk about incorporating in a live circuit these molecules of stale air or these decrepit, feeble words? Where can we find the formula to stop linguistic entropy?

In the absence of the god Thoth or the secularized and aging Mr. Thoth,[5] Oedipa goes to two miracle workers to try to wrest the secret for that formula from them. She also turns to Maxwell's Demon and the producer Driblette's ghost, but their silence shows that scientific procedures and spiritualist intuition are both powerless. The subject of enunciation (Oedipa herself, in these circumstances) is an attempt to establish a relationship with the "other" without which the discovery of the "word" can be no more than the symbol for paranoia.

Pynchon offers his reader a simplistic, mystifying code to act as the thread which will guide him through the labyrinth (a word/a sketch/an anagram such as Tristero/the muted post horn/W.A.S.T.E.).

The intermittent appearance of the word Tristero or W.A.S.T.E. stimulates the curiosity of the reader who sees them as intruders in the text and capable of changing its meaning. The same technique is sometimes used in poetry. The recurrent appearance of a color

or unknown word creates semantic changes and expands imaginative possibilities. Tristero's presence is a signal and a sign which is both a harbinger of things to come and a compensation for what is never revealed since the revelation is always just about but never quite ready to happen.

> But then she wondered if the gemlike "clues" were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (87)

The text's real quest is for a metaphoric alternative. Tristero's existence threatens the rhetorical figure most frequently used since Homer in its reassuring bipolarity of signifier/signified:

> Now here was Oedipa, faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway. With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together. (80)

Indeed, the story which Tristero tells follows the experimental and theoretical phases of the metaphor. Tristero is a signifier or rather a chain of signifiers which mark secret plots, clandestine operations, a way of masking but also of seeking out and discovering the truth. Often it is identified a posteriori.

But Tristero, whose emblem appears just about everywhere, is also a potential but as yet unknown signified whose signifiers must be catalogued by using the mystic's ecstasy, the madman's and the dreamer's vision, the artist's intuition, and, in literature, the process of poetic creation.

The description of the old seaman's delirium tremens can be considered a humorous demonstration of the metaphoric process (the act of metaphor).

The metaphoric process operates through the juxtaposition of two metaphors, one traditional, the other the product of Oedipa's spur-of-the-moment inspiration. Thinking of Viking funerals (the old man could very well set fire to his mattress with his cigarette) she sees the burning mattress stuffed with all the human

suffering it has absorbed as a metaphor for suffering, paralysis and death. Everything will go up in flame, even the metaphor which only tells us what we already know and which will turn to ashes and residue.

On the other hand, the second metaphor which the letters DT (delirium tremens) hide is very dynamic. It makes it possible to communicate from both the outer and inner worlds and to establish new connections with other worlds--the breath of God, joyful and threatening spheres--all this restores the relevance of the word. In a trance, Oedipa herself discovers the second term of the metaphor, thanks to a bad pun on DT (delirium tremens) and d t (differential time; death nearing, for example). dt acts as a trajectory for the metaphor which launches itself off into space in search of new worlds. DT contains dt and vice-versa. The distinction between signifier and signified tends to disappear.

The two movements, the trembling accompanying the delirium and the path of approaching death, will soon annihilate one another, thus freeing a source of verbal energy which drives death out of the story and its language.

Notes

[1] Question asked on page 125, The Crying of Lot 49, Bantam Books, Inc. 1966 (references in parentheses).

[2] The title has been reduced to the two last words.

[3] Inamorati Anonymous.

[4] An example among others in the Princeton Gnosis by Raymond Ruyer.

[5] Pynchon's character, Mr. Thoth, is the modern version of Thoth, the Egyptian God of Arts and the Humanities.