

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966)

Early in Pynchon's reworking of the detective novel, the suburban housewife Oedipa Maas learns that she has been assigned the task of executing the will of a former lover, the real estate mogul Pierce Inverarity. This daunting task will soon be dwarfed by a greater source of bafflement: Oedipa may have stumbled upon an ancient postal conspiracy stretching across two continents, from dynastic medieval Europe through a seemingly historyless modern California. But does the Tristero postal system really exist? Or is Oedipa losing her mind? Or is this a massive hoax orchestrated by the dying trickster, Pierce? Oedipa never finds out – nor do we.

The southern Californian setting of Pynchon's novel evokes the famous Los Angeles novels of Raymond Chandler, whose private eye can be counted on to get to the bottom of even global conspiracies. Pynchon's rewriting of a populist form, the detective novel, is an exemplarily postmodernist strategy, bridging the divide between high and low art. Such rewritings can produce pure kitsch, Pynchon announces at the outset, when Oedipa recognizes the muzak in the supermarket as "the Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto," high art (Vivaldi) bathetically rendered in a vulgar medium (the kazoo, of all absurdities), but *The Crying of Lot 49* will show that rewriting can also be more productively transformative, turning the familiar challengingly unfamiliar.¹ That detective fiction is Pynchon's source is particularly significant because this is the genre most concerned with the exposure of secrets by solitary human ingenuity. The novel details the failure of that paradigmatic belief that "all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules, to solve any great mystery" (100).

Obsessed by the 1960s television investigator Perry Mason, Oedipa's lawyer is incapable of understanding that Perry Mason is a fictional character; he is one of many characters in the novel for whom the fictional and the real are interchangeable. Likewise, Oedipa's co-executor Metzger, a former actor who cannot differentiate between war and those war movies in which he acted. "I know this part," he tells her as they watch one of his old films, "For fifty yards out the sea was red with blood. They don't show that" (24). The suspicion that the fictional and the real may be interchangeable explains the novel's concern with "world making." "I'm the projector at the planetarium," a theater director tells Oedipa, "all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth" (62); and Oedipa recalls a painting she once saw

depicting girls imprisoned in a tower embroidering a tapestry “which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void ... and the tapestry was the world” (11). To “project a world” as Oedipa keeps supposing she must (64, 69), is an image of solipsism because it places the perceiving individual in the role of sovereign creator; but the tapestry is also a gesture of expansiveness, to want to break out of your own solitude to imagine something greater than your perceiving, projecting self. The joke that Oedipa’s destination is San Narciso is self-explanatory, but for all that Oedipa suspects that reality is intractably subjective, she is still motivated to unravel the Tristero conspiracy. The self-reflexive dimension is clear: if metafiction is, as in the title of Linda Hutcheon’s book, “narcissistic narrative” because it cannot help looking at itself, Pynchon clearly wants the novel to be able to look outward even as he knows that such looking is always going to be distorted, privatized by the idiosyncrasies of the perceiving agent.

So what does Pynchon see? Well, even otherwise hostile critics have conceded that the best postmodernist fiction “constitutes an intellectual attack upon the atomized, passive and indifferent mass culture which, through the saturation of electronic technology, has reached its zenith in Post-War America” and that its sense of representational crisis comments sharply “on the historical crisis which brought it about.”² *The Crying of Lot 49* supports those claims: haunted by his time as a used car salesman, Oedipa’s husband, Mucho, “could never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else’s life” (5). American commodity culture means attempting to satisfy metaphysical need with material acquisition: the dealership for which Mucho works is a member of the (too good to be true, but it is) National Automobile Dealer’s Association, NADA, and so above the parking lot a sign waves “nada, nada, against the blue sky” (118). Or think of the “nothing” that is Pynchon’s atomized San Narciso: “less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts – census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway” (13). Oedipa looks at this city and wants it to mean something, but ultimately wonders if the hints of meaningfulness she encounters are “only some kind of compensation” for the loss of transcendent meaning, compensation for her “having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (95).

This is one of the novel’s many references to Pentecost, celebrated on the fiftieth day after Easter Sunday, commemorating the moment when the apostles were given the gift of communicating in foreign tongues. Although tongues are literally ripped out in the fake Jacobean revenge tragedy through which Oedipa encounters Tristero, the Pentecostal image of linguistic plurality

is deeply appropriate to a novel of global consciousness, a novel in which globalization is both the inevitable outcome of postmodern American capitalism and the challenge to its otherwise deleterious effects of atomization and ahistoricism. Cashing in on the Beatles' success, the novel's fake British band ("Blimey" says one; "Lord love a duck" says another [25–6]) are the comic face of globalization, but there are others less funny. Consider Pierce's new housing development, boasting an artificial lake into which are sunk "restored galleons, imported from the Bahamas; Atlantean fragments of columns and friezes from the Canaries; real human skeletons from Italy; giant clamshells from Indonesia" (20).

Let's pause on those skeletons since Oedipa doesn't. Here, they're just one component of a list of imported commodities for American dwellers of luxury homes, American solipsism having reached such a pitch that "real human skeletons from Italy" are no more remarkable than "giant clamshells from Indonesia." Surely this is what it means to be "sensually fatigued," the phrase Pynchon uses of Jacobean England's ominously gory tragedies, when decorative atrocity lies at the bottom of the luxury lagoon (49). The imported bones turn out to be the bodies of Second World War soldiers, while others become charcoal to make the filters for the cigarettes that Oedipa sees advertised on television: there is nothing that cannot be made grist to the corporate mill, Pynchon implies, and, just as bodies are turned into ash and ink in the violent Jacobean play Oedipa sees, they're turned into ash and decorative objects in Pynchon's postmodern America. The historical – and geopolitical – implications become clear when we learn that Oedipa's therapist, the deeply unfunny Dr. Hilarius, prescriber of tranquilizers to California housewives, has done his internship at Buchenwald, as if, knowing no moral boundaries, high capitalism is as corruptible as Nazi corpse-making was corrupt. At one point in the novel Oedipa learns in an army surplus store of a massive domestic demand for Nazi uniforms and swastika armbands: "This is America," she rebukes herself: "you live in it, you let it happen" (123).

A revelation of a kind, then, but the book refuses to give Oedipa the consolation of a conclusive ending: even in the novel's final sentence Oedipa still awaits the potentially revelatory "crying of lot 49" at the auction. But this isn't how postmodernist fiction works: if the novel is to culminate in a revelation we have to write it ourselves. The Tristero organization may or may not connect the Old World and the New; that the potential for reducing human beings to things certainly does is the never-to-be-spoken revelation that I take from *The Crying of Lot 49*. My purpose in giving historical motivations to the novel's formal withholdings is to suggest that characterizing metafiction as fiction about fiction is emphatically not to say that fiction is the *only* thing it is about.