

## The Form and Meaning of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

ROBERT MERRILL

SINCE the publication of *V.* in 1963, Thomas Pynchon has enjoyed an impressive if somewhat ambiguous critical reputation. As the work of a twenty-six year-old, *V.* was rightly seen as one of the most precocious debuts in American literary history. And Pynchon's subsequent novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), have confirmed the early impression that a remarkable talent had finally appeared in the postwar period, a talent which might ultimately rival Faulkner's. Not everyone would take Pynchon so seriously, of course, but no one has questioned his abundant gifts as a novelist. At the same time, there has been understandable confusion about Pynchon's use of these gifts. I say understandable because all of Pynchon's books are radically unlike the great novels of the Anglo-American tradition, no matter how that tradition is defined. In the words of that learned Zemblan scholar, Charles Kinbote, each of Pynchon's books seems "the monstrous semblance of a novel."<sup>1</sup> Pynchon's use of allegorical devices (such as "flat" characters, odd names, schematized action); his massive reliance on historical and scientific materials; his apparently perverse refusal to tell a story straight, to "convert (his) multiple cultural meanings into the stuff of human relationships"<sup>2</sup> — these habits have bothered Pynchon's admirers and detractors alike.

Perhaps the most unfortunate result of this uneasiness about Pynchon's methods has been a general reluctance to examine his novels rigorously. Where the form of a work is in doubt, we are naturally reluctant to judge its relative

success or failure. So we have had very few formal discussions of Pynchon's novels — remarkably few given the widespread impression that Pynchon is a writer of extraordinary potential. Moreover, those discussions which have appeared have been informed by critical standards of rather dubious relevance to Pynchon's works, as certain recurring judgments would suggest. Usually there has been much talk about "episodic looseness," "digression," "repetition";<sup>3</sup> about "loose structure";<sup>4</sup> about weak characterization ("the narrative form diffuses the reader's attention and ultimately the concern for the characters and their fate").<sup>5</sup> One sometimes imagines that Pynchon's critics have mistaken him for Henry James. Questions of relative merit aside, Pynchon's intentions don't correspond to James' — nor to the general intentions of the traditional novelist.

Grasping this is a necessary first step toward understanding Pynchon's achievement, but it is only the first step. We must go on to evaluate the real formal elements in his novels. What I want to do here is characterize the form of Pynchon's three novels and then analyze *The Crying Lot 49* as an example of this form. I have chosen to discuss this novel for two reasons. Because it is so much shorter than Pynchon's other books, it should serve more conveniently to illustrate the nature of his art. But it also seems to me that *The Crying of Lot 49* has suffered undue neglect as an individual achievement. What Pynchon has done in this short novel makes it worthy of a good deal more attention than it has received in the past.

The question of form is crucial here, for as Robert Scholes has recently remarked, "most serious misreadings of literary texts and most instances of bad critical judgment are referable to generic misunderstandings on the part of reader or critic."<sup>6</sup> He says elsewhere, "As long as we expect a nectarine to taste like either a peach or a plum we are bound to be disappointed."<sup>7</sup> Scholes is one critic who has helped to define the form of Pynchon's novels, though he

has not discussed Pynchon's individual works. I refer, of course, to the theoretical sections of *The Fabulators*, where Scholes describes a "new" form of fiction which has emerged since World War II. "Describes" seems the right word because Scholes is rather wary of defining this form very closely. He notes that such contemporaries as Durrell, Nabokov, Vonnegut, Barth, and Pynchon reveal "an extraordinary delight in design," a feature so marked in their fictions that "delight in design, and its concurrent emphasis on the art of the designer, will serve in part to distinguish the art of the fabulators from the work of the novelist or the satirist" (p. 10). He tells us that fabulation means "a return to a more verbal kind of fiction," a fiction which is "less realistic and more artistic . . . more shapely, more evocative; more concerned with ideas and ideals, less concerned with things" (p. 12). And he remarks the strong tendency toward allegory among the fabulists: "For the moment, suffice it to say that modern fabulation, like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy. Many fabulators are allegorists. But the modern fabulators allegorize in peculiarly modern ways" (p. 11). All of the features Scholes finds in fabulation are applicable to the form of Pynchon's novels, for Pynchon is indeed a fabulist. In fact, he seems to me not only the best but also the most representative of the American fabulists (excluding those who were born in Russia).

If we are to define Pynchon's form more precisely, however, I think we must tighten Scholes' "definition." After all, emphasis on design and verbal play are secondary features, not formal principles. It is his tendency to allegorize which distinguishes the fabulist from the traditional novelist. When Scholes says that "it is surely better to think of Voltaire and Swift when reading Vonnegut and Barth than to think of Hemingway and Fitzgerald" (p. 40), he is right. But this is true of all the fabulists. Each of

them allegorizes after his own fashion — there is an absolute difference between Vonnegut and Nabokov, for example — but each of the fabulists does tend away from the representation of “reality” (“one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes,” as Nabokov has said).<sup>8</sup> Formally speaking, this means that each of the fabulists tends to write what Sheldon Sacks would call apologues.

In *Fiction and the Shape of Belief*, Sacks defines an apologue as “a work organized to exemplify an idea or a closely related set of ideas.”<sup>9</sup> He says of apologues generally, “The informing principle of all such works is that each is organized as a fictional example of the truth of a formulable statement or closely related set of such statements” (p. 8). In Sacks’ terms, one might well think of Voltaire when reading Vonnegut or Barth, for *Candide*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Sot-Weed Factor* are all organized by the same general principles. That is, each is organized to make us *feel* the truth of “a formulable statement or closely related set of such statements.”<sup>10</sup> These works differ in many important ways, but formally they are all fables. And the same is true of Pynchon’s three novels. Sacks has cited *V.* as an example of a modern apologue,<sup>11</sup> but *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* also illustrate the form.

So far as Pynchon is concerned, the point is that we should not expect his nectarines to taste like peaches or plums. We should not expect a fabulist to convert his multiple cultural meanings into the stuff of human relationships, nor to direct the reader’s attention to concern for his characters and their fate. Sacks’ discussion of *Rasselas* is pertinent (see pp. 49-60). He argues persuasively that the apologist is not free to develop his characters at will — not if he would succeed as an apologist: “What is revealed about any major character is, almost of necessity and almost ruthlessly, limited to qualities directly required for their roles in the apologue” (pp. 59-60). The writer

of apologue — or fable — is not interested in psychological realism for its own sake. Such “realism” may even detract from his intended effect. The relevance of this to Pynchon’s work is crucial.

But it is perhaps even more important to recognize that what constitutes “digression,” “repetition,” and “loose structure” in a traditional novel is irrelevant to a book like *The Crying of Lot 49*. To take an obvious example, many episodes in *V.* are unrelated to the plot-lines involving Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil, Pynchon’s nominal heroes. If *V.* were a novel “about” these characters in the same sense that *Pride and Prejudice* is about Elizabeth Bennet, or *Huckleberry Finn* about Huck, it would indeed be a monstrous semblance of a novel, for roughly half of its materials would be digressive. But *V.* is thematically organized, so the standard for digression is of course very different.

In discussing *The Crying of Lot 49*, I want to show that Pynchon’s so-called “episodic looseness” is nothing of the kind — not if we understand the structural principle at work in the novel. This will seem an unpleasant suggestion to many, for the modern prejudice against allegory is extremely strong. But I would emphasize Scholes’ remark that “modern fabulators allegorize in peculiarly modern ways.” Pynchon’s way is not Bunyan’s, nor Spenser’s, nor even Orwell’s. Certainly it is not my intention to cast Pynchon in the role of contemporary typologist. Nonetheless, I do hope to show that a book like *The Crying of Lot 49* makes no sense unless it is read as a fable.

Superficially, the first chapter of *The Crying of Lot 49* leads us to expect yet another tale about the modern suburban housewife whose life seems “a fat deckful of days . . . more or less identical”<sup>12</sup> — a life taken up by Tupperware parties, suburban shopping centers, group therapy sessions, evening cocktails, and the inevitable unhappy marriage. Pynchon’s heroine, Oedipa Maas, is represented as the incipient rebel of all such tales, vaguely aware of her

dissatisfaction but not quite sure of the alternatives. The situation is so familiar that it comes as no surprise when Oedipa turns to a lover as early as the second chapter. After all, such stories *always* describe the heroine's disengagement from middle-class routine (if the protagonist is male, the retreat is from business and its materialistic values).

Of course, anyone who has read *The Crying of Lot 49* knows that Pynchon does not offer us the conventional "story" his first pages seem to anticipate. Pynchon is not really concerned with the details of Oedipa's life in the suburbs, which more or less disappear after the first two pages of the book. Nor is he much interested in Oedipa's marital problems; references to Mucho Maas are sparse and finally peripheral. Indeed, Pynchon is very much aware of the clichés invoked in his first chapter, for his treatment of Oedipa's seduction by Metzger can only be read as a parody of the unfulfilled-housewife-turning-to-a-handsome-lover motif in conventional fiction (see pp. 17-27). Pynchon's real interests lie elsewhere. As I have already suggested, they lie in the realm of fable. At the end of the first chapter, we learn that Oedipa thinks of herself as a Rapunzel trapped in her lonely suburban "tower," awaiting a "knight of deliverance" (pp. 10, 11). The fairy-tale reference is no accident. It is meant to suggest the element of fantasy or fable which will dominate the book. Yet Pynchon's fantasy is what Scholes would call "ethically controlled;" it returns toward actual human life with a vengeance. Like Alice, Oedipa is to wander through a bizarre, seemingly-mad terrain of the mind. Unlike Alice, she is to discover that this terrain corresponds to the world of "actual human life." Ultimately, Oedipa is the vehicle by which Pynchon explores the landscape of contemporary America, not the protagonist of a traditional dramatic action.

I am suggesting that Pynchon's novel tries to resolve some basic questions about modern America rather than its heroine's personal problems. It moves, that is, toward

a *revelation* about contemporary culture. This apocalyptic term is used throughout Pynchon's highly stylized account of Oedipa's "adventures." At the beginning of the novel, as Oedipa is about to take up her duties as executrix of Pierce Inverarity's estate, we are told that "she was to have all manner of revelations" (p. 9). As Oedipa descends upon San Narciso, the Southern Californian suburb Pierce has all but founded, she looks down upon "a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together," and she thinks of the printed circuit of a transistor radio. For the moment, "a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding" (p. 13); the circuit-like pattern suggests "some promise of hierophany" (p. 18). Later, Oedipa is to think that there was "revelation in progress all around her" (p. 28). This portentous word is used again and again, inviting us to see Oedipa's fate in the largest possible context. At first her concern is the estate of a former lover. Then it is the possible existence of a secret organization. The Tristero, which seems to have something to do with private mail delivery but possibly much more. Finally, however, Oedipa's concern (and ours) is the very nature of America — a subject worthy of the most profound revelations.

Pynchon's stylized treatment of Oedipa's plight prepares us for the nearly fabulous quest she is to undertake. Certainly the events which follow can only be seen as stages in a parabolic quest for knowledge. What else unifies such disparate episodes as Oedipa's conversation with Mike Fallopian, proselytizer for the Peter Pinguid Society, an organization so far to the Right that it is considered paranoid by the John Birch Society (pp. 31-46); Oedipa's first encounter with the WASTE symbol (p. 34); Manny Di Presso's story about the bones of an Army company left in the Lago di Pieta during World War II (p. 42); a ten-page description of *The Courier's Tragedy*, a mock-Jacobean revenge tragedy (pp. 44-53); Oedipa's visit to the grandson of a Wells Fargo guard (pp. 65-68); Oedipa's

session with John Nefastis and his machine derived from Clerk Maxwell's famous Demon (pp. 76-80); and finally, Oedipa's night-long journey through the streets of San Francisco in search of her own worst dreams (pp. 80-97)? By the time we reach San Francisco, Oedipa's relationships with Mucho and Metzger are far behind us. Nor are we much concerned with Pierce Inverarity's estate, except insofar as it is connected to the mysterious Tristero. All of the episodes mentioned above bear upon Oedipa's increasingly serious investigation into a private mail service employed by the numerous "undergrounds" of California. Bizarre as it all seems, both to Oedipa and to the reader, a kind of fearful logic begins to emerge as her inquiry proceeds. This "logic" is Pynchon's real subject.

Oedipa's quest begins innocently enough, for Mike Fallopian and the Peter Pinguid Society seem the essence of harmless eccentricity. Fallopian's attempt "to link the Civil War to the postal reform movement that had begun around 1845" (p. 35) seems just the sort of cheerful nonsense we tend to associate with Southern California. The odd parallel between Di Presso's anecdote and the bones referred to in a Jacobean play seems a little less cheery, though perhaps no more than curious. But as Oedipa continues to find the WASTE symbol wherever she goes, the novel's tone shifts noticeably. Something occurs rather like the change of mood in *The Courier's Tragedy* once the Tristero-figures appear. At this point in the play "a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words" (pp. 49-50). So it is with Oedipa's quest, which begins as a lark but climaxes (temporarily) in the almost desperate search through San Francisco. Here the ominous implications of Oedipa's experience become unmistakable.

As much as anything in the novel, the San Francisco episode reveals how very different *The Crying of Lot 49* is from a "realistic" novel. As Oedipa encounters the WASTE symbol again and again, this sequence takes on the surrealist quality of a dream — or a nightmare. The



whole episode is cast in a hyperbolic mode, as Pynchon presents what he will later refer to as "a hundred alienations" (p. 135): WASTE-users who range from little children playing a game to the Alameda County Death Cult. Indeed, Pynchon makes little pretense that such an episode is conceived realistically. Early in the scene we are told that Oedipa "entered the city again, the infected city" (p. 86). *The infected city* is an extraordinary phrase, one charged with such meaning we must almost imagine Dante amongst the damned. This apocalyptic note is sounded again on the next page, as Oedipa meditates on the many clues which point to the almost universal use of an underground mail service: "But then she wondered if the gem-like '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" (p. 87). Imagine such language in a novel by Jane Austen! For that matter, imagine such language in a novel by John Updike. It is the *mode* which is different, not just the mood.

Pynchon invokes here the true metaphysical context of his fable, for it is the Word which Oedipa has lost, not a husband or a lover or the comforts of suburbia.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the latter are but transparent attempts to conceal the loss. Once upon a time the Word was real, for belief was possible. In such a time the night was abolished, chaos was ordered. Today, psychoanalysis has replaced the Word, but as we are to see in the case of Oedipa's own analyst, Dr. Hilarius, the Freudian hypothesis abolishes nothing so fearful as the night. That Pynchon conceived his tale in such apocalyptic terms has been hinted much earlier, in the novel's first chapter. There Oedipa recalls standing before a painting by Remedios Varo:

. . . 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: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests

of the earth were contained in the tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. (p. 10)

Oedipa cries because she identifies with the frail girls in the tower. But their efforts are the efforts of us all, for the tapestry they make is the world itself. And this tapestry spills out into a void, "seeking hopelessly to fill the void." The tapestry of our lives seeks hopelessly to fill the void, to abolish the night. Once we become aware of this, as Oedipa does, must we not cry too?

At the least, we must begin to communicate — to resurrect the Word in some human fashion. This is what California's undergrounds have tried to do via the WASTE system, but such communications can be as empty as the letter Fallopian receives from a kindred spirit: "*Dear Mike, it said, how are you? Just thought I'd drop you a note. How's your book coming? Guess that's all for now. See you at The Scope*" (p. 35). The communication we truly need is love, as Oedipa discovers at the end of her sojourn in San Francisco. The last post horn she spots is tattooed on the hand of a drunken old sailor, whom she leads to his dirty mattress in a decayed rooming house. As she stares into his hopeless eyes,

She was overcome all at once by a need to touch him, as if she could not believe in him, or would not remember him, without it. Exhausted, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held him, gazing out of her smudged eyes down the stairs, back into the morning. She felt wetness against her breasts and saw that he was crying again. He hardly breathed but tears came as if being pumped. "I can't help," she whispered, rocking him. "I can't help." (p. 93)

Oedipa has felt the same frustrated desire to help and be helped in the episode involving Nefastis' machine. At first her attempt to "communicate" with Maxwell's Demon seems a ludicrous joke, but then we find Oedipa talking to the machine in a voice we must respect: ". . . if you are there, whatever you are, show yourself to me, I need you, show yourself" (p. 79). Likewise, she needs the old sailor;

she needs the communication of love which might abolish the night. At this point Oedipa is very close to a radical vision in which she might identify with all the old sailors, the disaffected who have gone underground.

It is not quite this simple, however. Pynchon would not have us believe that we can transcend our suburban landscapes simply by embracing the downtrodden as so many spiritual brothers. Certainly it is not so easy for Oedipa, who would reject such a vision: "With her own eyes she had verified a WASTE system . . . Yet she wanted it all to be fantasy — some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles. She wanted Hilarius to tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest, and that there was no Trystero" (p. 98). Accordingly, the next section of the novel describes Oedipa's retreat to Kinneret-Among-the-Pines, her suburban starting-point. But there is to be no turning back, for the representatives of middle-class security are as naked as the King: Hilarius, her psychoanalyst, topples into a paranoia more crippling than her own (p. 100-102); Mucho, her husband, drifts into an LSD-fog in which the individual self is lost forever (pp. 103-108); Metzger, her "knight of deliverance," runs off to Las Vegas to marry a fifteen-year-old (p. 110). As Oedipa must finally reflect, "they are stripping away, one by one, my men" (p. 114). And as "they" do so, Oedipa is forced to acknowledge that only *she* can abolish her night — if indeed the night can be abolished. Unlike Hilarius, who has embraced Freudianism in the hope that "the unconscious would be like any other room, once the light was let in" (p. 100), Oedipa must confront the true nature of her discoveries.

There should be no question that she does exactly that. From this point in the novel Oedipa returns to her quest, searching out further allusions to *The Trystero* in scholarly editions and finally Inverarity's stamp collection. More importantly, she comes to face the different interpretations suggested by her experience. Here, as we near the end of

the novel, our own interpretive problems are perhaps most obvious. The novel's ending has bothered Pynchon's readers more than any section of the book. For one thing, it is now clear that Pynchon doesn't intend to "develop" the many characters he has introduced earlier. Many of these figures — Oedipa's "men" — are sent off to their gloomy fates as by executive decree; others (Fallopian, Di Presso, Thoth, Koteks, Nefastis) are passed over without further comment. This treatment of character has led even so intelligent a critic as Roger Henkle to argue that Pynchon's affirmations lack "compelling power . . . due to weakness in realizing character."<sup>14</sup> But as I have already argued, Pynchon is about his business by *not* developing these characters further. Like any apologist, Pynchon individualizes his figures only to a point consistent with their appointed roles. Even to have brought them on-stage at the end would have diverted attention from Pynchon's true center of interest: the *meaning* of Oedipa's dizzying adventures.

Similarly, many readers have found the novel's resolution intolerably ambiguous. We leave Oedipa in what seems a critical position, seated alone and awaiting the crying of lot 49 (that is, the auctioning of Inverarity's stamps). She is surrounded by men who "wore black mohair and had pale, cruel faces" (p. 137) — perhaps agents of The Tristero? Will they so reveal themselves once the auction begins? We will never know, for the novel ends as "Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49" (p. 138). The cry of many readers is "anticlimax."

Again, if *The Crying of Lot 49* were a novel "about" Oedipa Maas in a traditional sense, such complaints would be wholly justified. But in the last pages of this book it is Pynchon's fable which must be resolved, not the future course of Oedipa's life. I have argued that this resolution involves certain basic questions about America — the America Oedipa has come to know during the book. To-

ward the end she realizes that her adventures might be interpreted in radically different ways:

Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth. In the songs Miles, Dean, Serge and Leonard sang was either some fraction of the truth's luminous beauty . . . or only a power spectrum . . . the bones of the GI's at the bottom of Lake Inverarity were there either for a reason that mattered to the world, or for skin divers and cigarette smokers. Ones and zeroes. So did the couples arrange themselves. . . . Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. 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. (pp. 136-37)

I quote at such length because I believe this is the most important passage in the novel. Here, as never before, Oedipa poses the alternative interpretations of her experience. Yet to pose alternatives is not to resolve questions, as more than one skeptical reader has reminded us. In fact, most critics seem to assume that the alternatives are not resolvable — that Pynchon has presented a mystery, not a solution. “Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero.” How can we say which is the case? And if we cannot say, how can we argue that the novel's thematic burden is finally resolved?

I would first point to the leap into abstraction which occurs in this passage: “For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America . . .” The novel's characters and events are finally exempla. It is not just the hieroglyphic streets Pynchon is talking about, nor the songs of a rock group, nor the bones of GI's; no, it is *America*. The various phenomena of the book are grouped here as the nation itself, our legacy. Notice also the syntax of this crucial sentence: “For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America *and if there was just America . . .*” (my emphasis). This con-

struction doesn't "prove" that there is only America, but it does emphasize the possibility. And this is truly disturbing, for the more awful alternative is not that a conspiratorial "they" controls the American landscape. The more awful alternative is that no such agency exists — for then there is only the landscape itself. The point is that Oedipa's America *appears* to have been shaped by some malignant force. We have witnessed this legacy over Oedipa's shoulder, so to speak, and what we have seen is sufficient cause for concern. As early as the first chapter we have seen more than Kinneret-Among-the-Pines (though we have seen that, too); we have also been introduced to the used cars Mucho Maas once sold:

. . . and when the cars were swept out you had to look at the actual residue of these lives (the lives of their owners), and there was no way of telling what things had been truly refused . . . and what had simply (perhaps tragically) been lost: clipped coupons promising savings of 5 or 10c, trading stamps, pink flyers advertising specials at the markets, butts, tooth-shy combs, help-wanted ads, Yellow Pages torn from the phone book, rags of old underwear or dresses that already were period costumes . . . (pp. 4-5)

And in the second chapter, as Oedipa approaches San Narciso, she may imagine that the houses offer a meaningful pattern, "some promise of hierophany," but once she gets into the suburb itself she finds only "auto lots, escrow services, drive-ins, small office buildings and factories whose address numbers were in the 70 and then 80,000's . . ., more beige, prefab cinderblock office machine distributors, sealant makers, bottled gas works, fastener factories, warehouses, and whatever" (p. 14). Like the young couple in Paul Simon's song, she finds America. And she will go on finding it as she moves from the suburbs of Southern California to San Francisco and back again. If I understand him, Pynchon means to say that we don't have to conjure up hidden conspirators in order to feel something like *angst*; what we have created ourselves is fearful enough.<sup>15</sup>

Nor can we take comfort by writing off such horrors as the vagaries of Southern California. To do so would be to repeat the error of that "optimistic baby" (p. 91), Oedipa Maas. Before she begins her quest, Oedipa is a kind of cosmic optimist:

Oedipa had believed, long before leaving Kinneret, in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California (not, of course, for her own section of the state, which seemed to need none), some unvoiced idea that no matter what you did to its edges the true Pacific stayed inviolate and unintegrated or assumed the ugliness at any edge into some more general truth. Perhaps it was only that notion, its arid hope, she sensed as this forenoon they made their seaward thrust, which would stop short of any sea. (p. 37)

There is something almost touching about this mystical faith in the power of the sea — that same sea Randolph Driblette walks into one fine night (pp. 110, 114). The parochialism of the passage is something else again. After all, it is "her own section of the state," San Francisco, which provides the most dispiriting episode in the entire novel. And beyond San Francisco there is that vast body Pynchon refers to as "the legacy America."

There is yet another way in which the novel's conclusion can be read as more or less optimistic, one which emphasizes its political implications. For Annette Kolodny and Daniel James Peters, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a kind of New Left manifesto. In their reading, the novel's central irony is that The Tristero first seems a malignant, forbidding possibility, yet is finally revealed as "another dimension of consciousness and a truer means of communication."<sup>16</sup> They would emphasize — rightly, I think — the change in Oedipa's understanding of this conspiracy. By the end of the book, Oedipa is willing to believe that The Tristero is "maybe even . . . a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know" (p. 128). Kolodny and Peters would go much further, however. They would identify all the various undergrounds of the novel

with *The Tristero*; and they would see Pynchon's view of these undergrounds as one of endorsement: "Secretly they thrive, and secretly they communicate — an underground of the alienated and withdrawn, who have kicked down the mythical props supporting America's glittering comfortable skin and returned to their instincts, their dreams of self, grotesque though they may be."<sup>17</sup> It is true that Oedipa comes to sympathize with "an underground of the alienated." This is clear enough in her experience with the old sailor, and it is implicit in her recognition that she may have to become an alien herself, "unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia." But when Kolodny and Peters speak of the novel's undergrounds in such exalted terms ("Secretly they thrive") and suggest that these groups have "kicked down the mythical props supporting America's glittering comfortable skin and returned to their instincts, their dreams of self," one must wonder if they are referring to such organizations as the Alameda County Death Cult, which once a month chooses "some victim from among the innocent, the virtuous, the socially integrated and well-adjusted, using him sexually, then sacrificing him" (p. 90)? Could they be referring to IA (Inamorati Anonymous), a group dedicated to the notion that above all else its members must be protected against falling in love (pp. 83-85)? I don't mean to suggest that we are likely to discover Pynchon at a Young Republicans Convention, but I do think his political position is rather less optimistic than these critics would have us believe. If we turn to *V.*, we find the following political reflections:

"If there is any political moral to be found in this world," Stencil once wrote in his journal, "it is that we carry on the business of this century with an intolerable double vision. Right and Left; the hothouse and the street. The Right can only live and work hermetically, in the hothouse of the past, while outside the Left prosecute their efforts in the streets by manipulating mob violence. And cannot live but in the dreamscape of the future. . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Sidney Stencil is a character in *V.*, not its author. And *The Crying of Lot 49* was written after *V.*, so that Pyn-



chon's opinions may have altered on this subject. But the treatment of political movements in *V.* seems to me to corroborate Stencil's views; and Pynchon's regard for the various undergrounds of *The Crying of Lot 49* does not seem significantly different. We are asked to sympathize with the *impulse* which leads people to radical disaffection, which is rather different from embracing their revolutionary activities (activities which come from the Right as often as the Left).

The vision Pynchon embodies in this book is darker than we have yet acknowledged. In a very real sense it doesn't matter which of Oedipa's "alternatives" is true. Either Tristero or the legacy America — in either case we have the contemporary landscape Pynchon reveals both to Oedipa and to the reader. This is why Pynchon can end his book as he does, for Oedipa has already discovered everything she needs to know about the nature of her world. She has decided to face that world, whether it is controlled by alien forces or simply *is*. Presumably we must do the same. If there is a moral imperative in this modern fable, I take it to be some such notion. But before we can confront the enemy, we must first know that we are at war. The burden of Pynchon's short novel is thus the devastated landscape introduced from beginning to end. The moral imperative is that we must begin to acknowledge it for what it is.

If this, or something like this, is the "formulable statement" Pynchon meant to embody in *The Crying of Lot 49*, then I would argue that almost every episode and character is relevant to its total design. "Episodic looseness" is a most unfair verdict on Pynchon's method. Indeed, the very opposite is the case, I am aware that ingenuity can rationalize away the most confusing elements in any literary work, but I believe it is more than ingenuity which allows us to see Pynchon's book as a realized whole. Rather, it is our willingness to read the novel in its own terms. To

do so is to arrive at something like a just appreciation of Pynchon's achievement.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962), p. 86.
- <sup>2</sup>Don Hausdorff, "Thomas Pynchon's Multiple Absurdities," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 7 (Autumn, 1966), 268.
- <sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 258.
- <sup>4</sup>Roger B. Henkle, "Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 17 (Summer, 1971), 207.
- <sup>5</sup>Robert Sklar, "The New Novel, USA: Thomas Pynchon," *The Nation*, September 25, 1967, p. 278.
- <sup>6</sup>Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 130.
- <sup>7</sup>Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 14. Page references in the next two paragraphs will be to this edition.
- <sup>8</sup>Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," *Lolita* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1955), p. 314.
- <sup>9</sup>Sheldon Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), p. 238. Page references in the next two paragraphs will be to this edition.
- <sup>10</sup>I emphasize *feel* in this sentence because an apologue is supposed to move us just as a traditional novel does. The difference is that in reading an apologue we are made to feel the validity of an idea or concept, whereas in reading a traditional novel we are moved by the represented fates of the characters. I might also explain here my continued use of the term "novel" throughout this paper. For the sake of convenience, I think it best to consider the apologue one form of the genre we know as the novel. In his published work, Professor Sacks seems to consider the apologue a distinct genre, but I know from talking with him that he is amenable to the idea that it be considered a distinct version of the novel form. The crucial point, of course, is that we distinguish among novels structured by different principles.
- <sup>11</sup>See Sheldon Sacks, "Golden Birds and Dying Generations," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 6 (September, 1969), 291.
- <sup>12</sup>Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 2. All subsequent page references will be to this, the most available edition.
- <sup>13</sup>Edward Mendelson places great emphasis on this point in his lengthy essay, "The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*," in *Individual and Community: Variations on a Theme in American Fiction*, eds. Kenneth H. Baldwin and David K. Kirby (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1975), pp. 182-219. Mendelson goes on to argue that Oedipa recovers a

sense of the "sacred" by the end of the novel. In effect, he argues that Pynchon is a religious novelist whose use of the term *revelation* is anything but metaphoric. His argument strikes me as ingenious and somewhat strained.

<sup>14</sup>Henkle, p. 214.

<sup>15</sup>Raymond M. Olderman has made a similar case against the literal existence of conspiratorial agencies in *V*. See *Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 123-44. Olderman seems to believe that the conspiracies in *The Crying of Lot 49* are "real," however (see p. 144).

<sup>18</sup>Annette Kolodny and Daniel James Peters, "Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*: The Novel as Subversive Experience," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19 (Spring, 1973), 86.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Pynchon, *V*. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1963), p. 468.

## The Penguins

the penguins  
 loiter about their pool  
 like vagrant nuns  
 killing time between prayers  
 but with an air of confidence  
 the other cloister lacks  
 taking miracles for granted  
 in a world  
 where fish fall from the sky  
 everyday at 2 p.m.

Greg Simison