

The Absurdist Heroine: A Wildean Critique of Pynchon's Uncertain Aesthetic

By James R. Wallen

Oscar Wilde, a man ahead of his time in many ways, was never more so than when he rebelliously declared that “in art there is no such things as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.” Since Wilde believed a great life to be a work of art, he urged all those who would lead such a life to likewise free themselves from the seduction of absolute truths that constricted one’s ability to express oneself and thus beautify the world. In the postmodern age, we are faced with a world that much more blatantly rejects the *possibility* of absolute truth, and the task of the artist in representing this world has necessarily assumed the task of expressing uncertainty. The works of Thomas Pynchon offer several examples of uncertain worlds, but although many scholars have *critically* analyzed Pynchon’s creation of these worlds, few have attempted an *aesthetic* analysis of them. I propose that Pynchon’s ultimate goal is not the mere portrayal but rather the *beautification of uncertainty*: a beautification I believe he accomplishes partly through the use of humor to create aesthetic impressions of absurdity, and partly through the utilization of a new breed of chaos-embracing protagonists. I will be presenting (or attempting to present) my aesthetic case in the style with which Oscar Wilde charged his future aesthetic critic.

I. The Wildean Critic

Oscar Wilde’s views on the importance of art could hardly have been less compromising. In the Wildean universe “it is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through art, and through art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence.” To Wilde life is not capable of beauty in and of itself, but must be made beautiful through the cultivation of our own aesthetic instincts and artistic exposure. Since Wilde believes that “to discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive,” it is not surprising that he regards art as the noblest

calling of man, for it is only through art that a beautiful (and therefore bearable) world is possible.

To understand this philosophy, we must also understand Wilde's conception of the relationship between art and life. Wilde believed that art changes both the way we lead our lives and the way we see the world. This is partly based on the notion that "the basis of life... is simply the desire for expression, and art is always presenting various forms through which that expression can be attained." By this Wilde means that people need to feel that their lives express something meaningful (that they have a soul, that they are 'sacrificing themselves for a greater good,' that God is watching and/or judging them, etc.), and that art is the best place to find examples of such a life. {1} Stripped of its hyperbole, there is also some truth in Wilde's statement that "people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects." We must realize here that Wilde does not mean "see" in its common sense, but rather in the sense that "one does not *see* anything until one sees its beauty." Wilde also believes that the history of art has a separate existence from the history of life, and that life is constantly struggling to catch up to it. This is because natural life is based upon a series of indifferent external phenomena, while "Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place." Thus, art represents what we as humans *bring* to the world, and the evolution of art is therefore the evolution of our ability to assign meaning to life.

In his *Intentions* (1891), {2} perhaps the greatest critical work of the nineteenth century, Wilde observed the artistic challenges of his world and anticipated the aesthetic and modernist movements as responses to these challenges. Wilde's world was one increasingly deprived of spiritual meaning by an influx of scientific breakthroughs, Darwin's theory of evolution chief amongst them. This scientific skepticism was accompanied by a philosophical kind, a skepticism that increasingly called into question the value of traditional morality. Men like Nietzsche and Wilde were just beginning to question whether "the mere existence of conscience... is [not] a sign of our imperfect development"? In a world in which everything could seemingly be traced to a scientific *prima causa*, and God no longer sat in judgement, Wilde questioned whether it was still possible to find nobility in *action*, since "each little thing that we do passes into the great

machine of life which may grind our virtues to powder... or transform our sins into elements of a new civilization.” Since he viewed the moral and physical consequences of our actions as insurmountably beyond our control, Wilde preached instead the virtues of the contemplative and artistic life, claiming that “when man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet.”

Yet while the purpose of this contemplative life was to allow the fullest development of each individual, Wilde feared that the freedom of the thinker and artist (i.e. the individual) was increasingly being sacrificed to the rise of democracy and the demands of the mob. Wilde felt that the continual trend towards realism (by which he meant art that attempted merely to *reproduce* the world) was a symptom of the public’s growing influence on art—an influence he detested. Wilde believed that the proper response of the artist was firstly to realize that “art never expresses anything but itself.” Wilde believed that art needed to free itself from the shackles of morality and from the obligation of expressing a specific and/or popular idea—this was a rallying concept for ‘l’art pour l’art’ and the aesthetic movement. Wilde also believed that realism should be rejected in favor of an art that “through its very incompleteness... becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself, not to the faculty of recognition or the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone, which... uses [art’s] very complexity as a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression.” Wilde believed that Art and Life achieved one of their profoundest mergers in the act of interpretation performed by the reader, and that complex art allowed for a more individualized relationship between reader and work. This view seems to herald not only the complex and *form-devoted* works of modernists like Joyce and Eliot, but also the more philosophically open-ended works of postmodernists like Borges and Pynchon.

Although Wilde could not have known the specific circumstances of the postmodern world, he recognized that all artistic forms will eventually grow stale and that there will always come a time when “the old roads and dusty highways have been traversed too often.” To this Wilde responds by placing the salvation of art in the hands of the critic. Wilde’s *Intentions* anticipate not only approaching advances of art, but also what would later be groundbreaking theories in postmodern literary criticism. Over half a century before Barthes’ “Death of the Author,” Wilde’s “The Critic As Artist” heralded a

new form of criticism that would “not confine itself... to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final” but “[treat] the work of art simply as the starting-point for a new creation.” Wilde viewed great art criticism as being an artistic sphere all its own, “occupying the same relation to creative work that creative work does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and thought.”

What, then, is the artistic role of the Wildean critic as distinct from, say, the writer? It is precisely this: whereas the writer takes thoughts and images from life and fashions a beautiful imaginary world *that allows us to see our own world in a new way*, the critic takes thoughts and images from one or more of these imaginary worlds and fashions a new and more beautiful *method of looking at these imaginary worlds*—a method Wilde thought could subsequently be applied to the more banal realm of actual life. This is the task to which this paper is set: a proposed reading of Pynchon that allows us to appreciate an aesthetic impression of beauty that I believe his work provides, and that I believe has been largely overlooked by critics too concerned with assigning a specific meaning to his works.

II. Pynchon in Context

Before I expound on my particular task, I believe it is important to examine the specific challenges faced by Pynchon as a postmodern author. In terms of what I am examining in this paper, I believe we can divide these challenges into two distinct (though connected) ideas: the first being our postmodern inability to view the world as *tragic in a noble or redeeming sense*, and the second being that the postmodern world is essentially one of *uncertainty*, in which we are bombarded by information while realizing the impossibility of a final holistic answer.

Ihab Hassan addresses this first idea directly, noting that “the contemporary world does not offer occasions for authentic tragedy.”^{3} The classic idea of a tragic world arises from the idea of man set in opposition to the cosmos. In this world, the life of man gains nobility from the idea that we continue to act with humanity and carry on even in the face of an uncaring universe (“As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods”). Wilde’s theory of the diminishing dignity of action represents one of the first chinks in this nobility. The increasing ease of contemporary life, however, has rendered that nobility almost entirely untenable. Recent ‘tragedies’ of the American stage center not around an

Othello but rather a Willy Loman- a hero Hassan describes as “a sad and broken man, probably more pathetic than tragic.” While Oscar Wilde justifiably looked forward to a day when “the security of society will not depend, as it does now, on the state of the weather”, the contemporary realization of that day no longer acknowledges an essential fragility of life. In today’s America, where the average life expectancy is in the mid-seventies and the infant mortality rate has ceased to be a pressing concern, we no longer have the sense that each individual is constantly threatened with death at the callous whims of Nature. In the postmodern firmament, the role once played by nature has been taken over by “the State” (which has grown somewhat synonymous with “the People”), and the struggle of Man vs. Nature has given way to that of the Individual vs. Society. In this struggle, the factors that threaten us are the very factors designed to ensure our safety and comfort. We have electricity and are kept warm in the winter, but we also have nuclear power plants that could render a small state uninhabitable in the blink of an eye. A hostile cosmos was a worthy enemy—in condescending to kill us it lent us some degree of importance—yet in postmodern society death is merely the final mortgage payment on a prefabricated existence. A man who dies on the freeway becomes a statistic for the insurance company, an inevitable and calculated consequence of efficiency: bodies may litter the wake of Industry’s progress, but it is all for the greater good. When death is reduced to a bell curve, it ceases to be the property of the individual who dies, and that individual is stripped of all nobility.

Another novel aspect of the individual’s struggle against society is that the forces of ‘goodness and justice’ are generally arrayed *against* it. A medieval despot may kill his subjects, but the feeling remains that he is ‘in the wrong’ and that his people have gained glory (if only in the eyes of God) by being the victims of his oppression. In a democratic society, however, the morals of the majority are passed into legislation and a government condemnation carries the weight of the people behind it. In raging against democracy, therefore, one is raging against the commonly accepted morality and a self-satisfied status quo. {4}

Thus, whereas the idea of man ‘raging against the storm’ leaves us with catharsis, the idea of an individual being consumed by a soulless and mechanized bureaucracy does not. Wilde foresaw this, and recognized in the contented complacency of democracy a

people that “are less conscious of the horrible pressure that is being put on them, and so go through their lives in a sort of coarse comfort, like petted animals, without ever realizing that they are probably thinking other people’s thoughts, living by other people’s standards... and never being themselves for a single moment.” Wilde believed that the new art would be synonymous with what he hoped would be the new individualism, which would “[seek to disturb] monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine.”

Pynchon’s work is certainly preoccupied with creating such a disturbance, but is at the same time limited by the degradation of tragedy discussed above. Pynchon is faced with the task not only of *portraying* this disturbance (as most of his critics have recognized), but of portraying it in such a way as to render his protagonist’s struggle beautiful and redeeming. Since there is no longer an inherent dignity in being destroyed by the forces opposed to the individual, Pynchon must (and, I will argue, *does*) create a new type of protagonist who opposes the world in an altogether different fashion from the traditional tragic hero, and who reacts in a new *but life-affirming* way to the forces conspiring against her.

This brings us back to the second idea, which can be partly expressed by the question: who or what are these conspiring forces? The answer is: we don’t know! This is because the postmodern world is essentially one of uncertainty. Much as in a Pynchon novel, the progress of human knowledge has served only to open a much larger set of questions, a set of questions whose answers are also questions. This can be well demonstrated by the advance of scientific knowledge. In Wilde’s day, the theory of evolution seemed to present a holistic *solution* to the age old-problem of human origin. Moreover, it reinforced the notion that all answers were within reach, and that it would take only a series of similar scientific breakthroughs to solve all the other puzzles that bound human ignorance. In Pynchon’s world, however, the tone has been set not by Darwin but by Einstein and Heisenberg, men who have actually pressed into formula the impossibility of human omniscience. In contemporary science, the rules are about what *we cannot* know for certain (the Uncertainty Principle) and the limitations of a single point of view (Relativity).

These rules are certainly in keeping with the artistic approach of Thomas Pynchon, who in *The Crying of Lot 49* and elsewhere creates worlds that refuse to yield concrete or final answers. In *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World*, Peter Cooper places Pynchon in the literary context of a group of “counterrealists [who] recognize that there is no Reality- only subjective realities, or mental constructions of the world made from unique and imperfect vantage points.”{5} Pynchon understands that there is no God’s-eye-view of the world, and satirizes all of those who claim to have found ‘The Answer.’ At the same time, however, Pynchon glorifies our *search* for meaning in a meaningless world, and our ability to draw tenuous connections amongst the variorum. A persistent tension in the work of Pynchon, and one especially prevalent in *The Crying of Lot 49*, is the tension between the necessity of searching for answers and the impossibility of finding them. On the one hand, Pynchon “inveighs against either/or thinking, analysis, and classification, and he suspects that organized plots threaten the free, spontaneous workings of life and the imagination.” On the other hand we have the Pynchon who “speaks of ‘assertion through structure,’ which he [also] practices. [Pynchon] makes the reader seek meaningful patterns and thus imitate his characters.” Thus, Pynchon recognizes both the dangers and possibilities inherent in Oedipa’s pregnant question: “*Shall I project a world?*”

Many critics, like Edward Mendelson, have taken Pynchon’s ambiguity to represent a “choice between the *zero* of secular triviality and chaos, and the *one* which is the *granz andere* of the sacred.”{6} I believe, however, that such a view entirely misses the point of Pynchon’s writing, which is to present a world in which ‘ones and zeroes,’ under the closest scrutiny, are discovered not to be opposites at all. Whereas Mendelson believes that “everything in *Lot 49* participates either in the sacred or the profane”, I would claim that *Lot 49* portrays a world in which the sacred and the profane *are ultimately revealed to be inseparable from one another*. An example of this springs easily to mind: Driblette’s inserted “*tryst with Trystero*”, the line which first gives name to the mystery which Mendelson claims represents ‘the sacred,’ is later shown to have been lifted from “a pornographic *Courier’s Tragedy*” in the Vatican. If the lines that launch *Lot 49*’s sacred mystery are themselves the product of an “obscene parody”, then how

could they be said to “[exist] on a plane of meaning different from the profane and secular”?

The question then, it would seem, is what are the possibilities of Pynchon’s world? Or, more specifically, is it possible to present a beautiful and life-affirming vision through work that expresses “a general uncertainty about the reality and hospitableness of the world, a fascination (sometimes horrified) with epistemological dilemmas, a recognition of the need for fictional versions of reality, and a simultaneous apprehension of their dangers and insufficiencies that leads to narrative disruptions and to self-parody.” This question lies at the heart of the challenges facing not only Pynchon but his fellow counterrealists as well. The answer, I believe, lies in the creation of a new aesthetic, an aesthetic of uncertainty and absurdity that simultaneously glorifies and satirizes the meanings we create for ourselves. I believe that such an aesthetic already exists, and that Thomas Pynchon is its leading spirit.

III. Towards an Aesthetics of Uncertainty

The difference between certain and uncertain aesthetics is the difference between the aesthetics of answers and questions. In examining this let us take the classic childhood question “Daddy, why is the sky blue?” This question demonstrates an aesthetically pleasing image—the rosy-cheeked and curious child sharing a special moment with its happy parent. Notice here that it is the demonstration of *curiosity* that arouses our feelings. In the past, such a question yielded a series of aesthetically pleasing answers, ranging from the reflections of Apollo’s chariot to the benevolence of God. Today, we know that the color is caused by photons from a particular spectrum that pass through the atmosphere and reflect off our eyes. It would seem that this would be an example of a question being more aesthetically pleasing than its answer.

Left here, this analogy would not bode well for postmodern literature. Are we simply to settle for an inferior brand of aesthetics? Or, I would ask, is it possible to improve this tragically undeveloped field? Has such an improvement already occurred? In a postmodern novel, one might come upon a child asking her father “Daddy, why does the sun project photons at the lower end of the light spectrum?” Here, we have the impression of the child’s curiosity, the humor of the child’s unexpected knowledge, and also an impression of our overall inability to explain our knowledge (for who really

knows *why* the speed of light is what it is?). This question, together with more somber examples like Vladimir's haunting "Well? Shall we go?" from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, demonstrates the movement towards uncertainty that aesthetics are taking. {7} I would now like to sketch some tentative guidelines for this new aesthetics.

Firstly, as demonstrated above, the beauty of this aesthetics lies in the question rather than the answer. It would seem to follow then that the most beautiful answers in this aesthetic *would be* questions. Secondly, a question is made *more* beautiful if it conveys a multiplicity of answers, allows us to *create* several answers, or dangles between two seemingly irreconcilable alternatives. This is the beauty that Wilde urged his aesthetic critics to preach, a beauty that can only be approached through arts which "[seek] for such modes as suggest reverie and mood, and by their imaginative beauty make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final." This is an aesthetic that meets the reader halfway: he is presented with a beautiful impression that in turn requires a beautiful interpretation. The reader's ability to make this interpretation is the measurement of his own aesthetic and critical faculties. The more these faculties are developed, the more the reader will crave uncertainty in his art. Measured against this aesthetic scale, I think that the world in which we await the crying of Lot 49 would place very high indeed.

One of the keys to this new aesthetic is humor. This is partly because of what Ihab Hassan calls "the birth of a new sense of reality, a new knowledge of error and incongruity, an affirmation of life under the aspect of comedy. For comedy, broadly conceived, may be understood as *a way of making life possible in this world, despite evil or death*. Comedy recognizes human limitations, neither in broken pride nor yet in saintly humility but in the spirit of ironic acceptance." In a universe that yields no certain answers, is it possible that our profoundest impressions could be of cosmic absurdity? Comedy, unlike tragedy, embraces our animal ignorance with a sheepish pride, and has increasingly become a necessary means of expression for authors (like Pynchon) whose "sense of order admits of potential disorder. In short, [who] have acquired a tolerance for the mixed, causeless quality of experience: its loose ends, its broken links, its surprises and reversals. [Who] knowing how dangerous facts can be... do not pretend to subdue them with a flourish and a symbol." All this is not to say that tragedy is unreachable in

the contemporary world (see section IV below), but rather that the cathartic effects formerly achieved by tragedy alone must now frequently be reached *through comedy*.

This last statement seems to beg some explanation. Let us examine the example of the anonymous inamorato who Oedipa meets in a bar. He tells us the story of a 39 year-old executive who has lost his job: “Having been since age 7 rigidly instructed to an eschatology that pointed nowhere but to a presidency and death, trained to do absolutely nothing but sign his name to specialized memoranda he could not begin to understand and to take blame for the running-amok of specialized programs that failed for specialized reasons he had to have explained to him, the executive’s first thoughts were naturally of suicide.” This is Loman-brand tragedy, presenting us with a pathetic avatar of postmodern dehumanization. Yet Pynchon describes him not in a tragic but rather a flippant comic style, appealing to the absurdity of man being reduced to such a level and thus overcoming the sense of nausea that should accompany such a portrait. Through humor, Pynchon alludes to a universal absurdity that evokes an aesthetic impression. As Hassan states it: “like the tragedy of yore the new comedy also purges and cleanses. Its purgation is achieved through a comic recognition of the absurd.” If the universe proves to be ultimately absurd, then Wilde’s “creator of beautiful things” {8} must henceforth make that absurdity beautiful.

This brings us back to the question from section two: what kind of protagonist is capable of functioning in such a world? Who can set a life-affirming example in a world that “is typically fantastic, grotesque, absurd, mysteriously threatening, filled with unforeseen events or shocking juxtapositions- a labyrinth, oddly animated by plots that seem deliberately and malevolently opposed to human priorities. [Because] when preexisting forces shape reality, the individual is shrunk to insignificance.” Obviously the tragic hero is no longer viable, for an insignificant Achilles is no Achilles at all. The answer, I believe, lies in an increasingly popular type of character that I will here coin as the Absurdist Hero. {9}

IV. The Absurdist Hero

By Absurdist Hero, I refer to the type of protagonist who responds to the lurking terrors and reifying tendencies of the postmodern world with irrational outbursts of humanity and humor. Whereas the Tragic Hero shakes his fist at the uncaring and hostile

cosmos, the Absurdist Hero raises his middle finger to the barely invisible conspiracy that may or may not be about to crush him. Classic examples of such heroes would include Yossarian from Heller's *Catch-22*, Benny Profane from *V.*, Tyrone Slothrop and Roger Mexico from *Gravity's Rainbow*, McMurphy from Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the eponymous protagonist of Hasek's *The Good Soldier Svejk*, and of course *The Crying of Lot 49*'s Mrs. Oedipa Maas.

The divergence between the Absurdist and Tragic Hero may perhaps best be observed by contrasting their reactions to fear. The Tragic Hero responds to fear with courage, negating his terror and bravely submitting to having his innards ripped out by vultures or to facing Achilles outside the city wall. The Absurdist Hero responds to fear with laughter, derision, paranoia, and (oftentimes) flight: {10} for the terror that haunts him has ceased to be a tangible threat but is now a lurking, amorphous conspiracy: a surrealistic warning light that occasionally penetrates the insulating white noise. The modern myth of Don Quixote (the proto-Absurdist Hero) as a noble dreamer who creates a world of good intentions is representative of our postmodern shift in perspective and is reminiscent of the Romantic reinterpretation of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Few contemporary readers would have recognized a 'hero' in the novel-addled protagonist of *Don Quixote*, but in our time he has come to symbolize the vanishing distinction between what is sane and insane, and the heroic possibilities inherent in 'tilting at windmills.' The Absurdist Hero is the product of a time that has lost its faith in opposites: 'good and evil,' 'fear and bravery,' 'sane and insane,' 'truth and lies' can no longer be made to stand for inseparable entities. Laughing in the face of illusion and disillusionment has become the truest way of preserving what is human in us. {11}

This is the highest task of the Absurdist Hero, just as it was with the Tragic Hero: to preserve his humanity (and thereby celebrate ours) in the face of overwhelming opposition. In the days of the tragic hero, it was the world that provided this opposition, and through his very rage Lear was able to pit humanity against the storm. Today this opposition is provided by the government, the people, and the reifying and mechanizing social factors that seek to turn us all into automatons, or, worse, advertising executives. Today's individual is *always* the victim of a conspiracy, because society conspires against the individual. Thus, the Absurdist Hero may recognize, as Yossarian does, that

everyone is trying to kill him, but must also like Oedipa be “endowed with a lightness of touch, a humorous self-critical disposition, a joie de vivre, which saves her almost to the last from the insanity she comes desperately to hope explains the connections she sees.”{12} We have already discussed the decay of nobility in action, and it would seem that to make such an individualist disturbance as Wilde hoped for we now are in desperate need of “characters [who] on the last page of their story, awaiting final judgement, [can] whisper to their possible Enemy, ‘Your fly is open!’”

Wilde’s own life, in fact, might be seen as a nexus between the Tragic and Absurdist hero, and is an excellent example of how the Absurdist Hero is able to make tragedy possible in our increasingly desensitized world. During his trials, Wilde used the courts of a society he opposed as a platform from which to satirize and deflate the high moral tones of his accusers (both libelous and legal) through flippancy, irreverence, and outright disdain. His absurdist crime was to obey a human impulse opposed to the laws and morality of his society, and he deliberately chose to martyr himself rather than flee. His triumph lay not in his martyrdom, however, but rather in his preservation of the comic disposition that allowed him, while dying in a cheap hotel room, to quip of his hideous wallpaper that “one or the other of us would have to go.”{13} Because Wilde was unapologetic, and because he jeered to the end at the suffocating morality that consumed him, his immolation took on tragic proportions-- but these proportions were only possible because of the years he had spent in defiance of the system that destroyed him (McMurphy would represent an excellent postmodern example of this type of tragedy). Wilde showed that, whatever catchphrases it may disguise itself in, society is ultimately opposed to a true individual, and that the more such an individual asserts himself the more terrible and certain will become his censure. Thus, the first task of the Absurdist Hero is to *become an individual*, and it is only after this individualism is accomplished and maintained that his life may be set in opposition to society and (possibly) take on tragic proportions.

How, then, does the Absurdist Hero achieve this individuality? The most basic obligations of the Absurdist Hero are as follows: to eschew insulation; to search for meaning (yet not to take it *too* seriously); to impose humanity upon the lifeless; to embrace uncertainty; to belch at fate; and finally to incriminate through his irrational

humanity the lifeless lives of those around him. The ‘how’ of each of these must necessarily be different for each Hero, and it is with his own individual ‘hows’ that the Absurdist Hero presents a life-affirming defiance of the world and gives us catharsis. The Absurdist Hero must have his own set of values, for values are in-themselves a middle finger to meaninglessness. The Absurdist Hero must project a world, but must not believe his world to be the only viable one—it is merely a version of absurdity that recognizes itself whereas the world is an absurdity that claims to be sane. The projected world must be conscious of a ‘They’ system (against which they Hero reacts), but must also project a ‘We’ system that remains the private property of its owner. {14} In projecting his world the Hero must neither become trapped in his own delusions and isolated from the ‘real’ world, nor a slave to the torrents of data he absorbs who is unable to keep his facts from consuming his fantasy. It is these last two tensions that dominate the Absurdist Quest of Mrs. Oedipa Maas, and I would now like to offer an allegorical reading of *The Crying of Lot 49* that proceeds along these lines, and documents Oedipa’s quest and her ability to navigate past the entropic dangers that claim the book’s other characters.

V. Oedipa’s Absurdist Quest

In the context of this paper, the most important thing to note about *The Crying of Lot 49* is that it is not for the most part a story of Oedipa *being* an Absurdist Heroine but rather of her *becoming* one. Her Quest is not ultimately to make a discovery or find faith, but rather to become a person who can walk the tightrope between binary decisions without stumbling over either side. In the reading I propose, each chapter constitutes a specific stage in her development towards her title. I will deal with each chapter individually, focusing on the changes Oedipa undergoes and on her encounters with characters representing the snares and pitfalls of her quest.

Chapter One—The Tower. In chapter one we are given a portrait of Oedipa as a housewife, the quintessential insulate, “shuffling... through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn’t she be the first to admit it?) more or less identical.” Oedipa is married to Mucho Maas, a disk jockey trying desperately to believe in something. Both live sheltered lives in “Kinneret-Among-The-Pines,” where Mucho awakens screaming in the

night from dreams about used cars and nothingness while Oedipa faithfully continues to visit her sinister shrink because “it [is] easier to stay”.

Other than Oedipa (and the shadow of Pierce), the two important characters introduced in the first chapter are Mucho and Dr. Hilarius. Mucho is representative of the sensitive middle class, a likable man with a good heart who goes to work on time everyday and “suffer[s] regular crises of conscience about his profession”. He is living an unremarkable American Dream, with a steady job and a beautiful wife, and is surprised to find himself unsatisfied. Mucho wants to believe in his life, and tries to, but is desperate for some higher meaning and remains too sensitive to the unfortunate patrons of used car lots to find dignity in peddling “the fraudulent dream of teenage appetites”. To Oedipa, Mucho represents the ease and promised comforts of her prefabricated existence, together with a hyper-awareness of what it lacks.

Dr. Hilarius represents the promised sensibility of this existence. Later in the book, when Oedipa comes to hope that the Trystero is “a little something for her shrink to fix”, she gives us the best insight into her initial relationship with him. Hilarius is meant to explain away the claustrophobia that Oedipa’s tower inspires; to convince her that the world is sane and that she is sane only if she agrees with it. He offers LSD as “the bridge inward”, and the drug is highly symbolic of all pre-packaged meaning, a promise of understanding that comes in pill form and is the same for everybody. Yet Oedipa does not want a bridge inward but a bridge outward—one capable of taking her outside of her tower.

The tower is Oedipa’s personal prison. From the inside, it is only noticeable to her as “the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix”. The lack of focus she perceives is really her own inability to see the world as it is, as opposed to how she has been told it is. She embroiders a world, like the girls in the Remedios Varo painting, but that world is the same peaceful picture for which instructions have been laid down in every tower of Kinneret-Among-The-Pines. It does not as yet bear her individual stamp. Her past relationship with Pierce represents both an attempt and a desire to break free of this insulating tower, but also her realization “that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all.”

The magic is the lurking social and power structures that have secretly dominated her life, and without insight into these structures the only Heroic {15} possibilities open to Oedipa have been to “fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey”.

Chapter Two—Escaping the Tower. Chapter two begins with Oedipa leaving the “illusion of speed, freedom, [and] wind in your hair” and checking into the Echo Courts Motel of San Narcisco. She is joined there by Metzger (the German word for butcher), who is everything Mucho is not: whereas Mucho tries to believe in something and fails, Metzger tries to believe in nothing and succeeds. This will later reflect one of the binary tightropes that Oedipa must walk, but in Chapter 2 what is most important is that Oedipa is *exposed* to the other side of this binary, that she is given information of world outside the Tower, and that *she impregnates herself* with the knowledge of a ‘They’ that must be acquired before she can react Heroically.

Metzger is a definite of tool of Pynchon’s ‘They.’ Indeed his entrance coincides with Pynchon’s (and Oedipa’s) first use of the word, when “he turned out to be so good-looking that Oedipa thought at first They, somebody up there, were putting her on”. Metzger, however, is a sympathetic tool: he represents a freedom from social constraints and mechanization that he has achieved partly through a Heroically good-humored skepticism, but equally through apathy and pragmatism. Metzger also represents intimations of a profounder knowledge, for he is someone who has seen the other side of the magic and has been able to “measure its field strength [and] count its lines of force”. Metzger is not insulated because he is ‘in the know’: as he rattles out lists of Pierce’s stockholdings during commercial breaks he also hints of a world outside the Tower, {16} a world that he can open to Oedipa as soon as she lets him in.

This brings us to the matter of Oedipa’s “peculiar seduction”, of which I consider peculiar the operative word. Much has been made of *Lot 49*’s resemblance to a detective story, and I would contend that Oedipa is seduced not in the classical sense but rather in the sense in which Humphrey Bogart or Paul Newman might be seduced—say by a mysterious Hollywood knockout who is obviously lying, possibly dangerous, and potentially useful. Oedipa’s seduction is even Heroic in some senses: after first repulsing Metzger through hours of calculated suavity and Heroically arraying herself as “a beach

ball with feet”, Oedipa finally ‘succumbs’ when she sees “Metzger wearing only a pair of boxer shorts and fast asleep with a hardon and his head under the couch”. Oedipa does not ‘yield’ to Metzger, but rather jumps him on an impulse. It is this impulse that first takes Oedipa out of her Tower, impregnated with the knowledge of a They and a hope of straightening out her once formless magic. {17}

Chapter Three—The Quest. After introducing Oedipa to the idea of a ‘They’ in chapter two, Pynchon introduces her to the idea of an ‘Us’ in chapter three. The idea of Us is first introduced to Oedipa by Mike Fallopian during a barroom conversation:

“Fallopian twinkled. “They accuse *us* of being paranoids.”

“They?” inquired Metzger, twinkling also.

“Us?” asked Oedipa.”

Given the importance of these two words throughout the works of Thomas Pynchon, it is hard to believe that the arrangement of this passage could be coincidental.

The idea of an ‘Us’ or ‘We-system’ is introduced to Oedipa in a binary fashion through the characters of Fallopian and Driblette. In becoming an Absurdist Heroine Oedipa must become capable of the *creative* paranoia described in footnote ten, and if Fallopian represents the paranoia part to its extreme then equally does Driblette represent the creative part. Fallopian is a paranoid (one who is hyper-aware of the influences of a They), but his formation of a ‘We’ system exhausts itself in the seemingly arbitrary canonization of Peter Pinquid and in his membership of a right-wing extremist group. Thus, his We system is essentially no better than his They system, especially as he still allows others to do the thinking for him. Still, Fallopian’s entrance marks Oedipa’s first consideration of an ‘Us,’ and leads to her discovery of the muted post-horn on a bathroom wall.

The muted-post horn is Oedipa’s first sign; the first indication of her Quest. The terms of this Quest are solidified during her attendance of *The Courier’s Tragedy* and her subsequent interview with Driblette. Driblette in not much of a paranoid—he projects a world with the insistence that it is *his* world, and thus represents more of an ‘I’ than an ‘Us.’ He is too aloof from the world to dwell heavily on a They, and has no concern with facts since “the reality is in *this* head. Mine. I’m the projector of the planetarium”. Yet it is Driblette who charges and inspires Oedipa with the idea of projecting her own

world—the Absurdist Quest of *The Crying of Lot 49*. This is evidenced not only by the line quoted above, but also by Driblette’s being the first to utter the name of Oedipa’s approaching We-system: Trystero.

Chapter Four—Projecting a World. The difference between Driblette’s projected world and Oedipa’s is largely a difference of texts. Whereas Driblette began with “Wharfinger supp[lying] words and a yarn. I gave them life. That’s it”, Oedipa takes her cues from the much more daunting testament of Pierce Inverarity. Pierce’s will symbolizes a nearly infinite mass of information, tied heavily into the notion of a They, and Oedipa takes it as her Heroic task to “bestow life on what had persisted, to try to be what Driblette was, the dark machine in the center of the planetarium, to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning, all in a soaring dome around her”.

Oedipa’s world is representative of a We-system because, unlike Driblette’s, it is constructed from phenomena and information from the external world, rather than merely taken from a literary text. In Oedipa’s projection “the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Trystero”. Oedipa concerns herself with the outside world, and later adopts ‘the disinherited’ into her system, but nonetheless (unlike with Fallopian) the system remains her own *individual* We-system, through which she is able to “[bring] something of herself” . . . to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity. She would give them order, she would create constellations”. In forming her own We-system Oedipa becomes an ‘I’ (i.e. an individual) who is necessarily opposed to a They, and who is therefore also a part of the Royal We comprised of all They-conscious individuals. It is in thus ‘bringing something of herself’ to the world that Oedipa first dons the mantle of Absurdist Heroine—she has individuated herself.

Initially, reliance on fact plays a vital role in the creation of Oedipa’s We-system. In chapter four Oedipa (primarily through Ghengis Cohen) is able to find a wealth of facts that support her projection of a world. Even as she begins to be inundated with clues, however, Oedipa realizes that “at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might . . . be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold”. Accepting this possibility, while at the same time clinging to a personal

search for “the central truth” (which may *become* an individual truth), is the feat upon which Oedipa’s Heroism hinges. At this point, however, Oedipa is far from being able to affirm this admission: she still yearns for the either/or safety of truth and fiction. More importantly, she still wishes to either be shown something greater than her life, or retire in good conscience to Kinneret-Among-The-Pines (a triumphant Nancy Drew).

Chapter Five—The World Strikes Back. In chapter five Oedipa’s Heroism is tested in several ways. The chapter begins with Oedipa still a detective, piecing together clues in hopes of reaching some enlightening resolution. She wants to believe that her search will be rewarded with some great epiphanal clarity, as is evidenced by her visit to Nefastis. The task of Nefastis’s sensitive is metaphorically similar to Oedipa’s own task of projecting a world: “The sensitive must receive that staggering set of energies, and feed back something like the same quantity of information”. As a mixture of the binaries represented by Fallopian and Driblette, Oedipa must take in the forces revealed by her paranoia and transform them into the projection of a constellation. Nefastis represents the belief that it is possible to make “the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true”, which also represents the belief in a single holistic objective truth. Oedipa too wants to believe in this possibility, and wonders “how wonderful [Nefastis’s delusions] might be to share”. Ultimately, however, Oedipa’s skepticism forces her to realize that “the Demon exists only *because*... of the metaphor”, and when the inventor’s cultish perversions manifest themselves she Heroically “[flings] a babushka over her license plate and [screeches] away down Telegraph”.

Nefastis is the first in a series of tests Oedipa must face before affirming her Heroic status at the end of the chapter. Oedipa still knows that, like Nefastis, her mission is to “make [her] coincidence respectable,” yet at the same time she has been disillusioned in her hopes for a literal truth and is understandably daunted that “with coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together”. At this point Oedipa, tormented by the either/or binary of the Trystero’s existence, is ready to give up on the whole thing, and tells herself that “she ha[s] only to drift tonight, at random, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix”.

The Absurdist mantle once donned, however, is not so easy to discard. Oedipa has already projected a world, and by remaining passive she merely allows that world to expand itself unchecked. Furthermore, Oedipa's alleged 'wandering' occurs under the rather Heroic name of "Arnold Snarb," beneath which she is shuffled (an individual amongst the crowd) into a gay bar where she introduces herself as "an agent of Thurn and Taxis" to a perfect stranger, to whom she then proceeds to detail the entirety of her conspiracy. After hearing the man's story, Oedipa proceeds to wander a dreamlike San Francisco suffused with muted post-horns. Oedipa is now torn between the hope that she is "meant to remember. [That] each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence," and the lurking suspicion that "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". It is at this point, encumbered by doubt, that Oedipa has an important encounter that is followed by a vital projection.

The encounter is with Jesus Arrabal, an anarchist Oedipa met with Pierce in Mexico. Jesus represents the subtlest and most seductive of the dangers threatening Oedipa's Quest: like Oedipa, Jesus projects a We-system against a They-system. Jesus, however, sustains his We-system through a belief in miracles that keeps him "a footsoldier" who still believes "the higher levels have their reasons". Talking with him, Oedipa wonders whether Jesus's unwavering faith in "an anarchist miracle" would still exist "without the miracle of Pierce to reassure him". Oedipa knew Pierce (at least partly) to be simply "play[ing] the rich, obnoxious gringo," but to Jesus the manifestation of this "oligarchist, the miracle" represented an absolute confirmation of his beliefs (much like meeting Satan would confirm a person's belief in God). To preserve the resiliency that allows her to bounce unharmed between binaries, Oedipa will later have to reject such a revelatory miracle that would have tied her irreversibly to "ones and zeroes."

The vital projection that Oedipa makes is of a champion-worthy We. Up to this point, The Trystero has merely represented homicidal postmen, Yoyodyne employees, mad scientists, and failed suicides. In wandering the city, however, Oedipa comes to associate The Trystero with "God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing... a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes,

simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private”. These citizens are the patrons of Mucho’s used car lot, along with all the others They have trodden on, and together they represent a justification of The Trystero. In projecting her We-system, Oedipa is now offering an alternative to the mechanization of American life and is lending some measure of dignity to the lives of all those disinherited from the American Dream.

Thus it is through her deep compassion for her We-system that Oedipa is able to withstand the “night’s profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication [that] was their way of beating [her] up”. This replication is her own world converging on her, and the dangers it represents later find expression in the fates of Hilarius and Driblette. Oedipa’s salvation through compassion is represented by her kindness to the old sailor: as Oedipa “[takes] the man in her arms, actually [holds] him”, and later when she delivers his mail (the first time she actually uses The Trystero), she begins to realize in herself a Heroic championship of the disinherited, a championship she is too sensitive to completely reject.

This fledgling affirmation is followed by an equally important rejection. On returning to her hotel, Oedipa is actually made witness to what “Jesus Arrabal would have called... an anarchist miracle”. Having already weathered the storm of her creative paranoia without allowing it to consume her, Oedipa is now faced with a palpable miracle in the dance of the deaf-mutes. Both situations represent the dangers of projection: the “night’s profusion of post horns” represents the isolation of pure paranoia that will consume Hilarius, and also the loneliness of unchecked projection that will engulf Driblette. The ‘miracle’ represents the maniacal faith of Nefastis and the footsoldier-resignation of Arrabal. Although she has yearned throughout the chapter for a blinding miracle of this type, it is to the credit of her Heroic resiliency and skepticism that Oedipa, face to face with such a miracle, is able to “[curtsy] and [flee]”.

Having bounced Heroically away from the manifestation of a pure binary, Oedipa now hurtles toward the other side. At this point, Oedipa is tested by an overpowering desire to return to the safety of her insulated life where “Hilarius [would] tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed rest”. This proves impossible, however, as her visit home reveals nothing but how far she has individuated herself from her old life. Oedipa now

begins to witness the disintegration of a series of characters, all falling victim to dangers she has so far avoided. {18} Hilarius's insanity, aside from representing the extremes of individual paranoia, also represents the breakdown of the implied sanity of insulation: Hilarius has "tried to cultivate a faith in the literal truth of everything [Freud] wrote, even the idiocies and contradictions", but his haunting knowledge of a Buchenwald has eventually made a rational universe impossible for him to accept. Mucho, on the other hand, has submitted to the pre-packaged meaning promised by LSD. In doing so, he has become exponentially "less himself and more generic" and has forfeited his individuality. Observing the fates she has avoided by projecting her *own* meaning, and isolated from her former insulation, Oedipa realizes that the only path left to her is the one leading back to San Narcisco and her Quest.

Chapter Six—The Crying of Lot 49. Immediately on returning to San Narcisco, Oedipa finds that Metzger too is gone. Whereas Mucho has sacrificed his individuality to a promise of meaning, Metzger has sacrificed all notion of meaning to the preservation of his individuality. Metzger's spiritual bankruptcy is represented by his "[elopement] with a depraved 15-year-old". Continuing her Quest, Oedipa befriends Prof. Emory Bortz and is exposed to a vast wealth of new information concerning the Tystero, including a factual basis for its championship of "The Disinherited". Oedipa also learns of the suicide of Driblette, which leaves her greatly depressed. Driblette's death, however, represents Oedipa's independence from her initial inspiration: she has successfully projected a world that is now a living, breathing entity. The individuality Oedipa has achieved also estranges her from Fallopian, who, belonging to a *literal* We-system, can stomach a true individual little better than They can.

Two dangers still remain to Oedipa. The first danger is her world's increasing subservience to fact. Although The Tystero is a We-system, all of the facts about it can eventually be traced to a They-system that may include Bortz and Cohen. While Pynchon certainly reveres history as a treasure-trove of information, it is the *use* and not merely the *acquisition* of this information that displays our individual character. Since there truly exists no We-system that is inseparable from a They (unless it be the Royal We), it is only by projecting a We-system that remains *her own* that Oedipa can herself remain separate from a They. Oedipa saves herself from consumption by facts through an

“anxious[ness] that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point. Lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself”. Oedipa realizes that the amount of information which They can put out will eventually consume her attempt at ‘bringing something of herself,’ and she soon develops a Heroic “reluctan[ce] about following up anything”.

Oedipa’s final challenge is a rejection of binaries and symmetries. Having developed “a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know”, Oedipa is now tormented by a seeming inescapability from four alternatives: that the Trystero is real; that she is hallucinating; that there is a conspiracy against her; or that she is imagining a conspiracy. Unable to escape the shadow of these possibilities, Oedipa raises a Heroic middle finger by “drink[ing] bourbon until the sun went down and it was as dark as it was going to get. Then... [driving] on the freeway for a while with her lights out, to see what would happen”. In desperation, Oedipa phones the anonymous inamorato from the gay bar, who then becomes the last of her acquaintances to desert her. It is at this point of supreme despair that Oedipa finally triumphs, a triumph signaled in the text as “San Narcisco at that moment lost..., gave up its residue of uniqueness for her”. Thus far, Oedipa’s notion of a They has been mainly confined to San Narcisco, a city recognizably ‘owned’ by Pierce. Now, however, Oedipa realizes that “San Narcisco had no boundaries... She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America”. Oedipa realizes, finally, that one of the horrors of Their America is that it *is* “like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless”.

Oedipa’s final triumph, her rejection of an either/or existence, converges with her We-system in a willingness to join the Tristero in its “waiting above all; if not for another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land to accept any San Narcisco among its very tender flesh without a reflex or a cry, then at least, at the very least, *waiting for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew*”. Oedipa’s affirmation of this Heroically irrational desire (the desire for an alternative to binaries and symmetry) is symbolized by her presence at the final auction. Much has been written on *Lot 49*’s

religious symbolism, and of the significance of “49” being one day short of the Pentecost. To me, ‘lot 49’ represents an asymptote of revelation: a trail of clues that can be followed forever, that creeps closer and closer to a final holistic meaning, and that will travel to infinity without ever actually reaching its destination. This asymptote, then, is the path of the Absurdist Hero, a path on which the journey itself is more important than the destination. Moreover, it is also the path for any reader who wishes to cultivate the uncertain aesthetic discussed in this paper. Just as for Wilde’s aesthetic critic, the affirmation of uncertainty is merely a prelude to the joys of creative interaction. To fully appreciate the works of Thomas Pynchon, the questions they raise, and the answers they withhold, we, as readers, must like Oedipa be able to “[settle] back” and await with eager irony “the crying of lot 49”.

{1} Since Wilde believed that any great life was itself a work of art, he therefore believed that the imitation of men like Christ and Caesar also fell under the category of life imitating art.

{2} Wilde’s *Intentions* include “The Decay of Lying” (1889), “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” (1889), “The Critic as Artist” (1890), and “The Truth of Masks” (1891). He later included “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1890) in the volume as well. These works are the culmination of Wilde’s pre-incarceration aesthetic philosophy, and immediately proceed some of Wilde’s great artistic works like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Lady Windemere’s Fan*.

{3} Hassan, Ihab. “Laughter in the Dark: The New Voice in American Fiction” (1964). This work predates *Lot 49*, but specifically includes Pynchon (who had already written *V.*) as one of the new comic voices referred to.

{4} While many postmodern writers (as well as myself) would claim that ‘the People’ are not in fact the ones pulling the strings, and that in practice American ‘Democracy’ is more of a propagandized oligarchy, it is nonetheless the case that most Americans *believe* the government speaks for them. Thus, correctly or not, the law is popularly perceived to represent the ‘will of the people.’

{5} Cooper, Peter. *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World* (1983). In this essay I am quoting only from Cooper’s first chapter, “The

Counterrealists”, which is devoted to placing Pynchon in context among his contemporaries. Most of the issues dealt with in Cooper’s book are peripheral to my own, though I am certainly indebted to his comprehensive analysis of Pynchon’s place amongst the counterrealists.

{6} Mendelson, Edward. “The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*”

{7} This movement towards uncertainty can also be observed in *statements* that betray an essential uncertainty, like this one from Heller: “There is record that Shakespeare lived but insufficient proof he could have written his plays. We have the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but no proof that the composer of these epics was real. On this point scholars agree: It is out of the question that both works could have been written entirely by one person, unless, of course, it was a person with the genius of Homer.”—Heller, Joseph. *Picture This* (1988).

{8} Wilde’s definition of an artist in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

{9} In *The Contemporary American Comic Epic* (1988), Elaine Safer discusses “Benny Profane and Stencil as Heroes of the Absurd”. Her term and the ideas expressed by it are similar to mine in several ways, for example when she describes how “Stencil’s exaggerated reaction to detail burlesques the experience of a religious hero. His devotion to an ‘ultimate Plot Which Has No Name’ parodies the traditional quest. His search is a ‘travesty’ of the quest of the traditional Christian hero ‘for some ultimate truth or goal—or grail’”. Yet whereas Safer’s “Heroes of the Absurd” are described merely as *parodies* of a traditional religious hero, my Absurdist Hero is intended as an *alternative* to the traditional tragic hero. I would not, for instance, place Stencil as an Absurdist Hero (though, as shown above, he has many of the qualities) because he is not a “frolicking character such as Benny... [who] has a certain loose, resilient vitality that one may yearn for”. Stencil is too self-serious to defiantly declare, as Benny does at the book’s end, “I’d say I haven’t learned a goddamn thing.” Being able to find pride, joy, and individuality in such a declaration (true or not) is exemplary of my Absurdist Hero.

{10} Laughter and derision here are self-explanatory, but perhaps the other two require some explanation. Firstly, by paranoia I mean the creative kind described by Pirate Prentice in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (and practiced by Oedipa in *Lot 49*): “For every They there ought to be a We. In our case there is. Creative paranoia means developing at least

as thorough a We-system as a They-system”. Secondly, although running away may be out of keeping with the popular conception of a hero, it is for just that reason that it is a powerful weapon to the Absurdist Hero who recognizes no preconceived guidelines for his behavior. Since, as has already been discussed, postmodern death is no longer essentially noble, escaping death is no longer ignoble. In letting himself be consumed as a Tragic Hero would, and Absurdist Hero would often be playing by ‘Their’ rules, while in escaping he defies Their notions of heroism and lives to laugh another day. Heller’s Yossarian is perhaps the best example here, declaring shortly before he escapes to Sweden “I’m not running *away* from my responsibilities. I’m running *to* them. There’s nothing negative about running away to save my life. You know who the escapists are, don’t you Danby? Not me”—*Catch-22*.

{11} This is because laughter is something distinctly humanizing—it is a property unique to humans among the animals, and is in direct contrast and opposition to the self-serious bureaucratic power-structure that opposes the individual. Laughter in the face of terror, and what Hassan describes as “the deflection of laughter towards anguish”, is an irrational response to the logical power structure of Pynchon’s lurking ‘They’, and is essential to the notion of a Counterforce that he develops in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This is perhaps best exemplified near the end of that book, when Pig Bodine and Roger Mexico sabotage a stately and formal banquet by shouting gross-out dishes until the powers that be lose their appetite. For members of Pynchon’s Counterforce, hope is possible so long as “there are nosepick noodles to be served up buttery and steaming, grime gruel and pustule porridge to be ladled into the bowls of a sniveling generation of future executives, public popovers to be wheeled out onto the terraces stained by holocaust sky or growing rigid with autumn” (*GR*).

{12} Hunt, John. “Comic Escape and the Anti-Vision: *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*” (1981). Hunt discusses how Pynchon uses humor to deflate the depressing themes of his books, but does not consider that a comic “anti-vision” can in itself be a life-affirming way of viewing the world.

{13} from Julia Brown’s *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Art* (1997). An excellent book!

{14} Some of the terms I am using here (We and They especially), which will be heavily included in my discussion of *Lot 49*, are somewhat specific to the works of Pynchon. While the other Absurdist Heroes of whom I gave example might not deal specifically with these *terms*, I think that each of their worlds has its own equivalent for a ‘They’ (i.e. for Yossarian the War, for McMurphy the hospital, etc.), and perhaps for a ‘We’ as well. The importance of a They to the Absurdist Hero cannot be overemphasized, because whereas the Tragic Hero found his glory in action the Absurdist Hero finds his in *reaction* (think of Tyrone Slothrop hurling pies from a hot air balloon at the impending aircraft). As for a We, the projection of a We-system is more a specific means of Pynchonesque Heroism than a qualification for all Heroism. Obviously, using Pynchon’s own nomenclature is essential in an interpretation of his work. Although *Lot 49* does not specifically develop the notion of a “Counterforce” that Pynchon espouses in depth during *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the ‘Us’ or ‘We-system’ discussed in this paper and in *Lot 49* would represent a way of joining that Counterforce. To clarify once more what may be a rather obscure argument: the Absurdist Hero must first recognize a They-system against which to react and from which to individuate himself. *As a way of individuating himself* the Hero may project a We-system that is *his individual* We-system (and as such my contain non-individuals), but that places him in complicit alliance with the Royal We that is composed of all Heroic individuals opposed to a They (this Royal We would represent Pynchon’s Counterforce.)

{15} Henceforth I will use the capitalized adjective Heroic (with Heroism, Heroically, etc.) to designate actions of the Absurdly Heroic type described in Section IV.

{16} This is because of the intimate relation between ‘know’ and ‘own.’ They, as much as anything, refers to the secret owners who know what is really going on because They get the balance sheets. The closeness of the two words can be seen throughout *Lot 49* in lines like “Inverarity knew. He owned 51% of the filter process.”

{17} An argument might be made that Oedipa is also freeing herself from social constraints by having an affair, but I don’t think that the infidelity-in-itself poses a huge problem to Oedipa (although it is her first) as we learn in the third chapter of Mucho’s penchant for Nymphets. Certainly, promiscuity plays an unabashed role in the lives of Slothrop and Profane, Pynchon’s other Heroes.

{18} The disintegrations are also representative of binaries that Oedipa no longer needs to cling to—her ability to search for an individual meaning invalidates the either/or represented by Mucho and Metzger, her projection of an individual We-system elevates her above the more subtle binary of Fallopian and Driblette. Driblette in this sense gives Oedipa the most trouble, as we can see when she wonders “if they got rid of you [Driblette] for the reason they got rid of Hilarius and Mucho and Metzger—maybe because they thought I no longer needed you. They were wrong.” This passage comes at a time when Oedipa’s individuality is threatened by an avalanche of information about The Trystero, a tide that threatens to consume her projection beneath the facts that spawned it. Driblette here becomes representative of the preservation of Oedipa’s individuality, and as such it is necessarily impossible (whatever Oedipa thinks) for him to help her any longer, since any input from him would merely be a projection of *his* individuality.