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Research Essay – *The Crying of Lot 49*



“communication is key” – John Nefastus

Scribbled on a bathroom stall wall...

“we use art to diminish consciousness and profit by delusion” – Hakim Bey

Scribbled on a bathroom stall wall...

“if you know what this means, you know where to find out more” - Thomas Pynchon

Scribbled on a bathroom stall wall...

The city gates are guarded by the Sphinx, a creature of malign design sent by angry gods.

Oedipus confronts the Sphinx, solves the riddle, and is made King of Thebes.

Oedipa confronts the riddle of Tristero, she is riddled with clues but cannot locate any permutation of the Sphinx to solve the riddle, “we have found the right clues [...] the overall sense of correlation seems right” (Moddlemog 302).

We are faced with an “adventure [which] comes from [Oedipa’s] overworked imagination and is therefore neither verified nor verifiable” (Moddlegmog 302). Faced with the ambiguous and oscillating sense of purpose, and an elusive ‘grand order’, the ‘Quest’ to find the truth.

The ‘Quest’ of our hero and heroine involves semiotics, “the association with both semiology and the great ‘Other’” (Addison 33). Faced with choices that have been elevated by the authors (Pynchon & Sophocles) to become mythical in nature, the characters are then “condemned by a corrupting influence [...] tainted by its collusion with modernist meta-narrative and imperial in its ambitions” (Addison 33). The journey of Oedipa in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (hereafter simply *Lot 49*) is synchronous/ analogous with the journey of Oedipus the King, (the 3rd place award winning drama of Greek playwright Sophocles circa 411 BCE).

I would argue that there is a similarity in the vision behind the respective ‘Quests’, for the outcome of both stories is this: both antagonists/protagonists are in pursuit of themselves. The mysteries in which they are embroiled are such the truth being sought is held by themselves. Simply put, they are their own persuirers, for each hold the ‘truth’, and each hold a ‘destiny’, are part of the ‘grand design’, whether they like it or not.

The mythos in both stories is held in semiotic binaries, hierarchal distinctions; “fine/applied, genius/artisan, primitive/decadent, [...] not remained inert or such in a rigid structuralist paradigm, for poststructuralist semiotics admits of no closure” (Addison 33).

These binaries must be considered and most importantly; the mysteries carry no closure (literally or psychologically). As readers in the stories of Oedipus and Oedipa, we become an active element of the narrative. The reader oscillates with the protagonists/antagonists (note the constant binary element) and becomes instrumental to the ‘grand order’ of the story. The ‘Other’ is the witness, the reader. Becoming complicit with awareness and cursed with the vision of knowledge. Driblette, director of *Lot 49*’s ‘The Courier’s Tragedy’ warns Oedipa against trying too hard to find meaning in the signs, appropriating what she thinks she knows, “you could waste your whole life that way and never touch the truth” (Serpell 236, Pynchon).

Oedipa’s Sphinx lies within the syntax of the Tristero mystery.

The use of syntax solves the riddle with the Sphinx by Oedipus, “a visual literacy, the semiotic reading of signs and symbols [...] that narrow visual meaning” (Addison 32) into a mythical victory. “Oedipus answered the Sphinx’s riddle and thereby saved Thebes from destruction” (Moddlemog 302). The victory only serves to compel the hero towards his own truth, moving him through the binary pathways of his destruction. Hero/villain, knowledge/destruction, gain/loss, control/madness, Oracle/Prophecy. Each element serves its opposite. This is the burden of seeking the ‘truth’, in whatever form it so reveals.

Oedipa discover in her ‘Quest’ through San Narciso (an Echo, mythical reference to Narcissus) the “prevailing winds of affluence” which generate “storm systems of groups suffering and need” (Pynchon 153). Now, an echo of the myth, “she advised her reflection that you have stumbled [...] onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routines and betrayals of spiritual poverty [...] onto the real alternative of exitlessness” (Pynchon 141). There is no way out, once you find your way in. This is the dilemma, the source of the

binary coupling. The oscillations of reader/writer. Creation/destruction, in/out, before/after, yes/no, alive/dead, father/son, truth/lies. The “recently discovered and decrypted journals” serve to keep Pynchon’s American underworld invisible and alive.

Hecate the three faced goddess answers “at the crossroads of my life” when Oedipus asks “where am I?”, his father lay slain by his sword (Rohe/ Francisco/ Maria 28), his indecision pushing him closer to his self-fulfilling prophecy. This victory for Oedipus only serves him more uncertainty, one step nearer fulfilling his ‘Quest’ wherein he is the one he seeks. Whereas for Oedipa “there is no proof that Oedipa solves the mystery of the Tristero, ever understands Pierce’s will, or solves anything (except perhaps herself from the sterility of an insulated life)” (Moddlemog 303). Thus, she finds herself at the crossroads of her life doubting everything, even her sanity. Perhaps she has discovered a truth that America is plagued with mediocrity, driven by undercurrents of WASTE and DEATH, elusive. The truth is within reach, but she is out of touch.

Upon her discovery of ‘exitlessness’, she is burdened now by “the closed-system nature of our culture doubled with the ‘absence of surprise’” (Grant 154). At further jeopardy to her sanity, she tries reading into the semiotics presented by Tristero, “how can she [be able] to understand objects that have signifying systems which are obscure and unknown? After all, these objects, familiarized through reproductions, are often known in appropriated, decontextualized and recontextualized forms” (Addison 35). Here the semiotics of Pynchon and Sophocles unite, the mythical appropriatio, the arbitrary use of an oscillating idea of the truth. “Like Oedipus, she is certain that she will find an Answer. Also, like him, she never imagines that it is her worldview that is actually under investigation” (Moddlemog 305).

In *Lot 49*, a shadow world is revealed. An underground network travelling through WASTE, (courtier DEATH). The nature of her psychosis, “like Oedipus she takes the perilous

plunge and surfaces with terrifying knowledge. Isolated, alienated and scared to death, Oedipa discovers that her only conclusion must be a pluralistic one that does not solve the mystery but simply reaffirms it” (Moddlemog 305).

What Pynchon explores and complicates is the idea of ‘the seeker’ in the mystery by naming the antagonist/protagonist ‘Oedipa’. “At the risk of finding too much in a name the relevance of Oedipus to both texts is undeniable, he is both the decipherer of the Sphinx’s riddle and the (self) blinded seeker of (self) knowledge” (Serpell 239). While Oedipa drives on the highway (self) blinded, her sightless “transference from life to art would suggest [in] the vehicle of representation its material base and style is neutral, independent of meaning, the old form/content dichotomy” (Addison 35). Is the art of deception and illusion of self, “some lucid instruction? There was no true continuity” (Pynchon 146). With no continuity, all becomes arbitrary. The ‘Quest’, the mystery, the illusion and the allusion. “In virtue of its relation to and difference from other signs within a system, [...] the relationships between the elements of a sign, between the a signifier and a signified is not natural and motivated, but arbitrary and conventional” (Marriner 57). Pynchon is manipulating the reader, very carefully.

If then, “communication is key” according to Nefastus, and language is made arbitrary by Pynchon “with [or without] definitive meaning of works, relations always change, both across time and different audiences” (Marriner 57). Therefore “reason demands that one cannot struggle for what one does not know, and the heart revolts at a universe so cruel as to visit such injustices on humanity” (Bey 99). Like Oedipa, who “comes to understand that her former life, representative of the lives of most Americans, was a sick life” (Moddlemog 305). While investigating yourself, for Oedipa and Oedipus, “which contexts are significant? Who produces the meaning? How are intentions and interpretations negotiated? Where is the meaning

situated?” (Addison 36). To answer these riddles, “the search for meaning is as much about the seeker as it is about the mystery” (Serpell 259).

For Oedipa, “because of other revelations, because it seemed a pattern was beginning to emerge” (Pynchon 71). Owing to this, a growing obsession with “bringing something of herself, even it that something was just her presence” (Pynchon 72). Leading to “all these fatigued brain cells between herself and the truth” (Pynchon 74), her ‘Quest’ leads her inward, “Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it was supposed to end) she too might be left only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself [...] she, [...] for the very first time saw it might be possible to be lost in this” (Pynchon 76).

Compare now the psychic oscillation of Oedipa to that of Oedipus, “he explores a struggle between what he wants and what he needs. Oedipus is presented as a character whose wishes to avoid the patricidal/ incestuous prophecy actually reveals a concealed compulsion that leads him to display symptoms of inhibition [which] further explores how Oedipus’ fate is related to an obsessive compulsion to overcome destiny and how his pathology leads to suffering” (Rohe/ Francisco/ Maria 27).

Ultimately, while Pynchon demonstrates an American [un]ideal, the reader becomes complicit in the narrative, “teach[ing] us that knowledge is elusive and interpretation is an ongoing process, not a finished product” (Moddlemog 310). For Nefastus, ‘communication is key’ which leads to Inverarity and ‘the commodification of desire’. We are then both witness and instrument of the Spectacle (Pynchon’s *American Life*, Sophocles, and the *Coronation at Thebes* et al.). Operative binaries and a celebration of ironies (Hitler Hilarius, Ghengis Cohen, the *Paranoids*, Hecate, Narcissus, Echo, the *Demon*, Mucho’s *Oed*, (Oxford English Dictionary) *Maas*, crying Lot 49 (49 days to ascend according to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*). Myths and

semiotics, intertextuality and disorder all serving ‘the grand design’, the unavoidable destiny (Serpell 259). Like Oedipus we have all chosen to blind ourselves for the curse of knowledge (stuffing screens into our eyes), consulting virtual oracles on ecstasy. Choosing blindness because, “chaos and its morphological variants are often related to the necessity and the thing that must be destiny” (Rohe/ Francisco/ Maria 29). The mythologies in the narratives are “analogous to dreams [wherein any] interpretations represent several of the [infinite] possibilities” Rohe/ Francisco/ Maria 32), because “reality itself is textual” (Fleetwood 2).

Unlike the painful knowledge that leads King Oedipus to take out his eyes, this is “creation through destruction, the banishment of illusion enhances awareness bringing the demolition of aesthetic blight” (Bey 21).

To conclude, “the reading experience is Oedipal, meaning fully participatory and open-ended [...] following the ‘clues’ like Oedipus and Oedipa, we learn possibilities only. Our ignorance turns to tentative and temporary knowledge, so that our final answer to Pynchon’s text is that there is no answer” (Moddlemog 305). We have a novel that celebrates ambiguity and transference of language. The careful use of myth and semiotics is a celebration of fantastic impossibilities. Despite the narrative of Pynchon’s mediocre and mundane America, we are led to believe, if only for a moment that there is something being kept secret. That we play a small part in something extraordinary. The Quest to discover the elusive Other is always a discovery of self. Just as Oedipus seeks to discover is himself, Oedipa’s journey is a discovery of self. The Quest is always something extraordinary, and at the end of every road the first person you will meet, always and forever, is yourself.

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