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Subject as Commodity Sign

Existential Interiority on Trial in Thomas Pynchon’s Crying of Lot 49

Can existential subjectivity still constitute itself once the individual and the socius are symbiotically dissolved in the self-emptying commodity signs that constitute the contemporary American dream? This is the question posed by Thomas Pynchon’s second novel, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966). While Lily Bart, Jay Gatsby, and Willy Loman are finally able to escape existential inwardsness only through death, in Lot 49 the escape from existential interiority is a cultural fait accompli, and the possibility of its reconstruction is put on trial.

Protagonist Oedipa Maas, as her name implies, is on the Lacanian Oedipal cusp between the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. Upon leaving Kinnet-A-Mong-the-Pines—a California housing development where she has lived a one-dimensional life of Tupperware and fondue parties with her husband, Wendell “Mucho” Maas—she leaves behind the flat but stable referents that have defined her existence, and now she must find new ones. In San Narciso, where she goes to execute the will of her former lover, corporate entrepreneur Pierce Inverarity, and later in San Francisco, where she spends the night wandering alone, her experiences echo Kerouac’s On the Road, with a twist: the America that she discovers has become a proliferation of self-emptying commodity signs circulating in an endless profusion that anticipates Jean Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra and Umberto Eco’s concept of the hyperreal. These signs—which sell themselves as fetishized abstractions, non-threatening substitutes for, and thus protection against, existential experience—are cultural productions, offspring of the American dream, and the novel is organized around Oedipa’s desperate attempt to decipher them so that she can know, not only the culture in which she lives, but her own subjectivity as well.
In direct contrast to the minor characters’ flight from existential inwardness, the protagonist becomes increasingly existentially aware and engaged over the course of the novel, seeking an alternative both to the American wasteland propagated by such corporate moguls as Pierce Inverarity and to the self-dissolution that is the minor characters’ response to it. To this end, she searches for clues about the Tristero, which she believes is an organized, underground resistance mounted by the socioeconomically disenfranchised and the culturally marginalized against the dominant cultural mode of excess, artifice, and “spiritual poverty” (128) of Inverarity’s America. Oedipa sees, in increasing numbers, what she believes are signs of the Tristero’s existence, but she cannot be sure whether or not she is solipsistically assigning them the significance she believes they have. At the novel’s close, she awaits the clue she hopes will tell her whether there “was some Tristero beyond the appearance of . . . America, or . . . just America” (137), whether the evidence she has found to support the existence of an underground resistance is real or imaginary.

Like Oedipa’s desire to make sense of her semiotic world, most critics’ response to *Lot 49* is also organized around the attempt to decipher the profusion of cultural signs the protagonist encounters. And despite the variety and ingenuity of that response, most analyses are informed by some version of one of the binary options Oedipa sets for herself: either there is a Tristero conspiracy or Oedipa is imagining it; either there is some transcendent meaning behind the signs of our existence or there are only the signs; either social reality can be known or we are lost in our own solipsistic indeterminacy. Perhaps Thomas Schaub presents this argument most succinctly:

At the end of the book the questions remain: is the Tristero pattern of Oedipa’s own weaving, imposed on the world outside? or is Tristero a pattern which inheres in the world outside, imposing itself upon her? Neither she nor the reader is allowed by Pynchon to ascertain the stable meaning of the blossoming pattern; and without this certainty her usefulness in preserving order against a declining culture remains painfully ambiguous. . . . Indeed, *The Crying of Lot 49* may be read as a tragic account of the difficulty of human action in a world whose meanings are always either our own, or just beyond our reach. (58–59)!

These options, however, rest on yet another binary opposition: that of psyche and socius. If, as in the previous chapters, we replace the du-
alistic view of psyche and socius informing most readings of this novel with a dialectical model of subjectivity, a third option for interpreting Oedipas's vision of contemporary America becomes possible: there is no Tristero conspiracy in America—no organized, underground resistance rooted in the underclass—but neither is she hallucinating what she takes to be the signs of its existence.

Because psyche and socius are mutually constitutive—micro- and macroproducts of the same spiritual condition—the signs of that condition automatically proliferate throughout the culture. No group need put them there deliberately. Thus, the increasing number of Tristero signs Oedipa sees over the course of the novel—the muted post horns, the WASTE and DEATH acronyms—are signs, not of a deliberate, organized conspiracy, but of the mute alienation, waste, and death that are, in one sense, the signs of America's underclass and, in another sense, the signs of an increasing entropy that is rapidly paralyzing the whole of American culture. Unless, after the narrative ends, Oedipa can begin to think beyond the binary limits of her dualistic vision of psyche and socius, she will remain, despite her existential engagement, epistemologically paralyzed by the either/or dilemma in which she finds herself at the novel's close, unable to answer her question concerning the options for the individual within contemporary American culture because she is unable to formulate adequately the concept of psyche and socius upon which such a question necessarily rests. In such a state of paralysis, she will remain unable to take action, which means she will be unable to assume a full-blown existential subjectivity, for in existential terms, we are what we do. Thus, Lot 49 suggests that the fear of solipsism is the way that consciousness undoes both itself and its awareness of cultural reality. For the opposition of solipsism and objectivity keeps both ontology and epistemology in the realm of the abstract and, therefore, outside history.

Given Oedipa's existential engagement, would an understanding of the dialectical relationship of psyche and socius—which would take her beyond the binary limits of her epistemology—be sufficient to inaugurate the fully realized, existential subjectivity for which she seems primed? Or is the postmodern America revealed in Lot 49 too overwhelming a burden for existential subjectivity to bear? That is, has the symbiotic desire of psyche and socius to escape existential interiority finally created a self-perpetuating culture of emptiness that has closed down alternative ways of being? This chapter will suggest that Lot 49
can be read as an attempt to discover the terms upon which an existentially authentic subjectivity might still be constituted in a culture grounded in the collective desire to escape existential inwardsness, and it will argue that, given the America portrayed in Lot 49, such an attempt constitutes a nascent politics of despair, a testing of the psychological/ideological means by which one can authentically continue to explore possible alternatives to an apparently hopeless and exitless situation.

That the America portrayed in Lot 49 is indeed based upon the collective desire to escape existential inwardsness is immediately evident in the similar rendering of setting and minor characters. Setting is presented as a profusion of empty commodity signs, signs that mark an absence rather than a presence—an absence of art, of history, of myth—and therefore require no existential engagement. These avatars of the commodity psychology promoted by the American dream are “safe,” emotionally insulating, nonthreatening. In Kinneret-Among-the-Pines, for example, art has been reduced to commodified pop music—exploited by a radio station that panders to “all the fraudulent dream of teenage appetites” (6)—and to the Muzak at the supermarket, which imitates, in absurd form, one of the classics: a Vivaldi concerto played on kazooos. That is, art is utterly commercialized and trivialized. It is deprived of its power and thus of its existential capacity to move us. Art is converted into an empty sign, an abstraction, a signifier that valorizes the absence of the object signified by putting a nonthreatening substitute, a commodity sign, in its place. WKCF’s teenaged listeners don’t have to prove themselves by having the experiences narrated in their music; they can “prove” themselves simply by annexing the music as part of their personal sign system. Adult supermarket shoppers don’t have to risk the emotions that might be engaged by the depth and breadth of a classical orchestra, or educate themselves enough to appreciate one, in order to show that they are cultured; kazooos will fill the bill just fine, thank you. Even the town’s name is an empty sign: Kinneret-Among-the-Pines evokes the idea of woodlands, presumably the woodlands that were removed in order to build the suburbs of which Kinneret is a part.

In San Narciso, the city built and owned by Pierce Inverarity, empty commodity signs proliferate in even greater profusion. At Echo Courts, the motel at which Oedipa stays, the thirty-foot, sheet-metal nymph out
front, with “a concealed blower system that kept [her] gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap . . . smiling a lipsticked and public smile” (15), is the empty sign of empty sex, the perfect wet dream of the existentially disengaged: an artificial woodland nymph on the outside and an artificial whore underneath. Yoyodyne, a giant aerospace plant, complete with barbed wire and guard towers, denies and disguises its ominous function by painting its buildings pink, the empty sign of what is usually considered the mark of the patriarchal girl child: castrated, passive, nonthreatening, and perversely seductive. The utterly artificial Fangoso Lagoons, one of Inverarity’s housing projects, boasts an “ogived and verdigrised, Art Nouveau reconstruction of some European pleasure-casino” (37)—an imitation of an imitation—and a man-made lake with human bones at the bottom for scuba enthusiasts. Like every other empty commodity-sign in the novel, this one, too, offers a nonthreatening abstraction in the place of an authentic experience: buyers can simply purchase the signs of “old money” and high adventure. In order to achieve this American dream, they don’t have to be anything or do anything but sign a check. As Jean Baudrillard puts it—seventeen years after the publication of Lot 49—Western culture is no longer concerned with imitation: “It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double . . . which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (Simulations 4, my emphasis).

Characterization also suggests that postmodern American culture is based on the collective desire to escape existential inwardness through simulation. Most of the minor characters have an existential experience, if not awareness, against which they are trying to defend themselves, and that defense constitutes their characterization. Indeed, the minor characters could be said to outline an architecture of commodity psychology by illustrating the kinds of avoidance behaviors facilitated by commodity culture, behaviors that, more or less, form a continuum from Mucho’s successful flight from existential inwardness to Dr. Hilarius’s failed attempt to escape it. The existential experience Mucho wants to avoid is that pressed upon him by the used car lot. Metzger wants protection against the existential contingencies underscored by the failed promises of his career as Baby Igor and by his insights into the convoluted nature of his own subjectivity as a former actor turned lawyer who still “acts,” that is simulates, in front of a jury. Miles wants to
escape his boring identity as an ordinary, American high-school drop-out working in a dead-end job. Roseman wants to deny his sense of inadequacy as a lawyer, a sense of inadequacy that reveals itself in his envious, obsessionial hatred of Perry Mason. Hilarius wants to escape his past as a Nazi doctor at Buchenwald. For these reasons, each character tries to dissolve his subjectivity into the proliferation of empty commodity signs constituting the contemporary American dream. Each grounds his subjectivity in a constellation of signs that have emptied themselves by proliferating at levels of greater and greater abstraction, becoming surfaces without interiors.

"A constellation of empty signs" might be one way to define the parodic quality of each character. It could be argued that a parody is an abstraction the exaggerated quality of which derives from its constitution as an exterior without an interior, as a constellation of empty signs. Mucho is, by the novel's close, a parody of a disk jockey, groovin' to Muzak and LSD. Metzger is a parody of a Hollywood "personality," a narcissistic shell devoted to developing the capital returns of image creation/exploitation. Miles is a parody of a British rock-and-roll star. Roseman is a parody of a lawyer. Hilarius is a parody of a psychiatrist. Certainly, the socius, because it is a proliferation of empty commodity signs, in effect invites these characters to flee existential interiority in just this manner, but they all eagerly accept the invitation. Thus, America doesn't "necessitat[e] the insanity of its citizens if they are to survive in a meaningful way" (Kharpertian 106); rather, it offers them the means to do what they want to do: escape from meaning into meaninglessness.

In order to see just how the flight from existential inwardness is facilitated by a culture in which empty commodity signs proliferate, it might be helpful to take a closer look at the two minor characters whose desire for emotional insulation is most evident: Mucho Maas, whose investment in empty commodity signs allows him to finally escape his interiority, and Dr. Hilarius, whose failure to find a similar means results in his failure to escape the existential inwardness he flees.

As we learn in the novel's opening pages, Mucho has remained semiotically overloaded by the used-car lot at which he'd worked for a couple of years. All the signs he associates with the car lot are "full": they carry a heavy affective load and engage him psychologically on a level that puts his own being, the meaning of his life, at issue. Mucho had to quit that job "on the pallid, roaring arterial" (5) of a California
freeway because he couldn’t handle the existential inwardness pressed upon him by the interplay of two sign systems associated with that occupation: the sign system that associated the cars with the poverty and despair of their owners and the sign system that associated Mucho with those who exploited that poverty and despair by continually selling their customers “new” self-images that were nothing but the same old images recycled. For Mucho, the cars were the incarnation of the lives of people “poorer than him . . . extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like”:

frame cockeyed, rusty underneath, fender repainted in a shade just off enough to depress the value . . . inside smelling hopelessly of children, supermarket booze, two, sometimes three generations of cigarette smokers . . . trading stamps, . . . butts, tooth-shy combs, help-wanted ads . . . rags of old underwear or dresses . . . for wiping your own breath off the inside of a windshield with so you could see whatever it was, a movie, a woman or car you coveted, a cop who might pull you over just for drill, all the bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes. (4–5)

What really sent Mucho over the edge, however, was not the hopeless lives the cars represented—in time, “the unvarying gray sickness” might have “immunized[d] him”—but the attitude of the owners who came to trade in their cars, unaware of their own collusion with the socioeconomic system in which they were marginalized: “He could . . . never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else’s life. As if it were the most natural thing. To Mucho it was horrible. Endless, convoluted incest” (5). Thus, Mucho’s dismay is not just a humanitarian compassion for the plight of the poor but the terrifying belief—though never articulated as such—that subjectivity is constituted by the sign systems that make up the landscape at the site of the intersection of subject and socius. That is, he responds to a postmodern perception with existential anxiety.

We see this anxiety operating in his attempts to defend himself against the subjectivity that the semiotic landscape of the used-car lot seemed to press on him: “He shaved his upperlip every morning . . . to remove any remotest breath of a moustache . . . bought all natural-shoulder suits, then went to a tailor to have the lapels made yet more
abnormally narrow, on his hair used only water” (4). The mere sight of sawdust or mention of honey—ingredients used to disguise an old car’s malfunctions—”distressed him” (4). It is not merely that Mucho was afraid to be associated with the used-car charlatans who exploited the poor; he was afraid of actually becoming one of these people, afraid that his subjectivity would be absorbed into the sign system that, through his understated dress and grooming—a different sign system—he was trying so hard to avoid. Only such a Heideggerian anxiety, anxiety about his very being, could produce the kind of paranoia that made Mucho walk “out of a party one night because somebody used the word ‘cream-puff,’ it seemed maliciously, in his hearing. The man was a refugee Hungarian pastry cook talking shop, but there was your Mucho: thin-skinned” (4). The wonderful humor of this passage notwithstanding, Mucho’s hypersensitivity to the mention of “all things viscous” that could be used “to ooze dishonest into gaps between piston and cylinder wall” (4) as well as the “alarming” persistence of his used-car memories (5), bespeaks an existential anxiety.

Mucho’s current job as a disk jockey for a small radio station is yet another attempt to defend himself against the insights he associates with the used-car lot. Although his cynicism about his new profession makes him feel guilty—he “suffered regular crises of conscience” about it—the fact that he doesn’t “believe in any of it” (3) gives him a feeling of distance and the illusion that he is somehow insulated from the semiotic world that still threatens him. Oedipa “suspected the disc jockey spot . . . was a way of letting the Top 200, and even the news copy that came jabbering out of the machine . . . be a buffer between him and that lot” (6). Thus, Mucho uses the proliferation of empty commodity signs to guard himself against the existential inwardness created by his experience of full, psychologically engaging signs. And his continual arguments with the program director concerning his image on the air function like Heideggerian “idle talk” to displace and mask deeper anxieties about issues of being.

Mucho’s flight from existential inwardness reaches its greatest level of manic avoidance toward the end of the novel, when Oedipa finds him reporting for his radio station from the scene of Dr. Hilarius’s shooting spree. As the program director tells her, “Day by day, Wendell is less himself and more generic. He enters a staff meeting and the room is suddenly full of people, you know? He’s a walking assembly of man” (104). That is, Mucho is beginning to resemble Pierce Inverarity in his
accumulation, not of multiple personalities, but of multiple personae, of multiple facades disconnected from one another and disconnected from any interior whatsoever. In fact, the very purpose of these multiple personae is to avoid interiority altogether. And it would seem that Mucho’s purpose is achieved: “Mucho came downstairs carrying his [news] copy, a serenity about him she’d never seen. He used to hunch his shoulders and have a rapid eyeblink rate, and both now were gone” (105). The sense that this new serenity betokens an absence of existential inwardness is reinforced by Mucho’s description of the nightmare he has finally managed to escape:

“The bad dream that I used to have all the time, about the car lot, remember that? I could never even tell you about it. But I can now. It doesn’t bother me any more. It was only that sign in the lot, that’s what scared me. In the dream I’d be going about a normal day’s business and suddenly, with no warning, there’d be the sign. We were a member of the National Automobile Dealers’ Association. N.A.D.A. Just this creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky. I used to wake up hollering.” (107)

Clearly, Mucho’s flight is an attempt to escape his own existential insights into the nothingness of contemporary American culture and his role in that culture. That his psychological escape is facilitated by his use of drugs does not alter the meaning of that escape: he continues to take the drugs because they provide what he has long desired and been unable to provide himself. As he tells Oedipa, “You don’t get addicted. It’s not like you’re some hophead. You take it because it’s good” (107). And it is especially noteworthy that the drugs do not send Mucho off into some imaginary limbo or fantasyland; they simply focus him entirely on the cultural productions—the empty commodity signs—that already surround him.

“It’s extraordinary,” said Mucho. . . “Listen.” She heard nothing unusual. “There are seventeen violins on that cut,” Mucho said, “and one of them—I can’t tell where he was because it’s monaural here, damn.” It dawned on her that he was talking about the Muzak. It had been seeping in, in its subliminal, unidentifiable way since they’d entered the place. (105)

Just as the ideology of the American dream furnishes Willy Loman with the ideological armor he uses to ward off an existential inwardness pressed upon him by his failures, so the empty commodity signs of the
American dream furnish Mucho with a psychological buffer against his existential experience of contemporary American culture, giving him an external site upon which to focus and quite literally lose himself. Paradoxically, postmodern American culture both horrifies Mucho and offers him the means by which he can escape his awareness of that horror.

While Dr. Hilarius, Oedipa’s psychiatrist, shares Mucho’s desire to flee existential inwardness, he does not have Mucho’s apparent success in accomplishing his goal. Just as Mucho is a parody of a disk jockey, Hilarius is a parody of a psychiatrist: he tries to heal patients by making faces at them, and when Oedipa tells him she thinks she’s hallucinating, he quickly says, “Don’t describe it” (7). Oedipa doesn’t trust him, although she continues to see him professionally, because he wants her to participate in an LSD experiment, and she’s afraid he might have put some of the drug in her tranquilizers, which she therefore won’t take. Nevertheless, Hilarius is probably right that Oedipa is addicted to him. As she puts it, “it’s easier to stay” (8) with her psychiatrist than to leave. Of course, Oedipa’s addiction to psychotherapy underscores the existential nature of her leaving Kinneret, and her therapist, for parts unknown. But it also suggests that Hilarius is aware of the potentially negative outcomes of psychotherapy. In addition, he admits that he wouldn’t know when and if Oedipa were “cured,” that is, ready to leave therapy. Thus, his making faces and his LSD experiments can be viewed as signs of desperation in the face of the indeterminacies of the psychoanalytic profession; and his self-abstraction as a parody of a psychiatrist is, in this context, an attempt to escape the existential inwardness pressed upon him by those indeterminacies, the existential inwardness that resulted from his guilty past as a Nazi psychiatrist at Buchenwald.

The relationship between Hilarius’s psychoanalytic theory and his desire to escape his Nazi past becomes painfully, if humorously, evident when he locks himself in his office in a paranoid attempt to defend himself against Israeli retribution for that past. While he claims to have followed Freud, to have “submit[ted] [him]self to . . . the ghost of that cantankerous Jew” as a “kind of penance” (100) for having been a Nazi, it is clear that he’d hoped to find in Freud’s theories an escape from the horror of his own psyche as it was revealed to him through his Nazi activities:

“Part of me must have really wanted to believe . . . that the unconscious would be like any other room, once the light was let in. That the dark
shapes would resolve only into toy horses and Biedermeier furniture. That therapy could tame it after all, bring it into society with no fear of its someday reverting. I wanted to believe, despite everything my life had been.” (100)

“Freud’s vision of the world,” Hilarius explains, “had no Buchenwalds in it. Buchenwald, according to Freud, once the light was let in, would become a soccer field, fat children would learn flower-arranging and solfeggio in the strangling rooms” (102). Thus, for Hilarius, the possibility of a Freudian cure for the individual psyche is based ultimately on the premise that the human psyche is, by nature, healthy: to understand the unconscious reasons for one’s illness is to restore the psyche to its natural, healthy state. His hyperrational reduction of Freud’s views clearly serves his desire to assuage his own guilty conscience because, if such a vision were true, it would mean that his own psyche, despite what he had done at Buchenwald, was fundamentally good. Thus, Hilarius’s inability to escape his guilty past rests on his inability to prove, in his clinical practice, that his psychoanalytic theories are correct. His paranoid fantasy about Israeli retribution can therefore be viewed as a projection of his own guilt and vulnerability.

While Hilarius flees existential inwardsness, he obviously fails to escape it; as we have seen, he remains acutely and painfully aware of existential contingency both professionally and personally. Had he used means other than Freud—say Mucho’s Muzak or Metzger’s Hollywood—he’d have had a better chance. As he says in response to Oedipa’s request that he help her dismiss what she thinks is her fantasy about Tristero, “Cherish it! . . . What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don’t let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be” (103). It would seem that Hilarius is advising Oedipa to believe whatever she needs to believe in order to avoid the kind of adaptation to the contemporary American socius that results in the psychological death of many of the minor characters. Without realizing it, he is, in effect, advising her to believe in Tristero because to do so is to believe in the possibility of an alternative to Inverarity’s America.

It is indeed Inverarity’s America—the legacy of the corporate mogul—in which the minor characters seem to proliferate on a par with the empty commodity signs that surround them. For as Oedipa realizes near the novel’s close, “San Narciso,” the city built and owned by Pierce
Inverarity, "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" (134). While the American dream, a Hegelianism for the masses, rests on a view of human development as progressive, Lot 49 shows that human development, at least in America, has begun to devolve. This is the America that unfolds through the growing awareness of Oedipa Maas.

In direct contrast to the minor characters, Oedipa moves from existential blindness and bad faith to existential awareness and engagement. In leaving Kinneret, she leaves behind a manner of being in the world (en soi) and being for herself (pour soi) that she’d hidden behind her whole life. In Kinneret,

there had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix. And had also gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair. . . . it turned out to be Pierce. . . . But all that had then gone on between them had really never escaped the confinement of that tower. (10)

It is significant, then, that upon leaving Kinneret, Oedipa first experiences the kind of paranoia many of the self-dissolving minor characters experience. Once one’s experience becomes existential, there are no guarantees—anything can happen. Watching television in her motel room with Metzger, coexecutor of Pierce’s will and child star of the movie before them on the screen, she thinks her companion might have arranged somehow to have the film shown at her hotel room the first night they meet as part of a seduction plot. Thus begins what will become her increasing awareness of the synchronicity that marks all the narrative events and her attempt to rationally order and explain the connections she sees. The attempt, however, is doomed to failure: the phenomena she observes do not fall into discrete, rational categories but overlap and invade one another in a convoluted, multilevel manner that defies interpretation. Of course, with Oedipa’s increasing frustration comes an increasing anxiety that matches or surpasses that exhibited by the minor characters. Yet the protagonist does not self-dissolve. She continues to undertake the impossible task of decoding the excess of data with which she is inundated.
Like her attempt to decode cultural signs, however, Oedipa’s existential engagement is frustrated by its failure to produce concrete results. For example, following her night in San Francisco, she meets an old sailor with the d.t.’s. Her initial response is to ask, “Can I help?” (92). And, indeed, she tries to help: she holds the man in her arms, gives him money, and mails a letter for him through what she believes is the Tristero’s underground postal system. But the entire incident is shot through with the hopelessness she expresses as she rocks the old man in her arms: “I can’t help,’ she whispered . . . ‘I can’t help’” (93). Similarly, when Oedipa meets Winthrop Tremaine, the swastika salesman, a few days later, she is of course appalled by his fascist racism. She wants to do something about him, but she does nothing: “She left wondering if she should’ve called him something, or tried to hit him with any of a dozen surplus, heavy, blunt objects in easy reach. There had been no witnesses. Why hadn’t she?” She realizes that she, that all Americans, are responsible for America—“This is America, you live in it, you let it happen” (112), she tells herself—but she takes no action.

Even her insight into the class structure in America, the only conclusion she draws about which she expresses no doubts, begins with existential engagement but issues in inaction. Having lost everyone she thought might help her—Mucho, Dr. Hilarius, Metzger, Driblette, Fallopian—Oedipa goes into a state of depression. She is, as she puts it, “saturated” (133), overloaded with signs the meanings of which she can’t be certain. Hitting bottom, she becomes a mass of physical and psychological symptoms: she has headaches and “waves of nausea” (129), is disoriented, plagued by nightmares, and, as we see when she drinks and drives without headlights, suicidal. Significantly, it is in this state of mind, with an utterly existential experience of herself and her world, that Oedipa’s perceptions of America are pointedly insightful. She realizes that the only true continuities in America consist of “storm systems of group suffering and need” and “prevailing winds of affluence” (134). She realizes that Pierce’s great wealth and the corporate structure on which it depends are replicated throughout America, as is the underside of that world:

She remembered now old Pullman cars, left where the money’d run out or the customers vanished, amid green farm flatnesses where clothes hung, smoke lazed out of jointed pipes. . . . She thought of other, immobilized freight cars, where the kids sat on the floor planking and sang back, happy as fat, whatever came over the mother’s pocket radio; of
other squatters who stretched canvas for lean-tos behind smiling billboards along all the highways, or slept in junkyards in the stripped shells of wrecked Plymoots. . . . She remembered drifters she had listened to, Americans speaking their language carefully, scholarly, as if they were in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in; and walkers along the roads at night, zooming in and out of your headlights without looking up, too far from any town to have a real destination. (135)

As always, Oedipà’s first response to this realization is an existentially engaged one: she wants to take action; she wants to do something to help. She wonders, “What would the probate judge [of Pierce’s estate] have to say about spreading some kind of a legacy among them all, all those nameless, maybe as a first installment?” (136). However, feeling powerless, she immediately abandons the idea: she knows the judge would be “on her ass in a microsecond, revoke her letters testamentary, they’d call her names [and] proclaim her through all Orange County as a redistributionist pinko” (136). Thus, while Oedipà’s existential awareness and engagement increase over the course of the novel, she never reaches the point of taking the action that defines a full-blown existential subjectivity. And part of her inability to take action is due to an epistemological paralysis based on her binary view of her situation.

The protagonist’s conception of her options—that either the Tristero is a real, underground organization or else she is having paranoid delusions about the nature of contemporary American culture—keeps her in the same spot waiting for an answer. And she will remain on that spot until she discovers her third option, the excluded middle: namely, that the horror of contemporary America is exactly as she sees it whether or not there is some Tristero giving its alienated periphery a collective voice. In other words, Oedipà must realize that, in contemporary America, paranoia is no longer a mental illness; it is the response of a social realist.

This is the subjectivity the final scene seems to await, just as Oedipà awaits the Tristero. The description of the room in which the auction of Inverarity’s stamp collection (lot #49) is about to take place, and where Oedipà awaits what she hopes will be a clue to the existence of the Tristero, has the unmistakable ring of an existential universe:

The men inside the auction room wore black mohair and had pale, cruel faces. They watched her come in, trying to each conceal his thoughts. . . . Oedipà sat alone, toward the back of the room, looking at the napes of
necks, trying to guess which one was her target, her enemy, perhaps her proof. An assistant closed the heavy door on the lobby windows and the sun. She heard a lock snap shut; the sound echoed a moment. (137–138)

This passage could have come straight from Sartre’s No Exit: hell is other people, and there is no way out; we are locked together in a sunless room, each of us in a state of utter isolation, trying to conceal our thoughts. All that is needed to complete the picture is an existential hero—a Merseult or a Roquentin. Whether or not, at some point after the narrative ends, Oedipa will take that step, whether or not she will finally take some action in keeping with her existential engagement, remains a question that raises an even more important question addressed in the novel: Is such a step still possible in contemporary America?

Can a full-blown existential subjectivity still be constituted in a land “conditioned . . . to accept any San Narciso among its most tender flesh without a reflex or a cry” (136) by a culture whose members increasingly resemble the empty commodity signs they so eagerly annex? In other words, if existential subjectivity is measured by existentially authentic action, what, in Oedipa’s world, should that action be? The protagonist believes there is nothing to do but wait, “if not for another set of possibilities to replace those that” currently exist, “then at least, at the very least . . . for [the] symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew” (136). Yet what hope is there that the “symmetry of choices” Oedipa has outlined—organized alienation or madness, wealth or poverty—will, of its own accord, “break down”? The prognosis seems especially dim as these binary oppositions are apparently so firmly established: “It was now 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” (136). Given this view of contemporary America, if Lot 49 is a novel about the possibility of constituting an existential subjectivity in this nation today, then it must also be a novel about the politics of despair, about the ways in which one can continue to take meaningful action in a situation that is apparently hopeless and exitless. This despair is evident in the novel’s overlapping social, philosophical, and psychological themes.

As Oedipa knows, “excluded middles” are “bad shit” (136), and Lot 49’s America is a nation of excluded middles. As we have seen, on the one hand, there is the extreme wealth of the ruling class, represented by
the estate of Pierce Inverarity, for whom the American dream is the "need to possess, to alter the land, to bring new skylines, personal antagonisms, growth rates into being" (134); on the other hand, there is the extreme poverty of the homeless, "the squatters," the heirs to "300 years of . . . disinheritance" (135). Whatever middle ground there is in the novel is inhabited by such self-dissolving abstractions as Mucho, Roseman, Dr. Hilarius, Metzger, Miles, Fallopian, and Driblette, and thus that middle ground has a vanishing ontological status.

Paradoxically, in the semiotic domain, the entire cultural fabric of America is rapidly tending toward an entropic sameness that blankets the novel's landscape, denying and disguising the socioeconomic disparities of our class system much as the layer of pink paint covering Yoyodyne denies and disguises its sinister purpose. It is interesting to note that most readings of Lot 49's treatment of entropy hinge on the contrast between definitions of entropy in thermodynamics—the tendency of heated molecules to disperse their energy to colder molecules until a uniform temperature, or random sameness, is achieved—and in information theory, or cybernetics, in which entropy is a measure of the amount of uncertainty in the information content of a message: the more possible meanings a message has, the more entropy, or ordered difference, it has. Thus, while an increase in thermodynamic entropy indicates an increase in sameness, an increase in information entropy, the argument goes, indicates an increase in differentiation. Theodore D. Kharpertian notes, for example, that

in thermodynamic terms, Oedipa moves from a state of greater entropy, a condition of inactive uniformity in which her "days seemed . . . more or less identical" ([Lot 49] 2), to a state of lesser entropy, a condition of active diversity made possible by the apparent existence of the Tristero. In cybernetic terms, however, she moves in the opposite direction, that is, from lesser to greater entropy, as the multiplicity of information she gathers about the Tristero increases the uncertainty of the information's ultimate significance. The Crying of Lot 49 depicts, therefore, the cybernetic evolution of Oedipa from a condition of unknowledgeable certainty to one of knowledgeable uncertainty. (104)

In cultural terms, then, as Dean A. Ward notes, Oedipa moves from a uniform, univocal, suburban America to an America characterized by infinite multiplicity, an America where anything can happen and where events can have any number of meanings (26–29).2
However, in the postmodern world of *Lot 49*, information theory's traditional model, which is used to oppose cybernetic entropy to thermodynamic entropy,

\[
\text{INFORMATION SENT} + \text{NOISE} = \text{INFORMATION RECEIVED}
\]

\[A + N = A \text{ or } B \text{ or } C \text{ or } \ldots\]

*Source: Adapted from Shannon and Weaver (5).*

no longer obtains. According to this model, an original message \((A)\) can, at least theoretically, be determined, against which received versions \((A \text{ or } B \text{ or } C \text{ or } \ldots)\) could be measured. The model thus relies on the possibility of a stable, knowable original message. In *Lot 49* there is no such possibility. Therefore, uncertainty becomes, not just a function of choosing among numerous possible received messages, but a function of never knowing, even theoretically, that any original message ever existed. Perhaps none of the received messages is the "correct" one. Or perhaps the noise itself is the real "message." Information in *Lot 49* has thus reached a new plateau: all messages could mean anything; therefore all messages are, in effect, the same—unknowable. In this context, information entropy and thermodynamic entropy lead in the same direction: the more information entropy, or uncertainty, increases, the more all messages become the same. Castillo's definition of entropy in Pynchon's short story "Entropy" reinforces the collapse of thermodynamic and information entropy in *Lot 49*. He describes it as a "tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos" (74). In the novel, then, entropy in either domain leads to sameness, diminished energy, and death.

Sameness, diminished energy, and death are, as revealed by the minor characters' flight from existential inwardsness, desiderata in the world of *Lot 49*. As Mucho happily explains, when he tells Oedipa about his newly acquired ability to process sound without the aid of electronic devices,

"No matter who's talking the different power spectra are the same, give or take a small percentage. . . . Everybody who says the same words is
the same person if the spectra are the same only they happen differently in time, you dig? But the time is arbitrary. You pick your zero point anywhere you want, that way you can shuffle each person’s time line sideways till they all coincide.” (106)

Just as the novel’s architectural landscape—the endlessly repeated freeways and suburbs, the innumerable Fangososo Lagoons and Echo Courts and Yoyodynes—melts together in the ultimate coincidence of simulation, so Mucho wants to merge with “a million lives” (107) and thereby lose himself. This is the same “fascination with senseless repetition” that haunts Jean Baudrillard’s America (1) and Umberto Eco’s Travels in Hyperreality. However, Pynchon suggests that the desire at work here, the desire for what Eco calls “the Absolute Fake,” is not, as Eco asserts, the “offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth” (31). Rather, it is the desire for a present without depth. In other words, Lot 49 indicates that the desire informing the flat postmodern landscape—Nature obliterated to make room for Fangososo Lagoons, in which natural objects are artificially reproduced—is the same desire informing the flat postmodern psyche. It is psychological entropy—sameness, diminished energy, and death—that finally makes Mucho’s face “smooth, amiable, at peace” (106).

This desire for psychological entropy, for existential insulation, is underscored by the contrast between the dry descriptions of sexual desire, which isolates rather than bonds participants, and the much more passionate descriptions of the desire for emotional insulation. The sexual passes the male characters make at Oedipa are perfunctory, consisting of brief verbal games that the men apparently don’t even expect to succeed. That is, sexual passes are social, rather than passioned, in nature. The only sexual encounter described in the novel is that between Metzger and Oedipa at Echo Courts, and this interchange, too, is impersonal, shot through with the two characters’ mutual isolation.

The encounter begins, tellingly, with Metzger “fast asleep with a hardon” (26). When he awakes to Oedipa’s kisses, she falls asleep, both metaphorically—she is “so weak she couldn’t help him undress her” (26)—and literally: “it took him 20 minutes” to undress her, and “she may have fallen asleep once or twice” (26). Furthermore, as Metzger undresses her, he reminds Oedipa of “some scaled-up, short-haired, power-faced little girl with a Barbie doll” (26). When Oedipa “aw[akes] at last to find herself getting laid,” she responds by “count[ing] each
electronic voice” she hears in the “fugue of guitars” coming from outside the window (26–27). Thus, Oedipa is passive, psychologically absent, and Metzger is turned on, not by sex, but by power, a fact that is reinforced by his subsequent elopement with a fifteen-year-old girl. The lovers’ isolation is underscored by the song with which the Paranoids serenade the pair, a love song in which the following words, in the following order, dominate: lonely, lonely, still and faceless moon, ghost, shadow, gray, alone, alone, lonely, lonely, gray, dark, alone, lonely, lonely. Finally, when Oedipa and Metzger achieve climax, “every light in the place . . . go[es] out, dead, black” (27, my emphasis). Yet this “love scene” is not presented as a disappointment to either character; indeed, it initiates their liaison.

In sharp contrast to the tone of impersonality and isolation that informs the portrayal of sexual desire, the desire for existential insulation is described in passionate, sensual terms. During Oedipa’s all-nighter in San Francisco, she has an experience that helps explain why the minor characters are drawn to the protection against existential inwardness afforded by self-dissolution. At one point during her wandering, the protagonist, perhaps because of her “linearly fading drunkenness” (86), feels that she has become invulnerable, beyond the reach of the dangers associated with night in the street, that is, beyond existential contingency:

The city was hers, as, made up and sleeked so with the customary words and images (cosmopolitan, culture, cable cars) it had not been before: she had safe-passage tonight. . . . Nothing of the night’s could touch her; nothing did. . . . She was meant to remember. She faced that possibility as she might the toy street from a high balcony, roller-coaster ride, feeding-time among the beasts in a zoo—any death-wish that can be consummated by some minimum gesture. She touched the edge of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to it; that not gravity’s pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravening, promised more delight. She tested it, shivering: I am meant to remember. Each clue that comes is supposed to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. (86–87)

Note the sexually charged nature of the language in this passage: made up, sleeked, roller-coaster ride, consummated, voluptuous, lovely beyond dreams, submit, delight, shivering. What Oedipa finds so attractive here is the psychological death, the release from existential contingency and
responsibility, that results from believing that all things occur that are meant to occur; that she, like everything else, is merely fulfilling a purpose imposed from the outside; that she is not responsible. This release—the release from existential interiority—not sex, is the big turn-on.

That the constitution of an existential subjectivity in Pynchon’s America requires a politics of despair is also evident in the novel’s representation of our limited epistemological resources. Indeed, most critics note the importance of uncertainty or indeterminacy for our understanding of the novel. Yet I don’t think that *Lot 49* invites us to “celebrate . . . our absolute inability to know” (Olsen 162). Rather, it illustrates the ways in which our “paradigms determine what we perceive” (Palmeri 980). Thus, at least in terms of my own paradigm of the dialectical symbiosis of psyche and socius, Oedipa can’t make cultural meaning out of all the cultural data she accumulates because she limits herself to explaining it in terms of some sort of conspiracy theory that implicitly separates the individual and the society into discrete entities. For example, it occurs to her that Inverarity might have set up, as an elaborate hoax, the innumerable “clues” she has found in support of the Tristero’s existence. And she believes that if this is not the case, then the signs of alienation she sees everywhere—the muted post horn is the most ubiquitous example—are either placed there by an organized underground or are products of her imagination. What she doesn’t realize is that, because psyche and socius are dialectically related in a mutually constitutive symbiosis, cultural meaning is diffused through all layers of culture. There is no conspiracy in the usual sense of the word, just the synchronicity—the innumerable connections, doublings, coincidences—that results from the unconscious, pervasive, collective desire that saturates, constitutes, and reflects cultural reality at any given moment. Because cultural meaning saturates all agents and objects, it is constantly “announcing” itself, constantly producing the connections that would make one suspect a conspiracy in the first place.

The interconnectedness of all cultural phenomena is responsible for Oedipa’s recurrent observation of what she believes are hieroglyphs. She repeatedly senses, as she gazes on some typical American scene, that she is looking at a hieroglyph that holds the key to some revelation. For example, her first view of San Narciso reminds her of a printed circuit, like those found in transistor radios:
The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. . . . there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out). . . . she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. (13)

And indeed, San Narciso—like Fangoso Lagoons, the L.A. freeway, and all the other cultural phenomena that seem to Oedipa to carry messages—is a hieroglyph that can communicate any number of insights into contemporary America. All the cultural phenomena in the novel are, in fact, hieroglyphs for one another because they are all manifestations of the same supersaturated solution that automatically diffuses its meaning, as a solution diffuses its molecules, throughout its material existence.

This synchronicity of cultural phenomena is emblematic of the interface of psyche and socius because it suggests that we are all conspiring, albeit for the most part unconsciously, in whatever occurs in the socius. Because of these innumerable interconnections, the path of all inquiry, which is unavoidably grounded in the culture of the inquirer, leads, albeit circuitously, back to itself, back to the question and the questioner with which it began, just as Oedipa’s night-watch in San Francisco both begins and ends at John Nefastis’s house. She doesn’t find an objective answer to her question about the Tristero on her labyrinthine pilgrimage to the heart of postmodern America because knowledge, at least knowledge about the nature of one’s socius, consists of what one is able to articulate of one’s diffusion within it, not of “objective” answers to “objective” questions.

Indeed, one of the novel’s most successful projects is to undermine the belief in objectivity—the New Critical epistemology—that, at the time of the novel’s publication, had dominated academia for over two decades. Oedipa goes to see The Courier’s Tragedy, a fictitious play by a fictitious seventeenth-century playwright, Richard Wharfinger, hoping to find a clue to the Tristero, to which she thinks the drama may allude. Driblette, the director, explains that a text exists not in the words on paper, not as a New Critical, autonomous object that remains stable and inviolate over time, but in the mind of the creator of any particular ver-
sion of that object, that is, in the mind of the interpreter. Driblette thus implicitly calls for what is now termed reader-response theory: texts tell us not about themselves nor about their authors but about ourselves. Any act of interpretation that conceives of itself as a transparent, ahistorical, objective apprehension of words on paper—the text in itself—is as absurd and impossible an activity as the attempt to establish authorial intention. Both yield nothing. As Driblette tells Oedipa,

“You know where that play exists, not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you’re looking for, but—” [his] hand . . . indicate[d] his . . . head—“in here. . . . The words, who cares? They’re rote noises to hold line bashes with, to get past the bone barriers around an actor’s memory, right? But the reality is in this head. Mine. . . . You could fall in love with me, you can talk to my shrink, you can hide a tape recorder in my bedroom, see what I talk about from wherever I am when I sleep. . . . You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several, about why characters reacted to the Trystero possibility the way they did, why the assassins came on, why the black costumes. You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth. Wharfinger supplied words and a yarn. I gave them life. That’s it.” (56)

The only real conspiracy in the novel, then, is that of the author to confound any attempt—Oedipa’s or ours—to make New Critical sense of the narrative events. The novel abounds in minor characters who remain little more than names dashing in and out, never to be heard from again, and with fictional historical trivia too numerous to be tied into an organic whole. Pynchon overloads us with data we can’t possibly process or even keep track of without laborious note taking that doesn’t repay our effort. Thus, while Lot 49 raises the questions that narrative generally raises—Which events are central to the plot and which are peripheral? What is the significance of any given event in terms of the text as a whole? What does the text as a whole mean?—the novel frustrates our attempts to answer them. In so doing, Lot 49 foregrounds the desires involved in our wanting those questions answered and in our attempts to answer them. The novel thus suggests, as does reader-response theory, that our epistemologies are grounded in our desires and that the power of reading lies, in large part, in our willingness to become self-reflexive about the activities in which reading engages us.

This view of cultural meaning as nonobjective, as a diffusion in which psyche and socius are mutually implicated, is underscored by
the text’s references to “Bordando el Manto Terrestre,” a painting by Spanish exile Remedios Varo. Oedipa remembers seeing the painting during a trip to Mexico with Pierce Inverarity some years ago. It consists of

a number of frail girls with heartshaped 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 this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (10)

That is, the tapestry the girls are creating is also the tapestry within which their tower is contained. Thus, all reality is at once personal and cultural, the product of a personal projection that both creates and is created by the socius. The two cannot be meaningfully separated, and any question about the one always implies a question about the other. Without a dialectical conception of their relationship, Oedipa’s attempts to understand her culture and her place within it will remain mired in the epistemological limitations that lead her to the despair she experiences at the novel’s close. However, there is no guarantee that a dialectical understanding of psyche and socius will significantly lessen that despair because, while such an understanding provides a holistic sense of psychosocial reality and the only meaningful place to begin inquiry, by its very nature it does not offer the kind of psychological assurances—epistemological closure, certainty, mastery—we have come to rely on.

Finding no sure answers in contemporary reality, Oedipa turns to history for an explanation that will help her make sense of her world and herself, that will lift her out of her growing desperation. Specifically, she looks for clues to the development of the Tristero from its origin in seventeenth-century Europe to its establishment and growth in America. With the help of scholar Emory Bortz, the protagonist tries to determine the original text of The Courier’s Tragedy, collates references to the Tristero in various editions of the play, gathers data on the dramatist’s life as well as on the historical period during which the play was written and first performed, and consults “obscure philatelic journals” (119) that might contain information about the Tristero’s history. By this point the Tristero has become, not just an underground communication network for America’s alienated or even the European under-
ground postal system that it began as, but an emblem of the possibility of knowing anything. As it turns out, however, history’s indeterminacy makes a politics of despair only more unavoidable.

Despite Oedipa’s diligence in tracking down clues and the college training that seems to have suited her well for just such tedious scholarship, she keeps running into blind alleys. “Beyond its origins, the libraries told her nothing more about Tristero,” and Bortz’s educated speculations were useless, merely “a species of cute game” (122). Given the impossibility of acquiring sure knowledge about the events occurring in the immediate vicinity of the perceiver, how can sure knowledge possibly be gained about events from which the perceiver is separated by both time and space? Indeed, Oedipa realizes the impossibility of determining historical causes for trivial and important events alike:

Did she know why Driblette had put in [his production of The Courier’s Tragedy] those two extra lines [referring to the Tristero] that night? Had he even known why? No one could begin to trace it. A hundred hangups, permuted, combined—sex, money, illness, despair with the history of his time and place, who knew. Changing the script had no clearer motive than his suicide. (121)

She becomes angry when Mike Fallopian tells her to separate fact from speculation—“Write down what you can’t deny. Your hard intelligence. But then write down what you’ve only speculated, assumed. See what you’ve got” (126)—because she knows that speculation is just about all she’s got. As Bortz and his graduate students point out when Oedipa asks them for historical data concerning the author of The Courier’s Tragedy, “The historical Shakespeare. . . . The historical Marx. The historical Jesus. . . . they’re dead. What’s left? Words” (113). In short, “historical figuration” is nothing but a seductive scam consisting of “breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings . . . layered dense” (36) over a proliferation of historical events rendered virtually unknowable by their complexity, as well as by their temporal distance from us.

Perhaps the best metaphor for the complexity of historical events, both past and current, and for the impossibility of acquiring any kind of complete knowledge of them, can be found in the can of hair-spray that takes flight in Oedipa’s bathroom at Echo Courts. The passage begins with Oedipa looking in the bathroom mirror, itself a metaphor for the desire to comprehend or establish her identity, which, as we have seen,
is part of what she seeks in seeking to understand postmodern America. Rather tipsy from drinking Beaujolais with Metzger, Oedipa fell over, taking a can of hair spray on the sink with her. The can hit the floor, something broke, and with a great outsurge of pressure the stuff commenced atomizing, propelling the can swiftly about the bathroom. . . . The can . . . bounced off the toilet and . . . continued its high-speed caroming. . . . the . . . wild, flashing over-flights of the can . . . seemed inexhaustible. . . . The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel; but she wasn’t fast enough, and knew only that it might hit them at any moment, at whatever clip it was doing, a hundred miles an hour. . . . The can collided with a mirror and bounced away, leaving a silvery, reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second before it all fell jingling into the sink; zoomed over to the enclosed shower, where it crashed into and totally destroyed a panel of frosted glass; thence around the three tile walls, up to the ceiling, past the light . . . amid its own whoosh and the buzzing, distorted uproar from the TV set. (22–23)

Almost all the qualities imputed to the runaway hair-spray can in this passage—it’s high speed; the practical impossibility of predicting or even mapping the trajectory of its “complex web”; the destruction left in its wake; the distinction between “its own whoosh” and the “distorted uproar” of the television in the next room, that is, of the media that pretend to report such news events—provide a model that illuminates the concept of history informing the whole novel. While history in *Lot 49* isn’t a function of total ontological chaos, it creates total epistemological chaos. History is a system of spiraling connections and reactions that bounce in any given direction for any given distance and at any given speed for any number of reasons: obstacles encountered, angle of impact, speed of impact, and so on. History is thus a function of factors too numerous and complex to grasp with any degree of certainty.

It is significant that the hair-spray can shatters the mirror into which Oedipa is looking when the scene begins, for the breaking of the mirror betokens the relationship between history and yet another avatar of the necessity for a politics of despair: nostalgia for the Lacanian Imaginary order. Lacan’s Imaginary order, which dominates early childhood, is initiated and informed by what he calls the mirror stage, when our subjectivity is reflected back to us—through other people if not through lit-
eral mirrors—as a stable unity. It is this sense of our self and our world that is shattered by the Lacanian Symbolic order or, put more simply if not more precisely, by history. For our initiation into the Symbolic order, because it is an initiation into our culture as it is inscribed in language, is intrinsically historical. As we have seen, Oedipa’s initiation into postmodern American culture is the novel’s pervasive theme. And it’s an initiation she resists as much as pursues, because she is “anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point. Lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself” (125). Indeed, as she muses over Driblette’s grave, she “wonder[s] whether . . . some version of herself hadn’t vanished” (121). And this vanished version of herself is the buffered, illusory subjectivity she lived in Kinneret, before her initiation into the Symbolic order of postmodern American culture.

It is noteworthy, then, that mirrors appear at those times when Oedipa seems on the verge of yet another new and potentially threatening discovery: for example, the morning she visits her lawyer concerning her execatrixship of Inverarity’s will; during her first meeting with Metzger; during her first and only meeting with Driblette; the day she discovers Bortz’s edition of The Courier’s Tragedy; upon learning that WASTE, which she believes is the name of the Tristero’s underground communications system, stands for We Await Silent Tristero’s Empire; and just before she learns that an absentee bidder for Inverarity’s collection of philatelic forgeries might be from the Tristero. Her looking in mirrors can thus be read as a desire to recapture the stable, unified version of herself she once knew or, in other words, a desire to return to the safety of the Imaginary order. The protagonist’s inability to find the self-image she seeks in mirrors—“she . . . tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn’t” (26); “in the mirror [she saw] [n]othing specific, only a possibility” (54)—underscores the unattainable, purely nostalgic nature of her desire.

Nostalgia for some former Edenic experience of wholeness that might be associated with the Imaginary order occurs throughout the novel in more concrete ways as well. For example, on her way to visit Fangoso Lagoons with Metzger, Oedipa muses nostalgically about the Pacific Ocean:

Somewhere beyond the battening, urged sweep of three-bedroom houses rushing by their thousands across all the dark beige hills . . . lurked the sea, the unimaginable Pacific . . . Oedipa had believed, long before leaving Kinneret, in some principle of the sea as redemption for
Southern California...some unvoiced idea that no matter what you did to its edges the true Pacific stayed inviolate and integrated or assumed the ugliness at any edge into some more general truth. (36–37)

Here we have nostalgia for Nature as the source of Truth, a source that remains always whole and stable, “inviolate and integrated,” capable of “assum[ing]” all attacks against its wholeness “into some more general truth.” This is nostalgia for Nature as the source and sign of the Imaginary order, of a stable, unified self in a stable, unified world.

This same kind of nostalgia for a pristine, pre-Symbolic sort of subjectivity occurs during her all-night vigil in San Francisco. She wonders if all the clues she has found in evidence of the Tristero’s existence “were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (87). This is the same “epileptic Word” she associates with some “central truth” hovering, throughout the novel, just beyond her ken, whose source lies in some earlier experience she cannot remember:

She could, at this stage of things, recognize signals...as the epileptic is said to—an odor, color, pure piercing grace note announcing his seizure. Afterward it is only this signal...and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers. Oedipa wondered whether at the end of this [journey]...she too might not 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.... (69)

Here, again, Oedipa longs for some kind of direct, immediate access to some “central truth” that she has somehow lost, some Edenic knowledge that would give her back to herself whole and stable.

The protagonist’s haunting desire to return to some earlier, more stable order of being underscores her inability to imagine a future in postmodern America. And it is at this point—with all the traditional ego supports removed—that existential subjectivity based on a politics of despair must begin. Upon what ground is such a politics to be undertaken within the framework of this novel? That is, do we have anything left in Lot 49 upon which it can be built? The answer, I think, is no. We have an American dream consisting of a profusion of empty commodity signs. We have a cast of characters who, as “death-wishful” and “sensually fatigued” (44) as Wharfinger’s seventeenth-century audience is purported to have been, dissolve their own subjectivity into
those empty commodity signs in order to flee existential inwardness. We can’t be sure why this state of affairs obtains in America because contemporary culture, as well as our own history, has become little more than an overload of indeterminate data. And we have a protagonist, the only character in the novel willing or able to sustain an existential inwardness, who doesn’t know what to do because she doesn’t know whether or not she can trust her own perceptions.

Reading the novel in terms of a fully existentialized dialectical model of subjectivity suggests that Oedipa does not attain the heroic stature some readers see in her. She does not “achieve an awareness of her culture,” which, because she “maintains her ground,” allows the reader to “experience . . . a sense of the possibility for meanings which inhere in the world and in language” (Schaub 67). Nor does the protagonist evolve into “a satiric heroine, attacking the republic’s undifferentiated and monolithic sterility” (Kharpertian 85). Instead, she engages in an existential struggle to learn what, if any, authentic existence can be lived in the America Pynchon portrays.

While Lot 49 thus asks if an existential subjectivity can be constituted in a postmodern culture so horrifying that our only viable response to it must be a politics of despair, the novel, in keeping with the problematic it portrays, doesn’t provide an answer. Instead, the text explores the landscape of the despair in which an authentic postmodern politics—if it is to exist at all—must be grounded. In other words, if a postmodern American subject is to have an authentic politics at all, it must be a politics of despair because despair is the only existential reality left us. We are not told, however, what such a politics will do or even how such a politics can, with certainty, be recognized. If Lot 49 tells us anything about the politics of despair, it tells us that it is a politics with no certain, stable ground on which to stand. It is a politics that asks us to look horror straight in the face with no sure hope of doing anything to change or escape it. And it is a politics that can’t even tell us if we’ll survive the effort. Perhaps, like Mucho, Metzger, or Miles, we’ll become cultural “personae,” types, empty commodity signs of a bankrupt culture. Perhaps, like Dr. Hilarius, we’ll give ourselves over to hysteria. Perhaps, like Driblette, we’ll commit suicide. Or perhaps, like Oedipa, we’ll wait for more information, knowing, as she knows, that we’re all executors of Pierce Inverarity’s will yet unwilling or unable to shoulder that responsibility in some concrete way.
At what point will Oedipa’s quest for the Tristero, her quest for knowledge of an alternative, become an end in itself, a function of the bad-faith desire to at once have a purpose in life yet eschew the responsibility for taking action? Perhaps a politics of despair demands an existential subjectivity that will acknowledge uncertainty and take its best shot anyway, because at stake is an America whose narcissistic death wish is in danger of drowning us all in the refuse of our repressed collective psyche. For if Baudrillard is right that, in contemporary America, “death ha[s] found its ideal home” in the excesses of “a utopian dream made reality” (America 31, 30), then surely it is because that dream is one of empty commodity signs, whose primary psychological attraction is that they insulate us against existential inwardsness, which means that they insulate us against life. If this is one of the stories Lot 49 tells, then Oedipa’s “you live in it, you let it happen” (112) is an admonition Pynchon directs at us all. Existential awareness of postmodern horror—in its apparent boundlessness and with no guarantee of any escape—may not be a sufficient response to postmodern culture, but it is, according to Pynchon, the necessary first step.