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Laughing Not to Cry: Resisting Postmodern Melancholia through Humor in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

Rodrigo Zamorano¹

The present article explores the function that humor plays in relation to the portrayal of postmodern culture in Thomas Pynchon's 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. It seeks to expose the understated but persistent melancholy that characterizes Pynchon's representation of postmodern American culture, and how it relates to the extensive use of humor in the novel. Following the conventions of the detective novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* revolves around Oedipa Maas and her quest for a mysterious underground organization called Tristero, a pursuit set in a world that, as the novel unfolds, is shown to be overwhelmingly fragmentary, oversaturated and nonsensical. The possibly destabilizing and threatening effects that this reality has on individuals find their expression in what this analysis characterizes as postmodern melancholia. In the novel, humor is used to simultaneously mask, counterbalance and resist this threat. The diverse forms in which humor is instantiated are analyzed to show how they contribute to the configuration of an implied reader, one that would be able to articulate a form of resistance to postmodern melancholia through a cynical approach to the problems posed by Pynchon's novel.

KEYWORDS: postmodernity, resistance, melancholia, humor.

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First published in 1996, *The Crying of Lot 49* has become a classic of early postmodern literature. It is also probably the most read of Thomas Pynchon's novels. Written and published at the height of the Cold War, the novel manages to portray postmodern American society in a way that is simultaneously puzzling, comical and grim. The plot revolves around the quest that Oedipa Maas, a rather typical American housewife living in 1960s California, embarks upon after her former lover, the elusive multimillionaire and real estate speculator Pierce Inverarity, dies and she is named co-executrix of his will. Inverarity, a California real estate magnate whose "assets [were] numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary" (Pynchon 1), has named Oedipa co-executrix of his will for unknown reasons. However, Pynchon's novel is arguably less about the results of Oedipa's quest and more about the pursuit itself; in the light of such interpretation, what Oedipa finally does (or does not) find in the end is less important than what she experiences while looking for it. As Oedipa's search unfolds, she finds herself confronted with a world that gradually becomes more and more nonsensical and in which the task of making sense of her experiences turns into a challenging feat. The impossibility of finding stability in a fragmented reality and the constant dissemination of meaning in a myriad of signs without referents are both distinctive features of contemporary postmodern culture. They are also some of the sources of what in this analysis will be called "postmodern melancholia."

Postmodern melancholia refers to the feeling of disenchantment wrought by the collapse of the Modern project and the advent of postmodernity; as such, it is an expression of the nostalgia for a center or organizing principle that could give order to the extreme fragmentation and senselessness of postmodern culture. Three different readings of contemporary culture will be used to define the concept: Fredric Jameson's understanding of schizophrenia as a perceptual incapacity symptomatic of life under late capitalism; Jacques Derrida's concept of play and *différance* in relation to the dissemination of meaning in an unrestrained proliferation of signs; and Jean-François Lyotard's

grasp of postmodernity as the epoch of the collapse of metanarratives. These notions and concepts will be used to expose particular aspects of the undercurrent of melancholia that pervades postmodern culture as portrayed in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Pynchon's novel is also notable for its extensive use of humor, mainly in the form of parody and irony, and through the depiction of absurd situations. This analysis will show how humor is used in *The Crying of Lot 49* as a narrative strategy of resistance to postmodern melancholia via the configuration of an implied reader that can negotiate the harshness of the reality represented with its comical representation. The implied reader is a function of the text that can operate "as a *presumed addressee* to whom the work is directed and whose linguistic codes, *ideological norms*, and aesthetic ideas must be taken into account if the work is to be understood [second emphasis added]" (Schmid, par. 5). It is through specific indexical signs in the text that this virtual "bearer of the codes and norms presumed in the readership" (par. 1) is objectified. This discussion posits that the implied reader in Pynchon's novel is a cynical one, and that it is upon this specific feature that its effectiveness to resist postmodern melancholia depends.

The definition of humor at work here follows the incongruity theory proposed by John Marmysz in *Laughing at Nothing. Humor as a Response to Nihilism*. Marmysz postulates that humor is a response that emerges of the active interpretation of non-threatening incongruities in terms of amusement and pleasure rather than painful anxiety: "humor . . . aids us in facing the world, not by encouraging us to deny or turn away from painful realities, but by encouraging to work toward the development of an understanding of those pains within a richer context" (124). The capacity of having humorous responses provides individuals with new perspectives that allow them to avoid a somber overemphasis on life's frustrating or painful aspects. Central to this understanding of humor is the concept of incongruity, which Marmysz defines as "a phenomenon . . . characterized by breaks, interruptions and discontinuity." As such, he adds, "it presupposes a separation between two

or more things that lack correspondence and fit with one another. Ideas, words, statements, sentences physical objects, or any other types of entities may be incongruous with one another” (124). Yet, not any simple difference constitutes an incongruity. The specificity lies in the resistance to harmonious resolutions: incongruities “represent that special kind of difference that emerges between adversarial opposites. Incongruity is, thus, associated with a kind of tension and harshness that arises from the confrontation between incompatibles. It involves an element of discord and friction” (125). The elements of discord and friction that characterize incongruities make it apparent that something is not working as it should, facing individuals with a choice to make: “In assessing the lack of fit between our concepts we are torn between the impulses to laugh and to cry” (131). Accordingly, humor is the creative capacity of finding ways of solving and eliminating the dissonance and replacing it with harmonic congruence. As already mentioned, this study postulates that the reader of *The Crying of Lot 49* is precisely one who possesses such capacity.

The novel begins with Oedipa Maas’ coming home one summer night to learn that her ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity has died, but not without first naming her co-executrix of his estate. At first puzzled and then intrigued about what she might discover, Oedipa decides to travel to San Narciso to assume the responsibility of executing Pierce’s will, thus seizing the opportunity of escaping, even if for a short time, the banality and overall emptiness of her middle-class suburban life. In order to get assistance to execute Inverarity’s estate, Oedipa decides to travel to San Narciso, “Pierce’s domicile, and headquarters” (13). The name of the city immediately hints at the mogul’s self-obsession and ambition. However, once Oedipa gets there she soon discovers that its general aspect reveals nothing about him: “Like many other places in California, it [San Narciso] was less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts” (13). The “aura”—a mark of Pierce’s presence—that Oedipa expects to find in the place where Inverarity “[had] begun his land speculating in ten years ago, and so put down the plinth course of capital on which *everything* afterwards had been built,

however rickety or grotesque, toward the sky [emphasis added]" (13) is missing. She also learns that that "everything" turns out to be practically the whole city, which was owned by or somehow related to Inverarity's innumerable and often morally questionable businesses.

Not long after embarking on this enterprise, Oedipa finds herself stuck in the quest of looking for a mysterious postal system called Tristero—alternatively spelled Trystero, and also referred to at times as "The Tristero". As the novel progresses, this organization becomes the key to all of Oedipa's unanswered questions about Inverarity, American culture and herself. As a result, she becomes completely absorbed in her pursuit, along which she encounters a fragmented, oversaturated, and nonsensical reality that strenuously resists her attempts to impose meaning and order on it. *The Crying of Lot 49* is about and built upon saturation; not only does it work as a motif in Pynchon's work, but it also determines the style of the novel. Therefore, one of the challenges the reader has to face is how to manage the uncontrollable and ceaseless proliferation of misleading and potentially unreliable signs that puzzles Oedipa. This discussion posits that the reader will try to develop sets of logical criteria in order to make sense of this situation; however, such criteria will be contested and denied by a novel in which meaning vanishes as soon as interpretative clues are gathered and submitted to analysis. Clues that may seem significant to the general understanding of the novel end up being interpretative dead ends. One of the narrative strategies that contribute to this state of confusion is the impossibility to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant. This incongruous breakdown of hierarchies in terms of meaning is a humor generating strategy, which will be discussed in more detail below.

How the Tristero suddenly becomes the center around which Oedipa's quest and life, along with the novel's plot itself, gravitate is symptomatic of Pynchon's modus operandi in *The Crying of Lot 49*: a confusing series of quickly produced clues ends up randomly assembled and pointing in an unexpected and not quite logical direction. Surprisingly, for Oedipa this arbitrariness goes unnoticed.

Although central to the novel, the true nature of the Tristero remains impossible to define, becoming the crucial question to be solved by Oedipa and the reader as well. The Tristero's equivocal constitution is apparent from the moment it surfaces in Oedipa's world. As J. Kerry Grant rightly points out, "The Tristero is revealed to Oedipa [and the reader] in tantalizing fragments, none of them sufficient to constitute definitive evidence of even the existence of a whole, let alone its shape" (53). This indeterminacy is used to suggest a number of different, often mutually contradictory possibilities regarding the true nature of the Tristero—reality/hallucination, revolutionary/reactionary, sacred/profane—, which reinforce the ambiguity that surrounds it.

Oedipa's quest could be read as preeminently driven by her desire to impose meaning over the nonsensicality of the world. At one point of the novel, Oedipa's desire is referred to, rather tellingly, as her "growing obsession, with 'bringing something of herself'—even if that something was just her presence—to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity. She would give them order, she would create constellations" (72). Oedipa's desire to find a firm basis on which to make sense of her experiences, and the impossibility of fulfilling it, are particularly evident during her first trip to San Narciso:

so in her first minute [there], a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding . . . 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. She suspected that much. (14)

This imminent, but finally never realized epiphany illustrates Oedipa's longing for a transcendental truth that could give sense to her life made up of "a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn't she be first to admit it?) more or less identical" (2). In order to avoid frustration and the ensuing melancholia caused by the loss of an ungraspable truth, "Oedipa resolved to pull in at the next motel

she saw, however ugly, stillness and four walls having at some point become preferable to this illusion of speed, freedom, wind in your hair, unreeling landscape—it wasn't" (15). In that moment, the four walls of an ugly motel room, an image of precarious stability, are preferable for Oedipa to the equally precarious instability of her everyday experiences. Symptomatic of the ambiguities in the novel, later on it is the highway frenzy what offers Oedipa the possibility of a momentary shelter: "Amid the exhaust, sweat, glare and ill-humor of a summer evening on an American freeway, Oedipa Maas pondered her Trystero problem. All the silence of San Narciso . . . had not allowed her to think as leisurely as this freeway madness" (87).

Oedipa's desire to project meaning soon puts her in a mood in which "she could, at this stage of things, recognize signals like that, as the epileptic is said to—an odor, color, pure piercing grace announcing his seizure. Afterwards it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers" (76). The signs keep on coming to Oedipa, but the revelation never materializes. Considering the possibility that this materialization will never happen, Oedipa wonders "whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back" (76). This speculation ends up being correct; by the end of the novel Oedipa is still looking for the Tristero and nothing seems to indicate that she will ever find it.

The possibility of determining the true nature of the Tristero and of Oedipa's quest itself is actually the dilemma at the heart of the novel: is Oedipa trying to find a potentially subversive organization central to American counterculture, or is she projecting on an aimless quest her desire to find something that could provide meaning to her life and the world she lives in? Things are further complicated by the fact that, just like Oedipa, the reader has to constantly confront questions

that will not be answered through logical deduction or the revelation of an all-encompassing truth. This resistance to interpretation stems from the extreme fragmentation, the enervation of social life, the lack of epistemological and existential certitudes, and the overall nonsensicality of the postmodern world portrayed by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

This discussion adheres to the understanding of postmodernity as the cultural expression of the current stage of capitalist development, or, to use Fredric Jameson's popular turn of phrase, as "the cultural logic of late capitalism." Faced with the undeniable complexity and multiplicity of contemporary culture, postmodernity rejects the supposed benefits or even the philosophical basis for epistemological foundation, "reveling instead in multiple forms of narrative and competing, equally valid theories and perspectives." However, this "general distrust of epistemological authority" results in a situation in which "all interpretations of reality [become] arbitrary and therefore simultaneously accurate and absurd" (Grassian 10). This feeling of indeterminacy and relativism is hyperbolically exacerbated in *The Crying of Lot 49*: not only does Pynchon's novel deny its characters the possibility of having a logical understanding of the exterior social world, but it also undermines the possibility of self-knowledge, since Oedipa is incapable of deciding whether or not she is being driven solely by her desire in her quest for the Tristero.

The underground postal system epitomizes the crisis of signification at the core of postmodern capitalist America. Since its very existence is neither positively affirmed nor categorically denied, the space the Tristero occupies is neither absence nor presence, but pure indeterminacy: "Either Trystero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa, so hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man's estate" (Pynchon 88). The fact that in this indefiniteness so many desires and divergent interests converge attests to a persistent longing for a missing center that could provide logical order to the nonsensicality of the novel's portrayal of American postmodern culture. Despite the elusiveness that the Tristero

represents—its problematic status as neither presence nor absence—, what the organization stands for is nonetheless capable of providing meaning to the lives of the individuals who know about its existence. When read within a poststructuralist framework of thought, the operations through which the Tristero functions become exemplars of the concepts of play and *différance*, and the ideas about the instability of signs studied by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

The Tristero functions as what Derrida, in the context of his critique of logocentrism, calls *play*, which the French philosopher defines as “the disruption of presence.” He further explains: “The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of absence and presence” (292). Play refers to the constant dissemination of meaning in the “movement of the chain”, or, in other words, to the impossible coincidence of the signifier and signified chains in a self-identical and pristinely transparent sign. Thus, play would name that simultaneous excess and deficiency that constitute every particular sign of any signifying system.

The precarious narrative that Oedipa constructs about the Tristero resembles the construction of a mosaic; she assembles the clues that she finds randomly along her way to compose a more or less coherent picture out of traces and small fragments. Yet, it is the Tristero’s very indeterminacy what allows Oedipa to somehow make sense of the uncontrolled proliferation of signs that emerge along her quest: “with coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Tristero, to hold them together” (Pynchon 87). In its overabundance, the clues, signs, and unfolding revelations that populate Oedipa’s world echo Derrida’s ideas about the “*overabundance* of the signifier, its *supplementary* character, [which] is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*” (290). According to Derrida, the supplement is an element that is—paradoxically enough—simultaneously unnecessary

and constitutive. Only when the supplement is added as an extra component, it shows itself to be ineludibly necessary, or, in other words, constitutive. The supplement thus exposes the falseness of the supposed completeness of that to which it is added. The clues pointing to the Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49* have a supplementary character, since they are the only elements that somehow prove the existence of the organization of which they are supposed to be traces.

A hyperbolic proliferation of signs that masks an empty space is certainly a suitable formula for the Tristero. Under this light, however, it is unclear whether Oedipa will ever find the object of her pursuit. What the novel actually suggests is that the clues pointing to the Tristero will continue appearing just to glide metonymically one into the other, finally never unveiling the “truth” about the mysterious organization. At one point, Oedipa suspects that the eternal deferral of the object of her quest is a certain possibility: “Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for performance. But then she wondered if 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” (95). As mentioned above, the clues that Oedipa manages to gather have a supplementary character, since they are traces of an element that is outlined exclusively thanks to those parts that are not properly part of it; the Tristero is known through those elements that are external to it, but that constitute the only proofs of its existence. The revelation of a transcendental truth, of “a pattern” of hidden meaning—of the tellingly capitalized “Word”—that Oedipa feels is on the verge of taking place, never actually does, leaving her just with the endless series of compensatory “gemlike” clues. These innumerable clues mask a constitutive lack, since they never stop appearing but only to point to other signs and never settle on a stable referent. In addition, the “cry that might abolish the night” in the final metaphor seems to point to Oedipa’s hope that the crying of lot 49—the auction of some of Pierce’s stamps that closes the novel—finally helps her to understand and unveil the truth about Inverarity’s legacy.

Thus, Pynchon's novel manages to stage a *play* of differences in Oedipa's quest, even though it conforms to the traditional narrative of the detective novel. In this sense, *The Crying of Lot 49* subverts and parodies this code by revealing no final hidden meaning in the form of *logos* that could order and limit the *play* of signs, thus reestablishing a reassuring presence in the end. By the end of the novel signs are even more unstable than at the beginning, and one suspects that Oedipa is unlikely to find nothing more than further clues when the crying of lot 49 finally takes place. The novel ends when the auction is about to begin, in what is the last and apparently most promising clue found by Oedipa.

In this scenario, the question arises as to what are the effects of the differential nature of reality in the novel. Regarding this issue, Derrida recognizes two forms that *play* can adopt: one affirmative and the other guilty. The first refers to "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation." Following Nietzsche, Derrida emphasizes here the positive connotations of play as a form of blissful and radical freedom. Guilty play, on the other hand, which is "turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin," is "the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty . . . side of the thinking of play" (292). It may be argued that *The Crying of Lot 49* moves between these two poles, at the same time celebrating and mourning the demystification of Western logocentric culture. However, when the bond that keeps signs and referents together, however deceitfully, is broken, the task of trying to impose stable meanings on reality reveals itself as a futile enterprise and as a source of anxiety and melancholia, the undercurrent feelings that characterize the representation of American postmodern culture in Pynchon's novel.

The aforementioned feelings are openly exposed in one of the conversations Oedipa has with the philatelist Genghis Cohen, one of the many men she asks to assist her in her search for the

Tristero. By the end of an interview with the old man—whose absurd name, along with others, will be discussed in more detail below—, he pours her a drink of dandelion wine and comments: “‘It’s clearer now,’ . . . ‘A few months ago it got quite cloudy. You see, in spring, when the dandelions begin to bloom again, the wine goes through a fermentation. As if they remembered’” (79). This comment triggers Oedipa’s melancholic reflection on the discoveries she has made about Inverarity’s possessions and muddy businesses: “No, thought Oedipa, sad. As if their home cemetery in some way still did exist, in a land where you could somehow walk, and not need the East San Narciso Freeway, and bones still could rest in peace, nourishing ghosts of dandelions, no one to plow them up. As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine” (79). The tragic tone of Oedipa’s remarks exposes the melancholia inherent to the world that she discovers along her quest. This reflection can also be read as offering a glimpse of the damaging effects of the collapse of metanarratives in late capitalist America: in his disregard for history and tradition, Inverarity has no scruples to destroy a centuries-old cemetery to build a highway and make profit out of it. Thus, postmodern melancholia is fueled by the nostalgia for the lost center and the desire to somehow recover the certitudes it granted, including the grand narrative of history. In the same regard, it may be argued that what the Tristero actually represents for Oedipa is the possibility of a communal space where to escape from the alienation of postmodern American culture. The craving for the existence of such a space is what links every one of the myriad dissident groups Oedipa meets while looking for the Tristero, and what in turns links her to them.

The appeal of the organization and the enduring mystique that surrounds it stem from the fact that, for the novel’s characters, the shadowy postal system represents the countercultural possibility of true communion outside official institutions. Yet, a common code is essential for true communication of any kind, and this is exactly what Oedipa fails to find time after time in relation to the Tristero. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, language—the shared code par excellence for members of a

community—no longer functions as a means for transparent, immediate communication. Instead, it is used in private, highly idiosyncratic ways. This atomization of language, whether it is a cause or a result of the fragmentation of the social fabric, leaves individuals unable to effectively communicate with each other. Cases in point are Oedipa's repeated failed attempts at communicating with the different men she encounters and asks for help along her quest. The fact that Oedipa's adventures take place in a man's world resonates with the reference to Oedipus, since as a postmodern heroine she is the only one really determined to find a truth that nobody else seems to be willing to pursue to its ultimate consequences.

If postmodernity is the cultural logic of late capitalism, then it is worth examining how the contradictions and tensions at the core of late capitalist America are represented in *The Crying of Lot 49*. In this context, it is hard not to read Pierce as the embodiment of capitalism itself. Inverarity's simultaneous omnipresence and elusiveness aptly represents the free flow of capital in global capital markets: the emergence of new forms of business organizations, such as multinational and transnational corporations, disseminates capital and makes its influence pervade every aspect of life. Yet, the all-encompassing effects of the late capitalist mode of production are exerted from no specific identifiable place. This state of affairs is psychologically threatening, since it exposes what Fredric Jameson calls the state of "schizophrenia" that characterizes postmodernity, which he describes as "the incapacity of our minds . . . to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (25). Late capitalism creates a schizophrenic reality that exceeds the human capacity to make sense of it, and that, consequently, denies individuals' control over their own lives. The novel's multiple references to the disease of epilepsy are also indicative of a fragmentary perception and seem to point to the characters' fragile control over their own cognitive and sensory experiences in the novel's universe.

This sense of helplessness and impotence befalls Oedipa when she starts discovering that almost everything she encounters along her quest was owned by Inverarity, or somehow related to his businesses. Significantly, even though Pierce is physically dead, his presence and phantasmagoric, almost otherworldly power, which is first and foremost economic, haunts Oedipa throughout the novel. Jesús Arrabal, the anarchist Mexican man who knew Pierce and whom Oedipa happens to encounter along her journey, describes Inverarity in supernatural terms. Recalling the time they met, he calls Pierce “the oligarchist, the miracle” (97). Arrabal goes on to explain to Oedipa that a miracle is “another world’s intrusion into this one,” and that Pierce represents the almost supernatural embodiment of “the thing we [anarchists] fight.” He adds: “In Mexico the privilegiado is always, to a finite percentage, redeemed—one of the people. Unmiraculous. But your friend, unless he’s joking, is as terrifying to me as the Virgin appearing to an Indian” (97). Inverarity hovers over *The Crying of Lot 49* as an uncanny, ominous force whose motivations and true nature are always out of reach for the other characters in the novel and the reader alike.

Early in the novel, just after knowing about Pierce’s state, Oedipa recalls her last telephonic conversation with him. Calling from an unknown place in the middle of the night, Inverarity ridiculously impersonates different characters throughout the conversation:

a voice beginning in heavy Slavic tones as second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate, looking for an escaped bat, modulated to comic-Negro, then on into hostile Pachuco dialect, full of chingas and maricones; then a Gestapo officer asking her in shrieks did she have relatives in Germany and finally his Lamont Cranston voice, the one he’d talked in all the way down to Mazatlán. (2-3)

Significantly, his own voice as Pierce is never heard. Moreover, the focus given to the farce conceals the fact that the reason why he is calling Oedipa remains unknown. The masking of Pierce’s personality in this first appearance sets the tone for the rest of the novel. This fact is further

reinforced by his equivocal name as well, which, unsurprisingly, critics have read as meaning both “untruth” and “in the truth” (Grant 7). In the few occasions when Inverarity shows up, his voice and actions are always mediated through somebody else’s memories or reports. In the passage just mentioned, Oedipa’s anguish, prompted by the impossibility of locating him neither literally nor figuratively, is masked by the humor of the situation: the absurdity of Inverarity’s behavior hides the schizophrenia related to his persona.

If at some point Oedipa seriously considers the possibility that “her Tristero problem” (71) is perhaps just part of a hoax arranged by Pierce to tease her—a question that neither Oedipa nor the reader can satisfactorily answer—, it is perhaps due to the ominous overtones regarding Inverarity. Interestingly, when Oedipa faces this possibility near the end of the novel, it does not keep her from continuing her pursuit. It is as though the quest itself was more important than the real possibility of finding its object, provided there is actually one in the first place.

However, Oedipa’s willingness to keep on her pursuit against all odds is time after time overpowered by the resistance to stabilization that the fragmented world she lives in offers. The society portrayed in the novel lacks an organizing center, and this lack gives rise to a myriad of isolated and not quite coherent efforts to make sense of the fragmented reality. The novel is set in the 1960s, which as Jameson points out, are “in many ways the key transitional period, a period in which the new international order . . . is at one and the same time set in place and is swept and shaken by its own internal contradictions and by external resistance” (15). The new international order that Jameson speaks of signals the advent of late capitalism and its postmodern cultural logic. This epoch is marked by the collapse of the grand narratives of modernity, which cease to be adequate metaphors to understand reality, and by the reorganization of the features that defined modernity. The world represented in *The Crying of Lot 49* is fragmented, incoherent, and oversaturated with a multiplicity of disjointed attempts to make sense of the chaos of reality, a

situation that illustrates Celeste Olalquiaga's claim about "the disconcerting quality of postmodernism's continuous transformation of . . . emptiness into saturation" (xx).

It is through a marked emphasis on the profound fragmentation of the social fabric that the novel performs a systematic demolition of the institutions and discourses that provided meaning to modernity, illustrating Jean-François Lyotard's understanding of postmodernity as the epoch of the collapse of grand narratives. Dr. Hilarious, Oedipa's aptly named Freudian psychoanalyst—or "shrink" (7)—, for example, is a demented character whose obscure Nazi past finally leads him into madness. Interestingly, in Freudian psychoanalytic theory language plays the function of re-establishing order into the ill psyche, thus providing relief through the realization of a lost or conflicted meaning. In *The Crying of Lot 49* on the contrary, language serves the exact opposite function, being a source of an endless dissemination of meaning, a constant play of signs without clearly distinguishable—or even existent—referents.

Scientific and academic knowledge are ridiculed and discredited throughout the novel as well. In this respect, John Nefastis, the insane young scientist that lectures Oedipa about entropy and Maxwell's Demon, and Oedipa's various fruitless exchanges with inept academics and professors are cases in point. The explanation that Mike Fallopian gives Oedipa for the existence of underground organizations of inventors summarizes the general suspicion felt towards official discourses. In this case, it is the myth of brilliance that Fallopian bitterly dissects:

'Look what's happening to them. In school they got brainwashed, like all of us, into believing the Myth of the American Inventor . . . Only one man per invention. Then when they grew up they found they had to sign over all their rights to a monster like Yoyodyne; got stuck on some 'project' or 'task force' or 'team' and started being ground into anonymity. Nobody wanted them to invent—only perform their little role in a design ritual, already set down for them in some procedures handbook.

What's it like, Oedipa, being all alone in a nightmare like that? Of course they stick together, they keep in touch' (70)

It is important noticing that, even if Fallopian's explanation addresses the inherent falseness of what he calls "the Myth of the American Inventor," he focuses on the "nightmarish" and numbing effects that the destruction of that national fiction has on individuals. Remarkably, it is corporate capitalism which effects this destruction.

Humor is used—and overused—all through *The Crying of Lot 49*, mainly in the forms of parody, irony, puns and word-games, and the portrayal of absurd situations. The use of humor as a narrative strategy that allows the reader to overcome the postmodern melancholia in the novel is to be deciphered in the reception; even if the world portrayed in the novel—situations and characters included—is overtly hilarious in its absurdity and senselessness, most of the time, if not always, the characters are not aware of the comic dimension that defines their lives and experiences. This lack of awareness adds to a certain tragic dimension closely related to the melancholia already described.

The otherwise irrelevant passage in the novel that tells the origin of the Inamorati Anonymous organization is remarkable because it clearly shows the narrator's ironic voice. It also illustrates Pynchon's deceptively humorous portrayal of profoundly grim situations. The story, which for the most part is a parody of the values of corporate America, revolves around a successful executive who, at age 39, finds himself "automated" out of his job:

Having been since age 7 rigidly instructed in 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 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. But

previous training got the better of him: he could not make the decision without first hearing the ideas of a committee. (91)

After a series of ridiculous deliberations the executive finally decides to commit suicide by setting himself on fire, but just seconds before executing his suicide plan, “his wife and some man, whom he soon recognized as the very efficiency expert at Yoyodyne who had caused him to be replaced by an IBM 7094” (93) come home. After the executive hears them having sexual intercourse “on the Moroccan rug in the living room,” his wife and her lover discover his presence. He then tells them about his plan: “I was about to do the Buddhist thing [set himself on fire],’ explained the executive. ‘Nearly three weeks it takes him,’ marveled the efficiency expert, ‘to decide. You know how long it would’ve taken the IBM 7094? Twelve micro-seconds. No wonder you were replaced’” (93). The story, which adds nothing particularly relevant to the novel’s plot, goes on then.

Another strategy used for the production of a humorous response is through the representation of madness: many of the characters Oedipa meets along her quest are or become mentally unstable throughout the novel. Those characters, to whom Oedipa resorts in search for help and advice, usually leave her helpless and even more confused. They also emphasize Oedipa’s acute loneliness in her pursuit for the Tristero. One of the first characters Oedipa visits is Roseman, her lawyer, who is insanely obsessed with a television program about a successful lawyer called Perry Mason, in what is a parodic reference to the lawyer and detective in Stanley Gardner’s pulp novels. Oedipa goes to Roseman’s office and finds him sleepless and overexcited: “Roseman had also spent a sleepless night, brooding over the Perry Mason television program the evening before, which his wife was fond of but toward Roseman cherished a fierce ambivalence, wanting at once to be a successful trial lawyer like Perry Mason and, since this was impossible, to destroy Perry Mason by undermining him” (9). When Oedipa asks Roseman why he looks so disturbed by her presence, he answers: “‘You might have been one of Perry Mason’s spies,’ said Roseman. After thinking a

moment he added, ‘Ha, ha’” (9). The humorous way in which the scene is portrayed blurs the fact that Roseman is completely deranged and that he suffers from a pathological incapacity of distinguishing reality from fiction. Obsessed as he is with a fictional character, Roseman lives in a state of delusional paranoia; he even plans to publish a book called *The Profession v. Perry Mason, A Not-so-hypothetical Indictment* denouncing Perry Mason’s falseness and the inaccuracy of his methods.

A similar comical representation of insanity concerns Oedipa’s psychoanalyst, Dr Hilarious, who harasses her to get her involved in “the bridge,” the code name for his experiments about the effect of different kinds of hallucinatory drugs on “a large sample of suburban wives” (8). A rather unorthodox therapist, one of Hilarious’ therapeutic techniques consists of making faces: “he once claimed to have cured a case of hysteria blindness with his number 38, the ‘Fu-Manchu’ . . . which involved slanting the eyes up with the index fingers, enlarging the nostrils with the middle fingers, pulling the mouth wide with the pinkies and protruding the tongue” (9). From the name of the character to his completely ridiculous techniques, psychoanalytic discourse embodied in the doctor is mercilessly vilified and ridiculed. When talking to Oedipa in their last encounter, Hilarious mourns his failure as a Freud’s disciple and the failure of psychoanalysis itself: “I tried . . . to submit myself to that man, to the ghost of the cantankerous Jew. Tried to cultivate a faith in the literal truth of everything he wrote, even the idiocies and contradictions . . . And part of me really wanted to believe—like a child hearing, in perfect safety, a tale of horror—that the unconscious would be like any other room, once the light was let in” (109-110). The absurdly comical way in which Hilarious is represented again masks a darker, more sinister side to the character: his involvement in Nazi experiments with prisoners, the memories of which finally drive him crazy. Not only does Oedipa, Hilarious’ patient, seem saner than him, but also it is she who finally helps him when, entrenched in his office and armed with a rifle, he finally goes crazy. In an inversion of the psychoanalytic situation

Oedipa advises Hilarious: “‘Face up to your social responsibilities,’ . . . ‘Accept the reality principle. You’re outnumbered and they have superior firepower’” (111).

The names of the novel’s characters function as full of parodical potential as well. Many of them are overtly hyperbolic in their references, but their meanings are impossible to conclusively determine in the context of the novel’s oversaturation of signs. Hence, even when they seem to be representative or symbolic of the characters, it is impossible to address the references in a straightforward manner. This happens because names mean either too much or too little, in what could be read as a commentary on the “tyranny of naming itself” (Grant 1) that is one of the novel’s most prominent motifs. Oedipa’s name, for example, resonates with quest and casts her as a postmodern female mythological hero. However, the facts that the name is feminized and that the character is set in a completely different scenario make the reference equivocal. Tristero, with its echo of melancholia, is also particularly loaded and another case in point. Thus, the name choice of characters and organizations is a locus of comic representation. Names such as Mike Fallopian, John Nefastis, Dr Hilarious, Pierce Inverarity, Genghis Cohen, and Oedipa Maas and organizations such as W.A.S.T.E., KCUF Radio Station, and Peter Penguid Society are all highly improbable yet impossible to ignore due to their ridiculous yet suggestive power. Names are often misleadingly charged with overtly obvious but confusing connotations (Oedipa, W.A.S.T.E., Tristero, San Narciso), and sometimes they just seem to be motivated for the sake of absurd fun (Genghis Cohen, KCUF Radio, Mike Fallopian). Hyper-referential names such as Inamorati Anonymous and The Greek Way (a gay bar) are also sources of comical effects. The former is a parodic twist on the Alcoholics Anonymous fellowship, but, literally, for people in love. The latter is a reference to the age-old association between Greek culture and homosexuality. It is worth noticing that however humorous this last reference may be, it seems to point again to the novel’s universe as essentially masculine, which would partly explain Oedipa’s acute loneliness and helplessness along her quest.

Since some of the names seem to serve a larger purpose within the narrative while others seem to be merely absurd, an active reader is necessary to somehow define a general criterion through which the incongruities that names posit could be solved. As already mentioned, this capacity of solving incongruities is what elicits a humorous response.

Throughout the text, the narrator's constant ironic comments add to the overall humorous tone of the novel. For example, regarding Mucho's unwillingness to sweeten his coffee with honey because "like all things viscous it distressed him," the narrator reports and comments: "He [Mucho] walked out of a party one night because somebody used the word 'creampuff,' it seemed maliciously, in his hearing. The man was a refugee Hungarian pastry cook talking shop, but there was your Mucho: thin-skinned" (4). Also, when Oedipa, after having morbidly speculated about the way Pierce might have died, laughs out of nervousness alone in the middle of her kitchen, the narrator points out: "That only made her laugh, out loud and helpless: You're so sick, Oedipa, she told herself, or the room, which knew" (1-2). The incongruity of personifying the room so that it knows what is impossible for an inanimate object to know not only is a humor generating strategy, but it also sets the tone for the rest of the novel and its particular bizarre logic.

There are also numerous examples of absurd humor in the encounter between Oedipa and Metzger, Pierce's estate co-executor, at the "Echo Court" motel. Once a child movie star known as Baby Igor, the gallant and handsome Metzger visits Oedipa and tries to seduce her. After realizing Metzger's intentions towards her, Oedipa by chance turns the television on and accidentally finds the broadcast of *Cashiered*, one of the films about Baby Igor's adventures, so she and Metzger start watching it. The movie ends up being the melodramatic sob story of a father, his little son and his dog in the middle of war. The humor of the situation, however, does not stem from the film, but from Metzger's absurd comments as he and Oedipa watches it: "Ridiculous," said Metzger [commenting on a scene]. "They'd built a gate in it, so German U-boats could get through to attack

the British fleet . . . ‘How do you know that?’ ‘Wasn’t I there?’” (21). After playing a game called “Strip Botticelli” and drinking a couple of bottles, Metzger succeeds in seducing Oedipa.

The Courier’s Tragedy, the revenge Jacobean play in which Oedipa learns about the Tristero for the first time is notable for its extensive use of parody. The play—whose fictional character stresses the novel’s playful intertextuality and complicates even more its voidness of referents—functions as a plot device to introduce the Tristero and recount its history and origins. However, in its nearly unintelligible plot full of excesses of all kind, the play, which is integrally told, also serves as a platform for black humor, irony, and parody: “There is an amusing scene in where Francesca delicately seeks to remind her brother of the social taboos against incest. They seem to have slipped her mind, replies Angelo [Francesca’s brother], during the ten years he and Francesca have been having *their* affair” (51). The scene in which this dialogue takes places ends with the incestuous couple “collapsing onto a divan” (51), hinting again at a parodic representation of psychoanalytic discourse. There are substantial examples of black humor in the frequent scenes of murder and torture in *The Courier’s Tragedy*. One of the most striking is a scene in which a cardinal is “forced to bleed into a chalice and consecrate his own blood, not to God, but to Satan. They [his torturers] also cut off his big toe, and he is made to hold it up like a Host and say, ‘This is my body,’ the keen-witted Angelo observing that it’s the first time he’s told anything like the truth in fifty years of systematic lying” (53). In the play’s fifth act, which the narrator describes as “entirely an anticlimax,” “every mode of violent death available to Renaissance man, including a lye pit, land mines, a trained falcon with envemon’d talons, is employed. It plays, as Metzger remarked later, like a Road Runner cartoon in blank verse” (58). Saturation is at work again in this case and its result is a comic effect: the exaggeration of death and its devices, the morbid delight and light-heartedness with which scenes of pain and death are represented turns drama into comedy, performing again the comic representation of human misery.

The different situations analyzed so far all point out to a sense of helplessness, of being caught in an ominous, ungraspable system which exceeds the human capacity to make logical sense of it, and that has destabilizing effects on individuals. The fragmentation and nonsensicality of reality, and the existential void they are expressions of, are in one way or another resisted by the characters in this distressful and enervating scenario. However futile their attempts of defiance are, they all attest to the desire of somehow resisting postmodern melancholia. Oedipa and the outcasts she meets on her journey all share a certain nostalgia for a world in which the human experience was still meaningful, spatially and historically intelligible, and in which events could always be referred to, and understood in terms of, legitimate explanatory frameworks. This common desire for stable meanings crystallizes in the shadowy Tristero, probably because in its indeterminacy it still offers an open possibility to escape the logic of late capitalism and the melancholia that characterizes it. Oedipa's desire to give some kind of intelligible order to a chaotic system of randomly assorted signs, her desire to "project a world" (64) is notably put into question in her interview with Driblette, *The Courier's Tragedy's* director, who tells her: "You came to talk about the play," he said. "Let me discourage you. It was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything" (60). If, as already mentioned, the evidence seems to indicate that Oedipa will never find the object of her quest, the novel suggests that it is her desire to find meaning what keeps her from resigning to what even early on becomes evident: that she will never find the Tristero.

Acting *as if*, in spite of all evidences of failure, and out of self-delusion is an expression of what the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls cynical reason, by which he refers to the state of resigned apathy that has taken over contemporary culture as a result of the disenchantment with the failed project of modernity: "cynicism is *enlightened false consciousness*" (5). According to Sloterdijk, cynical reason is the postmodern condition par excellence: the resigned assumption that after the

collapse of all metanarratives and collective projects, the relativization of all truths, and the unmasking of progress as an Enlightenment myth, life goes on. Moreover, Sloterdijk links the emptiness that characterizes postmodern culture with melancholia: “Psychologically, present-day cynics can be understood as borderline melancholies, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work. Indeed, this is the essential point in modern cynicism: the ability of its bearers to work—in spite of anything that might happen, and especially, after anything that might happen” (5). The cynic’s disenchantment is expressed in an attitude of distrust and dismissal of any sort of ideological project, accompanied by the incapacity of investing those hopes into another kind of endeavors. The cynic deeply distrusts the culture he is part of, but he also is deeply aware of his limitations as an individual; consequently, the acknowledgment of the impossibility of any sort of confrontation with the culture that is nonetheless despised comes as a natural response. Faced with this state of general disillusionment the individual must decide between melancholia or cynicism: “We have to choose between a pessimism that remains “loyal” to its [the Enlightenment project] origins and reminds one of decadence and a lighthearted disrespect in the continuation of the original tasks” (6). The cynic chooses the latter.

The cynic is not represented in *The Crying of Lot 49*. As already mentioned, characters are not aware of the senselessness of the world they live in, which is part of the tragic aspect of their lives and actions. Thus it is the reader who has to respond with cynicism to the world the novel portrays. Faced with the impossibility of finding meaning in a novel that resists any attempt of stabilization, the reader of *The Crying of Lot 49* resorts to cynical reason in an effort to overcome melancholia. The articulation of humor into a strategy of resistance to postmodern melancholia performed by the reader is the expression of cynical reason; the emptiness that the novel constantly seems on the verge of collapsing into, making the reader collapse as well, is thus masked by light-heartedness and humor.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* there is an evident attempt to represent the complexity of contemporary culture. Both the form and the content of the novel reflect the major social, economical, and cultural changes provoked by the advent of late capitalism and its postmodern cultural logic. In this discussion postmodern culture is defined as eminently melancholic due to the collapse of the grand narratives of modernity and the absence of ontological and epistemological certitudes, all of which produce a state of affairs in which individuals are left to their own precarious devices to make sense of an unstable and destabilizing reality. *The Crying of Lot 49* is thus shown to be a deeply melancholic work, even though the melancholy at work in the novel is far from immediately evident. In this sense, melancholy is the extreme opposite of humor in terms of prominence: where the latter is one of the most outstanding and easily noticeable features of the novel, the former is subdued to the point that it may even go unnoticed on a first approach to the novel. However, its presence is by no means less persistent.

The severe fragmentation of the social fabric in postmodern culture is also expressed at the level of individuals, in their schizophrenic incapacity of making sense of their experiences. The realm of the social shatters as a result of the collapse of the grand narratives that once guaranteed the existence of collectively agreed parameters that qualified human experience. This produces a culture marked by isolation and by the absence of effective communication, a social formation in which language is used as private games. However, this adverse and hostile reality is contested by individuals' desire to overcome the senselessness of postmodern culture. Even if this resistance is weak, and perhaps not even consciously articulated, it attests to a desire to overcome postmodern melancholia.

The examination of the functions that humor plays in relation to the representation of postmodern culture reveals humor's paradoxical double function in the novel: on the one hand, it is used to discredit and ridicule official discourses, exposing the collapse of the modern project and its

incapacity to continue to provide meaningful and reliable experiential, epistemological, and ontological frameworks through which individuals could experience their lives in meaningful ways. On the other hand, humor provides comic relief by softening and harmonizing the psychologically threatening incongruities of the postmodern experience that humor helped to expose in its full extent in the first place. Thus, the functions humor plays in the novel point to the configuration of a narrative strategy—the creation of a cynical implied reader—through which postmodern melancholia can be resisted, even if precariously. This strategy, which is to be deciphered in the reception of the novel, is an expression of both cynical reason and of the desire to somehow regain control over the production and circulation of meaning.

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