

« Do I Know You ? » :
author-reader relationship in *The Crying of Lot 49*

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Maurice COUTURIER

«DO I KNOW YOU ? » : AUTHOR-READER RELATIONSHIP IN
«THE CRYING OF LOT 49»

Novelists are not always the easiest people to meet on a friendly basis. When they are as warm and hearty good talkers as Robert Coover, you tend to be easily intimidated ; you have the strange feeling of being confronted with a roomful of exuberant strangers and can't muster the courage to take the floor. I know a lady who, having the privilege of receiving him and his wife for a few days in her home after the publication of *Spanking the Maid* was terribly disturbed when making the bed for her guests ; during their visit, she was at great pains to be herself. When the novelist is a haughty aristocrat who believes, like Nabokov, that «[h]is best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning,» (1) you terribly hesitate to solicit an interview and would rather meet him, as if by accident, in a secluded nook of the Garden of Eden, without having had to announce your visit nor to introduce yourself as a Nabokov expert. You are never sure that you will fit the part.

On the other hand, readers and critics tend to bear a grudge against the author who, like Thomas Pynchon (a one-time student of Nabokov), has retired for good in his ivory tower and seems to scorn the world. When reading or studying his novels, one would like to wheedle a sign of recognition, of approval, but nothing happens, because he scornfully spurns our miserable supplication or arrests our pathetic gesturings with a chilling «Do I know you ?» Such is the frustrating experience most readers have had with *The Crying of Lot 49*. At first the story seems rather straightforward. You have good reasons to believe that you will reach the safe port of a mind-resting dénouement at the end, but you don't ; the author discourteously slams a door in your face in the last sentence. This little novel, which is a great deal more elaborate than it looks, remains a brainracking puzzle eighteen years after its first publication. It taxes the intelligence and imagination of the critics in the same way as *The Turn of the Screw* with which it shares many characteristics. Its narrative discourse serves as an opaque screen between us and the author ; its circuitous plot sends us on a wild-goose chase from which, we fear, we may never return ; its metaphorical network catches us in its web and threatens to dilute and absorb us. This novel, which appears as a kind of textbook on communication and the media, raises endless problems concerning the exchange which develops between author and reader in postmodern fiction.

I. The Narrative Discourse

There is apparently nothing new in the narrative discourse of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Thanks to Joyce and Virginia Woolf, we are now accustomed to this form of style which espouses the protagonist's point of view. Here is the opening sentence :

One summer afternoon Mrs Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets

numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary.(2)

This is a straightforward discourse, apparently, with an omniscient narrator pulling the strings. The opening words, «One summer afternoon,» which are reminiscent of the incantatory «Once upon a time and a very good time it was» with which Joyce opened *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, seem to be an indication that no first person narrator will ever come on stage. Mrs Oedipa Maas is thereby introduced as an object, rather than a subject, of the narrative ; her social and matrimonial status is underlined as was that of Clarissa at the beginning of *Mrs Dalloway* : «Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.» (3) A male character's name does not lend itself to such subtleties. Mrs Oedipa Maas is presented as a member of a class, that of the married women, and as a dependent with a borrowed name (that of her husband). Her first and most important name, Oedipa, is sandwiched between the social tag and her husband's name.

The absence of Mrs Dalloway's first name at the beginning of Virginia Woolf's novel was due to the fact that the narrative echoed the thoughts of Lucy. The status of that sentence is ambiguous though. It is either a reported speech (the original words being : «I will buy the flowers myself»), or a sample of what Ann Banfield, in her marvellous book *Unspeakable Sentences*, calls «represented thought,» (4) and which used to be called «interior monologue,» Lucy saying to herself something like : «Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself, therefore I won't have to worry about that.» Ann Banfield would probably object to a double interpretation of the same sentence ; the dogma «1E/1 Speaker», which means that one expression (which is not the same as «one sentence» of course) must have one and only one speaker, is the founding principle of her theory. It is clear, however, that the sentence can be turned into different expressions, a problem which she does not raise. It probably represents Mrs Dalloway's utterance but not necessarily verbatim ; she could have said : «I will buy the flowers myself,» but it would have sounded a little insulting to Lucy, implying that she was unable to do it properly. More likely, Clarissa said something like : «I'll take care of the flowers, Lucy, you have so much to do !» But Lucy may have understood that her mistress didn't trust her with the flowers and the «herself» in her interior monologue (translated narratively into «represented thought») would mean just that.

Let us now return to *The Crying of Lot 49*. The occurrence of the first name in this opening line prevents us from perceiving the ambiguity of the discourse at first. The speaker-oriented verb, «came,» is the first clear indication that the story is being told from Oedipa's angle. The next important clue is the adverb, «perhaps,» which could naturally reflect the narrator's personal comment but more likely echoes Oedipa's doubts. The latter interpretation is immediately confirmed when we read : «to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix...» The apposition would be narratively redundant if the text were written from the point of view of a heterodiegetic narrator ; we already know Mrs Maas's first name. The whole passage is in fact written in the «represented thought» style ; Oedipa's thoughts could be interpreted like this : «to find out that I, Oedipa, had been name executor, or I suppose, executrix...» The apposition simply implies that she was terribly surprised that Inverarity could entrust her with such an important task. The preterit, «she supposed,» would be somewhat suspicious in either reported speech or plain narrative style, like the preterit of «to believe» in the following passage from Nabokov's *Transparent*

Things : «Armande believed (in the vulgar connotation of the word) that Julia Moor had met Percy. Julia believed she had. So did Hugh, indeed, yes». (5) Verbs of consciousness like «to believe» or «to suppose» tend to assume different meanings in the preterit ; that explains why the narrator of *Transparent Things* had to specify that «believed» must be understood in its vulgar sense which is quite natural in the present tense.

The psychological motivation for the correction («or she supposed executrix») is not obvious at first. Oedipa has been informed that she was «named executor» of Pierce Inverarity by a letter from a law firm signed by her co-executor, Metzger. (6) Inverarity had named her in a codicil added to his will ; since the chief executor, named in the will proper, was a man, Oedipa could only be referred to as «co-executor». Mentally she reacts to being mentioned in the letter in the masculine gender, but it is not clear if she is reacting to the wording of the letter or to that of the will. She senses that someone, an institution, perhaps, is refusing to acknowledge her sex, and she resents that.

Two or three different discourses are embedded here :

- the narrative discourse representing Oedipa's thoughts
- Oedipa's response to Metzger's letter
- Oedipa's response to Inverarity's will.

The exact meaning is undecidable because there is no way to find out «to whom» (remember *Mrs Dalloway* again) Oedipa is responding. Faced with this form of discourse, called «represented thought» by Ann Banfield, the reader is compelled to offer a number of relevant paraphrases and to interact with all the subjects Oedipa may be responding to, plus one, Oedipa herself.

In novels like *The Crying of Lot 49* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the reader experiences difficulties to distinguish the narrators from the protagonists (Oedipa, Stephen), or, for that matter, from the authors. Adult Joyce obviously struggled to espouse the stream-of-consciousness of his protagonist through this style, modulating his language according to the age of Stephen and forcing his reader to change his stance from chapter to chapter. Wayne C. Booth personally thinks that Joyce has burdened his reader with an impossible task :

Whatever intelligence Joyce postulates in his reader – let us assume the unlikely case of its being comparable to his own – will not be sufficient for precise inference of a pattern of judgments which is, after all, private to Joyce. And this will be true regardless of how much distance from his own hero we believe him to have achieved by the time he concluded his final version. We simply cannot avoid the conclusion that to some extent the book itself is at fault, regardless of its great virtues.(7)

The illusion which runs through this verdict is the same as the one we found earlier in Nabokov's arrogant statement about his «best audience». The only acceptable reading of a literary text is that of its author. The modernist or the postmodern text tries precisely to beat this illusion : it induces the reader to interact with a multiplicity of characters, speakers, thinkers, to dilute himself in endless psychodramas, and eventually to forget the author he was reaching for

By the way, Joyce did perhaps commit a slip in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by giving too clear an indication of his own reading. This happens at the beginning of Chapter 4, during the evocation of Stephen's macerations and devotions : «he seemed to feel his soul in devotion pressing like fingers the keyboard of a great cash register and to see the amount of his purchase start forth immediately in heaven...» (8) The semi-modal, «seem», at the beginning, is partly

responsible for the ambiguity. Apparently, the narrator is sticking to his role, hiding himself behind the protagonist ; but, as the sentence develops, we have the feeling that he is deliberately prompting words to Stephen who, in the state of mind he found himself in after the retreat, was unlikely to metaphorize in this ironical way. The author's intention clearly shows through the text at this point ; or, to put it more scientifically, his discourse supplants that of his protagonist. But this is rather exceptional elsewhere in the novel, so that we rarely have the feeling of making contact with Joyce himself.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, there are no such slips or tips. The reader understands comparatively well what Oedipa feels or understands, but he does not know how the author gauges her. The narrative reads like a third-person transposition of Oedipa's thoughts or words, or of the words she hears, like for example in the following passages :

She left Kinneret, then, with no idea she was moving towards anything new.

It may have been an intuition that the letter would be newsless inside that made Oedipa look more closely at its outside, when it arrived. At first she didn't see. (9)

The summary of *The Courier's Tragedy* is written in the present tense, but obviously it is meant as an accurate representation of Oedipa's experience of the play :

It is at about this point in the play, in fact, that things really get peculiar, and a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words (10)

Towards the end, the style turns to straightforward stream-of-consciousness: Change your name to Miles, Dean, Serge, and/or Leonard, baby, she advised her reflection in the half-light of that afternoon's vanity mirror. Either way, they'll call it paranoia. They. Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, into a secret richness and concealed density of dream... (11)

Here also we can find a strong image which could be interpreted as the narrator's prompting. But Oedipa is so utterly alienated from reality at this point that the image, the «vanity mirror», may have occurred to her spontaneously. Even our hesitation is important : we can never be sure that we have made contact with the narrator or the author ; we cannot even distinguish between the two. It is our desperate quest to make contact with Pynchon which keeps us reading, even though we never manage to score a hit.

II. Looking for the story

So far, only the narrative discourse has been taken into account. A text, like a novel, is a whole in which a diegesis (the story told) and a discourse interact in a very complex way as the structuralists have explained. In fact, there is no clear-cut difference between «histoire» and «discours» as Benveniste once naively believed ; it is for the purpose of our analysis that we distinguish between the text as a discourse and the text as a story, as Todorov has repeatedly explained. The two are inextricably linked like the figure and the ground in a drawing as they are defined by Hofstadter in *Gödel, Escher, Bach* :

When a figure or «positive space» (e.g., a human form, or a letter, or a still life) is drawn inside a frame, an unavoidable consequence is that its complementary shape — also called the «ground» — has also been drawn.

In most drawings, however, this figure-ground relationship plays little

role. The artist is much less interested in the ground than in the figure.

But sometimes, an artist will take interest in the ground as well.(12) In some extreme cases, in Escher's lithographs or Magritte's paintings for example, the figure and the ground endlessly mirror each other. It is the case also in Barthelme's «The Balloon», as I have explained elsewhere : the reader becomes gradually incapable of distinguishing between the balloon *qua* balloon and the balloon *qua* fiction.(13)

Having failed to make contact with Pynchon through the discourse (the vehicle, the ground), let us examine the story (the tenor, the figure). In a folk tale like those analyzed by Propp, or in a fable by La Fontaine, the story follows a logical course and ends up in a satisfactory dénouement which easily lends itself to an allegorical interpretation. Here, we are confronted with an insoluble problem : the story has no proper beginning, no proper development, no ending to speak of, as if Pynchon had come across the same difficulty as Barthelme's narrator in «The Dolt» : «Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin».(14)

No single model is adequate to analyze this story. The «modèle actantiel» invented by Greimas cannot apply since Oedipa is alternately the subject, the object, the donator, etc... The lack of closure of the story, the absence of a dénouement, makes it impossible to reconstruct the logic of the previous sequences. The story boomerangs, in fact, against three sets of structuring elements :

- the places
- the men
- the texts.

Instead of «story», one could naturally say «Oedipa». It is Oedipa who is tossed around like this, like the can of hairspray which has run amuck in Chapter 2. She cannot be a proper «subject», to borrow Greimas' terminology, since she does not even know what «object» she is looking for. This is not a detective story, as some critics have suggested, but a parody of Perceval's quest of the Holy Grail. Oedipa has probably been told, like Perceval, that she was not to ask too many questions, but she can't help herself and precipitates her own doom. It is because she always wants to know what happens next in the movie she is watching in the company of Metzger that she gets involved in a love affair. The questioning will go on with Fallopian, Driblette, Koteks, Nefastis and all the other men. As Metzger remarks when she decides to go and speak to Driblette :

«Some people today can drive VW's, carry a Sony radio in their shirt pocket. Not this one, folks, she wants to right wrongs, twenty years after it's all over. Raise ghosts. All from a drunken hassle with Manny Di Presso».(15)

It is because she asks too many questions that she is tossed around from place to place, from man to man, and from text to text.

The parallelism (should one speak of compatibility ?) between the three sets of structuring elements is not faultless all along. In the opening pages, Oedipa is in Kinneret with Mucho, her husband, but there is no text yet between them. The text will appear when she leaves him for San Narciso : he writes a «newsless letter» to her whose chief message will be on the envelope : «REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POTS-MASTER» (with a little joke on «mail/male» which appears also in *Gravity's Rainbow* and Barthelme's *Come Back, Dr Caligari*). The text is therefore a by-product of a separation between two persons ; it is an attempt, often quite trivial, to obliterate space and time. Mucho is saying

nothing in his letter, except that he would like to have her back, because he needs her sexually and psychologically. The newsless letter is then a pathetic begging for love which the considerate «postmaster» spells out on the envelope by saying that the husband must be informed about his wife's infidelities.

When Oedipa returns to Kinneret at the end of Chapter 5, it is not to pay him a visit but to consult her psychiatrist. She seems to have completely forgotten her disoriented husband, being herself too engrossed in her problems to worry about him. She meets him accidentally, outside the psychiatrist's place, in a KCUF mobile unit. A communication cross-over takes place at this moment : «Mucho pressed the cough button a moment, but only smiled. It seemed odd. How could they hear a smile ?». (16) Mucho simply wants to tell her with a visual sign, that he is pleased to see her, but he is afraid that the sign will be «overheard» on the air. After interviewing her, he calls her «Mrs Edna Mosh» for no particular reason, saying that the name will «come out the right way» and explaining that he had to make allowance for «the distortion on these rigs». (17) He is simply saying, in fact, that she looks different now and does not bear his name anymore. He too has changed during her absence as his boss will explain to Oedipa : «they're calling him the Brothers N. He's losing his identity, Edna, how else can I put it ? Day by day, Wendell is less himself and more generic.» (18) This time, it is Oedipa who has asked to be called Edna, playing the dreadful game of her distracted husband. They are all playing musical chairs without realizing it.

Here is how the Mucho plot could be summarized :

Mrs Oedipa Maas leaves Mucho in Kinneret for San Narciso and Inverarity's estate.

Mucho tries to lure her back by writing a newsless letter.

Oedipa comes back to Kinneret to see Hilarius, her psychiatrist, and accidentally meets Mucho who calls her Mrs Edna Mosh.

Oedipa calls herself Edna and leaves Kinneret for good.

The ruling principle which accounts for this strange plot could be called «tangentiality» :

Oedipa does not leave Mucho for Inverarity, but Kinneret for San Narciso.

Mucho's letter does not communicate with its content but with the blurb on the envelope.

Oedipa does not come back to Kinneret for Mucho but for Hilarius. Mucho does not call her Oedipa but Edna...

With each new sequence, the characters drift away from each other and assume new identities, as if the story were beginning again each time. The process of interaction which had started earlier between Oedipa and Mucho does not bring them any closer to each other, nor does it make them any happier. It is a destructive process which pulls them apart.

In the course of the story, Oedipa visits, or tries to visit, every place at least twice : she returns to Kinneret, she goes back to San Narciso, she calls San Francisco on the phone. When she is back in San Narciso in Chapter 6, she goes a second time to the Scope, to Zapf's bookstore, to Genghis Cohen's... The places are more or less the same each time, except Zapf's bookstore which has gone up in smoke; but the men who are «metonymically» connected with them keep changing : Mucho has lost his identity, Metzger has run away with a nymphet, Driblette has drowned himself, Zapf has moved... There is a teasing suggestion, too, that

the old man at Vesperhaven House, Thoth, is the original for the old sailor at the Embarcadero in San Francisco who asks Oedipa to post a letter for him. The time gap between the two visits to the same place always brings dramatic changes in each of the interlocutors, as if the transformation of one deictic coordinate, time, succeeded not only in altering what Barthelme humorously calls the «universe of discourse»(19) but also the subjects themselves.

The only areas of certainty seem to be the texts; Oedipa doesn't trust anything but the documents. It is a text, the letter, itself a translation of another text, the will with its codicil, which sent her upon her quest. The text takes her back to a place, Mexico, which she will never visit in the course of the story, except, vicariously, through the intervention of a Mexican she meets in San Francisco, Jesus Arrabal, a complementary figure and ideal enemy of Inverarity, as he says to Oedipa : «He is too exactly and without flaw the thing we fight.» (20) Inverarity's will, along with its translation in legal jargon, is going to manipulate Oedipa from beginning to end : it sends her off to San Narciso, brings her to meet Metzger and the Paranoids, and leads her to attend a performance of *The Courier's Tragedy*. The play is, of course, the second most important text in the book; Oedipa wants to rediscover the original, cleansed of all the additions and inflections added by Driblette and the various scholars, and her quest takes her to Zapf's bookstore, to the home of an eminent specialist of Elizabethan drama, Bortz, to the Lectern Press in San Francisco, back to Zapf's bookstore or what is left of it, and to Bortz's place, but not to Driblette since the actor is now dead.

Oedipa hopes that she may decipher the secret coded into Inverarity's estate thanks to the play. Unfortunately, the only relevant passage is of doubtful authenticity. The whole story hangs perhaps on a misprint. Oedipa's predicament may be the same as Nabokov's John Shade, in *Pale Fire*, who naively thought that the «white fountain» he saw during a heart attack really existed in the world beyond because a lady was reported in a newspaper to have seen the same white fountain in similar circumstances. Unfortunately, there was a misprint in the article; the original word was «mountain» instead of «fountain». John Shade lamely comments : «Life Everlasting – based on a misprint !» (21)

Oedipa is not concerned with «Life Everlasting» but with Tristero and Inverarity. She hopes that once she has discovered the original text she will know for sure if Tristero ever existed and is still around. She will know that she has properly deciphered the message addressed to her through his will by Inverarity. Her personal stake in this quest is therefore to reestablish communication with Inverarity, a communication she herself interrupted a year before when she hung up on him. Her quest is hopeless however : if she succeeds in making contact with Inverarity, in discovering the existence of Tristero, she will lose happiness and contentment for good since she will know that her universe is being undermined by an adverse system. She is caught in what Bateson and his disciples would call a «double bind» : if she succeeds she fails, if she fails she succeeds.

The constant reference to, and manipulation of, texts achieve one thing at least for the reader : they foreground the text of the novel and intimate that there is no pre-text, no «Ur-text», but only a complex body of words which can't be rearranged in any other way. *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to be a new version of Borges's «Pierre Ménard» : the reader, like the Don Quixote scholar, can only rewrite the text verbatim. He is burdened with the same impossible task as Oedipa and caught in the same double-bind : if another text is discovered behind or beneath Pynchon's text, it is a sure proof that the novel has been misread !

The Crying of Lot 49, like James's *The Turn of the Screw* whose title it

mirrors morphologically, continues to harass the reader endlessly because of its lack of closure and its paradoxical structure. It saturates him in the same way as the whole experience saturated Oedipa : «It's over, she said, they've saturated me. From here on I'll only close them out.» (22) This complex little novel teaches us «not to insist on meanings» as Barthelme advised in «The Balloon», (23) but induces us to yield to the fascination of the text. «A good try !» Pynchon seems to say at the end of our pathetic quest, «but you have failed again. You were in fact trying to reach me through the infinite layers of the text, through the endless gallery of my male characters. Sorry, but we haven't yet been introduced !»

III. The Metaphor of Communication

Pynchon can parry all our attacks. Yet, if we didn't make all these «thrusts at truth», (24) if we didn't metaphorize, the text of the novel would be lifeless and limp. The hurried reader who walks along the galleries of Escher's imaginary museum won't notice the complexity of a lithograph like «Convex and Concave» in which stairs can go up and down at the same time, ceilings can turn into floors, etc..., or the circularity of «Print Gallery» in which the young visitor is digested by, stuck upon, the print he is looking at. Our fascination is not spontaneous. It grows in proportion to our personal involvement. It is the same thing with *The Crying of Lot 49*, as Tony Tanner explains : «It is a strange book in that the more we learn the more mysterious everything becomes. The more we *think* we know, the less we *know* we know.» (25) And yet we can't stop reading the book again and again with nearly morbid complacency. This is sheer narcissism, of course : it brings out the best in us and gives us the illusion for a while of participating in the creative process.

Our attitude towards the novel is largely conditioned by Oedipa's own narcissism which, as we learn at the end of Chapter 1, predated the death of Inverarity. She remembers how her men's admiration has led her to con 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 you hair.» (26). The same image occurs in Barthelme's *Snow White*. Oedipa, like Snow White, is «the devouring mother of pre-Oedipal fantasy» that Christopher Lasch portrays in *The Culture of Narcissism*. (27) She fully deserves her name for she is a projection of all her men's desires and frustrations, a reversed image of themselves which appears in the mirror. It is her man's adoration which put her in her tower, set her up in the role of a Rapunzel. This image reminds her next of Remedios Varo's «Bordando el Manto Terrestre», a painting she saw in Mexico with Inverarity. Here is the description :

In the central painting of a triptych, titled «Bordando el Manto Terrestre», were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void : for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ship and forests of the earth were contained in the tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (28).

The Remedios Varo painting is a great deal more complex than the Rapunzel image in which Oedipa saw herself as the center of the world : the girls are inventing the world with their hands and imaginations from their place of confinement. Some day, of course, they will discover the circularity of the process : they

can't go on inventing the world without, eventually, inventing themselves. This is another version of the story told by Escher's «Print Gallery». At the time of the visit, the painting was a cruel revelation to Oedipa, a revelation that she had always wanted to escape :

What did she so desire escape from ? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental... (29)

The painting is an ideal representation of a solipsistic world from which no one can hope to abscond himself. At the end of her reverie, Oedipa makes a bold gesture in her imagination to escape from the inexorable logic of her imprisonment; she starts projecting a world : «If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else ?» (30)

In Berkeley, she will come across another painting which, according to David Cowart, is Remedios Varo's «Encuentro», and represents a woman who «opens one of a number of small caskets in a room, only to find her own face inside staring back at her.» (31) This painting spells out the narcissistic fantasy latent in the Rapunzel reverie : Oedipa is not really trying to refashion a world, as she pompously claims, but rather to refashion the everyday world in her own image so that she may feel free. Like her mythical model, Oedipus, she is struggling to remove all authority, even if it means tearing the world apart and making it unfit to live in.

These paintings, along with their interpretations by Oedipa, provide an allegorical representation of the process involved in reading a postmodern novel like *The Crying of Lot 49*. The reader is locked up in his study, like the Rapunzel in her tower, and he can expect no assistance from outside, certainly not from the author anyway. In more traditional fiction, the reader generally feels superior to the bemused characters, and stands on the side of the condescending narrator and author. In this novel, he is gradually absorbed in or by the story; like Oedipa, he is manipulated and can't escape. Wherever he goes, whichever interpretation he offers, his hopeless move has been foreseen, just as every move of Oedipa; by the time we reach the end of the novel, we have thoroughly been contaminated by her paranoia and we wonder if we have not become fictional characters in Pynchon's novel.

Our paranoia is precipitated by the absence of closure, of course. We love secrets, but we want to be sure that they can eventually be cleared, as Frank Kermodé explains :

To read a novel expecting the satisfaction of closure and the receipt of a message is what most people find enough to do; they are easier with this method because it resembles the one that works for ordinary acts of communication. In this way the gap is closed between what is sent and what is received, which is why it seems to many people perverse to deny the author possession of an authentic and normative sense of what he had said. (32)

Frank Kermodé attacks the old theory of communication which for two thousand years was known under the name of rhetoric, a theory which was speaker- or writer-oriented. It was taken for granted that the receiver was in a position to subscribe to the exchange contract proposed by the sender if the diction was appropriate. Such a theory was of course a necessity at a time when cultural and political communities were in constant danger of disintegration. The closed narrative was only the literary manifestation of this necessity, so that it is no

accident that Greimas's «modèle actantiel», which is based mostly on primitive or comparatively traditional narratives, is purely a transliteration of the theory of «telegraphic» communication proposed by Jakobson. The linguistic model for the traditional tale is simply the well-structured sentence, one could even say the written sentence since traditional grammar only governed the structure of the written language.

In modern fiction, especially since Flaubert, the old theory of communication does not apply any more. The «unspeakable sentences» analyzed by Ann Banfield are not only samples of «represented speech and thought», that is sophisticated devices to «represent» dialogues and thoughts, they are exemplary passages where the old principles of rhetoric break down. Here, the text is not writer-oriented. In the opening sentence of *Mrs Dalloway*, it is because Clarissa's original utterance is unrecoverable that the reader enters upon a complex process of interaction with the various subjects involved (Clarissa, Lucy, the anonymous narrator, Virginia Woolf herself) and tries to project meanings appropriate to each. He puts on a number of masks which dilute his identity; like Oedipa, he assumes different names and dangerously loses his bearings. Oedipa even lost her sexual identity in the process, hence her name.

Pynchon's novel is about novel-reading and the problems of communication inherent in the process. Oedipa, though she seems a little naïve at times, behaves very much like the «learned readers» who dote on a novel like *The Crying of Lot 49*. She finds out, gradually, that her men turn into fictional characters and narrators and allows herself to be absorbed in the story they have invented. Her chief problem is to decide which of Inverarity or Tristero is the prime mover of the plot. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* raised a similar question which many critics, including such important writers as John Updike or Mary McCarthy, have tried to answer in different ways : which, of the poet John Shade or of the commentator Charles Kinbote, is the chief author ? As I have explained elsewhere, nobody can offer a satisfactory answer within the old theory of rhetoric.(33) It is as if we were to ask, about Escher's «Verbum» or «Circle Limit», which is more important, the figure or the ground ? Notice that in both cases the artist (Nabokov, or Escher) manages to turn our attention away from him by focusing it on the intricacies of his elaborate construct.

Obviously, the neo-rhetoric theory of fiction, based on the standard theory of communication (author → narrator → text → narratee → reader) can't apply here. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the communication process begins with the reader :

Reader → [Oedipa → (Inverarity/Tristero)] → Author

The reader must first crack the Oedipa secret, that is to say witness how she cracks the Inverarity/Tristero secret, before he can begin to make contact with the author. In *Pale Fire*, we must decide, using Kinbote's words, if Kinbote is the King of Zembla or a demented scholar. One is confronted with a similar problem in *The Turn of the Screw*, but there are a few additional relays :

Reader → Narrator → Frederick → [the governess → (hysterical governess/«real» ghosts)] → Author.

It appears, in all three novels, that the reader invents the author in his own image as he reads and tries to make sense of the text. Reading such novels is a highly narcissistic enterprise; that probably explains why such works have drawn so many elaborate commentaries for so many years.

Of course, the reader is painfully aware, all along, of standing at the receiv-

ing end of the line, of deciphering signs addressed to him from a distant past by the author, but he is never sure of deciphering them properly. He senses that the author has an ideal reader in mind whom the actual reader can never match. In his attempt to fill the part of the ideal reader, the actual reader unconsciously invents an ideal author who looks very much like himself. The new theory of communication can therefore be represented like this :

Real author → TEXT → Ideal reader

↙
Réal reader → TEXT → Ideal author

The text is made of the complex interaction between the discourse and the story, what we find between the square brackets in the diagram representing the structure of *The Crying of Lot 49* ; it is the «*hyphos*», the complex web in which author and reader get entangled, as Barthes explains in *Le plaisir du texte*.(34) The narrator and the narratee are part of the text. The conscientious reader gamely tries to dissociate himself from the dull-witted and gullible narratee implicit in the text. In a novel like *Lolita*, where Humbert Humbert (also mentioned in *The Crying of Lot 49*, by the way) invents different narratees in the course of the story, it is not an easy task to dissociate oneself from these clumsy puppets (the members of the jury, the «learned readers», etc...).

As we see on the diagram, the author and the reader play a strange game of mirrors. The former writes for an ideal reader who looks very much like «the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning», as Nabokov nicely put it.(35) The latter tries to emulate this ideal reader whom he vaguely spies through the distorting mirror of the text, but instead projects a reflected image of himself, the ideal author. He naively believes that he will recover his sanity when he has fully identified with the ideal reader, and when his ideal author matches the actual one. This would require that the diagram pivots 180° around him, but it can't be done since the line of communication is one-directional like Zeno's arrow.

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Reading *The Crying of Lot 49*, one intimately feels that Professor Nabokov may have had more influence on his bashful student at Cornell than he has received credit for. These two great novelists share a common interest in science (physics in the case of Pynchon, lepidopterology in that of Nabokov); in modern parlance, we could say that they made their two cerebral hemispheres interact in a terribly complex way. The «learned reader», teased by Humbert and Tristram Shandy (a likely ancestor of Tristero, by the way), is utterly paralyzed («saturated») by so much knowledge and wit. He desperately mobilizes his intelligence and gropes for a theory of the «authorial self» which, if it does not help him much with individual books, will at least safeguard the coherence of his critical discourse. Sometimes, the struggle takes tragic proportions, as, for instance, in Charles Caramello's interesting book, *Silverless Mirror* :

Critical theory, as we have seen, has shown an increasing interest in the drama of the concept of the authorial self; postmodern fiction, incorporating that theoretical interest as a reflexive theme, stages a conceptual drama of the authorial self. It asserts that literary performance is not the «work» (as opposed to «Text», as opposed to «play») of a discrete

shaping presence, but the transactions of an intertextual process from which we can infer the lineaments of a shaped absence. At the same time, however, this fiction enacts its *assertion* that shaping has become shaped, that the performer is the performance, as a central problematic – as an *interrogation* – in its conceptual drama. The particulars of this interrogation, moreover, may imply a comprehension, a recuperation, of this performed performer, this shaped shaper, as a performer and as a shaper.
(36)

The endless proliferation of reflexions, with somewhere in the corners of the mirror the ghosts of Barthes and Lacan, the shadow of Ihab Hassan, bear witness to the moving discomfort and puzzlement of Caramello and most of us before the receding specter of the «authorial self». Reading his book, and this article, one can't help thinking that the unfortunate critics must have been snubbed repeatedly and cruelly by high-and-mighty «Do I know you's» to hide themselves behind the convoluted embeddings of academic syntax and sophisticated theories.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) *Strong Opinions* (London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 18.
- (2) *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) (London : Picador, 1979), p. 5.
- (3) *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1967), p. 5.
- (4) Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences* (Boston, London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 65-108 passim.
- (5) *Transparent Things* (New York : McGraw – Hill, 1972), p. 45.
- (6) *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 5.
- (7) *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 335.
- (8) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) (London : Heinemann, 1975), p. 137.
- (9) *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 14, p. 30.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- (12) *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (New York : Vintage Books, 1980), p. 67.
- (13) «Barthelme's Uppity Bible», *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, N° 8, (October 1979).
- (14) *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968) (New York : Pocket Book, 1976), p. 73.
- (15) *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 51.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- (17) *Ibid.*
- (18) *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- (19) The phrase is frequently used by Jane in her letter to Mr. Quistgaard. *Snow White* (1967) (New York : Atheneum, 1972), pp. 44-46.
- (20) *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 83.

- (21) *Pale Fire* (London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), p. 62.
- (22) *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 122.
- (23) *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, p. 23.
- (24) *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 89.
- (25) Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (London, New York : Methuen, 1982), p. 56.
- (26) *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 12.
- (27) Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York : Warner Books, 1979), p. 346.
- (28) *The Crying of Lot 49*, p. 13.
- (29) Ibid.
- (30) Ibid.
- (31) David Cowart, «Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Paintings of Remedios Varo», *Critique*, XVIII, N° 3 (1977), p. 24.
- (32) Frank Kermode, «Secrets and Narrative Sequence», *Critical Inquiry*, VII, N° 1 (Autumn 1980), p. 85.
- (33) Maurice Couturier, «Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, or The Purloined Poem», *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, N° 1 (April 1976).
- (34) *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris : Seuil, 1973), p. 101.
- (35) *Strong Opinions*, p. 18. See note 1.
- (36) Charles Caramello, *Silverless Mirrors* (Tallahassee : University Presses of Florida, 1983), pp. 24-25.