

PARANOIA IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND IN AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION
IN THE CRYING OF LOT 49

Thomas Pynchon's novel, with its blending of discourses and literary styles and genres and its collage of the 60s popular culture, tells about the mystery of a sign.

We follow breathlessly Oedipa's trials and tribulations, her textual and "real" life wanderings in a world in which the line between sanity and insanity, between normality and the deviant are systematically blurred. We are drawn through myriad allusions, quotations, references into the 60s' rebellious turmoil, with its relish in consciousness expansion, and its cultivation of a climate of political suspicion. The ensuing play on ambiguities, on truth and illusion, on reality and simulacra results into a fine exploration of the contemporary American imaginary and mentality with a permanent and ironical reference to its literary and political past.

The numerous references to paranoia in the text, not merely as a psychological disorder or disturbance, but also as collective condition and penchant call for a closer study of this notion in the novel especially in relation to culture and textuality.

The concept of paranoia as defined in *The Language of psychoanalysis* by J. Pontalis and J.Laplanche ¹can be summed up as a type of psychosis that is characterized by a delirium more or less systematized and by the tendency to interpret. The authors point out that the term which originally meant "madness" in Greek, initially encapsulated an entire spectrum of deliriums, until it was restricted to a more specific characterization in the 20th century. The definition from the Columbia Encyclopedia reads paranoia as "a term denoting persistent, unalterable, systematized, logically reasoned delusions, or false beliefs, usually of persecution or grandeur »². As I will later show, the concept of paranoia is a very complex phenomenon because it encloses an entire

¹ J. Pontalis , J Laplanche *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York : W.W Norton &Co, 1977), 254.

² The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia : <http://encyclopedia2.tfd.com/paranoia>

universe of concepts and transformations related to such questions as the idea of a linguistic disorder, the creation of an alternative world through a lapse into fiction, the desire to interpret, and to inscribe meaning onto the world, the desire for an ultimate truth. But more prominent of all, is the paradox which this concept encloses and how it can apply to texts: the contrast between the linguistic randomness, the arbitrariness of a delirium and the need to systematize, to explain logically, the contrast between disorder and an impulse to organize, and to resist chaos. My claim is that the text twists the psychoanalytic diagnosis into an aesthetic category.

While paranoia appears very often as a psychological reality, alienating characters from themselves and others (Oedipa, Much Maas, Dr. Hilarius), throwing them on the edge of destruction, we shall see that this motif can be studied at different levels. It often takes the shape of a cultural phenomenon, emblematic for postmodernism that has been studied by such theorists as Fredric Jameson and Inhab Hassan. Furthermore, Pynchon's novel features paranoia as a rhetorical means of subverting the different systems that control and shape the American way of life: literary and linguistic conventions, the master narratives of American history, the unwavering belief in science, in a nutshell all the codified areas of the American society. Thus, *The Crying of Lot 49* appears as an attempt to subvert, or if not, at least to play with, the very idea of order and organization.

Oedipa Mass is part of the 60s middle class consumerist society. She suffers from her imprisonment in a comfortable but empty world of objects and simulacrum. A letter draws her out of this world. She has a heritage to sort out, and, by the end of the book, we will find out that what she has to organize and give a meaning to is represented by the American heritage itself, embodied in her late boyfriend's stamp collections: a window to the past. Taking up her mission, Oedipa is confused and stimulated by the fortuitous discovery of a sign –the muted post horn. Subsequently, she desperately tries to trace back this arbitrary sign, to see what it stands for. Details pile up and Oedipa thinks she has uncovered the mystery out of the dust of the ages. The discovery revolves around a secret organization called Trystero, an underground alternative mail delivery system- that is, an underground form of communication. Oedipa builds up the story of the Trystero organization by interpreting random data and facts. However, the multiplying and omnipresent sign of the post horn slips away from her. It disseminates through the text until it loses its credibility, its reliance. Thus, the mystery remains intact by the end of the book. The paranoia theme springs from Oedipa's continuous questioning of the reality of the plot that she is

weaving: how could she know that what she knows is true? Where does life end and where does fiction and fantasy begin? Is she inside or outside the text?

But beyond these epistemological questions, at the level of discourse, paranoia becomes a way of playing with language and intertextuality, and of putting forward a different type of creativity by means of subversion, pastiche and randomness.

The first part of my study will be concerned with paranoia as an interpretative disorder (besides being a detective, Oedipa is a reader and literary critic whose wanderings challenge the hermeneutical type of reading), the second part of my study will link paranoia to the quest for ultimate meanings and totalizing plots (the plot of the novel, of the society, of the tragedy). Last but not least, I will analyze paranoia as a creative force (celebrated by postmodern aesthetics), or rather as an ambiguous type of textual remedy (as it proves to be both a cure and poison for the empty sign, what Jacques Derrida termed as a *pharmakon*³). All in all, I will try to tackle paranoia as a need to bind, to unify the text, to weave together. This may result into chaos and disarray but it may also lead to the conquest of new literary horizons.

I. PARANOIA AND THE ESCAPE FROM THE TOWER

Thomas Pynchon's novel tells the story of Oedipa Maas and her desire to uncover the truth about a secret organization. The novel starts off by introducing Oedipa's ordinary middleclass life in the imaginary town of Kinneret, with its domestic chores, trips to the market, "the layering of a lasagna, the garlicking of a bread" (10), the making up a "deckful of days which seemed [...] more or less identical" spiced up only by the "too much kirsch in the fondue" Tupperware parties (9) and the omnipresence of the "greenish dead eye of the TV tube" (9). Oedipa inhabits a commodified, a consumerist world dominated by the television void: the theme songs of television shows (*Hunteley and Brinkley*) the "visit" of *The Shadow*, a well known comic book made into a TV series, the legal TV drama *Perry Mason* that her lawyer takes as a reference, numerous cartoons and so on. All these shows, virtual projections of the real life threaten to confiscate reality, invade and take over the real. In order to support my argument I would like to bring into discussion Jean Baudriallard's insightful analysis of the mechanisms of the consumerism society. Baudriallard gives an interesting account, in his study *The Consumerist*

³ Derrida, Jacques. *Disseminations*. (London, The Athlone Press Ltd, 1981), 95

*Society*⁴, of how our subjectivity is threatened by the objects we consume. The thinker's main claim is that we live in a society in which objects form a special environment which threatens our autonomy, our independence. Baudriallard argues that within the consumerist society we never consume the object in itself, instead we take them as signs. The objects have lost their use-value. As such they function metonymically "as a shifting and unconscious field of signification"⁵. Thus, Baudriallard further explains that desire in our consumerist society "...signifies itself locally in successive objects and needs." The thinker identifies a "tragic paradox of consumption: everyone wants to put -- believes he has put -- his desire into every object possessed, consumed, and into every minute of free time, but from every object appropriated, from every satisfaction achieved, and from every 'available' minute, the desire is already absent, necessarily absent. All that remains is *consommé* of desire."⁶

What is strange about this world besides its depthlessness is that the characters' subjectivities seemed threatened by the objects they consume and by the permanent dominance and interference of the "spectacle"⁷. Thus, their grasp of the action seems undermined by the objects that surround them and by the this spectacular conditioning. Objects and images threaten their autonomy, their subjectivities and bring them on the brink of a paranoiac state of mind. Mucho Maas, Oedipa's husband becomes sickened with his used car salesman job as he is permanently confronted with the residues of the consumerist society; he realizes not only the way people relate to cars as if they were some "motorized, metal extensions of themselves" (13), but the way their own lives get to have an exchange-value. This mixture of death and waste that characterizes the commodified space will anticipate Oedipa's own findings. Mucho is a disinherited believer, turned into a cynic by the "endless convoluted incest" (14) of the commodity exchange. He shows early signs of paranoia as he appears pathologically "persecuted" by images related to cars. For example, he doesn't like honey as it recalls him of motor oil etc.

We may justly ask ourselves why does abundance ("a salad of despair" made of "clipped coupons promising savings of 5 or 10c [...], pink flyers advertising specials at the markets", (14)) becomes tragic and somehow synonymous with death? One possible answer may be that

⁴ Baudriallard, Jean : *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. (Sage, London, 1998) ; 77.

⁵ Idem

⁶ Idem

⁷ Debord, Guy : *The Society of The Spectacle*. (NY : Zone Books, 1994)

people try to attain happiness by an accumulation of objects that have lost their use-value, instead they function metonymically “as a shifting and unconscious field of signification”⁸. Happiness is never to be encountered; instead it abounds in its metonyms that are signs, or simulacra of happiness. The conception of happiness is a matter of metonymic substitution: substituting one car for another, a gadget for another, a TV program for another etc.

Oedipa and Mucho find themselves at the beginning of the novel trapped by the materiality of their world made up of an accumulation of objects or voices that only simulate reality. Oedipa sees herself playing “...the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, a prisoner among the pines and fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair” (20). This feeling of being trapped finds an expression in her later contemplation of the “Bordando el Manto Terrestre” painting by Remedios Varo. Neither Pierce with his “many credit cards” (20), nor Mucho is able to deliver her from the tower. Oedipa craves for metaphor, for transcendence, for depth. But As Fredric Jameson has pointed out in his essay *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*⁹, Oedipa’s postmodern world is made up “multiple surfaces”¹⁰ and “depthlessness”¹¹ which draws its condition from the culture of advertising, mass production and the “accumulation of spectacles”¹². Pierce himself, a perfect flat figure, seems made up from voices drawn from the popular American culture. What’s more, he seems to be an avatar of Uncle Sam himself (Oedipa actually mention an “Uncle Sam hallucination”¹³). He can impersonate different popular culture voices, a Gestapo officer, a comic-Negro or a character from the Shadow series, at the same time anticipating the detective novel pastiche that will follow. He is a collage of the American culture, of its different layers, voices –of its melting pot. And in fact he only appears in the text as an immaterial presence, a shadow, a voice, an apparition, a trace. His subjectivity has been broken down into mere representation. At the same time after his death, he lives Oedipa with a mission: that of sorting out his estate; she is the executor of his will. But as it will later turn out, Pierce’s estate seems larger than expected; and as Oedipa goes about her task, she discovers that the size of the estate overlaps the size of the entire American life. He seems to own everything in Oedipa’s world. He

⁸ Baudriallard, Jean : *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. (Sage, London, 1998) ; 77.

⁹ Jameson, Fredric : *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2001), 20

¹⁰ Idem

¹¹ Idem

¹² Debord, Guy: *The Society of The Spectacle*.(NY : Zone Books, 1994), 5.

¹³ Pynchon, Thomas *The Crying of Lot 49*, (New York : Buccaneer Books,2001) 18

owns America itself. Moreover, as she will engage on a long trip across the mogul's empire she only finds meaningless signs proliferating, waste, death (or their acronyms W.A.S.T.E , D.E.A.T.H), a world that has been already bought, sold out, auctioned, a world where even the dead people (the bones of the American soldiers who had fought in the 2nd World War and died for the country) can be bought and transformed into a commodity (namely the "Beaconsfield Cigarettes, whose attractiveness lay in their filter's use of bone charcoal, the very best kind" (34)). Even the dead peoples' bones have a use value in the commodified and secularized America that Oedipa inherits. But what can one do when they have to carry out the "will" of Uncle Sam himself ? This appears as an enormous responsibility that Oedipa's has to carry on her shoulders, maybe like in the Beatles's song "Hey Jude". And what is left of the Uncle Sam icon and the "grand narrative"¹⁴ it tells about, the grand narrative of patriotism, of freedom and manifest destiny? Oedipa cannot find an answer to these questions. Yet she lets herself carried away, and amidst this loss of values, this absence of grandeur, she desperately looks for meaning. That's how she comes across the muted post horn, in the beginning, just an empty, floating signifier, apt to receive any meaning; it may stand for many or even any signifieds. In his essay on postmodernist aesthetics, Fredric Jameson talks about the "breakdown of the signifying chain"¹⁵ and the production of meaning through a "movement from Signifier to Signifier"¹⁶. His theory of signifiers and their endless deferral of closing upon final signified may throw light on the muted post horn's terrific journey through the text.

And here we have the premises for the interpretive disorder that will seize Oedipa in the following chapters, this hopeless attempt to invest the world with meaning, and to bring about order. What Oedipa will do when she comes across the floating signifier of the horn is to systematize the coincidences that might explain its meaning into a plot, which, this time, not coincidentally resembles a detective plot. Non coincidentally again, what may seem as pure delirium at the level of the narrated events, becomes a sophisticated and well-constructed design at the

¹⁴ Lyotard, J. F. *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv

¹⁵ Jameson, Frederic

¹⁶ Jameson, Frederic *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2001), 20
"Meaning on the new view is generated by the movement from Signifier to Signifier: what we generally call the Signified –the meaning or conceptual content of an utterance- is now rather to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of Signifiers among each others."
" pg.20

level of the discourse. We justly ask ourselves then: what is the really danger of paranoia, and what its stake? But let us look more carefully at Oedipa's quest for signs.

II. PARANOIA AND THE QUEST FOR SIGNS –OEDIPA'S INTERPRETATIVE DISORDER

When Oedipa arrives at the imaginary city of San Narciso, she stops to compare its houses with the circuit card hard of a radio. The image bears a "hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of intent to communicate" (24). The narrator adds: "there was no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her" (24). Oedipa officially becomes a reader, an interpreter of hieroglyphs, and constellations and this revelation has the flavor of a "religious moment" (28). The model of reading she puts forward in the image of the circuit card is the "hermeneutical type of reading" that Fredric Jameson defines as follows: "...the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth"¹⁷

Because when we read, interpret, when we map out the world, and the universe, we imitate the Creator, we project a world and invest it with harmony and order. And this projection stems from words. Oedipa has inherited the American dream and story, and as it appears not less hieroglyphic than the radio circuit, she decides, out of her desire for transcendence, to project a world. But Oedipa doesn't know yet that language is unstable and it resists these traditional practices of reading.

The first proof of this instability is represented by the menacing Yoyodyne Corporation (satirized later) and that obviously belongs to Pierce, the "foundling father" (26). The Yoyodyne corporation with its "parade of more beige, prefab, cinderblock office machine distributors, sealant makers, bottled gas works, fastener factories, warehouses..."(26) looms large in the landscape of the text, as a threatening of the automation and mechanization of the environment. The mechanized landscape becomes threatening, as it appears to have an autonomous power to control. But the pun of yo-yo and dynamite, producing a sort of toy-explosive, undermines the menacing effect and possibly the belief that the context of multinational corporations breeds conspiracies.

¹⁷ Jameson, Fredric: *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London, Indiana University Press, 1998), 9

Oedipa further stop at the Echo Courts hotel and the mythological allusions point to the fragmentation of her subjectivity as her erudite name, rich in meaning (or not) disseminates in the artificiality and the gaudiness of the mythological representations from the hotel. Here she encounters the Paranoids group, a parody of the Beatles, who accompany Oedipa's wanderings with their tunes. Here we have paranoia, coming directly out of Freud's closet and officially becoming part of the popular culture: it will grow to be the soundtrack, the landmark of this collective, explosive delirium of the 60s. But at the same time, there is something uncanny about the Paranoids' presence: they resemble automata, or androids, possible bearers of conspiracies. Or is it only a symptom of the mass reproduction of the music they share and impose? The climate of uneasiness brought in by the Paranoids is further underlined by Oedipa's encounter with Metzger. They don't really communicate as their eyes are riveted on the TV screen and their conversation is mingled with the spectacle offered by the broadcasting of the *Baby Igor* movie and of the commercials. As such their encounter comes to us filtered through the screen and its "autonomous world realm of artifice" (68) what Guy Debord called "the perceptible world replaced by a set of images" (40).

The TV mise en abime becomes a perfect summary of the novel :

"So it went: the succession of film fragments on the tube, the progressive removal of clothing that seemed to bring her no nearer nudity, the boozing, the tireless shivaree of voices and guitars from out by the pool. Now and then a commercial would come in, each time Metzger would say "Inverarity's"..." (41). The blending of mediums, and of realities, emblematic of the postmodern world, is intensified by yet another allusion to the act of reading underway in the following chapters: Oedipa's struggles with layers of clothing and later with layers of meaning, while the shadow of the deceased Uncle Sam is looming over the landscape. Paranoia oozes in through the mixing in of the 60s' spirit, its polyphony of voices, its noisiness, its musical drunkenness, and its commodity-fueled abundance. The film's (although a parody) sad ending subverts Oedipa's expectations of genres: she is convinced that she will witness at the end the Hollywood-type of prefabricated happiness. Pynchon subverts Oedipa's and his readers' codified expectations.

The first two chapters of the novel stage Oedipa's "reality", as being emptied out of meaning through serialization and commodification. Even her lovemaking to Metzger lacks depth and becomes confiscated by the spectacle. On this premises, it is very difficult to say what is real

and what is not in her life.”Reality” becomes something elusive, obscure, something that cannot be pinned down, codified, systematized, that is an empty signifier. Oedipa and Mucho are the victims of this of the artificiality of the consumerist world, and “breakdown of the signifying chain”, its permanent tendency to replace an object for another, in an endless chain of signifiers. Happiness is a matter of metonymic substitution, of a perpetual following of the vertical paradigmatic axis. They both seek a means to transcend, to break the chain of substitution, and escape the “encapsulation of the tower” (44) to accede to metaphor.

In this wasteland of meaning, the discovery of the “Tristero System” becomes a path to delivery. The beginnings of the postal plot, coincides with her affair with Metzger. Oedipa starts seeing this as something meaningful. She becomes disturbed by the way all these coincidences “fitted, logically, together” (44). We notice her yearning for logic which tells of a cognitive and imaginative investment that is characteristic of the paranoid phenomenon.

Oedipa starts off her adventure as a reader. The essential element that pushes her into this adventure is represented by Pierce’s stamp collection “thousands of little colored windows into deep vistas of space and time” (45). Her encounter in The Scope bar with Mark Fallopian a follower of the Peter Pinguid Society, a right-wing Cold War organization (whose story is backed by some more or less caricatured historical facts) gives a political turn to the conspiracy theory she is about to weave. Her accidental stumbling in the ladies’ room upon the horn symbol as part of a pornographic add provides the missing link between stamps and their history that Fallopian knows about. All of a sudden, Oedipa’s personal and social malaise is complicated by historical and political allusions. It reveals another dimension, a subversive one. Fredric Jameson defined conspiracy as “as an attempt [...] to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves”¹⁸. He discusses in his essay how random objects from the daily life “find themselves slowly transformed into communication technology” and how “the local items from the here-and-now can be made to express and designate the absent and unrepresentable totality”¹⁹. In the following chapters we will witness this relentless proliferation of signs which process the story of the menacing system.

¹⁸ Jameson, Fredric *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*(London, Indiana University Press, 1998), 10-11

¹⁹ Idem

In its beginnings, maybe again a way of undermining the darkness of the theory she is about to build, The Tristero plot is staged as performance, as popular entertainment; it has all the attributes of a spectacle : “the Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness. Would it smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage, say good night with a Bourbon Street bow and leave her in peace?” (54). There is a contrast between the “languid, sinister blooming of the Tristero” (54), menacing, oppressive type of atmosphere, and this burlesque allusions (the above quoted slogan even resembles the commercial of a film noir). This opposition points to Pynchon’s subversion of and play with different genres. The easy drama of the Baby Igor has a tragic end, the Tristero plot takes a cabaret turn. The introduction of the parallel and minor plot of the cigarette charcoal made of human bones – which constitutes fine demystification of American patriotism and somehow competes with the Tristero plot in Oedipa’s imagination-ensures the passage into fiction and textuality. Somebody from the “paranoid” group makes a remark about a Jacobean revenge play that was on show: “The Courier’s Tragedy”.

As he has earlier played with the conventions of a Hollywood movie, Pynchon goes on to the conventions of the Jacobean tragedy: not only does he recount the play, making it gruesome and licentious to extremes, but he takes on to imitate the versification style. Thus, the play becomes a *mise en abime* of the story. Angelo, the dark figure of the play, whose revenge-driven machinations result into a horrific massacre, may stand for the “evil agent” behind all the bloodthirsty episodes from the American history, the Civil War, The World Wars, The Korean War, The Vietnam War; he is the “founding father” who, instead of being the paternal protective figure that the grand narratives have put forward, is a bloodthirsty, orgiastic, incestuous figure. History becomes a succession of meaningless massacres. To express this lack of meaning the text features a link to the bones of the dead American soldiers. In the tragedy the bones of the victims of Angelo’s massacre become the ink that Angelo uses for communication in his letters. There is an “underground”, intertextual suggestion saying that the victims of history which become “ink”, and then words, in addition become part of the official discourse of power, but the “ink” of power is also “smoke”, as the reference from the Lago di Pieta story suggests. The voices (or better said the voicelessness) of all these real or imaginary victims put a pressure on the muted postal horn.

Oedipa’s confrontation with the director of the play (and later with professor Emory Botz) , here desire to grasp the meaning of the play and his subsequent refusal to help her out are

emblematic for Oedipa's role of a literary critic. Driblette's answer goes against interpretation dismissing any "scholarly disputes" (78): "Let me discourage you. It was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn't literature, it doesn't mean anything" (77) and later rebuffs at Oedipa's interest for the original of the script: "You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words" (79). He points out that words are not tied up to a single, unique meaning; that they are shifters, and that meaning depends on the reader. By entering the textual world Oedipa is confronted with the past, with history, with power; the mystery is played out at the level of the text, in the fictional world. It lies at the heart of the text but Oedipa cannot take it at symbolic value, as she mistakes the map for the territory.

The height of Oedipa's role of literary critic is attained when she reflects whether she should bring Pierce's estate "into pulsing stelliferous Meaning" (82); "Shall I project a world? The chance encounters and pieces of information that follow (the Yoyodyne shareholders meeting in an atmosphere of corporative anonymity and compliance, the presentation of the Nefastis Machine with its Maxwell's Demon only to be worked by "sensitives", the encounter with the old man from the retirement house and his story of the Indian murders, the footnote about the Tristero from a different edition of the play, the visit to Nefastis' home) they all constitute an infinite deferment of the signified. A significant detail is represented by the failure of the curious Nefastis machine which, ironically, is supposed to function through metaphor. Oedipa assists at the failure of the dominant figure of speech, as the meaning of the post-horn continues to disseminate through the text: "Now here was Oedipa, faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts [...] With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Tristero, to hold them together" (109). Oedipa enumerates the historical data she already knows about Tristero and acknowledges her disorder that is: either "Tristero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasized by Oedipa, so hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man's estate" (109). Details continue to pile up (historical details about Tristero, literary speculations about different versions of the play), written pieces from the puzzle keep accumulating until the map, that the narrator is trying to draw, outgrows the size of the territory. She cannot fit the pieces together: the essential thing resists reading. The accumulation of information only increases the mystery and somehow deactivates the metaphysical message of Oedipa's quest.

Thus, the search for the Trystero is in fact a blind search for the scattered pieces of the self viewed as a totality, a quest for the lost subjectivity of which Oedipa has been robbed. Her method reminds us of the Rorschach Experiment in psychiatry, in which subjects are asked to examine and then to respond freely to inkblots, that is they are asked to read their own egos into arbitrary shapes and colors. However, the encounters, the findings are arbitrary: a collection of random intersections

There is a pervading a sense of meaninglessness and incompleteness that overwhelms Oedipa by the end of the book. What would be then the cure of her disorder?

III. PARANOIA AND THE PHARMAKON

As we have seen so far the paranoia phenomenon appears under various disguises in the text: it is voiced by the popular culture as a symbol of its newly conquered freedom and exhilaration, it is enhanced by the automaton like movements of a commodified and estranged world and by the suspicion which hangs over historical discourses, it is increased by traditional practices of readings. The novels goes to great lengths to stage Oedipa's possible lapse into her systematized delirium, that is into a fictional world, that she has weaved like the trapped girls from the painting only to fill the void. Her a competing story of order, a constellation, an artifact (built through interpretation and redoubling) attempts to replace the world with the absence-presence of the word, to fill the emptiness with the yarn, to give meaning, in other words to replace the void reality by a "pharmakon".

This concept, used by Derrida's in his study *Dissemination* seems to perfectly illustrate the fundamental ambivalence that characterizes the motif of the escape into a forged reality in Patrick McGrath's novels. In the chapter entitled *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida broaches the question of writing; it starts as a commentary on one of Plato's dialogues "Phaedrus". Derrida plays on the ambivalence of the untranslatable Greek word "pharmakon"- signifying both remedy and poison; this fundamental ambivalence gives rise to contradictory interpretations of a text which lies at the foundation of Western philosophy and of a metaphysics based on binaries. Plato tries to set a clear and differentiation between writing and speech, between philosophy and mythology, and to reveal the subordinate relation between them, but rhetoric subverts his argument. The assimilation of writing to pharmakon comes from an Egyptian myth, in which the

god of arts, Theuth, presents to the king of Egypt the invention of writing “as a pharmakon for both memory and wisdom”²⁰ The king rejects the usefulness of the gift dismissing it as a mere shadow of logos, miming memory and producing only appearances. Nevertheless, by pointing out the dualities that inhabit this word, Derrida reveals the instability that lies at the heart of writing and of texts, their constant “play of differences”.

The concept of the “pharmakon” has a special relevance in the description of the new textual world in Pynchon’s novel that comes out of the weaving of plots from chance intersections. The fictional world emerging from this endeavour- the Tristero organization- is exceedingly ambiguous and very hard to pin down. It permanently wavers between “cure” and “poison”, and it resists reading. What is paradoxical in the novel is that Oedipa, in search of her lost subjectivity and of Meaning engages in her luxuriant narrative movement, with its spiralling, its redoubling its multiplication and convulsion of plots, only to reach a dead end. The artifact brings about death and waste: the Tristero mystery, despite the accumulation of details, remains intact by the end of the novel as Oedipa awaits for the auction to begin. The question that imposes itself is: is there a healing of to the paranoiac disorder she seems to suffer from ? Or does it only bring about unbinding and disarray? The answer lies in the ambiguity of the concept of pharmakon, which is at the same time remedy and poison, original and copy, absence and presence.

Similarly, the competing fictions in *The Crying of the Lot 49* empower the characters and degrade them; they are an antidote to their alienation from the consumerist world of mere representation but they also intoxicate them and lead them to a downfall; elevates them on the heights of a superior world of form and signs that can explain and give meaning to the whole universe, but then it lets them be shattered by its emptiness. Oedipa is no longer a hero in the classical sense of the world; her quest has lost its grandeur and its meaning; it can be read more like a dissemination of the narrative into language games. Her pharmakon is represented by the infinite possibilities of accidental language combinations and the life , the plurality of plots they built from their arrangements. The language games work to create a permanent dialogue between genres, they break the rigid barriers between them, and between the epochs that have originated them. The endless slippage of signifiers makes texts (be it a Jacobean play, a Hollywood movie,

²⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Disseminations*. (London, The Athlone Press Ltd, 1981), 95

or a detective novel) interact, construct and deconstruct each other, and continually generate meanings that never reach a closing

By means of all these detours, wanderings, false encounters of readers, scholars and characters characterized by unstable reference, by unexpected disclosures, by the undermining our sense of causality, the text seems to point to the fact that, on the one hand there is no absolute truth, and on the other hand that the relationship of subordination between fiction and the real world, between signifier and signified is not definite. That it can be subverted in a way in which life may emerge from the text. The denouement of Pynchon's novel seems to suggest that without being grounded in meaning, words become just rhetorical devices, surfaces and from their arbitrary arrangement, they built up life.

Bibliography

- ❖ Baudriallard, Jean : *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Sage, London, 1998.
- ❖ Debord, Guy: *The Society of spectacle*. Zone Books, NY 1994.
- ❖ Derrida, Jacques. *Disseminations*. London, The Athlone Press Ltd., 1981
- ❖ Jameson, Frederic *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* , Duke University Press, 2001),
- ❖ Jameson, Frederic: *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. London. Indiana University Press, 1995 (Part one: Totality as Conspiracy).
- ❖ Lyotard, J.F.: *The Posmodern Condition*. Manchester University Press 1984.
- ❖ Pontalis J., Laplace J. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. New York. W.W Norton &Co, 1977.
- ❖ Pynchon, Thomas *The Crying of Lot 49*, New York . Buccaneer Books,2001.