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Selling San Narciso: Pierce Inverarity as Insider-Innovator in *The Crying of Lot 49*

Fred Johnson, Whitworth University, US, fjohnson@whitworth.edu

This paper puts social networking theory into conversation with ideas from Michel de Certeau and Michel Serres, in order to explore the agency of Pierce Inverarity, whose death sets in motion Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Pierce—a 1960s war profiteer, maker of soulless cityscapes, and master manipulator—is justifiably seen as a villain. But he is also the novel's most effective agent; he manipulates the culture he discovers and cultivates instabilities from which he profits. *Lot 49*'s protagonist, Oedipa Maas, habitually looks for central managers in control of the culture, but Pierce is not that. Instead, he is an often subtle persuader who designs ephemeral spaces that invite the agency of outsiders. He counts on the creative misuses people may find for his products. He does not have his community's best interests at heart, but he demonstrates what it means to come alongside a community and foster gradual change. Pynchon—by making his villain an effective community change agent—sharpens his critique of middle-class complacency: Oedipa recoils from the decentralized cultural complexity that Pierce welcomes. Pynchon suggests that so long as Oedipa and her clever, educated cohort think of society as the product of other powerful ruling minds, agents like Pierce will have the advantage, as they diffuse their self-serving innovations through the networks of contemporary life, unchecked.

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Pierce Inverarity, the character whose death sets in motion the plot of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, takes a justifiable beating from critics. He is called a "rogue entrepreneur" (Varsava 69) and counted among greedy "corporate moguls" who propagate "an American wasteland" (Tyson 5), or he is called a "totalitarian" and said to be running a "concentration-camp-like enterprise" (Hollander 87). He is characterized as a patriarchal anti-muse, employing the devastating vision and power of the military-industrial complex to stifle American imaginations (Kharperian 86–87), repress women (Sherard 61), purvey alienating simulacral realities (Couturier 15–16; J. Decker 30), and trample the disadvantaged (Varsava 64–65). On many fronts, then, Pierce is a villain whose works are insidious and disturbing. Still, Pierce is a Pynchon invention, and he is something more than a cartoon villain out of sinister 1960s capitalism. *Lot 49*'s protagonist, Oedipa Maas, habitually looks for central organizers in total control of culture and capital, so it is striking to discover that Pierce does not tend to work like that kind of micromanaging, all-powerful autocrat. Instead, he appears to cultivate spaces that invite the agency of outsiders, and he depends on often subtle persuasion rather than outright coercion. He appears not only to count on but also to take pleasure in the creative misuses people may find for his products. And so he is the effective capitalist as societal bricoleur, creatively manipulating the culture he discovers and forever cultivating instability from which he hopes to profit. On one hand, Pierce clearly does not have his community's best interests at heart as he works and meddles. On the other hand, he demonstrates what it means to come alongside a community and foster gradual change, instead of trying to force sudden revolutionary change. Without making Pierce a good man, then, Pynchon makes him the most self-aware community member inside the *Lot 49* story, so that he is all at once the villain of the piece and, I will argue, an uncomfortable model for those who want to bring about change—for good or for ill, for charity or for profit—within a community.

Insider-Innovators in Space

Pierce is, first of all, an "innovator," as that type was defined by the sociologist Everett Rogers. Rogers's *The Diffusion of Innovations* (1962) gave compelling shape to a set of five "idea adoption" profiles—innovators and early adopters, early and late majorities, and laggards—and those five profiles have continued to influence conversations about innovation and change in culture. Rogers wrote his book during the same decade when Pynchon was dreaming up Pierce. Both writers were thinking about (among other things) the ways that some remarkable agents in local communities encourage the transformation of practices and attitudes inside those communities. Both writers were fascinated by fast changes bubbling up in their era of increasingly

massive mass mediation and increasingly speedy rapid transit, with its resulting high levels of communication between different communities. Both writers noticed that conspicuously innovative people tend to take actions and hold attitudes that place them at odds with other individuals inside their local social networks.

In Rogers's scheme, innovators are explicitly outsiders, often not "respected by other members of a local system" (283). If innovators strike it big, they are likely to become eccentrics like Steve Jobs or Elon Musk (or Pierce Inverarity), famous for their successes but also for their uncomfortable risk-taking, missteps, and interpersonal difficulties. Rogers suggests that only about 2.5% of any given population falls into the innovator category (281). These individuals are marked by their "venturesomeness, due to a desire for the rash, the daring, and the risky" (283). They willingly gamble their often ample resources on innovations that may fail. Those could be big gambles like Elon Musk's SpaceX venture,¹ but the innovative mind Rogers describes is also drawn to small novelties. Innovators would have been among the first to have fax machines, email addresses, and mobile phones, even when there were few who could receive their transmissions or imagine how those devices would transform all our lives. These individuals are content "to cope with a high degree of uncertainty" when they adopt new technologies, ideas, and practices (282). Pierce, as a risk-taking investor in war and real estate and human remains, fits that bill.

Rogers's innovators are driven to novelty and adventure, and so they also tend to become connected to more people outside their local social networks than do non-innovators. One way we might read Pierce Inverarity is as an exploration of *exactly* that kind of connected person, paradoxically combining a big, robust social network and outsider status. (Again, Pynchon and Rogers seem to have been sharing some preoccupations.) Pierce is connected to an astounding number of people, from many walks of life, as Oedipa discovers when she traces his far-flung social network across improbable pathways from booksellers and professors to disgruntled engineers to stockholders, from lawyers to actors to gangsters to road builders and bone thieves. That big social network alone makes it more likely that Pierce might be the conduit through which a new idea hops from one community to another. Yet Pierce's choices were always, Oedipa says, "unpredictable" (19), and he was relentlessly strange. Pynchon gives Pierce a mountain of eccentricities—the telephone hijinks, the unusual hobbies pursued tenaciously, the bizarre investments, the whimsical sculpting of San Narciso, the appointment of an unqualified "executrix," for starters—all of which mark his

¹ The aural pun perpetrated by the name of Musk's company and repeated over and over by straight-faced newscasters is one among many things that make Musk seem like a Pynchon character.

separateness from the community around him. And for all Pierce's many connections, only his odd and possibly malignant relationship to Oedipa appears to have been at all intimate. It is remarkable, at a glance, that Pynchon imagines a man *like this* would be capable of effective (though not benign) leadership in his local community, and of selling so many things, so successfully, to the people around him. But, then, we can point to very eccentric wealthy influencers all around the modern world.

This is where it is important to notice that adoption profiles may vary by situation, and that Pierce seems able to move easily between his innovator behaviors and what Rogers calls "early adopter" behaviors, when needed.² Early adopters, Rogers says, are "a more integrated part of the local social system than are innovators. Whereas innovators are cosmopolites, early adopters are localites" (283). Early adopters value the innovative, but because their ideas and practices are better attuned to those of their local communities, their unusual notions are perceived as less risky than those of innovators. Communities seek the advice of their early adopters, and "change agents" looking to spread new ideas or products seek them as "local [missionaries] for speeding the diffusion process" (283). Other Pierce-like characteristics Rogers identifies with earlier adopting personalities (innovators, early adopters, the "early majority") are financial security, above-average education, high status and aspirations, upward mobility, openness to change, and contact with people who operate outside of their local community's norms (288–92). Pynchon imagines Pierce as a man of questionable values who not only uses all these traits to his advantage but also has some sense of what he is doing.

Pierce's Fangoso Lagoons project nicely illustrates how he persuades and profits by teetering strategically between innovation and early adoption. The housing development is unusual, featuring homes along canals and a constructed lake with a floating social hall that is an "Art Nouveau reconstruction of some European pleasure-casino" (56). For scuba divers, the lake is stocked with restored galleons, fragments of columns and friezes, giant clamshells, and, apparently, the bones of American soldiers. Maurice Couturier justifiably lambastes Fangoso Lagoons as symptomatic of false realities being peddled to Californians (15–16). Lois Tyson agrees: "Like every other empty commodity-sign in the novel, this one too offers a non-threatening abstraction in the place of an authentic experience: buyers can simply purchase the signs of old money and high adventure; they do not have to be anything or do anything but sign a check" (9). And it is true that as an ersatz Venice or miniature Caribbean the place is

² It would also be fair to speculate that for certain ideas and behaviors, Pierce would be neither innovator nor early adopter. As a trickster capitalist, chances are good that he would be a "laggard," the opposite of an innovator, for innovations that do not promise him continuing opportunities for creative destruction and personal profit.

superficial and gaudy, lacking gondolas and history, sporting only campy, second-rate mafiosi and displaced sunken treasures, with a ghoulish indifference to the provenance of those bones. But while few can easily finance Caribbean treasure diving or whimsical Venice excursions, Fangoso Lagoons is a practical option for scuba-loving day trippers and budget-minded picnickers.

Like Oedipa and her companions, typical visitors would not mistake Fangoso Lagoons for Venice, any more than Tank Theatre audiences believe they are transported to Jacobean England, or than patrons of Pierce's real-world contemporary, Walt Disney, saw Disneyland's Tomorrowland as a true, revealed future. It is telling that Oedipa, who "[falls] in love with" the floating clubhouse (56), enjoys it for what it is, not for what it imitates. And, like Oedipa, we might find that this second-rate Venice is a first-rate Fangoso Lagoons, charming because it is not born of an innovator's mania but of an early adopter's savvy about his community's existing desires and preferences. As an innovation-minded early adopter (or early adoption-minded innovator), Pierce invents with and within community conventions, creating a singular space that combines qualities attractive to many. His uncanny knack for introducing disruptive but community-aware innovations suggests his sense of himself as operating not *on* his community but *inside* his community, as an influential agent in a network rather than as a top-down coercive force. Pierce's mastery of this insider-innovator work also makes him good at selling some things—those bones, in this scene—that ought to be horrifying. Turning the bones of anyone—let alone hero soldiers—into an amusement for the idle is a creepy thing to do, and Pierce's willingness to do so is emblematic of his particular brand of villainy. He is sensitive enough to the ingrained biases in—and habitual blinders on—the people to whom he sells that he is able to put horrors into play in ways that no one much notices or minds.

Michel de Certeau's distinction between *place* and *space* pairs interestingly with Rogers at this point, by providing a useful way to describe what Pierce is doing and how he is getting away with it. *Places*, as defined by de Certeau, are the domain of innovators. Like a printed map, a place is stable—arranged and bounded by an order-imposing force. Everything in a place has its own proper spot to be, and it stays there (de Certeau 117). At the extreme, Rogers's innovators dream of stable places, precisely configured. Without worrying about how people *will* use their innovations, they imagine how people *might* use them. They create a map, regardless of the territory. Early adopters, in contrast, might be said to think of *spaces*. A space, for de Certeau, is complicated by moving parts and unpredictable variables; a "space," he says, "is a practiced place" (117). If a place is like a word defined, a space is a word spoken in and modified by context. A printed text is a place; a reading of that text forms a space. A colonizer enters a space with plans

to redefine it as a managed place. An ideal community developer, in contrast, might ask how to enter a space and contribute within it, rather than reinventing it or forcing it to conform to a pattern she imposes. Early adopters might be characterized in this way: Rather than imagining stabilized *places* where their innovations will work, they consider what will happen when innovative notions enter living *spaces* populated by autonomous people.³

That sounds potentially benign—coming alongside the community and walking with it toward change attenuated to its needs and concerns—but Pierce’s self-interested actions illustrate how cooperation with early adopting influencers may as easily lead to reprehensible results as to benefits. Pierce walks a community right into blithe acceptance of those bones. He also profits (to take another example) by renting space to Winthrop “Winner” Tremaine, racist seller of government surplus and Nazi cosplay items. Winner’s shop might be controversial in the more conventional space of a healthy, welcoming city center. Winner is casually ignored, though, and maybe even tolerated, when tucked into a squalid retail pocket in the shadow of Pierce’s own San Narciso freeway project.⁴ That same retail pocket shelters Zapf’s Used Books, which moves a lot of oddball and shocking texts that would be unlikely to get shelf space in a more family-friendly store. It seems to me good to have a space for non-mainstream and countercultural texts, by and large, but here, again, we should notice that Pierce profits from something average community members would not approve of, if they were looking closely. A similar sleight of hand allows him to profit from cooperation with the military-industrial complex of the 1960s, with his war machinery sold out of mostly unremarkable modern office spaces filled with standard-issue organization

³ Pynchon’s 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon* carries its title characters to and through their task of creating an artificial geopolitical line through the American wilderness. The book becomes a particularly clear and extensive embodiment of Pynchon’s interest in these tensions between narrowly-defined places and complex, practiced spaces. Brian McHale, for example, has written about “the subjunctivity that is such a salient feature of *Mason & Dixon*: the American West as subjunctive space, the space of wish and desire, of the hypothetical and the counterfactual, of speculation and possibility” (44). McHale notices that, as in the world of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “the world of *Mason & Dixon* is all but overrun with interlopers from Elsewhere” (56)—representatives of unrealized or un-comprehended possible worlds or parallel worlds, bringing with them surprising ways to put space into practice. Samuel Cohen has explored how place-makers tend to shut down the potentialities of spaces throughout the novel; in *Mason & Dixon*, Cohen writes, a boundless America of endless possibility “is Britain’s dream”—a dream of spaces—but “America keeps awakening itself, as it turns frontier into settlement into colony, curtailing its possibility, consigning hopes to its rubbish heap” (273). Sascha Pöhlmann, similarly, has looked at how the “utopian potential” of the novel’s wilderness spaces “is gradually limited to a single order by the homogenizing narrative of nation-ness and its related ideologies” (187).

⁴ A clever element here is that Pynchon has Winner show something of the same sense of where he can and cannot hawk his wares. He tells Oedipa that he advertises, with great success, in “girlie magazines,” another shady space that is disreputable but blandly tolerated in 1960s America (149). (Also, since “The Shrink Flips,” an early excerpt from *Lot 49*, appeared in *Cavalier*, Winner and Pynchon have something in common.)

men who even sing corny corporate theme songs together. For the era, this is a benign surface, only troubling upon close inspection. Pierce sells his products and makes his profits in the ways they are most likely to be bought and agreed upon at the time of sale—down to just about every piece of San Narciso, itself a textureless and bland *space* that no one would dream of choosing but which everyone there has somehow agreed to choose, bit by bit, offer by offer, sale by sale.

Permanently Temporary Space

Oedipa, at the center of *Lot 49*'s narrative, struggles throughout to make sense of Pierce's insider-innovator agency. Arguably, she never quite pins it down, but she comes close when she wrestles with Randolph Driblette's metaphor for himself as a theatre director. "I'm the projector at the planetarium," Driblette says. "[A]ll the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also" (79). Oedipa's first run at applying Driblette's metaphor distorts it significantly. She wonders if she can become "what Driblette was, the dark machine in the center of the planetarium," and in doing so she imagines herself as the sole controlling author of an ordering narrative for Pierce's estate, a projector that will "bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning" (82). The slippage here—from artful stage director to real-world executor of a large estate to independent director of Meaning—matters, because of the way Oedipa imagines herself working alone and unhindered, as a mad innovator out in the world, building a stable *place*, putting everything into a fixed, invented order with the programmed predictability of stars and constellations projected in a planetarium.

A closer look at Driblette's metaphor shows him (and Pynchon) gesturing toward contextual factors—the pesky complications of vicissitudinous *spaces*—limiting any would-be *place*-making attempts by his characters. The projector metaphor drifts toward innovator-like solipsism, as Oedipa first imagines it does, but it never arrives there because the projector is only a machine. It is dependent. Like stage directors, tycoons, and executors, it is itself a culturally-produced artifact made meaningful within a complicated cultural *space*. A projector needs a projectionist needs a planetarium; all exist only inside institutions, and they do their work in the context of individual performances mounted for transitory audiences. Oedipa, thinking alongside the metaphor, soon realizes her own limitations as a purely innovative and unhindered *place*-making force; she qualifies her totalitarian projector fantasy by noticing how her meager knowledge of law, investment, and real estate, along with her lingering questions about Pierce himself, keeps her from taking full charge of Meaning. She lacks a developed sense of the workings of the huge "stage" (or planetarium ceiling) onto

which she is hoping to project her vision. The director may, as Driblette says, “give the spirit flesh” (79), but the director also works with and within dramatic traditions and trappings. The director generally works from the basis of a script of some kind, too, and with physical actors, and for a likely audience. These limitations suggest a connection between successful play direction and an early adopter’s more community-aware mindset. If the play is too avant-garde and too clumsily staged, typical theatergoers may deny it was a play at all, and the director will have, by that measure, failed.⁵

And so, unpacked, the projector metaphor suggests that even (maybe especially) in the zany world of *Lot 49*, practiced *space* relentlessly asserts itself over imagined *place*; the “projecting” mind cannot wholly overcome matter, moment, and conditions. Like Driblette, Pierce knows he is acting inside a context; it turns out he is not trying to simplify his contextual space to stable place and simply control it and the people inside it. Oedipa feels, even toward the end, that Pierce must have had a specific endpoint in mind for all his manipulations, as if he had been constructing a Rube Goldberg machine with all the pieces running smoothly in one direction (not unlike stars in a planetarium, running predictable courses). He tells her this: “Keep it bouncing....that’s all the secret, keep it bouncing” (178). But she thinks this: “He must have known, writing the will, facing the spectre, how the bouncing would stop” (178). Here, she suggests that Pierce, with death on his mind, would think of reaching a well-ordered conclusion—one that might be discerned in the text of his will. But Pierce never works that way; he keeps things profitably unstable (bounced!). In this sense, Pierce’s agency is sinister not because it is totalitarian but because it is manipulative, unscrupulous, and devoted to instability. He aims not at putting things into place but at moving things around disruptively and profiting from the resulting hurly burly.

It follows, then, from Pierce’s devotion to instability and impermanence, that he tempts and nudges outsiders and dissidents, rather than trying to eliminate or control them. As in the cases of Zapf and Tremaine, Pierce’s loosely ordered city is a *space* with room for nonconformists to keep living out of bounds (more or less) from conformity. Just as the Yoyodyne mail system provides infrastructure for the PPS postal scam, the highways Pierce builds provide, along their undersides, conduits for W.A.S.T.E.’s activities. W.A.S.T.E., then, is not cleanly antagonistic to the mainstream or to the products of Pierce’s manipulative ingenuity. The *Lot 49* underworld is shaped by and

⁵ Malpas and Taylor have connected Driblette’s way of describing his agency with M. H. Abrams’s observation that as the Romantic outlook took hold in the 18th century, philosophers and artists began to think of “the perceiving mind” as “[discovering] what it has itself partly made” (qtd. in Malpas and Taylor 56). Pynchon’s work, as Malpas and Taylor argue, “relentlessly worries away at the problems this idea of experience and knowledge generates” (57), and Oedipa’s sometimes half-hearted attempts to become a meaning projector fit into that discourse.

dependent on the profiteering work of Pierce and others like him, who have willingly opened to underworlders the spaces in which they improvise. Citizens of the underworld are thereby symbiotically attached to the world of the ordinary, their nonconformity always in dialogue with that world and its spaces. And so, when Oedipa follows a courier away from the “drunks, bums, pedestrians, pederasts, hookers, [and] walking psychotic[s]” under the freeway, Pynchon has her end up right back in ordinary society (129–31). The spaces are connected and intertwined via the works of Pierce Inverarity. W.A.S.T.E. itself subsumes sundry subgroups that have competing ideas about its nature, but all choose independently to use the linking infrastructure provided by Pierce and other devoted industrialists like him. In that sense, they are more reliant on Pierce than on each other. They are his customers, they choose—transaction by transaction—to be his customers, and he influences but does not control their unpredictable energies.

Because Pierce’s goal is not to build a permanent stable order but to make sale after sale, continually shaping instability to his own benefit, it makes sense, too, that his endlessly pragmatic city is ephemeral by design—more utilitarian, temporary shelter than imperial fortress. He ruthlessly exploits momentary spaces rather than attempting to set a place-order in amber. Oedipa uses a series of revealing metaphors to think about San Narciso as she drives into it for the first time, each of them showing that she senses (but cannot quite grasp) the uncanny ephemerality of San Narciso. The city’s order reminds her of “a well-tended crop” (24). This year’s harvest will be distributed; next year these fields may hold different crops or lay fallow. She compares the city’s visible order to the circuitboard in a transistor radio (24), and she thinks of the circuitboard as something meaningful in and of itself. But, like Driblette’s stage, the transistor radio comes fully alive only in context. For someone like Pierce, the circuitboard’s interest and power comes when people add unpredictable things to it—the signals it can carry, the ways people will transport it easily from place to place, the programming choices it gives to users and broadcasters, the cheap disposability of it, the fact he can profit from each of those things. More bouncing, more revenue streams. Oedipa thinks of how the city is where Pierce had “begun his land speculating...and so put down the plinth course of capital on which everything afterward had been built, however rickety or grotesque, toward the sky” (24). It is striking (and close to the mark) that she uses the words “rickety” and “grotesque,” evoking shantytowns and imperfect improvisation rather than long-term city planning and permanence. In contrast, “toward the sky” does suggest the size of Pierce’s fortune, but it is an ironic metaphor: the actual city is filled not with skyscraping towers but with low-slung, serviceable, “prefab” (26) buildings. This city is much more *space* than *place*, more roadside memorial than sturdy plinth course. It is built for nimble profiteering, not preservation, and its strangeness follows from its thinness and volatility, not from its unassailable permanence.

One may then argue that Pierce's productions, as Driblette suggests of his own, issue from wrong orifices. One may argue that life in a place like San Narciso is not life well-lived, but Pynchon does not suggest anyone is literally trapped there. No character—not even Oedipa, whose curiosity overcomes her initial misgivings (20)—is simply pressed into the service of Pierce's civic drama, his “census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway” (24). As a political force but not a politician, Pierce can influence but not make laws. He does not operate like the despotic Peter Pinguid Society with its mail quotas or like Jesús Arrabal, the unbending idealist who does not win converts. As an entrepreneur who pursues many projects, he is unlike the narrow, racist Tremaine, with limited products and clientele, and unlike Zapf, offering mostly unwanted books to a mostly indifferent public. He relentlessly influences interactions to his temporary advantage. As much as Oedipa searches for unique revelations and extraordinary place-order in Pierce's city, she also notices, early on, that “if there was any vital difference between it and the rest of Southern California, it was invisible on first glance” (24). The city is not so strange, on its surface. For all its quirks, it is built to be recognized and consumed, and so it is built to be (like Fangoso Lagoons) *acceptable*—something people might pick because it works, for now, even if it is not the better thing they might really want. Pierce, as insidious insider-innovator, can sell what is subtly mainstream to the outsiders, what is a little nonconformist to the insiders, what is a little cheap to the snob, what is a little high-class to the bargain-hunters. Each group buys not quite what it wants, and the culture space is shaped and reshaped by little compromises, every compromise profitable to the disruptive seller.

And so Mark Decker is right to conclude that *Lot 49* looks at “what [and who] gets left out of our efficient post-Fordist society” (144), is right in saying that Oedipa learns to heed the messy “context” that supports Kinneret's structure and worldview (149), but is interestingly wrong when he concludes “that people like Inverarity have attempted to remake reality into a superefficient machine that seeks to replace all difference and diversity with a useful sameness” (143). Rather than “succumbing to randomly dispersed energy” (Slade 112) or falling into “paralyzing equilibrium” (M. Decker 145) or being “a dead end, where nothing is any longer surprising or original” (Davidson 48), Pierce's city is almost intolerably changeable, organized for a world in which (as Thomas Schaub says of Pynchon's fiction, generally) “accident is not separate from design but is the passive result of many designs operating at cross-purposes to each other” (Schaub 8). While Pierce is not allied with revolutionaries like Jesús Arrabal or Mike Fallopián, he does use disruption and dissatisfaction to get things done. He is the imaginative user of *spaces* who leaves room for those who would creatively repurpose his innovations. More than that: Unlike Jesús and Mike, who wish to permanently re-train

people's desires and motivations, Pierce is not trying to bring about a stable order. He is not aiming for personal utopia but for constant profit through the cultivation of instabilities that are likely to profit him. If Oedipa, as Mark Decker suggests, "finds a way to disrupt that machine [of the dominant culture] by creating diversity" (143), then she does so in part because Pierce steers her in that direction. He is fantastically, disturbingly disruptive, not as a dictator of lived realities but as a mindful (if perhaps unwelcome) co-creator of lived realities.⁶

Things may be going wrong in and around San Narciso, but Pynchon does not make Pierce and his associates *solely* responsible for the state of *Lot 49*'s society, which he depicts as a complex co-evolving space where—wittingly or not—individuals and groups are always collaborating with and accommodating one another, where the world is steadily made and remade by messy interaction rather than simply planned and re-planned by central authority. Lois Tyson, analyzing "existential subjectivity" in *Lot 49*, describes that kind of reciprocal, co-evolutionary world-making as "mutually constitutive symbiosis" (6), wherein "the individual subject is neither wholly an autonomous agent nor merely a social product" (7). Oedipa Maas, as Tyson argues, is confounded by her encounters with culture in part because she wants to see herself as autonomous and cannot bring herself to admit that she and her culture are co-making and co-molding each other. Instead (and as Molly Hite has argued) Oedipa looks everywhere for a central agent in charge—a controlling world-maker who is not her and whose independent will credibly and completely thwarts her own. Pierce's crafty manipulations of ideas, spaces, and people suggest he might easily endorse the notion that personhood and culture are mutually wrought, but Oedipa looks everywhere for signs confirming that Pierce is the sole place-making power behind the "hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning" she detects in San Narciso's streets (24), or the "hieratic geometry" of Fangoso Lagoons (56), or the complex web of his own interests.

Where disruptive, ethically-challenged Pierce is highly connected, innovative, and effective, Oedipa's insular, conservative life in suburbia prior to Pierce's death reads as

⁶ This reading of Pierce resonates at least a little with Christopher K. Coffman's consideration of potentially (though not necessarily) hopeful shreds of ecological balancing in Pynchon's work, and at least a little with Michael O'Bryan's consideration of Pynchon and hierarchy-rejecting anarchist politics. But Pierce—who maybe understands *very well* about ecosystems and horizontal organization—does not seem to care about balance or the bettering of lives. He cares about the ways "bouncing" in lived *spaces* can lead to profit for him. Similarly, see Joanna Freer: "Anarchism, a much-misunderstood political philosophy, would in many of its variants posit that an ideally functioning society should work via the spontaneous and temporary association of people contributing to a particular task before disbanding, thus avoiding the entrenchment of hierarchies and the accumulation of power by individuals therein. Pynchon's novels, which typically present the reader with large numbers of characters whose narrative strands will intersect in different ways for different readers on different readings, can thus be seen as mimicking this flexible and anti-hierarchical anarchistic model in the manner in which they allow for the production of meaning" ("Politics" 178). The problem of Pierce, in part at least, is that he seems to understand much of this better than the hippies and revolutionaries.

a willful but failed retreat from esoteric connectivity and from embracing her role in the making of culture. Oedipa imagines that “what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all” (21), and she evokes both Rapunzel (who was kept prisoner by a malignant, magical witch) and the weavers in Remedios Varo’s *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* [*Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle*] (who are kept in thrall by a dark, directing figure that guides their work). Where Rapunzel and her hair aid the prince’s entry into the tower, Oedipa imagines that Pierce has broken in on his own. Where Varo’s weavers are part of a triptych which ends with one weaver escaping through the power of her imagination, Oedipa acknowledges only the middle panel, ignoring the triptych’s exploration of artful, inventive world-making agency. Oedipa imagines (as many have noted) four choices for coping with the entrapping force she dreads: “she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey” (22). “Superstition” implies going along with the mysterious organizing force; “embroidery,” per Varo’s painting, implies active (and perhaps resistant) world-making; and “madness” implies both rejection of the outside force and active embrace of a new internal (and paranoid) one. These options call for responses to the force—by submission, resistance, or denial. All demand acknowledging the problems of personal responsibility that Oedipa encounters when she connects to Pierce’s immense social network. But the choice she makes—the deejay, Kinneret, retreat—attempts to circumvent personal responsibility. Oedipa rejects Pierce’s space-bending agency in spite of her own eccentric, frequently demonstrated attraction to alternative approaches to life.

Trickster Spaces and Crossroad Agency

Network scientist Duncan Watts says that human social networks have two central, paradoxical traits; those traits help explain both why Oedipa hopes retreat to suburbia will insulate her from the disruptive instability of Pierce’s world and why her isolating strategy fails. First, Watts says, people “cluster,” “meaning that on average a person’s friends are far more likely to know each other than two people chosen at random.” Second, “it should be possible to connect two people chosen at random via a chain of only a few intermediaries” (77). Though most people connect to few individuals outside their local social networks, the resulting complex global network guarantees a short link-to-link pathway between any two individuals (88). Those interpersonal network pathways are potentially disruptive to planned places, as they allow the incursion of alternative ideas and practices. It follows that trickster-hearted innovators like Pierce use such pathways to—as Rogers predicts—import innovations “from outside the system’s boundaries” and to spread innovations locally (283). Pierce uses those pathways to find and implement new schemes for financial profit. Oedipa, hiding in suburbia, wants as

little to do with those pathways as possible. She has retreated to an ostensibly stable *place*, hiding among ostensibly like-minded people, hoping to avoid unpredictable connections to unstable *spaces*, but those connections are always available.

In fact, Oedipa's retreat and the stability of her place are always in jeopardy, not only from the many eccentrics around her but also from her own eccentric, imaginative tendencies, no matter how she resists them. Kristin L. Matthews, for example, argues that "Oedipa has mastered the science of reading, homemaking, and consumerism" (98), becoming "the consummate suburban wife" (99), but the text tends to suggest the opposite. The husband is miserable and probably wayward, and she cannot comfort him. The herb garden is growing mold, her makeup is not quite right, and she is reading *Scientific American* instead of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Oedipa is invested in a specific reality map—a *place*, in de Certeau's thinking. She aims, half-heartedly, to play a chosen, prescribed role and live within the boundaries of a dependable reality. But the map (as always) is not the territory. Where Pierce and his disturbing enterprises are energized by a "multifarious and silent 'reserve'" of alternate hypotheses on which typical practices might have been based (de Certeau 48), Oedipa's elusive stability is forever challenged by that same reserve.

Lot 49 repeatedly contemplates the impossibility of a retreat from connection (and thus the impossibility of a retreat from that silent reserve). Isolation may be sought by Oedipa in suburbia, by Mucho in LSD, by Dr. Hilarius in Freudianism, by the Inamorati Anonymous in flight from love, by Driblette in suicide. But Mucho's LSD escape depends on feedback and information from the world at large, and his "escape" is both subject to interpretation and hopeless without chemical reinforcement. Hilarius—who tries to believe that Freud's therapeutic system, despite what he calls its "idiocies and contradictions" (134), can conquer horror and make the subconscious orderly—cannot forget the cold-blooded horrors he saw and perpetrated in Nazi Germany; for him, the monstrosities unleashed there turn Freud's vision of mental health into fragile nonsense. The IA organization is made up of connection addicts, always in danger of falling off the (otherwise empty?) isolation wagon. Driblette's suicide, like Mucho's LSD insight, is subject to interpretation. This could go on: The novel's isolation seekers always fail to be left alone and unchallenged within their narrowed notions about reality and how it should work. Even the Tristero can be infiltrated, after a fashion, by an imaginative housewife. Social networks are too prone to admit new contacts and new ideas; people are too prone to adopt them; social order is, as Tyson argues, too symbiotic (6–7)—mutually constituted and complex beyond the grasp of any would-be organizer not bent on using extreme coercive means to control and curtail the lives of the *won't-be* organized. So the good news for *Lot 49*'s America (but not, somehow, for Oedipa) is that permanent cultural enervation is not really underway; the bad news is

that it is not humane idealists in this story who best understand how to affect the shape of a fundamentally dynamic, changing culture. It is self-serving Pierce Inverarity, who is neither trying to organize energy according to fixed principles, like Jesús and Mike, nor hiding from his own disruptive agency like Oedipa.

And so perceived agency is very much at issue in this narrative. Eric Charles White, via Michel Serres (and Lucretius), has explored orders of Venus, Mars, and Hermes as they apply to *Lot 49*, and that framework usefully illuminates the distinctions Pynchon makes between Pierce's understanding of his agency and Oedipa's understanding of her own. An order of "Venus," White explains, "would promote multiple perspectives on a world in flux, multiple tales of cosmic evolution, while [an order of] Mars demands representational closure, a definitive image of reality, a single master narrative commanding the entire sweep of natural history" (266). In this figuration, the notion of the *clinamen*, a "swerving or random fluctuation" in an otherwise smooth flow (White 265), names those negentropic disturbances that can lead to variation and reconfiguration in a cultural system. What Serres calls the "parasite" of new ideas, the results of a *clinamen*, may transform a culture, but that same "unprecedented," newly formed organizing principle might subsequently "[emerge] at the top of a hierarchy whose lower elements it now controls," becoming itself a new Martial organizing principle (a new boss, same as the old boss) (White 273–74). As de Certeau might have put it, secondary productions may become primary.

Serres (and White) conclude that Martial culture is clearly undesirable and that pure Venusian culture, forever and always open to all hypotheses, is unachievable, so that the best we can hope for may be an order of Hermes. An order of Hermes is the sort of unstable, co-created, *space*-driven order in which the talents of a Pierce Inverarity—trickster, deceiver, facilitator of thieves—might dominate.⁷ In such an order, "a welter of parasites struggle for control" but none dominate. "Here," White explains, "we have a regime of strictly local chieftaincies: Hermes, god of the crossroads, is a parasite who [Serres says] 'has placed himself in the most profitable positions, at the intersection of relations'" (274). White calls this "the agon of the many among themselves—the reign neither of Venus nor of Mars but of Hermes, trickster, liar, and thief who plays constantly for temporary advantage" (274). Oedipa, who tends to look for Martial orders (and authorial intention), continuously rejects anything that looks like an order of Hermes.

White proposes that Oedipa's envisioning of Tristero is negentropic, infusing new shape and form into an increasingly entropic San Narciso, reversing the city's "slide

⁷ In contrast, Evans Lansing Smith characterizes Pierce as a Hades figure, "an invisible Lord of the Dead who knows all the secrets" (45). Readings like Smith's give Pierce immense power and knowledge, but reading Pierce as Hermes makes him a master of acting with limited information. In my reading, Oedipa's problem is not so much that she cannot interpret all the signs as that she is so fully dedicated to doing so, and as a result misunderstands Pierce's art of acting without total knowledge.

toward terminal stillness” (269), finding *space*-ness in a rigidly ordered *place*. But White reads more efficacy into Oedipa than Pynchon gives her, more permanence into the order of San Narciso than it warrants, and more drive for totalitarian efficiency than Pierce exhibits. Though Oedipa is inspired to new sympathy for the dispossessed, and though she maps a possible alternative paradigm of world history that accounts for alterity, her theory is not shown to transform the culture (however powerfully it transforms her). Moreover, Oedipa’s Tristero theory evokes, as White suggests, not an open, emancipatory order so much as an alternative Martial order: “Oedipa’s paralogical intervention [detecting Tristero] may merely install an essentially similar world order” (White 270–71). Even in the final moments of the narrative, as she waits for revelation of a centralized, organized conspiracy, she never abandons her search for the Martial. Meanwhile, Pierce, in a Hermes-like role, makes a difference. It is too much to say that *Lot 49* celebrates capitalism, but the novel, read in this way, does suggest that Pierce’s culture-shifting shrewdness is something to cautiously admire. He tinkers with culture, understanding it as an open system (or a set of compatible open systems) full of dynamic possibilities. Rather than stamping out difference, he exploits *clinamina* that appear in and around San Narciso, which is full of spaces where oddballs and outcasts can formulate alternative ideas and practices.

Pierce’s many weak interpersonal ties to all sorts of people turn out to be a powerful asset at the “crossroads.” Mark Granovetter, in his classic study of weak ties and social connections, notes that though weakly-tied people are sometimes viewed as alienated, it is, ironically, strong ties that “lead to overall fragmentation” of communities. People embedded in different social clusters—rich, poor, philatelists, stockholders—rarely reach each another through their strongly tied connections, who tend to belong to the same semi-isolated communities, sharing similar relationships and ideas. Weak ties, in contrast, are likely to connect people with individuals and ideas to which they would not otherwise have access. “Intuitively speaking,” Granovetter explains, “this means that whatever is to be diffused can reach a larger number of people, and traverse greater social distance...when passed through weak ties rather than strong” (1366). Pynchon writes Pierce as a maestro of weak ties. Among the characters who know Pierce personally, Oedipa alone appears to have had more than a passing relationship with him. But as a venturesome innovator, he has formed so many weak interpersonal ties that he is what network scientists call a “hub” in his social network, a super-connected node bridging together many social clusters. Watts shows how a small number of such “superconnected nodes in a network can have an influence that is disproportionate to their number” because they effectively join many otherwise separated social clusters (105). As such a node, Pierce makes it more likely that those he connects will encounter ways of thinking and living entirely different from their own, just as the highways and physical structures he builds enable the flow of diverse people and ideas in and out of

San Narciso. He does not direct traffic at the cultural crossroads, exactly, but he nudges and manipulates it.

Since Pynchon leaves the picture of Pierce hazy to the end, it is impossible to account for Pierce's every motive in appointing Oedipa executor. But it is clearly an act designed to link her more fully into his network of weak ties. We can infer much about Pierce's motives and agency by examining this final linking choice of his and its results, and in doing so we can further distinguish his agency from Oedipa's. Practically, Oedipa is an inappropriate executor. Because we know that Mucho has been in radio for five years, that Oedipa married Mucho two years into his radio career, and that her relationship with Pierce ended a year before her marriage, we can conclude that she and Pierce have been estranged for four years or more. It follows that she is hopelessly unfamiliar with the state of Pierce's estate, if she ever was familiar with it. While her humanities degree makes her "just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts," she is unprepared to put her research and analytic skills to work as the executor of an enormous fortune (104). Though her habitual attention to textual details and connections certainly might work to her advantage as an executor, she is far more interested in metaphors and evocative imagery than in finances and material transactions, so she tends to use her skills to do things like imagine San Narciso as a circuit board, obsess over arcane signs and symbols, and suss out hidden cabals between the lines. What she does with the will is interesting and generative, as many have argued, but it has little to do with the mundane executor's work of seeing that assets are properly dispersed.

Pierce, then, willingly risks having the legalese in his will interpreted by someone who does not speak or particularly care to understand the language. By the end, Oedipa even has "redistributionist" fantasies about "spreading some kind of a legacy" among all who share "Tristero's secret" (181), signaling her humane (if, as depicted, ineffectual) response to the suffering people she encounters as she works. But Pierce is familiar with Oedipa's tendencies; she is, after all, the woman who justified their break-up using imagery from paintings and fairy tales. Hers was unlikely to be a practical, systematic, money-minded enactment of the will. And even without factoring in Oedipa, Pierce's handling of his fortune seems careless. His lawyer, the man who "drew up his will" (29), is Metzger, the former actor and current "Humbert Humbert cat" (147) whose first priority is the seduction of his co-executor, who always has alcohol on hand, who trades on looks and charm, and whose final recorded act is to abandon co-executorship and marry a teenager in Las Vegas (147-48). Surely a fussy corporate lawyer would have been better suited for the job. But nothing shows Pierce to be concerned about the precise dispersal of his material fortune. From what we know, he has no heir apparent and no interest in a dynasty of corporate leadership. *Lot 49* does not explore Pierce's

specific wishes about the distribution of his assets; Oedipa's mind is elsewhere, as Pierce must have anticipated.

But Pierce's unlikely successes built on funny choices show him to be a smart, strategic maker and molder of social networks and social interactions, and nothing indicates that Oedipa's executorship is the exception to his crossroads mastery. As a Pierce Inverarity choice, its unlikelihood is a point in favor of its having been some kind of final, intentional "bounce," designed to energize his network once more. Our best indicators of Pierce's intentions, then, given his skill at getting what he wants, are the immediate results of this last negentropic thwack. First among them: Executorship coaxes Oedipa into choosing to venture out from her Kinneret retreat, something the living Pierce never accomplished. Oedipa has been stewing in suburbia, in the pot with the accumulating failures of her hoped-for suburban stability. The news of her appointment provokes for her a crisis of curiosity. Executorships can be declined, and even when executors accept the duty, much of the work can be delegated, as Roseman tells Oedipa. However, one question from the lawyer—"But aren't you even interested... [i]n what you might find out" (20)—is enough to overcome her reservations. By tempting Oedipa's curiosity, Pierce finds a way to revive his relationship with her, if on strange new grounds. This move is typical of Pierce's early-adopting, opinion-leading style: match the innovation to the consumer based on the consumer's inclinations; create structures to enable and encourage the purchase. Pierce has crafted an offer which Oedipa can refuse but will not.

A second result of Pierce's choice, following from the first, is Oedipa's break with Mucho. Arriving in Pierce's town, outside her suburban quarantine zone, Oedipa finds herself immediately surrounded by negentropic energies with the potential to get her self-limited *weltanschauung* "bouncing" again: British pop music, teenage angst, Miles's continental nihilism, values broadcast through an odd TV drama that ends (and is exhibited) contrary to expectations, an actor's charisma, a permissive environment created by cynical teenagers and manipulative actors, cavalier drunkenness, and constant reminders—also via television—that Pierce's way of operating threatens Oedipa's notions about how the world ought properly to behave. Pynchon leaves open the question of whether or not the whole scene, presided over by a naughty motel sign that looks suspiciously like Oedipa, has been coordinated by Pierce. But Metzger, "who [turns] out to be so good-looking that Oedipa [thinks] at first They, somebody up there, were putting her on" (28), was certainly chosen by Pierce, and on the evidence of Oedipa's responses, he is the kind of (very strange) man likely to succeed in seducing Oedipa, where others—Roseman, Miles, Driblette, Nefastis—fail. So this much could easily have been planned by Pierce; this much could have been skillful

product placement and network linkage. And since marriage to Mucho and retreat to preinscribed suburbia mark Oedipa's break with Pierce, her affair with Metzger, a breaking of her marriage vows, represents a break with her break and an admission that her suburban gambit is not working. She undermines her own defense against Pierce.

A third result follows from the first two: the expansion of Oedipa's social network. In her first significant act post-infidelity, she finally allows Metzger to tell her what Pierce said about her, and so she begins to engage with Pierce and his ideas actively. As she explores Pierce's world, Pynchon shows what Pierce must have known or suspected. Beneath her insulating tactics, suburban Oedipa has been submerging her own eccentric, early-adopting tendencies. She becomes a hub, "weakly" linking many of the other eccentrics in Pierce's extended personal network, further breaking the spell of her isolation, exposing herself to elements of society she has been ignoring, and activating her remarkable connection-making mind. She becomes more open to playing improvised roles in nonstandard narratives and to exploring their implications. In what follows, she pursues dubious signs, entertains paranoid conspiracy theories, tracks subtle trends, and generally tries to comprehend societal outsiders. At Berkeley, she is attracted to social unrest but reflects that she "had been educated at a time of nerves, blandness and retreat among not only her fellow students but also most of the visible structure around and ahead of them" (103). This education, she thinks, makes her unfit for campus counterculture, but it turns out her text-tracking skills take her places more countercultural and far less privileged than campus. She thinks of her mental activation as a "sensitizing" of her faculties to the meanings of and connections between seemingly "off hand" things: postage stamps and cancellations, graffiti, old men's stories, pre-Restoration plays about restoration, and the rest (45). She begins to care for people whose lives are invisible to the average person and to formulate a novel worldview that includes them.⁸

Yet Oedipa continues to shy away from her own agency. If "embroidery" implies (as in Varo's painting) participation, we might say Oedipa's sensitization lands her in a series of "embroidery" crises. She observes and catalogs possible *clinamina*, but she increasingly avoids information that would prompt her to participate, that would make her, and not some outside controlling force, responsible. Though she gives in, she at first refuses to let Metzger give her information about Pierce. Later, instead of

⁸ It is hard not to see Oedipa as awakening, though to what she is awakening is a matter of debate, as is to what extent we should see her new agency and attitudes as ideal or effective. For other treatments of Oedipa as an awakening figure, see, for example, Cathy Davidson on Oedipa as an androgyne; Richard Hardack on Oedipa's potential lesbian identity; Erik Dussere on Oedipa as leaving behind her Dylan-esque "Ms. Jones" status to become an aware resister of the mainstream; and Kristin L. Matthews on Oedipa's discovery of new, self-aware ways of reading in and through culture.

going directly to Driblette for more information about the Tristero, as she knows would make sense, she heads to Berkeley, then to San Francisco. As Oedipa, Emery Bortz, and Genghis Cohen piece together information about the Tristero, she pays less and less attention, often choosing not to ask followup questions. In her executorship, as in her viewing of *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle*, she avoids looking squarely at either the dark figure (Pierce?) or the subversive girl (herself?). As the narrative ends, she is still waiting for a big revelation of the hidden, overwhelming power of the Tristero. She continues to expect an ordering force so powerful she cannot resist it and cannot be blamed for its choices. She stops trying to live in a suburban sit-com and begins trying to await silent Tristero's empire.

In other words, Oedipa responds to glimpses of countercultural activity not by understanding the counterculture as part of a complex system of human connection and mutually constitutive cultural interaction in which she is implicated, but by imagining that these people who differ from the seemingly dominant culture must belong to an irresistibly powerful underworld controlling or manipulating the seemingly dominant culture—what White suggests could become an alternative Martial order. As with so many of her tendencies, Oedipa explains this one with metaphor: She is attracted to the image of the Pacific Ocean assuming “the ugliness” on shore into “some more general truth,” washing over messiness with order (55). She imagines the Tristero “shadow-state” (163) as a powerful cabal of oceanic place-makers, able to subsume all other orders into their order. In this fantasy, Oedipa reveals herself to be the sort of disappointed Pynchonian idealist Molly Hite has described: “In Pynchon’s comic vision, Western man is a failed Platonist, committed to the proposition that the truth is One, and able to function only because he keeps happening on truths on the way toward the elusive Truth” (24). Hite contends that for Pynchon characters this tendency results in a “comic nostalgia” for the missing principle of order or ordering force (25), and also a predisposition to seek out a big controlling bad guy to blame for the fallen state of the world.⁹ But Pynchon’s writing, Hite says, always undermines the order-chaos dichotomy so that multiple orders are possible, rather than singular ones only (25–32). In this, she anticipates White’s application of Venus, Mars, and Hermes to *Lot 49*. There is not one bad guy, there is not one principle of order in the world, there is not a stable paradigm for anchoring one’s beliefs and practices. There is a busy crossroads, and, in *Lot 49*, Pierce is standing there connecting agents, passing information and ideas, and making deals.

⁹ Thomas Schaub, in a similar vein, examines how “the rage for order is persistently denied” (x) in Pynchon’s works, which so often “depend on the tyrannizing desire of the mind for unity and meaning” (ix). Scott Sanders places Oedipa’s paranoia in the context of Pynchon’s Puritan ancestry, suggesting that many descendants of Puritans, rejecting an omnipotent God, persist in Puritan habits of mind, so that they tend toward paranoia, reflexively locating some other ordering force. “God is the original conspiracy theory,” and the most elegant, Sanders says (177).

In an ungenerous (and quite plausible) reading, Pierce places Oedipa into his network vengefully, in order to squelch a former lover's happiness, caring little what happens to his network after his death. In maybe the most generous reading, Pierce draws Oedipa into his network in the hope that she will be able to do some powerful things with it, as he has—maybe even better things. But as entangled as Oedipa becomes, she does not, by *Lot 49*'s end, understand her connective agency as Pierce seems to have understood his. Paula Martin Salván argues that *Lot 49* presents a “third” kind of community, one which “stands in between” the visible, Martial community of the dominant culture and the invisible, Venetian community of the dispossessed. This community “[participates] in both [other communities] yet [escapes] the closed dialectical structure they propose”; it is “linked to the Trystero in some way but also part of the civil order it opposes” (84). As Salván proposes, Oedipa's exposure to Pierce's network presents to her the possibility of participating in such a third, Hermes-like community, yet Oedipa is fixated on the one-bad-guy principle and perceives (or tries to perceive) her actions as irrelevancies, ultimately null responses to unassailable powers (“malignant magics”) that control her. Pynchon underscores a striking irony here. Pierce Inverarity has the makings of a big business military-industrial villain. He is the hidden face of the faceless corporation. He—for heaven's sake—turns the bones of soldier heroes into cheap amusements. But Pierce, for all that, has a firmer grasp on his responsibility for the state of the social order than does Oedipa, who aspires for so long to anonymous normalcy. Pierce interacts with culture; Oedipa hides in culture. Oedipa's sense of a shared, mutually constitutive reality causes her to imagine she can get lost in the mutuality; Pierce's sense of shared reality inspires him to fiddle with the shape of culture, acting from a “third” space between the dispossessed and the despotic.

To regard Pierce's agency as wholly and solely neo-totalitarian would take some of the sting out of Pynchon's critique. Through manifestations of Pierce's disruptive agency, Pynchon suggests the uncanny and disturbingly effective power of the industrialist's flexible engagement with and persuasion of his community. Pierce engages and persuades, rather than brutally coerces. He sometimes loses, as he does when Oedipa leaves him. While both Pierce and Oedipa are possessed of immense wit, Oedipa's wit yields an esoteric reading of the Tristero, and Pierce's wit yields the dynamic (if unhealthy) spaces of San Narciso. Pierce actively influences the shape of his society, perceiving eccentricities and innovations in spaces not as disruptions to stamp out but as opportunities to utilize or energies to channel. He does not partake of pure antisocial isolation—Mucho, Hilarius, the IA—or the irresponsibility of moving with the crowd, as Oedipa has tried to do in Kinneret. Conversely, Oedipa's sunglass-trapped tears (21) turn out to be a useful metaphor for her actions throughout the

story, as, to the end, she holds back her agency and avoids doing anything radical or disruptive *with* Pierce's network, reading the network rather than consciously making it a tool. She continually resists the notion that she can affect the disposition of lived reality, and even the notion that the shape of society may be informal, fluid, and socially wrought, rather than controlled from above by a formal, author-like place-making power.¹⁰ Oedipa's contained tears, then, become a metonym for middle-class avoidance of responsibility. If Pierce, the sinister man, is too powerful, that is partly the fault of those who ignore or refuse their own responsibility for shaping culture, despite their grief about the state of the world. As Oedipa says, "This is America, you live in it, you let it happen" (150). Pierce is effective but careless. Oedipa cares, but she is ineffective. Pynchon suggests that so long as Oedipa and her clever, educated, privileged cohort think of their dynamic society as someone else's responsibility or as the product of highly-powerful ruling minds, self-serving wits like Pierce will have the advantage, keeping all the space making and disruptive secondary production to themselves, brazenly diffusing their self-serving innovations through the networks of contemporary life, unchecked.

¹⁰ Ali Chetwynd has argued that "*Lot 49* sustains the possibility that its disparate discoveries might resolve into explanation, right up until its final page" (39). *Oedipa* does seem to hold out hope for that possibility, but it is crucial to see that Pierce does no such thing.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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