

Maiden in the Tower: *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*, Rapunzel, and Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*

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Abstract: *This essay focuses on Thomas Pynchon's novel The Crying of Lot 49 as an example of the genre of profanated romance, traced by Dennis de Rougemont who conceives of it as a variation of the Tristan legend, and relates the suffering in romance to death and self-understanding. Freud viewed the death instinct as motivator of human culture as well as human destructiveness, and my essay, anchored in Norman O. Brown's and Ernest Becker's interpretation of Freud's ideas, shows how the main protagonist Oedipa Maas questions her social conditioning in her initial confrontation with Remedios Varo's painting, a turning point in the novel, and a blueprint for other encounters with various forms of the aesthetic—a striptease performance and a play. Those infuse and complicate her romantic quest for the execution of her lover Pierce Inverarity's estate, finally enabling her to accept death as an integral part of life.*

Keywords: *repression of death—profanated romance—quest—art—culture*

The aim of this essay is to link Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) to the existing tradition of the genre of romance,¹ focusing

1 Although Deborah L. Madsen discusses *The Crying of Lot 49* in terms of romance in "Pynchon's Quest Narratives and the Tradition of American Romance," she fails to address the issues of death inherent to the genre. For more information, see *Approaches to Teaching Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and Other Works* by Thomas H. Schaub (ed. and preface), New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America, 2008, pp. 25-30.

on the concept of death as foregrounded in Oedipa Maas's encounter with Remedios Varo's painting *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*. Constituted as the quest of Oedipa who tries to re-unite herself with Pierce Inverarity, her dead lover, who has named her executrix of his estate, the story recounts an ancient urge to immortalize oneself and the loved one. As such, it represents an epitome of the repression of death. In this essay I will show how the narrative is constituted to negotiate the issue of death through romance. By gaining important psychological insights about her social conditioning, through the encounter with Remedios Varo's artwork, the main character Oedipa sets a basis for gradually overcoming her repressions and accepting death as an inherent part of life.

In focusing on death and romance I have had recourse to texts that treat these themes from various perspectives. Dennis De Rougemont² understands the romance narrative as a variation of the Tristan legend and relates the suffering in romance to death and self-understanding. As the suffering brings a higher lever of self-understanding, the romance hero, according to de Rougemont, profits from being separated from his lover. By contrast, in his seminal study *Denial of Death* (1973) Ernst Becker sees the romantic union as a way of attaining immortality through the "cosmology of two." While presenting different perspectives on issues of romance and death, however, both de Rougemont and Becker base their theories on the notion of the "repression of death." This idea is based on Sigmund Freud's concept of the death instinct, expressed as an aggressive instinct in society, that needs to be "moderated and tamed" (81). Becker recasts Freud's idea of death drive as "the ever-present fear of death" which presents a normal function of our instinct for self-preservation. As such it gives rise to the need for meaningful life achieved through individual or collective heroism (17). This heroism is achieved through the act of *transference* where an individual projects his fear of death and the need for immortality onto love relationship, and hopes to attain it through the "cosmology of two." While repressed death is a motivator for the pursuit of the beloved being, it

2 Lila V. Graves and Lawrence Wolfley link Pynchon's work to the school of psychoanalytic culture criticism, with Dennis De Rougemont and Norman O. Brown as its representatives, which flourished in the late fifties while Pynchon was at Cornell University. Indebted to Freud in different ways, both analysts trace the decline of twentieth-century culture to "independent abuses of sexuality and power." Whereas Brown's *Life Against Death* supplies, as Wolfley claims, a conceptual framework for the development of this theme in *Gravity's Rainbow*, de Rougemont's study, according to Graves, inspires V., and also *The Crying of Lot 49*, I would suggest.

also denies life. "Only if Eros—the life instinct—can affirm the life of the body, can the death instinct affirm death, and in affirming death magnify life (Norman O. Brown 108-109).

While my theoretical take on romance and death is closer to Becker than to de Rougemont, I find de Rougemont's concept of "profanation" resonant for my analysis of *The Crying of Lot 49*. According to him, all romantic fiction since the Tristan legend shows a consistent debasement of values of love while retaining significant traits of the romantic genre. Likewise, *The Crying of Lot 49* has a number of relatively easily identifiable romance elements that all center around Oedipa's early encounter with the painting, which I will shortly address. First, her encounter renders her a maiden in the tower (of her ego) and Pierce a (failed) knight of deliverance. Second, Oedipa's subsequent quest for the execution of Pierce's estate through the cryptical landscape of Southern California reinforces the reading of the novel as a romance. Third, the mysterious Tristero system that Oedipa chases figures in the narrative as a sacred object of romance and a substitute lover. Finally, besides the thematic links to the tradition of romance, the most obvious relationship between Pynchon's novel and the traditional romance is established by names. For example, the mysterious Tristero is a pun on both 'Tristan' and 'tryst'; besides being an acronym for *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oedipa's nickname, 'Oed', captures the German word for 'sad' and 'lonely' ('öd') and seems to allude to 'Isolde' or 'Iseult'³ (Berressem 82-83). However, whereas in the original romance *Liebestod* is what awaits at the end, in *The Crying of Lot 49* as a profanated version, the readers are offered *Tod* at the outset.

As the most important link to the romance tradition, Oedipa's early encounter with the Surrealist painter Remedios Varo's *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* while in Mexico City with Pierce will be the main focus of this essay. Pointing both backwards to their past love relationship, and forward to Oedipa's upcoming mission as executrix, the scene presents a focal point in the first part of the novel. Made in 1961 as a second piece of Remedios Varo's self-biographical triptych,⁴ the painting represents

3 According to Hanjo Berressem, T.S. Eliot quotes the word from *Tristan and Isolde* in *The Waste Land*, a work which might provide another clue to Pynchon's postmodern California.

4 The first panel represents a group of girls emerging on their bicycles from a building of narrow gables under the supervision of two overseers, a woman in a nun's habit and a man carrying a bag full of birds. The third panel, entitled "Escape" is from 1962 and represents two lovers fleeing in a magic, fury shell

a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out of the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (11)

Like the girls who inhabit the enclosed space of the tower and are guarded by a witch that supplied them with a thread for their embroidery, Oedipa realizes, in her encounter with the painting, that she occupies her culturally pre-determined spheres and, through the activity of her subjectivity, embroiders "the tapestry which [is] the world" (Pynchon 12). Her perspective, as well as her tears, is always already refracted through her cultural conditioning, the consumerist landscape of the California of the 1960's:

She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape. What did she so desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: and that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. (Pynchon 12-13)

Quoting André Breton, one of the key figures of Surrealism, Bohn differentiates between two distinct phases in the process of the observation of the surrealist painting (148). While initially causing an emotional reaction due to its "revelatory power," the painting gradually offers the possibility to question its effects through the process of (cognitive) interpretation. Featuring Oedipa's initial emotional reaction followed by important (intellectual) insights, the novel recounts the proposed binaries at the core of reading. As Hanjo Berressem maintains, the painting functions as "an allegorical mirror of herself," and suggests Varo's imprisoned girls as proxies to Oedipa.

towards a cave. The triptych now belongs to a private collection (Kaplan 11).

Seeing the journey as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment in the triptych, Varo thematizes her own flight from her strict upbringing and tradition (Kaplan 21). In 1929, Varo married a fellow-artist Gerardo Lizarraga, and flew, in 1937, from Spain, because of the civil war, and later to Paris, with another lover, a surrealist poet Benjamin Péret. Varo's fear of death is curiously encoded in her personal information. Besides literal flying, Varo tried to fight death by reducing her age by five years, and declaring 1913 as the year of her birth (Kaplan 56). She got her name after Virgen de los Remedios as a supposed "remedy" to her mother's grief after the decease of an older daughter (Kaplan 11).

Identifying with their destiny, Oedipa realizes that she is, either by herself or in her relationship with Pierce, unable to leave "the tower" of her ego. Since the tower Oedipa inhabits is itself a part of the world, Oedipa also creates herself, embroidering the tapestry (Berressem 91-92).

Framed as a tower, Oedipa's ego is another reference to romance. Rendering the tower as both a physical space of romance and a metaphor for the workings of subjectivity, Pynchon evokes older codes of magic and combines them with the more recent codes of psychology.⁵ The tower of the ego, "its height and architecture," is incidental, and so is its magic. "Anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all," the magic of the witch represents a projection of, what Freud would term, "a repressed mental entit[y] into the external world," a culture aiming to repress its own mortality (Lloyd 122-123).⁶ While urging man to build immortal cultures, the fear of death also entails (aesthetic) representations of death that both

point obliquely to that which threatens to disturb the order but articulate this disturbing knowledge of mortality in a displaced, recoded and translated manner, and by virtue of the substitution render the dangerous knowledge as something beautiful, fascinating and ultimately reassuring. (Morra, Robson, & Smith xxxiii)

Weaving the tapestry with the two sets of threads coming out of the cauldron and with the love-potion that the witch is brewing while reading the little black book which possibly includes the instructions (i.e. spells and songs) for the inscription of the tapestry (Bill Brown 4), the girls, like Oedipa, succumb to cultural instructions for life. After all, magic is, as Lloyd maintains, a "bookish business" as it, utilizing linguistic symbolism, makes the symbolic literal (124).

Pynchon further strengthens references to a folk tale romance in his allusion to Rapunzel. As a maiden in the tower, Oedipa resembles Rapunzel, a prisoner of a folk tale. Kept in the tower by a witch, Rapunzel uses her

5 I follow here Fredric Jameson's division of codes in romance. For further reading, see Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (Autumn 1975), pp. 135-163.

6 Inspired by Hegel's view, nineteenth-century thinkers used to see magic as a first stage of the evolution of human civilization, later followed by religion and science. In Pynchon's profanated romance, both older codes of magic and newer ones of religion and science are utilized, thereby self-consciously following the evolution of romance as a mode (Lloyd 122-123).

beautiful tresses to let the prince in. Upon discovering the love affair, the witch cuts off Rapunzel's tresses, and throws her into the desert, and, fastening the braids of hair to the hook of the window, lures the prince into the tower. Realizing what has happened to the pregnant Rapunzel, the prince leaps down into the thorns, which pierce his eyes. Likewise, Oedipa

had also gently conned herself into the curious, Rapunzel-like role of a pensive girl somehow, magically, prisoner among the pines and salt fogs of Kinneret, looking for somebody to say hey, let down your hair. When it turned out to be Pierce she'd happily pulled out the pins and curlers and down it tumbled in its whispering, dainty avalanche, only when Pierce had got maybe halfway up, her lovely hair turned, through some sinister sorcery, into a great unanchored wig, and down he fell, on his ass. But dauntless, perhaps using one of his many credit cards for a shim, he'd slipped the lock of the tower door and come up the conchlike stairs, which, had true guile come more naturally to him, he'd have done to begin with. (Pynchon 12-13)

Since Oedipa's knight "fell on his ass," and subsequently died, Oedipa, like Rapunzel, will in the course of the novel roam the southern Californian desert and try to bring him to life.

The figure of Pierce as a failed knight of deliverance is, along with the idea of Oedipa as a maiden in the tower, a prime element of Pynchon's profanated romance. Pierce's failure to rescue Oedipa embodies her own attempts to leave the tower, since "Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there's been no escape" (Pynchon 13). What she tries to do in administering Pierce's estate is facilitating his immortalization project, to "keep it bouncing," "to alter the land" (Pynchon 123). The involvement with Pierce's legacy will also carry with it "all manner of revelations" (Pynchon 10), bringing Oedipa closer to her own death, that she "had been steadfastly refusing to look at [...] directly" (Pynchon 93) and potentially rendering Oedipa, as J. Kerry Grant suggests, her own.

Another failed knight and an agent of profanated romance is Pierce's proxy, the handsome co-executor Metzger. Once again, Oedipa seduces him by letting "her hair all the way down. She knew she looked pretty good" (Pynchon 18). Later, Metzger's "radiant eyes flew open, pierced her, as if she could feel the sharpness somewhere between her breasts" (Pynchon 27), anticipating the event of sexual "piercing," their intercourse. While apparently marking a turning point in the narrative, the (sexual) ruling out of Pierce, and Oedipa's infidelity, the intimate encounter with Metzger still makes the romantic Oedipa wonder whether "this were really happening in the same way as, say, her first time in bed with Pierce, the dead man" (Pyn-

chon 22). Learning after the intercourse that Pierce warned Metzger that Oedipa “won’t be easy” (Pynchon 22), as if he could predict his death and Metzger’s subsequent involvement with his lover, the woman starts crying, as she once again realizes her entrapment in someone else’s script.

Oedipa’s crying in Metzger’s bed is anticipated by her tears in front of the painting:

Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. No one had noticed; she wore dark green bubble shades. For a moment she’d wondered if the seal around her sockets were tight enough to allow the tears simply to go on and fill up the entire lens space and never dry. She could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unbound varied in important ways from cry to cry. (Pynchon 13)

Wearing bubble-shades and wondering whether “the seal around her sockets were tight enough,” Oedipa re-confirms her status as a romantic maiden in the tower. Or else, like the clothes she puts on prior to her striptease performance on her first night with Metzger, as a fashion accessory of the 1960’s *par excellence*, the bubble shades testify to her immersion in culture.

Rather than her intensity of feeling, the size of the culturally pre-determined lens determines how much Oedipa is supposed to cry, or else like the tapestry Varo’s girls are embroidering, the tears will “spill out ... into a void” (Pynchon 13). With their blank surface that prevents eye contact and mirrors the surroundings, the bubble shades show Oedipa as a replica of the world, sharing the fate of other maidens before her.

As a point of endless mirroring, the bubble shades in the narrative constitute a mediating figure between romance and the aesthetics of postmodernism. In the figure of Oedipa’s bubble shades in front of the painting, Pynchon translates the tower into the products of modern architecture such as the Westin Bonaventure hotel. Built in the new Los Angeles downtown by the architect John Portman, the building, according to Jameson, rather than trying to introduce a differential element in its surroundings, replicates the adjacent streets, ultimately replacing the rest of the city. Showing in its glass skin only the reflected surroundings of the hotel, rather than the proper exterior of it, the hotel remains dissociated from the rest of the city: “[W]hen you seek to look at the hotel’s outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself, but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it” (Jameson, 1991, 39-42). Like the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, with her bubble shades Oedipa becomes her own tower, self-contained and hidden,

that both aspires to be a part of social reality of the postmodern capitalist culture, and longs to be autonomous. Although veiled behind the glasses, Oedipa's tears will have a revelatory power to herself, "as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry" (Pynchon 13), and she will gain important insights throughout the subsequent series of cryings (Bill Brown 2).

Having established *The Crying of Lot 49* as a profanated romance, I will now go on to address the issue of death as negotiated by Varo's painting. This is most efficiently done by the dynamics of mirroring in front of and within the painting.⁷ According to psychoanalytic theory, the Self is split into doubles in a situation that potentially threatens annihilation. When the fear of death rises to the surface, the double emerges to embrace those more horrifying aspects of the self. However, "[a]s a denial of death, the double also prefigures it—it uncannily repeats the very element of isolation that is denied" (Rabinovitch 23-26). After all, Oedipa identifies with the girls, who in terms identify with each other; Pynchon's novel is a profanated "copy" of the original romance. Even Varo's painting is copied in the Berkeley hotel. As Berger suggests, drawing upon Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), whereas the original is always deeply embedded in its historical context, the copy, resisting time and recuperation by the institution of gallery, can be used for various purposes. As a product of its specific time, the original, with the advent of mechanical production, retains a character of a ritual object, which also once was the original function of art. "The bogus religiosity which now surrounds original works of art, and which is ultimately dependent upon their market value, has become the substitute for what paintings lost when the camera made them reproducible" (Berger 23). As opposed to the authentic work of art that Oedipa encounters in Mexico City, by virtue of being displaced in place and time, the copy "meet[s] the beholder or listener in his own particular situation," to the effect of a "tremendous shattering of tradition" (Benjamin 1169-1179), and thereby resists the fatality of time. While the encounter in Mexico City reinforces the sense of Oedipa's embeddedness in culture, the copy of Varo in the "sprawling, many-leveled, German-

7 According to Stephan Mattesich, the girls exist between the "schizophrenic subjectivity" of "she" and "they" and recall the holographic structure repeating the whole in each part (3). This "process of algorithmic or polymeric duplication" is conveyed in the gable structure, while the bicycles in the painting signify tautology and static immobility.

baroque hotel, carpeted in deep green, going in for curved corridors and ornamental chandeliers" (Pynchon 69-70), cancels the negativity of time and marks her progress in terms of acceptance of death. In her room in the Berkely hotel

[s]he [Oedipa] fell asleep almost at once, but kept waking up from a nightmare about something in the mirror, across from her bed. Nothing specific, only a possibility, nothing she could see. When she finally did settle into sleep, she dreamed that Mucho, her husband, was making love to her on a soft white beach that was not part of any California she knew. When she woke in the morning, she was sitting bolt upright, staring into the mirror at her own exhausted face. (Pynchon 69-70)

Reflecting in a re-coded manner Oedipa's previous experience in front of the original painting, this nocturnal encounter, rather than a mirror to Oedipa's situation, collapses into an image *and* a mirror. While dreaming⁸ about love, Oedipa still wakes up from "something in the mirror," and seeing her "exhausted face," starts realizing the absurdity of her mission.

Acknowledging the governing aesthetics of mirroring in the novel, we can say that Pynchon's profanated romance is structured around the ekphratic⁹ reflections which I call "Pynchon's triptych," and which contain the fear of death (and its gradual acceptance). While reflecting the fictional content of the fairy tale "Rapunzel," the subject matter of *Bordando* anticipates Oedipa's (life) story, that is, the text itself. Concerns of Rapunzel, Varo's girls, and Oedipa all echo each other, as all the women try to immortalize themselves and their lovers, but with a difference. Like paradigms for her story, Oedipa's life is fictional, revealing its true nature only in the encounter with other imaginary sources as metaphors for reality. Delineating the world as a fabrication of various semiotic systems, Varo's painting points at the process of the construction of the text as its double.

However, appropriating images for their own ends, ekphratic narratives show a tendency to "alienate or displace the object, to make it disappear in favor of the textual image being produced by the ekphrasis" (Mitchell 157). Subverting the timeless and universal persistence of Varo's original

8 Nietzsche related the idea of sleep to death, as it is a core of all pessimistic religions and philosophies stands "only as a symbol of a much deeper and longer *compulsion to rest*—in practice it is death that works so seductively behind the image of its brother sleep" (Dollimore 97).

9 I am using W. J. T. Mitchell's notion of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (152).

trptych, and annulling its linearity, Pynchon creates a sequentially ordered series, a repetition with a (minimal) difference, promoting the arbitrariness and transience of their status. While shattering the protagonist from death, the recurrent motif of the maiden in the tower also abstracts it from the narrative. Caught between the "schizophrenic subjectivity" of "she" and "they" (Mattesich 3), Oedipa's existence, like the imagery realm of Varo's girls, is obscure and even absurd. Nor is her lover Pierce, featuring absent assets and playing roles, more tangible; he is in the course of the narrative ruled out by at least three or four other (potential) lovers (Bexter 29), a common feature of a profanated romance. Finally, as the ultimate aim of Oedipa's quest, the mysterious Tristero turns out to be equally elusive and exists only as a sum of different discourses, such as fictional accounts, historical references, as well as memories.

As stated at the outset, the aim of this essay is to link *The Crying of Lot 49* to the existing tradition of the genre of romance, with the special focus on the workings of the concept of death as foregrounded in Oedipa's encounter with Varo's painting. Gaining, through the encounter with Varo's artwork, important psychological insights about her social conditioning, Oedipa sets a basis for gradually overcoming her repressions and accepting death as an inherent part of life. While the concepts of the maiden in the tower and the knight of deliverance locate *The Crying of Lot 49* within the romantic discourse, they also prefigure the duplications at the core of the related issue of death. Oedipa's encounter with the painting and the allusion to "Rapunzel" both split the self into its double in order to protect it from death, and also prefigure the gradual acceptance of human finitude in the figure of the Tristero. This double movement unfolds as a tension between narrative progression marked by Oedipa's adventures, such as the adultery and the suicide attempt, and narrative regression, for the purposes of ascertaining the origins of the Tristero. The double movement is finally overcome in the integration of the two dimensions, entailing a circular structure, uncommon in traditional romances, of both evolution and a standstill.

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