

Tim Suen
May 19, 2004
21L.451

Paranoia and the Circulation of Discourse

“Why...is everybody so interested in texts?” asks Driblette, the director and star of *The Courier's Tragedy* in *The Crying of Lot 49* (61). Traditionally, readers have studied texts in search of meaning. The New Critics placed emphasis on analyzing structures within texts in order to support or disprove an interpretation. The Puritans, to whom Driblette compares Oedipa, were “hung up” on individual words in their literal readings of the Bible (62). This obsession with the text presupposes a certain respect for the authority if not artistic genius of the author. As a result, literary critics have often been preoccupied with identifying the author of a text as well as the author in the text. Foucault, however, suggests that authorship has been improperly given precedence in literary criticism (1636). Far from a sign of artistic individuality, the issue of authorship only became relevant when those in power wanted to punish writers for their subversive works. Thus, the author and authenticity, common topics of academic debate, are societal constructs that have attained significance due only to arbitrary historical circumstances. Rather than dawdling on these “tiresome repetitions,” Foucault proposes broader questions, such as “What are the modes of existence of this discourse?” and “Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?” (1636). *The Crying of Lot 49* is centered around the circulation of discourse. Time and again, the exact content of the discourse does not matter so much as how it is being exchanged and distributed. Oedipa does not realize this and continues to ask questions in search of textual authority instead of trying to uncover the forces that are responsible for leading

her on her quest. As a result, she takes the discourse at face value and does not begin to consider the paranoid perspectives until it is too late.

In *Lot 49*, the focus is not on the meaning of the discourse itself, but on how that discourse is practiced and transmitted. What is said is of less significance than how and why it is being said. This is highlighted by the fact that the content of the texts in *Lot 49* are meaningless refuse. In Inverarity's America, an underground system that has been developed for delivering mail is referred to as W.A.S.T.E. Those who refuse to send their correspondence through the United States Postal Service put it through the WASTE system. Its patrons range from disgruntled engineers to failed suicides, but, as the innamorato asks, "What do they tell each other?" (94). The mail delivered by the Peter Pinguid Society suggests one possibility:

*Dear Mike, it said, how are you? Just thought I'd drop you a note.
How's your book coming? Guess that's all for now. See you at The
Scope. (39)*

The content of the message is almost completely devoid of meaning. The generic greeting conveys no information with its small talk. Lacking even a signature, it is interchangeable and could come from anyone to anyone. The most pathetic part is the last sentence, since Mike Fallopian is already at The Scope, where the mail is delivered in the first place, and would presumably already have spoken to the sender in person. Based on this correspondence, the mail and the mail system have no reason to exist. Thus, it is critical to look at the practices that put this mode of discourse into existence: "To keep it up to some kind of a reasonable volume, each member has to send at least one letter a week through the Yoyodyne system. If you don't, you get fined" (39). Since the system exists to support itself, the discourse created by the Peter Pinguid Society need not have significance in and of itself beyond its relation to the system. With the stamp replaced by the initials PPS, the text can be seen as a post-postscript, an

afterthought put into existence because “It’s the principle” that matters. In this case, the principle is not the discourse itself, but the terms on which it is being distributed.

Oedipa, however, does not ask the right questions and allows herself to be manipulated by those in control. This occurs literally in her encounter with Metzger. She knows from the start that the appearance of Baby Igor on her television screen is more than just coincidence: “Either he made up the whole thing, Oedipa thought suddenly, or he bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this” (20). The distribution of discourse, a movie, in this case, merits extreme suspicion. Her awareness, however, does not prevent her from falling prey to Metzger. By provoking her interest in *Cashiered*, Metzger uses the movie to his advantage in an unfair bet and a game of Strip Botticelli in which he controls all the answers. In this effort he is aided by Oedipa’s inability to look outside of a given discourse. Once the movie has her attention, not only is Oedipa blind to how it is being used to control her, but also begins to place value on Metzger’s knowledge of the movie. As the one who knows in the game of Strip Botticelli, Metzger not only has the power to provide answers but also to deny questions. Rather than asking how *Cashiered* will end, however, Oedipa should have been wondering why they were watching the movie and why she was asking him questions about the movie. Ultimately, *Cashiered* is meaningless melodrama, ending with the lurid electrocution of Baby Igor and the trite apologies of the father. But Metzger knows what is going to happen anyways, so the content does not matter for him. The movie is just part of Metzger’s elaborate seduction of Oedipa, whom Pierce had said “wouldn’t be easy” (30).

Oedipa’s obsession with the text and authorial knowledge follow her throughout the story. This is best illustrated by her quest for the significance of Trystero in *The Courier’s Tragedy*. Disturbed by parallels between the play and Pierce Inverarity’s will, Oedipa, like a good student,

looks to the script and the author for answers. At each opportunity for resolution, however, authorship and authenticity are denied and deferred. First, Driblette, the director, tries to dissuade her from even discussing the play: “It isn’t literature, it doesn’t mean anything. Wharfinger was no Shakespeare” (60). For him, the text is not sacred and not worthy to be the subject of “scholarly disputes” (61). Oedipa, however, wants to treat it as literature and, in doing so, assigns meaning to the author. When Driblette dismisses her question about Wharfinger, she demands to see the text, but Driblette is particularly cavalier about scripts. They are “worn, torn, stained with coffee” (60) and the copies were made from a paperback of which he loses “at least half a dozen every time” (61). As expected, the words do not hold much value for him, nor should they, he suggests, for Oedipa. The text, Driblette claims, is just used “to get past the bone barriers around an actor’s memory” (62). The specifics, “why characters reacted to the Trystero possibility the way they did, why the assassins came on” can be debated endlessly without conclusion (63). The meaning is in his vision, his delivery of the text. Without his transmission of the discourse, the words and what they signify would simply be a trace left behind, “Dead, mineral, without value or potential” (62). Without his production, or the Paranoids having talked about it, for that matter, the play would not even have existed for Oedipa.

Oedipa, nevertheless, is more interested in who wrote the play than why it has been produced. As a result, she embarks on a search for the authentic text, which continues to elude her. Paradoxically, each subsequent obstacle seems to promise a greater return, if for no other reason than to reward her efforts. The first link in the chain of transmissions is Zapf’s Used Books. There she finds the paperback *Jacobean Revenge Plays* and the line about Trystero. The issue of provenance, however, remains unsettled. The preface is “unsigned” and the folio edition is “undated” (72). Furthermore, penciled in is a note referring to a variant of the line. As a result,

the authority of the text remains in question and the origins of Trystero unverified. The next step is the source for the paperback reprint, a textbook entitled *Plays of Ford, Webster, Tourneur and Wharfinger*. This text is deferred twice. Not available at the L.A. library or at the office of the publisher Lectern Press, it has to be traced to a warehouse in Oakland. Far from validating the existence of Trystero, however, this text provides a completely different version of the line. Instead of “Who’s once been set his tryst with Trystero,” it reads “Who once has crossed the lusts of Angelo” (81). To further complicate matters, the footnote explains that this line appeared only in the Quarto, which may have been the product of a later restoration. The Whitechapel edition, on the other hand, gives “This tryst or odious awry,” which may be a pun on “This trystero dies irae” (82). The Whitechapel version, however, is in fragments and is “hardly to be trusted” (82). Instead of providing the clarity Oedipa desires, this academic analysis of the text leads to only greater confusion. Never validated, the authority of the work continues to be deferred to earlier and earlier sources. As Driblette had remarked, “You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth” (63).

Not willing to give up her search for textual authority, Oedipa resorts to seeking out Emory Bortz, the editor of the textbook. Once again, she asks about “the historical Wharfinger” (124). At this point, one of the graduate students starts to make fun of her and even Bortz suggests that talking about an author who lived hundreds of years ago would be a dead end. Rather than observing the function of the text, however, Oedipa and Bortz focus in on the word. The fundamentalism of Bortz’s reading is apparent in his horror at distortions: “Misprints. Gah. Corrupt” (125). Nevertheless, Bortz does manage to provide some conclusion to this quest for origin. From him, she learns that the couplet mentioning Trystero exists only in a pornographic version of *The Courier’s Tragedy* in the Vatican library, which was possibly part of a

Scurvhamite project to parody theater. This knowledge, however, only defers substantiation of Trystero once more, since Oedipa must turn to the Scurvhamites to determine the meaning of the word. Convinced of a core truth that can be revealed by the real text, she places excessive value on authorship and authenticity.

In her effort to confirm her sources Oedipa fails to ask the right questions. In spite of all the detective work needed to track down the author of those lines, Oedipa does not come much closer to understanding Trystero than when she started. There are two reasons for this. First, none of her sources have the ability to prove their own validity. As a result, the authority of each source is simply deferred to the next link in the chain, with each subsequent link becoming more and more tenuous. Second, the text itself ultimately says nothing about Trystero. Oedipa assumes that there is a core truth at the end of her search, but Wharfinger's works provide no such guarantee. In fact, the Trystero couplet in the play dead ends with the Scurvhamite edition at the Vatican library and from there she has to go to Blobb's *Peregrinations* to learn more about Trystero.

What Oedipa should have been concerned with is not the validity of the text but its means of transmission. The line about Trystero incites her curiosity not because it had appeared in the text hundreds of years ago but in the performance put on by the Tank Players several days prior. So more fitting questions are "Why does the play exist?" and "What effect does it have upon her?" Fallopian asks, "Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something Inverarity set up before he died?" (138). While knowing the legitimacy of each text may help answer this question, much of the evidence lies in Oedipa's actions. Has the discourse brought about in her a response appropriate to that hypothesis? Oedipa had "seen two WASTE postmen, a WASTE mailbox, WASTE stamps, WASTE cancellations"

and imagined the “image of the muted post horn all but saturating the Bay Area” (107). In terms of power and resources, the possibility is also there. Every company and property in San Narciso that is link to Tristero can be connected to Pierce Inverarity. He owned the Tank Theater which performed *The Courier’s Tragedy* and the shopping center inhabited by Zapf’s Used Books, and he donated to San Narsco College, where Emory Bortz taught. The discourse exists because of Pierce Inverarity and has the potential to be controlled by him. The possibility that WASTE is a convoluted practical joke is not out of the question.

What justifies this paranoid interpretation, however, is the effect this discourse has upon others. Before Oedipa has a chance to act on this revelation, all the evidence is destroyed. Driblette, who directed the Tank Theater production, “walk[s] into the Pacific” (125). This is foreshadowed by his claim that “If I were to dissolve in her...be washed down the drain into the Pacific, what you saw tonight would vanish too.” Like Wharfinger of centuries past, all that remains of his production is the trace, the Tank Theater and the fading memory of the play in the audience’s minds. The line with Tryster, in particular, would disappear especially quickly, since Bortz and his students had not seen it and others probably would not have remembered. The elimination of such corroborating evidence would be particularly appropriate for a hoax. In addition, Zapf burns his own bookstore for insurance money, leaving behind only “a pile of charred rubble,” “the smell of burnt leather,” and the disgruntled Winthrop Tremaine next door (122). Although it may be pure coincidence, *The Courier’s Tragedy*, as performed by Tank Theater, appears to have obliterated all sign of its existence.

Also worth considering is Oedipa’s discovery of the Tristero. Assuming that she is not going mad, there are two possibilities. Either Tristero is an elaborate plot designed to tease Oedipa or there really exists “a network by which X number of Americans are truly

communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system” (141). Both are highly improbable. Thus, it remains to analyze the circulation of the WASTE system. How does it come about and how is it used? As Fallopian says, “Write down what you can’t deny. Your hard intelligence. But then write down what you’ve only speculated, assumed.” Oedipa seems to see WASTE and the muted horn symbol everywhere: in the bathroom stall by Kirby at The Scope, as a doodle by Stanley Koteks at Yoyodyne, in the watermark of Pierce’s stamps, in the Tank Theater production of *The Courier’s Tragedy*, on Mr. Thoth’s ring, on the lapel pin of an inamorato at The Greek Way, in a jump rope game played by the dream children, in a laundromat, traced out by a Mexican girl on the bus, in the latrines by the Alameda County Death Cult, by the mother of a boy catching a TWA flight. Based on everything Oedipa has come across, WASTE appears to be an underground system for delivering mail. If WASTE really is as subversive as it makes itself out to be, then it is important that no one outside hear anything about it. Only Stanley Koteks, however, actually tries to keep Oedipa from learning about WASTE. Recognizing her as an outsider, he immediately projects “a mask of distrust” and clams up with “we had best no go into it any further” (70). Others claim the seditious nature of their participation but do nothing to conceal it. The mother of the boy heading off to negotiate with dolphins encourages him to write by WASTE because “The government will open it if you use the other” and does so loudly enough for Oedipa to hear (100). The WASTE carrier lets Oedipa follow him for hours. All the other symbols are in a public place. Based on its apparent function, there are two possible reasons for the openness of the WASTE system. The first is that WASTE does not have to be as secretive as it claims. Perhaps Oedipa is seeing these signs only now that she has been sensitized to the symbol. Maybe WASTE has little reason to fear government reprisal, since there is

nothing illegal about setting up an alternate postal system. The second is that WASTE wants Oedipa to find out about it. Why else would a “secret” organization that has a lot at stake make itself so visible?

In addition, the discourse of WASTE compels Oedipa to seek to know more and to speak more about it. It is the very exclusivity of the system that seduces Oedipa, the fact that it refuses to let her in on its secret. Literary critic Flaxman quotes Groucho Marx in saying, “I would never want to belong to a club that would have me as a member” (50). Her natural assumption is that they will not accept her because they do think she is good enough. If secrecy is the goal of WASTE, however, they either should never have let her know about the organization at all or immediately offered her membership in the club. Denying Oedipa knowledge only encourages her to learn more about it in hopes of gaining revelation upon acceptance. “But aren’t you even interested...In what you might find out?” asks her lawyer Roseman (10). WASTE appears to promise deliverance from her “Rapunzel-like role” (10). The other function of the discourse is that Oedipa feels obliged to speak about WASTE compulsively. She tells her story to Stanley Koteks, the inamorato she finds at the Greek Way, Emory Bortz, Genghis Cohen, and Mike Fallopian. She tries to tell her psychiatrist Dr. Hilarius as he is going mad, and she asks the children of the night if the playground jingle goes “Thurn and Taxis” rather than “Turning taxi” (96). Perhaps WASTE wants to put out its name as was the case for Trystero with Diocletian Blobb:

If I wanted word to get to England, to sort of pave the way, I should think he’d be perfect. Trystero enjoyed counter-revolution in those days. Look at England, the king about to lose his head. A set-up. (130)

In spite of its claim to secrecy and subversion, WASTE perpetuates itself, willing itself to be discovered. At some point, Oedipa is inundated with so many signs that she believes, “I am

meant to remember. Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence” (95).

These possibilities construct for themselves a paranoid history. Given the evidence that WASTE wants Oedipa to discover it and spread its word, it appears more likely that the system was set up by Pierce rather than existing on its own. While a secret underground should close itself off to the likes of Oedipa, WASTE rather makes itself felt without ever revealing itself to her. The Scurvhamites, the supposed authors of the Tristero couplet, believed that everything was predetermined, driven either by God or an opposing Other. Whether this Other is Pierce, Tristero, or Oedipa’s own mind remains an open question, possibly to be settle by the crying of Lot 49:

For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (150-151)