# "The Wasteland Quest": Cityscapes of Memory in Postmodern Fiction

Monica SPIRIDON*

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The activity of watchful observation in a modern metropolis is a multifaceted method of apprehending and reading a labyrinth of complex signifiers. The city as an aid to historical memory opens up "the immense drama of *flânerie* that we believed to have finally disappeared" contends Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1999: 40). Following the critical stances of contemporary historians, urban theorists, anthropologists as well as sociologists, we can regard the *flâneur* as an interceder and as a performer of spatial memory. In order to evaluate things in their half remembered significance, the *flâneur* had to wrest the spatial details out of their original context – maintains the sociologist Georg Simmel. To read them means to produce new constructions, to derive more meaning from them than they possessed in their own present: "That which is written is like a city, to which the words are a thousand gateways" (Opiz 1992: 162−181).

In his well-known novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon significantly connects these two cultural themes: spatial memory and *flânerie.* Pynchon's representation of European pre-modernity and its projection into the American present require a distinctive mode of remembering. In Pynchon's novel, the twentieth century Californian metropolis San Narcisso − a fictitious equivalent of Los Angeles − becomes a manifold projection of the European spatial memory.

Even for professionals of urbanism, Los Angeles is an atypical city, a "re-creation" in all possible aspects: "a bazaar of repack-aged times and spaces. A theme park-themed paradise" (Soja 2000: 238). Considered from this perspective, Pynchon's San Narcisso can be singled out as a Post-European city. Oedipa Maas, the fictional protagonist of Pynchon's novel, is a *flâneur* of the contemporary mass society and an active and multifunctional agency of recollection. Her name draws us back to the genetic ground of European mythology, connecting one of its main actors, Oedipus – an inborn interpreter of riddles – to contemporary transatlantic society. The novel sets the European cultural memory into a fictitious American urban space, open to repetition and to theatrical performance. By mid-nineteenth century, the story of the famous European mail network *Torre e Tasso* (*Thurn and*

* The University of Bucharest, Romania.



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*Taxis)* and that of its war with the mysterious outlaw Trystero has been transferred across the Atlantic and staged in Southern California, as a part-real/ part-imaginary detective plot, revolving around the Mafia type communication network: W.A.S.T.E.

To quote the urbanists, contemporary Los Angeles is a nowhere bereft of memories, a so-called "Lite City". Fiction writers such as Thomas Pynchon clearly underline this. Assigning meaning to a "Lite City" is, structurally and semiotically, a fascinating process, highlighting the ontological power of language as well as the intermingling of recollection and writing (Soja 2000: 247).

Trying hard to stock take and to evaluate the endowment of her deceased friend Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa realizes that gradually she is getting caught up into a totally different enterprise: rebuilding a symbolic legacy of America. Unconsciously and even against her own will she turns into the restaurateur of a significant part of the European spatial memory: the genesis of the postal network Torre et Tassis in the Holy Roman Empire:

> Omedio Tassis, banished from Milan, organized his first couriers in the Bergamo region around 1290. Some said that the name Taxis came from the Italian "*tasso*", badger, referring to hats of badger fur the early Bergamascan couriers wore. (...) From about 1300, until Bismarck bought them out in 1867, Miz Maas, they were *the* European mail service (Soja 2000: 247).

The urban area of San Narcisso, where Oedipa keeps strolling almost randomly day and night, bears a perfect analogy with the theoretical model of a so-called *Third Space* [1]. As defined by Edward Soja − who seeks to understand spatiality as it is simultaneously perceived, conceived and lived − a *Third Space* is both a meeting point and a melting pot of group recollections: "As she'd guessed that first minute, in San Narcisso there were revelation in progress all around her" (Pynchon: 29).

In order to resuscitate the European past in the urban American present Pynchon's fictitious protagonist takes on the three main functions of the modern *flâneur*, identified by Walter Benjamin: successively or simultaneously, Oedipa Maas is an *actor/ spectator*, an *archeologist* and a *detective.*

The relationship between the *flâneur* and the city is currently identified as one of estrangement. To the *flâneur*, his city represents a showplace. San Narcisso as a whole is a mentally projected space, staging a show about the build up of the Holy Roman Empire through an well-articulated network of communication.

The protagonist of *The Courier's Tragedy*, a play directed by Randolph Driblette in a theater of San Narcisso, is the young

> Niccolo, masquerading as a special courier of the Thurn and Taxis (Torre et Tasso), a family who had held a postal monopoly through most of the Holy Roman Empire (Pynchon: 45).

[1] "Lived spaces, combining the perceived and the conceived, the objectively real and the subjectively imagined, things in space and thoughts about space in an expanded interpretive scope that I have described as a third space perspective" (Soja 1996: 351).



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Pynchon strategically blurs the boundaries between the actors and the spectators of *The Courier's Tragedy* on the one hand, and the actors and the spectators of the living theatre of memory called San Narcisso, on the other:

> The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside. Oedipa did not know where she was (Pynchon: 37).

In Pynchon's novel, there are several strolling actors and strolling spectators and their status is highly ambiguous.

Newly arrived in San Narcisso – the dream factory of the movie world – Oedipa successively meets a whole bunch of actors, directors, and playwrights, not to mention several professors of theatrical creative writing and theatrical literary criticism. Pierce Inverarity's own lawyer and Oedipa's collaborator – Metzger – is a former movie star. Almost all the events occurring in Pynchon's novel can be seen as performances in the theatrical meaning of the word. *The Crying of Lot 49* comes to an end before either Oedipa or Thomas Pynchon's reader can understand more clearly if the whole plot was, or not, a shrewd and ingenious "mise en scène" by Pierce Inverarity, the constructor, the owner and, why not, the author of the city called San Narcisso as well as of its European memory.

It has often been pointed out that the *flâneur's* activity of observation and recording of the metropolitan space is not confined to seeing or viewing. The *flâneur* must listen carefully to stories, scraps of quotations as well as search for clues amongst the "dead data" of the metropolis or in the archives, like a historical investigator.

Therefore, the *archaeologist* as a particular *flâneur* figure emphasizes both the significance of language and of the research for traces of the past in the layers of the urban memory from the present downwards. Theorists insist upon the necessity for a hermeneutic intention in such excavations:

> A good archaeological report must not only indicate the strata from which its discovered object emanates, but those others, above all which had to be penetrated: the ever-same in the new; antiquity in modernity; representatives of the real in the mythical; the past in the present and so on (Benjamin 1999: 42).

The memory of the postal network built between the beginnings of the Holy Roman Empire and the French Revolution, that helped unify the molding European space, including Italy, the homeland of "an outlandish and fantastical race" to quote Pynchon, has been concentrated in a theatrical plot in which the place called Lago di Pietà plays an essential part. A different layer of memories, related to a Second World War tragedy and having as its stage the same Lago di Pietà, provides the starting point for a series of historical cross-fertilizations.

In a third move, all these overlapping recollections have eventually been relocated across the Atlantic and resumed in a somehow distorted way around the artificial lake created by Pierce Inverarity near San Narcisso:



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> These bones came from Italy. A straight sale. Tony Jaguar says he harvested them all from the bottom of Lago di Pietà. Lago di Pietà was near the Tyrrhenian coast, somewhere between Naples and Rome, and had been the scene of the now ignored (in 1943 tragic) battle of attrition in a minor pocket developed during the advance on Rome. For weeks, a handful of American troops, cut off and without communications, huddled on the narrow shore of the clear and tranquil lake while form the cliffs that tilted vertiginously over the beach Germans hit them day and night with plunging, enfilading fire (Pynchon: 41).

Memory often intermingles with secrecy, calling for a detective investigation. It has been argued already that the representation of the figure of the *detective* and earlier that of the *flâneur* in mystery fiction served to reassure the reading public that the apparent chaos of impressions and the overwhelming diversity of relations and experiences in the twentieth century metropolis was both intelligible an legible (Brand 1991: 40-45).

Oedipus has been frequently seen by literary criticism as the starting point of a fictional road leading from the European Antiquity straight towards Agatha Christie's famous detective characters. If the detective is traditionally "an eye" in a story about acuities of seeing and if we accept the affinities between flânerie and detection, then "flânerie" as observation involves modes of seeing and of reading (Grossvogel 1979: 58).

The activity of detection by the late nineteenth century was supported by the new media of communication that at the same time opened up the possibility of new forms of criminal activity. As a sophisticated individual detective, Oedipa is able to make connections in an increasingly complex and opaque milieu. It is in the labyrinth of the masses and its interaction with the built labyrinth of the city, rather than in the empty streets of the metropolis, that secrets are revealed to Oedipa − synchronically and diachronically connecting Europe and America through manifold recollection.

Acts of cultural anamnesis can be regarded as equivalents of literary inter-texts. The spaces of memory present in fictitious cities are crossroads of allusions, of inscriptions, of the extension and the transcription of primary texts. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the most diverse texts, quotations and scraps of information are flocked together in constellations of meaning rendered possible by their similarity. In her quest of the original "Torre et Tasso story", Oedipa explores piles of manuscripts, post stamps, magazines, old original and fake editions, turned into popular theatre, into videotapes or cartoons:

> From obscure philatelic journals furnished her by Genghis Cohen, an ambiguous footnote in Motley's Rise of the Dutch Republic, an 80-year-old pamphlet on the roots of modern anarchism, a book of sermons by Blobb's brother Augustine also among Bortz's Wharfingeriana, along with Blobb's original clues, Oedipa was able to fit together this account of how the organization began (Pynchon: 70).

One of the essential records she comes across is *An Account of the Singular Peregrinations of Dr. Diocletian Blobb among the Italians, Illuminated with Exemplary Tales from the True History of That Outlandish and Fantastical Race*.



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Dr. Blobb's narrative bears witness to the benefit of the memory repository rebuilt piece by piece by Oedipa:

> Diocletian Blobb had chosen to traverse a stretch of desolate mountain country in a mail coach belonging to the Torre et Tassis system, which Oedipa figured must be Italian for Thurn and Taxis. Without warning, by the shores of what Blobb called "The Lake of Piety", they were set upon by a score of black-cloaked riders, who engaged them in a fierce, silent struggle in the icy wind blowing in from the lake (Pynchon: 108).

During her endless rambling across the San Narcisso county, Oedipa is stubbornly fighting to restore the European memory of a vast territory, bereft of meaning and which could have been gradually transformed into a transatlantic "Waste Land". (In the name of Trystero's network W.A.S.T.E., the reference to T. S. Eliot is transparent): As the critical literate contends/puts it in Pynchon's novels "the wasteland quest plays itself out in an entropic landscape. In the Lot no 49, consciousness is lost in the indeterminate maze that becomes the postmodern city. Pynchon sees the modern city as the end of a historical process" (Lehan 1998: 267):

> There was the true continuity. San Narcisso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America. Were the squatters there in touch with others, through Trystero; were they helping carry forward those 300 years of the house disinheritance? Surely, they'd forgotten by now what it was the Trystero were to have inherited; as perhaps Oedipa one day might have. What was left to inherit? That America, coded in Inverarity's testament, whose was that? (Pynchon: 123)

The backbone of Pynchon's fictitious world is provided by a rich intertextuality closely interconnected to self-reflective mirroring – two privileged tools of spatial memory. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, both San Narcisso city, the territory of Oedipa's wondering, and the motel *Eco's Courts* where she decides to settle down for a while, help resuscitate the mythological ground surrounding the story of Echo and Narcissus. Apart from this, the narcissist dimension of Pynchon's narrative is enhanced by a classical *myse en abyme.* The centennial story of the Torre et Tasso organization and of its struggle with the Trystero usurpers is mirrored by the *Courier's Tragedy*, written by the fictitious author Richard Wharfinger. As a matter of fact, this bizarre play script is a rereading and a remembering of the American post-European history. And, at the same time, a sort of symbolic compensation for "the loss of memory and remembering that − according to Norman Klein − seems particularly intense in the geo-history of Los Angeles" (Klein 1997: 372).

In almost the same way as in Las Vegas, the urban empire built by Pierce Inverarity obviously aims at aping the Old Continent, turning everything around into mere scenery:

> …the imbricate memory puzzle. They came down in a helix to a sculptured body of water named Lake Inverarity. Out in it, a chunky, ogived and verdigrised *Art Nouveau* reconstruction of some European pleasure casino (Pynchon: 37).



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In this huge urban theatre, Oedipa's deceased friend seems to have decided to keep alive the American echoes of the tragic events occurred centuries ago near the Lake of Piety:

> There had been the bronze historical marker on the other side of the lake at Fangoso Lagoons. On this site, it read in 1853 a dozen Wells, Fargo men battled gallantly with a band of masked marauders in mysterious black uniforms. We owe this description to a post rider the only to witness the massacre, who died shortly after. The only other clue was a cross, traced by one of the victims in the dust. To this day the identities of the slayers remain shrouded in mystery (Pynchon: 42).

In an indirect but highly suggestive manner, Pynchon imagines a genuine bridge of memory closing the cultural gap between the two shores of the Atlantic: "Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three,/ Turning taxi from across the sea…" reads a childish short poem accidentally heard by Oedipa in the streets. "Thurn and Taxis, you mean?" (Pynchon:82) – she concludes, emphatically underlining that for Pynchon's contemporary *flâneur* crossing the Atlantic is a symbolic passage in time that only memory is able to secure.

**Conclusions**

Pynchon's novel is a poignant narrative of the modern metropolis, the site of the ruins of previous orders in which European histories, memories and traces entwine continually and recombine in the construction of chaotic horizons. *The Crying of Lot 49* requires a mode of reading open to the prospect of a continual return to events, to their re-elaboration and revision, of a retelling, re-citing, and re-sitting of historical and cultural knowledge. In Pynchon's fictitious city, the spaces of Oedipa's rambling and their intersecting networks provide the basis for an image of the metropolis as a highly complex web, verging on the chaotic (at least as far as the individual's sense perception is concerned.)

The lived space of Pynchon's Post-metropolis depends upon the re-calling and remembering of earlier European fragments and traces that flare up and flash in the present, as they come to live on in new constellations. Cities have always been typical spaces of exchange, where conflicting and confusing perceptions and representations criss-crossed continually: spaces where memories have been negotiated and processed. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, memory is not an instrument for the reconnaissance of what is past but is rather its medium. The medium of what has been lived, just like the soil is the medium in which ancient spaces lie buried.

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## Abstract

My study tracks down a cluster of key metaphors of urban reading which also function as figures of memory in Thomas Pynchon's novel the *Crying of Lot 49*. It also follows the early European memory as reenacted in different ways in the postmodern metropolis of Los Angeles and interpreted by Pynchon's inquisitive characters (some of them writers, directors and actors).



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