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Spooking Oedipa: On Godgames

She looked around, spooked at the sunlight pouring in all the windows, as if she had been trapped at the centre of some intricate crystal, and said, 'My God.'

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

Modern literature is an immensely variegated fabric: its themes have been woven, and rewoven, in threads of illusion.[1] As a body, modern literature seems overwhelmingly complex and elusive, but there is, in its core, among its ganglions, along its nerves, an invariable concern for illusion. In this century, all forms of illusion have been given literary employment: deception, metamorphosis, politics, sexual masquerade, psychosis, obsessions with (and of) the *persona*, and, above all, the perceptual ambiguities implicit in art itself. The experience of this century has been sufficiently convoluted, baffling, and multivalued to inspire most thinkers to meditations that must culminate in, as subject or as mode, the shifting fabrics of appearance. It is evident, I think (to add what is merely a significant commonplace), that the grounds of illusion, in politics, society, culture, or the psyche, have provoked thought to magnificent displays.

In his *Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature*, Wylie Sypher remarks upon the 'condition of modern man, who has been forced to live in a world where there are, as Whitehead put it, no longer any simple locations, where all relations are plural.'[2] Experience, whatever its context or evident shape, has been seen to break down into multiple perspectives – apparent solids dissolve into their manifold hidden planes while observably stable ego-relationships metamorphose into systematic configurations of 'role' and play. The multiple perspectives themselves, which alone remain of a former faith in substantiality and intelligibility, prove to be no more certain than their subjective roots. Illusion has taken on the quality of a stock-in-trade content.

1 This paper is a revised and expanded version of two papers on the subject of illusion in literature that were read to learned gatherings. The first was read to the 13th Congress of the *Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* which was held at the University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, in August 1975. The second paper was read to the annual meeting of ACUTE, held at Laval University, Quebec City, in May 1976.

2 Wylie Sypher, *Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature* (New York: Random House 1960) 263–4

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Having acknowledged the universal fascination of illusions in modern art and literature, I wish to discuss a specific class of illusions that, while strongly characteristic of modernity, does not spring from the experience of this bewildering century. I shall discuss a precise mode of illusion in which one person (or several) is made a victim by another person's superior knowledge and power. Caught in a cunningly constructed web of appearances, the victim, who finds the illusion impenetrable, is observed and his behaviour is judged. This mode of literary illusion is essentially baroque in origins and its clearest exemplars are to be found in the writings of the seventeenth century.

The accurate name for this kind of illusion must be attributed to the English novelist, John Fowles. In his novel *The Magus*,[3] the hero, a young English teacher working in an English-speaking school on a Greek island, becomes ensnared in an intricate net spun by a wildly experiemental millionaire with a remarkable sense of humour. Conchis – whose very name suggests an inward labyrinth, the mandalic whorls of a sea shell – creates a succession of illusions that make it impossible for the young teacher, although he is both inquisitive and intelligent, to understand what is taking place around him. His true situation, as he is caught up in one clever and impenetrable illusion after another, is impossible for him to understand. Fowles calls this situation a 'godgame' by which designation he names, retrospectively, a literary subgenre that has existed for some time. By 'godgame' Fowles means a game-like situation in which a *magister ludi* knows the rules (because he has created them) and the player does not. The term 'godgame' may be extended to include all instances of a certain kind of literary illusion, common to both the baroque and the modern periods, in which a victim within a confusing, shifting web of incidents attempts to think his way out or through (that is, discover the rules), and in which the process of thinking, or playing the game, may be described from the inside as a succession of states of consciousness.

There are many examples of illusion in baroque writing and among these, it must be admitted, the specific mode of the godgame is comparatively infrequent. Nonetheless, it is significant. There are godgames in several of Shakespeare's plays. *The Taming of The Shrew* begins with a framing-action that is clearly a godgame and there are aspects of the godgame in other plays, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Measure for Measure*. *The Tempest* provides the clearest case, of course. All of Prospero's illusory deceptions are strategems in a game, utterly incomprehensible from the standpoint of the unwitting players, intended to test the characters of the castaways and to provide a basis for the final judgment that he passes. The second part of *Don Quijote*, where the Knight and Squire are subjected to the

3 John Fowles, *The Magus* (Boston: Little, Brown 1965)

illusions created by the Duke and Duchess, also exemplifies the godgame (embryonic forms of which are scattered throughout both parts of the novel). One should observe that in both *The Tempest* and in the second part of *Don Quijote*, illusions are created for no purpose other than that of seeing how the victims will behave. The *magister ludi*'s observation of the victim's behaviour is central to the experience of the godgame.

I shall take Calderón de la Barca's *La Vida es Sueño* as the outstanding instance of a godgame in baroque literature (though it is far from unique) and as my defining illustration for the purposes of this paper. It is one of the most intriguing godgames (and one of the most fascinating works of literature) in the entire body of Western literature.

Segismundo, the hero of the play, has been imprisoned within a desert tower, not knowing that he is the son of the king of Poland, or that there is a world beyond his tower, or men other than his jailer. He has never been told that he has been imprisoned in order to avert the moral and political disaster that his father, an accomplished astrologer as well as king, has foreseen. In other words, the artificial reality of his tower, and his existence within it, seems to him (indeed, *must* seem to him) complete.

In his first appearance, as he stands in the lighted doorway of his tower dressed in animal skins and weighed down with chains, Segismundo begins by posing questions. What crime has he committed against heaven to be treated in such a way? or rather, as he rephrases the question, what crime, other than being born, has he committed? Segismundo thus poses his existence as a problem. In the torchlit doorway, his sudden presence before the travellers indicates the operation of some hidden godgame and at once calls it, or its rules, into question.

He goes on to tell the travellers that he has never seen a man other than his jailer and has learned nothing other that that which he has been able to teach himself – government from the animals, astronomy from the birds and the stars. His delusion is virtually complete for not only does he know almost nothing about reality, he also knows nothing of his own identity or of the reasons for his imprisonment.

Later the astrologer-king, Basilio, explains, but not to his son, that Segismundo has been born under an eclipse and, in being born, had caused the death of his mother. Basilio had interpreted these signs to mean that Segismundo would prove a monster. He now intends to test his prediction by recalling his son. When Segismundo is brought back to the court, he is drugged. He is given no explanations. He simply awakes in bed attended by courtiers and is told that he is crown prince of Poland. His reaction parallels that of Christopher Sly in *The Taming of The Shrew* – he accepts the new illusion and begins immediately to live as crown prince. Why should he not, one might ask, since he possesses no way of judging the truth of the illusion?

Subsequently, the test of Segismundo's character seems to prove that his father's auguries have been correct – he is violent, brutal, vengeful even to the point of throwing a disobedient servant out of a window. Basilio, of course, does not inquire whether this behaviour is that foretold by the auguries or simply a consequence of the barbaric treatment Segismundo has received. Later, drugged once more, he is returned to the tower, and told, upon awakening, that he has been dreaming. Indeed, even while he was living the role of crown prince he had been told that he might well be only dreaming. Thus it is easy for him to accept his keeper's word that he has only been asleep. He opens his eyes, looks about him at the familiar cell, and exclaims 'God save me, what things I have dreamt.'

The power of Segismundo's delusion is overwhelming: Calderón has left no point of reference outside the closed system of illusion and has provided that system with a built-in explanation for an apparent inconsistency. Segismundo is *forced* to conclude that even in dreams one ought not fail to do good since it is impossible to distinguish a dreaming from a waking state. No doubt his conclusion indicates, as Hispanic scholars have often pointed out, the inherent nobility of his nature; it also illustrates the logic of the illusion to which he has been subjected. Everyone dreams, he meditates: the king that he is a king, the rich man that he is rich, the poor man that he suffers from poverty. 'I dreamt,' he concludes, 'that I saw myself in a carefree state and now I am dreaming that I am in this prison weighed down with chains ... All of life is a dream and dreams are dreams.' 'La vida es sueño / y los sueños, sueños son.'[4]

Later, when the rebellious soldiers come to free him and to make him king, Segismundo accepts their invitation. Bearing in mind that he may be dreaming once again, he sets out to confirm the truth of the Heavens' auguries. If he is sceptical about reality, he nonetheless goes out to battle with an acquired control that he had not shown before, convinced that even in dreaming one must act responsibly. He does not lose this conviction, controls himself, acts wisely and prudently, even to the extent of convincing his father that his nature will now pass tests of strictest scrutiny. At the end he is established in his rightful place, the tower is behind him forever, but he continues to believe that it may all be a dream and that he may awake at any moment in chains once more.

La Vida es Sueño suggests a definition of 'godgame' that requires a situation in which one dominant character – a magus such as Prospero (one must reflect how aptly Fowles named his novel, charged as it is with

4 Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La Vida es Sueño*, II *Comedias*, facsimile edition (Madrid 1636), prepared by D.W. Cruikshank and J.E. Varey (Greggs International Publishing in association with Tamesis Books Ltd 1973) 18

*Tempest*ian motifs), a powerful duke as in *Don Quijote* or an even more powerful king as in *La Vida es Sueño* – creates a web of illusion so thorough that the characters who are ensnared will not be able to extricate themselves. They will be led, in other words, to accept illusion for reality, to act in terms of illusion, to reveal their beings in its terms and, if they attempt to think through the illusion, they, like Segismundo in *La Vida es Sueño*, will be frustrated. In certain respects the godgame recalls other common illusions of Renaissance literature. It has affinities with the *topos* of the enchanted garden (or castle) in sixteenth-century literature and it also suggests the trickster motif in other Baroque literature. The godgame, however, is significantly different from either of these other *topoi*. Unlike the enchanted garden – the Bower of Bliss, say, or Alcina's paradise – it is not created for its own sake or for that of giving pleasure, nor need it take any specific form. It is created solely for the victim and then only for the purpose of observing his behaviour. On the other hand, the *magister ludi*, despite occasional resemblances, is unlike such trickster figures as Don Juan Tenorio or Milton's Satan. He does not create his illusion, as Don Juan does with Doña Isabel, in order to achieve a seduction, or for any precise or momentary purpose, nor does he break it, or allow it to collapse, but rather he keeps it going through a series of linked incidents while he *observes* his victim. He is far more like a 'god' than a simple trickster.

There are several formal characteristics of the baroque godgame. I derive them from *La Vida es Sueño*, but I am certain that brief reflection will suggest their appropriateness to such other works as *The Tempest* or the second part of *Don Quijote*. First, there will be a series of incidents that, through their linkage, create an illusion. Second, these linked incidents will constitute reality for the victim. Third, the constructed illusion will be impenetrable. Fourth, the illusion will form a self-correcting and self-explaining system. Fifth, the illusion will be plotted and planned (looking at it from the standpoint of the god or gamesman), but from the standpoint of the victim this will be unknown. The illusion, for the victim, will be more like choreography seen from inside the dance. Sixth, the victim will act in terms of the illusion. He may be thought of as reacting, of course, but from his perspective he will be acting. Seventh, the victim's actions will be observed. And, being observed, they will be subject to judgment, although an actual judgment will not be strictly necessary. The same observations are openly available to the god and to those around him. (This is pre-eminently the case in *Don Quijote*, but it will hold for the other instances as well.) These observations are also open to the audience, the readers, ourselves.

The last characteristic of the godgame strikes me as the most important. Its purpose is to create a situation in which the victim may be observed and his nature tested. This is precisely what Basilio reiterates throughout *La Vida es*

Sueño: the illusion is a test of human nature, its effects must be observed, and the revealed nature must be judged and either rewarded or punished. In a similar manner, Prospero's godgame variously reveals the natures of his shipwrecked countrymen and he imposes a judgment upon them. In a dissimilar manner, human nature is also tested by the duke's godgame in *Don Quijote* – but there the natures of the two victims are seen to rise above the petty nastiness of the gamesmen. In all three cases the end of the godgame is to bring to light some truth about the victim. This much, at least, should be said of all baroque godgames.

The use of godgames in baroque literature coheres with the general incidence of illusion and perspectivism in that period. On the other hand, the distinctive re-employment of godgames in twentieth-century literature creates one of its most salient (if paradoxically unnoticed) defining marks. It is significant that godgames do not figure prominently in the literature between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries as they do in those periods. There is, to be sure, the inescapable evidence of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* in which the 'insular' pedagogical community of the Tower (with its Masonic, and hence conspiratorial, undertones) constitutes an educational godgame for the benefit of Wilhelm Meister's development that is, strikingly, far more modern than baroque in its conception. Yet, on the whole, the godgame, perhaps because of the fundamentally optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment and the early industrial epoch, occurs only infrequently in the literature written between the baroque and the modern periods. Of course, there are minor godgames in Gothic fiction and debased forms appear in Victorian detective stories in which the emphasis is less upon the observation of the victim than upon the skill of the detective in unravelling its complexities ('The Redheaded League' and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* are clear instances). Similarly, mechanically-conceived versions of the godgame are frequent in science fiction and generally in fantasy. One thinks immediately of Clarke's *Childhood's End* or LeGuin's *City of Illusions*. Indeed, the shallow, unexploratory godgame is overwhelmingly frequent in science fiction (it was, for example, a recurring device in the television series *Star Trek*). In none of these popular versions, however, is the godgame employed, as it often is in baroque literature and in some major modern literature, to explore man's moral nature. The godgames of *La Vida es Sueño*, *The Tempest*, and *Don Quijote* are, in pointing the reader towards a significant moral insight, sharply heuristic. The modern godgames that I shall now discuss are, if anything, more heuristic than their baroque exemplars. They operate more deeply than the level of plot in so far as they strive to achieve a more precise understanding of man's cognitive and volitional potential, and this can scarcely be said of the godgames in detective or science fiction.

A number of modern writers have employed godgames, or elements of godgames, in their fiction. Kafka's *Das Schloss* suggests, as do several of his short tales such as 'In der Strafkolonie,' a prototypical godgame in which the element of character-revelation is subordinated to an account of the uncertainty and bafflement that characterize the illusion when it is seen from within. Werner Bergengruen's *Der Grosstyrann und das Gericht* contains conspicuous godgame elements.[5] And modern American literature includes several works, such as Finney's *The Circus of Dr Lao* and Heller's *Catch-22*, where the emphasis upon games and gamesmen must suggest strong affinities with the godgame as it is seen in those lucid exemplars of baroque literature. In this paper, I shall concentrate upon three modern writers who stand out as particularly important creators of godgames: Hermann Hesse, Jorge Luis Borges, and Thomas Pynchon.

Pynchon is the most systematic of these, for reasons that I shall indicate, but all three share an inclination towards situations in which one or more characters is subjected to a linked series of illusions that leads either to a revelation of the character's hidden nature or, in the case of Pynchon's fiction, to a modification of the character's essential nature. In all three cases the godgame remains remarkably consistent with its baroque exemplars. Nonetheless, there is in Pynchon's fiction a definite progression towards a fundamental pessimism about the results of the test, the modified nature that the godgame will reveal or produce. Both the pessimism and the ubiquitous complexity of Pynchon's godgames reflect his post–World War II, American understanding of the routine power of systems of all kinds, governmental and industrial. While the shape of their experience keeps to the formal lines of the baroque godgame, Pynchon's deluded victims are bewildered survivors (and in this sense close to the practice of Kafka) in an on-going horrorshow. Even the 'god' of the game becomes the unanalysable (except in terms of function), unthinkable *they* of bureaucracy and behavioural conditioning. Pynchon's is an appalling world. It is a marked remove from the essentially optimistic world of Hesse – where characters are seen to possess 'better' natures than have been achieved as the fiction begins – or the studiously withdrawn, sublimated, and cognitive world of Borges.

Godgames figure in several of Hesse's fictions, particularly *Demian* and *Der Steppenwolf*. They are beneficent, psychologically oriented illusions in which the victim is led to understand himself better and to realize a greater degree of his potentiality. Even in his last novel, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, there

5 Werner Bergengruen, *Der Grosstyrann und das Gericht* (Zürich: Die Arche 1967; 1st ed. 1935). The key sentence in the priest's attack against the 'god' (the Grosstyrann) is: 'Du hast mit deinem freien Willen dies widergöttliche Spiel angehoben ... in Gleichheit Gottes die Schicksale der Menschen zu bewegen und zu beschauen und endlich als ein Weltenrichter über sie zu befinden' (p. 311).

are godgame elements in so far as the members of the pedagogical community are helped to self-realization, observed, judged, and either rewarded or punished. The secret communicants of *Demian*, the obscure benefactors of *Der Steppenwolf*, and the withdrawn educators of *Das Glasperlenspiel* have much in common: they stimulate action, observe it, judge it, and in so doing help their clients to higher levels of selfhood. It is important to observe that the 'gods' in Hesse's godgames are remote, mysterious, and in some respects unintelligible. One striking difference between the baroque and modern godgames lies in the withdrawn, hidden (or disappearing) nature of the god in the latter.

Hesse's *Demian* recounts the evolution of its central character, Emil Sinclair. He is instructed by an older, stangely confident boy, known as Demian, in the ways to deal with bullies, with emotional disturbances, and with life generally. As the novel progresses it becomes evident that Demian is only one representative of a larger, almost wholly secret, community dedicated to the worship of an ancient god, Abraxas, and to assisting others in the development of their potential. At the end of the novel, Emil and Demian lie side by side, wounded, in a field hospital, and Demian promises to 'come again,' though not 'crudely,' if he is ever needed. In the morning Demian has gone, and a newcomer is in his cot. In the ambiguities of its conclusion, *Demian* makes it relatively certain that, while Demian may return in some transmuted appearance, Emil has reached the level of development at which he too, intelligently in command of himself, may act as a benefactor.

I have referred to the 'evolution' of Emil Sinclair. That, I think, is the precise term to describe the operation of the godgames in Hesse's fiction: his characters evolve under the guidance of obscure powers, through illusions or linked events that possess something of the nature of illusions, towards a realization of potential. In *Der Steppenwolf* the central character is brought methodically away from a state of chronic depression that has arisen from his sense of dissociation. 'Steppenwolf' is Harry Haller's own term for the repressed 'shadow' side of his personality; that is, the collection of violent, brutal drives that, in an active state, assume the traits of a single, coherent personality. In Haller's view of himself this personality is like a wolf from the steppes, voracious, hostile, an outlaw. Through a series of encounters that are never made entirely clear, Haller is introduced, first, to the joys of uncritical sensuality which he had previously attempted to deny and, second, to the multiplicity of aspects embrionically latent within his single being and which he had mistakenly grouped together as one under the inaccurate label 'steppenwolf.' In *Der Steppenwolf* the rules of the game are even more obscure than in *Demian*. Both the 'god' and the nature of the illusions are unclear. Pablo may be thought of as a god or as a demiurge, but he is in either

case largely inexplicable. Still, the operation of the godgame is explicit: the benefactors lead the virtually deranged Haller to understand himself, to cancel out his restrictive self-censorship, and thus to recognize in the unexplored depths of his own shadow his manifold potential. Above all, the benefactors bring him to see, through the agency of the Magic Theater, that the 'steppenwolf' label has been mistaken: his shadow has been neither single nor evil.

There are overt elements of Jungian allegory in Hesse's fiction, as critics have variously noted, that cause one to recall other writers, such as Miguel Angel Asturias, Patrick White, or Robertson Davies, who have adapted aspects of Jung's psychological model to the process of characterization. The end towards which Hesse's novels develop is that so frequently found in novels by White, Davies, or Doris Lessing (among others): the Jungian desideratum of individuation. Furthermore, Hesse's characters discover depths within themselves (as do the characters of the other writers mentioned) that, rendered paradigmatically, accord to the normal Jungian model of hierarchical and interdependent levels of conscious and unconscious activities. In other respects Hesse's emphasis upon beneficent godgames that work, with more or less secrecy and mystery, towards the development of human potential recalls Goethe's similar stress in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. For example, the pedagogical community of *Das Glasperlenspiel* suggests an evident affinity. Yet, having allowed for the intellectual traditions to which Hesse's fiction belongs, and which serve to define its conceptual content and themes, it is nonetheless possible to point to those formal, abstractable features that are thoroughly godgame-like in their configurations.

In speaking of *La Vida es Sueño*, I distinguished seven formal marks of the godgame. The seventh of these – the god's observation of his victim – seems most essential. However, in modern godgames, such as those of Hesse, the observing god shrinks, withdraws, and becomes absorbed into the texture of the game itself. In the extreme case – that presented by Pynchon's fiction – the only evidence for his existence is that implicit in the game's rules. They hint at the god's existence. Still, the function of observation remains entirely basic. It is shifted from the god to the audience of the game's playing and, most importantly, to the victim himself. An introspective victim keeps a record of his experiences, like Harry Haller providing the journal of his enlightenment, reflects upon it, and thus achieves what the most famous of baroque godgame victims, Don Quijote, believed he must leave to a benevolent sage. This is the case in *Der Steppenwolf*, in Fowles's *The Magus*, and commonly in Borges' tales. Once again, Pynchon presents a variation: his victims are developed from the third person, but within the traditions of the psychological novel, in such a manner that it is not merely the sequence of

their reactions that the audience observes but also the interior record of parallel states of consciousness.

I believe that I can illustrate my point by a reference to two of Borges's tales. Godgame situations – or close parallels – are frequent in his work and usually follow a first-person narrative in which the narrator ends in a precise revelation of his peculiar moral temper. Even in such godgame stories as 'La Muerte y La Brújala,' where the narration is in the third person, the direction of the tale has been towards a comment upon the detective's moral nature. 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and 'La Lotería en Babilonia' (both from *Ficciones*) are particularly clear instances of first-person narratives in which the narrator recalls confusing and complex experiences in which he has been involved; both focus upon the narrator's thinking, his inquisitiveness, and his recognition of hypotheses; both conclude with a revelation of the narrator's moral temper, established confessionally but indirectly through his attitude towards the outcome of his thinking. In 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,' the narrator recounts how he learned that a late Renaissance conspiracy to create a secret, imaginary world has persisted into this century. The evidence for the conspiracy has come to him bit by bit, through successive coincidences, but he has been able both to penetrate the conspiracy and to understand the imaginary construct that is known as Tlön. Tlön is an entire world inhabited by Berkleyian idealists in which mind necessarily precedes object and, most strikingly, objects come into existence in response to thought. The narrator then observes that various Tlönian objects – known as *hrönir* – have begun to appear on earth and that a process through which Tlön will eventually replace earth seems underway. Now, here is an obvious godgame – a conspiracy, a construction of linked illusions, actions in terms of the illusions and observation (the narrator's and the reader's), but what counts is the character of the narrator who is also the victim. He is surprised and inquisitive at once: he investigates, pursues his interest, fits together a hypothesis, and finally withdraws from the threat of the encroaching Tlön. He does not care that Tlön will supplant earth, he remarks, but will continue revising, in the quiet days of a suburban hotel, an ambiguous Quevedian translation of Browne's *Urn Burial* that he does not intend to publish. Thus, the importance of the godgame has resided in its effects upon the narrator – it has caused him to develop and to assert a specific moral temper. Similarly, the first-person narrator of 'La Lotería en Babilonia' recounts his experience as a victim (my translation):

> Like all Babylonian men I have been a proconsul; like all, I have been a slave; as well, I have known omnipotence, scorn, prisons. Look: my right hand lacks its index finger. Look: through this tear in my cape a bright red tattoo on my stomach can be seen: it is the second symbol, Beth. This mark, during nights of the full moon, gives me power

over men whose mark is Ghimel, but subordinates me to Aleph, who in moonless nights owe obedience to those of Ghimel.'[6]

Existence under 'La Compañía' – the unknown, unknowable system that, through its indefinitely complex lottery, introduces chance into a deterministic world – is subject to the extremes of an arbitrary process of rewards and punishments. Every sixty days each citizen of Babylon must accept a 'prize' from the Lottery, and this 'prize' may be anything from apotheosis to the most degrading form of death by torture. And even these 'prizes' are subject to an unpredictable further series of qualifications through subsequent drawings. The narrator, who is *looking back* upon his experiences in Babylon (apparently he is already beyond Babylon aboard a ship waiting to sail from an unnamed port, exiled, one supposes, through the agency of the Lottery), examines a number of hypotheses concerning the origins of La Compañía and its operations. He can conclude nothing certain (very much like the narrator in the other tale) but he does, in revealing his moral temper, indicate a posterior development of character: he accepts fully the consequences of the Lottery, likens the acts of La Compañía to those of God – he refers, for instance, to its 'divine modesty' and specifically compares its 'silent functioning' to God's ways – and he rejects as *vile* every hypothesis that tends to demythologize La Compañía or leads to a denial of its existence. He is, thus, despite his investigative intelligence, the very type of an ideological devotee, a servant in the full sense, a man bound to the service of an idea who thereby accepts all of the consequences of that idea. Yet this, clearly, is no less a moral revelation than the conclusion of 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.' The end to which the narration points – its innermost *telos* – is the revelation of the character's moral nature.

Borges's tales are habitually complex and equivocal – to use one of his own terms (that which describes, for instance, the translation mentioned at the end of 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'), they are often *indecisas*, ambiguous, or uncertain. Critics of quite different approaches have often, I believe, misjudged Borges's work in attributing to him a concern for objective system-building per se and, hence, they fail to see that the narrator of a story by Borges is, pre-eminently, a character. Still, despite their complexity, I think that his stories do respond to analysis. They show a steady focus upon the

6 Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial 1974): Como todos los hombres de Babilonia, he sido procónsul; como todos, esclavo; también he conocido la imnipotencia, el oprobio, las cárceles. Miren: a mi mano derecha le falta el índice. Miren: por este desgarrón de la capa se ve en mi estómago un tatuaje bermejo: es el segundo símbolo, Beth. Esta letra, en las noches de luna llena, me confiere poder sobre los hombres cuya marca es Ghimel, pero me subordina a los de Aleph, que en las noches sin luna deben obediencia a los de Ghimel.' (p. 71)

narrator's moral nature as it is revealed, to himself and to the reader, through the process of his introspective meditation upon the stages of his experience in maze, labyrinth, or godgame. A character is for Borges, in a way that is almost Tlönian, a reflection of mind. It is to the mind of the character, its conclusions, its degree of certainty, its decisions, ultimately its quality of thought, that the content of Borges's stories points.

In the fiction of Thomas Pynchon the god is even more withdrawn than in Borges's tales. There are occasional suggestions of a named *magister ludi*, or of a precise conspiracy such as that constructed by the behavioural psychologists in *Gravity's Rainbow* who experiment with, and finally 'condition,' the hero, Tyrone Slothrop, into rigorously determined responses. In Pynchon's fiction the god is typically absorbed into the operations of the game itself: its rules are his manifestation; the game and his existence are fused. In many respects, Pynchon recalls the work of Kafka, but this resemblance is nowhere more apparent than in the way the ground of the illusion remains opaque, its origins in whatever manipulative thinking, cruel or experimental, shut off from the bewildered, anguished, unpenetrating, minds of the victims. *Gravity's Rainbow* inevitably must suggest many provocative lines of contact with the fiction of Kafka (above all, *Das Schloss*) in which the closed psychic state of the character, entrapped within the anguish of incomprehension, stands bleakly in the narrative's central focus.[7]

Yet even in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the named psychologist, Dr Edward W.A. Pointsman, is subordinated to and enclosed within much larger systems of godgame activity (of which he himself is merely a piece or token). From the standpoint of Pynchon's characters, the god is given the qualities of bureaucratic administration; the godgame itself, the routinized irreversibility of contemporary political or industrial bureaucracy. For Pynchon, as for other American writers (such as Heller), there is little difference between political and industrial systems; apparent differences are actually functional transformations of a single, oppressive System that lies behind, and permeates, contemporary Western society – a point made clear in *Catch-22* in the interchangeable activities of business and war, one which appears repeatedly in Vonnegut's novels and is given nearly total lucidity in Pynchon's treatment of the Yoyodyne conglomerate in *V* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, or, most graphically, in the fused metaphor of the Rocket, at once an industrial, scientific, political, and military system, in *Gravity's Rainbow*. On the other hand, the purpose of the godgame in Pynchon's fiction remains analogous to that of the baroque exemplars, or to the practice of such modern writers as Hesse, Fowles, and Borges: to observe the character's responses. Pynchon's

7 It is interesting to note that in Helen Weinberg's *The New Novel in America: The Kafkan Mode in Contemporary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1970) there is only a single reference to Pynchon. No American writer better deserves the epithet 'Kafkan.'

idiosyncratic twist in playing the godgame is to point experience towards the modification of the characters' natures, not simply to a revelation or an uncovering of potential already in some sense present. In the extreme case, such as Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, they may be 'conditioned' almost to the point of non-existence; more usually, as in *The Crying of Lot 49*, they react to the play of the godgame with induced psychoses. Significantly, 'paranoia' has always been a key term in Pynchon's writings.

Borges has remarked that 'one of the great ambitions, or perhaps will-o'-the-wisps, of literature [is] the idea of writing a book, a book that shall be somehow all other books, a book of books, a book like that seashell of which Wordsworth speaks in his *Prelude* ... Many men have toyed with the idea, with the dangerous and divine idea, that a book might be written, a book that should be something of a Platonic archetype, a book of books.'[8] He then goes on to cite the *Divine Comedy* (*La Commedia*) as the book that contains all that can be said concerning guilt, repentence, and justice; *Ulysses* as the book that contains all the things that happen or may happen to a single man in a single day; *Leaves of Grass* as the book of democracy. I can imagine additions to Borges's list: *Don Quijote* as the book of adventures (or of perspectives); *Faust* as the book of aspirations; Borges's own collected works as the book of paradoxes (or of labyrinths). And to this list I should also add Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as the book of systems, and in particular the book of godgames. Any serious discussion of the godgame in modern literature ought to centre upon *Gravity's Rainbow*. The novel contains an immense number of them: maze-like systems of predetermined behaviour that overlap, integrate, and shape the story from beginning to (distant) end. Each of the several plots builds upon its distinctive godgames, each subsumes other, smaller, and autonomous godgames, and each interconnects with the godgames of the other plots. All these godgames have in common an insistence upon the reiterated *They* (it is one of the most common words in the novel); that is, the unknowable, absorbed *magister ludi* who is manifested only in the operations of the game. Each godgame, further, is centred upon the behaviour of its victim or victims. The general formula for the novel might be expressed: each character is either placed within a predetermined system of behaviour or he is conditioned in terms of a stimulus which is then presented, or withdrawn, while his behaviour is observed (by the reader, by the character, hypothetically by the *They*). The consequence is invariably a radical modification of the character's nature.

Something of the complexity with which Pynchon invests his godgame structures can be seen in the episode in *Gravity's Rainbow* in which Slothrop

8 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Walt Whitman: Man and Myth,' *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1975) no. 4. 708–10. Sr Borges first gave this paper in English to a group at the University of Chicago on 30 January 1968.

is placed in touch with the double-agent (at least), Katje Borgesius. Sent to a resort-casino on the French coast of the Mediterranean by superiors in London who are fascinated by his ability apparently to precognate the point of impact of German *V* rockets and who suspect that the explanation must lie in an assumed connection between Slothrop's role of experimental guinea pig in the laboratory of the behavioural scientist who, in a later scientific transformation, also invented the plastic used in the nosecones of the German rockets, Slothrop is designedly brought into contact with Katje, the mistress (among other things) of the German officer in charge of the *V* Rocket program. The agent of introduction is an octopus trained in a London laboratory and positioned in the sea at the moment when both Katje and the unsuspecting Slothrop are near to each other on the resort's beach. The octopus predictably grabs Katje while Slothrop (with his ingrained chivalric values), equally predictably, attempts to rescue her. In the act of trying to kill the octopus, Slothrop is handed a crab with which to feed the octopus by another soldier with the injunction not to kill it. Released by the octopus, Katje literally falls into Slothrop's arms, becoming, briefly, his lover. The crab, too markedly apposite, disturbs Slothrop, though he cannot see an answer to its apparent riddle.

> So it is here, grouped on the beach with strangers, that voices begin to take on a touch of metal, each word a hard-edged clap, and the light, though as bright as before, is less able to illuminate ... It's a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia, filtering in. Pale lines of force whir in the sea air ... Pacts sworn to in rooms since shelled back to their plan views, not quite by accident of war, suggest themselves. Oh, that was no 'found' crab, Ace – no random octopus or girl, uh-uh. Structure and detail come later, but the conniving around him now he feels instantly, in his heart.[9]

This seems to catch the baffled consciousness of a godgame victim. Slothrop senses that something is not right – the incidents have been too paradoxically linked – but he cannot think through them to the now-opaque 'reality' that they hide. Shortly afterwards, having discovered no answer to the riddle posed by Katje, the octopus, and the crab, he is chased from the Casino (the main room of which is called, significantly, the Himmler *Spielsaal*) by mysterious agents. He disappears into the obscure flux of the Zone (Pynchon's name for the uncertain, anarchic regions of a collapsing and defeated Germany), swallowed into the larger, encompassing godgames of war and its aftermath. His directed, or conditioned, pursuit of the plastic used in the *V* rocket nosecones is seen as, ultimately, only a single aspect of a vastly

9 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking 1973) 188

greater web of conditioned responses in which every character is, however unreflectively, a victim.

Pynchon's fictions provide a profoundly pessimistic reading of what is worst in contemporary society. Often funny, they are never joyful. In his 'full look at the worst,' the godgame acts as the universal metaphor for the human condition. His second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, written in 1965, illustrates this proposition with a relentless, unmistakable precision. In its much shorter compass, it is nearly as remarkable an example of a godgame – precise rather than multiform – as the vast, cetacean *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Oedipa Mass, the heroine of *The Crying of Lot 49*, learns suddenly that she has been made a co-executor of the will of a former lover, Pierce Inverarity, the immensely wealthy owner of an industrial conglomerate. The aspect of the novel that links it to the theory of godgames is indicated by an early image – and it is also an image that projects the central theme of the novel. As Oedipa drives down a hill towards San Narciso, the Southern California community where her former lover's multiple enterprises have their headquarters, she sees the community laid out before her like a 'printed circuit.' In one sense, this use of a 'printed circuit' for a human community is a typical Pynchonian metaphor – a technological function, or process, superimposed upon a mental, or cultural, one – but in another sense it focuses clearly the novel's specific issues. San Narciso, as Oedipa sees it, is 'less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts.' Society, then, *is* like a 'printed circuit' in that it is essentially a network of superpersonal abstractions each of which possesses a determinate function. The social network, like Inverarity's interlocking conglomerate, is no more than so many interconnected functions operating independently of the individual's existence. Moreover, this conceptual network which we call society and which, intermittently, takes the form of a human community also resembles a 'printed circuit' in that it is an informational system in two senses. First, it conveys information; that is, information is transferred within the system from one part to another. Second, the nodes, wires, and interchanges of society not only carry information but, in their own right, signify meanings. All that happens in the novel can be interpreted as an expansion of this primary image: society is an informational system, it can be interpreted, and it may generate, in terms of the kind of information it either conveys or signifies, a profound effect upon the interpreter. Pynchon's victims are, to some degree, all 'interpreters'; that is, receivers of information from the surrounding systems.

As the novel develops, Oedipa learns that there are really two systems in American society, each with its peculiar informational content. On the one hand there is the society of the successful, represented by the multimillionaire whose estate she is to help execute. On the other hand there is the

society of the failed, the unsuccessful in business, love, science, and even revolution. Further, Oedipa seems to learn that each society, each with its content of information, possesses a distinctive communication system. For the successful orthodox society there is the regular United States Postal System. For the unsuccessful there is a private system, known as WASTE, which is an aspect – a 'function,' as it were – of a larger organization, the Trystero, that, dating back to the sixteenth century, exists in secret opposition to all regular postal systems. Oedipa begins to acquire an impressive amount of evidence for the existence of the WASTE – she observes its advertisements scrawled on the walls of lavatories, its use of a large corporation's interoffice delivery system, wastepaper receptacles under freeway overpasses that function as mail drops, and drunken postmen who appear to walk aimlessly from pickup to dropoff points. She also overhears anecdotes that seem to corroborate the existence of the WASTE. Furthermore, the evidence for the parent organization, the Trystero, becomes equally impressive: the signs appear everywhere, forming a 'printed circuit' as plain as that which she had noted originally from her car. In fact, it is an almost overwhelming pattern of evidence involving references to the Trystero in Jacobean drama, history books, memoirs, anecdotes, wall slogans, children's games, and of course stamps and philatelic catalogues. The symbol of the Trystero – a muted posthorn – begins to appear with something of the solid predictability of the *hrönir* in Borges's story in watermarks, tiepins, drawings, doodles, and labels.

The godgame aspect of the novel emerges when Oedipa realizes that, for all the stunning evidence she has apparently uncovered (or stumbled upon), the Trystero may be only a hoax cleverly planted by her former lover to delude her. Indeed, counter-evidence begins to appear to suggest that the books, the play, the sources of evidence, the stamps themselves, may all have been fraudulent, deliberately constructed by the man whose will she was named to execute. Thus she is able to observe that in the counter-pattern a suspiciously high number of places associated with the Trystero are owned by Inverarity's conglomerate. Earlier, Oedipa had recognized that Inverarity's will had been an 'attempt to leave an organized something behind after his own annihilation.'[10] Now she perceives that he might have 'tried to survive death, as a paranoia; as a pure conspiracy against someone he loved' (p. 134). The consequence of her double action and reaction – the inconclusive search for the Trystero and the recognition that it may be a hoax – is an increasing state of mental disturbance. Pynchon describes her situation graphically, in words that might well provide the epigraph for all godgames:

10 Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Bantam 1967) 58. Further references will be given parenthetically after the citation.

'She looked around, spooked at the sunlight pouring in all the windows, as if she had been trapped at the center of some intricate crystal, and said, "My God"' (p. 67). Oedipa's psychosis is induced by the baffling aspects of her experience. It is also important to note that she is aware of her mental state. One of the novel's motifs has been the recurring references to paranoia (a rock group, for example, names itself the 'Paranoids') and gradually Oedipa begins to embody this motif. Her incipient paranoia – totally absent from, even alien to, her nature in the first chapter – is forced upon her. Her readings, or misreadings, of the 'printed circuit' of society bring her irreversibly to the boundary of sanity. Even the fillings in her teeth begin to hurt. And at the conclusion of the novel she is waiting, to one side, in a shaft of sunlight *informed* by rising and falling bits of uninterpretable dust, at the auction of Inverarity's Trystero stamps (the 'lot 49' of the title), preparing some kind of hysterical action.

The theme of induced madness is central to Pynchon's theme of behaviourally determined human personality. His characters are depthless, leading 'paracinematic' existences, and their actions are invariably reactions to superpersonal, or transpersonal, conditions. In the specific case of Oedipa Mass, it is possible to note the element of experimentation (an element that actually suffuses *Gravity's Rainbow*). She is tested by her experiences, her nature is modified through a series of linked incidents which she knows may be either an illusion or her own delusion. So complete is her uncertainty, indeed, that she may be fairly compared with Segismundo in *La Vida es Sueño*. Although *The Crying of Lot 49* does not provide an absolute criterion to determine whether the linked incidents are a hoax, a delusion, or a reality (i.e. the Trystero may exist), there is an overwhelming presumption that they are a hoax, a series of linked illusions carefully constructed by a powerful, intelligent industrialist with all the resources of American industry (including computerization of the 'game') available to him. In any case, the test, the revelation (or modification) of personality, the openly available judgment – in short, the formal requirements of the godgame – are all present.

The formal similarities between diverse godgames, from distinct national literatures and written at different times, indicate that the godgame is a precise literary sub-genre. It is no more accidental within the history of literature than, say, the interior monologue or the epistolary convention. It can be isolated, abstracted, and defined in the same way that an epistle, a soliloquy or a literary dream can be; conversely, its function within a total work can be identified, its integrative importance explained. Furthermore, the godgame is related to other uses of illusion and perspectivism in literature but it is not identical with them. It possesses a formal justification of its own.

The godgame recurs throughout Western literature from the Renaissance to the modern period – and even before the Renaissance, there are often distinct godgame-like elements in the romances, such as *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*. However, two periods of literary history contain instances of especially focused godgames: the baroque and the period since the first world war. There are significant differences in the modern versions of the godgame (such as the withdrawal of the 'god' into the game and the intense concentration upon the victim's introspection), but there are sufficient formal similarities to allow one to speak of the godgame as a common phenomenon. Both these periods are known to reflect cultural preoccupations with illusion generally; in this sense the godgame can be seen in both periods to correspond to other literary, artistic, and intellectual phenomena. Thus, the incidence, shape, and range of its use in a cultural period may suggest a great deal about that time; that is, an analysis of godgames may point towards larger, more complex issues, and may do so with desirable clarity. For example, the lesser emphasis upon the god in modern literature suggests the current dread of overpowering, inexplicable authority (such as one encounters in both Heller's *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*) acting within pervasive, dogmatic systems.[11] Even so, the godgame is a distinct literary mode of illusion, fascinating whenever it occurs, even in debased versions, that deserves its own peculiar attention.

One reason for the fascination of godgames lies, I think, in their archetypal undertones. Beneath every literary godgame there lies a situation that recalls (while evoking the appropriate feelings) the common human intuition of being made a victim, a scapegoat, or a sacrifice, and of being deluded by someone, by a *they* set over and against oneself. The unsettling potency of Pynchon's fiction stems in large part from his successful linking of the character's predicament (being a victim caught in the intricate crystal of a godgame) to induced psychosis. Inevitably, one must suspect that this happens commonly enough – almost anyone can partially sense the 'cold and sweatless meathooks of a psychosis' (p. 98) that Pynchon causes Oedipa to feel. Looked at in this way, then, the godgame seems to reach back towards those ancient human ideas concerning the race's origins and purpose. After all, the providential view of human history as it is found in Biblical literature (in the Book of Job, say) asserts a godgame upon a cosmic scale. Man's creation entails his being tested, observed, and judged. In terms of its providential associations, the godgame can be seen most explicitly in that

11 I have attempted to analyse the attractiveness and 'inexplicable authority' of these dogmatic systems in an essay entitled 'On the Spoor of the Blatant Beast: Allegory and the Political Mind,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 74 (1975) no. 4, 418–34. For similar conclusions about the picaresque, see Claudio Guillén, *Literature As System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1971) 105–6.

eccentric, though exemplary, masterpiece of baroque fiction, *Paradise Lost*. There the cultural archetype is lucidly evident.

The godgame plays upon, and calls forth, the essential human fear of puniness: of being weak, entrapped, depersonalized, and made a victim. Hence it makes vivid latent anxieties, or even deeper anguish, about a crucial aspect of human existence that is at once a quality of mind, of history, and of society. The fear of puniness, of being helpless and of being less than one would wish to be or ought to be, runs deeply and pervasively. The godgame, despite the elusiveness and paradoxical mutism of this fear, captures and articulates it precisely. Yet, strangely, the godgames's fundamental cohesion to the nature of human experience (and to literary experience) has not prevented it from being overlooked. It has, as it were, been miscatalogued and misinterpreted; obscured, perhaps, by its own massive centricity. In glancing back at this puzzle of literary history, students of literature owe some gratitude to John Fowles for having given them a term (and a novel) by which to identify this class of illusion. As Borges so often suggests, the only way out of a conceptual ensnarement (if there is a way) is to possess an accurate terminology. An exact term emasculates bamboozlement.

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