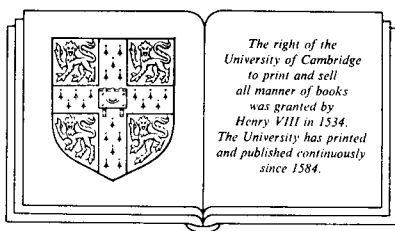


*New Essays on  
The Crying of Lot 49*

*Edited by  
Patrick O'Donnell*



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## Introduction

PATRICK O'DONNELL

THOMAS Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, was published in 1966; that same year, the Manila Summit on America's increasing involvement in Vietnam took place, "Hogan's Heroes," "Green Acres," and "Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C." were top-rated television situation comedies, and *Esquire* published an article entitled "Wake Up America, It Can't Happen Here: A Post-McCarthy Guide to Twenty-Three Conspiracies by Assorted Enemies Within."<sup>1</sup> Such is the contemporary cultural context out of which Pynchon's enigmatic, conspiracy-ridden novel emerged – a novel which, in many ways, easily seduces us into linking an article in a popular magazine, television programs, and an historical event to the fortunes of a fictional character named Oedipa Maas. But it would be a mistake to assume that there is any definitive connection to be made between "fiction" and "history" by comparing the novel – in its moment of production – to the selected particularities of its cultural milieu. For *The Crying of Lot 49* speculates upon the whole idea of "connection," or the activity of connecting, as *the* characteristic human endeavor, whether it be in writing and reading literary works, or in articulating ourselves – our identities – as historical beings. We *need* to narrate, Pynchon's novel argues; we feel the necessity to create and perceive significant patterns in all that we read and do; we are driven to see the connections between the events of our own lives and the larger, external events of that unfolding story we call "history." However, in the familiar dilemma posed in all of Pynchon's novels, but never so dramatically as in *The Crying of Lot 49*, this need to make sense and perceive patterns of significance in text, life, and history can easily become the activity of the para-

noid, who is poised between the fear that, in the end, nothing makes sense and the desire to see plots, connections, significance everywhere.

Chaos or totalitarian order; meaninglessness or paranoia; void or dark design – these are the polarities of Thomas Pynchon's *oeuvre*, which in 1991 numbers four novels, several short stories, and a scattering of essays and reviews. With the publication of *V.* in 1963, Pynchon arose almost immediately as a major postwar writer who had tapped into the fantasies and fears of a generation just emerging from the McCarthy era and about to embark upon a long nightmare of presidential assassinations, social violence, and the Vietnam War. *V.* garnered a number of laudatory reviews upon its appearance and won the prestigious Faulkner Foundation award for the best first novel of 1963. This labyrinthine assemblage of puzzles, plots, and counterplots immediately brought to its author a public recognition which has grown with the appearance of each succeeding novel, and which Pynchon has successfully parried (and, perhaps unintentionally, nourished) with his notorious reclusiveness – matched only in the annals of contemporary American literature by that of J. D. Salinger.<sup>2</sup> The details of Pynchon's biography are, accordingly, sparse, and one might well have the paranoid sense that, given the control the author has maintained over the projection of his public image (or lack of it), the few available details that do exist are only the ones Pynchon has allowed to leak out or those of little consequence. But their very scarcity has made them of special interest to many of Pynchon's readers, who search in vain for any straightforward manifestation of the autobiographical presence of the author in his fiction. Recognizing, then, as Peggy Kamuf argues, that "[b]iographical narrative appears . . . to be the most economical means of gathering, with some semblance of coherence, the disparate marks left by the practice of writing," we offer these scattered facts about Pynchon's life in order to place his work – a work most clearly concerned with the limits of writing and the illusory, dangerous power of coherent plots – within the useful, but partial and suspect, framework of Pynchon's "biography."<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Pynchon was born on May 8, 1937, and grew up in the middle-class suburbs of Long Island.<sup>4</sup> His earliest authorial efforts

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are recorded in his frequent contributions to the Oyster Bay *Purple and Gold*, his high school newspaper, most notably in a column entitled "The Voice of the Hamster" written under various pseudonyms: "Boscoe Stein," "Roscoe Stein," and "Bosc." Pynchon graduated from high school in 1953, began his university studies at Cornell University as an engineering physics major, interrupted his college career with a two-year tour of duty in the Navy, apparently serving as a signal corpsman, then completed his studies at Cornell (where he took a class from Vladimir Nabokov), earning a B.A. degree in English. Pynchon began writing stories during his undergraduate days (his first two, "The Small Rain" and "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," were published in 1959) and worked on the campus literary journal with Richard Fariña, who wrote about Pynchon in his series of reminiscences about the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Long Time Coming and a Long Time Gone*.<sup>5</sup> In a satirical remembrance Fariña recalls Pynchon as being lanky, taciturn, and in search of tacos after a brief absence from Mexico, where he lived for much of the early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Pynchon's affinities with Fariña's sensibilities and work are recorded on the dust jacket of Fariña's 1966 novel, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*, where he writes, "[t]his book comes on like the Hallelujah Chorus done by 200 kazoo players with perfect pitch. . . . In spinning his yarn [Fariña] spins the reader as well, dizzily into a microcosm that manges to be hilarious, chilling, sexy, profound, maniacal, beautiful and outrageous all at the same time."<sup>7</sup> Pynchon's own fiction shows some resemblance to what he perceives to be the paradoxical rhetorical effects of Fariña's work and its ability to "spin the reader" (combining euphoria and chaos) into a world which is hyperbolic and fantastic and yet, composed as it is of contemporary materials, familiar.

In 1960, after graduation from Cornell and a short respite in Greenwich Village, Pynchon went to work as a technical writer for Boeing Aircraft in Seattle. During his two years at Boeing, Pynchon worked on a number of guided missile projects and wrote an article for *Aerospace Safety* entitled "Togetherness" which described safety techniques for the airlifting of IM-99A missiles. Certainly his experience as an engineering physics major at Cornell and a technical writer at Boeing gave Pynchon the background necessary to

incorporate as metaphors the numerous scientific concepts which pervade his work. The title of "Togetherness," however, suggests the ironic attitude that Pynchon must have taken towards his work at Boeing, as is suggested in these headlines from the article: "One mistake and a lot of money has been wasted when you're moving a missile to its new home. It's a job requiring detailed safety on all sides. Togetherness, then, is the word."<sup>8</sup> The merging in these phrases of nostalgic domesticity with the sinister reality of what missiles are for (disguised by the homeliness of the language) prefigures the typically parodic intonations of Pynchon's fiction, where "reality" is packaged in metaphors that reveal the fantasies and romanticized desires of a culture bound over to deathly designs beneath the camouflage of utility, community ("togetherness"), and domesticity (the missiles' "new home").

While at Boeing, Pynchon continued writing fiction, publishing "Low Lands" and the widely anthologized "Entropy" in 1960, and "Under the Rose" in 1961. He most certainly must have been working on *V.* during those years. He completed *V.* in Mexico after he left Boeing, and with its publication in 1963 Pynchon's career as novelist begins, along with his virtual disappearance from the public scene. We might speculate endlessly on the reasons for this disappearance – shyness, xenophobia, paranoia, a mania for privacy, or, as David Seed suggests, a desire to imitate poets from the goliards to the Beats by becoming a nomad, "a writer at large."<sup>9</sup> But whatever personal motives lie behind his reclusiveness, Pynchon has been satisfied to let his writing stand as the signature and representation of his public life.

Accorded the Faulkner Foundation Award for his first novel, loudly acclaimed at the age of twenty-six as a major new figure in contemporary letters, Pynchon apparently receded into unknown regions – possibly rural Northern California, the anonymity of Southern California, or self-exile in Mexico. In 1964, his story "The Secret Integration" was published, and two sections from *The Crying of Lot 49* came out in popular magazines – *Esquire* and *Cavalier* – before that novel was published in 1966. David Seed has suggested that at least three versions of *The Crying of Lot 49* exist: an early manuscript (accepted for publication by J. P. Lippincott) from which the two excerpts in *Cavalier* and *Esquire* came; a review



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copy version, which reflected minor revisions from the original manuscript; and the published version, which reflects more (mostly minor) revisions. Seed states that a comparison of these versions “sheds a fascinating light on Pynchon’s compositional methods and on his scrupulous care over the smallest details of phrasing.”<sup>10</sup> The various editions of the novel since its original publication continue to reflect this scrupulosity in the many minor changes between editions.

*The Crying of Lot 49* won the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, although critical acclaim for the novel, as we shall see below, was less enthusiastic than it was for *V*. In 1966 Pynchon also published his most important piece of nonfiction, “A Journey into the Mind of Watts,” an evocative description of the black ghetto in Los Angeles, then torn by race riots and, in Pynchon’s words, “impacted in the heart of this [Los Angeles’] white fantasy . . . a pocket of bitter reality.”<sup>11</sup> *Gravity’s Rainbow*, published in 1973 and widely considered to be Pynchon’s major work, is an encyclopedic, epic novel that, in Scott Simmon’s phrase, purveys an “historical and cultural synthesis of Western actions and fantasies.”<sup>12</sup> Pynchon’s third novel received an abundance of critical praise and won the National Book Award (shared with Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories*, and accepted for Pynchon by a comedian, “Professor” Irwin Corey). After the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow* Pynchon won the Howells Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters for his collective body of work, but he rejected the prize. *Gravity’s Rainbow* was also nominated for the Pulitzer Prize by the judges of the prize committee, but the committee was subsequently overruled by the Pulitzer advisory board.

Since the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon had been working on a fourth novel and his work had rarely been seen in print: occasional book blurbs for such works as Peter Matthiessen’s *Far Tortuga*, Tom Robbins’ *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, Laurel Goldman’s *Sounding the Territory*, and Steve Erickson’s *Days Between Stations*; the “Introduction” to *Slow Learner*; a remembrance of Richard Fariña in the *Cornell Alumni News*; and a laudatory review of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*.<sup>13</sup> In 1988, at the age of 51, he won a MacArthur Foundation award, an

extraordinary grant which gives recipients \$1,000 times their age per year for five years, potentially renewable for life. Pynchon's fourth novel after a seventeen-year hiatus, *Vineland*, was released in December 1989. Touted as a novel that combines "elements of daytime drama and the political thriller," *Vineland* begins among the redwoods and small logging towns of northern California.<sup>14</sup> It portrays a group of 1960s hippies, radicals, and drug agents living in the conservative 1980s, with a plot revolving around various relationships and conspiracies embracing government agencies, spies, ex-"sting" specialists, and revolutionaries. Fellow novelist Salman Rushdie proclaimed *Vineland* a portrait of a "crazed patch of California" standing for "American itself," in which "one of America's great writers has, after long wanderings down his uncharted roads, come triumphantly home."<sup>15</sup> Here Pynchon continues his fascination with the way in which personal lives are intertwined with political movements and actions as part of an ongoing plot only partially revealed by the narrative of "history" and contemporary life.

Coming after the relatively spectacular success of *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* was greeted with mixed reviews. Sandwiched between two longer, seemingly more elaborate and complex works, it has often been regarded as Pynchon's "minor," if most accessible, novel. That first adjective is challenged by the mere presence of this collection; the second is partially confirmed (perhaps, to a large extent, because of the novel's brevity) by the novel's frequent appearance in the syllabi of college and university courses in contemporary American fiction and by the fact that it is the most frequently translated of Pynchon's works: so far, versions of *The Crying of Lot 49* exist in Swedish, Italian, Danish, German, French (two translations), Spanish, Norwegian, Dutch, Japanese, and Polish.

Most early reviewers of *The Crying of Lot 49* insisted upon comparing it unfavorably to the more massive *V.* One strongly negative commentator remarked upon *Crying's* "crampedness" in relation to the earlier novel, expounded upon its emerging patterns of significance becoming "progressively smaller, and refus[ing] to respond to the reader's (or the novelist's) efforts to inflate them other than by going limp with a modest hiss," and concluded by stating

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that “*Crying* is a step backwards to the art of the emblem books, a patchy collection of images propped up by claims of significance in terms which the artist hasn’t proved the right to use.”<sup>16</sup> The anonymous reviewer for *Time*, evaluating *The Crying of Lot 49* along with Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* and Fariña’s *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*, described Pynchon’s novel as “a meta-physical thriller in the form of a pornographic comic strip,” then lumped all three novels together as examples of “the gibberish literature that is currently being published as fast as it can be gibbered.”<sup>17</sup> Less reductively, Roger Shattuck cited *The Crying of Lot 49* as “a short, crisp afterthought to *V.*”; Granville Hicks described *Crying* as “a tenth as long as *V.*, . . . considerably easier to follow, and . . . just as funny”; and the reviewer for *Newsweek* stated that *Crying* “seems to be an outgrowth of *V.*” – like *V.*, a quest novel, but “the seeker and the specific object of the search are quite different in ‘*Lot 49*,’ simpler, clearer – and a lot funnier.”<sup>18</sup>

Though negative or reductive views of *The Crying of Lot 49* seemed to prevail, some reviewers found the novel more than just an “afterthought” to, or a more popular (“funnier,” “simpler”) version of, *V.* Richard Poirier, perhaps Pynchon’s most incisive critic, wrote in the *New York Times* that in *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon evidences “a tenderness, largely missing from our literature since Dreiser, for the very physical waste of our yearnings, for the anonymous scrap heap of Things wherein our lives are finally joined. The Pynchon who can write with dashing metaphorical skill about the way humans have become Things, can also reveal a beautiful and heartbreaking reverence for the human penetration of the Thingness of this country, the signatures we make on the grossest evidence of our existence.”<sup>19</sup> Yet even with this laudatory description of what he felt to be the novel’s strongest aspect – its ability to capture the sheer materiality of American life in its “tryst with America” – Poirier had reservations about the role given to Oedipa Maas, arguing that “it is impossible to divorce from her limitations the large rhetoric about America at the end of the novel. This is unfortunate simply because Oedipa has not been given character enough to bear the weight of this rhetoric.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most laudatory review of the novel was that of Stephen Donadio, who reviewed *The Crying of Lot 49* along with Fariña’s

*Been Down So Long*, William H. Gass's *Omensetter's Luck*, and Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*. Donadio wrote that *Crying* is "a desperately funny book, conceived and executed with an awesome virtuosity. The novel's tone and pace are characterized by their absolute intensity, and Mr. Pynchon's essential technique is suggested most simply by his descriptions, which invariably cut from one layer of culture to another."<sup>21</sup> Donadio perceptively noted in his review what has become a critical commonplace about Pynchon's fiction in general, that Pynchon's "primary observation" in *Crying* "remains central, and it is one which our current foreign policy only seems to confirm: that paranoia is the last sense of community left us."<sup>22</sup> Finally, Robert Sklar, in a review-essay that stands as one of the first significant critical discussions of Pynchon's fiction, argued that *The Crying of Lot 49* offers an advance over *V.* because, while the former is an exemplar of the school of black humor, the latter breaks free of categorization and succeeds in "making new and contemporary a traditional concern of the great American novelists – the creation, through the style and form of their fiction, of an imaginative system more true to their national and social system."<sup>23</sup> Sklar's assessment of the novel's ending, in which Oedipa awaits the "cry" of revelation that will spell her fate, foreshadows what will emerge as a major theme in Pynchon's acknowledged masterpiece, *Gravity's Rainbow*, where "that imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality," and, indeed, the "reality" that most accurately pertains to contemporary millennial existence.<sup>24</sup>

The criticism that has emerged in the twenty-three years since the publication of *The Crying of Lot 49* suggests that it is a much more subtle and complex novel than most of its earlier reviewers, both positive and negative, allowed. Criticism of *Crying* has also made the case that this is not a minor variation on the themes and attitudes of *V.*, nor merely a "key" to *Gravity's Rainbow*. Serious and detailed analysis of the novel has revealed not only that it stands on its own, but that it contains movements and strategies latent in Pynchon's other novels. The problematic character of Oedipa Mass is a case in point. She may be seen, as Poirier has argued, as two-dimensional and thus unable to bear the weight of the novel's "sociological" rhetoric, but she may also be viewed as a

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most unusual “type” – a female quester searching for truth, community, significance in the interconnected realms of the phallogocratic military-industrial complex and the narcissistic leisure world of southern California.<sup>25</sup> Cathy Davidson has argued that Oedipa is engaged in “exploring the riddle of her own identity,” and though this riddle may be unsolved by the novel’s end, in probing the entanglements of history, myth, contemporary lifestyles and preterite secrecies which make up the novel’s substance, she effectively “challenges the cherished myths of a male-dominated society, assumptions which, in their way, comprise a Sphinx as implacable as the female figure encountered by her mythic namesake.”<sup>26</sup> In somewhat different terms, Edward Mendelson has asserted Oedipa’s importance as a quintessentially modern figure caught between the sacred and the profane. Her choice, as she walks “the hieroglyphic streets” in a world arranged “like the matrices of a great digital computer, the ones and zeroes twinned above” is “the choice between the *zero* of secular triviality and chaos, and the one which is the *ganz andere* of the sacred.”<sup>27</sup> Even critics such as Thomas Schaub who, less optimistically than Davidson or Mendelson, regards the novel as “a tragic account of the difficulty of human action in a world whose meanings are always *either our own or just beyond our reach*,” argues for Oedipa’s importance as the central, ambiguous figure of this tragic state as she occupies a “linguistic space” between “outside and inside, between a reductive literalism in which words are mere tools standing for things, and a speculative symbolism in which words are signs capable of pointing toward realities which transcend those signs.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, since the novel’s publication, the complexity of Oedipa’s stature as revolutionary, or tragic, or existential figure has been established, and like her namesake she can be seen to embody the condition of indeterminacy – which enables the act of inquiry and the scrutiny of existing conditions – that can be set against the assumptions and certainties of Western positivism.

The best early criticism of *The Crying of Lot 49*, written in the aftermath of the 1960s, stressed what might be termed the “identity crisis” that is also noted by those who have argued for the complexity of Oedipa’s character: here the emphasis falls upon Oedipa’s evolving role as a reader of signs and texts.<sup>29</sup> Oedipa

must sort through a plethora of information in the attempt to arrive at the truth, or center of a conspiracy – the underground Tristero System of communication and exchange – which she seems to detect in her role as the co-executor of the enormous Pierce Inverarity estate. The system (if there is one) can be viewed as either Inverarity’s legacy or its inverse: a vast series of conspiracies, historical accidents, and analogues that potentially connects (for example) a medieval postal service with the literary productions of an obscure Renaissance playwright and a series of modern-day preterite organizations, from the fanatical right-wing Peter Pinquid Society to the lovelorn Inamorati Anonymous. In observing the signs of the Tristero’s presence (which may be illusory, since the signs she sees offer the possibility of being mere ciphers), and in finding her “place” within this system, Oedipa embarks upon a journey through the secular and underground worlds of contemporary southern California – a journey that compels her to inquire into the anteriority of events and their aftermath. Noting that “Pierce Inverarity” may be a play on “Dr. Moriarty,” thus casting Oedipa in the role of Holmes, Joseph Slade, in the first book-length study of Pynchon, suggests that Oedipa’s (arguably frustrated) quest, because it revolves around the formation of her identity as reader–detective in an indeterminate world of proliferating meanings, becomes “an endless fluctuation of sensibilities, rather like a film sprocketing through a projector. At any given moment the focus or frame changes. The self is not so much thought as lived; its existence is predicated on shifting multiple states of consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> This conception of identity in flux is one that, earlier, Tony Tanner had noted as a general condition of contemporary American fiction, where the quest for a free, liberated self is matched by an anxiety that the “fluid” or dissipated self – without the certain strictures of law or syntax – might altogether disappear.<sup>31</sup> For Tanner, in a second reading of *The Crying of Lot 49* which appeared as part of his 1982 monograph on Pynchon, the question of identity in the novel comes to rest in the realm of the “excluded middle” – “a middle term for something real but unascertainable.”<sup>32</sup> Suspended between polarities – narcissism and paranoia, totalitarian order and chaos, absolute certainty and radical uncertainty – Oedipa locates “herself” as one who mediates,

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“sorts,” or negotiates these extremes.<sup>33</sup> The struggle between fluidity and form in the construction of the self has been one Richard Poirier, in several books including *A World Elsewhere* and *The Performing Self*, has located within the specific historical progressions of classic American and modern literature. Pynchon, according to Poirier, is part of this tradition or progression, a descendent of Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville in his projection of a vision of “cultural inundation, of being swamped, swept up, counted in before you could count yourself out, pursued by every bookish aspect of life even as you try to get lost in a wilderness, in a randomness where you might hope to find your true self.”<sup>34</sup> For Poirier, as for Tanner and Slade, Oedipa is a representative American caught in the dialectic of form and formlessness, culture and nature, legibility and the inarticulate, as she struggles to acquire the knowledge that will give some shape to her understanding of the world, and of her being in the world.

As critical interpretation of *The Crying of Lot 49* has developed, the focus has shifted somewhat from the question of the readerly identity in the novel – though this has remained constant as different ideas of identity have evolved in contemporary literary theory and philosophy – to a view of the novel as a form of communication, or as embodying certain problems and issues surrounding speech acts and the processing of information. Oedipa’s role as a sorter of the information she receives, the importance of postal systems, which can either facilitate or repress the exchange of information, and the presence of such pseudoscientific esoterica as Maxwell’s Demon have led readers to information theory and thermodynamics in the attempt to explain how communication works in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Anne Mangel’s early article on “entropy” in the novel remains one of the most lucid discussions of how energy and information are connected in Pynchon’s world, or more precisely, how the projected “heat death” of the universe can be contrasted to increasingly elaborate and sophisticated ways of gathering and dispersing information in an open, noisy system of exchange – for Mangel, the sign of “life” in Pynchon’s novel.<sup>35</sup> Thus, especially in the *Walpurgisnacht* sequence of the novel, where Oedipa walks through an hallucinatory San Francisco nighttown, gathering more seemingly random and meaningless

information about the Tristero conspiracy, she comes into contact with an impressive array of underground communities and isolates; in this sense, “information” leads to “community,” though it can also lead, as in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, to the horror of bureaucracy when it becomes officially channelled and exfoliated. Here, in Mangel’s formulation, the epistemological ambivalences of Pynchon’s attitude toward information are revealed.<sup>36</sup> In her underground journey, Oedipa establishes connections and discovers relationships previously invisible to the naked, neutral eye, yet the rhetoric of these passages suggests that the causes and consequences of her hermeneutic activities are ambiguous – perhaps indicative of her ability to pierce through the layers of information to the hidden life of the city, or perhaps indicative of the absence of any order or truth behind the proliferation of signs and messages that make up modern existence:

The city was hers, as, made up and sleeked so with the customary words and images (cosmopolitan, culture, cable cars) it had not been before: she had safe passage to its far blood’s branchings, be they capillaries too small for more than peering into, or vessels mashed together in shameless municipal hickeys, out on the skin for all but tourists to see. . . . She touched the edge of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to it; that not gravity’s pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravening promised more delight. She tested it, shivering: I am meant to remember. Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike “clues” were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (pp. 117–18)

Hence Oedipa, like Oedipus, is placed in the tragic circumstances of not knowing whether the information she receives will lead to the reordering of existence (“the abolition of the night”) or to a deeper recognition of what has been lost: one’s personal past as well as the archaic, cultural past which can only be partially recovered in the activities of the dreamer or the paranoid.

Much of the critical commentary about *The Crying of Lot 49* has focused upon this conflation of epistemology, thermodynamics, and information theory as it has asked: what does all this add up



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to? For the novel is filled with information, codes, messages, secret languages, historical and literary allusions, puns, parodies, figures of all sorts – and yet, though these elements seduce the reader (as they seduce Oedipa) into expecting that the “cry” of revelation is at hand and that the world is filled with multiple significances, we are left with the possibility that all these “clues” will reveal only the presence of our own desire to impose meaning on a meaningless universe.<sup>37</sup> As Frank Kermode has suggested, the novel “is crammed with disappointed promises of significance, with ambiguous invitations to paradigmatic construction, and this is precisely Oedipa’s problem. Is there a structure *au fond*, or only deceptive galaxies of signifiers?”<sup>38</sup> Does the novel, in the end, portray “the failure of our cultural assumptions, our philosophies, and even our imaginative constructs, to transform our lives”?<sup>39</sup> In terms of the second law of thermodynamics and its revision in information theory, which version of “physical reality” shall we endorse: the one which suggests that the universe is gradually running down, moving toward dissolution and chaos, and that the signs of this deevolution are everywhere, or the one which suggests that these signs signify not so much the “heat death” of entropy as the transformational flux of new life forms, new connections and new orders in the making, “a radically new conception of the nature of human identity and societal organization”?<sup>40</sup> Has Pynchon finally written a tragic novel, a novel of revelation, or a travesty of desire and signification in contemporary America?

Criticism of *The Crying of Lot 49* will continue to ask and answer versions of these questions, though perhaps the point is that the novel is put in the form of a question: it is, conceivably, a quest without end, an inquiry into and dramatization of our incessant desire for meaning, our will to generate signs and significance wherever we plant our feet. Framing this desire *as* a question is one of the hallmarks of postmodernist literature, to which Pynchon’s work is a considerable contribution. But this formulation also leads to one of the primary questions about postmodernist fiction itself: are its speculative nature, its parodic playfulness and bookishness merely forms of diversion which lead us away from an engagement with “reality”? Molly Hite’s reflection that the “excluded middle” of *The Crying of Lot 49* can be viewed as the

“human world, based on the shared hopes and fears that are the tenuous connections of community . . . rendered contingent and precarious by the awesome fear of mortality” is one response to this question, but there may be a problem with the question itself: either postmodern playfulness or political engagement; either reified significance or meaninglessness; either paranoid community or the alienation of the individual.<sup>41</sup> Something, Pynchon’s critics have suggested in manifold ways, must lie between the “either” and the “or” of these conditions. In coming to grips with Pynchon’s novel, we are compelled to redefine the terms of such issues and, as much recent criticism of Pynchon has done, to revise our notions of uncertainty, of action and the ethical, of historical process, of the nature and construction of identity, of interpretation and the work of metaphor.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this is the most crucial effect of this “slim” novel: to force us into redefining our categories of thinking, or more pointedly, to force us to stop thinking categorically at all.

The five essays in this volume comprise new views of *The Crying of Lot 49* in relation to this critical history. In “Borges and Pynchon: The Tenuous Symmetries of Art,” Debra A. Castillo provides a “deconstructive” view of *The Crying of Lot 49*, showing how Pynchon’s redaction of Jorge Luis Borges’s dicta for the literary game (symmetry, arbitrary rules, tedium) affect the nature and processes of signification in the novel. Focusing on the work of metaphor in elucidating these processes, Castillo suggests how Pynchon is aligned with literary postmodernism in both its potentialities and its limitations. John Johnston’s “Toward the Schizo-Text: Paranoia as Semiotic Regime in *The Crying of Lot 49*” offers a view of the novel’s processes of interpretation as they are constrained by the “regime of signs” that fosters Oedipa’s paranoia in the novel. Johnston shows how interpretation becomes a political activity in Pynchon’s novel, and how *The Crying of Lot 49* stands as paranoid text in relation to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which offers alternative sign-systems and, hence, alternatives to political power and paranoia.

In his essay on narrative transmission in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Bernard Duyflhuizen questions how Pynchon’s novel (and American society) transmits a cultural heritage, how that “story” can be disrupted, and in what ways its content is formed by the mecha-

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nisms of transmission themselves. Duyfhuizen's focus on cultural formations in Pynchon's novel allows him to discuss the issues of origin, power, and authority which arise out of Oedipa's becoming an executor of the Pierce Inverarity estate – an estate with the symbolic potential to stand for “all of America.” In discerning the cultural deformations and “bad transmissions” of the novel, Duyfhuizen remarks upon the breakdown in communication of the culturally authorized stories which consign us to predetermined roles and functions, and our anxiety as readers when, released from these “stories,” we confront a realm of interpretive freedom that is also a silent void, a blank space. In “‘A Metaphor of God Knew How Many Parts’: The Engine that Drives *The Crying of Lot 49*,” Katherine Hayles discusses the specific poetic and narrative device of metaphor and its use in *The Crying of Lot 49* to “construct a world” in which ambivalence or ambiguity is the primary ingredient. Hayles discusses the metaphors of the novel (including the “meta-metaphor” of the quest) and argues that their ability to conjoin the concrete and the abstract allows for an “escape hatch” out of the “either/or” world that Oedipa initially inhabits. In Hayles's view the engine that drives *The Crying of Lot 49* (a novel that, crucially, employs physical principles of communication and entropy) is Pynchon's use of metaphor's expansive capability to project us beyond purely physical circumstances in (to use the novel's words) “a thrust at truth and a lie” – a paradoxically verbal projection that reflects the desire to go beyond language and to deny death, even as transcending facticity implies death.

Finally, in “A Re-cognition of Her Errand into the Wilderness,” Pierre-Yves Petillon offers an evocative, wide-ranging assessment of *The Crying of Lot 49* within the interactive contexts of Pynchon's fiction, the 1950s and 1960s in America, American Puritanism, historical revolution, and eschatology. Writing from a European perspective, Petillon effectively shows how Pynchon's fiction is a layering of texts and contexts, or a kind of cultural palimpsest that reveals American attitudes towards time, expectancy, and the wilderness. This view from across the water provides a fitting conclusion to the considerations of Pynchon's “small” novel gathered here. Together, these essays are intended to provide the reader

with an array of approaches – historical, linguistic, hermeneutic, narratological – with which to approach the enigmas of Pynchon's most concentrated text. As each essay acknowledges in some fashion, a critical approach to *The Crying of Lot 49* is helpful up to a point: beyond that, the reader, like Oedipa, is on her own, stranded amidst the entanglements and wonders of Pynchon's words and signs.

#### NOTES

1. Corbett Steinberg, in *TV Facts* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), provides ratings for top-rated television programs; "Bonanza" was the highest-rated program of 1966. Raymond Olderman notes the appearance of "Wake Up America" in the May 1966 issue of *Esquire* in his *Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 120.
2. Novelist John Calvin Batchelor's somewhat whimsical "Thomas Pynchon is Not Thomas Pynchon; or, This is the End of the Plot Which Has No Name," *Soho Weekly News* (22–28 April 1976): 15–17, 21–35, claims that J. D. Salinger is Thomas Pynchon.
3. Peggy Kamuf, *Signature Pieces: On the Institution of Authorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 117.
4. Most of the details of Pynchon's biography recited here are provided by Matthew Winston, who has done more than any other critic to assemble the few available facts about Pynchon's life; see "The Quest for Pynchon," *Twentieth Century Literature* 21 (1975): 278–87. Additional "information" (or speculation concerning the lack of information) about Pynchon's life and identity is provided by the following: Thomas LeClair, "Missing Writers," *Horizon* (October 1981): 48–52; Helen Dudar, "Pynchon: The Man Who Won't Come to Dinner," *Los Angeles Times* (22 April 1974), calendar section: 6; Jules Siegel, "Who is Thomas Pynchon . . . and Why Did He Take Off with My Wife?," *Playboy* (March 1977): 97, 122, 168–70, 172, 174; Brian McHale, "Thomas Pynchon: A Portrait of the Artist as a Missing Person," *Cencrastus* 5 (1981): 2–3; Michael Hartnett, "Thomas Pynchon's Long Island Years," *Confrontation* 30/31 (1985): 44–8; and Charles Hollander, "Pynchon's Inferno," *Cornell Alumni News* 81, no. 4 (November 1978): 24–30.
5. All of Pynchon's early stories, with the exception of those that were