

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

English Honors Theses

Department of English

Spring 5-6-2012

The Tower is Everywhere: Symbolic Exchange and Discovery of Meaning in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

Jonathan Kincade
Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_hontheses

Recommended Citation

Kincade, Jonathan, "The Tower is Everywhere: Symbolic Exchange and Discovery of Meaning in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2012.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/2397125>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

THE TOWER IS EVERYWHERE: SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE AND DISCOVERY OF
MEANING IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*

by

JONATHAN M. KINCADE

Under the Direction of Dr. Calvin Thomas

ABSTRACT

Thomas Pynchon's novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, details Oedipa Maas' quest to unearth a possibly centuries-old clandestine mail system, the Trystero. Oedipa is immersed in notions of sociality and she must navigate the social landscape, searching for clues as to the existence of the social system. In her quest she assumes the role of a detective who searches for meaning, as she looks for clues and questions others who might potentially be privy to the secrets of the Trystero. She necessarily performs the process of symbolic exchange with those she encounters in an attempt at ascertaining some greater meaning within the world that she thinks might lie behind the Trystero. In this, the nature of the circulation of meaning is revealed as a cultural construct.

INDEX WORDS: Symbolic Exchange, Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Karl Marx, Entropy, Jacques Lacan

THE TOWER IS EVERYWHERE: SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE AND DISCOVERY OF
MEANING IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*

by

JONATHAN M. KINCADE

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts English
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University

2011

Copyright by
Jonathan Maurice Kincade
2011

THE TOWER IS EVERYWHERE: SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE AND DISCOVERY OF
MEANING IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*

by

JONATHAN M. KINCADE

Honors Thesis Director: Dr. Calvin Thomas
Honors College Director: Dr. Robert Sattelmeyer

Electronic Version Approved:

GSU Honors Program
Georgia State University
December 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Calvin Thomas for his theoretical support and direction on this paper. I would also like to acknowledge the Georgia State University English department faculty and staff for helping me to realize my own academic interests and equipping me with the skills necessary to complete such a large project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
SECTION	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 SYMBOLIC (EXCHANGE)	2
3 THE DETECTIVE AS LOCATOR OF MEANING	11
4 THE TRYSTERO AND THE ALIENATING (BIG) OTHER	14
5 CONCLUSIONS	23
WORKS CITED	26

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud argues that humans form social civilization at the expense of greater, instinctual, freedoms. Through entering society certain acts are prohibited and one enters society by virtue of certain prohibitions; one must align one's behavior to such law in order to receive acceptance and recognition from others. Yet there are certain benefits of entering into society, such as the formation and circulation of meaning—which is formulated within society and cannot be extricated from the social sphere. In this, meaning is often, but not always, based on the normative cultural values and laws of society that arise as a result of forming social civilization. Meaning arises through language due to the fact that words operate based on a collective agreement of use (the word tree signifies an actual tree because of a collective agreement towards such use of the word). But one must also take into account grammatical and syntactical rules to adequately convey meaning to others, signaling the notion that meaning as a whole operates based on one's inclusion into society and an adherence to such laws.

Thomas Pynchon's novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, details Oedipa Maas' quest to unearth a possibly centuries-old clandestine mail system, the Trystero. Oedipa is immersed in notions of sociality and she must navigate the social landscape, searching for clues as to the existence of the social system. In her quest she assumes the role of a detective who searches for meaning, as she looks for clues and questions others who might potentially be privy to the secrets of the Trystero. She necessarily performs the process of symbolic exchange with those she encounters in an attempt at ascertaining some greater meaning within the world that she thinks might lie behind the Trystero (she does not care about the political nature of the plot, only what it means). Nevertheless, Oedipa has yet to find the "true nature" of the Trystero by the novel's conclusion,

due to the social isolation she experiences at the hand of the social system. In highlighting this isolation, Pynchon's novel displays the nature of symbolic exchange as it occurs in social society.

Symbolic (Exchange)

Although he himself never used the words, the very notion of symbolic exchange is derived from French intellectual Georges Bataille's notions related to acts of consumption, which are constitutive of what he calls a "general economy." Bataille argues that waste, expenditure, and destruction are more fundamental to human life than production and utility, and under such general economy these fundamentals would be naturally achieved. Human beings are characterized as beings of excess and, in part, the process of symbolic exchange is related to the expenditure of excess energy. Because of humans' natural proclivity for waste, production has limits under a "restrictive" (capitalist) economy, as Bataille notes:

When one considers the totality of productive wealth on the surface of the globe, it is evident that the products of this wealth can be employed for productive ends only insofar as the living organism that is economic mankind can increase its equipment (Bataille 22)

In a capitalist economy, energy can only be spent towards production insofar as there is demand for the energy behind commodified labor. The capitalist mode of production is one of utility, making labor quantitatively limited in employment. As a result, Bataille argues, a surplus of energy is created after demand is met and work is completed. Such line of thought seems derivative of Marx, who himself theorized that surplus was to the detriment of capitalism, as the surplus must be spent regardless of an over abundance of

commodities and the reduction of general exchange-values.¹ In keeping with this idea, Bataille realizes that a surplus of energy must be spent in some manner external to production which ensures the expenditure of excess energy.

Here Bataille's theory seems reminiscent of the thermodynamic concept of entropy, which regards the amount of energy available for work in closed thermodynamic systems and the chaos that arises as a result (a major thematic notion in many of Pynchon's novels that will be returned to later this analysis). In thermodynamic entropy, the excess energy that remains after productive expenditure must also be spent and it is dissipated through waste heat, just as a capitalist "surplus must be dissipated through deficit operations" (Bataille 22) to ensure optimal valuation of commodities. Yet the link between the thermodynamic concept and the informational concept seems vague, as Nefastis notes in Pynchon's novel: "Entropy is a figure of speech, then...a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow" (Pynchon 85), but only in the sense that the equations from both fields seem similar (the significance of such a relationship will also be returned to later). Consumption and the expenditure of that which otherwise goes towards a productive capacity is constitutive of symbolic exchange, and symbolic acts manifest themselves as fundamentally wasteful acts: war, festivity, sacrifice, and gift-giving stand as notable instances. Bataille reached the conclusion that if individuals wanted to be sovereign, transcending even Marxist notions of sovereignty (i.e. communism), they should embrace a general economy of waste and expenditure, freeing them from the capitalist imperatives of utility and demand.

¹ In volume 3 of *Capital* Marx notes that "as soon as capital would have grown to such a proportion compared with the laboring population, that neither the absolute labor time nor the relative surplus-labor time could be extended any further" (295). This is an important notion because in Marxian economics time is pivotal to capital generation. There is a quantitative limitation to labor, and it can only be extended insofar as there is the possibility for such labor to generate capital, based upon market demand.

Bataille's idea of a general economy sees import in anthropological notions of how meaning is conveyed and received within society. Theorist Jean Baudrillard cites what he calls "primitive societies" as evocative of the thought that symbolic exchange is *not* tied to notions of production, although expenditure and waste still are still fundamental to the symbolic act. For Bataille, production made symbolic exchange possible, yet for Baudrillard "'subsistence' and 'economic exchange' are the *residue* of symbolic exchange, a *remainder*. Symbolic circulation is primordial" ("Mirror" 79), operating on the idea that "we are in exchange universally...that the only thing that exists is what can assume value, and hence pass from one to another" ("Passwords" 73). Primitive societies, those who do not operate based on the general notions of productive economies, that is to say production superseding consumption, expend goods based on the symbolic nature of sacrifice itself in relation to a utilitarian valuation of that which is sacrificed. Here, physical goods are wasted and exchanged in favor of the meaning that rests behind the literal event. Events such as feasts are wasteful in their application of excess food, which is almost never fully consumed, but such excess is exchanged for the communality, and for the meaning of the cause of the feast, that occurs as a result.

For all individuals, the symbolic ultimately precedes production because death is always already a viable choice for ultimate waste and expenditure, as Baudrillard theorizes: "life given over to death: the very operation of the symbolic" ("Symbolic" 131). There is an inextricable link between symbolic exchange and death, as death is an ultimate expenditure of life, which disregards the dominant social values of survival present within modern society. Death, as a sacrificial act, constitutes a wasting of life, and such wasting is a modality of symbolic exchange—as Baudrillard puts it, actions

such as suicide bombings become symbolic exchange because of the nature of death and sacrifice in relation to a specific teleology. Life is thus exchanged in favor of a specific goal, and this is an ultimate exchange which cannot occur again.

Symbolic exchange, as both concept and practice, is dependent on the social relations of man—human reality in all of its *anti-physis*². This social relation is derived from human reality as a construction, dependent upon language and the use of signs and signifiers. Even the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, which posits self-consciousness, is predicated on the use of language to think and rationalize one's existence, gesturing towards something external to reality and the realm of language: what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the “Real.” Yet reality, fundamentally antithetical to the Real, is situated in the realm of the “Symbolic” (and less importantly for my purposes, the Imaginary), an order characterized by law and structure, two concepts unthinkable without language, making the Symbolic an essentially linguistic order. The interplay between human social collectivity and the use of language as a means of conveying and receiving information is pivotal to ideas of symbolic exchange, and it is significant that Baudrillard refers to primitive society rather than the singular primitive man in his formulation of symbolic function.

Any sense of symbolic exchange, as Baudrillard realizes it, is dependent on the thought that Lacan's “symbolic order is also the realm of death, of absence and of lack” (Evans 202). Language is a necessary construct for symbolic exchange, a notion significant in the Trystero's position as a mail system, and there is an expenditure which

² In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes makes a distinction between *anti-physis* and *pseudo-physis* through concepts of myth as ideological practice. The term *physis* is a Greek word usually translated to mean nature: *anti-physis* is thus “against nature,” and concerns the social relations of man as they are constructed. They are antithetical to that which is natural. *Pseudo-physis* is a false representation of something as natural.

Lacan associates with speech and the symbolization contained therein: “the symbol is the murder of the thing” (“Écrits” 104). Of course such an idea goes hand in hand with Lacan’s idea that “in the symbolic nothing exists except upon an assumed foundation of absence. Nothing exists except insofar as it does not exist” (“Écrits” 392). The use of a word kills and inherently signifies the absence of that which it refers to; the symbolic is predicated on the idea that for one to refer to something it does not have to be present, and it most always is not. Language stands as a differential communication system in which signifiers can be identified, and subsequently linked to signifieds, constituting a sign, based purely on what they are not.

The Remedios Varo painting that Oedipa views on a trip to Mexico with Pierce Inverarity exemplarily establishes the symbolic *anti-physis* of the novel, and Oedipa’s position within it:

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

Pynchon’s narrative offers enough of a description of the painting, but his metatextual inclusion of the surrealist painting shows the nature of the Symbolic as it is established as a medium for symbolic exchange.³ The world of the painting is a nameless void into which a tapestry spills and, as the novel notes, the tapestry *is* the world. But what about

³ An image of the painting can be seen at the following URL: <http://turingmachine.org/remedios/picture11.html>

the void itself which the tapestry occupies? The presence of the tapestry signals that there is something possible to contain such a tapestry that is constitutive of the world, literally signaled by the negative space within the painting that the tapestry occupies. The void represents the Real; the world, as it can only be known through the tapestry, fills such a void ultimately relegating the void to a place that is unknowable. In this, it is important to note that the “frail girls” in the painting are closed off, sequestered in their tower away from the Real, interacting only with the tapestry itself, weaving it and its contents—both the tapestry itself and that which it contains are the Symbolic.

While the painting gives Oedipa a sort of solipsistic epiphany, a notion exemplified by her shelter within her own green bubble shades and her own feeling of being trapped in an omnipresent tower, the pivotal element of Varo’s painting is the fact that there are numerous girls who reside within the tower. The tapestry they weave is a collective, social, construct—the structuring of the painting leads the viewer to believe that each weaver has a hand in filling the void. Such sociality is analogous to the formation of the Symbolic as the void of the Real is filled linguistically, through the collective social relations that are constitutive of society. While viewing the painting, Oedipa “soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental” (Pynchon 11-2). Pynchon’s word choice is striking here, evocative of notions of Cartesian self-consciousness finding its basis in linguistics. There is an equation of the tower with the psychoanalytic concept of the ego, which is derived from Descartes’ formulation of the “I”. This “I” is a fundamentally social being which has a hand in weaving the tapestry that is the Symbolic. Oedipa feels that her tower is everywhere, finally realizing how fundamentally steeped in the social she is, regardless of location.

This seems a fitting place for Pynchon to introduce the painting within the novel for two reasons. First, the perceived solipsism that Oedipa feels when viewing the painting only foreshadows her later isolation from others in her search for the Trystero (this thought will be returned to later). She believes that she is isolated, but discovers later true isolation through her social exclusion. Second, and more pressing for now, the painting establishes the terms of symbolic exchange through the social realm, as Oedipa must negotiate such terms in her search for the Trystero. While she starts socially, she is later isolated within such sociality, thereby diminishing the possibility for exchange within the Symbolic.

The opening of the novel immediately grounds Oedipa's immersion in the social: "One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue" (1). Immediately, the reader is presented with Oedipa returning from a social event, and she is trapped within the social suburban landscape, a notion which is exemplified in the identicalness she sees in the subdivisions near the Yoyodyne plant in San Narcisco: "if there was any vital difference between it [San Narcisco] and the rest of Southern California, it was invisible on first glance" (Pynchon 14). Of course 1950s and 60s America is often historically characterized by suburban sprawl and the growth of the middle-class (it was here that cookie-cutter homes began to see prominence). Oedipa has only left her own suburb and arrived at another homogenous to her own, despite her scorn for southern California, which is based on some alterity established between the northern and southern territories of the state. Her position as a suburban housewife spares her from a traditional conception of commodified labor as it exists within the late-capitalist 1960s America

Pynchon's novel depicts. She is free to consume with others of her implied sociality (middle-class suburban housewives), marking her as one steeped in the notions of Symbolic (linguistic socialization with others) and symbolic exchange (consumption of goods with others as a social event). But Oedipa's position within the symbolic comes unsurprisingly as, for Lacan, "the human order is characterized by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every state of its [man's] existence" ("Ego" 29). This, of course, is why Oedipa realizes that her tower is everywhere. She is immersed in the Symbolic without possibility of escape.

There is a further symbolic characterization of Oedipa established through her traversal of Habermasian public and private spheres. Her return from the middle-class suburban social event shows her only in the private sphere of her own life. Despite this, her attendance of the party fundamentally establishes her participation in the public sphere, the place philosopher Jürgen Habermas defines as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas 49). Once again, the term social arises with respect to the establishment of normative relations among one another, that is to say, an agreed upon reality established through language. The public sphere holds political potential for symbolic exchange as public opinion, formed in the public sphere, "refers to the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally—and, in periodic elections, formally as well—practices vis-à-vis the ruling structure" (Habermas 49). This public sphere exists in a dialectical relation to the private sphere, which is the realm of the home and the individual. While symbolic exchange remains a possibility here, it does not hold the same political potential that social organization possesses within the public sphere.

Is not the party Oedipa attends at the novel's opening a chance at such formation of a public body? While Oedipa's attendance of the party holds the potential for the formation of public opinion, the result is a banalization of the political potentialities of middle-class subjectivity during the late-capitalist era—despite Oedipa's later claim to Metzger during the play within the novel, *The Courier's Tragedy*: "Metzger...I'm a Young Republican" (Pynchon 59). Rather than follow through with a realization of such political potential, even in her symbolic discourse, Oedipa is established as a non-political entity within the novel's opening chapters. Instead, the political is wasted in favor of a sort of petit-bourgeois symbolic exchange, one that is not tied to production or the money generation cycle associated with the proletarian worker. Thus, she resides in a space between, neither having to sell labor nor possessing the means to own it, an idea exemplified in her later juxtaposition, while at a Yoyodyne stockholders' meeting, between the stockholders of the Yoyodyne plant and the African-American laborers who serve them food, or between herself and the "busful of Negroes going on to graveyard shifts all over the city" (Pynchon 98).

There is a sense of irony in Oedipa's non-political stance regarding the Trystero, considering the immense amounts of fictional, apocryphal history Pynchon includes about the clandestine system, and the possible threat it poses to notions of fixed historical meaning and the power structures that arise from such an interpretation of historicity (i.e. government). Oedipa navigates such history through her engagement with professors, play directors, philatelists, and others who gesture towards this possibly political unearthing of the Trystero, yet she does not "care what Beaconsfield uses in its filter...what Pierce bought from the Cosa Nostra...or about what happened at Lago di Pietá, or cancer" (Pynchon 58), many of the issues brought up in regard to Pierce Inverarity, and Oedipa's suspicion that he somehow knew about the Trystero.

Instead, Oedipa simply wants to know what things mean—what the symbol of the muted post-horn means, what the WASTE system signifies, and what the true meaning behind the Trystero is altogether. As a result, her search for the Trystero becomes a search for meaning behind much of the symbolism she herself designates as symbolism.

The Detective as Locator of Meaning

Oedipa's fundamental doubts about the existence of the Trystero cause her to question whether she should bring Inverarity's "estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning" (Pynchon 64), which raises questions as to the nature of meaning in relation to symbolic exchange. But why does Pynchon write meaning with a capital 'M'? Here, capitalization designates meaning as a proper noun, characterized as a unique entity, autonomous and independent of any interaction with the actual act of symbolization or the conveyance of meaning to others; in a critical sense, but more so in a socially anthropological sense, meaning is the process by which signs within the Symbolic are both conveyed and understood in terms of the signifiers and signifieds that are constitutive of signs. Throughout the novel, Oedipa asks herself "Shall I project a world?" (Pynchon 64). Of course, the answer to this is that she does not have to. The world is already projected through the Symbolic; she needs only to find her own meaning within it through a navigation of socio-symbolic landscape. Oedipa characterizes meaning as autonomous and, thus, grapples with the concept, as she does throughout the novel, causing her to become entrenched in a sense of paranoia due to the ubiquitous connections she (thinks) occur throughout the world, made either by coincidence or some clandestine entity who determines the social landscape.

Many critics, in focusing on possible symbolism and meaning behind Oedipa's name, disagree about the role Sophocles' Oedipus myth plays in regard to Pynchon's novel. In this, there are two different readings performed: a Freudian Oedipal reading which focuses on Freud's interpretation of the Greek tragedy as psychosexual development, or a Greek Oedipus reading, that is to say, some attempt to link Oedipa's actions throughout the novel with ideas expressed in the actual diegesis of Sophocles' tragedy directly. While there is a sense of reconciliation between the Oedipus myth and Oedipa's tendencies within the novel, they are not based in psychoanalysis, rather the strongest correlation, as Edward Mendelson notes, "refers back to the Sophoclean Oedipus who begins his search for the solution of a problem (a problem, like Oedipa's involving a dead man) as an almost detached observer, only to discover how deeply implicated he is in what he finds" (118). In each case, this problem is provoked by the, unexpected, death of someone within the lives of each respective person. In this, Page Dubois notes that "death is managed, made comprehensible through the agency of the detective, who labors through a network of human connections to find the contaminated or polluted actor and to remove him from society" (110). Both characters must manage death through inquiry, performing searches in which they are, in Oedipa's case vaguely, implicated in the very problem they are attempting to solve. It is here that one arrives at the strongest link between Pynchon's Oedipa and Sophocles' Oedipus.

Oedipus' common designation as the first detective within the history of world literature manifests within Oedipa and her search for the Trystero—Oedipa is Oedipal only insofar as she is a detective. Pynchon's novel contains many of the classic elements of detective fiction: a seemingly idyllic introduction that is immediately dispelled through

death, provoking a search in which the detective must question witnesses and perform research, all in an attempt to find a culprit. Thus Oedipa plays the detective; this is a role that she assumes through Inverarity's death, although not necessarily linked to the Trystero (she discovers the Trystero through Inverarity's death but the reader is never given just cause to believe that the Trystero caused it). For both Oedipa and the reader, the Trystero represents some clandestine entity that poses a threat through sheer obscurity, and she must uncover this polluted actor, in all of its political potentiality, in order to find what it means. There is an equation between the detective's process of unearthing the culprit and Oedipa learning the meaning behind the Trystero, although Oedipa does not care for removing the so called polluted actor from society.

Of course, the nature of the detective's work is epistemological, as s/he attempts to search for knowledge and meaning through the facts of a given problem or case s/he is presented with. Debra Moddelmog argues that Oedipa has "a sort of Sherlock Holmesian view of the world, as if its phenomena were only waiting for someone with a colossal magnifying glass to detect them and read their meaning" (244), because of her nature as a sort of postmodern detective, signaling this epistemological nature in the detective's search for knowledge. Both Oedipa and Oedipus question witnesses in attempts at reaching a conclusion about their respective mysteries, thereby gaining a greater sense of epistemology that both realize they lacked in regard to the given situation. In this, epistemology is tied to meaning, as the lack of knowledge Oedipa possesses causes her to believe that the world possesses "outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" (Pynchon 14). Her lack of epistemological resolution signals an inability to rationalize and comprehend meaning as she attempts to

find it, regardless of its presence, within her engagement of the case of the Trystero. As a result, she wonders whether meaning is truly within the events and symbols she sees, or whether she is inserting such meaning in a paranoid manner.

Baudrillard offers a connection between the role of the detective and ideas of symbolic exchange, noting that “finding reasons for everything—causes and purposes—is another modality of exchange” (“Passwords” 73), and the epistemology which Oedipa seeks comes with its own necessary exchange. The search for clues stands as a symbolic exchange in which Oedipa must exchange, expend, something of her own for the meaning of the Trystero, a notion she contemplates herself. After unearthing the Trystero, Oedipa wonders

Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage, say good night with a Bourbon Street bow and leave her in peace? Or would it instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked to Oedipa’s, smile gone malign and pitiless; bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear? (Pynchon 40)

Oedipa questions whether or not she actually wants to know the secrets of the Trystero. In exchange for the knowledge that he killed his own father and slept with his own mother, Oedipus exchanged his own peace of mind and, in the same manner, Oedipa wonders whether or not she’ll have to exchange some sanity or peace of mind to behold the ultimate meaning behind the Trystero itself. In this, she, the detective, becomes one who performs symbolic exchange, expending something in return for the meaning that lies behind investigative events.

The Trystero and Alienating (big) Other

The Trystero slogan, embodied in the acronym WASTE, standing for We Await Silent Trystero's Empire, becomes the starting point for a critique of Pynchon's fictional postal system, as both the WASTE system, and the act of wasting through such system, constitute symbolic exchange. Of course, the mailboxes for the Trystero seem to the outsider nothing more than innocuous waste bins, yet there is a deeper social aspect to them in that they are used as mailboxes; they are avenues for the conveyance and reception of symbolization through communication. There is linguistic correspondence between people through letters, yet the actual positioning of the literal waste can in such an equation provides for a literal "wasting" that occurs within the symbolic exchange under the Trystero:

But at last in the shadows she [Oedipa] did come on a can with a swinging trapezoidal top, the kind you throw trash in...On the swinging part were hand-painted the initials W.A.S.T.E....She woke to see a kid dropping a bundle of letters into the can (Pynchon 105-6)

While there is the wasteful dimension of symbolic exchange bound in linguistics and the symbol as the murder of the thing, there is also a literal wasting of the letters to be sent to others under the WASTE system. This literal wasting is constitutive of symbolic exchange as it exists under the Trystero system. In order to symbolize and maintain exchange with others, one must literally waste a letter, by depositing it into a trash can. Letters are thus expended, along with the signs they themselves contain, in an exchange which regards physical matter as exchange-waste. This waste is used in such a process toward an attempt to convey a message and establish meaning between correspondents within the Trystero social schema.

In the end, the wasting that occurs is demanded of those who reside within the Trystero society. Speaking of the Yoyodyne mail system, which is dubiously confused with the Trystero, Mike Fallopian indicates to Oedipa that each member must send at least a letter a week, or otherwise be fined (Pynchon 39) and such a law is indicative of the system's own self-establishment and persistence. One must send the requisite amount of letters or otherwise be punished for transgressing the rules of the social schema. But what are letters if not gifts sent to others, a repetition of correspondence with the hope of recognition and reciprocation? Within contemporary society, "the exchange gift...operates not according to the evaluation or equivalence of exchanged goods but according to the antagonistic reciprocity of persons" ("Mirror" 75). There is thus an imposition to mean both through the law of the system itself, but also because of desire for recognition through the reciprocation of meaning—the receiving of a gift elicits a need to "return the favor." Yet the letters sent through the WASTE system, at least those seen within the novel, are rather banal in nature, not possessing much more information than a simple salutation and inquiry into the lives of others. In this, it is evident what is important: not *what* you mean, only *that* you mean at all without transgressing social law, keep the system structured.

Because of its governance of the social, the Trystero occupies the position of a sort of social big Other by which it moderates the exchange that occurs between its constituents. It is Lacan's big Other that presides over the symbolic as a cultural mediator. Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek notes that this big Other "determines what counts as normal and accepted truth, what is the horizon of meaning in a given society" (Žižek), while also creating a system of (unspoken) rules and normative values that one

must follow and embody, at least in the public sphere, in order to maintain acceptance within society. Oedipa is isolated from the men in her life, Mucho and Metzger, because of her adherence to pursuing a society that others dismiss as imaginary, not in line with the normal truth of society (she rationalizes this as the Trystero's doing). As a result, she grows paranoid within her isolation, questioning the validity of her quest. But Oedipa is also alienated by the Trystero itself, a more important idea because of her symbolic attempts at finding how circumscribed within the Trystero she might have been from the beginning (of the novel). She is alienated from being privy to the Trystero due to her lack of knowledge of, and adherence to, its own societal norms and in her exchange with Stanley Koteks

She took a chance: "Then the WASTE address isn't good anymore." But she'd pronounced it like a word, waste. His face congealed, a mask of distrust. "It's W.A.S.T.E., lady," he told her, "an acronym, not 'waste,' and we had best not go into it any further (Pynchon 69-70)

Because of her non-compliance to Trystero function and norms, Oedipa is shunned by Koteks, a possible member of the Trystero. Her behavior is not in accordance with a certain cultural dimension of the Trystero, and she is ignorant to the societal norms and practices; there are rules, and they must be followed to guarantee inclusion. For this reason, theorist Stephen Greenblatt defines culture in terms of constraint and mobility, arguing that it "functions as...a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals conform" (225). When individuals fail to conform to such limits they are alienated, denied exclusion from participating in the social relations and functions of society.

As a result of her exclusion from the social big Other, Oedipa grows paranoid, questioning whether she is alone within a vast conspiracy or whether she is going mad, projecting the entire event. Žižek argues that “being excluded from the social big Other, effectively equals being mad” (Žižek), signaling Oedipa’s paranoia as inextricable from the isolation within her own sociality and from the denying of entrance and inclusion in another. Of course the novel’s conclusion would not necessarily maintain ambiguity—nor would the narrative still be characteristic of the detective novel, in which the protagonists are typically solitary figures—if Oedipa was not on her own, in her sleuthing, throughout most of the novel. This provokes the thought that the novel might end differently if Oedipa had a companion accompanying her throughout her quest: someone to symbolically exchange with and maintain some, microscopic, position in which she is not truly isolated.

At the end her semiotic quest, Oedipa is left only with vague clues and intimations as to the true existence of the Trystero, and the symbols of the Trystero, such as the muted post-horn or the WASTE system, are clues that never get linked to anything tangible and conclusive. Pynchon depicts an ostensibly entropic world, in which randomness predominates over any traditional notions of pre-orchestrated events (through conspiracy), and the symbolism that often goes along with it through an actual belief in conspiratorial events. As a result, Oedipa is never able to exchange anything for the potential meaning that lies behind the Trystero; rather, she must manage the chaos that occurs and wonder whether such chaos, which often seems meaningful, holds

symbolism or not. It is clear that Oedipa must manage entropy as it accompanies symbolic exchange, as she seeks meaning within the world.⁴

The Crying of Lot 49 shows symbolic exchange as a management of entropy within the social, and both the thermodynamic and information theory concepts see import here. In a thermodynamic sense, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines entropy as “a measure of the unavailable energy in a closed thermodynamic system that is also usually considered to be a measure of the system's disorder” (“Entropy”), while in information theory, entropy is “a measure of the loss of information in a transmitted signal or message” (“Entropy,” *Random House Dictionary*). The unavailable energy associated with thermodynamic entropy remains in line with Bataille’s notions of a general economy, in which excess energy is expended through deficit operations; with this, symbolic exchange *is* the process of entropy itself. But Baudrillard’s theory of a primordial symbolic exchange sees no less import here: the human being, as a thermodynamic system, is entropic as he heads invariably toward death—thus gaining entropy—and he has the capacity to harness such entropy towards a symbolic aim (in this, thermodynamic entropy regards irreversibility within nature). Within language, entropy is gained from the ambiguity or obscurity of symbolization and Oedipa’s position within the symbolic is entropic in that she is presented with equivocal and inconclusive clues, all the while failing to locate meaning within them.

In the novel, the concept of entropy manifests in Maxwell’s Demon, a thought experiment created by Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell; here it is represented as

⁴ Entropy is a common theme across many of Pynchon’s novels. His characters often assume quests in which they must manage both the entropy of the world and the entropy of the information they are presented with (the case is no different with *The Crying of Lot 49*). Pynchon also wrote a short story entitled “Entropy,” which, overtly, thematizes notions of entropy.

an actual machine which Pynchon's narrative suggests links the disparate theories through a similarity of equation: "As the Demon sat and sorted his molecules into hot and cold, the system was said to lose entropy. But somehow the loss was offset by the information the Demon gained about what molecules were where" (Pynchon 84). Maxwell's demon remains an influential thought because it seeks to disprove the second law of thermodynamics, which shows that systems can only *gain* entropy through a loss of excess energy that cannot be used for work.⁵ Here, the equations from thermodynamics and information theory are combined, a combination which itself is symbolic. Oedipa considers the thought that "the Demon exists only because the two equations look alike" (Pynchon 85), an idea which signals the human desire for meaning and connection within obscure, highly entropic, information. The combination of the equations through a sheer similarity is a symbolic exchange in which the possible solitariness, and validity, of each equation is exchanged for solidarity of meaning between the two, the desire to forge a meaningful connection—this idea is evident in that Maxwell's actual experiment only regarded thermodynamic entropy, not informational entropy.

Entropy characterizes symbolic exchange within Pynchon's novel, and symbolic exchange thus becomes a manner of managing both types of entropy. The phenomenon of irreversibility that exists within nature typifies the nature of death that constitutes the realm of the Symbolic, and death is possible precisely because of entropy and language. As such, the human desire for meaning that is derivative of language is a manner of combating thermodynamic entropy as it is manifest in death. In such a sense, symbolic

⁵ For a more technical and mathematical explanation of Maxwell's Demon and entropy, one may consult the following article: Lieb, Matthew, and Jakob Yngvason. "The Physics and Mathematics of the Second Law of Thermodynamics." *Physics Reports* 310 (1999): 1-96. *Cornell University Library*. Web. Oct. 2011.

exchange involves teleological goals and (belief in) any possibility of making, symbolic, effective change towards the future. Oedipa's detective quest is spurred by death, and as a result she wonders whether she should bring the dead man's estate into meaning, thereby attempting to make some sense out of death and the ensuing chaos within the novel's diegesis. She thinks her actions can somehow unearth the Trystero, and so she presses forward, despite her ensuing isolation. Once again, the metaphor regards Oedipa as projector signaling the nature of meaning as projected rather than inherent within the processes of chaos that characterizes the narrative. There is meaning within the chaos only insofar as Oedipa ascribes meaning to such events—one is never given anything conclusive to justify or refute Oedipa's paranoia.

Of course, symbolic exchange is used as a means against informational entropy as well. In this sense, symbolic exchange is used to ascertain and ascribe meaning, thereby diminishing any sense of informational entropy. There is a sense of anxiety that accompanies incomplete messages—these are messages with high informational entropy—because it is more difficult to ascertain a definitive sense of meaning within the signifiers one is presented with. This is the reason the Symbolic is composed of rules, requiring the specific use of grammatical devices and a particular composition of complete sentences. Pynchon's novel is riddled with what seem incomplete or dubious signifiers (e.g. the muted post-horn, acronyms such as WASTE, DEATH, or KCUF) that can be literally pinned down in terms of their linguistic signifieds, but cannot be in terms of their meaning. Lacan notes that “a meaning is an order which suddenly emerges. A life insists on entering into it, but it expresses something which is perhaps completely beyond this life, since...we find nothing besides life conjoined to death” (“Ego” 232), signaling

the use of meaning as a means against death, which is a manner of uncertainty. The use of symbolic exchange as a means against informational entropy arises as a direct result of its use against thermodynamic entropy: there is a desire for definitive meaning in the process, of symbolization, against death.

Maxwell's Demon thus serves as a metaphor for the process of symbolic exchange that characterizes Oedipa's quest, and symbolic exchange in general. It is here that Pynchon's novel explores the nature of meaning as it occurs within society and how such meaning is (re)cycled. In describing the use of Maxwell's Demon, Nefastis notes to Oedipa that

Communication is the key...The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind...The sensitive must receive that staggering set of energies, and feed back something like the same quantity of information, to keep it all cycling (Pynchon 84 -5)

Here Pynchon's characterization of the device paints it as a sort of big Other, using communication to govern the processes of a microcosmic thermodynamic and informational system. There is a sense of symbolic exchange that occurs as the sensitive interacts with the Demon (molecule sorting is exchanged for informational certainty). Of course, Maxwell's Demon is only a thought experiment seeking to, hypothetically, disprove a law, rather than an actual process that can be seen occurring. Here, the sensitive to which Nefastis refers is the person who can actually utilize Maxwell's Demon but in actuality the sensitive refers to those within the socio-symbolic. The Demon passes on his data in terms of the normative values known as culture and the sensitive must respond in kind through a, public, espousal of such values in order for

recognition and inclusion. Without such reception of data, one is ignorant to such normative values and, like Oedipa's case, exclusion is imminent, thereby bringing about the very trouble ascertaining meaning that she has within the novel. To keep everything cycling regards both meaning and the cultural values that are required for the conveyance and understanding of such meaning.

Conclusions

Oedipa's immersion within the social doubly immerses the world of the novel in notions of the Symbolic and symbolic exchange. Of course, the nature of her quest frames her as a detective who searches for meaning behind the Trystero precisely through the process of symbolic exchange itself. Nevertheless, she is never required to exchange anything for such meaning because she never, conclusively, finds the system, though it is well arguable she exchanges and sacrifices her relationships with others in order to maintain her quest for meaning. As can be seen, the novel's structural progression is cyclical: the reader sees Oedipa alone at the novel's opening, and by the conclusion she is alone once again, truly isolated from others. This isolation constitutes Oedipa's failure to locate the meaning as she is ostracized within her own sociality and denied entrance into the social sphere of the Trystero. In this, Pynchon's novel gestures towards the nature of society as a whole as symbolic exchange is used as a structural and grounding concept for the basis of meaning.

Alongside the notion of entropy, symbolic exchange regards the human desire to find meaning within the world. As such, everyone, not just Oedipa, occupies the role of the detective in the search for meaning within the world. Here, meaning is given epistemological gravity over any notion of truth—meaning does not necessarily denote

truth, although the two are often problematically, and unknowingly, equated. As can be seen within the novel, meaning is that which gives purpose, it is not autonomous, a notion evident in Oedipa's questioning of whether or not she should project a world. Truth, however, remains autonomous and tied to a circumstance as it actually *is*. It is the process of meaning that turns truth into meaning itself, and on a societal scale this process creates the very normative values that are constitutive of culture, regardless of truth. Others within the novel regard the Trystero as a fiction, a non-truth, and Oedipa acknowledges such a possibility, but still chooses to see meaning within such circumstance. In this, truth is sacrificed for meaning, in an attempt at fighting both thermodynamic and informational entropy.

That Oedipa does not find meaning within Trystero before the novel's conclusion comes as no surprise and Pynchon's novel displays the nature of meaning and its circulation within society. One must "keep it all cycling," as Nefastis notes, in order to both convey and obtain meaning within society, circumscribing his or her behavior within the limits of the law—this law is expressed as the normative values and cues expressed within a given culture. As a result, all those who born into societal inclusion become realized as the sensitive(s) to which Nefastis refers; one must be sensitive to cultural norms and receive such information from a so called big Other in order to keep meaning cycling within society. This requires an adherence to the very laws and truths that Žižek refers to, an idea which Oedipa fails to grasp through the novel. While there is no literal institution that governs cultural law, or feeds data to one for that matter, subjects must align themselves within such laws to adequately convey and understanding

meaning within a given culture. This seems a fundamental conclusion to Pynchon's, inconclusive, novel.

Symbolic exchange represents an important concept within literary criticism, as the engagement with a literary text is essentially a symbolic exchange based in linguistics. The critic attempts to bring, or find, meaning within a text through symbolic discourse. Here, connections are drawn between compelling pieces of evidence in a manner similar to the connections Pynchon's novel draws between the disparate theories of entropy. Of course, in order for a novel to "mean" at all—to convey an intelligible sequence of events—it must adhere to the linguistic rules which allow for the process of meaning to occur. That one can convey and understand meaning is predicated on the notion that syntactical rules are adhered to. Conclusively structured sentences allow for an easier ascription of meaning due to their complete nature, unlike the inconclusive and incomplete symbols Oedipa is presented with throughout the novel. In this, symbolic exchange regards the critic's engagement with the text and an attempt at ascertaining meaning even within that which seems inconclusive, such as the conclusion of Pynchon's novel.

Works Cited

- Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: an Essay on General Economy*. New York, NY: Zone, 2007. Print.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Passwords*. London: Verso, 2003. Print.
- . *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London: Sage Publications, 1993. Print.
- . *The Mirror of Production*. St. Louis: Telos, 1975. Print.
- Dubois, Page. "Oedipus as Detective: Sophocles, Simenon, Robbe-Grillet." *Yale French Studies* 108 (2005): 102-15. *JSTOR*. Web. July 2011.
- "Entropy." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Web.
- "Entropy." *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. 02 Nov. 2011.
- Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Culture." Ed. Frank Lentricchia. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. 2nd ed. Chicago [u.a.: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 2006. 225-32. Print.
- Habermas, Jurgen. "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article." *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 49-55. *JSTOR*. Web. Aug. 2011.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006. Print.
- . *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: 1954-1955*. Cambridge [etc.: Cambridge UP, 1988. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital, Vol. 3: the Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole*. Ed. Friedrich Engels. Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer, 1988. Print.
- Mendelson, Edward. "The Sacred, the Profane, and the Crying of Lot 49." *Pynchon: a Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978. 118. Print.

Moddelmog, Debra. "The Oedipus Myth And Reader Response In Pynchon's The Crying Of Lot 49." *Papers on Language & Literature* 23.2 (1987): 240-49. *Academic Search Complete*.

Web. Sept. 2011.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Perennial Library, 1986. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. "The Matrix, or Two Sides of Perversion." *Philosophy Today* 43 (1999). *The European Graduate School - Media and Communication - Graduate & Postgraduate Studies Program*. Web. Mar. 2011. <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-matrix-or-two-sides-of-perversion/>>