

Every Literary Article I Read Has a Colon in its Title:
The Exhaustion of Literature

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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 5/1/96

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

April, 1996

Date of Graduation: May, 1996

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Purpose of Thesis

Recent trends in both literature and literary criticism have created a disturbing situation in critical academia. Literary criticism has ceased in many ways to be a dialogue between scholars and has become largely a string of monologues. Critics have largely abandoned relevant issues and, in their quest to say something (anything) new, have turned to the intensely obscure, the irrelevant, and over-wrought analyses. This thesis addresses the trends that have created this phenomenon, and explores specific examples of critical abuses pertaining to the work of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon.

The study of literature has changed in the past thirty years at a staggering rate. Centuries of traditional critical studies have been all but dismissed by contemporary critics and, in many circles, a call for an adoption of all new literary forms and a complete rejection of all old forms has been voiced. Simply try studying literature today; even a quick look into contemporary critical theory and literature is sure to confront the scholar with intimidating, practically foreign terms like "deconstructionism," "postmodernism," "phenomenology," "reception theory," "post-structuralism," "speech act theory"... the list goes on and on. The simple fact is, the complex, the elusive, and the highly academic have become dominant in both contemporary American fiction as well as the criticism that addresses it. While this change has forced fresh air into the canon, the whole concept of change just for change's sake is absurd, irresponsible, and ultimately detrimental to the field of literature.

With regards to fiction, the authoritative new school of literature is the postmodern. Postmodernism showed early signs of manifesting itself as early as 1960, when John Barth published The Sot-Weed Factor, and truly arrived in the mid 1960's. Both Donald Barthelme's Snow White and Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 were copyrighted in 1965 and saw paperback publication by 1967, and both works helped to define and strengthen the postmodern aesthetic. At that point, postmodernism asserted its claim as the champion of academic literary fiction, and drastically changed the face of literature.

At virtually the same time that postmodernism was evolving in

literature, deconstructionism was evolving in criticism. If postmodernism changed the face of literature, deconstruction turned criticism into a whole new beast. Deconstruction has proved to be as adaptive as necessary to survive in the literary environment; it has managed to mutate and spread its fundamental ideas into virtually every recent branch of critical thought. Although few critics still profess to be deconstructionists, they still practice the tenets that deconstruction introduced.

Ironically enough, deconstruction itself is a result of misinterpretation. When Jacques Derrida presented his paper on structuralism at a Johns Hopkins conference in 1966, he had no idea what he was starting. A French, anti-Platonic philosopher, Derrida sought to extend the philosophical ideals put forth by Nietzsche and especially Heidegger. It is very telling to note that Derrida was not particularly interested or concerned with literary theory, but instead with philosophy.

"But, because Derrida was made famous not by his fellow philosophers but by literary critics (who were looking for new ways of reading texts rather than for a new understanding of intellectual history), this label has become firmly attached to a school of which Derrida is, rather to his own surprise and bemusement, the leading figure" (Selden 171).

But why were literary critics looking so hard for new ways of reading texts that they subverted the ideas of a philosopher and forced them to fit literary theory?

The answer that is most often advanced, especially by literary critics, is that new readings shed light not only on the author's intended message, but also provide commentary on the times in which the book was written, the biases of the author, and the biases of

the reader. On the other hand, it is hard to ignore the material benefits created by deconstruction-based criticism: the goldmine of publications that lurked just under its surface.

Because of the sprawling university complex that has developed in the western world, and the dramatic increase in college enrollment in the post World-War II era, there are simply more literature students than ever before. With this marked increase in the sheer number of scholars, new topics are obviously an important, valuable commodity. Undoubtedly, this is why, "contemporary critics are no longer content with interdisciplinary efforts that simply combine, compare, or synthetically unify the methods of existing academic disciplines" (LaCapra 11). Especially in literature, scholars are judged largely by the sheer the volume of their publications. Deconstruction and the criticism it subsequently spawned afforded tenure-hungry professors, job-seeking PhD.s, and even graduate-track students an opportunity to interpret any work in the canon in any way they saw fit, and justified publication of their interpretations. Thus, it is easy to see why indulgent, interpretation-based schools of criticism have become so popular.

Deconstruction fit the bill for critics precisely. Derrida's philosophy maintained that,

To succeed in twisting free of the logocentric tradition would be to write, and to read, in such a way as to renounce this ideal. To destroy this tradition would be to see all the texts of that tradition as self-delusive... Language itself, so to speak, can be relied upon to betray any attempt to transcend it (Selden 173).

In a nutshell, Derrida maintained that language itself, (and this

was then translated by literary critics to mean literature, too) can not hold any one meaning, because the fact that it is created in all sorts of contexts (historical context, ethnic context, etc.) implicitly states that the language is poisoned, so to speak, with infinite hidden meanings of which even the speaker (or author) is unaware. Derrida's term deconstruction refers to the process of analyzing these hidden meanings in order to elucidate facets of the contexts in which the language(book) was spoken(written) and heard(read) in order to gain a more full understanding of the mindset of the speaker(author) and the listener(reader).

Although Derrida thought that the hidden meaning in language was much more important than the speaker's(author's) intent, he did not dismiss the idea of intended meaning. Instead, he felt that a "close reading of almost any text can detect some failure to attain a desired end, a more or less disabling contradiction between form and intent" (Selden 179). And like most issues, this is not one of black and white; there is a justifiable reason for examining this discrepancy between form and intent, and, at least this approach allows for an examination of what the author's intended message was.

Deconstructionists also had some noble intentions to justify the need to examine these differences between form and intent. At the time that deconstruction was cutting edge, its students felt that, through an analysis of the gap between thought and expression, biases, especially those that were the legacy of colonialism and western ethno-centricism could be exposed to the world. It was widely believed that an examination of an author's

intent versus the reader's interpretation would shed light on facets of the language that were inherently but very subtly biased. Indeed,

In the English departments of American universities during the 1970s, it was often taken for granted that the deconstruction of literary texts went hand in hand with the destruction of unjust social institutions - and that deconstruction was, so to speak, the literary scholar's distinctive contribution to efforts toward radical social change (Selden 178).

That was all before Stanley Fish. Though Fish does not claim to be a deconstructionist, instead referring to himself ambiguously as a pragmatist, many of his ideas are simply mutations of Derrida's ideas. Essentially, Fish maintains that, not only are authors' intended ideas over-shadowed by hidden ideas doomed to be exposed through minute facets of the language they use, but that there is no inherent, or correct message in any text. He further seeks "to remind literary critics that there is no point in talking about 'the interpretation which gets the text right', and every point in putting the text in as many contexts as anyone finds it useful to put it in" (Selden 183).

This is essentially the culmination of deconstructionism; recent criticism has become a means through which critics can systematically dismiss the intention behind any text and instead bend that text to support or mean anything they want it to. There are some serious problems with this situation. First of all, it is blatantly insulting to writers to state flat out that they are inherently unable to instill any sort of meaning in their work intentionally. Second, this encourages politicized, biased interpretations designed to further whatever agenda a particular

critic may have. Third, it taints the pool of criticism available to scholars with distracting, noisy, misleading information that is utterly worthless to any further study of the text. Finally, it discredits literary criticism and literature in general; this indulgent, reader-oriented, interpretive-centered spawn of deconstruction has in many ways turned critical study into an exercise in forcing square pegs into round holes, instead of focusing on elucidating important, relevant aspects of fiction.

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From a movement of literature characterized by an intricate set of techniques and themes on one end of the spectrum to a nonexistent school created by scholars desperate to categorize contemporary fiction on the other, the definition of postmodernism varies greatly depending upon the individual defining it. For those who do uphold the existence of the movement, a focus on innovative techniques and twisted themes are cited.

Technically, postmodernism relies heavily upon the pastiche. Different from a parody in that it abstains from condescension, a pastiche is a self-conscious, often tongue-in-cheek adoption of a previous form (for example, Barth's The Sot Weed Factor is a pastiche of the historical novel). This allows the author to supply allegorical meaning through the format itself, as well as the text. Self-aware narrators are another stylistic favorite of the postmodernists, as are textual noise, complex (or, more popularly in critical jargon, labyrinthine) plot-lines, exhaustive

listing, and extreme ambiguity.

Paranoia, confusion, loss of order (entropy), and self-reflexive examinations of literature are the themes that are most widely accepted as hallmarks of postmodernism. Just as these themes are the most agreed upon markers, so are John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon the most recognized and influential postmodern authors. Their works, which are described as 'labyrinthine' so often as to make the term tiresome, typify the complex structures and disorienting plots of the postmodern so well as to be definitive.

Postmodern works, therefore, are extremely agreeable (and vulnerable) to scholars seeking to analyze and interpret; they offer cryptic imagery, names, and jargon combined with a mixture of historic fact and fiction that encourages in-depth study. Such analysis should help to make complicated works accessible to first-time readers and students unfamiliar with a certain style or author. Because, however, of the trendy focus on reader-oriented interpretation, much of the criticism that should point scholars in the right direction serves only to mire them in piles devoted to confusing, hyper-intellectualized jargon that certainly seems to serve no other purpose than to satisfy the ego of its author.

But "Literary studies comprise a variety of activities - philology, literary history, textual criticism, literary biography, study of sources and influences, none of which are primarily directed towards interpretation" (Culler 1). Even though a sizable minority of critics dedicated to furthering an understanding of the author's intent and other, non-interpretive issues does exist, it

seems as if they are always hungering for a new work to devour piece by piece. Though these plentiful scholars should facilitate an understanding of complex works through extensive research and analysis, it is possible, even in literary interpretation, to take things far too far.

In order to elucidate the abuses of literature that have become all too common in recent years, it is necessary only to examine a random sampling of the criticism devoted to three of the most important American writers of the post-war era: John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and Thomas Pynchon.

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When, in 1960, John Barth published The Sot-Weed Factor, he was, albeit unknowingly, publishing the first contemporary American novel that truly embraced the aesthetic that would later come to be known as postmodernism. This huge book is a pastiche of the historical novel. The protagonist is Ebenezer Cooke, poet and author of the poem "The Sot-Weed Factor." Eben Cooke did really exist, and he did actually write a poem by this title, but Barth takes considerable poetic license in his "recreation" of Eben's experience in colonial Maryland.

The story line follows Eben from England to colonial America, and traces his experiences in the new world. Barth blends fact and fiction masterfully (his version of the Pocahontas story is scathing and hysterically funny), and leads his characters through a convoluted, back-tracking, cyclical plot full of extreme

coincidences and confusing experiences. Eben is assisted (or hindered, one is never quite sure) by his faithful(?) tutor Henry Burlingame III, a devious, double-dealing insurrectionary who claims to be working always on the side of good, but admits openly his duplicitous nature.

Thematically, The Sot-Weed Factor addresses the nature of friendship, the logic behind the concept of chastity and virtue, the ideal of justice (legal and universal), and appearances versus illusion (or epistemology versus ontology) explicitly. In addition to these ideas, the book, through its pastiche format, implicitly addresses the nature of history as a field of study (historiography) and the usefulness/accuracy of traditional historical novels. In all, The Sot-Weed Factor is an intensely entertaining albeit elusive book. And, even though there is a plethora of themes and ideas expressed therein, the complex structure and cyclical plot line make it impossible for critics to resist reading more into the book than is really there.

For example, in his article "John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor: The Pitfalls of Mythopoesis," Manfred Puetz falls into a popular critical pitfall, that of asserting that whichever work is being discussed is a comment on the state of literature. He maintains,

Barth uses [Burlingame] in order to demonstrate the dangers inherent in a strategy devised by many contemporary novelists for the benefit of their fictional characters. The novel of the sixties has celebrated with unsubdued enthusiasm the second coming of Proteus, the archetypal shape-shifter, and the maxims of Protean existence have been elevated to the status of a new philosophical program in our time (Puetz 137).

Now, it is true that Burlingame assumes several different

identities during the course of the novel, but Puetz provides no other support for this theory, probably because there is little support to be found for it. Burlingame is certainly not the only character in the story to adopt disguises and go through extreme transformations; both Joan Toast, Eben's love, and Anna Cooke, his sister, undergo a handful of drastic identity changes. Even if Burlingame was supposed to be reminiscent of "Proteus, the archetypal shape-shifter," there is no evidence whatsoever to support Puetz's assumption that Barth is using him as a commentary on other novelists as opposed to simply using this "strategy" for his own "fictional characters."

So here is a case where a critic not only read more into the work than was there, he also misinterpreted his own over-wrought claim. This is an example of a critic being afraid to criticize, a phenomenon that manifests itself repeatedly in postmodern criticism. Instead of simply noting that he thought Barth was, along with other authors, guilty of embracing Proteus, Puetz found it necessary to state that Barth was above that, and was issuing a warning to other contemporary writers.

Another critic, Zack Bowen, makes a statement that is simply stunning in its presumptuousness when he states, "It is hard to fault Mary Mungummary, Joan Toast, or the all-wise Governor Nicholson, who restore our faith in the ultimate intelligence, honesty, and integrity of the establishment" (30) in his article "The New Marylandiad: Barth as Poet Laureate in The Sot-Weed Factor". Here, Bowen is citing a governor and two prostitutes as representatives of the establishment. What? And, he is claiming

that Barth is upholding "the ultimate intelligence, honesty, and integrity of the establishment." This assumption is made about a book where lawyers are little more than bribers, and the judges openly auction off verdicts to the highest bid; this is a book where Lord Baltimore is implicated in a prostitution and opium-running plot that is ultimately designed to weaken the colonists resolve and leave them open to invasion by French Catholics.

It is difficult to believe that a knowledgeable critic could actually see The Sot-Weed Factor as a voucher for the establishment, just as it is tough to see prostitutes as personifications of the establishment. If that is not what Bowen is saying, the reader would never know, as he does not elaborate on this claim, but instead moves immediately on to a completely unrelated discussion. So here is an example of a self-indulgent interpretation, without any exploration of the reasons behind the interpretation. This type of analysis is of no use whatsoever to Barth scholars.

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"No mother it does not mean more than that.
Don't go reading things into things mother...
It means what it means. Content yourself with that..."

Donald Barthelme, Snow White (107)

Donald Barthelme was one of the writers who helped to shape the new forms that Post-Modernism embraced. His writings were strikingly different than anything previously seen, and this was no

accident. Barthelme saw a great need to break with traditional literary forms. Indeed, "Donald Barthelme believed that, just as modern painters had to reinvent painting because of the discovery of photography, so postmodern writers had to reinvent writing because of the discovery of film" (Olsen 14).

This attempt at reinventing is marked in Snow White. This work is essentially a collection of fragments that deal with generally the same plot and characters. For simplicity's sake, Snow White is generally referred to as a novel. It tells a skewed version of the Snow White myth of the Grimm brothers and later the Walt Disney Company. This version, however, is set in contemporary times and is not really a take-it-for-face-value story, but is another of those Post-Modern hallmark forms: a pastiche.

The novel works under the assumption that its readers are familiar with the traditional story of Snow White. They can therefore catch the implicit irony that is made apparent through the differences between the Barthelme version and the original, and the differences are severe. First of all, Snow White has sex every day with each of the dwarves. There is a special room, the Shower Room to be exact, where she waits each day as the seven dwarves enter sequentially for their daily tryst. This little factor certainly undermines her "snow-whiteness", and therefore contributes an element of impurity instead of the traditional innocence.

Another major departure from the myth in Barthelme's version revolves around the success of the different character types. In Barthelme's story, the prince figure is Paul, while the wicked

step-mother figure is Jane. Paul, however, is too indecisive to actually approach Snow White. Instead, he watches her from afar and wonders what to do. Jane, however, is an excessively good wicked-stepmother figure. She is jealous of Snow White's beauty and the interest that it commands in Paul. In order to put an end to Snow White, Jane sends her a poisoned Vodka Gibson. Unfortunately for everybody involved, Paul drinks it by accident and is thereby killed off.

Barthelme's use of these character types is quite telling. Snow White, the beautiful heroine in wait of a prince, is left unsatisfied. Paul is the only character who has the potential to save Snow White from her despair, but thanks to his chronic indecision, he is utterly unable to take the heroic action that Snow White and he both wish for him to take. Jane, the evil witch figure, is successful in her attempt to spoil the potential romance. Barthelme is obviously contrasting pre-existing character roles and their ability to function in modern society. Paul is portrayed as anti-heroic, Jane as successful through the assistance of sociological norms that discourage heroism, and Snow White as an unsatisfied victim of unrealistic hopes.

Critics working with Snow White, then, have several layers of allegory that they can seek to work through if they wish, as well as the fragmented structure. The book is punctuated with headline-esque statements, ridiculous concrete poems, and even a questionnaire from the book itself to the reader. All of these factors combined create what essentially amounts to a giant critical mess.

First of all, the text is ambiguous enough to allow many different interpretations. Because it is cryptic, and because of the current trend supporting arbitrary interpretations, much of the criticism surrounding Snow White reflects not the ideas of Donald Barthelme, but instead the convictions of the individual critics. Just a quick example: Larry McCaffery sees Barthelme's punning and complex use of language as a direct address to what he calls "the problems of a writer who accepts the notion of the 'brutalization and devaluation of the word'" (20), while Betty Flowers feels that the punning and complex use of language is "...an underlying mockery of the language..." (40).

It is unclear where Flowers gets this notion. In reference to this idea, she states, "The underlying mockery of the language is exhibited in the many puns, for puns are basically verbal tricks and a form of practical joke on the reader' (40). Somehow, she is attempting to connect the idea of punning with the Post-Modern idea of the self-aware text. This is certainly not accurate. Now, just because the book was written in the 1960s does not mean that every single facet of it must be a postmodern ploy; Shakespeare certainly did not have any underlying mockery of the language in mind when he wrote his plays, nor did he have any idea of playing a practical joke on his audience. Instead, Shakespeare sought to entertain his audience, as Barthelme certainly did, through clever and humorous use of puns.

Another prominent pitfall to criticism that deals with Post-Modern works revolves around the seeming infallibility of authors in the eyes of critics. This is excessively strange given the

whole idea of **critics** and **criticism**. Indeed, there is very little criticism in criticism today. Instead, if one critic finds a passage trite or an image overdone, that passage or image is cited as an example of irony, mockery, or some other aspect of Post-Modernism in action. For example, Betty Flowers writes,

...Barthelme has also manipulated the language so that it explodes into meaninglessness in the act of reading. At the heart of his tendency toward explosion is the overloaded image: Snow White's alienation is 'like a big gray electric blanket' (131). The initial picture operates fairly successfully in that the reader, by refraining from a close examination of the image, can 'feel' the extent of alienation which it is apparently intended to convey. When the image is further specified as a 'big gray electric blanket that doesn't work, after you have pushed the off-on switch to the "on" position,' it has become so stuffed with language that it ultimately explodes into absurdity (40).

While it is impossible to determine in every case whether a writer was just being Post-Modern or not, this seems to be a very dangerous approach to criticism. Through this approach, any poorly written slop could be considered great, as long as it was reviewed with this mindset. Again, it is impossible to say whether or not Barthelme was forcing an image into overdone absurdity or not, but to some extent, it does not matter. What essentially matters is that this sort of criticism loses an important judgmental voice regarding the possible shortcomings of written works.

And then there is criticism that has ceased to function as criticism at all. This interesting phenomenon can be found in Larry McCaffery's article entitled "Towards an Aesthetic of the Aesthetics of Trash, A Collaborative, Deconstructive Reading of: Barthelme's Snow White: The Aesthetics of Trash." This work is really a souped up version of an earlier article that McCaffery had

published, which was more simply titled "Barthelme's Snow White: The Aesthetics of Trash."

In the original version, McCaffery addresses many important aspects of the story. He examines characters, style, themes, and influences. In general, the first version is an excellent piece of criticism regarding a very complex work. Indeed, McCaffery even addresses the reasons for the departure from literary norms. He maintains, "As Barthelme is aware, our reaction to any work of fiction is influenced by a variety of literary and critical suppositions. Readers, as well as writers, have become so self-conscious about literary and critical conventions that writers have difficulty in creating anything which is not already a cliché" (28).

Evidently McCaffery himself felt this difficulty with regard to his criticism. Seventeen years after the original piece was published, McCaffery published his re-vamped version. The new version comes complete with editorial criticism scribbled into the margins, words crossed out, circled, and changed, multiple sentences in old Print Shop fonts printed on top of the actual text, and amusing little auto-biographical sketches that describe McCaffery's life at ages that correspond to the sequence of page numbers.

For example, the article tells us that, at age twenty six, "McCaffery (known in bridge circles via his moniker, 'Flash') and his regular bridge partner (Robert R. 'Beast' Gardner) introduce the equivalent of a Po-Mo bidding system into Midwestern duplicate circles" (40). McCaffery semi-justified this article and its

departure from anything except for the tangentially relevant with his closing line, "DB and SW: an Author & Book in Search of a (Post-Structuralist) Critic" (49). While it is very interesting and definitely unusual, the relevance and importance of this piece are suspect, as is its status as criticism.

Barthelme's Snow White is a novel that sits on the cusp of this division. True, it does appeal to extensive criticism through its outlandish structure and subject-matter, but it is surprisingly unpretentious in its language and its earnest sadness. It is a book that is rich in hidden meaning. These hidden ideas are responsible for much of the inappropriate criticism that revolves around Snow White. In the future, authors like Barthelme will continue to move into uncharted areas of the written word. Hopefully if they do, appropriate criticism will accompany the noise that will inevitably evolve, much like the noise that surrounds Snow White and other complex, contemporary works.

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"You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible.
So hung up with words, words"

Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, (79)

Finally, there is Thomas Pynchon. No other contemporary writer has aroused the kind of interest that Pynchon has, largely due to his eccentric (read paranoid, hermitic) lifestyle, but also due largely to his incredibly complex, heavily allusive, often goofy fiction. He is a decided favorite with critics, most likely

because his work affords them the opportunity to break into extremely intellectualized areas, and because he seems to have a rock-solid place reserved in the canon.

Pynchon's second novel, The Crying of Lot 49, is comprised of many of the facets that define postmodernism. Couple that with the fact that the book is short enough to be taught in an undergraduate course and, voila, inclusion in the canon suddenly appears. The Crying of Lot 49, due to its intricacies as well as its important role in pointing out the postmodern path, has become popular enough with scholars to qualify it also as a member of the quickly growing group of over-analyzed fictions.

A careful analysis of the interpretative articles dealing with The Crying of Lot 49 will prove helpful. These articles, when combed through critically, prove to be the ultimate manifestation of a train of thought regarding literature that rewards even the most far-fetched comparisons and analyses. The articles " 'Behind the Hieroglyphic Streets': Pynchon's Oedipa Maas and the Dialectics of Reading" by Chris Hall and "The Postmodern Labyrinths of Lot 49" by William Gleason as well as the book The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon by David Seed all exemplify the qualities of over-analyzation previously discussed. It is important to note that these works are neither more nor less guilty of this crime than the average work; they were chosen as a random sampling of Pynchon criticism that would typify the kind of over-wrought claims being made in most articles and books dealing with his fictions.

In order to claim that over-analyzation is a problem, a line needs to be drawn. Therefore, in order to provide that line, a

quick summary of Pynchon's symbolism ought to be made. The interpretation that follows is one that is fairly evident upon a couple of thorough readings of Lot 49, and is necessary to an adequate understanding of the novel.

Names are vital: Oedipa Maas is a reference to Oedipus Rex. Maas is taken from "mas", the Spanish word for more. Oedipa refers to the aspect of Oedipus' nature that forced him to seek the truth at all costs. Put the two together, and the name of the main character signifies that she will be searching for a greater level of insight and understanding. Pierce Inverarity is also important. Pierce, his first name, signifies that he has penetrated something. Inverarity is derived from a stamp collecting term, inverse rarity. This term is used to describe a price effect that happens to collectible stamps that are more widespread than originally believed. This alludes to his sprawling holdings in real estate assets.

The role of Oedipa in the story is also multi-faceted. She is not only the main character, but also a representation of the reader, trying to decipher potentially meaningless clues along with the important ones and then sort the two accordingly. Since she does represent the reader, Pynchon is acknowledging that the idea of noise and confusion for the reader in the book itself is similar to that noise faced by Oedipa in the story. This would then mean that not every single aspect of the story was relevant. Therefore, it is probable that much of the extensive analysis being done is not only so obscure as to be useless, but also absurd and inherently misdirected.

For example, Chris Hall feels that,

In addition, Oedipa's name suggests the possible extent to which Pynchon is deconstructing his own authorial identity and intentionality. Pynchon effectively mocks his own oedipal (Oedipa/I) motivation, as a neurotic fictional creator, with the figure of the little boy who, kissing his mother goodbye (His using his tongue emphasizes the incestuous overtones) assures her repeatedly, ' I'll write, ma' (123). (Hall 67)

This is ridiculous. There are no solid reasons for drawing these conclusions. Pynchon uses many characters in this novel. Just because one of them promises to write a letter does in no way indicate that he feels any sort of authorial connection with that character. Let's be realistic; the whole novel circles around a postal system. By necessity, someone in the story is going to have to write something. That is simply the nature of the story. The boy is a coincident, not even a very remarkable one. Because of the nature of the story, though, his role is blown all out of proportion. Additionally, one must ask whether or not this analysis is relevant even if it is accurate. Pynchon's clowning about his potential incestuous nature certainly does not seem to add anything of value to the message of the book. This is the sort of analysis that serves not to clarify the text for first-time readers, but instead to bog them down in irrelevancies while intimidating them.

Another author, David Seed, tries to apply Pynchon's novel to every avenue of American existence. Somehow, he sees a potentially parodic reference to religion in Lot 49. He not only sees this, but he quotes other critics and weaves their ideas into the complicated tapestry of his own.

This general rhetoric characteristic of the novel sheds important light on one particularly contentious issue - the status of the religious and transcendental references which run throughout lot 49. Edward Mendelson has put the case most forcibly for their positive value. He argues that spiritual language is applied to Oedipa in a much clearer way than to any other character, notes Pynchon's use of the term 'hierophany' from Mircea Eliade, and sees parodies of Pentecost at the end of the novel and in the play. He states categorically that 'religious meaning is itself the central issue of the plot.' In contrast, Schuab has pointed out the important element of doubt and uncertainty in Pynchon's sacred terminology which teasingly gestures towards another reality without categorically asserting its reality. We could take Schuab's argument a step further by suggesting that the religious allusions in Lot 49 are either parodic or paired with a profane meaning which constantly deflates the possibility of the spiritual. Thus when Oedipa contemplates the streets of San Narciso it is 'as if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken' (13/15). Here the secular reference strains against the spiritual one so that we could say **either** that the spiritual allusion charges the secular one with more potential significance than normal, **or** that the secular phrase prevents the spiritual one from being too affirmative (Seed 130,131).

First of all, there is no need for any discussion like this. This passage would have no importance if Pynchon had not tossed in the superficial comparison to a religious experience. Nothing in the passage indicates an inherently spiritual or secular nature. This is simply a small, insignificant sentence in the course of a complicated book, yet it has been blown absurdly out of proportion. No key to a full understanding of Lot 49 can be found in the previous passage.

The theme of noise is a prevailing one in The Crying of Lot 49. Thomas Pynchon included many irrelevant facts and dead-end trails in order to force his readers to understand the confusion that Oedipa faced by actually experiencing it. In effect, what

hyper-analysts like Seed are doing is biting on the red-herring bait -- Pynchon threw in noise as a technique, and all of a sudden, every facet of that noise is subject to masking a deeper meaning in the eyes of hungry critics anxious to strike. The result is that the novel generates more confusion in the (should-be) clarifiers than in the original fiction.

Another scholar, William Gleason, in his labyrinthine article about the labyrinthine nature of postmodernism in general and The Crying of Lot 49 in particular introduces the only piece of journalism that Pynchon ever published. The piece is called "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts," and it attempts to trace the history and logic behind the riots in the traditionally black neighborhood/slum. Gleason, however makes the comparison between the role of blacks in the novel and the things that Pynchon must have seen while researching his Watts piece. Gleason says,

Images of blacks--and blackness--recur throughout Lot 49. Oedipa's husband, Mucho, could not ignore the endless parade of "Negro, Mexican, cracker... bringing the most godawful of trade-ins" to his used car lot on another "pallid, roaring arterial" (4,5). Here blacks are one part of a multi-cultural "salad of despair" (5); at the Yoyodyne cafeteria they become tray-toting kitchen servants... (85)

Gleason goes on to discuss the portrayal of blacks in the Watts article as compared with their portrayal in the novel. Gleason ultimately claims that the research that Pynchon did for the Watts article influenced him deeply, and must have affected him strongly enough to mandate the inclusion of a pro-race-unity statement in The Crying of Lot 49. Gleason is certainly just reaching for some sort of connection in Pynchon's other work here,

as the mention of race relations is at the most casual throughout Lot 49. Certainly Pynchon might have included social commentary regarding racial friction here and there in this book, but at the most it is sparse and completely dismissable from an interpretive standpoint. The actual truth is that the Watts article was published in June of 1966, while The Crying of Lot 49 was copyrighted in 1965. Pynchon actually wrote the Watts article after he wrote the novel that was supposedly influenced by it.

Thus, in an attempt to clarify the obscure source of a topic irrelevant to the book, Gleason makes a statement that must be fundamentally incorrect. More than a page of his journal article is devoted to this idea and the interpretation thereof. Evidentially, scholars can now become so enveloped in a quest to link the obscure that they no longer find a need to be careful. This is certainly an unusual case, but it embodies the spirit of the potential trouble that has arisen due to this implied need to be more in-depth, more obscure, and more inciteful than previous publications.

This idea is summed up brilliantly by David Seed in his Foreword when he states, "Criticism is by its very nature an incremental process" (ix). This is certainly the case in today's scholastic atmosphere. It seems that criticism knows no limits, even those of mediation and common sense. Heaps upon heaps of analyses that serve to confuse instead of clarify are building up as scholars feed their egos writing indulgent interpretations, analyses, and comparisons that at best water down the field and at worst act as codifiers to further encrypt the very works that they

address.

The very nature of postmodernism makes it particularly vulnerable. Certainly Pynchon intended only a fraction of the things that are analyzed and interpreted into The Crying of Lot 49. However, given the novel's theme of noise and Pynchon's fascination with the thermodynamic concept of entropy, he must certainly enjoy, or at least be amused by the scholastic furor that has involved itself with massive study of every little word and phrase that he wrote.

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Since deconstruction fell out of vogue in the late eighties, there has been no dominant school of literary criticism to take its place. Instead, a jumbled assortment of interpretive-based (read neo-deconstructionist) have come and, in many cases, already gone. While it remains unclear which, if any school will triumph, it is to be hoped that, "Whatever school or schools survive the skirmish, criticism as an institution will no doubt remain what at its best it has always been: a dialogue among scholars. But for many of the critics here reviewed, that dialogue has been reduced to a monologue (Harris 7). Indeed, that is the danger inherent in these largely nameless schools of criticism: they ignore the body of knowledge already established and encourage self-driven elaboration, regardless of the course that it takes.

As academia continues to embrace styles like Post-modernism, literature continues to grow more complex. The polar division

between popular fiction and canonized literature also continues to grow. As a result, academic literature is becoming more and more codified. Essentially, authors and critics are pushing academic literature in a direction that excludes virtually everyone who does not reside within a university English department. Likewise, as authors continue to embrace the convoluted structures of Post-Modernism, critics are encouraged to continue to over-analyze and interpret works however they see fit. Academic literature better check these elitist tendencies, or just like the Ouida bird from Barth's Sot-Weed Factor who "was reputed to fly in ever-diminishing circles until at the end he disappeared into his own fundament" (682), it may become so highly intellectualized, so exclusive, and so self-indulgent that it loses credibility as a field of study.

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