

## 25 CRITICS DISCUSS

*The Crying of Lot 49* (1966)

Thomas Pynchon

(1937- )

“When Mrs. Oedipa Mass learns that the will of her onetime lover, a real estate mogul, Pierce Inverarity, has made her an executor of his estate, she leaves her husband Mucho to investigate Inverarity’s property. The investigation leads to the discovery of what she takes to be a conspiratorial underground communications system dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As she travels through California on her new quest she encounters the system’s symbol, the Tristero, a muted post horn, in many odd places and meets such curious people as Professor Bortz, editor of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century drama that treats the Tristero. Finally she believes she will solve the enigma through a mysterious bidder eager to buy Inverarity’s stamp collection, but the novel concludes as Oedipa awaits the crying out at the auction of the salient lot numbered 49.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 178

“One can trace in *The Crying of Lot 49* the same anti-vision and the same ambivalence within the questing character which distinguish *V.*, but its plot takes a different turn, for its questing character does make the connections and discover their meaning, though here a full disclosure is withheld from the reader. The angle of developing vision is always that of Oedipa Maas. But she herself is endowed with a lightness of touch, a humorous self-critical disposition, a *joie de vivre*, which saves her almost to the last from the insanity she comes desperately to hope explains the connections she sees. Not many characters on the last page of their story, awaiting final judgment, could whisper to their possible Enemy, ‘Your fly is open!’

It is in a strangely whimsical vein that the object of Oedipa’s quest is conceived, the fantastic cabal of the Tristero system, a vast three-and-a-half-century-old private postal network, patronized now only by solitaires and social outcasts who live outside ‘the life of the Republic.’ What sets her off on the quest is a responsibility imposed on her by her dead lover Inverarity to administer his estate. In one of the novel’s controlling images, Oedipa thinks of herself as a Rapunzel-like character, encapsulated in a tower. While Inverarity was alive she had remained safe in her tower, knowing that the price she paid was ‘an absence of an intensity’ about life, a lack of surprise.

At points and moments she had been aware of the narrowness of her prison; she knew she had settled for such a life because of ‘gut fear’ that outside the tower was only void, only death, or what would pass for it—meanings which would destroy the limited sense she had made of life. Inverarity’s will forces her out of the tower and into the void, to face whatever nameless and malignant magic had held her prisoner. Thus, in form, *Lot 49* is, like the Stencil narrative of *V.*, inquisitive, a cosmic detective story alternating between epistemology—how do I know what the facts are?—and metaphysics—what do these facts mean?

Oedipa responds in the spirit of a caper to early intimations that the Tristero exists. The Tristero is a sort of lewd dancer, a stripteaser on the stage of history, and she, in uncovering it, is attempting to see through ‘the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration.’ Yet from the beginning she also wonders if what she is after is going to get her in too deeply: when its dance ends, when Tristero’s ‘terrible nakedness’ is revealed, would it ‘come back down the runway...bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear?’

Early in her inquiry into Inverarity’s estate she experiences an ‘odd, religious instant,’ as she looks at the printed circuit board pattern made by the streets of San Narcisco, the headquarters of Inverarity’s activities. It is an instant in which she feels in the hieroglyphic pattern before her a ‘sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate.’ This sense of some impending revelation, of words she both wants

and fears to hear being spoken out of the void, increases steadily throughout the novel, as she moves amid signs and symbols of communication. The freeways also seem patterned like the printed circuits of a transistor radio; she finds herself living in a motel called Echo Courts; and she learns that the disc jockey to whom she is married thinks of himself, with the aid of LSD, as ‘an antennae, sending...[his] pattern out across a million lives.’

Oedipa finds herself involved with a group of electronics scientists who hold Sinewave Jam Sessions on Saturday nights with ‘audio oscillators, gunshot machines, contact mikes, everything man’; she tries for an ESP message from a profile photograph of Clerk Maxwell on the Nefastis Machine; she seduces one man before a TV set and is propositioned by another who likes to engage in the sexual game while the news from China is on. The largest metaphor of communication, however, is the Tristero system whose possible existence lures Oedipa into scholarly research for the true test of a seventeenth-century play and leads her to wander aimlessly all night through San Francisco, where she witnesses a nether world of secret communications.

As the coincidences blossom, suggesting another ‘separate, silent, unsuspected world’ intruding upon this one, Oedipa becomes ‘anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point. Lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself.’ Like Stencil of *V.*, near the end of her inquiry she feels ‘reluctant about following up anything.’ Her human contacts with the Tristero disappear or change: her husband takes up LSD; Dr. Hilarius, her shrink, goes mad; Metzger, her co-executor, elopes with a depraved nymphet; her contact at The Greek Way grows mute; but, most important of all, Driblette, the actor-director of the Tristero play, walks into the Pacific, taking his own life.

Deliberately or by accident, Inverarity’s will forces Oedipa tentatively to acknowledge that outside of her tower there may not be a void after all, that some ‘accommodation’ may have been ‘reached, in some kind of dignity, with the Angel of Death.’ If the Tristero does exist, then there is ‘another mode of meaning behind the obvious,’ a meaning aligned, perhaps, with the numinous beauty of truth, with justice, with reason. This is a meaning which others have known and which she could have known ‘if only she’d looked.’ If the Tristero does exist, however, the only way one can ‘continue, and manage to be at all relevant’ to the daily world is ‘as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.’

The other side of the proposition is, for her, equally terrifying. If there is no Tristero, she is already ‘in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia’; the void is real and in it are ‘only death and the daily, tedious preparations for it.’ Although Oedipa is allowed in the last scene of the novel to discover the truth, the reader never learns what this truth is. However, we are given all we need to know: if this world is not the fragmented, disconnected thing it appears to be—dull, out of focus, void of meaning, and leading to death—then its apparent discontinuity is actually held together by a secret, elusive, and transcendent meaning the knowledge of which leads to madness.” [Compare similar vision of Poe.]

John W. Hunt

“Comic Escape and Anti-Vision: *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*”

*Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature*

ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr.

(U Chicago 1968) 87-112

“One of the most significant aspects of Thomas Pynchon’s writing is his ingenious use of scientific-technological concepts as the basis for his fiction. Pynchon’s characters seldom reflect a traditional mythological or religious pattern of thought; in their world, the emphasis is rather on such things as thermodynamics and signal-to-noise ratios. Of the many scientific concepts which occur in Pynchon’s fiction, three intrude most dramatically: thermodynamics and Maxwell’s Demon, entropy, and information theory, all of which are important in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

The novel is an account of Oedipa Maas’s exploration into the estate of the deceased Pierce Inverarity, an entrepreneur, who seems, in the end, to own all of America. While investigating Inverarity’s assets, she wanders into ‘Yoyodyne,’ a government-contracted industry. There Oedipa meets one of the Yoyodyne workers, Stanley Koteks, who introduces her to the idea of Maxwell’s Demon with a breezy but essentially correct explanation of the concept.

Jesse Clerk Maxwell, a nineteenth-century physicist, introduced the Demon in 1871 in his book *Theory of Heat*. Pointing out that the second law of thermodynamics shows the impossibility of producing 'any inequality of temperature or of pressure without the expenditure of work'... As the Demon sorts the molecules, he increases the order in the vessel, and decreases the entropy, or amount of disorder in the system. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon uses Maxwell's Demon as a metaphor for Oedipa's experiences. The frequent allusions to Oedipa's sorting masses of information evoke the idea of Maxwell's sorting Demon. As the novel opens, Inverarity's estate presents Oedipa with 'the job of sorting it all out.' She begins by 'shuffling back through a fat deckful of days, trying to isolate the one on which Inverarity had last phoned her. The sorting and shuffling which is mentioned at the start of the novel is just the first indication of the separating Oedipa will have to do to create order out of the mass of clues, symbols, and signs which descend upon her....

The Demon, as Oedipa sees it, establishes a point of order and connection in a system of random occurrences. As she puts it, the Demon is 'the linking feature in a coincidence.' Oedipa's understanding of the Demon's function is pointed out when she thinks of the explanation of entropy given to her by John Nefastis, a Berkeley inventor who has built a machine he believes contains a real Maxwell's Demon: "For John Nefastis (to take a recent example) two kinds of entropy, thermodynamic and informational, happened, say by coincidence, to look alike, when you wrote them down as equations. Yet he had made his mere coincidence respectable, with the help of Maxwell's Demon.' Again, the Demon manages to bind occurrences....

Like Maxwell's Demon, Oedipa soon tries to link occurrences, to establish a point of order in what seems to be a random system of information. She vows to be 'the dark machine in the centre of the planetarium, to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning.' Her desire to bring order to the mass of confusing interests left by Inverarity leads her to the discovery of 'Tristero,' a mysterious organization involving a bizarre underground mail system called WASTE. Oedipa sets out to discover the nature and extent of WASTE and Tristero, an obsessive hunt which takes her all over Southern California. Just as the Demon, by sorting the molecules, gains information about them, so Oedipa shuffles through countless people and places, gathering information about the elusive Tristero.

Whatever concrete information Oedipa gains, though, is offset by increasing confusion. The Demon's sorting process can theoretically create a 'perpetual motion' machine, and such a machine seems to be operating metaphorically in Oedipa's situation. The clues she gathers yield more clues in an infinite process. Opening out into more and more suggestions, they yield no conclusion. Oedipa gradually senses this. Pondering the information gained from watching *The Courier's Tragedy*, a Jacobean revenge play which contains references to the Tristero, she realizes 'these follow-ups were no more disquieting than other revelations which now seemed to come crowding in exponentially, as if the more suspicion that the clues are unlimited comes a realization that they will never yield a stelliferous Meaning. She begins to consider whether 'the gemlike "clues" were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night.'

The parallels between Oedipa and the Demon seem almost too neat. Oedipa painfully discovers that symbols, such as WASTE and its emblem, the muted post horn, do not lead to one stelliferous Meaning. Rather, they point in a thousand different directions and never lead to a solid conclusion. This notion of symbol and metaphor seems to lie at the center of Pynchon's fiction. This idea forms the basis for Pynchon's novel *V.*, where the symbol V mockingly suggests a chaotic host of irreconcilable things. Pynchon fashions the Demon metaphor in *The Crying of Lot 49* in a similar way by manipulating it to point in opposite directions. Oedipa does indeed parallel the Demon problem as Maxwell stated it, but paradoxically she also incorporates its opposite, that is, the solution to the Demon dilemma.

The Demon poses a curious problem, partially because it challenges the realm of thermodynamics with a paradox. Since Maxwell introduced the Demon, several scientists have offered solutions to the Demon paradox.... [Leo] Szilard's idea that the Demon could not actually decrease the net entropy of the system, as Maxwell has supposed, was supported by another physicist, Leon Brillouin....[who] went on further to prove mathematically that the increase in entropy caused by the process of perception was greater than the decrease in entropy which the Demon could produce by sorting the molecules....

Just as the intricacies involved in the Demon's perception of the molecules actually increase the net entropy of the system, so Oedipa's perception of information actually increases the entropy, or disorder, around her. She comes finally to perceive the WASTE symbol and connections with Tristero everywhere and this disorder far outweighs what order she creates through definite information about Tristero. Ultimately, her perception becomes so disordered that she cannot remember when she has seen the post horn and when she hasn't... Perception, here, is working to create disorder. In Oedipa's perception, the post horn replicates infinitely. The entropy increases until finally she is unable to distinguish reality from fantasy-insanity.... Oedipa's task has shifted from sorting through an estate to distinguishing between reality and fantasy, the attempt to establish order having led to insane disorder....

Though her perception is leading her into a closed system of chaos, Oedipa is still pursuing the distinction between reality and fantasy at the end of the novel.... Her continual doubt and reevaluation of events differentiates her from the other characters in the novel who do, in fact, end in closed systems of inertness. Oedipa's husband, Mucho, fades into his drug dream; her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, aggravates his relative paranoia into complete paranoia; Driblette, the director of *The Courier's Tragedy*, commits suicide; and the unnamed figure at The Greek Way bar cushions himself in the soothing 'Inamorata Anonymous'.... The notions involved in Maxwell's Demon, entropy, and information theory reveal a great deal about what Pynchon is doing. By building his fiction on the concept of entropy, or disorder, and by flaunting the irrelevance, redundancy, disorganization, and waste involved in language, Pynchon [the Postmodernist] radically separates himself from [Modernist] twentieth-century writers, like Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce."

Anne Mangel  
"Maxwell's Demon, Entropy, Information: *The Crying of Lot 49*"  
*TriQuarterly* 20  
(Winter 1971) 194-208

"Mangel's is the seminal essay on Pynchon's treatment of entropy. Like Maxwell's Demon, who sorts molecules and apparently decreases entropy, Oedipa Maas is engaged in sorting—sorting out information and trying to find links.... Mangel concludes by noting that Pynchon [as a Postmodernist] flaunts the disorganization of language, unlike earlier twentieth-century writers [Realists and Modernists] who try to impose order through art."

Beverly Clark and Caryn Fuoroli  
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism"  
*Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Richard Pearce  
(G. K. Hall 1981) 325-36

[Edward Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*," 1975]: "Mendelson makes the best argument for transcendence in *The Crying of Lot 49*, for the reversal of entropy, for the reversal of the process portrayed in *V*. Although most of the secondary characters fall away from Oedipa Maas into obsession—Mucho Maas into solipsism, Dr. Hilarius into paranoia, Randolph Driblette into nihilistic despair, John Nefastis into obsession with science—the Tristero (or Trysterio) is 'always associated in the book with the language of the sacred and with patterns of religious experience,' the sacred realm described by Mircea Eliade....

The sacred repetitions in the book hint at the world of the Tristero, at times through hints of Pentecost, a traditional miracle associated with communication: Mendelson finds an ingenious, perhaps too ingenious, explanation for '49' when he suggests that the 49<sup>th</sup> lot appears the moment before Pentecostal (derived from 'fiftieth') revelation. Within *Lot 49* responses to such works as *The Courier's Tragedy* provide guides for the reader's response to the book: is a work entertaining but apart from our world, or does it offer 'an example of coherence and order which rebukes the confusion of life and offers an alternative example?' While Pynchon may, like Borges, appear closer at first to the former, his world actually impinges on ours...

Where other critics would argue that religious transcendence remains merely a possibility, and Mendelson himself admits that there are potential secular explanations, he still asserts: "The book offers the possibility that its religious metaphor is only a metaphor: but if the book were founded on this limited possibility, the remaining portions of the book would make no sense, and there would be little reason to

write it in the first place'... Those who trace religious patterns tend to find transcendence, while those who trace scientific patterns like entropy tend to find the void. Perhaps the wisest approach to the novel is to recognize both tendencies, poised in fertile ambiguity."

Clark and Fuoroli  
"A Review of Major Pynchon Criticism," 237-38

[John Stark, "The Arts and Sciences of Thomas Pynchon," *Hollins Critic* 4:1975]: "In *Lot 49* scientific theories not only provide a pattern of allusions; they also control the plot. Cybernetics and related disciplines place Oedipa's information gathering in a scientific context, as in the well-known image of San Narcisco as a circuit diagram for a transistor radio, and in the use of Maxwell's Demon.... Oedipa finally feels she must make a choice between opposed, binary possibilities (related, by the binary emphasis, to cybernetics). Tristero does or does not exist; she is or is not paranoid. But while science enables her to articulate her problem, it does not enable her to solve it." [Science fails.]

Clark and Fuoroli, 247-48

"When *The Crying of Lot 49* appeared three years later, *V.* had not yet died as any promising first novel might have been expected to do. But there is a curious dearth of serious reviews of the second novel despite, or perhaps because of, its compactness, coherence, and ostensible simplicity. (As Robert Sklar says...*Lot 49* is a simple novel that grows increasingly complex with each rereading.)... Robert Alter [attacked] 'apocalyptic' fiction and including among those cold, cynical, and faithless fictions *V.* itself. Presumably, *Lot 49*, another apocalyptic fiction, is taken care of that way. In *The New Republic*, Remington Rose published an astonishingly unintelligent and savage review, calling the book a 'well-executed, mildly nasty, pretentious collage.' And even Roger Shattuck, in *The New York Review of Books*, read *Lot 49* as a falling off from *V.*—'the tide has gone out,' he wrote.

The only important review that attempted to take the book as seriously as it has since been taken was Richard Poirier's. It stands out against the strange neglect of the book among the better critics. Clearly respectful of Pynchon, it reiterates many of the objections Poirier voiced in his earlier review of *V.*, but it is especially valuable in its detailed discussion of the quality of Pynchon's prose. Of course, there was some praise in other reviews.... In the long run, however, the 'ayes' had it, for the negative reviews could not diminish *Lot 49*' success. The book was becoming one of those convenient short rich texts that might be used in freshman and sophomore classes.... By 1973, Pynchon was largely 'in' in academic, and his massive new book came forth with an extraordinary panoply of front page red carpets and intellectual champagne."

George Levine and David Leverenz, eds.  
*Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*  
(Little, Brown 1976) 6-7

"When it comes to *The Crying of Lot 49*, the verdict is assisted by the fact that it is the only one of Pynchon's three novels whose size and scope make it usable in class. I too consider *The Crying of Lot 49* an astonishing accomplishment and the most dramatically powerful of Pynchon's works because of its focus on a single figure.... *The Crying of Lot 49* is in many ways a novel about the effort and the consequences of 'carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the Science itself.' That is precisely what Oedipa Maas does with the idea of Maxwell's Demon, an idea proposed at the end of James Clerk Maxwell's *Theory of Heat* (1871)....

Oedipa comes to picture herself as an equivalent of Maxwell's Demon, only in her case she sorts out a vast array of circulating data all seeming to emerge out of the inheritance from Inverarity. She is one of the executors of his estate, and she would like to transform all of the random information that floods in on her into 'stelliferous meaning,' just as the Demon operated as an agent of order in a system of random occurrences. She wishes, that is, to increase order and to decrease entropy in the system which is the life around her. By decreasing entropy, which is a measure of the unavailable energy in any system, she will forestall the drift toward death as the ultimate state of the entire system of life. However, by the end of the novel she has managed only to prove a point made by one of the later commentators on Clerk Maxwell, Leon Brillouin, in a paper published by *The Journal of Applied Physics*, entitled 'Maxwell's Demon Cannot Operate.' Brillouin contends that an intelligent being has to cause an *increase* of entropy before it

can effect a reduction by a smaller amount. This increase of entropy more than balances the decrease of entropy the Demon might bring about. In the words of W. Ehrenberg in his essay on Maxwell's Demon in *Scientific American* (November 1967), 'Similar calculations appear to be applicable whenever intelligent beings propose to act as sorting demons.' What are critics of Pynchon, like myself, but a species of sorting demon?

Really to see and hear his concerns, we must at least sense how Pynchon feels about his knowledge, we must participate in his Coleridgean anxiety about knowledge, about analysis, about any kind of sorting. Even Clerk Maxwell and the great chemist Kekule in *Gravity's Rainbow* are imagined as themselves haunted, visited, obsessed and paranoid in their exploration, just as much as is the fictional heroine, dear Oedipa Maas.... In Pynchon...paranoia is often the pre-condition for recognizing the systematic conspiracy of reality. So much so, that to think of oneself with any pejorative sense of a paranoid constitutes in Pynchon a kind of cop-out, a refusal to see life and reality itself as a plot, to see even dreams as an instrumentality of a bureaucracy intent on creating self-perpetuating systems.... In his works dreams are treated as so many planted messages, encoded by what he calls the 'bureaucracy of the other side.' It is as if human life in all of its recorded manifestations is bent toward rigidification, reification, and death....

Pynchon reveals the destructive powers of all systematic enterprise... All systems and technologies, in his view, partake of one another. In particular, science directs our perceptions and feelings whether we know it or not, even while, as literary people, we may like to imagine that it is literature that most effectively conditions how we feel.... In Pynchon's novels the plots of wholly imagined fiction are inseparable from the plots of known history or science. More than that, he proposes that any effort to sort out these plots must itself depend on an analytical method which, both in its derivations and in its execution, is probably part of some systematic plot against free forms of life.... The rage to order, Pynchon seems to say, is merely a symptom of accelerating disorder....

Pynchon is a great novelist of betrayal, and everyone in his books is a betrayer...who elects or who has been elected to fit into the scheme of things. But they are the worst betrayers who propose that the schemes are anything more or less than that—an effort to 'frame' life in every sense—or who evade the recognition of this by calling it paranoid. To be included in any plot is to be to that extent excluded from life and freedom. Paradoxically, one is excluded who is chosen, sorted, categorized, schematized, and yet this is the necessary, perpetual activity of life belonging to our very biological and psychic natures.

This is a distinctly American vision, and Pynchon is the epitome of an American writer out of the great classics of the nineteenth century—Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville especially. [No, Poe especially—not at all Emerson, and least of all Hawthorne.] The vision is not, as has been argued so often, one of cultural deprivation, but rather of cultural inundation, of being swamped, swept up, counted in before you could count yourself out, pursued by every bookish aspect of life even as you try to get lost in a wilderness, in a randomness where you might hope to find your true self. And it is that at last which is most deeply beautiful about Pynchon and his works. He has survived all the incursions which he documents, and he is, as I hope he will remain, a genius lost and anonymous.”

Richard Poirier  
“The Importance of Thomas Pynchon”  
*Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*  
eds. George Levine and David Leverenz  
(Little, Brown 1976) 18-29

“We are asked to sympathize with the *impulse* which leads people to radical disaffection, which is rather different from embracing their revolutionary activities (activities which come from the Right as often as the Left).”

Robert Merrill  
“The Form and Meaning of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*”  
*Ariel* 8 [1977] 69

“Pynchon wrote of the dead hero of *The Crying of Lot 49*: ‘He might have tried to survive death...as a pure conspiracy against someone he loved. Would that breed of perversity prove at last too keen to be

stunned even by death, had a plot finally been devised too elaborate for the dark Angel...? Pynchon survives his destructiveness by turning it into a novel too complex to escape. He is the artist of tortured entrapment and limitation. He did his bit to limit life by boxing all experience into one either/or: the mechanical symbiosis of *V.* or no life at all. But Pynchon went still further in ironically affirming limitation as the sole purpose of existence. Given our destructiveness, our need to kill, to sully life, our mission on earth, Pynchon concludes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, must be to celebrate the Devil."

Josephine Hendin  
*Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945*  
(Oxford 1979) 207

[Manfred Puetz, "Thomas Pynchon: History, Self, and the Narrative Discourse," *The Story of Identity: American Fiction of the Sixties*, 1979]: "In *Lot 49*, Puetz suggests, Oedipa Maas combines features of Profane and Stencil, in her concern with both the present and the past. And, once again, we encounter not historical reality per se but a character's attempt to construct such a reality.... In describing the birth of the Tristero system, Pynchon has closely followed the history of the sixteenth-century Low Countries, and...even Pynchon's historical inventions, such as the figure of Tristero himself, borrow from history."

Clark and Fuoroli, 240

"Oedipa is a female Oedipus who must solve Pierce's sphinxlike riddle (though not kill off her parents) and Pierce Inverarity's will appears to offer some way of piercing the verities of life... Pynchon continually presents the possibility that Oedipa's increasing verbal consciousness is mere paranoia, a silly, meaningless game.... The problem posed Oedipa in the will's 'code' is the same problem Pynchon's text poses for the reader. She is either mad or there is some redeeming system of communication. We are never told; the book ends before the crying of lot 49. The clues in the number 49, the Pentecostal references, and the whole religious vocabulary pose the choice as one between a secular madness, modern paranoia, or a surprisingly traditional Christianity....

The total action of *The Crying of Lot 49* may, in fact, take place between Easter and Pentecost. Oedipa drives into San Narcisco on a Sunday (and Pynchon mentions the fact twice...); the concluding auction takes place on a Sunday. The action of the book could easily take seven weeks, although... Pynchon does not give any definite proof. The possibility is only suggested, just as all other possibilities are suggested. If the first Sunday were to be Easter, it might explain Oedipa's sense of being 'parked at the centre of an odd religious instant'... We cannot know for sure what Oedipa is going to learn from the mysterious bidder on lot 49... The choice of what we are to conclude about the significance of Oedipa's experience is ours and ours alone. And the ultimate effect of noticing the parallel between action and reading, both open-ended, is to enforce the reader's sense of his own need to decide, to impose his own conclusions on the story."

Maureen Quilligan  
"Thomas Pynchon and the Language of Allegory"  
*The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre*  
(Cornell 1979) 42-46, 204-23, 261-63, 265-78, 289-90

"*The Crying of Lot 49* may be understood as the education of its central figure, Oedipa Maas; but it is an education which Pynchon complicates considerably by the uncertainty he introduces into every perception allowed to Oedipa and the reader. The major source of the ambiguity is Pynchon's figurative use of the concept of 'entropy'; for he exploits the diametrically opposite meanings which the term has in thermodynamics and information theory. Metaphorically, one compensates for the other. In both, entropy is a measurement of disorganization; but disorganization in information theory increases the potential information which a message may convey, while in thermodynamics entropy is a measure of the disorganization of molecules within closed systems and possesses no positive connotation. Pynchon uses the concept of entropy in this latter sense as a figure of speech to describe the running down Oedipa discovers of the American Dream; at the same time he uses the entropy of information theory to suggest that Oedipa's sorting activities may counter the forces of disorganization and death.

This thesis was first put forward by Willard Gibbs, who used probability statistics to apply the Second Law to the universe at large. Henry Adams was quick to appropriate the thesis and apply it to his study of history in *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*: 'to the vulgar and ignorant historian it mean only that the ash-heap was constantly increasing in size'... There is disagreement among writers as to the possible application of the law of disorganization to biological and sociological systems.... The binary dissociation of 'Entropy' becomes the convoluted alienation of a single character in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Pynchon achieves this by writing in a conditional mode, so that the text itself oscillates like a standing wave between nodes of meaning, and by locating the paralyzing difficulties of those poles within the perceptions of Oedipa Maas.... Oedipa's task as executrix of Pierce Inverarity's estate forces her to examine her cultural medium whose message is alienation, loss and death.... The success of Oedipa's sorting rests directly on the uncertainty over the source of the information she accumulates and organizes into the Tristero; for it these clues do not originate in a system or culture outside the one Oedipa seeks to redeem, then they are only a part of the inside system which is running down....

By naming the town Pierce founded 'San Narcisco,' Pynchon engages the reader in the habit of reading messages in the medium of the book at the same time we are pursuing Oedipa in her search. Pynchon's direct evocation of the Narcissus myth is a clear statement that Pierce's estate and what it represents is a culture in love with a dream-image of itself. In the myth, Narcissus spurned the love of Echo, who was doomed to repeat only the last words of other voices. Pierce, like Narcissus, prefers...the colored windows of mute stamps—to Oedipa's spoken love. The Echo Courts where she stays become the scene of her first adultery, and—it is suggested—the beginning of her escape from the image of the tower which defines her at the end of chapter one. She will no longer be an Echo, but will try to say first things about real facts.

The origin of Pynchon's use of the Narcissus myth is Marshal McLuhan's *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*. The world of *The Crying of Lot 49* is built around those 'extensions': word of mouth, cars and mattresses, the written work in plays and bathrooms, even the narcissistic extensions of man whose medium is the message of his culture. McLuhan's interpretation of the Narcissus myth is readily available for Pynchon's appropriation, for it establishes the identity between closed systems and narcissism.... American culture, in short, is numb, and addicted to what protects it from pain (and, ultimately, death). In McLuhan's terms, our culture has become addicted to the material forms which the American Dream has assumed. Of course, the dream and the culture, like Narcissus and his image, are inseparable; and it is in this convolution that Oedipa finds herself. In the spray can caroming off the walls of the motel bathroom we have both an image of entropy—a region of fast molecules within the can exhausting itself within the confines of the bathroom—and an image of human life threatened, albeit comically, by the systems it has created. Oedipa 'could imagine no end to it; yet presently the can did give up in midflight and fall to the floor.' By the end of the book, Oedipa realizes that San Narcisco is a microcosm of the Republic.... The Second Law of Thermodynamics lurks in her language as Oedipa wonders that Pierce 'must have known...how the bouncing would stop'....

*The Crying of Lot 49* is a view of America as a closed system running down. The bouncing will stop.... Inverarity's advice, 'Keep it bouncing' is linked to the Second Law; 'echoed' by Oedipa at the end of the book, this advice recalls Nefastis' dogmatism, which has its origin in information theory: 'Communication is the key...to keep it all cycling.' The Nefastis Machine represents a revision of Maxwell's hypothetical closed system with a sorting demon inside. Stanley Koteks' explanation of this to Oedipa is correct, and so is her objection, 'sorting isn't work?' Koteks' description and Oedipa's response are a fictionalized version of the distinction Wiener draws between contemporary physics and the physics of Clerk Maxwell's age....

Oedipa's function, sitting beside the Nefastis Machine, is to 'feed back something like the same quantity of information. To keep it all cycling.' The Machine, of course, is a comic distortion of the feedback systems Wiener is talking about. Nevertheless, it is a crucial interior metaphor of the book's operation as a whole. When Oedipa objects that 'sorting is work,' she ties the thermodynamic model to the book's postal courier themes, and to her own role as executrix. The first sentence of the book informs us that Pierce had 'assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary.' Because Pierce's estate is a microcosm of America, the four parts to the metaphor are these: what Maxwell's Demon is to the Nefastis Machine, Oedipa is to America.



Oedipa's efforts to disentangle Inverarity's estate involve her in a study of her society; she comes to realize that her world is a vast communications system feeding her information which may engulf before it enlightens. Like the Demon she tries to order the signs and symbols around her into some kind of operational meaning. But sorting is work, and she requires for this task some infusion of energy from outside to counter the entropic movement inside toward disorganization, sameness and death. Her role is bequeathed to her by Pierce, whose last name 'Inverarity' is cognate with the name of the town in Scotland where Clerk Maxwell—inventor of the Demon—was born. This is another of the messages coded in the text's medium; and it suggests that Pierce was the demon of his own system, which Oedipa, like all of us born into a system we did not create, bears the burden of keeping alive.... Oedipa's clues may be sacred signs, as well as secular information, 'as if...there were revelation in progress all around her' (italics mine). Information is a species of 'revelation' just as Nefastis' version of feedback is a species of California spiritualism....

The sacred language which informs *The Crying of Lot 49* is a foil to the inverted, profane culture it describes: smog obscuring the feminine moon, waste, debris, the 'empties' Bortz tosses at seagulls looking for the true sea, freeways built over graveyards, spray cans, rusting cars, shanties. All this is the iconography of isolation in a culture of throwaways. The ironic use of language has a fitting origin in Pierce's name, which derives from 'petrus' or rock. As founder of San Narcisco, Pierce is an inverse Peter, on whom is built the profane church of America. Pynchon enforces this irony immediately, for Oedipa—on reading that she has been named executrix—'stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible.' Pierce occasions the association of the TV with God, and this association persists throughout the book, for the TV's 'greenish eye' becomes the green bubble shades nearly everyone wears, and which, like the TV, permit the wearer to be in someone else's living space without making contact....

The story of Oedipa is the story of waiting for revelation, seeking it in the historical, secular and time-bound world around her, but finding no God beyond the words she hopes will tell her the truth. Because she is trapped, 'motion is relative'—which is the reason Pynchon includes the discussion at The Scope Bar about the Commodore Penguid...The Penguid records are a comic parody of the unreliability (the relativity) of historical records, mimicked by the either/or prose of the narrator.... Oedipa realizes, 'the act of metaphor...was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost'.... [As a Postmodernist, Pynchon himself has no faith in the truth of literature.] If the ending of *The Crying of Lot 49* is the point before revelation, then this revelation...is death... Our culture is dying because it is predicated on a denial of death...

Varo's painting and Driblette threaten Oedipa with the possibility that there is no meaning beyond the one she herself weaves, but this possibility, while never denied, is never confirmed either. Varo's painting is the initiation of a tapestry image which recurs three times late in the book. After interviewing Tremaine, Oedipa tells herself, 'This is America, you live in it, you let it happen. Let it unfurl.' Here the painting, like the Narcissus myth, has been assumed into the fabric of the novel and is part of the social vision of a culture weaving itself in time, each generation responsible for the ongoing expansion. At the same time, there is no given pattern to follow.... Earlier she worried that she was fashioning the tapestry; but now her paranoia has begun to blossom. She is not sure whether she is weaver or woven.... Passage through the night, the stripping away of clothes/figurations, and the promise of revelation toward dawn. This simile complicates the relationship of Oedipa to the Tristero, for the historical strip tease is likened to Oedipa's own in the previous chapter, and this prompts the inescapable suspicion that Oedipa and Tristero are somehow involved in one another, and that Oedipa herself—as her name suggests—may be at the heart of the declining society [the liberated woman].

Insofar as Oedipa is the sorting demon of her society she is fighting a losing battle. But in Oedipa, Pynchon has created a character with a knack for pointed questions. Her response to Koteks revealed the flaw in Maxwell's physics; and her answer to Nefastis is equally incisive: 'But what...if the Demon exists only because the two equations look alike [Second Law and Information Theory]? Because of the metaphor?' Nefastis merely smiles; he is a 'believer.' The contrast between Oedipa's worried questioning and Nefastis' belief is a distinguishing characteristic of Oedipa's intelligence; but the distance she keeps

from her own metaphors costs her dearly. They tease her with the possibility of meaning, without providing the comfort Nefastis, and later her husband Mucho, enjoy....

Pynchon has created in the W.A.S.T.E. postal system an inverse acronym, for We Await Silent Tristero's Empire stands for 'waste'... Oedipa now understands that her ego, like Narcisco, is only 'incidental'—'a name; an incident among our climatic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight... There was continuity.' Paradoxically, the word 'continuity' has come to mean in the course of the novel its exact opposite. For all Oedipa's admirable courage and persistence, she still possesses—like Herbert Stencil's pursuit of V.—a naïve hope that Tristero will be a tangible and literal person. Yet it is clear that Tristero's reality is metaphoric; and while it is an alternative, it is one indissolubly knit to the culture that alienates it. The community she discovers is real, though the word 'community' is a metaphor for the lack of community we all share....

At the beginning of *The Crying of Lot 49* the reader encourages Oedipa in her escape from the tower; but by the end of the book she is outside lost, and paralyzed by the 'matrices of a great digital computer.' This is Pynchon's image of a culture whose terms—as Sidney Stencil predicted—have been reduced to polar extremes. Oedipa is caught between the suburban culture she has outgrown and the communion of withdrawal. She is happy with neither option; Oedipa 'had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?'... If hope exists at all, it is in the ability to withstand the terrible ambiguity threatening Oedipa. The fictions Pynchon writes have no happy endings; they hardly seem to 'end' at all, for there is no end to the ambiguities his writing provokes. Oedipa does achieve an awareness of her culture, and that awareness is never held in doubt. Yet the doubts which her culture propagates are never resolved. To her credit she maintains her ground instead of slipping into a hermetic dogmatism or an apocalyptic suicide....

Oedipa does manage to escape the tower, but only increases her isolation. She could join the community available to her only by violating her integrity and accepting as literal truth the metaphorical linkages comprising Tristero (the replication of muted post horns, W.A.S.T.E. symbols, variations on the word 'Tristero'). The people in the novel who do this—Nefastis, Mucho, Hilarius—are severely undercut by the narrator. They are facile believers in their own metaphors, while Oedipa rides a fence between a 'hothouse' dogmatism on the one hand, and engulfment by the void 'outside' on the other. Indeed, *The Crying of Lot 49* may be read as a tragic account of the difficulty of human action in a world whose meanings are always *either* our own, *or* just beyond our reach. Narcissism, in short, may be a condition of our participation in the world.... With Metzger she strips herself naked, and this venturesome adultery is only the first of many examples in the novel in which her efforts to 'communicate' result in increased isolation....

At the end of the book the questions remain: is the Tristero pattern of Oedipa's own weaving, imposed on the world outside? Or is Tristero a pattern which inheres in the world outside, imposing itself upon her? Neither she nor the reader is allowed by Pynchon to ascertain the stable meaning of the blossoming pattern; and without that certainty her usefulness in preserving order against declining culture remains painfully ambiguous."

Thomas Schaub  
"A Gentle Chill, An Ambiguity': *The Crying of Lot 49*"  
*Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity*  
(U Illinois 1980) 21-42

"In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon draws us into the plastic megalopolis of the West Coast....sprawling incoherently but likened to a printed circuit. It is either an accidental conglomeration or a network of freeways, motels, used car lots, suburban lounges, television stations, corporate industries, and communications systems. And the novel develops through a series of similar and intricate plots that may be real or imagined, connected or disconnected, actually or apparently related to a series of events originating in the early days of modern history and involving the official mail service and its revolutionary counterpart....

When Oedipa prepares for a game of Strip Botticelli with Pierce Inverarity's agent in the Echo Courts Motel she puts on enough of a wardrobe to satisfy a latter day anthropologist—"six pairs of panties in

assorted colors, girdle, three pairs of nylons, three brassieres, two pairs stretch slacks, four half-slips, one black sheath, two summer dresses, half dozen A-line skirts, three sweaters, two blouses, quilted wrapper, baby blue peignoir and an old Orlon muu-muu. Bracelets then, scatter pins, earrings, a pendant.' When Oedipa thinks about how Metzger discovered her in the motel she chose at random, when Metzger appears as Baby Igor on the TV show they are watching, and when the commercials advertise the products of Inverarity's interlocking corporations, she begins to wonder 'if it's all part of a plot.' Thus Pynchon infects us with the paranoia of the sixties....

The ironic consequence of Oedipa's heroic quest: the more meanings and connections she finds, the more she contributes to the disorder of her world.... Pynchon plays with the image of the unpredictable atom in *The Crying of Lot 49* when Oedipa, preparing for a game of Strip Botticelli, accidentally knocks over a can of spray deodorant and cowers on the bathroom floor as it caroms off the walls. Still thinking in conventional terms, though, she imagines God or a computer could predict its path. Indeed, her search for order throughout the novel reflects her refusal to accept the law of the 'new world'.... Moreover, as Pynchon develops his singular form—or formlessness—from *V.* to *The Crying of Lot 49* to *Gravity's Rainbow*, the paths of his characters become less easy to plot.”

Richard Pearce, ed.  
*Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*  
(G.K. Hall 1981) 3, 5-6, 8

“In his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon plays more explicitly than in *V.* with the conventions of traditional linear narrative. As questing hero, Oedipa Maas is concerned to discover a central symbol called the Tristero; and since her perspective is the only one the book offers, there is less overt suggestion of alternatives to a quest for a terminal revelation—'terminal' in that revelation threatens to terminate not only the quest but also the quester. In approved detective story fashion, Oedipa accumulates clues that point to the Tristero but thereby compound the mystery, for the Tristero itself is a signifier. She anticipates encountering the Tristero 'in its terrible nakedness,' but it is not the organization itself that is crucial to her quest; it is the message the Tristero can deliver....

In the course of her quest, Oedipa has construed her discoveries as intimations of a sacred and transcendent order, and in the process she has been drawn into the assumption that these discoveries will be absolutely meaningless if such an order does not exist. In the absence of some version of an omnipotent providence, even a parodic and whimsically vengeful version, she believes the world must be 'really,' if incomprehensibly, chaotic.... The novel ends without 'coming to a conclusion' about whether the Tristero does or does not exist because any such conclusion would be beside the point. The novel is thematically and aesthetically whole apart from any supposedly climactic resolution....

The manifestations of the Tristero prove inadequate to this anticipation. Oedipa's search—and her research, for she is one of Pynchon's more literary detectives—explicate the long history of an underground resistance movement that seems to exist for the purpose of providing different ways to communicate information. The concept of communication is fertile in this novel, and the implication is that different means of communication will yield different messages. Yet Oedipa never receives 'the words she never wanted to hear'; she never gets the message, although it seems to lurk somewhere beyond the formal conclusion of the novel. As she collects information about the Tristero itself, she routinizes its charisma, to adopt the phrase that Pynchon himself borrows from Max Weber.

The Tristero becomes more and more a historical phenomenon, operating always in the shadow of legitimate postal services. It appears capable of sabotaging established systems of communication in bizarre and often inexplicable ways, and of filling investigators who come too close to revealing its existence, but it finally does not constitute a message. And in the context of the promised message, even the most malevolent manifestations of the Tristero seem inadequate, even trivial. All of these manifestations emphasize the idea of communication while failing to articulate what it is that must be communicated. The failure of these manifestations to produce meaning reinforces the implication that the anticipated message cannot be communicated by traditional means: not in the novel, not in language. Once again, the trope of the unavailable insight allows the promise of ultimate meaning to remain open at the close of the narrative....

In many ways *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to respond to those reviewers who maintained that in *V.* Pynchon was unable to control his subject matter. If nothing else, *Lot 49* is a controlled novel. On the surface, at least, it is a minimalist remake of *V.*, with the disconcerting side trips, flashbacks, and duplications pared away to expose the order/chaos dichotomy in its pristine horror. But the two novels are not variations on the same theme, with *V.* a more circuitous version of *Lot 49*. In *V.* order and chaos emerge as equally untenable interpretive categories, and the joke is that neither can contain and explain the proliferating manifestations of the V symbol. In *Lot 49*, despite the heightened parody, the joke is far less evident. Order and chaos make a more credible claim to be the only possible interpretations of a straightforwardly narrated action that continually strains toward closure. The problem in *Lot 49* is not that order and chaos are inadequate encapsulations of the world of Oedipa Maas; the problem is that both order and chaos are interpretations that could comprehend this world completely—reducing it in the process to inconsequence.

It is the apparent straightforwardness of *Lot 49*'s narration that makes it appear especially vulnerable to definitive interpretation. Whereas both *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* have multiple narrators and a disjointed chronology, *The Crying of Lot 49* has an omniscient narrator who follows the single main character, Oedipa Maas, through a series of adventures, each building on the last. These two factors, the stable point of view and the chronological sequence of the narration, distinguish *Lot 49* from the other two novels and make it seem more familiar and intelligible in its premises. Everything is oriented toward Oedipa's discovery of her 'legacy,' her revelatory Grail. There is less sense of trickery in this novel than in the other two: less sense that events constitute pieces of a gigantic puzzle passed on to the reader for reassembly....

This structural purity is finally parodic. In the process of producing an exemplary linear narrative, Pynchon has in effect written a commentary on the conventions governing one of the more familiar and ostensibly 'natural' types of story, the story that gets its main impetus from its sense of an ending. By writing a novel that satisfies even the most impatient reader's demand for spare, suspenseful plot construction, Pynchon has exposed some of the assumptions implicit in the demand for sparseness and suspense. *The Crying of Lot 49* explores and exploits the genre of quest or mystery story so thoroughly that it is in many ways an exemplary narrative. It tests the limits of an extremely traditional pattern, providing a retrospective context for the experiments of *V.* and motivating the explosion of linear form that is both structural principle and theme in *Gravity's Rainbow*....

The culminating revelation [in *Lot 49*] can take one of two familiar forms. Either (1) everything adds up to such an absolute unity that it is in the strictest sense unimaginable (Oedipa anticipates a 'direct, epileptic Word'), or (2) there are no connections between events beyond those that Oedipa has wished into existence.... It is difficult to see how Pynchon could have realized either possible conclusion. *Lot 49* is so thoroughly apocalyptic in structure that the final revelation cannot occur. The conclusion is necessarily deferred.... It means something to say that experience encodes equally the promise of 'transcendent meaning, or only the earth'; the choice is clearly between All and Nothing, a universe pregnant with purposes for the meanest and most apparently gratuitous life, or on the contrary, a universe in which there is no meaning anywhere, for anyone. The polarized alternatives set up an enormous amount of tension within the book....always cryptic.... Either way, the entirety of the action is so completely oriented toward an apocalyptic 'end' (in the dual sense of 'terminus' and 'fulfillment') that it seems Oedipa's world exists for the purpose of being changed utterly. Pynchon carefully refrains from trying to specify what it might change into.... [Oedipa] never achieves the culminating insight into the nature of her world, and thus neither interpretation receives authorial sanction....

Pynchon has projected twin 'resolutions' to this second novel that cannot be realized within the novel.... *The Crying of Lot 49* is an elegant, concise, and economical narrative, a paradigm of unencumbered linear development. Yet it does not come to the conclusion it anticipates. And this fact seems almost a betrayal because Pynchon continually stresses that the conclusion is what the whole narrative is for.... The blanket affirmation of either a benignly purposive order or of an indifferently meaningless chaos tends to be thuddingly anticlimactic.... It is not less a quest narrative because its goal, or grail, never puts in an appearance. On the contrary, it both epitomizes and parodies the genre of quest narrative by virtue of the fact that it withholds its object from view. In the process it calls attention to the paradoxical nature of goals

and grails in quest literature, for by convention the quest object never fulfills the quest, never satisfies the desire its absence arouses....

Her quest is a birth-passage, and from the beginning she is directed toward transcendence. Her subsequent progress is cumulative and linear. She is never deflected from her course; nothing that happens to her is irrelevant to her thesis that an omnipotent Tristero-system presides over seemingly random attempts at communication. Only one blocking action impedes her quest, and this is the suspicion that the promise of transcendence may be a complete illusion. The Tristero may not exist. Pynchon thus resolves the quest formula into its essential components: one hero, one goal, one obstacle. He also allows the suggestion of transcendence to take on the full range of metaphysical and religious connotations associated with the quest pattern. Oedipa hopes to emerge from the darkness of her received ideas into the light of truth: she longs for 'the cry that might abolish the night.' Her name, which is initially merely ludicrous, loses its associations with Freudian trendiness as the quest proceeds, and begins to recall her truth-seeking Sophoclean predecessor.... There is a strong suggestion that the final 'crying' is analogous to another culminating summons, the sounding of the Last Trump: blown, perhaps, on the Tristero's symbolic post horn, unmuted at last.

The structure of the narrative is thus overtly apocalyptic. It moves toward a conclusion that is also a revelation and augurs a complete transformation of the novel's world.... Apparently trivial, random discoveries display phantom resemblances that make them potentially important and purposive; these resemblances will be meaningful, Oedipa believes, if they point to a shadowy force or presence behind them.... By insinuating that Oedipa's parodically conceived world is made up of signs, Pynchon effectively begins a process of debanalizing this world.... The hyperbolically rendered details of everyday California life...are conventionally synecdochic. Initially, at least, their function is to point out the absurdity and incoherence of mid-century America. They are 'slices' of a life that makes little sense.... They signal a resistance to meaning. When this resistance is heightened by parody, it becomes the absurd....

The W.A.S.T.E. baskets become emblematic of Oedipa's progress, for in the course of her quest, she discovers a 'wasted' population linked by an elaborate system of communication and by a common attitude of waiting, as if for a coming millennium.... If she has projected meaning and value onto her world merely because she wants her world to have meaning and value, she is hallucinating, and worse, the world is wholly alien: 'only the earth'.... She offers a persuasive paradigm of interpretation. But her example is finally parodic.... The overt purpose of the parody in *Lot 49* is to show that Oedipa's world is deficient.... Oedipa's world cries out for so much meaning that the novel cannot reasonably be expected to satisfy it. Pynchon possesses no Grail that will fulfill his hero's, or his reader's, expectations.... Pynchon is able to satirize the assumption that a narrative means only when it adds up to a culminating insight....

In orienting all his action toward the missing kernel of significance, he operates like a sleight-of-hand man, misdirecting attention and arousing a desire for a core, center, culmination, end...As the Tristero acquires shape...a genesis, a membership, and a motive—it loses its potential for comprehensiveness.... Like the traditional questing hero, Oedipa loses her companions as she approaches her elusive Grail, but her progressive alienation parallels a progressive diminution of the Grail itself....The Tristero originated with a rebellion against the Thurn and Taxis family's postal monopoly; it emigrated to America and was responsible for certain 'Indian' attacks against the Pony Express; it persists as the W.A.S.T.E. system, an underground and illegal alternative to the U.S. mail.... If the Tristero turns out to exist, it will be a secret society with a long history of petty swipes against established systems of communication. Such a secret society does not seem to be the sort of thing that can infuse 'transcendent meaning' into a sterile and banal world.... If the signs do not herald the coming of Silent Tristero's Empire, she believes she must regard them as meaningless babble.... Oedipa's world has acquired its own meaning and value in the course of the quest....

Lacking faith, Oedipa...retreats into Romantic solipsism.... By her own metaphor, she is a princess in a tower, projecting the cohesive system of interpretations that she calls the world over a void.... The painting [of prisoners in a tower] sums up the case for Romantic despair....This world lacks unity, purpose, and redemptive significance: ironically, it is this meaning that Oedipa discovers during her quest, although she never realizes that this meaning keeps her legacy from being threatened by total meaninglessness....

America...has effectively denied possibility by bifurcating its population into members of an authorized 'order' or waste.... Oedipa...has duplicated America's error by judging that if the Tristero does not somehow provide a transcendent purpose for suffering and alienation, then humanity in its entirety is detritus. She has assimilated her legacy without recognizing it. Like America, she fails to see the alternatives.

Pynchon, however, dramatizes the alternatives by having the parodic, banal world that Oedipa inhabits gradually take on depth and seriousness in light of the transcendent that she seeks....The Tristero can function as both threat and promise: it may come as redeemer or as exterminating angel... Pynchon is able to make the Tristero the form of a final, apocalyptic message without ever suggesting what the content of this message might be.... Pynchon's sleight-of-hand in *Lot 49* involves promising the end without ever providing an image of it....

Like the insistently punning names of the characters...this sort of humor wears thin quickly, and Pynchon appears to risk charges of triviality by raising his readers' expectations only to dash them time and time again. But *Lot 49* is not a trivial novel, and the reason is that all this comic deflation sets the scene for the ensuing action....The tone of narration stops swinging between the extremes of cosmic meaning and total meaninglessness and settles down to vibrating on a middle frequency. *The Crying of Lot 49* becomes a realistic novel as it develops, and its emergent realism subsumes the initial question of whether the Tristero does or does not exist.

The stages of Oedipa's quest raise her world almost imperceptibly; at the same time, they lower the status of the Tristero....The Tristero may represent a promise of absolute community—this is what she yearns for, and this is the fulfillment of the key concept, communication. But in ignoring Driblette's invitation, Oedipa overlooks the basis for a real community... She is attracted to Driblette, but has more important matters to attend to. She moves on into increasing isolation. Her subsequent encounters play out essentially the same scenario, except that she is increasingly moved by the situations of the people she meets and increasingly confused by how many elements of these situations she must discount if she is to look only for clues to the Tristero....

The Nefastis Machine, according to its inventor, contains a genuine Maxwell's Demon who can sort data so that it yields meaningful information if activated by a 'sensitive.' Oedipa tries out her sensitivity and fails. The message, as Nefastis had observed, is in the metaphor: in her progress toward a presumed revelation, she has failed all along as a sorting demon because she has persistently rejected the elements of her experience that signal meaning and value in her own world. She is struck by compassion and empathy in each of her encounters with these solitary and perversely endearing characters, but she avoids identification, refuses to rest in compassion, and continues her journey toward what she hopes is transcendence.... Frightened by the implications of her discoveries about the Tristero, Oedipa decides to give herself up to chance and, by wandering through the streets of San Francisco to give the Tristero an opportunity to reveal itself.... She sees the world behind the tapestry and finds that it is not a void. But she does not understand what she sees because she is looking only for evidence of the Tristero....

She gets a guided tour of the human condition, and finds it too vast, too diverse, and too familiar to comprehend.... The strain of holding things together is too much; she succumbs to information overload... Because she aims at complete transcendence, she keeps construing events as clues that will carry her forward, away from humanity, toward a supernatural level of being that subsumes humanity to its own inscrutable purposes.... She wants to break out of her tower by discovering a world that is not her own solipsistic creation but one that offers some place for her desires and needs. She looks for a world that is *like* her. But she does not see how the world she does discover continually reflects back her own image.... Oedipa is searching for herself; that is, she is searching for a way to 'place' herself in a reality that has always appeared indifferent and alien. Ironically, she is offered the grounds for community in a sense of shared estrangement.... It communicates Pynchon's bleakly compassionate vision of present-day America as a community of isolates...

Her long dark night, the central event of the novel, represents a radical enlargement of her vision. Significantly, it is the episode in the book that is most conspicuously free of parody. The vivid images that

Pynchon offers in this section are metaphors for Oedipa's own situation, but they also link Oedipa to a community of people who are all characterized by their isolation.... She moves on, seeing the post horn everywhere among a derelict nighttown population. Each appearance of the symbol directs her to another aspect of the alienation and dispossession that she has acknowledged in herself, as if the post horn were a badge of membership or mark of Cain....The post horn is a mark of kinship. It calls attention to the 'wasted' elements of American society and suggests that they compose an alternative society, communicating by different means and relaying different messages....

The pathos and even tragedy that redeem Oedipa's world from banality emerge as a by-product of the quest—as the residue or waste generated by her being-toward transcendence. Construed as a series of clues pointing to an omnipresent Tristero, her insights reveal the human condition as a state of neediness or deprivation.... The culminating Meaning that Oedipa anticipates is supernatural and superhuman. The alternative is total incoherence. Her own expectations exclude a 'middle' that would be a human world, based on shared hopes and fears that are the tenuous connections of community, and rendered contingent and precious by the awesome fact of mortality.

This 'middle' realm is the traditional subject matter of the novel. It is the subject matter of *The Crying of Lot 49*, despite the fact that the narrative appears to exist for the purpose of negating the human world entirely. Pynchon himself has 'projected' a world, pitting the multiple resonances that his language sets up against an overriding sense of an ending that promises to resolve diversity into a unitary Word, which articulates the absolute and final truth. The Word is withheld. By this apparent fiat, Pynchon plays at guaranteeing the integrity of his narrative. The absence of the Word allows Oedipa's world to exist.... With the shutting of the lock, Oedipa returns to her tower, where she is left to contemplate the options of tapestry and void. But these are not the only options that the novel itself offers.

Like all questing heroes, Oedipa has traveled through a wasteland, but her commitment to the quest has prevented her from grasping the fact central to the novel, that waste is precisely what is most valuable. Established systems of organization convert human beings into articles of production or consumption: Oedipa herself appears first as a buyer of Tupperware... Every character in the book perceives himself as somehow excluded. The first thing Oedipa discovers about each of these characters is that he does not count in some official reckoning. Oedipa herself has to be propelled out of her matronly rounds in order to see these people at all. The quest provides her with the chance to break out of her tower...These are developed characters, and Oedipa's willingness to use them and then dispose of them suggests that she is still synced into the American Dream. She does not value waste. She moves relentlessly toward the conclusion."

Molly Hite

*Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*  
(Ohio State U 1983) 28-29, 67-91

"Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, which seems slight because of its brevity, is a major modernist [Postmodernist] achievement: a novel to be read not so much as one would read other novels, but as a work which serves as an experimental development of a major talent, whose flowering would occur in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon bridges most of the five categories cited above [innovative language, technique, abstract forms, influence of Kafka and Borges], owing more, perhaps, to Gaddis than to Kafka, but otherwise creating new voices, cutting through standard narrative devices, establishing different principles of observation.... Such visual deceptiveness became emblematic of 1960s culture: the self mirrored, remirrored, refracted, fragmented, reconstituted....

*The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), a novel of fewer than 50,000 words, alters our perception of seemingly stable institutions. Here, Pynchon works the new with confidence that his readers will follow him, although this novel has not caught on in the way of *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Like Oedipus, Oedipa searches—not for ancestral background, but for a worldwide conspiracy, an alternative mail system operated by a group called the Tristeros.... *The Crying of Lot 49* is really a brief statement about the 1960s. It was for Pynchon an interlude, a valley between a very long work about the fifties and another about the seventies—all three trying to comprehend America in the postwar years. Pynchon is an interpretive novelist, obsessively

seeking meaning in metaphors: in *V.*, the Edenesque Vheissu; here, the mail conspiracy; in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a technological paradise which squeezes out individual choice and freedom....

Oedipa, like Oedipus, is lost amidst patterns she cannot understand. Without knowing why, she has been made the executrix of the estate of Pierce Inverarity, with whom she had an affair before her marriage. Carrying out her role leads her deeper into conspiracy, the most mysterious aspect of which is W.A.S.T.E. —“We await Silent Tristero's Empire.” A peculiar knotted or muted post horn, first seen by her on the wall of a latrine, suddenly begins to appear everywhere. It is at the heart of the conspiracy of Tristeros, who have dropped out of America, suicides or would-be suicides. Having given up hope not only of the mail services, but of America itself, they use counterfeit stamps, and mail letters in waste containers.

Pynchon probes deep into the 1960s, when the literary need was to find some fictional equivalent for inexplicable events. Oedipa's quest for knowledge, which forms the entire narrative of the novel, is an attempt to derive sanity and order from incoherent experiences. Everyone she knows has gone underground, split off, divided; her husband wild on LSD, her shrink paranoiac, her associates severed from normal patterns, herself near the brink. Her search for the meaning of the muted post horn, which takes her ever deeper into Tristero mysteries, is her search for America....

*The Crying of Lot 49* is a meeting point of Pynchon's concerns, that linkage he sees as contemporary America: running down, laws of conservation fighting against diminution; individual choice struggling to remain viable; and words themselves traduced, as symbolized by the manipulation of the mails. The way into all this seemingly disparate material is by way of Pierce Inverarity's estate; to execute his estate is to explore America of the 1960s. Oedipa achieves 'recognitions' only by undertaking the quest. Had she remained indifferent or had she settled for surfaces, not probes, she would have become as counterfeit as those around her.... With all his disguises and brilliant management of narrative strategies, Pynchon has in part fallen back on picaresque narrative, which allows Oedipa to have sequential encounters. Coherence derives, ultimately, from the search itself, which continues as the novel ends and she awaits the actual 'crying of Lot 49' and its bidder.”

Fredrick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 359-60

“Pynchon characters rarely escape from their solipsisms to touch one another; similarly, they seldom escape from the amorphous but ubiquitous urban world. Paola and McClintic Sphere drive away from Nueva York and into the Berkshires as the latter resolves to 'keep cool but care,' yet the chapter ends here; we never see the couple in the country, and the next scene yo-yos us back to Benny Profane and the Whole Sick Crew. Neither Oedipa nor anyone else in *The Crying of Lot 49* really gets outside of the city. All action takes place in San Narcisco, Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Kinneret—with the exception of Oedipa's 'religious instant' on the hill overlooking the municipality. Her picnic excursion with Metzger 'would stop short of any sea,' reaching instead the Fangoso Lagoons....

Brillouin may finally have answered the challenge in 1951 with 'Maxwell's Demon Cannot Operate,' an article in the *Journal of Applied Physics*. Maxwell, he argues, wrongly supposed that it costs no energy to gather information. Actually, to gain information one must use more than an equivalent amount of energy, as Oedipa realizes through common sense during her dialogue with Stanley Koteks,

Oedipa feels on several occasions that she approaches a sacred knowledge. But the approach is all she achieves—or remembers. At any rate, it is all the reader sees.... All Oedipa discovers for certain is that she needs to believe in a 'transcendent meaning' behind the entropic waste landscape and that paranoia could supply it.... *The Crying of Lot 49*, like all of his fiction, renders the prospect [of apocalypse] in religious terms. The hint of imminent miracle runs throughout the novel, and a miracle, says Jesus Arrabal, is 'another world's intrusion into this one.' The character's name connects religious salvation and social plight: *arrabal* is Spanish for a suburb such as San Narcisco. Pentecost is the Christian miracle of sacred communication, and allusions or direct references to it permeate the novel, perhaps even supplying its title: Pentecost is seven Sundays, or forty-nine days, after Easter. Oedipa enters San Narciso and experiences her 'odd, religious instant' on a Sunday. The novel ends at an auction, held on a Sunday afternoon perhaps



forty-nine days later, with Oedipa feeling the onset of an awful, perhaps unmanageable revelation about the Tristero. And though it was not terribly effective, according to Bortz's history, the Tristero suggests the possibility—even the necessity—of violent retribution and the destruction of the old order....

Somewhat like Herbert Stencil, she may be driven on a quest just to maintain a necessary sense of purpose and vitality. Pynchon here improves upon *V.* by making the object of Oedipa's quest less arbitrarily chosen, her motivation less self-conscious—or even conscious—and yet more human and complex.... Oedipa comes to realize that she may, like a paranoid, be weaving together the pattern of events that she believes she is uncovering. Her desire to 'project a world,' in Driblette's phrase, reflects her felt but not entirely conscious need to imbue life with purpose, to restore lost intensity, to step outside of the tower that 'buffers' her from something undetermined.... Her visions of sacred and purposeful design—or evil conspiracy—often follow fast upon intimations of the void.... Oedipa recapitulates Varo's frail tower maidens 'seeking hopelessly to fill the void'....

Pynchon shows his ambivalence about fiction in *The Crying of Lot 49*, as he does in *V.*, by robbing point of view of its integrity and the reader of basic certainties. Here point of view shifts even when the narrator seems to remain the same person. The novel focuses on a single figure, but hardly from a single vantage point.... The reader senses that he is seeing things through a shaping consciousness very different from Oedipa's: it orders perceptions and clauses...as a tipsy housewife probably would not. That consciousness, by virtue of the style in which it expresses itself, often sounds better informed than Oedipa, and condescending to her. But sometimes, especially later in the novel, the reader is made to identify with Oedipa by being made to share her vantage point and her confused attempt to make sense out of things.... The subsequent description of crier Passerine notes 'his eyes bright, his smile practiced and relentless.' This recalls Oedipa's first view of Metzger, whose 'enormous eyes, lambent...smiled out at her wickedly,' and her image of the Tristero incarnate, whose 'luminous stare locked to [hers], smile gone malign and pitiless.'

Other elements of the description tie the crier to the theme of imminent, awful Pentecostal revelation. It would help immeasurably to crack the 'mystery' of the book if one knew whether these impressions belonged to a paranoid Oedipa or an omniscient narrator, but the passage offers no help, only more confusions; it slides back and forth between these possibly subjective, unreliable descriptions of Passerine and objective accounts of Oedipa's movements. Speaking of Pynchon in general, Alfred Kazin makes a point relevant here: 'the ambiguity of who-is-thinking-what gives the uncertainty an added touch of the sinister.... This uncertainty about who is knowing or speaking what pervades the book. Dr. Hilarius is full of 'delightful lapses from orthodoxy'... Many of the key lines break down into similar uncertainty on close inspection.'

Peter L. Cooper

*Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World*  
(U California 1983) 47, 57, 70-71, 151, 192-96

"Throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas has been involved in what Kathleen Woodward has described as 'positive feedback' with respect to the information she uncovers in pursuit of the clues imbedded in Inverarity's will. The more information she receives, the more destabilized her position becomes; her 'system' oscillates in wider and more encompassing patterns with every new hint, but she apparently gets further away from resolution...

Pynchon expresses through Oedipa her central, paranoid, almost solipsistic role in the construction of her epistemological system.... This system is tacitly compared to a machine whose function is 'to bring the world into pulsing stelliferous Meaning all in a soaring dome around her.' However...this machine is dark.... The metaphorical quality of Oedipa's search, equated to the act of writing fictions, is itself the dark machine in the center of the planetarium."

David Porush

*The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction*  
(Methuen 1985) 127, 129-30

“*Lot 49* begins with ‘a sunrise over the library slope at Cornell University that nobody out on it had seen because the slope faces west’—a variation on Bishop Berkeley’s classic epistemological conundrum of the tree that falls in the forest with no one to hear it. It ends teetering on the brink of what one character would have called an ‘anarchist miracle’: ‘another world’s intrusion into this one,’ ‘a kiss of cosmic pool balls.’ Teetering on the brink of a miracle, but not the miracle itself, for the novel backs off at the last possible moment from this intrusion of another world, leaving the problem of Berkeley’s epistemological skepticism—the problem of solipsism—suspended, finally unresolved.

Pynchon names his heroine Oedipa, suggesting that this novel, too, belongs to the genre of detective story—which it does, in a sense. Oedipa, like the classic private-eye, needs to know; she must struggle to bridge the gap between appearances and reality; she must question the reliability of every piece of information, every source. Set in California, *Lot 49* adheres rather faithfully to the conventions of the LA private-eye sub-genre practiced by Erle Stanley Gardner—whose lawyer-detective Perry Mason Pynchon several times invokes—or, better, by Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald. As in Chandler or Macdonald, nearly everyone Oedipa encounters proves to have been complicit in the original crime, the crime itself meanwhile changing its identity, becoming in the course of her investigations larger, more ramified, more sinister—a conspiracy.

The ‘crime’ itself, the object of Oedipa’s epistemological inquiry, appears at the outset as merely a number of odd loose ends in the estate of Pierce Inverarity, a millionaire real estate developer who had once been Oedipa’s lover and who, for reasons of his own, had made her the executor of his will. These loose ends, followed up by Oedipa with exemplary private-eye’s assiduity, each lead to the Tristero System, which may or may not be an underground postal network, and may or may not be stripping away from Oedipa, by means not stopping short of murder, everyone she has been relying upon for support, leaving her isolated with her disturbing knowledge....

This provokes Oedipa to ask, ‘*Shall I project a world?*’ Is Oedipa projecting the Tristero? Is the postal conspiracy only a solipsistic delusion with no reality in the world outside her mind? Nothing that we know about either Oedipa or the Tristero rules out this possibility. Oedipa herself clearly recognizes this possibility, and others that are equally unpalatable, if not more so.... Or possibly, Oedipa is hallucinating either this elaborate hoax or the Tristero conspiracy itself. Or, finally, the fourth alternative, Oedipa actually sees the truth plain: this other order of being, America’s secret double, really exists. Obviously, Oedipa’s fourfold analysis of her dilemma could be simplified still further. On the one hand, there are the epistemological solutions: Oedipa is either deceived or self-deceived, the victim either of a hoax or of her own paranoia. On the other hand, there is the ontological solution, to which Bishop Berkeley also resorted: God exists, and guarantees the existence of the perceived world; or, in this case, the Tristero exists...

Once a student of literature herself, she understands the ambiguity of her situation as clearly as her readers do. In this respect, as in others, she is an exemplary late-modernist heroine. Oedipa is left, at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, in an auction-room waiting for the buyer deputed by the Tristero to declare himself—or not, as the case may be. *If* he does, it will be a true epiphany, a descent of the Holy Spirit—proof that an alternative reality exists. But Oedipa does not break through the closed circle of her solipsism in the pages of this novel, nor does Pynchon break through here to a mode of fiction beyond modernism and its epistemological premises. The Tristero remains only a possibility.

The breakthrough will not come until Pynchon’s next novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where, no longer constrained by the limits of Modernism, he will freely exploit the artistic possibilities of the plurality of worlds, the transgression of boundaries between worlds, the ‘kiss of cosmic pool balls.’ The dead-ending of epistemology in solipsism can be transcended, but only by shifting from a Modernist poetics of epistemology to a postmodernist poetics of ontology, from Oedipa’s anguished cry, ‘*Shall I project a world?*,’ to the unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural.”

Brian McHale  
*Postmodernist Fiction*  
(Methuen 1987) 22-25

“Much briefer and more coherent than *V.*, this story centers on a California woman named Oedipa Maas who is named executor of the estate of a wealthy industrialist who was at one time her lover. The paranoia that was an underlying element in *V.* is the major focus of *The Crying of Lot 49*. In her travels from Silicon Valley to San Francisco, trying to fulfill her obligations as executor, Oedipa can never be sure of anything except that the world in which she lives is mysterious and menacing. She is not even certain that her former lover is dead or that her job as executor is not a colossal practical joke being played on her. She uncovers a secret right-wing organization which seems to be linked to a centuries-old subversive group. She discovers that her own ties to the world are not firm. The novel ends before she finds answers to any of her questions.”

John M. Muste  
*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*, Vol. 3  
Frank N. Magill, ed.  
(Salem 1989) 1233

“In *The Crying of Lot 49* ‘God knew how many citizens’ withdrew ‘from the life of the Republic, from its machinery’ but communicated with one another secretly by dropping letters in ordinary WASTE containers (distinguished by tiny dots between the letters) and subverting the interoffice delivery system of a ubiquitous aerospace conglomerate called Yoyodyne. Pynchon not only seems to have dropped out, he revels in the waste products of modern culture and, at the same time, reveals the waste of natural and human potential. Moreover, he has enlisted major publishers to deliver his message via the shopping malls as well as university bookstores.

Is the relation between the author and his characters coincidental or deliberate, a matter of random chance or calculated plot? Is it Thomas Pynchon? His agent? His publisher? The conglomerates that own the publishing houses and perhaps the shopping malls? The Department of Education? After all, we discover in *Lot 49* that Yoyodyne may have anticipated the needs of those who suffered from ‘whatever ... was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance’; it may have co-opted the counter-culture. We also learn that the plot may have been perpetrated by a wealthy (and maybe mad) practical joker. And if we’re disturbed by such possibilities, have we become victims of the kind of paranoia that dominates Pynchon’s novels? Have we, indeed, become characters in a Pynchon novel?

Nor are these frivolous questions. For they challenge our basic assumptions about fact and fiction, literature and life. They reflect the central concerns of a movement called postmodernism—about the nature of language and human consciousness, about traditional notions of the reading experience, character, and text. They also reflect the social concerns that began to develop after World War II and culminated in the sixties—when television, Xeroxing, new printing techniques, electronic circuitry, computers, and satellites began to convey an overload of information; when the mass media expanded and consolidated; when the speed of communication, the quantity of information, the power of the mass media extended the range of probability, and destroyed the boundaries between fact and fiction....

Pynchon evokes the increasing expansion of modern power as well as the increasing vulnerability of individuals, the increasing problems of communication, and America’s loss of innocence. More important, he engages us in these experiments through the main elements of narrative: language that ranges from esoteric to slang, enormous casts of multi-ethnic characters and caricatures, and multiple plots that entangle one another as well as the reader. One effect of such variety and multiplicity is to decenter the novel. *We don’t know what to focus on*. And as a result we don’t know how to distinguish the serious from the parody, the hero from the villain, the political right from the political left, the deliberate from the accidental, the good from the bad.” [italics added]

Richard Pearce  
*The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2*  
(D.C. Heath 1990) 2065-66

Michael Hollister (2015)