

A Possible Source for the Name Oedipa Maas

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The name of the heroine of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas, has been the subject of several speculations. While her given name, Oedipa, seems to pose no serious problem, her family name, Maas, has been interpreted in various ways, with references ranging from the Newtonian category "mass" to the low pun "my ass." Basing my argument on the truism that entropy is a most important concept in Pynchon's work in general, and in "Entropy" and *The Crying of Lot 49* especially, I suggest another possible source for the name Oedipa Maas in the work of a central figure in the field of thermodynamics who has not been dealt with in Pynchon criticism so far. Although Willard Gibbs, Henry Adams, and especially James Clerk Maxwell have figured prominently in critical essays on *The Crying of Lot 49*, I want to draw attention to Herrmann von Helmholtz, one of the greatest minds of the nineteenth century, whom James Clerk Maxwell considered an "intellectual giant" (598).

Herrmann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz was born on August 31, 1821, in Potsdam. Having made seminal contributions in the fields of optics, electrodynamics, mathematics and physiology, he is best known for his articulation of the First Law of Thermodynamics, the law of the conservation of energy, in a paper presented in 1847, "Ueber die Constanz der Kraft." Drawing on the insights of the British physicist William Thomson, later Lord Kelvin, who laid down the Second Law of Thermodynamics in 1851, Helmholtz predicted what came to be known as the "heat-death of the universe," a notion Pynchon (following Henry Adams) wrongly attributes to Willard Gibbs. In *Ueber die Wechselwirkung der Naturkräfte*, 1854, Helmholtz declared: "all energy will be transformed into heat, and all heat will end in uniform temperature. Then, every possibility of change will cease, and all possible natural processes will come to a standstill. . . . In short, the universe from that time onwards will be condemned to eternal rest."¹

In 1865, the German physicist Rudolph Clausius established the term entropy for the "transformation-contents" of a system, for the measure of the transformation of all energy into unavailable heat (34–35). In 1882, in his paper "Die Thermodynamik chemischer Vorgänge," Helmholtz proved that heat was nothing else but disorganized molecular movement. This diagnosis led him to explicitly state for the first time

that entropy could be read as the “measure of disorganization”—exactly the definition Pynchon uses in “Entropy”: “‘Nevertheless,’ continued Callisto, ‘he found in entropy or the measure of disorganization for a closed system an adequate metaphor to apply to certain phenomena in his own world’” (88). This equation of entropy and disorder also serves as a virulent metaphorical subtext for *The Crying of Lot 49*. Via Boltzmann, it finally led to the possibility of fusing thermodynamics and information theory.

Now, in the original German of “Die Thermodynamik chemischer Vorgänge,” Helmholtz’s definition reads: “Entropie als das *Maass* der Unordnung” (972; emphasis added). The German word for measure is here rendered in the quite unusual spelling of its nineteenth-century variant “Maass,” whereas nowadays it reads “Maß.” Given that Pynchon says he has “kept trying to understand entropy” (SL 14) and has read widely about that concept since writing “Entropy,” chances are that he might have come across Helmholtz’s text.

Oedipa Maas, in sorting information, finds that the clues she gathers lead, not to a “pulsing stelliferous Meaning” (CL 82), but to a proliferation of meanings. Thus, her name can be read as reflecting her precarious and ambiguous position with respect to both order and chaos. The Oedipal paradigm of the symbolic order, Deleuze and Guattari’s oppressive “co-ordinates of Oedipus” (55), is held in check by the entropic “Maas[s]”/measure of disorganization, and vice versa. Yet the entropic process does not spare the symbolic, or, by extension, the subject constituted by it. It may be no coincidence, then, that Oedipa’s Oedipal patronym, Maas,² is already in a state of disintegration with respect to Helmholtz’s *Maass*. And it may be no coincidence, either, that it is the signifier “s” that is missing, both Clausius’s sigla for entropy and Lacan’s algebraic symbol for the signifier, the signified and the subject.³

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Notes

¹My translation of “aller Kraftvorrath [wird] in Wärme übergehen und alle Wärme in das Gleichgewicht der Temperatur kommen. Dann ist jede Möglichkeit einer weiteren Veränderung erschöpft, dann muss vollständiger Stillstand aller Naturproceesse von jeder nur möglichen Art eintreten. . . . Kurz das Weltall wird von da an zu ewiger Ruhe verurtheilt sein” (25).

²“Maas” is not, strictly speaking, Oedipa’s patronym, but her married name, the name of her husband, Mucho Maas. Still, it functions as what Jacques Lacan would call a manifestation of “the name-of-the-father.”

³For a Lacanian reading of Pynchon’s novels, see Hanjo Berressem.

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