

How to Write an Essay on Thomas Pynchon

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New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49, by Patrick O'Donnell, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. 174 pp. \$24.95; pb \$9.95.

There's always a risk in putting together a textbook for students. The risk is that it's going to be read by scholars and specialists who may judge it more in the light of their own research interests than in terms of its avowed audience design. The general editor of the series *The American Novel* in which *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49* appears, Emory Elliott, says clearly that the series, including this book, is meant "to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to American novels now widely read and studied" (vii-viii). If we allow for the fact that most English departments still want their students to offer up more or less explanatory/appreciationist essays and term-papers on these novels, then the O'Donnell volume offers five exemplary cases for the intended audience.

I intend the term "exemplary" in a quite literal way. That is, a student equipped with this volume and the *Student Essay Fake-Book* by Gibaldi and Achtert¹ will be in a good position to see exactly how to write an essay on Thomas Pynchon, which—given constraints on length—will, more often than not, mean an essay on *The Crying of Lot 49*. What I'm trying to get at here is that there may be a formula for the genre, much as there's a formula for Mills and Boon romances. Let me say what I think its main constituents are and then how the essays in this book use them. To write a paper on Thomas Pynchon, you should:

A. *Employ one or a number of the following theoretical strategies*

1) "x is like y"—for example, "the reader is like Oedipa," and/or "the Varo painting is like Oedipa's metaphysical condition." This is a major constituent of the formula and should not be overlooked. Since pretty much anything can be made to appear pretty much like anything else, there is a low risk of failure in the strategy.

2) "x means y"—for example, "'Oedipa' means 'Oedipus,'" and/or "'Passerine' means 'pass'er in' [to the Other Kingdom]" (138). This is a less important strategy than the first because it risks going wrong

and leaving the writer with a set of difficult connections to hold down. But at least one example should be attempted per essay.

3) “x corresponds to y”—for example, “Mucho’s three life stages correspond to three types of meaning” (see page 58). This is very like strategy A.1—except that it’s a better vehicle for getting theoretical schemes from outside the novel to fit the novel’s own contents. In this sense, it has quite high priority since it’s a further part of the formula that the writer should try to pass off his or her theoretical speculations as belonging, in fact, to someone called “Pynchon.”

4) “x/y is an indissoluble binary”—for example, “reality is humanly constructed/reality is independent of human construction.” On the other hand, with *Lot 49*, there are a few standardly-available binaries, in case the writer can’t find a new one. Among them are: entropy/negentropy, paranoia/anti-paranoia, order/chaos, meaningfulness/meaninglessness, the Tower/the Void, life/art, original/copy, metaphorical/literal, 1/0. In some quite old papers on Pynchon, the critic was supposed to read these as moral choices for humankind generally and to sort them out, resolve them, or worse, transcend them. These days, a generally popular meta-theory of indeterminism (see B below) means that this is no longer necessary. Instead the writer should observe the principle of “necessary equivocation” (121)—though it is still permissible to write of *this* as an integral part of the human condition.

B. *Get yourself a theorist*

It’s essential to find a well-respected theorist, preferably French—or better still, a group of them—whose concepts can be made to fit in with the speculations or hypotheses you derive at stage A of the formula. Among the popular ones are: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari. Remember: it’s not essential that you understand the concepts you take from these theorists, so long as the *terms* which relate those concepts can be *made to look* as if they fit your own speculations. (You don’t have to understand them because, if you did, you could see that it’s quite difficult to get them to map directly onto the standard tropes of Pynchon criticism.) Moreover, as a writer of a paper on Thomas Pynchon, you are not expected to make sure that any of the concepts or theories you use in this way are commensurate. You can invoke Derrida and still insist on the ultimate human presence guaranteed by the “voice”—especially if it’s “Pynchon’s voice.” You can also mix Derrida with Foucault and not have to worry, for example, about the important theoretical differences between them which emerged around the latter’s *Madness and Civilisation*.² Regardless of these problems, it’s particularly important to use the word

"deconstruction"—but this should not be applied in anything which could be called its "Derridean" sense. Instead it should be considered, for example, to mean the opposite of "construction," or simply to mean "unpacking." (A variety of other readings are detailed below.)

C. *Re-tell highly selected bits of the novel*

Your re-telling should effectively be an adumbration of your theoretical position derived from stage A and supported by stage B. However, you should weave into this some specially reconstructed scenes from the novel. For instance, you should re-tell Oedipa's "dilemma" in trying to track down the connection among the several examples of muted post horns exactly *as if it were* the "postmodern" reader's dilemma in reading the novel itself. This kind of interconnection between your own critical practice and the actions, behaviours and thoughts of fictional characters is particularly useful. It has the ring of "proof" and "exemplification" about it, even though nothing is actually exemplified except the hypothesis or speculation you started with. A note of caution here (in connection with stage D below): you can't just re-tell any old bits of the novel you like. Instead, read at least five published papers on the novel, and you will see that there are stock episodes available off the peg. Particularly important here are the main faves: the Remedios Varo painting episode; the Metzger/Strip Botticelli/Baby Igor seduction scene; the *Courier's Tragedy* performance and aftermath; the Nefastis Machine; and the Old-Sailor-With-The-DTs event. The first is best for a metaphysical argument; the second for a hypothesis about media, impersonation and gender; the third fits nicely with cyclical ideas (the repetition of events in "art" and "life," for example); the fourth is good if you're using theoretical ideas (stage B) from popular philosophies of science; and the last is useful for humanistic theorists who want to show that there can still be touching and soulful moments in the most alienating of social formations.

D. *Don't read the novel so much as quote it*

If you look at the secondary literature, you will be able to glean precisely what is important for professional critics. Most of them, as you should, re-tell central chunks of it anyway. But in particular, there is effectively a "canon" of quotables you should turn to on every possible occasion. For example, no one ever quotes what Emory Bortz's³ nameless daughter says to Oedipa when she turns up at his house; if you quoted that little speech, you'd automatically be seen as incompetent in the writing of Pynchon papers. Instead, you absolutely must quote or refer to at least *two* of the following:

- "the hieroglyphic streets . . . like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above";

- the famous “symmetrical four” possibilities (briefly: the Tristero really exists, Oedipa’s making it all up, there’s a plot to make her think there’s a real Tristero, or Oedipa’s just making it up in her head that there’s a plot);
- “The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was”;
- “‘reality . . . is in *this* head. Mine. I’m the projector at the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also’”;
- “excluded middles” as “bad shit”;
- “The central truth itself” as an “overexposed blank”;
- “As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine.”

Add to this two minor tropes: a) You are advised to point out that a version of the book’s title is to be found in its very last words, and to note that this, for example, “brings us round again” to where we started; and, if possible, b) This should be connected to the idea of “entropy,” whose dictionary definition you should consult before the final write-up.

While my version of the formula can no doubt be read negatively, against Pynchon scholarship, or, Himself forbid, ironically, let me hasten to add that I think *some* version of the formula (perhaps not my own)—or at least some of its constituent tropes—can be found in both the best and the worst writing on *Lot 49*. For example, it can be found in Tony Thwaites’s superbly crafted “Miracles” as well as in Debra Moddelmog’s near-moronic “Oedipus Myth and Reader Response.”⁴ It can also be found in *Writing Pynchon*, for that matter, regardless of its attempts at alternatives.⁵ Critical practices, as my colleague Niall Lucy reminds me, are not merely historical formula-tions; they are also contingent performances. The same formula, in different hands—*performed* differently—will tend to generate different accounts of Pynchon. So the question becomes: how do the contributors to the book in question *use* the formula? Overall, as I have said, in exemplary fashion.

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Debra A. Castillo wants to take on the meaningfulness/meaninglessness binary. Although she doesn’t actually resolve it, there are problematic lapses into a valorisation of the human mind’s position in this dilemma: the idea that, even if the world’s significance *is* only

a mental construct after all, the mind itself is still a potential centre. Hence: "the structuring of meaning from chance clues reflects not the (disputable) order of the world but the ordering process of the individual mind" (43). Nevertheless, even though Castillo is reasonably sure about the mind being a possible centre, she still feels confident about using a very broad range of theories of indeterminacy as an explication and appreciation of the novel. She accordingly invokes Barthes, Derrida, Hartman, Hillis Miller *and others*. There's a deft inclusion of the term "desiring machines" from Deleuze and Guattari on page 37 (though no reference to them). The obligatory mention of "deconstruction" (as "recognition of an inherent stress point") is on page 30. However, on top of this, Castillo also invokes Borges as a kind of literary theorist, making his three requirements (symmetry, arbitrary rules and tedium) the main theoretical concepts through which to read *Lot 49*. Hence Castillo's exemplary re-telling (from her section on symmetry) can be generated in the following form:

There is both too much evidence and too many connections between clues, yet this overabundance of "something" fades into "nothing" (the clues are real, but strangely insubstantial), leaving an uncanny trace trapped in an "excluded middle" between meaninglessness and meaning. The purposeful movement of the detective fades into Oedipa's exhausted overstimulation and her dawning awareness that even the most frenetic mental and physical exertion merely disguises an external stasis and an almost entirely *internal* perception of an advance in the plot. (30)

Note here how the theoretical concept of symmetry from Borges is used to plug into the hypothesised theoretical binary of meaningfulness/meaninglessness. Note also the important insertion of the quoted term "excluded middle" in this process, and of the unquoted "trace," loosely from Derrida. Then note how *Oedipa's* actions and thoughts in the novel can be re-told as "her dawning awareness" of nothing less than a version of Castillo's own starting hypothesis. Q.E.D.

John Johnston works in a slightly different way and a simpler one. He works around the classic problem of indeterminacy stemming from Oedipa's "four possibilities": real or imagined Tristeros, real or imagined conspiracies (see above). To get at this, he invokes the idea of a "semiotic regime" from Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus* (strategy B). He says there are going to be "subsequent references" to this work later in his text (76), but in fact there are only a handful in the last couple of pages. This is perhaps because, unlike Deleuze and Guattari, who, as Johnston says, argue for an "anti-universalist

approach to language" (76), he wants to mean by "semiotic regime" something like an underlying structure. If it can be made to mean *that*, then the rest of the journey is all downhill. All Johnston has to show is that behind the indeterminacies of the Tristero/conspiracy (which he amply and arduously details) lies a hidden structural key, an "underlying coherence" (76), as he calls it. Hence, having quoted the passage about the truth being an "overexposed blank," he goes on:

In these terms the novel thematizes what from a structural point of view is its own condition of possibility. For if Oedipa's movement toward possible revelation can only be characterized as a gradual "stripping" or "de-buffering," then, textually, she always functions as an "overexposed blank," a blind spot or point of articulation through which two heterogeneous series begin to resonate, without ever exactly corresponding. Such a correspondence always remains a possibility, but the revelation it would imply would also entail a collapse or mutation of the novel's fundamental structure of doubt and deferral. (68)

Note here several clever tactics. First, the slipping in of the term "condition of possibility" from Foucault. While, in Foucault, the term is hardly "structural," let alone structuralist, Johnston is able to segue it into his re-telling so it can go proxy for his "underlying structure," his "semiotic regime" and the rest. Second, note the neat use of strategy A.3. That is, while the passage in question says nothing about Oedipa *being* an "overexposed blank" (that predicate is reserved for "the central truth," or its inaccessibility), Johnston makes us think the text says this by saying "she always functions" as one. Then we are taken to the brink of indeterminacy: the series never correspond (read: the world outside its human representation never reveals itself as such—surprise). But that double series, doubt and deferral, is now simply referred to as a "structure." In the end, you find beneath the indeterminacy a determinate structure—*of* indeterminacy! And as a coda: a demerit point to Johnston for failing to mention "deconstruction" explicitly—but this is more than made up for by consistent and extensive use of strategy A.1 in the form of "Oedipa or the reader" (72) and "both Oedipa and the reader" (73), etc.

Bernard Duyfhuizen can be strongly recommended for extended use of strategy D. He takes a single phrase from the novel, "hushing sick transmissions"—a reference to the used-car-salesman's trick Mucho shudders to recall of plying car transmissions with sawdust to hide their noisy faults—and turns it into an interrogative principle. The principle is: how can *cultural forms* be transmitted from generation to generation in a postmodern era which has lost the certainty of

structural-functional accounts of itself? Or: “How do [cultural patterns] establish a status quo that strives always to reproduce itself and, thus, to ensure the unencumbered transmission of sociocultural formations to the next generation?” (79). Clearly this is a pun. There’s no evidence in *Lot 49* that Mucho’s transmissions are cultural rather than automotive, but the theoretical principle can nevertheless (in fact, because of this) be mobilised for a reasonably consistent re-telling along these lines. Then, as with Johnston, we get the neat A.1 or A.3 suture. *Oedipa*, the character, is elided with the means of transmission —this is essential to the working of the strategic re-telling of the plot. Hence it has to be assumed that she, *Oedipa*, is the storyteller, the one, therefore, who *experiences* problems of cultural transmission and whose problematic experiences, as such, can be read for in the narrative itself. Under strategy B, Duyfhuizen enlists the help of Jean Baudrillard, with a little assistance from Walter Benjamin on the subject of storytelling—an interesting case of incommensurability unexplained. Hence the Metzger seduction scene (full marks for selection here) can be re-read as a “cute meet” which has become “destabilized”:

By destabilizing this “cute meet,” Pynchon wants to question the status of the “real.” As Jean Baudrillard writes, “Reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium, such as photography.” We can safely extend Baudrillard’s example to include film and television; indeed, the cultural function of both has been the massive production and reproduction of images that within contemporary culture underscores Oscar Wilde’s adage: “Life imitates Art.” (89)

Of note here are the following: the invocation of a “Pynchon” who “wants” to do something very like Baudrillard; the supposedly “safe” extension of Baudrillard’s mention of “photography” into “film and television,” making the passage fit with the filmic-televisual aspects of the seduction scene; the cryptic assimilation of this to a quite different, Benjaminite, theory of “production and reproduction”; and finally a return to literary culture’s classic life/art binary. The compulsory mention of “deconstruction” is on page 91, where *Oedipa* is said to “deconstruct the erotics of the fashion system” (91–92) in the sense that she *transgresses* the ideal of the scantily-clad woman by applying as many layers of clothing as she can to prevent Metzger from winning at Strip Botticelli. (A new strategy for feminism: when sexually threatened, deconstruct?)

N. Katherine Hayles begins her paper with a move towards strategy A.4: the assertion of an indissoluble binary. Accordingly, she writes

that *Lot 49* has *previously* been read as “a postmodern text, more interested in revealing the constructed nature of consensual reality than in mimetically reflecting a world that exists independent of our perceptions” (97). Hayles, unlike Castillo, refuses to side so clearly with the “mentalist” side of the binary and, instead, announces that “[t]he challenge is to understand how such an ambiguity can be constructed and maintained in a work which exists as a verbal construction, acknowledges itself as such, and yet points beyond to something outside the realm of language” (97). This is a very neat use of A.4 because what it allows is an explicit *non*-dissolution of a famous binary (textualism/realism), which thereby allows for a possible space of realism, “something outside the realm of language”—a truly excellent reintroduction of traditional mimetic realism into a “postmodern” space.⁶ This position is enabled by detailed reference to a theory slightly different from the usual run: Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*. Under Hayles’s reading of the idea of metaphor, it necessarily requires a version of “literal speech” (97)—otherwise metaphor is totalising; everything is metaphor. Hence the linguistic binary (metaphorical/literal) maps on to the ontological binary (constructed/real). With this theorisation in place (stages A and B), the text of *Lot 49* can be read through its central metaphors, again taken from the famous and seminal passages:

The ambiguity of the stripping process [as in Botticelli; see above] is amplified by the play on Narcissus and Echo that pervades this section. Oedipa, like the nymph whose visage and name grace Echo Court, fears that she may be losing her corporeality when she looks in the bathroom mirror and sees nothing. In the heart-stopping moment it takes her to remember the mirror was broken by the hair spray can, she has time to wonder if Metzger will disappear when the sun comes up. Metzger, playing Narcissus to Oedipa’s Echo, finds his reflection in the TV screen, but in a pinch the motel’s reflecting pool and blank windows would also serve. (104)

Again we can note, as with Duyfhuizen and Johnston, the use of strategy A.1: “Oedipa like the nymph . . . ,” though in this metaphoristic reading of the comparison, Oedipa turns out to be the exact opposite of the one who, according to Duyfhuizen, “deconstructs” the standard of the scantily-clad “feminine” prototype.⁷ The mirror, the TV, the pool are combined as reflective surfaces in general and can therefore be mobilised in terms of the central binary dilemma (whether something really exists or is a mere construction of the perceptions). Accordingly, while no definite decision has to be

made (remember) as to which side of this binary dilemma is correct—for it is Hayles who uses the term “necessary equivocation”—Hayles nevertheless shows that the narrative “mirrors” the theoretical dilemma she herself has set up. So “there really is mystery” to the text; it cannot “make up its mind” (121)—but the fact that this is played out so consistently in the narrative itself (that is, if we re-tell it via the structures of the theory) makes it “coherent” (121). Hayles mentions “deconstruction” no less than four times and in four distinct ways: as self-revealing a hidden component (98); as concealment rather than construction-as-revealing (100); as pointing towards one’s own “ambiguous relation to the world” (102); and as “constraint” rather than construction-as-interpretation (120).

Pierre-Yves Petillon does not do quite so well as his co-contributors when it comes to following the formula. Instead, his main interest is with *Lot 49* as a historical document, situated in relation to its American near-contemporaries (*On the Road*, *Invisible Man* and others) and antecedents (Henry James in particular). However, in his overall thesis that *Lot 49* encapsulates the “Zeitgeist” (129) of the US from 1957 to ‘64—where that curious spirit is, in part, derived from the other fictional works—we can say that there is at least a *kind* of theory operating which is to be replayed in the re-telling of the narrative. Along the way, Petillon uses some of the standard strategies. For example, we read that the Tristero “echo[es]” *tristessa* from Kerouac (130); that the orderliness/randomness dichotomy “could be read as a topographical survey of the literary landscape of the fifties” (136); that “49” means both the days of the Pentecost and the days it takes Tibetan souls to reach death (137–38), as well as the years 1849 and 1649 (152);⁸ that “OEDipa” is a reference to the *Oxford English Dictionary*;⁹ that “the novel as a whole might be regarded as a ‘black hole’” (147); and so on through a long list of asserted coincidences and, therefore, presumed “meanings.” The looseness of this thin application of the formula provides for what can only be described as a kind of literary-critical free-association:

A similar case could be made for the many allusive words of *The Crying of Lot 49*. The “horn” may be Kerouac’s saxophone blowing in the night, but it is also an icon from the archival past as it recapitulates the “horn” of the Thurn & Taxis carriers, blown so that the gates of cities would open when they rode in late at night with the mail. Those gates are very much like that “horn’d gate” of sleep “shadows” which the “real” world breaks through. These are the gates dreams break through, or (as previously suggested) the “horn” “between season and season” upon which one is torn. In Eliot’s *Little Gidding*, the world fades on the blowing of this horn,

which would take us, along the typological track, all the way to the shofar of Doomsday. (145)

No doubt: all makes perfectly good sense. Now while “deconstruction” is not mentioned explicitly, Petillon does make rather curious use of Derrida. According to the “Zeitgeist” theory (“signs of the times” [158]), Derrida fits in by virtue of the fact that he delivered a lecture at Johns Hopkins University in March 1966 “exposing the ‘center’ as [a] ghost” (158). From this, Petillon adduces the rather un-Derridean (in fact, counter-Derridean and logocentric) view that “[s]igns and words . . . keep us from revelation” (159)—as though there were a Derrida who argued that originary presence would in fact simply manifest itself *if it weren't for the bloody words getting in the way!* Hence Petillon's final statement of logocentric faith: “perhaps reading Pynchon ultimately means (once all the semiotic shenanigans are over and done with) remaining alert to that particular voice's print and listening ‘in hushed expectancy,’ not only to the words, but to the lull in between, and to the ‘hum,’ out there” (162). Ho hum.

Petillon writes that he does not know whether Derrida has read Pynchon: “perhaps he has. But in any case, it is rather fascinating to speculate on the fact that *The Crying of Lot 49* is, after all, about ‘couriers’ and contains, among other wonders, a micro-history of postal delivery in the Western world, which is exactly what Derrida was later to say he always dreamed of writing and what he would sketch out in *La Carte Postale*” (169). My colleague David Wills would have (and has had) something to say about that.¹⁰

All this is, as I have said, utterly exemplary in terms of what it sets out to do, and I wouldn't want to denigrate it for a minute. What does bother me, on another level, is that the contributors to this volume all want, to distort Graham Greene, “to extract the grain of determinacy” (ideal or real, sometimes mimetic and, in any case, outside the play of language). Where does this desire come from?¹¹ That must be a question for another place and time.

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Notes

¹Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 3rd ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1988).

²Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1979) 31–63. Michel Foucault, “My Body, This Paper, This Fire,” trans. Geoff Bennington, *Oxford Literary Review* 4.1 (1979): 9–28.

³Emery boards—are you getting the hang now?

⁴Tony Thwaites, "Miracles: Hot Air and Histories of the Improbable," *Futur*Fall: Excursions into Post-Modernity*, ed. E. A. Grosz, Terry Threadgold, David Kelly, Alan Cholodenko and Edward Colless (Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1986) 82–96. Debra A. Modellmog, "The Oedipus Myth and Reader Response in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 23.2 (1987): 240–49.

⁵Alec McHoul and David Wills, *Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990).

⁶My hesitations about the term "postmodernism" stem from John Frow's *What Was Postmodernism?* (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1991), which should perhaps be compulsory reading for those who would slip the term into their work so smoothly.

⁷"The face of the nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker's but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either. Oedipa pulled into the lot." Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*. 1966. (New York: Perennial, 1986) 26–27.

⁸A-and $4 + 9 = 13$. Obviously a case of satanism. Niall Lucy refers to this critical strategy as the literary equivalent of listening for back-masked messages on heavy metal records.

⁹What price "oedIPA" referring to the International Phonetic Alphabet?

¹⁰"PLS RECORD BOOK BID LOT 49 STOP J DERRIDA," *Writing Pynchon* 67–85.

¹¹For a range of clues, see Daniel R. Schwarz, "Review Essay: Canonicity, Culture, and Pluralism—A Humanistic Perspective on Professing English," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 34.1 (1992): 149–75.