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The Crying of Lot 49 and the Parody of Detective Fiction

Abstract: *The Crying of Lot 49*, recognized as an important example of postmodern fiction, is a novella by an American author Thomas Pynchon. It follows the story of Oedipa Maas, who encounters a possible underground conspiracy related to postal services. Its themes and structural properties suggest affinities with a detective story genre, although there are crucial differences which actually mark the novel as a parody of the genre. In my article I want to analyze two elements which contribute to the parodic nature of *The Crying of Lot 49*. One is the wide use of various cultural references to the popular culture, history, American society etc.; they are usually satirized by the author as to what contributes to the overall sense of a parody. The second contributes directly to the reversed structure of a detective fiction; the use of entropy as the plot device distorts the unraveling mystery in the novel. Moreover, the reading of the novel as a parody in terms of the characteristics listed above justifies its reputation as a postmodern text.

Keywords: Pynchon, Postmodernism, parody, detective fiction

Harold Bloom, a noted American literary critic, included Thomas Pynchon in a group of four contemporary American writers (along with Don DeLillo, Phillip Roth and Cormac McCarthy) who deserve special praise for their writings (Bloom 2003). Pynchon's work combines elements of black humor and magical realism which contribute to its theme of human alienation in the chaotic, contemporary world. *The Crying of Lot 49* was published in 1966, three years after his debut novel *V* (Britannica 2016).

The Crying of Lot 49 opens with its protagonist, Oedipa Maas, receiving information about the will of her dead, wealthy ex-lover, Pierce Inverarity, in which she was named an executrix of one of his estates (Pynchon 2000, 5). Set in the fictional town of San Narciso, California, the novel focuses on the journey of its protagonist. During

her attempts to solve the case of the ex-lover's will, she accidentally finds clues leading her to a mysterious organization known as "Trystero," which serves a role of an underground postal-service. Peter Freese describes the novel as:

(...) a search for meaning and values expressed through its befuddled heroine's abortive quest for an understanding of self and the world; as a serious investigation into the endangered future of the American Dream hidden behind a relentless satire upon the fads and aberrations in the Southern California of the sixties; and as an exploration of the state of the world through the ingenious employment of the concepts of both thermodynamic and informational entropy. (Freese 1997, 495)

The aim of this paper is to show how Thomas Pynchon's work can be read as the parody of detective fiction. The themes and the general character of the novel recall those of a detective story, although Pynchon's work diverts from the structure of a particular genre. This reading is based on two aspects of the novel, namely its parodic, satirical and comic themes and the concept of entropy, which plays an important role in the structure of the plot and the narration.

According to Linda Hutcheon, parody can be understood as an imitation characterized by ironic inversion and repetition marked by critical distance to the parodied text (1985, 6). It means that parody may preserve elements of the parodied text but with some elaboration of a critical nature, or it can manipulate the latter. She also argues that "[p]arody—often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality—is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders (...) through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Hutcheon 1989, 93). In postmodern literature, parody is often linked with metafiction. In *Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox* Hutcheon claims that metafictional parody is what was called "defamiliarization" in the formalist scholarship:

The laying bare of literary devices in metafiction brings to the reader's attention those formal elements of which, through over-familiarization, he has become unaware. Through his recognition of the backgrounded material, new demands for attention and active involvement are brought to bear on the act of reading. (Hutcheon 1980, 24)

The process of defamiliarization which occurs in metafictional parody is what makes it significantly different from a regular parody:

Parody is, therefore, an exploration of difference and similarity; in metafiction it invites a more literary reading, a recognition of literary codes. But it is wrong to see the end of this process as mockery, ridicule, or mere destruction. Metafiction parodies and imitates as a way

to a new form which is just as serious and valid, as a synthesis, as the form it dialectically attempts to surpass. (Hutcheon 1980, 25)

While regular parody is characterized by “imitation” or “inversion,” in metafiction, a parodic aspect does not dominate the whole text; it is not an end in itself because it complements a bigger theme of defamiliarization.

When it comes to the detective fiction, its definition is more difficult to state clearly, mainly because of the whole range of different variations of this genre. In the most general perspective, it can be assumed that a detective story focuses on a mystery which is then worked upon by a single character or many characters towards its resolving. A detective story usually establishes that “the clues from which a logical solution to the problem can be reached be fairly presented to the reader at exactly the same time that the sleuth receives them and that the sleuth deduces the solution to the puzzle from a logical interpretation of these clues” (Britannica 2007).

The satirical character of the novel emerges at the very beginning of the story, with a short description of the main protagonist: “One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue (...)” (Pynchon 2000, 5). The next paragraph presents an extended description of Oedipa’s everyday errands:

Through the rest of the afternoon, through her trip to the market in downtown Kinneret-Among-The-Pines to buy ricotta and listen to the Muzak (...) then through the sunned gathering of her marjoram and sweet basil from the herb garden, reading of book reviews in the latest Scientific American, into the layering of a lasagna, garlic king of a bread, tearing up of romaine leaves, eventually, oven on, into the mixing of the twilight’s whiskey sours against the arrival of her husband. (Pynchon 2000, 6–5)

This first description of Oedipa is already very meaningful in terms of the portrayal of the character. Oedipa Maas is introduced as a typical upper-middle-class housewife who used to be concerned primarily with the prosaic activities of her steady lifestyle – at least until she got to know about the will of her ex-lover. Her creation as a comic character results directly from the juxtaposition of her previous lifestyle and character with the further unfolding of the plot.

Certain critics, for example, John Barth, objected to the comicality of the characters’ names,⁹ but their comic connotation and concealed significance is an evident quality. Besides Oedipa herself, there is Dr. Hilarius, treating his patients with funny faces he makes and the use of LSD. There is Emory Bortz, the professor of English literature; also, Genghis Cohen (Genghis Khan), Mike Fallopien (a Fallopien tube), Manny Di Presso (“manic depression”), Stanley Koteks (“Kotex” a brand of feminine hygienic products) and others, including John Nefastis, whose name can serve as an anagram for “isn’t safe” (Davis 1972, 368) or derived from “nefarious” as someone evil or impious. (Abernethy 1972, 25)

Apart from the characters, it is worth noting that the novel is filled with many examples of situational humor. One such example is the game of Strip Botticelli led by two characters. Before the game, the protagonist purposely puts on herself many layers of various garments in order to have an advantage in the game. The game culminates in the moment when both the players try to avoid the broken can of hairspray running amok in their apartment that attracts the attention of the group of teenagers who have recently participated in a “surfer orgy (...) involving a five-gallon can of kidney suet, a small automobile with a sun roof, and a trained seal” (Pynchon 2000, 23–24). In another scene, John Nefastis, the alleged genius engineer and creator of the apparatus called Nefastis machine, turns out to be a scammer with an unusual fetish involving making love during the television reports on Vietnam or China (Davis 1972, 368). Situations like these contribute to Oedipa’s frustration and uncertainty about her mental health. Eventually she decides to visit her therapist, Dr. Hilarius. Unfortunately, he does not seem to be in perfect condition either. She almost gets shot in front of Hilarius’s clinic. Having fled to the lobby inside, she is informed by the assistant that “‘He’s gone crazy (...) He thinks someone’s after him (...) He’s locked himself in his office with his rifle’” (Pynchon 2000, 92). Oedipa attempts to approach his office carefully. He eventually reveals to her that he used to work in a Nazi concentration camp and that he believes in being stalked by Israeli agents. Just before the police storm the room, Oedipa tells Hilarius: “‘I came,’ she said, ‘hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy’” to which he answers “‘Cherish it!’ cried Hilarius, fiercely. ‘What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don’t let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be’” (Pynchon 2000, 95–96). In this case, the psychiatrist was to act as the authoritative figure, someone who would help Oedipa to make sense of everything that happened since she got to know about Inverarity’s will. Unfortunately, Hilarius fails her as well; frustration and uncertainty prevail.

Pynchon mocks various aspects of the society and culture of his times. Four boys from the band “The Paranoids,” whom Oedipa encounters during her stay in Inverarity’s motel, function as a satire on “The Beatles” and the youth culture of the sixties. They are all marijuana smokers, they fake an English accent for their songs and a part of their appearance is bangs (characteristic for the aforementioned rock group). “Yoyodyne,” (first introduced in Pynchon’s novel *V*) an aerospace company and also one of Inverarity’s belongings, satirizes the corporate monoliths and the culture that has grown up around them. The extensive use of LSD is present here as well; besides the aforementioned medical purpose, we also have the character of Oedipa’s husband, Wendell “Mucho” Maas, doing drugs. In the later part of the story, his addiction to the drug is exposed during his narcotic delirium when he talks with his wife (Pynchon 2000, 99).

However, it is not only the present that is of interest to Pynchon. The author includes in his novel a parody of a Jacobean revenge play, entitled *The Courier’s Tragedy*. The play itself has a crucial role in the plot because it introduces the reference to

the mysterious “Trystero” on which Oedipa reflects. The play is full of very explicit and violent scenes, described by the narrator:

She had to wait till the fourth act. The second was largely spent in the protracted torture and eventual murder of a prince of the church who prefers martyrdom to sanctioning Francesca’s marriage to her son. (...) While a battle rages in the streets outside the palace, Pasquale is locked up in his patrician hothouse, holding an orgy. Present at the merrymaking is a fierce black performing ape, brought back from a recent voyage to the Indies. Of course it is somebody in an ape suit, who at a signal leaps on Pasquale from a chandelier, at the same time as half a dozen female impersonators who have up to now been lounging around in the guise of dancing girls also move in on the usurper from all parts of the stage. (...) The fifth act, entirely an anticlimax, is taken up by the bloodbath Gennaro visits on the court of Squamuglia. Every mode of violent death available to Renaissance man, including a lye pit, land mines, a trained falcon with envenom’d talons, is employed. (Pynchon 2000, 46–51)

The whole story is presented as a chaotic load of absurd elements which function as a parallel to the novel itself, which never achieves a clear resolution as the reader gets lost in the myriad of information. The grotesque character of the play is stressed by remarks such as “a refreshingly simple mass stabbing” concerning one of the murders presented or the one describing the whole play as “a Road Runner cartoon in blank verse” (Kalaba 2013, 139; Pynchon 2000, 51).

The play and its chaotic nature leads us to the next, crucial characteristic of the novel as a parody of detective fiction: the idea of entropy. In the introduction to his short story collection *Slow Learner*, Pynchon provides a background story explaining his interest in the concept of entropy. After reading various works related to this term, such as Norbert Wiener’s *The Human Use of Human Beings* and *The Education of Henry Adams*, Pynchon recalls that he found “[a] pose (...) congenial in those days – fairly common, I hope, among pre-adults — was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline” (2012). The concept of environmental heat death and the increasing chaos inspired him to write *Entropy*, a short story published in the aforementioned collection. The plot of the story represents a direct metaphor of the concept of thermodynamic entropy: its action takes place in two apartments, one hermetically sealed from the outer world, which is arranged to serve as a stand-alone ecosystem, and the other one where a lively, four-day-long party takes place. At the end of the story, both apartments return to their “equilibrium” (the first one becomes unsealed, and the second finishes the party). Later on, Pynchon himself criticized his initial treatment of such a concept in prose:

Given my undergraduate mood, Adams’s sense of power out of control, coupled with Wiener’s spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness, seemed just the ticket. But the distance and grandiosity of this led me to short-change the humans in the story. I think they come off as synthetic, insufficiently alive. The marital crisis described is once again, like

the Flanges', unconvincingly simplified. The lesson is sad, as Dion always sez [sic], but true: get too conceptual, too cute and remote, and your characters die on the page. (2012, n.p.)

Nevertheless, the importance of the story is unquestionable as it was one of his first employments of entropy as a literary trope and its development is seen in *The Crying of Lot 49* (Freese 1997, 522).

Entropy is a term which was coined in the field of physics in general and thermodynamics in particular. It is defined there as "the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity" (Abernethy 1972, 20). An important thing is that the term was subsequently borrowed for the use in information theory. There, it means "a measure of the amount of information in a message that is based on a logarithm of the number of possible equivalent messages" (Abernethy 1972, 20). What links those two concepts is the fact that in a closed system, whether it is a physical environment or a system of communication, a diffusion of its elements will always occur.

The aforementioned Maxwell's demon is a direct representation of the concept of entropy in the novel. Maxwell's demon is a thought experiment consisting of the so-called demon which controls a two-piece gas chamber. By sorting the faster molecules of gas from the slower ones, he makes one piece of the chamber hotter than the other one, thus decreasing the entropy and violating the Second Law of Thermodynamics (Abernethy 1972, 23).

In the novel, Oedipa is confronted with the Nefastis machine, which is said to serve as the hypothetical Maxwell's demon. The machine's creator explains to her the working of the apparatus, stressing the role of information flow:

Communication is the key (...) The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind. There are untold billions of molecules in that box. The Demon collects data on each and every one. At some deep psychic level he must get through. The sensitive must receive that staggering set of energies, and feedback something like the same quantity of information. To keep it all cycling. On the secular level all we can see is one piston, hopefully moving. One little movement, against all that massive complex of information, destroyed over and over with each power stroke. (Pynchon 2000, 72–73)

Oedipa is instructed to simply stare into the apparatus to induce the operation. Obviously, the machine fails to work. Nefastis tries to take advantage of her frustration and proposes sexual intercourse. The absurdity of the situation contributes to the protagonist's lack of belief in a coherent meaning behind the world which is presented to her. But this disbelief is acquired first in connection with *The Courier's Tragedy*, which takes place earlier in the novel. Intrigued by the play, Oedipa goes backstage to ask the director, Randolph Driblette, what he knows about Inverarity or the Trysterio. Driblette expresses his irritation with Oedipa because of her interest in the text rather than the performance. He retorts:

You don't understand (...) You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. You know where that play exists, not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you're looking for, but — a hand emerged from the veil of shower-steam to indicate his suspended head — in here. That's what I'm in for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares? They're rote noises to hold line bashes with, to get past the bone barriers around an actor's memory, right? But the 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. (Pynchon 2000, 53–54)

The above passage is important because it exposes the dubiety and multitude that is connected with textual interpretation and the loss of the text's original meaning or ultimate truth. Driblette asserts that there is no such thing as an original, transcendental meaning, but rather a whole variety of meanings which emerge in differing contexts. Oedipa's meeting with the director has crucial consequences as she starts to realize that the existence of the Trystero may emerge out of her own perception of reality, of a paranoid belief that there must be an alternative reality underlying all these seemingly relevant traces. This realization leads her to write down a question, "Shall I project a world?" (Pynchon 2000, 56) in her memo book, as if to remind herself that solipsism is somehow unavoidable. Uncertainty prevails in her perception of the unfolding events: "At the stake are the related the issues of reading and interpretation: how can Oedipa be sure that her understanding is justified and how much do paranoia and fantasy play a part in her attempt to make sense of the whole event?" (Chotiudompant 2005, 78).

This moment in the plot indicates a metaphorical parallel between the protagonist and Maxwell's demon, or the general model from the information theory. The entropy in a particular system must persist. Because the accumulative experience of our protagonist is always disparate, truth and meaning change constantly. It develops to the point when they are so far-stretched that Oedipa must finally admit that the ultimate truth cannot be attained.

This assertion accompanies us until the very end of the novel, which is set in a mood of total ambiguity. Oedipa steps into the auction house to finally resolve the case of the "lot 49" and the true face of Trystero, but we do not get the answer – the novel ends before the auction starts. At this highest point of uncertainty and chaos, which was gradually growing throughout the plot, Pynchon exposes the way in which mechanisms borrowed from the structure of detective fiction can be manipulated. A specific inversion occurs here: while the aim of a detective story is to simplify and resolve a complex and ambiguous situation or mystery, Pynchon does the opposite. His novel gradually introduces more and more tangled and enigmatic elements until they reach the point of absolute disarray – or entropy. Even if detective fiction may have different, more or less fluctuating structures and methods of introducing complexities, they almost always end in a solution of the mystery. Such a thing does not occur in *Crying of lot 49*, where mystery is the principal and triumphant element in the story (Chotiudompant 2005, 80). Moreover, the novel's ending ultimately exposes its meta-

fictional character. Vivienne Rundle pays attention to the novel's discrepancy between the narrative and the discourse. Because of Oedipa's paranoiac perspective developing throughout the plot and the uncertainty accompanying its events, the narration stresses the contrast between what we can perceive through the discourse and what is given as the account of the plot. Rundle claims that what takes place at the end of the plot is not characteristic for a regular parody. To the very end, Oedipa awaits a resolution of the accumulating mysteries, what is characteristic for a regular detective story. The parodic subversion occurs at the level of discourse, when the narrative is cut off just before the mentioned resolution. Even at the end of the story, language plays a crucial role and the author wants to bring this to the reader's attention (Rundle 1989, 33).

Although entropy is probably the most important structural element of the novel as the parody of detective fiction, the aforementioned themes of satire and comedy contribute to the strengthening its parodic aspect. It should be emphasized that it is typical of postmodern literature to take various concepts with established properties and assumptions about reality and undermine them with the use of such tools as parody. And this is exactly what Pynchon does not only in *The Crying of Lot 49*, but also in his other works; for instance in *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Mason & Dixon*, both playing with American and world history and presenting a grotesque image of reality (Britannica 2016). The social and historical criticism, along with Pynchon's experimental literary techniques, established his reputation as one of the most innovative postmodern writers.

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