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Cherish Your Fantasy: Thomas Pynchon's Paranoid Meanings and Entropic Dissolutions

This essay reads Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) as one of the most profound articulations of the structure of the paranoid fantasies prevalent in American fiction and socio-political life in the wake of the 1960s. Pynchon stages the way paranoia organises itself as a defence against threats of disorder – figured in the narrative by entropy. In an obsessive series of figurations, *The Crying of Lot 49* contrasts the meaning-making processes of paranoia, in which nothing can be read as accidental, with the meaninglessness of entropic contingency. Rather than oppositions, however, the novella comes to insist that paranoia and entropy appear mutually constitutive. By foregrounding their imbrication, Pynchon suggests that an openness to that which disturbs paranoid desires potentially generates alternative possibilities that break from normative orders.

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If there is something comforting – religious, if you want – about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long.

(Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 434)

Thomas Pynchon's work has long seemed inseparable from and ubiquitous with the theme, or thematic obsession, of paranoia. In the broadest sense, paranoia refers to a belief – often but not always pathological – in the ultimate meaningfulness of existence, where connection is the privileged logic of guaranteeing meaning. As the epigraph suggests, however, Pynchon's interest in paranoia includes “anti-paranoia,” which is not merely paranoia's binary opposite but its structuring antagonist. This pre-

fix denotes an oppositional relation to the paranoia it modifies, yet Pynchon's oeuvre complicates the oppositional relation by suggesting instead a mutually constitutive link: paranoia and anti-paranoia depend on each other for their existence and organisation. I begin with anti-paranoia because it explicitly names, with its oppositional prefix, an antagonistic threat to paranoia that appears in other guises throughout Pynchon's oeuvre. In *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), for example, that which antagonises paranoid thought becomes figured as entropy – “something blind, soulless,” “a brute automatism” (155) – which the novella borrows from thermodynamics and information theory. While the definitions of entropy in these two fields are not compatible, both share the sense that “entropy is a measurement of disorganization” (Schaub 51). Thomas Schaub elaborates on the difference, which hinges on how each field understands “disorganization”: “disorganization in information theory increases the potential information which a message may convey; while in thermodynamics entropy is a measure of the disorganization of the molecules within closed systems and possesses no positive connotation” (51). I am less interested in the scientific discourses on entropy than in its figurative uses in Pynchon's narrative, which exploits its two mutually exclusive senses.¹

Published during the 1960s, *The Crying of Lot 49* satirises some of the central features of American society and politics as being governed in different ways by paranoid structures of meaning-making. The novella implicates a proliferating series of movements and ideologies in such paranoid structures, from Puritan beliefs and the philosophy of Transcendentalism to the novella's contemporary American counterculture movement, as equally dependent on totalizing orders of meaning and interpretation.² In all cases, paranoid structures work as defence mechanisms by imposing meaningful connection when faced with the threat of meaningless contingency, disconnection, randomness, and other principles of disorder.

Paranoia therefore both is and is not the master trope of Pynchon's work; it figures a variety of processes that prioritise meaning, connection, and legibility over non-meaning, disconnection, and illegibility. This structuring antagonism of Pynchon's oeuvre can be read in contrasting two remarks, the first from his most recent novel and the second from his earliest novel. In *Bleeding Edge* (2013), a character humorously suggests

¹ For a reading of entropy that *is* concerned with scientific accuracy, see David Letzler's “Crossed-Up Disciplinarity.”

² For discussions of Pynchon in relation to these movements, see the work of Joanna Freer, Richard Hardack, and Louis Mackey.

that “paranoia’s the garlic in life’s kitchen, right, you can never have too much” (11). This flippant remark jokingly deflates one of the problems with paranoia that Pynchon’s earlier work takes seriously: for the paranoid subject, one can never be paranoid enough, because paranoia exists as a “monopolistic ‘strong theory’” that seeks absolute dominance (Sedgwick 145). As a result, “paranoia reinforces unipolar thought, specifically, a model of oneness as allness” (Apter 371). What is perhaps most disconcerting in Pynchon’s fiction for readers – and, often, for characters – is the inability to manage paranoid structures such that everything, from the organisation of plot to the extra-diegetic implications, seems absorbed by their logic. From a different perspective, though, paranoia is always too much, always excessive, and therefore insufficient, which suggests that this desired “allness” always fails to overcome paranoia’s not-all status. Paranoia’s totalising force works against a primary antagonist, articulated rather concisely in Pynchon’s first novel, *V.* (1963): “life’s single lesson: that there is more accident to it than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane” (300). According to paranoid logic, there can be no accidents since every occurrence only appears legible as part of a larger design. As unbearable as paranoia may seem, its antagonist – whether named anti-paranoia, entropy, accident, meaninglessness, or contingency – appears truly unbearable.

This antagonistic relation reconfigures the classical understanding of plot and literary form. Aristotle defines plot minimally as “the organization of events” (11); in other words, plot depends on a motivated arrangement of actions or incidents. According to George Levine, in a review of Pynchon’s work, “[p]aranoia allows plot – is plot. But to carry the pun that far is to turn narrative into madness” (179). *The Crying of Lot 49* arguably does precisely this: the imbrication of paranoid and narrative plot threatens to destroy any rational organisation of the novella and of the extra-textual reality to which it alludes. Pynchon’s focus on paranoia can therefore be understood to serve a double function, since it refers to both a psycho-socio-political orientation and a literary form. Recently, Caroline Levine has argued for an isomorphism of form and politics: form “indicates an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping” and “politics involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping” (3). Levine foregrounds their structural homology, so form and politics become mutually imbricated. Yet in Pynchon’s work, this imbrication becomes potentially disturbing and problematic. With all the discourses and figures that appear in its narration, *The Crying of Lot 49*, as I will argue in this essay, suggests a radical instability that prevents readers

from settling on a meaning that would allow stable aesthetic judgments and interpretations. Far from repeating debates about Pynchon in relation to poststructuralist discourse or postmodernist fiction, I return to *The Crying of Lot 49* for what it continues to teach contemporary readers about ways of making meaning, as well as for its suggestion that readers need to be suspicious of such meaning-making desires. Instead of insisting on a stable order of meaning, readers are asked to remain open to the possibilities of the meaninglessness of contingency and accident. This does not imply, however, that such meaninglessness should in turn become privileged. Pynchon insists that paranoia and its antagonists offer different orders of totality; a critique of such totalising principles requires the recognition of their essential relationality. Rather than being nihilistic, this position offers a different way to conceptualise the paranoid structures (dis)organising *The Crying of Lot 49*, one that breaks from the normative orders of our organising fantasies.

1. Paranoia and Paranoid Fantasies

Paranoia in its etymological sense simply refers to a parallel knowledge or knowledge constructed parallel to its object. The prefix *para-* suggests “to one side, aside, amiss, faulty, irregular, disordered, improper, wrong” (“Para”). These latter terms form the sense of paranoia “as a pathologizing diagnosis” that defines the paranoid subject as non-normative or deviant (Sedgwick 126). Yet *para-* “also expresses subsidiary relation, alteration, comparison” (“Para”). *Nous*, the root of *-noia*, has a complicated etymology that includes both mind or intelligence and common sense or practical intelligence (“Nous”). Paranoia can be understood as a pathological knowledge, but it can also be understood as knowledge that occurs alongside or beyond other (forms of) knowledge. Michel Serres notes that because “para” names a relation, “paranoia” names knowledge that “is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation” (38). In this sense, paranoia does not necessarily refer to a pathological formation, for any close reading of a text, as a form of knowledge created alongside its primary (literary) object, would be paranoid.

To a certain extent, then, paranoid reading is unavoidable, and the question becomes at what point a close reading becomes excessive. Does paranoid reading in fact name a deviant version of close reading, or is all close reading to some extent paranoid? Paranoia has come to describe a specific mode of comportment toward the world that privileges the dis-

covery of meaningful and legible connections, a privilege especially acute in the socio-political ideologies that permeate *The Crying of Lot 49* and for Oedipa Maas, the novella's protagonist, in her efforts to make sense of the signs she encounters. The association between reading and paranoia provides all the more reason to depathologise paranoia, despite its common association with pathology, an association intensified by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading." Sedgwick famously challenges what she sees as a paranoid epidemic in literary studies, and she asserts that "paranoid strategies" "represent *a* way, among other ways, of seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge" (130). On the surface, Pynchon's work appears to be as anti-Sedgwickian as possible, given the sense in his texts that paranoid strategies become *the* way rather than *a* way of interpretation. The proliferating signs of paranoid implication in *The Crying of Lot 49* seem to attest to "the contagious tropism of paranoia" (Sedgwick 131), such that nothing remains unaffected in its wake. In fact, however, Pynchon follows Sedgwick's critique by pointing to a limitation in paranoia even as paranoia has come to seem pervasive in political and critical strategies.

Sedgwick's challenge to paranoia beginning in the late 1990s responds to a tradition of reading that goes at least as far back as when Richard Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" appeared – first as a radio lecture in 1959 and then as an essay in 1964. Hofstadter borrows the clinical term paranoia "because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that" he has "in mind." For Hofstadter, the paranoid style is connected to "movements of suspicious discontent." These movements always occur as part of a grand contestation:

The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point. (Hofstadter)

In a paranoid worldview, Hofstadter explains that "what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil," so there can be no compromise, only "the will to fight things out to a finish." This absolute or totalising logic of paranoia is one of its essential features, for paranoia involves an all-or-nothing struggle.

While some of Hofstadter's examples may feel dated – such as conspiracies about a Jesuit plot to overtake the world, panics over a global Communist victory, or beliefs in the extensive and dominating network of

free Masons – other comments feel perhaps too timely, as when he writes, “the modern right wing [...] feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion.” Paranoid modes appear across the socio-political spectrum, though as Hofstadter suggests, the paranoid style perhaps lends itself more to conservative ideologies than liberal ones. For anyone who has attempted to reason with someone's paranoid ideology comes to understand, the task proves exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Facts or moral arguments rarely change one's mind. This failure to puncture the paranoid fiction occurs precisely because these modes of reading the world are fantasies in the strict psychoanalytic sense. As Jacques Lacan writes, paranoia produces “*a stable delusional system that is impossible to disturb and establishes itself with total preservation of clarity and order in thought, will, action*” (17, emphasis in original). If you take away or puncture the fantasy, you disfigure the reality it supports, but this fantasy also protects against such attacks in its consistency and clarity.

2. *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Inescapability of Fantasy

Although nearly any text by Pynchon might prove instructive, *The Crying of Lot 49* offers a condensed and explicit articulation of paranoid structures of thought and interpretation. Ali Chetwynd remarks that Pynchon's texts written after *Gravity's Rainbow* and before *Bleeding Edge* turned away from an explicit focus on paranoia to emphasise questions of moral agency. Yet in relation to this latest novel, Chetwynd maintains “that, in Pynchon's post-Cold War novel and in his readers' post-9/11 world, paranoia is ever more warranted, but also ever less ‘worth’while” (34). Chetwynd refers to the fact that surveillance culture has replaced the culture of paranoia of the 1960s and 1970s, but this in fact marks an evolution through which paranoia has become embedded in everyday life. Paranoia can become a light-hearted joke, as in the *Bleeding Edge* citation, precisely because paranoia and paranoid critique have become the “default” (Chetwynd 34). By focusing on *The Crying of Lot 49* at this moment, then, I aim to reflect on the way the novella manages to be “precise” in its “historical context,” while both reaching “back centuries” and continuing to retain “a noteworthy contemporaneity” (Pöhlmann 325). A focus on *The Crying of Lot 49* enables a concise approach to paranoid structures in part because the novella “gives us a central character, Oedipa Maas, a

central plot, a single paranoia, and a predominant paranoid question” of whether the plot Oedipa discovers really exists (Levine, “V-2” 179). Pynchon himself disavowed the novella following its publication and yet it remains one of his most widely read texts, likely because of its formal condensation and brevity.³ Despite this ostensible coherence, however, the novella presents a serious problem to readers in that it insistently mocks the possibility of critical interpretation. As Philipp Schweighauser claims, “[t]he greatest challenge Pynchon’s novel poses to the reader is not to decide which of [its] interpretations is correct but to accept the impossibility of such a decision” (156).

This impossibility gets thematised at the level of its plot, which follows Oedipa Maas, who suffers from increasingly acute paranoia, as she sets out to execute the will of her ex-boyfriend, Pierce Inverarity, a real-estate mogul and capitalist par excellence. As she does so, she suspects that she is entrapped within an elaborate conspiracy working against her and possibly designed by Inverarity before his death. If Inverarity in fact orchestrates all that Oedipa encounters, then he figures the Author-God, establishing the plot that is actualised by Oedipa, who figures the reader. Yet one problem appears in the uncertainty about Inverarity’s role, for the novella also suggests the possibility that Oedipa may be inventing the conspiracy herself, in which case she merely desires an Author-God to stabilise her reading.⁴ Because paranoia works “on the plane of understanding” (Lacan 20), it foregrounds the problem of interpretation, of moving from a chain of signification to a greater meaning. The conspiracy of *The Crying of Lot 49* that demands Oedipa’s understanding largely centres on capitalist property rights and circulation, and it ultimately organises itself around the history of feuding postal services before their suppression by national postal monopolies. It comes to seem to Oedipa that Inverarity has ownership interests in everything she encounters, rendering her task of executing his will impossible. While Pynchon’s other novels often reveal that many paranoid characters are quite justified in their paranoia (and therefore, technically, not paranoid in a pathological

³ In the introduction to his 1984 short story collection *Slow Learner*, Pynchon writes, “[t]he next story I wrote was ‘The Crying of Lot 49,’ which was marketed as a ‘novel,’ and in which I seem to have forgotten most of what I thought I’d learned up till then” (22).

⁴ Sascha Pöhlmann’s discussion of Pynchon stresses that his work exemplifies the turn to the Reader polemically described by Roland Barthes in “The Death of the Author” (327). *The Crying of Lot 49* shows that this shift from Author to Reader provokes a crisis of interpretation.

sense), *The Crying of Lot 49* refuses to remove the ambiguity of whether Oedipa's paranoia reflects an actually-existing plot or creates its own plot.⁵ Given that Oedipa admits, "embarrassed," that she is "'a Young Republican'" (76), this profoundly ambiguous status of her paranoia perhaps speaks to the kind of untethered fantasies characteristic of the party of Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon, as well as the anti-Communist John Birch Society.⁶

In its simultaneous embrace of and challenge to paranoid knowledge, *The Crying of Lot 49* directly confronts the common charge that postmodernist literature is nihilistic.⁷ If the connective work of paranoia is always potentially totalising, and thus indistinguishable from its pathological iteration, then the ability to evaluate paranoid narratives from a neutral position becomes impossible. Similar to Andy Warhol's replication of capitalist ideologies in a work like *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), Pynchon's novella replicates paranoia's movements in order to make them legible to readers. Analogous to Warhol and other pop artists, Pynchon's novella seems to make indistinguishable its aesthetic and the economic principles it takes as its subject.⁸

Complicating this apparent indistinction, however, many of the novella's representations appear in excessive and humorous forms to call attention to themselves and construct a legible difference. Early in the novella, for example, readers encounter the backstory of Oedipa's hus-

⁵ Oedipa often places herself in paranoid situations, and she also frequently "demurs" to ask the questions that could, potentially, de-escalate her paranoid interpretations (90). As Chetwynd argues, "*The Crying of Lot 49* draws narrative impetus from the possibility that Oedipa's paranoia might be delusive" (37).

⁶ See Freer for a discussion of Pynchon's extensive engagements with the contests between leftist groups and political conservatives.

⁷ A strong version of this critique appears in what Elizabeth Ammons ironically calls "postmodern fundamentalism: bedrock commitment to antifoundationalism, indeterminacy, multiplicity, and decenteredness. That is, instability. Nothing to hang on to, nowhere to stand" (3).

⁸ Jonathan Jones' review of *Bleeding Edge* links Pynchon to Warhol, Rauschenberg, and pop art in terms of how his aesthetic insists on the absorption of modern life, but I argue this similarity is already apparent in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Warhol, who named his artist space the Factory, desired to make himself a "machine," and with this desire, he made "explicit that the perfect mapping of the aesthetic field onto the field of political economy coincides with monopoly capitalism" (De Duve 13). Pynchon's imbrication of the aesthetic and the economic in *The Crying of Lot 49* is reinforced by the novella's publication history. Several sections were serialised in *Esquire* (1965) and *Cavalier* (1966), likely due to Pynchon's uncertain financial situation (Serpell 46–47).

band, Mucho Maas, who had worked as a used car salesman. Mucho found “the endless rituals of trade-in” traumatic and unbearable, because “he could still never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else’s life” (14). This cycle appears to Mucho as “endless, convoluted incest” (14). Incest names another closed system, one with taboo connotations; here it is clear that people dealing in used cars remain trapped within a closed, perverse economy. Only the capitalist elite, such as Inverarity, have the means to exchange commodities in a way that produces surplus value and therefore gains them profit. Mucho’s efforts in the used car lot also, of course, earn him a profit, but he is bound to the incestuous exchanges of “each owner” and therefore takes advantage of a limited, closed system (14). The incest metaphor in fact suggests a boundary and closure to this system of exchange, where Inverarity’s capacity for expansion seems endless precisely because his exchanges resist the closure that circumscribes Mucho’s former life.⁹ In his bleak formulation, Mucho’s used car lot therefore participates in a static, closed system of exchange that figures one of the novella’s many encounters “between thermodynamic and informational entropy” (Schweighauser 151). In the thermodynamic sense, a used car exchange exhibits entropy in that nothing remains available for work, while in informational terms, the accumulation of cars by Mucho exemplifies the entropic increase of information. Inverarity’s real estate investments, in contrast, manipulate the economic system to produce a surplus, getting something out of nothing. Opposed to Mucho’s “futureless” vision of exchange, Inverarity’s capital makes its own future. Depending on genre and form, a narrative may follow either of these orientations. Pynchon’s novella, then, asks readers to mark the distinctions between different kinds of ostensibly closed systems, different economic logics, as well as between narrative and economic orders. Readers, like Oedipa, may feel entrapped by the paranoid/narrative plot, but the text’s language and style offer readers “a double vision that allows [them] to see” Oedipa and themselves “in tandem” from an implied position beyond the narrat-

⁹ This distinction between Mucho and Inverarity could be read in relation to Marx’s two circuits of capital (247–257). In the first, the worker sells a commodity, their labour-power, for wages, which allow them to purchase the commodities necessary for survival (C-M-C). In contrast, the capitalist invests money to produce commodities that then lead to surplus value, which can be re-invested to continue the circuit (M-C-M). The ideal reduction is M-M, that is, “money which begets money” (256).

ive entrapment (Serpell 53). While everything in the narrative feels open to satire because of its parodic principles, not everything gets flattened into a capitalist equivalence – Warhol's "a coke is a coke is a coke." In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa cannot always confirm this tautological equivalence, which spurs her paranoid speculations, asking whether a given sign really is just that given sign. The ethical weight of the text therefore emerges from the differential relations within the diegesis as well as its relation to its readers (Serpell 50–54).

Yet this ethics presents an intense challenge to readers, which appears explicitly in the novella's increasingly bleak, perhaps even futureless, plotting. Near the end of the novella, and out of desperation, Oedipa returns to her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius. Throughout the narrative, Hilarius has been a vehicle for Pynchon's extended satire of Freudian psychoanalysis. He also routinely makes racist jokes, and in this late scene, it is revealed that he is, in fact, a so-called liberal Nazi hiding in California.¹⁰ The liberal qualifier may seem oxymoronic, but *The Crying of Lot 49* includes an elaborate treatment of California as that most liberal and most conservative of spaces, a microcosm of American fantasies, which often turn out to be nightmarish. The novella remains timely for how insistently it demonstrates that the seemingly opposed positions of liberal and conservative often appear to be mutually constitutive or entangled such that they often become indistinct.¹¹ Even though Hilarius is not a figure to be trusted, his comments in this brief exchange with Oedipa, perhaps ironically, prove instructive:

"I came," she said, "hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy."

"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 138)

¹⁰ Pynchon makes similar critiques throughout the novella. Early in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the narrator refers to Inverarity's impersonation of "a Gestapo officer" (16). Hilarius' reference to "Liberal SS circles" further stresses a political indistinction (137). Later in the narrative, Oedipa encounters Winthrop Tremaine, a Swastika salesman with a lucrative business practice in California (149).

¹¹ As Lorenzo Ervin puts it, Democrats and Republicans "claim to be dramatically different in program and personalities, but are in fact two sides of the same coin: liberal and conservative" (73).

While not all fantasies are created equal – Pynchon certainly satirises, for instance, the fantasies that ground fascist politics and celebrates an anarchic sense of freedom – Hilarius nevertheless offers a profound insight when he suggests that fantasy is all we have.¹² Without our fantasies, we “cease to be” (138). In other words, there is not a reality beyond our fantasies; those fantasies *are* our reality. If the beyond of fantasy is not reality, then it can be framed instead as real accident, contingency, and senselessness, a certain real materiality that thwarts us and our fantasmatic consistency. The anxiety of the novella stems from the inability to know which fantasy is worthy of being cherished. The fantasy Oedipa seeks to cure herself of has to do with her suspicion that she is part of an all-consuming plot coordinated, in part, by Inverarity. But without this suspicion, Oedipa would not be able to actualise or construct the plot of the novella and readers would be left not with a surplus of sense or meaning but with a lack of it.

3. Entropic Dissolutions

The novella repeatedly figures this lack and this senselessness as entropy, producing a figurative economy that is “coherent” though not always “consistent” (Hayles 121). On the first page, Oedipa is tasked with confronting Inverarity’s vast and complicated assets and “sorting it all out” (9). The text thus establishes, from its outset, the sorting logic that will be figured in exemplary fashion by Maxwell’s Demon, who defeats entropy and provides a central metaphor in and of Pynchon’s text. Readers first encounter this demon – originally the thought experiment of James Clerk Maxwell – when Oedipa visits another character in Berkeley who claims to have invented a machine with “an honest-to-God Maxwell’s Demon” (86). In Maxwell’s thought experiment, the Demon “sat and sorted” air molecules in a box in such a way as to construct a cooler and hotter region. Instead of two regions with an equal – that is, random – distribution of molecules, one region has slower, colder molecules while the other has faster, hotter molecules. As a result, the two warm regions become di-

¹² In a timely reference to the psychedelic movement and various experiments with LSD (often government-sanctioned), Hilarius also supplies Oedipa’s husband, Mucho, with the LSD that makes him “less himself and more generic [...] a walking assembly of men” (140). Yet with this change comes “a serenity about him” Oedipa had “never seen” (141). For more on this element, see Freer (65–79).

vided between a hotter and colder region. Since the Demon only performs “mental work,” rather than work in the thermodynamic sense, he violates the Second Law of Thermodynamics by “getting something for nothing, causing perpetual motion” (Pynchon 86). Depending on one’s understanding and field, entropy measures that which is either available or unavailable for work, while in this instance entropy measures the total amount of energy remaining the same (Grant 97–111). This is a principle of chaos or randomness as equilibrium or sameness. Within the logic of the text, Mucho’s used car lot appears as an entropic system, where Inverarity’s capitalist world – in which Inverarity appears to be a literal Maxwell’s Demon – defeats entropic laws to get something out of nothing.

This antagonism between paranoia and entropy revises initial critical approaches to the novella. Deborah Madsen notes that many early critics “emulate Oedipa’s quest” (62); however, “where Oedipa continues to seek the absent centre to which she assumes all of her clues are leading, critics of the novel tend to nominate one of the explanatory discourses mobilized by the narrative as this unifying centre” (63). My return to Maxwell’s Demon and this antagonism of paranoia and entropy, however, is meant precisely to avoid positing a unifying centre. Near the end of the novella, Oedipa reflects that “[s]he had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided” (181). To see paranoia and entropy as opposed forces works to guarantee the law of the excluded middle, yet the novella keeps insisting on the failure of either/or logics. Another crucial distinction in my reading is that while Oedipa oscillates or “alternates between paranoia and its undoing” (Serpell 54), the reader is encouraged instead to recognise that these are not two independent positions but co-extensive. In other words, the novella’s seductive and fantasmatic suggestion that the choice lies between totalising meaning and absolute contingency is displaced by its repeated insistence that the two are not opposed but mutually constitutive. Part of what makes the novella so appealing to some and so frustrating to others is that every one of its proliferating gestures toward a central organising principle – its focalisation on Oedipa or its mobilisation of generic conventions, such as those of detective fiction – operates as a way of disavowing its very lack of such a principle. Even the introduction of Maxwell’s Demon and the discussion of entropy appear belatedly in the text. As a result, these figures of entropy can be used as governing ways of framing the text’s preoccupations, but they could also be read as yet another set of tropes striving to name something that keeps eluding the text’s grasp. This catachrestic misnaming is, perhaps, what prompts the narrator to describe “the act of metaphor” as “a thrust at

truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was" (129). Readers are similarly unable to locate themselves, for any position becomes undermined by the text's proliferating movements. Entropy, then, metaphorically names the various contingencies of the novella, but because it cannot fully become *the* governing figure for these contingencies – for if it could, the contingencies would be absorbed into a higher order – it remains a catachrestic misnaming.

Entropy likely looks rather familiar to literary critics due to its resemblance to trope. Etymologically, entropy refers to "transformation" or "turning." The prefix *en-* suggests "within," which relates to the transformation of energy or to the "transformation-contents" within a closed system ("Entropy"). As Pynchon notes in his introduction to *Slow Learner*, "people think I know more about the subject of entropy than I really do" (12). In fact, Pynchon continues, "my grasp becomes less sure the more I read" (14). Pynchon's introduction of course involves a playful rhetorical performance that involves a series of self-deprecating critiques of his own writing, as well as disavowals of his abilities as a writer. Yet Pynchon's claim to know less about entropy the more he reads about it in fact reveals how complex the subject is in the history of science. Rather than simply register Pynchon's difficulty with a complicated scientific concept and his inability to "know" what entropy means, then, I suggest this difficulty stems from the very implications of entropy as related to randomness and chaos, both of which undermine meaning and knowledge, in two opposed senses (thermodynamics and information theory). Entropy, as that which "turns" within a system, such as the system of signs constituting the plot of a novella, in fact points to both the ground and the limit of paranoid knowledge production.

Pynchon's narrative links entropy to paranoia in several ways. Initially, the narrator discusses how "the equation" for entropy in relation to "heat-engines" "looked very like the equation for" entropy in relation to communication (105). This resemblance "was a coincidence" (105). Entropy itself registers – and in *The Crying of Lot 49* might be understood as a figure for – coincidence, a possibility that the paranoid subject denies, often by bringing the supposed coincidence into a field of connections and thereby revealing its deeper, motivated nature. Since Oedipa (like Pynchon) finds all of this rather difficult to understand, she is told to think of entropy as "a figure of speech [...] a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. [...]he Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true" (106).

Oedipa, as the one “sorting” Inverarity’s assets and “business interests” and as the one who “would give them order” and “create constellations,” figures “Maxwell’s Demon” (90, 86). Oedipa gets something from what might be nothing, since her paranoid interpretation of what she encounters generates and sustains the movements of the plot readers are following without knowing the intentionality of the signs she reads. In other words, Oedipa can never be sure whether her reading is in fact a misreading or an overreading.

Oedipa’s attempts to interpret these signs also embody Hofstadter’s argument that “[t]he paranoid’s interpretation of history is distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone’s will.” Much of the novella takes place in the town of San Narciso, which playfully suggests the narcissism, as well as the solipsism, that informs Oedipa’s mode of relating to the world. Throughout the novella, Oedipa desires “always some first or last event that would resolve life in terms of something or nothing, meaning or meaninglessness” (Hartman 211). The frequent uses of “as if” in the novella point out that the paranoid specialises in converting “as if” into “as such,” getting, like Maxwell’s Demon, something from (potentially) nothing by converting the groundless fictional structure into a grounded ontological fact.

The Crying of Lot 49 has thus been recognised as one of those “Fables for the Critic” (Hartman vii), and Oedipa exemplifies Rita Felski’s “scholar-turned-sleuth” who “broods over matters of fault and complicity; she pieces together a causal sequence that allows her to identify a crime, impute a motive, interpret clues, and track down a guilty party” (7). Just as we, as literary critics and readers, are figured by Oedipa, we are also, like her, figured by Maxwell’s Demon. For when we read a text, we are all “sorting demons.” If paranoia insists on necessity – that is, on the meaningfulness of relations – entropy insists on contingency – that is, on the meaningfulness of accidents, which can only be ascribed meaning through the work of interpretation or narrative plotting. Entropy and paranoia perpetually disturb each other, yet where entropy in thermodynamics forecloses the possibility of paranoid movements, entropy in information theory adds more noise that needs to be sorted. There is, then, an asymmetric relation characteristic of a structural antagonism. Entropy, in both of its senses, constitutes the internal threat to any paranoid reading and fantasy, and yet entropy also mobilises more paranoid fantasy constructions.

The earlier distinction between pathologised and depathologised paranoia is important, given how seamlessly Oedipa slips from a minor suspicion to what reads like a pathological paranoid fantasy.¹³ Yet Oedipa is unable to confirm her inaugural suspicion. More disturbingly, “readers of *The Crying of Lot 49* [...] remain, like Oedipa, caught in the truly post-modern predicament of [...] a state of undecidability” in which “binary distinctions dissolve” (Schweighauser 156). In a novella where “excluded middles” are “bad shit,” readers and Oedipa find themselves with nothing but this situation (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* 181). In other words, readers – and Oedipa – are unable to verify the basis of paranoid fantasy. Oedipa faces intense doubt throughout the narrative, always prompted by the threat emerging from “a gentle chill” in “ambiguity,” that is, in uncertainty or undecidability, in something that resists being read (71). In these moments of doubt, Oedipa often experiences vertigo (156). She can never be certain whether her paranoia is merely a fantasy projected onto the entropic randomness of the world or wholly justified in registering a vast conspiracy. This either/or structure – used to great effect throughout the novella – registers a paranoid mode of thought, one that seems inescapable, as the novella’s only recourse is to expand this logic into longer chains:

Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream [...] *Or* you are hallucinating it. *Or* a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate, [...] so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. *Or* you are fantasying some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull. (Pynchon 170–171, emphasis added)

This enumeration points to the effects of entropy as paranoia’s structural antagonist, whose persistence prompts ever-intensifying paranoid responses. Oedipa’s paranoia is never secure enough to ensure the immediacy of meaning in the signs confronting her, but she keeps acting and reading as if the conspiracy exists, thereby reconfirming her paranoid

¹³ John Johnston similarly attempts to distinguish paranoia from its sense as a “mental aberration,” instead seeing it “as a basic type of organization of signs in which the semiotic or signifying potential is dominant” (47). Johnston considers the text as a whole, however, as “a schizo-text” that “presents a disjunctive synthesis of diverse and incompatible views.” This synthesis is enabled by “its underlying coherence as a specific regime of signs” that depends “on the endless proliferation of signs calling for endlessly repeatable acts of interpretation” (76).

subject position. In other words, paranoia aims to convert or exchange the free play of reading into a rigged match, such that there are “no bad surprises” (Sedgwick 130). Entropy’s force, however, breaks the all-or-nothing structure of either/or, introducing the need, in the logic of information theory, for an ever-expanding set of possibilities: “the noise that disturbs processes of communication, makes them less predictable, and introduces informational entropy to interrupt the repetition of the same” (Schweighauser 152). Oedipa’s mistake is to accept, or persist in desiring, this either/or logic, despite its limitations; she continues to believe that behind the signs she encounters “there would be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth,” thereby avoiding the possibility of “excluded middles” (181). A fantasy, then, of one extreme or another.

4. Conclusion

Oedipa’s exhausting and ultimately futile struggles confirm Hofstadter’s final claim that the paranoid “is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.” Yet Pynchon’s novella suggests in addition that the real suffering appears when our fantasies break down to reveal the mindless, brute contingency that paranoia, whether pathological or general, seeks to manage, order, and, ultimately, disavow. Over the course of the novella, Oedipa’s dreams blend with her reality; however, the real threat contained in these dreams is not that she is caught within a grand plot but that such plots are ultimately empty and merely constructed to dissemble that emptiness. Early in the novella, Oedipa recalls a trip to Mexico City with Inverarity, where she encounters a painting, *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961), by Remedios Varo. The ensuing ekphrasis reveals Oedipa’s solipsistic reading. Regardless of the various interpretations of Oedipa’s response to the painting – either the painting becomes “a parable of her own condition, her sense of insulation or isolation from the world,” or “the suggestion that the self is constituted by the world” (Madsen 54) – this reading positions her as a central point of reference, thereby exemplifying her “ethical myopia” (Serpell 52). Oedipa seems incapable of a disinterested aesthetic judgment: the painting only has meaning in relation to Oedipa herself. This solipsistic view is not necessarily paranoid, but it does organise many of Oedipa’s paranoid thoughts, for she believes in the necessity of a

meaningful role for herself and that which she experiences.¹⁴ In Oedipa's fantasy, the threat of the void, that is, of entropic meaninglessness, which eradicates Oedipa's solipsistic or narcissistic modes of relating to the world, appears as the true terror she cannot bring herself to face. If such an act were possible, facing up to the possibility of emptiness and refusing all-or-nothing injunctions might generatively disturb the paranoid fantasies unleashed, in nightmarish fashion, across the American scenes satirised and restaged throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*.

¹⁴ The link between paranoia and solipsism (or narcissism) in Oedipa's particular case is made explicit in one of the many crude, but satirical, "jokes" throughout the novella: nearly every male character sexually objectifies Oedipa almost immediately upon meeting her. When she finds herself in a male gay bar, however, the narrator notes, "[d]espair came over her, as it will when nobody around has any sexual relevance to you" (116). Here the loss of significance, of having no meaningful or recognizable place – whether positive or negative – generates the negative affect of despair for Oedipa.

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