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Recommended Citation
Hawes, Worth, "Postmodern Epistemology In Foucault And Pynchon" (1993). All-College Writing Contest.
https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege_writing_contest/56

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Postmodern Epistemology in Foucault and Pynchon

By Worth Hawes

I. Introduction: Postmodernity

Brian McHale distinguishes postmodernity as the contemporary period in which the questions of ontology provide the ‘dominant’ (10). In other words, the questions of ontology—what world is this? what am I? how is this world? how am I? etc.—provide the paradigm, or the arena, to or in which the most significant creative and critical endeavors of the period adhere. I suppose it is strange then, or at least ironic, that I would choose to focus on the epistemological implications of the postmodern age. Epistemology, as suggested by McHale, better characterizes the dominant of the Modern period (9). Yet, also as his theory asserts: the dominants in previous periods are taken up as ‘residuals’ in subsequent eras. So, indeed, it is not as if the modern period laid to rest the questions of our knowing.

The pursuit of knowledge in the postmodern era is an unparalleled course in frustration. The frustration primarily stems, as would be expected, from our ontological hesitancy. Heidegger’s *Seinsfrage* was not answered; we know neither the world we live in nor do we understand the system(s) of significance in it. Therefore, we lack an epistemological center, an ultimate ground or referent from and to which all signs can be invested with secure intelligibility. Lacking this centering, this anchoring, the symbols that we encounter on the road to ‘truth’ have nothing to fix them in a conceptual position. As Derrida, via a strong affinity for DeSaussure, has developed: significance is the product of difference; the word alone is empty, devoid of positive value, lacking a center. But such a situation is not simply remedied by placing our isolated word in a richer context. A word seeks it meaning in other words, which in turn seek their meaning in even more words and so forth and so on. The ontological uncertainty of the world, the de-centered nature of postmodernity, as we see, founds more than just existential ambiguity. When the center is bracketed, all lesser centers are equally held in question: the center of the ‘world’ goes and so goes the center of the word. The result is a free-floating sphere of perpetually deferred meanings, interpretations, and conclusions about

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1 This paper was originally written for Prof. Philip Simmons' English 326-Postmodernism.
our world. The result is a system of understandings that, lacking any concrete antecedent, must seek its authority by inciting its subjects to speak for it. We find ourselves enmeshed in a terrain of words and meanings to which we cling as a refuge from the superfluousness of existence, but simultaneously, we grow paranoid as these de-centered symbols vacuously move about in a new kind of play.

To expose the epistemology of postmodernity, I want to employ two key figures of the period: Michel Foucault and Thomas Pynchon. Foucault is perhaps the epistemologist extraordinaire of postmodernity. His theories have been seminal in the contemporary debate over the nature of Western understanding. Pynchon, in a different manner, fleshes out the postmodern condition in literary manifestations—and for our purposes, particularly in _The Crying of Lot 49_. Through these two primary sources, this essay aims to present three aspects of any knowing in the postmodern context: 1. the terrain of de-centered systems of meaning, 2. the self-subjugation and power games of understanding, and 3. the position of subjectivity. And ultimately, I seek to explain the genesis of postmodern paranoia—'the normal hermeneutic activity in disease' (Kermode 12).

I chiefly want to develop the categories from a reading of Pynchon but first, for a theoretical introduction, I turn to Foucault:

II. Foucault: Knowledge and Power

In postmodernity, knowledge and power can no longer be viewed as opposing terms. Knowledge, as that which approaches the 'truth', is the positive effect of power. For Foucault, power circulates in the discussion of or in the discourses about truth. The traditional conception of truth as the shelter from the despotic potential of power is denied in favor of a much more insidious symbiotic model of power and truth. Foucault dramatically states it this way:

Truth isn't outside of power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth...truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, not the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is
sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (“Truth and Power” 131)

Or in this manner:

[The truth is] a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and the operation of statements. Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. (133)

Again, in our conventional way of understanding truth, we equate it with freedom. To feel the impact of Foucault, one could simply replace ‘truth’ with the word ‘freedom’ in the previous passages. One would see that power would continue to dominate ‘freedom’. Power is no longer that specter which stifles the custodians of truth. These custodians are but henchman of ‘modern disciplinary power’. Power’s strength is nowhere better seen than in our belief that the truth is liberating, ‘liberation’ becomes merely an agent in power’s greater attempts to totalize all of the Western discursive tradition. It is only a ruse that leads us to think that the truth is liberating. In buying into such a logic, we only propagate the thrall of power. And it is this inciteful aspect of power—our oblivious speaking on behalf of power—that has allowed it “to penetrate everything, everywhere” (Cresap 361).

Knowledge/Truth is dictated at any given point by a dominant discourse which, in perpetual conflict with competing and alternative understandings, must subvert and bury its opponents. Strikingly, the ‘truth’ is manufactured in a project of exclusion, not in the traditionally suggested mode of inclusion. Here, the dialectical tensions, and ‘life and death struggles’, are never overcome; the final nails are being put into the coffin of Hegel’s synthesizing optimism. An ‘all-encompassing truth’ is a contradiction in terms.

To seek the truth, to seek meaningful order and classification, is to subjugate oneself—this theme is the heart of Foucault’s Weltanschauung. “We have become the victims of our desire for rationality” (361).

Why, in fact, are we attached to the truth? Why the truth rather than lies? Why the truth rather than myth? Why the truth rather than illusion?...how is it that, in our
societies "the truth," has been given this value, thus placing us absolutely under its
thrall? ["On Power" 107]

Since Kant, humans 'under the thrall of truth', via the 'human sciences', have
made themselves their own subject—both subject *qua* 'willful actor' and *qua*
citizen at the mercy of the ruler'.

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom,
a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it
happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already
one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses
and certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals. The individual,
that is, is not the *vis-a-vis* of power; it is I believe one of its prime effects. the individual
is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent which it is that
effect it is the element of its articulation. the individual which power has constituted is
at the same time its vehicle. ["Two Lectures" 98]

In postmodernity, where intelligibility must accept its self-enclosed nature,
where we are witnesses to a new "depthlessness" (Jameson 9), where we can
only perceive surfaces, we (those intellectually inclined) are engaged in the
domination of ourselves as we try to establish a sure and fast architecture of
significance/depth. For Foucault, all structures bind us and even pervade the
way that we understand ourselves: "it is impossible to conceive of a point of
reconciliation, within or outside history, where we would be free from the
necessity of constituting ourselves as the simultaneous subjects and objects of
power" (Cresap 362). In Heideggerian terms, there is no longer an *eigentlich*
(typically translated as 'authentic') self that can transcend its social existence.
An 'outside' of society does not exist. Foucault has a model for the manner by
which the domination of ourselves is internalized: Jeremy Bentham's
'Panopticon'—a prison so constructed that eventually the prisoners become
their own surveillants, their own guardians. Foucault's world is, indeed, an
insidious network of self-imposed constraint; yes, even in 'isolation' we inhabit
a prison of our own making.

Foucault's method, at different times called 'archaeology' and 'genealogy', is
primarily concerned with the study of texts and the methods by which they
'contain' truth and power and the methods by which certain texts are denied
either. He is at all times 'digging up' those excluded discourses which chal-
lenge the dominant one. ‘History’ would have us believe that it is, itself, a continuous stream of intellectual progress. By exposing submerged discourses, Foucault sets out to reveal the rhetorical and political maneuvering that such an assertion of continuity requires.

Foucauldian power, symptomatically, circulates in a postmodern de-centered fashion. Power operates without a definite subject (“The Confession of the Flesh” 202). It has no ultimate referent; power has no ‘author’. It sublimely lurks in the assumptions of Western society. Or in other words, power speaks of ‘truth’, but does not ‘know’ what this term ‘actually’ is.

Now that the arena has been exposed, I turn to Pynchon and the figure of Oedipa Maas, to the postmodern landscape of Southern California:

III. Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*

As I stated in the introduction, there are three main themes in postmodern epistemology on which I want to elaborate. Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* takes up all three themes very well. First, I want to paint a picture of the given terrain of Pynchon’s story. Second, I will show how the effort to understand this terrain is, as Foucault tells, an excursion in self-subjugation. And finally, what does Pynchon tell us about the nature of subjectivity? In an examination of Oedipa Maas, we will see rather clearly the de-centering of the interpreting subject—and subsequently, the de-centering of ourselves as readers. Let us start where we ended with Foucault:

III.A. De-centered Systems of Information and Significance

*The Crying of Lot 49* is a story about how meaning is constituted and given to the would-be knower. Oedipa Maas is the (un)lucky and unsuspecting executor of real estate mogul Pierce Inverarity’s immense estate. Shortly after taking up her duties, she stumbles upon an underground postal system. And as the story progresses, she finds herself, paradoxically, closer to and farther from understanding and finding the real and central ‘truth’ of the WASTE system—which in turn is a metaphor for the ‘truth’ of postmodern America and the ‘truth’ of the postmodern self: “the more we think we know the less we know we know” (Tanner 175).

What at once entrances her and stands in her way is the multiple de-centered systems of information circulation. By this, I mean that all the symbols
or clues that she comes upon are either explicitly empty or are more subver-
sively empty in the perpetual movement of deferral. Either a sign signifies
nothing or a sign leads her to another, and that sign to another, and that sign to
even another, and so forth and so on endlessly. Explicitly, the story is tem-
pered with blank T.V. screens, Muzak radio, and a secret postal system in
which no ‘real’ messages of ‘substance’ are sent. It is no mistake that the most
significant symbols of would-be truth in the novel are a muted post horn and
WASTE. In these examples, the emptiness of communication is radically
asserted (see Kermode 11 and Tanner 182). These systems are but suggestions
as to the nature of all communication and understanding. At the core of
Pynchon’s world, there is nothing to be uncovered.

Oedipa gets taken in by a curiosity. She latches onto the clue of the muted
post horn and the acronym WASTE. She hopes to find the central truth, or
Trystero, of the secret postal system. One clue, however, leads endlessly to
another. The post horn shows up in the oddest places: on the bathroom wall,
on a gang member’s jacket, on counterfeit stamps. The word Trystero first
spuriously appears in a play (about communication), then in a history book,
and then in a children’s rhyme. The story of Beaconsfield cigarettes sounds
like the Wharfinger Jacobean Revenge Play. How are all of these elements
linked? That is Oedipa’s question. What is the truth behind all of these ran-
dom things? The clues, as best as Oedipa can see, only refer to each other, for
nothing ever appears to be ‘behind’ them—“small epiphanies but no apocalyp-
tic revelation” (Tololyan 491); the clues can never seem to amass any depth.
Yes, information is being circulated, but what is its meaning? Depth is a
chimera; these symbols are finally as empty as the explicit examples of insub-
stantial information circulation.

A number of passages eloquently portray the situation. Oedipa looking at
residential subdivision:

The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the
same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even
less about radios than about Souther Californians, there were to both outward patterns a
hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There seemed
no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her...; so in her first minute of San
Narciso, a revelation also just trembled past the threshold of her understanding. (24)
Revelation will for Oedipa always be just out of her grasp. The ordering of the world, like the radio circuit, seems pregnant with some kind of truth and meaning that it should be able to communicate, but it cannot. “She discovers the promise of ever-elusive, deferred meanings, but no solution” (Tololyan 490). Like Foucault’s subjectless power, there is no ultimate referent, no center, no “epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (118). As the clues to the mystery only refer to each other:

Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irretrievably, leaving an overexposed blank where the ordinary world came back. (95)

*The Crying of Lot 49* is always playing on the boundary between the intent and inability to disseminate meaningful understanding, the boundary between plenitude and vacuity: “Is there a structure or only deceptive galaxies of signifiers?” (Kermode 11). Hints are everywhere but what is their significance? And if there really is no significance, are they really ‘clues?’: “You could waste your life...and never touch the truth” (80).

### III.B. The Pursuit of Truth as Self-Subjugation

The quest for Truth is a quest for domination. Oedipa is on a quest for truth. As we have learned from Foucault, truth rests on exclusivity and not on an all-emcompassing inclusivity. The wild landscape of Oedipa’s experience in Southern California could not possibly be brought under one inclusive principle of coherence. As a critic notes:

*Control* becomes the central issue of his work, even though Pynchon wants to refuse to favor order and hierarchy, the categories of rationalized control. His attempts to deny his work a center that controls it lead to an ironic and yet familiar self-entrapment: they result in a work where a decentered and diffused control becomes the omnipresent issue...[Pynchon’s work] ends by enacting the anxiety of mimesis, not its self-assurance. (Tololyan 489)

In a complete reversal of the conventional detective story form, *The Crying of Lot 49* moves from a state of relative order to one of chaos (Tanner 175). Yet,
this is the postmodern predicament: the closer we get to the truth the farther we get from it (see Karl 362). To deny this paradox is to fall into the tyranny of traditional understanding. To favor only the truth means to deny those aspects of human experience which challenge the ordering principles of our/power's choice. Pynchon creates (or mirrors) a world in which he dares the reader to come up with an interpretive conclusion. The text, itself, offers no sure conclusion, no central truth. Behind any paradigmatic conclusion, a monopoly, would lurk a threatening shadow—a Pierce or a Trystero system.

Oedipa is engaged in a quest which in one sense she is ‘counted in before she could count herself out’ (Poirier 58) and in another, she is her own driving force. At any rate, she is defined by her quest; and in the Foucauldian world that she is in, she is subjugated by her desire for knowledge. She craves to be the ‘sensitive’ that can reverse entropy (and death) and increase order (Poirier 56). At one point, Oedipa stumbles into The Greek Way bar. She sees the muted post horn on somebody’s lapel, and following in the footsteps of the Greeks who ever so valiantly originated the pursuit of truth, she becomes more curious and more constrained in the mystery: she thinks that she should leave but she cannot; she feels compelled to continue her quest.

But why? “Had she remained indifferent or had she settled for surfaces, not probes, she would have become as counterfeit as those around her” (Karl 360). Oedipa cannot remain a disinterested by-stander, because as soon as she glimpses the first glimmers of a potential conspiracy she realizes that ultimately it is her own ‘sanity’ (for lack of a better word) that hangs in the balance. As much as The Crying of Lot 49 is about Oedipa’s external search for the Trystero origin, it is as well an internal search. In a Foucauldian sense, she must make a subject of herself. She compulsively traces her clues, because, until she has the truth of Trystero, she does not know her own state of affairs. She does not know if she is a reliable witness to herself; she might be hallucinating the whole affair.

III.C. Subjectivity—Who is Oedipa Maas?

Oedipa, ultimately, has no one to turn to. All signs may be pointing to Pierce—he may be the author of the ‘joke’—but, parodically, like any good author of the postmodern era, he is dead. And even when his voice is alluded to he speaks in variety of dialects, he calls himself the ‘shadow,’ and he is calling from some unknown position in the world (11-2). And with hindsight,
we really cannot be sure that he is transmitting any ‘real’ message; all remains conjecture. The other players in the game have also deserted her: Mucho has become addicted to acid, Driblette has killed himself, and Dr. Hilarius has become psychotically paranoid (a rather humorous parody of the strength of psychoanalytic hermeneutics, and all interpretive schemas for that matter—if we did not know by now, they clarify nothing). Yes, Oedipa is forced to recognize the potential solipsism of her being in the world. All of those who could help her recede into “some kind of private universe which has no room for any relationships” (Tanner 180). This retreating in turn leaves Oedipa in her own private California; to save herself from this isolated fate she must find to what all the symbols seem to be pointing.

Can the reader of The Crying of Lot 49 make better of Oedipa’s situation than she can herself? No! We hardly know Oedipa at all outside of her quest. As far as the reader is concerned, she remains dressed for her game of ‘Strip Botticelli’—dressed in multiple layers of clothing (interpretations)—throughout the novel. The reader cannot make heads or tails out of the four possible options of the truth that are given at the end of the book: Is Trystero a real conspiracy? Is Trystero a hallucinated conspiracy? Is it simply a hoax master-minded by Pierce? Or is it a hallucinated hoax? (See 170-1). Oedipa and the reader never know: 1. the truth of Trystero, Pierce’s estate, America, or 2. the reliability of Oedipa as a knowing subject. As the novel remains open-ended, any conclusion is arbitrary and exclusive.

As a number of critics have pointed out, Oedipa is a reader (see Kermode 12 and Quilligan 125)—she reads plays, letters, notes on the bathroom walls, histories of the postal system in Europe. We, too, are readers. Might this book be suggesting that we too will face the same problems when we try to make out the message of the book? Well, I can only answer that one way: Yes. (The novel’s premises reject any firmer conclusions, any simple “Yes’s”. ) Might the book also be suggesting that in our postmodern landscape of contemporary America, our individual searches for our Trystero, the truth, we will only find ourselves in the same wild goose chase, in the same quest for order which only presents us only with a vertiginous disorder? Again, I say Yes. Ironically, The Crying of Lot 49 mocks its reader. Oedipa is analogous to the reader of the book in which she is the main character. To ask ‘why does Oedipa continue her search?’ is tantamount to asking ‘why did I read The Crying of Lot 49 in the
first place?' and further, 'why am I writing this paper?' Oedipa and the reader of her book both seek understanding of a world upon which they have both haphazardly stumbled—willingly and/or unwillingly. But thanks to an acquaintance and his promise of some payoff—in Oedipa’s case, a deceased real estate mogul and the promise of his estate, or in this reader’s case, an English professor and the promise of understanding postmodernity (or perhaps its only the promise of a grade)—we both remain in the hunt for a truth which never appears.

IV. Conclusion

In the beginning of the novel, Oedipa remembers a picture, *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* (*Embroidering the Terrestrial Cloak*), that she had seen in Mexico City when she was there with Pierce:

...a number of frail girls with heart shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests were contained in the tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (21)

For both Foucault and Pynchon this is a perfect rendition of the world that we live in. We are helplessly holed up in our ivory tower of rationality trying to illuminate the world with the brilliant colors and flourishes of our conceptual embroidery. Ultimately, however, the landscape remains a mute plenum. The world has nothing to say to us; it has no ‘truth’—just an over-abundance of experiences, which we, against the advice of our happy and ignorant complacency, set out to order.

As *The Crying of Lot 49* brilliantly depicts, the postmodern situation is one that stems from self-conscious isolation, constriction, and doubt. The center of the ‘world’ is denied and then our ability to communicate via the ‘word/symbol’ is de-centered and finally the self is de-centered as well. All these elements have become mere surfaces with no support.

Oedipa’s “Shall I Project a World?” is the ultimate cry of desperation in a postmodern world. Of course if the answer is affirmative, then we can never perceive an authentic response. We only continue to project our answers. Such is Oedipa’s plight: the call is made into the dark, but there is no re-
sponse, not even an echo—glimmers of daylight only reveal a powerful plot of alienated and alienating surfaces. Our fate as reader is similarly hopeless. Oedipa cannot speak to us, for we continue to question her ability to recognize the nature of her reality, and the narrator offers no solution either. But again, this is the horror that we face everyday in postmodernity—the endless play of differing and deferring.

The paranoia of postmodernity originates in the loss of a center. Authentic ‘truth’ cannot be found in the world, the word/symbol, or the self—they are all denied status as a center. What could possibly hold the truth in place when its referent is denied? As Nietzsche told us, now that God is dead, everything that is possible is permitted. A hundred years later, we are in the tempest of this statement’s implications. Foucault and Pynchon show us that it is only a massive conspiratorial effort of intellect that would have us believe otherwise.

Works Cited


