California Paranoia in Germany: Teaching the Political Aesthetic of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*
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**ABSTRACT:** While teaching as an exchange lecturer in Mainz, Germany, students misperceived me as a Californian, leading me to an unexpected responsibility for the state's history and culture. As one of my courses turned to Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, students' questions about Californian politics motivated me to break with the traditional reading of *Lot 49* as a postmodern novel, whose play with textual references precludes any interpretation distinguishing between "fiction" and "history." Instead, I developed an approach to teaching *Lot 49* that situates the novel's interpretive difficulties within the historical and political terrain of its contemporary California. At first encouraging students to participate in the paranoid tendencies of *Lot 49*, floating freely between its many interconnected references and signs, we drew attention to the novel's aesthetic and the way it encourages this paranoia. Calling our own reading practice into question, we then explored the politics of paranoia, complicating the familiar narrative of California's New Left with the less commonly taught history of the New Right. By letting students piece together this political backdrop in the novel, they discover for themselves what their earlier paranoid reading had obscured. Concluding with a portable lesson on the politics of literature, I explain how this approach to *The Crying of Lot 49* emphasizes an aesthetic politics: encouraging students to become conscious of the experience of reading a text—both what entices them and what remains at first unseen—and situating that process of reception within the social space of the novel.

I recently returned from a yearlong position as guest lecturer at the Johannes Gutenberg University, in Mainz, Germany. Teaching in their American Studies Department, rather than in my home department of English at the University of California, Davis, I had the opportunity to reframe JGU's core courses on twentieth-century American culture through the study of literature. While I was well briefed on the departmental curriculum, and built my classes accordingly, I was surprised to discover that teaching American literature to students in Mainz involved a shift in my own identity as a teacher as well. For my students, who encountered me as a visitor from the University of California, I seemed an emissary from the Golden State, that shimmering fantasy built up for them by Hollywood, the music industry, and primetime television. In truth, I have been a resident of California for a mere five years, growing up largely in New England and moving west only for graduate school. Neither I, nor any lifelong NorCal resident for that matter, would identify my speech, dress, or demeanor as typically Californian. Nonetheless, from the beginning of my yearlong
tenure in Mainz until its end, I was consistently asked whether I surf, whether LA traffic was truly so bad, and whether we Californians really says "hella" as a casual emphatic. At first, I approached these questions as the friendly misconceptions they were; I explained that, as a land mass, California was slightly larger than Germany itself, and that one would no more equate a resident of Santa Cruz with one from Orange County than one would a Berliner with a Bavarian. I gradually realized, however, that by translating these regional differences into local terms I was only reinforcing my students' underlying assumption. Somehow, upon arriving in Germany, I had become a Californian.

Had this curious experience been limited to episodes outside of the classroom, it would amount to little more than a private anecdote. As I began to reach the heart of my first semester of American studies courses, however, my unanticipated responsibility for Californian history changed both my personal and pedagogical orientation to the literature I was teaching. The most instructive such occasion arrived when one of my courses turned to Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). As my German students immersed themselves in the paranoid network of signs that saturate Pynchon's California, they turned to me as someone who could presumably help them contextualize this text's challenging aesthetic. What began as an innocent case of mistaken identity now motivated a wholesale shift in my reading protocols for this major American novel. No longer satisfied by the conventional treatment of *Lot 49* as a seminal postmodern text, resisting any stable interpretation, I took up the responsibility for my students' confusion, and began to scrutinize the political value of Pynchon's paranoid aesthetic. As my students and I began to explore the politics of paranoia, we complicated the familiar narrative of California's New Left with the less commonly taught history of the New Right, a presence lurking in the background of *Lot 49*. In what follows, I transcribe our movement from blindness to insight as a series of lessons that allow students to piece together the novel's political terrain and to discover for themselves what paranoid or postmodern reading practices obscure. Prompted by my own shifting identity as a teacher, my approach to *The Crying of Lot 49* builds towards a portable lesson on teaching the politics of aesthetics: encouraging students to become conscious of how the text shapes their experience of reading, and learning to reflect upon their own shifting values as readers.
Like Pynchon's later novels *Vineland* (1990) and *Inherent Vice* (2009), *The Crying of Lot 49* recreates the atmosphere of Southern California in the mid-1960s and the state's central role in the cultural turmoil of that era. Oedipa Mass, a frustrated housewife seemingly drawn from the first pages of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), returns from a Tupperware party to discover that her former lover, one Pierce Inverarity, has died under uncertain circumstances, and left Oedipa in charge of his considerable set of real estate holdings. Once Oedipa departs the tepid security of her domestic life in "Kinneret-Among-the-Pines" (likely a nod toward Carmel-by-the-Sea), the somewhat conventional opening gambit of this inheritance plot/detective narrative soon becomes wildly complicated. Oedipa's quest to make sense of Inverarity's estate leads her through the inner workings of Yoyodyne Industries, an aerospace contractor for the U.S. military, to UC Berkeley's literary circles, and an absurd Jacobean revenge play called *The Courier's Tragedy*, and finally places her on the textual trail of a shadowy and centuries-old organization called "Tristero," who operate at once as a private postal service for underground movements and (possibly) as anti-revolutionary assassins. Each forged stamp, mysterious symbol, and epistemological doubt only lead Oedipa to more of the same, and the reader of *Lot 49* quickly comes to share her growing paranoia about whether or not these various plots connect—and, if so, about who exactly is doing the plotting.

Because *The Crying of Lot 49* directly thematizes the multiple and contradictory interpretations of its own paranoid network of signs, Pynchon's novel has long served as a canonical text for postmodern literature. As a frequent touchstone in the work of Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, and Fredric Jameson, to name but a few, for many scholars and instructors Pynchon has become "the quintessential postmodern author" (Pettman 261). Though *Lot 49* will likely remain Pynchon's shortest, most taught, and generally most approachable novel, the book has nonetheless been championed as a streamlined compendium of the tropes and tribulations which have come to be termed 'postmodern': self-reflexivity, undecidability, floating signifiers, the collapse of high into low culture, depthless characters, epiphanic multiplicity, historical confusion, proliferating micro and counter-narratives, and the (failed) attempt to cognitively map the semiotically saturated present. (Pettman 261-262)
While the density of this list perhaps betrays the difficulty involved in defining "postmodernism" in the first place, "[n]o matter how it is characterized," Brian McHale insists, for postmodernism "the fiction of Thomas Pynchon appears to be universally regarded as central to its canon" (97). Indeed, according to the dominant postmodern reading of the novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* embraces an "endless proliferation of signs calling for endlessly repeatable acts of interpretation" (Johnston 76).

It was the "Postmodern Pynchon" that I myself was taught, some years ago, and which I had thought to introduce to my students in Germany. I was caught off guard, however, when my students immediately and completely sidestepped postmodernism's stubborn rhetoric of "undecidability" and insisted upon finding out more about the historical backdrop of the novel, and about the political climate of midcentury California in particular. Given the novel's play upon textuality and skepticism about interpretative certainty, postmodern critics have long maintained that "it would be a mistake to assume that there is any definitive connection to be made between 'fiction' and 'history' by comparing [Lot 49] – in its moment of production – to the selected particularities of its cultural millieux" (O'Donnell 1). For several weeks, however, my course on twentieth century American literature had precisely been insisting on digging into fiction's "cultural millieux" and exploring the politics of aesthetics. When we arrived at *Lot 49*, my students refused to entertain the scare quotes now keeping the words "fiction" and "history" at an ironic distance. A novel, they justly insisted, does not get the final say on how we are to read it.

Then came the rub: as a representative of California, they reasoned, surely I could explain what in the state's history had made it the breeding ground for such a singularly paranoid and evasive novel. Until my students placed this pedagogical demand on me, a demand born of the performative role of "Californian" that I had stepped into by transplanting myself and my curriculum to Germany, I was—to be frank—prepared to do no such thing. Only by embracing my new performed role as an instructor, and setting out to meet my students' expectations of this persona, did I finally break with the frustratingly insoluble postmodern reading of Pynchon's novel, and develop an approach to teaching *The Crying of Lot 49* that situates its interpretive difficulties within the historical and political terrain of its contemporary California.
For any undergraduate course's first session on *The Crying of Lot 49*, I encourage withholding secondary material, and simply allowing students to participate in the growing convolution and paranoia of the text. The simple exercise of parsing a brief dialogue, such as Oedipa recalling her last conversation with Pierce, will suffice to demonstrate how Pynchon thickens his prose with richly connotative, yet ultimately opaque allusions, offering the reader more descriptive detail than they can properly organize. Some readers will immediately embrace exploring Pynchon's wide range of cultural references and playfully suggestive character names, but instructors should expect a solid contingent in any class to feel genuine frustration with *Lot 49's* refusal to settle into a more conventional plot structure. The ambition of my first session is to acknowledge these affective responses to the text, and to establish our collective awareness of how the novel's aesthetic quite deliberately produces such effects.

One reliable technique for making this point is to play the Pynchon "name game," working through the hidden meanings potentially latent in names like "Oedipa Mass," "Mucho Mass," and "Pierce Inverarity." While some students may cling to a first, intuitive reading of such names, as a whole, a class should produce enough different interpretations for the instructor to be able to point out the general condition: Pynchon deliberately encourages the pursuit of meaning without providing his reader a reliable payoff or sense of closure. For my German students, particularly amused by the character "Metzger," I read the entry from J. Kerry Grant's *Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*. Building upon the literal German meaning of "butcher," the note suggests this name's potential association with alternative postal services: "Because of the peripatetic nature of their trade, German butchers in the Middle Ages were given letters to carry from village to village: Metzger hence came to signify 'temporary postman'" (Nicholson and Stevenson 94, cited in Grant 11). My German students expressed a mixture of surprise and skepticism—not one had ever heard of this tradition. My intent in sharing this note, however, was neither to affirm nor to refute its claim. Rather, sharing a scholarly entry such as this one with students helps demonstrate how thoroughly Pynchon’s texture of references influences his readership. From the novice to the most seasoned critic, *The Crying of Lot 49* causes its audience to reproduce Oedipa's obsessive pursuit of textual "clues." By initially allowing the class to bounce freely between interconnected words, images, and allusions in the story, drawing
attention to the text's paranoid aesthetic, our first day arrives at an all-important awareness of what the novel is doing to us as readers.

What propels my pedagogical approach to Lot 49 forward is introducing the possibility that this paranoid aesthetic might have a politics. In our second session, students come to class having read excerpts from Richard Hofstadter's seminal study The Paranoid Style in American Politics (1964), published the same year that Lot 49 is set. Although acknowledging that any political position can adopt a paranoid style, Hofstadter links the tendency to imagine "a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiracy network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character" with the cyclical return of the Far Right in America (12). In a series of claims that students should have little problem linking with Lot 49 in an open discussion or in more targeted group work, Hofstadter suggests that the paranoid attitude "is nothing if not 'scholarly' in technique," beginning with apparent facts and distorting them into an exhaustive "conspiratorial fantasy," which eventually becomes "more coherent than the real world" (3).

With Hofstadter's argument in hand, the class is prepared to re-evaluate the paranoid reading strategy that we had embraced on our first day. To emphasize this sense of reappraisal, I like to return to an early moment in the first chapter when Oedipa looks out upon the "vast sprawl of houses" that makes up San Narciso, an L.A. suburb where much of the novel's action will take place (Pynchon 24). This "ordered swirl of houses" reminds Oedipa of seeing "her first printed circuit," and while she confesses to knowing "even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" (24). Oedipa's "odd religious instant" is one of a relentless series of moments in the novel that encourage paranoia in her and in the reader—the desire to see "concealed meaning" uniting otherwise disparate phenomena (24). By losing themselves in the promise of sudden meaning and in the feeling of anticipation or frustration it produces, however, students have likely missed the concrete details composing Oedipa's vision. Comparing a circuit board to a mass of suburban housing, Oedipa's analogy not only links two pieces of Pierce's gargantuan estate, but moreover situates both as part of the distinctive landscape of Southern California in the mid-1960s. As the center of the American aerospace industry, hundreds of thousands of people traveled to the area in search of high-paying jobs with military contractors.
Between 1950 and 1964, "about six out of every ten new jobs created" in the region were in "the aircraft-missile-electronics sector" (Walsh 1152). As Oedipa marvels at the ticky-tacky houses signifying this area's exploding population, she notably passes "the Galactronics Division of Yoyodyne Inc.," Pynchon's fictional contribution to this booming regional economy.

Students now begin to recognize how the paranoid aesthetic of *Lot 49* has obscured attention to the historical backdrop of the novel, and can begin to delve deeper into the relationship between the two. Here, Casey Shoop's recent article "Thomas, Pynchon, Postmodernism, and the Rise of the New Right in California" will be of service as background reading for the instructor, with excerpted sections useful to share with students in class as well. Challenging the tenets of postmodern reading, Shoop argues that the paranoia in *Lot 49* cannot simply be taken as "an allegorical exercise in hermeneutic uncertainty" (65). Instead, the novel's paranoid aesthetic emerges from and participates in the "precise cultural-historical situation" in which it was produced: Southern California was "the place where the Right reacted most powerfully" to the growing influence of the New Left and the developing crises of the 1960s (65). Although easy for readers to miss given the novel's diffuse details, the traces of this extreme right are increasingly evident as *Lot 49* progresses. Flushing a few of them out with my class suddenly framed the novel's drive to produce paranoia as a potential effect of California’s burgeoning New Right movement:

- Genghis Cohen wears a Barry Goldwater sweatshirt in the year when "Mr. Conservative" ran for president on a ballot opposing the Civil Rights Act; although he obviously failed to win, Goldwater's campaign was instrumental in introducing former actor Ronald Reagan into the spotlight of Californian, and later national politics (94).
- Mike Fallopian, an employee of Yoyodyne, explains the muddled origins of the Peter Pinguid Society by casually mocking "our more left-leaning friends over in the Birch Society" (50); the John Birch Society is, of course, a longstanding right-wring fringe group, who earn repeated mention in Hofstadter's study of paranoia (50).
Later, Fallopian acknowledges his connection to Winthrop Tremaine, owner of a government surplus store who also happens to be in the business of selling rifles, swastika armbands, and SS uniforms on the side (149).

Reading this last scene in particular, along with the episode in which Oedipa's psychiatrist confesses to having conducted human experiments as a Nazi during World War II, had a profound effect on my class in Germany. Those who had any familiarity with Californian politics in the 1960s associated the state with the New Left, the Free Speech Movement, and the struggle for Civil Rights. Discovering this emergent Far Right, not simply as a hidden pattern in the novel, but as a genuine yet unfamiliar narrative from Californian history provided my students a powerful synchrony between text and context.

Admittedly, not all classrooms may share my students' sensitivity to Far Right politics, brought on by a lifetime's education on the legacy of German nationalism. Nor will every instructor teaching The Crying of Lot 49 have the mandate or desire to devote time to the shifting political spectrum of the 1960s. Nonetheless, I maintain that the core of this approach to Pynchon's novel does not hinge upon any particular classroom environment, for it does not finally emphasize the historical backdrop supplied by the instructor, but the more fundamental process of students learning to recognize and to question the text's influence upon their own experience of reading. Indeed, I think it would be unwise for an instructor to insist upon any of the above scenes as the definitive details hidden within the plot of Lot 49, as some kind of key that unlocks the rest of the novel. Rather, what the experience of teaching Pynchon in Germany helped me recognize is how students can learn to inscribe their own reactions to a novel within its political aesthetic. In this case, that meant my class growing disconcerted as they found out that a threateningly consistent pattern of Far Right activity had remained unseen to both Oedipa and to themselves during their paranoid stage of reading the novel.

An instructive example of this blindness comes when Oedipa travels to UC Berkeley. As a "Young Republican," Oedipa nostalgically recalls "Secretaries James [Forrestal] and [John] Foster [Dulles] and Senator Joseph [McCarthy], those dear daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so temperate youth" (76, 104). Berkeley, however, no longer belongs to these fraught conservative figures and the status quo of the 1950s, that "time of
nerves, blandness and retreat (103). As Oedipa walks around the epicenter of the nascent Student Movement, Berkeley seems to her more akin to those Far Eastern or Latin American universities you read about, those autonomous culture media where the most beloved of folklores may be brought into doubt, cataclysmic of dissents voiced, suicidal of commitments chosen—the sort that bring governments down. (103-104)

As she wanders, Oedipa observes "posters for undecipherable FSM's, YAF's, VDC's" a series of acronyms that, a hundred pages into Pynchon's densely allusive novel, the average undergraduate will likely join Oedipa in leaving unsorted (103). In fact, this unlikely trio conceals a sharp political discrepancy. These signs, as McCann and Szalay remark, "belong not just to the Free Speech Movement and the antiwar Vietnam Day Committee, but also to the insurgent New Right organization Young Americans for Freedom" (443). By letting New Right and New Left go undistinguished, Oedipa and the reader risk accepting that the difference between these real organizations matters less than her pursuit of the strange textual legacy of the Tristero. In one of the few moments when Lot 49 offers a stable, realist description of Oedipa's motives, the narrative confesses that growing up in the 1950s "had managed to turn young Oedipa into a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts" (104). If students hope to pass judgment upon Oedipa's indifference to practical politics and upon her blindness to the threat of an extreme Right, they must be willing to judge the paranoid reading practice that they initially shared with her.

With the class now aware that Oedipa's paranoia may be, if not actively promoting, at least passively enabling the growth of a New Right, on our last day with Lot 49, I challenged my students to make an argument about the overall political position of Pynchon's novel. Although the essay may be too dense for lower-level undergrads, my upper division class read McCann and Szalay's provocative article, "Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left," which contends that Lot 49 actively promotes a retreat from concrete politics into countercultural mysticism. Linking Pynchon to novelists like Don Delillo and Toni Morrison, as well as intellectuals like Michel Foucault, McCann and Szalay indict the "magical thinking" of this generation of "New Left" writers for contributing to an erosion of faith in welfare state reform, professionalism, and broader social activism, and
thereby aiding a national shift into the libertarian neoliberalism of the 1980s. After reading this article, my students now had the means to link the political aesthetic of Pynchon's novel to either the New Right or the New Left. After some healthy discussion, however, nearly everyone in the class decided that the novel does not finally affirm its paranoid connectivity as a political position any more than criticize it. My students' ambivalent conclusion has been acknowledged by Thomas Schaub, who in attempting to situate *Lot 49* alongside other California novels of the era concedes that trying "to plot Pynchon's cultural politics along some spectrum from left to right" remains a fraught enterprise (32). Although my students were uncomfortable with a book that confuses and obscures the origins of New Left and New Right, they maintained that the novel seemed uninterested in championing either program.

Anticipating this equivocal result, I concluded our brief classroom debate by leading into a broader lesson on the different ways of approaching the politics of literature. I drew a column of three layers on the board, filling in the bottom two levels with "biographic" and "programmatic," which I introduced as two familiar ways of talking about politics and literature. Biographic readings, I explained, either begin with assumptions about an author's political values, or end by making a claim about what they might be. Programmatic readings, in turn, attempt to stamp literature with a fixed political label: this novel is progressive, that poem is reactionary, and so on. In our own approach to *Lot 49*, however, we had broken with both of these approaches. We had increasingly distanced ourselves from Oedipa's tolerance for paranoia, but had seen no real grounds for treating her as an analog for Pynchon himself. Nor, in turn, had we been able to conclude that *The Crying of Lot 49* was a definitively New Left text, as do McCann and Szalay, or a New Right text for that matter. Instead, I suggested, our approach to *The Crying of Lot 49* had focused on the aesthetics of politics—the third box in my column. We studied our own experience of reading the text, both what enticed us as well as what remained at first unseen, eventually calling our paranoid tendencies into question, and then evaluating the politics of our aesthetic response by mapping its consequences in the social world of the novel. In this way, I explained, a novel does not need to argue on behalf of one camp or another to sharpen our awareness of the political—of the values that exist in a text and of our relationship to them. While Pynchon's paranoid novel makes a particularly effective case
study for becoming conscious of one’s own reading practice, I encouraged students to carry this lesson on the different approaches to reading the politics of literature into future coursework.

That it took me transplanting my teaching from UC Davis to Germany in order to recognize and respond to Pynchon’s California finally dramatizes a much broader lesson about the way that teaching the politics of literature can hinge upon moments that emphasize recognizing and responding to shifts in one’s perspective as a reader. The field of reception studies has long emphasized how both individual and group readers have their interpretive assumptions shaped by their geographic, institutional, and demographic environments. These influences, however, often work in ways that may be far from self-evident to the readers themselves until they change by will or by accident. My newfound approach to *The Crying of Lot 49* would never have taken shape without the shift in perspectives occasioned by my year of teaching abroad, and without the critical engagement—and friendly curiosity—of my students at JGU Mainz. Although the taxonomy of reading practices I sketched for them draws upon my reading of theorists like Pierre Bourdieu and Fredric Jameson, it was the new identity brought about by students misperceiving me as a Californian that motivated me to set aside theoretical debates and jargon, and to offer a practical model for helping them respond to their own experience of *Lot 49*’s political aesthetic. One important value of the pedagogical approach I have outlined is that, instead of handing a fixed political interpretation down from above, students reproduce the process of discovery, generating a political reading of the novel by responding to their own changing relationship to the text. In this way, my students discovered what I myself realized through the experience of teaching abroad: whether we choose to reflect upon it or not, the act of reading always carries a politics in tow.
Works Cited


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