

Marc Shkurovich, BK '19 – [marc.shkurovich@yale.edu](mailto:marc.shkurovich@yale.edu)

ENGL 127: Readings in American Literature – Prof. John Durham Peters

Assignment: We were to compare and contrast any two works/authors we read in class on a single theme. One author was to be from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the other from the 20<sup>th</sup>. The essay was to be around 2,500 words.

Essay title: *License to Build: Readership and Authorship in Pynchon and Melville*

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## License to Build: Readership and Authorship in Pynchon and Melville

“Why... is everybody so interested in texts?”

– Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

“...it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious  
in your curiosity touching this Leviathan.”

– Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

*The Crying of Lot 49* shares much with *Moby-Dick* in how they engage with us: both novels have the capacity to frustrate—their thematic scope spills far beyond the page counts; both novels *move* in multiple ways—their plots consist of journeys that mimic our exegetic quest; both novels reflect an authorial omnipresence—their propensity for self-reference establishes a direct, meta-level of address between us and the text. Melville and Pynchon both interrogate human knowledge and information exchange, raising questions of futility, madness, and incompleteness. They each blur the line between reader and writer, explicator and originator—they ask us to do as the novels’ characters strive to do: occupy each of these roles at once. That Melville wrote before the Civil War and that Pynchon wrote during the Cold War matters little as we look back from the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the lesson they teach when taken together—that in order to glean meaning from life, you must generate it for yourself—might be patently postmodern, but its relevance is universal.

Doomed pursuit is the engine driving both novels: the Trystero conspiracy is to Oedipa as *Moby Dick* is to all aboard the *Pequod*. Both are shrouded in mystery, out of sight for the majority of the novels, yet they dominate attention. Importantly, neither Trystero nor *Moby Dick* can be apprehended; they refuse to be reduced to a single position in our minds—it is the richness of their symbolism that makes them objects of obsession, after all. In two books that demand interpretation, these repositories of significance are also conspicuous as black holes of communication—they do not reciprocate the many attempts to understand them; they mean what we, along with Oedipa and Ishmael, take them to mean. The only chance for “success” in these novels is to salvage personal value from epistemological precariousness.

It follows that *CL49* and *Moby-Dick* hinge not on their finales but on how we arrive at them. Pynchon and Melville structure their narratives so as to encourage this attitude, though they do so in distinct ways. All occurrences in *CL49* are filtered through Oedipa's eyes and thoughts; Pynchon uses free indirect discourse to investigate the burden that falls on an individual seeking to answer: what does it all mean? Melville selects a first-person narrator, though Ishmael's retrospection permits him to foreshadow the events to come, and ostensibly licenses his occasional omniscience; this narrator will tell us what much of it means to him. Pynchon's distance from Oedipa, compared to Melville's proximity to Ishmael, is a useful first point of contrast that relates to the critical difference between them: Ishmael thrives as a para-author while Oedipa fails as a reader, unable to make any sense of the world.

When Oedipa visits John Nefastis approximately halfway through *CL49*, she encounters a mode of data transference at once utterly abstract and impossibly concrete. The Nefastis Machine promises to make James Clerk Maxwell's thought experiment real and reverse entropy by harnessing "mental work"; the invention would, in theory, be "getting something for nothing" (Pynchon, 68). To get something from nothing is by definition to create—mental work is the task of all authors—but there can never truly be nothing to start. Nefastis's esoteric terms obscure what exactly Oedipa is asked to do: "The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind... and feed back something like the same quantity of information" (85-85). A "sensitive" is not a reader but an interpreter, someone who can translate one form of information into another. Yet Oedipa focuses on sight alone, the sense associated with reading, rather than any of the cognitive tools necessary for translation: "Did the true sensitive see more?" she wonders when the piston fails to move (86). Neither the Machine nor the Demon are legitimate texts—no amount of passive absorption can distill kinetic energy into even the most

trivial form of data.<sup>1</sup> When Nefastis explains the procedure to Oedipa, Pynchon rips through the fourth wall of the page: “Communication is the key,” cries Nefastis on the verso; “Help... you’re not reaching me,” calls Oedipa on the recto (84-85). The duplicitous catch is that Oedipa is the one who needs to do the reaching, to move into the realm of construction—this is what she is never able to do, and why she struggles to communicate throughout the novel.

Melville is more generous than Pynchon. In *Moby-Dick*, sundry characters interpret their experiences using the readily available tools of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religion and superstition. These both play prominent roles in the seafaring life: former whalers like Father Mapple become preachers, and self-proclaimed prophets like Gabriel become whalers. The distinction between preacher and prophet is significant, however, and at first glance seems to lie in their attitude toward the future: as Ishmael makes clear in discussing Elijah and Ahab, prevision is understood as a symptom of madness and depravity. But if we want to understand who qualifies as a reader and author in Melville, scrutinizing context is more helpful. From the moment Pip is rescued from the ocean’s “heartless immensity,” he “went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was” (278).

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before passive eyes... [Pip] saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his god. (278)

Here, sight is enough to cost Pip his relative sanity, to sever him from his shipmates. As he floats on the water’s surface, his “ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably” (278), meaning that Pip loses the human scale—his context—allowing his consciousness to sink to the

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<sup>1</sup> Pynchon embeds details that wryly poke fun at the confusion of roles. Oedipa’s instructions are to focus on the photograph of Clerk Maxwell, whose “hands were cropped out of the photograph... [and] might have been holding a book... It seemed, behind the beard, he’d begun, ever so faintly, to smile” (86). Earlier, Stanley Koteks specifies that the image that works best for the Machine is the one commissioned by the “Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge” (69). Inventors are authors—both propagate knowledge; Oedipa does not.

ocean floor. Unlike the crew, Ishmael does not dismiss Pip's ravings: he senses that Pip's problem is one of interpersonal communication rather than the capacity for comprehension—either Pip is unable (or unwilling), to express the transcendent knowledge (“that celestial thought”) he has gained, or his shipmates are incapable of understanding him. Reading remains half the battle; shared context remains necessary for writing.

Pynchon draws on the 1960s' most infamous tool for mediating the world, LSD, in turning Mucho into yet another of the authors surrounding Oedipa. Mucho's hallucinogenic revelations speak to the pulverization of his personality, the price that he, like Pip, paid for a new understanding of his sensations: “Whenever I put the headset on now... I really do understand what I find there” (117). Mucho informs Oedipa that he takes the drug

Because you hear and see things, even smell them, taste like you never could. Because the world is so abundant. No end to it, baby. You're an antenna, sending your pattern across a million lives a night, and they're your lives too... The songs, it's not just that they say something, they *are* something, in the pure sound. Something new. (117-118)

As a disc jockey, Mucho is the intermediary between listeners and music, though his profession did not satisfy him so in the past. But with the aid of acid, he is now able to extract meaning from the soundwaves themselves. Lack of context is no hindrance for a mind so attuned;<sup>2</sup> raw energy itself—akin to the molecules sorted by Maxwell's Demon or the “strange shapes” of Pip's “unwarped primal world” (278)—is input, and creative substance is output. Yet even in broadcasting his “pattern,” Mucho is unable to pass on his revelations to his wife, despite the Maases sharing the same existential fear: that the world is devoid of meaning, that emptiness abounds. “It was only the sign in the lot, that's what scared me,” Mucho confesses to Oedipa. “Just this creaking metal sign that said nada, nada, against the blue sky. I used to wake up hollering” (118). As she reflects on her ordeal near the end of the novel, Oedipa “hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was... For this, oh God, was the void” (141). This must be the same

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<sup>2</sup> “You're too sensitive,” Oedipa tells him as explanation for why each of Mucho's jobs leaves him distraught (4).

void the weavers in the Remedios Varo painting, which caused Oedipa to cry, were “seeking hopelessly to fill” (11).

With *The Courier's Tragedy*, the play within *CL49*, Pynchon provides Oedipa with an overabundance of context. He opens at least four distinct levels of meaning production: Wharfinger wrote a play that Driblette staged that Oedipa saw performed that she then describes for us. But Oedipa, the wannabe detective, cannot look past the mention of Trystero in the play's closing line; unlike the authors of the first three levels—the playwright, director, and actors—Oedipa expects to find significance already writ large on the page. She asks Driblette to see the script, despite the fact that “[s]he didn't know what she was looking for, exactly” (60). “You don't understand,” Driblette angrily replies,

“You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words. You know where that play exists, not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you're looking for, but—” a hand emerged from the veil of shower-steam to indicate his suspended head— “in here. That's what I'm for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares? They're rote noises to hold line bashes with, to get past the bone barriers around an actor's memory, right? But the reality is in *this* head. Mine. I'm the projector at the planetarium, all the closed little universe in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also.” (62)

Driblette castigates Oedipa for her textual fixation, believing he is dealing with an academic—Pynchon again speaks past his characters to address English students like me. Driblette (who is both actor and director) concisely summarizes the ambitions of an artist—“To give the spirit flesh”—and insists that they can be realized with the mind alone. But Oedipa misses how this might apply to her endeavors—how the reality could be in *her* head—and becomes captivated by Driblette's projector metaphor, remaining hung up on words.

For one thing, she read over the will more closely. If it was really Pierce's attempt to leave an organized something behind after his own annihilation, then it was part of her duty, wasn't it, to bestow life on what had persisted, to try to be what Driblette was, the dark machine in the center of the planetarium, to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning, all in a soaring dome around her?... Under the symbol she copies off the latrine wall of The Scope into her memo book, she wrote *Shall I project a world?* If not project then at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among constellations and trace out your Dragon, Whale, Southern Cross. Anything might help. (64-65)

She mistakes Driblette's emphasis on constrained subjectivity (the play is a "closed little universe") as encouragement to turn her text ("the estate") into an expansive, universal ideal ("Meaning... in a soaring dome"). Oedipa begins by reading the will again, though now she believes she will build from what she has been given. But to "bestow life" would be to make something new; projectors merely push light past film onto a screen. Accordingly, she challenges herself to trace rather than sketch; to copy intelligible shapes rather than create her own. At this point, Oedipa still expects that "everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero" (64).<sup>3</sup> When she faces the Nefastis Machine later on in the novel, she finds nothing to read—no wonder she is unable to project.

Unlike Oedipa, Ishmael intuits that no decisive answer awaits within the enigma of Moby Dick. Chapter 70, "The Sphynx," recounts the process of decapitating a sperm whale, and Ishmael effectively parlays his description of the dangling cranium into an exposition of the whale's hold on Ahab's mind:

It was a black and hooded head; and hanging there in the midst of so intense a calm, it seemed the Sphynx's in the desert. 'Speak, though vast and venerable head,' muttered Ahab... 'speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, though hast dived the deepest... (212)

Familiarity with the deep is dangerous to the characters of *Moby-Dick*—those who seek to unravel its mystery tend to end up incommunicado like Pip. But Ahab's fascination contains both scientific curiosity and an understanding of what the head represents: Ahab "at last came to identify with [Moby Dick], not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations" (128). For us, the dangling head brings to mind the picture of Driblette's disembodied cranium, floating above the shower steam—Pynchon's symbol of subjective sufficiency. Melville provides us with a hint that Ishmael understands that no information is forthcoming *from* the whale's head, that all that is imbued in lifeless flesh is derived from minds

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<sup>3</sup> That Pynchon never settles on a consistent spelling of Trystero/Tristero is another nod to its unknowability.

like Ahab's: Ishmael invokes the Sphinx "in the desert" (212), an allusion to the limestone statue in Giza, which sits serene among sand dunes, rather than the Sphinx of Greek mythology, who actively arbitrates knowledge through riddle.<sup>4</sup> When he reaches the end of an inquiry, Ishmael is content to draw what conclusions he can, and encourages us to the same: "I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can" (235).

We must remember that not all narrators were created equal. Ishmael, on the one hand, is able to interpret even as he recounts thanks to his position beyond the plot; he can communicate so effectively because he knows he is speaking to us. From before his narrative even begins, Melville places Ishmael atop the shoulders of information gatherers like the Late Consumptive Usher and the Sub-Sub-Librarian. "The drama's done. Why then here does anyone step forth?—Because one did survive the wreck" (377). The wreck consisted of a ship's worth of sailors, all of whom read into the White Whale, but did not live to make permanent what they found: "the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (377). Ishmael's responsibility as their survivor, and as Melville's narrator, is to unleash "[t]he subterranean miner that works in us all" (130), to cause a ripple in the sea.

Oedipa, on the other hand, is just like Ahab. She participates in events as they occur, shares monomania and fatalism as defining traits, and teaches us only what we should not do. When Oedipa learns of Driblette's death, "she kept a silence, waiting as if to be illuminated" (125)—the passive sentence structure reinforces her resignation; when Emory Bortz hands Oedipa the text that, finally, will explain the story behind the Trystero, she blurts, "I can't read this" (129)—though it is the antiquated typography and spelling that intimidate her, her gut reaction articulates her predicament throughout the novel. By the end, Oedipa has gained

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<sup>4</sup> Later on, in the chapter titled "The Prairie," Ishmael studies the phrenology of the sperm whale's skull. He finds in its magnitude a "god-like dignity," and likens its forehead to "one broad firmament... pleated with riddles" (234). But he also appreciates the "great genius" of its "pyramidical silence" (235).



knowledge, but no significance—of “the symmetrical four” potentialities, only the reality of the Trystero conspiracy could *mean* anything, namely that “you have stumbled indeed... onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know” (141). This would be monumental, yet Oedipa would prefer if she were simply mentally ill, and never have to face the void again. Pynchon slips into the second person, engaging our attention, by having Oedipa speak to herself in the mirror—although this one is intact and Oedipa’s reflection is present, still “[t]here was nobody who could help her” (141).

In *CL49*, we are the closest thing there is to an Ishmael—we must draw conclusions for ourselves out of the wreck we witness. Even though *Moby-Dick* was never finished, unlike Pynchon, Melville provides a workable blueprint for the pursuit of meaning: one that is sequential and cumulative, rather than cyclic and self-defeating; one where reading requires writing.

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