

A Postmodernist Parodic Allegory: Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*



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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of

Arts at the University of Macau



June 2009

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Abstract of the Thesis

This thesis is an attempt to describe Thomas Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, in terms of both allegory and parody. Pynchon's writing of the novel is idiosyncratic in the way that it imitates the conventional strategies of composing allegory for the purpose of exploring the problems involved in the traditional understanding of the genre.

I start by introducing the conventional definition of allegory provided by M. H. Abrams. Traditionalists conceptualize allegory as a literary composition which has several vertical levels of signification. Edward Mendelson's article on Pynchon's novel adopts Abrams's definition of allegory to analyze the religious register of the narrative. By criticizing Mendelson we find that it is problematic to apply the traditional model of allegory, which mistakes a reading strategy for the characteristics of a type of literary composition, to *The Crying of Lot 49*.

In order to fix the problem, I borrow another model of allegory from Maureen Quilligan. Quilligan's model of allegory is helpful to describe Pynchon in three ways. Firstly, it opposes reading strategies building hierarchies. Secondly, it puts forward language as a primary concern of the genre. At last, it emphasizes the reader's self-consciousness of his or her own reading behavior. Although Quilligan's theory of allegory describes Pynchon's writing better than the traditional model, she thinks that allegories articulate the sacred and that expressing the sacred is the object of writing allegory.

However, those ideas are at odds with *The Crying of Lot 49* which address equally the sacred and the secular interpretations made by the characters on the sign "Tristero". To narrate Oedipa Maas's quest of the Tristero, Pynchon imitates a language of myth and ritual, but it is mixed up with other languages which deal with secular or

profane subjects. By blending diverse, even contrary, elements in the text, the allegory's tendency to elevate the sacred is checked. Pynchon writes his allegories with a parodic twist. The use of the term parody in my thesis follows Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody which targets twentieth-century art forms. The parodic twist in Pynchon's allegory explains the self-reflexivity of his writing in a new light, which is excluded in Quilligan's theory. The use of the two terms, allegory and parody, together promises a more complete description of Pynchon's writing of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Besides, this method of analyzing the text corresponds to a postmodern dilemma which the protagonist of the novel faces: whenever Oedipa Maas thinks she has learnt something about the Tristero, the Tristero will soon give her a lesson that it is something else. My thesis tries to show that whenever a single critical criterion is applied to Pynchon's writing the text foregrounds the problems of applying the chosen critical criterion. Quilligan's model of allegory explores the problems of a traditional understanding of allegory. Pynchon's writing questions Quilligan's model of allegory by giving it a parodic twist. Pynchon's postmodernist parodic allegory counters critical efforts to make a coherent sense of the text by reminding the reader of other possible meanings of the text which are ignored when he or she strives towards a coherent reading. The transcendental truth is forever deferred in the writing of *The Crying of Lot 49*, just as the final crying of lot 49 is absent at the end of the novel.