Pynchon’s Linguistic Technique Essay, Research Paper

In his Course in General Linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure differentiates language and speech by explaining language to be social and speech to be individual. (Rivkin 76) That is, language is the means through which communication and convention are established, while speech is the way in which the individual utilizes language as a means of expression of thought. By presenting linguistics as related to semiology, Saussure provides an effectively systematic method with which to view social sciences. He believes ?language is concrete? and ?linguistic signs?are realities that have their seat in the brain? (Rivkin 76-77). To Saussure, language is not something that can be manipulated; it is a given. Yet the paradoxical contrast between a word?s value and its signification seemingly allows for the opportunity to warp the conceptual relationship between signifier and signified. Saussure states that this is not an expression of ?the linguistic fact in its essence and fullness,? meaning a word?s potential value, though necessary to its intrinsic signification, cannot be considered a substitute for the indispensable signification, which exists as a fixed notion. (Rivkin 86) Yet Saussure?s theory was published post-mortem, and he never had the opportunity to read Thomas Pynchon?s The Crying of Lot 49. It is Pynchon?s intention to assert that communication and convention are not social, as a result of individual interpretation. Pynchon conveys this theme by creating a world in which all signs (by means of Saussure?s characterization) seem to be familiar to the extent that the entire world is foreign. That is, the line between signification and value is so vague that one knows not what Pynchon intends and therefore cannot dissect the story. This parallels Viktor Shklovsky?s theory of ?Art as Technique? in that Pynchon juxtaposes the familiar and the unfamiliar in his novel. Language is the means through which the story is communicated, but defamiliarization is Pynchon?s technique. In this sense, Pynchon?s method is a combination of Saussure?s Course in General Linguistics and Shklovsky?s ?Art as Technique.? The way in which Pynchon manipulates language, specifically seen in the characters? names and the illustration of cultural chaos, ultimately results in a form of art that deautomatizes linguistic habitualization.

The characters in The Crying of Lot 49 are in every sense familiar to the reader. They are people, living in the United States and dealing with their problems. To this extent, the reader can relate. However, Pynchon perverts this sense of familiarity by strategically naming the characters so as to perplex the reader. The protagonist, Oedipa Maas, has a first name that reflects Sophocles? trilogy. Oedipus the king, like Oedipa Maas, has to solve a riddle. Oedipa?s last name, Maas, could allude to mass, as in hoi polloi and implying Oedipa?s larger personage (i.e., Oedipa represents far more than just her individual character). Pierce Inverarity sounds a lot like peers in variety or piercing variety, perhaps implying his inconsistent or diverse natures. In addition, there are a number of characters whose names seem to imply so much or so little that the reader is led to believe these designation are nothing more than Pynchon?s own satire at work: Mucho Maas, Mike Fallopian, Randolph Driblette, Clayton Chiclitz, Dr. Hilarious, Stanley Koteks, John Nefastis, and Genghis Cohen. Through names such as these, with a multitude of possible meanings, Pynchon is combating ?algebrization,? a process Shklovsky mentions in his article. (Rivkin 17) In ?Art as Technique,? Shklovsky explains, ?The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known? (Rivkin 18). In this sense, Shklovsky is asserting that in art, as applied to Pynchon?s art of writing, there is no linguistic signification without value. For, the goal when writing is to mute the line between signifier and signified so as to allow the reader to interpret the information as he or she so chooses. Though Saussure never directly mentions names, it can be assumed that names exist as arbitrary linguistic signs. (Rivkin 79) However, Pynchon has chosen names that are so arbitrary, the reader assumes they represent something logical. It is impossible for the reader to look only to the signification and not the value. But by looking at the value, the reader becomes even more confused and disassociated. Therefore, Pynchon?s technique, linguistic defamiliarization, results in art as Shklovsky defines it.

Chaos is a common focus within art. For, artists often attempt to capture the confusion they see every day. Pynchon, a literary artist, attempts to illustrate a type of cultural chaos within this book. The plot specifically highlights conspiracies and illusions. The reader is told of Oedipa?s perplexities with the mystery of Tristero, but there is never a solution. Oedipa believes Tristero to be something of a constellation. Through this fact, Pynchon directly illustrates his own technique ? the imposition of interpretation on the meaningless. For, constellations consist of no order ? they are entirely random. Yet this conspiracy is Oedipa?s quest, and a reader is lead to believe that at the end of the quest, the riddle will be solved. None of the reader?s expectations are fulfilled. By doing this, the chaos of Pynchon?s novel epitomizes the chaos within the novel. As such, the language of The Crying of Lot 49 is far leap from semiology. In fact, Pynchon goes so far as to structuralize the linguistics of the novel in such a way that one does not know how the signified and the signifiers even relate to one another. Pynchon took that which was familiar ? language, and warped it in such a way that all signs became unfamiliar, thus classifying this book by Shklovsky?s definition of art.

Pynchon warps the horizon of expectation by presenting, in linguistic appearance and connotation, a world that is seemingly conventional and communicable. Yet he communicates the story by means of a language full of satire and allusion, leading the reader to believe the value of the signs is inseparable from the significance. But Pynchon?s language is never clear, and one knows not if it is arbitrary. Therefore, communication and convention are by no means social in Pynchon?s novel. The Crying of Lot 49 successfully defamiliarizes the reader?s innate or known systemic linguistic knowledge. Pynchon deautomatizes perception and forces unique insight from each reader. As a result, his product is a piece of art as defined by Shklovsky.