

Tal Kastner (Princeton University)

The Boilerplate of Everything in *The Crying of Lot 49*

“The Boilerplate of Everything in *The Crying of Lot 49*” identifies “boilerplate”—the notion of standardized contract terms—as a paradigm of expression that reveals the inherently qualified nature of agreement and interpersonal connection. As an instantiation of the phenomenon of iterability, the concept of boilerplate makes salient *Lot 49*’s prescient identification of the enduring constraints on agency in American life as well as the appeal of an ideal of determinate expressed agreement. Uncertain as to her mandate, *Lot 49*’s protagonist, Oedipa, finds herself “named” as the executor of the estate of her former lover, a California “real estate mogul.” As a result, Oedipa confronts repeated augurs of uncertainty that reflect the operation of boilerplate, such as the silenced post-horn and the stamps to be auctioned by the estate. In addition, the landscape Oedipa encounters of “census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei,” with its “hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning,” bears the imprint of boilerplate and capitalism. In light of the contemporaneous warning by Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black that near-invisible contract terms imposed by one party on another “will soon find their way into the ‘boilerplate’ of everything,” the paper reads *Lot 49* as a comment on the marginalization and reinforcement of disadvantage that capitalism enables. The paper also demonstrates how boilerplate disrupts the binary Justice Black invokes of “genuine agreement” and its “weak imitation.” As a medium of qualified connection, boilerplate thereby offers one way to imagine the “ritual reluctance” and “excluded middles” of *Lot 49*. Nonetheless, a quest for “Meaning” propels Oedipa to the novel’s uncertain end and guides the reader’s approach to the text, even as it heightens an awareness of indeterminacy. Thus, the paper demonstrates how *Lot 49* emphasizes the enduring seductiveness of the possibility of a meeting of minds, reinscribing it in a qualified and dynamic form.