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Pynchon, Genealogy, History: *Against the Day*

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One cannot overstate the centrality of historical questions in the work of Thomas Pynchon. What makes his fictions so compelling—more, perhaps, than any other quality—is the variety and complexity of historical rethinking they invite and perform. Tiina Käkälä-Puumala, in a recent dissertation, locates “Pynchon’s historic interest” in “the era of modernization we have been living in since the 17th century. . . . Puritanism, the Enlightenment, industrialism, scientific revolutions, global economy, information explosion, simulation—throughout his fiction Pynchon is very much a writer of modernization, of its historical preconditions, aims, and limits.”¹ Shawn Smith characterizes Pynchon as “the pre-eminent American postmodernist writer” and “an innovative and profound historical novelist as well.”²

Replying to critics of Ian McEwan in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in 2006, Pynchon casually affirms that, whatever the license creative artists enjoy, “most of us who write historical fiction . . . feel some obligation to accuracy.”³ Accuracy, however, may present itself in curious ways, and Pynchon proves, as one might expect, something of an unconventional historian. In a career one might describe as “a progressive *knotting into*” the problematics of historiography, Pynchon reconceptualizes history as

1. Tiina Käkälä-Puumala, “Other Side of This Life: Death, Value, and Social Being in Thomas Pynchon’s Fiction” (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2007), 12.

2. Shawn Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17.

3. Pynchon’s letter was apparently faxed to the *Daily Telegraph* office on or before December 6, 2006. The newspaper reproduced it more than once in articles about various authors’ weighing in to defend McEwan. The letter is illegible, however, in the online edition of the *Daily Telegraph*, and the link to an enlargement is broken. Readers may still be able to link to a legible enlargement in a December 7, 2006, *New York Times* story about this incident. See Sarah Lyall, “Novelists Defend One of Their Own against a Plagiarism Charge,” http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/07/books/07pync.html?_r=1&oref=slogin/.

what a Nietzsche or a Foucault would call genealogy.⁴ Foucault characterizes this strain of historiography as “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary.”⁵ Stripping away the layers of ideological legitimation, the genealogist-historian lays bare the play of power that seeks to disguise its own workings. Of course, a novelist working in this vein risks fatiguing and alienating readers. John Dugdale, reviewing Pynchon’s 2006 novel *Against the Day* for the *Sunday Times* of London, called it *Moby-Dick* without Ahab or the whale.⁶ But readers who find the overall point of *Against the Day* elusive may better tolerate the longueurs of Pynchon’s sixth novel if they recognize the technique as that of the genealogist. Only incidentally interested in routine historical iconoclasm, Pynchon undertakes a radical reframing of essential questions about the past. Bernard Duyfhuizen, characterizing “power and the movement of history” as “a pervasive theme in Pynchon’s writing,” notes a reversal here. Where “usually he shrouds the sources of power in many layers of governmental or corporate bureaucracy so that its effects are mainly felt while its origins remain hidden,” Pynchon now represents power as something more than the faceless *bête noire* of paranoids everywhere.⁷ The author means to turn inside out the way his readers think about and understand power, its manifestations in discourse, and its workings over historical time. Pynchon recognizes what Foucault called “the essential political problem of the intellectual,” which is the overcoming of impediments to “a new politics of truth.”⁸ Only the “patiently documentary” approach will do here.

In the opening chapter of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the protracted torture and execution of a would-be regicide, then interprets the spectacle as a “political ritual,” a discourse of royal power. Such spectacles, he observes, served the same purpose, in the eighteenth century,

4. Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), 3.

5. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” trans. Donald E. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 76.

6. John Dugdale, “It’s All about Bigging It Up,” review of *Against the Day*, by Thomas Pynchon, *Sunday Times*, December 10, 2006.

7. Bernard Duyfhuizen, “The Exact Degree of Fictitiousness,” *Postmodern Culture* 17 (2007), <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.107/17.2duyfhuizen.txt>, par. 11. Duyfhuizen notes another “genealogical” dimension to this novel in its sketching of the Traverse-Becker lineage: “The genealogical connections track not only family DNA, but the transformation of Webb’s anarchistic spirit through generations of decline to Frenesi’s role as a government snitch. In the larger story of America that Pynchon’s oeuvre presents, *Against the Day* redirects our attention to *Vineland* and to the commentary each Pynchon novel makes about the forks in the road America did not take and to our collective complicity in those decisions” (par. 6).

8. Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” trans. Colin Gordon, in *Power*, ed. James B. Faubion, vol. 3 of *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 3 vols. (New York: New Press, 1997–2000), 132–33.

as a well-staffed constabulary and an elaborate penal apparatus in modern times. But in every historical period power seeks its own perpetuation. Less barbaric now but every bit as spirit crushing, power constantly fosters and adapts to the means of its own legitimization. Foucault ends a subsequent chapter with a disturbing rhetorical question: “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?”⁹

Lamenting the “functional disease” of midcentury “American architecture,” Norman Mailer makes a similar observation: “One could not tell the new colleges from the new prisons from the new hospitals from the new factories from the new airports.”¹⁰ But the philosopher and the novelist differ in their emphases, the one enthralled by the articulation and reticulation of power, the other appalled by its brutality. In the subtle scholasticism of his observations about graceless architecture or the penal code, Foucault blunts the edge of what he intends as a political critique. For real engagement and effective polemic, by contrast, one turns to a Mailer or a Pynchon. If either seeks to reveal power’s insidious—or blatant—workings, it is always, still, with an eye to imagining a world in which various oppressive forces can be countered, dismantled, and resisted. Pynchon, in particular, from the beginning of his career, has looked for ways to expose and subvert the great engine of Faustian desire, the drive toward more knowledge and more power that characterizes a world order shaped and sustained by what in *Against the Day* he calls the “capitalist/Christer gridwork.”¹¹

I

Henry Veggian has observed that in *Against the Day* Pynchon seizes upon and transforms “the genealogical authority of the modern historical novel.”¹² In other words, cognizant of the genre’s long and distinguished history, Pynchon does not feel obliged to take on the Henry James who sneered at the “fatal cheapness” of historical fiction—or even the Georg Lukács who, asserting that history naturally breathes through the work of any respectable novelist, argued against the very existence of the histori-

9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 47, 228.

10. Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel/The Novel as History* (New York: New American Library, 1968), 176.

11. Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 1075, hereafter cited parenthetically.

12. Henry Veggian, “Thomas Pynchon Against the Day,” *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 35 (2008): 206.

cal novel per se.¹³ The critic of the genre may need, nonetheless, to make distinctions among historical fictions, which include the historical novel (oft maligned, though its practitioners include Tolstoy and Faulkner), the historical romance (as written by authors as different as Scott, Hawthorne, and Frank Yerby), and the postmodern hybrid that Linda Hutcheon characterizes as “historiographic metafiction.”¹⁴ By turns realistic and idealized, the first two traffic in versions of what supposedly was, but the more compelling form emerges out of postmodern uncertainty about the relations between “story” and “history”—words whose shared etymology undermines discrimination. Foregrounding its own artifice, such metafiction impugns or at least resists the very idea of a more objective historiography. It exposes the fictive undercurrent in every historical narrative.

As a genre, metafiction risks perceptions of ludic nonseriousness, but attentive readers have always recognized the perspicacity behind the playfulness. More than feckless fabulators, Pynchon and other accomplished writers of such fiction—including John Barth; Ishmael Reed; and, in *Kindred* (1979), at least, Octavia Butler—reframe history in surprising ways. Like Hayden White (author of *Metahistory* [1973] and other works of postmodern historiography), they insist that Clio’s susceptibility to a good story makes her the most complex—and generous—of muses. They also insist, with the ancients, that history belongs among the arts, not the sciences. Writers of historical metafiction ask thoroughly serious questions, then, about the past and its shaping of the ethical present, and Pynchon, in *Against the Day*, anchors fancy in the superabundant detail implied in Foucault’s figure of a “genealogical” study of the past. Among the most historically meticulous of storytellers, Pynchon aspires to the calling of fictive genealogist.

Pynchon learned his heteroclite historiography in a good school. Readers of *Against the Day* should recall the long-standing affinity between its author, born in 1937, and Henry Adams, born almost exactly a hundred years earlier, in 1838. Beginning his career with artful echoes of Adams, Pynchon had only to deploy a somewhat cooler irony, more incredulity toward metanarratives, and more tolerance of truths multiple and mutually contradictory. In his first novel, *V.* (1963), he introduces a major character who, like Adams, refers to himself in the third person and seeks, through ultimately autobiographical investigations, to understand

13. See Henry James to Sarah Orne Jewett, October 5, 1901, in *The Selected Letters of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955), 202–3; and Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962), 168.

14. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), ix.

his violent century in terms of its relation to a latter-day Virgin or Venus, a female entity at once terrible and infinitely seductive. In the varied avatars of the mysterious woman known as V., Herbert Stencil thinks he has discovered the twentieth-century equivalent of the divine female principle that had manifested itself, from antiquity into the Christian era, as fertility. But V. proves an intellectual chimera, the belated embodiment of the mythic thought that constantly falsifies historical reality in the name of a specious supernaturalism. In fact, she embodies a relentlessly entropic, unspiritual decay, a Spenglerian decline.

The reader of *Against the Day* may, then, discern a renewed relationship between its author and Henry Adams. Here Pynchon scrutinizes, more exhaustively than in *V.*, the period that Adams reviews in the latter part of *The Education* (1918): the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. But Pynchon takes up the historical questions he inherits from Adams with some significant shifts of strategy and perspective—and from a greater remove in time. In *Against the Day*, as in *Mason & Dixon* (1997), the author grapples resourcefully with the challenges of historiography. Not that he aspires to some narrow idea of “objectivity.” Leaving to Adams the role of formal historian, Pynchon rather aspires to transcend the invidious binary that Mailer flagged when he subtitled *Armies of the Night* (1968) “History as a Novel/The Novel as History.”

Postmodern historiographers recognize that, in accounts of the past, fact too often proves factitious and objectivity remains elusive. Echoing familiar pronouncements by Fredric Jameson, Andreas Huyssen observes, “The problem with postmodernism is that it relegates history to the dustbin of an obsolete *epistémè*, arguing gleefully that history does not exist except as text, i.e., historiography.”¹⁵ No historical narrative fully escapes the tidal pull of storytelling, whose tendency to shapeliness and coherence inevitably misrepresents the disorder at the heart of history. Conversely, great storytelling can achieve extraordinary insight into the past. To make a less extravagant claim, the storyteller can simply depict the human condition in a historical frame and thereby link past to present. In other words, narrow canons of accuracy may not be important to historical vision. Thus, readers learn from Virgil that all history strives to hang flesh on a single, skeletal verb. *Fuit Ilium*, he writes: “Troy was” (in English, one stresses the verb). Nor does the historiographical factitiousness of the *Aeneid*—that elaborate faux genealogy for the Roman state—detract from the seriousness with which its author meditates on the manifold ways the present realizes the past.

15. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 172.

But where Virgil's historiography coalesces in a vision of empire, Pynchon's parses imperial illegitimacy. Whether he writes story or history, what hybridizes Pynchon's work is his passion for justice-based chronicle. From *V.* to *Vineland* (1990), from *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) to *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and from *Mason & Dixon* to *Against the Day*, Pynchon insists on writing the history of the marginalized or, as he calls them, the preterite—those on whose backs an older idea of history unfolded. Like Foucault or Guy Debord (“examining history amounts to *examining the nature of power*”), Pynchon understands instinctively that a different history emerges if the investigator asks different questions—questions regarding just where and how power reveals itself in institutional structures; in socially conditioned habits of thought and speech; and in the rhetoric of science, politics, and the penal code.¹⁶

Which is not to say that the author has lost his extraordinary sense of humor. To be sure, great comic geniuses often yield, over time, to a fierce, Juvenalian impatience with all that they have exposed to laughter. But in *Against the Day*, published on the eve of his seventieth birthday, Pynchon manages still to leaven anger (based on his contempt for economic predation, his disgust at racism, his abhorrence of colonialism) with a wit that delivers him, over and over, from the artistic error of tendentiousness. Pynchon knows better, in other words, than to waste energy on argumentation. Rather, he invites readers to extend their general sympathy for the downtrodden to workers treated, at the turn of the century, with little consideration, if not with outright injustice, by such powerful and rich employers as the fictional Scarsdale Vibe. Disguising rapacity with unctuousness, Vibe invokes “our Economy’s long struggle to evolve up out of the fish-market anarchy of all battling all to the rational systems of control whose blessings we enjoy at present” (34). *Control*—the word figures as a Pynchon signature: he characterizes it in negative terms in all of his novels (it figures most memorably, perhaps, as the obsession of the bizarre Padre Zarpazo in *Mason & Dixon*), and Vibe presently articulates a more comprehensive vision, a plutocrat’s creed. Speaking to “the Las Animas-Huerfano Delegation of the Industrial Defense Alliance (L.A.H.D.I.D.A.),” he delivers some candid remarks about the workers that he and his kind blithely exploit. Vibe sacrifices these workers to the many-tentacled cephalopod described by Frank Norris (another of Pynchon’s nineteenth-century counterparts, along with Adams and, as will be seen, Emerson). More rapacious, even, than Octopus Grigori (conditioned by sinister Pavlovians in *Gravity’s Rainbow*), capitalism gives its two-legged prey little quarter. Completely untrammelled by “euphemism,”

16. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994), chap. 5, par. 134.

Vibe's orgy of self-congratulation represents—even for Pynchon—something of a rhetorical high point: “So of course we use them . . . we harness and sodomize them, photograph their degradation, send them up onto the high iron and down into mines and sewers and killing floors, we set them beneath inhuman loads, we harvest from them their muscle and eyesight and health, leaving them in our kindness a few miserable years of broken gleanings” (1000). This is more than the social critique of Norris and the American naturalists: like Nietzsche or Foucault, Pynchon seeks a language that will refuse and subvert the pieties of history—even historical fiction—as it is commonly written. He puts into the mouth of his archcapitalist a discourse that functions genealogically in that it brings closer a past unframed by teleological assumption or myths of exceptionalism.

Vibe's gloating, complacency, and trenchant locutions place him with *Lot 49*'s Pierce Inverarity, who revels in his “role of the rich, obnoxious gringo”; with the munitions magnates who convene toward the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*; and with Wade LeSpark, the arms merchant of *Mason & Dixon*.¹⁷ All participate in enterprises directing human energies only into channels that fill private coffers and enlarge the satanic kingdom of capital. In its violence, Vibe's discourse constantly threatens to slip the bonds of metaphor. In “harness,” workers become little more than sentient draft animals, laboring under “inhuman loads.” One discerns in the diction here (“harvest,” “gleanings”) ironic reminders that industry has co-opted an older, agricultural order less given to the dehumanizing of toil. Characterizing the exploitation of labor as a pleasurable perversion, Vibe represents the body of the worker as subject to the gratification of appalling appetites, among them the voyeurism served when “we . . . photograph their degradation.” Referring, presumably, to photojournalism, which ostensibly documents horrific working conditions and moves others to sympathy and outrage, Vibe expects his fellow plutocrats to remember that they own the media and employ those who take the pictures. Shocking photographs of sweatshop conditions sell newspapers. Throughout this apologia, Vibe pays less attention to the delights of lucre than to the perverse baronial pleasures that an attention-arresting verb like “sodomize” can only approximate. It suggests a whole world of unnatural practices: in the benighted Sodom of our factories and mines workers suffer unspeakable violation.

In such rhetorical set pieces, Pynchon makes no effort to temper the expression of his disgust. He knows, however, that “wise satirical practice requires the sensitivity and skill of a *fugu* chef at controlling toxicity, that is, knowing how long to suffer, and how gladly, and when to give in to

17. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 119.

rage, and the pleasure of assaulting at last the fools in question.”¹⁸ Pynchon alternates between the blunt instrument of satire, as seen above, and the extreme subtlety of his more nuanced historical themes. These he teases out with the patience, the instinct for indirection, of a postmodern Henry James. In scenes like the L.A.H.D.I.D.A. address, the author makes his political views clear, but such extravagance is balanced and framed by incremental intimations of other ideas, the more powerful for their oblique presentation.

Pynchon seems to have sprung from the artistic matrix fully aware that effective literary representation cannot dispense with this principle. It dictates the obliqueness with which, in his first novel, *V.*, he treats his subject matter, the endless, accelerating violence of the twentieth century. He presents decidedly out-of-the-way incidents leading up to and away from the Great War. By the same token, the reader encounters the greater war that followed only from the perspective of a Maltese noncombatant (or, rather, from his journals). When, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon makes World War II and its aftermath his immediate setting, he contrives to speak only glancingly of the camps, the great battles, and the atomic detonations. He leaves the full-frontal chronicling to the Herseys, the Wouks, the Styrons, for early and late he takes what a Salinger character calls “the long view.” That is, he wants to see, as only a novelist can, the working-through of history's great themes and problems.

In many ways, one learns to read *Against the Day* by rereading *V.* Both fictions treat the Great War, that fulcrum of the twentieth century, with artful indirection. In a single paragraph of the earlier novel Pynchon presents a catalog of disasters to illustrate the workings of accident, but in *Against the Day* the catalog, spread through the text, eventually signals the imminence of a specific global catastrophe. At first, pure accident disguises the gathering malevolence, but presently the disasters begin to seem decidedly portentous: the Krakatoa eruptions of 1883 (506); the Adair County, Missouri, cyclone of 1899 (309); the great Galveston flood of 1900 (188); a train leaping the tracks at Frankfurt Bahnhof in 1902 (662); the 1905 collapse of the Charing Cross Station roof (662); and, recurrently, the 1902 toppling of the campanile in Venice (256, 662, 860, etc.), so evocative of the tarot card depicting a tower struck by lightning (which inspired certain images in *The Waste Land* [1922]). References to attempted assassinations in the nineteenth century—of Queen Victoria by Edward Oxford in 1840 (230), of Henry Clay Frick by Alexander Berkman in 1892 (737)—culminate, as it were, in the shots fired by Jean-

18. Thomas Pynchon, introduction to *The Teachings of Don B.: Satires, Parodies, Fables, Illustrated Stories, and Plays of Donald Barthelme*, by Donald Barthelme, ed. Kim Herzinger (New York: Turtle Bay, 1992), xviii.

Baptiste Victor Sipido at Edward, Prince of Wales, in the spring of 1900 (528). Within months, however, the marksmanship of assassins would begin to improve. In July, Gaetano Bresci would succeed in killing King Umberto I of Italy (1011). In 1901, Leon Czolgosz would assassinate President McKinley (372, 978). In 1903, palace guards would murder Serbia's Alexander and Draga Obrenovich (228). In 1905, Ivan Kalyayev tossed a bomb from four feet away to kill Russia's Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich (595). Wanting, perhaps, to imply some gathering political doom, Pynchon makes no mention of successful nineteenth-century assassinations (Lincoln, for example, or Russia's Alexander II). By the same token he elides the incendiary act of Gavrilo Princip in 1914. Instead of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand (which figures in his 1961 short story "Under the Rose" and, more obliquely, in *V.*), Pynchon presents a droll account of the archduke's 1893 visit to America, where the fated heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne occupies himself in giving the jive idiom a Teutonic twist: "'s los, Hund? Boogie-boogie, ja?'" (48). More seriously, Pynchon sketches the spasms of the dying Austro-Hungarian Empire—the incidents and conflicts that preceded the catastrophe of 1914, notably the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria in 1908, the Turkish and Albanian revolutions (1908 and 1912, respectively), the Italo-Turkish War of 1911–12, and the First Balkan War of 1912.

Pynchon similarly suggests that in the decade or two before World War I a century of heroic Victorian exploration gave way to expeditions with a strategic agenda. Beginning with the Vormance expedition, nominally disinterested explorers devote themselves to spying out rail lines (or "the railworthiness of the terrain" [130]) that will be of crucial importance to the movement of troops when the balloon goes up. The narrator pays considerable attention to the "Bagdad' railway concession" (228–29, 567), the Trans-Siberian Railroad (259, 567, 789), Chinese Turkestan railway shares (503), the Karawankenbahn (652), and the proposed rail links from Tuva, in southern Siberia, to the Taklamakan Desert in the far west of China (788–89) and from "the Bosnian border . . . to the Turkish rail-head at Kossovaska Mitrovitsa" (841–42). Everywhere, the vast "continental system" (567) of railroads represents the tentacles of spreading capital, the grid of future war.

Pynchon deploys other, more mystical auguries as well. Ryder Thorn, a "Trespasser" from the future, tells the sensitive Miles Blundell: "Flanders will be the mass grave of History" (554). The painter Hunter Penhallow dreams of "the mass-grave-to-be of Europe" and its portal, "an iron gateway" through which "an incalculable crowd" will make its way (578). The vision jells as a painting, described almost three hundred pages later: a "meditation on the fate of Europe, *The Iron Gateway*, in which shadowy multitudes trooped toward a vanishing line over which broke a hellish

radiance" (867). The explicitness of these evocations waxes and wanes. Pynchon characterizes the mysterious cataclysm that visited Siberia in 1908, devastating miles and miles of forest and tundra, as, among other things, a foreshadowing of 1914–18. Thus, he likens "what was nearly upon them" (778) in the Tunguska region to "the general war which Europe this summer and autumn would stand at the threshold of, collapsed into a single event" (797). Repeatedly, he invokes "the Great War everyone expects imminently to sweep over us" (903), the "general European war" (809, 871, 937, 938) that seems to have been augured by one event after another: "As if what towered above them out there in the dark, across the lines, were not exactly a new and terrible weapon but the spiritual equivalent of one. A desire in the mass co-conscious for death and destruction" (720). (Pynchon favors Georg Groddeck's term, "co-conscious," over its more familiar Freudian analogue.)

But these observations, though numerous, do not gather to a narrative climax. They fall as solitary pebbles in history's great, echoing bucket. Toward the end of the novel, Pynchon speaks of the trenches and treats the Great War in curiously subdued tones, touching on "one night in the early autumn of 1914" (1022) and characterizing Flanders as "a poisoned sea brought still" (1023). The "great influenza epidemic" of 1918 (1024) takes its horrific toll even as, "out in Europe, the great Tragedy went rushing on" (1026). The author presents these perceptions through the eyes of his boys' book heroes, the fanciful Chums of Chance, who float above the carnage in their great airship, the *Inconvenience*. Such a perspective precludes immediacy.

This calculated refusal to represent fully that "great Tragedy" may explain the insistent references to doubling, bilocation, and Iceland spar (the transparent but refractive calcite through which one sees doubled images). As Käkälä-Puumala has observed, Pynchon often recurs to "the exaggerated display of binary pairs" that signal themes of "mythical, Manichaean dualism."¹⁹ But the point here is not the binaries themselves nor their putative hierarchizing tendencies. The novel's pervasive play on "the unyielding doubleness of everything" (957) rather supports an idea of *Erwartung* (that pregnant word from *Gravity's Rainbow*) as a beleaguered postmillennial humanity awaits an "end of history" unlikely to resemble the Fukuyama paradigm in any way. "History repeats itself," said Marx, "first as tragedy, second as farce." But in fact, Pynchon suggests, it repeats itself as yet greater tragedy. As a historical novelist, then, Pynchon contrives in *Against the Day* to refine the old idea of the past as what Barbara W.

19. Käkälä-Puumala, "Other Side of This Life," 47. For a brief catalog of this feature in *Gravity's Rainbow*, see David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 51.

Tuchman famously called a “distant mirror” of the present. The pattern of events in the present finds its mirror in the trajectory of events in the past: what awaits the twenty-first-century world will no doubt have its farcical side, but few will laugh.

The witty description of the novel that appears in its jacket copy (evidently penned by Pynchon himself—his name appears after the similar text that appears in the Penguin catalog) affirms precisely such a meaning: “As an era of uncertainty comes crashing down around their ears,” the characters must negotiate “an unpredictable future.” A century later, readers contemplate a similar situation. In the era of *Against the Day*, that is, readers may well recognize the not-so-distant image of their own day: “With a worldwide disaster looming just a few years ahead, it is a time of unrestrained corporate greed, false religiosity, moronic fecklessness, and evil intent in high places.” In the Penguin catalog version of this description, an ironic disclaimer follows: “No reference to the present day is intended or should be inferred.” As Heinz Ickstadt rightly concludes, “events that happen in narrated time resound in the narrating time that is the reader’s present.”²⁰

Many of the characters in this novel have or are said to be doubles: Yashmeen Halfcourt (750), her father (759–60), Professor Edward Morley and Charles “Blinky” Morgan (62), “the tiresome twins” Professors Renfrew and Werfner (230), Scarsdale Vibe and Foley Walker (724, 742), Prince Rinpungpa and the Yogi (750, 766). Thus overdetermined, the repeated imagining of doubleness—the two Asias (249), the two Venices (136), the “two Agadirs,” “the Two-*Stupendica* problem” (521)—contributes to the perception that a shadow novel exists to the side of the one we read. Indeed, the Iceland-spar effect seen in the printing of the title on the dust jacket would seem to announce the existence of some such biblioganger. “Some invisible narrative occupying . . . the passage of the day” (418), this shadow novel is the one writing itself early in the twenty-first century: as *Against the Day* sketches the genealogy of the world conflict that set its stamp on the twentieth century, so do events in its phantom companion lurch toward another, more terrible conflagration.

II

All of Pynchon’s protagonists pursue a postmodern grail: not education but *episteme*, not knowledge but *gnosis* (a term fraught, as will be seen, with energy subversive of various kinds of orthodoxy). Readers, meanwhile, find themselves engaged in knight errantry of their own. Their quest, like

20. Heinz Ickstadt, “History, Utopia and Transcendence in the Space-Time of *Against the Day*,” *Pynchon Notes* 54–55 (2008): 225.

that of an Arthurian knight, requires great perseverance, mastery of recondite lore, and a protracted struggle with illusion. For the text is the work of an enchanter who inveigles the unwary into confident identification with a protagonist who may, after all, be a highly unreliable center of consciousness. The quest requires, in other words, that the reader first identify with, then see through, Pynchon's paranoid protagonist. However edifying one may find the obsession of a Herbert Stencil, an Oedipa Maas, or a Tyrone Slothrop, it must be transcended if meaning's true grail is to be won. In the end, the reader must discern the factitiousness of what draws Oedipa Maas into its web in *The Crying of Lot 49* and recognize the parodic spirit with which, in *V.*, Pynchon invokes the ideas of Henry Adams and Robert Graves. The challenge to understanding becomes tougher in *Vineland*, with its now midrashic, now subversively feminist readings of Genesis, and in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the textual labyrinth includes teasing intimations of meanings that range from the gnostic to the cabalistic and from the Orphic to the Masonic (that last signals an awareness, I think, of just where such doctrines—whatever their appeal to Mozart and the American founding fathers—edge over into silliness, where someone has, as it were, taken to “sneaking Whoopee Cushions into the Siege Perilous, under the very descending arse of the grail seeker”).²¹ In *Mason & Dixon*, a variety of magical lore, from cabala and Gematria to the “scrying” of crystals, anomalous mountains, and sundry “Tellurick secrets,” complicates an Enlightenment parable about the emergence of the American nation.²² Clearly, Pynchon likes ancient, multivalent theologies and demonologies. They figure prominently again in *Against the Day*.

In all his novels, Pynchon charts what the critic John McClure would call a “postsecular” course between the godless Enlightenment Juggernaut and old-time religion. In his magisterial *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007), McClure argues “that a body of contemporary North American fiction contributes vigorously to the more general cultural debate over the place of the religious in postmodern life and society and that it does so in ways that distinguish it sharply both from defenses of philosophical secularism and from the most salient forms of religious revival.” Thus, he undertakes to elucidate “some of this fiction’s most characteristic strategies and claims: its plots of partial conversion, its project of ontological disruption, its efforts at once to reassert and to weaken religious conceptions of reality, and its attempts to imagine a new, religiously inflected, form of progressive politics.”²³ McClure makes

21. Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 321.

22. Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Holt, 1997), 172.

23. John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 7. A putative religious valence in Pynchon has long exercised his critics. Among the most useful discussions of this subject is Edward Men-

a strong case for including Pynchon among the novelists who reaffirm spiritual possibility. But readers must be especially attentive to Pynchon's "negative capability," the artistic faculty that Keats identified and defined as a willingness to live with contradiction. There is a certain correlation, withal, between Pynchon's ostensible spirituality and the subversive potential of whatever unorthodox doctrine he momentarily invokes.

Thus, in *Against the Day* "it seemed some revelation would emerge from the tensely luminous sky" (377). The language of belief—and belief thwarted—is ubiquitous, constantly invoked to characterize attempts on the part of various characters to find religious meaning in politics or science or mathematics. They embrace Capitalism, Anarchism, Aetherism, and other flawed models of transcendence. Studying electricity and electromagnetic currents, Kit Traverse thinks Vectorism "could have been a religion, for all he knew—here was the god of Current, bearing light, promising death to the falsely observant, here were Scripture and commandments and liturgy, all in this priestly Vectorial language" (98). Kit's fellow student at Göttingen, Yashmeen Halfcourt, embraces mathematics, which some might think the very yardstick of rationalism, out of "her old need for some kind of transcendence—the fourth dimension, the Riemann problem, complex analysis, all had presented themselves as routes of escape from a world whose terms she could not accept" (942). From David Hilbert and Sofia Kovalevskaia to Hermann Minkowski and G. F. B. Riemann, from Gauss, Ramanujan, Weierstrass, and Ferdinand Georg Frobenius to Kronecker, Cantor, Sir William Rowan Hamilton, and Bertrand Russell, Pynchon catalogs mathematicians almost as exhaustively as Don DeLillo in *Ratner's Star* (1976), a novel that scrutinizes the idea of mathematics as "what the world is when we subtract our own perceptions."²⁴ Pynchon suggests, more romantically, that all the great mathematicians "had chosen to submit to the possibility of reaching that terrible ecstasy known to result from unmediated observation of the beautiful" (635).

Elsewhere one reads of "mill hands with little patience for extreme forms of belief, unless it was Anarchism of course" (60). "At first," wander-

derson's "The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*," first published in 1975 but most readily available in *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 97–111. Thomas Hill Schaub presented a cogent counterargument in "Open Letter in Response to Edward Mendelson's 'The Sacred, the Profane, and *The Crying of Lot 49*,'" *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 5 (1976): 93–101. Another important discussion of this subject is Kathryn Hume's "The Religious and Political Vision of Pynchon's *Against the Day*," *Philological Quarterly* 86 (2007): 163–87. I disagree with the argument for Pynchon's religiosity, but I found my own thinking enormously stimulated by Hume's essay and by the exchanges we have had on the subject.

24. Don DeLillo, *Ratner's Star* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 432.

ing into “a small variety theater” full of fervent Anarchists, Lew Basnight, the reluctant security operative, “took it for a church” (49). Merle Rideout’s scientific curiosity is also characterized in quasi-religious terms: he embraces “a small Aetherist community, maybe as close as Merle ever came to joining a church” (60). In an especially engaging passage, Merle recounts, in his own irreverent idiom, “a story . . . from the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, one of many pieces of Scripture that early church politics had kept from being included in the New Testament” (579). These “reachings after the transfinite,” as Pynchon calls them in his essay on Donald Barthelme, reach one high point as Cyprian Latewood (“arguably,” as Kathryn Hume observes, “the most fully developed religious character in any of Pynchon’s novels”) takes the veil in a strange religious order, the Brides of Night (961).²⁵

But one cannot read about the Brides of Night without thinking of Las Viudas de Cristo, the convent-brothel of *Mason & Dixon*, not to mention *Vineland*’s “Harleyite Order, a male motorcycle club who for tax purposes had been reconstituted as a group of nuns” (358). Certainly the author has little sympathy for the traditional “Christer” outlook (though the evensong scene in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is replete with powerful sentiment). Especially problematic in this regard are his aeronauts, the Chums of Chance, who seek continually “to transcend the secular,” with which they “must ever strive to minimize contamination” (113). They aspire, always, “to glimpse . . . some expression of the truth beyond the secular” (126). But a “secular” pun qualifies every such locution: as aeronauts, they largely avoid contact with the world—*seculum*—below their ship, the *Inconvenience*. As characters in boys’ tales, moreover, they remain immortal, untouched by the secular in its root sense of “generation, age.” Their “unquestioning faith that none of them, barring misadventure, would ever simply grow old and die” (418) is set back a bit when the Tunguska event, which reveals to them a sacred city, seems to strip away their fictive status and expel them into real time, the real world (793). Before and after this Siberian experience, however, they periodically interact with the “real” characters. (This lability of diegetic levels figures also in *Mason & Dixon*, which embeds a serial fiction, *The Ghastly Fop*, whose characters occasionally wander into the frame-narrative.) In the closing pages of *Against the Day*, their airship now the size of a flying island like Swift’s Laputa, the Chums remain firmly fictive, and that status must color one’s reading of the novel’s already famous last line: “They fly toward grace” (1085). Only characters in a boys’ adventure serial can, in their new century or ours, set course for such a fantastic destination. In the end, one

25. Pynchon, introduction to *Teachings of Don B.*, xx; Hume, “Religious and Political Vision,” 177.

best understands the Chums and their adventures as some pure distillate of fiction itself. What flies toward grace is storytelling, with its perennial admixture of the subjunctive. Indeed, far from what an unfriendly reviewer called “a giant bag of imaginative hot air,” the 1,085-page piece of storytelling we hold in our hands is recognizably figured in the *Inconvenience* itself, “now . . . grown as large as a small city” (1084).²⁶

The Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*, provides the etymological underpinning for the most prominent of the out-of-the-way religious ideas here. Gnosticism, while highly varied across great tracts of history, tends to something like coherence and system in figures that characterize the esoteric “knowing” that is its spiritual goal. According to gnostic doctrine, the material world, along with our physical bodies, exists only to imprison or corrupt the pure light of divine being. The gnostic strives, supremely, to free what Pynchon calls the “light that history would be blind to” (1016). But prodigies of human (the doctrinaire would say demonic) energy go toward its perpetual perversion or imprisonment.

Beyond invoking the “mysterious shamanic power” (143) of bilocation, Pynchon recurs often to gnosticism’s dualistic ontology, a doctrine encouraging the perception that a pregnant doubleness—now sinister, now transcendent—dogs all that humanity knows of the world. Moreover, as noted before, he refers repeatedly to—and names one of the sections of the novel for—“the doubly-refracting calcite known as Iceland spar” (114), characterized now as “the sub-structure of reality,” now as “the doubling of the Creation, each image clear and believable” (133). If the refraction of light suggests its gnostic betrayal by matter, a double refraction might restore to eternity its white radiance. Through Iceland spar, in other words, the gnostic may glimpse creation untrammelled. Unless (always, the dual possibility) double refraction merely compounds light’s primal corruption.

Given certain hints in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, gnosticism may seem, in the present text, to offer itself as an ideal hermeneutic. But gnosticism presents no straightforward, historically focused set of ideas. A tremendously varied tradition with roots in Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, as well as affinities with cabala and Orphism, it resists differentiation from its many antecedents and allied doctrines. Whether warped by the persecutions of orthodoxy (as notably embodied in the 325 Council of Nicaea) or simply splintered by its own anarchic theology, gnosticism eventually proves limited as master mythos. On this score, the novel reaffirms the view that we can invoke no totalizing philosophy of history or culture to make sense of the past.

26. Tom LeClair, “Lead Zeppelin: Encounters with the Unseen in Pynchon’s New Novel,” review of *Against the Day*, by Thomas Pynchon, *Bookforum* 13 (2007): 17.

However mistaken the attempt to make any single doctrine the key to all the mythologies here, readers of *Against the Day* will discern more of what prompts Dwight Eddins to title his important 1990 study *The Gnostic Pynchon*. As Eddins observes, Pynchon alternates between the vision of an empty and meaningless universe and that of a universe rife with conspiracy that rises to the very clouds. Thus, “the complex religious dialectic of Pynchon’s fiction” involves, among other things, “the fluctuating tension between the notion of a neutral, structureless universe and that of a universe infiltrated by insidious structures of Control.”²⁷ These structures represent the dark side of gnosticism, whose ancient adherents believed that an evil demiurge at once creates humanity and the world and completely traduces the true divinity that manifests itself as light. This gnostic premise, which works quite well to describe the universe of Pynchon’s earlier novels (especially *Gravity’s Rainbow*), figures more loosely in the later fictions.

One must not, then, mistake the gnosticism of *Against the Day* for the near-absolutist doctrine of spiritual pessimism laid out in older histories of religion. The references to this esoteric doctrine in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, incidentally, precede the work of Elaine Pagels by a number of years. Pagels’s representations of gnosticism—and especially its suppression as the result of early Christian canon politics—would appeal to an author opposed, as Pynchon is, to social, religious, and political conformity. Though I am not aware of Pynchon’s ever having said anything in print about Pagels, I rather think that, given his prior interest in gnosticism, he might well have allowed his thinking about it to be influenced by the sympathetic account that emerges in her 1979 study *The Gnostic Gospels*. Describing a gnosticism less given to convictions about human inadequacy before the blind demiurge, Pagels emphasizes its positive features, notably its empowerment of women and its arguments for a life devoted to realization of an inner light that is legitimately divine, however obscured or quenched by the world’s fallen state, by priestly betrayals of true spirituality, and by secular subordination to Caesar.

A religious philosophy that has survived fitfully from antiquity into the present, gnosticism effectively destabilizes hegemonic ideologies; it lends itself to a variety of guerilla campaigns against the excesses of empirical or theocratic thinking. Gnostic allusion, gnostic gestures, gnostic distrust of spiritual and other forms of coercion, gnostic resistance to strait-jacketed orthodoxy: all contribute to Pynchon’s vision—Blakean or Lawrentian in its fierceness—of American promise and its betrayal. Lew Basnight thinks with melancholy sympathy of the “prophesiers who had seen America as it might be in visions America’s wardens could not tolerate”

27. Dwight Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 8.

(51). He echoes *Lot 49*'s Oedipa Maas, who laments the ossification of the American Dream: "How had it ever happened here," she wonders, "with the chances once so good for diversity?"²⁸

Pynchon invokes gnosticism to frame his perspective on the historical problem of evil in the world—especially the evil of modern times, in which humanity strives endlessly to devise new ways to violate the earth, take life, wage war, and accumulate wealth. Often cloaked in one kind of piety or another, this corruption perpetually undermines attempts to achieve political and economic justice, ecological balance, equity among nations, and the peace such equity might sustain. Some such larger thematic program seems to lie behind the novel's truly global vision. A geographical tour de force, this novel spans the United States, Mexico, Italy, Austria, Germany, the Balkans, England, Canada, Iceland, and great tracts of "inner Asia," including Siberia and a vast area subsuming parts of China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. As he once created Alexandria and Florence at the turn of the century and Paris in 1913, Pynchon now conjures Venice, Guanajuato, Göttingen, Vienna, London, New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, and the mining towns of the Rocky Mountains. Reading this globe-spanning narrative, in fact, one thinks at times of that Remedios Varo vision of *el manto terrestre*, the great tapestry of the world that so entrances and moves *The Crying of Lot 49*'s Oedipa Maas.

The reader of *Against the Day* may also recall the "Holy-Center-Approaching" that, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, becomes a favorite "pastime"²⁹ in what Pynchon calls the Zone—nominally Hitler's Germany, prostrate at the end of World War II, but actually suggestive of a whole civilization reduced to Hobbesian essentials. The holy centers of that earlier novel run from the decidedly dubious to the sublime, from Peenemünde's Test Stand VII to the never explained "Kirghiz Light," presented as some powerful, blinding, highly spiritualized experience in the depths of central Asia. More powerful than, say, Shelley's "white radiance of eternity" and other such models of transcendence, the Kirghiz Light hints at less benign illuminations and intimates as much the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as anything more numinous. Indeed, holy centers themselves stand little chance of survival in a world largely incapable of spiritual vision.

Now, in *Against the Day*, Pynchon returns to the conceit of holy centers and the "single great episode of light" that brings something like a spiritually enabling annihilation. It occurs "always" in "a hidden place, the way into it is not obvious, the geography is as much spiritual as physical. If you should happen upon it, your strongest certainty is not that you have dis-

28. Pynchon, *Crying of Lot 49*, 181.

29. Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 508.

covered it but returned to it" (165). Thus, the light manifests itself fitfully and, for the most part, ambiguously. Does the Tunguska event of 1908 (that "heavenwide blast of light" [779]) approximate revelation? Does it model what is elsewhere, more generically, a powerful spiritual experience that awaits pilgrims in Shambhala, the mythical holy city of Buddhism; in Tannu Tuva; in "Aztlán, the mythic ancestral home of the Mexican people" (277); or in another remote and forgotten corner of Asia or Mesoamerica? Or does it merely announce secular apocalypse—a version of what visits those two small cities in Japan toward midcentury or a Ukrainian power plant in 1986? How ironic, Pynchon suggests, that a notorious nuclear disaster should occur at a place whose name—Tcherno-był—puns on the Russian/Ukrainian word for "the destroying star known as Wormwood in the book of Revelation" (784; cf. 797). Pynchon adds to these intimations an elaborate, mysterious account of the cataclysm visited on "a great northern city" upon the return of the fictional Vormance expedition. Like the toppled campanile of Venice, the "charred trees still quietly smoking" and "flanged steelwork fallen or leaning perilously" (150) proleptically figure what would within a century (just as one millennium ended and another began) befall the Twin Towers. By the same token, the civilization that in many ways centers in New York breathlessly awaits the full realization of what the destruction of the towers portended.

These examples reveal light under opposing aspects. It can illuminate, and it can annihilate. But the historical reality principle dictates that the destructive aspect figure here with particular prominence. Etymology conspires to underscore the point that, wrongly conceived or valued, light can betray. Phosgene, the poison gas, is named for light (953). The word *photography*, designating the process by which Vibe and his associates can document the degradation of workers, is derived from the Greek for "light writing." Many forces partner, then, with the strikebreaking "Colorado militia . . . in . . . giving light a bad name" (1008). By the same token, enlightenment may take the form of the scarcely imaginable, and "the terrible trans-horizontic light of what approached" (542) announces an apotheosis of ordinance, lighting up the Western Front and taking the lives, between 1914 and 1918, of 10 million combatants. No ordinary crepuscular turning, "what looms in the twilight of the European future" (543) is the darkness that will follow the going out of lamps all over Europe.

One discerns the spirit behind *Against the Day*'s most important thematic feature—not to mention its title. Thematically, the "day" is that of *gnosis*, knowledge, truly enlightened thinking, the knot of ignorance untied. But this day, which might seem to find its nemesis in darkness and night, shifts its identity and its character endlessly. At Yz-les-Bains, an "Anarchist spa" (931), Yashmeen Halfcourt remarks, "We make our journeys out there in the low light of the future, and return to the bourgeois day and its mass

delusion of safety, to report on what we've seen. What are those 'utopian dreams' of ours but defective forms of time-travel?" (942). To unpack this sibylline utterance, one must recall Wells's time traveler, who journeys on one occasion far into the future and there beholds the moribund sun on the very eve of the entropic heat death. By implication, the "day" familiar to the middle classes would seem to be little more than what the prisoners in Plato's Cave know of light. But what is "against the day" is less ambiguous: it is "that dark fourth-dimensional Atlantic known as Time" (415), "the one force no one knows how to defeat, resist, or reverse" (558). At once Wordsworthian and Wellsian, the light fades as the world moves into the future. Miles Blundell reflects that "somehow, the earlier, the great, light had departed" (551).

Thus, Pynchon's vast novel is, among other things, a philippic, an inventory of all that is arrayed, in modern times, against the light. But in *Against the Day*, as in *Mason & Dixon*, the light is not the exclusive province of the Enlightenment, which has too often served to advance the coercive rationalism and rapacious self-justification of "capitalists and Christers." Though he invests much energy in indicting that collective rapacity, the author also strives to affirm the legitimate, if fitful, striving of certain benign ideological forces in history. These include tentative, blind, but incremental steps toward what one might characterize as a greening of its *Geist*. The humble pursuit of political and economic justice, the restraint of colonial and capitalistic appetites—these promise a new and better dawn. The novel, then, stages a struggle between light and dark, with much attention to reactionary politics, misguided science, and other forces ranged "against the day."

The phrase that gives this novel its title acquires considerable resonance from its eightfold recurrence, notably in apocalyptic contexts, in the King James Bible. One encounters it most memorably in 2 Peter 3:7 ("against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men") and Romans 2:5 ("against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God"). Such biblical echoes evoke an ancient spiritual repugnance for any and all worship of Mammon. As noted previously, Pynchon discovers much in religious lore to exploit and even endorse. He comes at such thinking, however, by decidedly circuitous routes; nor should we, absent some pronouncement in propria persona, make too much of his gesturing toward assorted spiritual nostrums. Rather, Pynchon eclecticizes to disarm and subvert certain unimaginative forms of rationalism.

However unlikely to embrace millenarianism himself, Pynchon seems to respect the modest credo of anarchists who believe in "certain hidden geometries of History" (373), geometries perhaps approximating the Emersonian faith that Jesse, the appealing, just-minded son of Reef Traverse and his sometime paramour Estrella ("Stray") Briggs, will as an old man

articulate in the closing pages of *Vineland*: “Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil.”³⁰ But even as he affirms an old workingman’s vision of a just cosmos, the author expects his readers to hear Emerson’s words, stirring as they are, with skepticism. One must resist taking in anything more than a “subjunctive” spirit the piety of a Transcendentalist pundit striving to affirm, with the previous century, that whatever is, is right. Thus, the problematic adjective here—“divine”—ought perhaps to be understood only as a colloquial flourish, something Pynchon echoes without actual theistic conviction. But Emerson knew something of Eastern theology, and Pynchon would appreciate the trace of karmic doctrine in that figure of cosmic justice as self-leveling beam.

In his introduction to the reissue of Jim Dodge’s 1990 novel *Stone Junction*, Pynchon characterizes larceny and, more important, literary art as a species of such “karmic adjustment.”³¹ In *Vineland*’s Takeshi Fumimoto (possibly the same Takeshi who appears in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a wacky kamikaze), Pynchon elaborates the conceit: as a “karmic adjuster,” Takeshi is, among other things, a figure of the artist. Thus, the author of *Against the Day*, invoking something like the old idea of poetic justice, conceives of fiction as a medium in which one may shape graceless reality—and even history—along lines more congenial to the deep and abiding human appetite for fair dealing and the righting of wrongs. This is the Pynchon who has saluted Ruskin’s idea of the imagination as “a capacity responsive to the claims of fact, but unoppressed by them.”³² In the Penguin catalog précis of *Against the Day*, Pynchon flags its “contrary-to-the-fact occurrences,” which represent “not the world” but “what the world might be with a minor adjustment or two. According to some, this is one of the main purposes of fiction.”

III

As I suggested earlier, Pynchon has always been engaged in something like an “archaeology” of his historical moment. One fiction complements

30. Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (New York: Little, Brown, 1990), 369.

31. Thomas Pynchon, introduction to *Stone Junction*, by Jim Dodge (New York: Grove, 1998), xi.

32. See Pynchon’s letter to the *Daily Telegraph* on behalf of Ian McEwan. Though Pynchon rightly credits Ruskin with this sentiment, he is actually quoting a Denis Donoghue remark about Ruskin. See Denis Donoghue, *Speaking of Beauty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 160.

its fellows, and all coalesce as a post-Faulknerian exercise: a Yoknapatawpha of American and Western civilization. The historical range of *Against the Day*, 1893 to 1923, covers the thirty years that saw, as it were, modernity's coming of age. The author chronicles the struggle between capital and labor, the competition for colonies, the deep pull of anarchy both philosophical and political, the wars, and the fluidity of international borders that could never accommodate all the nationalisms splintering and proliferating. "Lemberg, Léopol, Lvov, Lviv, and Lwów," recites a character: "all different names for the same city" (1079). (Another city, Sarajevo, retains its name but becomes what Samuel Thomas calls "a palimpsest of conquest, absorption and resistance."³³) Again, as in his first novel, *V.*, Pynchon makes World War I the crypto-fulcrum of recent history, but he pointedly declines to allow *Against the Day* to become a yet more Spenglerian version of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–95). He means to invite reflection on just what might be on our present horizon. As Shawn Smith observes, "Pynchon's fiction reunites the present with the genealogy of destruction that spawned it."³⁴ The twenty-first-century analogue to the Great War has not yet come about, but the centenary looms. Even the most casual parallels drawn between the brushfire wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and those of our own millennial era (the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the travail of Rwanda-Burundi and Darfur, the drawn-out agony of Afghanistan and Iraq, the looming Armageddon in the Middle East, beacons by Gulf Wars I and II) suggest a terrible prospect—something even more horrific than what overtook civilization in 1914–18.

Although he refers repeatedly to the approach (and, eventually, the fighting) of the Great War, Pynchon declines to characterize it as either narrative climax or historical climacteric. He would probably agree with William Pfaff's characterization of that conflict as "the most important event of contemporary Western history, one whose effects are still not exhausted. It closed doors opened by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and opened new ones, which led to cemeteries, torture chambers, and death camps."³⁵ But the author's refusal fully to depict World War I poses one of this text's most interesting questions: Why does a chronicle largely focused on the decades preceding 1914 not avail itself of a culmination as convenient to narrative as to history? Fought off-page, the Great War detains the reader only briefly as the novel reaches its conclusion. Pynchon brings his great airship into port in a short final section,

33. Samuel Thomas, "Metković to Mostar: Pynchon and the Balkans," *Textual Practice* 24 (2010): 364.

34. Smith, *Pynchon and History*, 181.

35. William Pfaff, "The Fallen Hero," *New Yorker*, May 8, 1989, 105.

“Rue du Départ,” which runs to only twenty pages. Set in 1923 Paris (the popularity of Hahn’s operetta *Ciboulette* indicates the year), with flashbacks to wartime Torino, Italy, this section offers little in the way of denouement. Pynchon, true to a postmodern aesthetic that resists closure, does not care to be limited to a single ending. In *V.*, for example, as “all things gathered to farewell,” he provides two conclusions, both set in Malta—but one in 1956, the other in 1919.³⁶ The double conclusion of *Against the Day* reverses this pattern: the endings are close to each other in time but far apart in space. “Rue du Départ” functions only as coda to the more elaborate conclusion of the long preceding section, which shares a title with the novel itself. Here Pynchon takes leave of a number of his characters in what appears to be 1921 Los Angeles. The date is implied by aeronaut Chick Counterfly’s remark that he and his father have not seen each other in “nearly thirty years,” not “since 1892 or thereabouts” (1034). (Nor has the reader heard anything about this “Dick” Counterfly, evidently a latter-day Pap Finn, in over a thousand pages.) Readers who recall the stunning, frame-violating climax staged in the same city at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow* may wonder at the largely bangless Los Angeles valedictory here. Why, indeed, the American West Coast, rather than some likelier European locale, for a conclusion on the eve of the very annus mirabilis of modernism—the 1922 that saw the completion of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and the publication of *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*?

If in fact the author has deliberately elided the year 1922 from his chronicle, it may be that he means to suggest a postmodern worm in the modernist apple, one *episteme* born at the very moment of another’s perfect ripeness. Certain of the more outré features of his 1920s Los Angeles provide an effective frame for characters who modulate from their nineteenth-century identities into figures more familiar to twentieth-century storytelling. Lew Basnight becomes the West Coast private eye (that tarnished American Adam) of later romance; Deuce Kindred, the classic Western villain, becomes a proto-Manson likely to receive “a death sentence” when apprehended for “a string of orgy-type homicides” (1059). Merle Rideout and Roswell Bounce become figures out of the *Back to the Future* films.

The last two figure in the author’s fanciful sketching of emergent moving-picture technologies. In the closing pages of *Against the Day*, some kind of early television apparatus picks up—some fifty years early—what appears to be an episode of *Gilligan’s Island* (1034), a childhood favorite of *Vineland* character Prairie Wheeler, the great-great-great granddaughter of *Against the Day*’s Webb Traverse. Replete with understated intima-

36. Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), 379.

tions of the media storm and paradigm-shifting technologies to come, *Against the Day*'s California valedictory looks forward, as it were, to *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland*, and *Inherent Vice* (2009)—and perhaps foretells some fictive meditation on what America may yet undergo in the new millennium. Readers curious about the larger vision of this greatest of contemporary novelists may expect further installments in a kind of postmodern *Comédie humaine*. But Pynchon offers only such continuation as history—still unfolding—will allow. Meanwhile, he leaves readers hoping that fiction will not one day have to treat some twenty-first-century convulsion comparable, *mutatis mutandis*, to 1914's great plunge into darkness.