

History, Utopia and Transcendence in the Space-Time of *Against the Day*

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I

Of all American contemporary writers, Thomas Pynchon has been the most consistently cosmopolitan. Even when his novels seem to be primarily concerned with the United States (or with a mythological "America"), as they evidently are in *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, their narrative range extends from the American continent to contexts, episodes and conflicts throughout the history of Western civilization, its beliefs, its scientific thought and its colonial conquests. Indeed, on the basis of his first three novels, one might even have assumed that it was German more than American history (especially that of the twentieth century) that occupied Pynchon almost to the point of obsession. But even in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, where that history enters his fictions most extensively, it is clear that the German is only a special case in what one might call a narrative history of transnational modernization. Although in *Against the Day*, Pynchon's sixth and by far longest novel, Germany still figures prominently as the locus of higher mathematics (and lower imperial politics), it has been assigned a comparatively small place in a much larger historical panorama. Pynchon has given his cosmopolitan interests even a global twist in so far as the book's tangled plotlines run through real and invented places in the U.S., Europe and Asia, on the margins but also at the centers of the political crises that marked transatlantic history between the 1890s and the First World War.

Among its innumerable protagonists are ruthless robber barons, unionists and bomb-throwing anarchists, private eyes and secret agents (who are often double agents), gunslingers, scientists and mathematicians, mystics and New Age charlatans, magicians, migrants and globetrotters, as well as a dog able to read Henry James (*The Princess Casamassima*, for instance) and Eugène Sue ("in the original French" [AD 125]). They roam the mountain ranges of southern Colorado and northern Mexico; travel from one continent to another; move from Chicago to New York, London, Göttingen, Vienna, Venice and Paris. They round the globe above (via airship) and explore it below (via subterranean frigate); they pass through what was once thought

to be the earth's hollow core, and between the earth and its, for us, invisible counterimage (the antichthon of Pythagorean philosophy). They fight in the Mexican Revolution and against heartless mine-owners in the Colorado labor conflicts of the 1890s and after; they flee from the myrmidons and bloodhounds of Capital, and from the spies and agents of the major European powers. They escape, during the First Balkan War of 1912–1913, from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire through the mountainous wilderness of Greece and Macedonia. They cross the oceans and the polar icecaps in their dirigible, and travel underneath the sands of the Inner-Asian desert in search of the sacred city of Shambhala. They demand revenge for the injustice they (or their family) once suffered, and seek transcendence and self-knowledge in the infinity of the Siberian taiga, in the pure spirituality of mathematics, or in the orgiastic-orgasmic joys of the body.

As always, Pynchon's figures are torn between a yearning for the Invisible and the Transcendent on the one hand, and a longing for pure immanence on the other. They therefore live in a concretely perceived and experienced world of enacted desires—desire for political and/or sexual power (or, inversely, for submission to that power), or desire for the unheard of and miraculous. In other words, they move in a narrated world that is as much particularized geographical, political and historical space as it is a recognizable territory of the period's imagination: of its scientific thoughts, its religious and literary fantasies, its dreams, nightmares and obsessions.¹

In this respect, Louis Menand is right when, in his skeptical yet perceptive review of *Against the Day*, he asks with ironic exasperation, "So what was Pynchon thinking?" only to answer that "he was apparently thinking what he usually thinks, which is that modern history is a war between utopianism and totalitarianism, counterculture and hegemony, anarchism and corporatism, nature and *techne*, Eros and the death drive, slaves and masters, entropy and order" (170). But the critics, too, are thinking what they usually think, namely that Pynchon is unable to create "real characters": that his protagonists are never psychologically developed, have no depth and therefore no consistency, are pasteboard figures out of comicbooks and thus "ruthless in a way only possible to a writer whose imagination has never dwelt among actual human beings" (Kirsch 2; cf. Kakutani). However, by now we should be used to Pynchon's double role as painstaking historian and bizarre fabulator, to his peculiar mix of genres, discourses, tones and styles—a mix which allows him to combine the realistic with the utopian or the science-fictional, the historical with the fantastic, the painstakingly factual with the plausibly (or sometimes implausibly) invented, the highly elevated or elegiac with the comical or parodistic,

the philosophically or scientifically erudite with the grossly pornographic, the corny and sentimental with the sophomoric humor of low punning. In short, Pynchon's texts combine in a rather curious way elements of the mimetic with the self-consciously staged and performative.

With the exception of *The Crying of Lot 49* (his most condensed and economical work of fiction), Pynchon's all-inclusive novels tend to sprawl and openly display their imperfections (if measured by the standards of Henry James, who hated the monstrosity of facts and words *en masse*). They are books of "extraordinary incoherence" (as George Levine once wrote with reference to *Gravity's Rainbow* [181]): They spawn plots and subplots whose "arrows are pointing all different ways" (GR 603) or that simply stop and lead nowhere; and they introduce a myriad of figures, many of them easy to forget (despite their often unforgettably funny names) since they appear only a few times, speak their parts (or set pieces) and leave. Even those who act in the foreground are not characters after the conventions of the realistic novel but types we know from other fictions: from novels, comicbooks, films or TV-series, since Pynchon's narrative space is also a highly intertextual one. Or they represent attitudes or ideological positions that can be placed along the two axes of a system of coordinates: transcendence/immanence, on the one hand, and dominance/submissiveness on the other.

If all of this is part of what one might call the Pynchon signature, it is nevertheless obvious that, to the chagrin of some of its critics, *Against the Day* is notably different from any of its predecessors. What makes for that difference, how the book relates to Pynchon's previous work and to what extent it marks a new direction in his writing are the focus of the following discussion.

II

In "Caries and Cabals," his seminal analysis of *V.*, Tony Tanner observed more than thirty years ago that it was a characteristic of Pynchon's fictions that they were over-coded almost to the point of self-parody at the same time they were also strangely under-coded—to the great frustration of his readers. Although *V.* abounds with information, with proliferating clues that yet converge to form a fairly clear semantic structure, its meaning nevertheless remains elusive and enigmatic. Who or what is the mysterious *V.*? Is she a figure with a history, or are her transformations an allegorization of historical process? Does she represent the dying cultural order of Victorianism? Is she a fiction of order in a historical reality of increasing chaos and

semantic emptiness? Or does she, inversely, stand for the gradual infiltration of chaos into the mere fiction of an order? Does she anticipate a new world increasingly made up of dead matter extending from the German death camps into the narrated present of the novel? Is she the sinister agent of a cosmic conspiracy? Is she an agent of destruction or of liberation, the harbinger of decadence or of an emerging radical democracy? Is V. short for Void? or for Vanitas? or for the Vector of Time (“time’s arrow”²) and thus an allegorical figure representing entropy? Or is V. simply an arbitrarily recurring letter, or part of a secret yet decipherable code? Although V. thus becomes increasingly mysterious with the ever widening range of possible (if contradictory) meanings, the symptoms of her ongoing transformation from “she” to “it,” from person to object, cannot be doubted. (V. could therefore also signify *Verdinglichung*: reification.) Concomitant with the general process of reification allegorized in the bodily changes that mark V.’s history, the letter V, by its very proliferation, becomes increasingly an empty sign, “a remarkably scattered concept” (V 389).

And yet, V.’s narrative discontinuity resists such a linear reading. In V.’s entropic scattering, entropy as a summing up of the book’s subject matter is, quite logically, also scattered, erased as a stable signified. For the discourse of decay, decadence and reification, so overstated to the point of triviality in its macrostructure, is honey-combed by a subversive subtext that undermines patterns of narrative coherence and places things, persons and events in the loose synchronicity of statistical order and random sequence.

This paradoxical coexistence of semantic structural coherence and diffusive suggestiveness also applies to *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Oedipa will be sure Tristero really exists only if it visibly reveals him-/itself “in its terrible nakedness” (CL 54), or if she willingly enters into the fiction he/it might also possibly be, thus giving to mere metaphor the reality of paranoia.³ She fervently yet apprehensively expects the first at the same time she fears to succumb to the second. As in V., meaning seems to accumulate via the proliferation of interrelated signs: in this case, the muted post horn and several ominous cryptograms,⁴ among them W.A.S.T.E., which may signify an alternative system of communication, or merely the desire/need for such a system—or nothing at all. Oedipa begins to see these signs everywhere and reads them as evidence of Tristero’s hidden presence, “until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero” (81). Although The Tristero may be simply a fantasy (suggested by an apocryphal Jacobean revenge tragedy she “happens” to attend), he/it may be a historical counterforce that has been secretly undermining established

order throughout the ages, or a personification of entropy as agency, or a hoax at Oedipa's expense. "[S]he dreamed of disembodied voices from whose malignance there was no appeal, the soft dusk of mirrors out of which something was about to walk, and empty rooms that waited for her. Your gynecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with" (175).

Pynchon does not deliver his heroine from this symbolic pregnancy. She remains in a terrain of total ambiguity and absolute uncertainty. Although the signs and symptoms she finds (or is made to find) endlessly proliferate, they suggest a meaning that constantly eludes her grasp. She is therefore always on the threshold of revelation, a revelation that might still happen or that has already happened but, like the epileptic's seizure, escapes memory and/or articulation (cf. 95). All of Pynchon's novels could be said to originate from this gap separating Word from word—the wordless experience of blinding knowledge as separated from the flat certainties of articulation. They enact the loss of "the direct, epileptic Word" (118)—although in each case in a different manner. Common to all of them, however, is the invasion of the fantastic—as intrusion of the uncanny, the terrible or the miraculous—into the realm of everyday experience.

V. and, perhaps even more so, *The Crying of Lot 49* seem to echo (if they are not modeled on) the *ficciones* of Borges, especially his story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." The parallels between Borges's and Pynchon's texts are indeed remarkable: We find in both the slow infiltration of the fantastic into the realm of the everyday, together with a fascination with mirrors, labyrinths, conspiracies and counterworlds. In Borges's story, what seems intellectual play gradually turns out to be conspiracy; and what appears to be a merely fictive counterworld gradually replaces fact, invades and finally takes complete possession of the real. In a somewhat different manner, the protagonists of Pynchon's novels may be on the verge of discovering an active force (or counterforce) within history, a secret and conspiratorial agency driving, subverting and transforming it—possibly; for neither Stencil (in V.) nor Oedipa know whether they are discovering or inventing, whether they find truth or are merely projecting and manipulating it—or are themselves manipulated to believe they find it. This uncertain status of the fictional leads Stencil to pursue endlessly what is for him an intellectual game while for Oedipa it is a profound epistemological crisis.

With *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon moves farther away from Borges: In the empire of the Rocket (its exploitative production, its technological sublimity, its devastating impact), the fantastic and invented exist as powerful facts and act as destructive agents in human history. As in the earlier novels, it is not plot that provides *Gravity's Rainbow* with at

least a semblance of narrative order. Rather, the novel's structuring elements can be found in a system of semantic oppositions, analogies and interlinking metaphors that form an elaborate and inexhaustible network of allusions. It is centered on the technological and symbolic fact of the Rocket (its body, its parabolic flight, its terrifying descent, the postwar search for its secrets) as an object of human ingenuity, labor, terror, awe and desire.⁵

For all its complexity, discontinuity and fragmentariness, *Gravity's Rainbow* thus draws remarkable structural coherence from the symbolic power of its central object—even though the seemingly infinite semantic ramifications it generates lead in multiple and often opposite directions. Take the rocket's flight, for instance. Its trajectory—among many other associations—resembles the trajectory of human life, a metaphoric linkage that provokes speculations on freedom and predestination. For in its infancy the rocket created severe problems for its controlling fathers: Until its *Brennschluss*, the V-2 was guided from the ground by remote control; afterwards it was beyond reach and free to leave its calculated course—which in many cases led to its early and uncalculated self-destruction. The development of a system of self-control therefore became crucial. A *Folgsamkeitsfaktor* (cf. GR 403), an "obedience factor," had to be implanted. Its obvious metaphorical implications Slothrop (who is in many ways tied to, if not identified with, the rocket) realizes in a moment of revelation: "Control might already have been put over him. [. . . A]ll in his life of what has looked free or random, is discovered to've been under some Control" (GR 209). Like one of the many rockets fired from Peenemünde or Blizna exploding prematurely because of the lack of an obedience factor, Slothrop eventually regresses into a self-less state, a dream of self before all socialization. Whether this state connotes an ultimate freedom or an ultimate dependency, the novel leaves—like almost everything else—undecided.

It is, of course, also possible to read Pynchon's novels simply for the factual information they provide. Indeed, learning is an essential part of reading them. When I first stumbled on *V.*, a year after it was published, my first reaction was one of shocked astonishment since this author I had never heard of seemed to know more about German history than I, who, like many of my generation, believed myself to be an expert in the matter of German guilt. And yet, back in the early sixties, Germany's brief colonial history was still something hardly anyone talked about. In contrast to Great Britain, France or Belgium, Germany, for once, seemed to have been clean, at least comparatively so, what with the good mission schools and all the grateful Southwest Africans who bore their German first names (all the Ottos, Wilhelms and

Christians) with pride. On the other hand, I had vague childhood memories of collecting, during the Nazi period, matchboxes decorated with pictures of German war heroics. Among these an apparently unforgettable one was called “General von Trotha bestrafte die räuberischen Hottentotten” (“General von Trotha punishes the thieving Hottentots”). It showed a few German soldiers with cannons and machine guns on a battle field strewn with naked black corpses. This recollection made “Mondaugen’s Story” immediately plausible to me as if I had come across an unknown historical document—something more, in any case, than merely fiction. In a by now almost legendary essay from the mid-eighties, Friedrich Kittler praised the documentary richness and the historical accuracy of Pynchon’s vision: the growth of those structures of a new technological global order which his fictions (especially *Gravity’s Rainbow*) so ingeniously revealed—long before they became acknowledged facts of contemporary history and everyday experience.

However, the question of what kind of knowledge Pynchon’s texts convey beyond the revelation of obscure, unknown or repressed historical (or scientific) information continues to be a matter of controversy. The very complexity of all of Pynchon’s books has also provoked an urge to simplify them.⁶ I remember very well that, when I first taught *Gravity’s Rainbow* in Berlin, I foolishly tried to make the book more available to my struggling students by calling it a “green” novel. (After all, one critic had labeled it “one of the great ecological novels of our century” [Poenicke 259].) Whereupon one of the students got up and left, protesting that she knew the party program of the Greens quite well and if Pynchon’s novel was close to it, she didn’t have to read it. And indeed, neglecting the book’s complex textual surface for the deep-structure of a few semantic oppositions runs counter to Pynchon’s strategy of suggestive if semantically subversive ambivalence. So do all readings that come up with a coherently plausible conclusion, since—as Tanner reminded us a long time ago—all conclusive readings are subverted by the text’s irreducible openness. According to Tanner, the ultimate lesson to be learned from Pynchon is the need to question one’s own need for closure (TP 82). And yet, it would be a grave mistake to ignore the often stunning literalness of Pynchon’s fictional analyses of contemporary history: *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* vision of ever-growing international cartels, its indictment of a history possibly in progress toward self-destruction even though the novel’s radically nonlinear narrative structure denies such semantic and teleological fixation. As with Sheherezade, the possibility of ending is the incentive to much end-denying, end-delaying, if not necessarily end-preventing, fabulation.

Pynchon's texts project a narrative world that is recognizably historical but also textual; or one could say that his sense of the real includes all products of the human imagination. It is therefore open to the possible (the terrible as well as the miraculous), to the yet unheard of or invisible. Its "facts" (or events) are either random and meaningless, or symptoms that lend themselves to a variety of different and contradictory interpretations—by the protagonists who are entangled in a world that is a text as much as by the reader entangled in a text that is a world. Since the only certainty possible, individually and collectively, is the terrifying inevitability of death, all symptoms tend to point in the direction of the Vector of Time. And yet the novels abound with inverse or multiple readings of the same facts. In this sense, Pynchon's texts operate on different levels of meaning and—almost like the objects of medieval hermeneutics—offer themselves to different modes of interpretation: the literal (what actually happens), the historical (when fact becomes sign and symptom), the moral (when event is submitted to judgment) and the metaphysical/spiritual (when symptom becomes revelation). Except that (since all of Pynchon's narratives project an epistemological field of radical uncertainty) all interpretations are embedded in a context of ambivalence, contingency and contradiction. Thus, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the same symptoms can be read as indicating a profane history either of technological progress or of ecological decay; a sacred history either of apocalyptic destruction or of eventual redemption; or a nonlinear (non)history either of random occurrence or of miraculous inversion. Similarly, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa, in her search for the Tristero system, gives name and face to a nameless and faceless terror that is perhaps her existential fear of death and nothingness, or of her own approaching madness, or of a cruel agency of self- and world-destruction—or that is, inversely, a desperately hoped-for agent of redemptive social change. All of these earlier novels anchor narration in a clear structure of meaning that yet allows, quite messily, for a maximum of semantic openness and indeterminacy.

III

Since *Against the Day* lacks the centripetal pull of such structural firmness, the reader is confronted with enigmas and ambivalences in abundance and yet feels little need to solve them. While there is no lack of mysteries (for example, the mysteries of light and electricity, the mathematics of curved space-time, the sudden collapse of the Campanile of San Marco in 1902, the still unexplained Tunguska Event of 1908), the text itself is less mysterious, therefore less "difficult"⁷—a

test less for the reader's hermeneutic ingenuity than for his/her willingness to follow the text's spatial shifts and temporal leaps, its discussion of mathematical theories and scientific speculations, its long string of episodes of adventure whose length and sequence, apart from being loosely determined by chronology, seem arbitrary. In contrast to *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the Rocket not only is the incarnation of a technological Divine but also generates a network of metaphorical (inter)relations, *this* novel's symbolic equivalents (the sublime physics and metaphysics of Light and of the newly discovered power of electricity) are comparatively diffuse and lack the integrative potential of the Rocket or the structural focus provided by The Tristero and V. In other words, *Against the Day* seems even more decentered, even more incoherent than the previous novels—which is not to say, however, that it is without structure. Indeed, the mathematics of post-Newtonian physics which figure so prominently here—such as the theories of vectors and quaternions, Riemann's zeta function, Minkowskian space-time—serve as metaphors for the book's structural openness, its narrative space organized as a multidimensional space-time continuum.⁸

If we can speak of an overall design at all—apart from the temporal frame provided by the thirty years of narrated time from 1893 to 1923 in which the multiple episodes and plotlines are placed in a highly fragmented and yet slowly advancing chronological sequence—it would have to be the loose pattern of simultaneous occurrences. Things happen at the same (or almost the same) time at different but often analogous places, such as the mountain regions of northern Mexico, of the Balkans and of northwest China, where each of the Traverse brothers in turn encounters tribal cultures (their spiritual traditions, their folkways, their fierce customs of revenge) along a borderline of conflict and advancing modernization. Persons, places, situations and events are interrelated by similarity of action, structure or function. Thus “[t]he political crisis in Europe maps into the crisis in mathematics” (AD 594); and the Tunguska Event of 1908—a mysterious (meteoric?) explosion of enormous power over the taiga of Siberia⁹—links to the entirely fictional destruction of a nameless city by an ancient and monstrous Power.¹⁰ In the latter case, a mythological “object,” deeply buried in ice, is dug up in Iceland by the (equally fictional) Vormance Expedition and brought to North America. There it comes to life, escapes its urban imprisonment and takes revenge: a Moloch raging against the modern metropolis. Both “events”—the historical as much as the fictional—mark a new dimension in human history: the shockwaves of the Modern that will culminate in the catastrophe of the First World War.

People and places are also correlated through bilocation, “which enables those with the gift literally to be in two or more places, often widely separated, at the same time” (AD 143). The painter Hunter Penhallow will thus be translated thousands of miles from an Iceland town to Venice at the magic moment “when the shapes and sizes of the masses here at this ‘Venice of the Arctic’ would be exactly the same as those of secular Venice and its own outlying islands” (136). In similar fashion, Kit Traverse is bodily transported—in a single moment and as if by magic—from Lwów to Paris; or is it that he is changed into his mirror image already there? For the world we know can duplicate itself, mirror-like, as its—at times visible, at times invisible—counterworld, called into existence by the double reflection of light in the pure crystal of Iceland spar (which can also be found in the Mexican mountains—another geographical connection):

“For this is not *only* the geographical Iceland here, it is also one of several convergences among the worlds, found now and then lying behind the apparent[. . .] Iceland Spar is what hides the Hidden People, makes it possible for them to move through the world that thinks of itself as ‘real,’ provides that all-important ninety-degree twist to *their* light, so they can exist alongside our own world but not be seen.” (134)

The creation of double- and counterworlds via the double refraction of light in Iceland spar is a central metaphor in *Against the Day* since it points not only to the doubling of the world in the moving images of film and television but also, in metafictional reference, to the doubling power of fiction in general and to the intertwining of the apparently real with its double- or counterimage which makes for the multidimensional world of Pynchon’s narratives in particular. “‘Lateral world-sets, other parts of the Creation, lie all around us, each with its crossover points or gates of transfer from one to another, and they can be anywhere, really’” (221), says the Grand Cohen, head of the New Age counterespionage organization T.W.I.T. (True Worshipers of the Ineffable Tetractys¹¹), which ends up duplicating its well-known rivals in the “Great Game” of power politics that will, inadvertently, lead into the disaster of the Great War.

These spatial interconnections by analogy, duplication¹² and bilocation have their equivalent along the axis of time. Past, present and future are fluid categories; in fact, they interact and mirror each other. Events that happen in narrated time resound in the narrating time that is the reader’s present.¹³ Time machines allow ambivalent glimpses of that future, and Trespassers traveling back in time from times ahead invade the narrative with ominous reports of doom, the future already

lurking in the present moment and location (in the fields that will become “Flanders Fields”), while most of the novel’s future-trusting protagonists are unaware of the catastrophes we as readers know are still to come:

“We are here among you as seekers of refuge from our present—your future—a time of worldwide famine, exhausted fuel supplies, terminal poverty—the end of the capitalistic experiment. Once we came to understand the simple thermodynamic truth that Earth’s resources were limited, in fact soon to run out, the whole capitalist illusion fell to pieces. Those of us who spoke this truth aloud were denounced as heretics, as enemies of the prevailing economic faith. Like religious Dissenters of an earlier day, we were forced to migrate, with little choice but to set forth upon that dark fourth-dimensional Atlantic known as Time.” (415)

The addressees of this dark message (from a future much further ahead in time than the First World War) are the Chums of Chance, the heroes of a late-Victorian juvenile adventure series modeled on the likes of the popular Tom Swift dime novels. They are benevolent but by no means infallible or invulnerable guardian angels, who take their orders from changing authorities (at first apparently Federal, later private ones) and cross the skies in their dirigible trying to prevent the worst. In contrast to their antagonists, the deeply pessimistic Trespassers, the Chums of Chance are mostly optimists with a childlike confidence in their time’s general progress. It is therefore no coincidence that the novel begins and ends with them.

In this intricate narrative network of plot(s) and events, the “real” protagonists as much as the imagined ones (that is, the novel’s ghosts and fictional persons) move as if in a nonlinear field of multidimensional space-time, pulled and pushed by forces they themselves can hardly understand. The lines they form issue from a sequence of events or moments, switch-points, forks in the road (a recurring metaphor in Pynchon), so that turns and alternative directions are always possible, if not always taken. Characters follow (and in a sense *are*) vectors of the various desires that form their life- and plotlines, that move (and often shift) them into different directions of space or time, or of different manners of fulfillment—paths that sometimes converge, sometimes cross and sometimes run parallel with each other. Their lines begin in various places but converge most often in Venice, where many of the protagonists meet before they move again to different destinations: “one might imagine a giant *railway-depot*, with thousands of gates disposed radially in all dimensions, leading to tracks of departure to all manner of alternate Histories” (682).

If Pynchon's protagonists should therefore be seen as postrealistic vectors (defined primarily by movement and directional shifts) rather than as conventional characters, then those traits that remain stable even when the protagonists change direction might be called eigenvalues. The discussion of eigenvalues is part of the raging debate on Riemann's and Hilbert's mathematical theories at Göttingen. Although that debate has nothing to do with the concept of character, the terminology used evidently derives from it—as it, in turn, becomes strangely suggestive of matters beyond mere mathematics. This is especially apparent when Yashmeen Halfcourt—a breathtaking beauty of Russian descent, a mystic of higher mathematics and an agent of T.W.I.T.—asks Professor Hilbert about the zeta function and whether eigenvalues might not be used to solve some of its mysteries. "'There is also this . . . spine of reality.' Afterward she would remember she actually said '*Rückgrat von Wirklichkeit*'" (604). But what, one may ask, makes for "self-value" and "reality's spine" in the multidimensional and relative world of space-time?

The world of Pynchon's novel is peopled by celestial (fictional and/ or otherworldly) beings, such as the Chums of Chance, who mostly, but not always, move in the skies. Although well-meaning in their function as protectors, they are also involved in such profane matters as surveillance and spying. Most of the protagonists, however, are very much terrestrial figures: pursuing power and domination in sex and/or politics, or searching for transcendence and spiritual purity, or seeking revenge for injustice suffered, or yearning for an alternative existence here on earth. Early in the book, one of the minor figures thinks he hears the whisper of the black man he just casually killed in a South African diamond mine "[w]arning that there was some grave imbalance in the structure of the world, which would have to be corrected" (170). This might well be the reality constant (the spine of reality) that marks the path of human history (its "world-line" [603]) as it unfolds in space-time. All the protagonists relate to it in one way or another: as perpetrators, victims and avengers, or as dreamers of change or of escape.

The first group makes for the scoundrels of the book—its arch-villain being Scarsdale Vibe, a banker and mine owner (possibly modeled on J. P. Morgan), and the very embodiment of all Capitalist evils. He is eventually shot, not by his supposed avengers but by "his old faithful sidekick," Foley Walker—yet not before delivering a final prophecy of Capitalism's victory: "'Anarchism will pass, its race will degenerate into silence, but money will beget money, grow like the bluebells in the meadow, spread and brighten and gather force, and bring low all before it. It is simple. It is inevitable. It has begun'" (1001).

Vibe's antagonist in the second group is Webb Traverse, a union worker in the Colorado mines, an anarchist, and an expert handler of explosives during the strike at Cripple Creek in 1894. He is murdered by two of Vibe's stooges, one of whom is later shot by Frank Traverse, the second of Webb's three sons, who are bent on revenging their dead father (whereas their sister, Lake, submits to the sexual power of Webb's killers). Reef, the oldest, first follows in his father's footsteps as an anarchist defender of the cause of Labor in the San Juan Mountains (like Webb he is rumored to be the legendary Kieselguhr Kid); then he becomes a man of many disguises, a gambler and a drifter, who eventually drifts to Europe, where he uses his underground expertise in the construction of Alpine tunnels. (From there he slowly moves to Venice, where he joins the plotlines of some of the other protagonists.)

Frank is the most American-rooted of Webb's three sons, moving along a north-south axis between the mountain ranges of southern Colorado and the Mexican Sierra Madre. He continues the Traverse dynamiting tradition during the Mexican Revolution and is the only one who fulfills the family's revenge project, at least in part. Returning from Mexico to Colorado, he joins the strikers at Ludlow, where he also reencounters (and stays with) Estrella ("Stray") and Jesse, the family Reef had left behind.

The youngest and most gifted son is Kit, whose interest in physics and passion for mathematics (especially vector theory) are brought to a boil by meeting the famous Nicola Tesla, who is just then conducting his pioneering experiments with high voltage and alternating current at Colorado Springs. (Tesla's project to provide free electricity for everybody is successfully blocked by his financial sponsor, Scarsdale Vibe.) Vibe buys Kit's scientific talent by sending him to Yale. While there, Kit meets Tesla again at his new Wardenclyffe laboratory on Long Island Sound, doing experiments in wireless transmission. Tesla advises Kit that, given Gibbs's death, it would be better for him to leave Yale and continue his mathematical studies with Hilbert at Göttingen. Kit then begins a long journey east—a "journey," he hopes, "into a purer condition" (675)—which will eventually take him via Belgium, Germany and Italy to the Flaming Mountains of northeastern China.¹⁴ Although, for a while, he is still financed by Vibe in his academic endeavors, he becomes increasingly aware of the sinister role Vibe played in his father's death, recognizes at last that he has sold himself and subsequently tries to escape "the Vibe curse" (527). Thus, while at Göttingen, the very Mecca of Higher Mathematics, he paradoxically loses interest in it:

[H]e knew the closest he'd ever got to a religion was Vectors, and that too was already receding down a widening interval of space-time, and he didn't know how to get back to it any more than Colorado. Vectorism, in which Kit once thought he had glimpsed transcendence, a coexisting world of imaginaries, [. . .] had not shown Kit, after all, a way to escape the world governed by real numbers. [. . . N]or would Vectors ever have been Kit's salvation. (675)

Enter Yashmeen Halfcourt, sent from London by T.W.I.T. (the spiritualist spy organization keen on getting information on the fourth dimension). Yashmeen is obsessed by "this all-but-erotic fascination" (496) with Riemann's mysterious zeta function, so that some regard her as the new Sofia Kovalevskaja, the Russian mathematician who had studied in Göttingen a few decades earlier and has indeed been Yashmeen's "'inspiration'" (634). However, changes in the Great Game of power politics cause an unexpected turn in Kit's and Yashmeen's "World-Lines."¹⁵ Kit, who has lost his sense of mission, is ready to be hired by T.W.I.T., which sends both of them to Italy (to Lake Garda and Riemann's tomb), from where Yashmeen moves on to other tasks in Vienna and Budapest,¹⁶ while Kit goes to Venice and from there to Inner Asia. His new mission is to find the mythic city of Shambhala—which is, as Yashmeen explains:

"An ancient metropolis of the spiritual, some say inhabited by the living, others say empty, in ruins, buried someplace beneath the desert sands of Inner Asia. And of course there are always those who'll tell you that the true Shambhala lies within. [. . .]

I suppose it is a real place on the globe, in the sense that the Point at Infinity is a place 'on' the Riemann sphere. The money invested to date by the Powers in expeditions to 'discover' the place is certainly real enough." (628)

Whether there is such a sacred place or not, Kit, like many of the other protagonists, is haunted by the discrepancy between the richness of spiritual promises and the poverty of their realization. While still looking for it, Kit loses interest in Shambhala as, earlier, he had lost interest in mathematics. In the end, he is not even sure whether he has been to Shambhala or not. He occasionally remembers "the purity, the fierce, shining purity of Lake Baikal" (778) or the vision he had of a city "vivid in these distances" (770) when passing through the natural wonder of "the Gate" (the Tushuk Tash); but "[b]y the time they arrived wayworn at the oasis of Turfan, beneath the Flaming Mountains, redder than the Sangre de Cristos, Kit had begun to understand that this space the Gate

had opened to them was less geographic than to be measured along axes of sorrow and loss" (771).

Of the Traverse children, Kit travels farthest without really knowing why (except that he wants to escape the possibly fatal reach of Scarsdale Vibe). Although he is the most intellectual of them, he is also the least aware, a postmodern Parsifal who misses asking the right question (or making the right commitment) at the right moment. Others make different choices—Cyprian Latewood, for instance, another secret agent and a homosexual (with a bent toward masochism in the fulfillment of his sexual desires), who is yet in love with Yashmeen. His various prewar missions to Vienna, Trieste and into the deepest Balkans finally bring him to Venice, where he takes revenge on his sadist lover/torturer, the British double agent Derrick Theign. In Venice, Cyprian once again meets Yashmeen, together with Reef Traverse, who has become her most recent lover.

First Yashmeen and Cyprian, then, during the Venice carnival (with its ritual transgressions, its inversions of roles and positions), all three enter a complex love/sex-relation that is as ecstatic as it is healing and transforming. (It is therefore at once mirror- and counterimage of Lake's degrading sexual bondage to the two killers of her father.) "The rule [. . .] is that there are no rules," says Yashmeen (943); and it is clearly she, the free Nietzschean spirit, who is the energetic center of this triangle. Her obsession with the absolute, the intensity of her absorption in the abstract purity of Riemann's mathematics, has been transferred from mind to body; accordingly, the "innocent expression of faith" Cyprian sees on her face when she concentrates on numbers and functions is also "that saint-in-a-painting look" (937) he sees when watching her reach orgasm with Reef. The union results in a pregnancy of which Cyprian, in a complex way, has also been an agent.

Pregnant Yashmeen and her two men then undertake another mission, this time for a utopian anarchist community that wants them to dismantle a terrifying weapon (an "Austrian minefield" [950]? or poison gas? or Tesla's light/electricity weapon?) hidden somewhere in the middle of the Balkans. The weapon, it turns out, may not exist, or, if it does, may be destined to explode sometime in the future.

After the child is born, Cyprian leaves the others and, having transcended self as well as desire, becomes a monk in one of Thrace's isolated mountain monasteries: "It may be [. . .] that God doesn't always require us to wander about. It may be that sometimes there is a—would you say a "convergence" to a kind of stillness, not merely in space but in Time as well?" (958). For Yashmeen and Reef Traverse (obviously a telling name), wandering, the nomadic state, is an Emersonian way of being *in* the world and yet unsettled: "The world

that is to be. We are out here, in it." Finding their way through the Macedonian mountains amidst the fighting armies of the Balkan War of 1912, they and their child, Ljubica, become a Holy Family of anarchist unsettledness—just as, at the very same time in the mountain ranges of southern Colorado, Frank, Stray and Jesse become their complementary mirror image when they find each other and join the striking miners at Ludlow. Both families unite, forming the nucleus of an anarchist community, and move west together: "Reef propelled by his old faith in the westward vector, in finding someplace, some deep penultimate town the capitalist/Christer gridwork hadn't got to quite yet" (1075). Like Yashmeen, Estrella/Stray is one of the strong women of the novel, her quiet pragmatism allowing her to link self-preservation with concern for others. She is in that sense a star (*estrella*) that shines and shows the way. At the same time she can stray (perhaps even go astray) and yet be straight. She is thus vector as well as eigenvalue.

Can the spine of reality, the reality constant in multidimensional space-time, also be regarded as a moral constant that defines eigenvalue? The figures who might be said to have an eigenvalue (that is, who combine the steady with the unsettled) are, on the one hand, the mystics, the seekers and the dreamers of what might be and, on the other, the dissenters from and resisters to what is. (Although they are not escapists in the conventional sense, they want to escape what restricts and confines them.) While those in the second group are entirely secular in their desires, those in the first are religious in their yearning for a God that either has disappeared or appears only in "visions of the unsuspected, breaches in the Creation where something else had had a chance to be luminously glimpsed. Ways in which God chose to hide within the light of day, not a full list [. . .] but chance encounters with details of God's unseen world" (853).

If there is a development in the personal histories of these seekers, it is a movement away from all substitutes for the Transcendent (be they the abstract religions of science, mathematics or technology) and toward those luminous glimpses of, and chance encounters with, the unseen world that is revealed in and through the body and its senses. The two groups overlap but are not identical. With the exception of Kit, the Traverse men are by no means visionaries, rather hard-nosed but neighborly frontier people, and anarchists only insofar as they aggressively resent unjust authority and exploitation. Reef is a gambler by conviction, and Frank, neither a dreamer nor an ideologue of revolution, is nevertheless caught up in its adventure and excitement. It is Yashmeen who believes in the transcendence of mathematics as much as in utopian dreams:

She had no illusions about bourgeois innocence, and yet held on to a limitless faith that History could be helped to keep its promises, including someday, a commonwealth of the oppressed.

It was 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, where she had preferred that even erotic desire have no consequences. (942)

The narrator's disapproval of such escape from consequences (be they spiritual or physical) is evident, as is his nod in the direction of a practical utopia:¹⁷ the unsettled settledness of the tribal family, its utopian potential centered in the Child.

This shift in the trajectory of personal histories is also noticeable on the symbolic level. The central metaphor of light is, of course, connected first with mystic illumination but also with the revelations of divinity in such "breaches in the Creation" as the awesome power of electricity and as the Tunguska Event. Kit's almost religious attachment to vector theory comes as a revelatory experience of light:

It 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 whose texts he had to get his head around as they came, study when he ought to be sleeping, by miners' candles or coal-oil light and often enough by the actual incandescence from the same electrical mystery he was studying[. . . .] But none of it too mysterious until one night out west of Rico someplace a window opened for him into the Invisible, and a voice, or something like a voice, whispered unto him, saying, "Water falls, electricity flows—one flow becomes another, and thence into light. So is altitude transformed, continuously, to light." (98–99)

Like all such revelations of the extraordinary, however, this is a fleeting moment that succumbs to the steady pull of the everyday. Even the longer-lasting epiphany of the Tunguska Event is soon forgotten, buried underneath the weight of a lifesaving normality:

It [the light from The Event] went on for a month. Those who had taken it for a cosmic sign cringed beneath the sky each nightfall, imagining ever more extravagant disasters. Others, for whom orange did not seem an appropriately apocalyptic shade, sat outdoors on public benches, reading calmly, growing used to the curious pallor. As nights went on and nothing

happened and the phenomenon slowly faded to the accustomed deeper violets again, most had difficulty remembering the earlier rise of heart, the sense of overture and possibility, and went back once again to seeking only orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep, to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day. (805)

The absorption of the extraordinary into the realm of ordinariness is the very hallmark of modernization, which received an enormous boost from the industrial production of electrical energy. Electricity has turned night into day and made the once miraculous the very sign of the normal, from the illumination of cities to the everyday domestic blessings of alternating current, or wireless transmissions from one continent to another. When the Chums of Chance cross the continent west toward California, they notice "how much more infected with light the night-time terrains passing below them had become" and "felt themselves in uneasy witness to some final conquest, a triumph over night whose motive none could quite grasp" (1032). The conquest of light over darkness is therefore paradoxically associated with the Prince of Darkness, who is, however, also called "Lucifer, son of the morning, bearer of light" (1033).

If this is paradox, it is also balance. Against too much light there is the relief of darkness; and the more dominant light is, the more darkness becomes a counterworld of mystery and fascination. To be "against the day" would therefore seem to imply resistance against the Western cult of light and enlightenment. Except that the opposition is not at all that clear cut. This is already implied in an aphorism by Thelonius Monk which is the novel's epigraph: "It's always night, or we wouldn't need light." Although emphasizing, tongue in cheek, the prevalence of darkness over light, Monk's aphorism nevertheless acknowledges the need for both. So do the parting words of the wise abbot of the monastic order Cyprian has joined:

"When God hides his face, it is paraphrased as 'taking away' his Shekhinah. Because it is she who reflects his light, Moon to his Sun. Nobody can withstand pure light, let alone see it. Without her to reflect, God is invisible. She is absolutely of the essence if he is to be at all operative in the world." (960)

And again: "Light like this must be received with judgment—too much, too constantly, would exhaust the soul. To move through it would be to struggle against time, the flow of the day, the arbitrarily assigned moment of darkness" (963). Wanting to be in the light constantly

would ignore not only the different shades of light during the day's course but also the necessary (assigned) sanity-preserving (or -restoring) periods of darkness.

The metaphors of light and darkness also give the novel's title several shades of meaning. As we saw above, the fading light of the singular Tunguska Event makes people forget their state of spiritual elevation (their "earlier rise of heart, the sense of overture and possibility") and lets them fall back on "orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep" as substitutes "to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day." If "against" is understood as a term of resistance, then anything that gets anybody through the night provides oppositional strength against the world as it is, perhaps also against the common light of day (the enlightened everyday of Howells's bourgeois realism and "its mass delusion of safety"¹⁸). However, if "against" is understood in the sense of "in preparation or provision for" (*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*), then whatever helps to get one through the night may also help to get one through the day—and vice versa, since the "day" seems to have its own merits. This is what Cyprian understands when, "seeing the usefulness of remaining attached to the day, he only nodded and went on chopping up vegetables" (840), and what Kit understands when he finally becomes aware that, "[i]n view of what was nearly upon them, [. . .] the shelter of the trivial would prove a blessing and a step toward salvation" (778).

To move against the day (*against* the grain of what is and *toward* the mysteries of darkness) does not exclude acceptance of the everyday (its life-preserving rituals and habits) nor preparatory exploration of what "the low light of the future" might still bring: a day of salvation or of judgment.¹⁹ The implications of the title thus also comprise the various functions of Pynchon's storytelling, combining angry, even vengeful resistance to the world that is with sounding the rich depths of the possible, miraculous and counterfactual. When the magician Luca Zombini tries to explain to his children the dignity of his profession, he also speaks with the fabulator's voice:

"Those who sneer at us, and sneer at themselves for paying to let us fool them, what they never see is the yearning. If it was religious, a yearning after God—no one would dream of disrespecting that. But because this is a yearning *only* after miracle, *only* to contradict the given world, they hold it in contempt." (354)

The yearning only after miracle evidently also includes the yearning for a happy ending, since all protagonists seem eventually to receive their just rewards. The scoundrels are punished: Scarsdale Vibe is

killed; Lake and her husband, killer Deuce Kindred, end up leading miserable lives in California. The searchers for transcendence find some utopia with each other. Even Kit, the uncertain seeker for Shambhala, will probably be reunited with his wife, Dahlia Rideout (another telling name), the two having, for no apparent reason, drifted apart: "May we imagine for them a vector, passing through the invisible, the 'imaginary,' the unimaginable, carrying them safely into this postwar Paris" (1082).

Appropriately, it is the Chums of Chance—bearers of hope, yet slowly aging heroes of the sky—who bring the novel to a close if not to closure. In its last section, not only do they happily and trivially marry a complementary set of flying young women, but their airship also has absorbed so much of the world that it has grown to the size of "a small city" (1084) and become a self-sufficient world of its own. Protecting themselves against too much light by absorbing a welcome amount of darkness,²⁰ they fly against the day toward an uncertain future, and yet continue in their path with childlike trust:

They know [. . .] it is there, like an approaching rainstorm, but invisible. Soon they will see the pressure-gauge begin to fall. They will feel the turn in the wind. They will put on smoked goggles for the glory of what is coming to part the sky. They fly toward grace. (1085)

We, who still remember the Trespassers' denunciation of the Chums' "'pathetic balloon-boy faith'" (555),²¹ may wonder whether such grace is indeed a blessing or only another of their optimistic delusions (since we know what the future they face so bravely has in store for them). The novel leaves this for us to decide. However, it is perhaps not farfetched to assume that the good ship *Inconvenience*—like the balloon in Donald Barthelme's short story of that title—has, by now, become a metaphor for Pynchon's own narrative endeavor. In writing "against the day" (with all the different semantic shadings this phrase has accumulated in the course of the book), Pynchon has turned his novel into a Noah's Ark of the imagined and the imaginable, into a fantastic counterworld that rejects, absorbs and conserves as much as it transcends the Real.

IV

To conclude, I come back to my earlier question of how and where we can place *Against the Day* in the larger context of Pynchon's narrative work. As I have argued elsewhere (q.v.), *V.* can be said to contain the thematic and formal repertoire of all of Pynchon's

subsequent fictions—even though the two following novels were pushed in a new direction by the impact of the 1960s. *The Crying of Lot 49* and, even more so, *Gravity's Rainbow* were marked by a new sense of apocalyptic urgency. Pynchon gave his fictional probing into “the moment, and its possibilities” (GR 159) a new twist by placing both novels at the brink of the possible (be it catastrophic collapse, miraculous renewal or simply the grayness of continuing entropy). In *Vineland*, published seventeen years after *Gravity's Rainbow*, this openness has given way to closure. *Vineland* may thus be read as the last piece of a trilogy which deals with the contemporary moment of the sixties and thus with a generation that was eventually swallowed by the system it had set out to change, its revolutionary fervor not being strong enough to withstand the pull of television and the image culture. In *Vineland*, all hopes that had been part of Oedipa's desperate expectancy have come to nothing. Repression reigns—although the unexpected may still happen to frustrate the force of evil at the very last moment and protect the innocence of the child Prairie. Such rescue, however, appears to be a last (fairy-tale) resort. The final image of the sleeping child and her loving, face-licking, tail-wagging dog becomes an emblem of pure faith in a world in which all counterforce has ceased to matter.

As all of Pynchon's novels—but especially *Gravity's Rainbow* and later *Mason & Dixon*—make clear, America has never, at any point in its history, been exempt from the burden of its European past. Rather, it has continued that past under new conditions. It has functioned as a screen on which Europeans have projected their desire for origin, paradise or new beginnings and then proceeded, even as settlers of a “new world,” to create structures of oppression. The Rocket and The Tristero as well are thus products of a common Western (transatlantic) history conceived of as a long sequence of ruined utopian dreams and squandered chances, of which the last and perhaps greatest was “America.” Alternative visions—which Pynchon always locates between parody and hope—can therefore point in only two directions. Either they are directed nostalgically backwards toward a vision of Nature as yet untouched by Western man, or they push sideways and against historical linearity toward the niches or the marginal spaces of the passed over. Therefore, Pynchon's novels place value on people and objects out of order—on “waste” in the largest sense—and on moments of malfunction and anarchic openness when a system breaks down and a new order has not yet taken shape (as in the Zone of *Gravity's Rainbow* or The Visto of *Mason & Dixon*); or they invest hope in those (most of all children) who embody a continuous promise of the possible.

Mason & Dixon begins and ends with the voices of children—first, American children to whom stories about Mason’s and Dixon’s America are being told, and last, English children—Mason’s, now in America—aching with loss and yearning for the America of the stories they were once told. The loss of paradise is taken for granted (there is a whole series of paradises lost); but the vision of and the desire for paradise are constantly evoked in the ambivalent splendor of the (merely) “subjunctive”: of the once seen or dreamed, then lost and wasted in the progress of Enlightenment (cf. M&D 345). If Mason and Dixon’s historical journey into the heart of an as yet unexplored and therefore still wonder-full wilderness eventually leads to its destruction, Pynchon’s reimagination of that journey aims at a reinstatement or a recreation of lost miracles.

Thus *Mason & Dixon* ends, ironically and somewhat melancholically, with the reassertion of a dream of “America” it had deconstructed throughout its previous pages. Although, in Pynchon’s narrative world, all dreams of origin and all longing for revelation belong to the realm of the Subjunctive (forever beyond reach in the realm of the “Indicative” [M&D 677] and yet real as “‘Vector[s] of Desire’” [96]), his novels are nevertheless pervaded by a consciousness of impossible possibility. On the one hand, they aim at uncovering the fictional status of the seemingly rational and real, at stripping “Progressive Civilization” of its fancy clothes to reveal it in its nakedness, the barrenness of an essentially fallen world. On the other, they reinstate in their radius of narration everything excluded by the discourse of Reason: the fantastic, the miraculous and wonderful, its nonrational refuse and rejects transformed into “‘Provisions for Survival in a World less fantastick’” (M&D 22).

Although, in its playfulness, *Against the Day* has reminded some critics (Michael Wood, for instance) of *V.*, it seems closer to *Mason & Dixon* in that both are narratives about a past whose future is not open any longer. This is what distinguishes them from the preceding fictions, which dealt with the present, cut through the moment and its possibilities, and dwelt on the puzzle of its hidden meaning: the ambiguity of what was still to come. Both *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day* lack the intensity as much as the semantic density of the earlier novels, the sense of being immediately involved (intellectually and pragmatically) in the confusions but also in the shaping of a still unfolding moment of collective experience. Instead, they playfully and nostalgically indulge in imagining what once was richly, even chaotically, possible (or at least imaginable) but has since been discarded by forces powerful enough to define what we now recognize as the “necessary” and therefore linear path from past to present.

When Reef, Yashmeen and their little daughter, Ljubica, try to find their way through the chaos of the Balkan War, the narrator comments:

As the landscape turned increasingly chaotic and murderous, the streams of refugees swelled. Another headlong, fearful escape of the kind that in collective dreams, in legends, would be misremembered and reimagined into pilgrimage or crusade . . . the dark terror behind transmuted to a bright hope ahead, the bright hope becoming a popular, perhaps someday a national, delusion. Embedded invisibly in it would remain the ancient darkness, too awful to face, thriving, emerging in disguise, vigorous, evil, destructive, inextricable. (964)

This deconstructive push to regain the dangerous and chaotic openness of what once was an experienced moment in a still undecided present (that is, the construction of a labyrinth of fictions against the steady pull toward a closure of life and narrative alike) is one aspect of Pynchon's writing against the day. The other is—despite all better knowledge, despite presentiments and warnings—reconstructive: a primary acceptance of the world that is, even if such an act of faith can be maintained only with a great amount of either sentiment or irony. These sudden turns from the complexly scientific, the philosophically sophisticated or the aggressively satirical to simple verbal gestures of faith, sentiment and wonder²² have puzzled many Pynchon readers from early on. In his foreword to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Pynchon seems to engage in an act of empathetic identification when he comments on a 1946 photograph showing Orwell with his adopted son: "Orwell is holding him gently with both hands, smiling too, pleased, but not smugly so—it is more complex than that, as if he has discovered something that might be worth even more than anger." Pynchon then continues:

It is not difficult to guess that Orwell, in *1984*, was imagining a future for his son's generation, a world he was not so much wishing upon them as warning against. He was impatient with predictions of the inevitable, he remained confident in the ability of ordinary people to change anything, if they would. It is the boy's smile, in any case, that we return to, direct and radiant, proceeding out of an unhesitating faith that the world, at the end of the day, is good, and that human decency, like parental love, can always be taken for granted—a faith so honorable that we can almost imagine Orwell, and perhaps even ourselves, for a moment anyway, swearing to do whatever must be done to keep it from ever being betrayed. (F xxv–xxvi)

On the strength of such unhesitating trust in life, Pynchon has launched the giant balloon of his fictional counterworld, which, even if it cannot interfere with or replace the Real, has risen high enough above it to be apart from it and yet a part of it—able to move against but also obliquely in and with the day.

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Notes

¹Accordingly, Pynchon makes ample use of the various novelistic styles and genres of the period—such as the science fiction of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, the Western after Zane Gray, detective novels from Poe to Chandler, and adventure and dime novels of the *fin de siècle*.

²This is Sir Arthur Eddington's definition of entropy (qtd. in Rifkin and Howard 49).

³The temptation of paranoia was best defined by a figure outside the text (but not without relevance to it), the murderer Charles Manson, who said in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, "Once you give in to paranoia, it ceases to exist. That's why I say submission is a gift, just give in to it, don't resist" (361).

⁴Such as N.A.D.A. [National Automobile Dealers' Association] and D.E.A.T.H. [Don't Ever Antagonize The Horn]. W.A.S.T.E. contains a promise of social redemption, the human "waste" of the capitalist system recycled to become the eschatological community of those waiting for salvation: "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire" (CL 169, 174).

⁵A similar case can be made for *Mason & Dixon*, where—apart from the given biographical facts of the two protagonists—the two observations of the transit of Venus, and especially the heroes' surveying of the wilderness and their drawing of the Mason-Dixon line provide structural coherence to the semantic openness of the book. The straight line of rational civilization Mason and Dixon hew through an irrational wilderness becomes the interface between past and present, between civilized rationality and the fantastic, fabulous and heterogeneous life of the imagination left behind in the wake of progress.

⁶For example, David Leverenz's reduction of Pynchon's complexities to a simple set of semantic oppositions.

⁷"Humming along" is the telling title Michael Wood gave to his pleased review.

⁸However (as in the case of entropy), the relation between scientific concept (or mathematical equation) and its narrative concretization can never be more than metaphorical; that is, it marks similarity as well as difference.

⁹Scientists are still undecided whether the "Event" was caused by an exploding meteor, by the eruption of a subterranean volcano or the explosion of subterranean gases, by a cosmic bomb or by the impact of antimatter. The energy released is estimated to have been over one thousand times greater than

that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Eighty million trees were destroyed. The sound of the explosion was heard hundreds of kilometers away, and strange light phenomena were seen all over the world. Scientists cannot explain why there were apparently several explosions in the sky and why meteorite fragments have not been found in the ground (see Bojanowski). Contemporary rumors (also mentioned in *Against the Day*) had it that the “Event” resulted from a failed effort by Nicola Tesla to communicate via wireless transmitter with Perry’s expedition to the North Pole. According to another legend, Tesla was trying to use wireless electric-power transmission to create a high-energy military bomb.

¹⁰Melville’s Ishmael, attempting to describe the darkest and deepest mysteries of Ahab’s soul (the mythic savage ancestor buried in archaic depths), also has recourse to an archeological metaphor: “[T]ake your way, ye nobler, sadder souls, to those vast Roman halls of Thermes; where far beneath the fantastic towers of man’s upper earth, his root of grandeur, his whole awful essence sits in its bearded state; an antique buried beneath antiquities and throned on torsos!” (249). Pynchon takes his ancient avenger spirit from an Eskimo belief “that every object in their surroundings has its invisible ruler [. . .] an enforcer of ancient, indeed pre-human, laws, and thus a Power that must be induced not to harm men” (AD 150–51). The violation of these laws by the inquisitive and exploitative modern spirit unleashes that ancient Power’s fury against “urban civilization” (151). Not only were “[f]ire and blood [. . .] about to roll like fate upon the complacent multitudes” (152); the city’s “inhabitants became, and have remained, an embittered and amnesiac race, wounded but unable to connect through memory to the moment of the injury, unable to summon the face of their violator” (153).

¹¹The Tetractys, a triangular figure, is a sacred symbol of the Pythagoreans consisting of ten numbers or points arranged in four rows of one, two, three and four, which add up to the holy number ten. The Tetractys symbolizes cosmic harmony and completeness; it is also thought to be connected with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life and thus to the cards of the Tarot. The number four refers to the four elements but, in the context of Pynchon’s novel, is also vaguely (and falsely) linked by some protagonists to quaternions and the fourth dimension. The Pythagorean numbers, the musical system based on them, and the secret brotherhood that worshipped those numbers and practiced the music recur time and again in *Against the Day*—as when Cyprian decides to join a monastic order “descended from ancient Bogomils” (AD 956), an order of anarchist or at least underground tendencies that believes in Pythagorean principles and number-worship.

¹²There is also doubleness in identity: the English scientist Professor Renfrew turns out to be his German counterpart, Professor Werfner. And there are mirrors in wordplay: “the English word “pun,” upside down, is . . . “und”” (AD 622).

¹³Our fin de siècle mirroring and recognizing itself in the novel's image of the one preceding it. Thus the havoc the escaped monster ("the object") wreaks on the vertical city, "the bad dream I still try to wake from, the great city brought to sorrow and ruin" (AD 148), has been interpreted by at least one reviewer as Pynchon's memory of September 11, 2001 (Kirsch 2). The text itself draws an associative line from the Tunguska Event to Tchernobyl and the atomic age: "a hitherto-unimagined quantity of energy had entered the equations of history" (AD 797).

¹⁴Needless to say, these travels rarely proceed in a linear mode. Not only are they broken up by the intersecting plotlines (or world-lines) of other protagonists; they are themselves frequently interrupted by unexpected turns and deviations. Thus Kit's transatlantic steamer is "actually" a camouflaged Austrian battleship, its own double, its own separate mirror image, which takes Kit to Africa (while the "real" liner continues to Trieste) before he is finally brought by a trawler to Ostend. These inadvertently stumbled-on locations all have their own sets of minor figures and subplots, which develop dynamics of their own and push in different directions. In Ostend Kit happens to attend a congress of "Quaternionists-in-exile" (AD 548), for whom Sir William Rowan Hamilton, the Irish mathematician, is the prophet of a scientific religion. A terrifying Quaternion- or Light- or Time-Weapon ("a means to unloose upon the world energies hitherto unimagined" [542]) comes into the possession of a member of the Belgian Secret Service—known for his brutality as an officer in the Belgian Congo—who hands the "enigmatic object" over to Kit, who gives it to his temporary Japanese girlfriend, a fellow mathematician drawn to Quaternions ("The fatal number four—to a Japanese mind, literally fatal. Same character as for death" [564]). From then on the knowledge of the Quaternion Weapon runs through the novel like an ominous prophecy of disaster.

¹⁵"World-Line" is an Einsteinian term referring to the (curved) path of an object through four-dimensional space-time. It is also used more generally (and more loosely—as by Pynchon) with reference to the path of a personal life-history.

¹⁶She may, by now, also have become disillusioned with her dream of a mathematical Absolute:

"Whatever hopes I may have had for the ζ -function, for the new geometry, for transcendence by way of any of that, must be left behind, souvenirs of a girl's credulity, a girl I scarcely know anymore. [. . .] Now I am expelled from the garden. Now in a smooth enough World-Line comes this terrible discontinuity. And on the far side of it, I find that now I am also *strannik*." (AD 663)

As Yashmeen explains a few lines earlier, *stranniki*, in Russia, were "'underground men'" in voluntary exile, saintly if outlawed nomads whose "'only allegiance was to God'" (663). Although Yashmeen's exile is ordered more than willed and her allegiance is not to God but, if anything, to a pure

state of intellectual obsession and emotional intensity, she is from now on a nomad in pursuit of a utopian dream that has been lost to the past and is yet somehow in the future: “The world that is to be. We are out here, in it” (939).

¹⁷The dream of utopia is treated throughout with irony and yet eventually reasserted:

But as if, too, there might exist a place of refuge, up in the fresh air, out over the sea, someplace all the Anarchists could escape to, now with the danger so overwhelming, a place readily found even on cheap maps of the World, some group of green volcanic islands, each with its own dialect, too far from the sea-lanes to be of use as a coaling station, lacking nitrate sources, fuel deposits, desirable ores either precious or practical, and so left forever immune to the bad luck and worse judgment infesting the politics of the Continents—a place promised them, not by God, which’d be asking too much of the average Anarchist, but by certain hidden geometries of History, which must include, somewhere, at least at a single point, a safe conjugate to all the spill of accursed meridians, passing daily, desolate, one upon the next. (AD 372–73)

“Actual” utopian communities, like that in Yz-les-Bains, appear more or less as replicas of the socially established: anarchist utopia with a golf course. The intact communities of ethnic cultures that Cyprian experiences in the Balkans are already lost to history (see 844). Apart from Yashmeen’s “limitless faith,” it is Kit who, at the end, reaffirms utopia as a dream against the day:

[A]nother time [Kit] might all at once be seeing Lake Baikal, or facing some chill boundary at least that pure and uncompromising. The other side of this “Baikal,” he understood, was accessible only to those of intrepid spirit. To go there and come back would be like living through the end of the world. From this precise spot along the shoreline it was possible to “see” on the far shore a city, crystalline, redemptive. There was music, mysteriously audible, tonal yet deliberately broken into by dissonances.” (1080)

¹⁸Thus one of the female members of the utopian community at Yz-les-Bains explains:

“This is our own age of exploration [. . .] into that unmapped country waiting beyond the frontiers and seas of Time. 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 any of these ‘utopian dreams’ of ours but defective forms of time-travel?” (942)

¹⁹The title of the novel is apparently taken from the Second Epistle of St. Peter, where he admonishes that “the heavens and the earth” are “reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men” (3.7).

²⁰“As the sails of her destiny can be reefed against too much light, so they may also be spread to catch a favorable darkness” (AD 1084).

²¹“[D]amn you all. You have no idea what you’re heading into. This world you take to be “the” world will die, and descend into Hell, and all history after that will belong properly to the history of Hell’” (AD 554).

²²In a comparable way, Richard Rorty has described the contradictions and compromises of his own version of pragmatism:

The kind of religious faith [suggested by pragmatism] is . . . a faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community. I shall call this fuzzy overlap of faith, hope and love “romance.” Romance, in this sense, may crystallize around a trade union as easily as around a congregation, around a novel as easily as around a sacrament, around a God as easily as around a child. (160–61)

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