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Abstract:

Review of Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise (eds.), *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, Newark: University of Delaware Press: 2011. ix + 293 pp.

Review of Pynchon's *Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*

Joanna Freer

In Pynchon's 2006 novel *Against the Day*, characters rove all over the known world and, indeed, beyond, discovering hidden realms and involving themselves in political conflicts, obscure mysticisms and mathematical debates. Given its vast scope, the novel may, as Christopher Leise contends, require "more lamps than most to illuminate its unsuspected importance" (11). *A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* is a fine contribution to that effort. The eleven essays by variously well-known Pynchonites complement those published in the only other collection to date to deal centrally with *Against the Day*, that being *Against the Grain: Reading Pynchon's Counternarratives*, edited by Sascha Pöhlmann. Narrative strategy; science, belief and faith; and politics and economics are the three rather expansive categories under which Severs and Leise have attempted to marshal the contributions that make up their volume, although a number of the essays touch on more than one of these topics. Considered separately, each of these essays represents a valuable addition to Pynchon studies, but one of the strengths of the collection is the presence of numerous points of convergence between critics in terms of the subject matter discussed, with interesting divergences in opinion and interpretation that will surely provoke further thought and debate.

Against the Day has provided critics with a greater sense of overview on Pynchon's career, which now has a substantial "late" phase of production to rival the early phase. Brian McHale has turned this to good effect in his essay "Genre as History: Pynchon's Genre-Poaching," which offers a perceptive analysis of Pynchon's incorporation of popular generic forms into his work.¹ Reading backwards from *Against the Day*, McHale describes a principle of synchronisation at work from *Gravity's Rainbow* onwards, according to which Pynchon's appropriations are carefully chosen for their popularity in the era being narrated. This "genre-poaching" is understood to be a form of revisionist historiography, a means to approach some sort of overall truth regarding the era and its self-representations. Amy J. Elias' similarly-focussed analysis in "Plots, Pilgrimage, and the Politics of Genre in *Against the Day*," follows on slightly awkwardly from McHale's, distinguishing an entirely different set of three dominant generic modes in the novel, which function more as structuring principles than guides to voice, setting or character: the hero quest, *picaresque* and what Elias terms "postmodern pilgrimage." For Elias, the last of these provides the best description of journey narratives in the novel, with characters travelling through a "sacralised geography" (33) offering "the possibility

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of alternative space-time" (34). But such alternatives cannot be contained within the pilgrimage paradigm Elias offers; they are addressed much more effectively in Inger H. Dalsgaard's contribution to the collection.

Critical interest in issues of mapping in Pynchon's work soared following the publication of *Mason & Dixon*. Following traditional interpretations of such matters, Krzysztof Piekarski, Martin Kevorkian and Elizabeth McKetta explore the oppressive potential of maps in *Against the Day* as tools of capitalist exploitation, suggesting that "maps exert control not just over environments but also over bodies, and the shapes of lives" (48) and investigating the analogy between mapping and story-telling. In "Mapping, the Unmappable, and Pynchon's Antitragic Vision," the anarchism of the text is also addressed in connection to the unmappable and its anti-tragic possibilities for resistance. Graham Benton's discussion of anarchy in this volume offers a far more stable analysis which recognises the slipperiness of the term, but the overall point being made here regarding Pynchon's "anarchist poetics" (57) – his attempt to create an unpredictable and thus unmappable novel – helps to pin down what many people have been thinking about Pynchon's novels over the last few years. On an entirely different tack, Justin St. Clair's "Binocular Disparity and Pynchon's Panoramic Paradigm" offers a much fresher look at narrative strategy in Pynchon's big novel, via the historical form of the panorama. St. Clair's analysis complements McHale's in suggesting that Pynchon has sought out and incorporated an outdated form of visual media popular at the time of the novel's setting, and his rather outlandish thesis that Pynchon's novel can be read panoramically, employing the panoramic device of binocular disparity combined with doubling to create depth, is both fascinating and compelling. However, his extrapolations from this regarding immersion, hallucination and national mythology may be a slight overstretch.

The second section opens with a contribution to the burgeoning field of ecocriticism on Pynchon. In "Bogomilism, Orphism, Shamanism: The Spiritual and Spatial Grounds of Pynchon's Ecological Ethic," Christopher K. Coffman argues for an expanding ecological dimension in Pynchon's novels, bound up with notions of space and morality. For Coffman, *Against the Day* foregrounds the notion of "a living earth that responds actively to the movement of human characters through its space" (93), aiding the well-intentioned while lashing out at those who damage environments. His overall argument will not meet much opposition, albeit overly reliant in places on a distinction between the natural world as positive and the human body as negative, the logic of which needs to be clarified. From the spatial to the temporal, and "Readers and Trespassers: Time Travel, Orthogonal Time, and Alternative Figurations of Time in *Against the Day*" is aligned with the majority of essays in this collection in reading a thematic choice as evidence of a political agenda. Here, the focus is on time travel as potentially subversive of the capitalist "time is money" ethos. Despite some repetition and a rather laboured middle

section, Inger H. Dalsgaard comes to some impressive conclusions regarding the type of relationships Pynchon is seeking to foster between temporal experiences of reading and interpretative strategies.

In one of the most entertaining offerings in the collection, Terry Reilly elucidates the role of the scientist and inventor Nikola Tesla in *Against the Day*. Reilly considers Tesla "the perfect Pynchon character" (142) in his quirky bridging of the worlds of science and mysticism, and effectively demonstrates in this essay how events from Tesla's colourful biography punctuate the novel in a way which is more pervasive than the casual reader might suspect. Yet "Narrating Tesla in *Against the Day*" leaves the reader wanting a deeper insight into Pynchon's logic in incorporating Tesla as he does, something which may well attract future critical attention. Developing the religious angle hinted at by Reilly, Kathryn Hume's contribution to this volume, "The Religious and Political Vision of *Against the Day*," is wilfully and avowedly controversial in positing a new Catholic religious sensibility as well as a stronger commitment to political violence in Pynchon's novel.² Unfortunately, many of Hume's assertions are not adequately substantiated by her evidence. Most damagingly, perhaps, she acknowledges but fails to address the implications of Pynchon's derisive use of the term "Christer" throughout the novel. Counter-arguments pertaining to each of her key points made within this same volume (by Amy J. Elias and Graham Benton respectively) are, it must be said, far more convincing.

Graham Benton's "Daydreams and Dynamite: Anarchist Strategies of Resistance and Paths for Transformation in *Against the Day*" is in many ways the centrepiece of the volume, providing the sustained attention to anarchism needed to tie together and elucidate manifold references to the subject in the other essays. Benton is enlightening in defining anarchism historically, and in tracing Pynchon's treatment of both European and American anarchisms through the novel. He also explores anarchism's presence in earlier works, uncovering as he goes some of the practical difficulties that inhere in Pynchon's apparent advocacy of this most varied of political ideologies, not least of these being the post-9/11 attitude to anti-government feeling in America. Coming to similar conclusions via analysis of what Pynchon critiques rather than what he advocates, Jeffrey Severs explores Pynchon's anti-capitalism via an exposition of what he considers his new approach to representing women and women's roles in *Against the Day*. It is true that, as Severs contends, such questions as "[h]ow do women make capitalism go?" and "what is the relationship between capitalism and women's bodies?" (217) have concerned Pynchon from *V.* onwards, but his account of a significant (but still limited) maturation in Pynchon's attitudes to women in this later novel, reading a new sensitivity to female economic history therein, will remain contentious. Closing the politics and economics section, the final essay in the collection, J. Paul Narkunas' "Europe's 'Eastern Questions' and the United States' 'Western Questions': Representing

Ethnic Wars in *Against the Day*," is a meditation on the role of the Balkans in the novel, supplementing the work Sam Thomas has already done on this issue.³ Narkunas devotes a perhaps overly large proportion of the essay to providing an overview of the complex politics of the region in the period contemporary with Pynchon's narrative, yet the analogical relationship between this troubled region and the American West he proposes is revealing, especially with regard to the connections between ethnicity, religion and capitalist/imperialist profiteering Narkunas uncovers.

With the possible exception of Kathryn Hume, the contributors to this collection read Pynchon's *Against the Day* as a mature expression or even exemplar of ideas, practices and sympathies, be they political, religious, or literary, which have been present throughout his oeuvre. As many of the readings suggest, this novel, formally anarchist as well as ideologically so, makes explicit Pynchon's politicization of postmodern literary practice. The volume thus offers a robust defence of *Against the Day*, countering the negativity of its reception by reviewers, the narrow-mindedness of whose realist demands for rounded characters and coherent narrative Leise laments in his introduction. By combining analyses which both complement and contradict each other, the editors achieve their aim of providing readers with a kind of gestalt insight into the book, providing "a set of directions, an itinerary, a map to a hidden space": a "corrupted pilgrim's guide,"⁴ encouraging exploration of the novel's manifold meanings.

End notes

1. A version of this essay appeared as McHale, "Genre as History: Pynchon's Genre-Poaching".
2. A version of this essay appeared as Hume, "The Religious and Political Vision of Pynchon's *Against the Day*".
3. See Thomas.
4. Both of these phrases are taken from Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 566.

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