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Abstract:

This essay examines genre parody in Thomas Pynchon's 2006 novel *Against the Day* as a means of productive transgression. Focusing on one section of the epic novel, in which the character Kit travels through China and Tibet in a mock pilgrimage that echoes Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, I argue that Pynchon circumvents what Linda Hutcheon has identified as parody's conservative impulse by repeatedly thwarting the attempts by Western colonizing forces to "know" the East by way of both mapping—as in the conquest stories of imperial romance fiction—and unmapping—as in the ambivalent stories of late imperial romance fiction. Pynchon's unsettling employment of parody, I demonstrate, is paralleled in the mimicry employed by the colonized subjects in the novel, which erodes the sovereignty of the competing imperial forces of the Great Game. Additionally, I argue that Pynchon links the spatial and material reality of empire to an earthly spiritualism such that a non-singular enlightenment can only be attained through a disavowal of the routinizing and rationalizing forces of Western thought.

“All Maps Were Useless”: Resisting Genre and Recovering Spirituality in *Against the Day*

Jared Smith

Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006) is clearly, but certainly not simply, a novel about subversion. From its suggestive title to its revolutionary rhetoric to its bomb-throwing characters, the novel is deeply concerned with the great historic battle between elect and preterite, center and periphery, recorded history and metafictional historiography. Pynchon frames these oppositions amid the turn of the twentieth century (1893–1923), “an era,” according to Eric Hobsbawm, “which upper- and middle-class memories have tended to see through a golden haze: the so-called ‘beautiful times’ or *belle époque*” (7). In an effort to recover a truer world history of this era, which has been retroactively romanticized through the filter of The Great War, Pynchon recasts a number of outmoded genres of fiction that constituted the popular literary landscape during that time. His revised boy-adventure tales, western classics, and spy thrillers relay a much more volatile turn-of-the-century atmosphere, one of unregulated and exploitative capitalism, social-anarchist movements, depredations carried out on native peoples in the name of imperial expansion, and working-class uprisings. The characters of bygone genres wander from region to region like old friends acting unfamiliarly: The iconic American cowboy finds no pleasure in vengeance, the hard-boiled detective observes interminably but never really solves a crime, and the boy-adventurer group becomes incorporated through global capitalism.

The sheer complexity of the novel's interconnecting themes and ironic use of genre have led many reviewers to lament Pynchon's apparent affinity for equivocation. John Carvill is accurate in noting the novel's elusiveness of meaning: “Everything you find room to say displaces something else, and any bald statement is incomplete without a phalanx of caveats, provisos, and footnotes.” And yet, while this historical and generic fragmentation undoubtedly leaves the reader feeling like he or she has no stable ground upon which to stand, it also opens up an important space for possibility.

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Many critics have emphasized the significance of parody to *Against the Day's* narrative structure¹—and to all of Pynchon's work—for it is precisely that which allows him to debunk the historical myths founded by the Western institutions of imperialism and capitalism that were perpetuated by the popular literary genres of the time.

The successful mapping and mocking of multiple genres requires exceptionally mobile characters and plot. We are not short on mobility in *Against the Day*, which is, at best, a peripatetic, yet sometimes desultory novel. The predominantly American and European characters travel widely and often—across diverse landscapes and to the farthest reaches of empire, through popular genres and intertexts, along spiritual paths, and toward political mobilization. One of the text's central parodies arrives in the form of Kit Traverse's political-spiritual quest through the geographies of empire in Asia and to the spiritual terrain of Shambhala, a mystical holy city in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.² It is within such physical and spiritual geographies that Kit enters the literary space of what John McClure calls "late imperial romance," novels by Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, and Joseph Conrad that are concerned with the "romance-eroding effects of Western expansion" and "sought to forestall, in very different ways, what Max Weber was calling the disenchantment of the world" (2).³ McClure has noted that *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* both reveal Pynchon's marked fascination with the "underworld of espionage" (12) in Kipling's late imperial romance adventure *Kim*, and so, too, have recent critics rightly drawn parallels between *Against the Day's* Kit and Kipling's titular protagonist.⁴ But to what extent does parody serve a critical function in Pynchon's work? "The textual and pragmatic natures of parody imply," cautions Linda Hutcheon, "at one and the same time, authority *and* transgression" (68, my emphasis). McClure believes that, unlike other postmodern novels, Pynchon's parodic *Gravity's Rainbow* is able, in part, to move beyond "the patterns of late imperial romance, which tends to renounce imperial and anti-imperial struggle alike in favor of aristospiritual projects of strong resignation" (175). *Gravity's Rainbow* does so by advocating "worldly resistance, rather than religious resignation, as an alternative to empire" (McClure 175). Ronald W. Cooley, however, maintains that Pynchon's parody of *Heart of Darkness* in *V.* still ultimately re-inscribes the reductive discourse of colonialism: "In repeating the clichés of imperialist fiction, even while reversing their targets, Pynchon authorizes the process of reducing the Other to a stereotype" (320).

Postmodern parody induces the author to walk a fine line between pronounced dissociation from the original text, in which the relationship

between original and parody is in danger of being lost, and a nuanced revision that the original work threatens to consume. Any work that attempts to revise a novel like *Kim* runs the risk of re-positing its more unpalatable latent imperial ideologies, such as Orientalism, which Edward Said theorized as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). Consequently, Pynchon's parody and revision of late imperial romance fiction in *Against the Day* employs a whole host of narrative techniques to safeguard itself against becoming another mouthpiece for the totalizing narratives it seeks to subvert—Western rationalization and Orientalism. The scenes at the periphery of empire, in Kashgar, Western China, present a kind of colonial contact zone where the free exchange of cultural codes provides fertile ground for postcolonial mimicry, which serves not only to appropriate colonial discourse for resistance, but also to disarm and elude Western notions of the colonial Other. Spirituality functions as a source for anti-colonialism in the text as well as a site for the re-imagining of the East. Pynchon condemns Western disenchantment by rendering the geography in Central Asia and the path to Buddhist transcendence similarly unmappable. Furthermore, Kit's pilgrimage to Shambhala, represented by his itinerary as "not a geographical map at all but an account of some spiritual journey" (248), ultimately serves to repudiate the paradoxical Western tendency both to covet Eastern spirituality as an unknown, mystical commodity and to attempt to command and secularize it. Through a complex string of thematic developments and interconnections, Pynchon dissolves Orientalized notions of the East as the sole depository for non-Christian spiritual transcendence.

I will examine *Against the Day* to determine how Pynchon's parodic treatment of imperial fiction lays the groundwork for the novel's larger subversion of rationalizing Western imperial forces through a presentation of anti-colonial resistance that is at once parodic in itself and spiritually sovereign. In doing so I will demonstrate how Pynchon is able to move beyond the generic conventions of imperial narratives—with their Orientalized notions of the colonial Other and Eastern spirituality—by suggesting that a non-singular religious transcendence is universally available to those who renounce Western imperial projects of capitalism and expansion. While much work remains to be done on the varied ways in which issues of race, identity, and gender manifest in *Against the Day*, the primary objective of this essay is to relate one aspect of the novel's concern with empire to the subversive qualities of parody.

My argument is organized into four parts, three of which correspond to the three phases of Kit's time in Asia: the journey to Kashgar, the colonial setting, and the pilgrimage to Shambhala. I will attempt to align the easterly movement of the narrative with the historical evolution of imperial romance fiction—from the codified spaces of empire that reflect the genre's legacy to the more unstable, heterogeneous peripheral zone of the colony, where late imperial romance and fiction of intrigue situate their anxiety and ambivalence. I will consider Pynchon's implementation of the doubly-voiced parody as an articulation of subversion and a tool for historical revision throughout all of the text's movement.

Traversing Empire and Romance

Before Kit can even enter the world of intrigue that Kim inhabits, Pynchon must map his trajectory from imperial center to periphery in order to emphasize the sharp contrast between the mapped and gridded spaces of empire and the nebulous, blank spaces of disorder at its borders and beyond. In fact, the Chums of Chance presage Kit's journey, as they, too, travel through Asia, albeit underground, in search of the lost city of Shambhala. The map they procure to do so—the enigmatic Sficiuno itinerary, an encrypted map of "paramorphic distortion" (249) from the fourteenth century—provides the reader an early visual of Kit's route, but can also be conceived of as a map that tracks the evolution of imperial romance's generic understanding of itself, from certainty to ambivalence: "Distances, referred back to an origin point at Venice, are painstakingly accurate for the earth's surface and the various depths below. But somehow these three coordinates have not been enough. The farther we follow the Itinerary, the more...somehow...out of focus the details seem to drift, until at last, [...] they actually become invisible" (437). The Chums' journey provides us with a useful conceptual model for understanding Kit's forthcoming role as a parodic figure from this turn-of-the-century genre.

Hundreds of pages later, Pynchon details Kit's journey from Europe through the conquered lands of various imperial powers. We begin, like the Sficiuno itinerary, in Venice, and then continue along straight lines through the gridded lands of the Ottoman, Austria-Hungarian, Russian, and British empires. Because many characters are permitted to move freely throughout the narrative, appearing often serendipitously to meet up with one another, the care and precision Pynchon devotes to this passage are significant. We follow Kit as he travels from Trieste to Constantza, across the Black Sea via steamer, through the strangely familiar Russian Caucasus where "giant

walnut logs [come] floating steeply downstream, destined for saloon bars like those in Colorado" (751), and then to Baku, a "sandswept oil port," where "corporate yachts" are "moored among oil tankers" (751). The Russian imperial region of Baku is a wasteland with "skies of hell" and "pillars of fire" (751).

Such a detailed rendering of the destructive and exploitative forces of imperialism is significant in its sharp contrast with the rhetoric of imperial romance fiction, which "provided a valorizing vision of expansion" for the "triumph of reason, knowledge, order, and Protestant piety over the forces of unregulated nature and blank superstition" (McClure 10). Clearly, Pynchon is prefacing his parody of *Kim* by reminding the reader of the true legacy of imperialism, one that contrasts sharply with the romantic fiction of conquest from nineteenth-century writers like G. A. Henty, Mayne Reid, and Frederick Chamier.⁵ Moreover, the dark panorama of a land corrupted by foreign entities in search of oil is an all but overt reference to the United States' current involvement in the Middle East. At Krasnovodsk, Kit boards a train, which, like mapping, is another instrument of disenchantment, and, as Professor Renfrew so accurately points out, is requisite to the infrastructure of war:

The railroads seem to be the key. If one keeps looking at the map while walking slowly backward across the room, at a certain precise distance the structural principle leaps into visibility—how the different lines connect, how they do not, where varying interests may want them to connect, all of this defining patterns of flow, not only actual but also invisible, potential, and such rates of change as how quickly one's relevant masses can be moved to a given frontier.... (689)

Railroads dominate and mediate space, while maps reduce it to a two-dimensional representation of containment.⁶ Pynchon introduces cartography to highlight the expansion of borders and railways advocated by the imperial project and its literary cultural production. But "beyond the simple geography," says the anarchist Ratty McHugh, "there's the quite intolerable tyranny over people to whom the land really belongs, land which, generation after generation, has been absorbing their labor, accepting the corpses this labor produces, along with the obscene profits, which it is left to the other and usually whiter men to gather" (935). This type of anti-imperialist rhetoric, spread consistently throughout the novel, is what redeems the presence of the Other from the forms of two-dimensional representation and the literary genre into which it had been exiled.

Imperial romance fiction, McClure says, "celebrated imperialism" and "adventures caught up in projects of exploration, conquest and conversion" (2). Although Susan Jones does not, like McClure, distinguish between late imperial romance and earlier forms, referring to all of it as a "complex group of fictions appearing in Britain between the 1880s and the 1920s" (406), she nonetheless recognizes a shift in writing from narratives that "emphasized plot and action, while frequently exploiting situations and landscapes of empire," to a genre that "generated as many anxieties about imperialism as it encouraged readers to uphold its values" (407). As Kit reaches the margins of empire, and moves closer to the literary space of the genres that will become his parodic foil, the railroads and other indicators of capitalism begin to dissipate or meet opposition, and the "anxieties about imperialism" to which Jones refers begin to take shape. At a delineated threshold—"the principal crossing from world to world" (753)—the reader also experiences the first echoes of a spiritually inflected anti-colonial resistance:

They stopped not at Bukhara but ten miles outside it, because the Mahommedan community there believed the railroad to be an instrument of Satan. So here instead was a new city Kagan, with its smokestacks and mills and local dignitaries grown suddenly rich on real-estate chicanery—the waste expelled from holy Bukhara, which lay out there ten miles away as if under a magical proscription, invisible but felt. (753)

Notably, the narrator emphasizes the spiritual, almost supernatural power ("magical proscription") of the Mahommedan community. While this depiction of the Other may appear to be heavily Orientalized, when considered in the context of parody, we see that Pynchon is alluding to the practice of novels like Kipling's to "[draw] the British reader's attention to the many grand narratives residing outside Christianity" (Jones 416), albeit in an exoticized manner that imbues the Other with a curious mystical power. The pastiche here marks a shift in the narrative from the exploited landscape of early imperial fiction to the largely unknown, disordered space longed for by late imperial fiction. Kit's linear journey through empire—aided by industrialization (cutting through the land and sea via railroad and steamer)—has been halted by the uncertain land of the Great Game, where espionage and intrigue work toward re-enchantment. Kit's crossing of the threshold signifies his movement from center to periphery, where the tone of imperial fiction shifts from certainty to anxiety and, significantly, where Pynchon fully develops his parody of *Kim*.

Parody of Intrigue and the Mimetic Contact Zone

Kit's adventure in Western China, much like Kim's, is set against the backdrop of the Great Game. In Kashgar, the headquarters for the British and Russian imperial outposts in Central Asia, Pynchon constructs an elaborate colonial contact zone of overlapping and competing imperial powers interacting with native resistance groups organized by religious independence movements: "the interests of England, Russia, Japan, and China [...], not to mention those of Germany and Islam, were already, for many, woven too intricately to keep track of" (756). It is this culturally heterogeneous colonial space that provides the stage upon which the characters, cultures, and political contingents parodically perform the fiction of intrigue.

Pynchon's Kashgar is slightly displaced from India, the geographic setting of *Kim*, but the parodic intent is apparent. Jon Thompson reminds us that the Indian society represented in *Kim* is not the hybridized "paradise of the dishonorable" (756) we have in *Against the Day*: "Contrary to the popular perception of the novel, *Kim* does not show us the clash of cultures within India, much less the clash between East and West. What Kipling offers instead is almost a completely harmonized vision of Indian society and one radically removed from historical actuality" (89). In fact, Yumna Siddiqi locates in early twentieth-century fiction of intrigue a tendency to quell any semblance of discord in the empire, a need to "cover over imperial contradictions using strategies of representation and narrative resolution that void the act of insurgency of its political content" (87). In its parody of these genres, *Against the Day*, it seems, attempts to foreground anti-colonial insurgency by comically pointing to the precariousness of the colonial system of control.

If we are to think of postmodern parody in terms of Hutcheon's "authorized transgression" (76), that is, subversion that must ultimately remain within the prescribed confines of the parodied genre, then we ought to also consider parody's individual social utility within the colony, what Homi K. Bhabha might more accurately describe as postcolonial mimicry. Like the inherently double-voiced nature of parody, "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 86). In Bhabha's colonial setting, the colonized are forced to appropriate the linguistic, cultural, and ideological codes of the colonizer, but eventually, they are able to reverse the colonial gaze, using its own discourse to challenge and undermine the systems of control. "The *menace* of mimicry," says Bhabha, "is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (88). Much of Pynchon's parody of late imperial romance arrives by way of the native

characters who resist an imposed Orientalized subjectivity by revealing the ambivalence of the imperial project through mimicry.

One native character in Kashgar who uses mimicry—thus parodying and allowing for genre parody—is Al Mar-Fuad (read: Elmer Fudd), a self-described Anglophile and “Uyghur troublemaker” (757). A messenger for the Doosra, a servant of the great and mysterious Northern Prophet, Fuad is a colonial Other, and a character who stands in opposition to the imperial forces in Central Asia. Meeting to discuss territorial disputes with Auberon Halfcourt and his coadjutor Mushtaq, Fuad is outfitted in “English hunting tweeds” and a “deerstalker cap turned sidewise” (757). His mimicry of English fashion indicates the presence of inter-cultural exchange in the colonial space (he wields “an ancient Greening shotgun whose brasswork carried holy inscriptions in Arabic” [757]), while underlining the presence of anti-colonial resistance at work in the novel and providing an opportunity for Pynchonian humor. Fuad even appears to command some authority in the scene by appropriating the imperialist rhetoric of conquest and expansion; his message to the British agents is straightforward: “surrender the city to the Dooswa” (757).

This mimicry poses a legitimate political threat to Halfcourt, who is beginning to “gather that something’s afoot to the east” (761). Fuad speaks English, wears English clothing and assumes English cultural practices; most important, he and the Doosra exhibit a penchant for territorial expansion, or, at the very least, a desire to redeem the land to its native inhabitants.⁷ His subversive performance of English identity thwarts Halfcourt’s perception of the native Other: “I shall never understand them [...]. Their strangeness—in language, faith, history—the family interweavings alone—they can turn invisible at will, simply by withdrawing into the limitless terrain of queerness, mapless as the Himalaya or the Tian Shan” (758). Fuad’s mimetic exhibition of British cultural and linguistic codes (and, indirectly, American ones as well), closes the gap between Self and Other, producing anxiety on the part of the colonizers.

Another colonized character whose appropriation of colonial discourse becomes a source of resistance is Al-Doosra himself. When Kit visits him before the pilgrimage, the Doosra defies Kit’s preconceived notions of an Eastern religious ascetic: “the Doosra was younger than Kit had imagined,” and, like Fuad, “lacked gravitas” (765). His disarming appearance and demeanor challenge Kit’s Orientalized preconceptions. The Doosra, too, is “plumper than the general run of desert ascetic,” and he speaks “fluent English,” albeit with a comically disruptive “University-nitwit accent” (765).

Here the Doosra's linguistic mimicry reverses the paradigm of superior/inferior by playfully mocking the codes of British accent hierarchy. In an even more farcical instance of subverted paradigms, Kit is portrayed riding "with his stirrups almost touching the ground" (765) on a diminutive and embarrassing local "pony," while the mighty Doosra sits atop a magisterial and "legendary Marwari, [...] a horse of great bravery and endurance, all but deathless, finely quivering with some huge internal energy" (765). The Doosra, an empowered colonial Other, disrupts the "tacit acceptance of English supremacy and Eastern inferiority," which "profoundly affects the formal composition of [*Kim*]" (Thompson 83-84). Thus, Pynchon distances himself from Kipling by reducing the pre-figured colonizer to the butt of a joke while offering some level of revolutionary agency to the colonized who have appropriated colonial discourse. Accordingly, the Doosra wields a pronounced signifier of empire—a "Japanese '38th year' Arisaka rifle" (765)—which is itself a mimetic imperial object and simulacrum of the Hapsburgs' ".26-caliber Mauser" (765). The special attention given to the history of the Arisaka rifle furthers the trope of reversing colonial discourse through mimicry by displaying how even Eastern imperial enterprise can be traced back to a Western origin.

There is a palpable anti-imperial current running through the novel's Central Asian setting: "These are no longer bands of peasants uprooted from their land," says a train engineer on Kit's trip through Asia; "they are now organized units of resistance, their target is the Russian occupation, and the people support them widely and absolutely" (753). The implications here of the Soviet War in Afghanistan and the United States' own imbroglio in the country, of course, are not lost on the reader. What is especially significant, however, is that the revolution is organized around a somewhat ambiguous spiritual base. Al-Doosra, Fuad, Hassan, and Chingiz all honor a mythologized shaman from the North who is prophesied to redeem Asia "from Islam, from Buddhism, from Social Democracy and Christianity" (756). The Northern Prophet evidently preaches a non-singular pluralistic spirituality that threatens Western modes of control. Interestingly, Chingiz appeals to Mushtaq, a "subaltern" (in the dual sense that he is both a subordinate officer and a colonial Other), to disavow his allegiance to the imperial army and take up with the revolution: "He is thy shaman too, Mushtaq" (757).

As the holy Arabic inscription on Fuad's shotgun indicates, the roiling anti-colonial resistance in the peripheral space is as decidedly spiritual as it is political. Postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee identifies the spiritual as

the domain of the colonized and an essential building block for anti-colonial nationalism in the early stages of revolution:

By my reading, anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the “outside,” of the economy and of the state-craft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. (6)

By maintaining spiritual sovereignty, the colonial Other represented in *Against the Day* cultivates its sources of resistance. This community holds on to the spiritual marks of cultural identity while mimicking the material domain of the colonizers. Furthermore, their agency transgresses the authoritative conventions of imperial romance fiction that Pynchon seeks to revise and subvert. Spirituality, it seems for the colonized characters in the novel, is both a sanctuary *from* the Western project of rationalization and a platform for organizing resistance *against* its agents.

Unmapping Shambhala

If we accept McClure’s assertion that “non-Western cultures are made to serve as reservoirs of spiritual energy and experience for the secular (spiritually dry) West, and non-Western peoples are valued only insofar as they perform this function” (180), then Chatterjee is right to conceive of the spiritual as the site for resistance against colonizing forces. It is precisely this spiritual domain that is under threat of secularization in imperial romance fiction and also that which is, paradoxically, still in danger of Orientalization by way of the genre’s re-enchantment of empire. Kim’s dual identity as a British spy in the Great Game and a student of Tibetan Buddhism under the lama highlights the central conflict of the genre: Kim, as an agent and representative of Western imperialism, finds currency in Eastern spirituality because it is defined by its difference from singular Western religions. As a result, the lama and the spirituality he represents cannot escape the

subordinating gaze of Orientalism. He is perpetually Other, rather than an individual with autonomy.

In Pynchon's parody of late imperial romance, then, much of what the genre celebrates is undermined and destabilized. The native characters in Kashgar farcically employ mimicry to push back against any genre conventions that would mark them as inferior, and they demonstrate their own ambitions toward self-determination as well. Still, the demands of parody do force Pynchon to occasionally accommodate the modes of the source genre. Kit is enlisted by Halfcourt for "a long-shelved plan to project a mission eastward to establish relations with the Tungus living east of Yenisei" (763). The objectives of the mission are vague at best, but its link to the strange politico-spiritual pilgrimage of Kipling's protagonist is made very clear.

As the details of the mission unfold we learn that Kit, the self-proclaimed *strannik*⁸, will embark on a quest toward the mythical Buddhist kingdom of Shambhala. It so happens that the Western entities in the novel also have "a lively interest," (437) but their interest differs from Kit's in key ways. They imagine Shambhala as a wellspring of wealth and power, a strategic piece in the race toward economic and military dominance, not a holy site for spiritual transcendence. Pynchon acknowledges that this is a choice, a way of seeing:

Kashgar is the spiritual capital of Inner Asia, as "interior" as one can get, and not only geographically. As for what lies beneath those sands, you've your choice—either Shambhala, as close to the Heavenly City as Earth has known, or Baku and Johannesburg all over again, unexplored reserves of gold, oil, Plutonian wealth, and the prospect of creating yet another subhuman class of workers to extract it. One vision, if you like, spiritual, and the other, capitalist. Incommensurable, of course. (631)

These two visions are mutually exclusive. Holding the capitalist view is to strip the land of its natural resources and the energy of its sacred beginnings; the spiritual path requires a renunciation of the destructive forces of capital. These contradictory perspectives—and the irony resulting from the rhetoric of the civilizing mission against the ugly backdrop of the colonial setting—are partly what imbued late imperial romance with its tone of deep ambivalence. But rather than enshroud that ugliness in mystery and intrigue, Pynchon punches through the fog, drawing stark lines between these two ideals that are "incommensurable, of course." Forcefully occupying another land and subjugating its people is to divest it of all value—both economic and spiritual. Enshrouding it in intrigue merely obfuscates this truth.

Fortunately, we are dealing with Pynchon, which is to say we are traveling through a world of historical reimagining, or "what the world might be with a minor adjustment or two," as the author himself said of his novel in an early promotional description.⁹ Geography, both as a spatial topography and as a conceptual terrain of desire, plays a central role in the way that the novel critically engages with the history of imperialism and anti-colonial resistance. Brian McHale identifies a motif played out in *Against the Day* poached from espionage novels, in "the moment [...] when characters contemplate a map of *desired* or *disputed* territory" (8, my emphasis). The maps we find in the novel, however, do not necessarily aid characters in navigating or gaining access to a particular region. These maps are strange and supernatural, transcending two-dimensional representation and resisting what Fabienne Collignon calls "single narratives [...] of enforced stability and transparency" (547).¹⁰ The Sfinciuno itinerary, as we know, is one such map, but we also encounter pocket-sized "toy" maps of infinitesimally small scales (806) and crude, hand-drawn maps (789), among others. The multiplicity of maps in the novel is Pynchon's reminder that cartography is an act of interpretation, and that maps are ideologically motivated and limited in their ability to represent layered planes of existence.

Many of Pynchon's other works reveal a deep fascination with maps and space. *Mason and Dixon* is perhaps his strongest indictment of maps and the groups in power who create them: "[T]he Line is exactly what Capt. Zhang and a number of others have been styling it all along— a conduit for Evil [...] of use at Trail's End only to those who would profit from the sale and division and resale of Lands" (*M&D* 701). In a detailed study of the maps that informed *Gravity's Rainbow*, Eric Bulson says, "For Pynchon, the history of mapping in the West cannot be separated from the increased abstraction of space and the many ways it has been adapted to violent, militaristic ends" (17). But Bulson argues that Pynchon employs a strategy of "spatial disorientation" in order to encourage readers to "reorient their interpretation of history by challenging them to remember what the maps conceal: the innocent lives underneath" (17).

Spatial disorientation might be one way to think about the parts of *Against the Day* concerned with Central Asia. The plumb line of the railroad, an emblem of progress and Western development, gives way to labyrinthine slot canyons and unnavigable mountainous terrain. In some ways the novel seems to cleave more closely to the genre it parodies, replacing the mythology of the civilizing mission with "a counter-romance that delves into realms of stubborn strangeness and enchantment" (McClure 8). Yet, as we

will see, Pynchon is equally skeptical of this convention as well as characters following "aristospiritual projects of strong resignation."

Kipling's spy-pilgrim protagonist provides only the basic outline for Kit during his adventures in Central Asia. Both characters encounter spiritual and political guides during their journeys. For Kit, these are the Doosra's loyal officer Hassan and Lieutenant Dwight Prance of British imperial forces. Prance, a pale, redheaded former "scholar of geography and languages at Cambridge" (765), initially presents as an obvious symbol of the West and Western rational thought. But there is more complexity to this character: During his long deployment in Central Asia he has comically and perhaps unconvincingly gone native: "Now he could scarcely be recognized—the man was filthy, sun-beaten, got up in some tattered wreck of a turnout intended [...] to be read as Chinese" (761).

The question of Prance's loyalty to the crown after so many years away from Great Britain makes his initial investment in Kit's mission unclear. He insists on two precautions before their journey commences. They must first disguise themselves as Buriat pilgrims, which serves an obvious practical function, but also seems an important prerequisite for the spiritual aspect of their mission. As Prance tells Kit, "If you are lucky enough to grow into your role, perhaps, somewhere on the journey north, all will become clearer to you" (764). The second ritual is to pass beneath the "great Archway known as the Tushuk Tash" (764), a local religious site and a "Gateway." Prance tells Kit, "unless we enter by way of [the Arch], we shall always be on the wrong journey. [...] We may follow the same route there as ordinary travelers, but if we do not pass first beneath the Great Arch, we shall arrive somewhere else" (764).

The Great Arch serves as a portal, the point of access to a world that Evans Lansing Smith says is an example of postmodernism's "ludic syncretism," in which tropes from multiple cultural mythologies play and interact self-reflexively (3). Smith reads Kit's pilgrimage to Shambhala in terms of the Greek *nekylia* because it is rife with what he terms "necrotypes," or "archetypal images catalyzed by the descent into the underworld" (2). The Great Arch, argues Smith, is a necrotype of the highest order, representing "surely one of the most extraordinary thresholds in the long history of the *nekylia*, from the Virgilian Halls of Dis, to Dante's famous gate, where one abandons all hope, or the gateway into the circles of the violent, guarded by the Medusa" (286). Smith's point is well-taken, and marks another key difference where Pynchon distances himself from the genre he is parodying,

which tends to rely on romantic notions of Eastern religions as exotic and mysterious.

As the pilgrims approach the Tushuk Tash, spatial disorientation begins to set in, and all of our "maps" of understanding—genre, history, space—begin to dissolve. Kit realizes that the journey is "less geographic than to be measured along axes of sorrow and loss" (771). And the geography around the region becomes a living force:

[T]he Tushuk Tash was impossible actually to get to even by local folks. A maze of slot canyons lay in the way, too many of them ever to have been counted. All maps were useless. Cartographers of different empires, notably the Russian, had been driven to nervous collapse trying to record the country around the Tushuk Tash. Some settled for embittered fantasy, others more conscientious left it blank. (769)

And it is not just the geography of this section that disorients, its very narrative structure is unmappable. This narrative disorientation is presaged by the Doosra, who cautions, "The *journey itself* is a kind of conscious Being, a living deity who does not wish to engage with the foolish or the weak, and hence will try to dissuade you" (765). He's not kidding; we move forward and backward chronologically, experience apparent editorial lapses (Hassan appears and reappears inconsistently), and find ourselves unable to trace the pilgrims' steps toward Shambhala. Other scholars writing about *Against the Day* have similarly noted that fluctuations in mapability, with regard to characters and space, have a direct impact on narrative form: Krzysztof Piekarski, Martin Kevorkian, and Elisabeth McKetta argue that in the stories of the Chums of Chance, Cyprian Lakewood, and many of the novel's anarchists, "a tension between mapping and the unmappable reveals itself, on a formal level, through a contrast between a tragic and an anarchic poetics" (53).

I believe that the narrative poetics during the pilgrimage to Shambhala reflect an active resistance to infiltration, mapping, and control—the campaigns of colonization. At the gateway to Shambhala, the structures of rational thought and cartographic logic begin to break down. The "cartographers of different empires" can no more access the spiritual center of the region than they can chart the geographic terrain—"All maps were useless" (769).

Although Kit never actually reaches Shambhala, he does appear to attain a qualified level of transcendence, which further entangles the novel with its source-text. After viewing Lake Baikal, the holy site for Buriat pilgrims, Kit

is visited by a disembodied voice that whispers, "You are released" (771). The voice may be his father's, which could imply that beyond a mere pastiche of late imperial romance, Kit's pilgrimage does help resolve certain conflicts in the novel. Webb may be releasing Kit from the guilt he carries for accepting funding from the capitalist Scarsdale Vibe to indulge his academic aspirations.

Further complicating the novel and its relationship with *Kim*, Lieutenant Prance appears to truly access Shambhala and achieve enlightenment. When traveling through the strangely carnivalesque Tunguska region, the two wanderers arrive in Tannu Tuva, a locale Prance has passed through before. This time around, however, Prance perceives the region as the holy city of Shambhala: "There was something else. Prance seemed almost embarrassed. 'This is the heart of the Earth,' he whispered. 'Funny' said Kit, 'all's I see's a bunch of sheep'" (786). The exchange between Prance and Kit highlights Pynchon's propensity in this section to simultaneously reaffirm and undercut Western portrayals of Eastern spiritual transcendence like the one we see in *Kim*. The scene recalls *Kim*'s ending, when the lama's River of the Arrow turns out to be an irrigation ditch. Says Peter Hopkirk, "What the Tibetan was really seeking during the Search—those three years of wandering the length and breadth of India—was enlightenment. This, Kipling appears to be saying, comes only from knowledge gained through meditation, and could happen anywhere" (264). Situating Prance's enlightenment in an arbitrary village of Siberia is part of Pynchon's pastiche of *Kim*. The parody is conveyed by Prance's own embarrassment and in Pynchon's underlining of the farcical elements already present in *Kim*, here rehashed with Kit's flippant comments about the setting where Prance reaches enlightenment. In sum, Pynchon avoids having his text conflated with the parodied text by stripping the scene of its seriousness. The reader would be remiss to forget that Kit's method of conveyance and guide to Tuva is a talking white reindeer (786).

Still, there is a sense that Kit does arrive at some level of spiritual enlightenment, but it is unclear whether that enlightenment is representative of Buddhism or any other Eastern religion. We know that at Lake Baikal, Kit discovers "the heart of the Earth itself as it was before there were eyes of any kind to look at it" (769). Also interesting is that while Kit is guided by Hassan through Central Asia, he is reminded of home: The Stony Tunguska begins to take on aspects of the Tierra del Fuego (784), Lake Baikal recalls the "pure, small mountain lakes in Colorado" (768), and the raucous Irkutsk is reminiscent of a frontier mining town—"like Saturday night in the San

Juans all over again" (773). For Smith, the scene at Lake Baikal "combines the descent to the underworld with the idea of ricorso—circling back to the beginning at the end of time, for purposes of renewal and transformation, catalyzed by the revelation of one's destiny" (288). Longing for an ancient, pre-modern time is not an unfamiliar theme in Pynchon's work, and the parallel of Central Asia to Colorado suggests the possibility that all places on the globe were once sacred. Prance refers to this pluralistic worship of the earth as "shamanism," a spiritual force "that allow[s] humans to be in touch with the powerful gods hiding in the landscape, with no need of any official church to mediate it for them" (777). The "gods hiding in the landscape" is also a subtle reference to guerilla warfare—a tactic often used in revolutions—which again links spiritual resistance to anti-colonial resistance and self-determination. "There isn't a primitive people anywhere on Earth that can't be found practicing some form of [shamanism]," Prance tells Kit. "Every state religion, including your own, considers it irrational and pernicious, and has taken steps to eradicate it" (777). Shamanism is a wild, unknowable force, and is thus a threat to state and imperial control.

Another reason Kit does not attain transcendence is that he is still imbricated with the Western imperial project and does not yet comprehend the dark intentions of the Western elements attached to him. Prance, on the other hand, does transcend, in the more literal sense that he is "taken aloft" aboard *The Inconvenience*, leaving Tuva and his sheep behind. This is the "mechanical rapture" that Yashmeen dreams about in an earlier scene:

We ascended, or rather, we were taken aloft, as if in mechanical rapture, to a great skyborne town and a small band of serious young people, dedicated to resisting death and tyranny, whom I understood at once to be the Compassionate. [...]

They used to visit all the time, coming in swiftly out of the empty desert, lighted from within. I did not dream this, Father. Each time when they went away again, it was to return to "The Work of the World"—always that same phrase—a formula, a prayer. Theirs was the highest of callings. If there was any point to our living in that terrible wilderness, it was to persist in hope of being brought in among them someday, to learn the Work, to transcend the World. (750)

While *The Inconvenience* may not be the heavenly city of myth, it may figure as an important conduit toward universal transcendence. It is important to note that throughout the novel the Chums have access to, yet

exist on different plane than all of the other characters and may indeed answer to the "highest of callings." It is also significant that prior to being taken aloft, Prance sheds all of his Western identifiers. Not only does he again pass as another ethnicity (this time a Japanese spy, which is also treated comically [783]), but he acknowledges that his ties to the British army have been severed: "There may not be a 'mission' anymore" (787). Which is why, upon rapture, he is referred to by the narrator simply as "Dwight Prance," losing his military rank that connected him to the imperial project.

Once Prance joins the Chums of Chance aboard the "skyborne town," he is not heard from again in the novel. For Kit, transcendence is neither in Central Asia nor aboard the Chums' dirigible that flies "toward grace" (1085). The multiple references to Colorado throughout his pilgrimage suggest that he may find it elsewhere, perhaps in the more volatile parts of America where anarchist uprisings are afoot. In his later travels Kit encounters several places that remind him of Colorado and Central Asia, and although he strays briefly from "the right piece of trail" (1074) while working as a bomber engineer and pilot in Italy, he eventually takes up the road and the *strannik* lifestyle again for good.

Returning "Home"

Before returning from Central Asia, Kit encounters Fleetwood Vibe, who is also wandering the harsh Siberian tundra. Fleetwood, too, is on a pilgrimage in search of hidden cities and an invisible railroad reported to connect Tuva to the Taklamakan. Yet Fleetwood acknowledges the fact that spiritual sites like Shambhala are inaccessible to him: "I wish it could be Shambhala that I seek. But I no longer have the right" (790). Being a member of the Vibe family, and thus marked by the ultimate destructive forces of Western imperialism and disenchantment, Fleetwood lacks the authority to seek earthly transcendence. Described as "of the opposite sign" (791) to Kit's, Fleetwood is on a pilgrimage of inverse proportions; the goal of his journey is death, he says, and "penance is my life" (790). Fleetwood is destined to wander the taiga in search of "other cities, [...] secret cities, secular counterparts to the Buddhist hidden lands, [...] dense with industry" (790).

If Kit is a parody of Kim, a character seeking re-enchantment through the unmapping of empire, then Fleetwood might represent the forces of disenchantment, from those early narratives still intoxicated by the exhilaration of conquest and expansion. The two characters are more than just a conceptual model for understanding romance; their very presence signals the different forms unauthorized Western occupation assumes in

spaces all over the world. McClure's contention with all of imperial romance, and I believe Pynchon's too, is not with its methods of disenchantment or re-enchantment, but with its abstraction of the colonized from the narrative altogether, initiating a "battle of romances, fought between competing European interests on the terrain of the Other" (McClure 8).

As I have argued, Pynchon does his best to disrupt and disperse this unauthorized battle by employing parody to make "the original lose in power, appear less commanding" (Hutcheon 76). Cooley maintains that parody in *V.* does not escape its authorized original, but that it, in fact, re-enforces the discourse of the original text. *Against the Day*, however, is a much later and more mature work, and in it Pynchon's parody not only diffuses the original power of the prior text but transcends the very boundaries of genre convention by way of its multi-layered approach and the thematic interconnectedness of the entire novel. Pynchon reveals the ecologically destructive and politically oppressive ideals held by the genre by juxtaposing the secular gridded lands of empire spoiled by capitalist enterprise with the disordered spaces of the periphery upon which imperialism is ever-encroaching. He exposes the Orientalizing tendencies of the Western colonizers and undermines colonial discourse by imbuing the colonial Other with revolutionary agency by way of mimicry—itself a form of parody. He organizes anti-colonial resistance around a non-Western spirituality that contests notions of the peaceful mystic, and his colonized characters do not simply offer up their spiritual essence, and thus, their cultural identity, to the politically-entangled Westerner like Kit. And finally, he disposes altogether of the corruptive myth that the East is the sole domain of mystical transcendence by implying that such enlightenment can be attained by anyone, anywhere who can successfully renounce and overthrow the West's domineering narrative of Christian secularization through rationalization. In so doing, Pynchon attempts to repatriate what is clearly a Western pathology from the spaces of the globe into which it has spilled. If *Against the Day* does, in fact, achieve all of this, presenting a successfully transgressive parody while escaping late imperial romance's ideologies, then might it also fulfill Cooley's stringent requirements as a truly anti-imperialist novel?:

What would an anti-imperialist novel be like? And more specifically, could a novel about empire, written from what Edward Said calls "the Metropolis" (the West), ever be an anti-imperialist novel? Such a novel would, it seems to me, have to meet at least two criteria. First it would have to develop a sustained and relatively coherent critique of the historical fact of empire. Second, and this seems rather more

difficult in light of the first objective, it would have to subvert two sets of novelistic conventions: the discursive conventions that make any attempt by an authorial I (however disguised) to tell the story of an Other, a reductive, and potentially a totalitarian enterprise; and the narrative impulse towards closure—towards a re-establishment of order that is always in some sense political. (307–08)

In terms of Cooley's first criterion, *Against the Day* does indeed develop a sustained argument, insofar as it attempts to reverse-engineer the fatal global developments that led up to the First World War. It settles decisively on empire as the root cause of that great catastrophe. The first part of the second criterion is a bit more difficult to tease out in the novel: Pynchon makes no attempts to impose upon the Other his own story, although he does work to recover the position of the Other within the popular genres and texts of late imperial romance. His parody works to dismantle the West's conception of itself in romance, and thus enacts a space-clearing gesture whereby the Other may gain some political agency. Still, his position as a white, male American writing about empire might automatically preclude any possible success in this endeavor. Let us turn, then, to the second part of the second criterion—that of re-establishing order. *Against the Day* positions its parody, like the politically active miners of Colorado, "to be a threatening, even anarchic force" (Hutcheon 75), and the narrative techniques employed by the author mirror a similar sort of organized chaos. Likewise, Pynchon has not been noted as an author who favors closure in his novels. And the conclusion of this novel, a novel very much caught up in history, could be said to be no more or less stable than its introduction. But its attention to the inherent instabilities of our collective past reveals much less about its anti-imperialist concerns than it does about its own relationship and engagement with elaborate historical re-mappings. David Witzling describes Pynchon's overall novelistic strategy as "seeking refuge in alien times and places in order to approach seemingly unspeakable truths of the contemporary world" (97). And despite Pynchon's attempts to convince the reader otherwise,¹¹ *Against the Day* clearly speaks to our time and engages, by proxy, with the global politics of now. Therefore, the novel's anti-imperialist and anarchist objective, we might say, is not only to induce historical disorder through a revision of a former day, but also to shed light on the institutional forces of neo-imperialism and to project opposition toward the established order of our time—in effect, to write against *our* day.

End notes

1. See Brian McHale's "Genre as History: Genre-Poaching in *Against the Day*" and John Clute's "Aubade, Poor Dad."
2. For a comprehensive study of the myth of Shambhala in Tibetan Buddhism, see Edwin Bernbaum's *The Way to Shambhala*, Anchor Press, 1980.
3. McClure here is drawing on Weber's theories outlined in "Science as a Vocation," in which he proposes that the rationalizing effects of Western science have removed, and are continuing to remove, the belief that within nature there are "mysterious, incalculable powers at work" (13). He terms this process, effectively, 'disenchantment.'
4. See Celia Wallhead's "Kit and *Kim*: Espionage in *Against the Day*" and, again, McHale's "Genre History," p. 8.
5. In "Into the Twentieth Century: Imperial Romance from Haggard to Buchan," Susan Jones lists these and other writers as early practitioners of imperial romance.
6. Fabienne Collingnon's "A Glimpse of Light" deals specifically with the rationalizing symbols of maps, railways, and light in the novel.
7. The novel places great emphasis on "Irredentism," the sociopolitical concept that land controlled by one nation, but containing groups with ethnic/historical connections to another nation should be redeemed to the latter. See pp. 756 and 761 in *Against the Day*.
8. Described by Yashmeen as men who "led everyday lives [...] then one day [...] simply turned—walked out through the door [...] from all of it [...] to keep wandering the world," (663) the *stranniki* are considered holy ascetics in Russia. Yashmeen, and even Kit, adopt the *stranniki* lifestyle in some way.
9. See the author's description of the novel on the *Against the Day* Wiki. It originally appeared on Amazon.com prior to the novel's release, but was quickly removed.
10. Collingnon is drawing upon Michel de Certeau's concept of maps as reductive narratives used to contain and control diverse spaces of the unknown.
11. From the author's original description: "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. No reference to the present day is intended or should be inferred" (Pynchon Wiki). The final line did not appear in the book jacket version.

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