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Aubade, Poor Dad

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Against the Day by Thomas Pynchon

The day that ends the dream of Thomas Pynchon is the same old day of *V*. It is also the screaming across the sky in *Gravity's Rainbow*; and the future it would be death to enter after leaving *Vineland*; and the blistering echolalia from within the Hollow Earth, the drum roll of the Disappeared which tells the penetrant heroes of *Mason & Dixon* that what stains the world you rape stains you. There is nothing newer than this in the hundreds of thousands of words that make up the latest and most Pynchonesque novel yet by America's greatest Fool writer, except for the fact that it is all over now. *Against the Day* (New York: Penguin, 2006) – which begins intoxicatedly at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and terminates in the "terrible cloudlessness" of the aftermath years begat upon us by World War One, in the years that Pynchon calls "Hell" – is an aubade against the coming of the twentieth century. Like any aubade it is written in the knowledge that, in the end, Time wins (Pynchon capitalizes Time lots). When the novel stops, leaving a few survivors in alternate worlds to cultivate their gardens in peace as long as they do not come back, our bridges have all been burnt, and there is nothing more to tell.

It is an immense book, and it is full of noise. Every single page counts for something, though hundreds of pages introduce narrative schticks that expire almost instantly when lit, so that the reader cannot know which insight, which brilliant phrase or tour de force riff, will entail the kind of story consequence – and then? and then? – that we as readers and critics are properly trained to attempt to trust and trace. But whether or not it is entirely tolerable – I know that I for one missed whole tranches of import in the unforgivingly incessant half-drowned packrat rataplan of the whole – what is clear is that the occluded waves of unfolding of story and implication in the book are intended. The innumerable pages of *Against the Day* mulch together like a great tidal cud, and dozens – actually hundreds – of named characters appear and disappear according to what one might call peristaltic imperatives: a kind of Mexican Wave. For an instant we see them, and then they are engulfed again, before their act is completed, not to reappear (if at all) for hundreds of pages maybe. But we saw them, and we were meant to.

Over and above a growing awareness that these waves of story are indeed heading somewhere, what saves one's readerly sanity in the middle of these 450,000 words may be the fact that every figure in the book is immediately *recognizable*; I think that without exception every single one can be initially identified as having been configured in terms of some genre or other of popular fiction, as it was written before the end of World War One. These genres include the Western, from Edward S Ellis to Bret Harte to Jack London; boy's adventure fiction, from the Airship Boys tale to Horatio Alger; the Dime Novel in general; the British school story in general and the *Zuleika Dobson* British-school-story-for-older-boys

femme-fatale tale in particular; the future war novel; the Lost Race novel; the Symmesian Hollow Earth tale; the Tibetan Llama or Shangri-La thriller; the Vernean Extraordinary Journey; the Wellsian scientific romance; the Invention tale and its close cousin the Edisonade; the European spy romance thriller à la E Phillips Oppenheim; the World-Island spy thriller à la John Buchan; the mildly sadomasochistic soft porn tale as published by the likes of Charles Carrington in Paris around the turn of the century. Not to mention the large number of utopias influenced by Edward Bellamy and William Morris, both of whom ghost the book.

Due to Pynchon's fully earned iconic status as great American writer and Zeitgeist voice, *Against the Day* has already been widely reviewed in the general press, and various versions of the list of popular genres given above have appeared in some of these notices. There's a problem, though. Non-genre critics seem generally to presume that Pynchon accessed this material more or less raw, that *Against the Day* represents a direct and unfiltered mining of prelapsarian ore; and that therefore the *tonality* of the book – its doom-haunted desiderium – is in itself uniquely or even particularly Pynchonesque. Given the depth and compass of his conversation with a vast range of previous writers and genres, however, as well as the fact that over the past forty-five years his own works have become an integral part of that conversation, I suspect Pynchon himself would feel uneasy with any critical presumption that his grasp of previous genres was anything like that simpleminded.

The intervening filter is, of course, the literatures of the fantastic as they actually exist. We needn't rehearse the obvious at great length here – that for the last fifty years or so, sf and fantasy has increasingly focused on our pre-World War One past through steampunk and the gaslight romance, through a huge proliferation of pastiches of earlier genres, through that form of the alternate history which gives habitation to escapees from the charnel house, through the boom in time travel tales back to a past that needs *preserving*, and through Michael Moorcock's creation of the literary device of the multiverse in order to give lebensraum to various otherwise incompatible genres and tales within the pages of one book – but we should say that *Against the Day* honourably adds to that conversation. It is a pure science fiction novel of these latter days of sorting.

Moorcock – or some ghostly afflatus of Moorcock now so widely disseminated through the field that his name can easily be forgotten – is perhaps the main figure here. We're thinking (ware list!) of his Airship Boys tales; of his recursive desiderium-drenched proto-steampunk Edwardian sf novels which posit routes into futures less dreadful than the one we got; of the Europe Between the Wars tales, full of iconic figures whose intertwining discourses on the states of the worlds allow the inference that each history of the world is a failed experiment in avoiding the inevitable War just like the last one; of the multiverse itself, a topology best articulated in the long *Cornelius* and *Von Bek* series, through characters who "bilocate" into impossible self-haunting versions of themselves, and occupy worlds whose storylines nest inside one other like matryoshka dolls, and meet in restaurants on lamplit promenades which may exist in more than one glamour of Venice at a time; of the recurring figures who occupy the multiverse: the Temporal Adventuress, the plucky hero and the flaneur, the louche spy, the utopist, the bewildered army officer, the magi and the bandits out of Asia; and of the Colonel Pyat novels [see above, p22-32] – in reality one vast novel longer than *Against the Day* and sometimes almost as walkabout – whose appalling anti-hero traverses Russia and the rest of Europe, Asia and Asia Minor, Africa and 1920s Hollywood, then France and Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany, just as though the world were a stage upon which he was destined to encounter and re-encounter a vast array of exemplary figures who join him from behind the arras of the world whenever they are called for – as though life were a kind of *pantomime* – a Commedia dell'Arte

troupe he constantly betrays while constantly speculating *wrongly* about his relationship to the fate of the planet. All of this, which makes up almost the whole range of Moorcock's oeuvre with the exception of his heroic fantasies, centrally impacts upon attempts of writers of the literatures of the fantastic to come to terms with the stories that gave us all sustenance before they received the fatal wound so long ago – around the time of World War One. Moorcock's work, and the work of his cohorts, is a kind of multi-dimensional map to the past of genre before we lived in Hell, inscribed in tongues on vellum, eyekicks galore. *Against the Day* gazes through this vellum.

There is more of course to Pynchon's range of reference than these recursions. His grasp of the sciences and pseudo-sciences of the late nineteenth century is far more extensive than Moorcock's, or maybe anyone's; he is deeply attuned to both the myth and realities of the American West, the dreamed West which is both arcadia and utopia; he conveys sense of place with such astonishing intensity that his Chicago and New York and London and Venice and places east seem too dense for one world to hold them, for his descriptions of cities read like descriptions of their absolute substance, the theotetos or God-salt of the theologians; and the whole of his oeuvre could be understood as a chronicle of the war between anarchism and history – between slaves and owners, between enclaves that hold our heart's desire and the corporate world that makes offers we can't refuse, between science that tells us how to escape and Technos, between eros and aporia – with the famous Pynchon conspiracies weaving webs of Maya between these opposing poles.

All of which may sound more like the diagnosis of a disease burden than of the underpinnings of a novel, and there are times when it costs like sickness to continue to read *Against the Day*. Finishing the book is like getting well. Every trope and turn out of the literature of an entire century is imagined and re-imagined in the great gut of the seemingly perpetual *digestion* of Pynchon's telling, in which the cast appears and disappears (as I've already suggested) like fish in a tidal rip. Except for the fact that he brings most of them back to continue trouping their colorations, one could almost describe *Against the Day* as a prose version of Luis Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), a film which claims (among other things) that human beings understand the genres that tie them about as well as an ostrich understands Auschwitz. *Against the Day* is huger and almost certainly more disorganized than anything Buñuel could tolerate. Maybe one should say rather that Pynchon's vast lament is a bit like *The Phantom of Liberty* as written by Eugene Sue.

All the same, at least four story clusters might be sketched in. They flow together, separate, knot and vanish into thin air; but they can be followed.

1) The Airship Boys cluster, which is told in a boys' adventure idiom. We first meet the Chums of Chance, a team of five plucky lads who man the airship *Inconvenience*, at the Chicago World's Fair. Under the orders of an unseen directorate which gradually becomes less substantial as the years pass and history darkens, the Chums perform feats of rescue and surveillance and exploration typical of their breed. The world ages, but they do not seem to, though their ship grows steadily larger around them; by the end of the novel, it seems huge enough – like the ship in Gene Wolfe's *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987) – to cause a partial eclipse when it passes between sun and earth. As with most Airship Boys, the vector is utopian: through clean living and industry and learning, through the sanitizing uplift of their own example, they will create a better world, a pax aeronautica. In *Against the Day*, as they become increasingly counterfactual to the world below, the intensity of that vector becomes *transcendental*: they begin to leave us, though they visit once in a while to help. En route, they are privy to the discovery that the crystalline substance known as Iceland spar has a quality of doubling the "sub-structure of reality", creating a palimpsest of worlds, along the verges of one of which the Chums watch as a "guardian spirit" – or maybe the primordial god Buri – or

maybe something nuclear brought to fusion by a convergence of worlds – is hauled south to New York, more or less exactly one century before 11 September 2001; and destroys Manhattan in a world not quite ours. The Chums then begin their search for Shambhala, or Shangri-La, undergoing various sf adventures (including travel in a ship which sails beneath the Sahara) until finally, in the final pages of the book, they find a group of girls with artificial wings whom they marry en masse, as in any Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. Boys and girls, now connubially linked, escape at last on the very final page.

2) The Western Revenge cluster, which is told through an array of dream-demotic narrative voices; sometimes I heard echoes of Larry McMurtry, a fellow spelunker out of Pynchon's world. A union organizer (who is an anarchist at heart) named Webb Traverse spends his spare time as "the Kieselguhr Kid" blowing up railway lines. Suspected of this, he is brutally murdered by two thugs in the employ of the stage-villain plutocrat Scarsdale Vibe. Webb's four children are expected to avenge their father. The three sons (a flim-flam man, a mathematician, and a reluctant revolutionary who spends much of the novel in Mexico) appear and disappear dozens of times throughout *Against the Day*, testing the world for us according to their lights, and mostly falling in and out of love. (The sexual activity level of the book is extremely high, and often anomalously explicit, as far as the popular genres of the time are concerned. Much of this sex is casual, in the sense that the perps soon separate, but almost all of the sex is meant. It is even more anomalous – in terms of the genres Pynchon is accessing – that women are clearly more sophisticated about sex than their men, and perfectly frank about their knowledgablness. In the end, moreover, even the most "promiscuous" of them find secure niches with men of their choice, though choice men are rare. The end result of this escape from genre stricture is an intermittent sense that the stays of the world have themselves loosened, a hint that some partial escape from Hell may be possible.) Webb's daughter goes off with one of the murderers, which anecdotalizes the plotting of this cluster for a few hundred pages or more; but in the end, more or less inadvertently, or at the hands of others, justice is done, sotto voce. But any solace or repose the Traverse family gains is essentially melodramatic: subject to some flick of the conjuror's wrist: as the youngest son says, "We're all just night-riders here miles up a posted trail." They could be potted any time. The West as portal to Utopia, the free life their father dreamed of so unrealistically, has been shut down.

3) The Geek Eccentric Scientist cluster, which is told in an amalgam of styles. Pynchon knows too much science, and is clearly too indifferent to the costs of mixing good and bad scientific speculations into one narrative mix, for readers easily to appreciate what may be a remarkable flow of nuanced BigThink and subcutaneously hilarious jape. It was enough for me to understand that – somewhere deep in every paragraph of unquotably weirdish speculation – someone was trying to understand the physics and mathematics of the refraction of reality into multiple alternates. (And other stuff.) The Chums (as we've seen) get a gander at a lot of this, and are duly bilocated into Paradise. But the world-reality that will close down these festivals with the onset of World War One is increasingly hard to relocate out of. Although the cast of *Against the Day* is haunted by mirrors and ghosts and doubles and castles in the sky (sometimes these are just the Chums) and maps which show the Way if gazed at through Iceland spar, there is an increasing sense that the game is up, that "the invasion of Time into a timeless world" is a "Transgression" which cannot be stanchd. Though the great (historical) Tunguska Event in Siberia in 1908 that "jolted the axes of Creation" awakes longing anticipation of some shudder in the loins of another world birthing, there is no Conceptual Breakthrough available. Nothing that the mad crew of Scientists comes up with can save the "World-Island" for the game of story. They all shrivel into babble, two feet short of the well.

4) The Flaneur Spy Adventuress cluster, told in any style that comes to hand, from the shilling shocker to Huysmans. This cluster gradually takes over from the Western cluster, which dominates the first half of *Against the Day*; correspondingly, the second half of the book takes place mostly in Europe and Asia. Most of the troupe in this part of the show – the gay spy flaneur down from Oxford, the Theosophists, the Adventuress from the mysterious East with a taste in sadism, and all their lovers and owners and torturers –

escape into enclaves as the overarching aubade of the big book they are nodules of, the big book whose ultimate task is to *dry up*, continues to sharpen its claws. Typically, every enclave is moist with sex. As we've noted, without quite seeming to admit it Pynchon gives the sexually adventurous members of his troupe – who seem as close to his heart as anarchists – some holes to hide in as the world locks into desert out here.

Hundreds of characters, but hardly individualizable in your half-nightmares that you will be reading *Against the Day* for ever. They flicker in and out of view as though lit from behind. The set pieces drown them out. The movement of the book as a whole drowns them in incessant perturbation. They drown each other in talk, which may go on for pages until a spasm of peristalsis washes them away for a hundred thousand words, but often they cannot stretch to fill the gap: by the time they return, we have lost them. And they drown in all the genres they take their sustenance from, because – except for the flood of sex that falleth from their Author like manna from heaven – they are ultimately *obedient*.

But of course that is the point of this great grotesque swaybacked desiccating book about the victory of Time against our single sad Earth. The hundreds of figures who jam into *Against the Day* are not in fact characters at all, because Pynchon has evacuated his book of that degree of hope. They are *utterands*: people-shaped utterances who illuminate the stories of the old world that their Author has placed before us in funeral array; they are codes to spell his book with. That is why Pynchon has them break again and again into songs about the roles they play: because they are being sung through. And because that book is about the death of the stories we used to tell, its utterands are bound to the stake of that telling. They are like lovers in the radium glare of dawn, singing the terminal verse of the aubade. Before we shut the last page, the day has blown them out.