



MARXIAN AESTHETICS OF DISPLACEMENT IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *AGAINST THE DAY*

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ABSTRACT

Loosely set in the years from the end of the nineteenth century until after the first world war, Against the Day can be tentatively broken up into four relatively major strands (Clute, 2006): First, the "Airshop Boys Cluster": seems to be somewhat framed by a bunch of youthful adventurer balloonists called the "Chums of Chance" that keep resurfacing, moving around the globe on missions that are recorded and published in a series of adventure books, all the while being steered and controlled by a mysterious "Organization" (with capital "O"). Second, the "Western Revenge Cluster": One Webb Traverse, a mine foreman whose secret anarchist habit is blowing up the capitalist tycoons' power lines and railroad bridges, is killed by guns the particular tycoon he is working for – fittingly named Scarsdale Vibe – has hired. Vibe comes across as an almost comic book plutocrat who is busy exploiting the US immigrant underclasses, buying off scientists and state officials and hiring mercenaries to win the war against a growing anarchist resistance.

Key words: politics, alienation, society, commodity, capitalism, organisational politics, anarchist resistance.

INTRODUCTION:

The science of sociology, for example, has been haunted by literature since its invention because "like sociological texts, fictional writings incorporate within their own discourse the crises of our culture" (Brown, 1987, p. 157; cf. Lepenies, 2002; Kizmic and Mozetic, 2003). Also, Freud is said to have been serious about reviewing his psychoanalytical findings on the foil of major literary works: "the novelist has always preceded the scientist" (quoted after de Certeau, 1986, p. 19; cf. Rancie`re, 2006). Indeed, the importance of the social body that



came to fascinate social thinkers seems to have been pioneered by literary undertakings before becoming part and parcel of the social sciences. “This programme is literary before being scientific [...] Literature itself was constituted as a kind of symptomatology of society [...]” (Ranciere, 2004a, p. 33, emphasis added). The modern novel thus played an important role in producing a mode of visibility. It is through an aesthetic operation, through a “poetical revolution”, that the ordinary was displaced from its obviousness and turned into a matter of social-scientific interest: “Marx’s commodity stems from the Balzacian shop” (Rancie`re, 2004b, p. 20)[1].

[...] Hundreds, by now thousands, of narratives, all equally valid – what can this mean? “Multiple worlds,” blurted Nigel, who had floated in from elsewhere (Pynchon, 2006, p. 68).

Against the day like its predecessors – such as V. (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Mason & Dixon* (1998) and, most prominently, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) – *Against the Day*, coming in at a staggering 1,085 pages, has been labelled a difficult read. The book teems with numerous narrative threads, plot layers and hidden allusions; it is engaged in a scrambling of temporal continuity, a denial of stable perspectives as well as chaotic subversions of the conventions of realist writing; and it is immersed in self-reflective, encyclopedic arrays of details from science, history, politics, popular culture, high culture and business. In short, Pynchon’s polymorphous fiction dramatizes “an experience of disorientation in the basic teleological and dialectic space of the ‘book’” (Mattessich, 2002, p. 15).

Loosely set in the years from the end of the nineteenth century until after the First World War, *Against the Day* can be tentatively broken up into four relatively major strands there are literally hundreds of characters (as well as non-human “actants”) that drop in and drop out of *Against the Day’s* unfolding. There are lots of drugs, and there is lots of kinky sex. There is considerable musing on the matter of “light” and “time”, the latter possibly in relation to the novel itself, for as one of the cast of eccentric inventors remarks:

Watches and clocks are fine, don’t mistake my meaning, but they are a sort of acknowledgement of failure, they’re there to glorify and celebrate one particular sort of time, the tickwise passage of time in one direction only and no going back (Pynchon, 2006, p. 456 et seq.).

Then there is the matter of Iceland Spar, a crystal able to exactly multiply images (thus enabling “bilocation”) that a part of the cast seems to be after and that is further complicating an obsession with duality at work in the novel. Moreover, an expedition to gather Iceland Spar brings home what is thought to be a meteorite but what turns out to be a strange living



substance, unleashing disaster in New York City – a breathtakingly written section that one cannot but relate to the terrorist attacks of 2001 and the emergence of, as the narrator puts it, “the infant science of counter-terrorism as an all-purpose code name” (Pynchon, 2006, p. 445)

For sure, there is much more. A preeminent trait of *Against the Day's* anarchic text-world is a deep affection of whatever is not serious as well as of chaotic subversions of realist conventions that go hand-in-hand with an unstoppable proliferation of any kind of situation. Ever so often, a narrative that has been building up is falling apart, being followed by song, slapstick and clownery, sometimes to be resumed some 400 pages later. The fondness for jokes as well as comic and fantastic distortions is a matter of considerable academic debate; Pynchon's novels have been read as serio-comic Menippean satires (named after ancient Menippus's delight in mixing prose and verse, parodying genres and social folly (Kharpertian, 1985; Kristeva, 1986) or critically reflexive and self-reflecting meta-parodies (Mattessich, 2002). According to Mattessich (2002), these texts resemble broken machines, writings that undermine their own analogical coherence. To paraphrase Rancie`re's assessment of Virginia Woolf, Pynchon seems to strive towards a language that dwells in its contingency, “at the risk of brushing shoulders with the mad” (Rancie`re, 2004a, p. 59). Following a Bakhtinian perspective, however, a novel is distinguished by the incorporation of various languages, by its diversity of voices with their socio-political implications, its heteroglossia, its dramatization of society's ideological struggles through intersecting discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). In her discussion of Bakhtin's idea of literary writing, Kristeva (1986, p. 42) has extended the notion of the “polyphonic novel” to the nondisjunctive, contradictory and carnivalesque text-forms found in the so-called modern novel of the twentieth century – in Joyce, Proust and Kafka, among others. The carnivalesque, however, should be not be confused with frivolity: “The laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is serious” (Kristeva, 1986, p. 50; cf. Bakhtin, 1986). For Kristeva, polyphony and carnivalesque language produce a double movement that both expresses the modern alienation of humans from their world and allows for voicing a radical awareness of this alienation.

[I]f we had to cover every contingency we might as well be writing espionage novels (Pynchon, 2006, p. 632).

These Bakhtinian reflections read like praise for *Against the Day*. Importantly, moreover, they enable reflecting upon the effects or affects generated through the process of reading. The novel enacts aesthetics of displacement that generates conditions of displacement, disorientation and possibly marginalization and schizophrenia in the reader: “Pynchon's novels have often claimed to reconfigure the pathways – neural and otherwise – that readers



travel” (Veggian, 2008, p. 212). When discussing *Against the Day*, then, one is pushed to confront the question of one’s own position(s) in the process of reading. Of course, this question permeates social-scientific research, i.e. the “reading” of social realities (Law, 2004), but it is precisely the shifting and unstable position of a Pynchon reader that provokes reflection on the imposing of analytical grids, on rendering a literary work tame[2].

As Mattessich (2002) argues, Pynchon can be read as a quintessentially contemporary author who writes historical fictions that are riddled with allusions to the here and now. The book’s aesthetics of displacement, its hunting for spaces of escape, its carnivalesque stagings of the carnivalesque and its textual broken machine become a meditation on the possibility of critique and otherness in the face of critique’s very own entanglement with power. As has been often noted (Raudaskoski, 1997), in *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* famous opening section the narrator’s voice might possibly comment upon the novel itself: “Is this the way out? [...] No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into [...]” (Pynchon, 1973, p. 3).

Some define Hell as the absence of God, and that is the least we may expect of the infernal machine – that the bourgeoisie be deprived of what most sustains them, their personal problem-solver sitting at his celestial bureau, correcting defects in the everyday world below (Pynchon, 2006, p. 586).

Against the Day seems to be clearly interested in capitalist organization or “the murderous fields of capitalist endeavour” (Pynchon, 2006, p. 724). A Weberian notion of the Protestant ethic and the subsequent heritage of Puritanism and the capitalist spirit to which it gave rise has been finding its way into Pynchon’s prose more than once (Moore, 1987;cf. Weber, 1980 [1922]). The judgement, however, seems to be more dystopian than Weber’s fears of the iron cage. In what might amount to a programmatic statement, the detective Lew Basnight, ever the drifter, muses about “the terrible American divide, between hunter and prey” (Pynchon, 2006, p. 186). What one could call the Puritan predator ethic of (early) capitalism has found its personification in the figure of Scarsdale Vibe. In a rare moment of self-pity and in an apt biblical tone, he tells his “special assistant” Foley Walker (Pynchon, 2006,)

Some 400 pages later, which might or might not mean later in Pynchon’s discursive handling of time, Vibe’s son Fleetwood reports that his father would be going nuts, giving his money to “some Christian propaganda mill” (Pynchon, 2006, p. 789). Maybe needless to say, Vibe thinks of himself as “a man of practice, not theory” (Pynchon, 2006, p. 1001), whose only scientific curiosity is directed at “how a subject might react to philanthropy in reverse, where the charity gets taken away, instead of handed out? Would he get angry? sad? desperate? give into suicidal thoughts?” (Pynchon, 2006, p. 621) And late in the book, when Vibe is brutally as well as eloquently addressing “the Las Animas-Huerfano Delegation of the Industrial



Defense Alliance – it’s worth reading the acronym, one of many in Pynchon’s oeuvre, out loud – his speech becomes a chilling manifest of how capitalist organization is depicted in *Against the Day*:

“We will buy it all up”, making the expected arm gesture, all this country. Money speaks, the land listens, where the Anarchist skulked, where the horse-thief plied his trade, we fishers of Americans will cast our nets of perfect ten acre mesh, levelled and varmint-proofed, ready to build on. Where alien mockers and jackers went creeping after their miserable communistic dreams, the good lowland townfolk will come up by the netful into these hills, clean, industrious, Christian, while we, gazing out over their little vacation bungalows, will dwell in top-dollar palazzos befitting our station, which their mortgage money will be paying to build for us. When the scars of these battles have long faded, and the tailings are covered in bunchgrass and wildflowers, and the coming of the snow is no longer the year’s curse but its promise, awaited eagerly for its influx of moneyed seekers after wintertime recreation, when the shining strands of telpherage have subdued every mountainside, and all is festival and wholesome sport and eugenically chosen stock, who will be left anymore to remember the jabbering Union scum, the frozen corpses whose names, false in any case, have gone forever unrecorded? who will care that once men fought as if an eight-hour day, a few coins more at the end of the week, were everything, were worth the merciless wind beneath the shabby roof, the tears freezing on a woman’s face worn to dark Indian stupor before its time, the whining of children whose maws were never satisfied, whose future, those who survived, was always to toil for us, to fetch and feed and nurse, to ride the far fences of our properties, to stand watch between us and those who would intrude or question? [...] Anarchism will pass, its race will degenerate into silence, but money will beget money, grow like 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 (Pynchon, 2006, p. 1000)

In *Against the Day*, almost gothic tale of Scarsdale Vibe serves as a vivid reminder of brutality at the root of capitalist enterprise and its unfoldings, a dark side that the field of organization studies, often sticking to the common celebratory enterprise discourse, might find hard to stomach. Of course, critically unearthing the role of violence in the origins of capitalism has a long and rich scholarly history, most notably related to Marxist thought and Marx’s concept of “primitive accumulation” (most fully developed in *Das Kapital*, see Marx, 1968 [1867], p. 741 et seq.). However, *Against the Day* seems to convey the image that primitive accumulation signifies more than a historical episode when the preconditions of a



capitalist mode of production emerged (such as, see Vibe's speech quoted above, the taking and enclosing of land to release it into the circuits of capital). Rather, it becomes a precondition to the ongoing production and exercise of the power of capital to normalize other spheres of life – and the sometimes violent conflicts thus unleashed (de Angelis, 2007, p. 133 et seq.; see also Retort, 2005)[3]. In coming across a manifold variety of injustices committed in the name of economic progress, the reader is vividly reminded of the brutal, militant history as well as of contemporary excesses of a western capitalism that sees itself at war with everything it cannot stomach or fathom (Kittler, 1997). Moreover, that state science is entangled with the horrors of enterprise is a recurring theme in Pynchon's novels. As Vibe comments on the ambitious, but ultimately doomed project of Nikola Tesla, who in the novel tries to invent a system that would generate electrical power for free:

[...] it has escaped his mighty intellect that no one can make any money off an invention like that. To put up money for research into a system of free power would be to throw it away, and violate – hell, betray – the essence of everything modern history is supposed to be (Pynchon, 2006, p. 33).

It can also be argued that politics of marxian proxyme is also prevalent into the thickness of the novel for example:

Is that who you are, that vaguely criminal face on your ID card, its soul snatched by the government camera as the guillotine shutter fell [...] (Pynchon, 1973, p. 134).

However, precisely the caricatured and almost comic book presence of Scarsdale Vibe points to a bigger game Pynchon seems to be after. After all, the claim that “there is a weightlessness to the characters that makes them hard to care about” (Dugdale, 2006) is a common criticism levelled at this author's novels: what is being missed are fully “developed” protagonists. Against the Day disavows what is generally agreed to be one of the novel's main functions, namely to tell stories of individuals so the “common reader” might identify with the coming-to-consciousness of a protagonist's self (Lee, 2007). Instead, the novel's protagonists and supporting acts become part of a more “schizophrenic, Borgesian” narrative structure “where characters become so flexible or indeterminate that at any point they might bifurcate and go off in into other possible narratives” (Rajchman, 1998, p. 105). This, then, might (also) be at stake: According to Clute (2006):

[...] 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 utterands who illuminate the stories



of the world that their author has placed before us in funeral array; they are codes to spell the book with. That is why Pynchon has them break again and again into songs about the roles they play in the book: because they are being sung through. And because the book is about the death of the stories we used to tell, its utterands are bound to the stake of that telling.

To explicate this argument, it is tempting to read *Against the Day* alongside Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desiring production that is super-coded or qualified by the capitalist axiomatic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1979). It is desire that produces the social and thus both the forces of capital and the counter-forces that might emerge. However, desire here does not designate individual imagination (and it does not necessarily imply a lack of object). There is only the machinic, productive and purely processual nature of desire, and there is the social that is produced by it. Capitalism introduces the forms of "money-capital" and "free worker", forces and agents of production, into the socius.

The capitalist machine thus inscribes itself onto desiring-production, reterritorializing it, producing "controlled" desire. More precisely, capitalism is split, oscillating between the desire to totalize and the desire to fragment. A schizophrenic load emerges, for the capitalist axiomatic relentlessly crosses and destabilizes, deterritorializes its own (interior) limits, only to reterritorialize them again and again through money-capital and free workers. According to Deleuze and Guattari, then, the "subject" is thoroughly dispersed and anything but a centered, fixed structure. It resembles a field of force, passing through states that define its multiple identities – the schizoid, the embodied polyphony becomes late capitalism's characteristic mode of subjectivation. "The supposed essential unity of the subject is thus broken down. It becomes a series of flows, connections and assemblages of heterogeneous parts of social and natural machines" (Newman, 2001, p. 103).

Read alongside this somewhat drastically sketchy outline of Deleuze and Guattari's (1979) *Anti-Oedipus*, Pynchon's writing becomes an attempt to trace in its textual polyphony and schizophrenia the emergence of a fully capitalist order (Mattessich, 2002). *Against the Day* teems with characters that are indeed sung through. They resemble "props" since they are caught up in, or organized by, dynamics that exceed their grasp. The idea of narrative as presupposing moral agents and their significant actions within a meaningful social order is problematized along with the reader's position. If the history of the novel resembles the history of different ways to narrate the self (Brown, 1987, p. 159), then on Pynchon territory the narrativity of fictional heroes is deconstructed (Kittler, 2006, p. 376).

In this reading, then, *Against the Day* offers a textual performance that retraces the schizoid load of capitalist ordering by "constructing as delirium the exposed delirium of the desiring



process itself” (Mattessich, 2002, p. 143). Through its form, its palimpsestic, rhizomatic aesthetics of displacement, the text implicates itself and the destabilized reader in what it describes. Mattessich (Mattessich, 2002, p. 67) calls this a strategy of dramatizing involvement. The book’s “structure” consists of a simultaneous presence of a disarray of episodes, hardly allowing room for linearity, for cause-and-effect thinking, implying an opaque state of forgettability, of fuzziness. The novel’s form(s), its scrambling of literary codes (Styhre, 2004), its perpetual dislocations become “a performance of the symptom that cannot be thematized without implicating one’s discourse in the elliptical and displaced time it evokes” (Mattessich, 2002, p. 139). If a writing that keeps disrupting its own analogical coherence itself participates in the schizophrenic logic outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, then the polyphony, the proliferation of spaces and the distortions of narrative time might construct a self-reflective parody of the novel’s own desire for power and mastery (Mattessich, 2002, p. 98). This way, parody, or rather meta-parody, becomes a register of critique by pushing the fictional masquerades to their limit, parodying the power relations the novel’s protagonists find themselves in, their often paranoid, Vibe-like projections and the novel’s own implication in its conditions of possibility (Foucault, 1977; Spanos, 2003). As part of this strategy of involvement, “realist” subjectivity itself is questioned and the “I” either becomes a caricature as in the case of the villain Scarsdale Vibe or is depicted as shifting and unstable.

Therefore, to conclude it can be surmised that literary texts have the power to reproduce, confirm, correct or move the borders between visible and invisible, sayable and unutterable (Vogl, 2002). It is through multiple registers that a novel such as *Against the Day* might open up another space for thinking and writing discourse.

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