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A few remarks on Pynchon's "Applied Idiotics" in *Against the Day*

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"In fact Jacinta did you know that there is an *entire branch* of spycraft known as Applied Idiotics—yes including my own school, a sort of training facility run by the Secret Service, near Chipping Sodbury actually, the Modern Imperial Institute for Intensive Instruction in Idiotics—or M.6I., as it's commonly known."
(*Against the Day*, 823)

The support of imperial interests demands manipulation and duplicity, but who knows how truly or falsely idiotic is this Bevis Moistleigh (who also happens to be a "natural" idiot, 824) even while giving extravagant details of his implausible training to an equally dubious Jacinta Drulov? The scene then lapses into a bit of singing and dancing, "That step ex-otic, known as / 'The Idiotic'..." a mindless pleasure again in the face of historical disaster.

There is in fact no clear distinction between pretending to be an idiot and actually being one, between the trickster and the fool. Hence the possible conflation of disguise and absence of disguise, as happens for instance with the spies Neville and Nigel: "impersonating British idiots" (685), but like the detective Lew Basnight ever in search of some intractable *stupor* which is one recognizable attribute of the sincere idiot, and which leaves them "mindless as sailors" (683), in true badass fashion. Several other

characters in the book are called or call themselves idiots at some point (all three Traverse brothers, Lew Basnight) or pass themselves off as such in Pynchon's recognizable battle of feinting and "counter-feinting" (676); and they evince mimetic talents which are not exclusively a mode of dissembling.¹ In her excellent book on the historical evolutions of the figure of the idiot, Valérie Deshoulières discusses the proximity between idiocy and imitation, recalling Keats's "chameleon"-poet who has the "negative capability" of being devoid of certainties and egotism (Deshoulières 83-84), and convincingly enrolling him in her typology of literary idiots: self-effacing simulation, either in poetic or histrionic or anomic fashion, is one of their frequent attributes. Pynchon might call this "impersonation" (and has been doing so since *V.*), which applies to his often ventriloquous narrators, and more broadly to himself as the maker of characters and the speaker of many voices.²

Dostoevsky's idiot, the epileptic Prince Myshkin, possesses an exceptional chameleon's calligraphy which enables him to perfectly imitate any handwriting or signature: "I fancy I've no talents or special abilities" (Dostoevsky 85) except that of imitative calligraphy (Dostoevsky 86). And he soon sets about imitating a medieval abbot's handwriting, then a military official's, and changes from Russian to English to French calligraphies (Dostoevsky 92), travelling through space, through history, and through identities with the mere tip of a quill.³ Pynchon pays a fleeting tribute to Myshkin, the prince who can't play his proper role in the social hierarchy, in the character of Cyprian Latewood, who testifies to the exchanges between a chameleon's idiocy and the duplicity of espionage: as a spy, he has been "allowing a lurid carnival of identities to enter his writing" (698), although his integrity probably lies in his "vague code about honoring the idiocy of others" (826). Latewood eventually becomes a mystic, his own idiocy turning Russian, as it were, and akin to that of the "wanderers" ("*stranniki*") remembered by Yashmeen Halfcourt from her childhood (663): roaming Old Believers who were possibly fanatics, or else exemplary idiots who dispossessed themselves of everything. For the idiot somehow cannot or will not cooperate in the

pursuit of self-interest and self-consistency, nor in the normal regulated exchanges between individuals. Prince Myshkin, for instance, whose kindness is often deemed monstrous, has “no sense of measure” (Dostoevsky book II, 29, and again 293, 329). The idiot presents a challenge to egotistical identity and measure, and belongs to both deficiency, and excess. Fixed outlines of the self collapse, through carnival profuseness or self-dilapidation or through effacement, and this calls for “a different experience of individuality, intersubjectivity and reception” (Deshoulières 173). Even Pynchon’s American Idiot and trickster seems eventually to bypass individuality: returning home after much wandering, Reef Traverse, trying to stay out of trouble on Ellis Island, “remained indecisively mute long enough to have a large letter I, for Idiot, chalked on his back” (1074). But an unknown “Obliterator,” whose face cannot quite be seen, comes along and charitably wipes off what is also the letter of the first-person pronoun. The idiot and simulator will go through the border, an immigrant and an exile in his own country, without the burden or comfort of a nameable individual self. Against the liberal injunction of autonomy, the idiot “deconstructs what is proper” (“déconstruit le propre,” Deshoulières 171), undermining propriety, property, and what is proper to a subject. In her book on stupidity, Avital Ronell thinks along similar lines when discussing Prince Myshkin: “In a strange yet persistent way, the Idiot signals an exemplary instance of Kantian ethicity inasmuch as he puts himself rigorously, one could say, in the place of the other” (Ronell 205).

At the same time, etymology points to the opposite: the Greek word “*idios*” meant “personal, private,” as opposed to what concerns public affairs and government; the *idiotes* was a person not holding a public office, a common citizen. But in Latin, the term “*idiotus*,” initially referring to the ordinary man, became exclusively associated with ignorance and the ensuing incapacity to participate in public affairs. It is this derogatory meaning that Pynchon’s deliberate “idiocy” strives to both redeem and claim, in search of an anarchistic-democratic subject struggling against political disempowerment.⁴

No economy but *dépense*, no presence without a mode of evasion or evasiveness within its mimetic surfeit and dissipation: in these modes of being of the idiot, formal characteristics of *Against the Day* can be recognized (as well as of Pynchon's other works), taken here to an often unconvincing degree of excess and expenditure. The response to "the given world" (a recurrent formula in the book), and to the despair this world may breed, is indeed a manner of wasteful "giving," ever exchanging surfeit and vacancy, and which has its many weak moments but also its persuasive beauty, and sometimes dizziness as happens memorably in the final pages, from Kit's translation to a hotel room in Paris to the ultimate encounter with the Chums' *Inconvenience*.

Fictional forms are intended to "contradict the given world," as Zombini the magician puts it (354), and to unsettle the common consensus on the form and uses of the world. If idiocy can be associated with mimetic plasticity, and the defeat of any rigid form as V. Deshoulières claims – the idiot's face, especially, like the face celebrated by Lévinas, "eludes the fixity of a definitive form" (Deshoulières 171) – then Pynchon is after some idiocy of form, involving some of the shape-shifting energies of his most admirable works, but within a more "democratic" and wasteful type of story-telling which does make this book less demanding and remarkable than *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Mason & Dixon*. Be that as it may, the idiot is, together with the ghost, an essential figure of resistance or resilience to the visible forms enforced by the "insufferably smug guardians of the daylight world" (672). For the ghost is equally a challenge to graspable form and solid presence, and also to the consensus on visible reality which is for Pynchon part of an oppressive reduction of the possible. Besides demanding redress, ghosts are vectors of wandering, dispossession, exile, transport, and can be the bearers of a critical energy, which, like the idiot's, is both aesthetic and political. They question visible shapes and boundaries, while disrupting the passage of time, and their haunting and traversing mode of 'being' involves contamination, porosity and mobility, just as much as paralysis and repetition. The ghost is a force of alteration as well as of

duplication, thwarting like the idiot the rigid assignment of roles and positions, and a possible force of reconfiguration of space and time: the “contradiction” of the given world undertaken by Pynchon’s fiction seeks to be an operation of ghostly warping, apparition and vanishing, together with “idiotic” simulation and sympathy. And representation finds its most apt metaphors in anamorphosis (see the “anamorphoscope” on page 249, applied on a secret map and revealing parallel worlds which include “imaginary” or “invisible” shapes); or in “paramorphism” (whereby the duplicated image is a distortion rather than an exact repetition of its model, 114), serving undecidably utopian and dystopian near-resemblances, ambiguous counter-forms and reforms of the given world.

As frames break down between inside and outside, through “distortions, displacements, rotations” (952), the reader is meant to be part of the ceaseless democratic redistribution of positions, which undermines the division between actors and spectators (of history). This is suggested most explicitly in one of Merle Rideout’s “scenes of American life” in motion, where onlookers appear on the picture: “... bystanders who had their backs turned and revealed their faces” (1038). Reading is a “bilocation” of sorts anyway, when we are both in the fictional world and in the actual one. But more precisely, reading is staged as both a ghostly and an idiotic activity, for example when Reef Traverse reads out loud a “Chums of Chance” story to the corpse of his father (215). The position of the reader is in fact occupied by both characters, one ‘live’ (Reef, reading) and one ‘dead’ (Webb, improbably and spectrally listening to the story): an idiot—and indeed it takes much sorrow and quite a bit of idiocy to keep “reading in the dark” or against the day; and a ghost—Webb does talk back to his son, briefly. Avital Ronell has indicated such kinship, like a common haunting, between the idiot and the ghost in her discussion of Myshkin: “His return to Russia is like the return of a ghost. [...] Promoting a ghostly Odyssean structure of homecoming and returns, his appearance, moreover, offers itself with all the ambivalence of a gift. [...] In his essence

he embodies the peculiar quality of recurrently appearing and disappearing, of obligating and not obligating" (Ronell 200-201).

And yet, in *Against the Day*, the reader can sometimes see the intentions without necessarily reaping their effects: it is not always so easy to be drawn into the purportedly shifting positions and shapes of the text; to lose one's bearings and see or sense other worlds appearing and vanishing within this one, like an access to "the haunted verge of the mirror" Hawthorne was alert to ("The Custom House"). Both insufficient speed and insufficient opacity may hinder the experience of baffled or rapturous immersion created by Pynchon's masterpieces, and weigh down this book a little too often. But it is not always so, and there are enough remarkable *passages* refiguring the "given world," and its ghostly human visitors whose faces elude full description, to save the book from its weaker recycling of previous motifs and metaphors, and from its most tedious episodes (for imagination is all about "passage," claims Tancredi the anarchist, 586).

I have tried to argue, in any case, that this is among other things a book of various idiots, and possibly a book for idiots (despite its learned mathematical or technological complexities); more so than Pynchon's previous works, where the epileptic, the saint, the paranoid, the anti-paranoid, the Fool, the stutterer, and other instances of the "irregular of spirit" (679) famously played a crucial part. But this latest book is perhaps more democratic, vulgar, embarrassingly and too "enormously given to all the world" (like the eyes of a baby on page 949): far from perfect. This shouldn't discourage a tolerably idiotic reader, more or less prepared to take the place of the other.

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NOTES

¹Many thanks to Tim Ware, who was present at the Tours conference on *Against the Day*, for collecting all the page references in the book for the term “idiot” and related words: see “Thomas Pynchon Wiki: *Against the Day*,” under the title “Idiots and Idiocy in *Against the Day*,” July 1st, 2007, <http://against-the-day.pynchonwiki.com/wiki/index.php>

²Is this “a tale told by an idiot” (*Macbeth*)? Shakespeare is indeed a deliberate background here, Hamlet’s predicament being passed on to Webb Traverse’s sons.

³In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari start their chapter on the “conceptual characters” created by philosophers and writers with the idiot: from Descartes’s classic idiot, the doubter and seeker of solid truths, to the “new idiot” imagined by Dostoevsky. “The old idiot wanted truth, but the new idiot wants to turn the absurd into the highest power of thought – in other words, to create. The old idiot wanted to be accountable only to reason, but the new idiot, closer to Job than to Socrates, wants account to be taken of “every victim in history” – these are not the same concept. The new idiot will never accept the truths of History. The old idiot wanted, by himself, to account for what was or was not comprehensible, what was or was not rational, what was lost or saved; but the new idiot wants the lost, the incomprehensible, and the absurd to be restored to him” (Deleuze and Guattari 62-63). I don’t believe the absurd has much relevance to Pynchon’s enterprise here, but the idiot as bearer of a stupefied testimony of history is certainly part of it, as well as the question of the intelligibility of history: see also Deshoulières, chapter IV, on the 20th century idiot as “absolute witness.”

⁴See on these questions my forthcoming article on the “Spectres of the democratic subject in *Against the Day*” in *L'impersonnel*, Le Mans: Presses Universitaires du Maine, Spring 2008, from a conference held in March 2007 at the Université du Maine. Incidentally, Myshkin is, of course, occasionally suspected of being a democrat: “some kind of inadmissible democrat,” (Dostoevsky book II, 238).