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Let the reader beware: "Minor Adjustments" of fiction in Thomas

Pynchon's Against the Day

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Pynchon's blurb for the novel calls for critical attention: "Let the reader decide, let the reader beware." I would like to suggest that this is not so much a warning as an invitation to pay close attention to the text insofar as it offers a view of what the world "might be, with a minor adjustment or two." How is one to understand the "minor" character of these "adjustments"?

A cursory look at definitions of "adjustment" in the *Webster's Dictionary* for a few preliminary remarks:

- adjust = "to make exact, to fit."

Ironic here, as Pynchon does not set History right in adjusting it to fiction; it actually undergoes major changes, in terms of dates, places and events... "contrary-to-fact occurrences occur."

- adjust = "to put in order, regulate or reduce to system."

A matter of composition—the novel's composition is chaotic, non-linear ("systematically unsystematic," as Henry Adams puts it in "Eccentricity (1863).") It is a "multiply-connected space," not a "simply-connected space with an unbroken line around it" (165).

Clearly Pynchon uses the word with a twist, as we'll see with a few of his "minor adjustments," which we'll study under the following headings: topographic, narrative/textual, and modal.

I./Topographic adjustments on a minor scale

To America! Linguistic tropism

America looms in the words of Reef Traverse in Venice: he's staying in a "little pennsilvoney" (729)—one hears *pensione*, along with *Pennsylvania*, and possibly *money*. He parts with "Areeferdirtcheap, kiddies" (733). A Viennese operetta features the "Burgher King" (914-915), and the "peppy" song sounds like a jazzy chorus-line right out of Broadway ("Take a stroll up—the a-ve-nue, You'll find that ci-ty beat puts-a—Synco-pation in-your shoe").

Colorado: from History to tall tale

The story periodically returns to Colorado to develop a tragic revenge plot (daughter marries her father's murderer, brother at their heels). The state—its geographical features and its history—displays some the novel's main motifs. A pun (*minor / miner*) introduces the motif of the switch to the minor mode associated with subversive activities: "C major ("or as they say in this town, 'A miner'")" (285). Dynamite and underground... Colorado's folklore is rife with history and legends echoing some of the novel's major themes¹: it was the target of actual bombings from air-balloons secretly sent out by the Japanese during WWII. At Pike's Peak, one of Colorado's greatest prevaricators and producers of tall tales was the presumed witness of a massive volcanic eruption (see the volcano at the antipodes of Pike's Peak, 112). Pike's Peak is also, of course, the actual place where Tesla's lightning experiment took place. There are traveling sand dunes at the foot of the San Juan Mountains (they are echoed by the traveling sand dunes in Inner Asia, 752), whose summits are fondly evoked by Kit Traverse as he faces those surrounding Lake Baikal ("here in Inner Asia would be his bold fourteeners and desert snows," 768).

Quite a bit of action takes place in Leadville. It was home to yet another

famous prevaricator, Orth Stein (how is that for a Pynchonian name?), who published his *Underground Fantasies* (an imaginary Cyclopean Cave complete with maps and graphs) in the local newspaper. In 1896, Leadville had its own 'Ice Palace,' erected by the town's Crystal Carnival Association—an ice-structure that melted down earlier than expected. It was a total flop, whose collapse is reminiscent of that of the "Wall o' Death" Deuce and Lake chance upon in Missouri (476), with its "fragile" remaining wooden structure ("enigma of structures in their vanishing," 477). Is it an avatar of the Crystal Palace in *Gravity's Rainbow* (the 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park paralleled by the Chicago World Fair)? Crystal is also another name for Iceland Spar ("crystal tycoons," 128): Leadville's Ice Palace is doubled by the Crystal Palace in Guanajuato, Mexico, in which Frank and Eweball are held prisoners (378).

Leadville—ironically, this tiny mining-town is advertised today as 'America's highest incorporated city.' Were it not for its legends and its carnivals (it boasts small, but frequent parades, some sporting the most Pynchonian events, such as chicken flies, coffin and outhouse races or Tomato Wars), the 'city' would not exist.

Incorporation

America's Wild West thus holds a kind of tropic place, central to the novel's development. At the turn of the twentieth century, its small towns were foils to the truly incorporated cities of Chicago and New York, and its primitive economy rested on individuals and their crazy ventures, whereas back East, America was in the process of consolidating its financial powers (with Scarsdale Vibe as the arch-capitalist in the novel). The text plays with the notion of incorporation and uses it in its spatial (incorporating a city), economic (corporate business), and philosophical acceptions (for Manichaeans, things of the body are evil, and as Chick remarks, this is a "somehow Puritanical" approach, whereby "everything you appreciate with your senses [...] all these are evil," 438).

Literal incorporation, then, is rife with complex implications: it bears the lethal

weight of capitalism as well as the promises of the other-worldly: in Missouri, the ruins left behind by an itinerant carnival have disintegrated into the rural landscape (“structural members of the Ferris wheel having for miles around been incorporated into fence, bracing, and wagon-hitches,” 476). The passage from the nominal to the verbal form of the notion reintroduces a literal meaning that challenges the others, and contaminates the following occurrences of the word. At the close of the novel, as Kit experiences Renzo’s nosedive over Torino, he “sees the appeal” of such risky flying: “Pure velocity. The incorporation of death into what otherwise would only be a carnival ride” (1070). Here “incorporation” holds a subversive potential that undermines its other, historical and economic definitions.

II./Narrative and textual adjustments

The adjustments of reading

Just as the novel oscillates between the greater scope of America’s history and the lesser lore of its Western tradition, its narrative style fosters a kind of instability that calls for constant adjustments of one’s expectations. To start at the level of the sentence, consider this example of the ambivalent referentiality of “them”: “Handled by foreign visitors from far across the sea with dangerous tastes, as well as domestic American child-corruptors, wife-crippers, murderers, Republicans, hard to say which of them, her or Rica, had less sense about who she went upstairs with” (191) – an instance of syntactical complexity in Pynchon’s prose: “which of them” may be understood to point backward and operate a subversive inclusion of Republicans into a list of dubious fellows, as well as forward, until the end of the sentence unfolds.

Oracular skips

On a larger scale, the narrative goes back and forth in time – constantly punctuated by oracular skips ahead, as in a passage concerning Hunter Penhallow

and his grandmother Constance:

Constance—headlong, unable to withhold, even knowing, in **the oracular way** expected of her, that as soon as he **could** he **would** follow their example if not their exact tracks—had become all his home. Of course he **would** leave—that was only **fortune-telling**. He **would** stow away on the *Malus* [...]. When he finally **did** go round the Point and out to sea. (128, emphasis mine)

The narrative shifts from subjunctive/modal to indicative. Again, at the end of a scene biblically introduced by “It came to pass” (395), Frank, after slaying Sloat Fresno, leaves “a little pueblo whose name he would soon forget”: “This had been so quick, even, you could say, easy. You could. He would soon begin to understand how it all **might** turn, **was** already, well before he had the godforsaken little town at his back, **turning**, to regret” (396, emphasis mine). Here modal adjustment and syntactic uncertainty combine: the “little town” can also be “turning to regret.”

The progress of the plot is as though over-determined by the narrative voice (mediated or not by prophetic characters) which takes on a metatextual dimension at times, as in: “Soon the crew began to find evidence of Trespass everywhere, some invisible narrative occupying, where it did not in fact define, the passage of the day” (418). “The passage of the day” can be heard as referring to the biblical passage chosen by a preacher for his Sunday service, which will serve as a basis for his sermon. The reference to the biblical text, and the preacher as a spiritual guide who defines the text which will illuminate the congregation’s day is subverted by the evocation of a “Trespass”: what boundaries are trespassed here? The word here refers to Trespassers from the future, but the textual proximity with the “invisible narrative” also suggests that the boundaries may be those between the visible and the invisible. The discrete, yet powerful presence of modal determinations and foreshadowing hints turns this “invisible narrative” into a revealed text—could this be the fictional translation of predestination?

The novel is rife with other echoes of *Gravity’s Rainbow*; page 152 in particular, with the motif of the Preterites (“impure refugees from what was to come”) doomed to destruction (“where could any of them have found refuge in time?”). The screaming that had inaugurated *Gravity’s Rainbow* resonates here again: “The

screaming that went on all night [...] had taken on urgency and despair" (153). Perhaps more than Pynchon's former works, *Against the Day* prompts a kind of retrospective look at the Pynchonian corpus, and relies on the complexity of a network of echoes that reach far beyond the scope of the text itself.

Compositional/intertextual adjustments

The image of "singl[ing] up all lines" frames the novel, at the very beginning (3) and towards its close ("the moment all lines are singled up," 821). The plot-lines do gather as the novel ends, long-lost characters tend to reappear, mostly unexpectedly, and sub-plots coalesce. Another form of incorporation... The reader's attention is increasingly called to intertextual games, as references to Pynchon's former novels crop up again toward the close of the novel, *Vineland* (up in the redwoods, family life, 1076), *Gravity's Rainbow* ("seized all at once as if by gravity," 1080), *The Crying of Lot 49* (reference to a stamp sale, 1081), *Mason & Dixon* ("music which cannot be marched to," 1083). In a more diffuse way, the whole novel seems to incorporate threads that go back to the very earliest of Pynchon's writings. A central motif is that of anarchy, which constantly acts as a counterforce against overwhelming determinations. It seems to me that the repeated references to the Chicago slaughterhouse at the opening and the close of the novel point back to one of Pynchon's first stories, "The Secret Integration," in which a group of kids plot their secret uprising under the code name of "Operation A" – for "Abattoir. [...] Armageddon."

Of course, the reference to anarchism reaches out to other arch-texts in Pynchonian sources, the first of which being Henry Adams's *Education*, whose evocation of the Chicago World Fair is particularly relevant here; Adams's perception of the chaotic nature of the Fair lays the ground for Pynchon's fictional recreation: "since Noah's Ark, no such Babel of loose and ill-joined, such vague and ill-defined and unrelated thoughts and half-thoughts and experimental outcries as the Exposition, had ever ruffled the surface of the Lakes" (Adams 1031). On a minor

scale, Adams looms in the background as Linsay rides a camel to “a certain unchartered Inner Asian oasis” (432-433): Adams himself had ridden camelback in Egypt, and made the following comment as he contemplated the walls of Constantinople: “His hobby[horse] had turned into a camel, and he hoped, if he rode long enough in silence, that at last he might come on to a city of thought along the great highways of exchange” (Adams 1050).

Linsay does not trek Inner Asia in thoughtful silence, though, and like Ulysses he hears the voices of siren-like invisible beings trying to lure him out of the track. His camel sends him a warning in the form of “a long eye-roll meant, *mutatis mutandis*, to convey skepticism” (433). “*Mutatis mutandis*”: the necessary changes / adjustments. That the camel should be the one to express this supremely philosophical attitude to the world, in joking reference to Henry Adams’s ever-wary approach of his fellow men and of worldly affairs, is but one of the discrete, yet effective, adjustments of the real into the fictional.

Interestingly, this tongue-in-cheek reference comes right after a typographic rendition of variations in sound intensity, a kind of score for the “augmented choir of voices” calling in the desert: “LINDSAY*LindsayLindsaylindsay.*” It pays close attention to minute variations in sound, in keeping with Pynchon’s longstanding care to let the reader hear as well as see or comprehend – which leads us to considering his adjustments in the musical sense, literally as well as metaphorically.

III./ Modal adjustments: “everything in minor modality”

A number of shifts into a ‘minor modality’ form a sort of base line humming below / beside the salient points of the narrative, which suddenly lapses from the elevated epic or elegiac styles to the minor genres of satiric or slapstick comedy. Such shifts are often triggered or accompanied by songs. As on page 138: “They landed. They conversed. They shared their picnic baskets.” The satirical reference to *War of the Gauls* (“I came, I saw, I conquered”) is closely followed by a song which clearly points to the Roman legions: “The world’s gone crazy,/ **Romancin’**/ Over Nansen

and Johansen [...] Oh, my there's legions besiegin' " (emphasis mine).

The final pages of the chapter which sees Kit off to Trieste and away from Dally (746-747) balance between the elegiac and the comic, as the evocation of the boat's departure mixes the Romantic flair of dated, somewhat precious lexicon ("trunks handed up in the vaporous scurry," "the somber fate," "curtain of Venetian mist") and situation comedy (the crowded boat is "always just about to topple comically"). Lovers parting on a boat, the whole harbor resonating with clamors, the dramatic setting—all this may be a joking reference to the popular sitcom *The Loveboat*, and possibly also a wink at John Barth's *Floating Opera* ("each vessel a waterborne stage for high-intensity theatricals"). As often, the passage into the minor mood is accompanied by the evocation of live music, performed here by "musicians in twos and threes"; strikingly, the paragraph concludes with this metatextual comment: "Everything in minor modality."

"The melancholy of departure"

The night steamer scene does evolve into a minor mood as the chapter comes to an end: "Dally was supposed to be past the melancholy of departure, no longer held by its gravity, yet, as if she could see the entire darkened reach of what lay ahead, she wanted now to step close, embrace him, this boy" (747). Yet the lighter and the darker moods overlap as "the melancholy of departure" is in fact a minor adjustment of de Chirico's 1914 painting²: the setting is no longer a train-station but a harbor³... The painting features a bunch of bananas—among Pynchon's favorites, ever since the famous Banana Breakfast at the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*. They had been announced a few pages earlier in their German version: "Ausgerechnet Bananen" (714), the translation of the popular song "Yes, We Have No Bananas."⁴

To take another instance of overlapping moods: on page 374, one Toplady Oust, "conceived in a choir loft during a rendition of 'Rock of Ages'": a joking reference to Reverend Toplady, the author of a hymn (1763) whose theme (God is a sheltering rock) is obliquely picked up a few pages down, as Frank and Ewball are

thrown into a “cell deep below ground level, hewn out of primordial rock” (378) in the Crystal Palace—an ironic debunking of God’s grace into a hellish pit. The title of the hymn was in fact picked up by rock band Def Leppard in 1983 (following a chance encounter with a hymn book open on a bench in a rehearsal room during their first US tour) as a feature of their *Pyromania* album—this underlying reference bears links to anarchism and bombs.⁵ Although in C major, the song ends on an inconclusive, minor chord and does not return to the tonic (contrary to Miles who says, tongue-in-cheek, to the leader of the ukulele band: “I promise to go back to the tonic and wait,” 27).

The grace of the trivial

The “minor” modality covers the gamut of the meanings of the term, in its musical as well as literary, generic implications. It also implies, as we saw earlier, a sort of downsizing, a reduction in scope, exemplified by the passage from the global to the local, the general to the particular, the historical to the anecdotal. This way of bringing the high and the low together may be seen as characteristic of Pynchon’s fiction, and I suggest that one may hear his “minor adjustments” as doing precisely this: adjusting to the minor scope / mood / mode. Though the novel touches on highly complex, sometimes grandiose themes, the narrative operates constant adjustments that integrate the trivial into the essential. The spiritual realm is always there as a backdrop with Pynchon, and this vital place of the minor, the trivial, is explicitly evoked: right before the plot precipitates into the Tunguska event, as Kit Traverse struggles to make sense of a number of ‘illuminating’ experiences in Inner Asia, the wise, all-knowing narrative voice concludes: “In view of what was nearly upon them, however—as he would understand later—the shelter of the trivial would prove a blessing and a step toward salvation” (778).

This is a constant in situations with an eschatological turn: the end-of-the-worldly is offset by the triviality of everyday occupations, generally something to do with food (*Gravity’s Rainbow’s* Banana Breakfast, in the middle of the German

bombing raids over London). Typically thus, after a close shave with death, Cyprian and Danilo pit philosophical against religious arguments to account for their rescue: “It was luck” vs. “it was the will of God.” The argument fades off as Cyprian turns to the quotidian, the non-threatening activities of the day: “Seeing the usefulness of remaining attached to the day, he only nodded and **went on chopping up vegetables**” (840, emphasis mine). As though this ever-returning, repetitive ‘day,’ with its pursuits for food and other trivial needs, stood as a counterforce to the awesome ‘day of reckoning,’ the final day the whole novel both anticipates and tries to keep at bay.

The eschatological perspective seems to take over in the final lines of *Against the Day*: “They will put on smoked goggles for the glory of what is coming to part the sky. They fly toward grace (1085).” Will the latter day’s glory be dutifully accompanied by thunderbolts and trumpet blasts? Will this last flight take the *Inconvenience* across to the other side, to the end of time, to the glorious manifestation of transcendence (the unnamable power of “what is coming to part the sky”)? A closer reading of the preceding paragraphs may lead us to reconsider this apparent promise of God-given grace, to tune into the minor key of a more ironic, complex, yet also more humane suggestion. Indeed, a few lines up, as the *Inconvenience* is getting ready to depart, the extreme violence of the final revelatory blast is thus anticipated: “As the sails of her destiny can be reefed against too much light, so they may also be spread to catch a favorable darkness” (1084). The expected polarities of light and darkness, together with the values commonly associated with them, are reversed, and on the journey to revelation it is darkness that is as favorable as halcyon winds are to a ship. It takes smoked goggles to face the glory of God’s light... or maybe one can also hear the final line in the minor mode, in which the words “glory” and “grace” resonate in a wholly different key, as suggested earlier in the novel by two minor episodes.

Back to the Wild West: the tragic union of Lake and Deuce is celebrated in a small “prairie church,” a strikingly deserted, almost abstract setting. Yet “Though

scarcely any music ever came this way, the stray mouth-harpist or whistling drifter who did pass through the crooked doors found himself elevated into **more grace** than the acoustics of his way would have granted him so far" (266). The minister's ghostly voice comes out as a "harmonic-minor drone." In this context, the use of "grace" in its non-religious, aesthetic meaning, is almost blasphemous. The result is an odd mixture of grace and music together with hovering death.

In the same vein, the word "glory" is used in its optical sense (it is the optical effect produced by the diffraction of light) right next to another word with a religious overtone, "halo." Close to the end of the novel, as Scarsdale Vibe is about to be offed by Foley in a typically Hollywood-like duel, the quintessential Western town foreshadows the ultimate vision the Inconvenience seems bound for at the very end:

Two facing rows of storefronts receded steeply down the packed-earth street. Where the buildings ended, nothing could be seen above the surface of the street, no horizon, no countryside, no winter sky, only an intense radiance filling the gap, a halo or glory out of which anything might emerge, into which anything might be taken, a portal of silver transfiguration, as if being displayed from the viewpoint of (let us imagine) a fallen gunfighter. (1005)

The complexity of Pynchon's minor adjustments crystallizes into moments of pure poetic pleasure. His fiction allows time to hear and see other graces, different glories—"Let us imagine." There are moments when darkness is approaching ("the desolation of heart we feel each evening at sundown," 373) and death is near ("the fall of night, 'weightless as a widow's veil,'" 373). Yet from the low vantage-point of the "fallen gunfighter," "stray mouth harpist" or "drifting whistler," minute adjustments in color and tone allow for a form of resistance: "prepare them against the day" (805). In the face of everyday mortality, fiction generously provides "moments of uncompensated kindness" (167).

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NOTES

¹ See Jessen and his excellent bibliography.

² The painting is entitled *Gare Montparnasse (the Melancholy of Departure)* (Museum of Modern Art, New York).

² And possibly a joke as this is on page 747, after all, and Pynchon's days with Boeing may still loom in the background!

³ There is more to the song than meets the eye: it was taken up by Hungarian musician Beda as a political statement against rampant racism following Josephine Baker's appearance in Vienna. Beda died in Auschwitz in 1942.

⁴ Def Leppard's lead guitarist Phil Collen's favorite instrument in the early 80's was an Ibanez **Destroyer** II (an unabashed copy of Gibson's **Explorer** – Gibson sued Ibanez for the deed). Phil Collen later ventured into the custom guitar business, and was to be **incorporated** by Fender.