



**GRAAT issue # 3 - March 2008**

**Freedom, force and space: Pynchon's politics of æther**

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Like *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day* introduces us from the start to a typically Pynchonian problematic of the energies or "secret lusts that drive the planet" (as Katje diagnosed them in *Gravity's Rainbow*, 223), involving the utopian potential of uncharted spaces, radically vulnerable to forces of reaction or established power. The possibilities of emancipation and freedom represented by these unexplored zones and latitudes are perpetually under threat from mapping, quantification and inscription.

Energies of light, mathematics, chemistry and even magic are channelled, co-opted, reduced to the exigencies of regulation and control. From the fictional Kit Traverse to the metafictional Nikolai Tesla, those attempting to break new ground and harness new energies are bought and paid off. Those involved in exploring the Æther, the 'subdesertine' worlds beneath the sand or the spiritual geography of Shambhala, be they the Chums of Chance, Cyprian Latewood or Kit, never know exactly why they have been sent there or by whom.

It might be possible to argue that in the figures of Scarsdale Vibe and Derrick Theign, Pynchon gets close to showing who is at the source of this tentacular power; however, the comic-book two-dimensionality of these figures, *qua* representatives of the ‘bosses,’ surely points to even darker forces behind them. As in the festival of *carnesalve* in the novel, the bad guys and bosses seem to have identities whereby “masks were the real, everyday faces, ... unthreatening, transparent yet mercilessly deceptive, as beneath [their] dark authority danger ruled and all was transgressed” (80). Rather than there being a ‘real’ person under the mask, the mask *is* the flatness of the ‘real person’ behind which something menacing and impersonal is at work.

One of the most prevalent ideas in the novel is the priority of inhuman forces and energies. In its preoccupation with vectors, light, space-time, film and photography, other dimensions—and the slippage between all of these things—there is the perpetual suggestion of supra-human forces governing events in the novel and in wider history.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the extended imagery in the novel involving light, and its conducting medium, æther. Indeed, we might argue that light itself becomes a central character in the novel, an agent, seemingly, of some of the most mysterious events in *Against the Day*. Lindsay Noseworth at one time finds himself “even coming to suspect that light might be a *secret determinant of history*” (431). This insight is given apparent confirmation later on in the Tunguska Event, in which a mysterious radiance is imbued with a multiple if unconfirmed significance. For the Chums of Chance it affords them a glimpse of the elusive Shambhala, “as if those precise light-frequencies which would allow human eyes to see the City had finally been released” (793). For others this light-event represents Tchernobyl, or Wormwood, the star of Revelation.

The narrator even maintains the possibility that it might be a luminous prefiguration of the forthcoming world war: “something which had not quite happened yet, so overflowing the tidy frames of reference available to Europe that it had only seemed to occur in the present, though really originating in the future” (797). Later on, Cyprian and Reef are shown a storeroom full of the light-emitting material Phosgene. Their guide, Mihaly Vámos, informs them that “We learned that it is light here which is really the destructive agent.” Its developers, he adds, “were devoting great attention to the Æther then, using as their model the shock wave that passes through air in a conventional explosion, looking for similar methods to intensify the light-pressure locally in the Æther....” (953). Light may well be a secret determinant of history—on certain occasions it seems also to be its destructive manifestation.

Light also informs some of the prevailing strands of mysticism in the novel. First, there is the repeated trope of the body as made up of light. It informs Hunter Penhallow’s musings on the paintings in the Accademia, “But not to deny the body—to reimagine it. Even [...] to reimagine it as light” (579). The Grand Cohen informs Lew Basnight that “We are light, you see, all of light—[...] When we lost our æthereal being and became embodied, we slowed, thickened, congealed to [...] this” (678-79). And for the Indians of Chiapas, Günther informs Frank Traverse, “Light [...] occupies an analogous position to flesh among Christian peoples. It is *living tissue*” (992).

While light most often comes to figure the pre-subjective or constituent forces making up the body, other forces play a similar role. Falling down the mountainside in his and Danilo’s flight from the Austrians, Cyprian has the following insight: “he became only another part of the mechanical realm, the ensouled body he had believed in until now suddenly of far less account than mass and velocity and cold gravity, here before him, after him, despite him” (837). While on the one hand bodies in the novel are constituted, powered and charged by incorporeal forces, conversely, these forces find themselves anthropomorphised in turn: consider Skip the ball lightning, with whom

Merle Rideout strikes up an unlikely, if temporary friendship (73); and Thorvald, “indisputably *always the same tornado*,” wreaking havoc at the Candlebrow time-travelling conference (453).

In *Against the Day*, the harnessing of light and development of technologies to exploit other energies and forces runs in parallel to the exploration and conquest of space. Space appears, is conceived of and is articulated in a myriad ways, especially in relation to time, which behaves equally unpredictably throughout. Perhaps we should speak of space–time rather than separate the two, since the various dimensions slip and slide in such a way as to seem interchangeable. Though it would take a better mathematician than me to explore the niceties of this adequately, for the Vectorists, we are told, the three dimensions of space are real, while time must be imaginary; conversely for the Quaternionists, it is the axes of space that are imaginary, while time is the real, scalar quantity (534). Elsewhere space is described variously as non-Euclidean (453), as networks of invisible threads across the field of vision (952), or in terms of the empty space or Æther allegedly worshipped for its own sake in the temples of Chidambaram (613).

As was notably the case in *Mason & Dixon*, the conquest of space proceeds hand-in-hand with a process of inscription and cartography. But in a universe where space consistently behaves in unpredictable ways, this mapmaking process will be far from simple. The most obvious figure for this in the novel is in the maps which originate off Venice, in the *Isola degli Specchi*, where generations of cartographers have been driven and doubly refracted round the bend through paramorphic maps and mirrors. These mirrors introduce virtual space into real space, to such an extent that conjurer Luca Zombini’s attempts to saw volunteers in half optically split and double their victims, thereby allowing their reflections to go off and live separate, independent lives (355), somewhat in the manner of a Gogol short story.

In another example, while looking through the appropriate viewing device, a Paramorphoscope, the Chums of Chance experience a vertiginous descent into the virtual—“indeed, engaging the proper controls on the viewing device could easily produce a long and fearful plunge straight down *into the map*, revealing the terrain at finer and finer scales, perhaps in some asymptotic way, as in dreams of falling, where the dreamer wakes just before impact” (437).

At other times, however, space has to be interpreted in ways that exceed two-, three- or extra-dimensional space. As Chick muses in the Chums’ mission in Venice, “Will this Sficiuno Itinerary turn out to be not a geographical map at all but an account of some spiritual journey? Nothing but allegory and hidden symbolism—” (248). Kit seems to come to similar conclusions in his journey through the Prophet’s Gate: “Kit had begun to understand that this space the Gate had opened to them was less geographic than to be measured along spaces of sorrow and loss” (771). In cases such as this, space seems to be generated by *affect itself*, one more energy at work in the novel.

Where power has got to grips with space, however—and as with forces and energy this is ever-increasingly the case—it has recorded and registered it in the interests of anonymous power. Our prime metaphor for this process is the railway, which first features as the target of Webb Traverse and the other anarchists’ bomb-making. Lew Basnight, working for the bosses, realises that it is “civil war again, with the difference now being the railroads, which ran over all the old boundaries, redefining the nation into exactly the shape and size of the rail network, wherever it might run to” (177). Or as Renfrew later lectures Lew on his paramorphic double Werfner,

history emerges from geography of course, but for him the primary geography of the planet is the rails, obeying their own necessity, interconnections, places chosen and bypassed, centers and radiations therefrom, grades possible and

impossible ... capital made material—and flows of power as well, expressed, for example, in massive troop movements, now and in the futurity. (242)

Or in a later conversation between the same two characters, Renfew speaks of “the teleology at work, as the rail system grows toward a certain shape, a destiny” (689). The point is, as ever, that force and space are the place of contestation, providing the vehicle and the site of any chance of freedom, or otherwise. As the anarchist Flaco tells Reef:

WE LOOK AT the world, at governments, across the spectrum, some with more freedom, some with less. And we observe that the more repressive the State is, the closer life under it resembles Death. If dying is deliverance into a condition of total non-freedom, then the State tends, in the limit, to Death. (372)

If the State represents Death and non-freedom, this will be insofar as it controls the energies and forces we have been speaking of, insofar as it co-opts the intellectual work and exploration of the mathematicians, physicists, photographers, bomb-makers, even the artists, as anarchist painter Tancredi is well aware. Equally, the State represents non-freedom through its conquest of space—the railway, sure, but also the æthereal explorations of the *Inconvenience* and the *Bol'shaia Igra*, not to mention the mobilisation of troops across Europe towards the end of the novel.

The question will remain: what is the scope for agency and freedom in the novel? To what extent can the anarchists and artists, occupying in this sense a similar position to the Counterforce in *Gravity's Rainbow*, pre-empt or outwit the ever greater arrogation to itself of forces, and space, labour and land by capital or power? If at many times, though less explicitly perhaps than in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the characters themselves seem to be inhabited by or constituted by inhuman forces, including light and darkness, will these not impersonally predetermine their behaviour in any case, in ways which are hard to foresee?

Rather than attempting to answer these questions, which the novel in any case leaves wide open, in what remains of this paper I would like to sketch some perhaps unlikely parallels between Pynchon's problematic and some allied concerns in, of all things, German idealism. I can only gesture at this comparison here, but in a novel which already provides a barrage of possible interpretative paradigms, perhaps one more won't go amiss.

One of the most obvious of these parallels is a shared concern for freedom. There is an anxiety, if this is not too strong a word, running from Kant's second critique via Schelling and others, regarding the space that freedom is to occupy in a world ruled by causal relations. Having reduced the world of phenomena to mechanism and causality, or having seen the world in pantheistic terms, with God and nature of the same substance (a causal chain ultimately linked to God), idealism seemed to have removed freedom from the world in favour of determinism, chains of causes which leave open no space for agency or free will.

We are obviously touching on very big questions indeed, but one thinker occupied with these concerns who anticipates Pynchon's novel in strange ways is FWJ Schelling. Specifically, in later works such as the *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom* and the various unfinished drafts of the *Weltalter*, or *Ages of the World*, we can see a comparable interest in the possibility of freedom in a world made up of determining forces. More interestingly yet, is Schelling's attempt to account for the creation, since this seems very close to the 'Manichæan' imagery of light and darkness scattered throughout Pynchon's novel.

Schelling's express aim in these late texts is to account for why there is *something* rather than *nothing*. In thinking this through, he must reserve a space for freedom, which for him designates the freedom for evil. Schelling is grappling with the eternal

theological problem of how to account for evil without imputing this to God. One of the usual ways in which this is done is to appeal to human weakness and imperfection: evil, then, would merely be a matter of degree, an insufficiency next to the divine perfection. However, Schelling believes that a stronger claim for evil is required in order to salvage a strong notion of freedom: radical freedom requires radical evil.

Schelling's conceptions mirror those of Pynchon in sometimes uncanny ways. First of all is his mythical account of prehistory, in quasi-theosophical terms. Before the creation, Schelling argues, there were two opposed principles, God, and what he calls the 'basis.' The first of these, God, is identified with light, spirit, and love, with expansive forces in general; the second, or basis, is a primal night, a withdrawing, constrictive force. As such the latter is also the principle of individuation. After the creation, the basis is at work in constricting matter into individuals, where spirit wants to reach out to others and to God. Among other things, Schelling is trying here to provide an account of evil which is independent of God: in the created world, the basis is this source, since it deflects individuals from God in favour of themselves, their dark interiority. Evil and thus freedom are saved, albeit relegated to a mystical zone: pre-creation.

We can see a near parallel to this mysticism in numerous allusions in *Against the Day* to the Manichæan conception of light in antithesis to darkness, as the light of creation. On the 'subdesertine' craft *Saksaul*, the improbably named Stilton Gaspereaux explains to Chick Counterfly, "The ancient Manichæans out here worshipped light, loved it the way Crusaders claimed to love God, for its own sake, and in whose service no crime was too extreme" (437). Later in the Balkans, of course, Cyprian, Yashmeen Halfcourt and Reef Traverse come upon a convent with a strictly unorthodox theology incorporating Orphism as well as Manichæanism: "The Manichæan aspect had grown ever stronger—the obligation of those who took refuge here to be haunted by the unyielding doubleness of everything [...] of cosmic struggle between darkness and light



proceeding, inescapably, behind the presented world" (957). We might well wonder how best to characterise this "doubleness," whether indeed we should see these oppositions in Manichæan terms, since each side of the pairing seems to be subject to metamorphosis or slippage into the other term. We might speak of contraries or (deconstructing) binaries: this seems much closer to the slipperiness of light-dark, spirit-matter and time-space distinctions in the novel.

One of Slavoj Žižek's most provocative claims about Schelling is that for all his idealism of light and spirit, he is in fact a *materialist*. So much might be inferred from the inextricability of the basis and spirit: spirit only manifests itself through the basis emerging from its primal night. The converse, we have seen, animates Pynchon's novel throughout: matter is spiritualised in *Against the Day*, bodies are made of light, light is a secret determinant of history. However, the spiritual element of corporeality pervades the novel too, in the perpetual presence of ghosts. As Žižek puts it, "*there is no spirit without spirits – ghosts, no 'pure' spirituality without the obscene specter of 'spiritualized matter'*" (Žižek 46, author's emphasis). And so Pynchon refers to Reef's dead as "these white riders of the borderline, nervelessly at work already as agents on behalf of invisible forces over there," white riders, then, on the borderline between dark and light, body and spirit. Civil war veteran Foley recalls the aftermath of battles where "he had kept company with ghosts by the thousands, all filled with resentments" (1002). And more obscenely, Lake Traverse is visited by Sloat's phantom penis, "as she had suspected for some time, harder when it wanted to be than the most obstructive barrier death could come up with" (479).

As the last of these quotes might suggest and provided we change the lexis slightly, translating a vocabulary of force and spirit into that of desire (or desiring-production), the foregoing seems to typify the bold assertion of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, "Isn't the destiny of American literature that of crossing limits and frontiers, causing deterritorialized flows of desire to circulate, but also always

making these flows transport fascisizing, moralizing, Puritan and familialist territories?" (305). Perhaps this is what we have been seeing throughout: force and energy traversing space, time and bodies, only to be laid hold of by power, channelled and restricted into unfreedom. Indeed, are the domesticity and cosy nuptials (or *ménages à trois*) that some have criticised in *Against the Day* one more instance of these latter, constrictive co-optations of light and force in the service of reaction? Whichever way we read this, here again we can see a Pynchonian insight into the primacy of force, energy and spacing, the vulnerability and elusiveness of freedom, and the inevitable recuperation and concentration of these by power.

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