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**Like metaphor, only different**

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"Could you get specific?"

"Metaphorical will have to do"

Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 683

Reading a book by Thomas Pynchon is definitely not an easy undertaking, as anyone who has attempted the task knows too well. This is particularly true of his latest novel, *Against the Day* (2006). Even enthusiastic reviewers could not help remarking on its extreme length, discomfiting discontinuity, exaggerated erudition and labyrinthine complexity. One critic compares reading it to "swiveling the dial on a radio, or dropping a bundle of snapshots, or watching light split through a prism" (Martin). This is true, but deliberate, of course. Pynchon's novels are intentionally structured to frustrate the human need to find order or meaning in any kind of plot, be it literary, historical, or socio-political. The publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, in 1973, had the devastating effect of disrupting a reader educated to modernist assumptions. With

*Against the Day*, Pynchon resolves to break new ground, supplying the postmodernist reader with some keys to the mystery of the text.

The aim of this study is to examine the shifting and problematic perspective of Pynchon's reader through an analysis of a paradigmatic episode which significantly occurs halfway through *Against the Day*. It focuses on the transformation of the luxury liner *S.S. Stupendica* into the warship dreadnought *S.M.S. Emperor Maximilian*. This episode is absolutely central, because it enacts a narrative strategy which is typical of Pynchon's novels, and which is also largely employed and developed in *Against the Day*, i.e. the literalization of a situation initially implied as metaphorical. Much of the reader's estrangement comes from the difficulty in accepting abrupt and frequent changes of perspective of such a nature, without losing control of the plot. In this episode, Pynchon makes the process explicit, and gives some clues on how to cope with it.

A metaphor, of course, is an implied comparison between things essentially unlike one another. Originally the Greek word "metaphor" meant "transfer," and the meaning has somehow remained in current use. As Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, "in modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a 'metaphor' - a bus or a train" (de Certeau, 115). As a matter of fact, the very word metaphor refers to a displacement and a relocation, both in the literal and figurative sense.

This is how vehicles function in *Against the Day*. Besides being concrete objects, they are also metaphors of this dreadnought-like novel, as well as literalizations of their own metaphorical meanings. The exhortation in the novel's *incipit*: "Now single up all lines!" is meant for both the crew of the *Inconvenience* and the reader, who is invited to participate in the launching of the novel-balloon to the sky, and to follow its labyrinthine journey for over one thousand pages. It is impossible to visualize the ever-

changing form of the *Inconvenience* in our mind. As one critic remarks, the unimaginable structure of *Against the Day* “records what such a ‘vehicle’ would resemble, if it were to assume the form of a novel.”<sup>1</sup>

Departure as a metaphor of a novel’s beginning resurfaces eight-hundred pages later, in a passage which resembles the “progressive *knotting into*” set at the beginning of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. One character, Cyprian, embarks on a steamer and reflects upon his journey:

If there is an inevitability to arrival by water, he reflected, as we watch the possibilities on shore being progressively narrowed at last to the destined quay or slip, there is no doubt a mirror-symmetry about departure, a *denial* of inevitability, an opening out from the point of embarkation, beginning the moment all lines are singled up, an unloosening of fate as the unknown and perhaps the uncreated begins to make its appearance ahead and astern, port and starboard, everywhere an expanding of possibility. (821)

The singling up of all lines represents the many directions the novel can take, the point of utmost openness and possibility, where anything can happen: just at the beginning of a novel.

Yet, on board the *Stupendica*, Kit, one of the novel’s main characters, has a different feeling about his journey to the open sea:

The enclosure, the repetition of daily faces, small annoyances anywhere else, here, intensified by the unavailability of dry land, achieved with little effort the feeling of malevolence, conspiracy, pursuit... (515)

Right from the beginning, Kit feels trapped inside the ship, and his uneasiness is highly significant, in light of what happens afterwards. The *Stupendica* episode begins as a classical romance *à la Titanic*, when young Dally meets Kit on board and falls in love

with him. He is, however, uninterested in her. This is how the narrator describes the situation:

It had begun to seem as if she and Kit were on separate vessels, distinct versions of the *Stupendica*, pulling away slowly on separate courses, each bound to a different destiny. (514)

The reader is encouraged to take the sentence as a metaphor—or, more accurately, a simile—of the distance between the characters’ feelings. True. But it is also a metaphor of an imminent war and of the abrupt changes that will go with it. This is made clear by the narrator with a prolepsis a few lines later:

Some liners, after 1914, would be converted to troop carriers, others to hospital ships. The *Stupendica’s* destiny was to reassume her latent identity as the battleship S.M.S. *Emperor Maximilian*—one of several 25,000-ton dreadnoughts contemplated by Austrian naval planning but, so far as official history goes, never built. (515)

When Kit and his friend Root descend into the lower decks of the liner, they discover that the *Stupendica* holds within herself another ship-to-be. They find spaces belonging to the *Maximilian* after the transformation, ready to emerge from nowhere by unlikely hydraulic movements. “A Chinese sort of situation,” as a crew member describes it, referring presumably to Chinese boxes. That is clearly an exaggeration. The description sounds like a parody of the former metaphor. Yet, a few lines later, the metaphor becomes literal. After receiving a wireless message reporting battle groups off the Moroccan coast, the liner literally transforms herself into a dreadnought: “entire decks began ponderously to slide, fold, or rotate, and passengers found themselves, often lethally, in the way of this booming and shrieking steel metamorphosis.” This is, in some way, the same condition the reader is caught in, when he/she experiences the slippery reality of the novel. In the end, nothing can be taken either at face value or metaphorically. Everything is double, bilocated, in two places at the same time, and

displaced on two different narrative levels. Later, when Kit discusses “the Two-*Stupendica* problem” (521) with a Jewish mystic, he receives a spiritual, cabalistic interpretation of the event. Yet, the following line deconstructs this explanation into a hallucinatory dimension, when Kit asks, comically: “This smoke in here I’ve been breathing [...], this wouldn’t be... um, hasheesh?”, leaving the reader even more uncertain about the reliability of any literal account.

In other words, the ship is one and double at the same time. Bilocation—the vessel’s ability to exist simultaneously in two places—is this novel’s space-time counterpart of the Orwellian “doublethink,” a mental discipline allowing one to believe two contradictory truths at the same time. In his introduction to *1984*, Pynchon reckons we unconsciously practice doublethink all the time, when listening to modern-day politicians or media outlets. He finds this mental ability recurring and even praised in a number of fields: in American literature (from Whitman<sup>2</sup> to Fitzgerald<sup>3</sup>), in social psychology (where it is called cognitive dissonance), and in quantum physics. Pynchon’s narrative strategy invites the reader to adopt a similar mental discipline as a constructive way to transcend contradictions, to believe and be in doubt at the same time. In order to make sense of the novel, the reader must consciously suspend the classical suspension of disbelief, adopt, as it were, a new kind of “Negative capability.” He/she must give up any form of ontological reassurance on what is real, realistic, or fictional.

In so doing, Pynchon fits in with the theoretical issues of poststructuralism and deconstruction. According to Roland Barthes in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, no writing is more artificial than traditional “realistic” writing, which, in its attempt to reproduce nature, makes a great use of literary conventions. Literal and figurative meaning—he adds—work together to give a text its multilingual nature. Jacques Derrida argues in “La mythologie blanche” that the classical contrast between the metaphorical and the literal dimension is misleading, since the two concepts linked by the metaphor never

come full circle. The final meaning of a sentence, even the most literal one, is always elliptical. As a result, with the continuous accretion of supplementary meaning, displacement is potentially endless.

In his previous novels, Pynchon had already highlighted how the blurring of the boundaries between the metaphorical and the literal may represent what the narrator of *Against the Day* calls “the unnaturally shaky quality of present-day ‘reality’” better than any traditional realistic technique. There is a specific moment, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, when ordinary language fails, “and a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words. Heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or as metaphor. But now [...] a new mode of expression takes over” (*The Crying of Lot 49*, 48). In *Against the Day*, this mode of expression is no longer new. It has become standard. Every concept is like a metaphor, only different. The transformation in the *Stupendica* episode is a metaphor, but it is also functional to the plot. It concretely separates both the ships and the two characters who, now literally, find themselves on “separate vessels.”

Pynchon’s novels, like many postmodernist texts, often engage the reader in the metafictional processes of reading and writing, through the use of characters who function as surrogate readers. The quests these characters pursue keep up with the reader’s quest for a final understanding, and both are frustrated. In *Against the Day* characters read and are read too. The “Chums of Chance” are at the same time real boys scouring the sky with their balloon, and characters from a series of books for children. At one point, some units of the “Chums of Chance” take up “metaphorical identities” (418), after which they can no longer retrieve their own original personality. Another character experiences bilocation while reading one of their stories, enjoying “a sort of dual existence” (215).

In the *Stupendica* episode, the two main characters, Kit and Dally, enact the role of surrogate readers, who violently experience the mixing up of reality and metaphor. Kit's descent "ladder by ladder into the engine spaces" of the ship, finding her "deeper than [he] had imagined, and much less horizontally disposed," can be interpreted as the attitude of a particular kind of criticism, one that tackles the text in search of the figure in the carpet. Kit reaches the engineering spaces, but, when the metaphor becomes literal, he can't go back to the surface. "Well, this has all been mighty educational," he offhandedly remarks after the ship's transformation; nonetheless he remains trapped in an in-between space, with no possibility of going back to an innocent, superficial interpretation. "Back to the lower depths with you, now," an officer rudely commands him when he's about to climb the ladder.

Forced to stay at "a 'deeper level,'" as a crew member explains to him, "where dualities are resolved," Kit can only accept what he considers a "temporary setback," becoming "the Phantom of the Lower Decks" (519). Another such space belongs to a place named "Museum der Monstrositäten," which Kit visits later in the novel. The museum can be taken as a further metaphor of the novel structure, since its rooms are organized in a peculiar way:

According to the design philosophy of the day, between the observer at the center of a panorama and the cylindrical wall on which the scene was projected, lay a zone of dual nature, wherein must be correctly arranged a number of "real objects" appropriate to the setting [...] though these could not strictly be termed entirely real, rather part "real" and part "pictorial," or let us say "fictional" [...]. The observer curious enough to cross this space – were it not, it appears, forbidden – would be slowly removed from his four-dimensional environs and taken out into a timeless region. . . . (633-4)

Pynchon knows that the literalization of metaphors can be a dangerous operation. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, it is argued that “The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost” (*The Crying of Lot 49*, 89). Now the inside is no longer safer than the outside: this is Pynchon’s issue. If the reader is not ready to use doublethink in a creative way, he/she gets lost and is crashed by this narrative device.

As for Dally, she experiences a different “zone of dual nature,” the one of dreams. Dreaming gives access to a double dimension, real and imagined. The dreamer experiences a sort of bilocation, being simultaneously unconscious and the performer of an action. Dally’s setback is “romantic,” different to Kit’s. When she looks for her lover on board, she can’t find him. But in dream she can. And this happens because she allows herself to be carried away by the poetry of words and colors, without insisting on sorting out every detail:

As if she had exited her life briefly and been given the ability to travel on a parallel course, “close” enough to watch herself doing it, Dally discovered an alternate way to travel by land, port to port, faster than the ship was moving. . . . She sped, it seemed slightly above ground level, through the fragrant late-summer twilight, parallel to the course of the ship . . . perhaps, now and then, over a break in the dunes and scrub and low concrete walls, catching a glimpse of the *Stupendica*, under way, passing along the eternal coast, dogged and slow, all details, folds, and projections muted gray as a fly’s body seen through its wings . . . (524)

The implication is that it’s ultimately unnecessary to tell the real from the fictitious, at least in a novel such as *Against the Day*. Pynchon encourages the reader to take up a parallel course, slightly above the ground level of the text. In this way, one can catch a glimpse of another kind of reality, only to be seen intermittently, through an opaque glass. Once the book is over one should take the example of Slothrop, in



*Gravity's Rainbow*, who refuses to “look down at the bottom of the text of the day, where footnotes will explain all.” One shouldn't look, because “nobody ever said a day has to be juggled into any kind of sense at day's end” (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 204).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Caesar, 5. At the end of the book, the narrator states that the ship has grown as large as a small city, and “has transformed into its own destination, where any wish that can be made is at least addressed, if not always granted.” In a similar way, the book does not give all the answers. Nonetheless, it raises infinite questions.

<sup>2</sup> “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes),” “Song of Myself.”

<sup>3</sup> “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function,” *The Crack-Up*.