



GRAAT issue # 3 - March 2008

It's just not cricket: cricket as metaphor in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*¹

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This paper makes a very modest proposal indeed; it has as its sole aim to attempt to illuminate one small aspect of the immense novel *Against the Day*. I shall first, very briefly, suggest some of the analogies and demands made on the reader by Pynchon's encyclopedic work in which everything connects with everything else; proceed to say why I believe he uses the game of cricket in *Against the Day*, and then analyze the stereotype of cricket and "The Great Game" of espionage as codes of language and behaviour. Extrapolating from that analysis, I shall make some very hesitant conclusions on Pynchon's vision.

What does not concern Thomas Pynchon would be easier to enumerate than what this polymathic author writes about. A reader, certainly this reader, faced with a new book by Pynchon feels like one of the rustics in *The Deserted Village* looking at the village schoolmaster: "And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew,/That one small head could carry all he knew" (Goldsmith ll. 211-12). Were there time, it would be interesting to develop some kind of theory as to what Pynchon demands of the reader –

what kind of contract he establishes with the reader. I cannot do that today, except to say that like later Joyce, he gives a total world view, and he also works by pastiche (the Chums of Chance, the Monty Python Twits, James Bond, "The Thing" etc). Pynchon may also be likened to Blake in that he personifies abstractions such as Loss, Sadness, Pain (Pynchon underlines how the Supreme Court has determined that the American Corporation has the status of "Legal Personhood," 148), and gives voice to the colonized, the oppressed, the dispossessed workers. Like Blake also, Pynchon has a view of Man disconnected from Women, and from a society which is out of balance, due to the machinations of Capitalism, Industry, Religion and Imperial Powers and thus he seems to suggest that both a personal and political revolution is necessary. Rather as Miles puts it: "Explosion without an objective [. . .] is politics in its purest form" (111).

Pynchon, as in his other works (*V.* is an obvious example), examines a swathe of history at the end of the nineteenth century, when the Imperial Powers were falling into decadence, and uses that history to criticize the contemporary period, in which society is equally out of joint. G.W. Bush is evidently referred to when the Chums' assignment to the Nation's Capital is recorded as *The Chums of Chance and the Evil Halfwit* (5). Bush is again portrayed as the Governor of Jeshimon: "Though he believed that the power that God had allowed to find its way to him required a confident swagger, his gait was neither earned nor, despite years of practice, authentic, having progressed little beyond an apelike trudge" (212). Post Thatcherite, Blairite, soon to be Brownite Britain is seen in a "Tory despotism of previously unimagined rigor and cruelty" (230). Beyond, or below the game of the book, is the sense of something serious going on.

It is for two main reasons, I believe, that Pynchon uses the game of cricket as a metaphor in *Against the Day*. First, because cricket is the Imperial game, a game exported by the British to its colonies. And, second, because cricket is a game of balance, doubles and mirror images. The off-break is exactly balanced by the leg-break; the

googly by the doosra.² Cricket operates in terms of mirror-images and can be seen, therefore, to connect, on a metaphorical level, with the themes of Double Refraction, the Michelson-Morley Experiment (61, 132), Iceland Spar (250), the Zombinis (354) and the Isle of Mirrors in Venice (355). Doubleness connected with Light and Time has been seen before in Pynchon, for example in the image of the turn-of-the-century clock, which is double faced, and which tells real time and reverse time simultaneously (V. 45-46). Doubleness is also reflected in Pynchon's syntax, so apparent in *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, where we find parallel sentences, beginning "Was it this?" and continuing with a series "Or was it that?" A typical example from *Against the Day*:

Was it Tchernobyl, the star of Revelation? An unprecedented harrowing of the steppe by cavalry in untold millions, flooding westward in a simultaneous advance? German artillery of a secret design more powerful by orders of magnitude than any military intelligence office had ever suspected? Or 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? Was it, to be blunt, the general war which Europe this summer and autumn would stand at the threshold of, collapsed into a single event? (797)

Constructions like this are ultimately open to the reader's interpretation; or to risk another analogy, like Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle" events (or narremes) are determined only conditionally by the reader's observation at a particular point in time and space, and could equally well be interpreted otherwise if the reader's observational state shifted.

My title is taken from British idiom; if something is not cricket, then something is wrong, out of joint, not fair play. Behind the idiom therefore is the idea that the game of cricket is a paradigm of fair play, that the British gentleman practices fair play in games, in life, and in war. It need not be said that this is obviously a stereotyped piece of nonsense which has its classic expression in Henry Newbolt's poem "Vitaï Lampada" [They pass on the torch of life]. It is worth reading, to remind ourselves of how the idea of gentleman, public school, game, and warfare are joined together in a vision that was

always false, and now, could be interpreted, superficially, as nostalgia for a lost innocence, but in reality as a construction that was convenient for the Imperial “Powers” to send millions to their death in WWI (Joan Littlewood’s “Oh What a Lovely War” and “Blackadder Goes Forth” obviously refer).

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night –
 Ten to make and the match to win –
 A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
 An hour to play and the last man in.
 And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
 Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
 But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote –
 'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

The sand of the desert is sodden red, –
 Red with the wreck of a square that broke; –
 The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,
 And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
 The river of death has brimmed his banks,
 And England's far, and Honour a name,
 But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
 'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

This is the word that year by year,
 While in her place the School is set,
 Every one of her sons must hear,
 And none that hears it dare forget.
 This they all with a joyful mind
 Bear through life like a torch in flame,
 And falling fling to the host behind –
 'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

Cyprian Latewood quotes from the poem: “And England’s far [. . .] and honour’s a name,” to which Yashmeen slams back: “And what does that mean? *his* game isn’t cricket” (813). Dr. Coombs De Bottle makes another glancing, unacknowledged, reference to “Vitaī Lampada”: “You might not as an American appreciate this, but among the last surviving bits of evidence that a civilization once existed on this island is the game of cricket. For many of us, a cricket match is a sort of religious observance. Breathless hush in the close tonight sort of thing. ‘Innocent’ as it gets” (236).

The orthodox, established view of Cricket then, for England and for the players of the former British Empire is a source of National Pride and sense of belonging. It is part of the British Ethos, and part of the ethos of the former colonies. When Sri Lanka and Bangladesh beat their larger neighbours India and Pakistan (as happened in the last Cricket World Cup, Spring 2007), there is National rejoicing by millions. When Pakistan and India play cricket it reduces the tension along the border, and may open talks to the question of Kashmir (that, at any rate, is what we are told). June, 2007 marks the fiftieth anniversary of BBC's Test Match Special (TMS), which gives a ball-by-ball account of the Test Matches played around the world. TMS takes over BBC Four Long Wave, BBC Five Live and describes every ball in the four test matches, each match lasting five days. The commentators all have British Public School diminutive nicknames: Johnners, Blowers, Aggers, the Bearded Wonder etc. And they all use language in a very coded manner (I might also mention that a former British Prime-Minister, John Major, has recently published a book on cricket entitled *On With the Game: The Story of Cricket's Early Years*). British coded language is criticized by Yashmeen as follows:

On this island, [. . .] as you will have begun to notice, no one ever speaks plainly. Whether it's Cockney rhyming codes or the crosswords in the newspapers—all English, spoken or written, is looked down on as no more than strings of text cleverly encrypted. Nothing beyond. Any who may come to feel betrayed by them, insulted, even hurt, even grievously, are simply 'taking it too seriously.' The English exercise their eyebrows and smile and tell you it's 'irony' or 'a bit of fun,' for it's only a combination of letters after all, isn't it. (224)

Pynchon would seem to suggest that in this post-modern world, for the British, at any rate, there is only ironic surface; given the current, supine position of British relations with America, this is an accurate and damning critique.³

We have then an image of cricket as establishment, a gentlemanly game of fair-play, polite applause, and British understatement. In fact it is nothing of the sort. It is a dangerous game of athletic chess, whereby a rock-hard ball comes at the batsman, from

a distance of less than twenty meters, at a speed of 150kph, when bowled by a fast bowler. It is a game of statistics, and of innumerable variables: humidity, the state of the pitch, the state of the ball and shine on it, the swing through the air, the spin, or turn, off the pitch to name simply the most evident. Like the language used by the commentators, the game also has its own code. You may not pick at the seam of the ball with your finger-nail (as certain Pakistani bowlers practised), but you may throw the ball back so that it hits the pitch, will thus get more used, and therefore will increase the swing and/or spin. There is no rule to say that you may not run if physically hit by the ball when between the wickets, but almost nobody does; and when the English captain Atherton did this in Australia, some years ago, he was roundly booed. You may not put any substance on the ball to increase its shine, but you may cover your face with sun-cream and use the sweat (which is of course impregnated with sun-cream) to polish the ball. Bodyline and Beamers are dubious practice, and thus “not cricket,” while Bouncers are regarded as fair play. The cricket ball must be bowled with a straight arm, hence, another buried Pynchon joke, when the words “EXPROPRIATE CHUCKERS” (239) are chalked on the walls of Cambridge, this is clearly aimed at irregular bowling habits often practiced by Asian bowlers, particularly in bowling the doosra, to which I shall turn in a moment.

Arcane codes of behaviour, as well as arcane codes of language are operative in the game of cricket. It is not difficult to see that, as usual, such codes have an important role in terms of inclusion and exclusion. And it is always Johnny Foreigner who attempts to break the code and gain some sneaky advantage; which is just not cricket! Pynchon suggests, wrongly, that the Australians seem to be responsible for the Googly (237), which looks like a leg break, but in fact turns the other way; the Googly is also known as a “a wrong ‘un” and was once called a Bosie (we remember, perhaps, that Renfrew doubts that Werfner knows a bosie from a beamer, 241). As Renfrew is the reverse of Werfner, so a Doosra is the opposite of a Googly, a doosra (translated as the second one or the other one) looks like an off break but in fact turns out to be a leg

break. This ball was invented by the great Pakistani spin bowlers, and the rules of the bowling arm 5 degrees off straight have had to be changed to 15 degrees, and with such a bent arm this ball is effectively a throw. Again it is the foreigner who is responsible for the dissimulation. Things are not what they seem. Things resemble their opposites. There is something going on beneath the surface, and there is something that doesn't want us to know (132). However, as human inhabitants of the planet we want to discover something real, beneath the simulacrum of existence, just as the reader of *Against the Day* is constantly teased into discovering a message below the game of the surface of the book.

There are several levels in the way the game of cricket is seen in *Against the Day*: the Australian tour for the Ashes which took place in England in 1902/03 fits into the time-scheme of the novel (236); the games Pynchon plays with the reader in utilizing cricketing terms as jokes – Igor Padzhitnoff (123, 245) which presumably is padding the ball off, a legitimate defensive ploy; the saloon at Candlebrow called “the Ball in Hand” (405); Halfcourt “taking flannel” (763); “smartly taken at silly point” (222) said by Nigel and Neville in appreciation of a riposte by Yashmeen; or, Yashmeen again, under howitzer fire in the Balkans, self-consciously using a cricket metaphor: “once they get their line and length,” she said, “we may have to vacate the premises” (965); and the long continued joke of the Doosra, that most modern, tricky, and possibly illegal ball, being personified as a mad prophet in the desert of Taklamakan (756, 765). The personage of “The Doosra” of course has allusions to Al Khaida and a pan-Eurasian (PanTurania, 761-62) Jihad. But most significantly Pynchon uses cricket as Kipling and others have used it, as a metaphor for “The Great Game” i.e. Imperial warfare and espionage.

“Something's afoot,” groans the Grand Cohen of the T.W.I.T. (230), and when Sherlock Holmes says: “Come, Watson, come! [. . .] The game is afoot” (Conan Doyle 636), few readers will pick up the buried Shakespeare reference in Holmes' cry, but

Pynchon, I strongly suspect, is one of them: “I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, straining upon the start. The game’s afoot” (HV, 3,1,31), for here we find the buried joke of “slips,” the cricketing position behind the stumps on the off side. Kipling’s Great Game, from the Stalky stories, and above all *Kim*, where the young Kimball O’Hara, cunningly disguised as a native, outwits the finest Russian spies, is announced from the first appearance of Padzhitnoff (123, 245), whose onion-domed craft is called “BOL’SHAI IGRA or ‘The Great Game’” (123). The Kipling reference is made explicit later with the work of the double figures of Renfrew/Werfner (they look identical, 650) and their names, as we have noted, are mirror images of each other:

Soon enough each had come to find himself regarded as a leading specialist, consulted by the Foreign Office and Intelligence Services of his respective country, not to mention the others who preferred to remain unnamed. With the years their rivalry had continued to grow well beyond the Balkans, beyond the ever-shifting borders of the Ottoman Empire, to the single vast Eurasian landmass and that ongoing global engagement, with all its English, Russian, Turkish, German, Austrian, Chinese, Japanese – not to mention indigenous – components, styled by Mr. Kipling, in a simpler day, ‘The Great Game.’ (226-27)

Further Kipling references are linked to Yashmeen’s father Lt. Col. G. Auberon Halfcourt (his very name “half-caught” is a cricketing pun), who works for the Political Department in Simla, which is precisely where Kim learns the great game from Col. Crichton and Lurgan Sahib (Kipling 198ff). He operates “somewhere out in Inner Asia” (222) – another buried cricket joke because if you are out in the field batting you are in, that is until you are out! – he performs “the odd extra-regimental chore,” a Kiplingesque euphemism for the Great Game. Presumably there is another joke with the name G. Auberon Halfcourt, being almost paranomastic of C. Aubrey Smith, the English Hollywood actor who embodied the British Empire on film, where he specialized in playing incorruptible senior army officers, judges and bishops in films such as *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1937), *The Four Feathers* (1939), *Rebecca* (1940) etc. C. Aubrey Smith was actually knighted for his appearance, since George VI thought he embodied and portrayed the mother country with perfect dignity during the Second World War. However, we should also remember that C. Aubrey Smith played cricket

for Cambridge and England, and actually captained the first English Test team in South Africa in 1889.

The most extended image of cricket in *Against the Day* is the figure of the “The Gentleman Bomber of Headingly [sic].” We note that the initials G.B.H. are an abbreviation of the serious crime Grievous Bodily Harm. The GBH, then, throws bombs during cricket games (although he is gentlemanly enough to wait for tea, 236). As De Bottle points out they are not really bombs but gas grenades. The cricketing point to be made here, is that one does not throw but bowls the ball to the batsman in the game of cricket, and that grenades are lobbed just like cricket balls: “Don't throw them, lob them—like bowling a cricket ball”⁴—as all public school boys are taught in Officer Training Corps. The figure of the GBH, who may or may not be De Bottle (who seems to have a disturbing sense of wanting to save anarchists’ lives as opposed to bourgeois civilians, and who knows quite a lot about cricket), is clearly known to Renfrew, and seems to be recognized by Lew (241), although Lew is cautious about Renfrew, who exhibits those most British characteristics of “smugness and self-pity” (241). The GBH is mentioned again during Vance Aychrome's gigantic vegetarian English breakfast (605-06), and is also mentioned in a conversation between Lew and Renfrew when the latter is desperate for Lew to find the GBH in connection with the *Interdikt* concern. Lew may (or again may not) have a glimpse of him at Fenner's cricket ground in Cambridge (690-91).

The game of cricket, as we have seen, has a stereotype of coded gentlemanly behaviour, but beneath the surface—in reality—we have seen that it is other than that. We have further noted that the game of cricket is a game of doubles and reversals within itself; and that those doubles and reversals spin out (if you will forgive the pun) into the larger world of Imperial Warfare and Espionage. The game, therefore, can be seen as a simulacrum, which hides a hidden reality governed by “The hierarchy” (397), the “High Command” (1084) or by “the invisible levels above” (245)—the conspiracy

would seem to be constructed by some primal cause, perhaps by God himself, in which all the opposites are connected and joined:

quite beyond coincidence, everywhere they had gone lately, no matter what conditions of secrecy they might have taken to the sky under, the inexorable Padzhitnoff, sooner or later, had appeared on their horizon. Whatever mutual suspicions might have flowered among the lads themselves—by the simplest computation, twentyfold at least—their true apprehensions converged on those invisible levels 'above,' where orders, never signed or attributed, were written and cut. (245)

In the last pages of the book, the polarities seem to come together in a “Covenant” as *The Inconvenience*, like some latter-day Noah’s ark, defeats gravity, accepts the sky, will, one day, escape the storm, and will, finally, have good more accessible to them. The end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in contrast, is an ascent betrayed to gravity by an apocalyptic descent⁵ whereas the end of *Against the Day* is much more a visionary ascent: “They will put on smoked goggles for the glory of what is coming to part the sky. They fly toward grace” (1085). This uncharacteristic epiphany has one further, perhaps unconscious, aspect: the father of cricket in its so-called Golden Age was Dr. W.G. Grace, who appears in Hunter’s dream wearing traditional cricket scrip of white flannels and an antiquated hat, ordering Hunter onto the boat train; a “call from the grave, the mass-grave-to-be of Europe” (577-78).⁶

Glossary of cricket terms used. NB these for a fielding side with a right-handed batsman. If the batsman is left-handed, then everything is reversed

Ashes: the burnt ashes of the bails used in the Test lost by England to Australia, and thus the symbol for which Australia and England play

Beamer: a ball aimed at the head (241)

Bosie: an archaic word for Googly, named after its inventor B.J.T. Bosanquet (241)

Bodyline: a ball aimed at the body, and a strategy adopted by the British Captain Jardine in 1933-34. Definitely “not cricket”

Bouncer: a ball that is balled short so as to bounce at the body and head

Chuckers: throwers of the ball, an illegal bowling action (239)

Doosra: a ball that looks like an off-break, but in fact breaks away to the left, a controversial, possibly illegal ball, “the other one, or the second one” (756)

Googly: a ball that looks like a leg-break, but in fact breaks away to the right, sometimes called “the wrong ‘un” (237)

Headingley: cricket ground near Leeds, Yorkshire; the venue for the second Test Match in a Test Series (consistently misspelled by TP as “Headingley,” 236ff)

In: the batting side is the side that is “In”

Leg-break: a ball that bounces or turns from right to left

Line and Length: the path of the ball towards the batsman and the distance down the pitch the ball bounces, considered as a whole (965)

Off-break: a ball that bounces or turns from left to right

Out: the fielding side is the side that is “Out in the field” (NB “out” is also the term used for the batsman losing his wicket; so that you cannot be out unless you are in! As G. Auberon Halfcourt is “out in Inner Asia,” 222)

Silly point: a fielding position on the left side (off side), very close to the batsman and square of his wicket (222)

Slip(s): there may be from one to four on the off side behind the batsman

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NOTES

¹I am grateful to my friend Alan Munton for his careful reading of this paper, and for helpful suggestions on cricketing lore.

²A brief glossary of cricketing terms used will be found at the end of this paper.

³A group of fanatic British Cricket supporters known as the “Barmy Army” embody the irony. They are obviously patriotic supporters of the British Team, but self-ironise in dressing up in absurd costumes.

⁴Horspool, 32. The Lob is also seen as an abbreviation of Lobatchevskian function (*Against The Day* 453).

⁵I am tempted, but will resist further analyses of cricket analogies in the repeated cry “CATCH” and Slothrop’s song “Follow the bouncing ball” GR, 759-60.

⁶This article was previously published in the Wikipedia: http://against-the-day.pynchonwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title=Main_Page#Featured_Article