



fictions present

Decollage of an Iconic
by Daniel Schulz
2018-05-30

Of Myth and Madness
by Ralph Clare
2018-05-05

Review of Making Life
Hungerford
by R. M. Berry
2018-03-03

Illegal Literature: Toward
Creativity
by Dani Spinoso
2017-12-03

Review of Stewart O'N
by Christian Messing
2017-07-02

The New, New, New P
by Matt Cohen
2017-02-05

An Aesthetics of the U
by Andrew Lindquist
2016-11-06

"Persist in Folly": Rev
Age of the Crisis of M
Fiction in America, 19
by John Bruni
2016-06-05

The Primacy of the O
by Julius Greve
2016-03-06

Recounting Signatur
McFarland's Constell
by Donald Cross
2016-03-06

[View all essays in this category](#)

[View full-screen](#)

Of Pilgrims and Anarchists

by Ralph Clare

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Time to get anarchic! Ralph Clare's review of *A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, the first scholarly take on Thomas Pynchon's 2006 *Against the Day*, zooms in and illuminates the novel's anarchist framework as the major claim and long-term contribution of the collection. The aesthetics and ethics of anarchism turn out to be not merely a theme in the novel's setting - the late nineteenth to early twentieth-century - but the way it impinges on our current situation.

A review of *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, edited by Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise. Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide, edited by Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise, mixes venerable scholars with emerging ones and makes the perfect critical introduction to Pynchon's sixth formidable novel. To date, this is the sole collection exclusively about *Against the Day*. Its scope, insights, and variety make it an excellent companion to the novel—and surely one that will leave a lasting influence. Separated into sections on Narrative Strategies; Science, Belief, and Faith; and Politics and Economics, the book is well ordered and provides enough overlap between sections to stimulate several critical dialogues across essays without losing the collection's coherence. Even better, *A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* succeeds in distinguishing *Against the Day* as both a unique novel in Pynchon's oeuvre and as one that helps us to rethink that very oeuvre.

To begin the collection, Brian McHale's "Genre as History: Pynchon's Genre-Poaching" sifts through the various, and mostly erstwhile, popular literary genres at play in *Against the Day* and assesses their greater meaning. The most prominent of these, McHale points out, are the boys' adventure story in the Chums of Chance scenes, the Western dime-store novel, spy novel, and imperial romance in the various stories of the Traverse brothers, and the hard-boiled noir in Lew Basnight's gumshoeing. Moreover, there are numerous "sub-genres" of these genres, such as Edwardian detective fiction, Wellsian scientific romance, and African and polar adventure stories. A list of Pynchon's most recent generic parodies may seem par for the critical course, but McHale reveals that such "genre-poaching is synchronized with the unfolding chronology of [Pynchon's] storyworld" (19-20). And while McHale admits the same can be said to some degree about Pynchon's pre-1973 novels, these works, he argues, are not as "systematically coordinated" apropos of historical setting and its concurrent genres as is *Against the Day*. The result is a refinement of what McHale calls Pynchon's "mediated historiography" that despite "its obvious limitations, distortions, and suppressions, captures the way a historical epoch represented itself to itself" (25).

The question of genre takes on social and political dimensions in Amy J. Elias' "Plot, Pilgrimage, and the Politics of Genre in *Against the Day*." Elias examines the tendency in Pynchon's works to employ features of both quest and picaresque narratives, and argues that *Against the Day* "constructs a form of journey narrative" that "offers alternatives both to the conventional normativity of the quest and the confusion of picaresque: namely, pilgrimage"

(32). Tracing the circular movements of many of the pilgrim-characters, and noting their tendency to form temporary communities during their travels (as pilgrims are wont to do), Elias suggests that the novel's characters thus "occup[y] the suspended space of utopian possibility" that constitutes "a kind of anarchism in relation to capitalist and republican values" (38). Moreover, the novel's generic shiftiness is tied to its anarchist ethics as aesthetic form meets political function, thus constituting "the grounds of its critique" (43). To be sure, Elias' evocation of anarchism remains fairly general, and more of an abstraction than an actual political project, yet her argument is nonetheless compelling. Elias' "postmodern pilgrimage" model with its attendant anarchist ethics and stress on *communitas* is a novel take on the physical and spiritual wanderings of not just the characters in *Against the Day*, but all of Pynchon's creations.

The politics of form is also touched upon in Krzysztof Piekarski, Martin Kevorkian, and Elisabeth McKetta's "Mapping, the Unmappable, and Pynchon's Antitragic Vision." The essay explores the theme of cartography in the novel and considers the various implications of "mappability and narrative fate," especially in terms of how characters are mapped and resist being mapped and how this relates to Pynchon's larger aesthetic aims (49). The authors' offer a nuanced reading of the Chums of Chance as escaping their authored adventures into a realm of possibility and self-mapping by the novel's end, which they point out is mirrored in Pynchon's use of grammar in the Chums' sections. This opens up into a consideration of Pynchon's eschewal of a central protagonist and clear plot in favor of multiple characters, viewpoints, and stories that compose "an anarchic performance that seeks to escape tragedy" (55). Pynchon, by taking a detour from the GPS of Aristotelian unities and Jacobean revenge fantasies, avoids the usual trip down tragedy lane for a tarry in the back alleys of who-knows-what-lurks-therein? As in Elias' essay, Pynchon's "anarchistic" form becomes reflective of a sort of "anarchic" politics premised on openness, possibility, and potential.

In "Binocular Disparity, and Pynchon's Panoramic Paradigm," Justin St. Clair turns from a theoretical speculation on cartography to a consideration of a kind of mapping in the service of popular culture—that of the nineteenth-century panorama. St. Clair examines the origin and history of the panorama and looks at *Against the Day*'s "remediation" of this erstwhile form of exhibition and entertainment. Such a "remediation" of the panoramic optics affects the novel's "logic of presentation," particularly in its theme of doubling characters, which offers "an alternative mode of characterization" to a psychologically realist one (75). Thus, according to St. Clair, "Pynchon generates depth by juxtaposing 'flat' characters in pairs, relying on the reader to process the disparity between two images" (75). Though more concerned with "remediated" form and its affect on character than politics, St. Clair's essay, similar to the preceding essays by Elias and Piekarski, Kevorkian, and McKetta, offers a reflection on the political implications of mapping and space by touching upon how the panorama can "glorify key mythohistorical events" and galvanize the nation-state (80). Thus, some untapped Foucauldian-rich panoptical aspects of the panorama still remain to be considered in the future.

Perhaps no Pynchon criticism is complete without a consideration of the mystic and arcane aspects of his work, and Christopher K. Coffman's "Bogmolism, Orphism, Shamanism: The Spiritual and Spatial Grounds of Pynchon's Ecological Ethic" does just that. Coffman's essay ties together *Against the Day*'s themes of "ecology, morality, and space" to show how the novel's "spiritual and spatial dimensions are mutually supportive" and promote "a normative environmentalism" (92). Coffman offers examples of a "conscious" earth that reacts to the characters' actions in both hostile and protective ways. The monster that the Vormance Exhibition uncovers and the rage of the Tatzerwurms, for instance, can be read as manifestations of the earth's discontent with environmental degradation and the resulting ecological imbalance, particularly as driven by greed, industrialism, science and technology. Some of the characters, however, realize and respect the earth's sacredness and even find redemptive possibilities within or through the earth itself. For Coffman, Cyprian's entry into a convent and embrace of

Bogmolism (an early, heretical offshoot of Christianity), which Pynchon lends Orphic qualities to, suggests an underground space in the novel that is positive in this sense. Hence, religions like Bogmolism, Orphism, and Shamanism, all of which Coffman provides a concise history of, suggest “alternate geographies—mystical and otherwise—[that] contrast with the dominant world of the text” and reveal “the limitations of human experience of that world” (112). *Against the Day* ultimately “illuminates the responsibilities of environmental stewardship” (112). Coffman’s essay succeeds, then, not merely by excavating more Pynchonian arcana but by linking them to larger questions regarding ecology and the environment.

Inger H. Dalsgaard’s “Readers and Trespassers: Time Travel, Orthogonal Time, and Alternative Figurations of Time in *Against the Day*” moves from the mystical spaces of resistance in the novel to those opened up by speculative science, such as time travel. For Dalsgaard, time-travel and alternative conceptions of time in the novel constitute Pynchon’s direct assault on the “orthogonal time” of day-to-day capitalism. Not just a catalogue of the novel’s various challenges to linear time, Dalsgaard’s essay also addresses the historical novel as a kind of time machine itself. In this sense, the reader finds herself in a similar position to the time-hopping Trespassers (and the Chums of Chance) in the novel, thus becoming an “observer-participant.” Moreover, the reader’s act of reading and interpreting affects the text the way a time-traveller might affect history. This is a liberating act, which frees us from certain grand narratives of history. Yet a problem arises for the reader of this historical novel because, like the Trespassers who have knowledge of the future, “the limits to that freedom are posed by a knowledge of history” (135). We, as readers, may be able to change our understanding of the past, but we cannot alter the past and the terrible events of history itself. Nonetheless, an awareness of history’s potentiality and multiplicity of might help us reflect on our present historical moment before it becomes a seemingly unavoidable past.

The influence of Nikola Tesla’s real and speculative scientific discoveries on Pynchon’s work is the focus of Terry Reilly’s “Narrating Tesla in *Against the Day*.” Reilly examines Pynchon’s use of real and fictitious scientific figures in his works—from Ben Franklin in *Mason/Dixon* to the Polish undertaker in *Gravity’s Rainbow*—and pays special attention to his characterization of Tesla in *Against the Day*, which, Reilly argues, “represent the logical extension—and perhaps culmination or apotheosis—of this narrative process” (141). Providing a biographical synopsis of Tesla’s life, theories, and inventions, Reilly maps Tesla’s influence throughout the novel. To this end, Reilly touches upon Kit’s interaction with Tesla in Colorado Springs, the Columbian Exhibition, the machinations of the “Edisonian” Scarsdale Vibe and Professor Vanderjuice, and the Tunguska Event, as well as in the speculative inventions that make occasional appearances, such as the *Zambraneno* and the Integroscope. As Reilly notes, Tesla’s fascinating and tragic life makes him a perfect “character” for a Pynchon novel, and particularly this one.

Originally published a few years before *A Corrupted Pilgrim’s Guide*, Kathryn Hume’s “The Religious and Political Vision of *Against the Day*” establishes two of the major nodes of critical concern with the novel that the essays in this collection have used as lines of flight. Hume argues that “Christian and often specifically Catholic sets of doctrines” dominate the text primarily through the motifs of penance and atonement, “spiritual” light, disembodied or God-like voices, and sacred geographical sites (168). Wedded to this is Pynchon’s supposed “support [of] political violence,” evidenced via the novel’s anarchist dynamiters. Each of these methods of resisting power is embodied in Cyprian and Webb, respectively. Hume writes that her contention regarding the “overall [Christian] tonality” of the novel is controversial, yet she points that this “does not mean that he [Pynchon] denigrates other forms of enlightenment” or that he “demand[s] that dogma be treated as absolute truth,” makes the statement less controversial, perhaps, than her argument that the text underwrites political violence (182). Coffman’s essay, for instance, could be said to support Hume’s view of *Against the Day*’s Christian tonality, since it looks primarily at the novel’s use of early Christian heresy of Bogmolism (as influenced by Orphism), though it also considers non-Christian religions, such as Shamanism. And Elias’ essay,

with its notion of a “postmodern pilgrimage,” similarly calls attention to a central and centering Christian influence in the novel.

As to Hume’s assertion that the novel sanctions violence, Elias’s essay, as well as Piekarski, Kevorkian, and McKetta’s (each published some years after Hume’s), are quite convincing in their “anarchist” readings that stress the novel’s endorsement of a kind of communal and social anarchism rather than one of armed resistance and violence. It is certainly significant that, as Hume reminds us, Webb’s ghost haunts the novel, but his sons’ renouncement of avenging his death, though it plagues their consciences, comes with a nomadic seeking out of new forms of being and collectivity. Hume, too, touts the Chums’ community and the ethic of nomadism as positive ways of resisting capital that don’t end with a bang or a whimper, but with an opening up of possibilities. Thus, the Bros. Traverse could be said, ironically, to follow Webb in anarchistic spirit if not violent practice. I wonder, then, if the text’s seeming advocacy of “creative destruction”—which DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* neatly points out has today been appropriated by the economic logic of “cyber” capital—is ultimately undercut, or at least superseded, by the idea of a creative construction, a *communitas*, or as Giorgio Agamben might have it, a “coming community.” That said, Hume also makes a bold distinction between *Against the Day* and earlier Pynchon works, particularly in terms of discovering a more “sincere” Pynchon, who, although he remains “famous for excessive and tasteless jokes,” means us to take many scenes in the novel, like Cyprian’s entering a convent and the use of violent means, seriously (181). That Pynchon may be offering us a “new urgency and clarity” in his work is a striking claim to make regarding one of the *patres familias* of postmodernism (186)—especially as these “new” qualities echo the concerns of many contemporary writers, from David Foster Wallace to Jonathan Safran Foer, who share certain postmodern literary roots.

Graham Benton’s “Daydreams and Dynamite: Anarchist Strategies of Resistance and Paths for Transformation in *Against the Day*” gives the most thorough reading of anarchism in Pynchon’s work to date. Benton takes a brief tour through anarchist philosophy, and looks at how anarchism factors into Pynchon’s early novels, before demonstrating how *Against the Day* incorporates both American and European theories of anarchism throughout its pages. For Benton, “Pynchon explores the possibilities that a progressive anarchist stand may proffer but also makes a serious contribution to anarchist discourse by amplifying and probing the flaws inherent in anarchist theory” (191). As such, the dynamite in the novel is a complex figure, signifying both anarchist resistance to capital and the power of capital itself (the Pinkertons hired by Scarsdale Vibe use it against the anarchists themselves). Benton also questions Hume’s contention that the novel supports political violence. Nowhere is it more evident that “Pynchon is [...] attuned to the real human cost of such a [violent] anarchist stance” than in Reef and Flaco’s bombing of a café, after which they help the survivors before the police arrive (205). Benton’s historical reading of anarchism is a welcome one and serves as an excellent buttress to the earlier essays dealing with anarchism too. And the essay’s conclusion, which connects Pynchon’s latest take on anarchism and terrorism to our contemporary, post 9/11 politics and permanent state of emergency, reaffirms the timeliness of Pynchon’s “historical” novel.

Tracing the changing representations of women in Pynchon’s early fiction up to *Inherent Vice*, Jeffrey Severs contends, in “The abstractions she was instructed to embody”: Women, Capitalism, and Artistic Representation in *Against the Day*,” that Pynchon’s sixth novel exhibits “a new approach to gender, women’s economic roles, and women’s sexual selves” (216). Severs’ argument focuses on Dally Rideout’s character, whose early adventures suggest a Pynchonian play on Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, which Severs claims is itself a play on the late-nineteenth-century “working-girl” dime-novels (a sort of Horatio Algerian *bildungsroman* with woman heroes) (221). Through her experiences, which include a growing awareness of capital’s specific reification of women’s bodies and the way in which male artistic representations attempt to shape her, Dally, according to Severs, becomes one of Pynchon’s most fleshed out characters and shows his awareness of (his own prior) representations of women.

J. Paul Narkunas' essay "Europe's 'Eastern Question' and the United States' 'Western Question': Representing Ethnic Wars in *Against the Day*" gives a fascinating account of the way in which the forces of corporate capitalism and government instigate racism and war in an attempt to formulate a "national character" (242). In a historically detailed and late Foucauldian-influenced reading of the novel, Narkunas shows how the end of the frontier in America is related to the various nationalistic struggles in the Balkans that the novel depicts. Just as the nationalistic struggles in the Balkans become "ethnic wars," so too do the capitalist powers recast political or class struggles in terms of race or ethnicity, thus creating, excluding, and vilifying an "other" to construct a national identity against. Further, the Great War in Europe is mirrored in America's war against labor and immigrants within its own borders. All in all, Narkunas employs Foucault's notions of biopolitics and "governmentality" to excellent ends here in his investigation of *Against the Day*'s representation of the nascent neoliberal nation-state. There is even more potential for similar readings in the future, as Giorgio Agamben's work, such as *State of Exception* (2005), has taken up and furthered Foucault's early formulation of biopolitics in important ways.

While each of the essays holds merit in thinking about *Against the Day* and Pynchon's work as a whole, the essays on anarchism—focusing on both anarchic aesthetics and ethics—are perhaps the most intriguing in the collection. There has always been an anarchic feel to Pynchon's work—in both its form and content—and *Against the Day*, as this collection proves, has simply brought it to the fore. In addition, the ever-pressing question of "What is a poor preterite to do?" is given a new set of possible answers within such an anarchist "framework," which is flexible enough to respect individual and collective freedoms. That said, *A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* is strong from start to finish, a valuable edition to the overflowing stacks of Pynchon criticism and, we might say in sympathy with the novel's anarchists, dyn-o-mite!

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