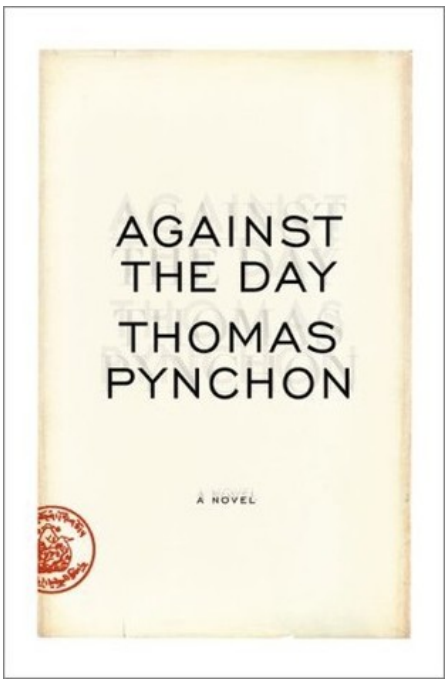

Against the Day

Thomas Pynchon , Vicente Campos (Translator)

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Spanning the period between the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the years just after World War I, this novel moves from the labor troubles in Colorado to turn-of-the-century New York, to London and Gottingen, Venice and Vienna, the Balkans, Central Asia, Siberia at the time of the mysterious Tunguska Event, Mexico during the Revolution, postwar Paris, silent-era Hollywood, and one or two places not strictly speaking on the map at all.

With a worldwide disaster looming just a few years ahead, it is a time of unrestrained corporate greed, false religiosity, moronic fecklessness, and evil intent in high places. No reference to the present day is intended or should be inferred.

The sizable cast of characters includes anarchists, balloonists, gamblers, corporate tycoons, drug enthusiasts, innocents and decadents, mathematicians, mad scientists, shamans, psychics, and stage magicians, spies, detectives, adventuresses, and hired guns. There are cameo appearances by Nikola Tesla, Bela Lugosi, and Groucho Marx.

As an era of certainty comes crashing down around their ears and an unpredictable future commences, these folks are mostly just trying to pursue their lives. Sometimes they manage to catch up; sometimes it's their lives that pursue them.

Meanwhile, the author is up to his usual business. Characters stop what they're doing to sing what are for the most part stupid songs. Strange sexual practices take place. Obscure languages are spoken, not always idiomatically. Contrary-to-the-fact occurrences occur. If it is not the world, it is what the world might be with a minor adjustment or two. According to some, this is one of the main purposes of fiction.

Let the reader decide, let the reader beware. Good luck.

--*Thomas Pynchon*

About the Author:
Thomas Pynchon is the author of *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Slow Learner*, a collection of short stories, *Vineland* and, most recently, *Mason and Dixon*. He received the National Book Award for *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1974.

Against the Day Details

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From Reader Review Against the Day for online ebook

Håkon says

Against the Day is about a feeling. Feeling as if one is not in control of one's actions, as if one's life is constantly impaired by externalities. I think anyone who is even mildly paranoid will sometimes be under the impression that they are not truly in control of their actions.

"do what they tell you and take what they give you and don't go on strike or their soldiers will shoot you down."

We attempt to live meaningful lives, surrounded with the people who mean something to us, but there is always someone (or something) lurking around the corner, ready to fuck everything up.

That "something" might be the nation, The War, capitalism, or even human nature itself. Pynchon's views on corruption and domination are informed by his views on history. He doesn't view history, like most historians, as institutional, as a war between nations for resources, with human lives as currency. Instead, his history is one of "lives as they are lived, deaths as they are died, all that is made of flesh, blood, semen, bone, fire, pain, shit, madness ,intoxication, visions"--that is real history, says Pynchon.

As much as it is about corruption and evil perpetrated on the powerless individual, it is also about potential; The potential of the human spirit, in the face of suffering and malevolence. The potential of science, as a force of good. The potential of love and friendship, in the creation of paradise, absent from time and space entirely.

Against the day is a beautiful and heartbreaking rendition of individuals trapped by historical systems of labor, capital and warfare. Pynchon is a master of pastiche, of prose and ideas, weaving concepts together and breaking them apart like a magician. Pynchon might be intimidating and harsh at times, but fundamentally, his message is one of love, compassion and potential.

Oriana says

Update the second, March 08
Well, well, well [she says, much subdued, pensive; not at all her normal, boistrous, effusive self].

Here we are, March 1, 2008, and I have just closed the cover of *Against the Day*.

I suppose it's hard to even talk about a tome like this, a thing of this range and scope and breadth. I'd really like to use all the superlatives I can, and then invent new words to describe Pynchon and what he does, because he really is like nothing else ever. In fact, I've been saying that to all my friends over the months I've been ensconsed in this book, that what Pynchon writes are not novels, in any traditional sense, I think. They just flagrantly ignore the rules of structure, and sense, and momentum.

If you'll indulge me, I've come up with a sort-of analogy for this. It's like, instead of reading a book, you're like reading a chunk of a river. (Bear with me here.) Whereas normally a book will progress, go beginning-middle-end, this one is like a million rivulets, each slipping overunderthrough one another, that you follow

for a second, or a couple pages, until they go back under and get lost in the general cacophony. Lots of the characters even have names like that -- Stray, Reef, Lake, Heartsease, Ljubica (which means 'love'), Ryder -- that just slip through your fingers as you say them, as the characters go somewhere else and you lose track. There are no beginnings or ends to a river (see? I'm bringing it back), you just watch as different bits of it flit by.

I mean, how can I read something *else* now? This book kind of disassembles your concept of reading, of how to read, of how to go through a book. In a way I feel like I should just keep reading this, over and over, for the rest of my reading life.

Also, because of all this, 1,085 pages is really nowhere near enough. There is so much more to the lives of these characters! I mean because the book really encompases the whole world, right? So everyone is still living somewhere, in the world between the pages (because, oddly, I don't know that anyone of note actually dies in this book), and I want to know what they do with the rest of their lives, who they go on to love, how they fight, what cities they stumble through, how they find their circuitous destinies. (This is insanely presumptuous, but I think Pynchon might be fond of that thought, since so much is made in this book of people doubling, and living many lives, in and out of the world, or the 'Counter-Earth', or within photographs, or after having Zombini do some kind of spell, or that thing with the Iceland spar, which I don't know if I really get.)

I guess I'm babbling. But I think that's fitting too, for this book. I've gotten a lot of different kinds of shit from different friends for my rapturous devotion to Mr. Pynchon. I don't care. I also don't care that this is probably a sort of frustrating review, which doesn't say much at all about the book. I also don't care that there is obvs *so much* in this book that I didn't get, and would never get, even if I *did* spend the rest of my reading life on it. I don't care. I am fiercely in love with *Against the Day*. I am fanatically devoted to Thomas Pynchon. I am so, so thrilled that I read this book.

Update, Jan 08
In case anyone's keeping track, I am just a smidge over halfway through this fucker. And as a diversion, I present you with a few random samples of Pynchonery:

"Abruptly, sweeping into the scene like an opera singer with an aria to unload, here came 'Mr. Ace,' as he called himself. Glossy black eyes, presented like weapons in a duel. When he smiled, or attempted to, it was not reassuring."

"It was all he could do not to reach for her, gather her into some kind of perimiter. But the moisture in her eyes was shining like steel, not dew, and nothing about her trembled."

"You could hear faint strands of music, crazy stuff, banjos and bugling, trombone glissandi, pianos under the hands of whorehouse professors sounding like they came with keys between the keys."

"Dally's voice was hard to pin down to any one American place, more of a trail voice with turns and drops to it, reminders of towns you thought you'd forgotten or should never've rode into, or even promises of ones you might've heard about and were fixing to get to someday."

See? *See??*

First entry, Nov 07
wooooo hooooooooooo!!!!!

(that's me going down the rabbit hole, as it were, into the depths of Pynchonalia)

Also, it's so convenient that the folios of this book are such that there are five blank pages at the back. Now I can (with no shame whatsoever) keep a list of all the characters! How the hell else am I going to make it through a 1,085-page monstrosity?

Ellie says

I can't even begin to write a review of this massive, impressive work. I found it extremely difficult but hypnotic. Although there were times I thought I'd never finish it, I couldn't put it down. Hopefully, I'll write a review in the future.

Just a few words, on reflection. The theme of day/night, light/dark was never clear to me (no pun intended) although the references to these topics are profuse and obviously have meaning. It seems, writing as a first guess, that the light is dangerous and that life lived against the day has more integrity. However, moved as I was by the imagery, I was not able to reach a clear understanding of the theme.

There are an amazing number of characters and events in the novel. Clearly, anarchism is important as well as capitalism and greed. The story is played out over several continents and decades, from the Chicago's World Fair in 1893 through the first World War. The characters travel through Asia, Europe and America's "wild west."

The prose can be hauntingly lovely (as well as rambunctiously obscene) and although I was often baffled by the book, I was entranced by the writing and the feeling of meaning just out of my reach.

Eddie Watkins says

This might very well end up being my favorite Pynchon novel. But I don't know, since if I were to become a one-author-reading hermit all of Pynchon's novels would be there with me, as they are the hands-down most rereadable novels I've ever read (with Nabokov a close second).

I would place this next to Gravity's Rainbow as his two most ambitious novels, but there's something about Against the Day that I like better. In many ways it's like reading a massive young-adult novel, there's just such a sense of outright fun and adventure about it (I read many parts of it with a big world atlas open on my lap, following the characters journeys).

In Gravity's Rainbow Pynchon is always striving to express things beyond the confines of the book, which gives it a tremendous sense of urgency, like he had direct experience of a reality that just couldn't be put into words. Against the Day lacks this urgency, though there's still the keen interest in a reality beyond the normal everyday, but there's also more of a detachment on Pynchon's part, which makes reading it less stressful (Gravity's Rainbow has a tendency to make me paranoid while reading it) and simply enjoyable,

while still satisfying the desire for alternative realities.

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tim says

Against the Day, for me, is pure reading bliss. Pynchon effortlessly conjures up magic and grace, stretching them through a full spectrum of absurdly strange situations. His characters often lack depth, but he more than makes up for that in many other ways, not least of all with the shear beauty of his prose.

Of the thousand-and-one topics within this book, my favorite themes dwell on light, time, parallel universes, and dimensional transcendence. Anarchy may be the most prevalent thread found throughout, but an equally prominent theme, if only slightly less obvious, is the search for Shambhala—both the mythological kingdom said to be hidden somewhere in Inner Asia, as well as the invisible spiritual equivalent located within the Self.

There are stories, like maps that agree...too consistent among too many languages and histories to be only wishful thinking…. It is always a hidden place, the way into it is not obvious, the geography is as much spiritual as physical. If you should happen upon it, your strongest certainty is not that you have discovered it but returned to it. In a single great episode of light, you remember everything.

Regarding light, one character sums up Pynchon's curiosity with it when he says: *I want to reach inside light and find its heart, touch its soul, take some in my hands whatever it turns out to be, and bring it back.* One distinctly memorable scene involves an encounter with a tree in Mexico full of giant luminous beetles all flashing on and off together in unison. While watching these magnificent creatures, the observer somehow realizes (I won't pretend I can convey the same magic Pynchon does, so you will just have to take this at face value) one of the illuminated beetles is his soul, and that the other beetles of light on the tree are the souls of everyone he has ever known. All together these synchronized strobing souls make up one complete radiant soul in the same way that light is indivisible.

Light is living tissue. As the brain is the outward and visible expression of the Mind.

Pynchon has even more fun exploring the nature of time. *For what mission have I here, in this perilous segment of space-time, if not somehow to transcend it?* Most of the book takes place in the years leading up to WWI. Using the knowledge of the day, Pynchon bombards the reader in mathematical theories on vectors and quaternions in an attempt to push the boundaries of three-dimensional space. All this leads up to his attacks on the so-called 'forth dimension.' Even wondering if *we can look at the 'forth dimension' as if it were time, when it is really something of its own, and 'Time' is only our best imperfect approximation.*

When dissecting and reassembling time, Pynchon seems to place a keen interest in manipulating it for the reader's benefit and joy. Pynchon is something of a mystic and trickster. *Whatever the number of* n *dimensions it inhabited, an observer would need one extra,* n *+ 1, to see and connect the end points to make a single resultant.* Pynchon must somehow reside in, or frequently visit an extra dimension from the norm. How else is he able to bring back to consensus reality seemingly endless accounts from other realms, parallel universes, and multiple dimensions, all while transporting the reader along with him into those very same worlds?

Nikos Tsentemeidis says

Διατηρο?σα τις επιφυλ?ξεις μου κατ? τη δι?ρκεια της αν?γνωσης. Τελικ?, αποφ?σισα να εμπιστευθ? την κρ?ση μου, χαρακτηρ?ζοντας αυτ? το βιβλ?ο ως αριστο?ργημα. Ε?ναι σ?γουρα, το πιο πρωτ?τυπο που ?χω διαβ?σει.

Το μυστικ? της αν?γνωσης. Η πρ?τη αν?γνωση προ εξαμ?νου δεν προχ?ρησε καθ?λου και τα παρ?τησα στις 150 σελ?δες. Ε?ναι ?να βιβλ?ο, που απαιτε? την ταυτ?χρονη ικανοπο?ηση κ?ποιων συνθηκ?ν, για να μετατραπε? η φαινομενικ? απροσπ?λαστη αν?γνωση σε μια απ?λαυση. Η πρ?τη φορ? βο?θησε γιατ? πλ?ον ?ξερα περ? τ?νος πρ?κειται, οπ?τε ξαναδιαβ?ζοντας την αρχ? καταν?ησα καλ?τερα κ?ποια πρ?γματα, και μετ? απλ?ς ε?χα την κατ?λληλη ψυχολογ?α για να το συνεχ?σω. Εντ?λει δεν με δυσκ?λεψε. Θα κ?νω μια αντιστο?χιση με το «Εκκρεμ?ς του Φουκ?» του ?κο. Δ?ο βιβλ?α πολ? μεγ?λα και με απ?στευτο ?γκο πληροφορι?ν. Αν βαθμολογο?σα απ? το 1 ?ως το 10 το π?σο με κο?ρασε το καθ?να, θα ?δινα 7 στο εκκρεμ?ς και 3 σ' αυτ?. Οι πληροφορ?ες στην προκειμ?νη περ?πτωση δεν ε?χαν μονοτον?α.

Πλοκ?. Η πλοκ? δεν διεκδικε? δ?φνες, ?σο το περιεχ?μενο. Μου ?κανε ιδια?τερα θετικ? εντ?πωση, η λεπτ? γραμμ? μεταξ? πραγματικ?τητας και φαντασ?ας, που χρησιμοποιο?σε καθ' ?λη τη δι?ρκεια ο συγγραφ?ας, δ?νοντας περισσ?τερο μια ρεαλιστικ? εικ?να της ιστορ?ας.

Περιεχ?μενο. Και τι δεν ?χει αυτ? το βιβλ?ο! Η επιστημονικ? κατ?ρτιση των ηρ?ων και εν προκειμ?νω οι επιστημονικ?ς πληροφορ?ες, περ? ηλεκτρισμο?, μαθηματικ?ν κτλ με γο?τευσε. Σημαντικ? το ?τι δεν ?ταν μια ξερ? αναφορ? εννοι?ν, αλλ? και φιλοσοφικ?ς συζητ?σεις για το μ?λλον της επιστ?μης. Η ιστορ?α λαμβ?νει χ?ρα στις αρχ?ς του 20ου αι?να και οι πρωταγωνιστ?ς συζητο?ν για το μ?λλον του ηλεκτρισμο? και την ελε?θερη δι?θεση του σε ?λο τον κ?σμο, λ?γα χρ?νια μετ? τις ανακαλ?ψεις του Tesla, και κατ? π?σο θα μπορο?σε να αποτελ?σει ?να θανατηφ?ρο ?πλο.

Ο Thomas Pynchon ε?ναι ?νας ιδιοφυ?ς ?νθρωπος. Κατ' αρχ?ς ε?ναι απ? τους πιο ταλαντο?χους στην αφ?γηση. Ε?ναι απ? αυτο?ς που κ?θονται και σου λ?νε μια ιστορ?α, ασχ?τως αν ε?ναι καλ? ? ?χι και ?λοι γ?ρω του στ?κονται καθηλωμ?νοι. Ε?ναι αξιοθα?μαστο το π?ς καταφ?ρνει και προσθ?τει τ?σα πολλ? στοιχε?α στην αφ?γησ? του, χωρ?ς να κουρ?ζει. Σε πολλ? σημε?α, σε μικρ?ς δ?σεις (διακριτικ?) παραθ?τει στοιχε?α ιστορικο? μυθιστορ?ματος: βαλκανικο? π?λεμοι, πρ?τος παγκ?σμιος, επαν?σταση Εμιλι?νο Ζαπ?τα κτλ., πολιτικ?ς ιδ?ες και γενικ? πολλ?ς και ωρα?ες πληροφορ?ες, που ?μως δεν γ?νονται β?ρος στην αφ?γηση. Ιδια?τερο χρ?μα δ?νουν οι περιγραφ?ς απ? τα μ?ρη ?που διαδραματ?ζεται η ιστορ?α: Σικ?γο, Λονδ?νο, Μεξικ?, Οστ?νδη (Β?λγιο), Βενετ?α, Τεργ?στη, Βι?ννη, Θεσσαλον?κη, Κ?ρκυρα κτλ.

Θεσσαλον?κη.
«Μακ?ρι να μπορ?σω να σου τη δε?ξω κ?ποτε, Λ?ιτγουντ, η Θεσσαλον?κη ε?ναι ?λος ο κ?σμος σε μ?α π?λη…». Χαρακτηριστικ? φιγο?ρα η Β?σνα που τραγουδ?ει σε χασισοποτε?ο, γνωστ? ως η «μερακλο?» το «θα σπ?σω κο?πες, για τα λ?για που 'πες». Δ?κα σελ?δες για την Θεσσαλον?κη, απ? τις πιο ενδιαφ?ρουσες του βιβλ?ου.

?σως κουρ?ζει ο μεγ?λος αριθμ?ς προσ?πων, ?μως δεν αποτελο?ν το β?ρος της υπ?θεσης, γεγον?ς που υπερκερ?ζει με τις αφηγητικ?ς του ικαν?τητες ο Pynchon. Περισσ?τερα για την πλοκ? δεν χρει?ζεται να αναφ?ρω. Θετικ? επ?σης βρ?κα το χιο?μορ σε αρκετ?ς περιπτ?σεις: «…εν?ς κρυπτοαναρχικο? που ε?χε ξεπ?σει να δουλε?ει για την κυβ?ρνηση», « … σ αυτ? τη σχολ? μετ?

απ? τ?σσερα χρ?νια μπορο?σε να γ?νει κανε?ς καθηγητ?ς φυσαρμ?νικας (αποκλειστικ?)…». Κ?τι ?λλο που επ?σης μου ?ρεσε: «Εκε? π?ρα στην Ευρ?πη ?λοι αυτο? σκοτ?νονται μεταξ? τους για κ?τι μπερδεμ?νες πολιτικ?ς θ?σεις που κανε?ς τους δεν τις καταλαβα?νει, αλλ? μ?λις ?ρχονται εδ? (Αμερικ?), μ?χρι να πεις κ?μινο, αφ?νουν στην ?κρη ?λα εκε?να τα αρχα?α μ?ση και γ?νονται αδ?ρφια στον αγ?να…». Η συγκεκριμ?νη αναφορ? γ?νεται για τους Βαλκανικο?ς λαο?ς, στην ιστορ?α των οπο?ων αναφ?ρεται συχν? πυκν? για τουλ?χιστον 100 σελ?δες, γεγον?ς που αποδεικν?ει τις απ?στευτες γν?σεις, ?πως και πιο συγκεκριμ?να για την π?λης της Θεσσαλον?κης. Και εδ? επαν?ρχομαι στο ?τι αποδεικν?εται η ιδιοφυ?α του, να δ?σει τ?σο αρμονικ? τις γν?σεις (ιστορικ?ς, πολιτικ?ς, επιστημονικ?ς κτλ.) με την αφ?γηση.

?λα αυτ? μου βγ?ζουν μια επιμον? στην συγγραφ? εν?ς μυθιστορ?ματος που τα ?χει ?λα με γν?μονα την τελειομαν?α, ?χι ?μως σε σημε?ο υπερβολ?ς. Μου βγ?ζει ?να ωρα?ο πρ?τυπο, ειδικ? στην εποχ? της παρακμ?ς της ποι?τητας σε ?λα τα επ?πεδα. Το ?ργο εκδ?θηκε μ?λις το 2006. Το 1963 εκδ?θηκε η πρ?τη του δουλει? και χωρ?ς να ?χω διαβ?σει τα νε?τερα του βιβλ?α, μου δ?νει την εντ?πωση πως ?χει καταφ?ρει να κρατ?σει πολ? ψηλ? την ποι?τητα. Συνειρμικ? δημιουργε?ται μια αντ?θεση στο μυαλ? μου με την νεοελληνικ? πραγματικ?τητα της μετρι?τητας, της δ?θεν κουλτο?ρας, την υποτ?μηση της αριστε?ας και ?λη αυτ? την προσπ?θεια μεταξ? συγγραφ?ων να διαφημ?σουν τα βιβλ?α τους παραπλαν?ντας το αν?ριμο κοιν?, ως αντ?παλο δ?ος στην κ?θε «Δημουλ?δου». Η λ?ση ε?ναι ν?οι συγγραφε?ς με την π?να του Pynchon. Η ε?κολη τροφ? για ε?κολες πωλ?σεις κ?νουν μ?νο ζημι?.

Για να συνοψ?σω, π?ντε μ?ρες τ?ρα το «Εν?ντια στη μ?ρα» με συνεπ?ρε. Βο?θησε φυσικ? το ?τι ε?ναι οι μ?νες μ?ρες του χρ?νου που τυχα?νει να ?χω ?πλετο χρ?νο. Αυτ? το βιβλ?ο, θ?λει χρ?νο. Το να διαβ?ζεις 10,20 σελ?δες με διαλλε?ματα σου δημιουργε? κεν? και χ?νεσαι. Το ιδανικ? ε?ναι να το πι?σεις για 50 σελ?δες και να αφοσιωθε?ς. Αν στις 100 σελ?δες δεν τραβ?ει, δεν θα ?χει αποτ?λεσμα. Η δε?τερη αν?γνωση της αρχ?ς νομ?ζω βοηθ?ει πολ?. Παρ' ?λα αυτ?, δε θα το σ?στηνα. ?χι χρησιμοποι?ντας τα ?σα θετικ? ?χω γρ?ψει παραπ?νω. Οι εντυπ?σεις μου, καθ?ς συνεχ?ζω να διατηρ? κ?ποιες επιφυλ?ξεις μου, ?σως για κ?ποιον ?λλον στην αν?γνωση δεν ?χουν να πουν τ?ποτα. Ε?ναι τ?σο πολυδι?στατο ?ργο που ?χει πολλ? να δ?σει, διαφορετικ? στον καθ?να. Διαβ?ζοντας το, κυρ?ως στην αρχ?, σκεφτ?μουν αν ε?ναι πραγματικ? αριστο?ργημα ? απλ?ς μια μπο?ρδα. Την απ?φαση μου την π?ρα και μ?νω ?συχος, μ?χρι το επ?μενο του βιβλ?ο.

Κ?τι που ξ?χασα να αναφ?ρω, ?πως σ?γουρα και πολλ? ?λλα, κ?που στις 1000 σελ?δες, λ?γο μετ? τη Θεσσαλον?κη δηλαδ?, το σεν?ριο διαθ?τει και σεξ, αρμονικ? π?ντα με την αφ?γηση.

Michael says

This is a very difficult book to assail and digest but worth it for me to see how the pomo master keeps up with the scene of post-postmodern he has spawned. The wonderful new weird I can't get enough of (such as the three M's of Mitchell, Murakami, Mieville), and others I keep trying (like DeLillo and Lethem). I bring these others up to convey that if you like them, this may be worth the ascent.. There is something in it for most readers (mystery, espionage, fantasy, historical fiction, family saga, campy humor, philosophy, mathematics), and in that sense there is too much in it for most readers. Too rich. Like reading 3-4 of those other authors in a row. The same was true for "Gravity's Rainbow", a masterpiece of comparable scope which took me a few years to complete. Jeeze, can it be back some 40 years ago? It's hard to believe that Pynchon, one of the key fathers of postmodernism, has still got the juices. Here we get the same MO of

personifying entropy and forces of physics into history. And plenty of mind-bending forays and obsessive quests by a troupe of comic and tragic characters performing the kaleidoscopic dance for our delight and wonder. Only this time around we don't take mescaline any more.

What is he doing here to mess with our minds? This time he more after the relations of reality to math than to physics per se, and instead of World War 2 as the mental crucible, he is concerned with the fateful collision of burgeoning modernity at the end of the 19th century with the vortex of forces at play after the turn of the 20th century that leads to World War 1. Though it didn't take me years to finish, I did take took a refreshing month-long break in the middle. There are some truly loveable characters here worth staying the course for, more so I think than in Gravity's Rainbow. Others in my reading group should take heart that long pauses can make for a feasible strategy.

Jules Verne gave us 80 days to travel around the world, but with this book as a travel itinerary Pynchon does it in 25 plus years span (and 10 years to write). From the book jacket:
Spanning the period between the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the years just after World War I, this novel moves from the labor troubles in Colorado to turn-of-the-century New York, to London and Gottingen, Venice and Vienna, the Balkans, Central Asia, Siberia at the time of the mysterious Tunguska Event, Mexico during the Revolution, postwar Paris, silent-era Hollywood, and one or two places not strictly speaking on the map at all.

I love it how Pynchon kicks off the book by bringing a lot of his key characters together in Chicago at the beginning and then disperses them about the globe. At the World Exposition in 1893, all the great wonders of modern science and industry are on display. There we experience the arrival of a crew in the dirigible *The Inconvenience*, the cartoonish "Chums of Chance", who we learn fly around the world on secret missions handed down by a mysterious Upper Hierarchy. They are the epitome of youthful and plucky gung-ho for technology in the service of progress and adventure. Their assignment has something to do with Tesla, who is working on wireless communication and hopes to create a source of free electricity for the world. We meet a key enemy of the story, the slimy magnate Scarsdale Vibe, who desires only economic exploitation of such wonders. He funds a Professor Vanderjuice to beat Tesla at the game and a young Tesla assistant, Kit Traverse, to study at Yale the type of math most relevant to his lucrative schemes. There you have the historical thrust of the innocent and the corrupt of this tale in a nutshell.

Aside from Kit, other loveable characters we meet on scene in Chicago are a traveling photographer and electrical appliance handyman, Merle Rideout, and his brilliant adventuresome daughter Dahlia (Dally). Then there is the righteous detective Lewis Basnight, working to outsmart possible anarchist bombers. I don't count the five members of the Chums of Chance as "loveable" as they remain caricatures of their titles (Captain, Communications Officer/Historian, Scientific Officer, Handyman Apprentice, Mascot, plus the literary dog Pugnax as a protector and oracle). Finally, we run across some important minor characters, a pair of Austrian government agents who are guarding and keeping out of trouble the young Archduke. Yes, the very one whose assassination by a Serbian agent triggered the Austrian response and cascade of treaty obligations as the onset of World War 1. Much of the book is a form of foreshadowing of this coming conflagration.

Soon the Chums of Chance fly away to tune into an Arctic exploratory mission that has a lot to do with finding a form of calcite known as Iceland Spar. It has the property of double refraction that holds out the prospect of a window into an alternate reality.

Before we get to the house of cards in Europe, we take a diversion to Colorado, where Merle and Dally soon end up and Lew somewhat later. Merle's chemistry skills from photography and his handyman talents lands him work in the mining industry through a new friendship with the miner Webb Traverse, father of the math whiz Kitt whom we met in Chicago. We expand our key characters with Kitt's older siblings, including the happy-go-lucky gambler, Reef, the pragmatic mining school student, Frank, and their wild, boy crazy teenager sister, Lake. Lew comes to town on the trail of anarchist threats to the railroads owned by his corporate masters and makes a modest transition to countering the subversive forces aligned with the mining unions. From the conditions of the workers, the dirty tricks and violent tactics of thugs enforcing the greedy corporations, and his growing friendship with pro-union Merle, Lew begins to question whether he is on the right side.

Colorado makes a great stage to wind-up and solidify the characters and to display a nexus of historical forces. Manifest Destiny has closed the wilderness, the Indians are all out of the way on reservations, and capitalism has a free hand to apply new technologies to exploit the environment big time and the muscle of legal and extra-legal means to ride herd over the workers, which includes a lot of foreign immigrants with socialist fervor. The balance is upset by the entropic monkey wrench of the anarchists, who get pretty bold with their dynamite craze. Soon a lot of folks take up dynamite as a personal means of self expression and empowerment. Tall tales emerge of a mysterious Kieselguhr Kid, named after clay that stabilizes nitro in dynamite, as evident in this gossip:

"Don't carry pistols, don't even own a shotgun nor a rifle—no, his trade-mark, what you'll find him packing in those tooled holsters, is always these twin sticks of dynamite …
Couple dozen in big bandoliers across his chest."
…"But say, couldn't even a slow hand just gun him down before he could get a fuse lit?"
"Wouldn't bet on it. Got this clever wind-proof kind of strike rig on to each holster, like a safety match, so all's he has to do's draw, and the sucker's all lit and ready to throw…
Even old Butch Cassidy and them'll begin to coo like a barn full of pigeons whenever the Kid's in the county."

A critical event happens that ends up indirectly sending all the key characters off in different pathways through the rest of the novel. Without saying who or why, I share the modest spoiler that Webb gets murdered. All of the brothers are forever after motivated toward avenging his death while at times actively dodging this duty. Lake runs off with a flashy scumbag, unaware of his connections with the corporate bad guys. Lew gets on the dangerous bad side of the dark forces and takes the opportunity of a quick escape to London. The travels and quests of our characters will continually intersect the shadowy forces that drive the missions of the Chums of Chance and that of various nations' spy networks concerned with harnessing advances in math and science for the development of powerful new weapons.

The Traverse family saga is loads of fun, full of naughty bits, and replete with feats of derring-do that knits their fate with that of the world. Frank and Reef wander around the west looking for a target for their revenge, and in the long course of events Frank ends up in Mexico in the middle of their revolution while Reef gets in the middle of the Balkan conflicts that preceded World War 1. Meanwhile, Kit pursues math studies in Gottingen, where he bonds with fellow math whiz, Yashneen, the daughter of an important English spy and Russian mother. They soon are led into significant forays in Austria and Belgium, and then he assumes a quest that takes him through Central Asia to Siberia as she joins Reef on the Balkan escapades. As for Dahlia, she converges with Lew in London, where he is adapting his detective skills to espionage, and then she ends up in Venice, where she gets involved with the ferment of the arts and part of the draw that makes this city a home base of sorts for Kitt.

Yes, this is all quite dizzying, but Pynchon weaves a very satisfying web, and it becomes clear why places like Bosnia, Venice, and Belgium are favored sites to portray the fateful transformations between the 19th and 20th centuries. Bosnia is obvious as its annexation by Austria in 1908 kicked off an uproar among world powers, particularly with the Ottoman Empire which had held it as a Muslim province on Western Europe's doorstep for five centuries. Venice is an ancient link between Europe and Asia, home of Marco Polo, the capital of one of the first nation states, a leading center of the Renaissance, and for long periods in history a part of the Austrian Empire. With its traditions of carnival and masked balls and ancient tradition of mapping and mirror making, it makes a great site for romance and intrigue for Pynchon. Belgium, which figures in the book as a site of dual conventions of anarchists and radical mathematicians, is a lowland county whose sea walls are metaphorically depicted as barely hold back the suffering from King Leopold's colonialism in the Congo. It is foreshadowed as the future pathway for German invasion of France and site of the long slaughter at Yypres. The spying Belgian security police captain looks for significant connections between the two sets of conventioneers:

"They could turn out to be only innocent mathematicians, I suppose," muttered Woevre's section officer, de Decker.
"Only." Woevre was amused. "Someday you'll explain to me how that's possible. Seeing that, on the face of it, all mathematics leads, doesn't it, sooner or later, to some kind of human suffering."

Again and again we circle around mathematical advances and the competition between the Quaternionists and the Vectorists. The average reader can be sorely mystified and perplexed as to how much of this is a parody of academics and how much a real contributor to the forces of history. The progress of math to make use of dimensions beyond the three of conventional reality and of imaginary numbers whose terms incorporate the square root of -1 did pave the way for use as tools for progress of physics in Special Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. For example, the treatment of time as the fourth dimension in a geometry known as Minkowski Space was an ideal way for Einstein to portray the effects of gravity on space. However, in most ways mathematical innovations are just a useful tool for description of reality and not translatable into altered perspectives on fundamental aspects of reality. In this sense, the search for invisible realities, sources of energy, doorways through time in the extra dimensions and imaginary numbers of mathematical systems is just an endearing lunacy. Even so, the prospect of new weapons coming out of these academic fields presages the obvious fulfillment later in the century on their predictions of the powerful energies that might be released from splitting the atom. In retrospect, the allure is plausible:

It is said that the inventor of this weapon has found a way to get inside the scalar part of a Quaternion, where invisible powers may be had for the taking.

And in this age of bizarre spiritualism at the end of the Romanticism (based on a recent historical reading of Chaos Imagined, there would likely thoughtful folks who would align the science with the mysticism of Tarot and the Hindu Atman and Shiva and come up with the potential for bifurcated lifelines, for co-consciousness, and for parallel universes, such as in this projection:
Deep among the equations describing the behavior of light, Vector and Quaternion equations, lies a set of directions, an itinerary, a map to a hidden space. Double refraction appears again and again as a key element, permitting a view into a Creation set just to the side of this one, so close as to overlap, where the membrane between the worlds, in many places, has become too frail, too permeable, for safety. …Within the mirror, within the scalar term, within the daylight and obvious and taken-for-granted has always lain, as if in wait, the dark itinerary, the corrupted pilgrim's guide, the nameless Station before the first, in the lightless uncreated, where salvation does not yet exist.

The Chums of Chance flying above all the madness below somehow maintain their innocence despite

contracting with various governmental powers. Their adventures extend to a search for the invisible or underground Asian city of Shambhala and efforts to counter interventions of time travelers from the future, wavering between the flavors of Lovecraft and Steampunk (e.g. Pullman’s “Golden Compass” and Westerfield’s “Leviathan”). Sometimes these madcap elements wore thin, but usually it was a relief to come back to them from the intense drama and struggles of the “real” characters. I was uplifted how, when World War 1 finally came to pass, they largely flew above the fray, so to speak, and punched out to the other side with even more optimism and ambition than they started with. The same is true for many of the Traverse and Rideout clans, as we bid a fine farewell to them in sunny California. Don’t you love it when you go through hell and still reach a happy ending?

Michael Finocchiaro says

I loved traveling along the four parallel storylines of this, the longest of Pynchon's books. I think I fell in love with Dahlia Rideout (sorry Kit). I wanted to be one of the Chums of Chance or at least read their books to my kid with the Hardy Boys. I wanted to have a whiskey with Lew Basnight (although I may have been terrified). I loved the bad guys and the good guys and really all the characters here. There was so much to enjoy, so much to think about, never a dull moment. Of all of Pynchon's books, this was probably the most fun (even if I preferred Mason&Dixon for its two main characters).

In retrospect, I find myself dreaming and pondering AtD more than GR or M&D. I have even developed a slight obsession with Dahlia Rideout as my favorite heroine of all time (am I alone of this particular fetish or have her beautiful eyes and sassy talk seduced other readers as well?) i wish that Brian Vaughn would do a comic of the adventures of The Chums of Chance (rather than The Escapist) as that was also an awesome and beautiful part of the plot. AtD makes me wish in vain that there was more Pynchon out there to read, but, alas, there is not.

Manny says

It had been some time since the Chums of Chance had last visited Candlewood University, and as soon as they were on *terra firma* they made their way directly to Professor Vanderjuice's office. The Professor, who was in the process of calibrating what looked like a complex optical instrument, welcomed them effusively. "Randolph! Miles! Lindsay! Darby! Chick! How wonderful to see you!" He gave Pugnax's head a pat, receiving a friendly growl of recognition from the canine savant, and exchanged manly handshakes with the others.

"So what have you been up to, Doc?" asked Randolph, the greetings completed. "Your wireless telegraph message sounded most intriguing. Something about a... book?"

"Indeed, indeed," said the Professor, hardly able to contain his habitual enthusiasm. "And what a book! We have had our setbacks with the temporal displacement unit, I am the first to admit it, but this time it is 'the real deal'. Feast your eyes on this!" As he gestured towards the scientific device with which he had been occupied, apparently some kind of microscope, the Chums were surprised to notice that it was trained on an open volume. The Professor carefully unfastened the clamps and handed it to Randolph.

"*Against the Day*, a novel by Thomas Pynchon," exclaimed the intrepid aeronaut as he studied the flyleaf. "Published in... 2007?!"

"Quite so, quite so," murmured the Professor. "By far our most successful experiment to date. Nearly a whole century forward. Please, read on!"

The other Chums crowded around their leader and peered over his shoulder as he turned the pages. There certainly were a great many of them.

"I can't make head or tail of it," admitted Randolph after a few minutes of study. "All these... mathematical equations..."

"Long sentences," added Chick.

"And foreign words," concluded Darby.

"It is, indeed, something of a challenge," said the Professor. "But, as you will no doubt remember, literary theory has long been a passion of mine. I remain convinced that, with suitable mechanical aids, even the most recondite screed will happily yield up its--"

He broke off in mid-sentence; from the glances being exchanged between Randolph and Miles, it was all too clear that they had not yet forgotten their unfortunate encounter with the Pansensual Gerty MacDowell Experience (see *The Chums of Chance and the Jujubes of Joyce*). But after a moment of hesitation, he continued, ignoring his young friends' skeptical expressions.

"I have studied the text carefully," said the Professor. "It soon becomes clear that the theme of mirroring is of central importance. Reflections and twins abound. Professor Renfrew, and his 'conjugate', Professor Werfner. Vibe, and his shadow Foley. Venice and *Venice im Wien*. The *Isola degli Specchi*. The curious doubly refractive properties of Iceland spar. Do you begin to see?"

"No," said Miles truthfully.

"It will become clearer," said the Professor with unshakable confidence. "What we are being told to consider, we soon realize, is the essential duality of nature. Yin and yang. Waves and particles. Vectors and quaternions. Bras and--"

"Panties?" suggested Chick.

"I was in fact about to say kets," said the Professor, not in the least discomfited. "But that too. What, after all, is sex, viewed in formal terms, but a vain attempt to find a common eigenbasis for two generally non-commutative operators?"

Chick tried, with rather limited success, to find a rejoinder to this no doubt penetrating question. But before he could stammer more than a syllable or two, the Professor was off again.

"I tried to determine what it was the author was telling me," he continued. "Why all these mirrors? I thought of *Alice through the Looking-Glass*, since childhood one of my favorite tales. And then it hit me. Lolloping Laplacians! This was evidently not the real book at all, but merely its reflection. The first step must thus be to build a device capable of restoring the true text. Luckily, I happened to have a high-quality calcite crystal

and a good understanding of quaternionic theory. The decoding instrument was easy to construct."

He strode back to the "microscope", replaced the thick volume in its original position, and adjusted the focus. "Here," he said. "Look at it again!"

Randolph peered through the eyepiece and whistled. "I thought it was bad before," he said. "But now! Mathematical symbols on each page, every third sentence in some outlandish language or other..."

"One cannot deny it!" said the Professor cheerfully. "But having proceeded so far, we must not let ourselves be deterred. This, we have determined, is the true book. But what is it saying?"

He paused, pretending to wait for an answer to his transparently rhetorical question, but received none.

"I realized," he said, his voice now almost a whisper, "that it was telling us how to understand the other world... the world on the other side of the Mirror."

"You mean the Looking-Glass World?" asked Randolph. But the Professor shook his head. "No," he breathed. "*not* the Looking-Glass World... for, I have now come to understand, *we* are the Looking-Glass World, the imaginary, quaternionic world. What this book is telling us is how to reach the *real* world."

The Chums gaped open-mouthed, stunned by the enormity of the revelation they had just received.

"But..." said Lindsay in the end, "if the book is incomprehensible..."

"*No* book is incomprehensible," replied the Professor briskly. "My work with Joyce convinced me of that. I now have in place a rigorous study program. Intensive courses in the development of the labor movement, the histories of Mexico and the Balkans, techniques of silver mining, the dynamics of Æther vortices, special and general relativity, vector calculus, Riemann's ζ-function, cricket, the exploits of the duc de Richelieu--"

"Is that the *third* duc de Richelieu," asked Linday, who was taking notes, "the one who was involved with Émilie du Châtelet?"

"The very same," said the Professor, without pausing for breath. "As for languages, obviously French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian. Latin and Greek go without saying. Then it is undoubtedly useful to possess at least a smattering of Dutch, Croatian, Albanian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Turkish, Japanese, Swedish, Finnish--"

"But..." expostulated Miles, "even if one had a century of study time..."

"You underestimate recent advances in educational theory," retorted the Professor with a mischievous look. "Choose a language, any language!"

"You said Finnish?" suggested Darby. "We were there once (see *The Chums of Chance and the Curse of Karelia*) and I picked up a few words of the lingo. Here, *yksi*, *kaksi*--"

"An excellent start!" said the Professor. "Follow me!"

Snatching up the book again, he opened a door and led the Chums down a long corridor. After passing a dozen oak-paneled doors, they paused before one marked DEPARTMENT OF SCANDINAVIAN

LANGUAGES. The Professor knocked; a moment later, an arctically blonde young woman emerged, dressed in an alluringly brief *ensemble* consisting of a few scraps of reindeer leather.

"Excuse us for troubling you, Liisa," the Professor said, giving her a courtly bow. "My young friend wishes to improve his grasp of Finnish." He turned to Darby. "Unless you have got 'cold feet'?"

"No siree," said Darby with undisguised enthusiasm. "Boy-oh-boy!"

"Excuse me," interrupted Lindsay in a prudishly horrified tone, "I would just like to assure myself that this is entirely 'legit'--"

His protestations came too late; Liisa pulled Darby into the room, which appeared to contain little except a blackboard and a large bed, and closed the door, after which there came the unmistakable sound of a key being turned in a 'Yale' lock.

"You need have no fear," said the Professor reassuringly to Lindsay. "We use the most modern techniques, intensive one-on-one tuition based on a version of the *sexualpedagogiska metoden* which Fröken Suomalainen has in fact been instrumental in developing..." He continued in similar vein for a few minutes, without notably increasing Lindsay's confidence, until the door opened again and Darby stumbled out, tie orthogonally askew and almost implausibly well-informed about the inessive case.

"Was the experiment a success?" asked the Professor.

"Who-whee!" said the young student by way of answer. "What's next?"

"I think perhaps some higher mathematics," mused the Professor, opening another door marked ADVANCED RIEMANNIAN STUDIES. A brunette with an Italian accent was explaining the concept of hyperbolic geometry, with frequent references to her dramatic *décolletage*; but before Darby could sit down, Lindsay, wise from his earlier mistake, marched him out into the corridor again.

"Now," he said firmly. "What I want to know is, do we really need all this?"

"It is barely enough to keep up," said Professor Vanderjuice in a wounded tone. Randolph and Miles, familiar with this concept from an earlier adventure (see *The Chums of Chance and the Red Queen's Race*), nodded, but Lindsay set his jaw defiantly.

"Let's see what Pugnax thinks," he muttered. "*If* I may?" He relieved the Professor of the book, which he was still holding, and bent down to show it to the hyperintelligent canine.

"Rrrf!" exclaimed Pugnax after a few moments of perusal. "Rrrff-rrf-RRF! Rrrf!" The Professor suddenly looked shamefaced.

"To be completely honest," he sighed, "your dog has a point. I have perhaps been a little too enthusiastic in promoting my new invention. In fact, it is sufficient to have a robust sense of humor."

"Rrrf, rrf-rrf!" added Pugnax. "Rrf!" Vanderjuice sighed again. "Yes, yes, yes," he said with just a hint of asperity. "And a dirty mind."

Stian says

... maybe in some other world things would've been different, but here and now, in this one, Reef huddled down into his chair by the fire, the noise from the saloon downstairs where he'd been playing cards all night reaching his ears but hardly bothering him, though he did for a second think of the scum sitting down there playing on, never giving in, because why give in? why be cautious? you miss all the shots you never take anyhow. Maybe there's a point to it.

Reef took up his book and looked at it. Big-ass motherfucker. Maybe it'd be better to go back to the *Chums* series. . . but hay-ull, he might as well try it. He'd done all the *Chums* books he had been carrying with him in any case, so it was time to move on to something different. And now that his nightly reading functioned more as a sort of gloomy serenade to his dead father than anything else it seemed reading material was inconsequential. It wasn't even for pleasure anymore, because it was fun or anything: it was like Webb was sitting right there next to him, could hear every word he was saying, even judging him: "why ain't you out there blowin up railroads, son? you ain't even got them yet, have you?"

Over the next two months, Reef read, or rather serenaded, to his dead father, and the more he read the more he sensed Webb's presence in the room, and not spiritually either, but genuinely, really there, Reef feeling more and more strangled, even oppressed, as if his father's ghost had him in a chokehold.

Upon finally finishing the book, Reef, with some struggle, took a deep breath, halfway into which he began coughing violently, as if a mosquito had flown straight down his throat (hell, maybe one *did*). He fell to his knees on the wooden floor, coughed some more, and after that one last liberating cough, there he stood, right in front of him: that wasn't no ghost, that was his father.

"Pa, shit. You can't just do that. Kit told me once about how *you can't just reassemble…*"

"Listen, son, I ain't got all day. Capitalists in heaven too… sure, they ain't got railroads, but believe me, they got some mighty fine things you can blow up."

"Well, Pa, you wanna know how Ma's doin' and the rest…?"

"Naw, son. I just want to know what the ha-yull this book's trying to say. You read me them *Chums* books and they were entertaining, sure, but what in the actual ha-yull this book is *about*?"

"Well, Pa, it's about 1200 pages…"

"Don't be a smartass, son. I din't raise no smartass like that. I just can't wrap my head around this book, 'sall. Just give it to me quick and I'll be on my way and give you some peace, alright? I trust you'll get them two bastards eventually anyway, son."

Reef thought for a second, not really knowing how to summarise the book. In fact, it seemed damn-near impossible.

"Alright, Pa. Well, shit. I hardly know where to begin. There's a lot of weird stuff in here that is real funny though: do you remember Skip, the conscious ball lightning, Pa? Or Thorvald, the sentient tornado? And do you remember that fella who thought he was an actual Berliner, living in an actual konditorei *as a Berliner*?"

“Yeah, son, that was funny alright.”

“Yeah, and the themes, Pa… It seems to me to be about dualities of nature, and things colliding… maybe most prominently with anarchism and capitalism. Order and chaos... There’s a whole lot of stuff about math too, the Riemann hypothesis… stuff I’m sure Kit would love.”

“Didn’t understand nothin’ of that math stuff.”

“Neither did I, Pa. There’s some stuff about time travel too, ain’t there? Finding Shambhala, the whole Buddhist thing… there seems to be something about never reaching that world we want, never bein' able to get there… Damn, Pa, I don’t know. It’s stuffed with themes. I think you can read into it whatever you like. It’s art, Pa, ain’t it?”

“Damn straight it’s art, Son. And art’s important for us trying to transcend the boundaries of the everyday world. Blowin' shit up is one way, art another. You remember that. Just testin’ you. I gotta get back up there now, blow some shit up again… you find those two bastards.”

“Alright, Pa. I will. Nice seein’ you again.”

And with that Webb disappeared. The oppressive air gone, Reef breathing freely again for the first time in two months, feeling relaxed, having finished this mammoth of a book and the constraint on his throat alleviated, no longer feeling like he was living in a stultified world, or rather he was at least aware that he was, he was free to do what he did best. He went out the door, down the stairs and out of the saloon, dynamite in his backpack, the sun gleaming down onto his face, ready to get back to business again – ready to blow shit up, like the Kieselguhr kid.

Nate D says

Some works are so densely, elaborately planned and plotted that any map to their intricacies would necessarily be longer than the work itself. This, I think, is the justification and promise of post-modern literature, with works reaching further in all directions and via as many tools as possible. *Against the Day* is one such work: almost any given line or action may upon study be split, like light through a prism, into a full spectrum of significant motifs.

And so *Against the Day* serves as a refracted history (beginning in history's common beam, yet bent slightly away) of how the bright promise and "unshaped freedom" of the turn of the century was "rationalized into movement only in straight lines and at right angles and a progressive reduction of choices, until the the final turn through the final gate that led to the killing floor" of the 20th century's Great Wars. The quoted lines refer to the stockyards of the novel's opening setting and microcosm: Chicago, 1893, with the "White City" of the World's Columbian Exposition running into the stockyards where cattle that once roamed the western plains unfettered were brought to slaughter.

This history is told mainly through the broad social forces of labor, capitalism, and anarchy all bumping against one another, violently or not, across thirty years and hundreds of significant characters. But these motifs blend and overlap with the concurrent history of math and physics, so it is also a book about electricity, about bilocations, about vectors and quaternions and graspings at academic fourth dimensions

(and so, briefly, time travel), and, pervasively about light, which so suffuses every corner of the work that I could resist picking its up its language here. But fortunately, despite the complex conceptual wash, and as with *V*, Pynchon is fairly clear in laying out his palette -- fortunately since this nearly 1100-page supernova is rather more densely interconnected than the thematic dichotomies of *V*, even as it spews (seemingly?) extraneous material in all directions.

Against the Day is certainly among Pynchon's best (in fact, it would be a reasonable starting point for new readers, if not for sheer length), but it's also Pynchon: digressive, intermittently plotted, and full of references that fly straight by me or will require considerable additional consideration to fit into a relevant spot in the workings. But what makes this novel burn so brightly is that even with this cast of hundreds, the book is largely carried out by believable, memorable characters capable of leading the reader through even the most absurd or divergent mirrored funhouse halls.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

PYNCHON IS THE UTOPIUM OF THE MATH CLASSES:

A Rhapsody of Exquisitely Mindful Pleasures

"Nobody ever said a day has to be juggled into any kind of sense at day's end."
[Thomas Pynchon, "Gravity's Rainbow"]

Most authors inadvertently encourage us to be lazy readers. They make it too easy to read their fiction. We expect authors to comply with conventions of story-telling, a manageable number of characters, a narrative arc, a sense of relevance and progress towards a conclusion, a climax, a goal, a realisation and/or an understanding.

Pynchon doesn't necessarily write this way. He takes us to a world that might look like ours, but it is potentially alien (or at least foreign), in that there are some things or a lot of things that we do not know or understand about it.

"I'll tell you a story someday. Maybe."
[Thomas Pynchon, "Against the Day"]

What we see and experience at first might look familiar, superficially, but ours is the experience of a tourist, a stranger in a strange land or a space traveler landing on a distant moon or planet.

We have to construct knowledge, meaning and understanding, bit by bit, like a spy, a sleuth or a detective.

"...a crime, often of the gravest sort, committed in a detective story, may often be only a pretext for the posing and solution of some narrative puzzle..."
[Thomas Pynchon, "Against the Day"]

Pynchon doesn't just present his fictional world to us in easily digested mouthfuls. Whether or not his novels are difficult, they require mastication, exertion. We have to work on them. We have to do our bit. Having bitten off, we must chew.

This is their challenge, but even more importantly this is our reward. Pynchon offers us not mindless pleasures (an early working title for "Gravity's Rainbow"), but exquisitely mindful pleasures.

"'Oh, you're overthinking it all,' Yashmeen said, 'as usual.'"
[Thomas Pynchon, "Against the Day"]

That said, what would a Pynchon novel be if you didn't endeavour to think (or overthink) it through?

Are we meant to settle for studied incomprehension?

"NOW SINGLE UP ALL LINES!"

The first line of the novel is a nautical term that relates to the preparation of a ship (or in this case, an airship) to leave its mooring and depart (or take off).

Several sets of double ropes would normally secure the ship in its place. This command reduces the mooring to one rope in each position. It's a halfway step.

Just as it releases the ship, it releases the lines themselves: once freed of their burden, the lines can now float free. They might also represent the verbal lines of the book, which are then commanded to cast off *"cheerly now... handsomely... very well,"* a perfect description of what Pynchon proceeds to do throughout the novel. He writes comically, eloquently and effectively.

"It's Always Night, or We Wouldn't Need Light"

The epigraph is attributed to Thelonious Monk in a Time Magazine profile published in 1964. While it might have been an expression that Monk used frequently, it could be a misquotation of another expression attributed to Monk by the saxophonist Steve Lacy in 1960:

"It must be always night, otherwise they wouldn't need the lights."

The two expressions have slightly different connotations. The first implies that the darkness of the night requires the enlightenment of the day or lighting. However, the second, in the context of jazz musicians playing at night in clubs, implies that the dimly lit darkness is a precondition for their music, their creativity, spontaneity and improvisation.

The darkness is not a negative quality that needs to be alleviated by the light. It's a positive that allows individuals to perform at their best.

"Against the Day"

This construction, if it's credible, hints at the meaning of the title *"against the day"*.

In the novel, which is set between the 1890's and the early 1920's (the era in which Modernism began), it's the light of day that is the negative. It symbolises the work of the Devil, the obviousness and conformity of the crowd, and its scrutiny by the powers that be (whether governments or employers).

Pynchon’s sympathy is very much with non-conformists, anarchists and socialists who are battling against capitalism and imperialism (or different manifestations of civilisation promoted by Great Britain, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Tsarist Russia and Turkey), often with the only tools available to them: strikes, protests, assassinations, bombings and terrorism.

The latter are the underground (the counterculture), the former the overground (the over the counter culture).

Above them all are the Chums of Chance, *"a five-lad crew"* (plus their dog, Pugnax, who enjoys reading Henry James’ *“The Princess Casamassima”,* also a novel about radical politics featuring a terrorist assassination plot) who float above the world in their airship *(“the Inconvenience”),* privileged to have a map-like perspective or birdseye view of the clashes of civilisations occurring on the surface.

By befriending chance, they too oppose (law and) order, and embrace the chaos of unrestrained freedom, free as birds (although as Bob Dylan would later ask in *"Ballad In Plain D"*, *"are birds free from the chains of the skyway?")*

Servants of Greed and Force

Underlying the clash of civilisations is a (daylit) certainty that I (the sovereign Subject) am right and you (the Other object which is the subject of sovereignty) are wrong.

Pynchon questions certitude and power from both mathematical and metaphysical perspectives.

The maths might deter some readers who would otherwise thoroughly enjoy the novel. However, in truth, it's not necessary to study up on it, unless you're particularly inclined to do so. It's primarily contextual, and there is enough explanation in the novel itself to get Pynchon's drift.

The maths is largely dispensed with in the first third to half of the novel. I tried to keep up, but still found myself doing some online research to determine how much I was missing out on. However, once I felt that I had some basic layman's understanding of the issues, I was content to focus on the pleasures of the text.

This mightn't be much comfort to a sceptical or impatient reader, but I found that it was a lot easier to read, comprehend and enjoy the novel after the first 490 pages or so!

The Fork in the Silk Road

The maths helps to understand the concept of doubling or coupling that is fundamental to the book.

Neither concept is far removed from Nabokov's employment of doubles in *"Lolita"*. It's a literary or cultural device, in this case, one built on a mathematical or scientific foundation.

If we start with a ray of light passing through a prism (such as Iceland spar), it's possible that the ray might be refracted into two sets of waves or particles. Thus, the thing that was once singular might now be separate or double. If there is a symmetry between the refracted light, one wave might be the opposite or inverse of the other.

Thus, we have the potential for both *"bi-location"* and *"algebraic coupling"*.

However, what is separate or inverted can potentially be joined or reverted.

Pynchon jokes that the German word "und" when refracted and inverted might become the English word "pun". Thus, yet again (after *"Mason & Dixon"),* a conjunction is both significant and comical.

Metaphysically, what was once one, but is now two, might either engage in a life and death struggle, or seek to be re-united.

Thus, the double can either encounter itself in duplicity or oneness.

This is equally applicable to nations and people.

Dive-Bombing into the Day

From a national perspective, duplicity can result in war, unless resolved by treaty or entente.

There's much conflict between civilisations and nations in the novel. This aspect reminded me of Lawrence Durrell's works *"White Eagles Over Serbia"* and *"The Alexandria Quartet"*, just as much as boys' own adventure stories from the days of the British Empire (subsequently reprised in the likes of *"Raiders of the Lost Ark"* and steam-punk).

Pynchon captures how conflict followed from Imperialism, which followed from Capitalism, which was founded on the separation of labor and capital, as well as male and female.

The Interwovenness of Desires

From an individual perspective, opposites often attract, if only motivated by the desire to reunite what was once one *("the secular expressions of a rupture within a single damaged soul").*

This is often the most fascinating aspect of Pynchon novels. His early works were ineffably romantic, *"Against the Day"*, even more so (fewer characters being truly uneffable).

This novel is what I'd call *"anarcho-romantic"*, opposing power and master/slave relationships with freedom and equality, both socially and sexually.

We shouldn't be wasting our time building wealth for capitalists and imperialists, but punning, playing games and having sex in some new Utopian commonwealth of nations and genders. (I'll give it a go...again!)

I Heart Yashmeen Halfcourt

The Triumph of the Night

Sex is a major part of *"Against the Day"*, as if it's the most obvious activity to engage in at night (when pitted against the day).

Pynchon's representation of sex is a product of liberation. It doesn't come attached to any particular configuration of genders, body parts or numerical permutations and combinations, as long as you're having at least one orgasm (each), some fun, a giggle or a look.

She is the World

For all the sex, this fictional world is just as much a woman's, as a man's, world.

Its 70 chapters are a quasi-biblical septuagint. Towards the end, it segued into a nativity story of Yashmeen's Christ-like daughter, Ljubica (literal meaning: love or kiss; violet [see also chaya or etheric double]). However, this is just one of many tales of family, love, romance, passion, flirtation and kissing in the novel.

Whereas the focus of *"V."* was the feminine and *"Gravity's Rainbow"* the masculine, *"Against the Day"* suggests that what is paramount, in the night of the liberated imagination and against the rationalism of the pseudo-illuminated day, is our relationships with each other, including and especially family.

Perhaps, at the end of the day, family is even more important than mathematics and science. All we need is love.

The Green Hour

Did I mention food, alcohol and drugs?

Meals are intimately described, as if on a menu. The alcohol is as bar-hoppingly diverse as the geographical canvas of the narrative. The drugs reflect the taste of an author born in the 30's writing about the time before his birth.

The alcohol and drugs, in particular, enable us to see what is not there, sometimes even what is there but invisible.

"Or, as we like to say, l'heure vertigineuse."

"The Absinthe Drinker" by Viktor Oliva

Oops, I just realised I hadn't mentioned philately or cricket, the latter of which is the greatest game, the game that witnessed an empire become a commonwealth of sorts. But for that, you'll have to peruse the sundries below...

(view spoiler)

Sue says

An amazing book, describing a time of turmoil and discovery, showing the best and worst of mankind and individual men and women. This multifaceted story begins at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and ends after the world altering events of World War I. The world is moving into new areas; armies on horseback are giving way to men with machine guns. The wide open West of the United States is being increasingly hemmed in by wealthy industrialists who hire "goons" with guns to break strikes. In Europe, the structure of the continent is changed by the outcome of WWI. And against this background, there is a large cast of characters living big lives. Anarchists around the globe strike out against those that would control them.

Then there are the metaphorical levels of the book.. Here the major motif is light in its many forms and applications: natural, man-made, possibly supernatural. Mentions of light occur constantly and light is the subject of some characters's work. Time and space also are constantly considered; I.e. slipping in and out of present time or space, etc. If the book were a bit shorter, I might consider a re-read to track these themes. One of the most spectacular instances of light is that of the Tunguska Event which unnerved people in a large swath of the world for some time.

As I neared the end, I began to think about the broad themes of this book: light (? as an entity in itself, as a force), light vs darkness, anarchy and anarchists, power, evil, war, money behind most evil and only limited good. And the characters, well they are geniuses and dummies, killer's and serial lovers, anarchists and strikebreakers, millionaires and peasants, dreamers and realists.... In short, they are all of humanity and some who may not be of this world.

Like Mason & Dixon, the other Pynchon book I've read (and recommend) Against the Day is historical fiction, fantasy, sci fi, a picture of a world on the brink of massive change--economically, politically, in the military, scientifically, geopolitically, essentially in almost every way. The only difference is the century. Pynchon has given us a work that in some ways is indescribable but is a wonder to read. As I have said before, I will readily admit: I do not understand much of it, but that didn't interfere with my enjoyment.

Mattia Ravasi says

Video-review: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APsR1...
Featured in my Top 20 Books I Read in 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4X6OQ...

The most epic, heart-warming, heart-breaking, majestic, hilarious, dreadful and inspiring piece of fiction I have ever read. If you took Once Upon a Time in the West, a couple of Final Fantasies (the good ones), the whole of HP Lovecraft's production, Verga and Hardy and Zola and such topnotch realists, and at least three or four more secret ingredients - and then gave it all to the world's greatest fiction writer to turn into one single uniform narrative, Against the Day is what you would get.

Truly up there with the Divine Comedy, Middlemarch and such.

Jonathan says

Go read Geoff's review here: https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...

Then go read Theroux's great review in the WSJ - http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB1164...

" If there is an inevitability to arrival by water, he reflected, as we watch the possibilities on the 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, even for ship's company who may've made this run hundreds of times…"

Paranoia is a sensation one would naturally associate with Pynchon, and one should always read his texts with almost pathologically heightened spider-sense. So when, for example, we discover that all of his novels contain a reference to "singling up all lines" (a nautical term indicating the moment before departure) one would be wise to note that this tells us something important about *what his novels are doing* (a nod here to Geoff and others who, in comments during his reading of V, made this clear).

The quote above, from page 821 of AtD is a pretty obvious metaphor for his work. The use of the word "uncreated" is not accidental, nor is the suggestion that we as readers may have made this journey many times before. But, for Pynchon, and for those of us lucky enough to read him, possibility is always expanding, is illimitable and, as such, story and hi-story can take us anywhere it damn well chooses.

And so, though this is a novel about love and about family (a journey we have traveled a hundred times before) it is also about the violent collision of both with the mechanised horrors of the 20th century. It is about the Dream of Rationalism, about illimitable hope for progress and the advancement of our species. And about dirty, puerile, disappointing Life.

But most of all, and this stands out most strongly when I read criticism of the book, it is about Webb, Mayva, Reef, Lake, Kit and Frank Traverse. Their friends, enemies and lovers. It is about these parents and their children, about loyalty, failure, betrayal and memory. How anyone can possibly find these characters "flat" or "flimsy constructions" is entirely beyond me. Every event, every person, in this novel orbits around this family. They are the novel's core and its lightening rod. To see, for example, the science sections as somehow unconnected to, or not relevant to, this family is to entirely miss the point.

A crystal of Iceland spar has a fascinating property. Because of its natural polarization it is birefringent, meaning light rays entering the crystal become polarized, split, and take two paths to exit the crystal - creating a double image of an object seen through the crystal. This property had a huge impact on the scientific developments of the late 19th and early 20thc. Its shortage in the late 19th century was considered an emergency of international import.

The design of the ATD book cover has the text doubled as though we are reading it through a piece of Iceland Spar. The crystal is mentioned and riffed upon repeatedly in the text, and we even have one of the sections of the novel named after it. This crystal and its properties are obviously something TP means us to notice. We have many mirrors reflecting the world, characters are bilocated, Tesla is contrasted with Edison...If multiple dimensions, multiple possible worlds exist beside one another, with only tissue-thin walls between them, what happens to the factual and the counter-factual? What happens to the True?

It was certainly interesting to come across issues of doubling again so soon after finishing Miss MacIntosh My Darling...

The difference between TP and MY is that TP is an engineer, a scientist, a lover of gears and cogs and equations and electrons and oil-stained fingers. MY, on the other hand, writes from some cloud-cluttered height, a place of light and dreaming and utopias in the sky. TP's Anarchists are farcical, or at least the world around them is, MY's have a nobility and a loftiness of purpose. TP sees Being as mediated by technology, MY seeks the unmediated Soul. TP also loves the low-brow: smut; puns; and sexcapades of countless types. I am fond of a good dick joke or two, so love that about him. MY can be witty, but I would be suprised to find a dirty joke in her work...

The temporal location of ATD is also key, of course, when technical progress and unfettered imagination seemed to promise other worlds, radical changes to human nature and society. Until, sadly, 1914, when humanity woke up, face down in the mud. The hangover would continue to worsen right up to the present day.

"You have been so easy to fool - most of you anyway - you are such simpletons at the fair, gawking at your Wonders of Science, expecting as your entitlement all the Blessings of Progress, it is your faith, your pathetic balloon-boy faith."

I loved the idea that the great weight of all the dead from WWI, all that trauma, was dense and violent enough to fracture time. It certainly fractured History. It certainly fractured Art.

There were moments in this book, and most acutely during a scene late in the story involving statues of the Angel of Death, that I felt genuine *fear* for these people and their world because of what was coming (and, of course, the fear was really for the "real"world and all those millions of "real" people) - I have never had that sensation while reading before. It has lingered with me all day. It is certainly a powerful work which can re-create, can summon up, that kind of dread, that kind of acknowledgment of all the blood and suffering which began precisely 100 years ago.

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To finish, a little bit of TP prose:

"After passengers for Telluride had changed at Ridgway Junction, the little stub train climbed up over Dallas Divide and rolled down again to Placerville and the final haul up the valley of the San Miguel, through sunset and into the uncertainties of night. The high-country darkness, with little to break it but starlight off the flow of some creek or a fugitive lamp or hearth up in a miner's cabin, soon gave way to an unholy radiance ahead, in the east. It was the wrong color for fire, and daybreak was out of the questions, though the end of the world remained a possibility. It was in fact the famous electric street-lighting of

Telluride, first city in the U.S. to be so lit, and Frank recalled that his kid brother, Kit, had worked for a while on the project of bringing the electricity for it up from Ilium Valley.

The great peaks first sighted yesterday across the Uncompahgre Plateau, snaggletoothing in a long line up over the southern horizon, now announced themselves at every hand, fearsomely backlit, rearing before the gazes of the passengers, who had begun to rubberneck out at the spreading radiance, chattering like a carful of tourists from back east."

This little passage, from around page 300 or so, and selected pretty randomly, gives a pretty good example of Pynchon's technique and his skill. He dances between the lyrical, the satirical, the geographical and the historical with breath-taking ease. He knows landscape, he knows people and he knows the history of both. He moves effortlessly between the language of the elite and the language of the street, often within the bounds of a single sentence. Personally I would be happy to simply sit at his feet and listen to him give birth to Story for the rest of my life. Here's hoping he has at least another big, masterful book in him.

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nostalgebraist says

(Update, 3/23/13: finally plodded my way to the end of this thing. Review still stands.)

First things first: I haven't finished Against The Day yet. I'm on page 752, which is more than 300 pages from the end. But 752 of this book's pages, with their tiny print and their relatively homogeneous content, are enough to solidify one's judgment several times over. It's possible that the ending will cause me to reconsider some of what I'm about to say, but given what I've seen so far, I doubt it.

I want to like Pynchon. Lots of people I respect are very fond of him (see e.g. this glowing review by Adam Roberts), and he's often mentioned in connection with writers I like (Wallace, Barth, Nabokov, postmodern fiction in general). He certainly *seems* lovable. His books are bursting with cool esoteric facts and wacky character names. He exudes a boisterous love for material existence in all its particularity. He's obsessed with ukuleles. What a character, right?

I dunno. Somehow he's never worked for me. I read The Crying of Lot 49 and, while it didn't strike me as actively bad, it failed to excite any visible activity on my E-Meter. Totally neutral. If there was a point, I missed it. Then I tried Gravity's Rainbow, had a negative visceral response and put it down (with some force) on page 120. But I was determined to finish one of these big Pynchon books in my lifetime, and I had heard that ATD was gentler and more fun than GR, so I said what the hell.

200 pages in, I was hopeful. The book seemed just plain good, charming, lyrical, plotty. I thought I was finally on Pynchon's wavelength. 752 pages in, I can report that I was wrong: I'm still as mystified as ever.

A saner review would end there. I just don't get Pynchon, and if I try to explain what's "wrong" with him I'll simply annoy people and/or make a fool of myself. Well, here goes.

It's the End of the World As We Know It

The word "day" in ATD's title has at least two meanings: it refers to the time when the sun is up and everything's illuminated, and also to the day in the sense of "the present day." As early as that title and the

epigraph -- "it's always night, or we wouldn't need light" -- ATD sets up the core of its thematic edifice. That core is an opposition between "the day" and "the night." "The day" is daytime clarity, logic, consolidation, lack of ambiguity, "official" versions of history, electricity, modernity. It is aligned with the version of America that is quickly being established at the time at which the novel is set -- the turn of the twentieth century -- an America with a relatively homogeneous culture, relatively powerful institutions (private and public), an America that communicates at the speed of electric current and can form nationwide consensuses with relatively little latency.

"The night" is nighttime haziness, pre-modernity, subjectivity, secret histories, esoteric knowledge, fiction, mad hopes, counterfactuals of all sorts, the subjunctive. The central conceit of ATD is that the day's victory -- the victory of modernity and its official, real-world history -- was not inevitable, and that at the turn of the 20th century the day contended with a vast range of competing possible worlds. On the most mundane level, Pynchon is suggesting that other social arrangements (anarchy rather than consolidation of power) and other scientific ideas (quaternions rather than vectors) fought for precedence with the ones we actually got. But with characteristic zeal for the blurring of the metaphoric bridge, Pynchon also explores wilder interpretations of the phrase "possible worlds." At times the counterfactuals become literal alternate universes in the science fictional sense. Sometimes they are doppelgangers or alternate selves coexisting in one universe, which have some vague connection to the imaginary numbers. Sometimes the counterfactuals are not alternate histories but actual *fictions*, as when we see the Chums of Chance, the heroes of a 1890s-era boy's adventure serial (Pynchon's invention), acquire real existence in the same world in which the books they star in are published.

How much of this is "true"? How much of it is insightful? Surely the modern world we actually got was not quite inevitable. But whether this has any interesting connection to the relationship between written fiction and reality, much less to the relation between imaginary and real numbers, is questionable. It probably doesn't matter -- it seems best to view ATD as an exuberant fantasy, an attempt to envision a version of the pre-WWI era in which nocturnal/counterfactual weirdos of *every conceivable kind*, from anarchists to time travelers, mount a motley, heroic last stand against the day. That, in the abstract, sounds promising. The problems are all in the details.

We Danced Like People in the Hyper-Tight Light of Fried Chicken Commercials

ATD's world is made out of the raw material of genre cliche. The characters are boy adventurers, western gunslingers, evil plutocrats, globetrotting spies, bewitching women from the Orient. Reviewers infinitely more well-read than I have charted the way that Pynchon (yet more well-read) derives almost every one of his characters and episodes from the conventions of one 1900-era popular genre or another. The book revels in its own gleeful corniness, or rather the juxtaposition of that corniness with torrents of accurate historical detail and writing that's way beyond anything in the source material. It's the kind of thing I'd want to call "campy" if Sontag hadn't declared that you can't be campy on purpose.

Pynchon, evidently, is interested in combining artifice with realism and the serious with the silly. That's something I love too, and a lot of the appeal of this sort of book for me is in the way implausible or impossible things can be made to feel real through the magic act that is good writing. Pynchon's version of this effect, though, is quite different from (say) the version I loved in Wallace's Infinite Jest. Wallace creates a political and social situation that's absurd and cartoonish, but when he zooms in on any of the people living in that situation, they feel real. From afar, the world of Infinite Jest looks like a maniacal child's play set, but if you peer inside the minds of any of the action figures you find fully functional minds with hopes and neuroses, reflecting and deliberating in hyper-realistic detail. Pynchon, by contrast, never delves for more than a fleeting moment into any given character's mind. References to mental states crop up, but usually in

the service of getting someone from one place to another, or of depicting the long-time evolution of a relationship or the like -- a textual version of the montage. Moment-to-moment consciousness, not yet edited into time-lapse summaries, is not among his subjects.

His version of the artifice/realism two-step is a more third-person, solipsistic one. Put simply, he takes silly things and *takes them seriously*, or vice versa. This is fundamentally different from making silly characters real by depicting their consciousness. It's a gesture of the writer's own consciousness, a change in writerly stance that need not accompany any shift in the object of that stance. Pynchon's gambit is that his corny subject matter can be elevated by modulations of his own way of speaking about it, by calculated bursts of lyrical, quintessential "good writing."

So, for instance, when we first meet the Chums of Chance (pedant repellant: technically, the five-boy crew of the skyship *Inconvenience*, one unit of the larger Chums of Chance organization), the writing sounds like this:

"Oh, boy!" cried Darby Suckling, as he leaned over the lifelines to watch the national heartland deeply swung in a whirling blur of green far below, his tow-colored locks streaming in the wind past the gondola like a banner to leeward. (Darby, as my faithful readers will remember, was the "baby" of the crew, and served as both factotum and mascotte, singing as well the difficult treble parts whenever these adolescent aeronauts found it impossible to contain song of some kind.) "I can't hardly wait!" he exclaimed. (1-2)

But the pastiche of boy's adventure stories doesn't follow the Chums everywhere, and sometimes we read things like this:

For somehow, the earlier, the great, light had departed, the certitude become broken as ground-dwellers' promises -- time regained its opacity, and one day the boys, translated here to Belgium, as if by evil agency, had begun to lapse earthward through a smell of coal smoke and flowers out of season, toward a beleaguered coast ambiguous as to the disposition of land and sea, down into seaside shadows stretching into the growing dark, shadows that could not always be correlated with actual standing architecture, folding and pleating ever inwardly upon themselves, an entire mapful of unlighted outer neighborhoods sprawled among the dunes and small villages. . . . (551)

Neither of these passages blends with character psychology in the way good third-person prose often does. Is the quaint, awkward style of the first quote reflective of how the Chums think? Is the shadowy dread in the second quote the Chums' own, or just the narrator's? We might wonder if the changing style reflects the Chums' growing maturity. But there is no such trajectory in the Chums' own behavior, only in the writing. The tone and style of the second quote has essentially *nothing to do* with the human subject matter -- it is just Pynchon choosing to relate the experiences of inane characters in a high-flown style, *because he can*. (The Chums are an extreme case, but most of this carries over to the other major characters.)

Just as Pynchon is uninterested in conventional characterization, he is also uninterested in plot. It feels odd to call ATD a plotless novel, since it is a novel in which a great deal happens. These events, however, are not connected by anything resembling cause and effect. Plot devices enter the story, stick around for a scene or two, and then disappear. Different strands of the plot do not interact with one another even when they would be expected to, as though they are taking place in different universes (in some cases, this may literally be true). In one early chapter, the Chums transport to New York City some sort of alien (?) embryo which has been retrieved from the north pole, and it proceeds to wreak havoc in a sort of a pre-image of 9/11. The whole thing is a great little episode of Lovecraftian sci-fi, quite successful on its own, and I was excited to see where Pynchon would take it. The answer, of course, is that he doesn't take it anywhere. The devastation

of New York never comes up again. There is probably some multiversal explanation for this, but it is nonetheless a perfectly typical example of the book's acausality.

What the book eventually begins to feel like, dispiritingly enough, is a television series. It's televisual in its abundance of period-authentic visual detail ("eye-catching sets") and its paucity of mental detail, its remixing of existing genres (imagine the pitch: "it's a steampunk revenge western sci-fi period piece!"), its seemingly endless and aimless succession of amusing episodes with no lasting consequences, its preference for characterization by means of snappy dialogue. When the plot is allowed to move, it moves in ways that feel like internal compromises on the part of a writing staff. For instance, one chapter culminates in the death of a semi-major villain, but this villain is merely the lesser member of a villainous pair, with little significance of his own, and so the "writer" of that "episode" can happily top off his story with an apparently important plot point without altering the overall situation in any way that might impair the freedom of other staff members to explore the setting in their own ways. Things change, but nothing really changes; you can tune in next week, even if you've missed an episode or two, and be confident that you'll encounter the same kind of adventure you're used to. Pynchon distorts conventional storytelling for artistic purposes, but he ends up in the same place as artistically unambitious TV shows. (What would Wallace say?)

Thomas Pynchon vs. The World

Where are the day and the night in all of this? Pynchon's fondness for everything he associates with the night (everything he pits against the day) often frames itself as a fondness for human freedom. Pynchon is for the right to go crazy, to disobey conventional canons of taste and decency, to refuse to do what The Man -- or the plot -- tells you to do. Over time, though, Pynchon's enforced entropy begins to feel more oppressive than any strong plot ever could. Behind the string-pulling mastermind villain Scarsdale Vibe is Pynchon himself, pulling strings to make sure nothing ever connects. True freedom, after all, depends on a reliable underlying physics, a logic of cause-and-effect. I could stop writing this review right now and walk outside my apartment -- that's a way in which I am free. I would feel much less free if I, say, did not feel (mostly) sure that in doing so I would not step into an alternate universe (something that actually happens to one ATD character). I am free to choose my actions, but implicit in the notion of "actions" is some sense of consequence; if I don't know how the world will respond, I have no basis on which to choose how to act, and might as well not be free at all. Pynchon's characters seem superficially free -- and utilize that freedom in all the traditional boozy, horny, countercultural ways -- but these dancers in the dark face a world which is *less* meaningful, *less* connected, than even our own vale of tears.

So the night and the day are strangely mixed in Pynchon's world. Nocturnal chaos reaches, in its statistical limit, a homogeneity indistinguishable from the results of authoritarian, diurnal control. People straight from the light of a flickering television screen in the 21st century flit about among glittering reflective surfaces, outer lives without inner lives. This is freedom? This is the carnival, the night? Is Pynchon trying to tell me that in the end the day and the night are one in the same? But I can simply pick up another, better book and verify that this is not the case: it is easy to find characters both more free and more constrained. Freedom that breaks down this way is not the genuine article.

What Pynchon needs sorely in this book is a foil. A staunch representative of the day, an advocate of traditional fiction and the conventional view of modern history. Someone to tell him, when he strays: *dammit, Tom, you're getting into pure stoner logic here, there really isn't any connection between historical counterfactuals and imaginary numbers except as a very facile metaphor.* This book is lacking in the heat and light that results from genuine conflict. It is drowning in pure gooey Pynchonianness, so suffused with Pynchon's fixation on everything alternative that the mainstream never gets to make its case. Show me the face of coherence, if only so you can reject it. If Pynchon wants to escape into the bland infinity of endless

alternatives, I would at least like to see what he is running from.

Geoff says

Like all great things, *Against The Day* refuses summary. By its length and complexity, the sheer amount of Time it takes to get through, the concentration it requires to keep track of its multitude of characters, its encyclopedia of settings and events, its fascination with emerging ideas, scientific advances, political movements, technologies, its exploration of a wide variety of metaphysics and religious ideas, its globe-spanning survey of world events at the turn of the last century, by its very form and nature and what it demands of its serious readers it consumes one as one consumes it- a dedicated reader must live with it and make it live with them. I found myself unable to read anything else while reading it. It tendrils itself into one's being, and at multiple levels, for its vast intellectual wells, its deep humanity, its overt tenderness, its tendency to search out the ineffable anima of its characters, to locate the emotional node in a natural setting, often only by a fleeting observational note, how it errs on the side of the complex and the mind-bending and often absurd, how it is dedicated to not explaining its mysteries, while at the same time not shying away from lengthy digressions on mathematical abstractions and physical properties of minerals and light and space, might seem in contrast to the fanciful "boy's adventure comic" framing device of the novel, its frequent low-brow wordplay and ridiculous jokes, and the many turn-of-the-century story cliches it employs, expands upon, subsumes into its cosmos- pistol-packin' Westerns, hard-boiled detective novels, science fiction, prairie family dramas, etc.- but this is far from the case. The "types" employed that fill out this huge cast of characters and events are only more framing devices, tropes, daubs on the palette of a set of collective narrative tactics, a kind of collection of familiar apparitions used to set in motion Pynchon's universe-sized epic.

This is one of those Big Books where it is arguable that the true "characters" of the novel are *the mechanics of the universe*. Light and Darkness, Time, the Stars, Gravity, Earth, Mathematics, Death, Rebirth, New Life. But this would be disregarding that the novel is really, simply, a drama of two families at the end of the 19th and early decades of the 20th century, living through its changes and disasters, its sociopolitical upheavals. And how perfect their names- Traverse and Rideout. Rideout and Traverse. One might also easily be persuaded that this is a pure fantasy novel, for it cares not for adhering to the rules of this universe, and the Chums of Chance, the aeronautic *motivus* of action in the book, transcend all rules of space, time, and physics. Ghosts and wanderers from the future dwell in its pages- psychics, seances, the Tarot, other-dimensional interventions are ubiquitous, impossible objects and geometry-defying buildings and landscapes abound. Within the world of *ATD* the fantastic lives directly astride the Real, parted only by a thin veil that is constantly leapt across. As well, one could be tempted to call *ATD* an historical novel (because it is pure historical fictioneering) for one of Pynchon's great preoccupations here is the "singling up of all lines" of history into its inevitability- how the past, when it was present tense, shed all other possibilities to become the future it became. But he extends this and asks: What of the infinite possible pasts, and if their infinite futures *were realized*? What have become of and where are located the possible futures we have shed by narrowing down potentiality through choice and chance?- These other worlds, dimensions, or speculative universes are the true setting of *Against The Day*, and all the talk of Vectorists, Quaternions, Riemann surfaces, tesseracts, properties of the Aether, of Light, of Iceland spar and its double-refractive properties, are ways of asking a huge question, one we are caught in the very middle of in this experiment of becoming ever more conscious beings: Once, men sat and looked out on a flat plain and called that plain the world, and the world was thought flat and the center of the universe- then we built ships and set out, and found the world was round, and then we went further and found that the earth was not the center of the universe at all, but a speck in a cosmos unimaginably huge and complex- and so we built ships to attempt a crossing of that

other ocean, the one not of water but of Space, and as we progress onward making discoveries and refining mathematics, it might follow that that first uncentering of the earth, the first rounding of the earth, might be the first of a long process of uncentering, of “rounding” the universe into its proper form and setting- maybe a thread, a membrane, or a spheroid amongst countless, uncountable other universes, maybe expanding forever into what we can’t conceive, and what might this mean, and who is out there living beside us, invisibly, each and every fractured moment of our lives? And are there other Selves out there, doubled, trebled, even uncountable versions of us living out lives across this multi-dimensional sprawl? What are their destinies? And, considering the unbearable tragedies of History personal and universal, *what might have been*?

Light and darkness, their ambiguities, how their antagonism creates our reality. Life and death, and the borderlands between, thin as a tissue, wavering in a gust of wind. Dreams and waking life, and what’s the difference and how would we know when we are within one and within the other? Identity, what we are at any given moment, the way we know ourselves to be ourselves. Mathematics, science, and religion, the development of how humans attempt to explain their strange presence here in this baffling realm, which seems made not to be bound in words and symbols, but always becomes so, more and more, each day, with each new sunrise, both more understandable and simultaneously more mysterious, unexplainable. The heart and the head. All lines of history, specifically at the turn of the last century, singling up into the slaughterhouse of WWI and its death-twin two decades later, hand in hand, devouring generations and echoing like the tolls of dead bells even now, remaining in toxic presences flitting in and out of our collective consciousness, what those events tell about our nature. The horror behind us, and what’s ahead? What might we make of the Time remaining? Love and absence. Family. Madness and revenge. Chance and determination. Free will or despotism. Anarchy and capitalism. These ideas, questions, problems, swirling around us in the aether, facets of mind and world- our Being is composed of how we confront these. *Against The Day* has somehow managed to map and tell a comedic epic of Being underneath these storm-skies, these cloud-form-phenomena that hang above us all, ready to let light in or rain down lightning and thunderous darkness. How does one possibly novelize questions like these, bring them into our terms and under the control of our language? However it is done, Pynchon has achieved that here.

And it builds and builds throughout its 1100 pages to the finale, and it is *fun* and *funny* the entire time, and it is packed full of adventure and danger and heros and villains, narrow escapes and love affairs, and it is deep and wide and tender and sad and strange and struck through with longing and loss and incomprehensibility, like existence. And like us it anticipates something parting the darkened sky, a vehicle of magic bearing “good unsought and uncompensated”, from some dimension better than ours, to deliver us, to carry us away in light- We of the Futurity of Narrowing Possibilities, we await our Chums of Chance. *They fly toward grace.*

Bradley says

I'm not sure that I can review this. Honestly.

I'm overwhelmed with the sheer sprawling immensity and lack of cohesion except for just a few special points... the big ones happening to be light and light's refraction, and anarchism.

SAY WHAT?

Yeah. That's kinda my view, too. It's set up with seemingly hundreds of little scenes and build-ups starting

all the way back to Chicago's World's Fair and ending after WWI and never staying in any place for very long. Want to globe-trot around the world? Hop from character to character in admittedly brilliant and detailed and deep world-building sampling whole realities of the past? Stick around. We've got anarchism and dynamite-wielding revolutionaries, Archduke Ferdinand, Nicola Tesla, druggies, time-traveling hucksters turning harmonicists into a paranoid commune, we've got the ultimate steampunk, we've got sexual escapades from all sorts and means and ends, we've got a cumulative history of detectives starting from mining towns and ending in LA pre-noir, we've got cowboys, the Mexican Revolution, and best of all, tons and tons of science AND science fiction.

But above all, we've got light. Lots and lots of light. Double refractions cause both hallucinations and mirrored universes and where are you, Alice? The rabbit just disappeared.

So did the plot.

This novel has no plot even when it has lots and lots of scenes that appear to have plot and cohesion... but it still has nothing tying it together but a vaguely uneasy feeling that we've just been given an Anarchist Plot from the other side of the Mirror.

Who knows? Maybe I'm alone in this feeling. Maybe others will find something very deep and amazing in this after they've studied all the references, done an enormous survey of the pulp fiction of the day, analyzing all the clichés and overblown character-references, etc., but I don't have the energy or the desire for that.

Indeed, I'm caught on the fence between wanting to throw my hands up and go, WHY? and just sit back and relax and enjoy the nearly pointless ride of it all.

It was entertaining in all its myriad pieces, to be sure. I cannot say the same about trying to tie it all together in order to make sense of it all afterward. Or during, for that matter. It's random and anarchistic AS a novel. Not just with the characters and the constant re-referencing to anarchism.

shrug

I'm glad I read it, to be sure, and I'm also super thrilled to be done with it as well.

I feel like I just read a DFW novel that was wider rather than deeper than his normal fare. :)

Do I get bonus points? *sigh*

K.D. Absolutely says

A bewildering book. Reading this is like standing on a sideline watching the turn of the century. Pynchon is right there beside you and flipping through the scenes showing you how the common people in that era behaved *through his eyes*. This is definitely not a history book yet there are real-life characters, e.g., Tesla, Kovaleskaya, and even himself (Pynchon), or real world events, e.g., 1893 Chicago World's Fair, World War I, etc. Still, the bulk of the story is fictional and only uses history as a backdrop. This book is an example of *historiographic metafiction* or those postmodernist works that are intensely self-reflective and yet paradoxically also claim to historical events and parsonages. (Source: Wiki).

Of course, I must admit that I did not understand half of what this book was saying. Yet it is enjoyable because it is different. Pynchon is a bully. He wrote this book to show his talent as a writer. He appeared to me as a boastful (yet he has the right to be) novelist who enjoys writing long novels to prove that he is a cut above the rest. *I am different! I am better than you!* He, for me, is a modern-day James Joyce; who wrote another book that I did not fully understand and yet I found beautiful: *Ulysses.* Although this book is more ambitious than that: it's scope is wider (for 1893 to the early 1920's) compared to just a day on Dublin streets. *Against the Day* also uses contemporary English and yet Pynchon, like Joyce, uses textual play, parody and historical re-conceptualization that are shapeless and almost bereft of emotional impact. Like I said, reading this book is like standing on a side street watching the parade of images passing you by. The images can be blurry (because I am not familiar with those that Pynchon was trying to make fun about) or as sharp as a megapixel photo (because of the way he described them). However, at the end of my reading, they all seem to mix with one another and if I think through the possible theme - that main thin thread that passes through or binds the 1,220 pages - it is *nothing but a show.* There are many characters with names easy to remember: Sloat (my favorite), Deuce, Yasmeen, Miles, Chick, Lindsay, Randolf, Pugnax, Luca, etc. and yet I know that not one of these will linger in my mind like how Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus made an erasable imprint in my brain as fictional characters.

However, what made this unforgettable is the mere fact of reading it. It gave me headache and backache (no book has made my mind swirled as crazy as this) and yet you know that this is brilliancy at its finest. Mediocre novelists definitely don't compare. I mean who among the living writers can compose a beautiful novel with 1,220 pages and small dense prints? Publishers will be wary about the cost of publishing it if there is no guarantee that the book has captured readers. Pynchon has them. This being my 2nd book by him (my first was his thinner book, *The Crying of Lot 49*) I am happy to say that I will not think twice to someday read his other works like *Gravity's Rainbow, V, Vineland* and *Mason and Dixon.* All of them are door-stoppers but sure to be beautiful, well-crafted, first-class door-stoppers.

Warwick says

[written 2008]

The early reviews I read of *Against the Day* were all a little bewildered, and gave me the distinct impression that a lot of reviewers had tried to skim-read this huge novel so they could get their articles written in time. It's not an easy one to write up at all. It's very long, very busy, and you come to it with all kinds of preconceptions, just because it's Pynchon and although he's only written a few novels they all seem to be masterpieces.

For people who have been following him over the years, it's something of a change of direction. His last two books, *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, seemed to show a new concern with characters, personalities and intimacy compared to the unreconstructed craziness of his earlier work. But *Against the Day* has much more in common with his earlier books – it most closely resembles *Gravity's Rainbow* (the hipster's long novel of choice), although there is a weariness, a kind of ironic distance at work here which points to an older author.

If it seems like I'm putting off the business of actually trying to explain what this novel's about, it's because I am. Ostensibly we are looking at a timeframe moving from the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 to the years immediately after the First World War. Pynchon has always been much more interested than his compatriot writers in the world outside America, and here we get wonderful sketches of everywhere from Colorado, New York and Chicago to Siberia, London, Yugoslavia, Morocco, revolutionary Mexico, Constantinople,

Venice and plenty more besides. The cast of characters is huge, though not as disorienting as some reviewers have made out. The main plot strand concerns three brothers from Colorado trying to avenge their father's murder, though there is also a boy's-own spy story involving British agents and unrest in the Balkans, not to mention a whole subplot about characters who are at least partly fictional even within the world of the novel.

It's not even entirely certain whether or not these events are taking place precisely in our world. In the novel, not only do we have the new force of electricity changing the face of society, but we also have mathematicians and scientists devising machines which can make photographs move or allow for the possibility of time-travel. In many ways it's written not as a historical novel but as a sci-fi novel might have looked written by someone in the 1880s. ‘By now,’ someone remarks at one point, ‘I know that your most deranged utterances are only conventional history prematurely blurted.’

At first that just seems like a cute conceit, but as the novel goes on it assumes a greater importance. There is always a suggestion that the world of possibilities shown in here somehow became our own world after some cataclysmic event, which is especially associated with the War. ‘This world you take to be “the” world will die,’ says one character, ‘and descend into Hell, and all history after that will belong properly to the history of Hell.’

The upcoming war looms over everything, just as the Second World War did over *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is conceived as being so awful that it has stained time itself, affecting events long before it happened with an air of sinister disaster. It is the darkness behind everyday events, which is sensed preternaturally by almost every character in the book, and which allows Pynchon to give free rein to his delight in finding mystery and paranoia in otherwise normal events. Who else would, or could, describe a sunrise like this:

> The sun came up a baleful smear in the sky, not quite shapeless, in fact able to assume the appearance of a device immediately recognizable yet unnameable, so widely familiar that the inability to name it passed from simple frustration to a felt dread, whose intricacy deepened almost moment to moment – its name a word of power, not to be spoken aloud, not even to be remembered in silence.

Here you can see all Pynchon's trademarks – the long sentences, stacks of clauses skirting round some inexplicable sensation of mystery, a general feeling that you're never totally sure what he's going on about. It is this mood, rather than any event-based plot, which Pynchon is concerned with describing. And the writing is everything you'd hope for – I think he's the best writer of sentences since Nabokov. Some of the turns of phrase stop you dead: a view from a hotel window of ‘long, moon-stung waves’; a rough night for someone who ‘didn't so much sleep as become intermittently conscious of time’; or an emotional parting at a railway station, of which we are told: ‘though their kiss went on for what could have been hours, so little did it have to do with clock time, she was already miles away down those rails before their lips even touched.’

Looking back through my copy to pick out these passages, it's telling that I can hardly remember now which characters are even being written about here. They seem less important than what he uses them to say. Some people might even call them types; you could certainly be forgiven for getting a bit suspicious about the way every single female character is a submissive nymphomaniac – though that certainly allows for a lot of fun along the way. (OK, there's one major exception, but she's a *dominant* nymphomaniac.) The verisimilitude is also not helped much by the outrageous names everyone seems to have, like Professor Heino Vanderjuice or a musician called Chester LeStreet (hee-hee). It's definitely a little disappointing after where he seemed to be going with the last couple of books, but still, there's no doubt that by the end there are a core group of people

who you really do care about.

And they can be fun too. One of the many pleasures of the book comes from the incongruence of people and places, like the grizzled American detective who finds himself working for a tarot cult among the upper classes in London. The Colorado boys in particular generate some fantastically gruff dialogue, including one of my favourite remarks: '*Tengo que* get *el* fuck out of *aquí*.' The women are intelligent and funny and, as I mentioned, permanently horny. He does sexy rather well. 'Just can't stay away,' whispers one respectable girl who has ended up all corrupted in a brothel out west, '…you've simply ruined me for everyday bourgeois sexuality. Whatever am I to do?'

The proliferation of characters is partly down to one of the book's most important themes, that of doubling. Two of the cast, Renfrew and Werfner, are mirror-images of each other in more than just name; someone else finds himself wondering if he could be his own ghost. We hear much of the shamanic practice of bilocation, by which someone can be literally in two places at once, and there is also a preoccupation with Iceland spar, a kind of crystal which creates a doubling of light – and, by implication, of the world itself. Pynchon seems to have taken the advice of one of his characters: 'When you come to a fork in the road, take it.'

Like a lot of Pynchon's books, it starts off being a whole lot of fun with crazy jokes and weird sex and unnecessary songs, and yet again by the time you're sucked in you can't help feeling that something very important is going on. It seems to have to do with understanding what kind of person you might have been if some choices had been made differently, and what kind of world there could have been if some choices had been made differently. With some aliens, threesomes, tommyknockers, cowboys and meteorites thrown in.Have we been here before? Oh…maybe. Still, it seems a bit harsh to criticise him for producing more of the same when the same is so brilliant, so rich, and so full of complex and fascinating pleasures. Above all I was left feeling the sadness and the wonder of all the potential worlds I and everyone else could be creating, if we only had more time to stop and work out how. As one of the many walk-on reprobates points out:

> …isn't it the curse of the drifter, this desolation of heart we feel each evening at sundown, with the slow loop of the river out there just for half a minute, catching the last light, pregnant with the city in all its density and wonder, the possibilities never to be counted, much less lived into, by the likes of us, don't you see, for we're only passing through, we're already ghosts.