AGAINST THE DAY

Author: Thomas Pynchon (1939-)
Publisher: Penguin Press (New York). 1,085 pp. $35.00
Type of work: Novel
Time: 1893 to the early 1920's
Locale: The United States, Europe, Mexico, Shambhala, and the Center of the Earth

Pynchon's first novel in nearly a decade, and his longest, offers a fictional counterculture history of the Western world immediately before and after World War I.

Principal characters:
- Lew Basnight, a “psychical” private detective
- Randolph St. Cosmo, the commander of the sky ship Inconvenience
- Yashmeen Halfcourt, a mathematician working with a group of London Pythagoreans
- Deuce Kindred, a hired gun who kills Webb Traverse then marries his daughter
- Webb Traverse, a miner, labor organizer, and “anarchist”
- Frank Traverse, Webb’s son, a mining engineer
- Kit Traverse, Webb’s brilliant son, sent to Yale by Scarsdale Vibe
- Reef Traverse, Webb’s ne’er-do-well son
- Lake Traverse, Webb’s daughter, marries her father’s killer
- Scarsdale Vibe, a capitalist mine owner who orders the death of Webb Traverse
- Natalia Eskimoff, a medium
- Penny Black, an aviatrix
- Darby Suckling, the Chums of Chance ship’s “mascotte”

Everything that Thomas Pynchon’s critics have loved about his first five novels is in his sixth, Against the Day. Everything that his critics have hated about his novels is there, too. Both lists usually contain the same four or five items. The novels sprawl; at 1,085 pages, Against the Day is longer than any of its lengthy predecessors. They contain countless characters, with several hundred in Against the Day. They shift from high seriousness to silly songs; there are twenty songs in Against the Day (or twenty-one if you count “Very Nice, Indeed,” which is simply that phrase sung to the tune of the William Tell Overture). They rely on obscure metaphors from mathematics, engineering, and physics; Against the Day deals with aetherism, quaternions, double refraction, multidimensional vector-space, and Riemann zeta functions, among other science topics. They are vulgar and obscene. Each of these can be valid complaints against any Pynchon novel—with a quibble over the one about length, which is not true of Pynchon’s 1966 novel The Crying of Lot 49, and may or may not be true of
1990’s Vineland—including Against the Day. Each complaint, however, can be answered in turn, for Against the Day is Pynchon at the top of his game. 

The first is sprawl. Against the Day certainly does that. The usual assumption of negative critics is that, unlike the similarly sprawling novels of Leo Tolstoy, Pynchon’s do not cohere. A Pynchon novel, the mantra goes, is unintegrated fiction for a disintegrated age. Still, there are themes that do promise to hold Against the Day together. One theme is that traditional methods of coherence, such as temporal and special sequence, are illusory and, conversely, that things that seem to that same traditional mind totally disparate, such as physics experiments and labor movements, are intimately connected. Exploring such themes takes a vast canvas, and many who reach page 1,085 of Against the Day will find even that vast expanse too cramped to portray them adequately.

Fictionally, the most common method of coherence is plot, and though critics have called Pynchon’s works plotless, Against the Day does have a discernable thread that runs through the center of the book—though with so many alternate plots, few readers will want to concentrate on it alone. This plot follows the interconnections of two families, that of mining engineer Webb Traverse and billionaire mine owner Scarsdale Vibe. When Traverse becomes a troublesome labor organizer, Vibe hires Deuce Kindred to kill him. What follows takes on the flavor of early twentieth century Western revenge thrillers, but without the moral clarity of that genre. Good guys and bad guys merge as Vibe becomes a foster father to Webb’s son Kit, whom he sends to Yale; Webb’s daughter Lake marries Kindred; sons Reef and Frank each attempt to deny their implicit duty to avenge their father’s murder.

The second complaint is too many characters. There is more truth to this gibe than most. Michiko Kakutani argues in a New York Times review that the sheer number of characters leads to shoddy characterization, which leads to poor rapport with the reader: We cannot care about characters dashed in broad strokes. That is true for a majority of the characters in Against the Day; however, in a novel with hundreds of characters, what is true for the majority is irrelevant. All most readers ask of any kind of novel is one or two characters they can care about, and Against the Day offers several choices, each as deeply characterized as any contemporary reader can expect: Frank Traverse, the avenging son (any member of the Traverse family, in fact); Lew Basnight, the “psychical” detective; Yashmeen Halfcourt, the drop-dead gorgeous mathematician.

The fact that these character types are clichés from the popular adventure fiction of the time period in which the story is set masks Pynchon’s real accomplishment in characterization. He has taken cardboard types never intended to be realistically drawn and asked: What would they be like if they were real people in the real world?
What surprises the careful reader of Pynchon is not how facile the virtuous aviator is in fin de siècle adventure fiction but the disturbingly human way Commander Randolph St. Cosmo of the “Chums of Chance” outgrows his dime novel outlines even as we read Against the Day. Contributing to this marvelous illusion is Pynchon’s adaptation of the dime novel idiom, including hundred-year-old spellings (just as he employed eighteenth century diction and orthography in 1997’s Mason and Dixon). Darby Suckling, for instance, is not the ship’s mascot for the Chums of Chance, but their “mascotte,” the spelling indicating how recently the French loan word has attained its modern usage.

The third complaint is silly songs and popular culture. This category is moot in terms of criticism: A reader either likes it or hates it, and no argument is going to sway an individual one way or the other. There is one possible exception—the argument that Pynchon’s popular culture references are never gratuitous. They arise naturally out of setting and character. For example, the London scenes occur just at the historical moment that the “googly” (cricket’s equivalent of the curve ball in American baseball) revolutionizes the British national pastime. The London chapters are awash in cricketing terms. Often though, the most telling popular culture references are not recognized as popular culture. Character description, for instance, always includes a reference to what type of hat is worn. Porkpies, skimmers, scorcher caps, leghorn straw hats, trilbies, fedoras, slouch hats, beavers—names not even recognized any more—are always just right for the character and the moment, though few readers in the largely hatless twenty-first century would notice. The songs are as accomplished in their Hudibrastic, Tin Pan Alley rhymes as ever. Pynchon’s lyrics demonstrate that Broadway need not have relied (as it has) on revivals or British imports to keep the “American Songbook” going. The most stunning tour de force is perhaps a love song addressed to the mathematician Yashmeen, in which she is romantically matched with the names of all the great mathematicians of the age, each brilliantly rhymed: “murmur low/Zermelo,” “geniuses/Frobeniouses,” “swank array/Poincaré,” “though she/Cauchy,” “Riemann/dream on,” “spots in/Watson,” and so on.

The fourth complaint is obscure technical metaphors. This criticism is really a reincarnation of eighteenth century literary figure Samuel Johnson’s swipe at metaphysical poets like John Donne. Johnson felt that Donne and poets like him used metaphors for the shock of novelty rather than to convey meaning to the reader. Johnson was wrong, however, about the motives of the metaphysical poets, and critics are mistaken if they think that Pynchon is using analogies to physics and math in Against the Day to show off (as, unfortunately, too many of his readers and critics do, urging us to admire them because they can understand Pynchon’s most obscure references). He is using them, first, because they occur naturally to him, as he is by training an engineer, but more important, because he is writing in the same humane tradition as Donne, valiantly asserting that developments in science and mathematics are as much a part of our culture as developments in music and architecture. Pynchon came as close as he could to answering the charge of obscurantism in his October 28, 1984, essay in The New York Times Book Review, “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?” Pynchon’s essay marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of scientist cum novelist C. P. Snow’s famous Rede lec-
ture on “The Two Cultures” (1959). Snow argued that twentieth century civilization was in danger of fragmenting into two communities—one scientific and one literary—neither able to communicate with the other. Pynchon refused to be pessimistic about the inevitability of that schism, and *Against the Day*—in which political attempts to dominate space and time are cast against mathematics, which treats Newtonian concepts of space and time as irrelevant—is Pynchon’s latest contribution to the task of bridging the two worlds.

The fifth complaint is against obscenity and vulgarity. Both are unquestionably present in *Against the Day*. Despite its appearance so late in the year (released November 21, with review copies carefully vetted), *Against the Day* was nominated for the “Bad Sex in Fiction” award for 2006 but lost to *Twenty-Something* by Lain Hollingshead. The dust jacket blurb, said by the publisher to have been written by Pynchon himself, promises “strange and weird sexual practices.” The novel delivers. It is not for the squeamish. On the other hand, sexual scenes are brief and infrequent and never gratuitous. Far from titillating, the tone of such tableaux as Lake Traverse giving herself to her father’s killer evokes the sadness and emptiness of a “bad girl” trying in vain to find the love she thought she could not get from her father.

*Against the Day* is not light reading and would not be even at two hundred pages. It is dense with the necessary density of a novel that, like all of Pynchon’s fiction, spiritualizes the mathematical and mathematizes the spiritual. Pynchon’s conflation of electromagnetic physics and spiritualism in this novel is no random syncretism: It is an accurate portrayal of the interconnection of both disciplines in the years between 1893 and 1922. Casual references in the novel to Sir William Crookes—whose work with cathode rays made the vacuum tube, and therefore radio and television, possible—and to Sir Oliver Lodge—inventor of the spark plug—place them in the seemingly improper context of *Against the Day*’s medium Natalia Eskimoff. Nevertheless, both physicists were prominent spiritualists, and Pynchon’s narrative elucidates some of the surprising logic in the connection. Electromagnetic radiation, such as radio waves, suggests communication, connection by invisible means—voices, images, information passing through unseen worlds. The nonscientific world thinks of physicists and mathematicians as hardheaded materialists and realists, but most advances in those fields have been made by speculation that strikes the layperson as mystical, dreamy, or just plain crazy. What if there were more than three spatial dimensions, asked mathematician Herman Minkowski (1864-1909), mentioned in *Against the Day* on pages 324 and 458? What if time as we experience it did not exist, wondered metaphysician J. M. E. McTaggert (1866-1925), mentioned on pages 239 and 412? What if gravitation were simply a geometric function, queried W. K. Clifford (1843-1877), mentioned on pages 249 and 632?

The interplay of religion, physics, and the material world may well be best summed up by Pynchon’s choice of title for his sixth novel. *Against the Day* suggests an apocalyptic idiom from the King James Bible, 2 Peter 3:7 but also a photographic term that has implications for modern physics and non-Euclidian geometry. In the technique that early French photographers called *contre-jour*, “against the day,” cameras shot into the light source, reducing foregrounded objects to two-dimensional
Outlines. At the very historical moment that mathematicians, physicists, and science-fiction writers were exploring the implications of multidimensional space, photographers were reminding people how recently the pictorial arts had taught everyone to think in three dimensions. At that same time aeronautics forced map making to become three-dimensional, as aviatrix Penny Black observes on the antepenultimate page of the novel, 1,083. Pynchon knows how long pictorial art has been aware of the geometrical implications of perspective drawing, and he builds into the plot the use of a seventeenth century vogue for anamorphic drawings and paintings that could only be “decoded” by an anamorphoscope, which twists the distorted drawing into a recognizable shape. Pynchon has the Chums of Chance looking for a map that can only be decoded by a paramorphoscope, which reveals more than three spatial dimensions. It is this trans-tertiary world that constantly threatens to break into the novel and peeks in at the end as visitors from the future invade the world of the early twentieth century, seeming to promise revelation but leaving their real motives in question.

The only way to sum up Against the Day may well be the kind of old vaudeville joke in which Pynchon too often delights. What is the novel about? It’s about 1,100 pages.

John R. Holmes

Review Sources

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