

1 SASCHA PÖHLMANN, ed., *Against the Grain: Reading Pynchon's Counternarratives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 379 pp.

5 Pynchon scholarship and scholars tend to echo the defining characteristics of the author at the center of their discipline, namely, paranoia and erudition. In other words, Pynchon's paranoid texts often spawn paranoid readings, and his meticulously researched writing demands incursions into the esoteric and the arcane in search of the appropriate contexts and texts. It is said that pets often resemble their owners and something not altogether dissimilar could be asserted here.

10 Having published three novels in the space of seven years (between 2006 and 2013), the arrival of *Against the Day*—after an almost decade-long lacuna—perhaps signalled the beginning of what could be termed Pynchon's late period, in fact the author's most prolific stage thus far. The discipline of Pynchon studies appears to be, likewise, entering a new stage. The recent demise of long-standing US-based journal *Pynchon Notes* was preceded by the emergence of another author-centric publication, the UK-based open-access *Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon*, which has since revised its subtitle to *A Journal of American Literature*, either diluting or broadening its scope. In line with broader trends in U.S. literary studies, the intersection between literature and science, visualities, temporalities, and the political are the four prevalent themes that dominate contemporary discussion of Pynchon's work and make themselves manifest in the edited collection *Against the Grain*. The essays in this volume, furthermore, engage in the ever-strengthening move towards the reassessment of well-established critical dogma. And whilst concepts such as postmodernism and metafiction still apply to Pynchon's work, there is a growing tendency for the terms themselves to be present merely tacitly in recent critical studies, kept at arm's length, so that Pynchon's relationship to them can be questioned further.

15
20
25
30
35
40
44
45
46 *Against the Grain* has its origins in the 2008 International Pynchon Week held at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich and, as such, displays the same tell-tale symptom as most conference proceedings and post-symposium collections unavoidably exhibit, namely a general lack of thematic or even methodological coherence. However, whilst this could be seen as a drawback in the case of

essays on an author with a flat, unproblematic voice, as it pertains to Thomas Pynchon this is an approach that allows the polyphonic and encyclopedic qualities of the author's work to emerge in all their glory. After all, a scholarly collection dealing with Pynchon's oeuvre, which contains multitudes, would be remiss if it did not read like a score of different conversations taking place simultaneously.

With the majority of the pieces dealing with, or at the very least touching on, *Against the Day* (2006), the collection captures the initial flurry of academic and readerly enthusiasm for Pynchon's return to the marathonic form. Sascha Pöhlmann's introduction to the collection is much more than a mere set of preambular remarks on the essays to follow. Pöhlmann proposes that *Against the Day* be read as a postnational novel, going on to define postnationalism "as the theory and practice of challenging the hegemony of nation-ness" (17), which he sees, ultimately, as yet another metanarrative. Declaring that our critical preconception of Pynchon as a postmodernist requires a long overdue re-examination, Pöhlmann proceeds to outline a convincing case for *Against the Day* to be read as a complex text: not merely a labyrinthine one, but rather suggesting the novel's treatment of imaginary numbers as a structural metaphor that shapes the entirety of its narrative.

Likewise, Ali Chetwynd's contribution to the collection broadens our understanding of Pynchon's structuring principles, expanding as it does on the work of Molly Hite and many others. Chetwynd's piece, "Imperfect Circles," challenges the often-unquestioned notion of the V-2 arc as *Gravity's Rainbow's* central metaphor and organizing emblem, offering us a broader vocabulary of curves through which to read Pynchon's *magnum opus*. The piece's exploration of "alternative flight shapes" (115) takes us through symmetrical and asymmetrical curves, teleological forces, and the Rocket-Centre, ultimately positing the vortex as the "shape that allows us to reconcile the ideas of zero as a central point, and zero as a boundary on an interface between two states" (126).

Other noteworthy contributions include Simon de Bourcier's piece on the treatment of the Fourth Dimension in *Against the Day*, which presents the reader with a wealth of literary, historical, and scientific contexts for Pynchon's exploration of the topic. Reading the novel alongside the work of H.G. Wells, P.D.

Ouspensky, Henri Bergson, and others, de Bourcier places *Against the Day* firmly within Pynchon's long-standing tradition of representing different models of time. Inger H. Dalsgaard also examines different temporalities in her contribution to the collection, focusing on the post-industrial capitalist demands made by clock time. Dalsgaard persuasively argues that if, as Benjamin Franklin wrote, "Time is Money," then sloth and idleness become not an affront against God, but rather "a capitalist sin" (87). She then proceeds to astutely scrutinize *Against the Day*'s representation of "vehicle[s] for creative resistance to the capitalist colonization of time" (83), concluding that within the novel grace may be "available in the future"; however, it must be "attained actively," "rather than by waiting and hoping" (94). In so doing, Dalsgaard places *Against the Day* at a midway between doe-eyed optimism and the cynicism with which postmodernism has often been associated.

"Still Moving *Against the Day*," Rodney Taveira's contribution to the volume, has enormous potential with its promise to examine the *contre-jour* technique (present as early as *Against the Day*'s very title), painting, and the mid-point between the still and the moving image. Unfortunately, the article loses both focus and momentum, and that initial promise is eventually broken, as the piece touches on the work of Roland Barthes (though not in any depth) and attempts fairly unsuccessfully to draw parallels between Pynchon's fictional plastic artist Andrea Tancredi and figures as disparate as Luigi Russolo, Umberto Boccioni, and René Magritte, before ending in an unsatisfying nebulosity. Whilst Taveira's essay offers us too many divergent avenues, Clément Lévy's frustrates our expectations by barely expanding his promising topic beyond the length of an actual conference paper. Lévy's piece "As Far as Pynchon 'Loves Cameras'" presents us with many well-reasoned, thought-provoking insights into the pervasiveness of photography in Pynchon's work, from the fact that photography "gives form to our representation of the world" (165), to Lévy's ultimately Barthesian assessment: "Pynchon describes photographic images for the fatality they entail" (164). However, the richness of potential in Lévy's section merited, or even demanded, further development.

Just as the collection opened with Pöhlmann's introductory reading of *Against the Day* as a "complex text" through the lens of imaginary numbers, so does the volume end with another piece addressing mathematical metaphors: Hanjo Berressem's in depth interpretation of *eigenvalues* from Pynchon's first use of the term in *V.* onwards, focusing on *Against the Day* in particular. Discussing the author's characters as eigenorganizations and their movements as eigenvectorial, Berressem makes a strong case for a link between eigenvalues and "physical and psychic habits" (357), presenting us with an overview of "Pynchon's vectorial poetics" (362). As is the case with de Bourcier's contribution to this collection, this piece further highlights the growing trend—and indeed the critical need—for studies on the interaction between literature and science in Pynchon's oeuvre.

Besides being a rich trove of critical perspectives on Pynchon's work, *Against the Grain* also offers us a glimpse at the future of Pynchon studies, having heralded the publication of the collection's editor Sascha Pöhlmann's *Pynchon's Postnational Imagination* (2010), contributor Simon de Bourcier's *Pynchon and Relativity: Narrative Time in Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels* (2012), and the forthcoming collection on Sex and Gender in Pynchon's work co-edited by contributors Ali Chetwynd and Georgios Maragos (as well as Joanna Freer), not to mention the long-awaited *Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2011), edited by contributor Inger H. Dalsgaard, and both Luc Herman and Brian McHale. The rationale for the structure of the collection is not entirely clear, though the eclectic idiosyncratic to the discipline, by virtue of Pynchon's own encyclopedic narratives, is done no disservice by the wide range of approaches and themes. Not only does the diversity of this essay collection do justice to Pynchon's erudite knowledge of the highbrow, the lowbrow, and everything in between, it also serves as a map surveying the new discoveries, theoretical suppositions, and potential directions in which Pynchon scholarship may go in the future, charting as it does the on-going progress of the discipline.

Xavier Marcó del Pont (London)