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Good Mourning, America: Genealogies of Loss in *Against the Day*

ABSTRACT:

In this article, I offer a reading of Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day* (2006) that situates it in the 9/11 archive. I argue that Pynchon's displacement of the contemporary anti-American terrorism to its turn of the twentieth century anti-capitalist counterpart represents an implicit critique both of the terrorist spectacle that took place on 9/11 and the subsequent US response. Moreover, the implication of Pynchon's historical transposition is that the event itself, the media-induced "percepticide" that followed, as well as the government policies after 9/11, all worked to overshadow systemic contradictions and power relations implicated in anti-American terrorism. By working through allegory and allusion, and simultaneously uncovering and reimagining the historical co-emergence of corporate power and suppression of organized labor struggles in the United States, *Against the Day* turns the readers' gaze from the traumatic violence of 9/11 towards events and problems that are either forgotten or marginalized in the national debates about the post-9/11 moment. These include issues of class struggle, social justice, and the entanglement of corporate interests and state power in the United States. As a novel about loss, *Against the Day* can be seen as yet another, alternative narrative of mourning. However, Pynchon posits human suffering as the grounds for trans-national solidarities, and also, by insisting on the problems of labor, points to the horizon against which these are consolidated—that of a global political economy. That way, the novel weaves together issues of traumatic loss, affect and community, and politics; issues central to the 9/11 archive.

KEYWORDS:

History, mourning, trauma, 9/11, community, terrorism, capitalism

RÉSUMÉ :

Dans cet article, je propose une lecture du roman de Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (2006) le plaçant au sein des archives du 11 septembre. Le fait que Pynchon remplace le terrorisme anti-américain contemporain par son équivalent anticapitaliste du début du XXe siècle représente une critique implicite à la fois du spectacle terroriste qui a eu lieu lors du 11 septembre et des réactions américaines qui s'en sont ensuivies. L'implication de la transposition historique de Pynchon est que l'événement même, le « percepticide » déclenché par les médias, ainsi que les politiques gouvernementales de l'après 11 septembre ont tous œuvré dans le but d'éclipser les contradictions systémiques existantes qui engendrent le terrorisme anti-américain. À l'aide d'allégories et d'allusions, ainsi qu'en dévoilant et en réimaginant simultanément la coémergence historique du pouvoir des grandes entreprises et de la suppression de la lutte syndicale organisée aux États-Unis, *Against the Day* éloigne le regard du lecteur de la violence traumatique du 11 septembre pour le braquer sur des événements et des problèmes qui sont soit ignorés, soit marginalisés au sein des débats nationaux portant sur l'après 11 septembre. Ces événements et problèmes incluent la lutte des classes, la justice sociale, ainsi que l'enchevêtrement des intérêts des grandes entreprises et du pouvoir d'État aux États-Unis. En tant que roman ayant pour thème la perte, *Against the Day* peut être considéré comme un autre récit alternatif du deuil qui n'est pas limité par les frontières nationales. Pynchon postule que la souffrance humaine forme la base de solidarités transnationales, et désigne également, en insistant sur les problèmes des travailleurs, l'horizon auquel ces dernières s'adossent, celui d'une économie politique mondiale. De cette façon, le roman tisse entre elles les questions de perte traumatique, d'affect et de communauté, et de politique, qui sont toutes des questions fondamentales aux archives du 11 septembre.

MOTS CLES :

Histoire, deuil, traumatisme, 11 septembre, communauté, terrorisme, capitalisme

Can Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* be read as a 9/11 novel? This article is an argument in favor of such a reading. In my view, the novel stands out as an exception to the dominant ways in which the impact of 9/11 was registered in American culture and provides an alternative narrative of mourning. However, the mourning and loss that *Against the Day* dramatizes shift the grounds of the usual, normal and normative post-9/11 US debates.

Let me begin with a generalization: most 9/11 novels focus on the psychology of individual experience and translate the national crisis into a domestic crisis, a crisis in the family. In these family dramas, the event of 9/11 figures primarily as a turning point in the private lives of the protagonists: it causes individual trauma (in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), it breaks apart families (in DeLillo's *Falling Man*), and—more often than not—marks the possibility for a new beginning (Claire Messud's *Emperor's Children* and Neil LaBute's *Mercy Seat* are exemplary in that respect). It could be argued that these evolutionary family narratives participate in the rhetoric of break or rupture that dominated the public debates of 9/11. In the post-9/11 US foreign and domestic policy, the event figured as the point that marked the threshold of a new age. In this hegemonic political narrative, 9/11 represents the historical moment in which the main protagonist, the US nation, breaks up with a past that is equated with a state of almost childlike innocence and is made to, somewhat reluctantly, take action and “enter history.” Examples of such discursive management of the traumatic event are numerous, and are not limited to the sphere of politics: “History has called America to action,” said President Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address, while the 2002 National Security Strategy talks about “the new world we [the United States] have entered.” In *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*, John Barth wrote about “the End of the World as We (Americans) Knew It.” The protagonist of Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, a survivor of the attacks, hears the following words from his doctor: “Now you know what it's like to live in history.”

In one way or another, all these pronouncements rely on the idea that everything changed and that the US entered a new age on September 11, 2001. As Mary Dudziak warned, this idea “has been deployed to justify departure from past practices, from a new secrecy in detention and deportation of noncitizens to the preemptive use of American military power” (8). In other words, the rhetoric of rupture—which supports the discourse about crisis—is tied up with the logic of the state of exception. This is true not only of 9/11, although the aftermath of this particular event owes a lot to its encoding in terms of an end, or of a new beginning—in any case it implies a radical break with the past.

Against the Day shares this concern with historical breaks and continuities. The novel weaves an intricate narrative web that offers a panoramic view of a historical moment of crisis: a moment that is tragic and traumatic, but not unique or new; not a simple disruption within the system or a rupture in history, but a re-emergent systemic and historical pattern, a moment of repetition. Although partly relying on the genre of family drama, the sheer vastness of the novel's scope (over one thousand pages) turns it into a representation of the hegemonic structures of economy, technology, power, and affect. It

is the novel's expansive focus that allows *Against the Day* to transpose the topicalities of the post-9/11 "now" onto its relevant pasts. There is a trans-historical mapping at work in the novel, a process of unearthing the genealogies of the present moment. Pynchon's vision of history seems to owe a lot to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, in the sense that the moment of "now" is seen as an accumulation and intensification of significant pasts (cf. Benjamin 262-63).¹

These remarks might sound far-fetched, seeing that they concern a novel whose story is set at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, and which deals primarily with labor struggles in the American Midwest. Nevertheless, I want to argue that the novel both incorporates and dislocates the present, post-9/11 moment. One of the central story-lines in the novel follows the lives of the Traverses, a family of Colorado miners whose patriarch, Webb, participated in the labor struggles of the late nineteenth-century Midwest. Pynchon accurately documents the turmoils that accompanied the industrialization of the United States and, throughout the book, rather unambiguously refers to them as "class war." The other side in the conflict is represented by Scarsdale Vibe, the head of the Vibe Corporation, one of the "plutocrats" and "owners" that the likes of Webb wage their war against. Webb Traverse is also known as the Kieselguhr Kid, the mythic anarchist bomber, which is why he is eventually killed by Vibe's mercenaries—he is basically considered to be a terrorist. Through the novel we follow Webb's sons' attempts to cope with their loss and avenge their father, and we see them getting involved with and working for the Vibe corporation, participating in the Mexican revolution, international anarchist actions, imperialist schemings of the British and the Russian empires, as well as in more or less epochal events in South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia just before and during World War I.

Throughout these complex narrative developments, the novel offers us signals that connect it to the post-9/11 moment. The description of the destruction of "the great city brought to sorrow and ruin" (Pynchon 2006: 148) brings to mind images of New York City on and immediately post-9/11. The "day of unconditional wrath," as the devastation of the city is described, does not "purify" the city which continues to be dominated by "greed [and] real-estate speculating local politics" (Pynchon 2006: 153). Moreover, "on each anniversary of that awful event, spanning the sky over the harbor, would appear a night panorama—not quite a commemorative reenactment—more an abstract array of moving multicolored lights against a blue, somehow maritime, darkness, into which the viewer might read what he chose" (Pynchon 2006: 154). To read this passage without thinking about the towers of light that

1 Possible connections between Pynchon's strategy of trans-historical mapping and Benjamin's philosophy of history (an intriguing topic in itself) are explored in more detail in Cvek, especially in the section "Mapping histories" (233-39).

illuminated the New York sky on the first several 9/11 anniversaries seems impossible. Also, despite the fact that there is no such motif in the novel itself, the cover of the Penguin paperback edition features a painting by the Italian futurist Tullio Crali that gives us a view from the cockpit of an aircraft diving towards a skyscraper cityscape not unlike that of lower Manhattan (the painting is from 1939 and is called “Nose-diving on the City”).

If we take these clues as invitations to include the present moment in the novel’s spatio-temporal mix, *Against the Day* can be understood as mapping some central issues of the post-9/11 US contemporaneity onto another historical period: terrorism, capitalist globalization, the coupling of corporate interest and state power, quelling of political dissent at home, mourning and loss—all these are crucial themes of *Against the Day* as well as fundamental problems of the 9/11 cultural archive. Here, I want to focus on an issue that is as central as it is obvious: terrorism. First, I would like to examine a particular conflation operating in the post-9/11 US discourse on terrorism: the ideological merging of anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism. I think that for Pynchon this conflation marks yet another loss after 9/11: a further shrinking of possible alternatives to capitalist globalization. As *Against the Day* strives to disentangle this conflation, it also provides the readers with an originary tale of loss of political alternatives in the United States. My second point is that the novel offers a historical narrative about the entanglement of the discourse on terrorism and the rise of industrial capitalism in the United States. By way of these historicizing procedures, the novel works against notions of traumatic break—which were instrumentalized after 9/11—and exposes historical continuity beneath the apparently disrupting spectacle of violence.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the international anti-capitalist movement (or the “anti-globalization” movement) started appearing as an uncanny double of anti-American Islamic terrorism. Don DeLillo seems to have been especially interested in the parallels between the two, as he put them virtually on the same side in his 9/11 essay, describing both as being opposed to a future-oriented United States (cf. DeLillo 2001). Similarly, the only voices opposing the United States in *Falling Man* come from Islamic fundamentalists and a German leftist ex-terrorist—not an anti-globalization activist, but still someone (once) aligned with anti-capitalist ideology and action. Other examples of this tendency are many and speak of the unsuspected global consequences of the event. In the 2001 Annual Report of the World Economic Forum, the organization’s president Klaus Schwab stated that “The past year has ... been a tumultuous one for all of us, beginning with the threat of anti-globalization protest and ending with the threat of global terrorism” (World Economic Forum). The protesters and the

terrorists are here reduced to the presumably common denominator of a “threat” to global economy. Before the 2002 meeting of the World Economic Forum in New York, a *New York Times* columnist commented on the announced anti-globalization protests by saying that “New York needs this [protest] about as much as it needs another airplane attack” (FAIR). Such conflating of anti-globalists and terrorists should be viewed in the context of the common inclination of national governments after 9/11 to use anti-terrorist legislation for suppression of leftist opposition to neoliberal economic policies. One of the more infamous examples of this development comes from Germany, where a sociologist from Humboldt University was arrested on suspicion of terrorism based on evidence such as his use of the words “reproduction,” “political praxis,” “gentrification” and “Marxist-Leninist” in his published work (cf. Smith).

Another example comes from post-occupation Iraq. Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority—a body in charge, among other things, of the privatization of the Iraqi economy—started a counter-terrorism consulting company soon after the 9/11 attacks. In a 2008 paper about “New Risks in International Business,” Bremer talks about resistances to neoliberal policies (such as the ones introduced in Iraq after the invasion) and directly links the implementation of free market economy to the rise of terrorism. Bremer writes that free trade leads to “the creation of unprecedented wealth,” but also has “immediate consequences for many.” It “requires laying off workers. And opening markets to foreign trade puts enormous pressure on traditional retailers and trade monopolies” (quoted in Klein 360-61). All these changes cause “growing income gaps and social tensions,” which in turn can lead to a range of attacks—including terrorist ones—on US firms (Klein 360-61). Moreover, Bremer sees the threat of reactive terrorist actions primarily as originating in the anti-globalization movement. He states explicitly that “the anti-globalization movement is spawning terrorist groups at its margins. Because globalization is associated most closely with America, U.S. multinationals are particularly vulnerable to the risks it poses” (Bremer).

What Bremer’s article suggests is that new forms of “terrorism” are brought to life by the process of “economic modernization.” This points to a co-emergence: the violent implementation of an economic model is coeval with often violent resistances, of which many are dubbed “terrorist.” There is a history to this co-involvement: according to Jeffery Clymer, discourse on terrorism emerged in the US during the labor struggles of the late nineteenth century. Clymer concludes his study of “America’s culture of terrorism” by saying that “the idea of terrorism,” which was consolidating during that period, was “an important hegemonic prop in the maintenance of America’s capitalist order” (13). Pynchon has

clearly been interested in the co-emergence of the capitalist system of production and the violent resistances to it at least since 1984, when he wrote his praise to the English Luddites (cf. Pynchon 1984). In *Against the Day*, he revisits the same topic, but in a different historical context. I said that the novel dramatizes the moment of crisis as a historical repetition. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that it draws an arc from the early days of industrialization in the United States—the dawn of the American century—to the moment in which the US power has gone global (and is, according to many, in decline); or, in terms of world-system theory, from the end of the American cycle of accumulation to its beginning.

The opening of the novel takes place during the 1893 Chicago World Exhibition, an event which, in the classical study of “incorporation of America,” Alan Trachtenberg takes as the moment that symbolically marked the beginning of a new era. For him, the White City of the Colombian Exposition embodied the consolidation of the nation and its capitalist elite, but also ushered the United States into the era of incorporated economic and political power. Pynchon references many of the revolutionary events of the period treated by Trachtenberg, such as the building of railroads, which in *Against the Day* mark the global advance of capitalism in its new, corporate form. The novel can be read almost as a fictionalized account of Trachtenberg’s classic study. (More recently, Trachtenberg commented on his work by situating it in the context of globalization: “[w]e’ve arrived today at a new stage of incorporation, a point at which America, Inc., is about to rename itself Globe, Inc. In many ways it seems a colorized rerun” (2003: 762). This view of globalization as expansion of US corporate power provides another link between *Against the Day* and the present moment.)

For Trachtenberg, this period also saw the emergence of a national ideal: the entrepreneur. “Was not the successful businessman the very model of a ‘healthy and independent’ America?,” asks Trachtenberg rhetorically (1992: 73). Pynchon’s equivalent of this ideal type, Scarsdale Vibe, the arch-capitalist and incarnation of corporate greed, reflects on the social conflicts defining his historical moment by asking, “Should there be moral reservations, in a class war, about targeting one’s enemies?” (Pynchon 2006: 332). He then elaborates:

My civil war has yet to come. And here we are in it now, in the thick, no end in sight. The Invasion of Chicago, the battles of Homestead, the Coeur d’Alene, the San Juans. These communards speak a garble of foreign tongues, their armies are the damnable labor syndicates, their artillery is dynamite, they assassinate our great men and bomb our cities,

and their aim is to despoil us of our hard-won goods, to divide and sub-divide among their hordes our lands and our houses, to pull us down, our lives, all we love, until they become as demeaned and soiled as their own. The future belongs to the Asiatic masses, the pan-Slavic brutes, even, God help us, the black seething spawn of Africa interminable.
(Pynchon 2006: 333)

The figure that embodies Vibe's fear, as his listing of historical locations of class struggle makes evident, is one of a racialized worker-cum-terrorist. The image of the worker became during the Gilded Age antithetical to the new hegemonic ideal of Americanness. Thus, the "ideological" violence of late nineteenth century that accompanied the incorporation of America was considered "by definition un-American" (Gage 102). This conflation of anti-capitalism and anti-Americanism was emphasized by the fact that a large part of the industrial workforce, and consequently many labor organizers and anarchists, were of immigrant descent, as the closing lines of Vibe's speech remind us. In Trachtenberg's words, the worker at the time "appeared as foreign, alien, in need of Americanizing" (1992: 87). At the same time, "terrorism" became the word of choice for the description of anti-capitalist struggles. To quote Clymer once more, "emergent means of narrating industrial capitalism and classed identity were deeply intertwined with the way modern terrorism was imagined as a form of violence in turn-of-the-century America" (5). Hence, "terrorism" emerged as a term through which the debates on industrial/corporate capitalism were refracted—that is, it became the focus for either a displacement or articulation of systemic contradictions, primarily issues of class and labor in a consolidating national economy.

The novel often speaks to this conflation by evoking the notorious Haymarket bombing of 1886. As a private detective reasons in the novel, "since the Haymarket bomb," "antiterrorist security" has become a top priority at the Chicago World Fair (Pynchon 2006: 25). Later on, a member of the Chums of Chance shows his support for the Haymarket bombing by describing it as "a turning point in American history, and the only way working people will ever get a fair shake under that miserable economic system," only to be called "anti-American" and "communistic" (Pynchon 2006: 111-12). Foreignness is again articulated with terrorism in a comical dramatization of the protocols of "the infant science of counter-terrorism," when the suspect (who will turn out to be an undercover policeman) is first identified by "his accent, some think Irish, others Italian" (Pynchon 2006: 445). Such examples remind the reader of the historical fact of the incorporation of capitalist enterprise and

an ideal of Americanness which contributed to the hegemonic notion of anti-capitalist violence and anti-capitalism in general as being un- or anti-American. In Pynchon's *Against the Day*, we witness an attempt to undo this ideological conflation—in which opposition to capitalism and immigrant descent are merged in the image of the anti-American “terrorist”—and also an attempt at resurrecting, be it only in fiction, the tradition of a national anti-capitalist struggle.

In the context of the post-9/11 US, Pynchon's historical exploration of these early applications of “terrorism” to domestic resistances to capitalism obviously complicates the contemporary, often indiscriminate usage of the term. That is why Pynchon's historicization of the present moment should be seen as a political move. As critics have noted, the understanding of the problem of terrorism changed after 9/11 in the US. Whereas in the 70s and the 80s terrorists were seen as violently introducing politics to the private sphere of everyday life, after 9/11, Melani McAlister argues, “the problem was understood differently; terrorists might be speaking in political terms, but those terms were literally invisible, and so their acts became evidence of private pathology” (279). This depoliticization of discourse on terrorism is not without consequences. As McAlister warns in retrospect, “[f]ramed as an act of ‘evildoers’ who hated something as vague as ‘freedom’—rather than, say, something as concrete and specific as U.S. foreign policy—the violence of September 11 seemed incomprehensible as a political act” (279). I would like to emphasize the word “incomprehensible” here: the incomprehensibility of the 9/11 event was most often culturally inscribed as a consequence of an unrepresentable collective trauma that the nation experienced on 9/11. But McAlister's remark suggests that traumatic incomprehensibility could also be related to the disappearance of the historical and political concerns in the media and narrative accounts of the event, and their near-total substitution by psychological aspects of individual experience. It is enough to look at Updike's *Terrorist*, or even the depiction of the terrorists in DeLillo's *Falling Man* to see that Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai are right when claiming that in post-9/11 United States “terrorist” becomes a fluctuating signifier contingent on discourses of otherness/difference, race, sexuality, and nationality. This rhetorical procedure works to “reduce complex social, historical, and political dynamics to various psychic causes rooted in childhood family dynamics” (Puar and Rai 124). The terrorist act is depoliticized through a focus on the abnormal private life of the individual.

Against the Day articulates the problem differently. The novel registers the co-emergence of an increasingly globalizing capitalist system and the resistances that accompanied it, with no easy way to separate the sides in class conflicts that begin to unfold globally. The connections the novel establishes

between the present and its pasts indicate that contemporary terrorism is similarly not a simple matter of good versus evil. As the turn-of-the-twentieth-century political violence of *Against the Day* represented a symptom of growing economic and social tensions, the contemporary one can hardly be understood without the context of a globalized capitalist economy that continues to produce social inequalities on an even larger scale. Moreover, Pynchon's shift of focus onto a different historical manifestation of terrorism—a flexible and polyvalent term in US public discourse—points to the fact that the term participated in the hegemonic consolidation of capitalist/corporate and nationalist/globalist power both prior and after 9/11.

The novel's characters obsessively discuss issues of violent political struggle and, in particular, the matter of their victims' innocence. Webb Traverse, meditating on the proper target for his next dynamite blast and possible deaths of innocent people, reasons as follows:

Lord knew that owners and mine managers deserved to be blown up, except that they had learned to keep extra protection around them—not that going after their property, like factories and mines, was that much better of an idea, for, given the nature of corporate greed, those places would usually be working in shifts, with the folks most likely to end up dying being miners, including children working as nippers and swampers—the same folks who die when the army comes charging in. Not that any owner ever cared rat shit about the lives of workers, of course, except to define them as Innocent Victims in whose name uniformed goons could then go out and hunt down the Monsters That Did the Deed.
(Pynchon 2006: 84-5)

As much as it resonates with the post-9/11 discussions about the US innocence in face of the attacks, the passage cannot be simply applied to them either. This indicates the extent to which *Against the Day* is written “against” that iconic day. Pynchon radically shifts the grounds for the contemporary understanding of terrorism and draws the distinctions about “us” and “them” along very different lines: those of capitalist dispossession. Read in this context, *Against the Day*'s insistence on the co-emergence of industrial capitalism and “terrorism” points to the fact that, both in the age of the Red Scares and now, “terrorism” functioned as an often too simple ideological cover for contentious processes within existing power relations. *Against the Day* points to the involvement of the discourse on terrorism with the process of consolidation of class power, but, also—as the novel's fusion of the immigrant and

worker/terrorist suggests—its relation to the consolidation of a hegemonic idea of national identity.

However, *Against the Day* is not a neat allegory of the present-day United States; there is no symmetry in its correspondences to our historical moment. Rather, through its historiographic method constructed at the intersection of allegory and allusion, the novel draws an expansive historical map that provides significant genealogies to the post-9/11 US present. *Against the Day* constantly wavers between the original experience of history—the historical moment the novel references—and that which it haunts and which it is haunted by—the other histories that significantly resonate with it, but that are nevertheless irreducible to it. There is, I think, an ethical aspect to this method: by establishing parallels between different historical experiences, it encourages and requires a sympathetic reading of otherness, or an expansion of what Judith Butler called “the norms of recognition” (43).

The novel’s topics—the robber barons, the unchecked rise of corporate power, the military conflicts for natural resources in “Inner Asia,” the repression of domestic political dissent—can all be viewed as more than allusions to the post-9/11 moment: for Pynchon, they are early episodes in the long histories that converged in the 9/11 event and were intensified in its aftermath. This also means that Pynchon approaches the trauma of 9/11 as an opportunity for ethical and historical insight—for an account of all that has been lost. In the novel, 9/11 is regarded as illuminating both the genealogies of contemporary hegemony and the parallel histories of occlusion; as intensifying the historical coupling of US corporate and political power, exposing the affinities between globalization, imperialism and terrorism, as well as signaling the rise of the national security state after 9/11. Read within the 9/11 archive, *Against the Day* represents a refusal to approach the event in hegemonic terms. The opposition evidenced in the novel’s title can be extended to encompass this refusal. Like other 9/11 fictions, Pynchon’s oppositional discourse deals with historical loss, but the topicalities and the historical vision it offers represent an attempt to look beyond the events that triggered the process of mourning.

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