Thomas Pynchon is a hard writer to pin down. Over the last sixty years, his writing has arguably generated as much critical attention as any contemporary author to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. There are currently two active scholarly journals and approximately one hundred critical texts and essay collections devoted entirely to deciphering Pynchon’s challenging ‘encyclopaedic’ narratives. The author’s inherently reclusive nature has also resulted in critics using his deeply influential fictions as a means to expose the man lurking behind the page; despite a constant refusal to assume a public persona, Pynchon has been widely heralded as a perceptive social commentator, mathematical whiz, philosopher, music aficionado, and postmodern satirist, among others. Pynchon’s longest opus, Against the Day (2006), has only intensified such scholarship and debate, which has culminated in illustrious (albeit notoriously fickle) literary critic Harold Bloom’s bold proclamation that ‘certainly he is still the most important writer alive’.\(^1\) Recognising the novel’s daunting scope, Pynchon’s Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim’s Guide features a collection of essays by both established and emerging Pynchon scholars that serve as a ‘collective investigation’ (6), striving to promote a richer understanding of Pynchon’s socio-politically charged novel.

In the introductory chapter contextualising Against the Day’s pervading sense of interconnectedness, editor Christopher Leise cleverly asserts that ‘the treasury of genres, discourses, ideas, and facts cannot be fully accounted for by any one mind … save that of the septuagenarian Pynchon’ (5). Against the Day begins with the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair and follows hundreds of characters across nearly three decades, disorientating the reader with schizophrenic juxtapositions between First World War historical digressions and scatological fantasies. With this in mind, Severs and Leise have produced this text as a ‘guide’ that focuses (on what they consider) the three predominant dimensions of the book’s pursuits: narrative strategies, scientific belief and faith, and politics and economics.

The first set of essays brilliantly elucidate Pynchon’s complex narrative constructions in Against the Day, unravelling its mind-bending textual labyrinth to expose how Pynchon revels in manipulating generic devices and postmodern ideological variables in order to critically evaluate historical cultural eras and social mores. Brian McHale’s essay, ‘Genre as History: Pynchon’s Genre-Poaching’, is particularly persuasive and insightful, asserting that ‘Against the Day is a library of entertainment fiction … passed through the looking glass, rendered differently, altered: parodied, revised and demystified, queered’ (24). McHale specifically argues how the Tom Swift-inspired adventure, enduring Western, and spy thriller genres are represented in Pynchon’s novel through the practice of ‘mediated historiography’, which he defines as ‘the writing of an era’s history through the medium of its popular genres’ (25). Amy J. Elias builds on McHale’s fantastic opening critique by logically analysing how Pynchon’s defiance of generic expectations accommodates his anarchic politics. Arguably the most unique examination of the novel’s unusual narrative structure, however, is contained in

the fourth and final essay of this section by Justin St. Clair, who charts the construction and trajectory of major characters in the relation to the novel’s panoramic paradigm.

The subsequent sections, which focus on the intersection of scientific belief with faith, and politics and economics, feature essays that many critics feel delve closer to the ‘heart’ of Pynchon’s oeuvre. What I’m referring to here is textual analysis on Pynchon’s depictions of geopolitical systems, religion, and the wonderfully enigmatic concept of entropy (which has been inextricably linked with the author ever since he named his 1960 short story after the thermodynamic quantity). Against the Day has no shortage of meaningful scientific and spiritual allusions, ranging from characters exploiting the dangerous possibilities of time travel to evocative scenes with talking ball lighting. Inger H. Dalsgaard and Terry Reilly’s respective chapters on time travel and Nikola Tesla in Against the Day are the most compelling and thought-provoking in these sections, with both authors lucidly tracing complex scientific allusions and theory within Pynchon’s novel. For example, Dalsgaard considers that the text itself functions as a figurative time machine, where readers become ‘textual time travelers or ghosts h(a)unting narrative meaning, either within the framework of this novel or through alternative texts – including Pynchon’s other novels’ (117).

In contrast, Christopher K. Coffman’s overly ambitious attempt to scrutinise ‘popular’ religions with spatial dimensions in order to reveal the importance of planetary ecology in the novel fails to resonate not as a result of writerly enthusiasm, but due to the author reaching too far for a healthy connection. While Kathryn Hume does a better job at disentangling Pynchon’s religious and political positions in Against the Day, she notes that it is ‘his least paranoid novel’ (169). This assertion isn’t without merit. However, it does reveal a key oversight in this edited collection: the lack of attention devoted to Pynchon’s constant fascination and gaudy play with the dark forces of conspiracy and paranoia. For Pynchon, politics and economics typically result in the sinister blooming of grand conspiracies, featuring secret power structures and corrupt governing bodies. In this sense, Against the Day is no different, which is why it is disappointing that only Graham Benton’s essay, which provides an extensive textual-historical investigation of anarchism, broadly illustrates the narrative and thematic importance of conspiracy.

Leise concludes the opening chapter to Pynchon’s Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim’s Guide with the claim that ‘every Pynchon novel … calls for worthy guides, lamps to light the way home. But this novel may need more lamps than most to illuminate its unsuspected importance’ (11). This is the kind of guide that will provide loyal readers and experts with welcome supplementary lighting, and I suspect newcomers and budding scholars will wisely use many of the essays in this collection as safety beacons. While some of the ‘lamps’ are shining more brightly than others, Pynchon’s Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim’s Guide represents the current benchmark for future Against the Day scholarship and is another worthy addition to the ‘Pynchon Industry’.

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