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Abstract:

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Review of Simon de Bourcier, *Pynchon and Relativity: Narrative Time in Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels*

Sascha Pöhlmann

Six years after the publication of *Against the Day*, its critical reception is evidently moving beyond what could be considered its early stages — comprising reviews, three essay collections (two printed and one online in the journal GRAAT), and the bustle of online activity especially at Pynchon Wiki with its ongoing annotation project — into the phase where the first monographs that put the novel at their center are emerging. Simon de Bourcier's *Pynchon and Relativity: Narrative Time in Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels* does not deal exclusively with *Against the Day*, but the novel is at the heart of its critical endeavor, and I am confident that the study will prove to be one of those that scholars who work on *Against the Day* will do well to consult no matter what aspect of the novel they are interested in. Even though de Bourcier's study is quite precise in its thematic focus on relativity and time, it nevertheless also offers the wide range of different contexts that readers almost certainly need in order to grasp these issues in their complexity. De Bourcier is writing in that tradition of Pynchon criticism that dwells extensively on scientific and philosophical concepts in order to elucidate the texts that are fundamentally informed by them, and he lives up to the high standard set by these earlier works. Of course, this means that the study often does not place Pynchon's novels at the center of its attention, and indeed it chooses — perhaps even dares — to leave these novels aside to provide readers with a wide-ranging discussion of, say, the fourth dimension. While some readers may consider this practice too remote in a work of literary criticism and may wish for a closer mapping of theory onto text, I believe de Bourcier has all in all made the right choice in presenting his material the way he did, and has in fact done his readers a service by communicating the scientific, philosophical, historical and literary contexts as thoroughly as possible before relating them to the Pynchonian text at hand.

Basically, the book is interested in the concept of time in Pynchon's novels, and especially in the fundamental change in the scientific view of time that was brought about by Einstein's theory of relativity. It develops a number of different arguments from this premise in six chapters that are connected but could also be read independently. The Einsteinian paradigm shift that is the linchpin of this study occurred during the time in which *Against the Day* is set, and this is indeed the novel in Pynchon's oeuvre in which issues of time in all their variety are presented most prominently. De Bourcier

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therefore uses *Against the Day* as a lens through which he reads Pynchon's other novels with regard to relativity and time, which is particularly effective when he compares it to *Mason & Dixon* and its Newtownian world that is still waiting to be challenged by Einstein's theories. Given that these are the basis from which the study departs in a variety of interpretive directions, it is appropriate that it opens with a chapter on "Critical and Theoretical Writing on Time, Relativity and Pynchon," which not only critically (and appropriately) reviews the state of research on time in Pynchon's novels, but also gives an overview of the relevant theories of time that were developed in physics and philosophy around Einstein's theory of relativity. While de Bourcier does not lose sight of the physical aspects of the debate, he strongly emphasizes its philosophical consequences in order to present the different ideologies of time (and space) that also compete with each other in Pynchon's writing: on the one hand, there is an eternalist model in which time is static, which holds that "all events exist perpetually" (9) while presenting subjects only with an illusion of the passage of time, and which therefore privileges being over becoming; on the other hand, there is a dynamic model that acknowledges the objective reality of time and allows for the possibility of change and becoming. Yet time is not only presented as a philosophical problem in this chapter but also as a literary problem, and it tackles the issues of narrative time promised by the title of the study by addressing the writing of Ricoeur, McHale, Kermode, Bakhtin, and others. While this first chapter is kept rather short and therefore sometimes seems too dense and hasty in its juxtaposition of so many theoreticians, it should be considered a preparation for the one that follows, and it gives a solid overview of different views on time before elaborating on them in much more detail.

Chapter two goes far deeper into the territories that were indicated in that introductory chapter, and it offers a thorough, wide-ranging and indeed fascinating discussion of the various connections between relativity and fiction. On the one hand, this means the importance of techniques of fiction in scientific thought experiments or the formulation of hypotheses (referencing especially Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of 'As if'*); on the other hand, this means the impact of theories of relativity and quantum mechanics on the construction of fictional worlds. De Bourcier centers his discussion around a particularly striking (and very Pynchonian) motif, the "impossible object," which challenges the ontological status of the fictional world while at the same time revealing this world as *physical* in the sense that it is governed by laws formulated by physics rather than other sciences. The study discusses two particular cases of "impossibility," the time machine and Schrödinger's cat, and their literary manifestations. Pynchon's texts are remarkably absent in this section, being saved for the next chapters; however, this unfortunately makes the discussion of other literary texts (such as *The Time Traveler's Wife*) seem rather gratuitous, even if, like Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, they indicate "a source for one of the subplots of *Against the Day*" (73). (De Bourcier presents such possible "sources" time and again in his study,

but fortunately largely as asides; it is probably a matter of personal taste in Pynchon criticism, but I believe most studies, this one included, would be no worse without such references.) When Pynchon's texts do come up in this chapter, however, their discussion adds a very important component to the issue of time and relativity in this study: mortality. De Bourcier shows convincingly that the scientific and philosophical complexities of time in Pynchon's texts are intricately related to a metaphysics of "redemption, transcendence and return from the dead" (2). If the theoretical quality of relativity may seem to lack a human element, then this aspect returns it to the discourse, and in doing so de Bourcier does justice to Pynchon's novels that explore the tensions between the abstraction of science and the lived experience of human individuals in their society. The chapter ends by returning to the question of impossible objects and possible worlds once more, reading them in terms of heterotopia and multiverse as well as contradiction and paradox.

Throughout this discussion, *Against the Day* has been gradually moving closer to the spotlight, and the following chapter on the fourth dimension addresses it more explicitly than the preceding ones. However, de Bourcier still follows his strategy of contextualization and discusses the novel somewhat indirectly by relating it to the discourse on the fourth dimension that is contemporary with the time of its setting, its "moment of intellectual history" (89). However, *Against the Day* is not merely a secondary presence in this discussion, even if the chapter is still dominated by the discursive environment the novel is placed in. The chapter cites H.G. Wells, P.D. Ouspensky, Henri Bergson, Charles Howard Hinton and others regarding their conceptions of time as a spatial fourth dimension before the paradigm shift of Einsteinian relativity. Most importantly, de Bourcier picks up again the notion of the impossible object — in this case Dr. Zoot's time machine and Merle Rideout's Integroscope — in order to discuss the different concepts of time that coexist (uneasily?) in *Against the Day*, arguing that the former represents the "deterministic vision of the Fourth Dimension" (118) of pre-relativity while the latter represents the potential of "multiple presents" (121) inherent in the Einsteinian space-time continuum. His reading is a convincing one, and it usefully illustrates another level on which world views compete in the novel beyond the struggle between Quaternionism and Vectorism that many critics have mostly been focusing on. Very importantly, de Bourcier goes on to argue in the next chapter that competing world views are in fact always also competing worlds.

This argument is made with reference to the Aether, and chapter 4 uses this concept to convincingly propose one way of understanding the multiplicity of worlds in *Against the Day* that presents a major ontological puzzle to readers, who for example need to reconcile the (co)existence of the Chums of Chance with those of other characters in the overlapping worlds of the text. While not solving the problem — it is a *koan*,

not a mathematical equation — de Bourcier certainly offers an important way of rephrasing and conceptualizing it in the first place. He argues that the ontological tension in the novel results from its heterotopic doubling of "a universe without Aether and a universe filled with Aether" (153), and that the Aether functions as "a token of hypothesis-formation and as an index of world" (155). These are not merely two different conceptions of the universe but truly different universes, since *Against the Day* makes "no ontological distinction between scientific model and natural fact" (157), so that one can ask with all seriousness: "did the Aether really exist at the turn of the twentieth century? Was it as real as, say, natural selection or atoms are now?" (181) This argument about these two universes does not claim to uncover any sort of basic structure of the novel, and it allows for the fact that each of universes in *Against the Day* contains a larger number of potential worlds, and yet it offers a useful model with which to conceptualize the overwhelming multiplicity of and in the text by sorting it according to the formulation of scientific hypotheses that are not descriptive but constitutive of the world. This seems to me the most valuable and striking insight of the study as a whole, especially as it acknowledges the importance of the imagination that is central to the ontological play in the novel while showing at the same time that this imagination works according to rules that are, among other things, set by scientific discourse.

Chapter five explores this scientific discourse further by mapping *Against the Day* onto *Mason & Dixon* and reading its Newtownian universe through the lens of relativity. Here, de Bourcier takes an entirely different approach than before, and instead of dwelling on the larger intellectual context of the novel rather opts for close reading. This works so remarkably well that one cannot help but wish he had employed this skill more in the preceding chapters as well, their merit notwithstanding. Narrative time is now considered at the level of the sentence, and de Bourcier finds evidence of Pynchon's views of time and relativity — especially his rejection of determinism — in the syntax, semantics, and narrative perspective of *Mason & Dixon*. For example, he argues that the recurring mixture of past and future tense in a "coexistence of times" (163) introduces an element of uncertainty to what actually should be certain (because it is in the past), but is nevertheless kept open due to the narrative situation and the ensuing ontology. Yet de Bourcier also considers *Mason & Dixon* as a whole, and he argues that it can be located, "like *Against the Day*, in an inconsistent, heterotopic fictional universe in which pre-Relativistic and post-Relativistic worlds coexist" (185). Furthermore, he also returns to the importance of time in Pynchon's fiction for human lives with regard to "our relationship to the past and to the dead" as well as "the tyranny of measured time" (169), although both aspects — and especially the latter one, perhaps also with regard to its anticapitalist implications — would have deserved a more elaborate treatment. However, this is not really a shortcoming in such a dense study, but rather an indication that it opens up the discourse about time in Pynchon's fiction to more possibilities than it could address itself without sacrificing its focus and coherence.

Unfortunately, it is precisely this focus and coherence that the book seems to neglect in its final chapter, and even though it certainly has its argumentative value, I think it might have been a wiser editorial choice to do without it and to distribute its useful content to other sections without giving it the undeserved prominence of a separate chapter. Whereas de Bourcier's reading of *Mason & Dixon* in the light of *Against the Day* worked very well because of corresponding concerns with time and relativity, it is less successful with regard to all other Pynchon novels, which is what chapter six is about. The most useful insight to be gleaned from this comprehensive reading is that it is with *Gravity's Rainbow* that "Relativity starts to play a significant role in the temporal structures of Pynchon's writing" (192); however, the individual readings of all novels that de Bourcier offers unfortunately remain all too superficial, as they must be, given that they occur in the space of about twenty pages. Every Pynchonite will certainly understand the desire to write about all of his novels, and de Bourcier's readings are still insightful, but without the room they need they simply cannot develop the same depth the other chapters exhibit quite impressively, and so the final chapter does not move beyond being a coda to a more profound work.

Yet this criticism should not detract from the overall quality of *Pynchon and Relativity: Narrative Time in Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels*. Over the course of 210 pages, de Bourcier manages to explore a variety of the intricacies of time and relativity in Pynchon's novels that one may well expect rather of several books of that length, and at the same time he manages to keep a balance between density and readability. Especially given the scope and difficulty of his topic, de Bourcier must be commended for writing in a highly lucid and reader-friendly style. This does not mean that he presents as simple what is actually complex, but rather that he skilfully manages to guide the reader through these complexities without ever losing sight of him or her. The book is a model for academic writing in this respect: de Bourcier tells his readers very clearly what arguments he will present, and how; he gives examples where one might be lost among abstraction; and he often grants his readers the benefits of repetition before taking the next argumentative step. At the same time, he steers clear of banality and oversimplification, and readers will be grateful for having an author who tries hard not to make very complicated ideas even more complicated by his way of expressing them. Make no mistake: the book is still a very challenging read, but thanks to its style it is also a rewarding one. It takes the existing works on time in Pynchon's novels very seriously but manages to voice its own criticism clearly while adding what it perceives to be lacking. It is not the last word on relativity in Pynchon's fiction (and how could it be?), nor does it hope to be; rather, it is a strong case for a *recognition* of relativity in his texts, and I am certain it will be considered as a solid foundation for future critical work not only on *Against the Day*, but on time in Pynchon's novels in general.

References

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