

## **Thomas Pynchon's Science** – a call for a scientific Baedeker, and diverse observations

This a letter I sent to a reviewer who often writes about books with scientific or technological subjects. It was not for publication and was more in the nature of a suggestion I wanted to make to someone I don't know personally. For this reason I have removed the person's name and particular references, and left only my substantive remarks.

I enjoyed your recent article ... especially your ... summary (of the history of science). As an artist, I like (the) idea of beauty lighting the way to truth. It may not be a scientifically sound notion, but if it inspires us in science or art it is valuable. It has always been a source of relief to me that art is less rigorous than science – or rigorous in a different way.

What I wanted to suggest, which ... came to me while reading the review, was that you write a piece on the scientific issues dealt with in Thomas Pynchon's work, especially his latest, *Against the Day*. I am plowing through it now, and though I enjoy it immensely, at times wish I had an informative reference on such scientific ideas such as Quaternionism, Vectorism, ether (not the gas), imaginary numbers, and parallel realities. If not you, someone with a similar grasp of the subject and a similar ability to express things in terms non-scientists can understand. Ideally it should be a scientist, or historian of science, with enough imagination about the subject to grapple with Pynchon on his own terms. I am thinking of an article, but I suppose the subject could fill a book. I have checked a few things on the web, of course, and could spend days at it, but this seems a subject worthy of serious treatment by the right author. (Please excuse my presumption; you may not even like Pynchon.)

Pynchon is unusual in being one of few writers for whom science and technology are important themes, who is at the same time very fanciful about their implications, who could nonetheless never be described as a science fiction writer. I don't have his background but I believe his respect for the science is too deep to allow him to misrepresent the science for the sake of his stories.

For example, I wonder if his often comical representation of scientific society around 1900 is too great a caricature of the reality. I'm thinking of the theoretical controversies, e.g. about whether the ether exists or not, and the scientists taking sides. Also, of whether some scientists of those times associated their ideas and areas of research (sometimes considered "fringe" science), which most of us might suppose to have little or no relevance outside science, with any notions of subversion of the established political-economic-technological order.

Pynchon gives us many episodes of the miraculous, the visionary, the physically impossible, the occult. In the context of the books they are convincing, and work very well to get across his vision. But he is no table-rapper or gullible new-age type, and I'm confident he does not believe the vast majority of his extraordinary inventions to be actually possible.<sup>1</sup> Which makes his use of the paranormal all that much more interesting. After all, he is not doing this to merely entertain, as does most popular occult fiction. He is doing it to assert something about our lives which is true even if there are no ghosts, time-travel (other than the routine), alternate realities, or colossal adenoids that eat London.

Sincerely yours,  
Allen Schill  
Torino, June 5th, 2009

Footnote (not included in letter):

<sup>1</sup> For example, his mind-bending notion in *Against the Day* of a device that applies the principle of integration to still photography to let us see through the photograph and into time, future and past: as a photograph is a record of an image formed by light in a particular interval of time defined by the opening and closing of the shutter, and thus a sort of derivative, if we start with a photograph and carry out the opposite but complementary operation (do the integral), we have a record of movement through time. Leaving aside the technical details of such a device and the eventual logistical problems of its use, it is a stunning idea. I recall being really charged-up, as a high-school senior taking calculus, by the dual notions of the integral and the derivative. To me somehow they were tools that enabled a multidimensional appreciation of the phenomena of existence. I would be hard put now, 40 years later, to say much more on the subject (or to do an operation in calculus). Still I remember very well its effect on me then, and so I can appreciate Pynchon's invention.

If I may go off on a slight tangent here, let me comment on the use of the device of time travel in narrative art. (I am thinking mainly of films, and not so much of books, because I have read little science fiction other than a few classics like H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and so can't say much.) It has always bothered me when time travel is used as a narrative device in that usually it gets impossibly complicated and paradoxical. If I try to resolve things logically, I end up with my head spinning from all the contradictions, even allowing liberally for alternate or parallel universes. Of course I remember before quickly this is only popular entertainment, just a tease, and that I shouldn't expect much coherence, only that the more banal narrative conventions be observed (e.g., the hero, the girlfriend, the conflict, the resolution). The paradox of time travel may be addressed, but only superficially, by milking the subject enough to give the viewers the momentary, flattering impression that they are thinking about something big. (Audio: *Twilight Zone* theme.) Further complications are too difficult to consider and would only slow down the development of the plot.

For example, in *Against the Day*, Pynchon carries forward the adventures of Kit Traverse on board the *Stupendica*, a passenger liner that metamorphoses into an armored battleship, the Austro-Hungarian *Emperor Maximilian*, in some action in the sea opposite Morocco. Or rather one ship undergoes some sort of mitosis or meiosis (or parthenogenesis?) into two. At this time, it seems that we and Kit enter an alternate reality, because after the action the warship is not transformed back into a passenger ship, and there is no longer on board any sign of Kit's would-be sweetheart Dally and the other passengers. (They are still on the passenger ship, which is now elsewhere.) Eventually Kit escapes from the dreadnought, but it was never clear to me when (or if) Kit returned to, if not a "real" and definitive reality, at least the one he and Dally started out in, and they *do* get back together. (Kit's entire career in the book seems to be one nightmare, or at least very weird dream, after another.) This confusion may be the result of my weakness in simply parsing out what I'm reading. (I always had trouble putting all the pieces together in Sherlock Holmes stories and in television shows like Perry Mason, which exist in a strictly rational and Cartesian space-time.) But even if Pynchon is not immune to the difficulties of integrating parallel universes and time-travel into his fiction, the overall effect of the novel is so great that I happily forgive him any of these little problems.

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