

## CONTENTS

Against The Day . . . . .	1
Against Seriousness . . . . .	8
Against The Force . . . . .	12
Against Celebrity . . . . .	21
Against Literary Fiction . . . . .	24
Against One Dimension (and Three) . . . . .	30
Against Power . . . . .	35
Against Sobriety . . . . .	44
Against Los Angeles . . . . .	52
Against Real Estate . . . . .	60
Against Werewolves . . . . .	71
Against Smiling . . . . .	82
Against Realism (and “Reality”) . . . . .	93
Against Gravity . . . . .	107
Against Nixonface . . . . .	119
Against Sanity . . . . .	128
Against Hollywood . . . . .	143
Epilogue: For Paul Thomas Anderson’s <i>Inherent Vice</i> . . . . .	161
<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	172
<i>Endnotes</i> . . . . .	174

Any wonder it's hard to feel much confidence in these idiots as they go up against Pernicious Pop each day? There's no real direction here, neither lines of power nor cooperation. Decisions are never really made—at best they manage to emerge, from a chaos of peeves, whims, hallucinations, and all-round assholery. This is less a fighting team than nest full of snits, blues, crotchets and grudges, not a rare or fabled bird in the lot. Its survival seems, after all, only a mutter of blind fortune groping through the heavy marbling of skies one Titanic-Night at a time. Which is why Slothrop now observes his coalition with hopes for success and hopes for disaster about equally high (and no, that doesn't cancel out to apathy—it makes a loud dissonance that dovetails inside you sharp as knives). It does annoy him that he can be so divided, so perfectly unable to come down on one side or another.

—“THE COUNTERFORCE,” *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)

## AGAINST THE DAY

The present sucks, and nobody has much faith in any form of shared future, so it's not very surprising that we spend our time fighting over the past. The proponents of MAGAland promise to restore America to a perfect time that never existed. At the time of writing in 2020, the President of the United States, a teller of 20,000 lies, is a fiction writer who specializes in bad historical novels. So, the Continental Army stormed British airports in the Revolutionary War, the 1918 Flu pandemic ended WWII, and a "River of Blood" plaque commemorating a nonexistent Civil War battle graces the Trump National Golf Club. "Write your story the way you want to write it," the owner says. "You don't have to talk to anybody. It doesn't make any difference."

Call it *timewashing*, our era's signature creation of fake pasts that purport to cleanse history of its deep stains and recurring nightmares with the scented spray

of propaganda. George Shulman notes in his essay “Genre & Impasse in American Politics and Literature” that “the issue we face is less fake facts and ignorance—though these are real problems—and more the invested fictions that people enact or defend violently and self-destructively.” Building something different together requires some concept of futurity. Instead, increasingly ugly battles over various forms of timewashing have become such crucial features of the American cultural landscape precisely because they are a symptom of a larger epidemic—an incapacity to live with the past in all its troubling complexity.

There is only one proper way to resist the “war on truth,” we’re constantly told. It is the same solution offered for all of our current predicaments—economic, political, ecological, cultural, and literary. And that is to produce more facts. By contrast, Shulman champions the writing of Thomas Pynchon because it offers an alternative paradigm for coping with and resisting the politics of our era. He writes that “the premises of liberal and left critique of Trump” generally operate as follows:

first, not only that he lies in specific ways but that he invents hyperbolic fictions that substitute fantasy for reality; second, that the best response

to “the big lie” is to dispel the public’s ignorance, by replacing the fantastical with the factual; third, that exposure to facts suffices to enable a critical counter-politics. Of course, Trump’s big lies serve a larger authoritarian project, even an “aspirational fascism,” to use William Connolly’s illuminating phrase, and therefore need correction. But, this concern for factuality is misconceived if we presume that facts can speak for themselves. Instead, surely, it is through “organizing fictions” that we select empirical evidence and endow it with different worldly implications.

Shulman’s right, but the dynamic he describes applies far beyond the White House and will last longer than any given election cycle. It’s not going to work, now, later, or ever, to rely solely on more facts and better facts that are more compellingly fact-checked and that are reduced to easily consumable forms of political messaging, free from muddy human complexity, packed with our dietary supplements of cleansing outrage on one hand and fake uplift on the other. Ideally, such messages come shrink-wrapped and weaponized at fewer than 280 characters.

What if facts alone cannot save us, and what's needed is more (and better) fiction? If our country and our planet are winding down simultaneously isn't it past time to make art that is weirder, more difficult, riskier, and simply more *interesting*? We have nothing to lose but our book contracts by writing against the day, to refer to the title of Thomas Pynchon's 2006 historical novel.

Pynchon, with his radical style and his alternative histories of the United States, might be the patron saint of a new kind of literature that meets the enemy on his own ground and photobombs the reactionary keep of affect, resisting the assault on truth not with facts and sermons but with stories. We need Pynchon more than ever, because as Shulman notes, "creative political action cannot so much replace the fictive with the real, as mobilize people around an organizing fiction that depicts the grip but also the contingency of a reality they can change." Far from being a dated postmodernist kook whose aesthetic is retrograde and obsolete, Pynchon is relevant to the future as well as to the present and the past.

In *Mason & Dixon* (1997), Pynchon wrote: "Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir'd, or coerc'd [...] She needs rather to be tended lovingly and

honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry Radius." Narratives—or what Shulman calls “counter-fiction” and what the fiction writer John Keene calls his own “counternarratives,” for their ability to challenge received ideas about history and literature—surely connect to the Pynchonian “Counterforce” floated in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Extended beyond the specific characters of that single novel into a more universal metaphor and recast with a small “c,” the counterforce is an idea that is easy to adore but somewhat difficult to describe. It's an organization—or rather, the lack of one—that is impossible to join. It's a secret society of the humane that never meets. By placing fabulists, counterfeiters, songwriters, jesters, dreamers, druggies, flakes, lovers, and cranks near his heart throughout his novels, Pynchon makes the case for a counterforce comprised of fiction writers. Rather than whitewashing history, however, they inhabit its horrors but generate what Shulman calls “an alternative frame of reference” to the dominant collective dreaming. Like Roger Mexico in *Gravity's Rainbow* during his visit to a meeting of London officials after WWII, the counterforce pisses on the authorities.

To resist timewashing requires recovering the real dirt of the past but it also involves screening alternate

realities, what might have been and what still could be, in ways that deliberately identify themselves as made-up stories. It's a paradox rather than a contradiction that involves fighting fire with fire and embracing historical fiction as one literary mode of resistance. It's like Shulman says, we need fiction, not just history, to resist the lies about the past peddled in this new Gilded Age of revisionism. That also includes resisting the timewashing involved in the uplifting quest for empowering figures who supposedly shared all of our contemporary values, from the Spielbergian myth-making of *Lincoln* (2012), with its diversity-champion Civil War President, to the movie portrayal in *Mary Queen of Scots* (2018) of tyrannical royalty as the friend of queer and minority intimates. If only. This secret agreement on similar methods of revisionism between political reactionaries and liberals in the culture industry—albeit for divergent propaganda purposes—suggests that timewashing is the blunt instrument of the day. Contempt for intellectualism and fear of formally difficult works of art join political arch-enemies hand in hand in a children's crusade against complexity. Calgon, take me away!

To write against the day—our era of ascendant oligarchs, conglomerates, extractors, developers, polluters,



exploiters, liars, and abusers—is to write in favor of an alternate future. Historical fiction is time travel—in a sense, it’s a form of science fiction, and it shouldn’t pretend otherwise. Try a healthy microdose of paranoia—the “good paranoia” about those in power—as a countercultural antidote to conspiracy theory. The novel, as an art form, contains active ingredients, performing a role as immersive anti-meme and implicit critique of the deep-fake image-factories of social media.

Welcome back to the 1970s and the counternarratives of paranoid history.

Welcome back to Pynchon.

## AGAINST SERIOUSNESS

Because things are so rotten out there, we are required to be self-serious and censorious finger-waggers at all times. Yet if we are really witnessing the world's funeral, then arguably we need comedy more than ever. This state of affairs by which we've come to wreck ourselves so totally is a pretty good joke, we must admit. If things cannot be un-wrecked, and our comfortable existence is pretty much inseparable from planetary wipeout, then things are even funnier than we thought, viewed in a certain cosmic light. We must never give in to forces without laughter. Is it okay—or even necessary—to have fun right now? And what sort of fun are we allowed?

It's important to state from the outset that I don't love *Inherent Vice* because I think it is great literature—I love it because it knows it's not a major deal. *Inherent Vice*, a 2009 novel often referred to as “Pynchon Lite,” remains pleasingly term-paper-proof and dinner-party-proof.