Tantra in Pynchon’s Against the Day

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To cite this article: John Rothfork (2016): Tantra in Pynchon’s Against the Day, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2016.1226159

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2016.1226159

Published online: 21 Oct 2016.
ABSTRACT

Pynchon’s *Against the Day* seems to be a historical novel describing the struggle between capitalism and anarchy in the Gilded Age. However, the antagonists, Scarsdale Vibe and Webb Traverse, perish without successors. The view from the dirigible, *Inconvenience*, symbolizes Buddhist detachment from the battle (*maya*), which is elaborated by allusions to Tantra. The Trespasser, Ryder Thorn, preaches a social gospel to condemn the Chums of Chance for their dreamy detachment (p. 551). But the end of the novel endorses the Chums and the Tantric promise of the *Inconvenience* that floats above a violent world.

Most readers are likely to find a first reading of Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* to be overwhelming. Reading the vast novel is akin to embarking on an excursion in the airship or dirigible *Inconvenience* that floats lazily over a *Wizard of Oz* landscape in the novel. We have the feeling of gazing down at the pastel and pastoral fields that go:

“...rolling all the way to every horizon, the inner American Sea, where the chickens schooled like herring, and the hogs and heifers foraged and browsed like groupers and codfish, and the sharks tended to operate out of Chicago or Kansas City—the farm-houses and towns rising up along the journey like islands, with girls in every one [...] out in the yard in Ottumwa beating a rug, waiting in the mosquito-thick evenings of downstate Illinois, waiting by the fencepost where the bluebirds were nesting for a footloose brother to come back home after all, looking out a window in Albert Lea as the trains went choiring by” (71).

But there are nightmares in this bucolic tableau, even if the “balloonists chose to fly on, free now of the political delusions that reigned more than ever on the ground” (*Against the Day* 19). On a second reading of the sprawling novel, a plotline emerges involving a worldwide war between “the Plutonic powers” (176) of capitalism and proletariat labor dedicated to dreams of paradise and freedom promised by anarchy. Alan Trachtenberg describes the historic period of the Gilded Age as characterized by “struggles between labor and capital [that] raged on the ground of culture” over “the meaning of the nation itself” (78). In the foreword to Robert H. Wiebe’s *The Search for Order 1877–1920*, David Herbert Donald explains “that these years witnessed a fundamental shift in American values, from those of the small town in the 1880’s to those of a new, bureaucratic-minded middle class by 1920” (vii). From the view of late nineteenth-century American farms and small towns, it seemed that the railroad and the big cities, the millionaires and politicians, “had usurped the government and were now wielding it for their private benefit” (Wiebe 6) against the interests of Jeffersonian farmers and the churchgoing, virtuous citizens of small towns. As Pynchon’s novel illustrates, “the rhetoric of antithetical absolutes” between these two views “denied even the desirability of any interchange,” much less compromise or conciliation; “the issue was civilization versus anarchy” (Wiebe 96).

In history as well as in the novel, the antagonistic voices seem to merge in a chorus of bewildered wailing in World War I with many “juvenile heroes [...] hurling themselves into those depths by
tens of thousands until one day they awoke, those who were still alive, and instead of finding themselves posed nobly against some dramatic moral geography, they were down cringing in a mud trench swarming with rats and smelling shit and death” (Against the Day 1024). Instead of leaving us with lament from the Lost Generation, like Eliot’s The Waste Land, Pynchon’s long novel suggests a radical change of cultural view symbolized by the view from the dirigible described at the beginning and end of the novel. We are likely to be surprised to find that an alternative, if not a resolution, between the opposing views of capitalism and anarchy is hinted at from the beginning of the novel in the lyrical landscape scenes, which become increasingly important in the last half of the novel. We may be initially puzzled by Pynchon’s interest in Tantra as a form of aesthetics to suggest how to view or understand the lyrical passages in the novel, and surprised to find that a kind of Western Tantra, centering on the Inconvenience, provides an alternative view of life to diminish desperation or religious fervor in calls for violence to support either anarchy or rapacious capitalism.

The beginning of the novel foreshadows World War I, which “demolished each major premise about civilized international behavior” (Wiebe 263) and saw “the victory of elites in business, politics, and culture” (Trachtenberg 231). The collapse of Victorian values is illustrated by the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who visits the 1893 Chicago World Fair (Against the Day 46). The royal Archduke’s implicit claim to be devoted to supporting culture and civilization is destroyed when he confides, “What I am really looking for in Chicago […] is something new and interesting to kill.” He suggests that in cowboy America he might be allowed to hunt Hungarians. “The Chicago Stockyards might possibly be rented out to me and my friends, for a weekend’s amusement?” (46). Of course, “Anarchists and heads of state,” like Archduke Franz Ferdinand, are “natural enemies” (51), although the aristocratic British complicate the American view since even the agents of T.W.I.T. (True Worshippers of the Ineffable Tetractys), keen competitors of Madam Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society (219), end up doing journeyman work for the British Foreign Office in the Great Game of seeking to control central Asia. Auberon Halfcourt (half in the service of the British Foreign Office and half the disciple of T.W.I.T. in search of Shambhala) explains that “all the meddling of the Powers has only made a convergence to the Mahommedan that much more certain” (758) in central Asia.

Before the nightmare of World War I emerges into reality, Ryder Thorn appears to the crew of the Inconvenience probably in 1905. Ryder is a Trespasser, or time traveler, from the future who attends “the ukulele workshop that summer” at Candlebrow University (Against the Day 551). He tells the dirigible crew, “You boys spend too much time up there” in the sky. “You lose sight of what is really going on in the world.” As dreamy adolescents, “You think you drift above it all, immune to everything” (553). But, he warns the Chums, saying, “You have no idea what you’re heading into. This world you take to be the’ world will die, and descend into Hell.” And “the most perverse part of it” is that the Victorian combatants in World War I “will all embrace death. Passionately.” Ryder chides the young men saying this is “Not Bosch, or Brueghel,” but the reality of “League on league of filth, corpses by the uncounted thousands” (554). And yet, “You children drift in a dream” gazing down at what seems to be a tranquil landscape painting. At Chicago’s ironically named White City, “You are such simpletons […] gawking at your Wonders of Science, expecting as your entitlement all the Blessings of Progress, it is your faith, your pathetic balloon-boy faith” (555). On a close reading of Ryder’s sermon, it is important to notice how his religious rhetoric implies that the “pathetic balloon-boy faith” in detachment, or aesthetic drifting above it all, is a moral failure that makes the crew complicit in sending the world to Hell in World War I. The implication suggests a different opposition from the obvious one described in the beginning of the novel between Scarsdale and Webb or between capitalism and anarchy. Ryder’s sermon identifies the opposition as one between Hindu and Buddhist views of deluded and violent struggles for justice in a world of maya (illusion), and aesthetic detachment to avoid violence and to aesthetically appreciate perception or what life experience offers.

The recognition of this opposition between the gospel of social justice and Asian views that preach detachment (because they recognize that such hopes for justice are fueled by outrage and are
pursued by violence) provides a different structure for the novel that finds a beginning, as Amy Elias recognized, in the “mandalalike customs stamp that also may be a pilgrim badge showing Shambhala, a central textual symbol” (Elias 41).

After Scarsdale Vibe has Webb killed by Deuce Kindred and Sloat Fresno (Against the Day 395), the Traverse kids—Reef, Frank, Kit, and Lake—indolently seek to avenge their father’s murder by dabbling in coffeehouse anarchy for a decade while roaming most of the world. We are particularly interested in Kit’s hunting or search. Jared Smith tells us that “Kit travels through China and Tibet in a mock pilgrimage.” He explains that Kit’s journey is a mockery or parody because Kit (and perhaps the narrator) never manage to escape a Western academic and colonial view of power versus anarchy. Smith suggests that because we are not formed by Asian cultures, “Kit does arrive at some level of spiritual enlightenment, but it is unclear whether that enlightenment is representative of Buddhism or any other Eastern religion.”

In her analysis, Tiina Käkelä-Puumala explains that “With anarchists, the idea of community life without state administration and the abolition of money come together” (156) in a dream of total freedom that ignores how silver is extracted by blood in Colorado. Wiebe explains that in the anarchists’ view, “Money was power; conspirators had controlled the nation by dictating the type and quantity of legal tender [gold]; a people’s currency [silver] would send power along with money back into the communities” (98). Theodore Dreiser’s narrator in The Titan explains that William Jennings Bryan promised, “There was to be ample money, far beyond the control of central banks and the men in power over them. It was a splendid dream” (Dreiser 400). The historian suggests that the political hopes of the Populists and perhaps even of the anarchists—the “hope of Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau and Jefferson that the private person might view his own private interests […] as identical with those of the whole society” (Trachtenberg 179)—confronted the bureaucratic vision of Scarsdale Vibe, Frank Cowperwood, and J. P. Morgan in a head-to-head conflict in the presidential election of 1896 between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan. Republican supporters of McKinley, businessmen and manufacturers, “threatened unemployment, mortgage-holders eviction, and preachers damnation if Bryan were elected” (Wiebe 103). Although Theodore Roosevelt, “a man almost invariably pictured in a cowboy hat” (Wiebe 132), would call himself the Trust Buster, his Progressivism was clearly a national and international program built on assumptions of a bureaucratic order assumed as inescapable and self-evidently normal.

Tiina Käkelä-Puumala claims that the popularity of anarchy as the people’s work “clearly represent the possibility of an alternative economy based on the ethics of mutuality” (156). Something like this materialized in “the Bolshevik coup of November 1917” (Wiebe 275), but in America Wiebe argues that the presidential election of 1896 marked a clear and dramatic repudiation of socialism, radicalism, and anarchy. Instead of recognizing the debacle of William Jennings Bryan’s campaign—Wiebe calls it a “suicide” (102)—Pynchon ignores the election and Bryan’s defeat. Echoing popular opinion at the time, the narrator of Against the Day implies that Bryan was to blame for the illusory and confused dreams about coining silver that would somehow make everyone rich, as well as blaming him for the depression of 1893. “After 1893, after the whole nation, one way or another, had been put through a tiresome moral exercise over repeal of the Silver Act, ending with the Gold Standard reclaiming its ancient tyranny, it was slow times for a while” (89–90). Instead of telling us about William Jennings Bryan’s Cross of Gold speech or why the figurehead of the Inconvenience features “the head of President McKinley” (109), who was assassinated by an anarchist, the narrator pursues a different view that will lead us in the unlikely direction of Tantra or aesthetic detachment. The narrator describes Reef sitting in a European sidewalk cafe watching the youthful anarchist dreamers at “the Anarchist spa of Yz-les-Bains,” France, who are “solemn young folks [who] carried with them an austerity […] a Single Idea, whose power everything else ran off of. Here it was not silver or gold but something else. Reef could not quite see what it was” (Against the Day 931). Such obsession would seem to be a radical version of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Romanticism declaring that the value or power of an idea is not located in Enlightenment performance recognized as excellence, nor in Utilitarian prosperity, but in the depth of passion
experienced by the true believer regardless of the object of belief. Buddhism identifies such emotion or desire (tanha) as the fundamental problem of life that is best ameliorated or controlled by detachment or by a meditative awareness of our emotions that robs them of their compelling power. “The Greater Discourse on Steadfast Mindfulness,” attributed to the Buddha, declares that the monk practicing bare-awareness should be “firmly mindful of the fact that only feelings exists (not a soul, a self or I). That mindfulness is just for gaining insight (vipassanà) into our human condition to detach or liberate us “from craving” or desire so that we live “without clinging to anything in the world,” which often fosters violence (Mahàsatipaṭṭhàna Sutta 20).

Ironically, Reef’s musing occurs in the same section of the novel in which Yashmeen and Jennifer Invert McHugh condemn “ancient all-male structures” that “Blighted the hopes of Anarchism for years […] as long as women were not welcome, it never had a chance” (Against the Day 934). Jennifer explains that Reef’s perception of “a Single Idea” and radical cause “was in fact the result of a single male authority behind the scenes giving out orders […] to preserve their Anarchist fiction” (934). We may wonder how this differs from Scarsdale’s capitalism. The two views seem to offer, not yin and yang, male and female, but a Hegelian nightmare in which God needs Satan in an opposition that produces violence and death instead of dance and beauty. Each side struggles to attain unilateral and total power or control. The anarchical fantasy is expressed by Reef in asking his father, Webb, to validate or approve of his adolescent libidinal rage. “He wanted to say, don’t it get you crazy, Pop, don’t you want to just kill some of em, and keep on killing […]?” (94). Reef is all but consumed by adolescent rage, feeling, like a suicide bomber, “the desperate need to create a radius of annihilation that, if it could not include the ones who deserved it, might as well include himself” (95). Reef’s rage is mirrored by Scarsdale, who confesses to Foley a “strange fury I feel in my heart, this desire to kill off every damned socialist […] without any more mercy than I’d show a deadly microbe” (332). Are we left then, as in Voltaire’s Candide, with the consolation, such as it is, of Manicheanism or an eternal conflict between mutual and murderous fanaticism?

This would seem to lead us back to Western metaphysical or religious claims about human nature, which promise to simply turn the wheel of a complicated argument in another violent turn. Nonetheless critics, evidently knowing little of Hinduism or Buddhism, have taken the bait to, for example, claim that Pynchon’s novel expresses “a Christian and often specifically Catholic set of doctrines,” although, in the end, Kathryn Hume suggests that Pynchon offers “spirituality in a postsecular, undogmatic form” (164, 181). David Cowart believes that “Pynchon invokes gnosticism to frame his perspective on the historical problem of evil in the world” (401). He explains that Gnosticism is “a term fraught […] with energy subversive of various kinds of orthodoxy” (395), which would seem to make it a near neighbor of Romantic theory, if not anarchy. Cowart also relies on postmodern epistemology by appealing to Elaine Pagels’s analysis of early church history to say that “the novel reaffirms the view that we can invoke no totalizing philosophy of history [metaphysics] or culture to make sense of the past” (399). Toon Staes also relies on postmodernism to say that Pynchon refutes “a mechanistic imperative” or a modern theory to “illustrate that while there is no single genuine interpretation of history, past events are given meaning in the present through various discursive, and therefore ideological” theories, views, or narratives (544). Colin Hutchinson puts it succinctly: “Pynchon at the last moment substitutes the more hopeful notion that ‘grace’ (the last word of the novel) is available not in utopian projections of the future […] but in the boisterous, anarchical communal life-in-the-present.” He calls this “the work’s stoical, but cautiously optimistic, alternative conclusion” (184). Jared Smith’s essay covers many of the same passages I examine, but his analysis is militant in its Western academic methods and vision to conclude that “the novel’s anti-imperialist and anarchist objective […] is not only to induce historical disorder through a revision of a former day, but also to shed light on the institutional forces of neo-imperialism and to project opposition toward the established order of our time.”

These critics overlook the hint of an alternative view in the form of the search for Shambhala (Shangri-La) that is foreshadowed by the otherwise cryptic and easily overlooked Tibetan seal or emblem at the beginning of the novel. Amy Elias and Robert Kohn remind us that this is where the
novel begins. The seal depicts Mt. Kailasch, a manifestation of Shiva, the Hindu destroyer of illusion (*maya*; such as the illusions of fascism or anarchy), and the home of a Tantric Buddha (*Demchok*), a manifestation of divine bliss. In Vedic and Puranic Hinduism, as well as in Tantric Buddhism, divine bliss is iconographically rendered as a sexual union between Brahma/Saraswati, Radha/Krishna, Lakshmi/Vishnu, Shiva/Parvathi, or Samvara/Vajravarahi. Each of these couples or consorts is not composed of two discrete or independent beings but is unified or melded in bliss that subsumes, transcends, or heals individual longing (*dukkha*). Sudhir Kakar explains that a Hindu invokes "a deity not on its own but as a couple: Sitarama and not Sita and Rama, Radhakrishna and not Radha and Krishna" (*Portrait* 64). In another work, Kakar explains this bliss or *moksha* (release from ego anxiety) by quoting from the *Upanisads*: “just as the person, who in the embrace of his beloved has no consciousness of what is outside or inside, so in this experience [of *moksha*] nothing remains as a pointer to inside or outside” (*World* 16).

In any case, the Tibetan seal would seem to lead us to the scene in the novel where Auberon Halfcourt is searching for directions to reach Shambhala, talking to a book dealer in Bukhara instead of to a scholar, Rinpoche, or Tibetan meditation master. The bookseller seems to offer only a joke he has read about traveling to Shambhala: “Even if you forget everything else,” Rinpunpga instructs the Yogi, ‘remember one thing—when you come to a fork in the road, take it” (*Against the Day* 766). This is not so different from the famous *koan* of Zen Buddhism that asks the monk, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Of course, Auberon (the king of fairies) Halfcourt does not know the Buddhist context in which the advice points to a paradox that discursive thinking or logic cannot solve, which should cause the monk to be less willing to place uncritical faith in conventional reason. As a secular Westerner, Auberon worries about “how practical” such stories are “as directions to finding a real place.” The bookseller tells him, “It helps to be a Buddhist, I’m told,” perhaps not in regard to finding Shambhala as a real city meeting British expectations, but in regard to what we mean by *real*. We should not miss how this chapter ends with no logical or discursive answers, but with a meditative, aesthetic perception and mood that the narrator invokes by telling us, “By now the city outside was saturated in shadow, the women gliding away in loose robes and horsehair veils, the domes and minarets silent and unassailable against unwished-for depths of blue, the markets wind-rulled and deserted” (767). As though to explain the meaning of scenes like this in the novel, Sudhir Kakar informs us that “Intellectual thought, naturalistic science” and logic that hope “to grasp the empirical nature of our world thus have a relatively lower status in the [Hindu] culture as compared to meditative practices or even art, since aesthetic and spiritual experiences are supposed to be closely related. In the culture’s belief system, the aesthetic power of music and verse, of a well-told tale and a well-enacted play make them more, rather than less, real than life” (*Portrait* 182).

In another sense, the search for Shambhala connects with the Chums of Chance and Bindlestiffs of the Blue boyhood adventure stories and with James Hilton’s novel, *Lost Horizon* (1933), made into a popular movie by Frank Capra (1937). Captain Q. Zane Toadflax, who commands “His Majesty’s Subdesertine Frigate Saksaul” (425) in the Gobi desert, says “that the true Shambhala will be found, just as real as anything.” When the Chums demur, saying they “are to be counted among the basest of the base” and unworthy to “find the holy City,” Toadflax admits he “Would’ve preferred someone a little more karmically advanced.” What he means—or implies to readers—is someone more spiritually disciplined. Buddhism is all about emotional discipline and control. Its central focus is on meditation or monitoring our emotional states and emotional reactions to perceptions and ideas to provide a kind of distanced view of our experience that is somewhat comparable to the view offered from the deck of the *Inconvenience* in gazing down at the passing world. Among the several types or schools of Buddhism, Theravada practice, influenced by the model of the Buddha’s life, relies most on what it calls bare-awareness or mindfulness (*vipassana*) that focuses on maintaining an awareness of our perceptions and emotions. The most immediate effect of such practice is emotional detachment or equanimity. On a second reading of *Against the Day*, readers are likely to savor lyrical and nostalgic landscape passages of the text, such as the long passage about Merle and Dally Rideout’s ramble through a Thornton Wilder countryside: “they pushed out into morning
fields that went rolling all the way to every horizon, the Inner American Sea, where the chickens schooled like herring” (71). This scene, and many like it, ramble on for long paragraphs to provide readers with perceptions; with sights, sounds, and memories that are not offered as gears in a discursive, clockwork argument. They create moods and invite daydreams rather than build theories or explanations. In the context of Buddhism, this offers a form of meditation or bare-awareness that should suggest that our egotistic and deluded desire for the temporal and sensual experience of life to be substituted for and explained by the intellectual and moral abstractions of anarchism, capitalism, bureaucracy, or Social Darwinism are illusory. These theories and beliefs express our deluded and anxious needs for power rather than being Platonic forms or hidden forces discoverable by science. Such theories and explanations obscure and forestall an experience of the aesthetic or enlightened view that the landscape passages invite us to entertain as “beyond question, with grace” (70). What Pynchon calls grace seems to be related to what Hindus call rasa that invites us to taste or savor experience rather than substituting talk, ideas, and explanations for the experience. Sudhir Kakar explains that “Rasa, in art” quiets “the turmoil of chitta” or mental processes, such as analysis, to bring the mind “nearer to its perfect state of pure calm” (World 31).

Zen Buddhism developed vipassana practice into the ritual of zazen or sitting meditation as a major practice in a highly regimented and austere monastic life. Captain Toadflax identifies the difficulty of Buddhist practice or living in Shambhala by saying, “if anyone ever did actually discover a City sacred as that, he might not wish to wallow all that much among the secular pleasures, appealing though they be” to the unenlightened (Against the Day 435). Emotional detachment through bare-awareness requires a steely focus on our immediate perceptions in contrast to letting our emotions carry us away where they will in the Romantic belief that such inspiration or whimsy is divine or related to the divine. Such discipline typically means no drugs, no liquor, no sex, no rage, no violence, no blather on Facebook—a price that few American readers of Against the Day are ready to pay as an alternative to Rev. Gatlin’s invitation to a holy war. The narrator reports that this point “either escaped the attention of the Chums or they had heard it just fine, and artfully concealed that recognition” (Against the Day 435). The narrator is almost too artful in describing the price of such a disciplined and unemotional life in speculating that “Such to the [emotionally] dead might appear the world of the living—charged with information, with meaning, yet somehow always just, terribly, beyond that fateful limen where any lamp of comprehension might beam forth” (436). The lamp metaphor conjures the scene or tale of the Buddha’s dying guidance offered to his disciples as translated by Paul Carus in his influential Gospel of Buddha (1894): “O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves […] Look not for assistance to any one besides yourselves” (234). The context for this self-reliance is not Romantic indulgence in emotion, nor is it a call to anarchy. The context is bare-awareness or meditation in constantly monitoring our own emotions and perceptions. But for Westerners, it is, no doubt, more fun to think of Shambhala or the Pure Land as an exotic and adventurous tourist destination.

The Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet also relies on meditation, but this Tantric method rides the back of a tiger in regard to indulging in “spells, incantations, sacrifices, spirit possessions” (Allen 87), and other enticements to the senses, especially sex and dreams, that hope to lead the faithful practitioner to the recognition that all our perceptions are maya, or fleeting illusion hardly different from dreams. This meshes well with the magical realism of Against the Day that proliferates nearly endless and intricate modern or Western mandalas and rituals of science and math, as well as a sprawling historic world tourism that fails to find Shambhala. Kathryn Hume finds Pynchon’s rituals to be associated with “a Catholic perspective [that] makes sense as a step in restoring the magic destroyed by the Enlightenment project” (182). But Catholicism is not the only religion to focus on ritual and magic. In the context of the novel, orthodox Catholicism, much less the Bogomil heresy “going back […] to the Thracian demigod Orpheus” (956) that Cyprian Latewood embraces, is a less plausible, but probably more familiar, explanation to American academic readers than Tantra or the Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet, which also relies on ritual and magic. Jarvis reminds us that “The Buddhist aspect of the cult [Bogomil] is particularly strong.” Like Kathryn Hume, David Cowart also
makes too much of Cyprian Latewood becoming a nun in the deviant order of the Brides of Night (961; Cowart 401). If we seek to understand Cyprian’s religious conversion or awakening, we might better choose to examine the seemingly inconsequential scene when Cyprian is sitting “at a café off Kattunska Ulica near the marketplace” in Cetinje, Montenegro. With typical irony, the narrator describes Cyprian’s response to watching a “cooing couple” simpering over each other while also jealously having in mind Bevis Moistleigh, a “lovestruck young imbecile [who] had actually made his way, in that season of acute European-war hysteria, across an inhospitable terrain […] driven by something he thought was love” (Against the Day 847). The narrator reports that “At great personal effort keeping his expression free of annoyance,” Cyprian:

was visited by a Cosmic revelation […] namely that Love, which people like Bevis and Jacintha no doubt imagined as a single Force at large in the world, was in fact more like the 330,000 or however many different forms of Brahma worshipped by the Hindu—the summation, at any given moment, of all the varied subgods of love that mortal millions of lovers, in limitless dance, happened to be devoting themselves to (Against the Day 848).

The recognition here is that Shakti is perceived as a subjective experience rather than recognized as an objective force like electricity. This Vedanta recognition of how Brahman creates and sustains the dance of life among all individual beings in the universe through Shakti or cosmic energy seems to have a Theravada Buddhist effect on Cyprian, who is surprised to experience something of bare-awareness in regard to being conscious of his emotions. “He felt a strange sober joy at the ability […] to observe himself being annoyed.” Cyprian then reflects that “There had been a time, and not too long ago, when this sort of thing”—his jealousy, if not disgust at Jacintha being “carelessly radiant” in love when the world was descending into the horrors of World War I—“would have promised a good week of queasiness and resentment. Instead he felt […] a briskernal equipoise, as if he were aloft” (848) or detached from his own emotions and moral judgments, something like a view from the blimp and vaguely suggestive of Gautama Buddha’s enlightenment based on an examination of how desire works.

There are any number of vectors or views offered in the novel, but it seems obvious that none of the characters is willing to forego, renounce, or even try to control desire expressed in sex, drugs, and rage, and that their repeated indulgence causes them to experience what Buddhism professes as its first principle, dukkha (disappointment, ennui). Thus they “went back once again to seeking only orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep, to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day” (Against the Day 805). This may make Cyprian’s choice of Bogomil Manicheanism (956) seem to be a kind of despair rather than liberation or enlightenment. Reef tells us, “Cyprian must have known by now what happened to convents in wartime. Especially out here, where it’d been nothing but massacre and reprisal for centuries” (959).

There is much more of a dénouement in Against the Day than in Gravity’s Rainbow. We look for explanations, if not resolutions, in the lives of Webb’s children, who inherit an obligation to avenge Webb’s murder and perhaps succeed him as the Kieselguhr Kid in the fight for anarchism (“‘Kieselguhr’ being a kind of fine clay, used to soak up nitroglycerine and stabilize it into dynamite,” Against the Day 171). Adam Kirsh calls Frank “a gunslinger who joins the Mexican Revolution” and manages to kill Slot Fresno. Lake—Webb’s daughter—“perversely marries her father’s murderer,” who seems to be finally caught by the Los Angeles police as a serial killer (1055). Foley Walker kills Scarsdale before Frank can do so, proclaiming, not Allahu Akbar, but a version of the same thing, “Jesus is Lord” (1006). Kirsh says Reef “ends up in decadent, spy-riddled Eastern Europe,” and Kit becomes absorbed in the “dippy mysticism” of “advanced mathematics” (395). But this is not what we find in the last chapter of the very long novel. What we find there is a surprisingly conventional domesticity in the last chapter. We learn that Kit and Dally “were married in 1915, and went to live in Torino, where Kit got a job” (Against the Day 1067). Torino proves to be little different from Telluride. “The strike in Torino was crushed without mercy, strikers were killed, wounded, sent into the army” (1071). We learn that “Reef, Yashmeen, and Ljubica [Serbian for love] returned to the U.
S.” (1074), where they “run into […] Frank, Stray, and Jesse, who had the same thing in mind”—of finding “some deep penultimate town the capitalist/Christer gridwork hadn’t got to quite yet” (1075). “For a while they were up in the redwoods, and then for a little longer in a town on the Kitsap Peninsula” near Seattle. There “The girls [Stray and Yashmeen] spent hours with the baby [Plebecula], sometimes just gazing at her. Their other gazing was reserved for Jesse, who abruptly found himself with a couple of kid sisters” (1076).

We find Kit in Europe “getting on and off trains bound for destinations he was less and less sure of.” If not in an orthodox meditative state, “He would come to for brief intervals, and then go back inside a regime of starvation and hallucinating and mental absence” (Against the Day 1080). In this state of mind, he examines “Shambhala postage stamps […] with generic scenes from the Shambhalan countryside, flora and fauna, mountains, waterfalls, gorges [hardly different from Colorado] providing entry to what the Buddhists called the hidden lands.” When Kit protests, saying he thought he “was in Lwow,” Poland, Lord Overlunch corrects him: “Excuse me, but you were in Shambhala” (1081). Lord Overlunch invites Kit to a Paris street party with Dally inspiring another dream related by the narrator who asks us for our consent and complicity in entertaining the dream: “May we imagine for them a vector […] carrying them safely into this postwar Paris” with “dancers who will always be there” and with “difficulties they find are no more productive of evil than the opening and closing of too many doors” (1082–3)?

This dream is viewed from above by the Chums gazing down from the Inconvenience. We discover that the Chums also relish domesticity having married girls resembling dakinis or Tantric Buddhist dancing sky angels. The Inconvenience “had blundered into this flying formation of girls, dressed like religious novices” with “their metallic wings earnestly rhythmic.” We are prompted to recognize them as Tantric angels in being cautioned against our Christian assumptions: “Not that these wings […] could ever have been mistaken for angels’ wings. The serious girls, each harnessed in black kidskin” offered glances and “coquetries, indistinct foreknowledge that it was to be among themselves, these somber young women, that the Chums were destined after all to seek wives, to marry and have children and become grandparents” (Against the Day 1032). Even Pugnax, the dog, finds a mate in Ksenija (the Compassionate). Ksenija’s “task at this juncture was to steer everyone to safety without appearing to” (969). This may remind us of the popular Japanese Buddhist bodhisattva, Jizo, who is believed to protect and guide, among others, the spirits of aborted fetuses to new incarnations. Michael Jarvis suggests that Cyprian plays something of a bodhisattva role in aiding others. A few pages later, our omniscient narrator importantly explains that “persisting behind the world’s every material utterance, the Compassionate now took steps to re-establish contact with Yashmeen. As if the Balkan assignment had never been about secret Austrian minefields at all, but about Cyprian becoming a bride of Night, and Ljubica being born during the rose harvest” (973). The Buddha is often called the Compassionate one, especially in the manifestation of Avalokitesvara (Sanskrit), Kannon (Japan), Kuan-yin (China), or Chenrezig (Tibet). Sudhir Kakar reminds us that “Many Buddhist images of Avalokiteswara (‘the Lord who listens to the cries of the world’) are of a slender boyish figure in the traditional feminine posture—weight resting on the left hip, right knee forward; they are the Indian precursor of the sexually ambiguous Chinese goddess Kuan Yin” (Portrait 202).

It is not the Compassionate rendered as an icon or as a Tantric power, such as Shakti conceived of as similar to electricity (“the élan vital itself,” 714), that Pynchon offers as a solution or alternative to the violence and chaos that the novel illustrates, but compassion subjectively evident in the love and domesticity of the Traverse brothers and their families, as well as in the developing families of the Chums of Chance. This is essentially the Renaissance claim against medieval religious belief (monasticism and celibacy) that destroyed the art and culture of the classical world in anticipation of the Apocalypse and dreams of a divine life beyond imagining. It is also a Hindu or Buddhist answer that focuses on our lifelong emotional needs and development rather than on theological beliefs, academic theory, or explanations that fail to touch our emotions (dukka). The final image in the novel is of Inconvenience as a city, the successor to the sham city of the dead where the novel
began. We discover that the “Inconvenience, once a vehicle of sky-pilgrimage, has transformed into its own destination” flying toward grace (1085). The novel offers three cities as models for life: the sepulcher White City of colonialism, the mythic Shambhala, and the Inconvenience grown “as large as a small city” (1084). Trachtenberg explains the icon of White City, “not as an actual place, a real city, but as a frank illusion, a picture of what a city, a real society, might look like”—a prototype for dreaming of Disneyland or the Vatican. As he walks through the pavilions of White City, Lindsay Noseworth, from the Inconvenience, ruminates, “adrift between fascination and disbelief,” on how “This doesn’t seem “quite [...] authentic, somehow” (23). Trachtenberg tells us that “White City represents itself as a representation, an admitted sham. Yet that sham, it insisted, held a truer vision of the real than did the troubled world sprawling beyond its gates” (231). Our narrator says it was “at once dream-like and real” (36). Trachtenberg says it was “the momentary realization of a dream” (230). The dream “seemed to have settled the question of the true and real meaning of America. It seemed the victory of elites in business, politics, and culture over dissent but divided voices of labor, farmers, immigrants, blacks and women” (Trachtenberg 231). True meaning or not, we dream. And our novel suggests that loony dreams of a ukulele conference at Candlebrow University or of sexy angels in black lambskin (dakinis) are better than dreams of justice that entail the nightmares of World War I.

Trachtenberg suggests that the map or guide for White City might have been drawn by Edward Bellamy’s popular notion of utopia provided in Looking Backwards (1888). The narrator-guide in the novel explains that in this future world, “everybody is part of a system with a distinct place and function.” This might presage fascism and the immense military rituals of Nazi Germany or Mao’s China, but for that fact that “Happiness in Looking Backward,” as in White City, “is identified entirely with leisure and consumption—the consumption of religious emotions of ‘solidarity’ as much as of the cornucopia of goods produced by” capitalism (Trachtenberg 50). Instead of an alabaster prototype for clean shopping malls produced by American engineering, Shambhala is the dream of Tantric Buddhist shamans. Yashmeen writes to her father, Auberon Halfcourt, to claim that either Shambhala is “as close to the Heavenly City as Earth has known, or” it will become “Baku and Johannesburg all over again, [with] reserves of gold, oil, Plutonian wealth, and the prospect of creating yet another subhuman class of workers to extract it. One vision, if you like, spiritual, and the other, capitalist. Incomensurable, of course” (631). The closest anyone comes to Shambhala seems to be Kit, who at one time “entered a strangely tranquil part of Siberia, on the Mongolian border […] which Prance had been briefly through and said was known as Tuva” (786). After listening to Tuva throat singing that seems to produce two sounds at once, Prance says, “Perhaps shamans are not the only ones who know how to be in two states at once” (786). This should remind us of bare-awareness that observes how we simultaneously experience emotion and can also monitor or be aware of the emotion. Again, readers are likely not to notice the detached and aesthetic perception of Kit, who seems to find Shambhala at the very moment when Prance says, “Shambhala may have vanished in that instant” of the Tunguska event or the 1908 meteor strike in Siberia “from their list of priorities” or from the concerns of T.W.I.T. Instead of reassessing to focus on a new priority in the endless quest for power or to conjecture about causes of the event or what it might mean, “Kit rode away over a patch of open steppe” to listen to “bass throat-singing again. A sheepherder was standing angled, Kit could tell, precisely to the wind, and the wind was blowing across his moving lips, and after a while it would have been impossible to say which, the man or the wind, was doing the singing” (787). The two become one with the perception offering beauty but no discursive message or meaning. The answer to the complexities offered by the novel, if we can call it an answer, seems to be rasa, beauty, or grace.

A few pages later, Kit runs into Fleetwood Vibe, the son of Scarsdale, who is, he says, looking for “a hidden railroad” (Against the Day 789) that might take him to Shambhala. Fleetwood asks Kit, “Do you remember once, years ago, we talked of cities, unmapped, sacramental place . . .”? Kit cuts him short, saying, “Shambhala […] I may have just been there.” After failing to explain to Fleetwood how he had been in Shambhala, through aesthetic reverie, Kit tells him, “you’re like every other so-
called explorer out here, a remittance man with too much sense of privilege, no idea what to do with it” (790). What he means is that Fleetwood can see only what his capitalist and bureaucratic culture has enabled him to see in processing his perceptions to make sense of them. The price of entering Shambhala is the erasure or abandonment of the capitalist, bureaucratic, and ritual view as well as the expectation of academic answers or technical control; to exchange these for an aesthetic, silent, and bare-awareness perception or experience. Rather than explain this, the narrator says, “The two of them might have been sitting right at the heart of the Pure Land, with neither able to see it, sentenced to blind passage” through life; “Kit for too little desire, Fleetwood for too much” (791).

The capitalism of Scarsdale Vibe is dedicated to producing the sterile police state of White City. The Chicago and Los Angeles of the novel are caught midway between a police state and anarchy almost as Norman Mailer suggested in Of a Fire on the Moon with the future of the nation pulled between the antipodes of NASA in Houston and sprawling, crime-ridden Los Angeles. Shambhala remains, like the moon, alluring and exotic. The narrator, concerned about the Inconvenience, explains that the Tunguska event seems to have “torn the veil separating their own space from that of the everyday world” so that they “met the same fate as Shambhala.” That fate is to “allow human eyes to see the City” that had “For centuries […] lain invisible” (Against the Day 793). The Inconvenience does not visit a physical Shambhala, like it does White City and Los Angeles, but, “Returning from the taiga, the crew of Inconvenience found the Earth they thought they knew changed now in unpredictable ways” (795). Not in Shambhala, “they were on the Counter-Earth, on it and of it, yet at the same time also on the Earth they never, it seemed, left.” This dual consciousness is not produced through vipassana, disciplined meditation, or shamanistic dreaming. Rather it “had to do with the terms of the long unspoken contract between the boys and their fate—as if, long ago, having learned to fly, in soaring free from enfoldment by the indicative world below, they had paid with a waiver of allegiance to it and all that would occur down on the Surface” (1023). This would seem to be something close to bare-awareness in fostering emotional detachment. Shambhala is not exactly lost or replaced by “the City of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels” (1032), but we cannot entirely live everyday lives in Shambhala any more than we can in the moment of proclaiming Romantic freedom or in anarchical dreams and longing for utopia. Most Americans, despite an interest, are not invested in or shaped by Vajrayana or Theravada Buddhism, which for us may remain as exotic as Shangri-La. If not the White City, our monastery for the practice of something like bare-awareness or aesthetic reverie that grants entry into Shambhala is more likely found in the “Inconvenience, once a vehicle of sky-pilgrimage […] transformed into its own destination”—a community where the focus is on technology to support health, prosperity, love, families, community, and, above all, beauty. This is not the Social Darwinian capitalism of Scarsdale Vibe, but neither is it anarchy. The mantras and rituals of electricity—“It could have been a religion, for all he knew” (98)—along with all the math and physics lore, as well as the non-academic allusions to Tantra—constitute the possibility of a new American monastery or method that does not promise to replace the actual Chicago or Los Angeles, but it can promise to supplement politics and consumerism with an aesthetic dimension, which some cultures—Hinduism and Buddhism—see as divine or expressive of the divine. Perhaps the illustration of meditative and aesthetic detachment is evident, not in exotic Hindu or Buddhist icons, but in Stray and Yashmeen, who “spent hours with the baby [Plebecula], sometimes just gazing at her. Their other gazing was reserved for Jesse, who abruptly found himself with a couple of kid sisters” (1076). This is why, or how, the Inconvenience floats above the ground like a cloud, not as a literal model of Shambhala, nor as a vehicle to reach Shambhala, but as a developing community that Renaissance science, engineering, art, and even capitalist bureaucracy aspire to develop. If technology creates the machineguns of World War I and even the atomic bombs of Gravity’s Rainbow, it also constructs the Inconvenience from whose platform, above the “black grease-smoke, the effluvia of butchery unremitting” (100), we gaze on beauty and “fly towards grace.”
Notes on Contributor

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