

**DAHLIA'S JOURNEY:  
MISPLACED AFFECTION AND VISUAL ARTS  
IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *AGAINST THE DAY***

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***Abstract:** Among the many characters of the labyrinthine saga *Against the Day* (2006), this paper focuses on Dahlia Rideout. Her foster father is a photographer, her mother elopes with a magician, her childhood friend is a ball lightning. While in Venice, she becomes the muse of radical artists, and on the London stage Dahlia is quite a sensation. The thing that binds together her iconic status and her misfortunes throughout the books is light – that is, electromagnetic radiation, as scientists describe it, but also limelight, the aura of celebrity she shares with other female characters in Thomas Pynchon's fiction.*

***Keywords:** *Against the Day*, postmodern fiction, Thomas Pynchon, representation of women in art*

**1. Introduction: “Fabulists and counterfeiterers”**

*Against the Day*, Thomas Pynchon's 2006 saga, lifts up – literally, one might say – when a club of aviator kids, who call themselves the “Chums of Chance”, take off cheerfully in a hydrogen skyship, with the same subjunctive expectations his previous novel left open. *Mason & Dixon* (1997) made the subjunctive, that is the mood “denoting what is imagined or wished or possible” (Tanner 2000: 224), a crucial stance in understanding the origins of the American boundaries and American schisms, but also in assessing the discrepancies between the scientific measurement and artistic dream, between philosophical concepts and poetic metaphors. (idem: 225) In *Against the Day*, the subjunctive encompasses not only America, but almost the whole world, the Western and Eastern hemispheres, the Arctic and the Chihuahua Mountains as well. Pynchon's (1997: 350) belief that History “is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power, – who need but touch her, and all her Credit is in the instant vanish'd, as if it had never been” (and as a consequence History “needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiterers, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry Radius”) - receives here a more anarchistic touch. *Against the Day* is a conglomerate of intrigues with hundreds of characters, which begins at the Chicago World Fair in 1893 and ends after the Great War, during the early 1920s. It is a colossal genre-bending enterprise, at the same time romantic quest, revenge western, hard-boiled novel, steampunk escapism, time travel romp, shamanistic trip, bildungsroman, mathematical puzzle, and sophisticated parody of the highly-aestheticized nineteenth century social novels, such as Henry James' *The Princess Casamassima*.

Pynchon's comic evasions might not be considered acceptable history by the veracity-obsessed readers, but J.M. Tyree (2021: 6-7) reminds us that any historical fiction has time travel as its premise and that "to write against the day – our era of ascendant oligarchs, extractors, developers, polluters, exploiters, liars, and abusers – is to write in favor of an alternate future".

In *Against the Day*, as in *Mason & Dixon*, the subjunctive has both scientific and religious overtones. Sometimes the meanings converge. Other times they split dramatically, and when the latter is the case, one can discern in the book what the historian of science Stephen Jay Gould (2001: 288) identified as "our worst mental habit" – that is, dichotomy. This, Gould claims, is "our tendency to reduce a truly intricate set of subtle shadings to a choice between two diametrically opposed alternatives (each with moral weight and therefore ripe for bombast and pontification, if not outright warfare)" (ibid). On the one hand, the doubling of the characters' portrayal either through bilocation and their espionage activities as double agents, or by changing their gender roles, and the doubling of historical possibilities are epitomized by the optical effect of the Iceland spar, a mineral calcite having the property of double refraction, and also by imaginary numbers, "a doubling of the Creation", as an Icelandic librarian gnomically suggests (Pynchon 2007: 133). On the other hand, all kinds of persuasions – Catholic, Eastern-Orthodox, Gnostic, Buddhist, Orphic, Siberian shamanism and so on – usher the characters into the beyond. Brooding on the function of doubt in Christianity, Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, the enchanting storyteller of *Mason & Dixon* notes that "[t]he final pure Christ is pure uncertainty. He is become the central subjunctive fact of a Faith, that risks everything upon one bodily Resurrection" (Pynchon 1997: 511). The aspiring alchemist and photographer Merle Rideout in *Against the Day* recounts the Infancy Gospel of Thomas to his daughter Dahlia (Dally) as if the Gnostic text – the Gnosticism's dualistic ontology relates to the same pervasive motif of the double refraction (Coward 2011: 178) – would be a cautionary tale that every father should tell his daughter: "Jesus was sort of a hell-raiser as a kid [...], the kind of wayward youth I'm always finding you keeping company with, in fact, not that I'm objecting" (Pynchon 2007: 579). In Merle's vernacular, the son of God becomes a sort of Superman before the advent of comic books, a boisterous boy learning to use his superpowers properly, eager to prank everybody around him and playing with matters of life and death. One day, in order to amuse his pals, he takes all the clothes sorted out for colouring in a dyer's shop and throws the whole bundle in the red pot:

The dyer is screaming bloody murder, tearing his beard, thrashing around on the ground, he sees his whole livelihood destroyed, even Jesus's low-life friends think this time he's gone a little too far, but here comes Jesus with his hand up in the air just like in the paintings, calm as anything – 'Settle down, everybody,' and he starts pulling the clothes out of that pot again, and what do you know, each one comes out just the color it's supposed to be, not only that but the exact shade of that color, too, no more housewives hollerin 'hey I wanted lime green not Kelly green, you color-blind or something,' no this time each item is the perfect color it was meant to be. (Pynchon 2007: 580)

Despite the fact that Merle's memory does not serve him as well as his imagination, it is of the greatest importance that the parable is delivered in order to address a child's expectations. Also, the story evokes Christian iconography and colour perception, because colour is actually light, and light is "the closest word we

can find for invoking divine presence” (Hume 2011: 172). Yet the story is told in a funny and irreverent manner by a photographer who likes to toy scientifically with lens, precious metals, the strange properties of the Iceland spar, and chemical substances that in the hands of someone less artistically inclined may turn the search for the Philosopher’s Stone into an anarchist’s search for the deadliest explosive. It is also significant that Dahlia Rideout remembers the parable many years later when, as a young woman in Venice, she poses for the English painter Hunter Penhallow. This happens shortly after she is shown Tintoretto’s painting, *Abduction of the Body of Saint Mark*, which highlights “the crime at the heart of Venice founding myth” (Mogultay 2018: 63-64), the transgression that made Venice a sacred city despite its long history of ruthless commerce, public display of wealth, and bribery. It seems that Penhallow, who is not only a painter, but a time traveller too, someone who escapes from a great European war that has not yet happened, seeks “safety behind the cloaks and masks and thousand-named mists of Venezia” (Pynchon 2007: 576).

It is through these events that involve religious mysteries and light effects, recorded history and alternate universes, childhood jests and mortal sins, magicians and scientists, unreliable boyfriends and double agents that Dahlia reaches maturity. Her coming-of-age story deals with issues that other female characters in Pynchon’s fiction had to face. Thus, Dahlia Rideout’s growing up offers the reader some unexpected clues to how Thomas Pynchon shapes his female protagonist in relation to at least three other heroines before her.

## 2. Neither angel, nor femme fatale

Dahlia’s mother, Erlys Mills, abandoned her in infancy and eloped with the Italian magician Luca Zombini, known as Zombini the Mysterious. Merle is not Dally’s biological father, but he raises her with deep tenderness and care. One can discern an optical motif on Erlys’ side too. She is invisible during Dally’s childhood, a mere character in the bedtime story Merle tells in bits and pieces, and the wife of a magician who is interested in using the Iceland spar in order to push the old trick of cutting the assistant in half a little bit further, scientifically speaking (Pynchon 2007: 354-355). Thus Dally comes from a family – no matter how broken that family is – where illusion, light, and make-believe blend with a sad love story. Red-haired and green-eyed, having the name of a flower and a surname with musical connotations – “the rideout is the final chorus of a piece; to ride in jazz is to improvise on a melody” (Severs 2011: 225) –, Dahlia is the most enlightening presence in *Against the Day* and one of the most fascinating female characters in Pynchon’s fiction.

Her luminescent charisma is already implicit in the way Merle Rideout and Erlys Mills meet. What drives Merle to Cleveland, Ohio, in the first place is his interest in the theories regarding the “luminiferous Æther” (Pynchon 2007: 58), thought to be a medium through which the electromagnetic waves propagate, and his hope that the letter of recommendation he received from his friend at Yale, Professor Vanderjuice, will ease his access to the Ætherist community, a cult around the experiment done by the physicists Albert Michelson and William Morley. The craze caused by the new scientific fad brings to mind both the gargantuan banana breakfast (Pynchon 2000: 10-11) and the electric revolution envisioned by “The Story of Byron the Bulb” (idem: 660-668) in *Gravity’s Rainbow*:

There were diet faddists who styled themselves Lightarians, living on nothing but light, even setting up labs they sought of as kitchens and concocting meals from light recipes, fright light, fricasseed light, light *à la mode*, calling for different types of light filament and colors of glass envelope, the Edison lamp being brand new in those days but certainly not the only design under study. (Pynchon 2007: 60)

Just when the Æther-drift experiment fails, Merle meets pregnant Erllys. As in the lives of saints and medieval parables, the parents – not necessarily the biological ones – get together for a short time, yet enough for having, adopting or saving a special child. It should come as no surprise that Dally's first friend is a talking ball lightning who introduces himself as Skip, and whom Merle tried initially to catch using an insulated cage and a battery:

She had to admit Skip was an obliging little cuss, got their cookfires going in a snap, lit Merle's cigars for him, climbed inside the railroad lantern hanging off the back of the wagon when they had to travel in the dark. After a while, some nights, when she was up late reading, there'd be Skip up next to her, lighting the page, bobbing gently, as if reading along. (Pynchon 2007: 74)

Dally spends her childhood years and early teens traveling across America in Merle's wagon and dreaming of the Beaux-Art wonders she saw at the White City, the main attraction of World's Columbian Exposition. When she finally understands that the exhibits from the Chicago fairground used by her father as backdrop for shooting the visitors' portraits were dismantled, "her tears only reflected light, but did not flow" (Pynchon 2007: 70).

Pynchon often draws on hard-boiled fiction and film noir in order to create a specific atmosphere, to introduce some of his characters, or to suggest the power of "fatality" (Tyree 2021: 153). The noir voice-over suits Pynchon's designs, especially when he tackles the relationships between men and women. According to Tyree (idem: 154), [t]he *femme fatale mode* has become one of Pynchon's instant recognizable techniques of characterization. Not in Dally's case though. Independent and outspoken, she is granted a kind of sacred purity specific to the teens of the late nineteenth century adventure novels. This aura is kindled by her virginity and also by her androgynous features. In Telluride, Colorado, a mining town, she practices shooting with a revolver and wears the gun "in plain sight mainly on account of she didn't own one dress or skirt to hide it under" (Pynchon 2007: 303). Thus we are teased to infer that she wears trousers, not entirely acceptable female attire at that time. Dally is also good at escaping pursuers, at dodging indecent requests, and at doing magic tricks.

Jeffrey Severs (2011: 217, 220) sees her "as an extension of Prairie" – Zoyd Wheeler's daughter in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) –, a sarcastic teen in search of her estranged mother, Frenesi Gates. At the same time, Dally resembles Frenesi's friend, Darryl Louise (DL) Chastain, a *kunoichi* (female ninja) taken out straight of martial art movies and pop culture lore. She is as distinctively blonde and freckled as Dally is red-haired and freckled, has a boy's upbringing and thinks that her teen years are a very clear-cut part of her life. Darryl Louise's puberty and adolescence "were both turning out to be like vacationing on another planet and losing her traveler's checks" (Pynchon 1991: 123). Both young women may come across too cinematically imagined to feel real. However, everything they say and do bears the mark of verisimilitude.

Dally's looks and her chastity mark her as an asset in the eyes of those eager to trade her charms either as facile entertainment or on the real sexual market. When she arrives in New York searching for her mother, Dally finds a job as an actress on the streets of Chinatown. This show business is designated as "the white-slave simulation industry" (Pynchon 2007: 339). The cheap melodramas she plays in typecast Dally in the ideal role of the white young woman abducted by Chinese gangs. "Red hair! Freckles! Audition enough O.K.!" (ibid.) is what she is told by the impresario Hop Fung when Dally asks how come she is employed without a proper audition. Dally's theatrical success conjures up more immediate dangers, such as the devoted elderly fan with "pomaded gray hair and a gigantic emerald ring on his pinky" who grabs her wrist and tries to handcuff the girl while expressing his sinister appreciation: "You make such an appealing captive" (Pynchon 2007: 350). The fact that women and men are prone to mixing up the scenic persona with the real person pertains to the same motif of the double in *Against the Day*.

On board of the liner *Stupendica*, where she follows the Zombinis to Europe and meets again Kit Travers – her first true love interest and future husband –, Dally's behaviour is put in contrast with the beauty canon established by the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson:

Unlike the usual Gibson Girl, who liked to avert her eyes, not to mention her nose, as if it were not a fellow's appearance so much as his odor she wished to appear indifferent to, Dally never knew how to stop looking, even at somebody she had zero interest in, though heaven knew that was not the case right now. (Pynchon 2007: 511-512)

For Dally's long stay in Venice, Pynchon uses a Shakespearian device. In pretty much the same fashion that makes the Forest of Arden not a real place in *As You Like It*, but a timeless pastoral evasion, "a healing antidote" to court life (Nuttall 2007: 235), Venice is just a mirage in *Against the Day*. It is conspicuously the artistic city, the Venice of writers and of painters, and a crowded touristic destination, a place where Dally, like Rosalind, feels she had not only to disguise herself but also to switch gender in order to preserve her true self and avoid unpleasant encounters.

Quite soon she had grown to hate tourists and what she saw them doing to Venice, changing it from a real city to a hollow and now and then outright failed impersonation of itself, all the centuries of that irregular seethe of history reduced to a few simple ideas, and a seasonal human inundation just able to grasp them. (Pynchon 2007: 574)

Dally remains feminine with Kit Traverse, but she becomes boyish in the presence of artists. She dons men's clothes, crops her beautiful hair "into a drift of curls short enough to fit under a red knit fisherman's cap" (Pynchon 2007: 575), and models for painters of different schools. Dally proves so iconic that she suits various Venetian aesthetic ambitions. She feels attracted to Andrea Tancredi's project, *Preliminary Studies Toward an Infernal Machine*. Tancredi is a heretical futurist, a radical proponent of Divisionism who fell out with Marinetti's circle. He aims to describe dynamically the nature of time through a dialectic of strong colours (Pynchon 2007: 585-587). His declamatory devotion to progress and other world-improving tenets seems to Dally the same quasi-religious fanaticism that brought

Merle Rideout and his science-obsessed companions to the brink of madness when she was a child. That the Futurists' divination of the machine and their treatment of women as a cruel force of nature resonate with the rise of fascism is an implicit assumption in *Against the Day*. Dally never becomes a Futuristic muse.

Later in the book, when the sculptor Arturo Naunt chooses her as a model for a series of funereal monuments – allegories chiselled in black marble, agonizing soldiers in the laps of lean, hooded death angels with menacing wings – throughout London's cemeteries, Dally's face turns out as too specific for the sculptor's intentions. He wanted repose and stillness, but “what Dally gave him was a dynamic athlete, surrendered to a wind only she could feel, mindlessly orgasmic from its velocity” (Pynchon 2007: 895). Jeffrey Severs (2011: 232-233) counts Arturo Naunt among the many men in *Against the Day* who “try to make Dally profitable” by abstracting her to the few features that the market-driven economy selects as viable. Dally does not fit Naunt's project because she does not identify herself with the model, but with the angel, whose perspective she tries to understand and to learn, as if it were an actress' part in a drama. Besides, she does not see the point of the mandatory hood, meant to obliterate the light, that is, God's grace (Pynchon 2007: 894, 895). Dahlia Rideout cannot play convincingly the Angel of Death because every one of her gestures is a life-affirming performance.

As a performer, she has some conspicuous affinities with the French dancer Mélanie l'Heuremaudit from *V.* (1963), Thomas Pynchon's first novel. Critics have already tried either to tackle Dally as a more mature version of Mélanie, “a corrective” to his early portrayals of female characters (Severs 2011: 234-235), or to connect Dally's stay in Paris in the closing pages of *Against the Day* with the vicissitudes generated by the destruction of Europe during the Great War and the bleak events that are about to happen (Duyfhuizen 2012: 78-79). The hope is kindled by the strange resurrection in *Against the Day* of Mélanie l'Heuremaudit, who died horribly in *V.*

In the fourteenth chapter of *V.*, titled “V. in love”, Mélanie is a Lolita-like fifteen-year-old ballerina from Normandy. During the summer of 1913, she arrives in Paris under a sickening yellow sky in order to play in the much-talked about show *L'Enlèvement des Vierges Chinoises - The Rape of the Chinese Virgins*, choreographed by Satin. The avant-garde score is composed by Vladimir Porcépic (the story is a dark, decadent parody of the actual scandal caused by Igor Stravinsky's first performance of the ballet *Le Sacre du printemps* the same year). Pynchon conceives Mélanie l'Heuremaudit as glittering surfaces only, multiplied alluringly by mirrors. “You are not real”, she is told by the mysterious woman V. (Pynchon 1964: 379), and one wonders indeed if the remark is an entranced compliment aimed at the girl's beauty or a radical ontological statement.

Mélanie's stage name is “Mlle. Jarretière”. She dances, doll-like, among automata built by a German engineer, has an erotic encounter with a headless mannequin, and becomes a wind-up girl herself in a surrealistic dream. Her pet name is “*fétiche*” (fetish), and, when she becomes V.'s lover, she wears schoolboy's clothing. Mélanie's real personality, if she has one, seems lost among costumes, hosiery, colourful kimonos, spangled combs, bracelets, slippers with straps, Oriental make-up, and embroidered dragons. “She was not pretty unless she wore something” (Pynchon 1964: 373). There are so many accessories that during the show the young prime ballerina is accidentally impaled with a spear by two of the male dancers, because, ironically, she forgot to protect herself with the only costume item that might have saved her life: a chastity belt.

John Dugdale, who assesses Pynchon's literary allusions in chapter fourteen – Rimbaud, Joyce, Proust, Jarry, Rilke, Nabokov, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats among others – and also his visual and musical sources, such as Picasso's and De Chirico's paintings, Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* and Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (Dugdale 1990: 96-97), is concerned with “the hostility to Modernism in *V.* (for example, its perpetuation of Romanticism, its metaphysical delusions, its decadent sexuality, its idealising-sadistic representation of women)” (idem: 109). By conjuring up the artistic paraphernalia of the last century, spectacular images, masks, novelistic tropes, and poetic metaphors that belong to the inanimate world rather than to nature, Pynchon mocks the Modernist illusion of evading from one's personality through art and underlines the dangers of misplaced affection.

Fictions are demystified in *V.* by reference to that which is the case, the reality of situations, flesh-and-blood and its sufferings. When the text focuses on a particular Modernist artwork in the mock-*Sacré*, the insistence is that the fetish/symbol is an actual female body, that behind the role and costume of the dancer (the Modernist image par excellence) is a vulnerable young girl. (Dugdale 1990: 106)

In *Against the Day* we find out that Mélanie l'Heuremaudit survived the infamous 1913 show and that she befriended Dally after the war. Dally calls this “pretty young woman in trousers” Jarri, and when a group of Americans recognize the ballerina on the street and ask about her violent death, she invokes dismissively Grand Guignol and raspberry syrup:

“They needed a *succès de scandale*, and I didn't mind. A young beauty destroyed before her time, something the eternally-adolescent male mind could tickle itself with. *Mon Dieu!*” she sang, “*que les hommes sont bêtes*” in on the trail end of which Dally joined, singing the harmony. (Pynchon 2007: 1066)

How “real” is Mélanie this time? She appears in the book along Dally thanks to a science fiction projector that Merle Rideout turns on in California in order to see his adoptive daughter, who speaks back to him from Paris through a radio transmitter. Merle and his partner, Roswell Bounce, work near Hollywood, perhaps, as David Cowart (2011: 187) put it, as a nod to the 1980s *Back to the Future* movies. They build a device, the Integroscope, that combines alchemy, cinema, magic, and time-travel (Tyree 2021: 158-160), which in *Against the Day* turn out to be the same thing. All Merle has to do is take an old photograph of Dally since the days they travelled across America together and speed it up with the help of the Integroscope so that he can see her in a certain moment of her adult life. One cannot know exactly if this art of seeing “time within a static photograph” (Duyfhuizen 2012: 77) is the result of a truly innovative technology or mainly nostalgic reverie and longing on Merle's part, just as one cannot say for sure if Mélanie l'Heuremaudit really belongs among the many characters of *Against the Day* or is simply wishful thinking on Pynchon's part, a dreamed possibility, a subjunctive hope, a doubling of his novel *V.*, a travel back in time to his younger self.

### 3. Conclusion: father and daughter

Dahlia Rideout shares to some extent a family resemblance with other female characters in Thomas Pynchon's fiction. She is sarcastic, albeit vulnerable,

like Prairie in *Vineland*, independent, bold, and boyish, like Prairie's protector, DL Chastain, an adulated performer, like Mélanie l'Heuremaudit. She shows different guises, Catholic and pagan iconography blending with Modernist art, to different spectators. Unlike the French ballerina, though, whose trajectory she follows at one point in London when she becomes a famous actress and singer on Shaftesbury Avenue and the Strand, Dally does not let the audience turn her into a fetish. She is unfazed by the attention and the gifts that men and women alike lavish on her:

Understanding that none of this could last much beyond one season, almost in innocence amazed that she could watch so calmly the ardor of others as if from inside some glacial and lucid space, Dally was invited to weekends at some of the more sizable manor houses of the British countryside, required to do nothing but look the way she looked – as if her appearance possessed a consciousness, and must be allowed to obey its impulses – attended by domestic staff, puzzled by extravagant acts of abasement from young men whose names she did not always hear, let alone remember. (Pynchon 2007: 898-899)

Dally is never dehumanized in *Against the Day* despite the fact that some of her acquaintances try to exploit her charisma and even sell her into slavery. Tanner (1971: 161) states that the characters of *V.* experience life “only as spectacle” and that their voyeurism is a “way of evading true selfhood and denying or avoiding the possibility of love”. Dahlia Rideout's coming of age in *Against the Day* is always entangled with the invention of an optical device, with the mysteries surrounding a real or fictional painting, or with the history of photography and cinema. Yet she never regresses to visual suggestions, to a sum of literary and cinematic clichés. In Pynchon's typical postmodern epic, she is a character one might safely describe as “classic”. Merle's magic projector, which brings Dally and Mélanie together in the same frame, is not so much a piece of advanced technology, and even less a narcissistic artist statement, but a burst of unconditional love.

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