

Nihilism and Existential Anxiety in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*

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Abstract

Through the lens of the nihilistic philosophy and existential anxiety that defined the modern period, this dissertation analyzes Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day*. The research will also explain how the characters might lose touch with one another and what led to their anxiousness and resulting nihilism. Not only do they withdraw from themselves, but they also adopt a nihilistic lifestyle devoid of any moral or ethical principles.

Keywords: Pynchon, *Against the Day*, Nihilism, Anxiety, Alienation.
Against the Day (2006)

This chapter examines nihilism and existential anxiety in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006). It appears that nihilism in Pynchon's novels overtakes the overall atmosphere in the novel where characters seem engulfed in a meaningless world. At this point, meaning ceases to exist. By insinuation, characters try to reach the fulfillment of the American Dream. Nevertheless, they fell into the trap of replacing their positive values with negative ones. Thus, such an atmosphere advocates the idea that the American Dream is a farfetched illusion. Consequently, the research attempts to validate the idea that Pynchon presents his characters in a way that they are occupied with their identities amidst the illusion of the American Dream. In such a way, Pynchon's characters are caught within the nihilistic burden of living in such a society.

Pynchon's writings reflect the western literary tradition in which he focuses on the American dominant culture. In addition, Pynchon's writings deal with scientific, philosophical, and theological topics; David Cowart (2011) writes: "He [Pynchon] expresses, in numerous ways, a profound empathy with what he calls the preterite, the left out, the passed over in every form of election (spiritual, economic, racial, cultural)" (p.84). Like his American peers, Thomas Pynchon describes the dominant American themes in his society including the demise of the American Dream.

Against the Day overview

Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* was first published in 2006. It can be easily classified into the epic historical genre. The setting of the novel takes place during the between 1893 World's fair and the aftermath of World War I. The number of characters exceeds 100 characters. There are many places in the novel spanning Central Asia, Europe and the United States. There are other places that are not on the map at all. As its precursors, the novel can be read as a detective romance. It is considered the longest of Pynchon's novel at nearly 1,085 pages.

It is not easy to assign a beginning and an end to the novel. It's both arguable and

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ludicrous to pinpoint a starting point considering the gigantic size of the novel, 1,085-page novel, whose scenery is infinite and it includes more than 100 characters including a dog named Archduke Franz Ferdinand who is obsessed with reading Henry James' novels. There is the agitated offspring of the Kieselguhr Kid and the bisexual time-traveler who is obsessed with mathematics. However, Pynchon is known for dismissing the concept of time considering irrelevant within his fiction. He has been allegedly stated that civilization has died after World War I. At the same time, Pynchon refuses to assert the importance of place in his novels. For Pynchon, delimitations of the recognized world are purely atlases.

The plot line of the novel goes as follows: All through the approach to World War I, a character named Kit Traverse, who is the son of a Colorado radical and rebellious dynamiter by the name of Kieselguhr Kid, in his journey to grad university in Göttingen, discovers that he is Belgium, followed by pensionaries of the wicked capitalist tycoon Scarsdale Vibe. Avoidance from a menacing Flanders factory, Kit is drove into a window to a cascade of mush in an excessively nauseating arch and reached a channel in which he is saved by his Italian friends who were crossing the area in their airship gunslinger.

Alienation quest

In order to set the tone of the following analysis, there is going to be a brief account of the philosophy of Nihilism. This school of thought has many overlapping concerns within its application in the literary tradition. Nihilism is concerned with key thematic notions that are of paramount importance authors of literature. By applying these nihilistic notions, writers have sought a way to represent life in its crudest sense. Actually, it essentially designates the real life as pointless. As such, the discernment and understanding of reality does not correctly have sincere meaning in and of itself. Consequently, the purposelessness of life is its first and foremost feature. In such a world, people simply exist in drivel world. Thus, life is lacking any rational intellect, and it must be lived in alignment with the conventions and norms of its inherent illusion due to the fact that "the idea of a perceptual illusion relies implicitly on the idea that the individual is having an experience that may mismatch reality" (Morioka, 2017, p.6). Thus, the gist of life is not easily manageable, and it is humanity's obligation to search for appropriate outlet for their existential impasses.

The irrational meaning of life depends on the comparative view of living circumstances. At heart, life has numerous inconsistencies and disasters that must be circumvented. Humans tend to react to these circumstances by attempting to search for rational logic. As a result, viewing life in a relative way is a constituent quality of life. To explicate, humans endure numerous predicaments in their life. As such, they face these quandaries in diverse behaviors in relation to their ability to comprehend and cope with the challenges that they endure. Thus, people are trapped in the ongoing oscillation of life. Under such conditions, people face dilemmas according to their life conditions. Thus, they are stuck in this malicious loop of negative life circumstances. As in the following quotation, Kit Traverse who is a major character in the novel is communicating the message to destroying the world, "weapon able to annihilate the world" (Pynchon, 2006, p.559). He wishes to design weapons that are able to destroy the whole world. His wish for destruction is indicative of nihilistic tendencies.

A definitive character of the above description is Lew Basnight who is a typical hard-edged detective. The irrational fact in his life is his ability to become unseen. In the novel, there are three cowboy brothers who are looking for revenge for the murder of their father. Nevertheless, the cowboy brothers seem not committed to their task of avenging their father.

The futility of their mission appears congruent with the nihilistic feature of a meaningless life. In addition, the novel presents unreal monsters that dwell under the surface of the earth and are waiting to change the landscape of entire cities. The novel contains shamans who have the ability to be in two places at the same time and underwater ventures that reconnoiter the area under the desert. The following quotation illustrates the wish for a parallel world in the novel, "Let us imagine a lateral world, set only infinitesimally to the side of the one we know" (Pynchon, 2006, p.230). This is the wish of the Chums of Chance crew who live away from the real world by flying all the time up in the sky.

Under the light of nihilism, life is bound by a sense of pointlessness refereeing to the authentic meaning; an agenda which will hold little appeal to those who regard nihilism as simply an ahistorical fact about the human condition which we cannot overcome and have no reason to want to" (Tartaglia, 2016, p.28). In this sense, life seizes to provide human with logical explanation of their circumstances and the opportunity to escape life dilemmas. In the novel, Sparky expresses such sentiment telling Doc, "It all moves exponentially, and someday everybody's gonna wake up to find they're under surveillance they can't escape" (Pynchon, 2006, p.365). Here, Sparky speaks about the tightened grip of the real world which they cannot escape. In addition, they have to make preparation for the negative downside of life without being cruelly influenced by these dilemmas. As such, they can manage to escape any damaging impediment. As a result, this sense of futility designates the inverse of human's destiny in which they bound avoid their negative fortune during their life. Human's reactions to the negative turns in their lives have to be moderate so they can override the demolition of their capacity as humans. Such damage is at the core of the apprehensive state of mind which thwart humans from living a fullest life.

In *Against the Day* (2006), there many characters who seems to suffer the futility of life. Among these characters is Merle Rideout who evidently agonizes over the loss of his beloved wife, Erllys, and the sudden disappearance of his daughter, Dally. Rideout is faced with one of the harshest dilemmas that humans can endure. The negative downside in his life is apparent. In this light, nihilism is closely linked to the actions in Rideout's life. Another character who seems entangled in this vicious circle is Webb Traverse who is essentially undecided between his direct responsibility to his family and his obligation to stay committed to his role as someone who is trying to find solutions for the bad conditions of families around the world, and such obligation indicates that "these formations are linked to three distinct affects: cruelty, terror and cynicism, which all have specific and decisive relations to nihilism" (Diken, 2009, p.55).

In addition, humans may take these experiences as a way of exit from their daily burdens. The nihilistic influence upon humans appears in the state of existential anxiety. It thwarts them from becoming happy or perfect. Thus, people are not able to make rational sense of the world around them which "created natural world to exhibit rational order nor can we trust our senses or even our intellect: an evil demon might deceive us even in our reasoning" (Tongerren, 2018, p.7). The state of anxiety causes the gradual degradation of human condition in which they lose control over their own life. At this point, meaning seizes to exist in human life, and the search for it is meaningless.

Moreover, nihilism provokes the issue of estrangement and alienation. Nihilistic individuals live their lives in a society that appears to be subjugated by the crux of social fragmentation and meaningful human communication is prohibited. They do not intermingle with each other on the basis of social interdependence. Thus, this group of people does not comprehend the prowling incentive of their difficulties; and nihilism "falls into a kind of despair," especially when people "values can't be attained" (Huddleston, 2019, p.8). These

types of dilemmas make the characters unaware of the innovative societal variations. In this sense, they turn to detachment from each other. In the following quotation, the crew of the *Inconvenience* express such sentiment, “Returning from the taiga, the crew of *Inconvenience* found the Earth they thought they knew changed now in unpredictable ways” (Pynchon, 2006, p.795). Thus, they are disintegrated from the real world. Their estrangement is a clear sign of their split from societal relations.

Alienation and estrangement lie at the heart of Pynchon’s *Against the Day* (2006). If assignation with the physical world and accountability for the other humans are compulsory to an ethical, penitentiary life, it would appear as selective performances of viciousness are conceivably justified. The protagonist in the novel, Webb Traverse, and the novel’s other radicals are what Pynchon classify as bandits, whose sympathy with the other is demonstrated in struggling against the subjugation of the powerless group in society. The bandit’s action is analogized with the prevalent apathy of commonplace life that Pynchon views as ways to combat evil dictatorships. A justification of Scarsdale Vibe’s murder cannot be comprehended meaningfully to the real world. In this case, lack of apathy is present in the actions of the novel. Consequently, estrangement and alienation are what marks the interaction between the characters in the novel. They feel isolated as there is no sense of meaningful human relationships. Nevertheless, Vibe who is one of the characters in the novel is considered a modern dictator who has alienated himself from society in ways that logical human communication is not permissible. Although Pynchon appears unaffectedly contented with the Luddite practice of terminating capitalist technological advancement, engaging in physical viciousness against the tyrants themselves must be conveyed minutely, as instructed by the character of Reverend Moss,

Think about it [...] like Original Sin, only with exceptions. Being born into this don’t automatically make you innocent. But when you reach a point in your life where you understand who is fucking who—beg pardon, Lord—who’s taking it and who’s not, that’s when you’re obliged to choose how much you’ll go along with. If you are not devoting every breath of every day waking and sleeping to destroying those who slaughter the innocent as easy as signing a check, then how innocent are you willing to call yourself? It must be negotiated with the day, from those absolute terms” (Pynchon, 2006, p.87).

On the other hand, the famous group of young people called The Chums of Chance make a deficient dreamland as a result of alienation and estrangement from the world around them. They embark on an unusual mission to have their own unique societal structure. Nevertheless, they have a distorted version of a utopian world. Their rhetoric may allude to a religious explanation, but their overall judgment is secular in nature. The Chums of Chance, with all their ideal principles, has fallen into the trap of nihilistic attitudes towards the major issues in their lives. It appears that this indicates not refurbishment but the imperceptible connected of unjustified atonement. Their slogan becomes, “there, but Invisible” (Pynchon, 2006, p.1083). In this case, they wish to be detached from the real world. It is only through Lew’s understanding of refinement that we can differentiate between conservative materials and the immaterial ideals that are prevalent in the novel. This drives Lew into a state of isolation and estrangement from the other characters in the novel. He starts having an imperfect balance between his ideals and the reality of everyday life.

Alienation, in this case, instigates the sense of estrangement and isolation and negative though. Thus, individuals and characters alike are more inclined to living life in seclusion and it becomes their favorite mode of living; and in this case, “negative thought begins by resisting all attempts” (Chiesa and Toscano, 2009, p.59). They prefer to stay away from the presence of

other individuals or characters. These people have a close attraction to living in a peaceful atmosphere as they seek to upraise their character far from other individuals in “the process of alienation and recovery” (p.59). It turns out to be their method of promoting their being and characters in a world that appears barren of sense. In this situation, people start to look for permanency and peace in this damaging society. Amazingly, the state of estrangement and alienation go in the direction of fragmentation which eventually causes disintegration. To explain, the state of estrangement and alienation causes individuals to become detached from the world around them and they become as if they are strangers to each other. In this case, nihilistic individuals cannot reach plausible exits of their dilemmas. Even their perception of Time is distorted. In the following quotation, Time becomes a burden, "Time itself was disrupted, a thoroughgoing and merciless for swearing of Time as we had known it" (Pynchon, 2006, p.148).

The application of fragmentation and isolation can be found in the character of Reverend Moss. Through this character, Pynchon queries the likelihood of living in a secluded and fragmented life amidst a loose connected society. It follows that this character is innocent in terms of its political views including its multifaceted significance of both inculpableness and innocence in a society filled with of immoral and discriminatory conduct. In such a society, characters are impelled to revolt against the standards norms and values and become secluded and alienated. Reverend Moss questions the ability of human being's ability to stay calm in this world, "How could anyone's nerves here remain unafflicted?" (Pynchon, 2006, p.630). Thus, Reverend Moss prefers seclusion and isolation in such a corrupted world.

At different points in the novel, Pynchon categorizes the self-identification of virtue as a setback to isolation and fragmentation. Towards the end of her story, Yashmeen, the acclaimed bisexual mathematician has shed much of the anarchist values. In this sense, anarchism shares many values with nihilism as both movements agree on the meaningless of life. On the other hand, Yashmeen's societal obligation is empowered by the dislodgment of her wants for wholeness which is a state that is not attainable in this world. Thus, Yashmeen turns to history as a way of an exit from this corrupted world. This alteration from hypothetical diversion is not in the direction of secular embitterment. As for Yashmeen, whose distracting urge has reached the point where even sexual pleasure has no meaning or consequence. At this point, Yashmeen's nihilistic attitudes have reached their peak.

Thus, it follows such nihilistic attitudes by Yashmeen the fragmentation that we have talked about earlier and the consequences of isolation and disintegration. Therefore, this necessitates agreeing to an active obligation for both her own activities and the progressively worldwide humanity in which she inhabits. Appropriately, her goodbye party indicates and increases the sentiments of alienation that she feels towards the world around her. She does not feel anything anymore, “preferred that even erotic desire have no consequences” (Pynchon, 2006, p.942). At the end, Yashmeen's innocence is not without a cause. Her overall activities lean towards anarchism which can be understood in the context of her rebellious personality. Thus, nihilism is an integral part of her formation. It has been a gradual progression towards these nihilistic feelings and an outcry to the environment around that there is ultimately no meaningful human connection in this wicked world; and “the meaning of nihilism is therefore dependent upon both a spatial and a temporal understanding of any particular formulation” (Slocombe, 2006, p.3). It appears that alienation and fragmentation prevail at the expense of innocence.

Furthermore, these implicit differences are essential to a bursting considerate of how innocence is employed in *Against the Day* (2006) and in relation to nihilistic attitudes of the *Res Militaris*, vol.13, n°1, Winter-Spring 2023

characters. In comparing anarchist viciousness with symbolic insinuations America in the twenty-first-century, Pynchon is not ratifying Islamist terrorism. On the contrary, he is setting demarcation of the circumstances that brought about these frantic attacks providing the historical background which is more acquainted to Western readership. In the following quotation, the narrator talks about the groups that trying to destroy the world, "crazy Anarchists trying to start unions every time a man's back is turned"—unions that single up the lines, that unexpectedly bring together boys and girls and "transcend the old political space" (Pynchon, 2006, p.1053).

Nevertheless, Pynchon appear to be honest about the impossibility of maintaining meaning in such a worldwide capitalist society where injustice, corruption and manipulation are unavoidable. Such an atmosphere will gradually bring fragmentation, isolation and eventually alienation. These sentiments are what bring nihilism into the picture. The characters in *Against the Day* (2006) are drawn to nihilism and anarchism because of lack of meaningful communication and the resulting capitalist consequences that the modern Western world has brought.

The role of place in Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006) is of paramount importance in the course of the novel. Two cities stand out in the scenes of the novel: Chicago and Los Angeles. The city is described as, "Down the years of boom and corruption, they'd been warned, repeatedly, about just such a possibility. The city more and more vertical, the population growing in density, all hostages to just such an incursion" (Pynchon, 2006, p.151). Both cities are entangled in the middle between a dictatorship and an anarchy landscape. In such an atmosphere, the narrator is disturbed about the events happening to the Inconvenience. He elucidates that the Tunguska incident appears to have set demarcation lines between their own world and that of the real everyday space. It appears as if they are occupying different spaces. In this case, the notion of place in the novel denotes to the impossibility of cooperation and human communication in the events of the novel. More importantly, this state of lack of human communication adds to the sense of fragmentation and alienation as each group appears to occupy a different universe "that communication is an illusion, and that language does not function" (Slocombe, 2003, p.15).

In addition, the members of The Inconvenience do not come to a corporeal Shambhala as to what happens when they visit Los Angeles and Chicago. The team believes that earth as they know it has transformed in an unusual way. Their detachment from earth is another indicator of their loneliness and isolation. The team's long absence in the sky makes their human connection with earth nearly impossible. In doing so, it appears a state similar to semi-awareness happens which has resulted in their sensual disinterestedness. The following quotation illustrates this point, "[T]hey lived for different futures, but they were each other's unrecognized halves" (Pynchon, 2006, p.70). The truth lay bare naked which states that the group of young pilots is not able to stay in touch with the physical world. As a result, they have devised a way to fly far from the surface of the earth and the people inhibiting it. Thus, the ideals of family, love, and beauty are nearly absent in their lives. They have substituted them with anarchy and nihilism. It is their reaction against and exit from their poisoned reality.

Finally, the subsequent recurrences reproduce the nihilistic attitude and the outcome of the fundamental triangulation and penetrability of awareness in Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006). Because Pynchon consistently dramatizes a mystical landscape in a form of widespread realization, his text characteristically raises the question of global narratives. He believes that everything in the universe has voice. Thus, Pynchon's narratives are subverted. The cause of such subversion lies in the seemingly corrupt and unjust world that we live in. The Characters seems to caught in different locations at the same time, "somehow had the paranormal power

to be in at least two places at the same time ... known in the Psychical field for about fifty years as 'bilocation'" (Pynchon, 2006, p.685—86).

Conclusion

Such narration refuses to present meaningful communication between the characters as to reflect our ordinary life. Thus, the presence of nihilistic attitudes in Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006) open new doors to further understands the message of the novel.

On the other hand, it is seemingly conceivable that the narrator in one way or another withdraws his explanations and guesses. In such a condition, he is called an unreliable narrator. As in the following quotation, the narrator seems to contradict himself, "[I]f the Counterforce knew better what those categories concealed, they might be in a better position to disarm, denigrate, and dismantle the Man. But they don't. Actually, they do, but they don't admit it. Sad, but true" (Pynchon, 2006, p.712). The narrator appears to agree with two opposing facts. This judgment makes us as readers hesitant to accept the narrative at face value. In addition, it takes us back to altered nil valency which ratify a type of depictive randomness. Furthermore, it leads us to view the text as a counter narrative. This idea serves us well in the analysis, because it is directly linked nihilism which provide a counter and opposing narrative to the real world. Thus, the structure of *Against the Day* (2006) alludes to its nihilistic features. Even the title of the novel is suggestive of this idea. It appears as if it resists meaning or the passing of time. Nihilism stands against any meaningful communication among human beings that "need their life to have meaning. Since nothing is really (objectively) valuable, they are threatened with nihilistic disenchantment" (Reginster, 2008, p.90). The same is true for the novel. The characters are not able to connect with each other in a meaningful way. This process leaves the readers with burden of making meaningful synthesis in the novel.

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