

# POSTNATIONAL VISIONS IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *AGAINST THE DAY*

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## ABSTRACT

Thomas Pynchon is very often associated with the creation of alternative worlds and the category of postmodernism. These alternative realities have been analyzed by prominent scholars from different standpoints. For instance, the relation between Pynchon's multiple worlds and a trans/post-national imagination in his fiction has been addressed by several distinguished critics. However, regarding *Against the Day*, a meticulous analysis still has to be done. This essay aims at investigating how Pynchon's *Against the Day* depicts a postnational vision that questions and challenges the metanarrative of nationalism. Drawing on the works of leading experts in the field of Pynchon studies, this essay seeks to show how the alternative worlds of *Against the Day* instantiate a postnational vision which resists the rooted hegemony of nationalism in the world.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*, Postnationalism

## INTRODUCTION

In an interview with *The Guardian* on February 26, 2013, Martin Paul Eve observed that “Pynchon is continually ranked among the greatest living American novelists and to see the exponential increase in his output in recent years is definitely of interest” (2013). In 2014, Joanna Freer argued that “Pynchon is an originator of the postmodern style in literature” (2014, 1). Indeed, Pynchon has played an essential role in the establishment of the category of literary postmodernism. Even though it is not completely clear what the definition of postmodernism is, as Brian McHale suggested, without Pynchon's fiction there would have been no imperative “to develop a theory of literary postmodernism” (2012, 97). Pynchon's peculiar fiction does not lend itself to any particular genre, school, or trend, as it is all-encompassing, complex and comprehensive.

However, one reason for McHale's observation seems to be Pynchon's conceiving of alternative worlds that allow for ontological plurality. Similarly, Kathryn Hume has observed that “early in Pynchon's career, his insistence on alternate realities was part of what made him an exemplary postmodern writer” (2013, 1). This view corroborates the strict relation between the use of alternative worlds and the category of postmodernism

in literature. Nevertheless, what is most fascinating about Pynchon's fiction is the vast, variegated array of knowledge and its surprising depth, from science, technology, and physics to history, geography, literature, and so forth. To use Edward Mendelson's words, several of Pynchon's novels are "encyclopedic narratives" (1976, 1) in so far as they are dense, complex works of fiction that incorporate an extensive range of information in different areas of knowledge from specialized disciplines of science and the humanities, to the socio-cultural and religious beliefs and histories of nations. Employing the title "the maximalist novel," Stefano Ercolino has described such narratives using ten specific characteristics, including the "encyclopedic mode," that "define and structure" them "as a genre of the contemporary novel" (2012, 241-242).

In such a wide range of diverse issues and themes, Pynchon's alternative worlds have been very salient. The elusive lady V. in his debut novel *V.*, the underground Tristero system in his most canonical novel *The crying of lot 49*, the angels, the Thanatoids, and the dead in *Vineland*, and most recently the Deep Web and the software DeepArcher in his latest novel, *Bleeding Edge*, are quintessential representations of alternative worlds that allow for imaginary spaces in virtually all of his novels.

The question of alternative realities in Pynchon's fiction, and its relevance to the category of postmodernism, has been discussed by many critics from different points of view. In 2013, Hume, in what she calls "a worst-case scenario" (2013, 2), suggested that *Inherent Vice* is a novel with no final redemption, where there is "no other level of reality" to offer us "any escape or compensation or alternative or hope." She observed that the novel projects a pessimistic view on the alternative worlds, which, together with "the emphasis on the historical present" (2013, 16), makes the novel a historical, rather than a postmodern, detective story. In 2016, James Liner argued that the field of Pynchon studies has been influenced by "the increasingly questioned status of postmodernism" (2016, 5). Unlike Hume, he believes that *Inherent Vice* is signaling not the end but "a transformation of postmodernism" (2016, 1) and the novel is mobilizing a postmodern utopian alternative for "an escape from neoliberal capitalism" (2016, 10).

However, one thing the critics did not agree upon regarding these alternative worlds is whether they mobilize a postnational vision in Pynchon's fiction. In his analysis of American Studies in a transnational paradigm, Paul Giles observed that to

speak “in postnational terms may be premature, for the nation has not yet ceased to be meaningful as a category of affiliation and analysis” (2002, 20). However, concentrating on *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, in 2010, Sascha Pöhlmann has analyzed a “postnational imagination” (2010, 7) in Pynchon’s fiction. The critic takes issue with those scholars, such as Giles, who favor a transnational attitude in American Studies, dismissing a postnational perspective. Although he agrees with Giles in his assessment about the need for a “transnational, as opposed to postnational” (Giles 2002, 21) perspective in American Studies, he disagrees with such an evaluation with regard to Pynchon’s fiction and Giles’ suggestion that Pynchon’s novels mobilize a “specifically transnational rather than postnational” imagination (Giles 2002, 237). Having suggested that *Mason & Dixon* is “characteristically a late twentieth-century novel” (Giles 2002, 246), notwithstanding “all of its eighteenth-century apparatus,” Giles observes that the novel deals with “transnational crossings and the traversal of stable national boundaries.” Contrary to Giles’ description, Pöhlmann considers *Mason & Dixon* as a novel about “postnational flows and the creation and dismantling of unstable national boundaries and categories” (2010, 10).

Applying a “comparativist approach to the contemporary American and Mexican literary canons,” Pedro García-Caro has analyzed the works of Thomas Pynchon and Carlos Fuentes as narratives that “aim to unravel and denounce” the geographic dominance of “the national map” and “its projected borders.” These novels criticize “the narratives of national histories” with “the teleological discourse of modernity as an experience of national fulfillment” as their central concern. García-Caro argues that such fictions playfully aim at debasing “‘holy’ borders, international borders as well as the internal lines where narratives of nation are embodied and consecrated” as they begin “to contemplate the ensuing postnational constellations” (García-Caro 2014, IV).

Other critics, such as Tore Rye Andersen, hold a sort of in-between position. Andersen agrees with Pöhlmann’s analysis that “Pynchon’s postnational imagination denies ‘nation-ness its hegemonic status’” (2016, 35) because Pynchon’s work obviously “transcends the national framework.” Nevertheless, he observes, since “nations are very much a part of global history,” Pynchon’s “globally minded novels” map “the bloody trail” that nation-states have left behind “rather than merely denying their hegemonic status” (2016, 36).

Regarding Pöhlmann's argument, although he brilliantly analyzes a postnational imagination in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* at great length, he dedicates only a few pages to discuss the topic in *Against the Day*. An "interstice" between the two other novels, he observes that *Against the Day* is "nothing like *Mason & Dixon* or *Gravity's Rainbow* in many respects." At the same time, however, it evinces similar "postnational traits" to those in the other novels and "constitutes another part of Pynchon's postnational imagination" (2010, 361).

In the light of this brief introduction, my paper aims at investigating how Pynchon's *Against the Day* depicts a postnational vision that questions the metanarrative of "nation-ness" (Pöhlmann 2010, 7) in our life-worlds. I endeavor to show how Pynchon's alternative worlds in *Against the Day* manifest the potential of other "modes of being" (McHale 1987, 79) which instantiate transnational and postnational insights. These phenomena resist the rooted hegemony of "nation-ness" (Pöhlmann 2010, 7) as a dominating narrative that has made it difficult to imagine other possible worlds as an alternative "way of life" (McHale 1987, 79), over almost the last two hundred years.

Before delving into these issues, nevertheless, I shall provide a short theoretical framework regarding the definition of the terms "transnationalism" and "postnationalism" as I employ them in my paper, and what relation they bear to each other. Pöhlmann uses the term "nation-ness" (2010, 7) to refer to the concept of the nation as distinguished from nationality. In his use, "nation-ness" refers to the abstract idea of the nation which should not be confused with the prevalent use of the word "nation" to indicate the nationality of a person. With that in mind, postnationalism is "anything that works towards dismantling the hegemony of nation-ness as a metanarrative" (Pöhlmann 2010, 8). I would like to specify that, in this essay, the prefix "post" in the term postnationalism does not mean "after;" in other words, postnationalism does not mean after nationalism. Indeed, postnationalism, as I intend it, "is not concerned with overcoming nationalism but overcoming nation-ness" (Pöhlmann 2010, 10). To put it otherwise, it actively participates in challenging "the legitimacy of nation-ness as a metanarrative;" defined in this way, postnationalism constantly attempts to question "the hegemony of the national, its myths and

narratives, its discourses and categories, its fixed identities and its mechanisms of control” (Pöhlmann 2010, 15).

Another theoretical term that needs to be clarified is transnationalism. In general terms, it could be defined as “any phenomenon that transcends national borders” (Pöhlmann 2010, 9). As a category of analysis, transnationalism has a lot in common with the postnationalism defined above. To use Berndt Ostendorf’s words, “transnationalism presupposes anti-essentialism, favors plurality, mobility, hybridity and favors margins or spaces in between” (2002, 19). In this respect, postnationalism builds on these presuppositions and “makes explicit a normative position against the hegemony of nation-ness that is mostly implicit in descriptions and analyses of the transnational” (Pöhlmann 2010, 9). Thus, criticizing the rooted ideology of “nation-ness,” postnationalism can benefit from transnationalism in so far as it underscores the fact that there are other possible systems of ordering our world than “nation-ness.” In this sense, transnationalism is in line with and reinforces postnationalism as it is closely related to it.

#### FROM NATIONALISM TO TRANSNATIONAL IMAGINATIONS IN *AGAINST THE DAY*

The national order has been rooted in our life-worlds for nearly two centuries. It has constantly been used by the nation-state, through a rational discussion of “nation-ness,” as the single possible way of organizing the world in order to maintain political power and control. “Nation-ness,” not in the sense of belonging to a nation but as an ideological, theoretical concept, is very much present in the world of *Against the Day*. Indeed, it is hard for the characters in the novel to imagine its nationalized world, on the cusp of World War I, in a different framework than the national ideology. For instance, the Chums of Chance, who symbolize American national identity, hold a defensive position each time they encounter the flagship of their “Russian counterpart” (Pynchon 2006, 127). Only in the end, in the annual convention held by “the Garçons de ’71” (Pynchon 2006, 1087), do they realize the limitations of their national identity and seek to work transnationally to help the Europeans during the war.

In 1996, Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny assessed, rather optimistically, the condition of “belonging to a nation” as “a kind of ‘cultural recovery’” which potentially

brings about “— not a politics of blood —” but “acceptance, even celebration, of differences.” They observed that “being national is the condition of our times, even as the nation is buffeted by the sub-national rise of local, regional, and ethnic claims, and the transnational threats of globalization, hegemonic American culture, migration, diasporization, and new forms of political community” (1996, 32).

Nevertheless, in today’s world, nation-states and politics are no longer the only sites of sovereign power. Regarding the building of walls at the borders of nations, Wendy Brown has observed that “it is the weakening of state sovereignty, and more precisely, the detachment of sovereignty from the nation-state, that is generating much of the frenzy of nation-state wall building today” (2010, 24). She shows the “weakening” of the national ideology through a discussion of capital, “that most desacralizing of forces” (2010, 66), in the age of globalization that has turned “God-like: almighty, limitless, and uncontrollable,” albeit it does not replace the nation-state or subsume its sovereignty fully. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that “the concept of national sovereignty is losing its effectiveness” (2001, 307). In the competition between large transnational capitalist corporations and nation-states, the “state functions and constitutional elements” undergo a change where a “system of transnational command” assimilates nation-states and politics by surpassing their “jurisdiction and authority” (Hardt and Negri 2001, 306). However, Hardt and Negri are quick to note that “although transnational corporations and global networks of production and circulation have undermined the powers of nation-states” (2001, 307), the traditional functions of the state and its constitutional elements “have effectively been displaced to other levels and domains.”

If “nation-ness” has become such an ordinary, always already accepted concept that it is almost impossible to question its status, it is, too, a condition that needs to be changed. As Stefan Berger has argued, “historical constructions of national identity appear so easily as natural” (2008, 4). As any other human construction is subject to change in the course of history, nation-states have always implemented changes to the original construction of their national identity in times of political need. A manipulated historical construction, the national identity needs to be replaced by other possible ways of conceiving of our world that would go beyond the single metanarrative of the

nation-state and leave enough space for the existence and coexistence of new ways of ordering the world.

As far as Thomas Pynchon is concerned, he has been very prominent in creating the so-called alternative worlds in his novels which challenge the dominance of the nation-state as the single form of imagining our life-worlds. These multiple worlds are imaginary spaces, imagined by Pynchon in most of his novels, that offer new ways of organizing the world. As McKenzie Wark puts it, “there are other worlds, and they are this one” (2004, 178). Wark expresses his idea of a world as having “potential” (2004, 175) rather than “necessity” (2004, 170), which is to suggest that it can mobilize other ways of existence without being forced into a dominant system of power. Marie-Laure Ryan has argued that the theory of possible worlds proposes “the concept of modality to describe and classify the various ways of existing of the objects, states, and events that make up the semantic domain” (1991, 3). In such a condition, new ways of conceiving of the world might appear which could go beyond the calcified epistemology of hegemonic, overreaching orders such as the national ideology. When these alternative modes of being materialize, an ontological plurality of worlds, “in the sense of way of life, life-experience, or *Weltanschauung*” (McHale 1987, 79) or “any mode of being between existence and nonexistence” (McHale 1987, 106), becomes possible.

Pynchon’s alternative realities question, amongst other things, the hegemonic dominance of the national order. As García-Caro has argued, both Carlos Fuentes and Thomas Pynchon offer a “postnational satire” in their novels, which are works that seek to undermine the political, repressive constructs known as “nations” as well as the dominant, homogenizing ideology of nationalism that supports them. Regarding Pynchon, he advances “a theoretical framework rooted in textual commentary and cultural history, as well as archival research within which to understand Pynchon’s works as a postnationalist denunciation of American imperialism and its related jingoistic practices” (2014, VI).

As we learn from Pynchon’s own description of *Against the Day*, on the Amazon page for the novel, it is a narrative that spans “the period between the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 and the years just after World War I.” Moving across various spatial and temporal settings, Pynchon depicts “a worldwide disaster looming just a few years ahead” at “a time of unrestrained corporate greed, false religiosity, moronic

fecklessness, and evil intent in high places.” There is a “sizable cast” of historical and fictional characters that includes miners, anarchist bombers, capitalist bosses, shamans, scientists, and mathematicians. These characters “are mostly just trying to pursue their lives.” However, “an era of certainty comes crashing down around their ears and an unpredictable future commences” for them. In the meantime, “strange sexual practices take place. Obscure languages are spoken, ... Contrary-to-the-fact occurrences occur.” Pynchon tells us that “if it is not the world, it is what the world might be with a minor adjustment or two... Let the reader decide, let the reader beware. Good luck.” Although this description leaves out many significant events in the novel, perhaps there is no better way to provide a synopsis than the author’s own words.<sup>2</sup>

In this complex panorama of numerous interesting issues, *Against the Day* offers many examples where the metanarrative of “nation-ness” is challenged. The novel introduces certain transnational phenomena which connote, and sometimes overtly depict, a postnational view. Pynchon’s fiction takes us to a world where we encounter innumerable peoples, lives, lands, and real and imagined worlds. This globalizing tendency is no mystery to the Pynchon reader or anyone who has at least read his intriguing debut novel, *V.* An indescribably original novel, *V.*’s narrative engages in various places around the world such as New York, Paris, Florence, Malta, Cairo, Alexandria, Corfu, Rotterdam, Spain, Africa, and the Middle East. In fact, on the back cover of the paperback edition of the novel, released by Penguin in 2007, the infinite list of countries and cities is summed up by the phrase “constantly moving between locations across the globe.” Here, it must be noted that I am using the adjective global to refer to the encyclopedic quality of Pynchon’s novels which try to demonstrate, among other things, a representation of the world, and possibly contain it. Proposing the term “world- historical or global novels” (2016, 8), Anderson observes that at least three of Pynchon’s novels “stand clearly apart from the rest of his work” (2016, 24). He explains that “the remarkable unity of their vision” mobilizes a historical perspective that “maps the complexity” of significant historical transition points in the novels. This tendency keeps flowing into Pynchon’s other novels as well. As I will discuss in what

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<sup>1</sup> See Pynchon’s description of the novel, available at: <https://www.amazon.it/Against-Day-Thomas-Pynchon/dp/1400103703>

<sup>2</sup> See Menand’s description of the plot here: Menand, Louis. 2006. “Do the Math.” *The New Yorker*, November 27. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/11/27/do-the-math>.



follows, in *Against the Day*, the flow of information, technology, capital, and peoples transcends the national framework.

When Ratty expresses his idea about a “general European war” (Pynchon 2006, 942) that is about to take place, Yashmeen, the ward of a British diplomat in Inner Asia in the novel, replies, “why not let them have their war?” She explains that even if all European kings and Cæsars went to war for their nationalist ideology, “why would any self-respecting anarchist care about any of these governments?” She believes that these nation-states can fight each other as much as they wish while anarchists could lay back and not care at all. Ratty, one of professor Renfrew’s favorites, observes that on the contrary, such a universal war would create the worst situation for the anarchists: “Anarchists would be the biggest losers.” He explains that “today even the dimmest of capitalists can see that the centralized nation-state, so promising an idea a generation ago, has lost all credibility with the population;” anytime the old nation-state ideology has become weak, anarchism “is the idea that has seized hearts everywhere.” He mentions to Kit, the youngest son of the Traverse family and a student at Yale, that if the forces supporting the national idea fail, so does capitalism. Such a condition would lead to the growth of anarchism and, consequently, the beginning of the end of nation-states.

When capitalists realize that the nation-state is no longer popular with the population, they try to revitalize the central nation-state using a different method. War, Ratty opines, is the solution: “The national idea depends on war” (2006, 942). “If a nation wants to preserve itself, what other steps can it take, but mobilize and go to war?” To preserve the national idea, thus, war needs to be created. This view reminds us of one of the three Party slogans in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “War is Peace” (Orwell 1949, 3). Winston, the novel’s protagonist, learns from Emmanuel Goldstein’s book the true meanings of the Party’s slogans and the concept of perpetual war which explains how the Party maintains power. As he reads the book, it becomes clear that “it does not matter whether the war is going well or badly” (Orwell 1949, 134). What is needed “is that a state of war should exist.” In his 2003 foreword to Orwell’s novel, Pynchon mentions that “the Ministry of Peace wages war” (2003, 3) which is to suggest the government’s irresistible “addiction to power” (2003, 4). Indeed, “central governments were never designed for peace” (Pynchon 2006, 942). War is the

indispensable machine to perpetuate the national ideology and curb the growing power of the anarchists, the marginalized, and the “Preterite” (Pynchon 1973, 116). Ratty’s predictions are correct inasmuch as the unimaginable disasters of World War I were followed by another world war that would do even more damage.

The above example suggests how our world has been ordered and shaped within a national framework and how our life-worlds have been suffering the consequences. “Nation-ness” has been deeply rooted in our world that it has left no space at all for other ways of understanding and organizing the world. Ratty’s explanation reveals the painful fact that the narrative of the nation is not the metanarrative it claims to be; it is not an order that is based on the common good, chosen and decided by a vast host of single subjects among communities, but one that imposes its dominant ideology on societies and their singularities.

If it is true that nation-states use war to sustain the national ideology, Pynchon’s novel suggests that nation-ness is no longer the single overreaching metanarrative that has kept its hegemonic order in place for so long. This scene from the novel suggests that there is also a possibility for other global systems, to define, interpret, and manage our world, which go beyond the capitalist interests and borders of nation-states. Pynchon’s alternative worlds mobilize a vision free from the hegemonic limitations of a single, absolutist metanarrative where the reimagination of our world, so often enclosed by a non-negotiable order, becomes a possibility again. As Pöhlmann observes: “Pynchon’s postnational imagination proves the national world to be only one among many others and postulates no necessity except the necessity to imagine these worlds in order to change this one” (2010, 361).

On this note, I would like to draw attention to another example of a transnational framework in the novel. Scarsdale Vibe explains to professor Heino Vanderjuice that Dr. Tesla, a historical figure who had an important role in the development of electrical engineering, has been trying to invent a system that would provide free access to electricity to all the people around the world. Vibe, a wicked plutocrat and a ruthless mine owner, believes that Tesla’s idea of a “World System” is “the most terrible weapon the world has seen” (Pynchon 2006, 38-39). He emphasizes that, if not stopped immediately, it would weaken the “rational systems of control” over people and economy. In his opinion, Tesla’s idea would send us back to anarchic ways

of “fish-market” economy where nothing is controlled systematically, as they are at present under the power of capitalism. To him, such a transnational system would mean “the end of the world” and the ruin of the very nature of the world’s economy and the “blessings” of capitalism:

If such a thing [Tesla’s ‘World-System’] is ever produced,” Scarsdale Vibe was saying, “it will mean the end of the world, not just ‘as we know it’ but as anyone knows it. It is a weapon, Professor, surely you see that—the most terrible weapon the world has seen, designed to destroy not armies or matériel, but the very nature of exchange, our Economy’s long struggle to evolve up out of the fish-market anarchy of all battling all to the rational systems of control whose blessings we enjoy at present. (2006, 39)

Vibe explains to the professor that Tesla “is already talking in private about something he calls a ‘World-System,’ for producing huge amounts of electrical power that anyone can tap in to for free, anywhere in the world” (2006, 38). However, Vibe believes that no one will finance Tesla’s project because putting up money “for research into a system of free power would be to throw it away, and violate— hell, betray—the essence of everything modern history is supposed to be.” He asks the professor to invent “a counter-transformer. Some piece of equipment that will detect one of these Tesla rigs in operation, and then broadcast something equal and opposite that’ll nullify its effects” (2006, 39). The novel uses technology to show a transnational view where all people “anywhere in the world” (2006, 38), beyond the national borders of America, could enjoy the benefits of electricity. This can be considered as the application of the encyclopedic quality in the narrative inasmuch as the use of technology, as a specialized discipline of science, instantiates a global vision in which people around the world can equally benefit from electricity. Inger Dalsgaard has observed that Tesla’s idea of “the free distribution of electricity . . . may be thwarted” (2012, 164); but Pynchon uses technology “to foster local resistance to the tyranny of business mogul Scarsdale Vibe.” Indeed, Vibe does not want the new system to take root and go transnational insofar as his grasp on the economy lies in control and surveillance. As he tells the professor, Tesla’s system “uses the planet as an element in a gigantic resonant circuit” (Pynchon 2006, 38) which could endanger his economic status. On the other hand, Tesla’s “World system” would be exactly an alternative reality where a new possibility of organizing the world economy, beyond any national boundaries and in favor of “the Preterite”

(Pynchon 1973, 116), would thrive. Such a globalizing system would jeopardize the capitalist interests of Vibe. Thus, its effects have to be nullified in order to avoid “anarchy” (Pynchon 2006, 39) in the system which could interfere with his control of the economy.

Hence, going beyond the national means going anarchic and resisting the hegemony of the present calcified world order. However, anarchism, as Ratty explains, should not blow things up but play “more of a coevolutionary role, helping along what’s already in progress” (Pynchon 2006, 937). For instance, governments can be replaced by “other, more practical arrangements,” Ratty mentions, “some in existence, others beginning to emerge, when possible working across national boundaries.” But a transnational system benefiting the marginalized and the ordinary would threaten the fixed and secure capitalist interests. For Vibe, who is clearly a “representative” (Maragos 2014, 10) of authority, the way to prevent that from happening is to impede any alternative possibility to germinate. Therefore, he demands that Professor Vanderjuice design a “counter-transformer” (Pynchon 2006, 39) that could disable a transnational free electrical power system.

The arrival of the Chums of Chance, “a five-lad crew belonging to that celebrated aeronautics club known as the Chums of Chance” (2006, 8), at the Chicago World’s Fair already depicts a transnational order in the novel:

A Zulu theatrical company re-enacted the massacre of British troops at Isandhlwana. Pygmies sang Christian hymns in the Pygmy dialect, Jewish klezmer ensembles filled the night with unearthly clarinet solos, Brazilian Indians allowed themselves to be swallowed by giant anacondas, only to climb out again, undigested and apparently with no discomfort to the snake. Indian swamis levitated, Chinese boxers fainted, kicked, and threw one another to and fro. (2006, 27)

We also observe “Waziris from Waziristan exhibiting upon one another various techniques for waylaying travelers” and “Tarahumara Indians from northern Mexico crouched, apparently in total nakedness, inside lath-and-plaster replicas of the caves of their native Sierra Madre” (2006, 28). At their arrival, Lindsay and Miles are confronted by the spectacle of unsavory acts and exhibits on the fringe of the Fair. Nonetheless, the Fair provides the possibility for people around the world to be present at the same time and place, exchanging their arts and traditions. If we conceive of the Fair in terms of a

“trans-national plexus” (2006, 940), the novel grants a vision where the transfer of cultural traditions and knowledge transcends the borders of nations. Indeed, the Fair is a globalized city hosting an international event. When the boys “come within view of the searchlight beams sweeping the skies from the roof of the immense Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building,” they visit what the narrator describes as “a miniature city, nested within the city-within-a-city which was the Fair itself” (2006, 29). In this sense, the fair is a detailed miniature of the world where the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World is being celebrated. They have built new canals and reproduced different settings such as a Cairene street, a Japanese tea house, a Moorish palace, and a German village; such a global representation is an ideal setting for a novel that is in itself a representation of the world.

A salient issue in *Against the Day* is World War I. However, the novel does not say as much about the war itself as it does about its implications, such as the creation of modern systems of control and order in the world. The incomprehensible disasters of the war are only depicted through their side effects. In fact, this slanted representation of the global horror takes up only a few pages of such a vast novel. As David Cowart observes, the war is mostly fought “off-page” (2011, 186). That said, no war, not even a civil war, excludes the idea of the nation. *Against the Day’s* alternative worlds suggest a transnational attitude that seeks to overthrow the fixed idea of “nation-ness,” albeit that transnational structure acts as a sort of undercurrent. Though in the background, most often the transnational phenomena are trying to suggest ways of dismantling the hegemony of the national. For example, through “the mysterious Q-weapon” (2006, 561), Pynchon depicts a transnational view where “Quaternioneers” and “Vectorists” (2006, 564) interests intersect. This already shows how the inventors of the Quaternions and Vector analysis, from different nations, come together in the creation of a weapon which is bought by Piet Woevre from Edouard Gevaert in Brussels.

Such a small detail reinforces the idea that even if the weapon is concerned with destruction and the world of *Against the Day* is about to burst into World War I, it is noticeable that Pynchon tries to depict a transnational paradigm. Seen as a tool of destruction, the Q- weapon is a harmful instrument of horror serving the national ideology that would introduce “the vast population of the world’s innocent to more trouble than its worth to any government” (2006, 570). At the same time, from its

creators to its users, it brings people of different nations together and can be seen as a way of crossing over national borders. Therefore, the novel seems to depict a nationalist idea and a transnational paradigm simultaneously.

#### TOWARD AGAINST THE DAY'S POSTNATIONAL VISIONS

Of all the alternative worlds of *Against the Day*, the city above the skies is the one which is most clearly postnational. Obviously, there are many other scenes where such a postnational imagination is suggested. For example, Darby explains to Chick that, during the sieges of Paris, some of the balloonists came to realize “how much the modern State depended for its survival on maintaining a condition of permanent siege” (Pynchon 2006, 19). Pöhlmann argues that the elevated viewpoint of the balloonists let them broaden their “framework of thought” (2010, 362) by way of observing the big picture of “politics and society that could not remain within the accepted national categories.” Indeed, with the end of the sieges, the balloonists were set free “of the political delusions” (Pynchon 2006, 20) and, as Penny mentions, decided to fly “far above fortress walls and national boundaries, running blockades, feeding the hungry, sheltering the sick and persecuted.”

Although late, in the end the Chums of Chance recognize their identity, which reveals to them the limits of a self-conception based on an us-them attitude of sameness and difference. The national metanarrative that has shaped their identity and kept their story together until then loses its appeal and falls apart as they start to help and alleviate the suffering of Europeans during World War I by providing them with provisions. As Nathalie Aghoro observes, the Chums move on “from representing the national narrative to the transnational fork in the road that leads them towards cooperation in order to help a world that is threatened to resolve into fragments under the impression of World War I” (2009, 49). Their old, static, national identity becomes obsolete and another one needs to be newly constructed, which, as we shall see, would be formed within a “supranational” (Pynchon 2006, 1087) framework. In the light of their new understanding of the world, the Chums become aware of the possibility of cooperation and acting postnationally beyond the borders of nations in order to avoid the horrible fears of war and keep the world safe. Such a supra/post-national attitude is exactly what

Aghoro calls “the excluded middle that nationalist ideology cannot acknowledge in its fight for supremacy” (2009, 49).

The ending scene of the novel depicts a postnational vision where the national boundaries cease to exist. The city above the skies is a world where no single metanarrative, such as “nation-ness,” is in control. This alternative possibility goes beyond the national borders and exemplifies one of the most important things that has been sought throughout the novel: “a supranational idea.” When “the Garçons de ’71” are holding their annual convention up above the skies in Paris, Penny explains to the Chums that “the Boys call it the supranational idea” which is “literally to transcend the old political space, the map-space of two dimensions, by climbing into the third” (Pynchon 2006, 1087). “The supranational idea” has the capability to transcend “the old political space” which is nation-states’ official, hegemonic order of control and surveillance. Such spaces, with hard and fast epistemologies, oftentimes act at the service of politicians and governmental functions. Therefore, “the supranational idea” should transcend the static maps and boundaries created by the overruling dynamic of the national ideology. To go beyond such calcified epistemological ideologies, including the national, new ontological possibilities, worlds, and perhaps a plurality of them, must be set in motion; an event that would generate novel horizons of understanding and living our life-worlds.

As the novel comes to an end, Pynchon poses a serious concern. He suggests the need for an alternative world so as to interpret and organize our world in a different manner than the stagnant hegemony of nation-ness, even though its controlling order is so deeply rooted that it seems impossible to imagine a world without it. Through a comprehensive, well-crafted novel, Pynchon expresses and emphasizes the necessity for a postnational world, or what the boys call a “supranational idea” (2006, 1087). This indicates that new alternatives, such as the “third dimension,” could and must materialize. Pöhlmann observes that “the worlds Pynchon creates in his novels . . . are worlds that often resist the illusory coherence of the national as their basis. They present counternarratives that unhinge the national world by opposing it to different postnational worlds” (2010, 361). *Against the Day* demands a different vision of the world that would be free from the limitations of a single dominant metanarrative. By mobilizing a postnational imagination, in the following example, we can see how

Pynchon's alternative worlds in the novel seek to counter the overarching identity formation of nation-ness.

In the city above the skies, the Chums are freed from their restrictive framework of duties and fly over the national boundaries, going wherever they wish and helping whomever they desire. This deserves the label postnational. No longer under the grasp of a world restrained by the national ideology, the Chums find a new universal order "above the City in a great though unseen gathering of skyships" (Pynchon 2006, 1087) where the national is not in control. Of course, this world is "invisible" but the boys' motto indicates that it is "there:" "There, but Invisible." Ergo, it represents an alternative possibility that transcends such dominant narratives as the national. As Ernest Renan observed in "What is a Nation?," a nation should be based on the "plebiscite of every day" (1882, 58). To make that happen, the hegemony of the national must be negotiated and replaced by other methods of organizing the world. *Against the Day's* ending scene evinces a reunion of the skyships above the city which is postnational insofar as it leaves behind any single metanarrative. Indeed, the "supranational idea" (2006, 1087) is "there," even if "invisible," and directs the Chums toward "grace" (2006, 1089). By the end of the novel, a different framework of existence is suggested. "No one aboard *Inconvenience* has yet observed any sign of this" but "they know—Miles is certain—it is there." The Chums are ready "for the glory of what is coming to part the sky. They fly toward grace."

Although World War I took place, the alternative world above the city allows the Chums of Chance to witness, even if briefly, a utopian vision of a world without repression and oppression, in which it is possible to redefine one's relation to oneself, to others, and to the state. It is as if nation-state's control had been nullified by a new world order. Such a possibility, in what seems to be a closed system, is what postnationalism, as I understand it, seeks to establish. Where no space of freedom has been left to the imagination, the boys are set free and offered a new vision that endeavors to find an opening, even if momentary and ethereal, in the calcified rule of nation-ness. In the absence of the national idea, a postnational order might be possible where other epistemological understandings of the world pave the way for the coexistence of new ontological orders without necessarily being mutually exclusive, as the national is. Notwithstanding the dawn of one of the most devastating wars in



human history, in the end the novel provides a promising imagination. Through this new vision, we are invited to reimagine the world in a different light, other than those brought to us by overreaching metanarratives such as the national idea, that would have the potential to provide a postnational space.

With that in mind, it is also true that such a vision is not ultimate. Even with the existence of a postnational paradigm, there are other orders in our world that are in control and by no means is it possible to say that nationalism is on its way to its demise. As García-Caro observes, “the North American continent is far from being ‘beyond’ or ‘after’ the nation despite the signs of tiredness of rhetorical nationalisms, despite the partial collapse of the nation-state as an economic and cultural unit” (2014, VI). On the contrary, faced with “a postnational globalization that replicates earlier asymmetrical exchanges and neocolonial relations,” it is as though nationalism could still be able to recreate “both a sense of postcolonial resistance and its supplement—imperial narcissism.” However, *Against the Day* opens to the reader an alternative panorama where other modes of interpreting the world, beyond the all-encompassing, hegemonic narratives of control and order, are suggested. The national is one of the strongest narratives of control in today’s world and, directing attention to its hegemony and surveillance in every aspect of our social and individual lives, *Against the Day* mobilizes a postnational vision which challenges and resists its dominance in the world.

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