

AGAINST THE GRAIN

READING PYNCHON'S  
COUNTERNARRATIVES

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In memory of Sharon Krafft.

## Abbreviations

*AtD: Against the Day*

*CoL: The Crying of Lot 49*

*GR: Gravity's Rainbow*

*MD: Mason & Dixon*

*SL: Slow Learner*

*VL: Vineland*

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## Introduction: The Complex Text

Sascha Pöhlmann

Abstract: This introduction takes Thomas Pynchon's 2006 novel *Against the Day* as an occasion to raise the question of whether it is still legitimate to classify Pynchon as a postmodern author. The essay presents two major ways in which *Against the Day* transcends the category of the postmodern and thereby invites readers to reevaluate Pynchon's whole *oeuvre* anew while emphasizing once again its political dimension. Firstly, *Against the Day* is interpreted as a postnational novel that challenges the metanarrative of nation-ness in a variety of ways and thereby continues a project Pynchon has been pursuing at least since *The Crying of Lot 49*. Secondly, *Against the Day* is conceived of as a complex text in the sense of combining real and imaginary aspects, discussing the use of mathematics in the novel with special emphasis on aspects of describing, imagining and changing this world as well as many other worlds. Both these aspects illustrate how *Against the Day* exceeds the boundaries of postmodernist fiction and imply that Pynchon's novels in general are always so much more than postmodern.

We may have to stop calling Thomas Pynchon a postmodern writer. This is not because his works are not postmodern, but because they are more than that, and referring to them with that term only is even more of a simplification than it usually is, and also a misleading one. It has virtually become an axiom in literary studies to say that Pynchon is a postmodernist, if not *the* postmodern author, and I believe this statement should be questioned time and again *because* of its axiomatic status, especially because it all too often leads to the unfortunate and careless inference that whatever Pynchon writes is postmodern by default. The publication of *Against the Day* (2006) offers such a chance to reconsider the postmodernism of Pynchon's writing, and I will argue that there are certain ways in which it significantly transcends the limitations of that concept. Again, this is not to claim that Pynchon's writing is not postmodern, but that it is also other things, and that it seems more and more inappropriate to

limit one's view of these texts to a postmodern framework. Without a doubt, *Gravity's Rainbow* is still the defining text of postmodernism in literature, with *The Crying of Lot 49* probably a close second; *Mason & Dixon* is one of the most important examples of the postmodern genre of historiographic metafiction; the critique of consumer and media culture offered in *Vineland* even surpasses that of DeLillo's *White Noise* by also including a critique of the countercultures; the "mock-modernism" of *V.* (McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 63) may well be seen as a variety of postmodernism; finally, *Against the Day* is full of postmodern elements such as ontological and textual play, rewritten histories, and a radical multiplicity of viewpoints, characters and narratives. Yet the postmodernism of Pynchon's texts should not be regarded as a natural given, and it should especially not be assumed when a new novel is published; instead of making the novel fit the *oeuvre*, one does well to read the *oeuvre* anew and see how it is changed by the addition. T.S. Eliot's assertion in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is still worth pondering in this context: "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it" (5). While Eliot means literally *all* earlier works, it is beneficial in particular to apply this concept to the earlier works of that respective author. Doing so still implies a belief in a certain continuity provided by the author-function, but it also counteracts the exaggerated assumption of coherence within an author's work that Foucault warns against when stating that the "*oeuvre* can be regarded neither as an immediate unity, nor as a certain unity, nor as a homogeneous unity" (27). *Against the Day* presents an opportunity and a necessity to question this unity of Pynchon's *oeuvre*, to re-evaluate his earlier texts and to reconsider even basic assumptions about them, and to keep them open towards such reinterpretation without necessarily rejecting accepted ideas; this seems a much more useful approach to the novel than to label it "postmodern" by interpolation. It is obvious how the latter approach would limit the potential of readings of *Against the Day*, and the refusal to assume such limits may well point out how they have constricted readings of Pynchon's earlier novels as well. An essay by Sara Solberg has given us every right to compare apples and oranges, so let me do just that to illustrate my point: Joyce's *Ulysses* remains *the* modernist novel despite *Finnegans Wake*, and the postmodernism

of *Finnegans Wake* allows for readings of *Ulysses* (as well as *Dubliners* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) that go beyond the analytical framework provided by the concept of modernism. *Finnegans Wake* meant, although nobody could possibly know it in 1939, that people would have to stop calling Joyce a modernist despite the fact that *Ulysses* would remain the defining novel of modernism. Similarly, I believe we do not have to diminish the significance of Pynchon's texts for postmodernism by arguing, as I will in the following, that *Against the Day* exceeds the conceptual framework of postmodernism, and that it asks us to check if and where Pynchon's earlier texts did so as well. Brian McHale emphasizes the need for such conceptual flexibility in order to prevent theoretical short-sightedness:

Period terms like postmodernism (and modernism, for that matter) are strategically useful; they help us see connections among disparate phenomena, but at the same time they also obscure other connections, and we must constantly weigh the illumination they shed over here against the obscurity they cast over there. From the moment when the obscurity outweighs the illumination, and the category in question becomes more a hindrance than a help, we are free to reconstruct or even abandon it. ("What was Postmodernism?")

Pynchon's readers may appreciate the idea that we should, if possible, regularly check our paranoia, our desire to connect, our need to establish a narrative to help us make sense of what is going on. *Against the Day* serves well as a reminder that, after all, every categorization of period, genre, etc. is a construction that should not be mistaken for something like a "natural law," no matter how well it works.

The impulse for this reading of *Against the Day* stems from the event this book resulted from: International Pynchon Week 2008, held at the Amerika-Haus in Munich, Germany. The title of the conference was "Against the Grain: Reading Pynchon's Counternarratives," since this seemed not only a neat pun that allowed the blatant plagiarism of the original cover of *Against the Day* for the conference poster, but also one option among many to describe all of Pynchon's texts, which was readily embraced by many presenters. These texts are counternarratives, not only to dominant narratives, but even sometimes to themselves and each other. It is in this spirit I want to offer an analysis of *Against the Day* as a counternarrative to the

dominant postmodernist readings of Pynchon's novels, and therefore also as a counternarrative to *its own* postmodern elements; it is by refusing to be *only* postmodern that *Against the Day* rejects postmodern strategies while at the same time employing them.<sup>1</sup> The papers presented at the conference, and the essays collected in this volume that are based on these presentations, provide fertile ground for such an analysis, and their diversity surely was an inspiration to any participant in the conference (as they will be, hopefully, to the reader of the present collection). International Pynchon Week 2008 was a remarkable event in that it showed the Pynindustry as work in progress, as everyone was trying to make sense of *Against the Day*, which was published not long before the call for papers went out, and to relate it to Pynchon's other novels. During the four days of the conference, presenters and audience members witnessed and participated in what can be called critical reception in the making, and the sheer variety of topics, opinions, interpretations and contextualizations attests to the productive diversity of Pynchon studies as well as to what turned out to be the accuracy of the conference title: the narratives and counternarratives offered at the conference resisted being reduced to a single reading or explanation, and I hope readers of this collection will be content that this reduction has not been attempted in the editorial process. As the very first collection of essays on *Against the Day*—and I emphasize that this also means those essays focusing on Pynchon's other novels, since these readings are informed by *Against the Day*—this volume seeks to provide readers with a variety of possible approaches to the novel, either regarding its entirety or more detailed aspects. Let me summarize briefly what the reader can expect from this diversity.

The collection opens with Heinz Ickstadt's "Setting Sail Against the Day: The Narrative World of Thomas Pynchon." As its title suggests, the essay can be seen as a point of departure for the others that follow, since it not only reviews many of the most important aspects of *Against the Day*, but also places the novel in the context of Pynchon's other texts. Ickstadt offers an overarching analysis that connects particular concerns of *Against the Day*, ranging from mathematics to anarchism to light, with the more general issues that have haunted Pynchon's writing since *V.*—potential, subjectivity, history, a counterworld to the one we know all too well.

Keith O'Neill continues this critical contextualization of *Against the Day* in "Against the Master: Pynchon's Wellsian Art" by drawing on the dispute between Henry James and H.G. Wells that is an emblem of the rupture in literature between so-called "high culture" and genre fiction. Using Pynchon's essay "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" as a background, O'Neill argues that *Against the Day* reflects and takes sides in this debate and thereby more generally invests its own aesthetics with subversive political significance.

Simon de Bourcier picks up the reference to Wells in "Travels in the Fourth Dimension in *Against the Day*." He shows how the novel frames its encounters between possible worlds by narrativizing a debate contemporary with its setting, which involves different interpretations of the fourth dimension by Wells, Zangwill, Hinton, Ouspensky, Bergson, and Minkowski.

Even if the fourth dimension in *Against the Day* is not necessarily time at all, it would be a mistake to conclude that time is not relevant in the novel. Inger Dalsgaard approaches the subject from a different angle in "'Perchance to Dream': Clock Time and Creative Resistance Against the Day." Taking Pynchon's 1993 essay "Nearer, My Couch, to Thee" and its spiritual-political concept of sloth as a starting point, she discusses constructions of (and resistance to) linear concepts of time, and places *Against the Day* within both a scientific tradition of relativity and quantum physics and a literary tradition going back to *Hamlet*.

Toon Staes reads *Against the Day* within the tradition of the Pynchonian canon itself. His essay "'When You Come to a Fork in the Road'—Marcuse, Intellectual Subversion and Negative Thought in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day*" applies Marcuse's philosophy to the relationship between potentiality and actuality in the two novels, especially with regard to the individual facing a capitalist society in which the real and the rational are allegedly one. Staes employs Marcuse's ideas not only to offer an insightful analysis of each novel, but also to trace a more general heterogeneous continuity of narrative resistance in Pynchon's writing, as exemplified in the foreword to Orwell's *1984*.

Ali Chetwynd focuses entirely on Pynchon's 1973 novel in his essay "Imperfect Circles: Asymmetrical Orbital Motion from the Rim to the Centre in *Gravity's Rainbow*." He argues that critics have unduly privileged the notion of the "perfect rocket arc" as a structural

metaphor in the novel, and offers various related models in a comprehensive fresh reading that compellingly demands a re-evaluation of earlier ideas about that text. Ballistic arcs, spirals and vortices offer interpretive imagery that sheds new light on well-established topics such as the Rocket, Slothrop's scattering, and the various attempts at approaching holy centers.

Rodney Taveira addresses Pynchon's imagery literally in his essay "Still Moving Against the Day: Pynchon's Graphic Impulse," in which he approaches *Against the Day* from the angle of visual culture. His rich interdisciplinary discussion uses art history, photography, and cinema not only to place the painters in Pynchon's novel in their Futurist context, but also to offer a comprehensive analysis of visuality in *Against the Day* that has remarkable implications for a wide range of its crucial elements, including light, bilocation, Deuce's murders, the city of Venice, and physics.

Clément Lévy offers a different take on visuality in a more specialized analysis of photography in Pynchon, appropriately entitled "As Far as Pynchon 'Loves Cameras.'" He traces the use of cameras throughout Pynchon's works and reads major topics anew along the lines of this motif, offering fresh insight into the treatment of communication, spying, larger structures of control that relate to concepts of urbanity, and ultimately representation and its difficult relationship to the real.

Georgios Maragos stays with the topic of communication in "A Medium no Longer: How Communication and Information Become Objectives in Thomas Pynchon's Works." He adds to the well-established scholarship on this issue by offering a straightforward thesis based on a complex and comprehensive analysis: in Pynchon's novels, media cease to be means to an end, but become objectives themselves.

William D. Clarke focuses on a single novel in his essay "'It's My Job, I Can't Back Out': The 'House' and Coercive Property Relations in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*." He draws on socio-economic theory to discuss property as a "strange" and elusive metaphor that offers at best a shaky foundation for capitalism, and goes on to argue that, accordingly, *Vineland* effectively employs inherently conflicting and contradictory concepts of property in its cultural critique.

Michael Harris, in his essay "The Tao of Thomas Pynchon," complements this economic perspective with an analysis of spiritual

aspects in *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day*. Pynchon's use of non-Western spirituality has been of interest to early critics already, but the more recent novels demand that even more attention be paid to it. Harris offers a concise and varied interpretation of Eastern religion in Pynchon's texts, arguing that it is a significant motif as well as a meaningful structuring device.

Jessica Lawson concentrates on the carnal side of Pynchon's writing in "'The Real and Only Fucking is Done on Paper': Penetrative Readings and Pynchon's Sexual Text." She considers the complex relation between *Gravity's Rainbow* and its readers in the light of theories of the erotics of language, writing, text, and interpretation, and offers valuable insights into this profound set of questions about the novel: "how we get inside it, how it gets inside us, and who exactly comes out on top."

Manlio Della Marca deals with quite another kind of fluid in his essay "Fluid Destiny: Memory and Signs in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*." He takes his cue from Marx, Engels, and Zygmunt Bauman, and places Pynchon's novel at a point of transition between the solidity of a modernity focused on hardware and the fluidity of a postmodernity focused on software, thereby presenting a dialectic that opens up new readings of that text.

Lovorka Gruić Grmuša returns to *Against the Day* by looking closely at one of its major settings: the Balkans. In "The Underworld and Its Forces: Croatia, the Uskoks and Their Fight for Autonomy in *Against the Day*," she parallels a literary analysis of narratives of underworlds and exile in the novel with a historical account of Croatian struggles for national independence, showing how Pynchon represents fictionalized human and supernatural forces of the underworld as agents in a political process.

Celia Wallhead continues the discussion of imperialism by drawing on an intertextual connection between *Against the Day* and Kipling's novel *Kim*, which was published during the time in which the former is set. Her essay "Kit and *Kim*: Espionage in *Against the Day*" points out parallels between the texts and employs them in order to show how Pynchon's novel can be read as a postmodern reworking of the spy-adventure story.

Leyla Haferkamp analyzes *Against the Day* with regard to some of its major scientific aspects in "'Particle or Wave?': The 'Function' of the Prairie in *Against the Day*." She argues that the prairie works in

Pynchon's text as a complementary spatial modality that has both political and poetic ramifications in its metaphorical potential to combine dichotomies such as order and chaos or culture and nature; to that end, she also relates the prairie along with the particle-wave duality to the smooth and striated spaces theorized by Deleuze and Guattari.

Francisco Collado-Rodríguez addresses the scientific background of *Against the Day* by contextualizing it comprehensively within Pynchon's oeuvre. "From Science to Terrorism: the Transgressing Function of Energy in Pynchon's *Against the Day*" goes back as far as *V.* in its argument that Pynchon uses three basic strategies in employing the organizing principle of energy (manipulation of scientific notions, use of intertextuality/metafiction, recurrent and ironic exploitation of alphabetic letters), adding that *Against the Day* expands this project to include terrorism and light as major tropes.

Hanjo Berressem closes the collection by moving the discussion of science in *Against the Day* to the field of mathematics, which is certainly the scientific dominant of the novel, and by taking it to other spheres of knowledge from there. In "'Vectors and [Eigen]Values': The Mathematics of Movement in *Against the Day*," Berressem argues that Pynchon employs a "vectorial poetics" in his novels that is especially prominent in *Against the Day*, and that can be approached usefully by further theorizing ideas Pynchon mentions in his texts: eigenvalues, sinuous cycles, and habits.

It will be fascinating to see how these essays, this early criticism of *Against the Day*, work for other readers, how they make new connections possible, invite expansion or criticism, and how these narratives spawn more narratives, counter- or otherwise.

Let me now come back to the narrative of *Against the Day* and postmodernism. How exactly does the novel overflow that concept? What leads me to argue that a postmodern lens allows for many exact readings but leaves other possibilities out of focus? In short, it is Pynchon's globality, or what I call elsewhere his postnational imagination.<sup>2</sup> While postmodernism has worked a great deal towards the deconstruction of hierarchies in the contexts of gender, sexuality, race, colonialism, class, and a few more, it has either insufficiently or not at all paid attention to the nation as a governing principle of being, knowledge, thought, identity, and politics. Nation-ness, the abstract

concept instead of a more particular nationality, is one of the most dominant ideas of modernity, and probably *the* most successful secular structural concept not only of group identity and geopolitics, but also of personal identity and self-definition. As Anthony Smith argues:

In a sense, nothing so clearly marks out the modern era and defines our attitudes and sentiments as national consciousness and nationalist ideology. Not only in everyday political and social life, but also in our underlying assumptions, the nation and its nationalism provide a stable framework for good and ill and define the goals and values of most collective activity. The modern world has become inconceivable and unintelligible without nations and nationalism [...]. (106)

It is surprising that postmodernism has not singled out nation-ness as a primary target of its deconstructive efforts; apparently, this is one metanarrative it was still very hard to be incredulous toward. While postmodernism is actually well-equipped to challenge and deconstruct nation-ness, it has not applied its discursive tools to this particular problem, but has chosen to focus on others instead. Postnationalism, which I define as the theory and practice of challenging the hegemony of nation-ness, can build on a postmodern framework, but was not an integral part of it. “Being national is the condition of our times” (Eley and Suny, “From the Moment” 32), but so far it has not been sufficiently recognized as a condition that needs to be questioned and changed. It is crucial to note in this context that the important and impressive postnationalist efforts in American Studies do not go far enough, since they mostly seek to transcend *nationalism*, whereas a postnational practice works to think beyond *nation-ness in general*. Pynchon’s novels, I argue, are very important examples of such a postnational (not only postnationalist) practice, but it is a practice that has been outside the visible spectrum of a postmodernism that, like Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, could not let go of nation-ness, that last albatross around its neck. To be sure, some critics have recognized that Pynchon’s texts operate beyond a national framework, most notably Edward Mendelson, who argued early on that “Pynchon’s international scope implies the existence of a new international culture, created by the technologies of instant communication and the economy of world culture” (164-65). Paul Giles included *Mason & Dixon* in his study *Virtual Americas*:

*Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary*, and Terry Caesar and Takashi Aso published an essay on “Japan, Creative Masochism, and Transnationality in *Vineland*,” yet these are the only significant attempts to read Pynchon at least from an international or transnational perspective, and none of them goes as far as acknowledging Pynchon’s full-blown deconstructive effort directed against nation-ness itself, and they thereby illustrate a more general postmodern reluctance towards postnationalism.

While Pynchon’s project of a postnational imagination can be traced back to at least *The Crying of Lot 49* and even to some extent to *V.* (and continues in his 2009 novel *Inherent Vice*), it is *Against the Day* that makes the most pressing demand to (re-)read Pynchon’s novels in that light. *Against the Day* is the most explicitly global of Pynchon’s texts; yet its globality is not a new aspect of Pynchon’s fiction, but merely a clearer manifestation of earlier phenomena. This globality, of which the postnational imagination is a part, is also what marks the move beyond the epistemological boundaries of the postmodern which all too often coincided with national boundaries; Wai Chee Dimock summarizes this tendency with regard to American literary studies by writing that “[i]t is as if the borders of knowledge were simply the replicas of national borders” (3). Many passages in *Against the Day* illustrate perfectly how Pynchon’s postnational imagination counters this replication, the most explicit of which is Ratty McHugh’s anarchist speech on the effects of a “general European war”:

“Anarchists would be the biggest losers, wouldn’t they. Industrial corporations, armies, navies, governments, all would go on as before, if not more powerful. But in a general war among nations, every small victory Anarchism has struggled to win so far would simply turn to dust. 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. Anarchism now is the idea that has seized hearts everywhere, some form of it will come to envelop every centrally governed society—unless government has already become irrelevant through, say, family arrangements like the Balkan *zadruga*. If a nation wants to preserve itself, what other steps can it take, but mobilize and go to war? Central governments were never designed for peace. Their structure is line and staff, the same as an army. The *national idea* depends on war. A general European war, with every striking worker a traitor, flags threatened, the sacred soils of homelands defiled, would be just the ticket to wipe Anarchism off the political map. The national idea would be

reborn. One trembles at the pestilent forms that would rise up afterward, from the swamp of the ruined Europe.” (*AtD* 938)

McHugh acknowledges that nation-ness once was a concept with revolutionary potential but argues that it has become a mere tool to create a group identity that can then be employed to control that group. This is why the anarchists are “when possible working across national boundaries” (*AtD* 933). He fears the rebirth of the national idea and what it would mean for the world, and of course the history of the twentieth century proved him to be painfully right, especially with regard to the idea that nation-ness depends on war. In passages such as these, nation-ness is presented as a flawed narrative whose claims to be a metanarrative are highly problematic and need to be challenged; *Against the Day* takes this assumption as a normative starting point for an elaborate and varied deconstruction of nation-ness and its derivative concepts and entities, such as national identity, nationalism, and the nation-state. The diversity of postnational strategies employed in *Against the Day* includes and expands those already used in Pynchon’s earlier novels; let me give a few examples. *Against the Day* relentlessly dismantles the myths and symbols that work to transform the narrative of nation-ness into a metanarrative, as can be seen in the heated debate on board the *Inconvenience* about how to celebrate Independence Day, which ends with one of many nods to Homer Simpson’s idea of pedagogy:

In the U.S.A., it was almost the Fourth of July, which meant that tonight, by standing orders, there had to be a shipboard celebration out here, too, like it or not.

“Lights and noise, just to keep us hoppin like trained baboons,” was Darby’s opinion.

“Anyone at all educated,” protested Lindsay, “knows that Fourth of July fireworks are the patriotic symbols of noteworthy episodes of military explosion in our nation’s history, deemed necessary to maintain the integrity of the American homeland against threats presented from all sides by a benightedly hostile world.”

“Explosion without an objective,” declared Miles Blundell, “is politics in its purest form.”

“If we don’t take care,” opined Scientific Officer Counterfly, “folks will begin to confuse us with the Anarcho-syndicalists.”

“About time,” snarled Darby. “I say let’s set off our barrage tonight in honor of the Haymarket bomb, bless it, a turning point in American history, and the only way working people will ever get a fair shake under that miserable economic system—through the wonders of chemistry!”

“Suckling!” the astounded Lindsay Noseworth struggling to maintain his composure. “But, that is blatant anti-Americanism!”  
 “Eehhyhh, and your mother’s a Pinkerton, too.”  
 “Why you communistic little—” (*AtD* 111-12)

Lindsay’s nationalist attitude—and it is not “just” patriotism, which is only a word for one’s own good nationalism as opposed to the disgusting chauvinism of others—is contrasted with Darby’s anarchist views, and the juxtaposition demands a reevaluation of one’s understanding of America. While Lindsay wants to symbolically maintain and support the national narrative and its binary opposition between us and them, which is the basis of any national identity, Darby seeks to redefine America beyond national identity in terms of class. In deconstructing the symbolism of the Fourth of July within the narrative of the Chums of Chance, which originally starts out as an example of patriotic young adult fiction that perpetuates a national imagination, Pynchon challenges the official discourse of American national identity not only by investing its most cherished holiday with subversive meanings but also by showing that the ideological production of national identity occurs by way of nationalized narratives.

*Against the Day* parodies these symbolic acts in order to undermine the authority of nation-ness and question its legitimacy. The Chums of Chance, enrolled in the Harmonica Band Marching Academy, find themselves “reprimanded like everybody else for improvising during the more tightly arranged pieces like ‘My Country ‘Tis of Thee’” (*AtD* 419); this shows that the practices of nation-ness cannot accept individual deviances from its prescribed structures. The passage presents the performance of national identity as highly regulated and its reiterations under strict control, but it also shows that improvisation is possible even within its framework, and that such acts of deviance and self-assertion work to undermine a dominant discourse: these improvisations amount to seeing “America as it might be in visions America’s wardens could not tolerate” (*AtD* 51). In a similar way, *Against the Day* works to dismantle the national myths of a cult of personality, for example when Kennedy’s famous 1963 speech in Berlin is not used to convey any usual sense of the greatness of a national leader etc., but serves as a starting point for a comical exaggeration of the popular misunderstanding that Kennedy in this speech actually told everyone that he was a doughnut. The phrase “*Ich*

*bin ein Berliner!*” (AtD 626) is taken out of its context so that it is not available for purposes of national identity construction; instead, it is reinscribed so that it runs counter to any such serious purpose. These parodies efficiently show how national identities are constructed discursively, and how these identities need to be denied any essential status no matter how much they may claim to have it. *Against the Day* shows the absurdity of an alleged essential national group identity in presenting national traits of character as completely unjustified assumptions and as the clichés they are: this is how Englishman Dwight Prance can be mistaken for a Japanese spy in the first place, and his defense is a comic recursion to stereotype: ““But I say look here, I’m *not* Japanese. I mean am I walking about in sandals? gesturing with fans, speaking in unsolvable riddles, any of that?”” (AtD 783). National identity is unstable and at the same time the result of ill-founded perceptions of group identities. Many of the instances in *Against the Day* when characters revert to their national identity are humorous ones, reminders of stereotypical constructions rather than of actual essential traits, such as when Frank calls Wolfe Tone O’Rooney’s bluff when he poses as Eusebio the Mexican:

“Got to say you speak some mighty fine English, there, Eusebio,” nodded Frank.

“In Tampico everybody speaks northamerican, it’s why we call it ‘Gringolandia’ here.”

“I bet you see a lot of Irish around too, huh? those *irlandeses*?”

“Señor?”

“Oh they’re easy to spot—red-nose drunk all the time, jabbering, dirt-ignorant, idiot politics—“

“And what the bloody fuckall would you know about it—*este...perdón*, señor, what I meant to say, of course—“

“Ah-ah...?” Frank grinning and waving his finger. (AtD 641)

This passage does not assign O’Rooney a stable Irish identity that his performance of a Mexican identity could not cover up. On the one hand, O’Rooney is all too clichéd as an Irish character in the first place: his name could not be more appropriate for an Irish revolutionary, and he employs, of all things, a potato to forge the documents that identify him as Eusebio Gómez (AtD 373). On the other hand, he only really loses his temper when Frank mentions Irish “idiot politics,” not after one of the earlier insults. He employs nationalist politics as an anticolonial weapon, but he does not espouse

a hierarchic, nationalist exceptionalism. Instead, his political outlook is global and not nationalist in that his anarchism overrides his nationalism, as the development of his allegiances shows: “Wolfe Tone O’Rooney was after weapons for the Irish cause, primarily, but found himself drawn more and more, the longer he stayed in Mexico, into the gathering revolution here” (*AtD* 642). Politics are always already global *and* local in Pynchon’s novels; they are never merely national (which is not to be confused with the local).

As the postnational imagination of *Against the Day* questions the foundations of national thought, identity and politics, it offers a huge counternarrative to a history that has been perceived as national. Historiography and literature both have helped maintain the power of nation-ness; *Against the Day* shows how both can work towards questioning that power. One of the most fundamental acts of redefinition occurs when young Jesse is supposed to write an essay on “What It Means To Be An American” for school:

“Oboy, oboy.” Reef had that look on his face, the same look his own father used to get just before heading off for some dynamite-related activities. “Let’s see that pencil a minute.”

“Already done.” What Jesse had ended up writing was,  
*It means do what they tell you and take what they give you and don’t go on strike or their soldiers will shoot you down.*

“That’s what they call the ‘topic sentence’?”

“That’s the whole thing.”

“Oh.”

It came back with a big A+ on it. “Mr. Becker was at the Coeur d’Alene back in the olden days. Guess I forgot to mention that.” (*AtD* 1076)

Jesse radically moves beyond patriotic definitions and essentialist views of national identity; to him, being an American is not about innate traits of character or any of the glorious constructions of ingroup versus outgroup any national narrative relies upon. Instead, he writes about a condition common to a certain *class* of people that is by no means limited to any national territory, and he effectively makes a postnational anarchist demand: if this is what it means to be American, then America must be abolished. The national narrative turns out to be a fraud for those who do not submit to the rules; national unity is invoked only when it serves a political purpose (e.g. taxes or war), but there is no genuine community.

This is also a lesson the Chums of Chance learn throughout the novel. One could simplify their development as moving from national to postnational. They set out in the service of a mysterious agency that seems to be (at least connected to) the US government, and they are constructed as binary opposites (yet also doubles) of their Russian counterparts, the “Tovarishchi Slutchainyi” (*AtD* 123) or “accidental comrades.” Yet both the formerly American and the Russian crews end up severing their ties to their respective governments and their national identities, opting for a global outlook instead. The Tovarishchi Slutchainyi change the name of their ship from *Bolshai’a Igra* (“The Great Game”), with its connotations of nationalism and colonialism, to *Pomne o Golodayushchiki*, or “Remember the starving” (*AtD* 1024), while the Chums of Chance end up working neither for “American government” nor “Large American corporation” but “Ourselves” instead (*AtD* 795). In flying “far above fortress walls and national boundaries” (*AtD* 20), they are all espousing “the supranational idea [...] literally to transcend the old political space, the map-space of two dimensions, by climbing into the third,” knowing full well that such a move is not utopian in itself, since some also see “the third dimension not as an avenue of transcendence but as a means for delivering explosives” (*AtD* 1083). While the postnationalism of *Against the Day* retains a certain skepticism towards all too optimistic ideas of “planetary oneness” (*AtD* 942), it nevertheless leaves no doubt that remaining within a national framework of thought is not a viable option.

*Against the Day* therefore repeatedly and explicitly presents the limitations of a national epistemological framework by countering it with a global one. Lew Basnight experiences the movement from one to the other after having been dynamited, literally getting his “first sight of the world” (*AtD* 185) not only of Nigel and Neville, but also of the world as a globe rather than a mere collection of nationalized territories. After having left the US for England, they hear about a hurricane that killed 6,000 people in Galveston, and Lew is devastated by the news:

“Why Lewis, whatever is the matter?”

“Six thousand people,” said Lew, “to begin with.”

“Happens out in India all the time,” said Nigel. “It is the world, after all.”

“Yes, Lewis, wherever could you have been living, before that frightful bomb brought you to us?” (*AtD* 188)

As he moves from one nation-state to another, Lew is forced to consider the world and not only the nationalized place he had not contextualized sufficiently within globality. The episode directly shows him his epistemological and emotional limits, and it furthermore shows that these limits coincide with national limits. The insufficiency of the limited national view is stressed in *Against the Day* since it is contrasted with global outlooks that acknowledge connections not limited by national boundaries, as especially espoused by anarchists such as Ratty or Veikko, who had “never seen much difference between the Tsar’s regime and American capitalism. To struggle against one, he figured, was to struggle against the other. Sort of this world-wide outlook” (*AtD* 83). Or, as Hunter Penhallow puts it when he comments on “a level of “reality” at which nations, like money in the bank, are merged and indistinguishable”: “in the realm of pain and destruction, what can polarity matter?” (*AtD* 903). *Against the Day* leaves no doubt that a nationalized view of the world is simply too narrow, even dangerously restrictive in many regards; it emphatically demands a global approach from its readers.

To be sure, acknowledging that Pynchon’s novels seek to transcend the epistemological borders of nation-ness through their postnationalism and globality should not be mistaken for the simpler argument that they are part of what is commonly seen as “world literature.” This term always seems to plainly indicate that a text comes from a culture other than one’s own, just like *international news* is merely news from outside one’s own national context, which again attests to the problematic *epistemē* of nation-ness. Even more questionably, it may point towards a quasi-Arnoldian notion of “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold 6), which comes with the ideological baggage of all the well-known problems of canon formation. Pynchon’s fiction is not global in these respects, or at least it does not matter whether it is or not; it is global and postnational in scope, and it is world literature in the sense that it offers *worlds*, including this one. It is *Weltenliteratur* and not *Weltliteratur*. Of course, this perfectly qualifies it as postmodern according to McHale’s definition in *Postmodernist Fiction*, since it conforms to the ontological dominant he sees as a crucial feature of postmodern texts (10). Yet what also matters is the *use* this ontological play is put to, and also the self-reflexive critique of this imaginative play *while carrying it out*. This is most apparent in

*Against the Day*, and it has implications for the earlier novels as well. In the remaining pages of this introduction, I will try to illustrate that point by analyzing one of the most crucial ways of imagining worlds in *Against the Day*—mathematics—and by pointing out its implications for a literary imagination that can be understood as global and postnational, and which struggles with its own imaginative practice. Just as *Gravity's Rainbow* drew on chemistry and physics and *Mason & Dixon* on (para)geography and astronomy, *Against the Day* looks to mathematics and uses it as a leitmotif that offers a vast variety of ideas, images and structures for the literary text, and it is also used metaphorically itself. Literature and mathematics are combined in order to comment on how both fields imagine the world; this imagination is a well-known issue in all of Pynchon's texts, as his own blurb for *Against the Day* reminds us in what should go down in literary history as one of the biggest understatements: "If it is not the world, it is what the world might be with a minor adjustment or two. According to some, this is one of the main purposes of fiction." As I hope to show in the following, the novel uses concepts of the mathematical imagination to pursue that purpose and to comment on its own fictional strategies in the process.

*Against the Day* is a complex text. This statement should not be understood as perpetuating the cliché that Pynchon's novels are difficult, but rather as saying that the novel is complex in the way numbers can be complex. The text itself provides this metaphor in passing when readers are told that the Irish mathematician William Rowan Hamilton, when he "discovered" the Quaternions, carved "his renowned formulae" into Brougham Bridge in Dublin "with a pocket-knife part real and part imaginary, a 'complex' knife one might say" (*AtD* 634). "Part real and part imaginary" is exactly what *Against the Day* is, and the description provides a concise understanding of its overall narrative project that ties in with Pynchon's programmatic blurb. Earlier, a panorama is described as "a *zone of dual nature*" that contains a number of "'real objects' appropriate to the setting" that yet "could not strictly be termed *entirely* real, rather part 'real' and part 'pictorial,' or let us say 'fictional'" (*AtD* 633). It is remarkable that the complementary term of "real" is "fictional" in this case, not "imaginary": while the fictional and the imaginary are clearly related to each other, they are not equated, and it would lead to an impoverished understanding of the imaginary in *Against the Day* to

view the terms as synonymous. The text emphasizes the power of the imaginary by complicating a hierarchical binary opposition that would construct it as the weaker supplement to the “real,” as happened in some early reviews of *Against the Day*. Critics raised accusations against the novel to the effect that it lacked realism, implying that its worlds differed too much from the reality they recognized and sought to understand through fiction that matched it closely; for example, Adam Kirsch claimed that the “silliness of ‘Against the Day’ about the very subjects where we are most urgently in quest of wisdom proves that, whatever he once was, Thomas Pynchon is no longer the novelist we need.” *Against the Day* comments on such simplistic views of fiction, reality, and the imagination by drawing on mathematics in order to show how foolish it is to dismiss the imaginary as something “unreal” or fictional that is either opposed or irrelevant to a consideration of reality. Apparently, the imaginary world of a work of fiction must be defended against some literary critics when it allegedly differs too much from the world in which they read it, while at the same time no mathematician would consider imaginary numbers silly or a waste of time even though, strictly speaking, they do not exist. Here, the mathematician can teach the critic about the benefits of thinking a world with new rules, and this image of mobility, expansion, and resistance against the *status quo* informs *Against the Day* as deeply as Pynchon’s other works. It draws on imaginary numbers to show how it is possible to think even the most fundamental ideas and experiences differently, which is exactly what these numbers demand. They relate to an equation that is not solvable in the realm of real numbers:  $x^2 = -1$ , since every square of a real number is necessarily a positive number. However, the equation is solvable when introducing the imaginary unit  $i$  by defining  $i^2 = -1$ . Imaginary numbers are an expansion of the world that does not seek to describe it, but to break with conventions of thought that constitute our reality. Even though an imaginary number demands an “impossible” operation, it can be related to real numbers and coexist with them precisely in complex numbers—numbers of the form  $a+bi$  that have a real part and an imaginary part. Just as imaginary numbers do not bring about a wholly different kind of mathematics, but rather enrich mathematics by breaking with its established modes of thought, Pynchon’s imaginary worlds are not separate from the “real” world of their readers. Instead, they expand a “real” world that may never have

been all that simple and homogeneous, a fact that only becomes obvious when this world is overlaid with other worlds.

This process, which in *Mason & Dixon* has its representational correspondence in the multi-layered cartographic practice of “parageography” (*MD* 141), is exemplified best in *Against the Day* by the material called Iceland spar and its double refraction of light. The dust jacket of the novel’s first hardcover edition was designed to show that effect of double refraction, which is commonly demonstrated by placing a piece of Iceland spar over a written text. In the written world of *Against the Day*, this multiplication occurs as a literal separation of countless worlds, and it raises grave doubts about the original unity of “the” world in the first place, or any “natural” system of ordering it (such as nation-ness). After all, Iceland spar is said to be nothing less than “the sub-structure of reality,” and remarkably its “curious advent into the world occurred within only a few years of the discovery of Imaginary Numbers, which also provided a doubling of the mathematical Creation” (*AtD* 133). The connection is strengthened even more in the description of the capabilities of Iceland spar: it “is what hides the Hidden People, makes it possible for them to move through the world that thinks of itself as ‘real,’ provides that all-important ninety-degree twist to *their* light, so they can exist alongside our own world but not be seen” (*AtD* 134). Ninety degrees is also the angle by which the horizontal axis of real numbers in a geometrical coordinate system is turned as a result of multiplication with  $i$ , thereby creating the complex plane in which complex numbers can be visualized. Both Iceland spar and imaginary numbers make possible a “doubling of the Creation” (*AtD* 133) in separate yet closely related ways, and both demand an imagination of worlds from the reader of *Against the Day* while offering metaphors for this creative multiplication; the text itself becomes a complex plane.

Yet the novel makes even further use of imaginary numbers than that, especially with regard to Hamilton’s Quaternions, which offer a space in which alternative worlds can be imagined. Quaternions add three more numbers to real numbers,  $i$ ,  $j$ ,  $k$ , and their relation to each other is:  $i^2 \cdot j^2 \cdot k^2 = i \cdot j \cdot k = -1$ . *Against the Day* juxtaposes  $i$ ,  $j$ ,  $k$  with the more familiar axes  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$  of a Cartesian coordinate system and thereby not only imagines alternative places, but also a whole alternative *space* in which these places could exist. Yet this clash of coordinate systems had devastating consequences for the Quaternioners, since

“the *xyz* people, the party of a single Established Coördinate System, present everywhere in the Universe, governing absolutely,” could not tolerate the revolutionary “*ijk* lot” (*AtD* 533):

“Actually Quaternions failed because they perverted what the Vectorists thought they know of God’s intention—that space be simple, three-dimensional, and real, and if there must be a fourth term, an imaginary, that it be assigned to Time. But Quaternions came in and turned that all end for end, defining the axes of space as imaginary and leaving Time to be the *real* term, and a scalar as well—simply inadmissible. Of course the Vectorists went to war. Nothing they knew of Time allowed it to be that simple, any more than they could allow space to be compromised by impossible numbers, earthly space they had fought over uncounted generations to penetrate, to occupy, to defend.” (*AtD* 534).

This is not just a war of ideas that has no effect on reality, it is a war of the imagination in which the potential to think differently is at stake, and in which the victorious dominant system has confirmed its hegemony of interpretation of reality by preventing anything that, as Yashmeen has it, “would allow access to a different [...] ‘set of conditions’” (*AtD* 618). Therefore, “the Hamiltonian devotees had now, fallen from grace, come to embody, for the established scientific religion, a subversive, indeed heretical, faith for whom proscription and exile were too good” (*AtD* 526). Their heresy is a counternarrative to space itself, to our everyday concept of reality, and to our understanding of time. *Against the Day* here manages to invest the most abstract ideas of mathematics with political significance by celebrating potential in the face of the most rigid ideas of order, and by asking readers to imagine a change of world view that could hardly be more fundamental.<sup>3</sup> The play of worlds of *Against the Day* is part of these imaginative changes, and its multiplications matter most where they show how petty the limits of reality actually are, and how they are curbed and determined by forces that are eventually always political; it functions like those “‘paramorphoscopes of Iceland spar’ that ‘reveal the architecture of dream, all that escapes the network of ordinary latitude and longitude...’” (*AtD* 250). No wonder that many characters in *Against the Day* see mathematics for a time as “a reflection of some less-accessible reality, through close study of which one might perhaps learn to pass beyond the difficult given world” (*AtD* 749). For a long time, Yashmeen considered math as a way to satisfy “her old need for some kind of transcendence—the

fourth dimension, the Riemann problem, complex analysis, all had presented themselves as routes of escape from a world whose terms she could not accept” (*AtD* 942). However, her confrontation with the world taught her that her hopes “for transcendence by way of any of that, must be left behind, souvenirs of a girl’s credulity, a girl I scarcely know anymore” (*AtD* 663). Similarly, Kit realizes early on at Yale “how little the place was about studying and learning, much less finding a transcendent world in imaginaries or vectors” (*AtD* 318), and his mathematical quest remains unfinished (although he may be the character who comes closest to a transcendent yet entirely non-mathematical experience when he travels in Inner Asia). Even though *Against the Day* uses mathematical ideas to challenge the imagination and its boundaries, it is careful not to invest them with too much significance and revolutionary potential. While they certainly have epistemological and metaphorical value and fulfill an important purpose on a metafictional level, and while they constitute a valorization of the imagination as an important constitutive factor of reality, the text does not end up advocating an idealism that denies this reality any material character beyond this imaginative component. Instead, it harks back to *Gravity’s Rainbow* and its questions of technological determinism, weaponry, and violence: mathematics is deprived of any purity of abstraction when Piet Woevre claims that “all mathematics leads, doesn’t it, sooner or later, to some kind of human suffering” (*AtD* 541). The reminders of this materiality are often brutal intrusions in *Against the Day*, and they often stand in the tradition of Marxian materialism by betraying their economic origins, as especially Kit has to learn the hard way:

Vectorism, in which Kit once thought he had glimpsed transcendence, a coexisting world of imaginaries, the “spirit realm” that Yale legend Lee De Forest once imagined he was journeying through, had not shown Kit, after all, a way to escape the world governed by real numbers. His father had been murdered by men whose allegiance, loudly and often as they might invoke Jesus Christ and his kingdom, was to that real axis and nothing beyond it. Kit had sold himself a bill of goods, come to believe that Göttingen would be another step onward in some journey into a purer condition, conveniently forgetting that it was still all on the Vibe ticket, paid for out of the very account whose ledger he most wished to close and void, the spineless ledger of a life once unmarked but over such a short time broken, so broken up into debits and credits and too many details left unwritten. And Göttingen, open to trespass by all manner of enemies, was no longer a refuge, nor would Vectors ever have been Kit’s salvation. (*AtD* 675)

In this passage, the material world of life, death and money asserts itself most forcefully, and all work of the imagination rather seems like idle play, only reinterpreting the world instead of changing it, and thus missing what actually matters. Yet even this harsh materialism is in turn suspended only a few pages later in a description of Venetian architecture in which the imagination reasserts its power through another mathematical metaphor:

[Venice] was supposed to've been built on trade, but the Basilica San Marco was too insanely everything that trade, in its strenuous irrelevance to dream, could never admit. The numbers of commerce were rational, but among the real numbers, those that remained in the spaces between—the irrationals—outnumbered those simple quotients overwhelmingly. (*AtD* 732)

This time, real numbers are opposed to irrational ones, illustrating another classic dichotomy in Pynchon's novels. This powerful image suggests not only that the rationality of commerce excludes the crucial factor of the imagination and that it wrongfully denies the existence of other ways of structuring the world, but also that its hegemony is at the same time opposed to and shot through with the countless repressed alternatives it denies. The metaphor manages to convey both the undeniably existent reality of a rational capitalist system as well as the undeniably possible alternatives to it.

*Against the Day* refuses to decide on the matter for the reader and warns against deciding hastily any which way, and the novel itself seems to suspend judgment on its own potential to mediate between the real and the imaginary—as a complex text, it cannot get rid of either term without losing its complexity. One could conceive of this as oscillation between two poles, or rather as the constant doubling mentioned in connection with Iceland spar, imaginary numbers and bilocation in *Against the Day*. In closing, I would like to argue that the Chums of Chance exemplify this phenomenon best, even though they are certainly not the only ones in the text. There are also ““semi-imaginary badmen”” (*AtD* 180) or the Yogi in Bukhara, who “is a sort of fictional character, though at the same time real” (*AtD* 766), and yet the narrative of the Chums displays their status as complex characters most clearly.

The Chums turn out to be travellers between worlds they themselves did not expect to exist, a process that takes its course as they free themselves more and more from the “political delusions that

reigned more than ever on the ground” (*AtD* 19), especially as they leave the safe and simple haven of the nationalist narrative provided by their superiors. Right from the beginning of *Against the Day*, readers are warned along with Chick Counterfly—by Lindsay Noseworth, ever the voice of “reason”—not to imagine that “in coming aboard *Inconvenience* you have escaped into any realm of the counterfactual,” but that even there one “must nonetheless live with the constraints of the given world” (*AtD* 9). Yet even then, at least the commander of the Chums seems to be aware of the possibility to change worlds and enter a new set of constraints:

“So...if you went up high enough, you’d be going *down* again?”

“Shh!” warned Randolph St. Cosmo.

“Approaching the surface of *another planet*, maybe?” Chick persisted.

“Not exactly. No. Another ‘surface,’ but an earthly one. Often to our regret, all too earthly. More than that, I am reluctant—” (*AtD* 9)

Towards the end of *Against the Day*, this is exactly the journey they undertake, and by now Chick has figured out that “each star and planet we can see in the Sky is but the reflection of our single Earth along a different Minkowskian space-time track. Travel to other worlds is therefore travel to alternate versions of the same Earth” (*AtD* 1020). In journeying to the “other Earth” (*AtD* 1021), they also travel to a myriad of alternative worlds, and instead of reaching a single one completely in time and space, they remain suspended and at least doubled: “They were on the Counter-Earth, on it and of it, yet at the same time also on the Earth they had never, it seemed, left” (*AtD* 1021). In their oscillation between worlds, the real of “this” world asserts itself once more in that the Chums stumble upon the First World War, and it is countered with the imaginary narrative of transnational organizations like the Chums and their doubles, the Tovarishchi Slutchainyi, doing their best to relieve the pain brought about by a war waged in thoroughly nationalized terms. This ontological complexity is also reinforced by the narrator, who reminds readers of the fictional status of the Chums by quoting the title of an earlier novel he wrote about them (*AtD* 1019), as if it were necessary at this point to make sure the Chums are not mistaken for an entirely “real” set of characters within *Against the Day* itself. Their ontological status remains suspended; on the one hand, they really are characters of a series of books of young adult fiction, on the other hand, it is

possible for them to confront other characters in the world of *Against the Day* like Lew, and to question them about their reading habits:

Lew Basnight seemed a sociable enough young man, though it soon became obvious that he had not, until now, so much as heard of the Chums of Chance.

“But every boy knows the Chums of Chance,” declared Lindsay Noseworth perplexedly. “What could you’ve been reading, as a youth?”

Lew obligingly tried to remember. “Wild West, African explorers, the usual adventure stuff. But you boys—you’re not storybook characters.” He had a thought. “Are you?”

“No more than Wyatt Earp or Nellie Bly,” Randolph supposed. “Although the longer a fellow’s name has been in the magazines, the harder it is to tell fiction from non-fiction.” (*AtD* 36-37)

Ultimately, the ontological ambiguity of the Chums of Chance with regard to both their fictionality and the world they exist in works towards the same end as the motifs of Iceland spar, imaginary numbers, or bilocation in *Against the Day*: all these are ways of thinking about a complex universe that is always both real and imaginary, and in which the terms are constantly renegotiated, and neither of them can eradicate the other. It is an artist, Tancredi, who explains this condition concisely: “‘everything that we imagine is real, living and still, thought and hallucinated, is all on the way from being one thing to being another, from past to Future [...]’” (*AtD* 586). This does not give precedence to the imaginary over the real but demands a precision of terminology that prevents the erroneous assumption that the imaginary is by definition what is not real. Heino Vanderjuice argues in *Against the Day* that “‘the world we think we know can be dissected and reassembled into any number of worlds, each as ‘real’ as ‘this’ one’” (*AtD* 1078), which is exactly what the novel does in emphasizing the imaginary part of its complex world; at the same time, it also makes sure that Yashmeen’s words to Cyprian retain a political meaning that emphasizes the real part of the fictional equation: “‘We can do whatever we can imagine. Are we not the world to come?’” (*AtD* 879).

Therefore, by thus constructing itself as a complex text, *Against the Day* not only reasserts the power of the imaginary in a world that so often comes across as “the real” world, but it also maintains a decidedly political tone. In doing so, the text positions itself far from the postmodern excesses of too easily conflating the real, the imaginary and the fictional, which ultimately deny any of them any

power to change the other and result in a dangerous simplification of a world that is complex in more than one sense of the word. We may have to stop calling Thomas Pynchon a postmodern writer.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This could be described in David Cowart's words as "the paradoxical subversion of the postmodern gospel" (4).

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, others will be able to add more such possibilities, and I will offer only the one I consider most important to Pynchon's writing.

<sup>3</sup> The postnational significance of this lies not merely in showing that everything could be different no matter how natural it looks, including nation-ness; it also lies in the fact that the Quaternioneers are a "band of varying ages and nationalities" that speak only the "common language [...] of the Quaternions" (*AtD* 525). Similarly, and on a funnier note, Miles Blundell finds out that the "Italian number that looks like a zero, is the same as our own American 'zero.' The one that looks like a one, is 'one.' The one that looks like a two—" (*AtD* 243). Mathematics potentially creates a transnational community whose mere existence proves that nation-ness is far from being the only constituent of group identity in the world, and that its claims to hegemony stand in the way of other forms of the common.

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