

Resisting Nationalism: Postnational Visions in Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*

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Summary

I aim to investigate how Pynchon’s *Against the Day* depicts a postnational vision that questions the metanarrative of “nation-ness” (Pöhlmann, 7). My discussion is informed by Sascha Pöhlmann’s enlightening study of postnationalism in Pynchon’s fiction. Here, the postnational is anything that “works towards dismantling the hegemony of nation-ness as a metanarrative” (8). Nonetheless, although Pöhlmann brilliantly analyzes Gravity’s Rainbow and *Mason & Dixon*, he dedicates few pages to discuss *Against the Day*. Drawing and building upon Pöhlmann’s theoretical study of postnationalism, I endeavor to show how Pynchon’s alternative worlds in *Against the Day* manifest the potential of other “modes of being” (McHale, 10) which instantiate a trans/post-national insight, resisting the rooted hegemony of “nation-ness” in our life worlds.

Content

In 1996, Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny assessed, rather optimistically, the condition of “belonging to a nation” (32) as a state of “cultural recovery” which could potentially bring about “acceptance, even celebration of difference.” They observed that “Being national is the condition of our times.” Nevertheless, with the rise of the nationalist movements in the U.S., and elsewhere, in recent years, many racial, ethnic, and social groups have been the target of intolerance. Such a condition calls, ipso facto, for a rethinking of the notions of nation and community. In today’s world, nation-states and politics are not anymore the only sites of sovereign power. Indeed, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that “the concept of national sovereignty is losing its effectiveness” (307). As the “State functions and constitutional elements” effectively undergo change, a “system of transnational command” assimilates the government and politics.

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Several significant factors have played a role in highlighting the (un)making narratives of (trans/post)nationalism in the U.S. Fiction has always been influential in the representation of protest and dissent against hegemonic structures of socio-political power, impacting our quotidian “lived spaces,” to speak like Henri Lefebvre. In this respect, Thomas Pynchon has been very salient in creating the so-called alternative worlds which challenge the dominance of nation-state and undermine the legitimacy of nationalism as the single form of ordering our life worlds. Pynchon’s alternative worlds reflect upon the spatiality of our lives in the way it constructs national identities and boundaries and is used to exert social power and surveillance over “a political body of governable people” (Pöhlmann, 177). A hegemonic narrative, nation-state has made it very difficult to imagine other (im)possible worlds, in the sense of “way of life, life-experience” (McHale, 79), for almost as long as the last 200 years

In 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, 7), which refers to the concept of nation as distinguished from nationality. My discussion is informed by Sascha Pöhlmann’s enlightening study of postnationalism in Pynchon’s fiction, which takes issue with those scholars, such as Paul Giles, who favor a transnational attitude in American studies, dismissing a postnational perspective. Here, the postnational is anything that “works towards dismantling the hegemony of nation-ness as a metanarrative” (8). Nonetheless, although Pöhlmann brilliantly analyzes *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* at great length, he dedicates few pages to discuss the topic in *Against the Day*. An “interstice” (361) 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, the novel evinces similar “postnational traits” and “constitutes another part of Pynchon’s postnational imagination.” Drawing and building upon Pöhlmann’s theoretical study of postnationalism, I endeavor to show how Pynchon’s alternative worlds in *Against the Day* manifest the potential of other “modes of being” (McHale, 10) which instantiate a trans/post-national insight, resisting the rooted hegemony of “nation-ness” in our life worlds

For example, in the novel *Darby* explains 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” (19). Pöhlmann argues that the elevated viewpoint of these balloonists allowed them to broaden their “framework of thought” (362) by way of observing the big picture of “politics and society that could not remain within the accepted national categories.” In effect, with the end of the sieges, the balloonists were set free “of the political delusions” and decided to fly “far above fortress walls and national boundaries” (20). Realizing the problematic nature of “nation-ness,” they seek to feed “the hungry” and shelter “the sick and persecuted,” irrespective of nationalities or boundaries. On the cusp of a war that is nationalized, they are trying to develop a transnational attitude in the hope of peace in the world. Their good will,

however, is fiercely antagonized “because it violates the dictates of national politics and identity” (Pöhlmann, 363).

Moving from a trans/post-national point of view, this, and other similar scenarios in the novel, can be analyzed in suggesting how the alternative worlds of *Against the Day* demonstrate an imagination which calls into question the dominant sovereignty of “nation-ness” and national identity by way of setting in motion other ways of epistemological thinking and organizing our world.