

# Bilocated Identities: Taking the Fork in the Road in *Against The Day*

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**Abstract:** Offering one of the first critical receptions on identity in Thomas Pynchon's latest novel beyond the reviews, this paper seeks to show that bilocation, a fictional disposition affecting personal mobility in *Against The Day*, brings up the question of what we are by suggesting what we could be. It investigates how the novel redefines and enlarges concepts of identity by exploring several aspects of sameness and selfhood exposed to a very special kind of migration: Being in two places, countries, or worlds at the same time, a multiplicity of characters in *Against The Day* opt for the excluded middle when a fork in the road presents itself. The paper investigates these new forms of identity in the novel and explores their impact on philosophical concepts such as the notion of a seamless continuity of identity, the role of subjectivity for identity, and the concept of a narrative identity.

Tackling the forks in the road that people encounter on their personal path stands out as one recurrent theme of Thomas Pynchon's *Against The Day*. Whether the protagonists strive to transcend inner contradictions or to adapt personal and national narratives to new insights from traveling Pynchonite worlds, they frequently lapse into a certain mode of 'double thinking' that Pynchon has already declared universal in his foreword to Orwell's *1984*: "For Walt Whitman . . . it was being large and containing multitudes, for American aphorist Yogi Berra it was coming to a fork in the road and taking it, for Schrödinger's cat, it was the quantum paradox of being alive and dead at the same time" (x). As the fundamental questions in *Against The Day* demand unusual answers, the baseball player's Yogiism is found again in the novel:

Directions for journeying to Shambala are addressed by the author to a Yogi, who is a sort of fictional character, though at the same time real—a figure in a vision, and also Rinpungpa himself. . . . ‘Even if you forget everything else,’ Rinpungpa instructs the Yogi, ‘remember one thing—when you come to a fork in the road, take it.’ Easy for him to say, of course, being two people at once. (861)

On the search for Shambala, the mythical realm of happiness and peace of mind, his advice emphasizes that choosing or not choosing between two possibilities affects personal identity. By following one path and not the other, one leaves a possible experience and thus a fragment of one’s identity behind while assuming another. The alleged need for choosing seems to make peace of mind difficult to achieve.

According to literary theorist Brian McHale, the postmodernist “novel of forking paths and excluded middles” (107) celebrates the combination of mutually exclusive possibilities, beliefs, or choices, and he explains the principle by citing another postmodernist author:

Borges in “The Garden of Forking Paths” describes a classical Chinese novel in which *all* the possible bifurcations of such a system are actualized:

“In all fiction, when a man is faced with alternatives he chooses one at the expense of the others. In the almost unfathomable Ts’ui Pen, he chooses – simultaneously – all of them. He thus creates various futures, various times which start others that will in their turn branch out and bifurcate in other times. This is the cause of the contradictions in the novel.” (107, italics in original)

In *Against The Day*, world peace is at risk as ‘double thinking’ and inner contradictions are disclosed, bringing about global repercussions. National contradictions gradually escalate in the novel, with World War I being an imminent danger, and the instances of bilocation on a personal level could be seen as reflections of social and political unrest spreading over the world. Like small threads weaving through the narrative, multiple heterogeneous forms of doubling appear on the platform of Pynchon’s world and find their common denominator in what is also the title of the central chapter of the novel: bilocations. The yogi mentioned above, a sea liner being a battleship at the same time, two versions of the city of Agadir, people duplicated by a magician’s mirror, and a crystal with the ability of double refraction by the name of Iceland

Spar are only a few examples for this omnipresent disposition. As the stipulation in the novel to opt for the excluded middle<sup>1</sup> in an either-or decision becomes a claim for multitude and diversity and opposes itself to one-dimensional worldviews, bilocation itself does not follow a uniform pattern and assumes manifold shapes. In the following, all instances of doubling will therefore be considered as being part of the over-arching phenomenon of bilocation. *Against The Day* celebrates this simultaneousness of alternatives by giving its characters the possibility of multiple, contradictory experiences, each challenging our beliefs about space, time, and, above all, identity.

This paper seeks to show that bilocation in *Against The Day* brings up the question of what we are by suggesting what we could be.<sup>2</sup> The novel redefines and enlarges concepts of identity by exploring several aspects of sameness and selfhood in relation to being in two places, countries, and worlds at the same time. The first part of my paper outlines underlying concepts of identity from the perspective of a world where bilocation is possible. The second part investigates how some characters in the novel tackle the forks in the road when their personal identity is at stake. Due to the diversity and the high number of instances of bilocation in the novel, I will focus on cases of merging, doubling, and parallel identities which use simultaneous migration to avoid particular locations behind hostile lines, or engage in a quest to encompass Pynchon's latest narrative worlds as a whole.

Such cases have preoccupied the field of the philosophy of identity as thought experiments for quite a while, and it is agreed that their consideration leads to profitable insights. In doing so, "we discover what we believe to be involved in our own continued existence, or what it is that makes us now and ourselves next year the same people. We discover our beliefs about the nature of personal identity over time" (Parfit, *Reasons* 200). Such thought experiments are fictionalized in Pynchon's *Against The Day*, and its narrative of duplication and bilocation redefines the concepts of identity over time and space.

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- 1 Pynchon first introduced the notion of the "excluded middles" in his novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (125).
  - 2 See also Staes's take on *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day*.

## THEORIZING IDENTITY

Before analyzing in detail some instances of identity affected by bilocation in the novel, I will present different concepts of identity and explain how Pynchon's narrative of multifaceted instances of doubling provides the opportunity to discuss them by enlarging and redefining these notions. First and foremost, it is important to keep in mind that defining a concept like identity is always done within the frame of a certain tradition of thought. The definition profoundly depends on the philosophical approach applied. How the concept is conceived and which angle is emphasized seems to reveal more about the state of mind of a person and a society at a certain point in time than the term itself.

Western philosophy has a long tradition in conceiving the concept of identity with a strong focus on rationality and the subject. Descartes established a causal relationship between human existence and the capacity to reason. His "Cogito ergo sum" even designates the enlightened 'I' as identical with human reason, which leads to a "preponderance of reason or rational thought in general over sensuous experience; the 'I think' has objectified the thinking subject's rational access to the world" (27, my translation),<sup>3</sup> as Dörfler states in his work on difference and identity of the subject. In *Against The Day*, the dominion of rationality is expressed through the pursuit of progress by science and capitalism. Interestingly enough, the character that incarnates the rational logic of money—Scarsdale Vibe—buys himself an extension to his identity: Foley Walker.

Descartes asserted his belief in the disembodied subject by establishing the Cartesian dualism: "I possess a distinct idea of body, inasmuch as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that this I [that is to say, my soul by which I am what I am], is entirely and absolutely distinct from my body, and can exist without it" (Barker 165). If identity is considered as distinct from a defined physical shape, Vibe's purchase of a second "unthinking thing" to incarnate his identity seems rational, but whether this acquisition actually increases his personal corporate and corporal equity or not shall be discussed in the next section.

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3 Original reads: "Übergewichtung der Vernunft, oder allgemein des rationalen Denkens, vor dem sinnlich-gegenständlichen; das 'ich denke' hyperstasierte den rationalen Weltzugang des denkenden Subjekts."

The search for rational parameters in order to conceptualize identity perpetuates itself in the notion of sameness. The Cartesian assertion that the ‘I exists becomes ‘I am one entity and I am the same as yesterday.’ So the different instances of sameness are space and time: Personal identity reveals itself through continuity in space over time. Sameness includes both “the physical continuity, over time, of my brain and body,” and some kind of psychological continuity: “What has been most discussed is the continuity of memory. This is because it is memory that makes most of us aware of our own continued existence over time” (Parfit, *Reasons* 204-5). But memory fails us. The continuity of memory may be disrupted by oblivion, medical conditions, and unconscious states like sleep.

Further limitations of thinking identity as continuity in space over time are examined in *Against The Day* through the scientist duo Renfrew and Werfner. They are the fictional embodiment of a philosophical thought experiment described by philosopher Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons*. He states that “there are two kinds of sameness, or identity. I and my Replica are *qualitatively identical*, or exactly alike. But we may not be *numerically identical*, or one and the same person” (201, italics in original). What are the repercussions on the notion of identity as *idem et idem*, if two bodies can claim to have one and the same identity? Does this fundamental belief in one’s own identity being shared with another suffice to be considered as true, or is social acknowledgement needed to validate this claim? Can this dilemma be solved by simply conceding that there might be two or more kinds of sameness? Either way, the existential condition of Renfrew and Werfner in the novel emphasizes the fact that identity is constructed and not essentially inherent in the human self. Thus, a simple disruption of physical oneness through bilocation shows that identity is defined not only by continuity in space over time, and consequently raises a set of questions about the human self that shall be discussed later on.

The discourse of continuity and sameness implies the presupposition that identity can be verified objectively. Yet such an approach denies subjective facts linked to identity as, for example, self-perception or the subjective perception of the world. In *The Unity of The Self*, Stephen White, professor of philosophy concerned with the human mind and moral psychology, explains “that the true nature of the problem of personal identity is obscured by discussions that focus on continuities and similarities, whether these are physical, mental, causal, or emotional” (136). These discussions circumvent the question of identity because

they focus on its preconditions, and leave out the question “whether the same subject or self is preserved under these conditions” (136). The ‘objectively’ defined notions of sameness are not able to describe the subjective and existential consciousness of the individual concerned.

In my understanding, the concept of sameness tries to give an answer to the question ‘What am I?’ by defining the chronological and physical framework for identity, but the question ‘Who am I?’ cannot be answered by the statement that I am still the same person as yesterday. Who exactly is this person? And is the idea of ‘person’ already assuming an identity of body and mind that is challenged by the question? The question ‘Who am I?’ needs to be answered on a subjective level, as White elaborates when talking about the subjectivity of selfhood:

There are two characteristics that . . . connect the problem of personal identity with the problem of the subjective character of experience. Unlike facts about objective entities, facts about the subject or self as it figures in the problem of personal identity and facts about the subjective character of experience are not facts about entities in the world. And unlike facts about objective entities, the relevant facts about the subject and about subjective experience are accessible only from the first-person point of view. (137)

Thus, selfhood is an intrinsic feature of an individual that can only be accessed through the person or evaluated through her/his expression of personality by means of language and behavior. In short, it can only be mediated through the construction of a narrative identity. A person links together the series of personal experiences, actions, and thoughts by telling her/his personal story; personal changes, such as growth, or interruptions of consciousness, such as sleep or lacking memory, acquire meaning through narration. Furthermore, a person’s narrative is often told and retold by others as well. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, known for his studies on narrative identity, justifies this notion by asking: “[D]o we not consider human lives as more readable when they are interpreted through the stories people tell about them?” (138, my translation).<sup>4</sup> By constructing a narrative identity, we are able to inscribe meaning and continuity into the succession of personal states that could otherwise appear as random.

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4 Original reads: “[N]e tenons-nous pas les vies humaines pour plus lisibles lorsqu’elles sont interprétées en fonction des histoires que les gens racontent à leur sujet?”

## Bilocated Identities: Taking the Fork in the Road in *Against The Day*

However, narrative identity not only contains personal elements. Since humans assume different roles according to the situation they are in and are connected with others through social interactions as well as embedded within a framework of meta-narratives, such as history or the nation, they integrate parts of other narratives into their own and create intertextual links for this reason. In Pynchon's novel, where the Chums of Chance and their Russian counterparts are displayed as rivaling national identities attempting to transcend their antagonistic selves on a transnational level, their narrative identity is displayed on a metafictional level. As skyfarers, they have a top view of the world and their stories can be read in American dime novels. The double presence of American and Russian national icons shows how their narrative identities shift between sameness and difference, between national representation and selfhood.

The narrative and intertextual elements of identity in *Against The Day* playfully explore diverse facets of identity by applying the imaginary disposition of bilocation to Pynchon's fictional worlds. Adding the possibility of duplication to human identity cancels out defining factors of the notion, i.e. the continuity in time and the unity in space. Without those, potential preconceptions can be revised and concepts of identity may be adapted or expanded.

### BILOCATED IDENTITIES: THE ECONOMICS OF IDENTITY

What unites the different experiences that, together, constitute this life? . . . What unites all of these experiences is, simply, that they are all mine. These answers I call the view that *psychological unity is explained by ownership*. (Parfit, *Reasons* 214, italics in original)

The rational and calculated move the Vibe family figures out for Scarsdale to escape war seems to take this argument literally:

During the Rebellion, shortly after Antietam, just as he was beginning his sophomore year at New Haven, Scarsdale Vibe, having turned the right age for it, had received a notice of conscription. Following the standard practice, his father had purchased for him a substitute to serve in his place, assuming that upon obtaining a properly executed receipt for the three hundred dollars, why that would be that. (Pynchon, *Against* 112)

By paying Foley Walker to go to war and to experience what was intended for him, Scarsdale Vibe has acquired a second physical representative for his identity. But unexpected by him, this has been a two-way transfer since he has handed his money and his identity over to Walker, who from now on has the responsibility (and the right) to assert: “I am he” (Pynchon, *Against* 111). One could say that Vibe has taken the fork in the road by merger and acquisition.

As the war substitute is wounded in battle in place of the magnate, this experience is physically owned by Foley Walker, but assigned to and therefore qualitatively owned by the subject Scarsdale Vibe. Tied to the magnate by this experience, not only as a body double but with his entire person, Foley claims that “if you save the life of another, he becomes your responsibility forever” (Pynchon, *Against* 113). And since the subject Scarsdale is essentially preoccupied with the expansion of capitalism and his personal enrichment, Walker supports this ambition, shares his lifestyle and merges identity with him:

The Twin Vibes, as they soon came to be known, were sighted together often at Monmouth Park and Sheepshead Bay as well as tracks farther afield, togged out in matching sport ensembles of a certain canary-and-indigo check, screaming and waving fistfuls of betting slips—when they were not careering at excessive speeds up and down the avenues of Manhattan in a maroon phaeton whose brass and nickelwork were kept rubbed to a blinding shine, side by side in their pale dusters, appearing to the unwary spectator as ineluctable as any other Apocalyptic Riders.

“So you could make a case,” Foley concluded, “for me being more Scarsdale Vibe than Scarsdale Vibe himself.” (Pynchon, *Against* 113)

This twinship engendered by the overemphasis of the rationality of money overrules the governmental logic of identity in large parts of the novel. The government relies on the unity and continuity of identity as it defines and controls its citizens with social security numbers, passports, and/or identity cards. By reassigning Scarsdale’s identity to his war substitute and paying for it, the capitalist view of the Vibes has helped to escape governmental control over its wealthy subject. It has even enlarged the Vibe Empire with the unrelenting support of Walker as “deputy of Wealth” (Pynchon, *Against* 111).

But in *Against The Day* money devaluates identity, as it is part of a deterministic worldview that finds its expression in Vibe’s obsessive adherence to



capitalism, when he says that “money will beget money, grow like the bluebells in the meadow, spread and brighten and gather force, and bring low all before it. It is simple. It is inevitable. It has begun” (Pynchon, *Against* 1125). As Toon Staes writes in his paper on the novel:

The result is that advanced industrial society now determines *a priori* the individual’s needs and aspirations, which means that the freedom of choice the individual still has is subsumed to “the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs” . . . . Furthermore, since we are desperately addicted to this self-sustaining chain of production and consumption of desire, . . . the system has completely rationalized its exploitation of resources and its inherent capacity of annihilation. . . . And so, instead of autonomous individuals, we get one-dimensional characters framed in the structures favoring death. (italics in original)

The capitalist aim of maximizing profit by sustaining the circuit of supply and demand hides behind the aseptic image of rationality and extends itself to the identity of the subject. The one-dimensionality of rational thought erases all other facets of human identity and reduces the self to reason; thus, the subject loses its individuality. An overemphasis of rationality undermines the concept of identity itself, as Vibe’s personal development from businessman to the incorporation of global capitalism throughout the novel seems to exemplify. Noticing his employer’s loss of characteristic traits, Foley Walker reappraises his own value: “You suffered through the Wilderness and at last, at Cold Harbor, lay between the lines three days, between the worlds, and this is what you were saved for? this mean, nervous, scheming servitude to an enfeebled conscience?” (Pynchon, *Against* 377). The drifting apart of the former inseparable twins finds its final showdown in the streets:

Even in a town full of murderous Anarchists who hated him worse than Rockefeller, Scarsdale had seen no need to walk around these streets heeled. In his accustomed tone of command, at exactly the moment he should not have adopted it, he now barked, “Well you see them as clearly as I do, Foley. Take care of it.” In reply, smoothly as if it were another long-practiced personal chore, Foley stepped away swiveling, lined up the Luger’s muzzle with his employer’s heart, and chambered the first round. Scarsdale Vibe peered back, as if only curious. “Lord, Foley . . .”

“Jesus is Lord,” cried Foley, and pulled the trigger, proceeding to empty all eight rounds into what, after the first, was a signed deal.

As if come to his ancestral home after long and restless journeying, what had been Scarsdale Vibe settled facedown into the dirtied snow and ice of the street, into the smell of horses and horse droppings, to rest. (Pynchon, *Against* 1130)

Foley Walker has acquired responsibility for Vibe's identity. He complies with it by killing the body that has lost its identity, as Vibe has become a one-dimensional representative of Capital. Scarsdale's violent end could hence be seen as a physical resolution of the foregoing metaphorical death of his selfhood. The destruction of his duplicated identity is the resolution to an identity crisis where the rational drive of capitalism has overpowered all other aspects of personal identity. Scarsdale's death can therefore be seen as a claim for an enlarged, multifaceted concept of identity.

#### BILOCATED IDENTITIES: THE DUPLICATED SCHOLAR

Another case of identity crisis in *Against The Day* is represented by a scholar who lives out a mental conflict by duplicating himself. Renfrew/Werfner seems not able or willing to decide about an inner contradiction; he rather takes the fork in the road by doubling himself and thus giving room to all possible expressions of himself:

“This person Renfrew/Werfner appears afflicted [. . .] by a deep and fatal contradiction—deeper than consciously he can appreciate, and as a result the conflict has no other place to go but outward, ejected into the outside world, there to be carried out as what technically we call *Schicksal*—Destiny—with the world around him now obliged to suffer the disjunction in himself which he cannot, must not, admit . . . so pretending to be two ‘rivals’ representing the interests of two ‘separate nations’ which are much more likely secular expressions of a rupture within a single damaged soul.” (Pynchon, *Against* 772, italics in original)

The outcome is “a pair of rival University professors, Renfrew at Cambridge and Werfner at Göttingen, not only eminent in their academic settings but also would-be powers in the greater world” (Pynchon, *Against* 254). They symbolize the political impact that the rupture between England and Germany has on Europe and on the world, as the two similar countries stress their differences and

strive for supremacy, even if they would be better off accepting that peaceful coexistence would serve them better. Making peace with their inner-European contradictions might have prevented World War I.

As the political consequences of Britain's and Germany's rivalry unfold and are reflected by Renfrew and Werfner in *Against The Day*, the question that imposes itself is: Who are the scholars after their amoeba-like splitting? Neither does the concept of sameness—or more precisely in this case, oneness—apply to them, nor are they different from each other.

The fictional possibility of this antagonistic pair sharing one mind and two identical bodies raises the question about what has happened to the initial 'I.' Reductionist philosophy has arranged a similar thought experiment in order to understand the essence of identity:

My brain is divided, and each half is housed in a new body. Both resulting people have my character and apparent memories of my life.

What happens to me? . . .

We might say, "What we have called 'the two resulting people' are not two people. They are one person. I do survive [the] operation. Its effect is to give me two bodies and a divided mind." (Parfit, "Personal Identity" 5-6)

We do not know how Renfrew and Werfner have acquired their state of bilocation, but Parfit's description of the experiment resembles the process of division that is done by stepping into Zombini's mirror. The magician in *Against The Day* uses double refraction to make people appear twice but is then unable to revoke the bilocation:

"I thought it would be completely reversible. But . . . I forgot the element of time, it didn't happen all at once, so there was this short couple of seconds where time went on . . . and that was enough to make it impossible to get back to exactly where we'd been." (Pynchon, *Against* 400)

His magic trick illustrates that bilocation has not only an impact on continuity in space but in time as well. In the following, these two dimensions and their influence on the concept of an enlarged identity shall be explored.

The bilocation of Renfrew and Werfner palpably poses a problem to them as to the rest of the world. Some envisage murder to get rid of them; Lew Basnight,

the investigator from Chicago who meets the pair during his stay in England, is so disturbed by them that he returns “to his pernicious habit of Cyclomite-nibbling” (Pynchon, *Against* 769), and the scholarly pair itself is so consumed by personal rivalry that it sows conflict over entire nations and continents.

As mentioned in the second section, their relationship’s narration plays with the notions of continuity and sameness with regard to the concept of identity. Renfrew and Werfner’s bilocation has interrupted their physical continuity in space as one single person. In order to investigate their qualitative continuity and how time ties into it all, I will first take a look at the sameness of this bilocated character.

Sameness seems preserved with Renfrew and Werfner both reverting to their shared pre-bilocated memory and intellectual capacities. For instance, their sameness is expressed by their choice to exert the same profession and their interest in the same field of research. Both focus on the academic contradiction that appears to have caused the splitting but which binds them together as well. Even as they are situated in two different countries, “their shared interest in the Eastern Question had evolved from simple bickering-at-a-distance by way of the professional journals to true mutual loathing, implacable and obsessive, with a swiftness that surprised them both” (Pynchon, *Against* 254). They are interconnected through constant academic exchange, and their obsession reveals how much they are alike.

Moreover, the identity of their external features and the sameness of their professional procedures reveal some symmetry, but

[t]he professors’ manoeuvrings had at least the grace to avoid the mirrorlike—if symmetries arose now and then, it was written off to accident, “some predisposition to the echoic,” as Werfner put it, “perhaps built into the nature of Time,” added Renfrew. (Pynchon, *Against* 255)

Sameness disturbs the two scholars, so they constantly stress their differences. Renfrew and Werfner appear to complement each other, while at the same time being unable to tolerate each other because of their being identical. They are conscious of their symmetries, but do not want to acknowledge them. They live in different nations, apparently needing a large distance between each other and even then still feeling a strong rivalry that others have to ‘suffer.’ Renfrew and Werfner are competitors who ferociously defend their uniqueness in the outside

world in order to gain control over their field of existence, always knowing that they are irrevocably linked by the same identity.

According to White, control and autonomy are crucial factors in shaping personal identity. In his conception, autonomy means that parts of an individual's identity are only determined by her-/himself and do not need to be confirmed and asserted by institutions or social relations. Some aspects of identity are "autonomous," like the memory a person accesses individually; others are "nonautonomous" and can only be accessed with external consent, such as social relations, possessions, or contractual rights and obligations (White 149-51). Renfrew and Werfner share their academic knowledge, their memories, and their individual abilities because those are intrinsic features of their identity; they can both equally access them even if they are separated in space. And "while each of the two resulting persons has the same autonomous relations" (149), as exemplified by the initial person Renfrew/Werfner, "the nonautonomous relations may differ substantially" (149).

As discussed in the previous section, identity draws from a person's position within social, cultural, or national surroundings. Those surroundings define part of 'who we are,' even if we cannot control or determine them entirely. Both Renfrew and Werfner are linked to the outside world, and since they do not suffer each other, they need two separate (but not necessarily differing) surroundings that they have found by living in rival nations that do not seem so different either. On the one hand, Renfrew and Werfner's separation is wanted by the two rivals themselves; on the other hand, it is needed by their environment to cope with their bilocation, as people seem to be profoundly disturbed by both professors being in the same place:

The mystery of why Werfner should be in town at all, so far out of his ground, so close to his British adversary, would not go away. There persisted the classic nightmare scene of the man who is standing *where he should not be*. Despite both professors' frequent and strenuous denials of twinship, some symmetry was being broken. Violated. (Pynchon, *Against* 769, italics in original)

Their presence in the same place, though not exactly on the same spot, illustrates that their experiences in two similar, but not quite identical nation-states have added new dimensions to their identity that cannot be abandoned subsequently. Their identity has been enlarged as they have gained experiences in

two locations at the same time. Like jigsaw pieces that seem slightly askew, their enlarged identity cannot be reduced to oneness anymore. Each one of the pair has acquired unique, sometimes even contradictory insights over time, which might be an explanation for the broken symmetry that Lew notices:

But Lew just then was seeing something extraordinary, something he would never have dreamed possible with these two—they were exchanging signals, not exactly warnings but cues of hand and eye, the way actors in a vaudeville skit might—they were *impersonating British idiots*. And in that luminous and tarnished instant, he also understood, far too late in the ball game, that Renfrew and Werfner were one and the same person, had been all along, that this person somehow had the paranormal power to be in *at least* two places at the same time, maintaining day-to-day lives at two different universities—and that everybody at the T.W.I.T. had known all about this, known forever, most likely—everybody except for Lew. . . .

Once he was willing to accept the two professors as a single person, Lew felt curiously released, as if from a servitude he had never fully understood the terms of anyway. (Pynchon, *Against 771*, italics in original)

Lew is relieved when understanding the professor's enlarged identity, and only then is he able to accept his existence because he can classify it. This shows that others play an important role in the construction of identity since it has a bearing on social relationships. The identity status can not only be asserted by the relevant person, it furthermore needs to be granted—especially if two bodies compete for the same mind and the relationships and legal rights that are connected. As White states, “whether that person's existence preserves what matters to one . . . can depend on other people as well” (153).

Renfrew and Werfner's enlarged identity has an impact not only on personal relations; their bilocation also serves as a metaphor for the pre-World War I conflict between Britain and Germany. Similar to the professor, these two European countries stress their disparity in order to conceal their sameness and unsettle the continent as their contradictions spread into the outside world.

**BILOCATED IDENTITIES: IDENTITY AND THE NATION**

National differences play an important role in the narrative of the Chums of Chance. The following discussion on identity and the nation will illustrate that the aeronauts and their adventures are a metafictional reference to narrative elements that help construct identity.

In *Against The Day*, the Chums of Chance undergo several instances of doubling. While they pursue their own narrative as balloon boys, they have a shot at being harmonica players on the ground, travel the desert in a sand vehicle, or find their female counterparts on another skyship. But the most important duplication displays a narrative of US national identity and defines itself against an opponent country. The skyship crew plays the role of US-American national representation and each encounter with the nation's primary foe drives the boys into a defensive position:

It [the *Bol'shaia Igra*] was readily recognized by all as the flagship of Randolph's mysterious Russian counterpart—and, far too often, nemesis—Captain Igor Padzhitnoff, with whom previous “run-ins” (see particularly *The Chums of Chance and the Ice Pirates*, *The Chums of Chance Nearly Crash into the Kremlin*) evoked in the boys lively though anxious memories. (Pynchon, *Against* 137, italics in original)

They define themselves against their Russian “counterpart,” a word that reveals some insights about the mechanics of sameness and difference at work in the concept of national identity. As the etymology of the word suggests, a counterpart can be understood as a rival, opponent, or adversary, when the difference in a bipolar relationship is emphasized; ‘counter-’ coming from lat. *contra* and meaning ‘against.’ The relationship between the Chums of Chance and the Russian crew illustrates that one aspect of the narrative of national identity is the definition of one nation against another. This may be due to the fact that it is easier to unite a heterogeneous group of individuals as a people under a flag by enhancing their own positive values at the expense of a most contrasting counterexample. Furthermore, difference to others has a stabilizing effect on a people as being the smallest common denominator that consolidates inner group deviations.

At the same time, such a defining focus on difference foregrounds bipolarities, and not just in the case of national identities: communism against

capitalism, democracy against autocracy, good against ‘the axis of’ evil. Such bipolarities can be seen as both ends of one and the same matter or function when challenged. The self emerges as symmetry along the lines of mutual recognition. Therefore, it is coherent that counterpart conveys the notion of sameness in a bipolar relationship.

The focus of the Chums of Chance on the “parallel organization at St. Petersburg, called the Tovarishchi Slutchainyi [Accidental Comrades]” (Pynchon, *Against* 137) evolves from radical difference to sameness in the novel:

“The travels of Captain Padzhitnoff,” tapping a pointer across the map that covered the entire forward bulkhead of *Inconvenience’s* wardroom, “over the years, have pretty closely matched our own. No surprises there. But looking only at the months just before he disappeared, everyplace we’d been that year, . . . old Padzhy’s gone as well. Where we haven’t been yet, he seems to have left no trace.” “Swell!” Darby ejaculated. “We’re chasing ourselves now.” “We always knew he was haunting us,” shrugged Lindsay. “Likely this is only more of the same.” (Pynchon, *Against* 1150)

Only at this late moment in the novel do they recognize their identity with the “opposite number” (Pynchon, *Against* 139). This recognition reveals the limits of a self-conception based on sameness and difference. The national narrative that has defined their identity until then—American boy scouts as counterparts of the Russian elite squad—becomes obsolete, and the threads that held this story line together dissolve as they stop chasing each other and join their forces to ease the suffering of Europeans during World War I by providing them with provisions. The opponent becomes a partner, and narrative identity needs to be newly constructed.

According to Ricœur, “the narration assembles the character’s identity—that can be called its narrative identity—by establishing the character of the story. It is the story’s identity that shapes the character’s identity” (175, my translation).<sup>5</sup> The personal identities of the Chums of Chance are profoundly determined by US national identity as they are intertextually linked. This is underlined by the multiple references to them being the protagonists of all-American dime novels in

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5 Original reads: “Le récit construit l’identité du personnage, qu’on peut appeler son identité narrative, en construisant celle de l’histoire racontée. C’est l’identité de l’histoire qui fait l’identité du personnage.”



*Against The Day*. By being sent on a voyage through the skies of the world as political and personal realities shift in the novel, the Chums of Chance are compelled to redefine themselves.

But this reassessment may appear astonishing to external observers who do not yet know how their different states of identity are linked by narrative. Consequently their rival Padzhitnoff asks for the story behind their changes:

“Why should you have believed anything we told you?”

“Officially, of course not. Must always be ‘some American trick.’ You can image emotions up at staff level—very delicate balance of interests out here, who needs Americans to come blundering in, like galloping cowboys, disrupting all known quantities?”

“But unofficially . . . *you*, as a sky-brother, *might* have believed us?”

“I? since Tunguskan *obstanovka*, I believe everything. [. . .] American government? What do they think?”

“We don’t work for them anymore.”

“*Zdorovo!* You are working for whom now? Large American corporation?”

“Ourselves.”

Padzhitnoff narrowed his gaze, which remained friendly. “You—balloon-boys—*are* large American corporation?” (Pynchon, *Against* 892, italics in original)

Padzhitnoff learns that the narrative of the nation does not work here anymore, and he searches for substitutes to be able to ‘locate’ his old enemy. Unable to think in individual terms, he goes for the next best institution he can imagine: the American corporation. His imagination takes him from one conventional narrative to the other, and he waits for the boys to clarify their side of the story.

As the Chums of Chance travel from an identity based on sameness to individual selfhood, their starting point is being part of the national narrative identity as all-American dime novel icons who serve as a platform for intertextual links between the nation and personal identity that Americans as individuals can integrate into their own stories. They progress 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. Cooperation is their option for the excluded middle that nationalist ideology cannot acknowledge in its fight for supremacy. And as the nations on Earth are not ready to leave frontiers behind,

the sky becomes the image of transnational cooperation in the last pages of *Against The Day* with a convention initiated by a French group of balloonists who have used their abilities “over twenty years ago, during the Sieges of Paris, when manned balloons were often the only way to communicate in or out of the city” (Pynchon, *Against* 22):

The Garçons de '71 were having their annual convention in Paris. Everybody on the *Inconvenience* was invited. The festivities would be pursued not on the ground but above the City in a great though unseen gathering of skyships.

Their motto was “There, but Invisible.”

“The Boys call it the supranational idea, . . . literally to transcend the old political space, the map-space of two dimensions, by climbing into the third.” (Pynchon, *Against* 1217, italics in original)

Having transcended the national narrative in search of selfhood, the Chums of Chance are now part of a counter-society that may be able to change the shape of the world. As White says,

we cannot decide as individuals what counts as our own continuation, any more than we decide as individuals what kind of society we shall inhabit. But as we determine collectively the form and shape of our society, we thereby also determine the boundaries of ourselves. (161)

As mentioned in the second section, personal identity is shaped by the stories we tell ourselves and others; this means that personal stories as well as meta-narratives, like the chosen example of the nation, are closely interlinked in order to construct who we are. The skyfarers' journey around Pynchon's fictional world of *Against The Day* underlines the importance of narration for an enlarged concept of identity that includes the intrinsic aspect of selfhood instead of circumventing it with reflections on continuity in space over time.

## CONCLUSION

Pynchon's choice to introduce bilocation to the multi-layered world of *Against The Day* has shaped the way the characters perceive their identities. In contemplation of the fork in their road, the novel's protagonists have adapted to this fictional disposition and have incorporated it into their self-conception. The

adaptations concerning their identities are heterogeneous: In addition to acquiring a second self, splitting into two bodies, and transcending the barriers of a confining narrative—as I have argued in this paper—numerous other instances of bilocated identity are shown to the reader in *Against The Day*. Thus, they give the impression of a wide network of enlarged forms of identity spreading over the world and unraveling fundamental insights into the concept.

The protagonists' exposure to bilocation, even if fictional, helps to reconceptualize identity. *Against the Day* plays with human concepts of identity, and this playful textual approach may lead to a deeper understanding of the human selves traveling our world. As Parfit says: "When we invent a new concept, we may find that it applies to parts of reality" (*Reasons* 291). The bitter ending of Scarsdale Vibe and Foley Walker's relationship advises against narrowing down identity by adhering to a one-dimensional worldview, in this case capitalism. It is a claim for a multifaceted construction of identity. Renfrew and Werfner's story exposes the pitfalls of an identity concept based on continuity in space over time, and the Chums of Chance explore the enlarged notion of narrative identity as the key to selfhood.

By these means—besides many others to acknowledge Pynchon's sustained demand for diversity and multiplicity—his latest novel provides us with a deeper insight into who we are by exploring imaginative variations of who we could be.

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