

## Pynchon's Age of Reason: *Mason & Dixon* and America's Rise of Rational Discourse

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Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing *wrong*, gives it a superficial appearance of being *right*, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.

—Thomas Paine (63)

By drawing upon astronomer Charles Mason and surveyor Jeremiah Dixon for the unlikely protagonists of *Mason & Dixon* (1997), Thomas Pynchon develops a revisionist history of these two Englishmen as they come to terms with America in the so-called Age of Reason, which was informed by a European philosophical movement with its roots in rational discourse aimed at cultural and political intellect that eventually served as the foundation for American independence and democracy. But as Thomas Paine suggests, time wields a stronger power than does reason, and what history calls the Age of Reason may remind one of an ideal time in America when, in theory, rational discourse converted people into better citizens. However, as Mason and Dixon create their Line, recognizing that it will, in effect, divide North from South, they begin to realize that America consumes them with irrational discourse.

Does this make the Age of Reason an Age of Unreason? Perhaps not, but Pynchon's novel suggests that the Age of Reason—at least as we know it—never happened, and that rationality remains unstable, indeterminate, and applicable only case by case. Human nature and rationality, for Pynchon, are given to deontology: a Kantian pursuit of good will while obeying moral obligation despite the presence of irrationality.<sup>1</sup> In "Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals," Kant writes,

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a Good Will. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other *talents* of the mind, however

they may be named, . . . are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them . . . is not good. (9)

Kant defines good will thus: “[that which] is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some purposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition—that is, it is good in itself” (10). And over two centuries, history has marked the Age of Reason as a remarkably good period in America. But among all the positives (such as the formation of a new nation), the glaring negatives (such as slavery and Indian eradication) often receive little mention. In fact, allusions in *Mason & Dixon* to the 1860s and the 1960s suggest that America has yet to experience a true Age of Reason, or at least that what constitutes the Age of Reason is not what we have imagined. Pynchon’s novel challenges readers to rethink and redefine ideas of reason and rational discourse, not only in colonial America but also in contemporary America. One way to explore such new definitions is through Kant’s work and that of theorists who explore the possibilities of what Kant’s ideas mean.

Pynchon assesses recorded (and recording) history in an exchange between Ethelmer and Ives LeSpark:

“It may be the Historian’s duty to seek the Truth, yet must he do ev’rything he can, not to tell it. [ . . . ] Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir’d, or coerc’d, only in Interests that must ever prove base.” [ . . . ]

“Hogwash, Sir, [ . . . ] Facts are Facts, and to believe otherwise is not only to behave perversely, but also to step in imminent peril of being grounded, young Pup. [ . . . ] Dr. Johnson says that all History unsupported by contemporary Evidence is Romance.” (M&D 349–51)

Pynchon’s use of history seems not so much flexible in fitting the story as malleable in conveying a broad picture of American culture.<sup>2</sup> But why focus on Mason and Dixon? The astronomer and surveyor as protagonists might strike readers as, at the very least, bizarre, since the real historical Mason and Dixon remain footnotes, at best, in most historical studies. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin observes, “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255).<sup>3</sup> Hence, Pynchon’s book asks us to care about history—the characters and the politics of the early nation—and about the human condition itself. Pynchon resurrects the dead and the past to provide a sweeping social comment on then and now.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Mason and Dixon furnish the occasion for ingeniously inventive storytelling, for their exploits while creating their famous Line give Pynchon an almost unlimited (and unbridled) opportunity to assess America prior to its revolution.<sup>5</sup> As Charles Clerc notes, "The number of historical facts that accumulate in the novel indeed becomes surprising. Even while we are aware of reading re-imagined or recreated history, we suspect that most bases may prove at least partially factual" (48). Pynchon seems to know that contemporary readers cannot rely on only one version of history if they wish to adhere to contemporary ethics of reading, but must remain open to how other writers, including fiction writers, interpret history to keep history alive. It is in this spirit that I link Pynchon with Kant in suggesting that the history in *Mason & Dixon* incorporates a philosophy of morals and the judgment that the early nation lacked a clearly defined moral structure.

But in working toward an explication of Kant, I will also discuss other theoretical issues. Critics of the novel have seized upon Pynchon's exploration of reason and rational discourse. Clerc, for instance, writes,

The deficiencies in human nature show up especially against the ironic backdrop of *progress in the Age of Reason*. A triumph of the 18th century is its beginning advances in science, seen in the accomplishments of men like Mason, Bradley, Maskelyne, Franklin. (But if progress, why so much stupidity and irrationality?) (101)

Pynchon's novel represents a type of historical writing that historians typically shun for a more sterile, journalistic (that is, supposedly objective) version of history. The novel, furthermore, seems to adhere to Benjamin's eighteenth thesis, part A, in which he writes,

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as "the time of the now" which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (263)

*Mason & Dixon's* connections to this thesis of Benjamin's are startling, especially when one considers the protagonists' literal use of the constellations for their project. Thus Pynchon enables his contemporary

audience, by following the exploits of Mason and Dixon, to make sweeping connections between an often-overlooked historical episode and various other points of history. The title of the novel's first section, "Latitudes and Departures," signals both the literal travel awaiting Mason and Dixon and the departures Pynchon will take, with a considerable degree of latitude, from rigid conventional history (Benjamin's rosary beads).

Pynchon also draws upon notions of the public sphere in relation to the Age of Reason. Jürgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, identifies the public sphere as that public place, such as a coffeehouse, where people—mostly property owners—came together to share rational discourse:<sup>6</sup>

[As early as the thirteenth century, citizens] claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason. (27)

Communication is the key to this rational discourse, and Habermas discusses how reason (debate, for example) became critical in the public sphere, for it did not appear (in theory, of course) until private people had "come together as a public" (27). Habermas refers to both seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain as "model case[s]" of the development of a political public sphere, in that a "modern parliament" emerged from the "assembly of estates" (57). By law, this "constitutional state" decreed the rights of the public sphere, giving rise to three ideas: 1) freedom of speech; 2) freedom of the human being; and 3) freedom for private-property owners to have protection and equality (83).

In coffeehouses, taverns and other public meeting-places, the public came together, and rational discourse arose. The public sphere also became crucial, Habermas observes, to those wanting to manipulate public rational discourse for political ends. Ideally, public-sphere meeting places offered people a chance to gather and share ideas without government interference. In *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America*, David S. Shields argues that the coffeehouse

advanced the liberty of expression beyond personal expressions of jest, ridicule, parody, gossip, scandal, giving voice to a *sensus communis* articulating social appetites and passions . . . [and] experimental liberties.

In them desire, interest, power, and law became issues of playful interrogation—and targets of total raillery. (xxvii)

"In the coffeehouse," Shields observes further, "'the world' finally began to converse with the world" (22).<sup>7</sup> In *Mason & Dixon*, such discussion is not mere playful interrogation, but an experimental discourse critical to definitions of the Age of Reason and to the rise of rational discourse in the public sphere, a rise that coincides with Kantian deontology and its application to historical situations involving Pynchon's astronomer and surveyor.<sup>8</sup>

#### Rational Discourse in the Public Sphere: Mason and Dixon in America

The nearest Coffee-House, The Restless Bee, lies  
but a block and a half distant. There, if anyplace,  
should be News, up-to-the-Minute.

—Thomas Pynchon (M&D 304)

Pynchon does not construct an alternative history to that of the real Mason and Dixon and their Line so much as, in broad yet succinct strokes, he fills in the gaps of history by showing readers various incidents that might have happened not only during the creation of the Line but also during America's so-called Age of Reason. Michael Schudson argues that for Habermas's public sphere to work, "not only does participation need to be widespread, but it must be rational" (147). Thus, when he concludes that "rational-critical discussion" (160) did not permeate colonial America as theorists often ideally surmise, he presents a perspective for readers of *Mason & Dixon*. In the course of the novel, Mason and Dixon begin to realize that their Line will serve as the division between North and South, and, more important, between free and slave provinces. They wonder how a nation in an Age of Reason can rely so heavily on both slavery and Indian eradication.<sup>9</sup>

We can also assess Mason and Dixon as case studies of how Kant's philosophy might work, especially considering them as potential "misologists." Kant writes,

the more a cultivated reason applies itself with deliberate purpose to the enjoyment of life and happiness, so much the more does the man fail of true satisfaction. And from this circumstance there arises in many, if they are candid enough to confess it, a certain degree of *misology*, that is, hatred of reason, especially in the case of those who are most experienced in the use of it, because after calculating all the advantages they derive . . .

even from the sciences (which seem to them to be after all only a luxury of the understanding), they find that they have, in fact, only brought more trouble on their shoulders, rather than gained in happiness. . . . [They] do not allow their reason much influence on their conduct. (11)

On the one hand, perhaps Mason's melancholy in grieving for his deceased wife, Rebekah, stems from his search for a rational purpose for her death, leading to his internalizing his pain; thus he might loosely fit the definition of a misologist. He does not hate reason, exactly, but he is given to moments of using careless reason or no reason at all to reach a quick, easy end without complicating the issues. On the other hand, Dixon consistently uses reason until he learns that, by itself, reason cannot help him—when, for example, he finds himself in a critical confrontation with a slave owner. Both characters continually attempt to come to terms with reason and rational discourse, and often discover that these means alone are not enough to solve problems of human suffering.

Mason and Dixon encounter what Frederick M. Dolan characterizes as a would-be "moral community" in the throes of shifting toward guidance by "political science": a cold, calculating science that minimizes rational discussion in favor of maximizing personal gain.<sup>10</sup> In one plot line, Dixon becomes increasingly distraught over slavery in America.<sup>11</sup> Of course, Mason and Dixon, while at the Cape of Good Hope on a separate observing assignment, encounter slavery before they reach America. Dixon discusses the imminent voyage to the New World thus: "'Tis said these people keep Slaves, as did our late Hosts, —that they are likewise inclin'd to kill the People already living where they wish to settle'" (248). Mason responds, "'Another Slave-Colony . . . so have I heard, as well. Christ'" ; then, "'Good Christ, Dixon. What are we about?'" (248, 253). Mason's question signals that they have come into conflict with reason because they have come into conflict with their purpose—conflicts that will lead them to walk a fine line between rationality and misology.

Having reached America, Mason and Dixon know very little about it save its reputation for the supposed rational discourse that prevails there as citizens, of course, strive for enlightenment. For example, when they enter The Restless Bee Coffee-House (by the back door), their conversation with the world (see Shields) takes a surprising turn:

With its own fuliginous Weather, at once public and private, created of smoke billowing from Pipes, Hearths, and Stoves, the Room would provide an extraordinary sight, were any able to see, in this Combination, peculiar

and precise, of unceasing Talk and low Visibility, that makes Riot's indoor Sister, Conspiracy, not only possible, but resultful as well. (305)

Moments later, in this very place, Mason and Dixon hear news that the Paxton Boys, who have already massacred Indians in Conestoga and Lancaster, will attempt to eradicate the Moravian Indians in Philadelphia. "Mason did note as peculiar, that the first mortal acts of Savagery in America after their Arrival should have been committed by Whites against Indians" (306), leading him and Dixon to reflect on slavery thus:

They saw white Brutality enough, at the Cape of Good Hope. They can no better understand it now, than then. Something is eluding them. Whites in both places [America too] are become the very Savages of their own worst dreams, far out of Measure to any Provocation. Mason and Dixon have consult'd with all it seems to them they safely may. [. . . Mason postulates that positive and negative Electricity, and] "the size of the Swing between the two,—that vertiginous re-polarizing of the Air, and perhaps the Æther, too [. . .] may be affecting the very Mentality of the People [at the Cape]."

"Then what's America's excuse?" Dixon inquir'd, mild as Country Tea. (306-07)

Using a discussion of Indian/white relations to segue into his dominant theme of slavery in America displays Pynchon's attention to historical detail. The very notion that white Americans began eradicating Indians to conquer the land and held slaves in bondage to help manage the land would seem to negate any sense of rational behavior. Furthermore, these processes of elimination and control suggest that "rational" discourse often takes the form of rationalization—political arguments as excuses meant to justify such atrocities.

Later, nearing the finish of the Line, Mason suggests that they can rationally persuade the Indians blocking their path to move by letting them look at and through the surveying instruments. Despite his occasional protests against the lack of rationality he and Dixon encounter in their voyages, here Mason falls back on the flimsiest reasoning to persuade the Indians to move. A frustrated Dixon corrects him, telling him what the Indians really want:

"They want to know how to stop this great invisible Thing that comes crawling Straight on over their Lands, devouring all in its Path. [. . .]

“A tree-slaughtering Animal, with no purpose but to continue creating forever a perfect Corridor over the Land. Its teeth of Steel[. . .] And what of its intentions, beyond killing ev’rything due west of it? do you know? I don’t either. [. . .]

“What else are these people suppos’d to believe? Haven’t we been saying [. . .] This is how far into your land we may strike, this is what we claim to westward. As you see what we may do to Trees, and how little we care,—imagine how little we care for Indians[. . .] We might make thro’ your Nations an Avenue of Ruin, terrible as the Path of a Whirl-Wind.” (678–79)<sup>12</sup>

Mason’s attitude here is symptomatic of American politics then and now. Whereas Mason suggests distracting the Indians with “Magick”—like the old wink-wink policy of using trinkets, or worse, liquor—Dixon has tuned into something more compelling. Mason’s flippancy is akin to the irrationality of America, and Dixon’s response foreshadows what will become his deontological bent. Mason often makes discerning comments about the atrocities they see, but he never really lets his emotions or his ethical sense move him beyond observation. Dixon’s frustration grows out of his helplessness to do anything about the absurdities—and worse—he witnesses, thus giving rise to what will become his pursuit of a good in a land seemingly devoid of such pure pursuits. Mason, by not thinking through the possible repercussions of his behavior, violates the Kantian virtue of volition by making a careless choice, a choice Dixon confronts because he sees that it can possess no good in itself. In this instance, both men exhibit traces of misology: Mason’s disregard for reason in dealing with the Indians and Dixon’s realization that reason is probably not going to help in this situation.

Pynchon couples the ideas of westward expansion and Indian eradication to make a sweeping comment on American policy toward the indigenous inhabitants of the land. Philadelphia is “selling rifles to anyone with the Price, most egregiously the Indians who desire our dissolution,” while “[b]oys old enough to handle a Rifle are drilling out in Back [of the coffeeshouse]” (309). War, not rationality—or worse, war as rationality—has often dominated as the true form of American Reason throughout our history. Young men—“boys,” in many cases—eradicate the Indians; nearly eradicate themselves a century later; a century after that, eradicate scores of thousands of Vietnamese (not to mention the loss of 58,000 American troops); a generation later, eradicate tens of thousands of Iraqis—all in the name of a country that more than two centuries ago devoted itself to rational discourse. What does this say about American politics and democracy itself? When Dixon asks Mason, “‘Is this what America’s going to be like?’” (311),



he captures the essence of what, in reality, America has become: a country with a political system that, for example, continually rationalizes war, for better (the Second World War) or worse (Vietnam). Pynchon also segues into other arguments regarding America then and now through Mason and Dixon's fear that their Line will serve an even more sinister purpose. Dixon tells Mason, "'We are Fools[. . .] We shouldn't be runnin' this Line[. . . S]omething invisible's going on, tha must feel it, smell it . . . ?'" Mason responds, "'American Politics,'" and Dixon affirms, "'Just so. We're being us'd again'" (478).

Dixon's frustration mounts because he realizes that, to the party using him, his creating the Line means more than settling a simple boundary dispute: that he is an inadvertent accomplice in atrocities. His insight later reveals that he knows the Line will separate North from South, but the sheer fact that he senses this indicates that he has begun to tune in to pursuing a good even while he remains involved in an act which has the negative repercussions of marking off the slave states. In time, he will confront a choice that tests the virtue of his volition. More interesting, Dixon becomes a symbol of what it means to be an American—to live and work in a land of irrationality that boasts of nothing but its rationality. That so many Americans—then, and even more frighteningly now—conduct their business oblivious of the obvious wrongs going on all around them stimulates in a bewildered Dixon a hunger to pursue good.

That Mason and Dixon are being used becomes even more blatant in a public (house) discussion, at The Rabbi of Prague, when a patron declares,

"[T]his Age sees a corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick. Projectors, Brokers of Capital, Insurancers, Peddlers upon the global Scale, Enterprisers and Quacks,—these are the last poor fallen and feckless inheritors of a Knowledge they can never use, but in the service of Greed. The coming Rebellion is theirs,—Franklin, and that Lot,—and Heaven help the rest of us, if they prevail." (487–88)

With its coming revolution steeped in—for one thing—the affairs of the bourgeoisie who will become elected officials after the Revolution, America in the Age of Reason is on the verge of becoming the capitalist machine we know today. But by linking "Brokers of Capital," "Peddlers upon the global Scale" and "Quacks," Pynchon identifies American capitalism as less than rational, especially given the human atrocities that plague America. In a similar discussion, the Quaker Dixon tells the Son of Liberty Philip Dimdown, "'Tis not how British treat Americans [. . .] 'tis how both of You treat the African Slaves, and the Indians

Native here, that engages the Friends more closely,—an old and melancholy History'" (568).

Indeed, a melancholy history dogs white America, as Mason and Dixon's journey through the public sphere illustrates. Discourse occurs, but its rationality remains in question. That Mason and Dixon participate in many discussions either in coffeehouses or in public meetings diminishes the romance with which many historians (See Habermas and Shields) tend to surround such places in tracing their contribution to the rise of rational public discourse. Thus one favorite coffeehouse, Janvier's,

has ever provided a venue for the exercise of Proprietarian politics[. . .] By the end of each day, finely divided coffee-dust will have found its way by the poundful up the nostrils and into the brains of these by then alert youths, lending a feverish edge to all they speak and do.

Conversing about politics, under such a *stimulus*, would have prov'd animated enough, without reckoning in as well the effects of drink, tobacco [. . .] and sugar. (328, 329)

Although Pynchon pays appropriate homage to the coffeehouse and its function in the so-called rise of rational public discourse, he also explores what many discussions regarding this rise either downplay or exclude: the consumption of alcohol. Referring to Mason, Dixon and the Line crew, Pynchon writes, "When they may, they drink. So does ev'ryone else" (452).

Beyond workaday drinking, Pynchon portrays the use and users of drugs.<sup>13</sup> The day after shopping for opiated pharmaceuticals with the help of Benjamin Franklin, Mason and Dixon visit Col. George Washington, who advises them,

"As a rule here [. . .] ye may speak your Minds upon any Topick Politickal. But on no account, ever discuss Religion. If any insist, represent yourselves as Deists. The Back Inhabitants are terrified of all Atheists, especially the Indians,—tho' Englishmen bearing unfamiliar Equipment across their land might easily qualify." (278)

Rational discourse in the public sphere (and even, as this scene indicates, in the private sphere) has not evolved as far as some historians of the Age of Reason would have us believe. Politics dominate the conversation. But the men avoid discussing religion, not, for instance, out of respect for the distinction between church and state, but rather for fear of terrifying the country folk. Does it seem

strange that rational discourse could not (and still does not) exist without acknowledging religion to some degree?

Even stranger is a touch that might seem irrational to readers for whom history includes such virtuous mythic figures as the George Washington who could not tell a lie. Pynchon has the future first president ask his black Jewish slave, Gershom, to fetch him some hemp—and some (no doubt alcoholic) punch—and the four of them get stoned and discuss, among other things, Plato's *Republic*, while Martha (self-styled "'Agent of Domesticity unrelenting, the wife'" [280]) serves them pastries. If comic hyperbole (or appropriate realism?) serves Pynchon's purpose, it can serve an audience's purpose as well. In a desensitized era when an unfaithful Bill Clinton claims not to inhale, more conservative citizens might long nostalgically for that Age of Reason when purity supposedly prevailed and George Washington, to uphold the moral life, confessed to chopping down the cherry tree. Yet Pynchon rejects such an idealization, portraying instead the revered father of our country as a dope-smoking, munchy-scarfing, slaveholding homebody.

One might speculate, however, that Pynchon does not mean to discredit either Washington or drug use. Thus, "[i]n this Province of the Unreflective, if the Colonel serves not as a Focus of Sobriety, neither is he quite the incompetent Fool depicted in the London press" (275). Nevertheless, in Pynchon's world, idealized or mythic images of saintly or immortal predecessors exist only as figments of the national imagination. By portraying Washington as involved with drugs, Franklin and "that Lot" as greedy, power-hungry opportunists, genocide, Westward expansion and slavery, Pynchon rewrites history in terms that are perhaps more realistic and more rational because not over-rationalized. Indeed, one cannot rationalize such things, though many versions of history have tried to: Revolutionary leaders were righteous and without serious fault; Indians had to be eliminated because they hindered national expansion; slavery was essential for our country to become the economic power it was destined to become. In short, the virtue of America's volition, in such instances, has served the pursuit of an imaginary good will. But none of these rationalizations makes sense, especially when based on inaccurate and uncritical representations of history. History relies on fiction, to be sure, and Pynchon's fiction rewrites history, hilariously yet profoundly.

Dispelling such romantic notions about the Age of Reason as that coffeehouses were loci of rational discourse and that leaders were wholly virtuous allows Pynchon to shift his focus to that other site of irascible public gathering, the tavern. In the tavern, Mason and Dixon

not only encounter discussions of real American politics but also continue their observation of rationality. They "go Tavern-hopping and find secret-society meetings in the back rooms of every place they visit. [. . .] In one of these Ale Venues [. . .] there proves to be a Back Room's back room,—for purposes of uninvited inspection a pantry, but in fact an Arsenal for various Mob activities" (290). In *The Orchid Tavern*, Mason learns the truth of Pennsylvanian (and American) politics from a fellow drinker, who tells him, "Pennsylvania Politics? Its name is Simplicity. Religious bodies here cannot be distinguish'd from Political Factions. These are Quaker, Anglican, Presbyterian, German Pietist. Each prevails in its own area of the Province'" (293). Indeed, the idea of church and state as separate entities represents the locus of unstable and irrational discourse: they do not and cannot exist separately in America, then or now.<sup>14</sup>

Away from such public meeting places, Mason engages in other conversations regarding politics, Indian affairs and slavery. In Brooklyn, discussing politics with the revolutionary Drogo, Mason quips, "lad, can you not see, even thro' the Republican fogs which ever hang about these parts, that 'tis all a moot issue, as America has long been perfectly and entirely represented in the House of Commons, thro' the principle of Virtual Representation?" (404). Of course, America will break free from British rule, but many Americans who already feel exploited, alienated and forgotten will become perhaps even more lost in a capitalist America whose elected officials answer for the most part to money and not to human voices, a future Pynchon eloquently foreshadows with the weasel-word "Virtual."

He pushes the idea of virtual representation even further by applying it to what would become, and remains, America's political scheme. As the conversation with the gang of revolutionaries continues, one likens Mason to a serf, or, "[a]s they call it here, a Slave," to which Mason replies that he works "under Contract," reasoning, "I have encounter'd Slavery both at the Cape of Good Hope, and in America, and 'tis shallow Sophistry, to compare it with the condition of a British Weaver'" (406-07). Wicks Cherrycoke (*Mason & Dixon's* narrator) writes in his journal, "What is not visible in [the] rendering" of another scene "is the Negro Slavery, that goes on making such no doubt exquisite moments possible,—the inhuman ill-usage, the careless abundance of pain inflicted, the unpric'd Coercion necessary to yearly Profits beyond the projectings even of proud Satan'" (412). But later, the Chinese Captain Zhang tells Mason and Dixon,

"To rule forever [. . .] it is necessary only to create, among the people one would rule, what we call . . . Bad History. Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,—to create thus a Distinction betwixt 'em,—'tis the first stroke.—All else will follow as if predestin'd, unto War and Devastation." (615)

Composing and consuming bad history (rationalizing what has no rational end—the purely irrational) makes the evils America commits appear necessary. If our righteous leaders (political and otherwise) condone atrocities, then such things as genocide, slavery and war cannot be evil, can they? America must have used (and still uses) such means to achieve an American ideal—an American good—set forth by our forefathers. In short, bad history makes us feel good about our Bad History.

Mason, again flippantly, claims that "the Provinces are alike as Stacy and Tracy," to which Dixon astutely replies, "Except for the Negro Slavery upon one side [. . .] and not the other" (615). Captain Zhang then continues,

"If you think you see no Slaves in Pennsylvania [. . .] why, look again. They are not all African, nor do some of them even yet know,—may never know,—that they are Slaves. Slavery is very old upon these shores,—there is no Innocence upon the Practice anywhere, neither among the Indians nor the Spanish nor in the behavior of the rest of Christendom, if it come to that." (615–16)

Hence the Line becomes a metaphor for the tension Pynchon continually highlights: One may rationalize in America, but the very idea of the Line suggests irrational rationality. It embodies at once an evil, for the South will continue the practice of enslavement, and a good, for the North will provide a somewhat safe haven for some escaped slaves. But working-class Americans will also become virtual slaves to a capitalism that sees the divide between the rich and the working poor growing larger with each passing day. Mason and Dixon are complicit in this divide, although neither is a bad person. Yet something else seems to be at work here too. Whereas Mason lapses into moments of irrationality (or misology), Dixon, in adhering to rationality, comes close to making a choice that will both stem and depart from his ability to reason. The two, moreover, appear to exemplify Kant's definition of good will. Together they form a conduit that produces for Dixon a chance for action.

Mason and Dixon may recognize this divide, perhaps because of their familiarity with what Habermas identifies as Great Britain's model public sphere, which involves free speech, free human beings and freedom for property owners to have protection and equality. However, Mason and Dixon keep encountering the opposites in America: guarded speech, slavery, and indigenous property owners (Indians) with no protection or equality. Indeed, Pynchon suggests, except for the powerful and the wealthy, nobody enjoys these three freedoms in a pure sense. Again, America defies rationality.

Having finished the Line, Mason and Dixon (now in Delaware, "Tavern-crawling" [687]) come to terms with their adventures and reach conclusions about the public sphere. What is said of Dixon's surveyor's personal North-Point, "representative of his Honesty and Good Name," applies ironically to the reality of America by which Dixon has long been frustrated: "an often enormous Investment of Faith, and Will, lies condens'd within, giving it a Potency in the World that the Agents of Reason care little for" (688). Religious faith and stubborn will combine to make America incapable of idealized rational discourse, for it remains too committed to its arguments for irrational acts: slavery has practical benefits; Indians need religion and civilization (but they will be eradicated anyway); religion and government must coincide; and, two centuries later, America needs to fight in Vietnam and in Iraq. But whereas Mason descends ever further into melancholy, the fiery Dixon lets his emotions take over in a Kantian pursuit of good will. Dixon asks an oblivious Mason, "'Ev'rywhere they've sent us,—the Cape, St. Helena, America,—what's the Element common to all?'" Mason replies, "'Long Voyages by Sea[. . .] Was there anything else?'" Dixon reaches his epiphany by slow burn:

"Slaves. Ev'ry day at the Cape, we lived with Slavery in our faces,—more of it at St. Helena,—and now here we are again, in another Colony, this time having drawn them a Line between their Slave-Keepers, and their Wage-Payers, as if doom'd to re-encounter thro' the World this public Secret, this shameful Core." (692)

Indeed, in this case of "the world" beginning to converse with the world, Englishman met American and was shocked by the supposed Age of Reason. Does this public discourse reveal answers to horrifying questions? Is it rational? *Mason & Dixon* suggests not:

"[T]hey're murdering and dispossessing thousands untallied, the innocent of the World, passing daily into the Hands of Slave-owners and Torturers, but oh, never in Holland, nor in England, that Garden of Fools[. . .] Didn't

we take the King's money, as here we're taking it again? whilst Slaves waited upon us, and we neither one objected, as little as we have here, in certain houses south of the Line,—Where does it end? No matter where in it we go, shall we find all the World Tyrants and Slaves? America was the one place we should *not* have found them." (692–93)

Dixon discovers at this moment the very irrational rationality of having made the Line—and of the Line itself. Taking matters into his own hands, he exhibits a bravery that seems honorable and right compared to the way most Americans (and even Mason) act toward Indians and slaves with indifference at best. While in Maryland, Mason and Dixon attend an auction whose "goods" include horses, tobacco and slaves. Dixon confronts a slave driver who is beating his slaves, takes his whip, punches the man in the mouth, breaks his tooth, and tells him, "'I'm going to kill *you* . . .? Now be a man, face me, and make it easier, or must I rather work upon *you* from the Back, like a Beast, which will take longer, and certainly mean more discomfort for *you*.'" Nevertheless, as appropriate as such a form of violent reason might seem at the time, Dixon lets the man go, shaking the whip at him: "'If I see *you* again, *you* are a dead man. [. . .] And dead *you*'ll be, ere *you* see again this Instrument of Shame. For it will lie in a Quaker Home, and never more be us'd,'" to which the slave owner replies as he scurries away, "'Don't bet the Meeting-House on that.'" And someone in the street shouts at Dixon, "'Go back to Philadelphia'" (699).

For Dixon, violence is a means to the end of Kantian good will, and serves as a possible way to redefine the rational as that which (at least in America) relies as much on the irrational to be effective. In this case, Pynchon suggests, passion and emotion guide us as much as (or perhaps more than) reason. Dixon cannot stop the legal practice of slavery, nor will he even stop this particular slave owner.<sup>15</sup> But his irrational means—a violent act—serves his rational pursuit of an internal good end, if only because it sets a good example and allows him to express his views on slavery. He temporarily stops the local abuse, but more important for him, he answers the call of his own inner demons that decry this inhuman practice. Kant acknowledges the problems inherent in championing reason as a goal: "we may have misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason as the governor of our will" (10). Dixon knows that his actions will not effect monumental change, that his good will is not good "because of what it performs or effects."

Moreover, if the seeming opposites of reason—passion and emotion—grip Dixon in this incident, then this passion and emotion exist in Pynchon's America not as opposites to reason but as necessary

components of reason—conditions of its very existence. Dixon's passion and emotion in performing this act of goodness at once defy the notion of reason, even as he follows Kant's "practical imperative": *"to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only"* (47). Dixon does not use violence only for the sake of violence; his desired ends remain equivalent to good will. And the irrational rationality of his outburst gives insight into Pynchon's worldview: passion and reason are necessarily complementary, as, perhaps, are the irrational and the rational. Acts of pure reason sans passion most often lead, as America's sordid history demonstrates, to cruelty and despair. Furthermore, Dixon's action in this case reveals both the good and the bad that are the Line, the two forever linked, good will preventing bad from winning out—the same good will put to the test some one hundred years later in the good/bad dichotomy of the Civil War.

Shortly after this incident, Mason and Dixon part ways, their job complete. What Pynchon suggests they have learned contributes uniquely to our history. The exploits of these two men, a pair of protagonists only in Pynchon's world, give readers a glimpse into what might actually have happened in the Age of Reason. An astronomer and a surveyor come to realize that rational discourse in America justifies an unusual degree of reliance on religion yet condones slavery, Indian eradication and Westward expansion at any cost—all of which involve human suffering at levels that will forever remain beyond any rational comprehension. For these two men, the realm of purest reason, "pure Mathesis" (134), lies beyond the earth, in the stars they use to map the Line. Rational discourse? Age of Reason? We might laugh at the yearning for such ideals. Pynchon does too. But in this laughter a sharp pain surfaces. The period we have labeled the Age of Reason was not as we have so often romantically imagined it; rather, it needs continual problematizing for our understanding of it to become more . . . reasonable.

### Toward the Twentieth Century

Schudson suggests that the oft-idealized public sphere rich with rational discourse never existed: "It does not appear that in any general sense rational-critical discussion characterized American politics in the colonial era" (160). By taking us over two centuries into the past, Pynchon suggests that the absurdity of the twentieth century actually makes more sense if we recognize that the Age of Reason replete with rational discourse never happened—that we have yet to experience a truly enlightened era of rational discourse. He elaborates by suggesting



that, then and now, rational discourse depends on the irrational as much as it does on the purely rational. An Age of Reason has happened, just not as we have imagined it.

As Habermas writes about the British model of the public sphere, "this constitutional state came with one crucial drawback: publicness became the organizational principle for the procedures of the organs of the state themselves" (83). Writing about the turn of the nineteenth century, Habermas concludes that when public opinion becomes neutral in regard to the public and private spheres—neutral to "reasonable communication" and "irrational conformity"—public administration becomes the norm, and the state becomes practically impervious to the people's voice (242–43). About this "structural transformation" Habermas writes, "[The] ability to assume [the bourgeois public sphere's proper function] determines whether the exercise of domination and power persists as a negative constant . . . of history—or whether as a historical category itself, it is open to substantive change" (250).

America saw (and continues to see) domination and power as negative constants. *Mason & Dixon* grounds us in the past and, with its foreshadowing and references to contemporary culture, takes us to the present. Cherrycoke comments on religion and power, "'The New Religion had crested better than twenty years before [. . .] by the 'sixties we were well into a Descent, that grew more vertiginous with the days, ever toward some great Trough whose terrible Depth no one knew'"; and other comments concerning "the University man," "'an Awakening,'" and "'a Revolution'" (261) point directly to the 1960s and their revolutions as parallel to the previous Age of Reason. Aunt Euphrenia scoffs, "'Some Revolution,'" to which Ethelmer responds, "'How not? [. . . A]s you must appreciate how even *your* sort of Musick is changing, recall what Plato said in his "Republic",—"When the Forms of Musick change, 'tis a Promise of civil Disorder'" (261–62). These remarks allude to the oft-maligned musical revolution of the 1960s—soundtrack to a government sending soldiers to fight in Vietnam while interfering with protestors at home—taken by many then and now for a sign of cultural decadence. And by commenting on postwar "Worldliness" as "a step past Deism, a purpos'd Disconnection from Christ," and on the revolutionary implications of the new "'Negroe Musick'" of "'South Philadelphia Ballad-singers'" (264), Pynchon strengthens the parallels among the 1760s–70s, the 1860s and the 1960s, constellating what Benjamin calls "a conception of the present as 'the time of the now.'" "

Cherrycoke begins his tale (and the novel) by recounting a sinister conversation prior to his embarkation on the *Seahorse*. One of the controllers of his fate tells him,

“Madness has not impair’d your memory. Good. Keep away from harmful Substances, in particular Coffee, Tobacco and Indian Hemp. If you must use the latter, do not inhale. Keep your memory working, young man! Have a safe Voyage.” (10)

We can read *Mason & Dixon* as Pynchon’s dream of a safe voyage—an invitation to depart from an often rigid and inaccurate history, to examine its negative constants and to reexamine America’s past. We sense this dream in the novel’s final lines, addressed to the now dead Mason by his sons:

William and Dr. Isaac, Rebekah’s Sons, would stay, and be Americans. [. . .] Mr. Shippen, Rev<sup>d</sup> Peters, Mr. Ewing, all Commissioners of the Line twenty years earlier, now will prove, each in his Way, their Salvation upon this Shore. [. . .]

“The Stars are so close [out where you were] you won’t need a Telescope.”

“The Fish jump into your Arms. The Indians know Magick.”

“We’ll go there. We’ll live there.”

“We’ll fish there. And you too.” (772-73)

When Mason tells Johnson and Boswell that he has “ascended, descended, even condescended, and the List’s not ended,—but haven’t yet *trans*-cended a blessed thing” (746), Pynchon may be commenting on behalf of those Americans struggling to figure out the very essence of America in relation to anything rational. Mason has yet to figure it out: he (unlike Dixon) and we have yet to embrace the uniting of rational and irrational. Of Mason’s death Pynchon writes, “’tis possible, after all, down here, to die of Melancholy” (762). In his melancholy, Mason recognizes that

There may be found, within the malodorous Grotto of the Selves, a conscious Denial of all that Reason holds true. Something that knows, unarguably as it knows Flesh is sooner or later Meat, that there are Beings who are not wise, or spiritually advanced, or indeed capable of Human kindness, but ever and implacably cruel, hiding, haunting, waiting. (769)

Is Mason ultimately a misologist? Overall, perhaps not, assuming he (and of course Dixon) learns that hating and shunning reason, and

favoring and embracing reason are forever linked, forming the necessary bond between the irrational and the rational. The novel offers the Kantian suggestion that we are given to emotion *and* reason, and cannot function without both of them working together—that reason alone cannot be “the governor of our will.” Is a post-Age-of-Reason America only a fiction, a false hope to be abandoned, a never-to-be-realized goal, or a dream to which we can continue to aspire? Realizing such a goal (if we can do so) depends on our willingness to unite the rational and the irrational, reason and passion/emotion. And who better than Mason and Dixon—looking toward the stars to cognitively map the earth—to take us to the Age of Reason’s supposed crux, to reveal the very nature of reason’s, and America’s, history? These possibilities grace the pages of this complex homage to two unlikely sources of inspiration. Through Mason and Dixon’s disillusionment in America, readers can seek enlightenment. The novel reminds us that we are neither first nor last to wonder what became, and perhaps what will become, of the magic of America, burdened by a history that bears the label “rational” when reality demands that we look beyond the rational to locate and problematize what we are really about: the irrational.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Pynchon follows other critics and theorists who have used Kant. For example, in “What is Enlightenment?” Michel Foucault writes, “Kant indicates right away that the ‘way out’ that characterizes Enlightenment is a process that releases us from the status of ‘immaturity’ . . . a certain state of our will that makes us accept someone else’s authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for” (34). Recent Pynchon scholarship has worked with Kant as well: see Jim Neighbors’s “Kant, Terror, and Aporethics in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.” Arthur Saltzman, in “‘Cranks of Ev’ry Radius,’” observes that “The findings in *Mason & Dixon* . . . attest to the argument of Immanuel Kant: ‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made’” (64), but he does not develop a Kantian analysis.

<sup>2</sup>See Charles Clerc’s *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon*, and Thomas H. Schaub’s *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* for more-detailed discussions of Pynchon’s treatment of history. Both agree that Pynchon’s treatment of historical information allows him to explore the very nature of how we view history.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Wood also discusses Benjamin’s “Theses,” likening the suggestion of *Mason & Dixon* to Benjamin’s reminder that “not even the dead will be safe if we fail to abandon the notion of simply progressive history, which consigns the past to the rubbish-heap even as it claims to remember it” (122).

<sup>4</sup>Early reviews of *Mason & Dixon* seized on these themes. Anthony Lane wrote,

you tell yourself that Pynchon's heroes, who merely had to hack their way for four years along the border of Maryland and Pennsylvania, had it easy. That is unfair, for they *were* heroic, in a quietly dogged way, and you feel by the close that they deserve a medal for surviving not just the rigors of their professional task but the incalculable travails of Pynchon's fiction. (98)

Rick Moody wrote,

Pynchon seems to have learned even more about these subjects [death and decay] as he has gotten older. It's hard not to read of Mason's passing, and of his son's rhapsodic but sadly ironic depiction of an American continent in which "the Fish jump into your Arms," without being both moved and remorseful about the dwindling promise of our American enterprise. (110)

<sup>5</sup>Russ Castronovo discusses such narratives as those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs in arguing that "the Mason-Dixon line . . . provides a site for examining the pitfalls of racial ideology and the cul-de-sacs in inescapable nationalism predatorially inherent to borders" (198).

<sup>6</sup>Habermas relies on Kant in defining reason and rationality as well, especially in the section "Publicity as the Bridging Principle between Politics and Morality (Kant)" (102–17).

<sup>7</sup>Pynchon, ever the student of history, has Mason and Dixon spend much time in Philadelphia, "the greatest of North American cities," the site at which Shields starts his study (xxxii).

<sup>8</sup>Neighbors applies Kant to *Gravity's Rainbow* thus: "I will move into Kant by asking whether it is possible to form an ethics in an epistemological condition of non-comparability. . . . [W]here Kant seeks to reduce empirical contingency through the use of a regulative ethics, Pynchon in *GR* writes a non-regulative ethics grounded on contingency" (275–76). Whether we look at *GR* or *M&D*, Kantian philosophy provides an interpretive tool with which to probe our existing definitions of reason. Pynchon—like Kant—concerns himself with redefining reason and rational discourse, especially when these ideas come into conflict with definitions of America and American history.

<sup>9</sup>Critics often seize on Pynchon's treatment of the Enlightenment. Donald J. Greiner writes, "In the eyes of the European settlers, America *should* have been innocent, but the two surveyors and the reader learn that no one is ever free. . . . Death, defeat, and the New World: not exactly what Columbus, the Pilgrims, Mason and Dixon, and the Founding Fathers had in mind" (75). Victor Strandberg writes, "it is not surprising that Thomas Pynchon's journey to the eighteenth century is calculated to display the underside of the Enlightenment. . . . Pynchon casts a cold eye on the century of order, reason, and progress that gave birth to the modern age" (103–04).

<sup>10</sup>Dolan explains,

A dynamic society of conflicting interests and individuals supports little in the way of—indeed would seem to undermine—a moral community whose shared ends and commitments might constitute a relatively impersonal foundation for political legitimacy and coherency. Any such standards must, therefore, be discovered by reason guided by experience: in the place of a moral community, political science. (35)

<sup>11</sup>Pynchon’s “melancholick” Mason does not condone slavery, but much of his narrative involves his coming to terms with both Rebekah’s death and his estranged sons’ apparent indifference to him.

<sup>12</sup>On the effect of machinery/technology on Native Americans and also on the ideology of the early nation as an Eden, and to explore further these tensions in Pynchon’s novel, see Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*. In defining early America as a paradisaical garden, Marx considers, for example, Robert Beverley’s *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705), with which one might connect Pynchon’s glorious descriptions of food and abundance:

Beverley’s enthusiasm occasionally leads him . . . into the kind of inventive, high-flown boasting that was to become a hallmark of native humor. He tells, for example, of grapes so plentiful that one vine might fill a London cart, of potatoes the thickness of a child’s thigh, and of a frog large enough to feed six Frenchmen. (78)

Pynchon plays these tensions beautifully, for example, by juxtaposing destruction in progress and to come with such flattering descriptions of America as the following:

From the shore they will hear Milkmaids quarreling and cowbells a-clank, and dogs, and Babies old and new,—Hammers upon Nails, Wives upon Husbands, the ring of Pot-lids, the jingling of Draft-chains, a rifle-shot from a stretch of woods, lengthily crackling tree to tree and across the water. . . . An animal will come to a Headland, and stand, regarding them with narrowly set Eyes that glow a Moment. Its Face slowly turning as they pass. America. (257–58)

<sup>13</sup>Pynchon did not discover drug use in American history: the rampant use of opium in early America is well known. Pynchon connects then and now, affording us a hilarious look at our forefathers, who we might believe could not possibly have used drugs. See Pynchon’s introduction to *Slow Learner*: “I was hugely tickled by all forms of marijuana humor, though the talk back then [in the 1950s] was in inverse relation to the availability of that useful substance” (8).

<sup>14</sup>Eliminating evolution from public-school science curricula and posting the Ten Commandments in public schools are two examples.

<sup>15</sup>Clerc finds Dixon’s act nonheroic, at least in its effect: “In all respects generous and good, this act of manumission is not approved by the townspeople, and both Mason and Dixon must flee before the prospect of

arrest. Dixon's act, in short, is not considered heroic" (104). However, one might read Dixon's act as a precursor to heroism (and a foreshadowing of emancipatory deeds), Americans' risking their lives to free slaves before and during the Civil War. Perhaps Dixon's act imaginatively portrays an early emancipator's likely moral wrestling and outbursts of protest.

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