

Mason and Dixon: Pynchon's Bickering Heroes

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Many of Pynchon's characters are given to bickering. In *Vineland*, Van Meter engages with the other members of his "commune" in "energetic" and "relentless . . . bickering raised to the level of ceremony" (9). Vato and Blood, the "towaway teammates" (177), engage in "recreational bickering" (185); if they cannot bicker about basketball because they both support the Lakers, they have "to find something else to bicker about," such as Jack Nicholson's sunglasses in a film (378). Vato and Blood's bickering, in spite of apparently signalling division, may, in fact, be a form of bonding, a displaced or disguised display of affection.

These are minor characters, but the protagonists of *Mason & Dixon* are bickerers. Indeed, not only are those who drew the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland in the 1760s bickerers; the whole American nation is bickering as their story is being told: "This Christmastide of 1786, with the War settl'd and the Nation bickering itself into Fragments" (6). This early passage illustrates what bickering is and can lead to. Bickering is not merely arguing about insignificant matters; it is arguing that, although petty and insignificant, can, on the grand scale, bring about serious division. It is as if Pynchon were saying, if we bicker endlessly when we really have no reason for difference, division or antagonism, no wonder America and the rest of the world are in the state they are in.

Simple though bickering may at first appear, investigation reveals its links with the themes, objectives and methods of *Mason & Dixon* as a whole. We begin by looking at various definitions of bickering, to clarify and limit its meaning. Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides examples contemporaneous with the lives of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon. Indeed, as a second step, we suggest a possible source for the idea of antagonism and verbal sparring in *Mason & Dixon* in preparatory reading of eighteenth-century writing Pynchon may have done. *Mason & Dixon* is a sort of American version of Jonathan Swift's *Tale of a Tub* (1704), where a form of bickering is to be found. Third, we examine bickering as a speech act in terms of Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle and conversational implicatures. Bickering violates the Cooperative Principle, and Pynchon uses this conflict or subversion to discuss serious issues like religion, and also to create comedy

through irony and wit. The core of this essay is a study of conversational implicatures in the characterization, with special reference to Mason and Dixon, who do most but not all of the bickering in the novel. We look at the relation between bickering and communication to see what Pynchon has to say about energy, creativity and the probabilities of successful communication. We end by emphasizing Pynchon's characteristic dual intention of discussing serious matters in a comic way, by pointing out the relation between bickering and the comic mode.

1

Most of us have a vague idea what bickering is, since we have indulged in it, if not recently, at least as children; petty disagreement, especially with the emphasis on the attempt to get the last word, is inevitably infantile. But formal definitions sharpen the concept. A simple definition from a contemporary dictionary tells us that to bicker is "to quarrel about unimportant things" (OALD), the meaning most of us are familiar with. A sort of contradiction is inherent in this definition because quarreling is serious, but quarreling about unimportant things reduces the seriousness and can even make the act ludicrous or shameful due to the petulance of the protagonists. But some dictionaries give us a second meaning, namely, "to flicker, quiver" (AH). This second meaning is related to matter and to light, and is physical rather than abstract.

In the *OED*, we find additional and deeper meanings. The first two are physical: "skirmishing; a skirmish, encounter, fight; exchange of blows"; "an encounter with missiles . . . arrows . . . stones." Therefore, early bickering could end with the protagonists either injured or dead. The second two meanings are verbal and abstract: "quarrel, contention; angry altercation"; "noise as of contention." So the additional significances are, first, the physical violence, with or without weapons, and second, the auditory quality.

The origin of the word is uncertain, but the first examples, those related to a battle, quarrel or skirmish, are nouns. They have been related, however, to the rare and somewhat doubtful *bike*: "to thrust, strike with a pointed weapon." So when the verb emerged in the late eighteenth century, Mason and Dixon's time, it meant "to skirmish, exchange blows; to fight"; "to attack with repeated strokes; to assail with missiles"; "to dispute, quarrel, wrangle," and was applied to "any rapidly repeated noisy action, suggesting the showering of blows." The verb is frequentative, like "sputter," "totter" and "flutter": you cannot bicker with one utterance; there has to be repetition and a to and fro.

The *OED* gives several examples of bickering, the verbal noun. Curiously, an example of the base, literal meaning comes from the year Mason and Dixon arrived in America: "Skirmishing, a skirmish. **a 1763** BYROM 3 *Black Crows* 19 Disputes of ev'ry size . . . from bick'ring, up to battle." An example of the second, extended meaning comes from Samuel Richardson: "Wordy sparring, wrangling, altercation. **1742** RICHARDSON *Pamela* IV, 54 The Tears a poor Wife might shed in matrimonial Bickerings" (OED 1.848-49).

The frequentative aspect of the verb, and the connection to light and noise point toward matter and inertia, thus to entropy and to human limitations—perennial potential for subversive humor. The husband-and-wife context, which seems archetypal, is at once tragic and comic. The inherent contradiction in bickering often reduces the action to the level of farce. In such a scenario, however, the humor is seldom appreciated by the protagonists, or rather the two (it is usually two) antagonists, who are each concentrating on the effort to come out triumphant. The detached onlookers, or the audience, are the ones who can enjoy any humor.

2

Mason & Dixon contains many tales within the tale, like the digressions in Swift's *Tale of a Tub*. One is a tale about a seemingly magical, magnetic iron bath, "the Tub," capable of apparently inexplicable marvels like levitation, that comes to house an electric eel. In Swift's day, "a tale of a tub" meant merely a cock-and-bull story, the idea of a tub not being literal. Pynchon's literalizing the tub is parodic. But *Mason & Dixon* is a version of *A Tale of a Tub* not so much because of the preposterous notions and wild burlesque it contains as because of the bickering between its characters of different religious persuasions, notably the Anglican Mason and the Quaker Dixon.

The word tub points to the informal and derogatory term "tub thumping" for the oration of a particularly loud and ranting public speaker, especially a preacher. Swift's *Tale* recounts the adventures of three brothers: Peter (who represents Roman Catholicism), Martin (Luther, regarded as inspiring the Church of England) and Jack (Calvin, the spirit of Protestant dissent). The arguing of the three brothers and their associates is referred to as "banter," and bantering is shown to be a popular pastime: "*if this Bantring, as they call it, be so despisable a Thing, whence comes it to pass they have such a perpetual Itch towards it themselves?*" (21). Swift's satire is directed against "*the numerous and gross Corruptions in Religion and Learning*" (9), and ridicules the manner of worship and preaching of religious enthusiasts.

It denounces zealous pedantry, the bane of universal standards in taste and literature as set forth by the ancients. Religion—which to Swift meant rational Anglicanism—suffered attack from both Roman Catholicism and Dissent. Swift traces the dangers to a single source: the irrationality that disturbs the highest human faculties—reason and common sense. Swift’s sympathies were with Martin, the middle-of-the-road representative of Anglicanism; indeed, his religious persuasion impelled him to change his politics from Whig to Tory, to resist Dissent, thus causing in himself a conflict of loyalties. We do not need to look for Pynchon’s partiality, but we can trace Mason and Dixon’s bickering to religious differences: Dixon often feels uncomfortable with Mason’s High Church affinities and with his irrational superstitions.

A Tale of a Tub was followed in the 1704 edition by *The Battle of the Books* and *A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*; in 1708, Swift published *The Partridge-Bickerstaff Papers*. All these works contain ideas Pynchon appears to have used for his pseudo-eighteenth-century story. *A Tale of a Tub* includes an apology for “Peter’s Banter . . . upon Transubstantiation . . . where a Cork is turned into a Horse” (16). Transubstantiation was one of the main bones of contention between Catholics and Protestants, and arguments about it in *Mason & Dixon* are comic in part because of the novel’s references to various forms of bread (Mason’s father is a baker; the French chef introduces the croissant; Lord Sandwich’s contribution is a precursor to American fast food, etc.). Swift’s three brothers are given magical coats which always fit and never wear out: the world is seen as an enormous suit of clothes and God as a supertailor. The different religions are symbolized by their clothes, as if ideology were as superficial as outward show. In *Mason & Dixon* too, the protagonists’ coats and other clothes are often referred to with a religious and divisive significance. In *The Partridge-Bickerstaff Papers*, Isaac Bickerstaff sets up as a rival astrologer to the real one, John Partridge, and attacks the latter’s astrological superstition. Mason is an astronomer, but he dabbles in astrology and prepares Dixon’s chart. The name Bickerstaff, obviously, indicates the bickering cut and thrust of the characters’ exchanges, suggesting even hitting with a staff. Again, Pynchon’s earlier works have bickering characters, but *Mason & Dixon* foregrounds them, and eighteenth-century polemic may be one reason.

3

Paul Grice maintains that a successful conversation is necessarily a cooperative effort. For the Cooperative Principle, which governs this

enterprise, to function, we must respect four subprinciples or maxims: the maxim of Quantity (be informative), the maxim of Quality (be truthful), the maxim of Relation (be relevant) and the maxim of Manner (be clear) (27). A speaker who uses certain words but has an intention other than the literal meaning of those words may violate one or more of the maxims, thus generating a special meaning. The theory of these special meanings, or conversational implicatures, deals with exchanges where there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. The general tone of Mason and Dixon's bickering is negative, and the signalling of disagreement and disaffection may be the true message, the actual words possibly having little or nothing to do with it.

When a person violates an unspoken rule for the amount of information, its truthfulness, relevance or clarity of expression, there is usually a reason for doing so. For example, if we violate the maxim of Quantity by saying too little, perhaps we wish to evade the issue, or are being reticent for some other reason. If we violate that of Quality or Relation, maybe we have an intention to be humorous, more vivacious or even sarcastic in our speech. On one occasion (one of many), Dixon attempts to be playful, introducing an apparent irrelevance:

"In any case," says Mason to Dixon, "both Pennsylvania and Maryland are Charter'd Companies as well, if it comes to that. Charter'd Companies may indeed be the form the World has now increasingly begun to take."

"And I thought 'twas a Spheroid . . .?"

"Play, play,—trouble yourself not with these matters." Mason shivers.
(252)

Sometimes we violate the maxim of Quality and also that of Manner or clarity to be polite. Brown and Levinson explain how, in polite conversation, we adopt politeness strategies to maintain face. But in Mason and Dixon's bickering, the opposite usually happens: normally the maxims would be, at the least, strained for the sake of politeness; here they are often upheld, and the truth is told in all its bluntness because Mason and Dixon are angry with each other and want to cause discomfort. On one occasion, Mason and Dixon are annoyed at being expected to contribute a hundred guineas each to sail on the *Seahorse* to Sumatra, and also to share the Captain's mess. After some wrangling, but with attempts, at least on the part of the Captain, to remain polite, Mason, suspecting that Dixon is in league with the Captain, gives in, ungraciously, with a labored pun:

"We regret it, Sir," Dixon offers, "—far too much Whim-Wham."

Mason brings his Head up with a surpris'd look. "Saintly of you, considering your Screams could be heard out past the Isle of Wight? Now, previously unconsulted, / am expected to join this Love-Feast?"

Dixon and the Captain, as if in Conspiracy, beam sweetly back till Mason can abide no more. "Very well,—tho' someone *ought* to have told you, Captain, of that *Rutabageous Anemia* which afflicts Lensmen as a Class,—the misunderstanding then should never have arisen." (33)

Mason can direct the cut and thrust until even he realizes he has gone too far, as in the following exchange. Upon Dixon's becoming annoyed and accusing Mason of conveniently suppressing unwholesome memories, of having no conscience, Mason replies by deliberately diverting the bickering toward religion, which he knows will hurt Dixon even more:

Mason regards him carefully. Something has happen'd, back in Durham. He puts on a stuffy Manner, that Dixon might rise to. "We don't have that in the Church."

"Why aye, you do . . .? If there were as much Silence in thy Masses, as in our Meetings, 'twould be evident even to thee."

"You're saying we jabber too much for you? no time to meditate, not Hindoo enough?—Bad Musick, too, I collect. Well. Any silences in *my* Church, thank you, are the sort most of us can't wait for to be over. All our worries, usually kept at bay by that protective Murmur of Sound, ye see, come rushing in,—Women, Work, Health, the Authorities,—anything but what you're talking about,—whatever that be."

"Mason,—shall we argue Religious Matters?"

"Good Christ. Dixon. What are we about?" (253)

We will see further examples below of the role bickering plays in the development of Mason's and Dixon's characters. Mason sees himself as a man of wit, a latter-day Swift, and for lack of fashionable and polite society in America where he can show off his skills, he uses Dixon as a foil.

Rong Chen shows that violating the maxim of Quality by using conversational implicatures is often motivated by a desire for expressiveness. He defines expressiveness as "the effectiveness of what is said and the impact of it on the hearer" (33). Chen points out two aspects to the desire for expressiveness: the speaker has strong emotions about what he is conveying, and he wants to pass on his emotions and meanings forcefully and effectively to the hearer, making as much impact as possible, informative, psychological, rhetorical or otherwise. To achieve this impact, the speaker will use images,

metaphors, exaggeration, irony and sarcasm, which are types of Quality implicature. He may use a Relation implicature, saying something apparently irrelevant to put a stop to an argument, change its direction or inject a dose of humor through the contrast. Both Mason and Dixon use Relation implicature, with Dixon taking his cue from his colleague:

"Their infamy's no fresh News to me," Dixon quietly, "—what we must face is the probability that from now on, tho' we fight like Alexander and labor like Hercules, we shall always be remember'd as the Stargazers who turn'd Tail under fire."

"So might I have done," cries Mason, "had there been but room to turn it,—the irony how keen!"

"Eeh . . .? Well . . . I wasn't as scared as *thah'*, tho 'f course I did feel—"

"Hold,—who said I was scared?"

"Who?— Did I . . .?"

"Were you scared? I wasn't scared. You thought I was scared? I thought *you* were scared.—"

"I do recall a Disinclination, as who would not, to perish beneath the water-line of some, forgive me, miserable Sixth-Rate . . .?"

"Sounds like headlong panic to me," says Mason. "Thank goodness I was calmer about it."

"Calmer than what? An hour and a half of great Hellish Explosions and mortal screaming? Aye, Serenity,—we'll make a Quaker of thee yet."

"They'd decertify me out of Astronomy,—strictly C. of E. in this Trade,—I'd never micro in on another Star in that Town again. All the Pubs in Greenwich, shewn my Likeness,—aahhr!" (249-50)

A bickerer flouts and contravenes the maxims and their spirit, for the objective of his argument is the opposite of cooperation. Irony is one of the bickerer's chief weapons, and ironic intent usually undermines immediate cooperation, or it unites the speakers against some other target. Bickering often involves the infantile desire to have the last word in an argument, a desire Mason and Dixon accuse each other of harboring, and this also goes against the cooperative aim of respecting turn-taking.

4

In *Mason & Dixon*, we see bickering on all levels of society and in all social groupings as not only a matter but also a manner of communication, as a substance and a style of transmitting information. Perhaps because the novel is set during the Age of Wit, its bickering is

made through wit almost into an art form. Sharing apprehensions and some “‘darker Sentiments’” about their mission, Mason and Dixon can enjoy the repartee without becoming hostile to each other:

“Bit sophisticated for me. Tho’ I don’t mind a likely Conspiracy, I prefer it be form’d in the interests of Trade,—the mystickal sort you fancy is fair beyond me, I’m but a simple son of the Pit.”

“‘Trade.’— Aha. You heard me mention Jesuits,—so now you’re making veil’d allusions to the East India Company, in response,—I do see, yes . . . Drivel, of course.”

“Come, Sir, can you not sense here, there, just ‘round the corner, the pattering feet and swift Hands of John Company, the Lanthorns of the East . . .? the scent of fresh Coriander, the whisper of a Sarong . . .?”

“Sari,” corrects Mason.

“Not at all Sir,—’twas I who was sarong.” (479)

The anonymous narrator tells how the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke was appointed chaplain to the line-drawing party, and how he returned (albeit too late) to America two decades later, in 1786, for Mason’s funeral in Philadelphia, and has stayed on as a guest at his sister’s house, obliged only to keep the children entertained. They have heard many stories of his adventures, and now want “‘a Tale about America’” (7). As Cherrycoke narrates during one long night, his nephews and nieces, as well as other relatives, bicker among themselves, punctuating the tale with their comments and reminding us of its narrative framework.

At the start of his career, Mason leaves his village not only because he wants to be an astronomer rather than a miller and baker like his father, but also because he cannot stand the petty bickering in the village near Stroud: “‘some will wish but to flee,—to [. . .] anywhere but this Sink of village bickering.’” Such bickering leads to “‘Meanness and Stultification” and serves “‘purposes of Envy, Spite, and Vendetta” (207) in the former paradise now blighted by industrialization. However, when Mason gets to London, he finds that the village is a paradigm of the whole world: “‘Intrigues and Faction within the Royal Society, as among Nations and Charter’d Companies’” (247). He becomes aware of the sinister power in the background, at once religious, political and economic. Mason has great ambitions, but he is stymied by infighting within the Royal Society and by outright opposition. Being English, he is also opposed by the French. The first of Mason and Dixon’s joint assignments is to observe the 1761 Transit of Venus from Sumatra. Their ship is attacked by the French, against whose interests it is for the English to get good observations. Accurate observation leads to

superior knowledge, which leads to political and commercial advantage —power. Hence there is bickering between the English and the French, rivals in religion, politics and commerce.

5

Pynchon uses petty divisions and bickering as a device in characterization. Bickering can be symptomatic of more than difference or envy. For example, the bickering between cousins Tenebrae and Ethelmer (390) has sexual undertones, with a hint of an allusion to Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. Ethelmer, who has not seen Tenebrae for some years, finds her "nubile," and reminds her of old times: "Remember the time you snipp'd off a lock of your hair [. . .]?" When he points out that he no longer has to bend down to kiss her, she checks him: "Dangerous territory, Sir" (94-95). The incident goes no further, but it reminds us of Pope's mock-epic poem of 1711, which was based on an actual event that provoked a quarrel between two prominent Catholic families. Lord Petre cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair, much to the indignation of the lady and her relatives, and Pope was asked to write a light-hearted poem on the subject to soothe the ruffled tempers.

Tenebrae's parents, J. Wade and Elizabeth LeSpark (the latter Cherrycoke's sister), bicker out of marital jealousy, baiting each other about the time before they were married (410). A husband and wife separated when the Line runs not merely through their house but right through the middle of their double bed also bicker petulantly, making of bickering a speech act through which they express their desire either to be no longer married or to dominate each other (446-47).

When Cherrycoke meets Mason and Dixon after their arrival in America, they are "[b]ickering energetically" (363). Their subdued or noisy bickering can reduce or release energy, having either a soporific effect or the opposite. Cherrycoke is put to sleep (although he fudges the fact) by "their issueless Bickering" (649), whereas his brother-in-law, LeSpark, involved in a scurrilous part of the tale Cherrycoke knows nothing about, is awakened by the "Surveyor's [sic] Bickering as to the [. . .] Provenance" of Lord Lepton's rifle (428). Perversely, they argue over stupid things, creating obstacles to communication where none need exist. So not only do Mason and Dixon express mutual opposition through their exchanges on weighty issues such as religion, but they also allow their antagonism to inform harmless repartee: "They will talk seriously for half an hour about something completely stupid, then one will take offense and fall silent, or go off somewhere to try to sleep" (43). Apparently, they have the choice only between noise and silence.

The Line, as Ron Rosenbaum points out, is “itself informationless, yet it’s the genesis of Information” (43). It is the source of information through which Mason and Dixon prompt Americans to action in political, economic, social and other fields. Frantic activity results from their work. But for them to work, they must stop bickering.

When Mason and Dixon urgently need to communicate, as when doing field work, they must be selective about the information and convey the message with a minimum of redundancy or other noise—repetition or bickering. Remarkably, Mason and Dixon do overcome real obstacles when they desire to cooperate. Separated by distance in the field, they communicate perfectly well through speaking trumpets (332). They do not bicker when they are working together, and they have a technical language in common that no one else understands. Indeed, they can mutter together and communicate without being heard (443) if they do not want the others to know about some problem or hazard. Working together, Mason and Dixon communicate on a higher, purer level, and whatever they do is successful and productive, giving them power and a feeling of elation (440).

They are rather like the talking clocks, the Shelton Clock and the Ellicott Clock, which, finding themselves side by side for a short while on St. Helena, are apparently synchronized by the rhythm of the waves and so begin to communicate (121–23). Sophisticated clocks of the new mechanical age, which have revolutionized astronomy, they desire to communicate. They are clocks of the Age of Wit as well, so their conversation is full of puns and wordplay. Their apparent wisdom, gained through silently observing life without being prey to its vicissitudes and irrelevancies, makes them superior to their human masters, such as Dixon. Since they may communicate only once in eight years, they must obey the maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner. These two clocks demonstrate what human communication could be, given more intelligence and enough energetic will.

United by a common purpose, Mason and Dixon should not bicker. But they have so many differences. They belong to different Protestant denominations: Mason is Church of England, and Dixon Quaker. The southern Mason has a quicker, more openly ironic wit than the northern Dixon. In this early exchange, Mason leads the sarcastic bickering and appears to show Dixon up as provincial and petty (although Dixon may be playacting). Dixon speaks first:

“Ah mean, Ah’ve met Anglicans before . . .?”

“I wonder’d why you never stare at me much.”

“[. . .] No,—I’ve no problem with Anglicans.”

"Thank ye. I welcome the return of at least an Hour's more Sleep each Night otherwise spent in Fretfulness upon the Question." (43)

This type of exchange is typical and usually leads to further division rather than harmony. But having been attacked by the French ship *l'Grand*, Mason and Dixon find that they have no strength left to keep up the bickering. We may defend our ground in dialogue by applying politeness strategies, putting ourselves over in a way which makes our best side evident; however, the required tactics and evasive action demand energy: "They are well the other side of Exhaustion, and neither has bother'd to keep his defensive works mann'd against the other. With what they've lately been through together, it seems quite beside the point for them to do so" (42). They unite against a common enemy and forget their differences.

Their joint assignments bring Mason and Dixon into enforced proximity, even intimacy on occasion, over more than five years; both are highly skilled, and they are united by the desire to complete their assignments successfully. Grice postulates that each participant in a conversation recognizes a common purpose, or at least a mutually accepted direction. When Mason and Dixon are working together, they respect the four maxims. They respect the maxim of Quantity by making their contributions as informative as required without confusing each other or anyone else with additional information that is not to the purpose. They respect the maxim of Quality by making their contributions truthful and accurate, which is essential to drawing the Line. As regards the maxim of Relation, their statements are relevant, because they do not wish to prolong the work unduly. Finally, in terms of the maxim of Manner, how they conduct their exchanges, they are "perspicuous" (Grice 27), avoiding obscurity and ambiguity, being brief and orderly. The following conversation, in which Mason and Dixon explain to John Harland how they make their measurements, also illustrates how they observe the four maxims:

"Because of the way Earth spins," Mason explains, "the Stars travel in Arcs upon the Sky. When each arrives at the highest point of its Arc, so are you, observing it in the Instant, looking perfectly Northward along your Meridian."

"So the Trick would be knowing when it gets to that highest Point."

"And for that we have the equal-Altitude Method. . . . We are waiting just at the Moment upon Capella. Have a look?" [. . .]

"Of a Star," Mason adds, "we wish to know but where it is, and when it passes some Reference."

"That's it?"

"Well, of course, one must manipulate the various Screw-Settings precisely, read the Nonius, and an hundred details besides I'd but bore you with,—"

"Seems fairly straightforward. This moves it up and down . . ."

"Bring Capella to the Horizontal Wire," suggests Dixon.

"Hey!" Mason in a tone not as vex'd as it might be, "who's the certified Astronomer, here?" (332)

Despite such comradely collegiality, Mason and Dixon continue to be divided, not least by a not-always repressed professional rivalry. Mason, particularly, as the more gentlemanly astronomer rather than a mere surveyor and as the senior of the two, expects to be accorded precedence and to make his viewpoint prevail. So the moment they rest and the formality of the professional hierarchy is relaxed, they begin to bicker. They admit that bickering wastes time (461), but when, on account of the weather or the season, they have enforced leisure and should conserve their energy, they expend it in disruptive social intercourse. They bicker over whether their work is "'pure Adventure'" or "'Repetition and Routine.'" Mason uses ironic exaggeration and metaphor, violating the maxims of Quality and Manner: "'yes the total Blindness in which we must enter that Desert, might easily have slipp'd my mind, allowing me a few pitiable seconds' respite from Thoughts of it'" (340). Mason is the more imaginative and metaphorical speaker; Dixon relies more on imitation and parody. When Mason objects to his tone of voice, Dixon replies in mock apology, imitating Mason's accent: "'*Ehw* deah . . . imagin'd I'd been taking rather the jolliest of Tones actually, my how awkward for you . . .?'" And the narrator comments, "Another Holiday flare-up. [. . .] Apologize, scream, apologize, scream" (340).

Snowbound, they cannot channel their energy into their work, and when their bickering reaches fever pitch, Dixon insinuates that Mason is morose because he is sex-starved, wallowing in his widowerhood (391). Mason implies that sexual abstinence is better than going with prostitutes, which is what he suspects Dixon does. The conversation ends amicably, but perhaps only because the two agree to part company for a time, Mason to go north and Dixon south. They admit they have behaved rather like Punch and Judy: "'it's been like a Boothload of Puppets swinging Clubs all about, hasn't it'" (393). On one occasion, someone asks sarcastically, "'Now,—which is the Husband?'" (642)—not an inappropriate question about a pair who borrow the Harlands' "Honeymoon Quilt" (393). The to and fro of bickering recalls not only Punch and Judy but also the movement of a pendulum slowly approaching inertia.

Mason and Dixon are divided in almost every way and on almost every issue. They argue because of their age difference, their regional origins, their speech, their professions, their religions, their physiques, their looks, their tastes, their social status, their social ambitions, their marital status, their preferences in alcohol and other beverages, their modes of dress, their temperaments, their wit, their bravery, etc. The following passage brings out some of the most important differences between the two men. They are startled by the silence of Christmas, and Mason prevails on Dixon to investigate, exerting his authority by pulling rank. The comedy lies not only in the vulgar reference but in the exaggeration of the difference in age (a mere five years) and of professional superiority:

"One of us," Mason declares, "must put on his Shoes and Coat, and go down into that Street, there, and discover the reason for this unsettling Silence."

"Eeh, so let's have Junior's Arse in the Roasting-Pan once again, shall we,—thah's bonny!" protests Dixon.

"Be practical,—if they kill you, and I remain safe, the loss to British Astronomy, if any, will go largely unnoticed."

"Well,—put thah' way, of course,—where's m'Hat, then . . .?, not that one, thankee, Sir . . .?, no, I'll need the Broad-Brim today,—"

"You're going out as a Quaker?"

"Eeh! He has Costume-Advice for me now as well! He, who all too plainly exhibits his Need, when in Publick, ever to deflect Attention,—"

"—Inexpensive Salvo," Mason notes. (302)

Later, fencing verbally over the respective merits of tea and coffee (a sensitive issue in view of the English tax on importation of tea into the colonies, shortly to provoke the Boston Tea Party), Dixon, infected now by Mason's wit, has his turn using devices like exaggeration, metaphor and excessive technical detail, violating the maxims of Quality and Quantity for the sake of expressivity. Dixon triumphs in this exchange, which he has initiated for once, in spite of Mason's pun about "tasteful London" and his insinuation of Dixon's gluttony ("someone else" meaning "you"), understatement violating the maxim of Quantity. Dixon gets the last word with a comic punchline, appearing to violate the maxim of Relation, alluding to the fact that tea contains tannin:

"Can't understand how anyone abides that stuff."

"How so?" Mason unable not to react.

"Well, it's disgusting, isn't it? Half-rotted Leaves, scalded with boiling Water and then left to lie, and soak, and bloat?"

"Disgusting? this is Tea, Friend, *Cha*,—what all tasteful London drinks,—that," pollicating the Coffee-Pot, "is what's disgusting."

"*Au contraire*," Dixon replies, "Coffee is an art, where precision is all,—Water-Temperature, mean particle diameter, ratio of Coffee to Water or as we say, CTW, and dozens more Variables I'd mention, were they not so clearly out of thy technical Grasp,—"

"How is it," Mason pretending amiable curiosity, "that of each Pot of Coffee, only the first Cup is ever worth drinking,—and that, by the time I get to it, someone else has already drunk it?"

Dixon shrugs. "You must improve your Speed . . .? As to the other, why aye, only the first Cup's any good, owing to Coffee's Sacramental nature, the Sacrament being Penance, entirely absent from thy sunlit World of *Tay*,—whereby the remainder of the Pot, often dozens of cups deep, represents the Price for enjoying that first perfect Cup."

"Folly," gapes Mason. "Why, ev'ry cup of Tea is perfect . . .?"

"For what? curing hides?" (467)

Here Mason and Dixon have exchanged roles as tormentor and victim. In the earlier stages of their relationship, discourse markers such as the pronouns of address you and thou (though this is partly regional) perform a signalling function in the global organization of their dialogues. Strangers at first, they have to negotiate their mutual acceptance, establishing professional and social identities. In view of the difference in professional status obtaining at the outset, Dixon is deferential, and Mason is condescending, as shown in their exchange of letters. Dixon's first letter took twenty revisions and abstinence from drink for the duration of its composition; Mason extends in-group membership to Dixon through markers such as the first-person plural possessive: "our Clock by Mr. Ellicott" (13).

They are wary of each other until they are united by an external menace, the first "'Interdiction'" (47) of their quest, the attack by the *l'Grand*. Colleagues, they are further united by the knowledge that their lives may depend upon their standing together. They eventually become "'coupl'd [. . .] inextricably'" (372), twinned, "'converging, to all but a Semblance'" (although Cherrycoke adds here, "'till something . . . something occur'd [. . .] that divided their Destinies irremediably'" [315]). The reduction of the self and the merging into the other suggest loss of differentiation, leading even to assimilation. They achieve solidarity and affinity, forgetting power-based opposition. Their union reaches its height when, according to Cherrycoke, Mason falls in love

with Dixon. When Dixon bravely intervenes on behalf of a group of slaves, fights the slave-driver and frees the slaves, Mason is filled with more than admiration. "Only now, far too late," after years of strictly circumscribed affection, "does Mason develop a passion for his co-adjutor, comparable to that occurring between Public-School Students in England" (697). But this claim is too much for Cherrycoke's audience, who protest his being "'far too romantick'" (698).

Bickering reflects the pendulum-like movement of Mason and Dixon's cooperation and strife, union and separation. Their second "Interdiction" is their being prevented from continuing the Line west of the Warrior Path. Their ghost twins, Baker and Carpenter (Mason's father is a miller and baker, and Dixon uses wooden stakes in his surveying), are killed in their place, and Mason and Dixon interpret the deaths as a sign that they must stop their work and their collaboration (678). The "'Third Interdiction'" is more psychological: "'for some couples, however close,'" Cherrycoke comments, "'Love is simply not in the cards. [. . . A]t the end of the eight-Year Traverse, Mason and Dixon could not cross the perilous Boundaries between themselves'" (689). Perhaps Cherrycoke already knows his report of Mason's passion is far too romantic, or perhaps Dixon deflects Mason's "Admiration," for example, with his "Rustick Joakery" (698). In any case, the process of assimilation is halted—from differentiation to sameness, back to differentiation again—and Mason and Dixon avoid the possible loss of their separate identities in homogeneity.

They decide not to stay together, though their reasons are not clear. First, one wants to stay in America while the other does not, and then they reverse their decisions, again swinging like a pendulum. Or perhaps their behavior is more like the attraction of unlike and repulsion of like magnetic poles. They return to England and do not see each other for four years. When they are reunited, they dedicate far more time to bickering or sitting in silence than to communicating significant information. They bicker about the fish they haven't caught: "bickering about the Species eluding them,—Dixon seeming to Mason far too eager to lecture, as if having assum'd that Mason has never seen a Sea-Trout" (755). Mason cannot abide Dixon's knowing more or being cleverer than he. Once after a year without seeing each other, Mason manages to offend Dixon by trying, as usual, to be witty:

Mason arrives one day to find Dixon sitting there with giant Heaps of Cherries and Charcoal. "Have some," offering Mason his choice.

"Excuse me. The Gout is eas'd by things that begin with 'Ch'?"

"Why aye. They don't know that down in Gloucestershire?"

"Chicken?"

"In the form of Soup, particularly."

"Chops? Cheese? Chocolate?"

"'Tis consider'd an entertaining Affliction, by those who have not suffer'd it."

"Oh, Dixon, I didn't mean,—“ Ev'ry turn now, a chance for someone taking the hump. "Here, your Cushion,—may I,—“ (750)

Mason tries to make amends, and the comradely spirit returns, enabling them to trust each other again and confess their secrets. Thus at the end of the book, each comes up with a surprise—for the other and for the reader: Dixon tells Mason of the woman in his life and of his two grown-up daughters; Mason tells of having remarried, having had a son and having another child on the way. It is as if, because of Mason's hostility, Dixon has all along been supplying insufficient information, violating the maxim of Quantity. In terms of communication theory, we also have another example of the stultifying/energizing effects of bickering.

There may be another reason for the occasional tension between Mason and Dixon in their last meetings: Pynchon's apparent injection of some of Boswell into Mason as well as into Cherrycoke. Mason and Boswell have in common a tendency to voyeurism: they were both fascinated by death. In Adam Sisman's *Boswell's Presumptuous Task*, we learn that Boswell "was possessed of a terror of self-extinction . . . revealed most clearly in his terrible fascination with those close to death. He befriended the Keeper of Newgate Prison and procured interviews with condemned criminals." Like Mason, "[h]e was an inveterate attender at public executions, closely observing how men and women looked death in the face" (Mullan 11). When Mason and Dixon first meet, they bicker over the difference between London, where Mason feels at home, and Dixon's North, and also over their different ways of speaking. On this occasion, Mason invites Dixon to accompany him on one of his frequent visits to a public hanging:

Mason has been shov'd about and borne along in riots of sailors attempting to wrest from bands of Medical Students the bodies of Shipmates come to grief ashore, too far from the safety of the Sea,—and he's had his Purse, as his Person, assaulted by Agents public and private,—yet, "There's nothing like it, it's London at its purest," he cries. "You must come out there with me, soon as we may."

Taking it for the joke it must surely be, Dixon laughs, "Ha, ha, ha! Oh, thah's a bonny one, all right. Eeh."

Mason shrugging, palms up, "I'm serious. Worse than that, I'm sober. A man's first time in town, he simply can't miss a hanging. Come, Sir,—

what's the first thing they'll ask when you get back to County Durham? Eh? 'Did ye see them rahde the Eeahr at Taahburn?'"

Is it too many nights alone on top of that fam'd Hill in Greenwich? Can this man, living in one of the great Cities of Christendom, not know how to behave around people?— Dixon decides to register only annoyance. "Nooah, the first thing they'll ask is, 'Did thoo understand 'em the weeay they talk, down there . . .?'"

"Oh, damme, I say, I didn't mean,—"

So Dixon for the second time in two minutes finds himself laughing without the Motrix of honest Mirth,—this time, a Mr. Mason—how-you-do-go-on laugh, sidewise and forbearing, the laugh of a hired Foil. (15)

When Boswell's "friend, the philosopher David Hume, was on his deathbed, Boswell haunted his Edinburgh apartment. . . . waiting to see if the notorious sceptic and supposed atheist would finally recant his disbelief (he did not), and was importunate with questions about Hume's feelings in the face of his imminent extinction" (Mullan 11). Mason lingers with Dixon as if fascinated by his frailty and the sense that he is undergoing a metaphysical struggle: "Dixon wakes briefly. 'It had damn'd well better be Bodily Resurrection, 's all I can say . . .?'" (753).

Cherrycoke imagines Mason meeting Johnson and Boswell as all three are on their way to Scotland (744-47). Here, Johnson and Boswell also bicker. And Pynchon endows Mason with some of Johnson's attributes as well: the touchiness and melancholy which Boswell did not seek to veil in his accounts. These traits of Mason's often set the scene for his less light-hearted bickering with Dixon.

6

The deaths of Dixon and Mason are very moving, and can be seen as tragic in their unfulfilled promise. But Mason and Dixon's bickering, whether angry or jovial, is almost always comic. Highlighting their differences contributes to the comedy, for the comic abhors sameness: differentiation creates comedy.

The stultification in Mason's village, of which bickering is a symptom, suggests vexation with a growing sameness. Bickering in high places suggests discharges of energy causing disorder where it is least expected. Bickering in general, with its turn-taking, suggests the rhythm of a pendulum ("Apologize, scream, apologize, scream"), which manifests the gradual decrease of energy under the influence of gravity. Witty bickering requires energy, and when the protagonists grow tired,

they fall silent. The complementary processes of humanization and mechanization are also implicated here, since the loss of creative energy and individualism renders people automata, while mechanical devices or animals that evince human traits appear to have inordinate mental energy.

Such issues point to serious concerns in the contemporary technological world, whose roots are in the eighteenth century; but the novel often treats them comically. Given the logical structure and emotional dynamics of humor, Pynchon's comic strategies function with the same material as his serious discussions do. His fiction characteristically leads us to meditate on themes such as life and death, freedom, creativity, and scientific discovery in terms of binary opposites. Similarly, the intellectual structure of humor prompts us to perceive a situation in two self-consistent but mutually incompatible frames of reference or associative contexts. This perception resembles violation of the maxim of Relation.

The emotional dynamics of humor involve an impulse of aggression or apprehension: malice, contempt, condescension or mere absence of sympathy with the victim. Mason's bickering reveals emotions and attitudes covering the range of those impulses. Sometimes his malice is combined with affection in friendly teasing, as, indeed, the aggressive component in civilized humor may be sublimated or no longer conscious. But we laugh when a stroke of wit surpasses or discomfits a rival. Mason, in his widower's melancholy and his frustrated ambition, seems to assuage his anguish in victimizing Dixon (we rarely see him bicker with any other character).

The cleverer Mason's wit, the more he laughs, and the more we laugh. Laughter can dispel emotive excitations such as envy, brutality or sexual gloating. Mason's attitude toward Dixon, a very skillful surveyor and a more generous person, includes an element of envy; as we have seen, Mason is also fascinated by brutality. Through Mason, Pynchon points at society in general, not only at eighteenth-century abuses like slavery and spectacles like public hangings, but also (via the postmodern gap of historical metafiction) at late-twentieth-century equivalents. Laughter often releases tension or relieves apprehension, even pent-up boredom, sexual frustration or unavowed fear. Mason suffers from all three of these last, without admitting it; but being subliminally aware of them when not occupied with his work, he seeks release through bickering, which for him is comic, and for his victim mostly exasperating:

"Here's The Dodman. Might we go in this one, do tha guess . . .?"

"Why not? What's it matter? Savages, Wilderness. No one even knows what's out there. And we have just, do you appreciate, contracted, to place a Line directly thro' it? Doesn't it strike you as a little unreasonable?"

"Not to mention the Americans . . .?"

"Excuse me? They are at least all British there,—aren't they? The Place *is* but a Patch of England, at a three-thousand-Mile Off-set. Isn't it?"

"Eeh! Eeh! Thoo can be so thoughtful, helping cheer me up wi' thy Joaks, Mason,—I'm fine, really,—"

"Dixon, hold,—are you telling me, now, that Americans are *not* British?— You've heard this somewhere?" (248)

Mason, more self-consciously a man of science, enjoys sophisticated jokes whose logic is hidden or only implied, whereas Dixon's sense of humor is often childish and scatological. Mason's quick thinking enables him to select in advance frames of reference that will collide and give rise to comic effects. These collisions are often discursive, like the trivial versus the exalted. As we have seen, Dixon gradually assimilates Mason's character because, in terms of comic bickering, humor is socially infectious. In one exchange, Mason suggests that Dixon does not understand women's understated way of speaking, whereupon Dixon's retort silences Mason:

"She never actually said she wanted him off the Crew," Dixon notes.

"It's what she meant. You have to understand them, Dixon, they've this silent language, that only men of experience speak at all fluently."

"Then why is it I've lost count of how many of my evenings tha've ruin'd, with thy talk of Cannibalism, or Suicide, or Bickering among the Whigs . . .? anything, but what 'they' wish to hear?"

"Unannounc'd blow." (441)

We see Dixon learning to use sarcasm, as in this bickering about the weather:

"Can't say I'm too easy with this weather," Mason remarks.

"Do tha mean those white flake-like objects blowing out of the northeast . . .?"

"Actually, I lost sight of the Trees about fifteen minutes ago."

"Another bonny gahn-on tha've got us into . . .? Are we even upon the Road?"

"Hold,—is that a Light?"

"Don't try to get out of it thah' way."

"I am making it snow? Is this what you mean to assert, here?—how on earth could I do that, Dixon, pray regard yourself, Sir!" (363)

When bickering becomes an antagonistic but paradoxically cooperative effort, it can lead to a culmination, a sort of punch line, which Dixon comes to vie with Mason to produce. On St. Helena, shortly before Dixon is to return to the Cape, leaving Mason alone with his rival Maskelyne for three months, Dixon has a joke at Mason's expense. He pretends to dare to ask Maskelyne a delicate question about his mission for the Royal Society:

Back comes Maskelyne, fussing with his Queue. "Think about it!" Mason whispers in some panick, as the other Astronomer locates his Seat, sits, and peers at them suspiciously.

Dixon with a beefy grimace meant to convey righteousness, "Nah,— I'm going to ask him."

"Fine! Fine, go ahead,—I withdraw from this in advance, it's between you two."

Dixon's eyebrows shoot Hatward, signaling Mischief. "Eeh, well *thah's* too *bahd*, Meeaahson,—my Question to Mr. Maskelyne was to've been, Pray thee Sir, might I buy the next Round out of my own Pocket, blessèd be thy own Generosity for fair, of course,—"

"Ahrrrh!" Mason brings his Head to the Table-top in a controll'd thump, as Mr. Blackner immediately appears with three gigantic Pots of today's Cock Ale. (120)

7

Bickering can either transmit a sense of hostility regardless of the specific message or be the form in which a message is conveyed. In either case the result is usually humorous for the detached listener or reader. In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon brings together the serious and the comic, the lofty and the trivial, as in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, with meanings specific to the eighteenth-century context, but also with resonances for the present-day reader.

Pynchon has found affinities between the intellectual tastes of the eighteenth century and our own. Styles and techniques in humor, and the criteria for judging whether a humorous offering is good, bad or indifferent are matters partly of period taste and partly of personal preference. Common requirements, however, are originality, emphasis and economy. All the bickering, and all the jokes and humorous anecdotes in *Mason & Dixon* have the element of surprise that cuts across our expectations. All are highly original, one-offs, often puns. For example, in the course of a session of witty repartee in a punch house, the proprietor comments on the astronomers' verbal sparring, "'Sirius Business'" (118).

In terms of emphasis, exaggeration and its opposites, understatement and simplification, are peculiarities in the comic bickering of Pynchon's characters:

Mason's last entry, for September 11th, 1768, reads, "At 11h 30m A.M. went on board the Halifax Packet Boat for Falmouth. Thus ends my restless progress in America." Follow'd by a Point and long Dash, that thickens and thins again, Chinese-Style.

Dixon has been reading over his Shoulder. "What was mine, then . . .? Restful?" (705)

Assessing Sisman's account of Boswell's "presumptuous Task" (writing the life of Johnson), John Mullan says of Boswell's contribution to literary biography: "Boswell set biography a new ambition: capturing the copiousness and quiddity of a personality—the self peculiarly revealed in odd quirks and, especially, in unpredictable, evanescent talk" (11). This describes what Pynchon does through Cherrycoke with Mason and Dixon.

The third element, economy, translates into the higher forms of humor that require imaginative effort, like Mason's predilection for hints and allusions rather than explicit statements, and condensation of thought through metaphor or metonymy. Apparently irrelevant references sometimes achieve this effect, as in the bickering about the snow and its causes. On this occasion, the protagonists do manage to reach an inn, where they find Cherrycoke. Mason and Dixon pretend they are not always happy to see Cherrycoke. They regard him as little less than a spy, which was how Johnson and his acquaintances often felt about Boswell. When Mason and Dixon come across Cherrycoke, they exaggerate their feelings and pretend they are hallucinating:

"Are we never to be rid of him, then . . .?" cries Dixon.

"An Hallucination," Mason assures him, "brought on by the Snow, the vanishing of detail, the Brain's Anxiety to fill the Vacuum at any Cost. . . ." (363)

Arthur Koestler points out interrelations between artistic inspiration, comic inventiveness and scientific discovery. What the comic effect and scientific discovery have in common is seeing an analogy where nobody has seen one before. Thus the dualism of mind versus inert matter continues to be one of the eternal themes of literature, portraying man as a puppet manipulated by gods or laws of physics. There is no clear frontier where the realm of science ends and that of art begins. Humor is natural, but jests can be improved if the writer/

speaker adds wit. Repartee implies both mental agility and linguistic grace produced by conscious art. As Freud says, “Wit is made, but the comical is found” (289). Mason cultivates wit by deliberately contravening the rules of the Cooperative Principle. His urbanity, learning, sharpness, elegance and—when he feels like it—charm are focused as wit and directed at Dixon with a derisive power intended sometimes as a social corrective but mostly as an effort to produce an artistic effect. Both function through the conversational implicatures concerned with bickering.

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