

## The Anarchist Miracle and Magic in *Mason & Dixon*

Jeffrey Howard

From early in Pynchon's career, the magical and the miraculous have been central themes. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Jesús Arrabal defines a miracle as "'another world's intrusion into this one'" (120), a phrase Oedipa Maas echoes when she wonders "[i]f miracles were . . . intrusions into this world from another, the kiss of cosmic pool balls" (124). Arrabal, an anarchist revolutionary, applies this concept to the spontaneous formation of revolutions, which he idealizes as "'[a]n anarchist miracle'" (120). In "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" Pynchon suggests that the concept of miracle has broader implications within his own oeuvre, aligning himself tentatively with the "Luddite hope of miracle" as embodied in "fictional violations of the laws of nature—of space, time, thermodynamics, and the big one, mortality itself" (41).<sup>1</sup> The concern with miraculous, otherworldly occurrences extends throughout Pynchon's career and culminates in *Mason & Dixon*. That novel abounds in miraculous events, what the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke refers to as "Might-it-bes, and If-it-weres,—not to mention What-was-thats" (618), including spiritual or quasispiritual revelations, oracular predictions, disembodied voices, and ghostly, demonic and angelic presences. As Brian McHale puts it, "Like the world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, with its angels, its voices from beyond, its revenants and cases of demonic possession, the world of *Mason and Dixon* is all but overrun by interlopers from elsewhere" (MDZ 56).

In addition to an interest in the miraculous, Pynchon exhibits a concern throughout his oeuvre with magic—both a generalized sense of enchantment and specific traditions of occultism such as feng shui, kabbalah and ceremonial magic. This concern manifests itself in a variety of ways, including Pynchon's speculations in *The Crying of Lot 49* on the "high magic to low puns" (129) and the occultist allusions throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon laments the loss of miraculous and magical possibilities caused by the Enlightenment science informing Mason and Dixon's project to map and demarcate America. At the same time, Pynchon attempts to reconnect with these lost possibilities in America through the representation of miraculous occurrences. These moments constitute anarchist miracles in that they cannot be absorbed into any existing religious or spiritual

ideology or even proved to be true, and they contribute to a larger project of fictional magic within Pynchon's narrative.<sup>2</sup> For Pynchon, magic is the re-opening of possibilities in the metaphysical and the sociopolitical realms.

Two passages from *Mason & Dixon* illustrate the theme of a loss of the magical and the miraculous accompanying the protagonists' explorations. The first is an often-quoted commentary by Cherrycoke on colonial America:

Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?—in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on Westward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,—serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*,—Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,—winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair. (345)

This passage, with its tone of lament for the loss of subjunctive hopes, has led McHale to expound at length on Pynchon's vision of "the American West as subjunctive space, the space of wish and desire, of the hypothetical and the counterfactual, of speculation and possibility" (MDZ 44), and to explore the ramifications of various narrative threads cast in the subjunctive and the alternative spaces these subjunctive passages create. The examples of subjunctive hopes Cherrycoke provides here, however, all refer to the supernatural or miraculous: "Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom." Exploration results in a shift in metaphysical perspective that Pynchon casts in linguistic terms as a movement from the subjunctive, the grammatical mood that expresses possibility, to the indicative, the mood that expresses certainty. As unknown geographical spaces are explored and demarcated, the possibilities of miraculous events in these areas disappear.

"Reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments" brings a sociopolitical element to this metaphysical commentary. Those who wield power can overcome resistance to their decrees if they can convince others that governmental practices are

inevitable, fixed and declarative rather than arbitrary, changeable and subjunctive—that is, wishful, hypothetical or counterfactual. Proponents of slavery, for example, represented it as inevitable. Subjunctivity implies the possibility of social change, a possibility that is lost if a given social or political practice is regarded as a matter of destiny. For Cherrycoke, however, the loss of sociopolitical possibilities is closely tied to and perhaps indistinguishable from the loss of metaphysical possibilities. He moves directly from governmental power to the erosion of the borderlands of the sacred and the absorption of this realm into the bare mortal world of rationalistic, unmysterious reality.

Cherrycoke laments that “These times are unfriendly toward Worlds alternative to this one. Royal Society members and French Encyclopædists are in the Chariot, availing themselves whilst they may of any occasion to preach the Gospels of Reason, denouncing all that once was Magic” (359). The phrase “Worlds alternative to this one” invokes the miraculous by echoing Arrabal’s “another world’s intrusion into this one”; thus the eighteenth century is implicitly hostile to miracles as well as to possible alternative worlds. By mentioning Royal Society members and French Encyclopædists, Cherrycoke blames the hostility of these times on the Enlightenment. His lament for the loss of magic also extends his concerns beyond the Christian realm to that of metaphysics and spirituality in general.

Pynchon’s interest in magic is explicit in his introduction to an allegorical fantasy and proto-cyberpunk novel by Jim Dodge, *Stone Junction: An Alchemical Potboiler*. This introduction first appeared in 1997, the same year *Mason & Dixon* was published, making the views expressed in it especially relevant to Pynchon’s novel. *Stone Junction* describes the initiation of a young man into a conspiratorial organization known as AMO, the Alliance of Magicians and Outlaws, echoing W.A.S.T.E. and the Tristero from *The Crying of Lot 49*. Beyond appreciating the surface affinities between the plot of *Stone Junction* and his own fiction, Pynchon seems to identify with Dodge’s use of magic as a theme and a device. When he writes that sometimes an author “must accept the presence, often a necessity, of magic in his own work,” he seems to be referring to his fiction as much as to Dodge’s. Indeed, Pynchon extols the virtues of magic not just as a literary device but as an actual presence:

*Stone Junction’s* allegiance, however, is to the other kind of magic, the real stuff—long practiced, all-out, contrary-to-fact, capital M Magic, not as adventitious spectacle, but as a pursued enterprise, in this very world

we're stuck with, continuing to give off readings—analog indications—of being abroad and at work, somewhere out in it. (xiii)

“Contrary-to-fact” connects magic with the notion of subjunctivity that McHale sees as so pervasive in *Mason & Dixon*. Magic might be defined as the art of opening or re-opening possibilities, both social and metaphysical. Mrs. Edgewise, for instance, “a Magician [. . .] in the Neighborhood,” is “cheerfully rendering subjunctive, or contrary to fact, familiar laws of nature and of common sense” (365); thus she works against the narrowing of possibilities from subjunctive to declarative that Cherrycoke laments. Indeed, her conjuring mirrors Pynchon’s fictional practice in *Mason & Dixon*, which is pervaded by miraculous events that defy both natural laws and common sense.

Pynchon’s comment about magic “being abroad and at work, somewhere out in” our world suggests, however, that magic is more than a metaphor for fiction. It implies rather that the presence of magic in fiction mirrors the possibility of actual magic in the world. Pynchon leaves open the question of how literal or metaphorical this magic is. Thus, when he analyzes the mystical conclusion to *Stone Junction*, which involves the protagonist’s discovery of a twentieth-century equivalent of the philosophers’ stone, he argues,

we are free to take it literally as a real transfiguration, or as a metaphor of spiritual enlightenment, or as a description of Daniel’s unusually exalted state of mind as he prepares to cross, forever, the stone junction between Above and Below—by this point, all of these possibilities have become equally true, for we have been along on one of those indispensable literary journeys. (xiv)

These equally valid possibilities for the end of *Stone Junction* suggest Oedipa’s four symmetrical alternatives near the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

By citing in the *Stone Junction* introduction the nineteenth-century French occultist Eliphas Lévi, Pynchon both suggests his preoccupation with magic as a theme and offers specific insights into *Mason & Dixon*. Commenting on the conclusion to *Stone Junction*, in which Daniel passes through a “gateway to elsewhere,” Pynchon writes, “it is for him to slip along across the last borderline, into what Wittgenstein once supposed cannot be spoken of, and upon which, as Eliphaz Levi [sic] advised us—after ‘To know, to will, to dare’ as the last and greatest of the rules of Magic—we must keep silent” (xiv). The reference is to Lévi’s *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (*The Dogma and Ritual of*

*High Magic*, translated by A. E. Waite as *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*). Pynchon may have alluded to this work as early as *The Crying of Lot 49*, in “there was that high magic to low puns” (129). But whether or not “high magic” alludes specifically to Lévi, Pynchon certainly draws on the occultist concept of high magic as opposed to what Lévi calls infernal or delusive magic. In the *Stone Junction* introduction, Pynchon refers to the following passage:

To attain . . . the knowledge and power of the Magi, there are four indispensable conditions—an intelligence illuminated by study, an intrepidity which nothing can check, a will which cannot be broken, and a prudence which nothing can corrupt and nothing intoxicate. TO KNOW, TO DARE, TO WILL, TO KEEP SILENCE—such are the four words of the Magus. (37)<sup>3</sup>

Although Lévi does not in fact privilege silence above the other three rules, Pynchon does. Via the reference to Lévi and to Wittgenstein’s proposition 7 (“What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”), Pynchon implies a respect for the ineffable, that which cannot be expressed directly in words but only gestured toward verbally.

Cherrycoke’s preoccupation with the magical and the miraculous foregrounds these themes. He narrates most of the novel, with the exceptions of the *Ghastly Fop* episode and the frame tale that tells of Cherrycoke and the LeSpark family from a third-person point of view. In addition to the already-quoted passages regarding the loss of sacred, magical and otherworldly possibilities, Cherrycoke describes America as “this object of hope that Miracles might yet occur, that God might yet return to Human affairs, that all the wistful Fictions necessary to the childhood of a species might yet come true, . . . a third Testament” (353). Besides his interest in miracles, Cherrycoke reveals a nostalgia for religious certainty that stems from a strong sense of doubt, as evinced in a phrase like “wistful Fictions.” He is torn between belief and skepticism, the desire for miracles and the sense that in the Age of Reason they may be disappearing or already eradicated. Cherrycoke’s narrative thus abounds in miracles, including ghosts and disembodied voices, whose degree of reality is deeply uncertain. These miracles occasion small dramas of ontological uncertainty, passing through stages of reality and irreality in which some are tentatively and partially validated and others are skeptically but ambiguously dismissed. For Cherrycoke, the search for miracle is a struggle against a nihilistic, disenchanting view of history, and a search for veins of enchantment that lead to humanistic possibilities.

Cherrycoke’s miracles have what Brian McHale (in *Postmodernist Fiction*) would call uncertain ontological status. But whereas McHale

implies that postmodernist issues of ontology are primarily formal, isolated from any actual concern with the spiritual or metaphysical, the ontological uncertainty of miracles in *Mason & Dixon* stems from Cherrycoke's deep-seated spiritual conflict. Dwight Eddins expresses a similar corrective to McHale's approach:

The notion that Pynchon's prevailing epistemological drama is really an onto-epistemological drama is one that has significant consequences for the determined secularity of most Pynchon criticism. . . . [T]he problematic of various modalities of existence—if taken seriously—raises the banished specter of metaphysics, and in turn that of religion. (4)

The rub here is “if taken seriously,” a difficulty for many readers because of Pynchon's frequent wild humor and satire. Nonetheless, through Cherrycoke, Pynchon offers many cues on the levels of textual evidence, tone, plot and theme that his onto-epistemological drama of the miraculous can be taken seriously precisely because of its uncertainty and conflict. Taken seriously does not mean taken solemnly, since many of the miracles in *Mason & Dixon*, such as a mechanical duck that achieves angelic status, are quite comic. Yet other miracles, such as those centered around the questions of mortality and the meaning of existence, provoke serious thought by gesturing in conflicted ways toward metaphysical issues.

Each episode describing one of Cherrycoke's miracles is a carefully orchestrated drama of the dialectic between belief and skepticism, reality and irreality. Often, a given miracle passes through several stages of reality and irreality, such as initial presentation as literal event, skeptical debunking, metaphorical explication, and suggestion that the event may have been real after all. Cherrycoke dramatizes this movement in an imaginary vaudeville duet by Mason and Dixon toward the novel's end:

[M] I say! is that a— [D] No, it ain't! [M] I do apologize,— [. . .]  
 [Both] [. . .]  
 The Cataracts and Caverns,  
 And the Spectres in the Sky,  
 [M] I say, was that— [D] I hope not! [M] Who  
 The Deuce said that? [D] Not I! (753)

This duet suggests that the protagonists often enact the dialectic of belief and skepticism in their bickerings over the reality or irreality of the phantasmagoric sights and ghostly manifestations of the novel. Yet Cherrycoke as narrator looms behind these disputes, serving as both

recorder and, to some extent, inventor of miraculous moments that dramatize his own metaphysical uncertainty. When Joseph Dewey describes these moments as "pure invention" (127) and Jeff Baker labels them examples of "irrealism," both overlook the way Cherrycoke has carefully crafted them to resist unequivocal categorization as real or fictional, natural or supernatural.

The appearance of Mason's dead wife, Rebekah, provides a paradigm of the ontologically uncertain miracle. Cherrycoke begins by narrating the first such episode in matter-of-fact, if somewhat chilling, terms: "And here it is, upon the Windward Side, where no ship ever comes willingly, that her visits begin" (163). He then uses Mason's thoughts to introduce the enlightenment skepticism toward alternative worlds (and Catholicism): "Isn't this suppos'd to be the Age of Reason? To believe in the cold light of this all-business world that Rebekah haunts him is to slip, to stagger in a crowd, into the embrace of the Painted Italian Whore herself" (164). Indeed, as Cherrycoke describes Maskelyne's insanity and the similar madness that St. Helena begins to induce in Mason, we become increasingly skeptical about Rebekah's ghostly visits. Just when skepticism seems fully warranted, however, Cherrycoke introduces a detail that makes us wonder if Mason's haunting is real. As Mason negotiates over his fare and destination with the captain of a dhow, a voice intrudes: "'Break-neck,' whispers a Voice clearly, tho' no one is there." This voice seems to be that of either Rebekah or Dieter, the ghostly German soldier who haunts Maskelyne. In either case, the voice cannot be attributed entirely to Mason's hallucination, for the captain apparently hears it (or senses something) too, saying, "'I've no wish to offend your Companion. Done'" (174). Of course, we may question Cherrycoke's narratorial reliability.<sup>4</sup> That he assigns the moment a certain ontological status does not necessarily mean Pynchon does. That Cherrycoke tells ambiguous ghost stories he sometimes suggests or claims outright are real does not mean we must regard them as such. His possible motives include pure fabrication for the sake of entertainment and, as Baker suggests, the undermining of realist conventions to give "us the possibility of magic in a reason-weary world" (178).

However, Pynchon suggests that partial and tentative validation of the miraculous is his goal by placing a striking miracle outside Cherrycoke's narrative, in the objectively narrated frame tale. This miracle is the ghostly intrusion, near the beginning of the novel's last chapter, of the Philadelphia preterite, accompanied by the poet Timothy Tox, into the LeSpark living room:

When the Hook of Night is well set, and when all the Children are at last irretrievably detain'd within their Dreams, slowly into the Room begin to walk the Black servants, the Indian poor, the Irish runaways, the Chinese Sailors, the overflow'd from the mad Hospital, all unchosen Philadelphia,—as if something outside, beyond the cold Wind, had driven them to this extreme of seeking refuge. They bring their Scars, their Pox-pitted Cheeks, their Burdens and Losses, their feverish Eyes, their proud fellowship in a Mobility that is to be, whose shape none inside this House may know. Lomax wakes, sweating, from a poison'd Dream. [. . .] The Room continues to fill up, the Dawn not to arrive. [. . . Tox p]roceeding, then, to recite the *Pennsylvaniad*, *sotto Voce* as he wanders the Room, among the others, the untold others. (759–60)

This part of the narrative is ontologically stronger than Cherrycoke's narrative; as McHale argues, the frame tale is not filtered through Cherrycoke's unreliable narration and has at least a pretence to greater objectivity than his story (MDZ 51). Therefore, the miraculous phenomena that occur in this scene are especially striking. They are intrusions from another world in more than one sense, intrusions not only from some metaphysically mysterious other world into the real one but from the fantastic unreliability of Cherrycoke into the objectivity of Pynchon's metanarrator.

While Cherrycoke's background presence as narrator highlights the themes of miracle and magic, Jeremiah Dixon is the focal character for the theme of the anarchist miracle within the narrative. As a cheerful, hedonistic surveyor whose very occupation ties him to the earthly, Dixon might at first seem an unlikely candidate for this role. Dixon keeps silence on metaphysical matters in the manner of Lévi, so that "[t]he most metaphysickal thing Mason will ever remember Dixon saying is, 'I owe my Existence to a pair of Shoes'" (238). Yet Dixon's quiet, inscrutable, worldly-wise spirituality is at the center of the mystical element of *Mason & Dixon*, as Cherrycoke acknowledges when he refers to "Dixon,—whose present state of religiosity is a puzzle to everyone" (594). Dixon's religious beliefs are mysterious because they are anarchistic. As Dixon reveals in his conversation with Mason about Quaker prayer, he has been thrown out of Raby Meeting (43). His religious anarchy must be significant for him to have been expelled from a religious community founded on the appeal to individual conscience and on the lack of structured ceremony. As David Foreman points out, the historical Dixon was actually "'disowned for drinking to excess'" (155), which is consistent with the pattern of sensual indulgence Dixon displays throughout Pynchon's novel.

Yet, in his attempts to instruct Mason in the art of Quaker prayer, Dixon shows that he has a mystical side and continues to be concerned with spiritual contemplation: “the fairly principal thing, is to sit quietly[. . .] We spoke of it as the Working of the Spirit, within. ’Tis a distinct Change from the ev’ryday . . . tha wouldn’t be able to miss it, should it happen . . . ?” (101). Dixon is discussing something akin to the miraculous “religious instant” Oedipa experiences looking down on San Narciso, and the objection Mason raises about the transitoriness of such a revelation recalls Oedipa’s recurring frustration (CL 24–25; cf. 95). These moments in both *Mason & Dixon* and *The Crying of Lot 49* reflect the question William James discusses of how one can incorporate privileged spiritual moments into one’s everyday life. Dixon deftly and wisely turns the tables on this question by responding to Mason’s objection “it passes” with the answer “It abides,—’tis we who are ever recall’d from it, to tend to our various mortal Requirements . . . ?” (101). Equally important to the content of Dixon’s speech is his manner of speaking, which is characterized by tongue-in-cheek mischievousness, tentativeness and moderation. Thus he responds to Mason’s jab about Quakers’ keeping their hats on with “Aye, the Spirit ever fancies a bonny hat,—but the fairly principal thing is to sit quietly . . . ?” (101). The ellipses and question marks ending his sentences, a speech characteristic Dixon exhibits throughout the novel, take on special significance in this passage. They evince a wise (and distinctly postmodern) tendency to hedge his own beliefs, to acknowledge that the truths he is explaining to Mason are necessarily partial and uncertain rather than rigidly doctrinaire.

Dixon’s decision to “nip down to The World’s End” tavern and “see what the Cape Outlawry may be up to” (101) shortly after this conversation reflects the earthiness of his personality and his freedom from the hypocrisy that mars many of the more self-righteously religious characters in the novel. Unlike Cape Town’s supposedly orthodox Dutch citizens, who avoid the sensual delights of the Malay Quarter and live in a state of perpetual self-torture (while perpetrating real crimes against their slaves), Dixon indulges his senses freely and anarchisticly. This freedom from repressive religious ideology gives Dixon the human decency and worldly wisdom that make him the conduit for the most conspicuous anarchistic miracle in the novel: his attack on the slave driver in Maryland.

In this paradigm of the miraculous and the magical, Dixon assaults the slave driver to stop him from whipping his slaves, then seizes the whip and frees the slaves. Cherrycoke describes this intervention in terms of grace: “Here in Maryland, they had a choice at last, and Dixon chose to act, and Mason not to,—unless he had to,—what each of us

wishes he might have the unthinking Grace to do, yet fails to do. To act for all those of us who have so fail'd. For the Sheep" (698). Though *Mason & Dixon* as a whole conveys a skeptical attitude toward Christianity, which often serves as a cover for hypocrisy and cruelty, the unreserved use of the theological term "unthinking Grace" here is appropriate, justified by the action that follows. The description of that action is simple, direct and forceful in a way rare in Pynchon: "Dixon, moving directly, seizes the Whip,—the owner comes after it,—Dixon places his Fist in the way of the oncoming Face,—the Driver cries out and stumbles away" (698). In a novel the overall pacing of which is deliberately, meticulously slow, this moment of spontaneous resistance to institutionalized cruelty has a miraculous quality.

Indeed, Dixon recognizes this quality, for after the encounter he "understands what Christopher Maire must have meant long ago by 'instrument of God,'—and his Obligation, henceforward, to keep Silence upon the Topick" (699–700). Dixon thus identifies this moment of unthinking grace as a miracle in Arrabal's sense and an instance of high magic. The world of the sacred intrudes into the world of everyday commerce and allows Dixon to resist, on however small a scale, the institution of slavery. Christopher Maire, we recall, is the Jesuit who tries to recruit Dixon to work on behalf of the Jesuits while drawing the Mason-Dixon Line, saying, "'this is the one [. . .] God's Instrument if ever I saw one'" (230). On one level, Maire's declaration ironizes Dixon's miraculous action, for Maire's notion of being an instrument of God would have Dixon be a pawn in a Jesuit scheme with divisive and violent consequences. Yet Dixon seems also to have in mind Maire's admission to "'having once or twice, when it matter'd, unreflectively shewn an instant of this Pity whose value you cry up so,'" even though Maire denounces these moments by asserting that "'tis not for any of us to presume to act as Christ alone may,—for Christ's true Pity lies so beyond us'" (231). Dixon, however, embraces his own moment of unreflective pity and understands that it is precisely this moment—not his drawing the Line—that makes him an instrument of God. His "Obligation, henceforward, to keep Silence upon the Topick" echoes Pynchon's remark that "the last and greatest of the rules of Magic" is that "we must keep silent." The implication is that Dixon's brush with the sacred could only be sullied or cheapened by talking about it. Both his Quakerism and his adherence (unwitting or not) to the rules of magic cause him to protect the sacredness of this experience through silence.

In addition to the language and imagery of miracles, the discourse of magic appears throughout *Mason & Dixon*. While miracles are spontaneous intrusions into this world from another and are represented

primarily in the imagery of religious revelation, magic involves active human effort and is rendered in the vocabulary of occultism, including geomancy, kabbalah and ceremonial magic. Several magician figures, variously solemn or parodic, appear in the book, including Dixon's mentor, William Emerson, believed to be "a practicing Magician" (218), Captain Zhang, one of "the Chinese Wizards" (523) who practice feng shui, the kabbalists at The Rabbi of Prague tavern, the conjurer Mrs. Edgewise, and even Benjamin Franklin (488). Mason's sons William and Doctor Isaac dream in their final vision of America that "[t]he Indians know Magick" (773), expressing a naive yet touching hope for possibilities of enchantment associated with indigenous peoples that Enlightenment colonialism would destroy. Many of the novel's magicians resist or combat the seemingly entropic process of disenchantment—"a corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick" (487), in the words of one of the book's kabbalists. If unchecked, disenchantment results in a view of history as entirely a matter of struggles for economic and political power and as concerned with magic only inasmuch as it can be turned to "the service of Greed" (488).

Magic is a means of re-opening metaphysical possibilities, re-enchanting the world, that counters the loss of possibilities lamented by Cherrycoke and documented throughout *Mason & Dixon*. Magic is thus a form of what Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* calls "counterforce," something that opposes the dominant cultural forces of decadence and entropy.<sup>5</sup> It functions both as a metaliterary trope for the fictional processes that lead to recovered metaphysical potential and as a metaphor for the attempts of characters within the narrative to re-enchant their worlds. This re-enchantment is, however, partial and fragmentary in that it results in ambiguous pockets or islands of possibility within a larger context of politico-economic domination and manipulation. Magic in *Mason & Dixon* takes the form primarily of feng shui, kabbalism and magical signs or sacred glyphs. It can be both black magic, investing history with a sense of malevolent but otherworldly conspiracy, and white magic, granting aspects of America tentative hope and lyric beauty.

Understanding magic as a counterforce helps explain how Pynchon can simultaneously document disenchantment and still present methods of selective re-enchantment. Harold Bloom also sees the struggle between overwhelming forces of oppression and pockets of resistance as central to Pynchon's aesthetic, which Bloom views in both kabbalistic and Gnostic terms: "[Pynchon] is a Kabbalistic writer, esoteric not only in his theosophical allusiveness . . . but actually in his deeper patterns" (13). Bloom argues,

For Pynchon, ours is the age of plastics and paranoia, dominated by the System. . . . What is more startling about Pynchon is that he has found ways of representing the impulse to defy the System, even though both the impulse and its representations always are defeated. In the Zone (which is our cosmos as the Gnostics saw it, the *kenoma* or Great Emptiness) the force of the System, of They (whom the Gnostics called the Archons), is in some sense irresistible. . . . Yet there is a Counterforce, hardly distinguished in its efficacy, but it never does (or can) give up. (I 1-2)

Bloom's argument veers off track, however, because he attempts to use the Byron the Bulb episode in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a parable of Pynchon's "authentic nihilism, his refusal of the transcendental aspects of his own Gnostic vision" (EN vii), which Bloom also calls "Pynchon's despair of his own Gnostic Kabbalah" (I 8). While Bloom's reading of "The Story of Byron the Bulb" is incisive, he exaggerates the importance of this tale as Pynchon's final renunciation of the transcendent, contradicting his own powerful thesis about the counterforce which cannot give up. That thesis, and not the nihilistic reading, is borne out even at the most apocalyptic concluding moment of *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which the closing lines "There is a hand to turn the time, / Though thy Glass today be run" (760) suggest the hope for an anti-entropic counterforce.<sup>6</sup>

While showing that eighteenth-century America is on a trajectory toward what Bloom calls an age of plastics and paranoia, *Mason & Dixon* nonetheless portrays and valorizes enclaves of resistance and re-enchantment. Pynchon suggests the presence of a Gnostic and kabbalistic counterforce that has not given up on the transcendent, even if his authorial hand must turn the time back to the eighteenth century to bring it into focus. The axman Stig may be correct that only "the poor fragments of a Magic irreparably broken'" (612) remain in America, but these fragments do yet abide, scattered like the bits of Slothrop (GR 712, 742) or the "gemlike 'clues'" (CL 118) Oedipa speculates might compensate for the lack of a central logos. One enclave of the magical counterforce is The Rabbi of Prague, a rustic inn in the American wilderness that inexplicably serves as "headquarters of a Kabbalistic Faith, in Correspondence with the Elect Cohens of Paris" (485). While David Cowart acknowledges Pynchon's sympathy for spiritual and magical alternatives to prevalent American economic and political powers, he sees the kabbalists and Cherrycoke as "absurdly committed to hope [and] broken magic" (343). He does not acknowledge that a postmodern magic is necessarily broken and fragmented rather than unified and totalizing.

In addition to kabbalism, another form of magic in *Mason & Dixon* is geomancy, especially feng shui. Emerson teaches his students, including the young Dixon, to fly by following ley-lines, perfectly straight lines that apparently generate a “palpable” yet mysterious “Influence” (218) that resembles magnetism but is not so explicable scientifically. Dixon declares that “our Leys were nowhere near as evil as [some such right lines. . . .] Flying them was indeed quite pleasant” (219). The Mason-Dixon Line, however, is another matter. When Captain Zhang, the chief geomancer in the novel, first observes the Line, he harshly condemns it: “Terrible *Feng-Shui* here. Worst I ever saw. [. . .] It acts as a Conduit for what we call *Sha*, or, as they say in Spanish California, Bad Energy” (542). Although the reference to California is a tongue-in-cheek allusion to contemporary New Age movements, Pynchon’s primary use of feng shui is positive rather than satirical. To Zhang, right lines—“the very Shape of Contempt” (615)—both create arbitrary and pernicious worldly distinctions, and dishonor and wound the mystic “Dragon or *Shan* within” the landscape (542). Mason and Dixon themselves finally come to accept that Zhang’s feng shui yields a valid observation about the Line: they “understand as well that the Line is exactly what Capt. Zhang and a number of others have been styling it all along—a conduit for Evil” (701). Through feng shui, Pynchon re-enchants the wounded land without glossing over the human suffering associated with the Line. Thus this arbitrary boundary drawn to settle a property dispute between the Penns and the Calverts, a conduit for distinctly worldly evil, may yet prove also to be charged with mysterious energies, telluric and otherworldly.

Many of the novel’s apparently random and bizarre episodes converge with the feng shui imagery to invest the Line with several layers of mystical association. These episodes include Franklin’s “Leyden-Jar *Danse Macabre*” (294–95), the story of Felipe, the electric eel or “Torpedo” (431–34), George Washington’s paranoid rant about ideographically-inscribed lead plates placed by a Sino-Jesuit conspiracy (285–88), and Mason and Dixon’s visit to the serpent mound (597–601). Professor Voam synthesizes these episodes when he explains, “the Marker Stones set at regular intervals,—a cascaded Array of Units each capable of producing a Force,—I do suspect we have the same structure as a Leyden battery,—and, need I add, of a Torpedo” (600). These seemingly disparate elements converge on the notion that the many-layered serpent mound may be a “Force Intensifier” (600), designed to gather mystic currents of energy and heighten their power.

The serpent-mound episode functions metatextually, enacting the process it describes by gathering disparate narrative threads into a

symbolic, paranoid nexus that intensifies their power. Dixon's explanation of the principle of the mound's construction applies to *Mason & Dixon* as well: "alternating Layers of different Substances are ever a Sign of the intention to Accumulate Force" (599). By this process of symbolic overdetermination, Pynchon piles layer on layer of significance onto a single narrative element. The metatextual magic of layering, what Squire Haligast calls "Lamination abounding [. . .] its purposes how dark'" (389), appears earlier in the novel when Cherrycoke and Philip Dimdown offer printed books and revolutionary broadsides—"thin layers of pattern'd Ink, alternating with other thin layers of compress'd Paper, stack'd often by the Hundreds'" (390)—as examples of force-multiplying devices. Magic within the novel becomes in part a trope for the magic of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

The magic of *Mason & Dixon* conflicts with some familiar constructions of postmodernity, such as the poststructural and the Marxist, but Pynchon has long portrayed himself as a heretic. In 1989, expressing support for Salman Rushdie under a fatwah, Pynchon wrote,

Our thanks to you and to Marianne Wiggins for recalling those of us who write to our duty as heretics, for reminding us again that power is as much our sworn enemy as unreason, for making us all look braver, wiser, more useful than we often think we are. We pray for your continuing good health, safety and lightness of spirit. (29)

This message suggests that Pynchon's notions of heresy may involve resistance not just to orthodoxies of novelistic style or to mundane, inauthentic American life, but to postmodernist critiques that deny humanistic and spiritual possibilities. The poststructuralist view, which argues that Pynchon's novels are mere assemblies of words linked only to other words, without reference to any human—let alone spiritual—reality, does not account for the anarchist miracles and the suggestions of magic in *Mason & Dixon*. Neither do Marxist sociomaterialist views, such as Jameson's and Baudrillard's, which insist that a lack of spirituality defines postmodern literature. Pynchon is, of course, aware of the powerful insights afforded by such theories, and uses them throughout his works, including *Mason & Dixon*. His heresy consists in a refusal to accept these systems as binding dogmas that exclude possibilities of magic and miracle.

Pynchon's treatment of spirituality and magic is postmodern in its tentativeness and distrust of totalizing systems. It differs from the modernist notion of spirituality, exemplified by T. S. Eliot after his religious conversion, which seeks to define reality in terms of a single

system of spiritual certainty. Pynchon resists such a rigid, systematizing view. As John McClure explains,

[Pynchon] sympathetically explore[s] certain non-secular constructions of reality while repudiating others as forms of repression and control and insisting on the inevitable partiality of all. Pynchon is particularly insistent on the necessarily and even redemptively unfinished nature of any ontological mapping, the ever-present danger of confusing a particular representation of reality for being itself, which must always exceed any formulation. (153)

McClure's comments apply even more to *Mason & Dixon* than to the earlier works on which they were based. The key concepts of spirituality in *Mason & Dixon* are possibility and subjunctivity. Pynchon's ontologically uncertain anarchist miracles and his ambiguous use of magical discourse remind us of possibilities that always elude any totalizing system. Of all Pynchon's works, *Mason & Dixon* is the most concerned with a postmodern vision of spirituality. Much of "the mounting evidence of Pynchon's spiritual and metaphysical (even religious) seriousness" (Coward 361) comes from *Mason & Dixon* itself and from the essays that bear directly on it, such as "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" and the introduction to *Stone Junction*.

*Mason & Dixon* is a literary journey toward the magical and miraculous possibilities of America. The novel performs important cultural work by restoring a sense of these possibilities, working heretically against what McClure identifies as prevailing constructions of reality (and postmodernity) as disenchanting and spiritually void. Pynchon himself has invested a great deal of energy into depicting disenchantment as an effect of twentieth-century history, especially in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Yet he has also consistently represented pockets of enchantment within his universe, and a counterforce that works to preserve these possibilities. At the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the hymn by Puritan heretic William Slothrop insists, "There is a Hand to turn the time, / Though thy Glass today be run." In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's authorial hand turns the time back to when a strong sense of the loss of magic and miracles was countered by an atmosphere of their presence or recoverability. Rather than merely rehearsing clichés about the inauthenticity and absurdity of America from the beginning, *Mason & Dixon* attempts to reconnect with America's magic. The novel's vivid evocation of the sense of magic and miracle in early America encourages us to see such possibilities as attenuated but still available today. William and Doctor Isaac's closing vision of a land

where “‘The Fish jump into your Arms’” and “‘The Indians know Magick’” (773) has already, by the time they express it, been compromised by genocide and ecological devastation. Nonetheless, the simultaneous melancholy and lyricism of the ending urge us to strive to make this vision tenable (rather than dismiss it as naive) through the active effort of a counterforce. Turning the time means not just turning back nostalgically toward a previous age but using the insights gained from the past to combat, in limited but practical ways, the entropy of the present.

—*University of Texas at Austin*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In retrospect, we can see hints in “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?” of Pynchon’s later exploration of the theme of miracle in a historical novel set in the eighteenth century, an era when spirituality and the metaphysical were being questioned even while a rebellious Luddite counterforce insisted on the validity of such aspects of human experience. David Cowart notes the link between the Luddite essay and *Mason & Dixon*, although he touches on the theme of miracle only briefly and indirectly. Pynchon argues that the concept of miracle was integral to the eighteenth-century culture that gave rise to Gothic fiction as well as the Luddite movement:

The craze for Gothic fiction after *The Castle of Otranto* was grounded, I suspect, in deep and religious yearnings for that earlier mythical time which had come to be known as the age of Miracles. In ways more and less literal, folks in the 18th century believed that once upon a time all kinds of things had been possible which were no longer so. Giants, dragons, spells. The laws of nature had not been so strictly formulated back then. What had once been true working magic had, by the Age of Reason, degenerated into mere machinery. (40–41)

<sup>2</sup>Although the miraculous and the magical might seem to be at odds with well-known theoretical formulations of postmodernism, such as poststructuralism and Jamesonian Marxism, John McClure challenges such an assumption. He argues that “in order to understand postmodern fiction, we need to attend to the ways in which it maintains and revises a modernist tradition of spiritually inflected resistance to conventionally secular constructions of reality” (143). Specifically, he argues that many works of postmodern fiction “make room in the worlds they project for magic, miracle, metaphysical systems of retribution and restoration” through “their assaults on realism, their ontological playfulness, and their experiments in the sublime” (144). McClure uses Pynchon as his primary example of a postmodern writer with metaphysical and spiritual concerns, and his ideas provide support for an

analysis of *Mason & Dixon* focused on miracle and magic, even though his essay was published before the novel appeared. McHale and Joseph Dewey also explore spiritual and otherworldly themes in *Mason & Dixon*, though neither critic extensively explores the anarchistic nature of Pynchon's miracles or his use of occultist discourse.

<sup>3</sup>Pynchon apparently alludes to this passage from Lévi in *Gravity's Rainbow*, warning aspiring magicians,

For the working mystic, having the vision and passing through the chambers one by one, is terrible and complex. You must have not only the schooling in countersigns and seals, not only the physical readiness through exercise and abstinence, but also a hardon of resolution that will never go limp on you. (749-50)

Steven Weisenburger traces the main source for this passage to Gershom Scholem's writings on the Jewish tradition of Merkabah mysticism, which involves an ascent toward God's throne dependent on the mystic's psychological strength (311). However, the prescriptive and admonitory "you must" also echoes Lévi, and foreshadows Pynchon's linking of the writer's craft with a magician's training.

<sup>4</sup>Several critics, including Baker, Dewey and Bernard Duyfhuizen, have discussed Cherrycoke's influence on the narrative and the issues of narrative reliability his presence raises. Dewey's argument is especially relevant to my own because it highlights the way Cherrycoke's spiritual preoccupations shape the narrative. Dewey argues that "[t]he narrative presence of Wicks Cherrycoke turns *Mason & Dixon* into an explicitly religious novel that explores the damaged legacy of Christianity, the emerging muscle of the Enlightenment and, finding both systems wanting for largely the same reasons, turning to a most unexpected source—the mysticism of the East—for (re)solution" (113). Dewey further asserts that Cherrycoke's "intrusive narrative moments of pure invention" describing "baldly supernatural phenomena" (127) are actually koans, paradoxical tales meant to communicate in the manner of Zen the limitations of reason, and to point the way toward Eastern enlightenment. Although Dewey's insights are powerful, he misses the anarchistic pluralism of these miracles through limiting his analysis to the single paradigm of Eastern religion. By referring to these moments as pure invention, he also overlooks the uncertainty as to whether they are natural or supernatural, real or fictional.

<sup>5</sup>McClure supports the notion of magic as counterforce; he argues that the process of re-enchantment can be viewed as central to postmodernism rather than opposed to it, and presents several "counter-definitions of the postmodern . . . that represent the postmodern project as one of re-enchantment" (147). These counter-definitions include that of Zygmunt Bauman, who argues in *Intimations of Postmodernism* that "'postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a *re-enchantment* of the world that modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant*'" (qtd. in

McClure 147). Pynchon's valorization of magic in *Mason & Dixon* can thus be seen not just as nostalgia for a former time but as the pursuit of a postmodern project in the medium of historical fiction.

<sup>6</sup>Moreover, Bloom's excessive valuation of the Byron the Bulb episode leads him to make inaccurate predictions about the then unpublished *Mason & Dixon*, which he speculates could only involve Pynchon's "studying of new modalities of post-Apocalyptic silence" (l 9). Pynchon's work after *Gravity's Rainbow* contradicts Bloom's suggestion that the Byron the Bulb tale "ends something in Pynchon" (l 8). Not only *Mason & Dixon* but also the Luddite essay and the *Stone Junction* introduction suggest that Pynchon has maintained an interest in counterforces, whether eighteenth-century antitechnological groups or late-twentieth-century Alliances of Magicians and Outlaws.

<sup>7</sup>Indeed, much of the magic in *Mason & Dixon* self-reflexively comments on Pynchon's own fictional practice, so that the second-most prominent form of magic in the novel is the magic of written signs. Cherrycoke makes the clearest statement about this form of magic when he glosses Washington's comments on the inscribed lead plates:

There remains a residue of Belief, out to the Westward, that the mere presence of Glyphs and Signs can produce magickal Effects,—for of the essence of Magic is the power of small Magickal Words, to work enormous physical Wonders,—as of coded inscriptions in fables, once unlock'd, to yield up Treasure past telling. (286)

The mysterious power of glyphs and other signs, what we might call semiotic magic, operates throughout *Mason & Dixon* as a self-reflexive metaphor for the power of the novel's own language. While the theme of signs can be partially explained in terms of the semiotics of theoreticians like Roland Barthes, many examples support Kathryn Hume's assertion that Pynchon explores the possibilities of what Eric Gould calls "the numinous signifier" (Hume 19). That is, Pynchon suggests that some signs might be not just arbitrary human conventions but actual pointers toward supernatural truth or power—sacred writing: "hieroglyphics" (CL 52; cf. 24, 181).

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