

Pynchon's Swedish: A Footnote

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Considering the surveying difficulties, the clearing of land and the fixing of boundaries in *Mason & Dixon*, it is probably not a coincidence that the Swedish protagonist, the lumberjack, the Axman, is called Stig. Stig is not only a common Swedish given name; *stig* also means the same as the English "path," and the Swedish *stigfinnare* the same as the English "pathfinder." It is difficult to discover this double-edged Stig if you don't speak Swedish. Pynchon is well informed, as usual.

A deeper etymological investigation, in the footsteps of the Swedish philologist and scholar of classical antiquity Jesper Svenbro (now active in France), reveals that the Swedish *stig* comes from the Greek *stoikhos* (move on a line), which in turn has to do with *stoikheion* (letter), *stikhos* (line of poetry or line of trees) and *steikhein* (advance, wander, travel).¹

It is not only timber, then—which paper is made from—that Stig, the wanderer, leaves behind in the boundary corridor (the Visto) he cuts through the woods. Stig, whose name contains the secret of writing, also marks the long line of letters, which, if cut up and stacked in equal lengths one on top of the other, is transformed into lines on the pages of a novel. Entangled and hidden in *Mason & Dixon* is thus a three-kilometer-long model of the Mason-Dixon Line.

—*Stockholm*

Note

¹See Svenbro, *Myrstigar: Figurer för skrift och läsning i antlkens Grekland* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1999) 74, 94; "La cigale et les fourmis: Voix et écriture dans une allégorie grecque," *Opuscula Romana* 18.1 (*Lectiones Boëthianae* VII) (1990): 7–21); *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* 6 (1995): 28.