

Narratives of the Visto

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Pynchon and Mason & Dixon, by Brooke Horvath and Irving Malin, eds.
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Of the thirteen pieces in *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon* (eleven essays plus the introduction and bibliography), not one is written by a woman. Of them all, not one addresses the issue of gender in the novel. I wonder why that is? There are essays on poetics, on the motif of the Line, on the representation of America and of imperialism and of the Enlightenment. There is an essay on the narrator, Wicks Cherrycoke, on the reading strategies demanded by the narrative, on the style of the novel; and the volume concludes with Clifford S. Mead's very helpful comprehensive bibliography. But of women and gender and sexuality—nothing. Is this a characteristic of Pynchon studies generally? Are women perhaps put off by the patriarchal bias of the postmodernist theorizing and narrativizing that informs so much of what is written on Pynchon? Do women find the texts themselves unsympathetic to women readers and feminist readings? A glance through the contents of back issues of *Pynchon Notes* will indicate that this is not in fact the case. There are plenty of women scholars out there, reading and liking and writing on Pynchon. So why are they not represented here, in the first book-length collection of essays on *Mason & Dixon*?

These essays together represent a consensus view of *Mason & Dixon*—what it is and where it is to be situated within the body of Pynchon's work. They are essays essentially about the narrative quality of the novel, in relation to various informing contexts. Most of the essays are articulate, perceptive and readable. But together they make *Mason & Dixon* seem too much like Pynchon's earlier works, and they represent rather too consistent a viewpoint. These are weaknesses of editorial judgement, not of the individual essays that constitute the volume. The quality of the essays is such, indeed, that each is worth discussing in turn, to give it its due.

The collection opens with Irving Malin's "Foreshadowing the Text," which documents, in the form of a journal rather than an essay, his close reading of the beginning of *Mason & Dixon*. Malin claims that his diaristic form resists academic rigidity and the tendency of previous

Pynchon criticism to invoke complex systems and “scientific traditions” (27). He employs instead an atomistic method, which is self-consciously Kabbalistic or Talmudic (31) in its pursuit of meaning for its own sake. Malin takes pains to create the impression that he is open to all the potential meanings the text may offer; he describes his Pynchon-inspired dreams and his fears that he does not read the text “sanely.” He begins with the book jacket, wondering why an ampersand takes the place of the word *and* to join the names Mason and Dixon, and why the names are split typographically by the use of a bold font. He stops to ask whether he is reading into this text meanings that were not put there by the author, like Oedipa projecting a world into a chaos of self-created signs. In this way, even the atomized and deconstructed text is brought into relation with Pynchon’s earlier work. Malin’s seemingly open and unfixed, free interpretation, then, is firmly grounded in his earlier readings of Pynchon.

Does Malin produce a new kind of reading which resists the lure of systematic thought? He argues that in this novel Pynchon uses the dictionary to generate semantic context whereas in *Gravity’s Rainbow* he used scientific works, transforming the text of *Mason & Dixon* into “a *field of energy*” (33; Malin’s emphasis). But that field is no less a system for being linguistic rather than scientific. And Malin centers this systematic textual reading in such symbolic highlights as the themes of flight or movement, America, time, duality or binaries, secrets and ambiguities, beginnings and endings. The most useful and engaging feature of this close textual analysis—which for the most part seems infuriatingly self-indulgent—is the discussion of the rhythm of Pynchon’s prose, an aspect of Pynchon’s style that rarely receives comment.

Malin’s “journal” is followed by Brian McHale’s “Mason & Dixon in the Zone, or, A Brief Poetics of Pynchon-Space.” It opens by comparing *Mason & Dixon* with *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* in terms of the “canon of quotations” (43) that frequently appear in critical readings of the texts. McHale focuses on the representation of America as a “subjunctive space.” He shows how Pynchon deploys a might-have-been mode of articulation throughout *Mason & Dixon*, a technique he uses in parts of *Gravity’s Rainbow* but takes to new lengths in the new novel. McHale offers a catalogue of such spaces: nested spaces (or interpolated narratives, such as Hervé du T.’s story of the automaton Duck and Dixon’s story of the Lambton Worm); dream spaces, including hallucinations, fantasies and daydreams; American spaces such as the Delaware triangle and the territory beyond the Warrior Path; other-world spaces such as the lost eleven days from the old Julian calendar, and the spaces from which characters are

visited by spectral beings; and finally, interior zones constituted by spaces larger inside than outside. As McHale points out, the spaces defined by *Gravity's Rainbow* tend to be vertical, based on the paradigm of "flight and fall" (57); space in *Mason & Dixon* is defined horizontally. He relates this spatial shift to a change in ideological/metaphysical orientation: as *Gravity's Rainbow* was concerned with fascism, so *Mason & Dixon* is concerned with democracy.

At least as late as the period in which *Mason & Dixon* is set, traditionally hierarchical social relations continued to be pictured in terms of a vertical "Chain of Being" from the highest to the lowest. Characters here—aristocrats mainly—invoke the vertical chain several times (e.g., 194, 438); but on one of these occasions Dixon counters with his own alternative model of a horizontal, democratic chain, based on his experience of surveying. (59)

McHale follows the motif of chains through the narrative, as the Great Chain of Being becomes the chain of slavery, from which the surveyors can release only those located on the correct side of the Line. But this line of thought is sorely abbreviated in the essay, and McHale concludes disappointingly that the yearning for transcendence in *Gravity's Rainbow* is replaced in *Mason & Dixon* by "something like a resolutely earthbound this-worldliness" (60). This is an unsatisfactory counterpart to his illuminating catalogue of the fictional spaces Pynchon creates, and McHale fails to account for why the narrative should be structured this way.

In the following essay, "'Crank of Ev'ry Radius': Romancing the Line in *Mason & Dixon*," Arthur Saltzman observes that the motif of the arc in *Gravity's Rainbow* is complemented by the motif of the Line in *Mason & Dixon*. Saltzman argues that in his latest novel Pynchon explores the impossibility of linearity and so exposes the lack of order inherent in the universe, even the clockwork universe of his eighteenth-century characters. However, despite the apparent simplicity of *Mason & Dixon's* design, the activity of delineation or "Stencilling" in this novel as in *V.* only generates more ambiguity, disorder and chaos (67).

A map is a veiny abstraction, whose lines are woven like a spell against confusion. The frontier exists in the permanent subjunctive (345), and everywhere the travels of Mason and Dixon take them turns out to be another frontier—outlaw, dissolute, unfixed. The condition of their lives, like that of the terrain, is of "no fix'd place, rather a fix'd Motion" (707), a fluxional reality that refutes their protracted ceremony of ordinance. (69)

Saltzman argues that this theme is complemented by imagery such as Benjamin Franklin's organic battery made from a line of hand-holding fops, and the Surinam Eel, "a living Line of Fire" (70), which mock the very idea of linearity.

Donald J. Greiner begins his "Thomas Pynchon and the Fault Lines of America" at the conclusion of *The Crying of Lot 49*, with Oedipa contemplating her America; in *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon goes back to the founding of the Republic and the formation of the ideals that are lost in *The Crying of Lot 49*. The conspiracy bringing order to Enlightenment America is rationalism, and its tool is science. Greiner likens *Mason & Dixon* to R. W. B. Lewis's American Adam: the narrative of a hero in conflict with a society of which he is mostly ignorant and which defeats him. Greiner reflects, "How had it ever happened here, Pynchon asks in *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Mason & Dixon* is his answer. It happened way back in the past because, in the rush to establish Enlightenment order on pristine complexity, the new American Adams hacked out the fault lines of the future" (83).

David Seed's "Mapping the Course of Empire in the New World" promised to be among the most engaging and challenging essays in the collection by bringing contemporary postcolonial theory to bear on *Mason & Dixon*. Seed begins with Edward Said's observation that territory is the primary goal of imperialistic expansion, and that the culture of imperialism is built on this motivation. Cartography and surveying are, therefore, cultural activities that empower colonizers by establishing control over newly acquired lands. Seed locates the "awareness of the cultural implications in topographical representation" (85) in *V.* particularly, in the culture of "Baedeker land."

In his first two novels Pynchon had drawn attention to the rectangular grids in American cityscapes and Baedeker street-plans. *Gravity's Rainbow* pursues the symbolism of differential calculus by breaking entities down into similar segments. In *Mason & Dixon* the right line and rectangles signify the systematic colonization of the American "wilderness." (93)

As in *V.*, Seed contends, in *Mason & Dixon* much of the plot involves—and consequently the protagonists are engaged in—touring. Indeed, Seed argues, the divergences from the main historical plot based on the survey generate much of the narrative's meaning. As surveying and map-making are variously interpreted as the narrative progresses, so the concepts are destabilized and deconstructed.

Mason and Dixon's engagement with the spaces they encounter, and their changing perceptions of how place can and should be experienced or represented occupy the bulk of Seed's analysis. This

means that he usefully explicates the significance of such motifs as optics, surveying methods, the analogy between landscape and the human body, and of course the territorial imperative of surveying. Seed contextualizes the contemporary scene by reference to William Bartram's *Travels* (1791) and William Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* (1728). But he lapses into cataloguing incidents in which lines are proposed and subverted, which has already been done in an earlier essay (Saltzman) and does not need repeating here. It is disappointing that Seed promises a discussion of the cultural implications of territorial expansion in the context of European imperialism but gives us instead an account of Pynchon's use of motif and symbol, linking this to his method in earlier texts. Consequently, it is a short leap to the paranoid interpretation of motifs and symbols—as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where “paranoia [is] an extreme skepticism toward appearance that produces inferences of conspiracy” (94). Codification of the landscape through surveying produces a system of cultural symbolism, not as an access to Pynchon's engagement with issues of colonialism and postcolonialism, but as a means to describe how Pynchon's established methods and concerns are extended to this novel.

Victor Strandberg's “Dimming the Enlightenment: Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*” relates the novel's theme of rebellion to Pynchon's rejection of the Eisenhower-Nixon-Reagan political culture of postwar America, represented earlier by the Whole Sick Crew in *V.* and the hippie community in *Vineland*. Strandberg accuses Pynchon, “the Bomb-fearing peacenik” (101), of wallowing in apocalyptic anxiety. He uses unquestioningly the autobiographical observations in Pynchon's introduction to *Slow Learner* as the basis for his discussion of *Mason & Dixon*'s revelation of the dark “underside of the Enlightenment” (103), such as the ongoing conflicts between Britain and France that form a context for the emergence of post-Revolution America:

On the wrong side of the Augustan moral geometry, causing these atrocities against Indians and black slaves, repose the forces of capitalism, industrialism, and imperialism that rose to supremacy during the Enlightenment thanks to the scientific revolution of the time. . . . In this reverse geometry the purported triumphs of the Age of Reason actually reflect moral turpitude. (105)

Strandberg then offers an account of the subversion of Reason in the novel. In this most judgmental of the essays, he concludes that the satirists of the Augustan age did a better job than Pynchon but that the novel will transcend Pynchon's polemics by virtue of the skill with which the characters and their adventures are created.

Joseph Dewey addresses the nature of Pynchon's narrator in "The Sound of One Man Mapping: Wicks Cherrycoke and the Eastern (Re)solution." He begins by asking why *Mason & Dixon* needs a framing narrative and such a narrator as this. His answer is several-fold: that Cherrycoke is an outsider; that he is, like Scheherazade, captive to his own tale; that he is a Christian minister who transforms the story he tells into a religious tale through the force of his questioning about mortality, organized religion, and the mysticism of the East. Dewey creates another of those binaries said to characterize Pynchon's work: an opposition between Western rationality and Eastern mysticism:

Throughout Cherrycoke's narrative, characters will touch on the Eastern (re)solution—a freewheeling hybrid of Hinduism, Zen Buddhism, African tribalism, Native American primitivism, ancient Druidism, Quaker quietism, and the Taoist practice of Feng Shui—but the disciplined purity and deep conviction of such a resolution is dismissed as foolishly insane, dangerously simplistic, or blatantly heretical. Pynchon, then, offers in *Mason & Dixon* an antiparable in which the (re)solution is repeatedly dismissed; within the freewheeling paradox of Eastern thought, it is the solution that is both present and absent. (117)

Cherrycoke's interest in mysticism is related, Dewey argues, to Pynchon's generation. Unlike Strandberg, Dewey calls the anti-Establishment hippie Cherrycoke "a Job in tie-dye" (119), set to entertain an audience Dewey likens to the lost generation of the Eisenhower fifties. Oppositions that appear as paradoxes are identified as key to Cherrycoke's narration. But what of the excluded middle? Dewey argues that finally Cherrycoke leads Mason to an Eastern resolution, a paradox that is both intellectual and corporeal, when Mason is granted a vision of the heavens as a three-dimensional field of energy. One question Dewey does not ask relates to the narrator's ridiculous surname. He points to the possible significance of his first name—Wicks—in contrast to the names of the LeSpark clan which forms his audience, and he observes that Roger [sic] Cherrycoke, a psychometrist at The White Visitation in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is a fictional descendant. But how does Pynchon use the sickly sweet connotation of Cherry Coke in relation to this narrator? Why should Pynchon attribute significance to only part of the name if not in some way to undermine the credibility of the narrator? And why does Dewey seem unaware of these issues?

In what is possibly the best essay of the collection, "Reading at the 'Crease of Credulity,'" Bernard Duyfhuizen offers an incisive reading of *Mason & Dixon*, one indebted to his earlier essay on the "reader trap"

in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Duyfhuizen acknowledges the antecedents in Pynchon's work of framed narratives, such as the historical episodes of *V.* framed by the episodes set in New York in 1956, and the framed perspectives used in episode 14 of *Gravity's Rainbow*. He identifies the tendency in Pynchon's frame narratives to deconstruct themselves; rather than pass the burden of narrative from one narrator to another, Pynchon's narratives undermine the idea of narrative authority and reliability by blurring the boundaries between levels and voices. And Duyfhuizen points out that Cherrycoke's is not the first narrative voice we hear: another unidentified, undramatized, presumably twentieth-century voice introduces the narrative and interrupts it at various points in the text. Consequently, the narrative method of *Mason & Dixon* works to emphasize the ontological instability of the fictional world Pynchon creates. Duyfhuizen takes as a case in point the tale *The Ghastly Fop* in chapter 53, where the text suddenly transforms into a captivity narrative of uncertain origin. Duyfhuizen's is an accomplished narratological analysis of the digressive narrative line, which he relates to the uncertain line created by the surveyors.

David Foreman's account of historical documents relating to *Mason & Dixon* focusses on Pynchon's ability to confound fact and fiction, to make historical facts seem invented and inventions plausible. He discusses *The Journal of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon* and the edited variants given to the proprietors of Maryland and Pennsylvania. He also identifies relevant secondary sources, such as a 1945 essay by Thomas D. Cope in the Pennsylvania Academy of Science's *Journal*; a 1950 article by H. W. Robinson in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*; an 1854 address by John H. B. Latrobe to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania titled "The History of Mason and Dixon's Line"; and a 1926 article by H. G. Wright in the *Yale Review*. What emerges confirms McHale's earlier description of *Mason & Dixon* as a work of historiographic metafiction (in Linda Hutcheon's terminology), where one of the primary systems of meaning Pynchon deconstructs is the systematic construction of historical meaning (163).

Jeff Baker's assessment of Pynchon's use of historical sources, in "Plucking the American Albatross: Pynchon's Irrealism in *Mason & Dixon*," confirms Pynchon's extensive recourse as well to what Baker calls "irrealism." This technique represents a critique of the idea of American democracy. Baker begins by invoking the William Slothrop episode in *Gravity's Rainbow*, observing that *Mason & Dixon* explores "the fork in the road America never took" by taking issue with the origins of the Revolutionary War. Baker identifies groups such as the Sons of Liberty who used the rhetoric of American democracy to

undermine the authority of the British Board of Trade and so defend the economic interests of the colonies:

In point of fact, democracy was not the issue at all, though it became the rallying cry of groups like the Sons of Liberty in their efforts to undermine British rule in the colonies. Perhaps most inexplicable and offensive, though, was the revolutionary rhetoric of slavery employed by the Sons of Liberty (and many other revolutionaries) to justify the growing colonial rebellion. (171)

Baker then turns specifically to the use of slavery as a rhetorical device by these groups, who presented their economic rebellion as resistance to British attempts at enslavement. It is ironic, as he argues and as Pynchon makes clear, that the colonial trade defended by this democratic rhetoric in fact had its roots in the slave trade. Pynchon's examination of the roots of American democratic rhetoric is significant because this theme pervades his writing. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon sets out a countercultural critique of American national self-representations. His narratives challenge conventional novelistic realism in the varieties of discourse they use—history, cartoon, dream, fantasy, sermon, song—and, as Baker argues, “the narrative coding embodies the democratizing principle that underlies [*Mason & Dixon*’s] egalitarian message . . . in an act of narrative subversion that repudiates reality in favor of the monstrous possibilities of the unreal” (180). In this way, Pynchon indicts all who participate in systems of rationalization and control.

Thomas H. Schaub's “Plot, Ideology, and Compassion in *Mason & Dixon*” discusses the idea of Pynchon's politics of compassion. Schaub argues that uncertainty characterizes Pynchon's earlier work and that doubt is again a prominent narrative motif in *Mason & Dixon*. But unlike those of earlier novels, *Mason & Dixon*'s plot does not follow a pursuit; instead it offers a series of fables the meaning of which is clear. These episodes repeat the central theme, and doubt is transposed onto the significance of storytelling itself. Like the drawing of the Line, writing is also a form of mapping, Schaub argues. Pynchon's deconstruction of eighteenth-century distinctions between fact and fiction comes into play and brings into prominence the narrator, Wicks Cherrycoke. Schaub observes that in *Mason & Dixon* plot gives way to character and that here Pynchon creates perhaps his first sustained characters. In more theoretical phraseology, “Mason and Dixon are the interpellated subjects of plot . . . it is they who practice the formation they reproduce” (198). Schaub reasons that Pynchon's erosion of the distinction between plot and character dramatizes the position of the

subject within ideology, who cannot speak outside the terms of the ideology. This recognition that there is no place from which to speak innocently accounts for the affective characterization of *Mason & Dixon*: the “yoking of sentiment and critique is a key structural principle of *Mason & Dixon*, one which gives new emphasis to the element of compassion present in Pynchon’s fiction from at least *The Crying of Lot 49*” (199). The endings of *The Crying of Lot 49* and of *Vineland*, and McClintic Sphere’s “keep cool but care” line in *V.* are seen as key moments of compassion in Pynchon’s work, compassion that in *Mason & Dixon* reaches tragic proportions. Schaub concludes that *Mason & Dixon* belongs to a genre of nostalgic tragedy: “tragic because there is always some prior crime that makes our present moment ‘too late,’ and nostalgic because the novels end ‘at home,’ in moments of willed reconciliation with what has gone before” (201). Gone from *Mason & Dixon* are the moments of pure rage such as “Mondaugen’s Story” in *V.*, about Von Trotha’s genocidal campaign against the Hereros; in *Mason & Dixon* Schaub perceives that “even the quality of anger has diminished” (201).

Schaub’s is a fine and perceptive essay, like most of the contributions to this book. As one closes the book, one is left with the comforting impression of having come to terms with the novel, of seeing how it fits into a developing pattern of Pynchon’s work and yet appreciating how this novel is distinct in itself. But is this sense of completion or totalization a good thing? I rather think not. For we have been presented with an unrelenting sequence of readings that originate in the same essential point of view. When Schaub observes that the Visto is constructed with no regard for the *Shan* of the landscape, the spiritual Dragon that resides in the land, he sets up an opposition between Western and Eastern conceptions of landscape that passes without analysis by any of the contributors to this book. Slavery is treated in relation to evolving American concepts of democracy and to Pynchon’s critique of Enlightenment rationalism (the episode in which Dixon thrashes the slave driver is mentioned several times); but there is no sustained discussion of Pynchon’s representation of race. And women are nowhere to be heard of in this collection. This is an editorial failure. Most of the essays individually are excellent pieces of work: challenging, engaging, perceptive. The collection as a whole, however, just does not cover the ground. Even a cursory glance at the index reveals the editorial blind spots: no entry for gender, though there is an entry for “males, bonded”; nothing on race, though there is a single entry for racism. Yet the entries on narrative and form—narration, narrative choices, narrative instability, narrative linearity, narrative techniques—are plentiful. Not surprisingly, the book presents a reading

of *Mason & Dixon* by highlighting the aspects of the text that are important to the editors. The result is a coherent collection that prepares the way for further discussion, as the editors indicate, but this is achieved by neglecting areas of research and discussion that need to be acknowledged.

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