Mason & Dixon on the Line: A Reception Study

Douglas Keesey

Reviewers of *Mason & Dixon* were under peculiar pressure: how to deal with a novel of such scope and ambition within a brief space and early deadline? According to Walter Kirn:

> [I]t's a fair bet that anyone who reviews the novel has 1) merely skimmed it, meaning his impressions are superficial; 2) actually read every page, but only by foregoing food and rest, meaning his impressions are warped by stress; or 3) not read the book at all, meaning his impressions are just as worthy as those of the thousands of other literate folk who will buy Pynchon's novel on reputation, put it down, and pronounce it either another masterpiece or a disappointing falling off.

Kirn, who admits to having read half, skimmed a fourth and left the remainder unread, fits all three of his own categories. Surely his disdain for the nonreaders in category 3 is displaced from its original and more proper target—himself. Another nonreader is James Gardner, who "read the first fifty pages and then gave up, having found nothing in the plot, the characters, or the style to warrant my reading seven hundred pages more." To quit reading is the fundamental right of every reader, but one may well wonder about the ethics (or the logic) of a reviewer reviewing a book he hasn't read. Gardner's subsequent attempt to justify himself by saying he is actually reviewing the reviews of the book rather than the book itself only compounds the problem, especially given his claim to detect subtle indications of negative judgments "between the lines" of ostensibly positive reviews. It must take subtlety indeed to read the hidden truth in reviewers' responses to a novel when one has not read the book to which they are responding. The unsubtle truth of Gardner's review is probably that, having disliked the few pages he did read, he projects onto other reviewers his own negative response, rolling it over everyone. (The "giant Cheese . . . [is] Reason run amok" [Pynchon, M&D 167].) Luc Sante takes a more generous approach to the had-we-but-world-enough-and-time problem: admitting that Pynchon's new novel is too big in every way "for a short review to do it any kind of justice," he concludes, "All I can do is doff my cap." This response at least has the virtue of not making the reviewer's problem Pynchon's,

unlike Gardner's whining about "long books, big books, heavy, boring, and unwieldy books."

Thickness. One fact registered by all reviewers, whether or not they like the novel, is that this is a book of considerable size and density: "tough slogging" (Skenazy); "dismayingly turgid" (Eder); "tedious" and "wearying" (Abbott); "leaden" and "intractably obscure" (Gardner). B. W. Powe goes so far as to call it "a reading ordeal, a test, a threat to my sanity, with its length and self-indulgence and obscurity and heavy-handed exposition, a deliberate attempt to defy the common reader." However, as Michael Sprinker argues in a letter protesting Denis Dutton's award to Fredric Jameson of first prize in *Philosophy and Literature*'s Bad Writing Contest, the "whole matter of 'bad writing' ought to be thought about more carefully." Sprinker believes that "for Dutton [and we might add for Powe] any writing more taxing on his attention than the morning newspaper could potentially qualify as 'bad writing.'" By Dutton's criteria, Sprinker notes, one of Proust's page-long sentences would probably be considered bad writing and not "a powerful, stylistically bold experiment in expanding the syntactic and semantic potentials of language."

The length and density of Pynchon's writing can be defended on the same grounds. Consider the striking juxtapositions arising from poetic compression in this dense description, wherein Nature's purity defies Reason's facile formulations, its attempts at violation: "The sunrise comes chaste beyond all easy Wit" (M&D 258). Or consider the following lengthy sentence:

> The Geometers [Mason and Dixon] have encounter'd the eminent Philadelphian [Ben Franklin] quite by chance, in the pungent and dim back reaches of an Apothecary in Locust-Street, each Gentleman upon a distinct mission of chemical Necessity, as among these shelves and bins, the Godfrey's Cordial and Bateman's Drops, Hooper's Female Pills and Smith's Medicinal Snuff, hasty bargains are struck, Strings of numbers and letters and alchemists' Signs whisper'd (and some never written down), whilst a quiet warm'd Narcosis, as of a drawing to evening far out in a Country of fields where drying herbal crops lie, just perceptibly breathing, possesses the Shop Interior, rendering it indistinct as to size, legality, or destiny. (M&D 266)

It would take pages of explanation to unpack the meanings so elegantly enfolded in this passage, but a start might be to note the gradual transition it effects from brand-name historical realism to drug-inspired surrealism, as numbers are troped beyond measure and letters signify more than their literal meaning. Nature repossesses the city, breathing

new life into dead urban forms, making the chemist's shop seem as expansive as the country, lending those inside the shop a freedom beyond the law, and hazily diverting them for the time being from their otherwise distinct mission of official commerce and certain death.

Rather than caviling about the book's density and length ("He is too important a writer to have an important editor, it seems" [Eder]), reviewers might at least consider whether these attributes of the novel are justified. Although close readings like the one above cannot be expected in most reviews (the conventions governing book reviews disallow them), a general defense of the novel's thickness is implicit in some reviewers' throwaway lines. When Miles Harvey advises that "maybe it's best to just throw prudence to the wind and scratch your own way through this dense but glorious wilderness of words," he suggests an analogy between the reader's progress through the book and Mason and Dixon's trek through the wilderness. Anthony Lane doodles around the same comparison: "in the midst of an overgrown patch [of the novel], you tell yourself that Pynchon's heroes, who merely had to hack their way for four years along the border of Maryland and Pennsylvania, had it easy. That is unfair, for they *were* heroic, in a quietly dogged way, and you feel by the close that they deserve a medal for surviving not just the rigors of their professional task but the incalculable travails of Pynchon's fiction." Future studies of this novel might profitably explore the extent to which Pynchon's prose is mimetic of Mason and Dixon's long and arduous journey, but the wilderness isn't just a foil to their heroic line-drawing any more than Pynchon's density is merely a challenge for us to cut through it. Michiko Kakutani is truer to the spirit of Pynchon's wilderness of words when she describes it as "calculated in its sheer vastness and prolixity to immerse the reader in the confusions of the world." Such confusions are more likely to give of bird and bush, to be vitally productive, than an artificially imposed and unnaturally divisive line: "Ev'rywhere else on earth, Boundaries follow Nature,—coast-lines, ridge-tops, river-banks" (M&D 542). Pynchon's discursiveness holds out as long as possible against penetration, its thickness making *Mason & Dixon* "a novel as fit to burst with energy and promise as early America itself" (Rifkind).

Structure. The book's thickety sprawl has led some reviewers to conclude that it is simply unstructured—"desultory" (Menand), "seemingly arbitrary" (Lombreglia), "meandering, digressive, anti-narrative" (Keough). Although a number of critics describe the novel as "picaresque" (Mooney, Sante, Weeks), none relates the book to this eighteenth-century tradition (despite its eighteenth-century diction) or considers whether Pynchon chose the episodic form for the same aesthetic and ideological reasons his predecessors did or for different

ones (the picaro as eluding the confines of social class and the law? coincidence as providential? a happy ending reconciling the hero and society?). Instead, reviewers complain that *Mason & Dixon* is "a 773-page novel with essentially no real plot" (Lombreglia), as if fiction modeled on nineteenth-century realism were the only kind to have a *real* plot; or critics object to the book's "shaggy-dog plotting" (Weeks) and its "long loose episodes . . . that are nearly impossible to follow" (Rifkind), as though disorientation were merely meaningless and digressions obviously beside the point. Consider the following scene, in which a boy challenges Mason and Dixon with something undreamt of in their philosophy:

> "I can show you something no one has ever seen, nor will anyone ever see again."
>
> Mason squints in thought. "There's no such thing."
>
> "Ha-ha!" The lad produces an unopen'd Goober Pea-Shell, exhibiting it to both Astronomers before cracking it open to reveal two red Pea-Nuts within,—"Something no-one has seen,"—popping them in his mouth and eating them,—"and no one will see again." (M&D 645)

Reason's generalizations can no more cover life's experiential particulars than critics' generalizations can account for the many meanings of Pynchon's digressions. To assert that "in a book about map-making, you shouldn't need a compass" (Vilmure) is to miss the value Pynchon places on the wilderness's resistance to being mapped; it is to fail to see the trees for the forest.

At the opposite extreme from critics who find the novel unstructured are those who claim for it the simplest structure: a line. In what may appear to be a bizarre discrepancy in reader responses, reviews with titles like "Meanderings Seem Almost a Maze Without Center or Exit" (Weeks) are countered by others with titles like "Pynchon's Line" (Miller), "The Pynchon Line" (Shippey), "Pynchon Draws the Line" (Skenazy), "Thomas Pynchon's Line on Modernity" (Bukiet), and "Linear Pynchon" (Pelovitz). Indeed, the word line appears so insistently in reviews of *Mason & Dixon* ("All Lined Up" [Boyd], "All Down the Line" [Mooney], "America's Own Line" [Kipen's intended title]) that the repetition alone makes one suspicious. Granted, "Drawing the Line" (Gray) is the book's central metaphor, but is its *structure* linear? Yes, says David Marc Fischer: "Plotwise, Pynchon's Fourth [novel] is also more straightforward [than his previous ones]—fittingly so, considering that much of *Mason & Dixon* dwells on linear matters." Yes, agrees David Wiley: "*Mason & Dixon* is by far Pynchon's most accessible and linear novel to date. It follows just two characters

in a straight line as they survey their way across America." And Rick Moody too believes that the "action of *Mason & Dixon* is refreshingly linear, compared with the complexity of Pynchon's earlier work." The audible sighs of relief at this new novel's simplicity are signs of a wish-fulfillment fantasy. These reviewers' linear eureka is merely the obverse of other critics' inability to find any structure: either reviewers are overwhelmed by the novel's complexities, or they reduce it to a simplistic certainty.

A more comprehensive approach to the novel is to see it as "at once plotted and plotless" (Kakutani). The realization that the book is *both* linear *and* episodic can be the occasion for dismissive carping ("a series of drip-drying vignettes, so to speak, hung out on a plot line" [Skenazy]), or for the beginning of genuine insight. Sante gives his review the suggestively oxymoronic title "Long and Winding Line," and Brooke Horvath offers a weirdly productive description of the novel's "narrative line" as being "straight as a plum bob swaying in an ill wind." Both reviewers imply that the novel's structure turns on the tension between the surveyors' line-drawing and Nature's resistance to it, a tension Pynchon's words register even at the level of the individual sentence. Note the way the inverted word order of this periodic sentence enacts a dilatory digression from the subject-verb-object march at its beginning: "We have Mileage Estimates from Rangers and Runners, yet for as long as [the Line's] Distance from the Post Mark'd West remains unmeasur'd, nor is yet recorded as Fact, may it remain, a-shimmer, among the few final Pages of its Life as Fiction" (M&D 650). Lane points out that the "novel runs, and dawdles, and doubles back," and David Pelovitz notes that the "story comes close to following a linear chronology, but the plot itself moves continually backward and forward." These comments suggest important areas for future study, for whether Mason and Dixon are moving westward or eastward at any given time, and why their westering finally comes to a halt are key issues in the book.

Another area of enquiry worthy of further exploration is opened up by two reviewers who focus less on the novel's temporal organization (line and digressions) than on its spatial construction: "Structurally . . . this chronicle has the A-B-A form of that 18th century invention, the sandwich: a pair of astronomical observations with an extended survey expedition in between" (Mooney); "*Mason & Dixon* resembles less a straight line than a luncheon snack" (Kipen). Ted Mooney and David Kipen deserve credit for noting the novel's tripartite division and for spotting Pynchon's own metafictional metaphor for it: "When [Mason and Dixon] come to explain about the two Transits of Venus, and the American Work filling the Years between, 'By Heaven, a "Sandwich,"'

cries Mr. Edgewise" (M&D 366). It is now up to scholars to pursue what reviewers let drop: is there more to the sandwich metaphor than comical interest, especially considering the frequent references to sandwiches in the book? Are parts one and three symmetrically related as the surrounding bread is to the filling inside, or are there important differences in part three that disturb the symmetry? Consider Brae's reminder to the twins, Pitt and Pliny, "'whoever said anything had to be symmetrickal?'" (M&D 483); and ponder Mason's decision against a third mission with Dixon because "'Someone must break this damn'd Symmetry'" (M&D 718).

Genre and Tone. As with the controversy over whether *Mason & Dixon* is structured or structureless, critics seem puzzled by the novel's mixture of history and comedy. Some reviewers feel that the humor overwhelms the history: "Handled seriously, [Mason and Dixon's line-drawing] would be a rich subject for a historical novel. But it is a poor vehicle for Pynchon's baroque conjuring tricks" (Carpenter); "the horror of *Mason & Dixon* is not integrated into the robustly comic passages and is too infrequent to ballast the novel's fancy" (Koenig); "*Mason & Dixon* has about as much to do with history as *MAD Magazine* has to do with hard-hitting journalism," because the "comedy consigns more tragic matters to the boondocks," resulting in a "'Cutesiad'" (Vilmure). Other reviewers maintain that the novel is more chronicle than comedy —but these critics too assume that the history and the comedy are *incompatible*: "*for all* its whimsical inventiveness, *Mason & Dixon* is *basically* a historical re-creation" (Gray; emphasis added); "*For all* its profuse detail, its jokes and songs and absurdities, the book *nonetheless* evokes its time and place better than any historical novel I can recall" (Boyle; emphasis added).

One convenient way to study the relation between history and comedy in the novel is to look at the question of anachronisms in Pynchon's use of eighteenth-century diction. Are these the errors of a historical ignoramus? Are they merely "Inexpensive Salvo[s]" at the reader aimed by an author "coprophagously a-grin" (M&D 302, 427)? Gardner is unamused by the "cutesy period punctuation," and he protests that "any man of the eighteenth century would have choked on his tongue before using 'presently' to mean 'at present.'" However, the *OED* traces this particular meaning of *presently* as far back as 1485, and gives several examples of this usage throughout the eighteenth century. Similarly, while James F. Trumm assumes that "Anachronistic references abound" in Pynchon's book "to such arcana as ketchup," Louis Menand checks the dictionary: "When Dixon, in the Dutch colony of Cape Town, becomes addicted to a Malay sauce called 'ketjap' and insists on pouring it over everything he eats, you may take

it as a homophonic joke. But 'ketjap' is the Dutch spelling of the Malay word for what became ketchup."

What first appear to be comical anachronisms may turn out to be factual pointers to alternative histories, real connections with other places and peoples official Western history has repressed. Pynchon's novel shimmers between "anachronism" and "chronicle" as between alternative and official histories, with "what could have been" or "might yet be" challenging "the way it was" and "must be": "Practitioners [of History], to survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit,—that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever" (M&D 349). A hemp-smoking George Washington may be a "wonderfully subversive" anachronism (Boyle) that pokes fun at the history of our Founding Fathers with "demythologizing irreverence" (Duyfhuizen), or it may be a repressed truth about one of our forebears whose recognition could validate future freedoms. As T. Coraghessan Boyle realizes, Pynchon's "broad wink at history is affectionate and warm, never dismissive, because history is a place in which to live, one version of many, a novel unfolded and unfolding still to affect us in any number of unforeseen ways. If the future is uncertain, so is the past." Subsequent studies of *Mason & Dixon* might profitably begin with this assumption that comedy is *not* incompatible with history, but a key route to other pasts and futures—an alternative history.

Theme. Unfortunately, Pynchon's comedy risks making it easy for certain reviewers to dismiss his book's historical and political theme as a joke—not that they need much encouragement to do so (see Keesey). For some, Pynchon will always be a conspiracy nut, good for a cheap thrill that can then be laughed off: "the mid-18th century colonies offer Pynchon a perfect stage for cabals to skulk upon" (McLemee); "No Thomas Pynchon novel is authentic without its dollop of paranoia" (Dirda); "Tho' sticky and complex, with Webs of Meaning woven thro' the Prose, the best way to read Thomas is to sit back and enjoy the Ride, a Roller-coaster through paranoid Conspiracies" (Nelson). These metaphors of melodrama-watching, cake-baking and rollercoaster-riding are a bit trivializing; the last plunges to new depths of fatuity.

Other reviewers, less distracted by comical ignorance, take the novel's treatment of conspiracies seriously enough to consider whether paranoia about them might in fact be justified. However, a number of these critics feel that the conspiracy theme remains undeveloped and unconvincing: "The narrative points to, but never makes conclusive, a conspiracy" (Madsen); "the nature of those [conspiratorial] forces and their interests, even the existence of the forces themselves, remains frustratingly obscure" (Lombreglia); "Vast political intrigues provide us

with ample paranoia," but "Pynchon's new novel is like a gigantic, seductive paradigm which was somehow never completed convincingly, a marvellous but ultimately empty theoretical construct" (Daw).

One thing that is suspicious about reviewers' professed inability to piece together a convincing conspiracy in the novel is the contempt they show for others who might try. Michael Dirda refers to the "computer freaks, science fiction fans and Gen-Xers who look upon *Gravity's Rainbow* as a kind of modern Scripture (as little read, I suspect, as the ancient one)." L. S. Klepp says, "Pynchonites—Thomas Pynchon's numerous cult followers—will swarm over *Mason & Dixon*, a great beached whale of a new novel, examining its entrails for signs and portents," "looking for deep, esoteric illuminations that certainly aren't [there]." Why is someone who might actually study the novel branded a Bible fanatic or whalegut-reader? And where does the vehemence of this hatred come from? Could it be that in the Pynchon fan the reviewer meets his loathed and envied alter ego, someone with the time and dedication to read and understand what the reviewer must perforce skim and prematurely judge? Kirn says Pynchon's books are "intended for literary monastics, for the tenured priesthood of paid interpreters that sprang up in colleges after World War II. . . . In academia, Pynchon found his patrons. In Pynchon, academia found its paychecks." Perhaps Kirn was not paid for his review, but this seems a lot like one professional reader calling other ones money-grubbers. Given that Pynchon reviewers and scholars are alike in so many ways, it's hard not to see in the contempt of the former for the latter an expression of anger at the constraints imposed on reviewers. Kirn again: "Pynchon is a writer you have to 'get,' and I find no activity less inspiring than Rubik's Cube-ing through a clue-strewn supertext in search of a paradoxical *Eureka*!"

So, one reason some reviewers had trouble searching out a convincing conspiracy in Pynchon's novel may be that, strapped for time, they didn't feel much inclination to look. For there *are* identifiable groups of men in power whose plot to divide up the world makes use of Mason and Dixon's surveying as its instrument. As Gregory Feeley notes, if Mason and Dixon are "given to apprehensions about the larger forces working around them," "Such premonitions are sound, for in Pynchon's version of the 18th century, cabals and conspiracies are everywhere, as pre-industrial capitalism prepares to employ its slavery-derived wealth to devour North America." And John Leonard points out that the novel isn't at all vague about some of these conspiracies; Pynchon names names: "for whom is the fixing of marine longitudes such an urgent issue? The British Navy, for one. The British East India Company, for another. The whole colonial enterprise, for a third."

These are the ancestors of today's multinational corporations. Perhaps some reviewers find it hard to acknowledge the existence of past conspiracies for fear of what they imply about present-day capitalism. Greg Boyd's response is symptomatic:

> As their lives and the Mason-Dixon line lengthen, [the surveyors] come face-to-face with the brutality of colonial South Africa, of slave-owning and Indian-hunting Americans. They begin to question their mission: Are there things we cannot know? Are there things best left unmeasured, unanalyzed, untold? The answer is irrelevant. Mason and Dixon and the rest of us blunder on as best we can. . . . As all about them grows more confusing and threatening, they stick to their line. In this way they are very much like us.

But Mason and Dixon *don't* decide that the conspiracy question is irrelevant, and Mason *doesn't* agree to a third mission with Dixon; it is only Boyd who avoids asking about the identity of those in power and who hews to the line they determine for him. Menand exhibits a more complicated—but ultimately similar—political apathy, which he too projects onto Pynchon:

> "Are we being us'd, by Forces invisible?" Dixon asks.
>
> The point seems to be that they are not, because although some people will try to take advantage of this process (and these in Pynchon are always evil), nobody is in control of it. This is just the direction in which human history happens to run, and the effort to get it to run in a different direction, the effort to construct a counterculture to the culture of bureaucracy and rationality, only ends up producing another regime of coercion and control, another iron cage—just as people struggling against dictatorships sometimes become terrorists.

While it is true that in his wildly uncontrolled paranoia a character named Captain Zhang becomes the mirror image of Zarpazo, the man he fears, and while it is true that some of the conspiracy theories in the book are wildly improbable and exemplify scapegoating ("'The Sino-Jesuit conjunction may prove a greater threat to Christendom than ever the Mongols or the Moors'" [M&D 288]), this does not mean that all paranoia about unseen power-mongers is unjustified or that any conspiracy theory attempting to name the names of these power-mongers is ridiculous. Future studies of paranoia and conspiracy as themes in *Mason & Dixon* should challenge all four of Menand's assertions above, and argue instead that Mason and Dixon *are* being used by unseen forces; that certain bodies of men *are* in control

(though not necessarily total control); that the direction of history *is* influenced by these men ("human history" isn't something that "just . . . happens to run"); and that countercultures, though sometimes vulnerable to cooptation, *are* both viable and necessary means of changing the dominant course of history. To take just one example from the novel, consider why Pynchon would have written the following except as a countercultural challenge to the predominantly capitalistic direction of history: "Commerce without Slavery is unthinkable, whilst Slavery must ever include, as an essential Term, the Gallows,—Slavery without the Gallows being as hollow and Waste a Proceeding, as a Crusade without the Cross" (M&D 108).

Characterization. Despite considerable controversy over the novel's thickness, structure, genre, tone and theme, reviewers almost all agree on one thing: they love the characterization of Mason and Dixon. Even critics flummoxed by other aspects of the book find in Pynchon's delineation of the title characters something they can understand and appreciate. Mason and Dixon are called "endearing" (Eder) and "curiously touching" (Abbott); they possess "emotional amplitude" (Kakutani) and "psychological complexity and depth" (Mooney); they are "extremely real" (Pelovitz), "anything but cartoons" (Sante). In short, critics find the characters *realistic* and *moving*, with the former quality viewed as a necessary condition for the latter, as can be seen in Boyle's praise for "Pynchon's most complete characters and, in the end, his most sympathetic" (note the parallelism). Critics described the "affection that grows" between Mason and Dixon as "genuine, funny and moving" (Krewson); the "mismatched partners' capacity to love each other" (Miller) provides an "emotional guy line that sees the reader through" (Sante), making this book "a buddy story" (Menand), "a paean to friendship" (Dirda), "one of the great novels about male friendship in anybody's literature" (Leonard). As a result of this real and moving friendship, *Mason & Dixon* is deemed "genial" (Passaro) and "restrained" (Steinberg), "calm" and "considered" (Lane), "serene" and "mellow" (Dirda), "relaxed and bemused" (Menand), "forgiving" and "sure" (Skenazy), "humane" and "mature" (Trumm)—qualities supposedly "lacking in Pynchon's earlier protagonists" (Mooney) and "missing from his earlier works" (Trumm).

This praise for *Mason & Dixon*'s well-rounded and emotionally affecting characters is both accurate and gratifying, but one wishes the new novel weren't being used as a cudgel to bash Pynchon's previous works, which are criticized for not having followed narrow conventions of realistic characterization that are the only standards these critics recognize. Not only do Pynchon's earlier works contain profound explorations of character in all its meanings, but there is much more to

the characterization of Mason and Dixon themselves than critics seem to realize, as will be revealed when future studies of the novel begin to make connections between character and those other problematic aspects of the book—theme, tone, genre, structure and thickness. What can be inferred about the relation between Pynchon's comedic tone and his historically serious intent from Mason's characteristic "Habit of delivering even his gravest Speeches, with the Rhythms and Inflections of the Taproom Comedian" (M&D 247)? If Mason and Dixon are, as the reviewers maintain, "less figures in a scheme and more substantial, more inspired with the breath of life" (Boyle), then is the supposedly free-acting and self-determining Dixon merely wrong to wonder whether "'Men of Science [like himself and Mason] . . . may be but the simple Tools of others, with no more idea of what they are about, than a Hammer knows of a House'" (M&D 669)? While Dixon's thought raises questions about how character is connected with the themes of paranoia and conspiracy, Mason's suspicion that "'None of this may be about either you or me'" (M&D 610) raises structural questions about whether these two line-drawers are really the main characters in the book. (Zhang and Zarpazo don't think so—"'We happen to be the principal Personae here, not you two!'" [M&D 545]—but then they're crazy, *right?*) Finally, the following passage suggests that Pynchon understands the very concept of character as profoundly related to changing historical contexts; character has a history of which he is aware and which studies of his characterization would do well to note: "As God has receded, as Deism has crept in to make the best of this progressive Absence, more and more do we witness extreme varieties of human character emergent" (M&D 358).

Quality. Although truly meaningful assessments of this novel's value probably require scholarly study and perhaps even the judgment of posterity, reviewers don't have the luxury of waiting: they must give an opinion now. If the book becomes a classic, the negative notices written by some critics may end up in collections like *Rotten Reviews* for future generations to laugh at. Indeed, some reviews of books now thought of as classics bear a striking resemblance to reviews of *Mason & Dixon*: "It has its faults which cannot simply be shrugged off—occasional overwriting, stretches of fuzzy thinking, and a tendency to waver, confusingly, between realism and surrealism" (on *Invisible Man*); he "builds up an atmosphere of real horror and significance and then dispels it ineffectively with some quite misplaced slapstick" (on *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*); "too long, too long, too long" (on *The Sot-Weed Factor*) (Henderson 35, 49, 24).

However, the majority of reviewers are quite positive in their evaluation of Pynchon's new novel, some going so far as to call *Mason*

& Dixon "a groundbreaking book, a book of heart and fire and genius" (Boyle); the "best novel of the decade" (Hensher); "a Modern Masterpiece" (Nelson). Willing to risk the possibility of future derision for having overestimated the book's significance, Malcolm Jones, Jr. argues that *Mason & Dixon* "may not be the Great American Novel but, hey, it walks like a great novel, it talks like a great novel, so. . . ." But, according to Joel Stein, "*Mason & Dixon* itself is neither epic enough, nor passionate enough, to embody that myth" of "the Great American Novel." Something tells me the smart money is on Jones.

—*Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo*

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