

Childhood as a Metaphor: Motif and Narrative Device in *Mason & Dixon*

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“The only hope, I suppose, is if we *haven't* come home exactly,— I mean, if it's not the same, not really,— if we might count upon that failure to re-arrive perfectly, to be seen in all the rest of Creation. . . .” (*Mason & Dixon* 755)

The new nation, the nation of civil law, can suppress madness—the mad are locked up—but children are still around; and it is to them that the forbidden passions are assigned. At least until the romance is over and real life begins. (Alryes 190)

Referring at the close of his article “Plot, Ideology and Compassion in *Mason & Dixon*” to the time of the novel, Tom Schaub designates it “the remembered futurity of a nation about to be born” (201). It is worth noting that since Romanticism the remembered futurity has been considered to be embodied in the image of the child. In what follows I will discuss the image of the child as a metaphor driving the narrative desire in *Mason & Dixon*. In my account I will rely on Peter Brooks' approach to narrative in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narratives* (1998).

Drawing inspiration from Sigmund Freud's essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Brooks proposes a dynamic model of narrative, whose operating logic can be described as anticipation of retrospection. In this model, the tension between repetition and change, binding the beginning and the end of the plot, propels the writer's and the reader's desire to make meaning—narrative desire—along a chain of signification transformations which seek to arrive at a meaning that would stop the narrative's movement. This movement thus begins with a blinded, that is, collapsed and inactive, metaphor of transmission. In the course of its advancement, the narrative unpacks the givens of the initial figure by acting them out as metonymy in order to arrive at the terminal figure, an enlightened and transactive metaphor of transmission. The metonymic process restores difference to the blinded metaphor, thereby turning it into an enlightened metaphor (Brooks 23-29, 90-112, 319-23).

It seems that in *Mason & Dixon*, the writer's narrative desire, fuelled by his efforts to explore and question contemporary nostalgic representations

of the rise of America's vision of itself, is carried through the narrative process by means of the child metaphor. Consequently, the reader sets out from the blinded metaphor of the nation as, simultaneously, a newborn infant, America as a prodigal son leaving its home Britain, and an image of future citizens whose education is supposed to turn them into dutiful children of the nation. The extradiegetic frame narrative that fades into and at times emerges from that of Rev. Cherrycoke's narration, whimsically and metaleptically¹ reworks these images by unpacking them metonymically. The reader is thus provided with examples of historicized Oedipal conflicts between sons and fathers, prodigal sons leaving their homes, masters serving as surrogate fathers who in the end betray their assumed sons, and children who, first deserted by their fathers, are forced later to act as those fathers' fathers—in other words, literally appear as fathers of men. The plot of Pynchon's novel finally veers into the conflated Wordsworthian and Emersonian image of childhood embodied by Mason's sons remembering their dreams of America, thus figuring the terminal enlightened metaphor of the novel's narrative.

Sensitive to the cultural significance of the power of cutting edge technology and scientific disciplines to captivate the mass imagination, Pynchon, when writing *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, seems to have been inspired by the Nobel laureate geneticist James Watson. Appearing before the congressional Human Genome Advisory Committee, Watson said, "we used to think that our fate was in the stars. Now we know that, in large measure, our fate is in our genes" (Jaroff 62). Indeed, in both *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon links the stars, that is the macroscopic, with the microscopic molecules that encode human heredity and are responsible for its transmission. The writer's interest in genes can be construed as a parodically biologized quest for the origin. Appositely, both novels do return to an origin. *Vineland* begins and ends with the word home, while the narration in *Mason & Dixon* starts with the historicized child audience of Rev. Cherrycoke and ends with the Romantic vision of the mythic redeemer children, Charles Mason's sons, arrested in the timelessness of the American pastoral vision.

The writer's gestures of reaching back—to the site of the 1960s countercultural movements in *Vineland* and the inception of the United States in *Mason & Dixon*—emerge from the cultural exigency of an American society beset with questions about its self-definition in the last two decades of the twentieth-century. Pynchon's retrospection can be seen as a critique of the neoconservative nostalgic project launched in the Reaganist 1980s and in the 1990s in order to redeem the tumultuous, multicultural, and anxiety-ridden present of global capitalism by "stabiliz[ing] what [neoconservatism] perceived as a harmful, dissolute erosion of cultural values" (Caputi par. 3). The writer seeks to defy the fusion of capitalism and nostalgia characteristic of the New Right strategy, which, by marketing merchandise self-consciously invoking bygone days, generates "imagined nostalgia" for an untrammelled

past never in fact “lived through but presented in fond and familiar ways” (Caputi par. 6). Pynchon’s quest for America’s self-definition takes him self-consciously to sites of the past that is as disunified and ambiguous as the present he sets out from.

He parodically thematizes his awareness of the vain generational longing for the healing of traumas experienced in the turbulent national past by having Rev. Cherrycoke expatiate in chapter 56 of *Mason & Dixon* on the great trauma suffered by his generation in the wake of 1752’s transition from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, which involved skipping eleven days, an experience that left a “chronologic Wound,” compelling the generation to seek obsessively for the sequence of those allegedly missing days in a vain effort to “pretend Life undamaged again” (555) and in the hope of redeeming the lost time. In response to his young audience’s incredulity and ridicule, he points out that “one day, should you keep clear of Fate for that long, you may find yourself recalling some Injustice, shared with lads and lasses of your own Day, just as uncalmable, and even yet, unredeem’d” (555).

Yet, as Caputi observes, the American search for meaning is not constituted solely by traditionalism. “New Right ideology—and by now, much of American culture—joins this traditionalism to a technological savvy eager to remain competitive in the globalizing world market” (par. 5). As does Pynchon, by parodically engaging genetics when interrogating the troubled past.

James Berger proposes the term “revised nostalgia” when discussing *Vineland’s* return to the revolutionary 1960s not “as to a site of original wholeness and plenitude” but rather as a site of cultural and political trauma, where a traumatic past “persistently leaps forward into the present” (171). He stresses that the traumatic moment is simultaneous with a “utopian, or revelatory, moment” (171), which resembles Walter Benjamin’s concept of *jetztzeit*, the visionary, “critical moment of historical, redemptive possibility that continues to erupt into the present even after many previous failures” (171). Mediated by particular cultural and ideological forms, “*Vineland’s* utopian/traumatic vision,” the revised nostalgia, “possesses ethical and political urgency, an imperative to use its glimpse of utopian potential to try to change an unjust history” (171-72). The return to the traumatic 1960s is refracted in the novel through the popular, mass culture of the Reaganist 1980s, which subsidized and perpetuated the view of the 1960s as “a source of political and especially sexual violence and chaos” (172).

Berger observes that the novel ascribes the failure of social movements in the 1960s to political betrayals that are inseparable from sexual betrayals (174-75). Sasha, Frenesi’s mother, realizes that her own “oppositions [. . .] to forms of power” are really “acts of denying that dangerous swoon,” that is sexual desire for “uniformed men” (VL 83). She believes that this uniform fetish is hereditary “as if some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence

requiring this form of seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control" (83). The reference to DNA thus bespeaks both the threat posed by the reproduction and transmission of control desire and desire control, and social control's penetration to the microscopic level of biological structure beyond individual consciousness. Moreover, the reference to genetic manipulation thematizes the anxiety about the impossibility of returning to people's original, prelapsarian untrammelled nature.²

In *Mason & Dixon*, the return to the site of origin coincides with Christmas of 1786, on the eve of 1787; that is, the year the American Constitution was ratified.³ The nation is thus represented as a child, while its DNA is figured by the compositional structure of the novel. In *Triangulating Thomas Pynchon's Eighteenth-Century World*, Manfred Kopp argues extensively and cogently that the spatio-temporal configuration of motifs in the novel is that of a double helix; that is, a DNA sequence:

It is . . . the book's unusual spelling of this term, "[h]elixxx," [M&D 417] that suggests an implicit connection to the famous DNA double helix. Incorporating not only binarity, balance, and complementarity, but combining also linearity and circularity in its own spiraling shape, this double helix has to be seen as the perfect illustration of the novel's internal configuration. In conjunction with various other references to genetics, this interpretation finally suggests that if *Gravity's Rainbow* stands "on the landscape like a formless monster with little, if any, organizing skeleton," [Weisenburger 3] then *Mason & Dixon* may also lack such a strong skeleton, but it shows an organizing DNA instead. (196)

However, the novel's plot resolves itself into a non-deterministic vision of what this figurative child could become: a vision of the subjunctive, non-reduced possibilities inherent in the genetic makeup, even if not to be realized, or realized only in bursts of *jetztzeit*, a utopian possibility of social change concomitant with traumatic moments. Thus, although engaging genetics, Pynchon rejects the sense of destiny written into the text of a genotype that has been invested with "all the power and prestige of modern science" and therefore he seems to agree with the opinion of David Cox, a Stanford geneticist who asserts that

[f]rom the molecular genetics point of view, it's absolutely clear that we're demolishing the arguments of genetic determinism. But the facts have never got in the way of people who wanted to use genetics in a deterministic way in our society. (qtd. in Allen par. 27)

It is the employment of instruments and weapons whose workings are based on the Newtonian deterministic vision of natural laws that ensures the domination of Western civilization—especially its tradesmen, merchants,

and politicians—in Pynchon’s colonial America. The cosmic—the stars and planets the Astronomers observe—is harnessed in the service of political and economic power on earth by means of precise mechanisms. “The finer the Scale we work at, the more Power may we dispose. [. . .] They who control Microscopic, control the World” (663). Although Mason’s observation is made when explaining the precision and the long range of the Lancaster County rifle, Manfred Kopp treats this statement as “[a] hidden reference to genetics” (195). If this is so, it is a vision of co-opted deterministic and reductive genetics, serving the commercial and political needs of the twentieth-century military-industrial complex, as well as commodified mass culture. This conjecture seems to be confirmed by the circumstances in which the word helix(xx) is mentioned in the novel. It appears during a parodic conversation at the “infamous Lepton Ridotto” (410) during which Lord Lepton, a villain-businessman and capitalist owner of a hellish metal works in the American wilderness—an uncannily secularized version of the Puritan Lord of the howling wilderness—questions the need for such a rigid ordering of the universe as envisioned by the Great Chain of Being, a metaphor visualizing an immutable, permanent and hierarchical order linking all higher and lower forms of life. We are thus encouraged to see the figurative genetic make-up of the nation, or its heritage, as both flawed and manipulable, and, in keeping with the non-deterministic vision of genetics, unpredictable in its richness and therefore full of future promise and possibilities.

In *The DNA Mystique*, Dorothy Nelkin and Susan Lindee propose that the genome has become the modern metaphor for the soul (qtd. in Wolpe 217). In the same vein it can be averred that the double helix compositional skeleton of Pynchon’s novel, an externalization, so to speak, of DNA, can be interpreted as a modern, biologized variation on Rousseau’s reversal in *Emile* of the connection made by Plato in *The Republic* between justice inscribed in the soul and justice in the *polis*. Both inscriptions are written in the “same letters,” but what is inscribed in “small letters” in the individual soul is more legible when written in the large letters of the *polis* (Plato 615; Alryyes 20). By modeling the composition of his novel on DNA, and thereby externalizing the helix structure, the writer writes large the potential inherent in the “genome” of the infant nation, and gestures towards all the possible plots and narratives of the nation’s fate in bud. In this regard it is reminiscent of a novel containing all possible plots, familiar from Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths,” which indisputably serves as an intertext for *Mason & Dixon*, in particular the counterfactual chapter 73. However, the geneticist and ethicist Alex Mauron wryly observes that “[t]o be a human person means more than having a human genome, it means having a narrative identity” (832).

Discussing the rise in the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century of the novel and of narratives bearing witness to the birth of the nation, Ala A. Alryyes designates them “national narratives” and defines them

as “the constellation of symbolic manifestations of the nation—its political prescriptions, myths of origin, rules of belonging and proper feelings, educational proclamations and policies”—that “underscore this made (and not found) nature of the nation” (12). Alryyes further notes—appositely invoking DNA—that “[l]ike the two strands of a double helix, the novel and national narratives intertwine” (205).

Although Pynchon’s return to the site of the nation’s birth is a rhizomic pastiche of different genres, it is by and large stylized as an eighteenth century novel. Pynchon’s book is thus underscored by the same concern as the rising novel and the contemporary national narratives—namely that of “resist[ing] fictional and political representations in which nature and God, duty and happiness, were firmly on the side of the father and of the Father” (Alryyes 16). Because children “represent both the promise of and resistance to continuity” (Alryyes 15), the childhood of man and society becomes the site on which the patriarchal royal authority can be contested. However, as Alryyes observes, both discourses ascribe to the child the paradoxical position of “an actor in an original discursive condition and also an excluded cipher; he/she is both out of place and a place of beginning” (15). The critic points to a paradox associated with the rise of the novel which

often narrates a neo-archetypal story of an often unhappy child who leaves her/his father’s house for a place in the world. Staging his Lockean freedom, the child sets forth into the world, losing a home, acquiring narratable experience, and becoming the hero of the novel. But the child remembers his/her father’s tears, and often his curse. The child’s experience in the world narrated in the novel is also a dialogue with the lost home. (25)

Alryyes further invokes Rousseau’s views concerning the child and the philosopher’s “secularization of a religious nostalgia for a lost unity” which, she claims, resemble Romantic allegorical narratives where the history of humanity is represented as the life story of a single person. Thus “the life of one man comes to stand for the history of the nation, and the child comes to allegorize both privileged past periods of national history and the promise of a happier future” (20–21), while “the citizen . . . becomes a ‘child’ of the nation” (22). It can therefore be concluded, in Alryyes’ words, that “[i]f narrative is the literary form which allegorizes temporality, the child is the literary *content* which acts similarly” (181).

In discussing the American Revolution as a watershed in the history of the American family, Jay Fliegelman reflects in *Prodigals and Pilgrims* on the manner in which the transformations in familial relations that gave rise to more affectionate and egalitarian relationships between parents and children amplified political appreciation of individual identity and personal autonomy. These changes were themselves rooted on the one hand in the Protestant

championing of religious autonomy and on the other hand in Lockean ideas on child development and upbringing that stressed education as a means of acquiring individual autonomy, attaining moral independence, and developing rational self-sufficiency. Therefore it comes as no surprise that family-life and family-relations metaphors figure prominently in the cultural and political discourse in colonial and, later, Revolutionary America: “[A] call for filial autonomy and the unimpeded emergence from nonage echoes throughout the rhetoric of the American Revolution” (Fliegelman 3).

Studying a general revolution in the understanding of the nature of authority which swept eighteenth-century Europe and America, Fliegelman discusses metaphors capturing the moment of breaking away from the corrupting effects of dependence and indolence by, among other things, shedding filial obedience and dependence on the parents, especially a patriarchal father. Fliegelman further stresses that “[o]nce the cause of American independence had been identified with substituting God’s yoke for Britain’s, rather than with the suspect virtue of self-dependence, the Tory arguments for the necessity of a protective parent were turned back on themselves” (175). The elevation of Washington to the status of the nation’s new and benevolent father and subsequent identification of Washington with America has resulted in identifying ontogeny with phylogeny, as Fliegelman aptly puts it, conflating history and biography. Consequently, America saw itself as born at once, its infancy paradoxically interpreted as an attainment of manhood (Fliegelman 223). The view of the instantaneous rise of the nation was also conceptualized in spiritual terms, whereby rather than returning to the earthly father, the prodigal son discovers a father of grace:

The spiritual model for the new nation “born at once” was the miraculous gathering of the diaspora, the formation of the new Israel. And the model for both was the Christian become regenerate by a second birth, reborn by embracing a new father of grace. (Fliegelman 224)

Two metaphors seem to be particularly resonant in these circumstances: the metaphor of the prodigal son turned pilgrim, who substitutes the heavenly father for the earthly representative of patriarchal power, and the metaphor of an orphan mourning the demise of his parent in a death-bed scene figuratively representing the demise of the ancien régime, with the child finding a new and affectionate parenting in an America, which according to Paine’s statement in *Common Sense* has the power “to begin the world again” (45). These metaphors seem to correspond in *Mason & Dixon* to Brooks’s blinded metaphors of transmission.

The extradiegetic frame narrative that opens the novel presents the act of telling the adventures of Mason and Dixon to the Le Spark youth by their tutor Cherrycoke. Throughout these entangled narrative levels a “metonymic

unpacking” of the inactive metaphors of transmission takes place. Itself an inactive metaphor, Cherrycoke’s tutorial is instrumental in the metonymical transformation of blinded metaphors of transmission into the enlightened metaphor of transmission by parodying the Enlightenment emphasis on teaching through entertainment and subverting the idea of the unified historical curriculum designed to turn young citizens into children of the nation.

The parlor in which Cherrycoke is to tell his story is described in the frame narrative. A mirror placed on the parlor’s wall seems to play an ingenious intertextual role. The motif of the mirror and the cat reflected in it are reminiscent of the initial scenes of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass And What Alice Found There*, which not only begins, just like *Mason & Dixon*, with the invocation of children gathered around the fireplace on a winter evening listening to a story told by a lonely bachelor wistfully expounding on the flow of time, but also reverses the sequence of events in its mirror world (like when the queen cries out and only then pricks her finger), just as the plot of Pynchon’s novel does. *Mason & Dixon* ends at the moment of Mason’s death, chronologically preceding Cherrycoke’s act of relating Mason’s and Dixon’s adventures, which opens the novel. This mirror reversal metaphorically marks the promise—inculcated in the heads of the first young generation of independent America—of a new nation in the New World which it is hoped will be governed by the principles of freedom and equality, unlike the Old World, riven with injustice and corruption:

“‘Tis the Elder World, Turn’d Upside Down,” Ethelmer banging out a fragment of the tune of that Title, play’d at the surrender of Cornwallis, “‘Tis a lengthy step in human wisdom, Sir. [. . .]

“These late ten American Years were but Slaughter of this sort and that. Now begins the true Inversion of the World.” (*M&D* 263-64)

On the other hand, the mirror on the parlor wall and assorted mismatched pieces of furniture in the room appear to gesture toward the Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which, like Pynchon’s novel, purports to settle accounts—in the Gothic mode—with the nation’s traumatic ancestral past and its transmission. In *Mason & Dixon* the Gothic mode functions on two levels—as a parody of eighteenth-century Gothic motifs and conventions and in its twentieth-century transformed shape which underpins and permeates the pastiche rhizome of the novel. By referring to the eighteenth-century Gothic, the writer subtly invokes its concern with thwarted inheritance and a family history which express anxiety about the demise of the old patriarchal social and political system in the wake of the rise to power of the bourgeoisie. Thus, indirectly and uncannily, Pynchon introduces the problem of those disenfranchised inhabitants of eighteenth-century America who,

not allowed any consensual political rights, were considered dependent on the father's or father figure's authority and thus denied autonomy. These were slaves, servants, women, and children, of which only male children became independent on reaching maturity. The figure of *Tenebrae*, who as a girl would be destined to remain dependent on the family patriarch, while her name—"darkness" in Latin—invokes the darkness of the most wretched dependents, that is, slaves, and serves as a link between eighteenth- and twentieth-century Gothic.⁴

In *American Gothic*, whose publication coincided with the appearance of *Mason & Dixon*, Teresa Goddu points out that the critical tradition within American literature is dominated by the generic term romance that displaces or subsumes the Gothic, which, in turn, is often replaced by the more general term "dark," a term that is, paradoxically, stripped of its racial connotations. Following in the footsteps of Toni Morrison, Goddu shows that race has assumed the role of an uncanny counterpoint for the white identity in American literature since its inception. Thus "resurrecting the term *gothic* reasserts the racial roots of the romance's blackness" (Goddu 7). Goddu points to the Gothic's preoccupation with the materiality of flesh and its focus on the body, especially in the writings of African-American authors, who employ the Gothic "as a useful mode in which to resurrect and resist American racial history." Goddu invokes the ending of Richard Wright's introduction to *Native Son*,⁵ where Wright points out that the horrors that Poe or Hawthorne had to invent are already embodied in African-American history—especially the haunting legacy of slavery—and Ralph Ellison's opening to *Invisible Man*, where he insists that "the gothic must be understood in realistic terms" (Goddu 131, 153).

Thus, by bringing out the trauma of slavery and its implication in the nascent capitalist economy, the second mode of the Gothic in *Mason & Dixon* follows Wright's contention and Ellison's injunction, and must be comprehended in realistic terms; that is, as a real, historical circumstance that disrupts the national narrative of innocence, purity and equality (Goddu 10). Rev. Cherrycoke's observation in his *Spiritual Day-Book* testifies to Pynchon's novel's self-conscious use of the two modes of Gothic: "To anyone who has observ'd slave-keepers in Africa, it will seem all quite ancient,— Lords and Serfs,— a Gothick Pursuit,— what, in our corrupt Days, has become of Knights and Castles, when neither is any longer reasonable, or possible" (275). By his apocryphal act—apocryphal because handed down from generation to generation in Dixon's family without any historical record to confirm it—of freeing slaves driven by a slave trader, Dixon, a prodigal Quaker son, expelled by his local gathering in Northern England, attempts in America to extend the benefits of the autonomy enjoyed by children of God to those who are denied it on the grounds of their alleged mental and physical inferiority which, in the vein of Lockean thinking, necessitates keeping them dependent. Dixon's

intervention can thus be construed as a reworking of Brooks's blinded metaphor of transmission. A prodigal son's refusal of any authority, even one which seems as democratically exercised as that of the Quaker gathering, grows into defiance of the vestiges of patriarchal power in a society which in its filial struggle against Britain compared its own situation to that of a slave. Like a burst of Benjamin's *jetzzeit*, Dixon's courageous gesture reveals in a flash the possible, subjunctive America of social justice and equality. It is worth noting that its subjunctive nature is underlined by the allegedly apocryphal character of the event.

Mason is also a prodigal son turned pilgrim, albeit only shortly before his death when he substitutes the authority wielded by the vision of America he has in his dream for the authority inherent in the hierarchical structure of the contemporary British society. Having defied his father, a baker who accuses him of dreaming in vain of rising in society, Mason becomes an assistant to the Astronomer Royal, Mr. Bradley, and hopes eventually to occupy his position. He thus substitutes a surrogate father, Mr Bradley, for his biological father as a source of authority. Cheated of his dream of becoming the Astronomer Royal by Neville Maskelyne, Mason returns to his father's household and his estranged sons after accomplishing his American mission. However, never reconciled with his father, he finally takes his new family and the two sons from his first marriage to America, where he dies. Dr Isaac, Mason's second son by his beloved wife Rebekah, who dies giving birth to the boy, assumes the role of his father's guide and emotional support-giver while he is still in England. This becomes clear in particular when they both visit Dixon's grave. Thus, in a literal manner, Dr Isaac becomes his father's father; the child becomes the father of the man.

Dr Isaac and William, his elder brother, keep vigil at their father's death bed in America. Welcome in America, the orphans find support and can start a new life. Appositely, the metaphor of orphans mourning the demise of the old world in the death of their father, discussed by Fliegelman, is employed by Pynchon as an inactive metaphor of transmission, metonymically played out in Dr Isaac's and William's bereavement and mourning of their father.

It must be noted, however, that *Mason & Dixon* ends in a scene whose last sentences transpose the actual orphans, Dr Isaac and William, who at their father's death bed should be over 26 years of age, into the figures of Romantic children. In the timelessness of their subjunctive mode of existence they address their father as if he were still alive, "We'll go there. We'll live there. We'll fish there. And you too" (773). They embody the subjunctive promise of the pastoral America "not yet 'reduc'd to certainty'" (177), and the America that "*may yet be true*" (345) coexistent in its timelessness with

[...] 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)

Mason's neglected and lonely sons thus become avatars of the Romantic promise of redemption through the figure of a lonely child in communion with nature. They seem to figure Emerson's "[i]nfancy" which is "the perpetual Messiah, who comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise" (37).

And although "[t]he fantasied child that veils the incompatibilities and the impassés, this child that restores to the social and sexual landscape a prelapsarian intoxication, is supplanted in the very moment of its accomplishment by the actual child who threatens to live on as the reminiscence of that which it formerly elided" (Blum 25), the hysteron proteron reversal, familiar to Pynchon's readers from *Gravity's Rainbow*, ensures that the enlightened metaphor towards which the plot of the novel veers invokes the prelapsarian child, thus foregrounding the intoxication with an America of the timeless promise and possibilities figured by this Romantic redeemer figure.

Consequently, it is this image of childhood as a space of freedom and future promise viewed in retrospect, a promise concomitant with and continually thwarted by historical circumstances such as slavery, that reverberates with echoes of Emerson, and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and is even ironically continued in the boyhood dream of the Fitzgerald's *Jay Gatsby*. However, the enlightened metaphor of the redeemer child towards which the narrative desire driving the plot of *Mason & Dixon* gravitates is not just a blank screen of adult desire; it also projects a promise of "purposeful[ly] Dither[ing]" (5) guidance provided by the figure of a poet or writer. Tom Schaub insightfully observes that in Mason's sons' final words readers are no doubt meant "to hear the pastoral accents of Frost's farmer going out to clean the spring in 'The Pasture' ('You come too'), and Whitman's invitation in 'Song of Myself': 'I stop some where waiting for you'" (201). Pynchon's elusive figure of a poet or writer is indeed waiting somewhere there, inscribed in the subjunctive space of possibility figured by the redeemer child, and beckons to readers while pointing to traumatic circumstances in the history of America.

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Notes

¹ On the complexity of the narrative and the plot of *Mason & Dixon*, see Duyfhuizen.

² This impossibility of returning home, to the initial, prelapsarian state is reminiscent of the blocking of all passages home in Mingeborough in *Gravity's*

Rainbow: "But there is the occupation. They may already have interdicted the kids' short cuts along with the grown-up routes. It may be too late to get home" (744).

³ Tom Schaub calls the time of the novel "the remembered futurity of a nation to be born, the past already imperfect" (201).

⁴ Fliegelman notes that prior to the eighteenth century the word "family"—coming etymologically from the Latin root *familia*, itself derived from the word *familus*, or servant—usually denoted an entire household (10).

⁵ I would like to thank Tom Schaub for calling attention to the omission from this essay's initial draft of Richard Wright's discussion of the Gothic at the end of his Introduction to *Native Son*.

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