

Aspects of *Mason & Dixon*

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Triangulating Thomas Pynchon's Eighteenth-Century World: Theory, Structure, and Paranoia in Mason & Dixon, by Manfred Kopp. Essen: Blaue Eule, 2004. 300 pp. 39 EUR.

Manfred Kopp's *Triangulating Thomas Pynchon's Eighteenth-Century World* presents a learned, wide-ranging and energetic reading of *Mason & Dixon*. It might be more accurate to say that the study offers several readings of Pynchon's novel, because each element of the subtitle is elaborated in a chapter or a series of chapters.

The first set of chapters concerns attitudes toward history and historiography in postmodern fiction. Here, Kopp builds on the work of Linda Hutcheon in discussing the novel as an instance of historiographic metafiction. Since Hutcheon's understanding of this postmodern mode or genre emphasizes its self-reflectiveness, it is appropriate that Kopp includes in this section an examination of recent American self-reflective satiric and comic novels that are set in eighteenth-century Britain or America and thus provide analogues, anticipations or foils for *Mason & Dixon*. These include John Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor*, Erica Jong's *Fanny* and T. C. Boyle's *Water Music*. Kopp draws out some important and interesting parallels, especially between Pynchon's novel and the works of Barth and Boyle. He also offers in this section a fine discussion of the conflation of narrative levels and of anachronisms in *Mason & Dixon*.

The second set of chapters focuses on binarism, balance and complementarity. It ranges widely through the text to focus on numerous instances of doubling, mirroring and repetition. Concentrating on the most prominent characters, Kopp discusses not only the protagonists themselves but Mason and Maskelyne, Ethelmer and Cherrycoke, Zhang and Zarpazo, Hsi and Ho, the Learned English Dog and/as Fang, before moving on to consider the relations of yin and yang, an understanding of phenomena explicitly introduced in the novel by Captain Zhang. Kopp also discerns a helical structure in the narrative that results from the combined effects of Zhang and Zarpazo. This particular aspect of the argument seems less convincing and well grounded in the text than the others in this section; also, while analysis of the tendencies highlighted in this set of chapters can be strong and

persuasive, the overall argument of these chapters may be more convoluted than is necessary.

The last set of chapters concerns forms of paranoia, conspiracy and “creative paranoia,” understood as the development of as elaborate a “We-system” as the “They-systems” of the paranoid. Here Kopp makes the well-founded point that one of the most all-encompassing forms of conspiracy in the novel can be understood as the workings of the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith. The discussion of the ways the East India Company may be arranging most of the developments in the world of Mason and Dixon is poised and rich, as is the section on the function and meaning of the inverted pentacle which, throughout the novel, keeps appearing on rifle stocks. His reflections on the ominous implications of the coming rebellion in the colonies show Kopp to be a strong reader, as does his use of Deleuze and Guattari to argue that *Mason & Dixon* is a rhizomatic text.

Not only in his introductory review of the critical literature but throughout his discussions of Pynchon’s novel, Kopp draws on a wide range of readings and references. I would not raise serious disagreements with most of the larger arguments in this book. Again, the work does not offer a cumulative exposition or argument, or a linked series of arguments; rather, each set of chapters, sometimes even each chapter, remains largely independent of the others. That being said, Kopp has researched well and thought productively about the implications of Pynchon’s narrative. This book offers many sharp ideas about *Mason & Dixon* and well-informed readings of the text.

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