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## WHAT GOES ON BEHIND MASON AND DIXON'S BACKS IN PYNCHON'S NOVEL?

UDK 821.111(73)-3.09Pynchon, T.

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The departure point of this article is the author's opinion that every new encounter with a previously read text provides an occasion on which to re-think the act of reading, and to question disciplinary knowledge. After a brief description of his earlier reading of Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, which was focused on the issue of territoriality, the author begins his description of his latest encounter with the text by indicating the context in which it occurs, and concludes that in his first reception of the book he failed to note what he now recognizes as the novel's core theme. Designating Pynchon's economic thematics as that core, he analyzes it and shows how it produces a number of epiphanic moments in the text. In his conclusion, the author argues that the description of these epiphanic moments, or of what takes place behind the backs of Pynchon's protagonists, can be articulated if one incorporates certain discursive procedures from Karl Marx's writings into the analysis.

**Key words:** rereading, *Mason & Dixon*, cartography, economics, capital

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*...Claims of the Trade preempting all...*

(Pynchon 1998: 428)

Disciplinary self-reflection can take many guises. One can reexamine the historical trajectory of the discipline, or take stock of its current state and indulge in prognostications about its future. Frequently these three strands of self-reflection intertwine and reinforce each other. The cacophony of jeremiads about today's plight and the bleak future prospects of the humanities, the study of literature included, originate in such reckonings. Taking as my point of departure self-reflection as endemic to the humanities, in what follows I will choose a less-frequented path. Before describing it I note that, unlike other kinds of knowledge, which can dispense with the past results of research, in the humanities the archive is not a historical relic, antiquated and of interest merely as a curiosity, but an active factor in processes of interpretation and research. The diachrony of the humanities does not consist of an accrual of new insights, but of constant reengagements

with extant knowledge. That knowledge functions as a cautionary revenant, but although it is always at hand in our engagements with the archive, new circumstances in which this activity is carried out modify how the archive is understood. Hermeneutics deals with this issue, and I am aware that this brief summary does not do it justice: nor was it intended to.

Instead, I turn to the less-trodden path of self-reflection. Here I have in mind the activity of rereading, of asking what is at stake and what is set in motion when a reader or student of literature returns to a previously read and interpreted text. It is difficult to find evidence for such self-reckonings. One reason for the dearth of this evidence is that we are afraid of falling prey to self-indulgence, and are wary of the confessional mode. Another is the aspiration toward objectivity and scientificity in research. However, if literary study has as its object any text in the present conjecture of the discipline, I see no reason why the second-order text of our own previous interpretations cannot be an object of scrutiny. It is precisely this kind of text that is my paper's departure point. I will briefly describe my first reading of Thomas Pynchon's novel *Mason & Dixon* and then give an account of how it differs from my more recent rereading of the text. Needless to say, the very fact that I returned to this text bespeaks my belief of its aesthetic worth, and that I number myself among those who (still), despite the cacophony of jeremiads, profess the value of literature.

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Shortly after Thomas Pynchon published his novel *Mason & Dixon* (1997) I wrote an article entitled "Territoriality, Literature: the Newest Pynchon" (1998). My argument in this article was influenced by my then deep interest in geographical matters, particularly as these were expounded by theorists of the spatial turn. Geographers such as Edward Soja, David Harvey, and Derek Gregory, as well as literary critics who argued that the spaces and places of literature should be addressed with an analytic rigor lacking in time-centered disciplinary paradigms, doubtlessly focused my attention on a thematic that I saw as central to Pynchon's novel. In addition, the issue of territoriality and mapping had a profound resonance in a situation marked by the war that ensued after the demolition of ex-Yugoslavia and the consequent strife over borders. In such circumstances—a coupling of theoretical interest and existential exigency—geography truly seemed a matter of survival. Therefore it was understandable that my reading of *Mason & Dixon* addressed the issue of mapping, and geographical matters were the underlying premise of my first encounter with the book. I was not alone in assigning the theme a significant role; one could even say that I was stating the obvious.

Regarding this matter it is indicative that in his book on cartographic reason geographer Gunnar Olsson cites Pynchon's novel on a number of occasions. In a footnote he emphatically states why he does so: "In my estimation Pynchon's book is an outstanding exposition of cartographical reasoning, from beginning to end a stunning performance" (Olsson 2007: 447, f18). It is difficult to gainsay such an assessment. But, however indisputable it is that cartographical practices figure prominently in Pynchon's novel, after having returned to the text I find that my earlier interpretation did not recognize another theme in the novel, one that I would now wager to say is the prime structuring force of the narrative. Summarily: if cartography, to use Olsson's phrasing, translates the winding river of nature into the straight lines of culture, and if Pynchon thematizes this work, I propose and argue below that both the culture and work narrated in *Mason & Dixon* are surface phenomena of a structuring, albeit strategically hidden, economic core.

There is no doubt that the recognition of this blind spot in my earlier interpretation owes much to developments that have nothing to do with the text itself. Without going into particulars, since my first encounter with the book, matters of the economy have been foregrounded in such a manner that other concerns have been sidelined, not only in the place where I reread *Mason & Dixon* but on a global scale: the immediate background of this rereading is the financial crisis. In my contribution to the collection of essays *Dream Tonight of Peacock Tails: Essays of the Fiftieth Anniversary of Thomas Pynchon's V* (2015), I returned to Pynchon's first novel and showed how the "emergency of the crisis" predisposes the reader, or at least this reader, to recognize an economic thematic in that novel. Such is also the case regarding my rereading of *Mason & Dixon*. If, as one of the editors of the aforementioned essay collection Paolo Simonetti writes, Pynchon's first novel "foreshadow[s] some of the most topical issues and anxieties of the new millennium" (Simonetti 2015: 6), I argue that this foreshadowing is even more blatant in *Mason & Dixon*. The economic *problématique* was already inscribed in the spatial turn and expounded upon, particularly by Marxist geographers. Noting this, I merely add that I think the Marxist analytic cannot fully cope with the intractability of the economy in its present mutation, nor does it exhaust the economic presence that insinuates itself into Pynchon's narrative. I will return to this problem in my conclusion.

## 2.

Just as my earlier cartographic reading did not stake out a wholly new territory, neither do I claim to be original in proposing an economic reading of *Mason & Dixon*. Others have recognized the role of economic concerns in the novel. Immediately after its publication, Mark Siegel described the East India Company, one of the recurrent motifs in the book, as a “world-strangling economic octopus”. Ian Baucom wrote about the two cartographers that “everywhere they go, they discover scenes of global difference policed, contained, and threatened by the hidden and controlling hand of global capital” (2001: 158). In a reading that is more concerned with Pynchon’s *Against the Day*, Joshua Clover states offhandedly that the entirety of *Mason & Dixon* thematizes “the imperial rationalization of up-for-grabs territory” (2011: 40). This quotation hints at how acquisition and mapping always work in collusion, so that cartography will inevitably resurface at points in my analysis of the economic thematic. It will do so particularly in my account of how Pynchon describes the work of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon in America. Before that I will muster evidence of what I designate the novel’s economic presence. This evidence will lead me to a number of epiphanic moments in the narrative, which are not only significant for *Mason & Dixon* but are symptomatic of Pynchon’s work as a whole.

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Without overplaying its significance, Pynchon’s use of the logogram “&” in his title, which commonly appears in names of business partnerships, should not be ignored. To say the least, the paratextual marker is not neutral. Rather it points to a thematic cluster, which is reinforced by lexical data. Words relating to economics abound in the text, indicating that this semantic field is always nearby in Pynchon; not only is it explicitly referenced, but it seeps into descriptions that are not primarily economic. To illustrate: “He grows older, and a life of super-human excess is at last presenting its Bills, —whose demands turn ever harsher with the days, even at an Interest” (Pynchon 1998: 114). Furthermore, economic entities like the omnipresent East India Company, or agents such as investors and traders indicate that the Age of Reason, the historical background of the novel, is an “all-business world” (164), as Mason interjects while grieving the loss of his wife Rebekah.

The time of the novel is designated not only by personages but also by historical and cosmic events, which are implicated in economic concerns and interests. The global development of trade is explicitly named or subtly interwoven in remarks such as the following by Rev Wicks Cherrycoke:

“freshly infus'd Coffee flows ev'ryplace, borne about thro' Rooms front and back, whilst Madeira, which has ever fuel'd Association in these Parts, is deploy'd nowadays like an ancient Elixir upon the seething Pot of Politics” (6). The “nowadays” of Wicks Cherrycoke's narration is Christmas 1786, after the War of Independence, when his listeners' post-Revolutionary homes seethe with the flavors and aromas of a globalized cuisine. Foodstuffs, beverages, habits of dress: the material of Pynchon's world is a product of interconnectedness and mobility. But it needs to be said that Pynchon's genealogy of the global order is not disinterested. He frequently reverts to outright indictments such as the comment “Commerce without Slavery is unthinkable, whilst Slavery must ever include, as an essential term, the Gallows” (108). Put otherwise, Pynchon's evocation of global trade is not confined to snapshots of a changed phenomenal world, but gestures to tectonic changes.

Thus Cherrycoke recalls a youthful offence, which refers to what Marx called the “secret of primitive accumulation”: “somehow, what I got into printing up, were Accounts of certain Crimes I had observ'd, committed by the Stronger against the Weaker,—enclosures, evictions, Assize, verdicts, Activities of the Military” (9). This confession appears early in the novel. Anticipating my later argument, I note that the Reverend recalls how his betrayal of clandestine activities was not rewarded but rather landed him in prison, where he comes to understand “that my name had never been my own,—rather belonging, all this time, to the Authorities, who forbade me to change it, or withhold it, as 'twere a Ring upon the Collar of a Beast, ever waiting for the Lead to be fasten'd on” (10). In these seemingly offhand remarks Pynchon, through his primary narrator, adumbrates a recurrent insight of his work: human agency is always already co-opted by power structures outside its control. For my present argument it is important to note that these structures in *Mason & Dixon* are part and parcel of an economic transformation.

In addition to primitive accumulation and the globalizing thrust of trade, Pynchon inscribes into his narrative the emergent Industrial Revolution and its harnessing of nature. At the beginning of Chapter 21, he evokes a “Golden Valley” and explains how it is undergoing change in the new regime:

The precise Geography of the Water-shed was now primary,—where Races might go, for Wheels to be driven and Workshops to be run from them [...] the Flow of Water through Nature, along a Gradient provided free by the same Deity, might be re-shap'd to drive a Row of Looms, each working thousands of Yarns in strictest right-angularity,—as far from Earthly forms as

possible,—nor that ev'ry stage of the 'Morphosis, would have its equivalents in pounds, Shillings, and Pence. (207)

In addition to material practices—customarily called the real economy—Pynchon mentions financial practices and schemes. There is talk of “bank-drafts” (31), “Proportional Share” (32), “Compound Interest” (318), “principal income” (768) and many other financial instruments and schemes. When we read of “the East India Company Director and speculator, notorious for having introduced to the Dutch Stock Exchange the practice of trading Shares one did not actually own” (157) or of “financial dealings” and “prematurely exploding Bubble-Schemes, making wild raids upon the Exchange, Gambling Stocks of what prove to be only Ghost-Guineas” (527), we are reading a history of finance that reverberates with present concerns. The syntagm “Suicide-Banks and Madness-Pools” (159) or more explicitly “extravagant Stock-Bubbles” (416) is almost uncanny.

The settings of the novel follow a trajectory of global incorporation. But, as in all of his novels, in *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon is primarily interested in the United States. As elsewhere he unmasks the celebratory cant of the nation and its discourse of exceptionalism. Christy L. Burns holds that Pynchon’s “anachronistic” practices in the novel allow him “to deliver a comical portrait of the nation’s early history, joking that in its nascent history of Americans, we were even then as we are now”. But Pynchon’s critique of American exceptionalism in this novel manifests in other ways as well. Hence, Pynchon’s unexceptionalist America is envisioned as just one more spatial fix, to use David Harvey’s term, in the dynamics of global expansion and incorporation. Putting America in such a context abets Pynchon’s critical reading of the country’s origin. For instance, after a mythologized account of the New World we read the following disenchanting diagnosis and prognosis:

[...] this Age sees a corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick. Projectors, Brokers of Capital, Insurances, Peddlers upon the global Scale, Enterprises and Quacks,—these are the last poor fallen and feckless inheritors of a Knowledge they can never use, but in the service of Greed. The coming Rebellion is theirs,—Franklin, and that Lot,—and Heaven help the rest of us, if they prevail. (487-88)

In describing Mason and Dixon’s encounter with the turmoil of pre-Revolution America, Pynchon deflates the colonialists’ quest for independence and shows it to be motivated by purely material interests. As he emphatically puts it: “What turn of earthly history, however perverse,

would dare interfere with the workings of the Invisible Hand?" (411). In the novel, Benjamin Franklin teaches the surveyors never to pay the retail price, while George Washington "wants to talk real estate" (276) with his visitors. Washington recounts to them his experience of the Ohio Company, a wholly secular errand in the wilderness, to paraphrase Perry Miller's famous contribution to American exceptionalist discourse. Washington comments that the Ohio Company's westward expansion was "as deep in the savage state as men have been known to venture" (281). But unlike Miller's eschatological reading of the white man's mission in America, Pynchon has Washington explain the imposition of "order" upon "Chaos" in economic terms: "Markets appearing, with their unwritten Laws, upon ev'ry patch of open ground, power beginning to sort itself out, Line and Staff" (281). A little later in the dialogue, Washington makes a revealing comparison: "with our forts at Wills and Redstone Creeks, and a Communication between ... As the East India Company hath its own Navy, why, so did we our own Army" (281). When Washington adds that "Out in the wild Anarchy of the Forest, we alone had the coherence and discipline to see this land develope'd as it should be" (281), readers of Pynchon's work know that the first person plural, Washington's "we", is not the group Pynchon identifies with but is rather the very instance that empowers his oppositional stance.

The novel's deflationary reading of American aspirations is evident in the mapping that Mason and Dixon engage in, which amounts to no more than establishing a boundary between two properties. The Rev Wicks Cherrycoke recalls his work with Mason and Dixon and summarizes it as follows:

'Twas not many years before the War,—what we were doing out in that country together was brave, scientifick beyond my understanding, and ultimately meaningless,—we were putting a straight line through the heart of the Wilderness, eight yards wide and due west, in order to separate two Proprietorships granted when the World was yet feudal and but eight years later to be nullified by the War for Independence. (8)

The novel narrates both the bravery and scientific import of the enterprise, but throughout the text the reader encounters dilemmas of meaning and purpose. Pynchon's characterization of Mason and Dixon is based on the interplay between these different responses to their work, which are varied and nuanced. In the next step of my argument I will address a number of instances that register a dawning insight on Mason and Dixon that there might be something more to their scientific pursuit than they bargained for.

## 3.

Christy L. Burns writes: "If *Mason & Dixon* initially separates science and capitalism, by the novel's close, the two surveyors begin to suspect their work's collusion with some hidden, political agenda". I have qualms about designating this "agenda" as political, as doing so simplifies its complexity. Unlike Burns, who sees the surveyors' sense of collusion growing as the novel progresses, I think the complexity and power of the novel's "agenda" is hinted at as early as Rev Cherrycoke's aforementioned confession. However, even if one overlooks or misses the primary narrator's remarks about how he was used by powers outside his control, an insinuating force that works against individual volition and agency is traceable at other points of the story. In a dialogue in which Mason and Dixon discuss their appointments and what they are assigned to do, Dixon remarks: "If Jesuits are manipulating me, then are we two Punches in a Droll-booth, Friend, for as certainly would it be the East India Company who keep *thee* ever in Motion" (73). I ask the reader to note how Dixon intuits that economic interests are behind their cartographic assignment, and add his next remark which voices the possibility that even the secretive religious organization might be a pawn of a hidden structuring force: "Or are we being us'd, by Forces invisible even to thy Invisible College" (73). In an exchange late in the novel we find an even more emphatic formulation of this unease: " 'And Men of Science,' cries Dixon, 'May be but the simple Tools of others, with no more idea of what they are about, than a Hammer knows of a House.' " (669). A mocking epiphanic moment ("one of them smacks his Pate for something other than a Mosquitoe" [692]) occurs in Chapter 71:

"Everywhere they've sent us,—the Cape, St. Helena, America,—what's the Element common to all?"

"Long Voyages by Sea," replies Mason, blinking in Exhaustion by now chronic. "Was there something else?"

"Slaves. Ev'ry day at the Cape, we lived with Slavery in our faces,—more of it at St. Helena,—and now here we are again, in another Colony, this time having drawn them a Line between their Slave-Keepers, and their Wage-Payer, as if doom'd to re-encounter thro' the World this public secret, this shameful Core [...]. (692)

Throughout *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon uncovers different secrets, and points to the shameful aspects of the Age of Reason. There is definitely a political charge in this reading of the Enlightenment, and Pynchon's politics



are unambiguous: he empathizes with those victimized by the emerging new order. That empathy reaches a crescendo when Dixon refuses a slave master's offer of a "mulatto gal", and "far too brightly", as Pynchon has it, retorts with a warning: "Sooner or later [...] a Slave must kill his Master" (697). However, we must not be rash in suggesting that Pynchon here embraces and promulgates Hegel's master and slave dialectic. Not only should we heed Pynchon's description of Dixon's utterance ("far too brightly") but equal weight ought to be given to the slave master's pronouncement when Dixon refuses the offer of the "gal", saying that he is not in the market. The slave master sarcastically responds: "'Ho!' drawing back in feign'd Surprise, 'what's this, not in the market, how then may I even begin to educate you, Sir, or should I say, *Friend*, upon this Topic? The news, *Friend*, being that all are in the Market' " (696–97). If Dixon's prognosis of reprisal and the slave master's statement of fact are weighed by the novel as a whole then the latter is more in keeping with the world Pynchon sets before us. That world is overshadowed by intimations of a presence that thwarts human freedom and uses human agency to further its designs. Simply, something over which they have no control is occurring behind the backs of Pynchon's characters.

4.

The immediate source of my title is a remark Michael Eldred makes in his book *Capital and Technology: Marx and Heidegger*. It appears in the seventh chapter and reads as follows: "According to Marx, the essence of capital is the endless, limitless valorization of value, an essence which sets itself up 'behind the backs' of people as Marx often puts it". In brackets Eldred gives the page numbers from the German edition of *Grundrisse*. If we look up the phrase in *Grundrisse*, it occurs in Marx's discussion of money. The same passage in the English translation reads as follows:

The period which precedes the development of modern industrial society opens with general greed for money on the part of individuals as well as of states. The real development of the sources of wealth takes place as it were behind their backs, as a means of gaining possession of the representatives of wealth. (Marx 1993: 225)

It is repeated in the same paragraph when Marx contends that gold is given "a really magical significance behind the backs of individuals"

(1993: 225), and Marx reverts to the same phrase when he discusses the preconditions for exchange between individuals, “the common interest which appears as the motive of the act as a whole is recognized as a fact by both sides” (1993: 244). He adds: “but, as such, it is not the motive, but rather proceeds, as it were, behind the back of these self-reflected particular interests, behind the back of one individual’s interest in opposition to that of the other” (1993: 244). If we look online, we find that others have remarked on this phrase in Marx. Jonathon Collerson notes that the phrase is repeatedly used in *Capital Volume I*, and in his brief discussion works with the phrase to describe the sort of materialism he finds in Marx. Collerson quotes Marx’s famous statement from the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where Marx writes that men do not make their history “under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past”; thus our present “has always already been produced behind our backs” (qtd. in Collerson). In my opinion this explanation neither exhausts the semantic potential of the phrase nor does it explain the epiphanic moments that I have targeted in Pynchon’s narrative.

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In my opinion Michael Eldred gives a more convincing reading. After drawing attention to the phrase, he writes:

Setting-up and valorization are the respective essential actions of the respective essences, whereby action here cannot be thought in terms of human action, but as an historical destiny that prevails over and overwhelms everything by disclosing the totality of beings to human understanding within a specific epochal cast.

Eldred correctly remarks that “to think valorization as attributed to destiny goes against the grain of Marxian thinking”, but I add that it goes against the grain of *one kind* of Marxian thinking. This Marx who deciphers the “destinal” as a “social product” is the humanist revolutionary who shares with Pynchon’s characters the values of the Enlightenment. But just as Mason and Dixon are perplexed when they see themselves as “merely cogs”—to use another Marxian metaphor (Marx 1990: 739)—in a totalizing dynamic, there is a Marx who lets slip in phrases such as “behind the backs of people” the possibility of a more perplexing, if not sublime, vision of capital. Others have worked with that Marx. For example, Fredric Jameson troped the intimations of the presence that I find in Pynchon as the sublime unmappability of capitalism (1991). This is the Marx that I firmly believe still speaks to the present mutation of capital and to the epistemological

blockage we feel as it holds sway and unfolds. Pynchon is one author who works in the face of that blockage. If my reading of *Mason & Dixon* has merit, it supports a reading of Pynchon's opus that finds there the lurking presence of capital. To bring that presence to the fore, one can do worse than call upon Marx. But this is a Marx who will also have to be reread and rethought.

Such a rereading will recognize that a metaphoric excess, reflecting a cognitive lack, exists in Marx that on one hand challenges facile political appropriations of his thought, and on the other intimates a reality that analysts purporting to provide rational explanations of their domain regularly miss. That excess finds expression in Marx's figurative language and is found in his practice of calling upon literary works in the discussion of certain problems. These procedures are not rhetorical flourishes; rather they indicate attempts to cope with the cognitive lack. My use of the syntagm "behind people's backs" supplements the work undertaken on Marx's ghosts (see Policante 2010) or his vampires (see Neocleous 2003). The metaphoricality of Marx's writing offers ample material for further research. The same holds for his literary references. Summarily formulated, both instances signify an excess that cannot be subsumed under Marx's analytic. Given that excess is something today's economists do not reckon with and that, when it presences itself, it undermines their neat formulas, in conclusion I programmatically point to literature as the site on which a more thoughtful engagement with the economy is staged. I do so while imagining Marx reading Pynchon; a Marx who could see both the mutation of capital after his nineteenth-century analysis, and what befell the revolutionary project that analysis inspired. Indulging in that thought experiment I have no doubt that Marx would find that excess in Pynchon's writings just as he did in the literature that was at his disposal. If that excess is provisionally designated as the unrepresentability of capital, then one can see that Pynchon has from his first to his last novel assayed its enigma. By supplementing my first reading of *Mason & Dixon* with this one, I hope to have shown how Pynchon engages in this novel an originating moment of modernity. The assemblage of cartography and economy that is thereby unearthed subverts modernity's claims to both enlightenment and emancipation. In this sense the presence behind the backs of Pynchon's surveyors exemplifies the systems and power that always destine dystopian outcomes for Pynchon's utopian strivings.

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