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<https://doi.org/10.15017/2559282>

出版情報 : 文学研究. 117, pp.45-54, 2020-03-06. Faculty of Humanities, Kyushu University
バージョン :
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The Line, the Map, and the Gaps in the Fold in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*

Ted Clontz

In the book translated into English as *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*, Julio Cortazar asserts that he “write[s] by default and dislocation... out of an interstice” (17). He further asserts that the “[p]hilosophers deliberately estranges himself and dislocates himself in order to discover the fissures in appearance” (20). These points have relevance for what I will be discussing. Thomas Pynchon in his novel *Mason & Dixon*, as in other of his works, writes to destabilize boundaries; we might say he folds in other generic traits into the novel form and uses other devices literary and otherwise to try to take the readers thoughts beyond ossified boundaries.

In 1763, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon who first worked together two years previous on the transit of Venus began a survey they had been hired to do, setting the boundary between the properties of William Penn's land, Pennsylvania, and the land of Lord Baltimore, Maryland. This boundary had been in dispute for several decades, tied up in Chancery, before finally being settled. They also were to set the line for what would become the Delaware colony. The line they drew, often through unsettled wilderness, is today part of the boundary between four US States. This line later became in part a real and in part a metaphorical demarcation between slave states and free states prior to the Civil War; it became the metaphorical line separating two distinct US cultures, the northern US from the southern. Indeed Dixon's name would morph into Dixie, a nickname for the South, an ironic occurrence

because Dixon, as a Quaker, was against slavery. It is also worth noting that the two were, in a sense, products of the Age of Reason in their scientific endeavors, as was, when we consider Franklin, Jefferson and others among the founding fathers, the soon to be country of which their line would be a part.

“Mason, pray You,—tis the Age of Reason...we’re Men of Science...must all days run alike” (27). Those words are spoken early on in Pynchon’s novel, *Mason & Dixon*, published almost two hundred and fifty years later, and centered around the adventures of these two before, during, and after the drawing of the line. Perhaps the reason Pynchon chose these two as a subject is lines, for boundaries such as this separate, divide. As Tony Tanner puts it in discussing this novel: “[l]ines become walls; differences become oppositions” (229). As one character in the novel puts it:

Boundary!.... Ev’rywhere else on earth, Boundaries follow Nature,—coast-lines, ridge-tops, river-banks,—so honoring the Dragon or Shan within, from which Land-Scape ever takes its form. To mark a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon’s very Flesh a sword-slash, a long, perfect scar, impossible for any who live out here the year ‘round to see as other than hateful Assault. How can it pass unanswer’d? (542)

Another states: “The Model...is Imprisonment. Walls are to be the future ...these will follow right Lines.... If we may not have Love, we will accept Consent,—if we may not obtain Consent, we will build Walls” (522).

The line ossifies into a wall, a boundary, intensifies the ability to control. In a long passage the narrator, lays out in part what is at stake from another perspective.

Does Britannia when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?—
in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is

allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of mankind seen,—serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that may yet be true,—Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measured and tied in, back to the Net-Work of Points already known, that 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, the Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair. 343

The importance of this long extract is, as Tanner points out, the word subjunctive, the grammatical case for hopes, wishes, dreams, and a word that appears several times within the novel. In other words, this passage points to the possibilities for humans that such lines can potentially take away. Here, metaphorically, the mapping becomes a delineation, a separation, where the chance for change is reduced as identities and oppositions become set, ossified. It makes someone either/or, either Marylander or Pennsylvanian, either Pennsylvanian or Delawarean. Identities, statuses become ossified. It creates a metaphorical inside and an outside where none existed before.

The other important word in this passage is “Rubbish-Tip,” a British word for trash dump. It also appears a few times within the novel. In reading it, one cannot help but to call to mind Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*. In this work, WASTE is an ambiguous acronym; perhaps it is a mode of communication for those left out of or turning their backs on the social contract. It may or may not exist, like the organization, Trystero that the T

in it represents. What this metaphorically stands for in *Lot 49* is those who are part of an excluded middle. People, some of them, discarded by society, some, Nazis, pedophiles, we might think for good reason, but being outside society they still search for connection in other ways. In this short work, subcultures exist either hidden or in the shadow of the dominant culture, including one so far right it is left, which seemingly mocks political demarcations. Many are ironically outside while being inside. They are fissures, gaps, interstices in the social fabric. Near the end, Oedipa thinks “how did it ever happen here, with the chances so good for diversity,” and she feels as if she is “walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeros and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles left and right...Ones and zeros” (150). This is binary, either/or thinking.

One definite oddity existed about the lines drawn during Mason & Dixon's work. Because a tangent point was not where it should have been, the starting point of one line was five miles off. The result of this was the notorious Wedge, a disputed space of just over one square mile bearing that shape which came into being along the borders of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. State ownership of this wedge was not determined until 1921, over one-hundred and fifty years after it came into being. It today belongs to Delaware, and the crossroads community of Mechanicsville, Delaware lies within it. This space properly belonged to no one, was neither Maryland, Delaware, nor Pennsylvania. It was a gap, an interstice in the lines folding in the land, the science at that time of mapping.

As Pynchon describes it in the novel:

...the notorious Wedge,—resulting from the failure of the Tangent Point to be exactly at this corner of Maryland, but rather some five miles south, creating a semi-cusp or Thorn of that Length, and doubtful ownership,—not so much claim'd by any one Province, as

priz'd for its Ambiguity, –occupied by all whose Wish, hardly uncommon in this Era of fluid Identity, is not to reside anywhere.

469

What he means when saying “this Era of fluid identity,” I think, harkens back to one of the issues dealt with in the settlement of the Americas. The ability to leave your past identity behind, assume a new identity, a facet which writers such as Melville and others dealt with. He continues:

Yet there remains to the Wedge and Unseen World, beyond Resolution, of transactions never recorded, –upon Creeksides and beneath Hedges, in Barns, lofts, and Spring-houses...indeed, all manner of secret paths and clearings and alcoves are defin'd... Anybody may be in there, from clandestine lovers to smugglers of weapons, some hawking contraband. 470

Such spaces often appear in Pynchon's works, whether it is Europe in the days immediately after Germany's surrender where normal rules do not apply, the zone in *Gravity's Rainbow* where governments no longer exist and, in the novel, realities and fantasies intermingle, or the Deeparcher program on the deep, or dark, web in his last novel to date *Bleeding Edge*. In his work attempting to define a poetics of postmodern fiction, Brian McHale highlights this type of space, after Foucault, as a heterotopia, a space where ontological boundaries collapse. In the case of the Wedge, the ontological boundaries of control are delayed coming into being, allowing for the fluid identities, the transactions never recorded, we might say, a ghost or shadow space of existence outside the boundaries of map lines. Like the groups, the individuals Oedipa happens upon in *Lot 49*, what occurs in the Wedge is not part of official culture in all that implies. But like all zones, no matter how radical they are in his novels, it eventually gets mapped back into the grid. That they become eventually a part once again of the grid is not the point. Thinking

outside ontological boundaries, thinking a plurality and not an either/or is the point. One might think of Hakin Bey's—(Peter Lamborn Wilson)—temporary autonomous zones, his way of eluding structures of control though spaces that do not attempt to be permanent and therefore fall under the control of institutes either inside or outside. These zones he sees as temporary because when they become permanent, when they ossify, they stifle humans in various ways. But this is not what Pynchon is after; I would argue that he is using such spaces metaphorically to challenge thought, which makes his works difficult at times.

In writing about *Mason & Dixon*, Carmen Perez-Llantada Auria asserts that one of Pynchon's reasons for choosing this subject is that the setting is the Age of Reason, a time when Newton's Laws were at full power in universal perceptions. God the clockmaker was the metaphor, winding his perfect machine and watching it operate from afar, far from the particle-wave duality and other quantum developments. It is, in part, a work of two gentlemen of reasonable age, usually that is, trying to force the world to fit into the observances and calculations. And failing, such as with the Wedge, or making it so in narrator Wicks Cherrycoke's words: "everything should come together at the same perfect Point" (337).

Another way to think of the boundaries is categorical thinking. Not too long after the publication of *Mason & Dixon*, Francisco Collado-Rodriguez published an essay in which he discusses this—the law of the excluded middle—in Pynchon's work. The point he makes is that among Western thought the either/or conundrum has had a very large impact upon the way we perceive the world, that it can ossify into rigid categories. Just as metaphorically the map demarcates people, begins separating definitions, such as North/South. The ones and zeros of binary thinking.

Categorical thinking is an important aspect of human thought. The

ability to assign something to a class, for instance, or a genre, however, has the chance to ossify into walls, or boundaries that stifle, and turn the other into an opposition where none is merited. Related to this, Collado-Rodriguez also points out “the categorical Law confirmed the overwhelming rule of dualism and supported the human insistence on finding and imposing limits and boundaries on reality” (473-74). Collado-Rodriguez does not leave it at that and goes on to point out as others have that:

Language cannot escape binary structures...[t]he literary motif of the “reconciliation of opposites,” also promulgated by many artists and thinkers in the course of the last twenty-five centuries, has escaped any discursive formulation so far: legal language, for instance, cannot get rid of its traditional dichotomies, guilty/not-guilty, true/false... (476).

The main point of his essay is to look at how Pynchon in the composition of his works attempts to escape these dualisms.

How does Pynchon attempt this?

In the broad sense, his novels have been categorized as Menippean satires, after the work of Northrop Frye and Mikhail Bakhtin. They incorporate songs, jokes, limericks, parts of plays. They incorporate references and bits of popular culture, and though he was not the first, he does so in such a way that would destabilize the notions of high and low culture and art to a degree I would argue not attempted before. One might say he folds them into the perceived set boundaries of the novel. Bakhtin thought the novel was primary because it could incorporate all other genres. And this his works do. In so doing, I would argue, they destabilize the concept of the novel, or at least how the novel had come to be defined, thought generically, how characters are represented. In this specific instance, he does this within the subgenre of historical novels. Typical historical novels usually would not make the heroes,

Mason & Dixon, so entertaining, or treat the life threatening situations they sometimes face as sometimes comic. Perhaps it is apropos that at one point it is difficult for Mason & Dixon to believe that America—and it's hard to know whether he is referring to the colonies or the country to come—seems to refuse to be taken seriously.

Another way in which he does this is through anachronisms: As the two sail for South Africa and the *Transit*, for instance, the bestselling historical novelist set in the British Navy, Patrick O'Brian, makes an appearance: "Hey tén Pat, Scribblin again', are ye? More Sea stories?...he's also acknowledged as the best Yarn-Spinner in all the Fleets"(54). In another instance, Mason, while in New York City on a break from surveying, meets a young woman: "Amy is dress'd from Boots to Bonnet all in different Articles of black, a curious choice of color for a milkmaid." When she speaks its: "Oh, aye, at home they're on at me about it without Mercy. I'm as, 'But I like Black,'—yet my Uncle, he's as..." (400). The girl is, as we might say today, gothed out, not the type of clothing choice to be found in that day and age. Replace her use of as when she speaks with the word like, and the result is the much commented upon penchant for the over use of that word by young people in the 80s and 90s.

The novel also contains a reference to rural electrification, which only began being discussed over a century later, before becoming a program during the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression. A reference to Bill Clinton's famously saying he didn't inhale. At the simplest level, we can regard these instances as linking the past to the present, showing the past folded into the present and vice versa destabilizes the sense of history as separate, not a part of the present.

Another technique his uses in this novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Against the Day* in particular is the mixture of fictional levels, what some call

metalepsis, or one fictional world creeping into that of another, the prime, oft cited example being Cortazar's story, "The Continuation of Parks." In this novel, Cherrycoke, is telling tales to keep the family with which he stays entertained; he has come to America to visit Mason's grave and lingered on in the house of his sister in Philadelphia. At the same time, two teenagers read a racy novel which itself incorporates the captivity narrative, an important genre in early American fiction. Two of these characters escape from the Jesuits and the text they are in to join the narrative of *Mason & Dixon*, the story Cherrycoke is telling, in a merging of narrative levels.

One more example: Mason and Dixon are characters many ways opposite in temperament. As Auria points out, however, sometimes they shift positions in the way they believe, in what course they should take, blurring a convention of characterization of humans, both in fictions and life. In addition to this case of opposites morphing into/toward one another, there is a pair who pretend to be the two, often arguing about who wants to be Mason and who Dixon. These and other devices Pynchon uses. Things that are outside what is considered the generic norm are folded into the novel.

Regarding all these devices: They show that the work forms an interstice, a neither/nor space outside the mapped-in, folded-in boundaries of thinking and genre. In his work on Michel Foucault and the fold, Gilles Deleuze writes of "constructing an *inside-space* that will be completely co-present with the outside space on the line of the fold" (118). He adds, "To think is to fold, to double the outside with a coextensive inside" (118). What he means here is that the boundary, the line between inside and outside is not a wall, but a porous contour of the self, individual or collective. Thought can, I would suggest, break down the sense of non-porous borders. It is also worth note that he asserts that Andrei Bely's novel *Petersburg* "uses...cortical folding to convert outside and inside" (119). In other words, it upsets the typical bound-

aries as portrayed in fiction and in life.

We might think of it in relation to *Mason & Dixon* as Pynchon folding outside forces into the generic category. We might say it represents the possibility of thinking beyond simple ossified inside/outside distinctions. To look at it as a continuity where the inside is contiguous, perhaps overlapping, folding with the inside. It's a given that, for instance, humans acquire their identities partially from the outside, but to destabilize the boundary, make it porous, work against ossification, enables mental adaptations to come into being. The novel that inspires or requires thought challenges the reader to step outside their usual ways of thinking acts, I would say, as an interstice, a gap between binary, ossified ways of thinking. Through the poetics he uses, I think Pynchon does this in his works. The boundary line in *Mason & Dixon*, the Age of Reason itself at some levels, offer great subjects for him to work this magic.

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