



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2011) Whose line is it anyway? Geographical specificity of enlightenment in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*. In: The 8th Biennial Symbiosis Conference, 23-26 Jun 2011, University of Glasgow, UK. (Unpublished)

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/12264/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>

or alternatively

contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Whose Line is it Anyway? Geographical specificity of Enlightenment in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*

While Enlightenment is often posited as the key thematic engagement of Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, Hanjo Berressem has correctly pointed out that such studies rarely define the precise context of Enlightenment to which they are referring and all too often ascribe a straightforward antirationalist approach to Pynchon's text, while neglecting the fact that a Humanist Pynchon must, in some manner, also be accredited to an Enlightenment tradition.¹ In short, it becomes necessary to ask: whose Enlightenment? In the case of *Mason & Dixon* this is perhaps best phrased as: whose line is it anyway?

In this paper, I will posit that a profitable investigation into this question can be found by answering: Michel Foucault's line, Foucault's enlightenment. Indeed, as of 2007 Foucault was still the most cited scholar in the humanities. With this in mind, I will present the points of convergence and departure between the Enlightenment stances of Pynchon and the Foucault of the 1978 introduction to Georges Canguilhem's piece *The Normal and the Pathological*. Crucially, in this work Foucault asks “why this question of the Enlightenment [...] has such a different destiny in Germany, France and the Anglo-Saxon countries,” the primary distinction drawn being the German lineage of a “historical and political reflection on society” evidenced by “the Hegelians to the Frankfurt School [...] and Max Weber,” whereas in France, Foucault believes it was the history of science, “through Duhem” and “Poincaré” in which the philosophical stakes of the Enlightenment were invested.² In considering such intra-European specificity, I want to open up notions of trans-Atlantic Pynchon, particularly as

1 Hanjo Berressem, “Review: Criticism & Pynchon & “Mason & Dixon”,” *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 838.

2 Michel Foucault, “Introduction,” in *The Normal and the Pathological*, by Georges Canguilhem, 4th ed. (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 10-11.

they pertain to *Mason & Dixon*, as containing more nuanced depths than has been previously supposed.

As a small degree of background context on Foucault's work until this point, in the subdermal archive of *Dits et Ecrits*, rather than in his monographs, it is worth turning to the first direct instance in Foucault's writing of the term Enlightenment, which comes in one of his earliest publications (*DÉ002*, 1957). In this work, Foucault sets out to contextualise nineteenth-century psychology as one of the many disciplines seeking to imitate the natural sciences – with, as Foucault sees it, limited success owing to the persistence of humanism – and find an extension of the laws governing natural phenomena in man (“de retrouver en l'homme le prolongement des lois qui régissent les phénomènes naturels”). According to Foucault, the imitated factors include quantification (“rapports quantitatifs”), resemblance to mathematical laws (“élaboration de lois qui ont l'allure de fonctions mathématiques”) and explicative hypotheses.³ Such a formation, although deduced by Foucault in a different fashion, is entirely congruous with the philosophy/history of science backdrop against which Habermas situates Max Weber's sociological extrapolation: Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, in which it is put that “‘Observation, experiment, calculation’ are the three tools with which physics unlocks the secrets of nature”.⁴ Foucault's early, uncritical use of the term “Enlightenment” is, even at this stage, framed in the German “*l'Aufklärung*”, thereby establishing a Kantian reference, Kant's famous piece, which Foucault later worked upon is called “*Was Ist Aufklärung*” -- what is

³ Michel Foucault, “La psychologie de 1850 à 1950,” in *Dits et Ecrits*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 120.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Polity in association with Basil Blackwell, 1986), 145-150; Foucault also mentions Condorcet in passing at Foucault, *HM*, 640.

Enlightenment? In this early stance, however, Foucault proposes the natural sciences as the base from which all concepts of the Enlightenment and rationality grow and thereby presents a notion of Enlightenment that stems from the same root as Weber, although taking neither the same route nor reaching the same judgemental conclusion as the end of the *Protestant Ethic*.

Weber has been central to much commentary on Pynchon's modernity. Although it is a topic for another time, much of this criticism is misplaced. However, these elements of Weberian mathesis, that do seem to hold are also raised by Foucault, but with an interesting geo-specificity at play. While *DÉ002* makes a sweeping generalisation as to the inevitable uptake of mathesis, in his 1966 review *DÉ040* praising Ernst Cassirer's neo-Kantian perspective in *La Philosophie des Lumières*, Foucault juxtaposes the pan-European institutions of learning in 1933 against the impending backdrop of National Socialism to show the incomparability: "France has had its teachers, England its public schools, Germany its universities" ("La France a eue ses instituteurs, l'Angleterre ses *public schools*, l'Allemagne ses universités"), in which, "The character of the German university had a function there that we can scarcely imagine" ("le personnage allemand d l'universitaire ont exercé là-bas une fonction que nous imaginons à peine").⁵ While Foucault's conclusion that German universities fostered a moral conscience at that dark time is incidental to the argument here, what is striking is the delineation of each European nation. It is here that early Foucault's correspondence with a quantifying Pynchon truly begins to become problematic. According to Foucault, this phenomenon of transference from the natural sciences in the Enlightenment project - which has been taken

5 Michel Foucault, "Une histoire restée muette," in *Dits et Écrits*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 546.

as a non-geographically determined granted in most accounts of a Weberian Pynchon – is only applicable to one region. Congruous with Dreyfus and Rabinow's account of Foucault as a “finer grained” Weberian⁶, it is specifically French.

According to Foucault, then, the critique of Enlightenment in historical and social terms is primarily a German trend, while the French have explored this topic through the natural sciences. Foucault himself proposes to bridge the two. To begin to explore this geographic specificity and look for overlap between Foucault and Pynchon, it is prudent to examine that text which comes closest to intersecting the Enlightenment and geo-diversity: *Mason & Dixon* with its “latitudes and departures”, its “there and back again”s and its mechanical ducks. Indeed, David Cowart, among many others, has highlighted this theme, calling Pynchon's Enlightenment epic “a 773-page extension of the sentiments previously articulated in Pynchon's 1984 article “Is It OK To Be a Luddite?”⁷ Furthermore, aspects of geographical specificity have played a major part in the history of Pynchon's writing and this cannot be underplayed. In early Pynchon criticism, that charge was led by William Plater whose work on the Baedeker guides placed them centrally for an understanding of *V.*⁸ and regarding the later texts, David Seed has made a good case for the postcolonial interrelation of cartography and imperialistic economics.⁹ Regardless of the justice or otherwise of these appraisals, for Pynchon's astronomers the political climate is admittedly difficult. France and Britain have fought the Seven Years War and France is on the brink of covertly supporting the Americans in their

6 Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault : Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 133, 166.

7 David Cowart, “The Luddite Vision: Mason and Dixon,” *American Literature* 71, no. 2 (June 1999): 344.

8 William M. Plater, *The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 64-134.

9 David Seed, “Mapping the Course of Empire in the New World,” in *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon*, ed. Brooke Horvath and Irving Malin (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 84-99.

separatist enterprise. For this reason, a justified early onset of Anglo-American Francophobia is merited within the work when Bongo, the olfactory prodigy aboard the *Seahorse*, announces from the “windward side”, with “a look of Savage Glee”, the imminent approach of the “Frenchies”. Crucially, this nasal approach towards detecting the French is a deviation from the usual rationality onboard, it is depicted as an outmoded tribal ritual (“Savage”), one of the “ancient Beliefs” that will “persist” despite the assertion of the Captain Smith to Mason and Dixon that “You'll note how very Scientifick we are here, Gentlemen”.¹⁰

Indeed, the multiple juxtapositions of the French in regards to scientific advances throughout this work – which seem, superficially, to lend credence to a parallel with Foucault's conception of Enlightenment specificity – can be neatly encapsulated by the broadest, and oft-cited, examples of Jesuit sympathy and Vaucanson's mechanical duck. The overly-satirized¹¹ Jesuits who appear throughout *Mason & Dixon* are reputed, by Pynchon's Dr. Franklin, to have constructed a laser-based system of geostationary satellite relay, which Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds believes “[undermines] chronology”¹² through its translation into eighteenth-century terms as “giant balloons” deploying “Mirrors of para- (not to mention dia-) bolickal perfection” to achieve their “d---'d Marvel of instant Communication”.¹³ Introducing this episode, however, is an awkward moment where Dixon is suspected of harbouring Jesuit sympathies owing to a complex series of diverse geo-political interaction.

10 Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), 37.

11 Cowart, “The Luddite Vision,” 354; Carl Ostrowski, “Conspiratorial Jesuits in the Postmodern Novel: Mason & Dixon and Underworld,” in *UnderWords: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's Underworld*, ed. Joseph Dewey, Irving Malin, and Stephen G. Kellman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 98.

12 Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, “Introduction: The Times of Mason & Dixon,” in *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon's Mason & Dixon: Eighteenth-Century Contexts, Postmodern Observations*, ed. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2005), 12.

13 *Mason & Dixon*, 287.

The suspicion laid on Dixon at this point turns upon his recognition of Chinese writing on the obverse of one of Céléron de Bienville's lead plates which are under discussion.¹⁴ While Bienville's lead-plate expedition was less overtly violent than his war against the Chickasaw Indians¹⁵, Dixon's casual dismissal of the "Royal Seal of France" further aggravates his companions' suspicions to the point where he is only redeemed through pointed dropping of the "Masonick password". The culmination of this is an explanation that they specifically suspected Dixon of being a Jesuit from "up North in Quebec" who has "cross[ed] the border in disguise, to work some mischief down here".¹⁶ Interestingly, this section is effecting an intricate conjunction of France, the Jesuits, America and technology, the last of which is Pynchon's recurrent signifier of Enlightenment. This is jointly achieved by the situation of the Jesuits' base in Quebec, the historical capital of New France, and the aforementioned French imperialistic claiming expedition of Céléron de Bienville¹⁷, the inscription on whose plates were referred to by an unidentified Indian replying to Col. William Johnson as "Devilish writing", although in reference to the French, rather than any Chinese.¹⁸ However, it must also be considered that it is hardly just the French who form the locus of this technological drive.

In regard to the former of these observations, it should be noted that France was not always a refuge of tolerance for the Jesuits, only so during this colonial phase before the Seven Years War. For example, in 1554 the order met

14 Ibid., 285-287.

15 See James Atkinson, *Splendid Land, Splendid People: The Chickasaw Indians to Removal* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

16 *Mason & Dixon*, 287.

17 Boyd Crumrine, *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania with Biographical Sketches of Many of its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co, 1882), 23-28.

18 Ibid., 27.

with stern opposition from Bishop Eustace du Bellay and the French Parliament on theological and political grounds and it took them until 1562 to establish themselves legally in France¹⁹, a good deal later than in many European nations, the society having met with Papal approval through the bull *Regimini militantis ecclesiae* as early as 1540.²⁰ As such, Pynchon's representation of a conflated Franco-Jesuit establishment is historically specific to the explicit time-frame of *Mason & Dixon* and does not appear interested in exploring the Jesuit movement's complicated history within France. The situation is also historically accurate for the New World settlers, however, and, as Carl Ostrowski points out in his piece on conspiratorial Jesuits in *Mason & Dixon* and DeLillo's *Underworld*, this exhibits an English nationalism that was primarily reflected through an anti-Catholicism, of which the Jesuits were the most convenient embodiment.²¹

On the second point, *Mason & Dixon* does not restrict its technological innovation to the French. While it is true that the most notable technological entrepreneurial incident in the novel, Jacques de Vaucanson's mechanical invisible erotic duck²², is the product of both a "Frenchy"²³ and a Jesuit²⁴ and also that, according to James J. Walsh, the Jesuits were among the upper echelons of technological innovation at this time²⁵, were Pynchon to be entirely aligned on his conception of Enlightenment with the Foucault of 1978, one would also expect his depiction of Germany to be one of social, as opposed to

19 John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge Mass. Harvard University Press, 1993), 287-296.

20 *Ibid.*, 284.

21 Ostrowski, "Conspiratorial Jesuits in the Postmodern Novel: *Mason & Dixon* and *Underworld*," 93-95; See also Arthur Marotti, "Southwell's Remains: Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in Early Modern England," in *Texts and Cultural Change in Early Modern England*, ed. Cedric C. Brown and Arthur Marotti (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 37.

22 *Mason & Dixon*, 371-381.

23 *Ibid.*, 371.

24 André Doyen and Lucien Liaigre, *Jacques Vaucanson: Mécanicien de Genie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), 12.

25 James J. Walsh, *American Jesuits* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 10; cited in Ostrowski, "Conspiratorial Jesuits in the Postmodern Novel: *Mason & Dixon* and *Underworld*," 96.

technological, reform. This does not appear to be straightforwardly the case. Indeed, in the frame narrative section of the novel in which the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke relates the tale of Mason and Dixon to his captive audience of youngsters, they are visited by a certain “Dr. Nessel, the renown'd German Engineer”, one of only a handful of references to that country in the novel and worth bearing in mind as a parallel to the German engineers depicted in Pynchon's earlier work. Dr. Nessel, however, far from focusing his critique in a Foucauldian “historical and political reflection on society”, adds a new planet and knowledge thereof to the “numerous Orreries” he had built across America.²⁶ Other references to Germany are also framed by the natural, as opposed to social, sciences; the mix of Laudanum offered to Mason is “compounded according to the original *Formulae* of the noted Dr. Paracelsus, of Germany”²⁷ and Dixon receives the “latest Declination Figures” by means of the “German Packet”.²⁸ This last example which, as Dave Monroe has pointed out²⁹, actually refers to a boat (there are also references to the “Falmouth packet”³⁰ and the “Halifax packet”³¹) has further resonances with technological systems for delivering data in the twentieth century, most notably packet switching networks, the German version of which (the “German packet” network) came under sustained attacks in the 1980s by crackers who could intercept the data sent over the system.³² The conspiratorial nature of the communications in the passage that follows – “Hush [...] No one ever speaks of that aloud here – seems to suggest that this reading is merited and, as a

26 *Mason & Dixon*, 95.

27 *Ibid.*, 267.

28 *Ibid.*, 299.

29 Dave Monroe, “Germany,” *PYNCHON-L*, 2002, <http://waste.org/mail/?list=pynchon-l&month=0201&msg=64578&sort=thread>.

30 *Mason & Dixon*, 96.

31 *Ibid.*, 704.

32 Chris Goggans, “Packet Switched Network Security,” *Phrack*, March 1, 1993, <http://www.phrack.org/issues.html?issue=42>.

consequence, the depiction of Germany is once more dragged into the techno-scientific arena.

Yet, there is an alternative presentation of Germany in Pynchon's work which would show that country as a force for social critique; the German aligned as a religious and mystical entity, presenting an argument against techno-rationality. The foremost example of this is the "German of Mystical Toilette" who "advises the Astronomers" against the "Folly", permitted by "Cities", that [QUOTE] "daily Living upon the Frontier will not forgive. They feed one another's pretenses, live upon borrow'd Money as borrow'd Time, their lives as their deaths put, with all appearance of Willingness, under the control of others mortal as they, rather than subject, as must Country People's lives and deaths be, to the One Eternal Ruler. That is why we speak plainly [...]. Our Time is much more precious to us" [END QUOTE].³³ Such a stance, wherein one sees a critique of the division of labour in society as a specific reaction to Enlightenment rationality which permitted such an economic setup, is extremely interesting in Pynchon's urban context. The reason for this is that the allusion to Manhattan in *Against the Day* suggests September the 11th 2001 to be an act "appropriate [...] to urban civilization".³⁴ In short, the social critique of the division of labour – on its trajectory through Enlightenment – culminates in a mode of resistance that posits terrorism as just retribution, perhaps indicative of a new militant postsecularism in Pynchon's works.³⁵

To return to geo-specificity, however, the ultimate balance of German presentation in *Mason & Dixon* lies more to the natural sciences and this infects

33 *Mason & Dixon*, 344.

34 *AtD*, 151.

35 On postsecularism in Pynchon see John A. McClure, *Partial faiths* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); As always, on terrorism and *Against the Day*, Kathryn Hume, "The Religious and Political Vision of Pynchon's *Against the Day*," *Philological Quarterly* 86, no. 1/2 (Winter): 163-187 is required reading.

even those instances where a German social or even metaphysical critique is at play. The best example of this is the German ghost “Dieter” encountered by Maskelyne early in the novel. In this scenario, Dieter begs Maskelyne to use his influence with Clive to release him from his bond of military service into which he felt press ganged. While this could be viewed as an element of social critique, it is tempered once more by a scientific rationality, for the pull that Maskelyne feels is described as one of “no escape”, a pull then described, as Strandberg has noted³⁶, in the language of science: “the Logic of the Orbit, the Laws of Newton and Kepler constraining”.³⁷

Which brings me, in my final roundup, to the fact that, of course, much of Pynchon's novel is speaking of America; it is for good reason that the largest section of *Mason & Dixon* bears that nation as its title. Yet, as with much of Pynchon's work, such as *Gravity's Rainbow*, the European setting serves as the backdrop against which America was formed, against which it was supposed to fork. This is echoed in *Mason & Dixon* under the most heavily quoted review passage wherein it is asked “Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream? [...] serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*”.³⁸ The Foucault of 1978 does not give any detail on the English and American stakes of Enlightenment, he merely points out that they are different, which makes any direct reading with Pynchon difficult at this stage. From what has been seen, however, it looks more likely that Pynchon's nationalities do not reflect a specific form of engagement with the Enlightenment, but rather adopt the earlier Foucault's stance on the natural sciences and mathesis as the basis for all, geographically non-specific

36 Strandberg, “Dimming the Enlightenment: Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*,” 107.

37 *Mason & Dixon*, 162.

38 *Ibid.*, 345.

Enlightenment discourse. Perhaps it was obvious that a novel referring to the division of America by a Line as a Geometrik scarring would take such an approach. This said, a 1975 interview with Foucault could offer material for further work on this topic in its revelation of an interesting, specifically American fascination with Nazism, asking: “Why these boots, caps, and eagles that are found to be so infatuating, particularly in the United States?”³⁹

While, historically speaking, there is no choice but for the dreamer of America to be Britannia, Pynchon's limited engagement with geo-specificity of Enlightenment provides interesting new in-roads to his work while also demonstrating, in America's surrender, along with the rest of the Occident, to a domineering instrumental reason, a newly reinforced scepticism towards American exceptionalism. An exploration of intra-European geo-specificity leads, in Pynchon to a universal Enlightenment which, despite being set in America's separatist phase, binds the nation back to its origin, the era of possibility forever closed down as she moves, once more, towards *Gravity's Rainbow's* movie theater, sitting beneath the descending ICBM and joining in the faux-optimistic sing-along: “Now everybody--”

39 Michel Foucault, “Sade: Sergeant of Sex,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michael Foucault, 1954-1984.*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000), 226.