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“The Driver's Whip is an evil thing”: Enlightenment as Mass Enslavement in the Works of Thomas Pynchon

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 til the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into 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.

Thomas Pynchon – Mason & Dixon

[PAUSE]

For those who have not yet encountered his work, Thomas Pynchon is an American writer of novels, short stories and occasional journalistic pieces who was born in 1937 and won the National Book Award for his 1973 novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* which was also selected for the Pulitzer Prize by the jury, although overturned by the board. He is, although he dislikes the term, a recluse; his whereabouts are unknown and there are extremely few photographs of him; none recently.

Pynchon's novels are vast in scope (*Gravity's Rainbow* has over 400 characters), but focus – as a broad-sweeping generalisation – on the path that America could have taken, but refused. His novels chart the route of the States back towards right-wing politics, particularly post-WW2, through analogies, or allegories, of postmodern historiographic metafiction. His tone veers between slapstick comedy and earnest sincerity: *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, focuses upon the transference of power post-WW2 to the US and the way this power is predicated upon weapons systems developed under the Nazi regime; the space-race and ICBMs all relied on the V-2 as their initial base.

Pynchon's other novels are possessed of equal grandeur. *Mason & Dixon*, the main focus of my talk today, examines the surveying work of the two eponymous leads and essentially offers Pynchon, in most appraisals, an opportunity to hold forth on Ludditism over 800 pages. As one would expect, however, of a book charting the course of the Line (the “Geometrick scar” as Pynchon terms it) which divided the North and South in the American Civil War, *Mason & Dixon* is enmeshed, twofold, in notions of slavery.

On the one hand, the novel's protagonists bring to the fore, through what Christy L. Burns has called Pynchon's parallax mode, the dramatic irony of our knowledge, as readers, of the significance that the astronomers' Line will have for America, and the world, through slavery; a dramatic irony based on an anachronism that is central to Pynchon's postmodern historiography and subverted subjunctive hope, as expressed in that opening passage. On the other, the preoccupation with Ludditism that informs the entirety of Pynchon's

corpus places a Frankfurt-school-esque Dialectic of Enlightenment at the heart of the works. This comes to us, however, via a difficult philosophical refraction, for the well-known formulation Kant put forward in his “What is Enlightenment” is that “Enlightenment is man's release from his *self-incurred* tutelage”. This view, quite clearly, sees Enlightenment as liberation from our bondage; two of the other parties at this table, Pynchon and the Frankfurt School, see, if you'll excuse my Adornion paraphrasing, Enlightenment as Mass Enslavement.

In this paper I will make an attempt to reconcile these two troubling poles – the historico-mimetic and the philosophical – through a third lens; the distorted version of Kant's Enlightenment presented by Michel Foucault.

In a 1978 introduction to Georges Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological*, Foucault carves the Enlightenment into three phases: 1.) the coming-into-being of “scientific and technical rationality” as a component of “productive forces” and “political decisions”; 2.) rationalism as a Utopian “hope” for a predestined “revolution”; and 3.) Enlightenment “as a way to question the limits and powers it has abused. Reason – the despotic enlightenment”.¹

To begin a parallel reading of Pynchon and Foucault along this theme, it is easy to deal with the first of these temporal phases. Certainly, Enlightenment, for Pynchon, is situated at the locus of politics and technology mediated by production and consumption. For instance, *Gravity's Rainbow* presents this

1 Foucault, “Introduction,” 10-11.

through a Weberian framework of rational bureaucracy, the logical outcome of which is IG Farben – who produced Zyklon B gas for the holocaust – and the Phoebus cartel while *Mason & Dixon* deploys the Jesuit telegraph system – which parodies contemporary geo-stationary satellite relay – and the constant positivist assertions of characters throughout: “You'll note how very scientifick we are here Gentlemen”.

The second of Foucault's phases, however, is more difficult to cover. Evidently, a “Utopian” hope must imply both of its Greek homophonic prefixes, the best and the impossible, conflated into one. Certainly there is a moment in *Mason & Dixon* where such a hope is situated, within an overriding framework of subjunctive possibility yet undermined by its impossibility. This is the purported tale wherein Dixon is reputed to have snatched the whip from the hands of a slave driver and attacked him with it.

Moving, then, to deal with Slavery at this mimetic level in *Mason & Dixon*, this episode and its theme, which Charles Clerc has called that for which Pynchon “saves his greatest wrath”² and which other critics have regarded as utterly central to *Mason & Dixon*³, is presented within a much-commented upon anachronistic structure. Indeed, Dixon's assault on the slave-vendor is pointedly contextualised from the reader's knowledge of the later significance of the Line for the Civil War, liberal values and slavery: “‘Go back to Philadelphia,’ someone shouts at Dixon.”⁴ This moment of hope for Dixon represents, as Jeffrey Staiger puts it with allusion to Griffith's 1915 film, an

2 Charles Clerc, *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000), 103-104.

3 Hinds, “Introduction: The Times of *Mason & Dixon*,” 14; Parrish, *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction*, 185; Thill, “The Sweetness of Immorality: *Mason & Dixon* and the American Sins of Consumption,” 49.

4 *Mason & Dixon*, 699.

“alternative space of imaginative and ultimately political possibility, an America without inequality and injustice that hovered like the ghost of an ideal over the birth of a nation”.⁵ However, this boundless possibility is tempered, twofold, by the narrative situation whereby the certainty of Dixon's interference is questioned: “‘No proof,’ declares Ives”⁶; and, for Staiger, in its fictional boundaries: it “exists only as a conjecture in *Mason & Dixon*”.⁷ This is because the action is situated at the junction of three temporal points: Dixon's supposed 1755 attack, Wicks Cherrycoke's 1786⁸ post-revolutionary war storytelling frame narrative and Pynchon's late twentieth-century perspective, the effect of which Mitchum Huehls has attributed in part to a ventriloquizing “Chinese-boxed” style.⁹ For a Foucauldian temporal specificity of Enlightenment, this has interesting consequences.

In one sense, then, this episode can be seen to present Enlightenment's Utopian hope for a predestined revolution through the fusion of ante- and post-bellum perspectives. Mason and Dixon's antipathy towards slavery seems to be on track as the winning side, apparently strengthened through the layered twentieth-century viewpoint. Foucault's mid-stage Enlightenment appears confirmed: the teleology of progress seems, for the inhabitants of *Mason & Dixon*, to wend its way. However, Pynchon's narrative is not so straightforward; the overlaid parallactic effect makes perspicuous the fact that inequality is not eradicated, but rather masked in the contemporary era. As Rousseau puts

5 Jeffrey Staiger, “James Wood’s Case Against ‘Hysterical Realism’ and Thomas Pynchon,” *Antioch Review* 66, no. 4 (Fall): 641.

6 *Mason & Dixon*, 695.

7 Staiger, “James Wood’s Case,” 641.

8 *Mason & Dixon*, 6.

9 Mitchum Huehls, “‘The Space that may not be seen’: The Form of Historicity in *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), 32-40.

it in *Emile*: “[t]here is no subjection so perfect as that which keeps the appearance of freedom”.¹⁰ This is, for instance, explored in Pynchon's 2006 novel *Against the Day* through Hop Fung, the owner of the white slave simulation industry with which Dally Ridout becomes involved¹¹, this parody on slave “colour” also having been posited in *Gravity's Rainbow* where Claude Gongue the “notorious white slaver of Marseilles” encounters problems with his quarry who wish to be green and magenta slaves.¹² By making clear the outrage felt when the racial “norms” are reversed, highlighted through the Baudrillardian hyper-reality of the simulation¹³ and the Conradian implication of *agent-provocateuresque* behaviour, Pynchon reveals the injustice of that very “normality” through a *reductio ad absurdum* of the group-boundaries across which empathic identification must, but often fails to, traverse: “whites in both places are become the very Savages of their own worst Dreams”.¹⁴

Furthermore, this middle-phase Enlightenment is further problematised in Pynchon because of the interdependence of the narrative layers. If, even at one level, a positivist ethical abolitionist teleology is proposed, it is concomitant that the sceptical contemporary voice protests that Enlightenment rationality was instrumental in first creating slavery for, and then turning slavery to, its own ends; first it conquered and then deployed. Brian Thill puts this one way when discussing the astronomers' fantasies of using slave labour¹⁵ – “slavery leading the charge to Enlightenment”¹⁶ – while Pynchon puts it another:

10 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or, On education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 120.

11 *AtD*, 339-340.

12 *GR*, 246.

13 See Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton, trans. , Beitchman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 172.

14 *Mason & Dixon*, 301.

15 *Ibid.*, 69.

16 Thill, “The Sweetness of Immorality: Mason & Dixon and the American Sins of Consumption,” 73.

“Commerce without Slavery is unthinkable”, a slavery which depends upon the “gallows”.¹⁷

To delve further into this phenomenon of the applicability, or continuation of, slavery to contemporary capitalism in Pynchon's works, it is necessary to explore Pynchon's relativism. Much of Pynchon's work is predicated upon trans-temporal relativistic metaphor, which I will here explore, initially, through his treatment of the Holocaust, before returning to slavery. This is best seen in Pynchon's early works, *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* through the character Lieutenant Weissman.

Weissman (note: white man) is the character otherwise known as Captain Blicero (the bleacher) in *Gravity's Rainbow*; the sadistic Nazi responsible for the launch of Rocket 00000: the Schwarzgerät and its sacrificial asymmetric load, his sex slave Gottfried. However, even in *V.*, Weissman's tendencies towards extreme right wing politics are manifested through his interrogation of Mondaugen's knowledge of “D'Annunzio”, “Mussolini”, “Fascisti” and the “National Socialist German Workers' Party”. Finally, he is disappointed: “‘From Munich and never heard of Hitler,’ said Weissman, as if ‘Hitler’ were the name of an avant-garde play”.¹⁸ Weissman is also, dressed in his 1904 get-up¹⁹, instrumental in the conflation of two historical periods that occurs during Foppl's Siege Party; the Nazi regime, who perpetrated the Holocaust and the German Südwest, who committed genocide against the Herero populous. The cumulative effect of this evidence is dramatic for it not only serves to build a horrific awareness of the genocidal drive enacted by von Trotha against the

¹⁷ *Mason & Dixon*, 108.

¹⁸ *V.*, 242.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

Herero population in 1904, but also, crucially, provides a referent for the Nazi death camps. Pynchon, in his aside quip on Weissman - “[t]his is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good” - relativizes the Holocaust.²⁰

This is, of course, ethically tenuous and is cross-applicable to Pynchon's treatment of slavery. Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, was written at the apex of Postmodern Historiography, best embodied by Hayden White. White, known primarily for the extension of Hegelian emplotment advanced in *Metahistories*, suggests that there is, essentially, only a single difference between narrative history and fiction: the claim to truth.²¹ As a causal chain is constructed between the events of the chronology, White claims the emergence of “an inexpugnable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena”, a relativity that “is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding”.²² Such statements, when revolving around the Holocaust, have found poor reception among those with the greatest right to specify the appropriate modes of representation: the survivors. Perhaps the most uncompromising of these voices is the perspective of Elie Wiesel who believes, not only in the absolutism of his experience, but also in its quale-like inexpressibility: “only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experiences into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so”.²³ Wiesel's view is intensely problematic. While White might take issue with the possibility of transforming any experience into knowledge, this absolute stance also impinges upon the pedagogical function of history. To exclude the

20 Pynchon, *V.*, 245;

21 White, *Metahistory*, 93-97.

22 White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” 37.

23 Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 166.

possibility of total empathic response by banishing Holocaust experience to the realm of the ineffable is, in the sense of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, to which Pynchon makes repeated reference in *V.*, to designate it as on par with the “mystical”²⁴, that which “we must pass over in silence” and about which nothing meaningful can be said.²⁵

To think about this relativism in terms of slavery and to return to the theme of Enlightenment, at one level, then, it appears to do a disservice to the victims and survivors of slavery when Pynchon moves his discourse from the marked body of the slave, the cruelty of the driver's whip to a distinctly contemporary commerce which also cannot function without a new form of “slavery”. After all, the experience of the checkout assistant is surely incomparable to that of African slaves, shipped from their homes to a savagely dehumanising world wherein they become property. Pynchon often forgets this; regardless of the era's supposed disdain for meta-narratives, his is apocalyptic. This is conveyed in an ironic heroization of the present, be it in *Gravity's Rainbow's* faux optimistic sing-along “Now everybody-”, *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice's* elegiac fogs for the Sixties, or *Against the Day's* airborne sailing towards a “grace” in a Calvinist sense, but which is actually World War 2, which seems to symmetrically parallel the earlier nautical disaster climax to *V.* It can often seem that, for Pynchon, things are just getting worse, or at least no better: capitalism, from slavery, appears but little improvement.

In a consideration of this relativism of slavery, then, two modes have to be dealt with: representational relativism and trans-historical relativism. As

²⁴ *TLP*, sec 6.522.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, sec 7.

regards the former, it must be noted that the absolutism of experience that would do justice to victims is, itself, deeply problematic. When the survivors of a historical trauma are all dead and gone, their experience must pass into the inherent relativism of language if it is not to be forgotten. As such, representational relativism can be construed as an ethical action. Cartesians will claim that it can never reconstitute the experience itself but, then, at least it can salvage what remains.

This is more difficult with trans-historical relativism. While it may be disrespectful to trace a lineage of slavery to wage-slavery, especially given that slavery is, I am extremely saddened to say, still alive and well in its most brutal forms today, it is still a valid genealogical tracing. Pynchon illustrates this twice in his work, firstly via the Calvinist schema of the Preterite and the Elect and secondly, more directly.

To deal with the more direct treatment of the issue first, it is only necessary to quote the episode in which Dixon is discussing whether the condition of weavers in Stroud is comparable to the slavery he finds in America: "I have encounter'd Slavery both at the Cape of Good Hope, and in America, and 'tis shallow Sophistry, to compare it with the condition of a British Weaver". The retort given to this reads: "You've had the pleasure of Dragoons in your neighborhood? They prefer rifle-butts to whips,--- the two hurt differently,-- what otherwise is the difference in the two forms of Regulation? Masters presume themselves better than any who, at their bidding, must contend with the real forces and distances of the World,-- no matter how good the pay. When Weavers try to remedy the inequality by forming Associations, the

Clothiers bring in Infantry to kill, disable, or deliver up to Transportation any who be troublesome". In this case, Pynchon seems, by giving Dixon's antagonist the stronger argument, to endorse the view that comparison of slavery to capitalism is an ethically viable move.

In considering how Pynchon's complex play on preterition and election ties in, however, we return to notions of Enlightenment and emancipation. Although I don't have time to give a full rundown here, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day* both feature, extensively, the labels preterite, for the dispossessed, and elect, for the successful capitalists. Such a reference to Calvin's theology (in which God has pre-selected those who will be saved and those who will be damned and there is nothing one can do to change it) is important for a consideration of Enlightenment and enslavement. If Pynchon's work is truly the nihilistic pit of impossibility so often proposed - in which, quoting here from Pynchon's non-fiction essay on Sloth, "nearer my couch to thee", we are no longer able to sever our identities from the Enlightenment technocracy around us: "that which increasingly defines us, technology" - then it is not surprising that the Calvinist doctrine is deployed across almost all his works, for even if the Preterite gain knowledge, their fate is still predetermined, Enlightened, or not. It is not, then, who or what we can dominate under an Adornion schema of Enlightenment that is presented in Pynchon's works, but rather a more Foucauldian notion of what we can, in both a practical and Kantian sense, know. As Pynchon puts it: "we do know what's going on, and we let it go on". The Enlightenment paradigm of knowledge ties in with a helpless predestination where knowledge of one's election or preterition makes no difference, for one cannot alter one's state. Knowledge does not lead to action

which could free us; enlightenment appears as, if not enslavement itself, then certainly not a liberation.

To wrap things up here, I will end with one last example from *Gravity's Rainbow* that works on this troubled double-edge of Enlightenment as a liberating knowledge: the tale of Byron the Bulb. In this episode, often cast as “surreal” or bizarre, it is revealed that a light bulb named “Byron” is demonstrably “immortal”, to the great displeasure of the multinational cartels who thrive on the inbuilt redundancy of their products and whose enterprise would be subversively undermined should news of this particular bulb become public.²⁶ Obviously, entwined in this allegory of capitalism and power is the notion of Enlightenment; Byron, although nominatively Romantic, is not an agent of illumination without reason. A coherent reading of this Enlightenment context is made by Patrick McHugh, who asserts that Byron's tale mirrors Adorno and Horkheimer's “enlightenment of the Enlightenment”, acting as the solely clued-up agent against the Phoebus system which, although “ostensibly committed to the Enlightenment, to bringing light into the world, uncovering truth, empowering freedom and justice”, actually “is no more than a cog in a vast cooperate cartel that uses Enlightenment as a ruse in service of social control”. Against this intricate network of power stands Byron, “the dissident intellectual enabled by his position in the social system to perceive the repressiveness of the system and dedicated to transforming his role from cultural agent of repression to cultural agent of freedom”.²⁷

While McHugh remains sceptical of the capacity of such a figure to mount

²⁶ GR, 647-655.

²⁷ Patrick McHugh, “Cultural Politics, Postmodernism, and White Guys: Affect in Gravity’s Rainbow,” *College Literature* 28, no. 2 (Spring): 1-28.

any effective resistance, entwined as it is within the hegemonic white-guy structure, such an interpretation is valuable in this context for its recognition of the Foucauldian entanglement of knowledge and power, but neglects an even stronger aspect to emerge from the narrative. As McHugh notes, Byron's world of resistance gradually collapses through the aesthetic movements; Romanticism to Modernism to Postmodernism. There are two features of this contraction, however, which must be foregrounded: firstly, Byron's world shrinks to the point of personal betterment with disregard to societal influence - a very Voltarian trope; secondly, and more importantly, dominant systems depend upon ignorance and unenlightened states, a potential breakdown in the simple trajectory of Enlightenment to capitalist rationality. The state in which Byron finds himself may be an accurate account of Enlightenment's results from a sceptical viewpoint, but it is certainly a deviation from Kant's original formulation, for it seems as though Byron actually exists in a state of unenlightened immaturity, self-incurred tutelage; in losing the will to revolution and regressing to darkness, is Pynchon critiquing Enlightenment, what Enlightenment has become or, in fact, the state in which the bulb has gone out: unenlightened humanity?

Pynchon's Enlightenment fiction, therefore, fuses aspects of many thinkers into a hybrid beast. It is not strictly Kantian, for the positive liberation from our own enslavement that knowledge should bring has not come to fruition. It is not strictly in line with the Frankfurt School, for although it would be fair to say that Pynchon sees a totalitarian nature in Enlightenment, Pynchon seems to imply that the knowledge brought by Enlightenment would be crucial for any potential resistance, even if that resistance has never come-into-being,

remaining forever a regulative idea. Enlightenment, then, as mass enslavement? No. This is too simple a construct, even if the themes do converge massively in Pynchon's work. While Pynchon himself is, in one way, situated in the third of Foucault's camps – his work sits in the enlightenment tradition and uses its own knowledge to self-criticise – such a stance considers only a single Enlightenment tradition, whereas Pynchon's writing contains, quite clearly, an amalgamation of multiple schools of thought on slavery and enlightenment. If *Mason & Dixon* brings together these divergent thinkers of Enlightenment in its representation of a line that scarred America, before we can talk about that line I would like to close with the observation that we must, first, ask in which tradition of enlightenment and liberation we are thinking. Are we looking at trans-historical metaphorical relativism and the ethical validity of applying slavery to the contemporary, Enlightened, capitalist era? Are we looking at the complex intersection of mimetic spheres and dramatic irony in Pynchon's treatment of slavery? Are we looking at our potential enslavement to the Enlightenment paradigm? While I hope I have touched upon each of these aspects and their interrelation today, it demonstrates the importance of first asking : whose Line is it anyway?