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Thomas Pynchon. *Mason & Dixon.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. 773 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-3758-6.

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Mason & Dixon is an extremely fictionalized biography of the astronomer and surveyor who loaned their names to the bifurcation of American culture. Thomas Pynchon's work begs a close examination of the relationship between popular culture and history; this latest novel is a prism refracting an accepted line of history into a harlequin spectrum of pop-cultural events. The Mason-Dixon line was one of the first divisors of American society, delimiting everything from free and slave states, to industrial and agricultural cultures, to tastes in music and food. In this novel, the Line, or the Visto, as Mason and Dixon call it (for it essentially provides a way of seeing things), foreshadows much of the conflict in American culture, but its making also provides a panoramic view of the dreams and nightmares of those who made it.

"All history must converge to Opera in the Italian Style," Pynchon suggests (p. 706). But "History is not Chronology, ... nor is it Remembrance" (p. 349). History is composed of a thousand histories, a vast variety of stories necessary to connect us to all of our potential. It is precisely here that students of American culture, particularly popular culture, help fulfill that essential role, taking up "Part of the Common Duty of Remembering" (p. 695).

Popular culture trails everywhere in Pynchon, like toilet paper on the great writer's shoe; it is more important to understanding history than what we traditionally have been taught is notable. George Washington smokes dope with our heroes, and Ben Franklin's scientific interests reach their highest and best use in his nightly stage show. Popular fiction ("The Ghastly Fop") and poetry (Timothy Tox's "Pennsylvaniad") provide a common bond for the vast cross-section of characters meeting in countless English and American taverns and coffee houses. Urban myths (talking dogs and ghostly side-shows) and suburban (giant Indian tombs that tap and focus the earth's magnetic field) are the fabric of this fiction, and are, at some level, what America is all about.

Pynchon's sympathies are anti-historical to the extent that the study of history is perceived as either an exhaustive excavation allowing some definitive analysis of the past or a scientific calculation to reduce the human past to a series of causative forces and predictable events. If such a practice were possible, Pynchon would oppose it. "Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir'd, or coerc'd, only in Interests that must ever prove base" (p. 350). Strict historicism is a killing field, containing and ultimately strangling the past. But Pynchon is an optimistic pessimist, doubting our ability to commit the perfect crime. Days are missing from the calendar, degrees from our maps, time and space enough to contain the very Munchausenian wonders with which he fills this novel.

Culture and history are made of the lives of average men, for better and for worse. *Mason & Dixon* is a sympathetic recreation of the commission of a spiritual crime, the story of two good men who, in the hire of great powers, draw a line across a virgin land and so limit its potential. The Visto inflicts on the world "A geometrick Scar," a "sword-slash," a "conduit for Evil." In Pynchon's "Irresponsible Embellishment" (p. 696), America before Mason and Dixon is a land of supersonic mechanical ducks, of a giant American Golem, of Ghost Fish and Werebeavers and Jack-and-the-Beanstalk-sized produce, and their work is the beginning of the end for such wonders and mysteries. Drawing lines not only starts wars, it limits us, "reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Government,–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" (p. 345).

Mason and Dixon are aware, nearly from the beginning, of their complicity in an immoral scheme, and know also that their excuses (which is the catalogue of our own) do not excuse them. *Mason & Dixon* abounds with the expected Pynchonesque conspiracies that might explain our world: the Jesuits form a cabalistic tech-

nocracy and the British East India Company a world-strangling economic octopus. But most importantly they obscure the obvious truth that we small figures, in our innocent, self-absorbed lives, are responsible for shaping our collective history.

This novel is not just about our world, our history, our culture. It is about us, the ways we live and think and probably always will. The greatest evil is not cosmic entropy; it personal slavery. The most heroic moment is not the completion of the Line or its abandonment; it is Dixon, returning from his failed mission, striking down a slave trader: "Dixon chose to act, ... [to do] what each of us wishes he might have the unthinking Grace to do, yet fails to do. To act for all those of us who have so failed" (p. 698). Pynchon's greatness may rest in his ability, at even irrelevant moments, to communicate so much in an image or sentence that your jaw simply drops open. But what makes this the greatest of Pynchon's works is its overwhelming humanity, its compassion for the good and foolish and weak–and occasionally valiant–human race.

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