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arrative and the Consequences of

THE JOKE SUBLIME. AN ESSAY ON POSTMODERN TIME

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Even at the risk of getting a bit romantic at the end, I would like to let myself go with the flow of critical romance in the Barthian sense, saying that no matter how many times you read a text, it never stops surprising you. The text I am referring to is what I will title as *The Rewriting of Mason & Dixon*, which was published under the title of *Mason & Dixon* by its author, Thomas Ruggles Pynchon in 1997. In what is nothing but a last re-presentation of the outside world—the world outside the text, be it the physical world, or other texts, both with their complex compound of fiction and reality—I found in a more careful—though maybe careless—reading of this novel, an exhilarating *derealisation* of my surrounding world. Such derealisation made the world lose its depth, just like when the lights are turned on in a cinema, and you discover everything you watched happened on a wall, a surface for reflection. To be a bit more specific about it, I might say the *outer world* I am referring to in this context is Fredric Jameson's already famous article "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism."

How playful can a writer get? What are the licenses, agreed or not, that any fiction text can allow for, within the boundaries of meaning generation? Or, in other words, what are the representational co-ordinates of the postmodern sublime as "a radical eclipse of Nature itself" (Jameson 1984, 77). How can the ghost of simulacrum become tangible at the expense of reality? We will start by presenting the non-variable elements in the equation of this postmodern sublime in order to settle the pre-conditions for the probability of the possible variable(s) to occur. The first pre-condition is what, in postmodernity, has been first termed by Julia Kristeva as "intertextuality". As Judith Still and Michael Worton put it, "although the term intertextuality dates from the 1960s, the phenomenon, in some form, is at least as old as recorded human history" (2). However, we are less concerned here with the definition of this term and its similarities or differences with what has traditionally been considered as *literary sources*, than we are concerned with its actual application or performance in the literary text itself. In that textual performance,

> the writer is a reader of texts (in the broadest sense) before s/he is a creator of texts, and therefore the work of art is inevitably shot through with references, quotations and influences of every kind. [. . .] This repetition of past or of contemporary texts can range from the most conscious and sophisticated elaboration of other poets' work, to a scholarly use of sources, or the quotation (with or without the use of quotation marks) of snatches of conversation typical of a certain social milieu at a certain historical moment. (Still and Worton 2)

The special case of intertextuality we will be dealing with is precisely that of a quotationless scholarly use of sources or, to put it more clearly, a complete re-elaboration of a very specific critical text (within the whole scope of critical discourse) in literary terms. Even at the risk of seeming a rather pretentious assertion, this paper will deal with the intertextual connections between Jameson's article "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," published in 1984, and the publication of Thomas Pynchon's novel *Mason&Dixon* in 1997. The second pre-condition for the probability circle of this narrative practice to narrow around certainty is set by the fact that Jameson's essay was published thirteen years before the publication of Pynchon's novel, time more than enough to read, plan, and elaborate. Within the critical frame we have presented above, we could say now that Pynchon's text is a parasite of Jameson's, that works by first feeding and developing on it, and later, by decentering it as a host text through an inversion of the parasite/host roles. By the conscious inclusion of critical terminology in a text that is presented as fiction, we could see a metafictional movement by which the text is consciously and critically analysing itself as fiction, therefore breaking suspension of disbelief in the reading practice. The reader is forced out of the text to look at it from a critical perspective, which turns its movement back to the text again, in reflexive circularity. Critical distance allows for a diminishment in cathartic identification, which would favour the preconditions for laughter to appear, were it the case. It also favours the perception of the narrative process as a commodity, fiction, as playful performance. And last of all, though not least, the intertextual practice at work in this particular case problematises the question of narrative origins by inverting the usual temporal relationship between both critical and literary texts, in which the literary text is usually written before the literary criticism which analyses it.

Having been excluded from Jameson's representation of the cultural logic of late capitalism—where there appear Stein, Roussel, Duchamp, Warhol, and Doctorow, among others—the ten-years-before sharer of the National Book Award for *Gravity's Rainbow* forces his presence in this analysis by means of the future perfect projection (or, should we call it *past perfect* now?). The result is that Jameson is the one who has written the most complete analysis ever made on the most recently published novel by Pynchon. Without ever mentioning the novel (how might he have done it?) Jameson goes through its main organising threads, thus adding up to a novel plot that grows the more complicated in the purest Pynchonian style. It is in this sense that Pynchon's novel does not only include, but also generate (yet without generating it in the proper praxis of literary criticism), its own literary criticism. The reader is put to face a temporal disorder whose most immediate effect is precisely what Jameson has called in his article "the positive terms of euphoria, the high, the intoxicatory or allucinogenic intensity" (73). The loss of some sense of temporal continuity or that sense of placement-within-history, which the postmodern subject lacks, is one of the main reasons for this euphoria to be generated. The postmodern subject has lost track of, cannot explain his/her historical moment, which leads postmodernity to become a cultural period mainly dominated by the spatial, rather than the temporal dimension. This idea is explained by Jameson in Lacanian terms as one of the main symptoms of schizophrenia, which Jameson takes only for descriptive purposes—though we might be wondering if what might interest us more, in this particular case of textual re-appropriation, would not somehow be its diagnosis. Jameson interprets postmodernity within the context of "the breakdown of the signifying chain" by which "the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure signifiers" (72). Euphoria raises in this context as the positive manifestation of what for schizophrenia would be the "negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality" (73). And with this, Jameson's article more than justifies the contradictory existence of terror and humour in Pynchon's hallucinogenic novel.

But let us go back to the temporal question, which is so puzzling in the narrative practice that Pynchon develops in *Mason & Dixon*. By writing the actual literary work *after* the literary criticism which so perfectly explains it, Pynchon is making us read his work backwards, therefore making the reader enter the scope of what Lacan calls the *point de capiton*. Lacan defines this concept as the end of the tautologous, unanchored *glissement* of the signifier over the signified, which (*glissement*) "is in fact an aspect of certain types of schizophrenic language" (Wilden 273). Is Pynchon asking us to take Jameson's essay as one possible *point de capiton* of his novel? The pattern presented by Lacan in order to explain the decodification of a linguistic message certainly fits the one that we can see in the narrative process of *Mason & Dixon*.

> [. . .]what I have called the 'anchoring point' (*point de capiton*), by which the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement (*glissement*) of the signification [. . .] The diachronic function of this anchoring point is to be found in the sentence [. . .] each term being anticipated in the construction of the others, and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect (Lacan, 303)1.

If we consider Lacan's explanation of message decodification as adecuate to be applied to the reading of *Mason & Dixon*, it would mean not only that we must go to the beginning of the message in Jameson's essay (considering we could stop there) in order to fully understand the novel, but also that it would be impossible to understand Jameson's article without having read *Mason & Dixon* (considering we could stop there too). That would certainly be a possiblity for escape of this novel, made as it is of bits of disconnected information, from the scope of the schizophrenic. However, we could still argue the obvious; namely that Jameson's article and Pynchon's novel are not the same text. They are writings distant not only in time, but also in purpose and style, just to name a few differences. It is more likely that they could be conceived as mirroring images, each similar though somehow opposite (as much as criticism and fiction can get opposite) to each other. Just the same as a child is both surprised and enraged at the perception of fullness in the

1 Wilden's interpretation of Lacan will sever us here for a better understanding and development of the idea of the *point de capiton*: "the *point de capiton* is defined in purely linguistic terms as that by which the signifier brings the indefinite *glissement* of signification to a stop. [. . .] The signification of a sentence remains "open" until its final term (including punctuation). Each term is anticipated by those which precede it in the construction of the sentence, and, inversely, the *meaning* of the sentence is *retroactively* revealed by a sort of reading backwards from the end. [. . .] for the complete message of the conscious subject to be understood (by the emitter or by the receiver) at any level at all, there must be an unconscious reading in reverse at the end of the message, a reference to the locus of the code *after* the complete message has been received (the message consisting if necessary of a series of significant "bits")" (274-5)

Symbolic father1, might Jameson's essay be surprised at the fullness of a literary text that could very well be defined as mainly Symbolic.

But the image in the mirror depends as much on the subject that looks at it, as it does on the surface of the mirror itself. And the mirror in *Mason & Dixon* is a surface quite irregular. Indeed, its surface, like in Alice's mirror, is "soft like gauze, so that we can get through." (Carrol 9).2 We could explain *Mason & Dixon* as the mirror image of Jameson's article and, as all mirror images, consider it to be the same thing, but seen from the opposite perspective. Jameson is presenting postmodernism as the culture of late capitalism. In order to do so, he uses examples, images and even metaphors that make his point clearer. Pynchon, on the contrary, develops his narrative from the start point of literary fiction, for which he uses plenty of rhetoric figures to *re-present* the postmodern culture. However, what is more interesting about that reflection is not so much the fact that the narrative process is inverted as the fact that the very images or metaphors that both use are *exactly* the same. But we will go back to this subject later. Now we would like to focus on this inversion that the mirror image makes of the reflected object. No matter how fast one might get to read *Mason & Dixon*, the *truth* that the novel tells impossible realities is presented as self-evident. The realm of the fantastic penetrates each line of the novel, where the most incredible events—from talking clocks, dogs and mechanical ducks, to giant vegetables, lost time realities, gollems and underworlds, just to start with—can occur. Images of a world upside down abound in this novel, the most obvious example being the one developed in chapter 75 where Dixon, guided by a mysterious man, is led to *Terra Concava*, a paralell though opposite world which exists within Earth. The literary references both to Swift and Verne are more than evident. However, Pynchon introduces a whole set of new elements that emphasise the inversion of the "upper world" or the surface of Earth as conceived from the underworld:

> In the larger sense, then, to journey anywhere in this *Terra Concava*, is ever to ascend. With its Corollary,—Outside , here upon the Convexity,—to go anywhere is ever to descend. [. . .] 'each of you is slightly *pointed away* from everybody else, all the time, out into that Void that most of you seldom notice. Here in the Earth Concave, everybody is pointed *at* everyone else,—ev'rybody's axes converge,—forc'd at least thus to acknowledge one another,—an entirely different set of rules for how to behave.' (740-1)

What characterises the opposite reality of the mirror image is this sense of inversion, of the world upside down, which is something more than an inverted perspective of the upper world3. The whole logic that organises and explains reality is altered, as if in some kind of carnivalesque representation. For, as Stuart Hall has put it, carnival "is a metaphor for the temporary licensed suspension and reversal of order, the time when the low shall be high and the high, low, the moment of upturning, of the 'world turned upside-down' " (6). This conception of what representation of reality might be in mirroring terms, implies something more than the simply Platonic mimetic function of literature, it conveys the idea of deformation via inversion, of a different dimension where the reflected image that is presented or re-presented, is unavoidably mediated by the mirror surface, as in Valle-Inclán's "Callejón del Gato" in *Luces de Bohemia*, where mirrors reflect an esperpentic image which is identified with literary device. It will be in this sense that Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* will reflect Jameson's essay; with a projection of the reflected image into the scope of, as Carrol's Alice would put it "Let's-pretend...," or the world of possibility within that "let's-pretend" given condition. However, that inversion is more a process of inclusion than of binary opposition. As Pynchon theorises in *Mason & Dixon*, the dividing line between opposites is never an exact calculation of differences, but it includes in its definition a whole set of lost (to calculation) times and spaces where anything can hide. In this blur of the boundaries imposed upon opposites, the non-found transcendental meaning is supposed to be located; always out of reach. It is the very process of representation, the very materiality of the mirror surface what remains impossible to be grasped. Therefore it springs out the need for

1 This relationship between the child and the symbolic is also related by Lacan himself to the specular relation (either *moi* or other) in the seminar of March-April, 1957.

2 The logic of the warped universe behind the mirror is present in all of Carrol's fiction. The connection between Carrol's fantasies and Einstein's Theory of General Relativity has been presented by Koestler as one of the manifestations of bisociative patterns in humour. "Lewis Carrol was a mathematician, the reasoning of the creatures in his magic universe is like exercises in non-Euclidean geometry" (101)

3 The mirror image certainly presents, as we can see in the previous quotation from *Mason & Dixon*, a perspective that is focused to a single point where all lines converge. It is opposite to the "real world" that looks at itself on the mirror, which opens up along diverging lines wherein the world within the mirror is included. The world outside the mirror is therefore defined as one that aims at disconnectedness, whereas the world within the mirror aims at the ultimate connection of all differences into a single meaningful (though, on the other hand, also impossible as it is only a reflection) point.

looking at it, for metafictional discourse to be present. Hall notices that particularity in carnivalesque representation when he affirms that

> (I)t is precisely the purity of this binary opposition which is transgressed. The low invades the high, blurring the hierarchical imposition of order, [. . .] revealing the interdependency of the low on the high and vice versa, the inextricably mixed and ambivalent nature of all cultural life, the *reversibility of cultural forms, symbols, language and meaning* [. . .] (8). (emphasis added)

That boundary line, the Line that both characters, Mason and Dixon, have been committed to draw, and which the novel *Mason & Dixon* is entrusted to perform, makes the centre of gravity whereto both Jameson's article and Pynchon's novel converge. Since the publication of *Mason & Dixon*, both texts have been intricately related to each other, their natures changing to adapt to the other's nature, their meanings varying always depending on the other's movements. It is then when the limits that would separate fiction and reality, literature and essay writing blur, giving birth to the metafictionally decentered hybrid. In the sense that both are attracted to each other, that both include and re-present each other, that both precede and follow each other at the same time, it could be understood that there is a certain desire for completion in both texts, for a meaning that can only be found on the other side of the mirror, the trajectory of the reading process going forward and backwards in a spiral movement always to be completed. Going back to carnival as an example of the inverted world-within-the-mirror, Hall affirms that

> The low is thus no longer the mirror-image subject of the high, waiting in the wings to substitute it, as in the classic metaphors of revolution, but another related but different figure, which has haunted and shadowed that paradigmatic metaphor: the low as 'the site of conflicting desires and mutually incompatible representation.' (9)

One of the main techniques used by postmodernity in order to achieve this effect of inversion is that of pastiche, by which the linear and coherent order of canonical discourses is deformed into incoherent splitness, one of whose main manifestations is apparent nonsense. Jameson does not fail to see the relevance of pastiche within postmodern culture, which he attributes to the loss of what he calls "national language." However, this idea of the lost "national language" can be read at many other levels merely just as a loss of "identity language," which Jameson relates to the modernist individual subject. The *transit* Jameson senses from parody to pastiche in postmodernity is justified by the impossibility for parody to work on a "discursive heterogeneity without a norm," which Jameson presents as the discursive mainstream of late capitalist society. The critical—which Jameson calls satirical—impulse of parody is no more present in pastiche, which thus becomes "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs." He somehow falls into the pit of critics who see in postmodern practices a culture of nihilistic exhaustion, of rapacious performance upon outmoded practices. The sickness of postmodernity deriving from these parasitical nourishing ends up in meaninglessness:

> [. . .] devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists [. . .] the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global structure. (Jameson 1984 65)

Jameson fails to see that the very masks pastiche is taking from the dead modernist discourses are re-cycled into a masquerade of no little hilarity, precisely—and not in opposition to—because it is devoid of "parody's ulterior motives." Pastiche is (no matter how paradoxically) pure playfulness, pure concept and word play, surely devoid of "normality," but certainly not of health. It would seem that in taking Jameson's essays as matter to be added up to his pastiche work, Pynchon also takes offence and, in playful response, makes of Jameson a figurative modernist. Pastiche or the revival of past—though not lost—narratives is postmodern narrative itself, being therefore not so past, and not so dead. With pastiche—as Jameson himself points out of postmodernism, though fails to see in this context—time is abolished, leaving a time-free setting of spatial playfulness. Ranging from scientific discourse to Pope's poetry, or Poe's short stories, from Swift's mock travel-book to Verne's science fiction, and Carrol's wordplays, Pynchon does something more than taking them as literary sources, or simply parodying them. As Pierre Menard would do in Borges' "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote", Pynchon does not copy, imitate or alter texts and styles. Indeed, most of these texts would have perfectly been written by those authors we have previously mentioned with the only

distinction that they were written by Thomas Ruggles Pynchon. The very idea of this writing, which is, and is-not a rewriting of previous texts, is better developed by Borges himself when he explains:

> No quería componer otro Quijote —lo cual es fácil— sino *el Quijote*. Inútil agregar que no encaró nunca una transcripción mecánica del original; no se proponía copiarlo. Su admirable ambición era producir unas páginas que coincidieran —palabra por palabra y línea por línea— con las de Miguel de Cervantes. (*Narraciones* 86)

Borges describes this narrative technique as articulated around two opposite though complementary poles: the first one is experimental, innovative and creative; the second one is restrictive, and sacrifices the new creation into the "original." Such conception of literary writing asserts and undoes both the mimetic literary ideal, and the romantic originality that gave birth to the modernist concept of authorship. Menard would certainly re-write *El Quijote*, but this one would be completely Menard's, and not Cervantes', a difference that Borges very specifically analyses. The result is a temporal annihilation or, at least relativisation in narrative practices, where the temporal order in which works were produced is inverted. This technique, Borges tells us, "nos insta a recorrer la Odisea como si fuera posterior a la Eneida y el libro *Le jardin du Centaure* de Madame Henri Bachelier como si fuera de Madame Henri Bachelier" (91-2). It is not only the diachronic conception of time what is relativised, but also the synchronic one. Textual authorship disseminates infinitely while, at the same time, the unmistakable style of each particular author is asserted. Due to historical changes, the re-written text is infinitely more complex and subtle than the "original" one. This complexity is achieved out of its essential ambiguity. This practice taken to its limits in the Menard example makes Borges conclude that "El texto de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico. (Más ambiguo, dirán sus detractores; pero la ambigüedad es una riqueza)" (89-90). Pynchon's texts cannot be said to differ, either in language, style, or textual organisation, from the "originals" out of which they have been conceived. Yet, they are Pynchon's: they are unmistakably his, due precisely to the same characteristics that made them Verne's or Swift's. For it is that we know it is his perspective, and not some other author's what mediates narrative practice. The same words, the same ideas, and the same style, when used from the perspective of the second half of the 20th century, render a completely different worldview, a radically different narrative cosmology. But Pynchon's work is much more complex than Menard's re-writing of *El Quijote*, as he does not restrict his narrative production to that of a single author or a single historical time. He changes, cut-and-pastes, with smooth or abrupt transitions from one to the other. It is true that, as Jameson argues, pastiche lacks parody's ulterior motives, what he calls its "satiric impulse," but that does not make it the less meaningful. On the contrary, its very ambiguity propels out its meaningfulness nearly—if not completely—to the infinite. But to make Jameson justice, we must specify here that he does not lack a notion of what this practice of original re-writing is. Indeed, he comes very close to that idea in what he but shortly develops as "the 'simulacrum'—the identical copy for which no original has ever existed" (66). And that is indeed the feeling the reader might have when reading Pynchon: that s/he has read that text somewhere else, though that *other* text cannot possibly be found. Could not it have been Edgar Allan Poe the one who wrote lines such as the following?

> "I was prevented from ever returning. Exil'd from the Knowledge. As I crossed into the Courtyard before Duke Humfrey's, I encountered a Barrier invisible, which I understood I might cross if i will'd, though at the Toll of such Spiritual Unease, that one Step past it was already too far. What that Influence was, I cannot say. Perhaps an Artifact of the Vortex. Perhaps an Infestation of Certain Beings Invisible. I receiv'd, tho' did not altogether hear, from somewhere, a distinct Message that the Keys and Seals of Gnosis within were too dangerous for me. That I must hold for the Promises of Holy Scripture, and forget about the Texts I imagin'd I'd seen" (*Mason & Dixon* 560)

The unreliability of mentally disordered or dreaming first person narrator (I imagin'd I'd seen), object anticipation (What that Influence was, I cannot say), the presence of the supernatural, the gothic ambience, lexical choice in general, and even the image of the vortex[1] are characteristically Poe's. Yet this is Pynchon's writing, and in a way that we could not even say is overtly parodic. But what can be seen in Pynchon's use of Jameson's essay is of a more subtle essence. That is not pastiche writing, but a temporal inversion of the (first) literary writing and (later) criticism sequence. It is eye-winkinking to the close reader what opens the

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1 In Poe's short story "....." a similar adventure is told where the main character is mystically sucked by a whirlpool. We should not forget either the obvious parallelism between the main character in Poe's *Ligeia* and Rebekah-obsessed Mason

text up to the whole discourse that a single word or wordplay may develop, thus implying the infinite length and multidimensional quality of the signifying chain.

However, it is not to this aspect of the signifying chain, but to its random heterogeneity and fragmentation that Jameson refers in his essay, which he explains as a direct cause of the postmodern subject's loss of temporal or historical dimension that ultimately leads him straight to schizophrenia. The dominance of the spatial dimension over the temporal one in postmodernity is the main cause—if not the only one for Jameson—which postmodern writing has developed into what he capitulates as "textually, *écriture*, or schizophrenic writing" (71). When the temporal connection necessary for the "one-to-one" signifier/signified relationship to be established is broken, there still remains the "mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of Signifiers among them" (72). The rupture of that mirage is what Jameson conceives of as the breakdown of the signifying chain, which renders the texts as a mere sequence of disconnected signifiers. Disconnectedness is indeed central to Pynchon's texts in general, and more specifically, to *Mason & Dixon*. It is not that plots in his novels do not follow some logical organisation, which can certainly be traced along both the temporal and spatial dimensions. It is just that the relationship among elements which allow for such organisation is somewhat more than ambiguous. Organisational patterns such as cause-and-effect, origin-and-end, or sometimes, even purpose-and-aim, are skilfully diffused in Pynchon's narratives. The result is a relative ignorance of some unifying meaning whose ultimate presence, Jameson argues, cannot be found but in some space (I would also add time) outside the text, which space is also unavoidably within the linguistic realm. Jameson's essay is certainly within that linguistic realm that Pynchon's texts need for unification of their scattered and unrelated signifiers (call them chapters, sentences, episodes or simply independent words). It is not only that the very ideas of time and space are central to *Mason & Dixon*, but that some specific codes for interpretation are posited within the novel that lead us directly to their interpretation within Jameson's article. As for time and space, and the reduction to the second that Jameson sees of the first in postmodern times, Pynchon develops a plot in which, due to their astrological content, space is to be figured out, or ruled by time measurements—taken, of course, from some other spatial distance (i.e. The measurements of the Transit of Venus, or the spatial representation of the lost eleven days). As for the specific decoding references that Pynchon inserts in his novel, we might look at the coincidence of Jameson's using the metaphors of "chain" and "China" in order to explain the schizophrenic or disconnected relationship among signifiers in postmodern writing. In order to better organise his essay, Jameson recurs to topic subdivision under certain titles, which in the case of schizophrenic writing are those of "The Breakdown of the Signifying Chain," and "China," which is also the title of the poem by Bob Perelman that he uses to illustrate his point. To this, we would confront the mysterious relevance of China in Pynchon's novel, its deep connection with tellurian forces and Jesuit conspirators, not to mention their impossible invasion of the recurring space of the lost eleven days:

> "Their Commission, that is, their Charter if you like, directed them to inhabit the Days, yet *not to allow the Time to ellapse*. They were expected to set up Households, Farms, Villages, Mills,-- an entire Plantation in Time. [. . .] 'Tis all an Eden there, Lads, and only they inhabit it, [. . .] Arriv'd they cannot say how, nor care, they sleep in our beds, live in our Rooms, eat from our Dishes [. . .] the more curious of them ever pursuing us, as might Historians of Times not yet come" (*Mason & Dixon* 196)

The recurrence of Chinese characters and motifs in this novel, (i.e. the dragon, Chinese tales, and Chinese cosmology), intimately connected as it is, with the Jesuit plots and artefacts, is presented as a threat, not only because the Chinese inhabit the third dimension of the eleven days lost to the Gregorian calendar, but because in being thus excluded from time and space, they are somehow disinherited from them, unknown by them, and as everything unknown, a rather threatening force.1 But it is not the relevance that China or the Chinese might have in *Mason & Dixon* what we are concerned with at this moment. It is just the fact that both "chains" and "China" not only appear in this novel, but that—just as Jameson does—they are connected to each other at some point of the novel. Jameson connects both ideas in order to explain precisely the disconnectedness in the postmodern historical, and therefore cultural discourse which leads him to conclude that this disconnectedness is pointed at "more joyous intensities [. . .] precisely that euphoria which we saw displacing the older effects of anxiety and alienation" (74). Jameson is arguing that this very

1 It is no coincidence that Pynchon gives these 11 days to the Chinese to inhabit, as China was precisely one of the latest places to change to the Gregorian calendar in 1912, not to mention that, to America, China is placed precisely in the unseen part of the earth

disconnectedness between signifiers, when used extensively, might lead to a pleasure effect similar to the one we feel at, for instance, watching a set of photographs. That is the pleasure both of direct perception, and of wandering fantasy since the intensity of that disconnection not only permits the viewer to establish a free association of images, but also releases him/her from having to organise each element along an ordered and signifying line. The technique used by Perelman in "China" is the same one as Pynchon uses in his writing of *Mason & Dixon*, where each chapter describes small episodes, which—though barely connected under the title *Mason&Dixon*—do perfectly work when considered in isolation. The reader of *Mason & Dixon* is allowed to establish any relationship s/he wants among chapters, and even not to establish any relationship at all thus enjoying each episode separately. As Jameson puts it: "When such features become themselves the cultural norm, they shed all such forms of negative affect and become available for more decorative purposes" (75).

To say that *Mason & Dixon*, or Pynchon's novels in general, have no other purpose than "decorative" would, however, be a great mistake. There is probably more content in them than most critics would dare dig in. Yet we cannot just ignore that the decorative or euphoric element—to use Jameson's terms—is rather relevant in them. Indeed, that they are a crucial technical resource for whatever purposes may lurk in Pynchon's rhizomatic mind. Completely useless episodes (in the sense that they add nothing to either plot or character development) are the most common in *Mason & Dixon*, ranging from old jokes to chasing scenes and the most absurd of situations, like Tom Hynes pissing a hart on the snow on his wedding night.

However, what is more surprising in *Mason & Dixon* is not just the abundance of such situations, but the fact that, sometimes, a very specific reference is given to trace their meaning back to another source. Such is the case of the hilarious misunderstanding of the two fools, Darby and Cope, for Chinese in the previously quoted passage where the words "Chain-men" and "Chinamen" are comically confused by Mason. It could be argued that the fact that the concepts of "chain" and "China" are so closely related in both Jameson's and Pynchon's texts, is just a coincidence. However, we could never call it a coincidence the fact that Jameson's text perfectly explains—even with explicit reference to these two words—not only what this episode in *Mason & Dixon* might mean, but also the technique used to convey that meaning. Going back to the mirror image parallel presented above, we could see here a perfect inverted pattern in which Jameson develops his critical theory using a specific metaphoric language, which Pynchon also uses to convey his practice of such theory.

But coincidences multiply. Let us turn back to what frames the main plot in *Mason & Dixon*. Let us try and see a common purpose in all the episodes, the force that sets action in motion, and let us suppose among the many possibilities, that one of both main characters being chosen1 by the Royal Society—for whatever other dark purposes they might entertain—to measure time and space with the final aim of making a map. Both political and economic reasons explain this first movement, as good maps and precise cartography would improve navigation and communication between the English Empire and the colonies, given that the colonies were a source of economic and political power. This task of reworking the world image from the perspective or, with the language of the English Empire is no less than impossible, as it implies representing curved surfaces into a flat chart, "at which point" Jameson affirms, "it becomes clear that there can be no true maps" (90). Despite its impossibility, Pynchon takes this first purpose, or original motto as the perfect pretext to set in motion a very complicated net of plots and subplots. These net of plots penetrate one another with the recurrent pattern of Chinese boxes (whether there may be some implied connection in the novel with the Chinese topic posed above or not, will always remain impossible to tell), whose presentation constitutes the main aim in Pynchon's narrative. The undecidability of everything that remains hidden within this arc that makes mapping forever imprecise is taken further and further when we find the metaphoric use—that Jameson would term as a mere "digression"—of the act of mapping in his essay. By transposing Kevin Lynch's concept of *alienation* of the subject within the city, Jameson explains that the possibility for desalination lays on the subjects "reconquest of a sense of place, and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories" (89). He develops the concept of cognitive mapping into the co-ordination of the "empirical position of the subject" and the abstractions of the global system. However, how this impossible bridge—which Jameson sees as a "global

1 More than "chosen" we would have rather said "named", which is the precise word Pynchon puts in Dixon's writing. The difference, though subtle, determines the distance between mere will, or decision, and word or law. The Royal Society's performative movement of naming them partners makes them partners, which they will remain for the rest of the novel.

cognitive mapping" and identifies with the Lacanian order of the symbolic-is to be built, still remains a mystery for Jameson. What he is certainly sure of, is that it would certainly constitute the "political form of postmodernism" (92). Whether Pynchon is attempting at building that impossible bridge or not, might be an issue of dubious resolution. What is clear, is that it serves as a contrast to the certainty in the similitude and inversion of both techniques (the oscillation between the literal and the metaphorical levels) and motives, as is seen in a mirror image. For Jameson, the postmodern subject's search for place within a recognisable pattern of global organisation is explained through the metaphor of mapping. For Pynchon, the mapping of the globe is taken as a metaphor (or, should we call it allegory?) of the subject's eternal search for a place, a mission, a meaning, within world patterns. But in the inverted image that Pynchon's text shows to Jameson's, something more than techniques and motives are shown. Pynchon indeed creates that bridge, he utters and performs the dimensions of this third reality where the individual and the global spheres meet. He transforms its unutterability into possibility, the world of fantasy, the carnival through the looking glass. It "stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (Jameson 80).

It is these dimensions whose space and time Jameson would finally analyse as euphoric. He notices that alienation at a global scale is so striking for human beings, that it has come to be experienced in the forms of "hallucinatory exhilaration." However, facing the impossibility of interpreting bursts of laughter as the immediate consequence of technological alienation, Jameson recurs to a different interpretation of what he has already identified with the "sublime." The "histerical sublime" (77) he defines, in terms of Burke and Kant, as "an experience bordering on terror" at the glimpse, or impossibility for representation of whatever might be so powerful as to crash human existence. That "whatever", which used to be Nature itself in pre-capitalist societies, has transformed into the post-industrial technological multinational system of our society. We can certainly account for some sense of this pre-capitalist sublime or terror of mysterious Nature in *Mason & Dixon*, the romantic fear of the hidden powers of the wilderness humanity is constantly violating. But, at the same time, there is some sense of the post-industrial sublime, in which the Lacanian Other that cannot be represented is multinational technological power, represented in this novel by the Jesuits, responsible for nearly every wicked or threatening invention that might appear in the novel. And undeniably, *Mason & Dixon* as a novel is the other sublime for Jameson's article, where his terminology is naturalised into the realm of the literal reading (where metaphorical maps are read as literal maps, and metaphorical Chains become literal ones), and where his ideas are, more than explained, performed. However, the level of elaboration—not to say of international distribution and commercialisation—is much larger in Pynchon's novel than in Jameson's article. For Jameson's article, *Mason & Dixon* is certainly that Other, what cannot be better expressed than performed, something so big and powerful as to crash any previous writing, and —finally—the unutterable, (as Jameson never gets to name Pynchon in his essay). Nevertheless and, despite the novel might get a bit sombre at times, no reader would deny that it is not only composed of many and most varied funny stories and allusions, but that it is in itself a wonderful and sublime Joke.

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