

Crossing the Warrior Path

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“‘It goes back,’” Thomas Pynchon invites us to imagine, “‘ to the second Day of Creation, when ‘G-d made the Firmament, and divided the Waters which were under the Firmament, from the waters which were above the Frimament,’ -- thus the first boundary Line. All else after that, in all History, is but Sub-Division.’”

In the beginning was sub-division, which is to say: In the beginning was the lawsuit. And how different is that from the Word? Are not theology and jurisprudence sister sciences, dedicated to the proper -- or must we today say authoritative? -- interpretation of manifested truths -- or must we say desires? If theology endeavors to rightly discipline the expression of desire, the functional essence of the lawsuit is instead the authoritative resolution of conflicting desires. The traditional bridge between theology and jurisprudence consists, of course, in the latter’s purported subsumption to the former.

Imagine, however, the hierarchy between theology and jurisprudence inverted: A new world is born. The reign of the lawsuit; i.e., the reign of un-reigned desire. And this new world, if one believes Thomas Pynchon, bears the name America. If the Word gave expression to the ordered desire for an other-worldly heaven and gave forth the Edenic paradise, the lawsuit demands the satisfaction of more earthy wants that *end*, without ending, in endless en-closures, i.e., at the border of the receding no-man’s land, the wild west—or, as Pynchon names it, the “Warrior Path” at America’s eternal frontier.

The lawsuit at the crux of Pynchon's new work, *Mason & Dixon*, is, as every American school child surely knows (an interesting rhetorical flourish that most assuredly will not be borne out by statistical sampling), that between the Baltimore's of Maryland and the Penn's of Pennsylvania. As are all good legal fights, this one too concerns a boundary dispute, the power of one person to magically, i.e. by law, enclose an area of earth beyond an imaginary, i.e. legal, line, thus effectively, i.e. legally, excluding others from its use and enjoyment. This was a typical boundary dispute, then, but for the fact that the parties were multiplied, many were titled, and some wore crowns. More than the personalities, however, what distinguishes this particular boundary dispute is that the ultimate legal solution, a line with an afterlife of its own, is a product of science. Mason and Dixon, the scientists called into arbitrate the conflict, can be seen, therefore, as path-breaking precursors of the now omnipresent expert witness.

The Duke of York, the later King James II, had a seat of power in New Castle (i.e. along a fly infested swamp in what is today Delaware), and desired a zone of protection. The Duke's brother, King Charles II, was only too willing to oblige. The problem was that Charles had no land left to give. Charles' and James' father, the unfortunate King Charles I, had granted to George Calvert, alias Lord Baltimore, the charter to the land stretching north from the Potomac river until the 40th parallel (actually the land that would become Maryland was given to Calvert's son, Cecil, as George departed this world shortly before the charter was sealed). The Duke's fair city of New Castle fell within the Northeastern corner of Lord Baltimore's charter. The plot thickened after Charles II, in settlement of a

debt owed to William Penn, the Senior, granted the land north of the 40th parallel to William Penn Jr., the renowned Quaker, utopian prophet of a new world, and defender of religious tolerance. How then, with all the land surrounding New Castle already having been signed away, could Charles II satisfy his brother's otherwise reasonable request?

The answer is simple, when one is King. First find some loopholes in the original grant to the Baltimores. Second, use some suspect astronomy and geography so complicated as to defy opposition. In other words, grant the good Duke of York a limited buffer zone, say 12 miles round, centered from the church in his city of New Castle. Everything outside the arc but south of the 40th parallel belongs to the Baltimores. What lays outside but north of the parrallel, to the Penns.

[Here insert Map]

All nice and neat, except for the pesky laws of geometry and human nature which refused to conform to the dictates of Royal Astronomy. Consider that Philadelphia, Penn's holy city and future capital of Pennsylvania, was, accidentally or not, built ten miles below the 40th parallel. Ponder as well that the 12 mile arc (““Oh, twelve miles ought to do it. We don't want to say thirteen, because that's so unlucky””) fails to intersect the 40th parallel, meaning that certain counties just above the arc and governed by Pennsylvania (they were gratted to Penn by York) came to lay as an exclave of the Penn's well within the official boundaries of Maryland. Compounding the problems is

the murky question of the future Maryland-Delaware border, unplottable owing to the Delaware Swamp through which it runs. Such disputes, Shakespeare teaches, were in the old world more than adequate preconditions for a royal adventure. But we are now in the new world; abstaining from warlike means to satisfy their land-hungry desires, the Baltimores and Penns agree instead to do battle, where else, in Court.

And a noble battle it was. Eighty years the Baltimores and Penns fight it out in the staged battlefield of many an English courtroom until, in 1750, Lord Chancellor Hardwicke decides that the original boundaries are too confused to be of use and draws the new Maryland-Pennsylvania border 15 miles south of the 40th parallel. But the problems do not end with Hardwicke's compromise. Lord Baltimore the 6th, is, not without ground, incensed at the sudden loss of approximately 3,600 square miles of his family inheritance (not to mention the reduction of the eastern part of his territory to a straggly line a mere 2 miles in width). Stubbornly, the Lord contests the decision for 10 years, to no avail. Even after he finally consents to Hardwicke's decision in 1760, problems persist because of repeated failures to measure the newly agreed upon boundaries.

Especially tricky proves to be the tangent line that the Lord Chancellor imagines would form the Maryland-Delaware border. The revised boundary agreement calls for a line running north from the geographic middle of the Delaware peninsula and tangent to the original twelve mile arc at the point it intersects with the *new* 40th parallel (i.e. the line 15 miles south of the 40th parallel), and thus marking the intersection of the 3 colonies. Scores of colonial astronomers, surveyors, and other quacks are commissioned to draw

the new boundaries, all to no avail. Despite the Lord Chancellor's decision, the boundary dispute rages into the 1760s.

Only after years of haggling and failure do the Penns and Baltimores take the ultimately pragmatic -- as well as prophetically American -- decision to seek the certainty lawyers were unable to provide in the gleaming instruments of science. Mason and Dixon, fresh from their success observing the transit of Venus in English Capetown, are summoned to America to accomplish what neither lawyers nor colonial astronomers could; i.e., to settle the boundary dispute once and for all by the most sophisticated scientific means available to the Royal Society. Their triumphant achievement is certainly a staggering blow by science against law in the disciplinary battle for courtroom predominance.

Mason and Dixon's line, familiarly known as the Mason-Dixon line, runs through the center of *Mason & Dixon*. The line -- more accurately the 244 mile long, 15 (?) foot wide swath cleared by Mason and Dixon's ax-swinging team at 39° 43' 26.3" latitude -- is, for Pynchon, an actualization of man's desire to control and dominate nature, to mark his environment, even to scar it. Pynchon's story is about the mapping of the physical and symbolic American terrain, about the desire that draws us to the unknown continent, to the dark spaces, to the eccentric, and the simultaneous desire for mastery, for knowledge, and for power. America is the land of this doubled desire. America harbors the longing after the innocent the black savage, and just as certainly the thrill at controlling, taming, and harming the imagined other. Americans imagine themselves engaged in a utopian return to a state of nature, though one that is provided with the

efficient mediocrity of McDonalds and Starbucks on every corner and governed by white family values. To continually venture over the border and to conquer chaos by disciplining and ordering it with power and knowledge is to live the modern progressive utopia that plays out on the geographical, racial and sexual topographies that come together in Pynchon's America.

The mastery of desire with knowledge is itself the unfulfillable desire that roots Pynchon's America. Though the desire for mastery seeks to assert itself, it is ever displaced in Pynchon's narrative by the plurality of intersecting desires and forces that he brings to the fore: The economic interests of the East India Tea company, the political interests of the English Royal Society, the greed of the parties to the lawsuit, Mason's melancholic search for the place of the dead where he can come to terms with his need for scientific and personal recognition, and Dixon's magnetic attraction to the dark and the new all mix to make the line a reality. Driven by desires innumerable, it seems that the line might go on forever, whether west straight out to the Pacific, or, as Dixon proposes, east over the Atlantic and back to England. Though Pynchon's theme remains the mastery of science over the natural universe, science itself is shown to be infected with the longings of multiple desires.

What is the Mason-Dixon line? One of Pynchon's masterstrokes is to limit the entire narrative discourse to the late 18th century. So faithful is he to the era, that the book is written in the orthography of the period. Pynchon's artificial bordering of the book's outlook effects the narrative voice as well, as the book reminds purposefully blind to the

line's reknowned future. That the narrator is forbidden knowledge of the future history of the line does not mean that he is blind to the line's potential. A line so soaked with the desires that root the American dream can little escape as well the overwhelming American addiction: The desire for slaves. Slaves, while centrally present in the first part of *Mason & Dixon* that takes place in Capetown, are conspicuously absent throughout most of the American journey. And yet, the focus on the Mason-Dixon line opens the question of race. Though Pynchon never abandons his historical position, his own narrative remains aware that the Mason-Dixon line lives on after the story of the book ends; the line has an "afterlife" not only as a geographical boundary, but also as a symbolic divide.

In the 1819-1820 congressional debates over the admittance of Missouri as the 24th state into the union, the Mason-Dixon line witnessed its rhetorical. Once again the line is a boundary, but this time as the symbolic divide between North and South, between free states and slave states, and between the two sides of the Civil War. To write a book on *Mason & Dixon* is to write a book about the the essential American sub-division, that between White and Black.

What is most marked about the line today is neither its physical nor its symbolic presence, but rather its absence. This is neither to say that the bounaries between Philadelphia, Maryland and Delaware have dissappeared, nor that the racial divide has been healed by the civil war or affirmative action. Nor does the disappearance of the line signify a halt to the process of sub-division that Pynchon traces in its continuity from that

fateful 2nd day oh so long ago. Rather, the absence of the line expresses a deep desire of the time to overcome and wash away divisions. In an era of globalization, of multiculturalism, and of the pending victory of western democratic culture, there are few desires felt so strongly today as the need to erase and forget the boundaries that once divided us. In the U.S. that desire is most pressingly living in the need to integrate the country racially and geographically, to bring both African Americans and the South into a unified America, even if that requires a purposeful blindness towards the lines of division that continue to exist.

That Pynchon chooses to write a book about about the multiple and chaotic desires that root the American dream at a time when the demand for conformity is imposing itself unrelentingly is no accident. And yet, Pynchon's book is not a pessimistic doomsday prediction. As the line nears its end, Mason and Dixon come upon their final obstacle. This last and most formidable barrier is neither a swamp nor a forest, neither mountain nor river. It is not a mere physical hinderance that blocks the westward march of desire unfulfilled. No, what threatens to put an end to the westward line is, appropriately enough, a line. Actually, a path: The Warrior Path.

The warrior path is a boundary, an imaginary line. It separates the conquered third of the future United States of America from that which lies beyond. The path is also the primary north-south route for the Indians. It is a magical and mysterious path occupied by invisible footfalls and uneasy spirits. As the border between white and non-white, between mastered and wild, between civilized and savage, the line represents as well the

boundary of science's effort to peer into the dark, to cross and map forever the frontier which always lies beyond the knowable. Before the Warrior Path, before the jump into the nameless void, Mason's and Dixon's line comes to an extended halt. The contract calls for the line to continue further, yet angst reigns.

Mason and Dixon cross the line. And nothing happens. What they find on the other side is unremarkable, and certainly not the answer to their dreams. Mason does not find the ghost of his wife or the recognition he craves. Dixon turns back East, eventually back to the comforts of his small English village where he dies shortly thereafter. The Warrior Path is crossed, and yet it does not disappear. Rather it is simply displaced. The Warrior Path must be crossed; and yet, in that it must ever be crossed, it must eternally remain. What makes Pynchon the great American writer of the 20th century is his gift for exploring the double desire for black and white that crosses and re-crosses the Warrior Path. The Warrior path, to translate Samuel Menache, "flows forever."

Mason & Dixon

1) Charles Mason (1728-1786) and Jeremiah Dixon (1733) - (1779), respectively astronomer and surveyor. Best known for plotting the Mason-Dixon line (1763-1787) that played a decisive result in the resolution of the 80 year border dispute between Philadelphia and Maryland.

2) a) The line, or approximation of it, that separated free from slave states in the debates leading tot he Missouri Compromise of 1820. b) A symbolic marker between north and south.

3) A book by Thomas Pynchon (1997).