"Mason, pray you,—'tis the Age of Reason," Dixon reminds him, "we're men of Science."
—Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*

In April 1984, when Thomas Pynchon published his *Slow Learner*, the times looked bad for the American Left. At home, President Reagan was soon to crush the last of the old-time liberals, Walter Mondale. Abroad, the Cold War opened its jaws wider than ever to consume even more trillions in American debt, with no Gorbachev—to say nothing of 1989—comprising even a remote possibility on anyone's radar screen. Given these circumstances, Pynchon's rare act of self-disclosure in the introduction to *Slow Learner* assumes increased importance as a source of insight concerning his whole career.

By 1984 Pynchon's decades of disenchantment with the Eisenhower-Nixon-Reagan political culture had critically intensified his long search for an alternative ethos. That search—which produced the Whole Sick Crew in *V.*, the hippie community in *Vineland*, and the motif of rebellion in *Mason & Dixon* (the Weavers' Rebellion, Bonnie Prince Charlie's Scots uprising of 1745, the Black Hole of Calcutta, the Levelers, resistance to the Stamp Act)—finds its rationale in a set of cultural attitudes that Pynchon usefully clarifies in the *Slow Learner* introduction, attitudes that change very little over the thirty-four years from *V.* through *Mason & Dixon*. Here we find a set of precepts that governs Pynchon's whole career.

The most fundamental of these precepts is Pynchon's intense discontent with the military deadlock of the 1950s—that formative decade when Pynchon graduated from Cornell and began his two-year stint in the U.S. Navy. His harshest judgment applies to the political leaders he held responsible for the Bomb-dreading
postwar standoff, creating what Faulkner called (in his Nobel address) "a general and universal physical fear" of such proportions that "there are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" But where Faulkner called upon artists to resist this attitude, Pynchon, as late as 1984, wallowed in it:

Our common nightmare The Bomb . . . was bad enough in '59 and is much worse now, as the level of danger has continued to grow . . . . Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it, most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear.

It is notable that Pynchon makes no distinction between the clearly "criminally insane" Soviet leaders such as Stalin and Beria and their surely less culpable Western adversaries such as Churchill and Truman. Instead, his view of history was importantly shaped, he says, by the "mighty influences" of Edmund Wilson's Marxist-Leninist history To the Finland Station and Machiavelli's The Prince (Slow Learner 18). These are classic works, to be sure, but by the 1950s Wilson had long since renounced his infatuation with the Soviet regime, and The Prince seems an oddly cynical book for a Bomb-fearing peacenik to be influenced by. It would seem that for Pynchon the finer distinctions of historical judgment were to be subordinated to the larger purpose of social criticism.

In pursuit of that purpose, Pynchon recalls three specific epiphanies of cultural enlightenment in Slow Learner. First, he learned from his military experience the perversity of class hierarchy (one thinks perhaps of the coprophiliac general in Gravity's Rainbow):

Whatever else the peacetime service is good for, it can provide an excellent introduction to the structure of society at large . . . . One makes the amazing discovery that grown adults walking around with college educations, wearing khaki and brass . . . . can in fact be idiots. And that working-class white hats . . . . are much more apt to display competence, courage, humanity, wisdom, and other virtues associated, by the educated classes, with themselves. (Slow Learner 6)

Second, he learned that his own attitudes were not above reproach either, in that the "racist, sexist, and proto-Fascist" talk in an early
story, “Low-lands,” represented not only “Pig Bodine’s voice, but, sad to say . . . my own at the time” (11). But at least he had some pretty elegant company, in so far as “John Kennedy’s role model James Bond was about to make his name by kicking third-world people around” (11). In the end, however, these transgressions too fall under Pynchon’s quasi-Marxist view of class:

It may yet turn out that racial differences are not as basic as questions of money and power, but have served a useful purpose, often in the interest of those who deplore them most, in keeping us divided and so relatively poor and powerless. (12)

Most significantly for his work, Pynchon’s discontent with his times shaped his aesthetic sensibility. Apart from a dismissive mention of *The Waste Land* and *A Farewell to Arms*, the only artists Pynchon cites in his introduction to *Slow Learner* are the cultural outcasts, rebels, and innovators of his lost youth. In music, he makes no mention of the great classical-romantic composers; instead, he venerates “jazz clubs,” Bird, Elvis, Spike Jones, bop, rock ‘n’ roll, and swing. In painting, none of the Old Masters rates a mention, but he says he took “one of those elective courses in Modern Art, and it was the Surrealists who’d really caught my attention” (20). Likewise, in literature his favor falls exclusively on contemporary voices of social protest and emotional liberation: *Howl, Lolita, Tropic of Cancer, Playboy magazine, Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro,”* and above all the Beat writers, who promoted “a sane and decent affirmation of all we want to believe about American values” (9)—these were the models Pynchon claimed to follow. Most importantly, he cites his exceedingly dubious but fervently held belief in “a book I still believe is one of the great American novels, *On the Road,* by Jack Kerouac” (7). It is fair to say that none of these aesthetic fashions would find much resonance with the aristocratic elegance of the Age of Reason.

Finally, perhaps influenced by the existentialist zeitgeist propagated by European thinkers like Heidegger and Sartre, Pynchon declares that “when we speak of ‘seriousness’ in fiction ultimately we are talking about an attitude toward death” (5). In Pynchon that attitude evoked the notion of the absurd, a fundamental precept of the greatly popular black humor movement. “A pose I found congenial in those days,” he remarks, “was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction” —a view that soon came to
encompass the idea of entropy, the "spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness" (13). But though this idea comes up pervasively in his big novels (as well as in his early story "Entropy"), the real focus of the theme of death is not the physics of entropy but the individual's subjection to the moving arrow of time:

that human one-way time we're all stuck with locally here, and which terminates, it is said, in death. Certain processes, not only thermodynamic ones but also those of a medical nature, can often not be reversed. Sooner or later we all find this out, from the inside. (15)

Clearly, this is not a man who will be much impressed by the Enlightenment-driven precepts of an Alexander Pope: that "Order is Heav'n's first law"; that "God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light."3

In sum, we find at the base of all Pynchon's work the temperament of a hippie rebel against tradition, convention, and all forms of social hierarchy. To pass judgment on our age in V. and Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon accordingly amplified the violence and madness of two World Wars with a choice selection of war-ravaged sites: Berlin, London, Peenemunde, Malta, and South-West Africa, where the German overlords' killing of sixty thousand Hereros became the precursor of one hundred times that many Holocaust victims. Ignoring the great advances accomplished by Western Civilization in the twentieth century—in science, civil rights, women's equality, expanding middle-class prosperity and health care, the defeat of worldwide fascist-communist tyranny—he launched his career in V., his prize-winning first novel of 1963 (the year after the Cuban Missile Crisis), by using the Fashoda Crisis of 1898 as his portal to the twentieth century. That episode was a matter of drawing amoral lines of force across the map, with the British painting Africa red from north to south while the French preferred purple going west to east. Barely averting war, those empires in collision near the Sudanese town of Fashoda proved a reliable harbinger of a cataclysmic age.

Given this worldview, it is not surprising that Thomas Pynchon's journey to the eighteenth century in Mason & Dixon is calculated to display the underside of the Enlightenment. Those same two empires that collided at Fashoda were going at each other a century and a half earlier on another continent, with a third empire—our America—about to emerge out of that confrontation. It
is especially useful to Pynchon’s purpose that the Line that would divide the new nation from 1776 to the present was created before the nation itself, a feature not of physical but moral geography. (“An emerging moral Geometry,” Pynchon calls the map of the Wedge region in Delaware—a wedge that did in fact split the country by the 1860s.) In the name of that geography, Pynchon casts a cold eye on the century of order, reason, and progress that gave birth to the modern age.

Pynchon’s vehicle for rendering judgment is that quintessential plaything of eighteenth-century literature, the mock-epic—a Fieldingesque mock-epic in prose, in this instance. A quick checklist shows a dozen or more mock-epic conventions at work in *Mason & Dixon*, apart from its inordinate length and imitation of eighteenth-century style. First, we have at stake the destiny of whole races of people: European settlers, Indians, and slaves. The setting ranges, epic-wise, across whole continents, from South Africa to the Appalachians. There is the on-the-road plot, which descended to Pynchon in a line running from *The Odyssey* to Arthurian legend to *Don Quixote* to *Tom Jones* to *Huckleberry Finn* to Jack Kerouac. There is the obligatory visit of the epic hero (Dixon) to the Underworld, in the North Pole “hollow earth” episode. There is much recourse to magic and the supernatural, with Rebekah’s ghost taking a somewhat similar role to that of Odysseus’s Athena appearing to the hero (Mason) at critical junctures (*The Odyssey* is cited on page 690). There are, in the epic mode, long-winded digressions such as the Captive’s Tale of Eliza Fields and the outer framework of storyteller and listeners (the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke and his family members). There is the epic theme connecting gods and men, which Pynchon magnifies into a catalogue of world religions in *Mason & Dixon*, evoking the whole range of Christian denominations (Anglican, Quaker, Methodist, Jesuit) along with Deism, Judaism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. There is the concluding reunion of father and son, with Mason in the Odysseus role and Doctor Isaac as Telemachus. (Another father-son motif, the Mason-Masklyne rivalry over Bradley’s legacy, suggests a biblical analogy to Isaac, Jacob, and Esau.)

There are, finally, the profusion of allusions, not to classical-biblical figures as in Milton or Pope, but to the neoclassic tropes and names that characterize the world of Mason and Dixon. Collectively, Pynchon’s deployment of these motifs appears to represent a kind of moral geometry that does to Augustan England
what the Mason-Dixon Line does to America. The better part of that geometry, in Pynchon’s view, resides in the figures who stand outside the Augustan vanities of the time: religious revivalists like Whitefield and Wesley (9, 100, 260, 405); the melancholiac Dr. Johnson (35, 745–47); the pre-romantic mad poet Christopher Smart (116); and fictional characters like Laurence Sterne’s Uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy* (364), along with Pynchon’s reverend narrator, Wicks Cherrycoke. The latter’s fierce social criticism, as when he decries the practice of giving Indians hospital blankets infected with smallpox as a “Wicked Policy of extermination” (308), prefigures the gradual departure of Mason and Dixon from Enlightenment rationalism. Concerning race, they come to see the vaunted Enlightenment as little more than a Heart of Darkness:

Mason did note as peculiar, that the first mortal acts of Savagery in America after their Arrival should have been committed by Whites against Indians.... They saw white Brutality enough, at the Cape of Good Hope. They can no better understand it now, than then. Something is eluding them. Whites in both places are become the very Savages of their own worst Dreams, far out of Measure to any Provocation. (306-7)

On the wrong side of the Augustan moral geometry, causing these atrocities against Indians and black slaves, repose the forces of capitalism, industrialism, and imperialism that rose to supremacy during the Enlightenment thanks to the scientific revolution of the time. “Newton is my Deity”—Dixon’s refrain (e.g., page 116)—evokes the worship of science and technology that would produce marvels like the Jesuit telegraph in Canada, but put them (as in V. and *Gravity’s Rainbow*) at the service of power-hungry, conspiratorial oppressors. Aligned with Newton on this dubious side of the Augustan moral geometry are other rationalist figures such as Linnaeus (430), Fermat (336), Herschel (769), Gibbon (349), the Encyclopedists (359), and the Royal Society.

In this reverse geometry the purported triumphs of the Age of Reason actually reflect moral turpitude. The imperialist version of this moral corruption is Clive of India’s rapacious administration, and its economic exponent is Adam Smith, whose Invisible Hand brings down some venomous sarcasm from the author vis-à-vis “the well-guarded, and in the estimate of some, iniquitous,
Iron-Plantation of Lord and Lady Lepton" (411). Their spokesman, Mr. LeSpark, stayed

safe inside a belief as unquestioning as in any form of Pietism [that he] ... goeth likewise under the protection of a superior Power,—not, in this case, God, but rather, Business. What turn of earthly history, however perverse, dare interfere with the workings of the Invisible Hand? Even the savages were its creatures. . . . (411)

Although he admits that "a considerable Sector of the Iron Market [is], indeed, directed to offenses against Human, and of course Animal, flesh" (412), LeSpark fails to acknowledge the invisible labor force behind the Invisible Hand. Instead it is the narrator Cherrycoke who delivers the fundamental reproach that Pynchon means to evoke in every mention of the Mason-Dixon Line: "What is not visible in his rendering . . . is the Negro Slavery . . . the inhuman ill-usage, the careless abundance of pain inflicted, the unpric'd Coercion necessary to yearly Profits beyond the projectings even of proud Satan" (412). Even Mason and Dixon themselves are divided by their Line, with their names ironically reversed from their subsequent historical meanings: it is Mason who beds with slave girls in South Africa and otherwise condones slavery, while Dixon—whose name evolved into "Dixie"—enacts his Quaker abolitionism to the extent of risking life and limb in the Baltimore slave-market episode (700). This discrepancy is one reason why, "at the end of the eight-Year Traverse, Mason and Dixon could not cross the perilous Boundaries between themselves" (689). But back in England, it is Dixon who thinks nothing of putting his surveyor's skills at the service of the Enclosures movement, helping rich aristocrats expropriate common lands from the poor (754), while it is Mason who sides passionately with the weavers' rebellion against capitalist expropriation (313). The Line thus not only separates Mason and Dixon; it marks off schizoid divisions within each psyche.

One might therefore say that Mason & Dixon is a giant prose version of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," with the Line standing in for the wall and the Enlightenment furnishing the dubious rationale for wall-building. "He had slic'd into Polygons the Common-Lands of his Forebears," Pynchon says of Dixon's journeyman work with Enclosures; "He had drawn Lines of Ink that became Fences of Stone" (587). Despite some local benefits of the Line in confirming property ownership and political boundaries,
nothing good can finally be said of it. As early as page 8, the Reverend Cherrycoke calls the project "brave, scientifick . . . and ultimately meaningless." Later, the Line is described dismissingly as having "the width of a Red Pubick Hair" (296) and as comprising "a Conduit of Evil" (701). It comes in the end to stand for every manner of artificial division and social hierarchy, from constructing the map of empire to maintaining the Great Chain of Being within which "Ev’ryone lies . . . each appropriate to his place in the Chain. . . . We who rule must tell great Lies, whilst ye lower down need only lie a little bit" (194).

The Line, then, represents a misbegotten rationalist undertaking that affords Pynchon book-length opportunity to expound his antirationalist theme. To a considerable extent, he accomplishes this end through playful magic realism motifs such as the giant cheese, the mechanical duck, and the Jesuit telegraph. Another tactic is to highlight the inhuman brutality of the times in episodes like the Tyburn hanging or scalp-taking on the frontier (111, 681). But probably the most sustained attack on rationalism comes about through the religious motifs that pervade the novel. Initially set in the Advent season of 1786, *Mason & Dixon* employs every manner of religious reference to indicate the prevalence of the nonrational: ghostly visitations, a golem tale, the Giant Beaver creation myth (620), a Wesleyan revival in Newcastle (100), a Whitefield revival in Philadelphia (261), a rendition of "Havah Nagilah" at George Washington's home (285), and various biblical applications: for example, Philadelphia as "Sodom-on-Schuylkill" or "the most licentious Babylon of America" (355, 356). This is not to say that religion is treated uncritically. At one point Christianity is implicated in "ev’ry Crusade, Inquisition, Sectarian War, the millions of lives, the seas of blood" (76), and even the genteel Reverend Cherrycoke lapses into "speculation upon the Eucharistic Sacrament and the practice of Cannibalism" (384). But the bulk of the Reverend's narration posits a Christian counterpoint to the Age of Reason's rationalist complacities. "Of course, Prayer was what got us through," he declares about the *Seahorse* episode (30), and his "Unpublished Sermon" turns the science of astronomy into a divine allegory: "As Planets do the Sun, we orbit 'round God according to Laws as elegant as Kepler's. . . . We feel as components of Gravity His Love, His Need, whatever it be that keeps us circling" (94).

The main converts of the novel are of course its pair of central figures. In the closing pages of *Mason & Dixon*, Mason comes to
realize two fallacies in his Age of Reason philosophy. One is that the struggle for order, lucidity, and progress epitomized in the Line is nullified by the possibility of radical human evil. Mason’s vision of evil gains ironic force against the backdrop of exuberance occasioned by Sir William Herschel’s discovery of a new planet:

The [Royal Astronomer Masklyne] had shar’d his delight with Mason over the new Planet.... Yet to Mason was it Purgatory.... What fore-inklings of the dark Forces of Over-Throw that assaulted his own mind came visiting?.... There may be found, within the malodorous Grotto of the Selves, a conscious Denial of all that Reason holds true. Something that knows, unarguably as it knows Flesh is sooner or later Meat, that there are Beings who are not wise, or spiritually advanced, or indeed capable of Human kindness, but ever and implacably cruel, hiding, haunting, waiting.... (769)

It is this undermining of Augustan faith in reason that causes Mason initially to forego a second expedition to see the Transit of Venus in 1768: “‘Someone must break this damn’d Symmetry,’ Mason mutters” (718). Likewise, he abandons astronomy in favor of astrology when he casts Dixon’s horoscope (765).

During his Age of Reason phase, Mason’s chief fallacy was to commit himself to reason, progress, and science—to the Transit of Venus and the Line—at the expense of his family. When he returned from St. Helena, only to set out immediately for America, his sister Anne reproached him about abandoning his children: “And the next time you see them? Years, again?” (202). Both Mason and Dixon make amends for this neglect in the closing pages. The lifelong search for a viable community in Pynchon’s books thereby ends in the two travelers’ commitment to the most ancient and deeply rooted of human communities, the biological family. In effect, the first Transit of Venus, in 1761, was a scientific expedition; the second, in 1768—after the Line is finished—bears out the allegorical meaning that the scientists had failed to recognize the first time: “to watch Venus, Love Herself, pass across the Sun” (61).

So Mason and Dixon both get married again, siring more children (as Thomas Pynchon himself has done in his fifties) while gathering their older offspring into the new family circle. Mason’s renewed bond with his most father-hungry son, Doctor Isaac, best
epitomizes this strategy. As though to compensate for those miss-
ing years of fatherhood, Mason reverts with the grown-up Isaac
to an early stage of child-rearing: “As they lie side by side in bed,
Mason finds he cannot refrain from telling his Son bedtime sto-
ries about Dixon. ‘He was ever seeking to feel something he’d
hitherto not felt’” (763–64). Of course Mason is speaking of him-
self as well as Dixon in that last statement, with family feeling
as that long-missing sentiment: “The Boy he had gone to the
other side of the Globe to avoid was looking at him now with noth-
ing in his face but concern for his Father” (768). So Mason addi-
tionally tells his own family story, how that earlier transit of
Venus—Mason’s romance with Rebekah—led to his earlier family-
formation: “At some point, invisible across the room, Doctor Isaac
will ask, quietly, evenly, ‘When did you and she meet? How young
were you?’” (767).

Thus, in the end, this epic quest narrative narrows its focus to
the wisdom of that genuine eighteenth-century mock-epic, Vol-
taire’s Candide: Mason and Dixon were to hoe their own gardens.
(Voltaire is mentioned on page 372.) But in a perverse final twist
of the plot, Mason gets the better garden. The Pynchonesque black
humor of history decrees that it is Dixon the would-be American
who ends up in an English cemetery, while Mason the would-be
Royal Society member expires in Philadelphia, soon to be the
American capital city, under the solicitous gaze of that quintes-
sential American man, Benjamin Franklin. It is a measure of
his growth that Mason accepts the new identity that Franklin
has arranged to confer upon him: “Upon Rebekah’s Tomb-Stone
he has put ‘F.A.S.’ [Fellow of the American Society] after his own
Name. So it means much to him” (761). It means much also that
after Mason’s death his and Rebekah’s two sons, William and Dr.
Isaac, choose enthusiastically to “stay, and be Americans” (772),
though Mason’s new wife and younger children go back to En-
gland. In this transition from father to sons, Pynchon’s closure
appears to grant greater weight to the ameliorative promise of
America than to the tragic patrimony of the Line—the invectives
of Slow Learner notwithstanding.

As for the Enlightenment, Pynchon’s dimming action figures to
have no more lasting effect than the paltry assaults of Foucault
and the critical theorists a generation ago. One reason for this
result is that the neoclassic writers did the job first and better,
in (for example) the satires of Swift, Johnson, and Hogarth as
well as the skeptical inquiries of Rousseau and Godwin. Indeed, they brightened the Enlightenment by so criticizing it, adding their luster to the permanent brilliance of Gibbon, Pope, Mozart, Adam Smith, and similar eminences, including those flawed vessels of Enlightenment wisdom, Pynchon’s cameo characters Washington and Jefferson. But if he shared the failure of Foucault and company to effectively dim the Enlightenment, Pynchon had one vital advantage over those ideological comrades in arms: unlike them, he is a first-rate artist. When the ephemeral politics of our age have boiled away, what will remain in Mason & Dixon is a richly stylized epic novel, peopled with a big cast of lively, uniquely drawn characters.

By conferring the immortality of art upon these figures, Pynchon achieves a victory of sorts over the true essence of chaos, which is not ideological but metaphysical, incorporated into the one-way arrow of time. Whether figured as the messed-up calendar with its missing eleven days (190, 554), or as the watch that gets swallowed into “acid and bile and [that] smells ever of Vomit” (325), time is the final adversary, a universal juggernaut that annihilates lives and meanings. In the encounter with Johnson and Boswell, near the end of the book, the Reverend Cherrycoke unmistakably stands in for Pynchon when describing the artist’s salvage project against the power of Time:

“I had my Boswell, once,” Mason tells Boswell, “Dixon and I. We had a joint Boswell. Preacher nam’d Cherrycoke . . . a sort of Shadow ever in the Room who has haunted [me], preserving [my] ev’ry spoken remark.”

“Which else would have been lost forever to the Great Wind of Oblivion,—think . . . how much shapely Expression, from the titl’d Gambler, the Barmaid’s Suitor, the offended Fopling, the gratified Toss-Pot, is simply fading away upon the Air, out under the Door, into the Evening and the Silence beyond. All those voices. Why not pluck a few words from the multitudes rushing toward the Void of forgetfulness?” (747)

Though “a few words” is hardly the right phrase for Mason & Dixon, these sentiments define the book’s lasting achievement. “Slow Learner” may describe Pynchon the political/cultural critic, but there is nothing slow or unlearned about his artistic power at this sunset end of a grand career.

2. Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 18–19. Further references will be noted parenthetically within the text.
