

## Tracking the Gothic in Thomas Pynchon's "Mason & Dixon"

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### Abstract

*This study explores Thomas Pynchon's novel "Mason & Dixon" (1997) to investigate the use of Gothic narrative strategies in postmodern American literature, particularly in texts concerned with trauma representation. At first, the analysis aims to define the essence of Gothicism by drawing on leading scholars and critics, highlighting its historical evolution and at the same time determining its ability to articulate various forms of traumatic experiences, regardless of the factors that caused them and their historical contexts. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the enduring influence of Gothic storytelling techniques on literature in general and trauma narratives in the postmodern era in particular.*

**Keywords:** Trauma, gothicism, postmodern literature, conspiracy theory, metafiction, historiography.

### تتبع القوطية في "ماسون وديكسون" لتوماس بينشون

#### ملخص

يبحث هذا المقال، من خلال تحليل رواية توماس بينشون ماسون وديكسون (1997)، تقنيات السرد القوطية في الأدبيات الأمريكية ما بعد الحادثة، ولا سيما النصوص المتعلقة بتمثيل الصدمات. أولاً، يسعى التحليل، من خلال آراء بعض العلماء والنقاد البارزين، إلى تحديد طبيعة هذا النوع الأدبي في الماضي والحاضر وكيفية تطورها عبر الزمن. ويناقش أيضاً قدرته على التعبير عن مختلف أشكال الصدمات بغض النظر عن العوامل التي سببتها وعن سياقاتها التاريخية. وهي بذلك تركز على التأثير الكبير لتقنيات السرد القوطي على النصوص المتعلقة بالصدمات في عصر ما بعد الحادثة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** صدمة، قوطية، أدب ما بعد حادثة، نظرية مؤامرة، ما وراء خيال، علم تاريخ.

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## **Introduction:**

This article explores the parallels between trauma representation in postmodern American fiction and the Gothic conventions by re-examining one of the most compelling examples of this intersection, namely Thomas Pynchon's "Mason & Dixon". In practice, it is to dissect Pynchon's novel to uncover the ways Gothic motifs and narrative strategies enables him to articulate the experience of the human psyche with the anxiety-provoking fragmentation of postmodern realities. Indeed, "Mason & Dixon" with its intricate narrative, complex characters, and thematic depth, is one of the most outstanding examples of postmodern trauma fiction offering a fertile ground for examining the intersection between Gothicism and trauma literature. However, before indulging into the novel's structural and thematic analysis from Gothic perspective, it is essential to discuss briefly the nature of Gothicism and its narrative methods and its ability to represent traumatic experiences. Doing so, the paper attempts at highlighting the Gothic influences on postmodern literature representation of trauma, and the way its moral aspects have enabled trauma theory to evolve into a fundamental ethical approach to postmodern literary criticism.

### **1- Gothic literature: Evolution**

The fundamental common point between Gothic literature and trauma literature is that both were birthed during periods of significant historical transformations, that prompted them to address seriously the challenges of exploring the psychological and social realms of trauma. Actually, there is a growing interest in the recent years to investigate the very nature of Gothicism and its ability to account for traumatic experiences generated by social and historical forces other than its historical context. Jessica Bomarito (2006) has pointed out that the Gothic literary tradition, taking root in the late eighteenth century, was a reaction to the sweeping socio-economic changes consequent to the Age of Enlightenment<sup>(1)</sup>. Its nature and traditional structural were further defined by Wasson and Adler (2014) as having two essential components: the first is directly related to psychological trauma consequent the realities of its time, and characterized by "a disturbing affective lens" of the reality giving the story its sense of "profound emotional distress or an unnatural emotional void"<sup>(2)</sup>, whereas the second element is "arguably spatial and that of distressing emotions confined within claustrophobic environment"<sup>(3)</sup>. This spatial dimension of the tradition is further developed by Manuel Aguirre (2008) who explained that its function is to lead both the characters and the readers from the "domain of rationality and intelligible reality" [of daily life to] "the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic numinous which transcend human reason"<sup>(4)</sup>.

In fact, its focus on the supernatural, the mysterious and the macabre reflects the collective anxieties and fears of a society grappling with the realities of rapid changes and suffocating feeling of alienation and uncertainty. Its haunted landscape and tormented characters are the medium through which these fears and anxieties were articulated in literature<sup>(5)</sup>. Expanding these arguments, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1980) attributes to this spatial model a historical dimension in addition to its psychological aspect, arguing that it typically involves "the self massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access"<sup>(6)</sup>, including its own past. This inability to accede to some spheres to one's memories, caused by a psychological traumatic experience or socio-political injustices, generates a frustration in which the past traumatic event haunts the present in a form of circularity that never ends. Just as one of the most influential Gothic fiction writers, Howard Philip Lovecraft, once declared "the past is real—it is all there"<sup>(7)</sup>. In this way, the psychological and the historical, and the present and the past merge together in Gothicism to articulate profoundly the human experience with various forms of trauma.

In this sense, Wasson and Adler (2014) argued that many scholars and critics increasingly perceive Gothic literature not really as a genre but as state of mind, or the atmosphere intended by a literary text rather than typical images or narrative structures<sup>(8)</sup>. In the same vein, Robert Miles (2002) while discussing the Gothic tradition contended that it has become a narrative strategy employed in all literary genres, rather being a genre that stands by itself<sup>(9)</sup>.

Michael Gamer (2000) has previously defined the Gothic as “a site that moves” and [characterized] “by its ability to transplant itself across forms and media: from narrative into dramatic and poetic modes, and from textual into visual aural media”<sup>(10)</sup>. Kirby Farrel (1998) has also argued that literary criticism in general is no longer viewing the Gothic tradition as a literature centered around the terror from some sort of fantastic horror and uncanny settings and its psychological impact, but its proliferation in contemporary culture made of it the expression of trauma no matter its origin<sup>(11)</sup>. He explains this phenomenon by the fact that the growing traumatic generated by the postmodern culture is so analogous to the socio-economic transformations that were behind the emergence of the Gothic literature that the devices of the one can be comprehensibly applied on the other<sup>(12)</sup>. This is also to be found in Michelle Massé’s (2012) conception of Gothicism that she defined as frame narrative that goes much beyond its concerns with trauma reenactment to encompass a wide range of cultural, historical and social preoccupations<sup>(13)</sup>. Such a conception confers a significant potential to the Gothic pattern to function as a narrative strategy to illustrate traumatic experiences in literature, whatever, the psychological or social contexts that generated them. This is what explains the Gothic evolution in recent criticism from a marginalized and frequently underestimated literary genre to a mode that predominates over not only literature but a wide range of other cultural productions.

### **1-2- “Mason & Dixon” and Gothicism:**

Parallel to this, postmodern literature emerged in the middle of the twentieth century, a period similarly marked by significant upheavals and a sense of psychic fragmentation, and the blurring of reality and fiction. Its paranoid skepticism towards the grand narratives and its inclination to fragmentation and paradox genuinely mirror the disorienting experience of living in a world of a shifting reality and under the terror of alienation and social marginalization. Therefore, like the Gothic, postmodern literature displays a fascination with those hypothetical realities which reflect the general fear of the mysterious, and the terror of the irrational. It frequently employs disorienting and uncanny scenarios settings to represent the darker aspects of the human experiences<sup>(14)</sup>. Therefore, the spatial model constitutes a common frame narrative that proved to an effective device to express the sense of awe and impotence. In Gothic literature, this is often achieved through images of haunted castles, gloomy landscapes, and supernatural occurrences whereas in postmodern literature, similar effects are achieved through narrative fragmentation, unreliable narration, and metafiction techniques. As Maria Beville (2009) contended, these features enabled the two traditions to explore the deeper psychological and social traumas. Even though distinct in their historical contexts, they nevertheless converge in the exploration of the intimacy of the human fears and anxieties<sup>(15)</sup>.

The Gothic tradition possesses, then, both the psychological and the historical dimensions that American postmodern fiction needs to articulate the ongoing trauma exercised upon the human psyche by the postmodern hypermediated reality, as well as the legacies of imperialism and its historical injustices. Similarly, the preoccupation with the psychological impacts of social and historical facts on the collective and individual psyche has shifted the notion of trauma from its pure clinical meaning to a defining cultural characteristic in postmodern literature. In other words, the very nature of both literary traditions seems to have known a substantial epistemic shift to become essential aspects of literary trauma criticism. Gothicism seems to have provided postmodern literary criticism with the necessary devices to articulate the psychic crisis resulting from the hypermediated and fragmented reality of postmodernity. Effectively, much of its structural patterns are easily recognizable in several postmodern texts especially those concerned with the representation of trauma associated with historical injustices and the constant marginalization of certain individuals and groups. These are also the literary aspects that postmodern American literature uses as narrative frames to represent some segments of its past and the injustices associated with it, and to vindicate revision and reform.

In this context, in *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic* Justin D. Edwards (2000) explains that American postmodern literature draws on the Gothic frame narrative to give voices to the leftovers of the American society and its official discourses, like women and various minority communities<sup>(16)</sup>. Going through many postmodern American literary texts, it becomes evident that the Gothic narrative structure provides trauma literature with a literary space and devices essential for its ethical and social criticism. It allows this type of literature to explore the relationship between the past and the present through fictional hypothetical scenarios in which the parallel between past and present cultural identities and societies becomes possible. Joyce E. Chaplin (1997) explained that the Gothic experimental framework has very often served as a productive place for trauma reenactment since it promotes the reexamination and even re-dramatization of certain historical occurrences and individual recollections, breaking by that, new grounds in the field of trauma studies with its own ethical imperatives<sup>(17)</sup>. In light of this, the study tries to show how prominent American writers like Thomas Pynchon has experimented with Gothic genre to confront the challenges of representing the psychic pains due to historical oppressions and injustices.

“Mason & Dixon” is, actually, a fictional version of an episode of the American history told by two characters inspired from real historical figures, the astronomer Charles Mason and the surveyor Jerimiah Dixon. Actually, the two scientists were appointed by the British government to draw a frontier between Pennsylvania and Maryland, and which became later the frontier between the North and the South, or, as the fictional Dixon phrases it in the story, the “Line between their Slave-Keepers, and their Wage-Payers”<sup>(18)</sup>, prefiguring the upcoming Civil War. Their mission lasted five years, during which they recorded their experience with the America oscillating between fascination and incomprehension. Joanna Freer (2018) argues that throughout the dramatization of such historical episode of the American history, Pynchon undertook to write a narrative highlighting dissenting voices about the colonial times, denouncing the American system of injustices. The ethical issues as reflected in the novel’s image of Western imperialism are extremely revealing about the Empire’s colonial legacies, mainly in the exercise of power and social exclusion<sup>(19)</sup>. In this sense, the narrative depicts the effects of these social and historical wrongs lived by the concerned individuals as personal traumas, and symbolically the book’s characters are pictured suffering from paranoia, disassociation and even madness. This is actually a form of trauma reenactment so similar to clinical trauma typical of the Gothic tradition which repetition forms a circularity where the past inexorably haunts the present and compromises the future.

Pynchon’s novel is, actually, a masterful blending between the historical and the imaginative, and the real and the fantastic through which he created a dissenting narrative on the American history with all its depths and complexities. The exploration of its thematic and stylistic aspects reveals Pynchon’s use of the subjunctive frame to articulate his suspicion of the American official version of its history, focusing on the indeterminate and subjective nature of historiography. Adam Lifshey (2010) describes very well how Pynchon employed a variety avant-garde devices and strategies inspired from magical realism and fantastic occurrences to craft a counter narrative to denounce the falsification and omissions of the American writing of its history. Through witty pastiches, anachronisms, and a careful balance between the real and the subjunctive, the novel is in fact an invitation to reflect on and revisit the national past to uncover what has been unjustly concealed and silenced in the official version<sup>(20)</sup>. While revisiting the historical traumas consequent to persistent oppression and marginalization, its critique is tinted with the supernatural, the uncanny, and the morally ambiguous.

The novel’s structure, with its intriguing plot and layered storytelling strongly echoes the Gothic tradition’s affinity for plot complexity with its stories within stories and sense of mystery, and evokes the legacies of one its champions namely Howard Phillip Lovecraft (1890-1937)<sup>(21)</sup>. Lovecraft’s vision of the world and his emphasis on the insignificance of humanity in the cosmic order have inspired to a large extent the postmodern fragmented

vision of the world and its tendency to question its very rationality. His fiction is essentially known for its depiction of what he calls *cosmic horror* and the exploration of the unknown using narrative techniques such as suspense, the gradual revelation of hidden truths and the portrayal mysterious characters. Though in different historical context, all these storytelling methods are to be found in Pynchon's narrative strategies in representing postmodern trauma and anxiety like the fragmented narrative, unreliable narration and general feeling of impotence. While Pynchon's works may not conform entirely to traditional conventions in the same manner as Lovecraft's, still much of "Mason & Dixon" plot is pervaded with a sense of mysterious conspiracies and unsettling suspicion of the establishment in power. In this sense, the novel's narrative structure largely parallels Lovecraft's portrayal of the cosmos with its immensity and awesome mysteries beyond human comprehension and control. In the story Mason and Dixon display the same amazement with the mysteries of the vast, uncharted territories they encounter during their journey in the New World. The Gothic influence, here, extends much beyond mere thematic resemblance; it enables the novel to disclose its real meaning, that the most profound fears arise from the realization of the humanity's insignificance in the vast scheme of the universe. The novel is pervaded with several images depicting the characters disoriented by an environment filled with hidden dangers and mysterious forces.

Therefore, the novel's engagement with these Gothic motifs, even reinvented through postmodern lens, constitutes a legacy of the Gothic tradition to the postmodern literature and its trauma representation. In fact, Pynchon's treatment of trauma is imbued with the fantastic and the magical and suggests a deeper and more pervasive sense of despair and frustration resulting from the human experience with injustices. This is clearly reflected in the narrative's exploration of the colonial violence against the Natives and the nascent struggle over slavery and the plagued Black community in the New World, and these historical injustices made the victims suffering from traumatic memories. The events of the story dramatize the nature of the repressed trauma which symbolically take the shape of ghostly presence that lingers in time and haunts the daily life of the characters. Avery F. Gordon (1997) defined the process as "the way the dead speak to the living"<sup>(22)</sup>, and at some point, of the story Mason speculates that "Men of Reason" would always consider a ghost to be something unreal and fantastic rather than a "wrong unrighted," similar to a restless spirit unable to find its way, needing help nobody can offer, and often unable to connect with those whom it needs, and that,

"But here is a collective Ghost of more than household Scale, -- the Wrongs committed Daily against the Slaves, petty and grave ones alike, going unrecorded, charm'd invisible to history, invisible yet possessing Mass, and Velocity, able not only to rattle Chains but to break them as well. The precariousness to Life here, the need to keep the Ghost propitiated, Day to Day, via Company's merciless Priesthoods and many-Volum'd Codes, brings all but the hardiest souls sooner or later to consider the Primary Questions more or less undiluted".<sup>(23)</sup>

The incorporation of supernatural occurrences enables the novel to reflect on the society's sinister and obscure aspects, and explore issues such corruption, paranoia, and conspiracy theories, and its dystopian atmosphere to intensify the sense of despair and powerlessness. This is what aligns the novel with Lovecraft's storytelling techniques namely the unreliable narration, fragmented narratives and the intersection between the real and the fictional. These influences can be seen in other Pynchon's novels such as *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), *Gravity Rainbow* (1973), *Against the Day* (2006), and *Vinland* (1990). Throughout these texts, Pynchon experimented with narrative structure challenging the conventional storytelling norms, and drawing inspiration from Lovecraft's innovative approach. His fiction is a form of postmodern literature that combines elements of science, history, philosophy, and pop culture in complex and playful narratives that challenge conventional notions of reality and causality.

### **1-3- Gothicism and the Conspiracy Theory:**

Factually, most of the novel's events occurred before the American and French revolutions, and thus before the emergence a true sense of nationhood, still the characters' situation strangely resembles modern times. The most amazing thing that the fictional Mason and Dixon have learned during their journey a disconcerting truth about the world that it is not really ruled by governments or states but it is in the hands of some multinational corporations and financial institutions. In St. Helena, the future royal astronomer Nevil Maskelyne introduces Mason to the power of these chartered firms, and enlightens them about the real nature of their job. The astronomer himself, as a character, is introduced as a mysterious personality with enigmatic motives, multiple identities and suspicious past. The incorporation of such ambiguous and mysterious characters constitutes a Gothic solid element in itself conferring the novel with a sense of mystery and haunting. It is not a surprise then that it is this character who would explain to Mason how it all works and confesses that they are quite similar; all are under the control of unseen forces more powerful than many nations, yet without a clear territory. Though these occult forces are not part of any alliance, they are still able to maintain impressive armies and navies, and are capable of funding past and future wars whenever they need or want<sup>(24)</sup>.

The nature of the forces Maskelyne talks about eludes the individual perception in the sense that it is impersonal and invisible and has no definite territory; it is instead a global entity, and the whole globe is its territory. Eve, M. P (2014) asserts that in Pynchon's novel any governing power becomes, in its relation to the market, "a 'composite reality and mythicized abstraction', countering the traditional conception of an all-too-visible mechanism of power"<sup>(25)</sup>. One of these entities, and the one that Maskelyne refers to in the novel, is the East India Company, which is so wealthy and powerful that it can sustain any colonial war anywhere on the globe. Maskelyne knows the truth about the wealth and political powers of these corporations very well because his brother-in-law, Clive of India, is the administrator of the East India Company<sup>(26)</sup>. We understand from the novel that this is the case with all the other chartered companies with the same powers and influences all over the globe. As the story progresses, whether in, England, Africa or the New World, Mason and Dixon start developing a growing sense of unease to whether their loyalty are to these corporations instead of any nation. They gradually realize that the political and cultural events surrounding their supposed scientific investigations are actually controlled by invisible hands who are monitoring secretly their entire activities<sup>(27)</sup>. In making his two main characters differentiate between their mission and its sponsor, Pynchon wants to separate capitalism from science and thus empties Western colonialism from any noble drives. As the narrative approaches its end, the surveyors grow worried about the possibility of their work could be used for illicit political purposes. They fear that the British Royal Society has used them to foster slavery and native land dispossession, perhaps they are themselves its "slaves"<sup>(28)</sup>.

In so doing, Pynchon introduces a new aspect of the traditional conspiracy theory. In much of his previous novels, like many of postmodern fiction, the focus was on the individual's fear from a world controlled more and more by machines and digital devices; here, science itself fears being controlled by human obscure forces. As John A. McClure (1995) explained postmodern fiction is a counter narrative that radically oppose the capitalistic use of science and its attempt to obliterate of any form of spirituality<sup>(29)</sup>. In the reality, Mason and Dixon's boundary is an impressive scientific achievement because many other scientists had failed in the enterprise before. It has become their lasting legacy into the twentieth century and perhaps beyond. However, the two scientists ended by thinking that their scientific achievement serves in fact at legitimating the transformation of the world into enclosed properties, intended to impose more and more taxes on people, and to seize more lands from the Natives. Unwillingly, as it seems then, the two scientists' work throughout the narrative has been used to enrich the wealthy at the expense of the poor and the oppressed. As their journey in the New World progresses, they become more and more aware of their complicity with the

imperialistic enterprise, and Dixon begins to question some aspects of their mission and wonders why every observation site recommended by the Royal Society ends up being a factory, consulate, or another chartered company agency. Mason suspects even more that both Pennsylvania and Maryland may also be some form of chartered companies, and adds with a lot of apprehensions that “Chartered companies may indeed be the form the world has now increasingly begun to take.”<sup>(30)</sup> Although, Mason's reply is dismissed as a joke; however, its frequent repetition indicates that it is a serious theme in the novel. In other many scenes, Mason and Dixon are pictured as paranoid characters with a constant feeling that they are controlled by genuine forces and that they are tools in a game played beyond them. However, as the plot of the novel develops, we gradually learn that these invisible forces are real and Mason's worries were justified.

These hidden forces larger than human beings and controlling every aspect of their individual and social lives emerge as recurrent themes not only in Pynchon's fiction but in postmodern fiction at large. In Pynchon's first three novels, these larger forces were vague, invisible and their very existence was question able and referred to as *they*, *V* or *Tristero*. However, it is only in his 1990 novel *Vineland* that Pynchon starts giving them human shapes, and even overtly named through political leaders just as Hitler, Nixon Roosevelt and even Kennedy who is supposed to be a victim of some sort of conspiracy, or else criminal organizations like Mafia and CIA<sup>(31)</sup>. In the novel, they take the shape of the chartered companies that Maskelyne designated as responsible of what the world has become, and whatever their names and nationalities may be, they all belong to what Stacey Olster (2008) calls “the decentered and deterritorialized”<sup>(32)</sup> shape of the capitalistic Empire in the postmodern world.

## **2- Past and Present: Dialogical Interplay:**

There is another aspect in the novel where the narrative's dialogic interaction is not only between the fictional characters and real historical figures, but, most importantly, between the present and the past. To do so, Pynchon uses a technique that Mason and Dixon employed in real history to chart the transits of Venus and to draw their boundary line. This scientific technique is called parallax traditionally used for measuring the distance of the object using trigonometry in the outer space. David Cowart (1999) explained how this method enables Pynchon to confront a series of triangulated views that synchronize the past with the present in his assessment of national history and to denounce the supposed objectivity of historiography<sup>(33)</sup>. Going through the narrative this method normally used to map the sky and the earth for scientific ends, has become one of the imperialist tools to hold off the world. According to Graham Huggan (1994), maps can be used as a persuasive tool to reduce the world into a single lifeless object easy to handle and possess. He, further, argues that the seventeenth and eighteenth scientific mapping of the world served mainly the imperialist project of colonialism and not really science<sup>(34)</sup>. When applied to the narrative, this device enables Pynchon to explain the process of intentional distortion of facts and historical records. This falsification of history is actually reported through the examination of two viewpoints and two mentalities in two distinct periods of national history, namely 1671 and 1997, in a similar way of the parallax method enables scientist to observe an object from two perspectives. It is only then that the reader fully grasps the extent of the imperialistic ambitions under the cover of science have shaped the occidental collective culture and its never-ending drive for expansion.

Adjacent to the dichotomy between science and capitalism, the novel highlights the intricate and ambiguous triangular relationship between capitalism, imperial order, and scientific exploration. This is another element that connects Pynchon's novel to Lovecraft's cosmic horror. Both authors use mathematical and scientific concepts to create a sense of awe and terror in their works. For example, and as S. T. Joshi (2010) pointed out, Lovecraft uses ideas from geometry, probability, and quantum theory to describe the nature and appearance of his cosmic entities<sup>(35)</sup>. In his novels, Pynchon uses concepts such as entropy, permutation,

and information theory to explore the themes of chaos, order, and information. As E.M. Wood (1997) explained, the capitalistic needs of primary resources and marketplaces urged imperialistic expansion, using very often excessive violence and scientific investigations to dominate huge regions over the world. Therefore, knowledge, whether scientific or any other cultural production, has become limited to the needs of imperialism<sup>(36)</sup>. In this way, Pynchon accuses imperialism and capitalism of historical injustices that are not simply material, but and as it seems in the narrative, they have also caused terrible cultural devastations with lasting consequences. Just as in *The Crying of Lot 49*, which portrays the protagonist Oedipa Maas as a victim of a conspiracy that involves a secret postal system called *Tristero*, which may or may not exist, Mason and Dixon gradually uncover the historical fallacies of the official discourse on American history and the conspiracy behind it. Like Oedipa, their search for the truth led them across several hints and symbols that just serve to heighten their bewilderment and anxiety<sup>(37)</sup>.

One of these discoveries is the truth about the mythical figures of the Founding Fathers, who are described in the novel as figures without ethical or spiritual ambitions in total opposition to the version of the official history. George Washington, for instance, betrays his greed by confessing his intention to establish a chartered company on a land reserved to the Natives and proscribed from white settlement regardless of the legality or morality of the enterprise. He tells Dixon that, Americans will fight Indians, when they wish, and when necessary, the British army itself, as they no longer accept restraint or taxation. The ministry may choose to overlook this reality, at their own risk<sup>(38)</sup>. His desire to fight both the Natives and the British authorities emerges out of greed and business rather than for the sake of any political or moral values at set in the official discourse. His immorality is further highlighted by his dismissive attitude towards the Natives during the discussion of the Paxton Boys massacre in the novel. Pynchon goes further even in his attacks on the Founding Fathers when he makes one of the characters stating that,

“No longer, Alas, a phrase of Power, -- this Age sees a corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick. Projectors, Brokers of Capital, Insur-ancers, Peddlers upon the global Scale, Enterprisers and Quacks, -- these are the last poor fallen and feckless inheritors of a Knowledge they can never use, but in the service of Greed. The coming Rebellion is theirs, -- Franklin, and that lot, -- and Heaven help the rest of us, if they prevail”.<sup>(39)</sup>

There is another gothic aspect of the novel which is associated with the prevailing dialogue between the past and the present. Actually, American Postmodern literature focus on the macabre and the uncanny has always been intertwined with moral and ethical questions. This aspect is vividly present in “Mason & Dixon”, where the Gothic elements extend beyond mere aesthetic and thematic choices to engage, as S. Cohen (2002) indicates, deeply with ethical dilemmas, as it confronts issues of colonialism, slavery, and the moral ambiguities of progress and civilization<sup>(40)</sup>. These ethical considerations, seen through the lens of the Gothic, gain a heightened complexity and urgency, reflecting the realities of a traumatic past. In the novel these past moments of struggle, the invisible and the concealed from national history take concrete shapes like ghosts or apparitions. At some point in the novel, anonymous marginal voices appear to be on the brink of taking over the main narrative. Towards the end, these voices come to the forefront after being summoned by Timothy Tox's verse. The outcast multitudes of Philadelphia then haunt LeSpark's living room. The extra-diegetic narrator informs the reader that,

“When the hook of Night is well set, and when all the Children are at last irretrievably detain'd within their Dreams, slowly into the Room begin to walk the Black servants, the Indian poor, the Irish runaways, the Chinese Sailors, the overflow'd from the mad Hospital, all unchosen Philadelphia, -- as if something outside, beyond the cold Wind, had driven them to this extreme of seeking refuge. They bring their Scars, their Pox-pitted Cheeks, their Burdens and Losses, their feverish Eyes, their proud fellowship in a Mobility that is to be, whose shape none inside this House may know”.<sup>(41)</sup>



These supernatural, fantastical, and surreal elements distort the boundaries between reality and imagination, contributing to a sense of fear and mystery. A kind of shadow or phantom history becomes, therefore, discernible as an unrealized possibility, a sort of another dimension that Pynchon describes as a “lateral world set infinitesimally to the side of the one we think we know”<sup>(42)</sup>. This is a direct invocation of the past as pre-history of the present. However unreal the scene may seem, the resulting emotion from the presence of fantastic is supplemented by an intimation of the past which is inexorably linked to magic as it conjures up old injuries sometimes ancestral but still like ghosts haunting the present. In a way, the real past needs the fantastic in order to emerge bringing to the surface the roots of all the traumatic experiences. Even though fragmented and destabilizing at times, the book's version of history is not meant to change the past. The book's parallax perspective is instead a conversation between the past and the present to highlight history's erasures, and ultimately functions as a recovery or healing process. In essence, his discourse blends the social with the psychological, and as in Lacanian psychoanalysis, it attempts to teach the individual and the nation to come up with the fact that their history is the sum of the events and facts they have lived individually and shared collectively and probably dismissed by official historiography. This fusion between the individual and the national is typical of the Lacanian analysis and constitutes one of the most significant aspects of Pynchon's novel. To a large extent, then, this communion between the intersubjective and the national psychologies<sup>(43)</sup> emerges as one of Pynchon's effective new devices with which he explicitly addresses his critique of political issues.

Expanding the comparison between Pynchon and Lovecraft, both seem to very often employ a form of metafiction, or self-referentiality, in their works. For example, Lovecraft often uses fictional books like *The Necronomicon* to provide background information and references for his stories<sup>(44)</sup>. In the same way “Mason & Dixon”, in addition to incorporating gothic elements, is invaded by an eerie gothic serial, at the same time as Reverend Cherrycoke's narration, referred to as *The Ghastly Fop*, a series published in magazines and books in the eighteenth century. At one point, its gothic tales take control over the narrative, told not only through Cherrycoke's perspective but also through the written accounts shared by his nephew and niece. However, the episodes of *The Ghastly Fop* that have been integrated into the storyline mostly focus on the early American captivity literature. Re-enacting those narratives and stories that were popular in the eighteenth century is in fact, an effective device to capture the mindset of that era and introspect its collective imagination and its prevalent self-representations. This of course of out of Pynchon's conviction that popular stories, despite their evident constraints, distortions, and omissions, reflect the way a specific historical era portrays itself<sup>(45)</sup>. Therefore, and through, the imitation of popular entertainment from the period Pynchon invites the reader inside the culture and its own artistic creations, enabling him to have realistic insights into the collective thinking of its inhabitants. Furthermore, the use of pastiche, a typical device of postmodern literature, serves as a means of drawing the attention of readers to the historical distortion and misrepresentations present in the popular culture.

The exploration of the imaginary is especially evocative in “Mason & Dixon”, as the story departs from mundane reality to delve into the imaginative domains of Gothic, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Spy, and Romance literature. Actually, the novel's intertextuality signifies the author's profound mistrust of official historiography's version of factual history and his confidence in popular memory to account for the genuine history. Reverend Cherrycoke evokes such a historical eventuality as he speculates on an alternate history where the belief in the power of glyphs and signs to produce magical effects persists, and explains that the essence of magic lies in the small words that create significant wonders, akin to the coded inscriptions in fables that reveal treasures upon deciphering. Therefore, codes are crucial, and their precise descriptions often concern matters of life and death, as a single misplaced letter can lead to swift and ruthless destruction<sup>(46)</sup>.

The stories, each character talks about his imaginary world expressing his beliefs and ideologies, tend to be taken by the other characters as some sort of truth about the reality they actually share. The novel portrays, in this sense, the development of a shared and inclusive cultural vision, that Paul Ricoeur defined as a “cultural imagination”<sup>(47)</sup>. Throughout the story, Mason tries desperately to preserve the fantastical and mythical, in a world dominated a materialistic ideology of the Age of reason which intends its obliteration. In incorporating supernatural and fantastic elements like the talking dog or the fantastic duck, Pynchon also indicts the dry form of reason as opposed to the enchanting world of the magical and the imaginary. In his way, Mason tries to save those, "Provisions for Survival in a World less fantastic" which as the Talking Dog claims later,

“So we know now to evoke from you, Man, one day at a time, at least enough Mercy for one day more of Life. Nonetheless, however accomplish’d, our Lives are never settled, -- we go on as tail-wagging Scheherazades, ever a step away from the dread Palm Leaf, nightly delaying the Blades of our Masters by telling them tales of their humanity. I am but an extreme Expression of this Process, --”<sup>(48)</sup>.

Therefore, in blurring the distinction between the real world and the subjunctive, Pynchon attempts to reconstitute what Adam Lifshy (2010) calls a previously "absent aboriginal space ... of unmapped atemporal locus where plural realities and possibilities exist side by side"<sup>(49)</sup>. This use of the subjunctive mode, or the parallel reality, as a literary device provides him with a site for his counter-narratives to confront the ideology of the Empire and its fabricated history.

This is what leads to another critical point in Pynchon's novel, as the narrative goes beyond the dialogical interaction between the present and the past to depict an exchange between two alternative worlds of the fantastic and the possible. It may be Pynchon's way of underscoring the difficulties of providing a solution to the dilemma between the representation of the reality about the past as it appears in official discourse and historiography and what really took place. He even suggests that the truth about past things could have been otherwise and consequently the present too, but now nothing could be done for a correction, which is clearly reflected in the structure of the narrative itself. Instead of proposing any solution, Pynchon effectively invites the reader to a subjunctive world to prompt his imagination to consider what could be the world beyond the Empire. Symbolically, Mason's and Dixon's adventure does not end like in the reality, but the plot continues to follow *subjunctive* places throughout the American territories they did not visit in the reality. One of the important aspects of the novel is another of Lovecraft's influence on postmodern American literature is precisely how he expanded the boundaries of the real towards the fantastic and the magical. His creation of the Cthulhu Mythos, a shared universe inhabited by ancient cosmic beings, inspired countless writers to explore alternative worlds and delve into existential themes, leading to innovative thematic exploration and narrative techniques. His works have inspired a generation of writers, among whom Pynchon to push the boundaries of literature and question traditional narratives, which is a pivotal element in the evolution of postmodern American literature.

Moreover, Mason and Dixon's fictional travel around the American landscape also draws attention to another important fact. At the same time scientific rationalism was dismissing popular myths as valueless superstitions, the imperial order sought to create a its own. Raymond Williams' essay (2014) has already talked about the magical system behind the messages of contemporary advertising corporations and the subsequent consumer culture<sup>(50)</sup>. While analyzing the content of the messages mediated by advertising, the American society seems to be seduced and even delighted with the magical and the mythical. Yet, Pynchon clarifies that the subjunctive world he foregrounds is absolutely different from the consumption society's illusionary system. As a counter discourse to the marketing mentality of the capitalistic system, Pynchon presents a popular mythology through folkloric tales, offering a system of values much more truthful to its people. This imaginary world of fantastic tales and ghost stories informs us that the history of marginalized communities is

still safely stored within the enchanted world through which the locals can transmit the values of their singular cultures. Through this world, Pynchon succeeded in reinserting what has been concealed in the history of America.

Nevertheless, Pynchon's "Mason & Dixon" does not offer a clear-cut proposal for a better society or any specific alternatives for readers to choose from. Instead, it presents a range of hypothetical scenarios, encouraging readers to imagine a different reality from that they know. The book suggests that the truth about the world may lie somewhere between what exists and what ought to have been. In this sense, the novel is filled with alternative histories and worlds that prompt readers to consider different possibilities. Brian McHale (2000) interprets Pynchon's frequent use of the subjunctive mode as a literary tool that allows the author to narrate hypothetical events that could have taken place in the fictional world of the book but never actually did. The hypothetical and counterfactual aspects of the subjunctive world's narrative offer unlimited possibilities for intellectual speculations and are one of its most potent achievements<sup>(51)</sup>. This indicates Pynchon's profound concern with the effects of the intrusion of traumatic history into the present-day societies, and also an interest in horrifying and dehumanizing discourses related to traumatic experiences of some communities.

The analogy between Pynchon's denunciation of the national historical falsification and Lovecraft's indictment of an injured nature and their consequent traumatic effects on the human mind shows the extent of the Gothic frame narrative's incursion into trauma literature. While scheming repressed events of the past and their incursion into the present haunting the protagonists' lives, trauma literature makes significant use of Gothic devices as structural vectors to articulate the sense of awe and frustration. The novel frequently pictures the past as a place overloaded with personal and historical upheavals, prompting immediacy and relevance in the present and summoning a reconsideration. In this sense, several Gothic authors have previously used the retrospective aspect in their narratives for the same purpose. A technique that the postmodern writers would rediscover as well as its intellectual impact on the readers and the power of its temporal circularity to express personal and collective traumas<sup>(52)</sup>. This convergence between trauma representation and Gothic conventions in Pynchon's novel illustrates a recurring pattern in other American novels in postmodern era. It is so because the Gothic convention proved its effectiveness in reflecting the millennial anxieties so analogous to the eighteenth historical and social contexts that generated the Gothic tradition itself. Pynchon's novels are replete with symbolic and allegorical elements, reflecting societal anxieties and historical and cultural alienation. Using symbolism in such a sustained way, the book aligns with Gothic literature's tendency to convey hidden meanings and deeper layers of interpretation of the social reality.

Mason's mind lifts up to the metaphysical as he thinks about his Talking Dog friend he first met in London. The dog's unique talents leave him in wonder, and he can't help but thinking about the mystical powers that might be at play around the world. However, Mason becomes disappointed and even angry when Dixon shows no interest in the dog's magical skills and asks Dixon, "Why mayn't there be Oracles, for us, in our time? Gate-ways to Futurity? That can't all have died with the ancient Peoples. Isn't it worth looking ridiculous, at least to investigate this English Dog, for its obvious bearing upon Metempsychosis if nought else"<sup>(53)</sup>. The disorienting effect of the passage resonates with Gothic literature and its emphasis on uncertainty and psychological confusion, with which it shares the same pessimistic and nihilistic worldview and their sense of terror. Like Lovecraft, for whom human life is insignificant and powerless in the face of the vast and indifferent cosmos, Pynchon's version of human history is also a cycle of violence and oppression perpetrated against powerless people in different places and times by hidden forces. Pynchon denounces on the mouth of "Mason & Dixon" 's narrator the official politicized discourses manipulated by lawyers according the needs of the ones and the orders of others, as he declares that,

"Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers, -- Tops and Hoops, forever a-spin -- Alas the Historian may indulge no such idle Rotating. History is not Chronology, for that is left to

lawyers, -- nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other, -- her Practitioners, to survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit, -- that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever, -- not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us all, -- rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with their Destination in common<sup>(54)</sup>.

Pynchon considers even the popular silenced stories to be the truth about the past history, and views them as counter-narratives with the power to overcome the falsifications of the Empire and its manipulative system. In his hypothetical story, Pynchon creates worlds that the market is, by definition, unable to construct. His narrative celebrates human values embracing difference and diversity and incorporating community, family, and individual liberty. The Empire's market is incompatible with such concepts since it is driven by gain and prioritizes profit over all other values. Karl Polanyi (1994) contends in *The Great Transformation* that for the needs of a capitalistic market, the economy must come before land [environment] and labor [human beings]<sup>(55)</sup>. In this context, Pynchon's alternative history generates a reality more human than the market ideologies may propose. Although fictional, these stories depict a world in which the human lives and social relationships have a precedence over the destructive system of capitalism. Doing so, Pynchon overtly dramatizes the socio-ideological evolution of discourse and conferring to its dialogical nature real dissenting political powers which strongly evokes Frederic Jameson's conception of the political possibilities of discourse to empower the historical novel with a pedagogical reading of history<sup>(56)</sup>.

### **3- History, Historiography and Fiction:**

One the most significant aspects of "Mason & Dixon" is its focus upon those historical moments of America that impacted in some ways the human lives compelling the readers to ponder on the socio-political logic behind the process, and also to envision an alternate reality, where things could have developed otherwise. However, the novel is far from offering any redemption but instead proposes a kind of "counterfactual" history that Jameson describes as an attempt to denounce the politicized nature of historiography and claim the natural right to consider another possible history. Jameson describes this aesthetic approach as "the making up of unreal history ... a substitute for the making of the real kind. It mimetically expresses the attempt to recover that power and praxis by the way of the past"<sup>(57)</sup>. This is the reason why the postmodern writers, including Pynchon, are profoundly concerned with imagining history otherwise than it is officially presented to correct historical misconceptions promoted by the capitalistic order. This narrative element is directly related to scientific metafiction used in the book. It is a technique in postmodern literature that considers scientific knowledge as a narrative similar to fiction, challenging the idea that science is the unique source of the truth.

In Pynchon's book, scientific metafiction is substituted with historiographic metafiction, and seems to seriously question the truth of historical knowledge viewing historiography as an interpretation of some real events, and so an imaginative discourse similar to literary narratives. In Pynchon's novel, this concept is explored in great depth and is even considered to be its most significant theme. Linda Hutcheon (2003) considers this aspect of the novel as an illustration of the writer's refusal to view history, as an academic practice that detains the single and indisputable truth about the past, and seems to suggest that both history and fiction are discourses, therefore human constructs, each claiming its own truths according to its nature<sup>(58)</sup>. Throughout his historiographic metafiction, Pynchon creates a complex network of references suggesting a sense of fragmentation and despair as his characters are pictured living the past as traumatic recollections. This clever use of intratextuality enables the narrative to explore efficiently the complexities of postmodern trauma, collective and individual memory, and national identity.

Staging the stories of people from various social backgrounds, and their folklore, the novel highlights the importance of popular history. Its most postmodern feature is precisely those

fragmented tales of oral popular traditions which represent different social and cultural origins. At some point of the story Maskelyne declares that “Ev’ry people have a story of how they were created”<sup>(59)</sup>, and in the same logic, C. Flay (2017) argues that, this reference to non-official tales about history is a symbolical act of rebellion against oppressive dominant narratives<sup>(60)</sup>. In addition to the fantastic dog, the novel is saturated with numerous strange and ghostly stories, where spirits, imaginary creatures, or invisible pursuers like supernatural guardians, lost lovers, or deathful enemies, torment several characters in the novel. Some of them pretend to have lived mysterious and unique experiences; for example, a character named Peter Redzing affirms to have been visited by Jesus himself, and Timothy Tox to have a Golem at his service and a French character to be harassed by a creepy mechanical duck. Maskelyne himself, who seems to part of the general conspiracy in the novel, is victim of some sort of apparitions whereas Mason frequently converses with his wife, Rebekah, who passed away years ago.

All these characters seem to apprehend the world through subjective prism and thus have a particular representation of the reality. The fact is that through verbal exchanges and stories, the different speakers of the story implicitly share their worldviews with each other, and whether real or not, the individual versions of things become the only truth they trust. Especially when they witnessed the Frenchmen being assaulted by the duck, they initially doubted its existence, and everybody quickly took the duck's existence seriously, as it perfectly embodied their current desires: a being with supernatural abilities, invisible yet inexhaustible strength, and remarkable speed that allows it to face all the dangers. Soon, the area will be filled with tales of the duck's deeds. The Duck leads a formidable army of Indians and even conquers the mountains to the west of this area. In just one afternoon, the duck has plowed every field in the county with her beak while simultaneously harrowing with her tail<sup>(61)</sup>.

The truth is that, though creepy, this invisible duck dramatizes the laborious social conditions of dwellers of this fantastic world and denounces their socio-historical marginalization and invisibility and at the same time standing for their “Inexhaustible Strength”<sup>(62)</sup>. Therefore, Pynchon's book slides steadily from the mainstream version of history toward other possible pasts. At times, the narrative becomes a combination of texts echoing sometimes American literary canons with different perceptions of the past. The story, then, resembles the sinister map the twins and their sister have been watching for so long without knowing its secrets and compartments.

“A sinister and wonderful Card Table which exhibits the cheaper sinusoidal Grain known in the Trade as Wand’ring Heart, causing an illusion of Depth into which for years children have gaz’d as into the illustrated Pages of Books ... along with so many hinges, sliding Mortises, hidden catches, and secret compartments that neither the Twins nor their Sister can say they have been to the end of it”<sup>(63)</sup>.

Echoing the dissenting voices claiming that national history is full of gaps, mysteries, and secret compartments and, therefore, haunted by all that has been concealed from people. The readers may conclude that if their history is like a novel, then many pages are missing in the national memory. This social and historical amnesia concerns fundamentally the lives and history of the Natives, Black community, and other minorities. Pynchon seems to suggest that a single dominant narrative always erases the complexity and diversity limiting the perspectives of individuals whose interests are not represented in these narratives. In his fictional works, the mega-narratives, such as race, religion, culture, or territory, are depicted as social abnormalities originating from certain groups desires to separate people based on imagined and hostile cultural or ethnic boundaries. Such sentiments are clearly present in “Mason & Dixon”, as it is set in a period during and after the revolution when a number of liberties were acquired by the American citizens. The mysterious Captain Zhang explains that when power is organized within territorial boundaries and consolidated by ethnic, racial, or cultural fences, it justifies the existence all powerful governing entities,

“To rule forever,” continues the Chinaman, later, “it is necessary only to create, among the people one would rule, what we call... Bad History. Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,— to create thus a Distinction betwixt ’em,— ’tis the first stroke.— All else will follow as if predestin’d, unto War and Devastation”.<sup>(64)</sup>

Overall, Pynchon's book does not intend to replace or reject history, but it justifies a legitimate suspicion that any particular discourse has the privilege of having an exclusively authentic understanding of the world. At this point, the novel goes beyond the artificial geographical boundaries towards a broader idea of humanity. In fact, the use of dialogic interaction of discourse indicates that the characters in the novel are socially connected and, thus, share the same past and destiny. This unbounded conception of history confers to the novel a global perspective beyond the Empire's segmentation of land and history. Nevertheless, even though fragmented and very often destabilizing, the book's version of history is not meant to change the past nor it can.

The book's parallax perspective is in the reality a conversation between the past and the present to highlight history's erasures, and ultimately functions as a healing process to accept what cannot be recovered from the past. In essence, his discourse blends the social with the psychological, and as in Lacanian psychoanalysis, it attempts to teach the individual and the nation to come with the fact that their history has been carved out severe traumatic events, painful moments, and historical upheavals. Once more the analogy between subjects and their nation echoes Jacques Lacan's communion between the subjective and the national psychologies and is very significant to Pynchon's novel. To a large extent, this duality is central to Pynchon's account of the American culture, and is one Pynchon's effective innovative devices to his critique of political issues. What America is now, post-modernly, and what it was then, at the eve of modernity, are cleverly combined in the two main characters' traits. However, Pynchon clearly warns the reader that in adhering alternative reality, the discourse of the Empire can embrace its own critique. In other words, the individual unwillingly perpetuates the system while complaining about its injustices. When nowadays, there is more and more public claim for a more social justice regardless of race, gender, and class, they also provide the Empire with tools can sell back to them an artificial version of these values.

### **Conclusion:**

Finally, this analysis reveals the multifaceted role of the Gothic tradition in shaping postmodern literature representation of trauma, offering insights into the complexities of the human experience in times of profound changes and incertitude. Thomas Pynchon's “Mason & Dixon” stands as a testament to the enduring influence of the Gothic tradition in postmodern American literature. The novel's intricate narrative structure, thematic depth, and character portrayals are imbued with Gothic elements that echo the genre's historical roots and its evolution over time. The Gothic aspects of the novel, not only serve as a means of aesthetic and thematic expression but also evolves into a tool for social and ethical criticism. By merging together, the Gothic and the postmodern, Pynchon prompts readers to confront the darker aspects of their history and identity, inviting them to a deeper understanding of the intertwined nature of frustration, trauma, and ethics. More generally, in postmodern literature, the Gothic tradition's ethical dimensions have evolved to accommodate a broader critique of social and historical narratives. Obviously, Pynchon's fiction, influenced by this tradition, employs Gothic motifs not only to create a sense of fear and unease but also to question the ethical foundations of the society it portrays. In a way, the underlying anguish of the narrative often stems from a profound questioning of human beliefs and the nature of reality, and its use Gothic elements are meant to foster a critical examination of history, power, and morality. Coming back again to the similarities between Pynchon and Lovecraft, both of their narratives are characterized by their detachment from conventional moral frameworks and the portrayal of a world where ethical certainties are constantly undermined. In “Mason & Dixon”, this

Lovecraftian ethical ambiguity is woven into the Gothic fabric of the narrative, creating a complex interplay between horror, morality, and historical truth. The integration of Lovecraftian cosmic horror and ethical ambiguity further enriches this tapestry, adding layers of complexity to the novel's exploration of trauma, fear, and the human condition.

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