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“What Arises from This?”: The Autostereogrammatical in Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*

The figure of the autostereogram recurs with frequency in Mason & Dixon. It invokes a particular mode of seeing and provides a new model by which we might read the novel and its central preoccupations: bifocularity, layering, lines, haunting, and encryption. This essay argues that Pynchon’s text is thus informed by an autostereogrammatical paradox, promising secretion in depth, while simultaneously celebrating the opacity of the surface.

Keywords: Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, autostereogram, parallax, optical illusion

On the first page of Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* is a description of an optical illusion. “A sinister and wonderful Card Table,” we are told, causes “an illusion of Depth into which for years children have gaz’d as into the illustrated Pages of Books” (1). The illusion occurs when the flat surface of the desk suddenly, generously gives way to multiplying visible layers. The image is conjured by the “Wave-like Grain” of the wood, where laminar lines of the fibres run in curvaceous rows, and is held below the surface of the desk like a secret. The layers of the desk, akin to the “so many hinges, sliding Mortises, hidden catches, and secret compartments” (1), present us with an accretion of visual complexity, both sinister and wonderful.

Later in the novel Tom Hynes is staring at some wallpaper when he also experiences an optical illusion. The wallpaper, just like the grain of the wood, consists of parallel columns: it is “pattern’d all over with identical small blue Flowers,” in a “floral repetition,” and as Tom is staring at the wallpaper this duplication gives way to depth (Pynchon 583). Tom, like the children, is gazing passively—he is “doing nothing”—but this passive visual consumption subverts the authority of the pattern on the wall; he “lets his eyes drift out of Focus,” an inattention that seems the spur to what comes next: “He finds that if he comes close enough to the Wall, and lets his eye drift slightly out of Focus, each Blossom will divide in two and these slide away to each Side, until re-combining into a Neighbour” (583). The images then become suspended above the supposedly

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real level of the picture plane: “the new-made images appear now to have Depth, making an Array of Solid Objects suspended in a quivering bright Aether” (583). The “solid objects” reveal three-dimensionality, occupying air that quivers in support around them. Here, passivity has been the spur to participation: between the viewer and the viewed, a third element has thrust upward, seemingly autonomously, but actually in symbiosis with the viewer’s gaze.

This specific and particular mode of seeing, which recurs frequently in the text, seems to describe explicitly the experience of successfully looking at an autostereogram.¹ The autostereogram, or “magic eye” picture, is an arrangement of small, horizontally repeating patterns within a screen of randomly scattered dots, from which, if looked at in the right way, a seemingly hidden image will emerge in three dimensions *out of* the picture. There are two ways of successfully looking at an autostereogram. In the first, the two lines of sight from either eye converge above the image; in the other, they converge beyond it or below it. These two methods of seeing an autostereogram correctly are thus either known as wall-eyed and cross-eyed, or convergent and divergent. To achieve either view, the brain has to overcome its desire to focus, or to converge at the point of the image. This moment of revelation, where images become multilayered and munificent, is known as parallax. The autostereogram thus offers a model of vision where the image itself seems to be an agent: we can provoke it, we can coax it, but nothing is guaranteed; the autostereogram asks us to consider whether two perspectives, if converged on correctly, can give way to a previously hidden third element—by dint of its revelatory structure, the autostereogram is naturally epiphanic.²

Mason and Dixon & *Mason & Dixon*: Bifocularity and the Parallaxic Reading

As astronomer and surveyor, respectively, Pynchon’s historical Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon offer dual perspectives on their task, which is to map the transits of Venus. They are subsequently sent to settle a boundary dispute between two American colonies by forces of which they have little knowledge; their judgment on the dispute of course results in the Mason-Dixon line. A boundary dispute means that two different perceptions of a mark are in conflict, but Mason and Dixon instead negotiate between their dual perspectives to reach certainty, knowledge, and consensus. *Mason & Dixon* is thus a novel much concerned with bifocularity and its implications. Mason and Dixon’s doubled perspective successfully results in a single, powerful, irreducible visual mark; a line across the earth that is both material and immaterial; a boundary marker and a performative enactment of the mastery of nature by two representative Enlightenment activities—surveying and astronomy. The dual perspectives, embodied by Mason and Dixon, have epistemological as well as ethical ramifications: their doubled status in the novel, the differences between them—introverted Mason with his predilection for wine-drinking and communing with ghosts, and extroverted Dixon, who advocates reason and progress with a genial equanimity—and their friendship as “Lens-brothers” comprise the source of their scopic and moral power.³

The autostereogram, then, provides a new model by which we might read *Mason & Dixon*: it is the dominant metaphor of the novel, and it offers ways of thinking about the novel’s central preoccupations: bifocularity, layering, lines, haunting, the relationship between vertical and horizontal axes, and encryption. Furthermore, it throws new light on the experience of reading Pynchon, because the model of the autostereogram destabilizes binary conceptions of depth value. The text is informed, this essay will argue, by an autostereogrammatical paradox, promising profundity in depth while actually inscribing on the surface: a horizontal complexity

operating with an illusion of vertical dimensionality. On one hand, the autostereogram disturbs our assumption that meaning resides in depth—in what is buried and latent—by creating a hyper-determined surface; the depth that it promises to disclose literally exists on the surface. We know as a viewer of the autostereogram, and as a reader of fiction, that depth is an illusion, and that both interpretative acts are therefore a mode of play, where the delight and vitality of the depthless, glittering surface is allowed to be all. But simultaneously, the autostereogram lives up to its promise, sharing its secrets and showing what was previously hidden. The surface is less meaningful than the image it obscures; and yet because it comprises the profundity of what is immanent, an architectural complexity of surface obtains, or a “radicality [...] of ‘flatness’” in Sanford Kwinter’s phrase (129).⁴ By playing with our assumptions concerning the correlation of depth and significance, *Mason & Dixon* offers a postmodern defense of exuberant surface complexity and play, while endorsing our expectations of hidden meanings, asking us to look beyond while simultaneously celebrating the opacity and artificiality of the surface. Offering the promise of something more just as it reveals itself as a transient stage on the way to a deeper knowledge—a knowledge that is promised but not necessarily disclosed—the image is both generous and self-defeating.

The structure of the novel is tripartite, and it is ordered by two distinct lines of sight: Mason and Dixon must chart two transits of Venus, one at the beginning and one at the end of the novel. For a transit to take place, there must be two observations (“Obs”) made, as Mason describes: “The further apart the Obs North and South, that is, the better. It is the Angular Distance between, that we wish to know.” From this, “someone sitting in a room will succeed in reducing all the Observations, from all ’round the World, to a simple number of Seconds, and tenths of a Second, of Arc—and that will be the Parallax” (Pynchon 93). The transit is both a movement, an arc or parabola, and a specific, measurable moment: the parallax. Just as the parallax is the moment of convergence during the viewing of an autostereogram, the moment is both one of expansion (what is seen is given sudden clarity) and reduction (all movement becomes a single measurement, all divergent points of view become one, “reducing all”). The line from the precise time and location of the transit to the observer on earth is referred to by one of the interlocutors of the Rev. Cherrycoke, following Lacan, as “A Vector of Desire” (96); Venus, the embodiment of love, is the object longed to be seen. Finally, she is: “she dropp’d, at last, full onto that mottl’d bright Disk, dimm’d by the Lenses to a fierce Moot, that Eyes might bear” (99). To be mottled is to be blotchy, incoherent: or patterned, marbled. Mottling might obscure or it might adorn; like the wallpaper, pattern conceals deeper patterns, until the sudden shift into clarity resolves all complexities.

The transits bookend the novel, which is arranged as an asymmetrical triptych. The first section is titled “Latitudes and Departures”; the second, “America”; and the third, “The Last Transit.” If we can imagine the two transits as the repeated parallel lines of image that need to be held, wall-eyed, in the protagonists’ (and the reader’s) vision, then what emerges—the bit in between, the occluded space in the middle, the secret held below—is perhaps America itself: it is the central section, and the central subject, of the novel. It is then the angle of these different perspectives that give us the triangulated view from which a vision of America can arise. Christy L. Burns has argued similarly for a “parallaxic method” with which to read the novel, arguing that the parallaxic “allows [Pynchon] a full and yet contentiously dialectical representation of ‘America’ as it was in the mid- to late-eighteenth century and as it is now” (1).⁵ Remembering that parallax is also the moment of revelation during the viewing of an autostereogram, the parallaxic method’s hermeneutic capacity might be extended by the autostereogram’s disclosive potential.

“Gaze Straight In”: Illusions of Depth

The autostereogram’s revelatory structure enacts a moment of quasi-religious epiphany, and Pynchon consistently uses a vocabulary imbued with spiritual and supernatural wonder, as stargazing detects “a sort of Optickal Tension among the Stars, that seem’d ever just about to break radiantly thro’” (Pynchon 726). If only we are patient enough, we might witness this radiant coming forth. And yet visual revelation is always fleeting, as Mason explains, “Have ye never fall’n into one of those Cometary Dazes, with the way the Object grows brighter and brighter each Night? These apparitions in the Sky, we never observe them but in Motion,—gone in seconds, and if they return, we do not see them” (726). The cometary daze, like Mason’s “blurr’d and strangely prolong’d Gaze” (70), is a visual indistinctness that here paradoxically results in the vision, or “apparition.” The transience of the autostereogram means that while you might achieve it, nevertheless if you shift, or drop your concentration (as Dixon explains, “its reflection once acquired, to keep most faithfully fix’d upon it,—for like the glance of a Woman at a Ball, it must be held for a certain time before conveying a Message” [287–88]), it might be “gone in seconds.” The autostereogram provides a sense of being blessed by the ability to see something elusive, and a scopophilic delight in seeing what is hidden.

In this sense, Pynchon depicts astronomy as a naturally autostereogrammatical discipline, with Mason and Dixon as priests of the scopic, who see further—and perhaps deeper—than others, and who must find both a way of interpreting their visions and of communicating them to the laity. Mason is skilled at the trick, frequently experiencing a “curious optical readjustment” while viewing the skies, whereby “The Stars no longer spread as upon a Dom’d Surface,—he now beholds them in the *Third Dimension* as well,—the Eye creating its own Zed-Axis.” The eye’s Z axis is its depth perception, and it is along this that the “star-chok’d depths near and far rush both inward and away, and soon, quite soon, billowing out of control” (Pynchon 725). That the image is “billowing out of control” reminds us that the image that emerges from an autostereogram is dangerously unpredictable, and that the act of emergence itself contains a sense of the hazard of the chance event: it is an emergency or an unforeseen event. The autostereogram’s latent emergency might disturb; the hidden image might say anything; all, at this point, is possible. And yet, the shift into clarity also gives us a paradoxical sense of the refusal of possibility:

“Whenever their circumstances, now uncertain and eventual, shall happen to be reduced to Certainty.”

“Eh, that’s deep?! Reduced?”

“As if there were no single Destiny, but rather a choice among a great many possible ones, their number steadily diminishing each time a Choice be made [. . .] much as a Lens, indeed, may receive all the Light from some vast celestial field of view and reduce it to a single point—suggests an optical person.” (45)

Unmistakably, the moment of crystallization of the autostereogram is a narrowing of possibility. The image that emerges could have been anything; the moment of its revelation is also the removal of its mystery. “Optical people” are able—or are perhaps condemned—to reduce things to certainty, and so the autostereogram, and its successful accomplishment, functions as a fantasy of knowledge: the certainty it affords is a dangerous epistemological illusion.

One way in which the novel analyzes this fantasy is through an insistent emphasis on the visible and the invisible, often depicted at the point of mutation, with an oscillation between

the two constantly invoked. Vaucanson's mechanical duck, who flies in and out of the narrative, and for whom invisibility is identical with ontological power and autonomy, "shimmer[s] into Visibility" (Pynchon 448). That which is "swelling, invisible, restless" (605) is ever-present; usually, in *Mason & Dixon*, "something invisible's going on" (478). The novel's optical structure provides an extension of Pynchon's insistent theme of paranoia; what is unseen is unknown, but it is also ontologically as well as visually incoherent: "Sometimes the Invisible will all at once appear,—sometimes what you see may not be there at all" (486). This invisibility is also epistemological, and identical with incomprehension: there is, we are told, "Nothing visible at the fringes of readability" (731). Conversely, writing without readability becomes an image, like the autostereogrammatic pattern before it has become meaningful: "There is writing on some of the Structures, but Mason cannot read it" (771).

When things in this novel loom toward, or emerge out of, it is generally a progressive move toward clarity and focus; "the ships grew slowly together, the *l'Grand* growing ever larger, smaller details ever more visible" (Pynchon 52). The autostereogram understands vision as essentially kinetic—something moves into visibility, into focus, in a way that echoes the linguistic register of vision: things "come into view"; a picture "emerges," giving us the kinetic potential of visual revelation. Conversely, the Map-scape of Africa emerges but remains indistinct:

[T]he unreadable Map-scape of Africa had unaccountably emerg'd, as viewed from a certain height above the pale Waves,—tilted into the Light, as a geometer's Globe might be pick'd up and tilted for a look at this new Hemisphere, this haunted and *other* half of ev'rything known [. . .] every detail, including the Invisible, set precisely, present in all its violent chastity. (58)

This description of "this haunted and *other* half of everything known" reminds us of the dangers of geographical monocularity. *Mason & Dixon* is a novel that understands that lines have presence, whether they are immaterial or not; making one into two involves a physical othering of land and people. Similarly, the image of the invisible as a "detail" that might be observed gives us, rather than as absence, the invisible as a type of presence: it is "present in all its violent chastity." The image has violent corporeality; its presence is tangible, if reticent. It must give itself up to the eye, dissolve its chastity in one potent movement, in an eroticized version of a model of concealment that promises eventual revelation. The obscuring of the longed-for image is thus positively charged, and confusion is productive, as we see when "the Sky is restor'd to its pitiless Clarity" (463), where the starkness in the aftermath of the autostereogram's retreat enacts visual loss.

Trying to Scry in Ghost-Quartz: The Cryptographic *Mason & Dixon*

The other half of everything known, then, is both the human and geographical collateral of the force propelled by the slashes on the land, and what lies beneath the visible; here figured as "haunted." The autostereogrammatic model of trying to visually bring something into being is about loss or its imminent possibility; any autostereogrammatic success is fleeting and unreal, and we know that what we see is illusory. The autostereogram thus contains an ineffable, immaterial trace—of its own immanent potential and potential loss. The ghost and the autostereogram, indeed, seem explicitly elided in the novel, as when Mason and Dixon meet Jonas Everybeet, who is particularly skilled at the viewing and interpreting of crystals. Jonas "has been trying to find

what in his Calling is known as the ‘Ghost,’ another crystal inside the ostensible one, more or less clearly form’d.” Jonas explains “‘Tis there the Pictures appear . . . tho’ it varies from one Operator to the next,—some need a perfect deep Blank, and cannot scry in Ghost-Quartz [. . .] the Symmetries are not always easy to see . . . here, these twin Heptagons . . . centering your Vision upon their common side, gaze straight in,—” (Pynchon 442). Scrying is the practice of looking into something translucent with the belief that things will be seen; some can do it, some cannot. Here again, then, is the visual ennoia, here named the Ghost, that, with a little patience, may resolve itself, till the “Pictures” appear from the symmetries, “more or less perfectly formed.” The secret picture haunts the visual space it should occupy, or, as Stefan Mattesich puts it in his reading of the same passage, “[s]pace is the invisible world that dwells in matter” (236). However, Jonas warns of the dangers of this privileged perception: “‘Others, before too much Clarity, become blind to the other World” (Pynchon 442). The other world and this one, the invisible and the visible, constantly threaten to invade each other, and the ability to see with clarity might itself become a kind of blindness, or an excess of certainty. While rectitude in the viewing of an autostereogram means exercising the ability to read the textual surface or the emergent image, it also means falling for a trick. The novel is suspicious of pretenses to mastery of all kinds, and the clarity achieved by the successful viewer of an autostereogram can be a kind of didacticism (“reduced to Certainty” [45]), and puts her in danger of losing the ethical good of a certain fuzziness of perception: the unfocused gaze induces an ability to see alternatives, or the ability to exist alongside the subjunctive, the possible, and the as yet unfixed.

The autostereogram is cryptic, and cryptographic: it is encoded with a secret, one that requires decryption, just as Mason says of astronomy: “the movements of the Heav’ns, which taken together form a cryptick Message [. . .] we are intended one day to solve, and read” (Pynchon 59). And yet, as I have suggested, the autostereogram also provides a model for Pynchon’s preoccupation with mourning: the suppressed image explicitly haunts the surface one, and it is usually an image of haunting: *Mason & Dixon* is full of ghosts. Abraham and Torok’s influential account of the way the self deals with traumatic experience offers a reinlection of the term crypt that articulates this link between the decipherable, the encrypted, and the buried. The crypt for Abraham and Torok is a space within the self that is constructed when something has been lost, “or more precisely” has experienced “the ‘loss’ that resulted from a traumatism.” The crypt is “a sealed-off psychic place [. . .] comparable to the formation of a cocoon around the chrysalis” (*Shell and Kernel* 141). The crypt that entombs a secret is an occluded, veiled space created around a traumatic loss that cannot be represented, or recognized, as a loss. It is a hidden, buried place, encrypted and indecipherable. As Jacques Derrida asks in his foreword to *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, “What is a crypt?” (xiv), a question he goes on to answer: “to disguise and to hide: something, always a body in some way. But also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise” (xiv). The crypt never contains the beloved object, but instead is a marker of the object’s absence: “What the crypt commemorates, as the incorporated object’s ‘monument’ or ‘tomb,’ is not the object itself, but its exclusion” (xvii).

Therefore, the crypt at the heart of the puzzle is also a site of haunting, and the double significance of encrypted, latent meaning and a burial site is particularly appropriate to a reading of *Mason & Dixon*, which oscillates between the decipherable and the encrypted, the interior and the exterior, and the living and the dead. Abraham and Torok’s notion of the crypt means that what is encrypted has no material presence, and instead is detectable only through its effects on language, as what is suppressed emerges through the creation of cryptonyms, or magic words. Theirs is, essentially, a theory of how to read that which has been rendered unreadable; as Tim

Armstrong puts it, the crypt is “cloaked in a silence that disrupts the possibility of linguistic expression itself” (63). The autostereogram functions precisely as a visual encryption, with the surface pattern acting much like Derrida’s interpretation of the function of the crypt: “to disguise and to hide [...] but also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise.” In addition to this interpretive distortion, autostereograms share with crypts their haunted status. The picture contains a ghost: like a medium, the viewer must invoke the emergence of the shadowy, immaterial secret, and might be its sole interlocutor. For Mason, the dead are imagined in visual terms: “They were like Stars to him,—unable to project himself among their enigmatic Gatherings, he could but observe through a mediating Instrument. The many Lens’d Rebekah” (Pynchon 195). Here Rebekah herself, Mason’s much-mourned late wife, is figured as the object of multiple perspectives on which a correct gaze might converge. For Rebekah, death is akin to being “held in detention”; “shadowy, whispering, veil’d to be unveil’d” (57). In detention she is encrypted, locked away, requiring a mediating instrument for interpretation.

The visual identities of Pynchon’s characters are frequently overlaid onto each other in a form of autostereogrammatical haunting, in which multiple faces in the novel are revealed as being inhabited by a likeness of the dead: Eliza is a “*Point-for-Point Representation*” of Rebekah (Pynchon 536). Rebekah’s ghost is consistently figured as a recalcitrant autostereogram inscribed on the face, as Mason describes the comet that he observes: “’tis a Face, though yet veil’d, ’twill be hers, I swear it, I stare till my eyes ache” (187). Similarly, Mason tries to search his sons’ faces for hers, a memorialization described in terms of optical illusion: “he stares into his Mirror memorizing his own face well enough to filter it out of Willy’s and Doc’s, leaving, if the Trick succeed, Rebekah’s alone, her dear living Face,—tho’ at about half the optikal Resolution, he guesses” (211). However, like the autostereogram, the trick’s success is fleeting: “When the time comes, he finds he cannot remember what he looks like. Withal, their Faces are their own, unsortably,—and claim the Moment” (211). The picture is haunted by the image it conceals, and the picture that emerges from the autostereogram is ghostlike: the representation is pure representation. Much like what emerges from the crypt, there are no material markers or physical presence, just an “undecipherable fetish” (*Wolf Man’s Magic Word* 81), as Abraham and Torok put it. It is ghostly because it is imbued with immanence; the autostereogram that has not “given up” its hidden image is pregnant with potential representation, haunted by its own possibilities.

“Surfaces of Meaning”: The Autostereogrammatical Palimpsest

In *Mason & Dixon*, secrets, and secret powers, become encrypted through layering: is to be hidden underneath, Pynchon asks, to be meaningful?⁶ *Mason & Dixon* demonstrates how layers and complexity might become readable, might offer up their meaning to an attentive or skilled reader or spectator, or equally, might refuse to. As Kathryn Hume has pointed out, in Pynchon’s novels “we find repeated views from above, achieved by humans or by supernatural or technological forces. We also experience views from below” (“Views from Above” 630). The emphasis on vertical perspective is given new significance by the autostereogram, as depth perception is equivalent to the revelation of new realities or metaphysical manifestations, just as it is in the novel: “What Mason sees, from his first Nightfall there, is Darkness *rising up* out of the sea, where all the carelessly bright day it has lain, as in a state of slumber [...] whilst at Dawn, that same Darkness, almost palpably aware of his Regard, appears to withdraw, consciously, to a certain depth beneath the Atlantick Surface” (Pynchon 107). Movement along the vertical axis is

expressed in visual terms. Daniel Punday has linked the two, arguing that “the association between vertical distance and visibility is constant throughout *Mason & Dixon*” (266), demonstrating the ways in which *Mason & Dixon*’s oscillation between the vertical and horizontal marks Pynchon’s evolving representation of ghosts. The space “below” the earth, indeed, contains life: “in Reality, we live upon a Map. Perhaps even our Lives are but representations of Truer Lives, pursued above and below” (Pynchon 442). A concern for those who live their lives below permeates the text; one of the repeated, talismanic lines of the novel (and will later also be of *Against the Day*) is the hermetic tag “as above, so below.” The idea that “in Reality, we live upon a Map” articulates the possibility of the illusion of depth’s sudden revocation, disclosing the knowledge that the surface is all there is.

Josephine McDonagh has written that the palimpsest, like the autostereogram, merely offers a simulacrum of depth: “it feigns a sense of depth whilst always in fact functioning on the surface level” (211), and the palimpsest provides a useful figure for the kind of layering that is necessary for any autostereogrammatical structure. The “Endless strata” of the palimpsest offer us underlying and overlying layers like sediment, a metaphor for history and memory disguised as an optical illusion. Consequently, Sarah Dillon has described the “fantasy of the palimpsest,” which leads to a “radical disjunction within the notion of [...] the present” (10). The presence of “the past, present (and possibly the future) in the palimpsest does not elide temporality, but evidences the spectrality of any ‘present’ moment which always already contains within it ‘past,’ ‘present’ and ‘future’ moments” (10). *Mason & Dixon*’s analysis of history assents to this conflation, and the protagonists’ recourse to the figure of the palimpsest is overlain with chronological disruption, as Mason acquires a dagger called a *Krees*, with its “tiny scratches, uncleanable Stains, overlie one the other in a Palimpsest running deep into the Dimension of Time” (Pynchon 72). Layers are thus able to accrete secret power: “alternating Layers of different Substances are ever a sign of the intention to accumulate Force” (599).

The palimpsest in *Mason & Dixon* also offers us a version of the autostereogram that mingles the scopic with the linguistic: “‘The printed Book.’ Suggests the Rev’d, consists of ‘—thin layers of pattern’d Ink, alternating with other thin layers of compress’d Paper, stack’d often by the Hundreds’” (Pynchon 390). And so the book itself is disclosed as an object of our vision as much as of our comprehension, compared to the layers involved in croissant-making, gold-beating, and lamination. With its “Sheets innumerable.” but consisting nevertheless of “pure Surface” (389), these physical manifestations of compressed layers disclose an autostereogrammatical paradox, which, in the case of the book, gives us a sense of textual rather than visual surface complexity. The palimpsest contains (artificial) depths that must be squinted at before they discharge their readable prose, and where things that arise from or out of these depths are similarly liable to become “immersed” (738), to sink down out of reach. Writing is presented as an accumulation of traces, as a marker of what has gone before, rather than primarily as signification. The palimpsest thus provides us with the trope of the text as archaeological, as the product of, as Michael Davidson has put it, “the gradual accretion and sedimentation of textual materials, no layer of which can ever be isolated from any other” (79).

The figure of the palimpsest in *Mason & Dixon* is archaeological and spectral in nature:

Over Wearside, here at Nightfall [...] when the spirits also are said in these parts to come out,—so beneath them now do the Dark-Age Maps, the long dogged Roman Palimpsest, the earlier contours of Brigantum itself, emerge at a certain combination of low Sun-angle and Scholarly Altitude above the Fell,—coming up through the

Spoil-heaps and the grazing, in colors of evening, in Map-makers' ink-washes, green Walnut, Weld, Brazil-wood, Lake, Terra-Sienna, Cullens-Earth and Burnt Umber,—as Emerson meanwhile points out to his flock the lines of the Roman baths and barracks and temples to Mithras, the crypts in which the mysteries were pass'd on to novices, once long ago invisibly nested at the Camp's secret core. (219)

Here the multicolored autostereogrammatical image emerges-under certain conditions-as a palimpsest of settlements from different eras. The model of visual emergence is here accompanied by ghosts and overlaid with the compression of time and history that the palimpsest implies, but it also contains those “crypts [...] invisibly nested at the Camp's secret core.” Hanjo Berressem has elaborated an interpretation of Pynchon's technique that seems sympathetic to an autostereogrammatical reading, when he writes of his “kind of pointilism, [where] the imagination creates immaterial ‘surfaces of meaning’ and ‘sheets of time’ from the unconnected and instantaneous multiplicity of material matters-of-facts” (172). The “kind of pointilism” of the autostereogram creates these surfaces of meaning. *Mason & Dixon's* radical questioning of the notion of historical progress, and its subversion of linear history (where the dark ages, Mithraic crypts, Roman Britain, the 1760s, and the 1960s can all meet and mingle), means that “sheets of time” are also what are held in abeyance by the palimpsestual autostereogram, ready to emerge “at a certain combination of low Sun-angle and Scholarly Altitude.”

This radical questioning of the notion of historical progress, where Mason and Dixon's task of scientifically exact surveying is conflated with the Dark-Age Maps and the “contours” of Brigantium itself, throws into uncertainty any sort of traditional hierarchy between Enlightenment rationality and what it seeks to master. The potential violence of the line that Mason and Dixon must draw is articulated by Emerson, in one of the novel's many warnings about the ethical dangers inherent in their task: “The Romans were preoccupied with conveying Force, be it hydraulic, or military, or architectural,—along straight lines” (Pynchon 219). Lines are essentially immaterial things, which can be violent and which can enclose, and the dangers of enclosure, both on the horizontal and vertical axes, are one of the things that the novel warns us of, and this knowledge offers us the possibility that what has been traumatically encrypted or buried, throughout history, is the land itself. The line that Mason and Dixon draw on the earth is a mark, a visual signifier (the *visto*), as well as a physical entity, a “conduit for Evil” (701), a historical turning-point, and a violent affront to unbounded nature. In *Mason & Dixon* the Romans are explicitly associated with lines, and therefore with Mason and Dixon's topographical mission. The “long dogged Roman Palimpsest” implies it is one of the readable or quasi-readable images that emerges from the crypt of history; a crypt created by a geographical trauma inflicted by the Romans on the land. All attempts to map are equally aggressive and are linked to the growth of capitalism, as both are drawn as paradigmatic assertions of power: “Markets appearing, with their unwritten Laws, upon ev'ry patch of open ground, power beginning to sort itself out, Line and Staff” (281).

The line, therefore, is often read as the central metaphor of *Mason & Dixon*. It is my contention that the text is, however, equally preoccupied with plural lines: while single lines are implicated in the trope of the violent event that enacts encryption, parallel lines are associated with interpretation, textuality, and parallax. Thus, and remembering the wave-like grain of the wood, or the repeated columns of flowers on the wallpaper, parallel lines provide a sense of the decipherability or otherwise of what is held latent in the autostereogram or is buried in the crypt. A recurring group of words in the novel are those arising from the morpheme “plex.” Complexity, multiplicity, and often just the archaic and obscure plexity all recur multiple times. The trees, we are told, are

“gone to Pen-Stroke and Shadows in cripl’d Plexity, bath’d in the declining light [...] Down the Hill-side, light in colours of the Hearth was transmitted by window-panes more and less optikally true” (193–94). The “cripl’d Plexity” of “Pen-strokes and Shadows” provides a sense of a state of indistinctness and unreadability: here we have images that have not attained the status of words, pure signification, like the disturbances in the textual field that arises from the encrypted object. Here, though, the untrustworthiness of the communicative medium is visual rather than linguistic: “more or less optikally true.” Later, “the entire plexity of possible journeys” (505) is conjured, and at the close of the novel, Mason considers “Plexities of Honor and Sin.” America is “perplexing” (522), and as always “[t]here is a love of complexity, here in America” (586).

Plexity always, specifically, concerns the intertwining of parallel lines. Plexity, according to Leonard Talmy, is a “quantity’s state of articulation into equivalent elements” (176)—one element is thus uniplex; many elements are a multiplex; things are complex when they contain two or more independent elements. From the Latin *plectere* we also get plaitedness and ply; if the trees have gone to crippled plexity, they have become intertwined with age, like straight lines crossing each other, rendering them unreadable. As the wood grain was laminar, non-intersecting, and readable, plexity is fatal to the decipherability of an autostereogrammatical image, because parallel lines are what we need for parallax to occur. Trees are usually imagined as parallel lines, “whereby Messages may be extracted from Lines of Text sacred and otherwise [...] their unspoken intention that the Numbers nocturnally obtain’d be set side by side, and arrang’d into Lines, like those of a Text, manipulated till a Message be reveal’d” (Pynchon 479). Even sausages are described as “hang[ing] against the sky, forming Lines of Text, cryptick Intestinal Commentary” (289). Lines of text are cryptic because they resist easy signification; they are unreadable, an image of opacity, pattern without meaning. They must be “manipulated” before they reveal their message. The autostereogram discloses a disturbance to our categories of interpretation: it self-reveals, with a seeming degree of autonomous agency, and our efforts to read might be fruitless. Pynchon contrasts visual pattern made readable, whether trees, sausages, or wallpaper, with language and text that is unreadable, that must be manipulated or decrypted before it signifies. *Mason & Dixon* traces the efforts we make to effect signification where it is not possible, and it shows how attempts to read displaced shards of meaning are destined to failure, even as we know the content of the crypt is absence itself. What the cryptographic reading offers the autostereogrammatical is the knowledge that what is hidden, suppressed, buried, or latent in the text is ineffable for the reader just as it is for Mason and Dixon, held below like Mithraic mysteries.

A State of Emergency

This essay has argued that *Mason & Dixon* is haunted by the figure of the autostereogram and is explicable, in part, by its elucidation. The figuring of the novel as an autostereogram necessitates the reading of it as an encrypted text, which may or may not prove decipherable, a reading that seems particularly compatible with a text as full of secrets, mysteries, and hauntings as this one—nevertheless, the autostereogrammatical model does raise the question: What is concealed within the text-as-image? The essay initially posited that a vision of America itself is perhaps the cryptic third element in that autostereogrammatical structure, implied by the arrangement of the novel’s sections. The idea of America as an emergent visual image or immaterial presence, one that must be read or interpreted to fully emerge, does indeed permeate the text. Early in the novel, Mason glimpses, in a barroom debate about tax, “something styling itself ‘America,’ coming into being,

ripening, like a Tree-ful of Cherries in a good summer, almost as one stands and watches" (405) where Pynchon figures the emerging, mutating image via time-lapse photography. As he grows old, "America draws back from the edges of Dixon's frame" (754), as if he cannot quite hold it in his vision any longer. Later still, Dixon asks Mason: "What could that be? What Phantom Shape, implicit in the Figures? 'Tis a Construction,' Mason weakly, 'a great single Engine, the size of a Continent. [...] Not all the Connexions are made yet, that's why some of it is still invisible [...] soon becoming visible'" (772). The cryptic nature of the autostereogram, pattern concealed by pattern, is limned here as a shadowy vision of America, "Implicit in the Figures." In the process of moving between opacity and clarity, America, "an old Continental hope" (772), is as yet unfixed. It is, in the 1760s, still to be fully articulated. This state of indeterminacy is equivalent to the unbounded land before the completion of the Mason-Dixon line; a boundary dispute indicates negotiation between two lines of sight, but it also means that the land is subject to a hermeneutic freedom: it is not perceptually owned or encompassed by any single vision.

Pynchon describes America as a subjunctive space: "Does Britannia, when sleeps, dream? Is America her dream? [...] serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*" (345). The thing that will turn America from "subjunctive to declarative," "reducing Possibilities to Simplicities" is that it will be "seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in" (345), a process in which Mason and Dixon are hopelessly implicated, even as they try to occupy ethically generous ground by means of their resistance to certainty; eventually, they, too, are "optical people." Stefan Mattessich makes a similar point when he articulates "[*Mason & Dixon's*] resistance to reading (or seeing)"—a resistance to reading is akin to resistance to the same moment of simplification that clarity invokes. He writes that "what gets lost in this resistance is a time deeper than memory and thus an immemorial space (Pynchon calls it 'America') that does not ever appear except insofar as it alters reading (perception)" (240). Pynchon's depiction of America as an "immemorial space," Mattessich argues, consists of "a history, a continuing legacy, a haunting" (240). America itself occupies a haunted space; she has herself been encrypted by the traumatic acts of enclosing, bounding, mapping, and dividing.

Furthermore, Mason describes "[America] '—Which, as if in answer to God's recession, remain'd invisible, denied to us, till it became necessary to our Souls that it come to rest, self-reveal'd, tho' we pretended to 'discover' it'" (Pynchon 486). The anti-colonialist gesture performed by "America [...] self-reveal'd"—it was not discovered—is a correlative of the autostereogrammatical metaphor: to self-reveal is what an autostereogram does. America, until its self-revelation, is here described as being in recession: a recess is where things yet to emerge hide. Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy have noted that "[r]ecession, then, is temporal and spatial: an interval at once legislative and sacred" (41). Recession is also "an end that guarantees a new beginning" (42), as the word implies its own end, and in doing so emphasizes its own status as temporary: it is conscious of its own imminent loss and its own potential rebirth. In *Mason & Dixon*, America is often conceptualized as recessionary: "America, withal, for centuries had been *kept hidden*, as are certain Bodies of Knowledge. Only now and then were selected persons allowed Glimpses of the New World" (Pynchon 487). Similarly, "[t]his 'New World' was ever a secret Body of Knowledge,—meant to be studied with the same dedication as the Hebrew Kabbala would demand. Forms of the Land, the flow of water, the occurrence of what us'd to be call'd Miracles, all are Text,—to be attended to, manipulated, read, remember'd" (487). Mason and Dixon's task, "to mark the Earth with geometrick Scars" (257), simultaneously conjectures signification out of a "perfect deep Blank" (442) and articulates a moment of loss. America is an encrypted body of knowledge, which must be read through the forms appearing

on its surface, “coming up through the Spoil-heaps and the grazing” (219): the geographical is graphical.

It is also clear here that the emergence of America, like the revelation of the image in the autostereogram, is akin to something holy. When the autostereogram works, it is like a blessing, to the elect few who “can”: you either get it or you do not. The patience that is necessary for this revelation is, in the novel, often recast as grace, as Dixon the Quaker reflects: “Howbeit, ’tis all Desire,—and Desire, but Embodiment, in the World, of what Quakers have understood as Grace . . . ? That inspires a ‘great Turning,’ a ‘direct experience of Christ’” (Pynchon 101). This great turning is explicitly the point of convergence: “the Promise of Man, the redemptive Point, ever at our God-horizon, toward which all Faiths, true and delusional, must alike converge!” (356): the redemptive point on which we must converge is the moment of revelation. But, crucially, this moment is also about loss. Just as Venus is love, and her elusiveness an object lesson in the perfect autostereogram—“we want things embodied, emerging, a perfect return” (690) Mason muses—nevertheless, one cannot hold an image forever. Instead, just “like Dreams just at the Crepuscule, ’twill all vanish, unrecoverably” (630). America might be the secret encrypted body of knowledge (Derrida: “always a body in some way”) that we desire, but we try to read her, or keep her, at our peril.

Mason & Dixon, and Mason and Dixon, offer us a model of creative bifocularity, where the depth below the surface appears to have disclosed its occluded image. However, this reading is subverted explicitly by the text in its insistence on making that clarity’s epistemological and ethical dangers its subject. Instead, in *Mason & Dixon*, the unreadability of the disclosed secret must be maintained—the contents of the crypt cannot be represented directly: in the sky are written “Messages of Great Urgency to our Time, and to your Continent” (772), but the “Spectres in the Sky” (753) to which Mason and Dixon have devoted their lives must remain undeciphered. Instead, what the autostereogrammatical reading offers us is an articulation of the visual longing and epistemological desire that the optical illusion represents, and the dangers of trying to impose certainty of interpretation onto the fuzziness of the world. As Michael Wood has argued, “Human Incompletion” (129) is what the novel suggests America needs to remember: a state of being open to possibility, of continual becoming, or, as the autostereogram would suggest, America as a state of emergency. Mason and Dixon, whose task might have rendered them incapable of being sympathetic to this aim, nevertheless understand that meaning resides in immanence and potential, and in the refusal of definitive signification. Remembering that what reveals itself at the moment of convergence is not just America but the “Promise of Man” (Pynchon 356), before the mapping, measuring, and the parallax sharpen things to exactitude, America is latent, and subjunctive; without all the “Connexions [. . .] made yet” (772), she is able to escape the determinacy of vision and, subsequently, definition. Inevitably, though, the loss that *Mason & Dixon* understands as inherent in the movement from the subjunctive to the declarative, and from visual indistinctness to clarity, will predominate, as the novel mourns that which “fails to return, is ever a source of Sorrow” (630).

Notes

¹From the early to mid-1800s, physicists such as Charles Wheatstone had been interested in stereoscopes, where the images are recombined through the use of mirrors or lenses. The autostereogram, though, is self-contained: you can do it yourself, with no need for external devices or equipment. The first was created by Christopher Tyler in 1979, laying the groundwork for the craze for “magic eye” pictures (as the autostereogram became known commercially) that took place in the UK and America in the eighties and nineties. It is likely to be relevant that Thomas Pynchon started work on

Mason & Dixon as early as January 1975 (see Gussow), and the novel was eventually published in 1997, spanning the period during which the autostereogram came to prominence.

²Pynchon's novels relentlessly return to themes of hidden knowledge and order coming to light with sustained attention, and so the autostereogram is a natural figure for his work. Charles Hollander has written about *The Crying of Lot 49* and "magic eye" pictures, using the latter as a metaphor for Pynchon's concealed Cold War narrative. However, as a figure of concealed knowledge, the Magic Eye might offer us a way into the novel, but it must be an imposition: when Pynchon wrote *The Crying of Lot 49*, in contrast to the period during which he wrote *Mason & Dixon*, there were no autostereograms.

³J. J. Long opens up the possibility that bifocularity is itself one of the things that *Mason & Dixon* suggests we have lost since the Enlightenment:

Single-point monocular perspective, for example, is far from being a natural mode of perception: human vision is binocular, has no vanishing point, is unbounded, in constant flux, and fades at the edges. But Renaissance perspective is such a powerful representational convention in the West that its conventional status is often forgotten: it appears natural. (49)

⁴Kwinter describes Kafka's aesthetic as flat, and writes that "[f]lat, of course, does not mean a diminished or impoverished dimensionality" (129). On the contrary, "what we have here [is] a prodigious but *constant* level of complexity at every scale" (129). I am arguing for a similar attention to the complexity of surface in *Mason & Dixon*.

⁵For more on Pynchon's parallelism, see Mitchum Huehls, who writes that "Pynchon employs a temporally parallax narrative form (different narrators deliver the story from ostensibly different moments in time)" (25).

⁶Critics of *Mason & Dixon* have frequently explored this figure of layering in the book: Kathryn Hume's essay argues for layering as one of the two dominant structural principles of the novel, Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds suggests in her introductory essay "The Times of *Mason & Dixon*" that layers are the key to *Mason & Dixon*'s temporal structure—that it "fictionalizes less than it *layers* a postmodern sensibility onto a near-factual eighteenth century" (13)—and Stefan Mattesich also echoes this sense: "The ingenuity of *Mason & Dixon* is that to read it well is almost necessarily to provoke the 'ghost' of a spatiality that disappears beneath our interpretative tools" (240).

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