

Dream Time, Modality, and Counterfactual Imagination in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*

Abstract: This paper elucidates the structure and scope of Pynchon's temporal imagination by studying the complex relations between narrative time and modality in his 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon* using the conceptual framework of contemporary narratology. It argues that Pynchon's use of the subjunctive mode allows him not only to articulate the political and ideological concerns in his vision of America on the eve of its founding but also to address the problems of historicity, causality and irreversibility of time. By employing the subjunctive as a general narrative strategy, *Mason & Dixon* challenges the various temporal regimes and discourses of modernity, and projects imaginative re-figurations of time and space. In carrying this out, the novel moves beyond what Pynchon calls "the network of ordinary latitude and longitude" (*Against the Day* 250) and replaces a totalizing singularity with plurality of times and timescapes.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon, temporal imagination, narrative time, modality, possibility

[Y]et there is no avoiding time, the sea of time, the sea of memory and forgetfulness, the years of promise, gone and unrecoverable, of the land almost allowed to claim its better destiny, only to have the claim jumped by evildoers known all too well, and taken instead and held hostage to the future we must live in now forever.

Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (341)

This article examines the problematic of narrative and temporal modality in Pynchon's fiction by taking as its point of departure the concept of "dream time" and its application in the construction of micro-worlds in his 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon*. It argues that despite the dominance of spatial over temporal categories in the novel, Pynchon's counterfactual imagination, which informs and shapes the narrative, can be best understood in terms of playful and subversive sensibilities that, among other things, seek to open up different, alternative perspectives on the past, present, and future. This generative mobility of Pynchon's imaginative thought draws its energies from the novel's frequent shifts into a counter-factual mode that facilitates fictional re-imagination of time and space. This subjunctive mode injects into *Mason & Dixon*'s fictive historiography a sense of radical contingency that makes space for alternative histories and effectively broadens the horizons of political possibility. In this capacity it functions as a central mode of critique of both Enlightenment ideology and the ideology of American expansionism. Furthermore, Pynchon employs the subjunctive to counter the various temporal regimes and discourses of modernity. In its celebration of temporal plurality, *Mason & Dixon* challenges the validity and universality of the horological notions and standards that underlie the Western conception of time. Apart from the political and ideological dimension, the use of the subjunctive also reveals Pynchon's imagination as engaged directly with possibility in its temporal aspects. I will delineate this specific temporal modality by studying the complex relations

between narrative time and possibility in his work, using the frame of contemporary narratology, in particular David Herman's model of hypothetical focalization, Mark Currie's account of narrative focalization and Saul Gary Morson's study of tempics. I will argue that Pynchon's subjunctive in its projective, creative character does not directly invoke spatial forms or relations and cannot be explained by appealing to possible world logic, which is unable to fully recognize the modality's link to anticipation and prediction. By opening narrative to the singular and accidental, the modality that informs Pynchon's text does not reduce the future to an extension of the present, and so it is inimical to the view of the contemporary as blocked futurity. The subjunctive mode as an expression of Pynchon's modalizing activity is, I contend, best understood as a thick concept that comprises a wide spectrum of activities such as imagining, supposing, conceiving, and dreaming: in this capacity it functions in Pynchon's narrative as a primary guide to possibility in its various uses and contexts, including the temporal ones.

Temporal Regimes and Dream Time

Much like *Gravity's Rainbow*, but perhaps to an even stronger degree, *Mason & Dixon* abounds in dreams and dream-related phenomena and occurrences. The novel incorporates all kinds of dreams and dreaming: good and bad dreams, pipe dreams, quasi-prophetic dreams, hemp-induced hallucinations and other kinds of imaginative visions. The book's eponymous characters dream, often of one another, and sometimes they share their dreams or visions. Of all the dreamers in the book, Charles Mason stands out, as he routinely experiences both nightmares and "daymares," and often speaks in his dreams (sometimes in exotic languages that his companion Dixon cannot identify). Dreams also provide Pynchon with texture and substance to construct a myriad of micro-worlds: subliminal spaces with fuzzy ontological status and boundaries. These micro-worlds often interpenetrate one another, destabilizing the distinction between reality and dream upon which novelistic world-building usually depends. Thus, for example, Mason wakes up with a *Krees*, a Malay Dagger, that he received in his dream (*Mason & Dixon* 70-71), or he shares with Dixon a hallucination in which they witness a field of giant vegetables in the trans-Susquehanna territory (*Mason & Dixon* 477). These micro-worlds, as Brian McHale points out, are characterized in terms of space rather than time, which is unsurprising as spatial categories appear to dominate over temporal ones throughout the novel. Time is indeed spatialized in *Mason & Dixon*: it is often thought of and imagined, as one of the characters in the novel puts it, as "the Space that may not be seen" (*Mason & Dixon* 327). And even when Pynchon explicitly brings up, for instance, the concept of *Tempus Incognitum* in relation to the calendar reform of 1752, he does so primarily in spatial terms.

The abrupt introduction of the Gregorian calendar in England provoked all kinds of fantastic speculations over the "lost" eleven days,¹ which Pynchon, in the manner his readers have come to expect, playfully explores. In Mason's fantastic

1 The Gregorian calendar introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII was first adopted by Roman Catholic countries. Protestant England was reluctant to implement the new system, and when it finally did, in 1752, eleven days had to be skipped after September 2nd.

account the eleven days become a kind of spacetime that has been colonized by Asiatic pygmies, who now haunt the people of this world. The spatialization of time is made even more explicit in Chapters 23 and 63 where the characters discuss the reform of the Chinese time system initiated by Jesuit missionaries during the Qing dynasty, which consisted in redefining the duration of the primal unit *ke* to one ninety-sixth of a day, or exactly one quarter of a western hour. The reform, when expressed in geometrical terms, amounted to the reduction of 365 and a quarter degrees in the Ancient Chinese system (correlated with the solar year) to “an honest 360-Degree Circle” (*Mason & Dixon* 229). As Capt. Zhang, the Fen Shui master in the novel, points out: “It was five and a Quarter Degrees that the Jesuits remov’d from the Chinese Circle, in reducing it to three hundred sixty. Bit like the Eleven Days taken from your Calendar, isn’t it?” (*Mason & Dixon* 629). Beneath the tomfoolery of these “wild speculations,” Pynchon seems to be articulating more serious concerns related to standardization of time and implementation of new temporal regimes.

The establishment of the new “temporal grid,” to use Pynchon’s own expression, is featured most clearly in his three novels spanning the period from the 18th to the early 20th century, novels that trace the emergence of modernity, the scientific paradigm and capitalist industrialization: *Mason & Dixon*, *V.* and *Against the Day*. More than in any other texts, in these Pynchon critically re-examines temporal revolutions and regulations such as the establishment of a global public time, time zones and other scientific and parascientific temporal frameworks of modernity. The corollary of a universal temporality is the commodification of time, the introduction of new technologies and precisely controlled time processes. These three novels are greatly concerned with how the new temporal regimes and technologies changed the experience of time and introduced new sensibilities contributing to what Robert Hassan has aptly described as two temporal Empires: “the First Empire of Speed: Clocktime modernity,” succeeded in the late 20th century by “the Second Empire of Speed: Networked Society.” “The ‘correction’ and maintenance of time,” as Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds puts it, are especially prominent in *Mason & Dixon* with its interest not only in calendar reforms but “also in the main characters’ job of recording exact astronomical transit times, using more and more accurate (and historically accurate) timepieces” (Hinds 9).² Pynchon’s narrative shows how the sciences, in particular astronomy and horology, were employed in the service of chronopolitics, which, as Johannes Fabian has argued in his anthropological study, defined geographical relations of power through its disciplinary temporal discourse and contributed to the shift from the local to the global dimension of time.

Pynchon addresses this problem explicitly in his 1993 New York Times essay, in which he explores the concept of time that accompanied and contributed to the transformation of America into “a Christian capitalist state” by looking at changes in early American city life—Pynchon’s prime example being the city of Philadelphia. Indicative of the emerging mechanized and industrial capitalist order, this new time replaced the pre-modern “slow time” of colonial Philadelphia, changing the city into an urban machine geared towards efficiency and profit: “The city was becoming a kind

2 For detailed discussions of the relation between calendar reforms and conceptualizations of time in *Mason & Dixon*, see Hinds and Albers.

of high-output machine, materials and labor going in, goods and services coming out, traffic inside flowing briskly about a grid of regular city blocks. The urban maze of London, leading into ambiguities and indeed evils, was here all rectified, orthogonal” (Pynchon, “Nearer, My Couch” 57). Much like the orthogonal layout of the streets, the new time in that urban machine was regular, predictable and linear: “every second was of equal length and irrevocable, not much in the course of its flow could have been called nonlinear, unless you counted the ungovernable warp of dreams” (Pynchon, “Nearer, My Couch” 57). The new attitude towards economy and time was perfectly exemplified in the figure of Benjamin Franklin, whose autobiography appears to be one of the very first works on time management and personal productivity published in America. Looking at the daily agenda it includes, Pynchon notes that Franklin allowed himself only a few hours for sleep.³ The remaining hours were meant to be spent productively, except maybe for the block of time between 9 pm and 1 am devoted to the Evening Question, “What good have I done this day?”. “This must have been the schedule’s only occasion for drifting into reverie—there would seem to have been no other room for speculations, dreams, fantasies, fiction. Life in that orthogonal machine was supposed to be nonfiction” (Pynchon, “Nearer, My Couch” 57). It was this “ungovernable warp of dreams” with its peculiar temporality that became a natural mode of resistance, offering a non-linear, imaginative awareness which does not translate time into money. The dream modality, Pynchon argues, is also the time of fiction, and of writers, who have long since contested the idea of time as commodity and its direct convertibility into money. Fiction, as the realm of the “as-if,” makes it possible to explore and test different ways of being in and orienting ourselves toward time. In doing this, it can re-describe the actual from unconventional angles and thus enlarge our view of its possibilities. As a strategy of resistance, the fictive modality is capable of replacing a totalizing singularity with a plurality of times and timescapes. The peculiar “architecture of dream” (*Against the Day* 250) thus enables one to escape “the network of ordinary latitude and longitude” (*Against the Day* 250) and experience other times.

Accordingly, *Mason & Dixon*, in its celebration of temporal plurality and in its creation of narrative configurations in which apparently different temporal zones coexist and/or slide into one another, effectively challenges and deconstructs the validity and universality of orthogonal temporality. In numerous horological references, the novel explicitly and thematically shows that the artificial determination of time by means of clocks and calendars does not represent a coherent, consistent cultural system, but, as Kevin Birth underlines in his anthropological study, can be perhaps best understood as “the sedimentation of generations of solutions to different temporal problems” (Birth 2). Pynchon’s narrative exemplifies how our time standards are in fact, to use Birth’s phrase, “a hodgepodge of different logics,” in which our desire for accuracy (the use of chronometers) meets church politics mixed with astronomy (the Gregorian calendar and the honest 360-degree Chinese circle) as well as anachronistic survivals of long-past societies (the choice to divide days into 24 segments by the ancient Egyptians, and

3 Pynchon’s portrayal of Benjamin Franklin in *Mason & Dixon* is far from flattering: he is an eccentric but well-connected character who never sleeps and appears to be closely aligned with the “dark” forces of the Enlightenment.

to divide hours and minutes into 60 segments by the ancient Babylonians). Moreover, the novel also recognizes the modern Western form of time as an expression of cultural imperialism. It continually reminds us that the Western conception of time is just one of many and that “[t]o say any one time is *the* time is both untrue and highly political” (Griffiths 2, original emphasis). Pointing to the ideological dimension of contemporary temporal discourse in modern Euro-American societies, Griffiths observes that “the West declares its time is *the* time. Not so fast. Its dominance is actually far from complete. Its challengers are everywhere” (19). Pynchon is clearly one of those challengers, as all his narratives, though to varying degrees, seek to oppose the fossilization of times and their conversion into disciplinary systems.⁴ It is worth noting that Pynchon’s view of dream time resonates extremely well with the central thesis of Jonathan Crary’s book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. In this short but insightful polemic, Crary presents sleep as one of the few remaining aspects of our lives that have not been harnessed to the late-capitalist engine of profitability and efficiency. By offering areas of time and experience that are not determined and shaped by the homogenizing force of the 24/7 operations of global exchange and circulation, dreaming empowers us to explore the modality of temporal becoming and so resists “despoliation of the rich textures and indeterminations of human life” (Crary 31). As a mental faculty, dreaming detaches us from the constraints of the actual and takes us to the realm of the modal where alternatives and possibilities can be not only imagined but also experienced. No wonder, Crary observes, that in the contemporary 24/7 environment one of the dominant forms of disempowerment is “the incapacitation of daydream or any mode of absent-minded introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow or vacant time” (88).⁵

Temporal Imagination and the Ambivalent Splendor of the (Merely) “Subjunctive”

The temporal modality of dreaming interpenetrates Pynchon’s fictional recreation of Colonial America not only locally (on the level of characters or as involved in the construction of oneiric micro-worlds) but also in a more general and fundamental sense, explicitly revealed in what is perhaps the novel’s most often cited passage:

Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?— in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is allow’d Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever ’tis not yet mapp’d, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,— serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be*

4 For a more detailed analysis of imperial politics in *Mason & Dixon*, see, for instance, Lifshy 117-138 or Seed 84-99.

5 Needless to say, shaping and regulating contemporary imaginaries has become one of the primary instruments in the various grids of control and surveillance that constrain us today. Thus, for instance, by merely remaining pliable and innocuous citizen-consumers, “we choose to do what we are told, we allow the management of our bodies, our ideas, our entertainment, and all our imaginary needs to be externally imposed” (Crary 60).

true,— Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,—winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair. (*Mason & Dixon* 346)

The subjunctive, as the above quotation makes clear, is not merely invoked to create a powerful and also somewhat disturbing dream of America in its historical or political specificity as an Eden-like land of liberty and opportunity, but emerges as a kind of global counterfactual mode in Pynchon's narrative. It is far-reaching and all-pervasive as the entire novel appears to be cast, to use Heinz Ickstadt's expression, "in the ambivalent splendor of the (merely) 'subjunctive': of the seen or dreamed, then lost and wasted in the progress of Enlightenment" (563). The subjunctive as a global narrative strategy is closely related to the problematic of historicity, causality and irreversibility of time as the novel explicitly and persistently brings into focus the pastness of the past and presentness of the present as well as their intricate interrelations. Many of the straight lines the narrative traces are ones that mark colonial exploitation, repression, and slavery. The subjunctive mode as a central component of his fictive historiography allows Pynchon to trace these lines and examine the American nation on the eve of its founding: "Like other novelists and historians, [Pynchon] identifies a strange mix of philosophical rationalism, spiritual yearning, and economic rapacity in the American salmagundi. But uniquely he settles on the surveying of the Mason-Dixon Line as symbol of and index of the forces that would become America" (Coward 137-138). In its fictive recreation of Colonial America, the novel, as Coward notes, is a bold and ambitious effort to re-conceptualize the hollowed American myths and to rewrite some of its archetypal narratives by depicting the New World as "one more hope in the realm of the Subjunctive" (*Mason & Dixon* 543). By this rewriting Pynchon injects into his fictive historiography a sense of radical contingency that makes space for alternative histories and effectively broadens the horizons of political possibility. The subjunctive functions thus as a central mode of Pynchon's critique of both Enlightenment ideology⁶ and the ideology of American expansionism, rooted in the European practices of colonialism. By exploring "a foundational tension between declarative and subjunctive Americas" (Lifshey 125), the novel exposes the totalizing ideology of the "imperial cartography" of the Conquest⁷: the Mason-Dixon line emerges as "an imperial intrusion, an insertion of artificial writing that implies a narrative of Conquest to be etched upon the hinterland and over the unmeasured indigenous narratives that abound in its path" (Lifshey 122).

6 As Coward puts it, Pynchon "sees colonial America as a place where Western civilization paused one last time before following its Faustian course towards rationalism, greater dependence on technology, and the throwing out of spiritual babies with the bathwater of magic and superstition" (Coward 15).

7 For a detailed reading of *Mason & Dixon's* engagement with the cultures of Native Americans in the context of the Conquest, see also Freer.

One might be tempted to consider Pynchon's concern with historicity in the novel as a kind of counterweight to the postmodern emphasis on space. And yet this position would be difficult to defend in *Mason & Dixon*, where spatial categories dominate temporal ones even in the most subjunctively colored chapters. In one of them, Chapter 73, Mason and Dixon survey an alternative Vista, continuing West, beyond the Warrior Path, their line crossing Ohio, and passing into the Trans Allegheny wilderness, largely untouched by European powers. This hypothetical westward movement, as McHale notes, recapitulates in reverse temporal order the history of European presence in North America, and the wilderness Mason and Dixon venture into is essentially subjunctive space populated with alternative histories of America—French America, Spanish America, Chinese America, Russian America—other “temporalities,” but localized in spatial enclaves, distinct “microworlds” (McHale 49). Undeniably, spatial forms are employed to articulate the historical and political conditions that shape the Western wilderness of *Mason & Dixon* into “a kind of contested writing surface on which alternative versions of the future (and the past) are in the process of being inscribed” (Miller 226); the geographical and topographical as well as historical and mythical features of the American West help Pynchon emphasize the subjunctive voice of history. Expanding McHale's reading, Adam Lifshey sees also the very possibility of ontological plurality as generated by the subjunctive mode, in which the New World emerges as created by absent presences and the Line as “imbued with an ongoing production of the spectral” (117).⁸ At the heart of Pynchon's political critique, Lifshey contends, is subjunctive America projected as an “unmapped atemporal locus where plural realities and possibilities exist side by side” (Lifshey 125).

While the subjunctive injects into the novel the imaginative dynamics of wish and desire, speculation and conjecture in predominantly spatial terms, it also reveals Pynchon's counterfactual imagination as a temporal modality concerned with possibility, as a mode that in its operation does not directly invoke spatial forms and relations. The subjunctive, I argue, affects the temporal gestalt of the novel by introducing a perspective “tilted” toward the future: it projects into the narrative present and past an experience of time which “normally is only available for the future: time dividing and subdividing, bifurcating and branching off continuously into multiple possibilities and alternatives” (Heise 55). In other words, the subjunctive mode makes use of the inherent asymmetry of time which characterizes our everyday experience: the future as that which lies ahead appears to be open and indeterminate, full of multiple possibilities, while the present and the past appear more limited, often narrowed down to one temporal strand among these possibilities. In her study of postmodern novels Ursula Heise sees this vision of time as asymmetrical and generated by three major strategies: repetition, metalepsis, and experimental typography.⁹ In the case of *Mason & Dixon*, however, these strategies are not sufficient to describe narrative time and

8 “The explicit hauntings in *Mason & Dixon* number in the hundreds, the implicit ones in the thousands. As Brian McHale points out, ‘the American wilderness of *Mason & Dixon* is a haunted landscape’. ” As in *When the Combes Fought*, as in *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Popol Vuh* and Columbus's diary, America is ideated as absence arisen in a context of Conquest that links all sides of a haunted Atlantic world” (Lifshey 124).

9 See Heise 57-59.

the specific sense of temporality that Pynchon's text evokes. The novel's extensive and intensive use of the hypothetical and the counterfactual requires that we look more closely at the relation between modality and narrative articulations of time. In order to appreciate the complex relation between possibility and imagined time, the following section offers a more theoretically-oriented perspective on Pynchon's use of the subjunctive.

Modality and Hypothetical Focalization

Standard formal approaches to linguistic modality clearly differentiate between its deontic function, concerned with possibility and necessity in terms of freedom to act (giving instructions or permission, expressing duty or obligations), and its epistemic function, concerned with assessment of possibility, certainty or probability of events.¹⁰ It is the second type, epistemic modality, that I wish to discuss here. In narratological accounts, modality is usually linked with the categories of focalization and perspective, and understood as constituted by statements of differing degrees of certainty, authority, objectivity and externality. In his lucid and informative article in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Valerij Tjupa lists four primary kinds of modality in which a story can be recounted: "a) neutral knowledge, b) an unreliable narrator's personal opinion, c) authoritative conviction that does not need approval, or d) an intersubjective modality that is neither neutral nor objective such as sharing of a common understanding among subjects" (Tjupa par.6). In *Story Logic* David Herman postulates another form of modality, one which has not been included in the classical typologies,¹¹ namely one that makes use of narrative's capacity to introduce perspectives other than the ones dramatized by characters or narrators. This hypothetical focalization (HF), as Herman calls it, "entails the use of hypotheses, framed by the narrator or a character, about what might be, or might have been seen or perceived—if only there were someone who could have adopted the requisite perspective on the situations and events at issue" (Herman, *Story Logic* 303). Drawing on possible-worlds semantics, Herman argues that focalization in general can be theorized as the narrative representation of propositional attitudes ranging from certainty to virtuality to radical uncertainty. In other words, focalization as the narrative transcription of attitudes of seeing, believing etc. encodes epistemic modalities into narrative discourse. Hypothetical focalization taps into a peculiar epistemic modality that counterfactualizes the reference world of the text by marking what counts as actual versus possible over the course of a narrative (Herman, *Story Logic* 310-1). It is therefore capable of introducing "a highly mediated relation between the expressed and the reference world" by encoding a whole spectrum of modal possibilities ranging from the hypothetical or doubtful to the known ("Hypothetical Focalization" 242). Hypothetical focalization is thus theorized in Herman's model as a special case of incongruence between the narrative's expressed and reference worlds; it opens up

¹⁰ Apart from these two types, modal epistemology distinguishes also alethic modality, concerned with the question of truth in modal judgements and claims.

¹¹ As Herman notes, the absence of this type of focalization in structuralist typologies is not fortuitous, as "its description requires conceptual resources largely unavailable to classical narratology" ("Hypothetical Focalization" 231).

a virtual perspective which can be described according to the degree of ontological doubtfulness it conveys. The incongruence can range from global (or macrostructural) to local (or microstructural): the former refers “to situations in which a relatively lengthy sequence is judged ontologically dubious by contextual evidence” (Hägg 188); the latter, by contrast, denotes “a more textually limited discrepancy between the world of fiction and its subworlds, HF being a representative case of the localized variety of noncongruence” (Hägg 188). The possible frames of reference, Herman contends, are introduced either directly (a counterfactual observer or witness) or indirectly (a merely hypothetical onlooker whose activity the reader infers), marking in this way “different distributions of doubt and doubtfulness with respect to the situations and events being focalized” (Herman, “Hypothetical Focalization” 246).

Herman’s model, by recognizing the importance of modality, appears to provide a solid conceptual framework that, as Martin FitzPatrick has argued, makes it possible to better understand “the forking paths of counterfactuals, wishes and unfulfilled possibilities” (FitzPatrick 248) in which subjunctive narratives, as the prime examples of what Gerald Prince calls the *disnarrated*,¹² abound. The semantic properties of these narratives “result from disruption of the relation between story and discourse” (FitzPatrick 245). More specifically, subjunctive narratives disrupt the exchange between story and discourse: “a *then* of events and a *now* of telling” (246, original emphasis). In doing so, they not only withhold significant information but also make it epistemologically insecure. As Emma Kafelanos observes, the problem with interpreting these narratives consists in the reader’s inability to easily establish configurations from available information and interpret the function of events in relation to those configurations (55). This difficulty becomes especially important in the context of postmodern novels, in which “the multiplicity and undecidability themselves are presented as irreducible facts, not as competing hypotheticals” (Margolin 149). In other words, in such narratives the question of the factuality of a given hypothetical is secondary to its world-building potential: the narrators and characters are concerned not so much with whether their suppositions are true or false as with their beliefs in and wishes for narrative configurations to be true or false.

Using Prince’s idea of the *disnarrated* and Herman’s models as a theoretical framework, FitzPatrick examines two examples of subjunctive narrative from Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The first one is a chase scene involving Roger Mexico, an event that does not occur within the main narrative frame and yet is presented as the narrator’s or Mexico’s speculation on how things could have gone. The other example is Slothrop’s encounter with Ludwig, an orphan boy searching for his lost lemming, Ursula. The pet’s ontological status remains unclear, and neither the reader nor Slothrop can determine whether the pet exists and has been lost or whether Ludwig is deluding himself and chasing a hypothetical lemming.¹³ The conceptual apparatus FitzPatrick

12 The *disnarrated* denotes “all the events that do not happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text” (Prince 2).

13 The episode becomes even more complex and obscure when Slothrop, who has been following Ludwig in the Zone, loses the boy and then sees him again carrying a lemming and looking happy. “We are not told whether Ludwig has found Ursula, has found a lemming and in his deluded state decides that this is Ursula, or is himself a hallucination invented by the increasingly unstable

employs is clearly applicable to other instances of Pynchon's subjunctive narrative. Its greatest advantage is that it permits more accurate descriptions of the hypothetical mode (strong, "cosmetic," compact, and as, for example, either embedded in the thought of a character, or more encompassingly focalized like "the view from the balcony") on different narrative levels. In *Mason & Dixon*, for instance, the subjunctive is not limited to the primary frame of narration (that of Rev. Wicks Cherrycoke), but appears also in the internal story of Mason and Dixon and on the level of the external, implied author. In my view, FitzPatrick is right in claiming that the placement of subjunctive narratives as opposed to indicative narration of the frames in which they operate strengthens the force of the subjunctive gesture. This amplification is most clearly visible in Chapter 73, which draws much of its energy from departing from the fixity of the indicative narration of the previous chapters that present more factually the end of Mason's and Dixon's project in America. And yet, as Samuli Hägg has argued in his narratological study of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Prince's concept and Herman's model cannot account for many instances of the texts' epistemic indeterminacy, especially ones in which readers encounter not grammatical markers of hypothetical focalization (auxiliaries, conditional phrases and the like) but contextually marked cases of ontological incongruity between expressed and reference worlds. In some episodes in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the distinction between the reference and a possible world is blurred to such an extent that it is impossible to determine "whether the focalization represents the belief context of a particular possible world or whether it represents the belief context of the reference world" (Hägg 202). The same kind of tenuous ontology characterizes many episodes of *Mason & Dixon*. Thus, for instance, the journey to the interior of the Earth (*Mason & Dixon* 738-43), a dream that Dixon narrates to Mason, lacks verbal markers of uncertainty and speculation, so Dixon's hypothetical journey is not clearly separate from the diegetic level of the narrative. Moreover, many of the micro-worlds in the novel are haunted by ghosts and spirits, and populated by ontologically ambiguous figures such as the Mechanical Duck, the Golem and the Learned English Dog whose mode of being is fuzzy and unclear. The reader cannot, to give another example, determine with certitude whether the ghost of Mason's wife visits him on St. Helena (*Mason & Dixon* 165) or whether the melancholic Mason, exposed to the fierce and unrelenting "Wind" that has driven many of the island's visitors mad, is simply losing his grip on reality and daydreaming or hallucinating. Examples of such radical indeterminacy abound in the novel, confirming Hägg's conclusion that "Pynchon's fiction refuses to function merely as an illustration of the concepts of narrative theory" (208). Hägg rightly remarks that, given the complexity of hypothetical focalization in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "one should retain a moderately skeptic view of the [traditional narratological] categories and concepts" (208). The study of these categories and concepts in general does indeed require, as Herman himself remarked, "pooling resources of linguistics, philosophy and the theory of narrative" (Herman, "Hypothetical Focalization" 246), especially since such study aims not only to sharpen our view of the differences between modes and literary genres, but, even more important, to "refine our understanding of the intentional properties of narrative discourse" (Herman, "Hypothetical Focalization" 246) by reorienting or re-describing focalization in general.

Slothrop" (FitzPatrick 249).

Herman's call for a re-description of focalization is, as Mark Currie suggests, motivated by the need to acknowledge the *temporal* dimension of temporality as the distribution of certainty over time. Currie's own approach in his 2013 book, *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise*, is even more radical than Herman's as he seeks to "temporalize" narrative focalization by restoring the concept of modality, which has been largely neglected in traditional narratological accounts. Distancing himself from the strong affiliations of contemporary narratology with linguistics and drawing instead on semantics, Currie argues that modality is one of "the most basic categories by which we can understand the passage of time in discourse" and, together with the concept of tense, "can be used to link narrative temporality to the experience of time in life" (3). Accordingly, he extends the notion of narrative modality by linking it with the perspectival structures of narrative (distribution of information) and by relating it to the grammar of verbs concerned with probability and certainty. The literary examples he examines are intended to show how modality can encompass the semantics of future time reference and thus register in the possible not only its contingency but also its futurity.¹⁴

Currie's argument is complex and defies short summary. Suffice it to say that it encourages us to move beyond the linguistically inflected study of narrative and look for sources of modality other than those derived from the semantic properties of the relation between story and discourse as delineated in classical narratology. Herman's account also anticipates this move by treating hypotheticality in very broad terms, that is, as encompassing both perceptual and cognitive focalization. By this means, as Hägg usefully points out, "Herman draws tentative lines of correspondence between HF and the representation of mental acts" (Hägg 192). It seems that the inability of Herman's four-scheme model of focalization to account for some more radical cases of epistemic indeterminacy does not so much indicate a mistake or inconsistency in his argument as reveal the limits of the tradition on which he draws, that of modal theoretical semantics.¹⁵ To put it plainly, many problematic cases in Pynchon's narratives cannot be clarified simply by reference to incongruences between the expressed and reference worlds. What is needed is a more nuanced approach to modality, an approach that

14 It is important to note that Currie treats modality not merely as a complement to the category of tense but as a category more basic to the temporality of discourse than tense. As such, he contends, it is capable of being "scaled up to describe something above the level of verb or sentence about the dynamics of doubts, uncertainty and knowledge that give narrative its sense of temporal movement" (Currie 3).

15 This approach is symptomatic of the general tendency in philosophy and literary studies to restrict imagination to objects of possible beliefs and fictional truths, which can then be analyzed in terms of fictional worlds, defined by sets of propositions (Moran 106). This reductive treatment of imagination, as Thomas has argued, is an effect of the linguistic turn, which in emphasizing the close association between thought and language effectively occluded other states and levels of imaginal consciousness. "*Imagining that* is a linguistic, or at any rate a propositional matter, and, as such, lends itself to explication in terms of the characteristic tools of the analytical philosopher, logical and linguistic analysis. Those tools, however, provide relatively little purchase on something non-propositional like imagery (unless it can somehow be shown to be reducible to a propositional format) or imaginative perception" (Thomas 165, emphasis in original). The purchasing power of propositional imagining, as I have argued above, wears thin and ultimately gives way, when confronted with the temporal aporias that Pynchon's narrative brings to the fore.

can do justice to the complex relation between narrative temporality and temporal possibility, especially in its projective character.

In Currie's view, narrative hypotheticality should be approached theoretically as a mechanism for the cognitive grasp of the future, as the projection of the future perfect in the form of a conjecture concerning "what might have happened." Possible-worlds theory ignores this projective dimension by establishing an equivalence between possible worlds "as parallel ontological worlds in which no special status is accorded to the actual world in terms of the semantic operations by which this world is constructed, so that possibility and probability can mean much more than the fidelity of a representation to the actual world" (107-8). In other words, modality in the possible-worlds model is understood in terms of contingency, as voices or statements of differing degrees of certainty, authority, objectivity and externality. Possible-world semantics thus neglects the relative probability or possibility of events (108). The heavy stress this model lays on logical contingency excludes "the perspectival structure¹⁶ of focalization in terms of temporal position: of what is certain, what is expected and what is unexpected" (113).¹⁷ Consequently, possible-worlds theory introduces the spatial into narrative accounts of temporality by constructing "a parallel and autonomous temporal system which relates to real time in the manner of metaphorical substitution: it's similar but different" (111). Thus, for instance, the notion of chronology is presented as a metaphor, "in the sense that it is merely analogous to the notion of chronology that pertains in real time" (Currie 111). By viewing temporal processes primarily as components of narrative logic (as principles of selection and combination), possible-world semantics detaches narrative time from the complex structure and rich texture of lived temporality. Therefore, it cannot account for the creative and projective dimension of temporal possibility: "the category of temporal possibility is simply displaced by the notion of possibility as alternative possible world, and modality's link to anticipation and prediction is severed" (110). Consequently, modality's function is reduced to the problem of temporal location and organization, and the question of perspectival immediacy and actuality is largely ignored.¹⁸

Currie's argument becomes even more complex, but given the thematic scope of this discussion, I shall limit myself to examining his notion of "hypotheticality" as retrospect which does not exist in the moment, that is, which goes beyond the perspective of characters and narrators (their location in a moment). This retrospection makes use of "a hypothetical perspective on what might have been seen if only there were someone there who knew the future, or occupied a position of retrospect (a location in a future moment, an omniscience across time)" (Currie 102). This type of narrative modality appears not only to explain the peculiar temporality of chapter 73 and other subjunctive-colored passages in *Mason & Dixon* but, even more important, to capture something of the ambivalent splendor of the 'subjunctive' in which the entire novel is cast.

¹⁶ I will discuss this structure as a central component of recreative projections in the following section.

¹⁷ For another critique of the attempt to reduce modality to possible-world semantics, see, for instance, Bueno and Shalkowski, and Malmgren 307-312.

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of these complex and contentious matters in contemporary narratology, see Currie 109-113.

Temporal Asymmetry, Sideshadowing, and Impossible Possibility

As Heise has argued, postmodernist novels often explore the inherent asymmetry of time and rely heavily on the type of perspective that is tilted toward the future in such a way that “we cannot be sure even retrospectively which one of several possible developments turned from possibility to reality, let alone... know which one is being realized in the narrative present. Through this narrative strategy, the reader is made to live in a constant retrojection of the time experience of the future” (Heise 55). This open and asymmetrical sense of time, which postmodernist narratives amplify and take to a breaking point, was captured in earlier fictions by means of the narrative device that Gary Saul Morson in his study of tempics has called “sideshadowing.” Unlike the familiar foreshadowing, which operates with symmetrical time and introduces a temporality of inevitability, sideshadowing is concerned with the hypothetical, with what might be and what might have been. By casting a shadow from the side, that is, from the other possibilities, it allows us to see how “the hypothetical shows through the actual and so achieves its own shadowy kind of existence in the text” (602). Sideshadowing gives a glimpse of unrealized but realizable possibilities: “along with an event, we see its alternatives; with each present, another possible present” (602). It restores the presentness of the present and the openness of the future by revealing other temporalities as they “are continually competing for each moment of actuality” (602). By doing so, sideshadowing destabilizes the temporal legitimacy of the actual, presenting it as “just another possibility that somehow came to pass” (602). Sideshadowing also undermines our tendency to trace straight lines of causality from one event in the past to the present and thus to reduce the constant “ravelment of possibilities.” Sideshadowing approaches time as a field of possibilities, with each moment having its own set of possible events that could take place in it. “From this field a single event emerges—perhaps by chance, perhaps by choice, perhaps by some combination of both with the inertia of the past, and in any case contingently. The other possibilities usually appear invisible or distorted to later observers. Thus a field is mistakenly reduced to a point, and, over time, a succession of fields is reduced to a line” (Morson 603). In other words, as Pynchon puts it in the earlier quoted passage from *Mason & Dixon*, this field of possibilities is “measur’d and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, ... changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities” (*Mason & Dixon* 346). Morson reminds us that “even if we are right about which events did happen, we may be mistaken in tracing straight lines between them” (603). It is in this context that I understand Bernard Duyfhuizen’s exhortation to get lost in the narrative wilderness of *Mason & Dixon*. “[R]eaders may be better off getting lost in the wilderness of narrators and voices than trying to carve a clear and straight Visto through its thicket of words” (Duyfhuizen 140). Pynchon’s narrative encourages its readers to treat all kinds of orthogonality with suspicion by making it clear that what is declaratively overwritten as Mason and Dixon cut their straight Line is unenclosed possibility per se (Lifshey 128).

What ultimately makes *Mason & Dixon* a time novel is its effort “to restore the possibility of possibility,” and to “penetrate into the middle realm” suspended between actualities and impossibilities (to paraphrase Morson). To what extent it succeeds in

this endeavor is left to the reader to decide, to the “you” in the last sentence of the novel. There is a persistent element of darkness that might quench this imaginative mobility. Heinz Ickstadt ends his essay on the subjunctive in *Mason & Dixon* by quoting an anonymous voice from the Internet that sees Pynchon’s novels as “pervaded by a consciousness of impossible possibility,” a consciousness that creates tension between a desire for revelation and a mocking rhetoric of irreversibility (567). This consciousness, in my view, does not so much confirm a postmodern diagnosis of the contemporary as a condition of blocked futurity as it signals subversive sensibilities that can effectively resist various temporal regimes as systems of oppression. Dream time, as one of the dominant subjunctive strategies of resistance in *Mason & Dixon*, is particularly apt in re-imagining how the past, present and future might imaginatively and unpredictably interact. While escape from the forces of oppression in Pynchon’s fiction is usually temporary, “often no more than a moment of miraculous anarchy that eludes capture and analysis, in part by being only temporary” (Miller 233), it remains a dormant possibility. It can easily be played down as wishful thinking or as a fantasy of how things could have been otherwise. But it can also move beyond that and reveal subjunctivity as a meta-code of temporal imagination, capable not merely of dreaming other times and temporalities in the individual theater of one person’s mind, but also of shaping the imaginaries of groups and communities. As many critics and readers have pointed out, *Mason & Dixon* goes beyond the ironic playfulness¹⁹ that characterizes much postmodernist fiction by engaging ethical and political concerns in its vision of America. Frank Palmeri argues that Pynchon’s narrative “moves away from the representation of extreme paranoia, toward a vision of local ethico-political possibilities” (par. 5) by shifting away from the individual to a more diffuse set of subjects” (Hinds 19). This shift is also a departure from the postmodern tendency to isolate and privatize “subjectification” (Palmeri par. 38).²⁰

It is hard to deny that *Mason & Dixon* projects history as a closed process as “seen from a known future that is our contemporary present” (Ickstadt 555) and that in doing so it eliminates the historically contingent, nostalgically presenting “a wisdom that comes from the knowledge of inevitable outcome” (Ickstadt 556).²¹ It

19 It is worth noting that possibilities and alternative visions remain in *Mason & Dixon*, as in the earlier novels, suspended between parody and hope. So they are not unambiguous; thus, for example, the vision of America in the novel is, as Ickstadt suggests, both an illusion (an idea and a place haunted by ghosts of a Dream) and a repository for hopes (563).

20 For a contemporary overview and a new reading of the political in *Mason & Dixon*, see Carswell 49-79.

21 Through its extensive use of the subjunctive, *Mason & Dixon* might also be seen as anachronistically announcing the new temporal sensibilities that emerged in the wake of the American and French revolutions. The text clearly foreshadows both of them; the former is more tangibly present, and the latter less so. Pynchon’s fictional historiography is not entirely at odds with Reinhard Koselleck’s and Peter Fritzsche’s argument that the loss of certainty and predictability can be taken as a fundamental characteristic trait of modern historical consciousness. The revolutions, upheavals and wars of the late 18th and the early 19th century fundamentally altered the “previously authoritative structure of temporality by redrawing the horizon of historical possibility” (Fritzsche 18): the future could no longer be derived from the present, and the present could no longer be seen as a continuation of the past. This radical shift in historical consciousness had ambiguous consequences. On the one hand, it contributed to a new frame of meaning through which

does not, however, I argue, render null “the moment and its possibilities” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 159) and does not vacate the temporal modality of its narrative reinvention and recreation. While the “possible” (utopian visions, dreams of paradise, tales of the miraculous and wonderful) is indeed practically destroyed and rationally deconstructed, *Mason & Dixon* incessantly counters the reduction of “Possibilities to Simplicities” by imaginatively re-creating and re-presenting them. The text thus oscillates, as Ickstadt himself admits, “between the knowledge of irrevocable loss and of the re-creative power of its own desiring” (Ickstadt 555). This oscillation results from the complex pairing of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries as “the actual and the imagined, what did happen and what might have happened” (Hinds 9). As Hinds observes, “the novel’s time obsession is largely dramatized by a constant interplay of these real and imagined, past and present ‘presences’” (Hinds 9). The interplay obviously involves not only the time of the novel’s narration but also the time of our reading. The impulse to read the text as projected against our own present is difficult to resist, as the novel by its pervasive use of anachronisms recasts the eighteenth century in modern terms, “equalizing” these two discrete eras at the “fold” that, much like a suture, reveals both a wound and its closure and the two eras as bleeding into each other. “This narrative maneuver erases history’s reality of before-and-after to create not chronology but synchronicity” (Hinds 11). In rejecting the past as a linear chain of causes and effects, Pynchon’s narrative introduces alternative worlds that harbor the possible as well as everything that has been deconstructed or destroyed and rendered impossible. Pynchon’s narrative thus shares the Melvillean yearning for immediacy and incarnation as it “can neither persist in the denial of an alternative world nor in the assertion of it—since each denies the other in a mixture of nostalgia and irony” (Ickstadt 565). This yearning is closely related to the subjunctive, which, with its projective, creative character, attests to the mobility and amplitude of Pynchon’s imaginative thought.

The subjunctive is not reduced either to its grammatical function or to the mere entertaining of propositions but emerges as a central modal component of Pynchon’s imaginative recreation of Colonial America. As such the subjunctive acts as a thick conception which involves historical and moral appraisals of past actions and situations and which in the course of the narrative creates an experience with a distinctive phenomenology. Imagining modality, as Balcerzak-Jackson reminds us, activates not only hypothetical reasoning but also “objectual and eventive imaginings [that] involve capacities related to perspective-taking and phenomenal experience” (47), imaginings that through their employment of cognitive resources “go beyond those needed merely to entertain a certain mental content” (48). In answering the question what it would be like doing such a thing or being in such a state, “imagining involves a certain—often vivid and immediate—phenomenology” (Balcerzak-Jackson 49) that sets it

Europeans and Americans experienced history as a process of permanent loss, which stranded them in the present and caused feelings of melancholy and nostalgia. On the other, it contributed to constructions of new individual and national imaginations by allowing for “imaginative journeys backward in time” that helped to build “subjecthood” in respect to “both the nation and the individual” (Fritzsche 7). As Fritzsche puts it, the radicality of these changes derives its force directly from the imaginary applied in remaking political and social life: “it was the self-authorization to reimagine the familiar world that proved to be so liberating, and so scandalous” (Fritzsche 21).

apart from supposing or hypothetical reasoning. The capacity to put oneself in the perspective of another subject by recreating or simulating the subject's involvement in a given situation or act has a distinctive phenomenal character of experience that accompanies the recreative projection.²² Pynchon's use of the subjunctive mode goes beyond hypothetical reasoning and requires not only counterfactual supposition of some proposition but also participation in what Richard Morton has called "dramatic imagining." This sort of imagining, capable of arousing a strong emotive response,²³ requires "something more like a point of view, a total perspective on the situation, rather than just the truth of a specifiable proposition. And imagining along these lines involves something more like genuine rehearsal, 'trying on' the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it" (105).²⁴

In this capacity the subjunctive mode is not merely employed as a tactic of doubt involved in the production of ontological and epistemic indeterminacies but is also capable of recasting the actual in new keys. By allowing for the singular and accidental, it does not reduce the future to an extension of the present. Nor does it merely endorse a model of time in which the infinite subdivisibility of the instant located within a discrete territory of the text produces "the effect of a singularized perpetuity, evocative of lived experience of time as motion" (Huehls 43). In claiming that Pynchon's subjunctivity as a mode of being within time lacks the future's possibility, Huehls seems to forget the concurrent interplay of temporalities replacing chronology with synchronicity that he himself identifies and describes as "a temporally parallaxic narrative form" capable of articulating time "without sacrificing time's temporality" (43). The hypothetical island in the middle of the Atlantic which, in the novel's alternative ending, Mason and Dixon occupy, "content to reside like Ferrymen or Bridge-keepers, ever in a Ubiquity of Flow, before a ceaseless Spectacle of Transition" (*Mason & Dixon* 713), does not necessarily indicate the state of being "trapped in a purgatory of subjunctivity" that lacks futurity (Huehls 42).²⁵ If the subjunctive permits stories and meaning to be born out of that "moment" in the middle of time's river, it is not only by virtue of its constant deferral of debts to the passage of Time but also due to its unique relation to time as a field of possibilities in all their plurality and indivisibility. What lie at the heart of the subjunctive are "the capacities of narrative itself, as invention rather than as mediate information" (FitzPatrick 259). This invention, as I have been arguing, is an imaginary

22 This feature of imagination is perhaps best captured in the recreativist or simulationist view that characterizes imagining as a cognitive mechanism grounded on embodied perception. See Currie and Ravenscroft.

23 As one of the characters in *Against the Day* puts it, "I am as fond of the subjunctive mood as any, but as the only use to which you ever put it is for a *two-word vulgarism* better left unuttered—" (1033, emphasis in original).

24 The hypothetical conversation between young Mason and his father in chapter 21 is an illustrative example of dramatic and emotionally charged imagining that Pynchon's work taps into.

25 I do not deny the dangers of possibility that Huehls identifies by citing the example of the Doctrine of Pre-Emptive Action from the 2002 National Security Strategy, which can be invoked "to justify violence in the present... by overdetermining the future" (46). As Michael Wood in his review of the novel observes, "the subjunctive doesn't have to be good news. America is a dream but also an infinite danger, and never more dangerous, the implication is, then when it claims to know itself or close its frontiers" (qtd. in Ickstadt 556).

intervention that introduces a liberating sense of plurality by projecting America as a subjunctive realm “filled with plural realities and unrealities. Indeed, it is the very unresolvability of this plurality that makes it subjunctive in the first place” (Lifshey 127). What the subjunctive in Pynchon’s work ultimately points to is counterfactual imagination concerned with possibility itself.

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