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Against Accumulation: *Moby-Dick*, *Mason & Dixon*, and Atlantic Capitalism

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Scott Kingsland Borchert

to

The Department of English

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Abstract

This thesis examines the question of what it means to think about a text as Atlantic literature. I consider two novels, Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, in their relation to the Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation. I borrow this term from Ian Baucom, who, drawing on the work of Giovanni Arrighi, argues that the period extending from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth century represents a definite epoch of historical capitalism: an Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation. To think about these texts as Atlantic literature, then, is to think about how they reproduce the logic of or understand themselves in relation to this Atlantic cycle, the dynamic engine of a circum-Atlantic world.

I turn to two key theorists whose work I feel is best suited to each novel. *Moby-Dick* is primarily focused on capitalist production as represented by the whaling industry, and thus I employ Georg Lukács—particularly his model of realism and its emphasis on revealing the nature of production of a given social field—for my reading of that novel. *Mason & Dixon*, however, is less directly concerned with production and instead centers its narrative on the consumption of Atlantic commodities, which invites a reading that draws on Walter Benjamin, whose work focuses (primarily) on this stage of capitalist production.

In my reading of *Moby-Dick*, I argue that the novel approaches the requirements of Lukácsian realism, but fails to meet them because of its compositionally eclectic nature. Because *Moby-Dick* is inherently contradictory, it does not contain what Lukács calls the moving center (the force that orients and directs the “totality of objects” of a given social field, in this case, capital)—or at least not conventionally. Instead, the moving center is displaced and reproduced figuratively in Ahab's monomaniacal hunt for the white whale, leaving the empty shell of its rhetoric on Starbuck: Atlantic capitalism as contradiction. This, I argue, is not Lukácsian realism per se, but what I term a “realism of crisis,” as the text encounters its own moving center (capital) in a moment of crisis and subsequently displaces it (to Ahab).

Mason & Dixon, however, traces the Atlantic cycle across space and, importantly, through a time that does not simply pass, but accumulates. We see this in the novel's ghostliness, in how it represents commodities, and in the Benjaminian constellation of the late eighteenth and late twentieth centuries—the “bookends” of the Atlantic cycle. Through adopting a Benjaminian philosophy of history, the text reveals how the Atlantic cycle is composed not of discrete and isolated past moments moving through the empty, homogeneous time of capitalist modernity, but rather of nonsynchronously contemporaneous moments accumulating in the wake of a singular historical catastrophe. That catastrophe, Pynchon's “the Day,” is analogous to the Atlantic cycle of accumulation.

Both novels encounter the logic of capitalist accumulation and respond in turn with an alternative form of accumulation. In *Moby-Dick*, we see a trend of literary accumulation (the “nonrealist” element) that seeks to counteract the brutalizing reality of the logic of capitalist accumulation (uncovered by the “realist” element). And in *Mason & Dixon*, we see an accumulative (Benjaminian) philosophy of history that seeks to counteract the empty time of capitalist modernity, and articulates itself as a politics of melancholy.

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Introduction

Atlantic Narratives

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* are as alike as they are different. While the former occupies an unquestioned, nearly sacred position in the canon of American literature and has been the subject of countless studies, the latter is less secure canonically and has attracted the attention of few outside the world of Pynchon criticism. But they share several key characteristics. Both are massive, occasionally unwieldy texts with encyclopedic tendencies; both resist easy categorization, generic or otherwise; and both attempt to portray a world of epic scope.

And both, I will argue, are fundamentally *Atlantic*.

What does it mean for us to understand a text as Atlantic literature? And, perhaps the more important question, why does it matter? In the pages that follow I will attempt to respond to this first question through my readings of *Moby-Dick* and *Mason & Dixon*. They are only two texts among many possible choices, so I will not claim my argument to be in any sense an exhaustive exploration of the notion of Atlantic literature. I claim only to offer two readings that might help influence how we think about these novels in particular and about Atlantic literature in general.

But again, why bother? Do we really need another literary category, another label to affix to works that seem to resist being categorized in the first place? In this case, I believe we do. My project, however, is not related to the bourgeois impulse to categorize, compartmentalize, and systematize the entire world (or at least, I hope it is not). Rather, I find Atlantic literature a useful and highly significant category in that it gives us a foundation from which to launch a critique of the historical processes that have

produced—and continue to shape—our present moment. To put it another way, thinking about the Atlantic means thinking about capitalist modernity, as Paul Gilroy, Édouard Glissant, and others have convincingly demonstrated.¹ By situating a text within the framework of Atlantic literature, we can reveal certain currents of modernity or open up discourses of counter-modernity in ways that are otherwise unavailable. Precisely *how* we can do so may not be entirely clear at this point, but my readings of *Moby-Dick* and *Mason & Dixon* will make this more apparent.

First, I should be clear about what exactly I mean by “Atlantic.” Typically, we imagine the Atlantic as, well, an ocean: a vast emptiness. It is an abstract space, a nothingness, only the “in-between” in which we wait while in transit from one piece of land to another—an ocean that separates, a place of little significance other than what it is *not*: not Europe, not Africa, not the Americas. This in turn shapes how we usually categorize literature; we talk about “British literature” or “American literature,” but never about a literature that is not directly tied to a territorial space on land, never a literature that is oriented toward the sea.² The Atlantic, then, counts only insofar as it is a space of transit from one continent (or territorial literary category) to another; otherwise, it is insignificant.

Let us imagine instead that the Atlantic is not some great pit full of water separating one landmass from the other, but a space that brings them together, or, even more importantly, a space in which an entire New World is created. Bernard Bailyn argues that it is problematic to speak of Europe discovering a “New World,” and that “we might better consider [the “discovery”] as a sudden and harsh encounter between two old

¹ See Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* and Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

² There are exceptions, of course, like postcolonial literature, which is very similar to my project of thinking about Atlantic literature.

worlds that transformed both and integrated them into a single New World” (40). This “New World”—the synthesis of Europe, the pre-Conquest Americas, and, we should add, Africa—is a circum-Atlantic world, one constructed in the Atlantic basin and incorporating all the territories that share its shoreline.

More concretely, what binds the circum-Atlantic world together is economic unity; that is, as a single market for labor, capital, and commodities. Specifically commenting on a group of British merchants, Bailyn explains how this works:

[The merchants] dealt in slaves, in Florida plantations, in sugar, tobacco, timber, and provisions; they supplied bread to the British army in Germany during the Seven Years War, and ultimately became bankers, British estate owners, and art collectors. The key to all their varied activities was their integration. Debts incurred in opening plantations in Florida were liquidated by profits in the slave markets in Africa; huge profits from bread contracts were invested in land deals in South Carolina and the Caribbean; capital derived from sugar production and marketing provided capital for commercial loans (35).

The circum-Atlantic, then, can be better understood as a single economic apparatus, an engine of production and distribution and consumption that binds far-flung markets and sites of production into a unitary whole, moving capital and bodies and commodities in vast flows that criss-cross and encircle the Atlantic basin. Through this economic unity there develops a kind of social unity as well, which we see, for example, in the tradition of Atlantic republicanism.

But there is more to it than this. In *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom argues that the circum-Atlantic world is not only a space of capital accumulation, but the site of

a definite period in the history of capitalism, the theater of an Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation. Here, he is drawing on Giovanni Arrighi's claim that historical capitalism is marked by a series of cycles of capital accumulation, each centered in one geographic and political theater: from a Genoese to a Dutch to a British and finally to an American cycle (although into what new form the American cycle is shifting has yet to be determined). The shift from one cycle to another seems to be motivated by a constant oscillation between the dominance of commodity capital and the dominance of finance capital. In Marx's formula, the accumulation of capital is carried out through a process of $M-C-M'$: money is used to buy commodities which are sold for more money, and something seems to have come of nothing. Finance capital, however, represents the constriction of this formula to $M-M'$. Through hyperspeculation, money appears to have left the world of material production and developed the ability to breed money from itself. As Frederic Jameson has it, money does not remain tied to "the concrete context of its productive geography" but, "like the butterfly stirring within the chrysalis, it separates itself from that concrete breeding ground and prepares to take flight" (251). During these periods, finance capital becomes the dominant form of capital accumulation ($M-M'$ over $M-C-M'$) and, Arrighi argues, we begin to see a shift from one cycle of accumulation to a new cycle.³

Where Baucom departs from Arrighi is in his analysis of the last two cycles, British and American. Whereas Arrighi's "long twentieth century" runs from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century and basically overlaps with the American cycle of accumulation, Baucom offers a different model, one that is a bit longer and a bit more

³ This is not a sudden shift, but a process that develops over the course of decades; thus the cycles are not clearly defined but tend to overlap.

specific. Following Walter Benjamin's theory of the long nineteenth century as one that inherits the commodity logic of the late seventeenth, Baucom's

more specific long twentieth century runs from the mid-eighteenth century through the 'present.' It is precipitated by the flight of capital from Amsterdam to London, conjoins the British and U.S. cycles in a single Atlantic cycle of accumulation, enshrines commodity capital as its nineteenth century midpoint, and enthrones speculative epistemologies and value forms at either end of its long *durée* (*Specters* 31).

I will return to some specifics of Baucom's argument in my reading of *Mason & Dixon*. For now, it is enough to say that my "Atlantic" is, for this project, Baucom's Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation: a historically specific and culturally significant phase in the history of capitalism, the engine, as it were, of capitalist modernity.

How, then, do *Moby-Dick* and *Mason & Dixon* relate themselves as texts to this Atlantic cycle? How do they understand it, portray it, reproduce it in novelistic discourse? Quite differently, as it turns out—or perhaps not as differently as it would seem. First, however, I will begin by addressing something the novels have in common: their peculiarity. *Moby-Dick* and *Mason & Dixon* have the potential to be relatively straightforward novels, but the former intersperses its main narrative with long and detailed chapters on whales and the whaling industry, while the latter constantly disrupts the detailed historicity of its narrative with glaring anachronisms and twentieth-century references. What does it mean when Melville drops the story of the *Pequod* to give us a thorough (and, as it turns out, accurate) description of the nineteenth-century American whale fishery? And what does it mean when Pynchon uses his impeccably precise

eighteenth-century narrative voice to make a joke at the expense of “distant and strange” New Jersey (445)?⁴

Other critics have attempted to answer these questions, but I find their solutions problematic. To suggest that the nonfiction element of *Moby-Dick* exists to represent a quest for knowledge or that the anachronisms of *Mason & Dixon* exist to subvert the notion of historicity are intriguing proposals. To stop there, however, is to offer a reading that is fundamentally ahistorical and universalist. Instead, I believe that we must examine these texts—and especially their more puzzling aspects—in a way that is historically particular and temporally specific: in relation to the Atlantic cycle of accumulation.

In order to do so, I will turn to two key theorists whose work I feel is best suited to each novel, and can best help us uncover what makes these texts “Atlantic.” *Moby-Dick* is primarily focused on capitalist production as represented by the whaling industry, and thus I employ Georg Lukács—particularly his model of realism and its emphasis on revealing the nature of production of a given social field—for my reading of that novel. *Mason & Dixon*, however, is less directly concerned with production and instead centers its narrative on the consumption of Atlantic commodities, which invites a reading that draws on Walter Benjamin, who is likewise focused (primarily) on this stage of capitalist production.

To understand fully how *Moby-Dick* is related to the Atlantic cycle of accumulation—and why it matters—I take up the question of genre. A notoriously hard novel to classify, *Moby-Dick* is clearly not a realist novel. But I believe that a theory of realism, namely a Lukácsian theory, can help us make sense of this text. By enlisting

⁴ Textual citations from *Moby-Dick* and *Mason & Dixon* will appear parenthetically by page number throughout.

Lukács in this project and reading *Moby-Dick* through, or perhaps *against*, his theories of realism, we can reveal how the novel reproduces the logic of capitalist accumulation. In this sense, *Moby-Dick* takes us to the heart of the Atlantic cycle, to the brutal and unrelenting logic of capital accumulation that engendered our modern world while unleashing a plague of suffering and misery upon those who inhabit it. This is a long and winding voyage.

Mason & Dixon, however, offers a different picture of the circum-Atlantic world. Instead of piercing the heart of its logic of accumulation, this novel carries us along in a journey that is quite literally circum-Atlantic, surveying the spaces in which a truly Atlantic world is being born. But what does it mean that *Mason & Dixon* is a novel produced in the 1990s “pretending” to be a novel of the 1790s? And why does Pynchon so frequently and conspicuously seem to subvert the historicity of his text, through constant anachronism and references to the twentieth century? I believe that while *Mason & Dixon* depicts its eponymous protagonists’ journey as a *spatial* one, it is also showing us a *temporal* journey through the circum-Atlantic world, one that requires a different understanding of history as well as a different understanding of time. For *Mason & Dixon*, I will argue, time does not pass, but accumulates. To see how this actually works in the text and what it means for the text’s relation to the Atlantic cycle of accumulation, we will turn to Walter Benjamin and his philosophy of history.

One brief note before we proceed: while *Mason & Dixon* obviously belongs to a circum-Atlantic world, is this the case, really, for *Moby-Dick*? After all, the *Pequod* begins its voyage in the Atlantic but traverses the entire globe, ending up in the Pacific. Isn’t this, then, really an international or global novel, more than a specifically Atlantic

one? The case would not be hard to make. I believe, however, that *Moby-Dick* belongs to the world of Atlantic literature precisely because it is so bound up in a particular industry of crucial position in the Atlantic cycle of accumulation. While whaling ships did sail into all seven seas, the whaling industry itself was firmly rooted in the Atlantic—not necessary the Atlantic Ocean, but the Atlantic economic apparatus, the Atlantic cycle. This is true of the *Pequod*; like the vast majority of American whaling vessels in the mid-nineteenth century, Ahab's ship is based in Nantucket, tied to the Nantucket market, and controlled by Nantucket capital. Although its crew is international, the industry it represents is not, and the power and wealth of that industry is concentrated heavily in New England. As Ishmael tells us:

Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banners from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer's. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires (70).

Like any imperial enterprise, whaling has a center, and that center is Nantucket, and Nantucket, like all nineteenth-century American port cities, is bound up in the Atlantic cycle of accumulation. If we think about the wealth generated by the whaling industry, no matter where in the world's oceans it happens to harvest its whales, we find that this wealth flows back to and is reinvested in the Atlantic cycle. *Moby-Dick*, then, is the perfect place to look for the inner logic of this cycle, to get to the heart of the circum-Atlantic world.

And thus, like the crew of the *Pequod*, let us “blindly plunge like fate into the lone Atlantic.” (115).

Part I

Moby-Dick, Lukács, and the Logic of Capitalist Accumulation

Though in many of its aspects this
visible world seems formed in love, the
invisible spheres were formed in fright.

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

The cetological chapters of *Moby-Dick*, mainly concerned with whales and whaling and of ambiguous relation to the central narrative, have been interpreted by critics in a number of ways. Early reviewers were often confounded by the seemingly hodge-podge nature of the novel, and some regarded this as its major flaw.⁵ In a review panning the “absurd” book, the London *Athenaeum* wrote: “[r]avings and scraps of useful knowledge flung together salad-wise make a dish in which there may be much surprise, but in which there is little savor” (Parker 7). Taking a similar stance, the Boston *Post* called it “a crazy sort of affair, stuffed with conceits and oddities of all kinds, put in artificially, deliberately and affectedly,” and not even “worth the money asked for it, either as a literary work or as a mass of printed paper” (Parker 40). The far less critical but extremely perplexed Boston *Daily Evening Traveller* regarded the novel as “a sort of hermaphrodite craft—half fact and half fiction” (Parker 32).

We are faced with this same question: what to make of *Moby-Dick*'s compositional eclecticism? Clearly, it would be unwise to follow the lead of these early reviewers and write off the nonfiction element entirely. Nor should we necessarily look to the twentieth-century critics, who, although less inclined to brush aside the cetological

⁵ See Betsy Hilbert's brief overview of early reviews in “The Truth of the Thing: Nonfiction in *Moby-Dick*.”

material, still fall short of recognizing its historical significance. Instead, I will propose an alternative reading of the nonfiction material, albeit a modestly alternative one. And yet, in proposing the reading that follows, in this attempt to answer my first question—what to make of the novel’s puzzling heterogeneity—I will have raised a second question: how can we think about *Moby-Dick* generically, especially in relation to the realist novel? After all, a text that is “half fact and half fiction” certainly sounds like a sort of realism. *Moby-Dick*, however, resists such easy efforts at categorization, and cannot comfortably be called a realist novel as such. In addressing these questions, I believe we can determine just what makes *Moby-Dick* an Atlantic novel as well as uncover the text’s relationship to the Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation.

In order to do so, we must first attend to more contemporary critical receptions of the novel’s nonfiction element. Unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts, twentieth-century critics have been less inclined to dismiss *Moby-Dick*’s heterogeneous composition as “absurd” or “crazy.” Indeed, some have focused their efforts on determining the nature of the relationship between the central narrative and its frequent cetological interruptions. In her brief survey of critical approaches to the nonfiction material, Betsy Hilbert identifies the “Ballast Theory of Cetology in *Moby-Dick*,” developed by such critics as F.O. Matthiessen and Howard Vincent (825). This theory views the cetological material as “the lumpen part of a good novel” whose main function, according to Matthiessen, is to prevent “the drama from gliding off into a world to which we would feel no normal tie whatever” (quoted in Hilbert 825). In other words, the nonfiction element of *Moby-Dick* exists principally to prevent the fiction element from becoming too extravagant or removed from the understanding of the reader.

This theory, perhaps a bit too crudely utilitarian, has been rejected by other twentieth-century critics. J. A. Ward sees the nonfiction material in *Moby-Dick* as the culmination of a tendency that exists throughout the entire body of Melville's work, an attempt "to arrive at an understanding of spiritual reality through an understanding of physical reality" (167). In this sense, the "incredibly intense study of the whale" represented by the cetological chapters is "a search for total knowledge," an "effort to achieve all knowledge through a knowledge of the whale" (Ward 173). Hilbert herself adopts a similar argument, contending that the eclectic mix of fiction and nonfiction mirrors "the diversity of human experience and knowledge," while simultaneously questioning the "categories and conventions by which we apprehend both fiction and nonfiction" (829).

While useful in their own right, these theses, I believe, are also problematic. Both Ward and Hilbert view the nonfiction material as nonfiction *first* and cetology *second*. What I mean is that, according to their arguments, the nonfiction material in *Moby-Dick* could really be about *anything*—cetology, archeology, crypto-zoology—as long as it serves the "search for total knowledge" or mirrors "the diversity of human experience." Of course, the plot of the novel would have to be different: a story about Ishmael the birdwatcher with lengthy and whimsical digressions on ornithology, for example, could function in a comparable manner. Regardless of the novel's subject, the basic relationship between the nonfiction and the fiction would be the same.

It is true that *Moby-Dick* is concerned with many things, but, although this may seem obvious, it is primarily a novel about whaling. The abundance of nonfiction material related to the whaling industry, as well as its uncertain relationship to the central

narrative, remind us of this. The cetological material infuses the text with historical detail that should not be brushed aside but is both specific and significant. (It is no accident that Melville sub-titled his work, “*or, the Whale*” and not “*or, the Quest for Knowledge*.”) To simply read *Moby-Dick* as a work about some universal quest for knowledge, or as a meditation on evil or God, would be to ignore the most basic subject of the novel: whaling, or, more generally, maritime commodity production.

Moby-Dick anchors the main narrative in what Eric Sundquist, in his historicist reading of Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, calls “critical historical moments” (139). Unlike *Benito Cereno*, however, *Moby-Dick* devotes entire nonfiction chapters to its historical context, and keeps this material relatively distant from the plot itself. Consider chapter twenty-four, “The Advocate.” Melville has his narrator, Ishmael, diverge from the plot completely in order to “convince ye, ye landsmen, of the injustice done to us hunters of whales,” that injustice being the whale-hunter’s lack of recognition (118). Contained in his argument is a wealth of information related to the political economy of whaling. Ishmael attempts to overwhelm the skeptical “landsmen” with a veritable wave of facts and figures:

we whalemens of America now outnumber all the rest of the banded whalemens in the world; sail a navy of upwards of seven hundred vessels; manned by eighteen thousand men; yearly consuming 4,000,000 of dollars; the ships worth, at the time of sailing, \$20,000,000; and every year importing into our harbors a well reaped harvest of \$7,000,000 (119).

Although famous for fantastical claims about the whaling industry, Ishmael presents sound numbers. In his study of the history of whaling in the United States, Eric Jay Dolin

presents similar figures for “the industry’s most profitable year,” 1853, which was only two years after the publication of *Moby-Dick* (206). American whalers did number over seven-hundred (peaking in 1846 with 735), which, out of nine-hundred vessels around the world, means that they did in fact “outnumber all the rest of the banded whalemens.” Additionally, Ishmael’s report of \$7 million in profits squares with Dolin’s \$11 million for the most lucrative year, which we would obviously expect to be a bit higher. Because the details of the cetological material are so true to fact, Howard Vincent claims *Moby-Dick* as “the best popular introduction ever written on the subject of the American sperm-whale fishery” (124).

Ishmael’s historically relevant—and not to mention accurate—information effectively stamps the tale with specificity of time and place: the “Golden Age” of American whaling, which lasted roughly from the War of 1812 to the Civil War, and revolved around New England, particularly Nantucket. But Ishmael goes further. He links the main narrative of *Moby-Dick* not only to an era in the history of the whaling industry, but also to a specific epoch in world economic history.

Until the whale fishery rounded Cape Horn, no commerce but colonial, scarcely any intercourse but colonial, was carried on between Europe and the long line of the opulent Spanish provinces...it was the whaleman who first broke through the jealous policies of the Spanish crown, touching those colonies...[and] at last eventuated the liberation of Peru, Chili, and Bolivia from the yoke of Old Spain (120).

Ishmael argues that the whaling industry was very much bound up in what was certainly a “critical historical moment”: the shift away from colonial empire and mercantilist economic policy toward commercial empire and free trade policy.

This shift was nothing short of a watershed moment in the history of capitalist development. Paul Sweezy reminds us that, during the early nineteenth century, the “elaborate restrictions and regulations of the Mercantile system were felt to be so many fetters on the freedom of capital to expand and enter whatever line of activity it chose...the maintenance of the empire was costly and seemed to many to be unnecessary” (297). Sentiments such as these, typified by Adam Smith’s famous *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, fueled the breakdown of European colonialism in the Americas, and contributed to bourgeois revolts that began in British North America and quickly spread across the entire hemisphere.⁶ The “whalemen who first broke through the jealous policies of the Spanish crown,” then, were in effect contributing to the demise of formal colonialism in the Americas and the end of the mercantile system. This subsequently placed the whaling industry in the vanguard of capitalist expansion and consolidation in South America.

It is hard not to hear echoes of a certain contemporary of Melville’s in this appraisal of the whale fishery. In 1848, only three years before the publication of *Moby-Dick*, Marx wrote:

The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in

⁶ See Bailyn, as well as Anthony Pagden’s *Peoples and Empires* and Michel Beaud’s *A History of Capitalism* for more on this period.

commodities, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development (*Manifesto* 474).

Ishmael's assessment of this relationship between European imperial expansion, capitalist enterprise, and the doomed "tottering feudal society" is strikingly similar to the one presented by Marx. Or, *Melville's* assessment is strikingly similar to that of his day's leading theorist of political economy. In this sense, *Moby-Dick* is far from an escapist narrative directed away from Melville's historical context, but rather an active commentary on that era as he and others (such as Marx) understood it. The text is not only grounded in the era of the dismantling of mercantilism by capitalist development and Atlantic revolution, but also evokes contemporary understandings of that particular era.

This pattern continues as Ishmael discusses the whales themselves. Chapter thirty-two, "Cetology," famously catalogues and comments on the order *cetacea* in an effort to present "some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera" (145). In *The Trying-Out of Moby Dick*, Howard Vincent has shown that Melville drew heavily from the scientific material of his day for this chapter, even inserting his own sly references to specific cetologists and satirizing them accordingly.⁷ Yet the chapter is not entirely devoted to serious scientific discourse (or to such dubious statements as "be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me" – a notion as absurd in 1851 as it is today; 148). In addition to striking this naturalist pose, Ishmael never neglects to describe the whale *as a*

⁷ Renowned whaleman and cetologist William Scoresby ("chronicler of the despised Greenland Whale") was the target of much of Melville's satire (Melville considered himself champion of the sperm whale).

commodity, and as a potential source of exchange value. Whales are ranked in commercial value just as they are in size or “majesty,” with the sperm whale winning the title of “by far the most valuable in commerce” (149). Like the aforementioned chapter on the historical role of the whaling industry, this chapter works to link the fiction element to the body of contemporary scientific research (i.e. the whales of the “real” world), and also to remind us that whales are commodities, determined as such by the era’s dominant mode of production, and assigned exchange value within the scope of an Atlantic cycle of accumulation.

It seems, then, that the “Ballast Theory” critics may have been on to something by arguing that the cetological material works to keep the fiction element grounded in reality. But more than merely keeping the work grounded, the nonfiction element of *Moby-Dick* situates the text within a world of maritime production, within an industry that is but an extension of the vast economic apparatus that once straddled the Atlantic basin, consuming the labor, the capital, the human bodies, and the natural resources of the spaces over which it held sway.

This is the idea to which I refer in my critique of Ward and Hilbert. Their analyses of the nonfiction element effectively strip *Moby-Dick* of its historical and material context, reducing the novel to one in which the relationship between the nonfiction element and the fiction element is ahistorical and (falsely) universalized. We cannot understand *Moby-Dick* without considering the historical detail embodied (although not exclusively) in the cetological chapters. *Moby-Dick* is of value to our project precisely because of its “[r]avings and scraps of useful knowledge flung together salad-wise,” to again quote the London *Athenaeum*’s review. It is of value because the

etological material insists that we do not neglect to think about *Moby-Dick* as a text which represents an industry, an arm of maritime production in a specific historical moment.

If this is how we can best understand the nonfiction element of *Moby-Dick*, then we are faced with my second question, posed earlier: does this mean the novel is a work of realism? The answer is no, but complicated. Despite the historical and material specificity of the nonfiction element, it would nonetheless be inaccurate to call *Moby-Dick* a “realist” novel. Although Melville shows a true commitment to technical realism in his depiction of the whaling industry, he also incorporates elements of the epic, of Shakespearean drama, of the Bible, of romanticism, among countless other sources “flung together salad-wise.” Taken together, these diverse components undermine any effort to categorize *Moby-Dick* as a realist novel.

Other critics, however, might disagree with this assertion. We could think about *Moby-Dick* in terms of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, and thus excuse the text’s eclectic makeup as a “diversity of social speech” that is fundamental to the novel as a genre (32). According to Bakhtin, the “basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel” is heteroglossia, a “multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships.” This certainly seems to be an adequate description of *Moby-Dick* and, as Bakhtin would have it, does not automatically disqualify the novel as realism. And he is, in this regard, probably correct. I, however, am interested in a specifically *Lukácsian* model of realism that defines itself against the kind of non-realist forms that lend *Moby-Dick* its heteroglossiac nature. A Lukácsian model, upon which I will elaborate shortly, is most useful for our examination of the text in relation to the Atlantic cycle of

accumulation because it understands realism in a very particular way. And this very particular understanding of realism, I believe, cannot be applied without qualification to *Moby-Dick*. A sort of broadly defined realism, perhaps; an example of Lukácsian realism, certainly not.

So what is it? Franco Moretti offers this solution: to understand *Moby-Dick* as a “modern epic” among the likes of Goethe’s *Faust* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. These texts, he argues, are necessarily contradictory—and, to an extent, flawed—attempts at approaching epic conventions through a kind of modernist form. Because they are “work[s] of transition, technically revolutionary, [they] *cannot avoid being internally discontinuous*” and work “like the *bricoleur*: one piece at a time” (Moretti 120, emphasis in original). *Moby-Dick*, then, is an unwieldy text with encyclopedic tendencies because it enacts a (problematical) lunge at a Hegelian totality, the essence of the epic.

While Moretti’s thesis is intriguing and undoubtedly useful, I am less eager to abandon the (partial) claim that realism seems to have on *Moby-Dick*. Instead of inviting the creation of a new generic category such as “modern epic,” the nonfiction material pushes us toward the realm of realist convention; it demands that we acknowledge the very particular way in which it depicts the world of the novel and how this depiction functions in the text. And yet, realism cannot claim the entirety of the novel, only aspects of it. In order to work through this contradiction, I believe it is most productive to keep realism on the table, particularly the realism of Georg Lukács. Although *Moby-Dick* is not a true “realist” novel, it in many ways approaches the Lukácsian requirements for what constitutes great realism, as exemplified by the work of Balzac and Tolstoy. It may not be a realist novel as such, but we should think about *Moby-Dick* in relation to

Lukács's theories of realism, and not outside of them. The benefit of such an approach will be clear as we raise the question of how the novel relates itself to—or, perhaps, reproduces the logic of—the Atlantic cycle of accumulation.

For Lukács, “true, great realism...depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects...[it] means a three-dimensionality, an all-roundness, that endows with independent life characters and human relationships” (*Studies* 6). Unlike naturalism, which Lukács associates with Zola and of which he is highly critical, realism does not strive to reproduce a superficial “snapshot” of average life. Instead, realism portrays society in such a way that its inherent contradictions are put into “bolder relief”; the resulting picture is a totality, one in which we see a “society in motion, complete with all its determinates and antagonisms” (Lukács *Studies* 89). This means that the project of great realism is to reveal the social structures that influence and condition the makeup and destinies of the characters, not only to remain true to historical reality but also to express that reality in such a way that what is otherwise invisible becomes visible and apparent. As I have demonstrated, *Moby-Dick* fulfills the Lukácsian demand for historical accuracy. What Sir Walter Scott accomplished for medieval England, and what Balzac accomplished for post-revolutionary France, Melville accomplished for maritime production of the mid-nineteenth-century through the superimposition of “critical historical moments.” Like Scott, he demonstrates a sense of “historical faithfulness”: an “authentic reproduction of the real components of historical necessity” (Lukács *Historical* 59).

Furthermore, *Moby-Dick* makes bold strides toward what Lukács refers to as the “totality of objects,” a term he borrows from Hegel’s “first postulate of epic presentation” (*Studies* 151). According to Ian Baucom, this means that realism

constructs itself from human types but turns those types outward from an inner world of feeling to set before its protagonists’ minds and challenge its readers and itself to map the “totality of objects” which collectively compose the entirety of an historically particular social world (“Inimical” 171).

In this sense, the “totality of objects” must be much more than a mere backdrop or collection of props; it must help us to “map” or reveal the structural forces of the world that the novel wishes to inhabit.

We can see this development of a “totality of objects” most clearly in Melville’s treatment of the commodities produced by the whaling industry. As I have mentioned, *Moby-Dick* does not neglect to remind us that whales are themselves commodities, determined as such by the logic of capitalism, even if they are also subjects of scientific study (we see this in chapter thirty-two, Ishmael’s cetological catalogue). Going further, we find that the commodities produced through the hunting of whales are not isolated, fetishized objects, but are inextricably bound up in the barbarism of maritime production. For instance, an eager Ishmael initially establishes a link between the toil of “whale hunters” and the commodities they produce when he says, “almost all the tapers, lamps, and candles that burn round the globe, burn, as before so many shrines, to our glory!” (119).

This somewhat naively uncritical step toward the “totality of objects” becomes far more grim as the novel progresses. Later, Ishmael regards the body of a slain whale, and

laments, “for all his old age, and his one arm, and his blind eyes, he must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all” (391). Poignant though it may be, the death of this whale is meant to draw our attention to the suffering of the workers of the whale fishery themselves: exploited, brutalized, and occasionally killed so that the same “gay bridals” and “solemn churches” may be illuminated—so that the capitalist economic apparatus and the society it fosters can exist. This is the true nature of commodity production, and it is made unsettlingly plain when Ishmael recalls all the death and violence he has seen in the whale fishery. “For God’s sake, be economical with your lamps and candles!” he cries, “not a gallon you burn, but at least one drop of man’s blood was spilled for it” (224).

By describing these commodities in such a manner, Melville is making the invisible structures of production visible, which is precisely the project of Lukácsian realism. We see that the weddings and other “merry-makings of men” are literally visible (from the light of the candles) because of the invisible labor of the whalers. But Melville makes their labor visible by forcing us to see it in the commodities they produce, to see every “drop of [a] man’s blood” that was spilled for every gallon of whale oil.

Melville continues this pattern, creating a “totality of objects” that encompasses not just the commodities directly produced by the whaling industry (oil, candles, ambergris), but also the broader material world that is dependent on this industry. New Bedford is not a static background of “patrician-like houses; parks and gardens” but consists of “brave houses and flowery gardens [that] came from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans,” all “harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea” (37).

Similarly, Nantucket is not just the point of departure for the *Pequod* and her crew, but the seat of a vast maritime empire: “The Nantucketer, he alone resides and rests on the sea; he alone, in Bible language, goes down to it in ships; to and fro ploughing it as his own special plantation. *There* is his home; *there* lies his business” (70). These two locations, the only actual *terra firma* settings in the entire novel, are explicitly linked to the broader system of maritime production, and we are made aware that they are, at a fundamental level, the products of that same system. Furthermore, the image of the Nantucketer “ploughing [the sea] as his own special plantation” links maritime production with the slave economy that not only built but, by the 1850s, continued to exist throughout certain regions of the circum-Atlantic world, the United States notwithstanding. This is the sense of interconnectedness which Lukács argues to be crucial to the realist novel, the same interconnectedness we see in images of Stubb consuming a whale steak by the light of the whale-oil lamp, or, even more strikingly, in the try-works as it renders the whale oil on board the ship, heated by flames fueled by the very oil it is producing for the consumer market (468).

And yet, even though *Moby-Dick* appears to fulfill the basic Lukácsian criteria for “great realism,” even though it shares Scott’s “historical faithfulness” and Balzac’s ability to depict a “totality of objects,” it nonetheless complicates (or departs from entirely) other conventions of the realist novel. So I must retain my original response to our question, is *Moby-Dick* a realist novel? The answer is still no—but still complicated. What complicates the novel’s relationship to realism is what Lukács refers to as the “moving center,” a crucial element in Lukácsian realism.

According to Lukács, great realist novels must contain a moving center, a force that is “present, visibly or invisibly, in every phenomenon” (*Studies* 145). This, as Ian Baucom explains, means that the realist novel “orients its maps of totality by discerning a social center of gravity around which all of its linked objects and all its representative human types orbit, a defining force that disposes and directs the movement of the ‘totality of objects’ through a given social order’s gravitational field” (“Inimical” 171). Lukács’s elaboration on the moving centers at work in Balzac and Tolstoy is worth quoting at length:

Balzac shows how capital, which he—correctly at the time—saw incarnated in financial capital, takes over power in France. From Gobseck to Nucingen, Balzac creates a long procession of the immediate representatives of this demoniacal force. But does this exhaust the power of financial capital in Balzac’s world? Does Gobseck cease to rule when he leaves the stage? No, Balzac’s world is permanently saturated with Gobseck and his like. Whether the immediate theme is love or marriage, friendship or politics, passion or self-sacrifice, Gobseck is ever present as an invisible protagonist and his invisible presence visibly colours every movement, every action of all Balzac’s characters.

Tolstoy is the poet of the peasant revolt that lasted from 1861 to 1905. In his life-work the exploited peasant is this visible-invisible ever-present protagonist...[which is] visibly or invisibly present not only in every greater or lesser phenomenon of life—he is never absent from the consciousness of the characters themselves (*Studies* 145-146).

The respective moving centers of Balzac and Tolstoy, then, are contingent on the specific historical moments of which they write. Lukács identifies finance capital as the moving center for Balzac's post-revolutionary France, and an exploited peasantry for Tolstoy's nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia, just as Baucom suggests that brutal warfare against what he calls "inimical life" is the moving center for Goya's Spain during the Peninsular War, and perhaps even for the twenty-first-century United States pursuing its "War on Terror" ("Inimical" 173).

But what about Melville's nineteenth-century world of maritime production? If we are to unravel this complicated relationship between *Moby-Dick* and Lukácsian realism, we must identify the novel's moving center: "that immanent, violent, simultaneously creative and destructive force orienting and directing the swirling movement of the totality of objects circulating within a historically particular social field" (Baucom "Inimical" 173). Given Melville's depiction of a "totality of objects" and his anchoring of the text in the historical specificity of nineteenth-century maritime production, we can conclude that the moving center of *Moby-Dick* is in some way related to the logic of capitalist accumulation. But how? The visible-invisible finance-capital protagonist of Balzac's realism is represented by Gobseck and "a long procession of the immediate representatives of this demoniacal force," and the exploited/insurgent peasantry of Tolstoy's realism is, of course, represented by the peasants themselves. To what in *Moby-Dick* specifically can we assign the role of visible-invisible protagonist, if we know the moving center must be somehow related to the logic of capitalist accumulation? One answer might seem like the obvious choice: first-mate Starbuck is, after all, the most profit-minded of the characters, and believes that he is only "in this

critical ocean to kill whales for [his] living” (125). Yet, as I will argue, associating Starbuck with the moving center (at least, exclusively so) quickly becomes a problem, and the implications for our analysis of the moving center—if one can exist, *how* and *in what way* one can exist—are startling.

First, let us begin with a standard reading of *Moby-Dick*, which goes more-or-less as follows:

Only a few days after setting sail from the shores of Nantucket, the *Pequod* is struck by a brief, but significant, controversy. Contrary to what they had believed, the sailors learn that the principal aim of the voyage is not to hunt whales, but, rather, to hunt *a* whale: the “white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw” known to those who labor on the seas as “Moby Dick” (176). It is to the hunt of this particular beast—the same that “dismasted” Ahab, leaving him without a leg—that the entire voyage will be dedicated. Ahab announces the quest to his crew, saying, “And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and all over sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out” (177). The crew responds affirmatively, with a collective “Aye, aye! . . . a sharp lance for Moby Dick!” and the hunt is on.

There is a cautious opposition, however, from first-mate Starbuck. Thinking of bottom lines and New England investors, he asks Ahab “How many barrels [of oil] will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it?” (177). Starbuck is unwilling to deviate completely from the original purpose of the voyage: to hunt as many whales as possible, generate profit, and create returns for the shareholders. The *Pequod*, is, after all, a commercial whaler, not Ahab’s personal vessel to be commandeered in a fit of

vengeance. To focus the hunt upon a single whale for the sake of revenge is, to Starbuck, “madness” (178).

Yet Starbuck’s argument for the commercial enterprise is overruled, and he, eventually, concedes to Ahab’s wishes. Thus the *Pequod* sets out, driven ever forward by Ahab’s monomaniacal fixation on the white whale, his all-consuming hatred of it, and his insatiable desire to bring doom to Moby Dick. Although the voyage begins as an unremarkable, commercially-oriented one, it swiftly becomes the means for what Ishmael calls Ahab’s “audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge” (202).

Thinking in terms of Lukács and the (potential) moving center of *Moby-Dick*, such a reading presents a fatal contradiction. By definition, the moving center cannot be one man’s “audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge”—and yet this is precisely what seems to triumph over Starbuck’s profit motive and, in turn, shape the course of the novel. Is *Moby-Dick*, then, a novel that stands on the firm ground of realism, but has its head lost in the clouds of bourgeois romanticism? Can we compare the supernatural motivation of Ahab to Balzac’s finance capital or Tolstoy’s peasantry? I suspect not. Yet there is, I argue, an alternative reading of *Moby-Dick* available, one that we can make sense of through the concept of the moving center, and one that does not see Ahab’s ultimate motivation as some extraordinary or even supernatural force, but as the manifestation of a particular logic that should seem much more familiar.

Let us return to the quarter deck of the *Pequod*, where Starbuck makes his protestations against Ahab’s project of hunting Moby Dick. This is the first moment we hear the beast’s name, and when we are first informed of the real aim of the voyage. As noted above, Starbuck is the only one to raise any objection to the plan. Although he

claims he is “game” for such a hunt, and “for the jaws of Death too,” there is one stipulation: the hunt must not come “in the way of the business we follow” (177). To seek out Moby Dick for the sake of revenge at the expense of hunting other whales for profit is, to Starbuck, unthinkable. Vengeance, he reminds Ahab, does not yield barrels of whale oil, and “will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market” (177). The quest for the white whale is an unprofitable, and thus decidedly inappropriate, adventure, for the *Pequod* did not set sail to chase Moby Dick, but to make money.

Starbuck, then, is presented as the representative of a rational, responsible capitalism. He recognizes that the hunt for Moby Dick is bad business and opposes it accordingly. Although he fails to dissuade Ahab from undertaking this project, Starbuck continues to think in terms of profit and fiduciary responsibility throughout the voyage. Much later, with barrels of oil leaking in the hold and Ahab refusing to stop and mend them, the first mate asks his captain, “What will the owners say, sir?” (517). Unlike Ishmael, who becomes caught up in Ahab’s monomaniacal quest (or at least caught up in the act of witnessing it), Starbuck never forgets the *Pequod*’s initial purpose, and his mind never entirely leaves the commercial realm of the whale fishery.

For maintaining his rational capitalist logic, Starbuck is consistently rebuked and repudiated by Ahab. During the confrontation over the leaky barrels of oil, Ahab ridicules Starbuck’s sense of responsibility to the *Pequod*’s investors, and draws a stark line between the two of them:

Let the owners stand on Nantucket beach and outyell the Typhoons. What cares Ahab? Owners, owners? Thou art always prating to me, Starbuck, about those miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience. But look ye, the only real

owner of anything is its commander; and hark ye, my conscience is in this ship's keel.—On deck! (517)

Starbuck, “always prating” about the owners, has an allegiance to profit; Ahab's allegiance is to his “conscience” wedded to command of the ship. And it is Starbuck, of course, whose allegiance is ultimately defeated.

The novel works to set up this opposition between the two: Starbuck's rational capitalism against Ahab's ambiguous, “supernatural” motivation. We would logically conclude that Ahab's project, so disdainful of investors and profit, is a non-capitalist or even anti-capitalist one, especially when his concerns are compared to Starbuck's fixation on the profit motive. I suspect, however, that this is not the case.

First, let us consider the nature of Starbuck's motivation. The profit motive, for Starbuck, is not just about cold obedience to the bottom line. He shows a true concern for the *Pequod's* owners and the commercial responsibility that they have invested in the crew. And who are the *Pequod's* owners? Not a group of super-wealthy New England capitalists, but “a crowd of old annuitants; widows, fatherless children, and chancery wards” (81). It is for the benefit of the poor and dependent, then, that the *Pequod* hunts whales for profit. Starbuck would probably even agree with captain Bildad's assertion that to “too abundantly award the labors” of the sailors would mean “taking the bread from those widows and orphans” (86). In this sense, profit is a product of the cooperation between capital and labor, something rightly owed the owners and investors.

This representation of capitalism is a highly superficial one indeed. Starbuck's logic is suspiciously tidy, rational, and even moral, and although it recognizes the profit motive and adheres to its commercial logic, it ignores—or conceals—the inner driving

force of all capitalist production: the insatiable need to accumulate more capital. It also fails to locate profit in the exploitation of surplus value, which is a product of labor. (Even in the case of the aforementioned widows and orphans, we find this distortion. Owners in name, they control “about the value of a timber head, or a foot of plank, or a nail or two” each, and nothing more, while the vast bulk of shares belong to Captains Bildad, Peleg, and Ahab; 81.) Furthermore, Starbuck’s “rational capitalism” is totally divorced from the horrors of Atlantic production, and, specifically, the destruction of the *Pequod*. Consider it this way: we are led to believe that if Starbuck’s concern for the widows and orphans back in Nantucket had won out, if his “rational capitalist” logic had not been overruled by Ahab’s supposedly supernatural motivation, then the *Pequod* would have never set sail on its fatal hunt for Moby Dick, and everyone would have walked away a bit more wealthy and a good deal more alive. Instead, Ahab deviates from the profit motive, neglecting his responsibility toward capital, and the *Pequod* meets its doom, suggesting that Starbuck’s “rational capitalism” is actually *in opposition to* such a human catastrophe as that experienced by the *Pequod*’s crew.

If we choose to accept this Starbuck/capitalist versus Ahab/non-capitalist dichotomy, then we are left with an extremely limited, and even distortive, depiction of capitalist logic. This is hardly satisfactory given *Moby-Dick*’s complicated proximity to a Lukácsian realism that above all demands an accurate portrayal of capital’s ability to orient and direct a “totality of objects” within a given social field. Or, put more simply, we cannot assume that the novel merely “leaves out” the logic of capitalist accumulation in favor of the more superficial and innocuous logic displayed by Starbuck. For this reason I believe Starbuck is hardly the unconditional representative of “rational

capitalism” that he might seem at first. Rather, he is, in Ahab’s words, but “a pasteboard mask” (178). The outward portrayal is of profit motive and commerce, but the more diabolical stuff of capitalism—its relentless logic of accumulation, its barbarism—is conspicuously absent.

This contradiction is reproduced in Starbuck’s attitude toward the sea, that stage on which the tragedy of the *Pequod* plays out. Late in the voyage, and already fearful of what awaits them, Starbuck peers into the deep and murmurs, “Loveliness unfathomable... Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory” (535). His “pasteboard mask” version of capitalism is a work of faith and fancy, blind to the sharks that circle in the fathoms below. If we are to understand *Moby-Dick* as explicitly situated within a specific historical context (an Atlantic cycle of accumulation), then we must discard such a misleading representation of its dominant and defining mode of production. Indeed, we must take Ahab’s advice, and “strike through” the “pasteboard mask” to reveal what lies beneath it—although we may recoil at what we find.

If the identification of Starbuck with capitalism is but “a pasteboard mask,” then what of Ahab and his “supernatural” motivation? Is this, too, a “pasteboard mask” through which we must strike? Ahab himself poses the question of his motivation, immediately prior to the final chase of Moby Dick. He wonders what could possibly be driving him to “keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming [himself] on all the time; recklessly making [him] ready to do what in [his] own proper, natural heart, [he] durst not so much as dare” (592). He gropes for an answer, but is sure only that it is some “hidden lord and master,” a “cruel, remorseless emperor” that “commands” him. We can

deduce that Ahab lacks total agency in his quest to kill Moby Dick, for he feels himself “both chasing and being chased to his deadly end” (419). The white whale, he laments, is “all a magnet!” (482).⁸ Clearly, Ahab’s “master” is an insatiable desire for revenge, his “emperor” an unrelenting hatred for Moby Dick. “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate,” he cries at the start of the hunt, “and be the white whale agent, or the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (178). This all-consuming need to “wreak hate upon” Moby Dick—at the expense of all other objects—is what drives the captain of the *Pequod*.

It is a drive that springs from within him as a kind of internal logic, relentless and self-contained, and not the product of any outside influence.⁹ As noted earlier, Ahab believes “the only real owner of anything is its commander; and hark ye, my conscience is in this ship’s keel” (517). He rejects the authority of the owners in Nantucket and asserts his position as “the commander,” who is the “only real owner” of the *Pequod*. Ishmael calls his captain the “supreme lord and dictator” of the ship (133), a thought Ahab echoes in his confrontation with Starbuck: “There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the *Pequod*” (517). As Howard Vincent suggests, “Ahab acknowledges no law but his own; his search will be carried in self-assertion, not in self-submission” (75). This hunt is relentless, as Ahab duly recognizes, for he says, “heart, soul, and body, lungs and life, old Ahab is bound” to the destruction of his nemesis (552). Starbuck notices that, even while asleep, the eyes behind Ahab’s eyelids

⁸ When Starbuck says to Ahab, “See! Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!” he is probably right; that is, Moby Dick is not out hunting Ahab (619). Ahab’s desire to kill Moby Dick is, however, not entirely the product of his own will, and he cannot help but “madly” seek the white whale.

⁹ Even though Ahab is enslaved to his need to “wreak hate” on Moby Dick, this does not mean the whale is somehow actively influencing him through its own agency, and we can therefore say that no outside influence—like that of the whale, the owners, or the crew—compels him forward. It is an entirely *internal* drive.

remain fixed on the ship's compass: "sleeping in this gale," he remarks, and "still thou steadfastly eyeest thy purpose" (256).

Ishmael, witness to Ahab's monomaniacal quest, turns to the supernatural in order to explain what he sees. (He, as narrator, is also primarily responsible for setting up the problematic capitalist/non-capitalist opposition between Starbuck and Ahab.) According to Ishmael, Ahab is simply "crazy" and sees all that "most maddens and torments," "all the subtle demonisms of life and thought" in *Moby Dick* (200). The white whale is "all evil...visibly personified, and made practically assailable," and Ahab's hate for the beast is "the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down." Ishmael's understanding of Ahab, then, is as a sort of a depository for the collective rage of the human species. The captain is either a demon or a man demon-driven, and he is subsequently portrayed as such in the text.

Yet there is a fundamental contradiction in Ishmael's understanding of Ahab, just as there is a contradiction in Starbuck's "rational capitalism." By examining this contradiction, I believe we can "strike through the pasteboard mask" constructed by Ishmael's narrative and fully reveal the essence of Ahab's quest for Moby Dick, bringing us one step closer to understanding the novel's moving center. Considering the situation of the *Pequod* early in the voyage, Ishmael laments:

Ahab had purposely sailed upon the present voyage with the one only and all-engrossing object of hunting the White Whale. Had any of his old acquaintances on shore but half dreamed of what was lurking in him then, how soon would their aghast and righteous souls have wrenched the ship from such a fiendish man! They were bent on profitable cruises, the profit to be counted down in dollars

from the mint. He was intent on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge (202).

Herein is the contradiction. Ishmael does not seem able to consider the fact that, regardless of Ahab's hidden intention, the *Pequod* did indeed set sail with "one only and all-engrossing object": to create profit for the owners and investors. He must, on some level, be aware that this is the "all-engrossing" purpose of the voyage, that "profit to be counted down in dollars from the mint" is the total and final aim, just as it is for all whaling vessels. It is an idea to which he refers again and again in the nonfiction material, for he constantly reminds us that whaling is a form of maritime production, a form of *capitalist* production singularly driven by the need for profit. (Recall my earlier discussion of chapter twenty-four, "The Advocate.") Nevertheless, he still sees Ahab's "immitigable" and single-minded project as something alien and "supernatural."

What Ishmael is seeing without understanding, and what the text is presenting to us in the most veiled and yet most glaring manner, I argue, is this: Ahab's monomaniacal quest for Moby Dick can be understood as a figure for capital's relentless pursuit of profit. It is true that Ahab may not be directly motivated by a desire for profit, as Starbuck claims to be. But his vengeful chase after the white whale mimics the key driving force behind the Atlantic cycle of accumulation, that which is the same for all capitalist production: the incessant need to generate profit and accumulate capital, infinitely.

As Marx defines it, the nature of capitalism is such that it requires the "circulation of money as capital...[as] an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement" (*Capital* 333). This logic of capital is a logic

of unceasing movement, of growth for the sake of growth and profit for the sake of profit. It is a “restless never-ending process of profit-making,” a “boundless greed after riches,” a “passionate chase after exchange-value” (Marx *Capital* 334). A monomaniacal “chase” indeed, one that knows no other object and heeds not the humanity that is left to suffer in its wake—a “chase” that should sound familiar to readers of *Moby-Dick*. Just as Ahab’s lust for vengeance “commands” him like a “cruel, remorseless emperor,” capital (and the capitalist, who is an embodiment of capital) is enslaved to a “boundless greed after riches.” Furthermore, the logic of capital, like Ahab’s need to destroy Moby Dick, is entirely internal, and not the product of any outside influence. Considered in such a light, Ahab’s pursuit of the white whale is no longer some mad or supernatural adventure, but a reflection of the capitalist logic that drives the maritime industry of which the *Pequod* is a part. This is not to say that Ahab is driven by the same force as capital—the need to accumulate more capital—but that he is driven in much the same fashion, and with many of the same consequences.

It is not surprising, then, that the doubloon functions as the principal symbol of Ahab’s quest for Moby Dick. Ahab announces the hunt by holding the coin aloft and promising it to anyone who first sights the white whale. He stands on the quarter deck, “slowly rubbing the gold piece against the skirts of his jacket” and “lowly humming to himself, producing a sound so strangely muffled and inarticulate that it seemed the mechanical humming of the wheels of his vitality in him” (176). Ahab’s “wheels of vitality” propel him forward on his quest, and their “mechanical humming” evokes the scene of the factory, or, perhaps, the great economic apparatus of Atlantic production which hums like a machine as it circulates capital, goods, and bodies. This effect is

produced as Ahab contemplates the doubloon, which is (or at least can be) a material representation of money-capital. In this case, the doubloon *is* a form of money-capital, as Ahab employs it with the aim of creating a new value, one determined by his own inner logic: the destruction of Moby Dick.¹⁰

The text works to link Ahab and the doubloon in ways that are highly significant. Ahab's "riveted glance" is "fastened" to the "riveted gold coin," and he wears on his face "the same aspect of nailed firmness" (470). Ahab even sees himself in the "three peaks as proud as Lucifer" etched on its surface: the "firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab, the courageous, undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab" (471). He believes the coin "mirrors back his own mysterious soul," but we must ask: does the doubloon mirror Ahab, or does Ahab mirror the doubloon? Here we find a dizzying circle of meaning, for the doubloon is like a mirror in which Ahab sees only himself, and yet it is also a literal symbol of money-capital; *capital* being what is figuratively reflected in Ahab's quest for Moby Dick, which is inaugurated by his posting of the doubloon. In other words, Ahab sees himself in a symbol of something of which he is also a symbol—that a *coin* is what reflects his "own mysterious soul" is strikingly appropriate.

Equally appropriate is the ultimate fate of the doubloon. Near the end of the voyage, Ahab announces, "I will have the first sight of the whale myself...Ahab must have the doubloon!" (584). His relentless desire for the whale is momentarily conflated with a similar need for the coin—for profit—and, in a very circular fashion, what is figurative suddenly becomes literal. When Ahab does finally gain the coin for himself, he

¹⁰ I should reiterate that Ahab does not literally function *as* a capitalist, but *like* a capitalist. His inner logic is not identical to the logic of capital, and he therefore does not lust after the same thing. Instead of exchange value, he seeks the "value" created by (or embodied in) the act of destroying Moby Dick.

cries, “Fate reserved the doubloon for me. *I* only; none of ye could have raised the White Whale first” [italics in original] (595). In linking the doubloon to the whale, and, in turn, the whale to the doubloon, the figurative nature of Ahab’s quest is confronted by its literal meaning. Ahab and the coin are exclusively bound to each other, for Ahab declares that “fate reserved” it for him, and that he is the “only” one, of the entire crew, who could have taken it. He is not only the one who does but the one who *must* expropriate the coin, the symbol of profit. Significantly, it is the union of Ahab and coin that leads us into the final catastrophe, the destruction of the *Pequod* and the death of all its crew, except Ishmael. In a sense, this scene is a performance of capitalist accumulation and its horrific human consequences; in it, we see the meaning of our figurative association become reality, if only for an instant.

When Starbuck encounters the doubloon, however, it takes on an entirely different function. He sees in the surface of the coin not Ahab’s “three peaks” but this contradictory image: a dark valley beneath a luminous sun. He remarks

So in this vale of Death, God girds us round; and over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope. If we bend down our eyes, the dark vale shows her mouldy soil; but if we lift them, the bright sun meets our glance half way, to cheer (472).

What to make of his ambiguous interpretation? Recall that the “pasteboard mask” version of capitalism associated with Starbuck is itself contradictory: it lays claim to the commercial realm, the profit motive, but does not locate the horrors of Atlantic production (with which Ahab is firmly linked) in the tyrannical reign of capital. The doubloon thus reflects the contradiction between Starbuck’s and Ahab’s respective

versions of capitalism: one is full of “righteousness” and “hope,” while the other is the stuff of “mouldy soil” in “this vale of Death.” One is falsely (and ideologically) rooted in a sense of responsibility and even morality, and one spawned by the demonic machinations of capital in historical fact. One, the mask, the other, the grotesque face hidden beneath.

But Starbuck’s “rational capitalism” is superficial: it is only a “pasteboard mask,” or the calm surface of the ocean below which “teeth-tiered sharks” lurk menacingly. Therefore, even though the surface of the doubloon might reflect a “sun of Righteousness” existing in concurrence with “the dark vale,” Starbuck is forced to recognize that this harmony is only temporary—or illusory. He cries, “Yet, oh, the great sun is no fixture; and if, at midnight, we would fain snatch some sweet solace from him, we gaze for him in vain!” (472). Here, Starbuck confronts what is below (or behind) the surface layer—of mask, sea, and coin. After all, the doubloon “speaks wisely, mildly, truly, but sadly”; it compels Starbuck to peer behind the pasteboard mask and recognize that the darkness—of midnight, of the depths of the ocean, and, considering our project, of production—ultimately holds sway over all.

Here, I argue, is where we can locate the moving center—or a variation on the Lukácsian moving center—in *Moby-Dick*. If Ahab’s quest for the white whale represents the logic of capitalist accumulation, a logic of brutality and horror, then *Moby-Dick*, like a realist novel, not only reveals certain aspects of a historically particular social field (the circum-Atlantic world), but *embodies in its central antagonism the fundamental logic of the system it represents*. Yet the text contains a crucial contradiction: although Starbuck should be the literal representative of capital (as Gobseck and his like are for Balzac), his

is a superficial and misleading logic, one that cannot adequately account for the most barbaric and essential features of capitalist accumulation. Instead, we must look to Ahab and his ruthless and relentless chase after Moby Dick, that particular antagonism that visibly and invisibly affects every character and every situation in the novel. Because the visible-invisible protagonism of the chase does not depict the logic of capitalist accumulation *literally*, we cannot consider it the moving center proper. Yet, because it represents that logic figuratively, I propose that we can understand it as a *displaced moving center*.

Or, going further, I propose that the essence of the moving center is displaced to Ahab's "supernatural" quest, while the outer trappings of what it *should* have been, Starbuck's "pasteboard mask" logic, still remain literally associated with the world of commerce. Taken together, then, we find that Ahab and Starbuck are not set in discrete opposition to one another (the Starbuck/capitalist versus Ahab/non-capitalist dichotomy), but are bound up in a dialectical relationship that represents the contradictions of Atlantic capitalism. Both are therefore necessary for a full understanding of how *Moby-Dick* embodies and reproduces the logic of capitalist accumulation, the basic driving force of the Atlantic cycle.

But the question remains: why? If *Moby-Dick* so nearly approaches all the requirements of Lukácsian realism, why does the text employ this figurative association to depict what could have been expressed more literally? Why this displacement of the moving center? I can offer two explanations (or, perhaps, a two-part explanation). The first: because *Moby-Dick*, no matter how close to realism it may be, nonetheless complicates and even subverts the project of Lukácsian realism. Melville has no explicit

allegiance to an accurate portrayal of the world as it is, to the task of the realists or even the naturalists. Although he may portray a “totality of objects” in such a way that reveals their interconnectedness as well as the historical and social forces at work behind and through them, this alone cannot make him a realist. Melville draws upon realism—perhaps even establishes it as the foundation for this novel—but he also draws heavily upon romanticism, the classical epic, Shakespearean drama, Miltonic verse, the fantastical, the fabulous. Comprised of all of these and countless other influences, *Moby-Dick* cannot be called a realist novel, and we therefore cannot expect it to function exactly like a realist novel. Yet, after what we have determined thus far, I am hesitant to call it *not* a realist novel. Instead, *Moby-Dick* represents a sort of realism in crisis, or, perhaps, a realism *of* crisis.

What I mean by this is that the displacement of the moving center is not merely the result of compositional eclecticism. In a psychoanalytic sense, we can read this displacement as the product of crisis, of extreme personal trauma, the sort of harrowing experience that dominates the plot of *Moby-Dick*. Specifically, I refer to Ishmael’s own experience as witness to Ahab’s quest and sole survivor of its cataclysmic conclusion. Generally, however, I refer to the force that *should* be the visible-invisible protagonist of the novel, but is not: the logic of capitalist accumulation. By displacing the moving center from a historically accurate force (capital) to a seemingly “supernatural” figure (Ahab’s quest for the white whale), the text itself reflects a psychological reaction to the horrors of capitalist production, a mental wound inflicted by a barbarism that “wreaks hate” upon the psyche and thus engenders this very sort of displacement. The reality is too harrowing, too traumatizing, and if we think about it in terms of Ishmael’s near-death

experience on the *Pequod* or the broader system of Atlantic production, the result is the same: the moving center must become displaced.

As “realism of crisis,” then, *Moby-Dick* depicts the “totality of objects circulating within a historically particular social field” as well as any true realist novel. But it takes the project one step further, for it does not merely contain a moving center, “that immanent, violent, simultaneously creative and destructive force orienting and directing the swirling movement of the totality of objects,” but actually reflects through its very form an encounter with its own moving center. This encounter—a moment of crisis to be sure—in turn displaces the moving center to where it becomes manifested figuratively. In this sense, “realism of crisis” cannot be recognized as true realism. Unlike Lukácsian realism, the text is not a depiction of crisis, but a *product of crisis* – the crisis of humanity experiencing and encountering the logic of capitalist accumulation, the crisis, perhaps, of modernity itself.

Or, a second explanation, one that is not mutually exclusive to my first: that the displaced moving center and “realism of crisis” are products of a very specific contradiction within Melville’s own attitude toward whaling. We should keep in mind that, according to Lukács, a great realist novel need not be written by a revolutionary, and that an author does not have to set out with the aim of radically critiquing a given social field in order to produce a text that accomplishes this very task (*Studies* 10-11). (For instance, even though Balzac was politically quite reactionary, he could still produce works of great realism that depict the contradictions and social structures of a historical moment; Zola, however, failed to do so, despite being a political radical.) So, the

question of whether or not Melville would have *wanted* to critique the whaling industry or the logic of capital in general is more-or-less irrelevant here.

Regardless of his authorial intent, Melville does carry out this critique through the text, and (on the one hand) *Moby-Dick* adopts a project of Lukácsian realism by directing a critical gaze toward the whaling industry as a form of exploitative—and not to mention dangerous—production. The nonfiction material (and much of the main narrative) function as would a great realist novel, according to Lukács: they portray a social field in such a way that its inherent contradictions are put into “bolder relief,” thus creating a totality, one in which we see a “society in motion, complete with all its determinates and antagonisms” (*Studies* 89). It is, essentially, a grim picture.

On the other hand, there is the material that works *against* this project, those myriad influences that I have suggested undermine the elements of realism in the novel. They do not represent Melville’s attempt to reveal or expose the brutal reality of the whaling industry, but are rather an effort to *glorify* whaling, which is basically the same endeavor outlined by Ishmael in chapter twenty-four, “The Advocate” (118). By reinterpreting whaling through the conventions of the epic, by creating a Miltonic Satan-figure in Ahab, by weaving Shakespearean soliloquies and Biblical allegory and romantic tropes into his narrative, Melville’s text works to create associations between high literary traditions and the whaling industry. And what is most striking is that he does so by creating a text that is not just “compositionally eclectic” as I described it earlier, but fundamentally *accumulative*. That is to say, *Moby-Dick* is not really a hasty assemblage of odds-and-ends “flung together salad-wise” but a textual accumulation of various literary traditions, from the epic onwards. This tendency is especially clear in the first few

pages of the novel: “Etymology” is a spare gathering of different etymological sources for the word “whale,” and “Extracts” is a bizarre assortment of “random allusions to whales” collected by a “Sub-Sub-Librarian” (xxv). While Melville may well be satirizing a sort of claim to universal knowledge of a particular subject, he also undoubtedly sets the tone for the novel’s entire literary strategy, one that seeks to glorify whaling by representing it through the accumulation of high literary traditions.

This project of literary accumulation might seem to contradict Melville’s alternative project resembling Lukácsian realism. But I believe that the fundamental conflict in *Moby-Dick* is not between these two contrasting project—to critique and to glorify—but rather between two trends of accumulation. The logic of capitalist accumulation, which is the visible-invisible protagonist of the novel’s social field displaced to a figurative representation in Ahab’s quest for the whale, is locked in conflict with the novel’s trend of literary accumulation, which represents Melville’s attempt to glorify the whaling industry and, in doing so, redeem it from the brutal logic of capital. The two distinct elements of the novel, not so much “fiction” and “nonfiction” as “realist” and “nonrealist,” can be oriented in relation to one of these two trends.

To return to our original question: what to make of *Moby-Dick*’s compositional eclecticism? It is the product of a contradiction in how Melville portrays the whaling industry. The Lukácsian “realist” element seeks to reveal the logic of capitalist accumulation, while the “nonrealist” element enacts a project of literary accumulation in order to redeem whaling from what the “realist” element is striving to reveal. Thus, the fundamental contradiction of *Moby-Dick*: between redemption and revelation, between the redeeming possibilities of literary accumulation and the traumatic revelation of the

logic of capitalist accumulation, between the “visible world formed in love” and the “invisible spheres formed in fright.”

Part II

Mason & Dixon, Benjamin, and the Philosophy of History

“...what if I can’t just lightly let her drop?
What if I won’t just leave her to the
Weather, and Forgetfulness? What if I want
to spend, even squander, my precious time
trying to make it up to her? Somehow? Do
you think anyone can simply let that all go?”

“Thou must,” Dixon does not say.
Instead, tilting his wine-glass at Mason as if
‘twere a leaden Ale-Can, he beams
sympathetically. “Then tha must break thy
Silence, and tell me somewhat of her.”

Thomas Pynchon, *Mason &
Dixon*

Brian McHale argues that *Mason & Dixon* should be understood as an example of historiographic metafiction. Borrowing the term from Linda Hutcheon, he claims that the novel represents a kind of “fiction that, by flouting historical verisimilitude in various ways, including deliberate anachronism, invites critical scrutiny of the epistemological bases of historical reconstruction” (McHale 47). There is no doubt that *Mason & Dixon* “invites critical scrutiny” of how we think about history and how we create narratives of the past. After all, what historical novel recounting the lives of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon would have the surveyors converse with a “Learnèd English [talking] dog,” or cross paths with a violently lovelorn mechanical duck, not to mention any other of the numerous fantastical and supernatural creatures that populate this text? And McHale is not alone in his analysis. David Foreman agrees that the “barrage of anachronisms...corrupts the facts and disrupts the whole retelling of history, infecting it with the uncertainty of fiction” (162), while Jeff Baker asserts that the narrative “tears the

fabric” of its “pseudohistoricity with cartoon-like interruptions and hippie-ish anachronisms” (177).

These critics are undoubtedly correct in arguing that novel subverts and destabilizes historical verisimilitude—even, perhaps, that it contests any claim to historical “truth.” But is that all? As historiographic metafiction (in the sense McHale is using it), is *Mason & Dixon* nothing more than a reaction to conventional forms of historical narrative? Can it do nothing but “flaunt,” “corrupt,” “disrupt,” “infect,” and “tear the fabric” of historicity? Does it offer an alternative—or is this “corruption” or “disruption” itself the alternative?

Instead of simply attacking or subverting the historical narrative, *Mason & Dixon*, I will argue, is proposing a different sort of historical narrative altogether, or, really, a different understanding of time: not homogenous and empty, not a single sequence of events, but something that accumulates. In this sense, *Mason & Dixon*’s philosophy of history bears a striking resemblance to the work of Walter Benjamin, particularly his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and fragments from *The Arcades Project*. In proposing an understanding of time that accumulates, *Mason & Dixon* also shares the (Benjaminian) project of “interestedness” that Baucom identifies with Atlantic “melancholy realism.” And, like a Benjaminian philosophy of history, and like melancholy realism, *Mason & Dixon* is unabashedly partisan: it sides with the oppressed, the victims of empire, and the “wounds bodily and ghostly, great and small, [that] go aching on, not ev’ry one commemorated,— nor, too often, even recounted” (6). The project of this novel, if not to “commemorate” or “even recount” each of these wounds, is to offer an alternative philosophy of history which seeks to do just that.

How?

To begin with, the novel clearly aims to disrupt a notion of linear, orderly time through its narrative structure. At first glance, *Mason & Dixon* is a classic example of the frame narrative, following in the tradition of *The Canterbury Tales* or *Frankenstein*. Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke is our narrator, relating the story of Mason and Dixon to his family one “Christmastide of 1786” (6). And although “Pynchon has...taken great pains in constructing his narrative frames,” as Bernard Duyfhuizen has it, “upon close analysis his frames seem to be designed to deconstruct themselves,” causing the reader to “lose his or her sense of where the frame’s edge separates one narrative from another” (134). Cherrycoke’s narrative is constantly interrupted and questioned, either by other members of the family or when it collides with other narrative frames. Chapter fifty-three, for example, begins (inexplicably) with a captivity narrative seemingly unrelated to the story of Mason and Dixon. This shifts to a first-person narrative, told from the perspective of the captive herself, which is then interrupted by Pynchon’s third-person impersonal narrator, telling us that Tenebrae has been reading this captivity narrative in the other room. We then learn that the narrative is an installment of *The Ghastly Fop*, a gothic serial we know from Cherrycoke’s narrative as being popular with Mason and others the surveyors encounter. Tenebrae and Ethelmer continue reading the captivity narrative, and without warning its central characters, Eliza and Captain Zhang, suddenly “arrive at the West Line, and decide to follow the Visto east, and ere long they have come up with the Party” — with Mason and Dixon’s surveying party, that is (534). Duyfhuizen points out that “*The Ghastly Fop* episode dialogically merges with the story of Mason and Dixon, and before another page goes by Cherrycoke has regained full control of the narration”

(139). Although probably the most dramatic example of this sort of narrative disruption, moments such as this occur throughout the entire novel. By consciously subverting the integrity of the narrative frame, Pynchon is supporting his theme of orderly lines and linearity versus chaos and nonlinearity, an opposition that, of course, affects how we think about the novel as a *historical* narrative as well.

More specifically, both Mason and Cherrycoke muse over the idea of temporal accumulation, and with it, what kind of history would account for a past that does not merely “pass.” These passages reject the notion of history as a single, linear chain of events for a kind of chaotic, accumulative (and, at this point, still ambiguous) process. After their near-fatal encounter with the French warship *l’Grand*, Mason and Dixon speculate over the event, believing that it “seems not to belong in either of their lives” (44). Mason wonders if there was a “mistake in the Plan of the Day” that caused a “piece of someone else’s History, a fragment spall’d off of some Great Moment” to fly into their paths. Shortly thereafter, having received a “Letter of Reproach and Threat” from the Royal Society (45), Mason interprets the letter’s warning as a kind of reverse-accumulation: “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, till at last ‘reduc’d,’ to the events that do happen to us, as we pass among ‘em” (first ellipsis in original).

History, in both these passages, does not resemble a linear chronology but something more complex, more irregular. Indeed, this kind of accumulative layering appears as a trope throughout the novel. Upon seeing the mysterious mound formations described by Captain Shelby, Dixon marvels at their construction and compares “how

these Layers are set in” to “all that Fancy Layering” inside Ben Franklin’s “Leyden Battery” (599). Although Mason is skeptical, Shelby contends that there is “lengthy Knowledge of such things,— according to which, alternating Layers of different Substances are ever a Sign of the intention to Accumulate Force,— not necessarily Electrical, neither.” The mounds, supposedly belonging to an “ancient” time (595), are layered forms that suggest accumulation, or are themselves accumulative in nature. They are not unlike the various other layered forms discussed earlier by travelers snowed-in at the same tavern as the surveyors. Swords produced by the “Armorers of the Japanese Islands,” Chef Allègre’s “Croissant Dough,” “Gold-beating,” “Lamination,” “the printed Book,” and “an unbound Heap of Broad sides” all involve the accumulation of various layers (389) – not to mention Franklin’s battery itself, or the layered physiology of Felipe/El Peligroso, the trained “Torpedo” (electric eel) “who nightly discharges into his Performance all the Day’s dire Accumulation” (432). Daniel Punday associates this trope with a tension between verticality and horizontality in Pynchon’s work (268); I, however, suggest that this layering, and especially its ability to “multiply the apparent forces” (390) or its “intention to Accumulate Force” (595), is related to an idea of time that is itself accumulative, to seeing history not as a single chain of events but something more akin to “Layers of different Substances” accumulating.

While the novel only imprecisely approaches this idea in Mason’s speculations and in the layering trope, it receives a clearer articulation through Cherrycoke. Early in his narrative, the Reverend suggests that “History is the Dance of our Hunt for Christ...the Event [Christ’s resurrection] is taken into History, and History is redeemed from the service of Darkness,— with all the secular Consequences, flowing from that one

Event, design'd and will'd to occur" (76). Although this thesis clashes with his later (more secular) sentiments, it importantly introduces the image of an "Event" out of which the rest of history will "flow," as if some force were propelling it. Ethelmer, however, is not content to leave this image untarnished by "Darkness," and he reminds us that flowing from this same "Event" are also "ev'ry Crusade, Inquisition, Sectarian War, the millions of lives, the seas of blood" (76) – a violent past ever accumulating in the aftermath.

It is not until we encounter an excerpt from one of Cherrycoke's sermons, positioned as the epigraph to chapter thirty-five, that we find the most precise articulation of the novel's philosophy of history. Undoubtedly one of the text's most crucial passages, it reads:

Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers,— Tops and Hoops, forever a-spin....
Alas, the Historian may indulge no such idle Rotating. History is not Chronology, for that is left to lawyers,— nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other,— her Practitioners, to survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit,— that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever,— not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,— rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common (349).

What is remarkable about this passage is that it is nearly a point-for-point reinterpretation of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." When Cherrycoke says that

“History is not Chronology” nor “a Chain of single Links,” he echoes Benjamin’s opposition to history as a “progression through homogenous, empty time,” a “Universal history” that only “musters a mass of data to fill that homogeneous, empty time” (“Theses” 261-262). Indeed, Cherrycoke’s alternative philosophy—that history is not “a Chain of single Links...[but] rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common”—strongly suggests Benjamin’s “Angel of History”: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he [the Angel] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (“Theses” 257).

Both Cherrycoke and Benjamin share this image of history: a “common Destination”/ “Event”/ “single catastrophe” that engenders a “disorderly Tangle of lines”/ a “piling [of] wreckage upon wreckage”/ a “pile of debris [growing] skyward.” According to this image, time does not pass in any kind of orderly, linear fashion, but rather accumulates, disrupting our conventional notions of “past” and “present” as distinct and static categories. And Cherrycoke, like Benjamin, suggests that the historian, faced with this knowledge of history, must carry out an essential task: to ensure “that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever.” For Benjamin, this task is to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” or else “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (“Theses” 255). Both emphasize a commitment the present must make to the past, whether in the shape of “life-lines” cast out from our “now” to “our forebears” or “flashes” from the past that we must “seize hold of.” Everything is subject to this commitment; Benjamin

argues that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (“Theses” 254), just as Cherrycoke envisions the “disorderly Tangle of Lines” as comprised of all lines “long and short, weak and strong.” And both identify the same risk, should the historian fail in this task: for the past to be lost, irretrievably, and the present diminished for it.

In addition, Cherrycoke (as well as the novel generally) and Benjamin share a common politics, or, as I put it earlier, a common partisanship. Partisan to whom? In the world of the novel, it is a commitment to the subjugated and marginalized, “the Black servants, the Indian poor, the Irish runaways, the Chinese sailors, the overflow’d from the mad Hospital, all unchosen Philadelphia” (759). All the victims of empire, and of capital: to Benjamin they are “the oppressed” (“Theses” 257), for Pynchon a “Mobility that is to be.” And history, far from being an impartial account existing within “empty, homogenous time,” is a site of their struggle. So, to undertake the project of a Benjaminian philosophy of history is to enter that struggle on the side of “all unchosen Philadelphia” – or, to put it another way, to inhabit a significantly and necessarily Marxian paradigm of emancipation.¹¹

But again: how?

We must take a closer look at the text of the novel, as well as at Benjamin’s philosophy of history. As Baucom has it, Benjamin’s “Theses” “outline the perception” of an accumulative philosophy of history, while the *Arcades Project* “demonstrates the method” (*Specters* 123). I have argued that the perception of the “Theses” is echoed in these passages and tropes in *Mason & Dixon*, especially in the above passage from

¹¹ This is not to say that Pynchon is a Marxist – the question is irrelevant here.

Cherrycoke. What of the method, then? How does Benjamin show us this philosophy of history in action, and, perhaps more importantly, how does it appear in *Mason & Dixon*?

The Benjaminian “method” Baucom describes is only sketched out in the “Theses”: to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” It is in the *Arcades Project* that we find an expanded—and more complex—description of this cryptic “flash” and how we must “seize hold” of it. First, consider the Angel of History from the “Theses” and the “wreckage upon wreckage...the pile of debris” accumulating at his feet. Benjamin’s method is to comb through this wreckage, this catastrophic detritus, and then to construct from the “rags, the refuse” of history a “literary montage,” of which the *Arcades Project* is an example (*Arcades* 460). The montage, in turn, is constructed of “images” which are dialectical and historical in the sense that they destroy the notion of a static past and present. Benjamin explains that

it is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, the image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural <*bildlich*>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images (*Arcades* 463).

In “seizing hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger,” then, we are “constellating” the “what-has-been” with the “now,” and in doing so creating a dialectical image that is “genuinely historical.” From these images, we construct the montage, or “assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut

components,” each of which contains within in “the crystal of the total event” (Benjamin *Arcades* 461).

An example is in order. One of Baucom’s main projects in *Specters of the Atlantic* is to identify the *Zong* massacre as precisely such a Benjaminian image. It does not merely shed light on the present or past, but is a “catastrophically exemplary event...in which a total event becomes retrospectively and proleptically visible” (Baucom *Specters* 167). That total event is “the arrival...of the contemporary,” by which he means

a long twentieth century underwritten by the development of an Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation: a cycle of capital dominated at either end of its 250-year history by the stock, credit, insurance, and other money forms of finance capital; headquartered in the spaces-of-flow of an archipelago of circum-Atlantic port cities.

The *Zong* “event”—or more specifically, the murder of one hundred thirty-two slaves thrown overboard, the ensuing insurance trial, and the petition of abolitionists to charge the captain with murder—draws together two historical moments dominated by the logic of finance capital: the moment in which the event occurred (what-has-been) and our own nonsynchronously contemporary moment of speculative finance capital (now).

I’ll return to this example, because it is important to my argument and not chosen arbitrarily. For now, we must determine how—or if—*Mason & Dixon* proposes or reproduces a Benjaminian philosophy of history, beyond simply approaching or echoing it in the discourses of the characters. In order to do so, we must look for these images, these constellations of the what-has-been and the now; we must look for traces of time that does not pass, but accumulates.

And there is an obvious path for us to follow in this investigation. After all, *Mason & Dixon*, if it is anything, is a thoroughly haunted novel—although how this haunting occurs is complex. Punday argues that “ghostly presences” in Pynchon’s earlier work—*V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and especially *Gravity’s Rainbow*—help develop themes of “alternatives to official accounts of history and what we take to be the everyday world” (251). In this sense, the ghosts of *Mason & Dixon* function similarly, and help to advance what McHale identifies as the novel’s historiographic-metafictional task.

But there is more. Aside from subverting historical verisimilitude, *Mason & Dixon*’s ghosts also force us to think critically about the history of empire, colonization, and, perhaps not surprisingly, historical time. Earlier I cited the novel’s commitment to “wounds bodily and ghostly, great and small, [that] go aching on, not ev’ry one commemorated,— nor, too often, even recounted” (6). What “ghostly wounds” are these? They represent more than a single “wrong unrighted” as “Men of Reason will define a Ghost” (68). Rather, *Mason & Dixon* is a novel haunted by a “Collective Ghost”: “the Wrongs committed Daily against the Slaves, petty and grave ones alike, going unrecorded, charm’d invisible to history, invisible yet possessing Mass, and Velocity, able not only to rattle Chains but to break them as well” (68). These ghosts are historical and systematic; they are not the product of some personal injustice but of a world-system that is fundamentally unjust.

Punday, citing this same passage, says that “we are invited to expect a story whose real hauntings involve the ‘Collective Ghost’ ... [and yet] such collective wrongs do not... directly provide the novel’s ghosts” (271). He argues that Rebekah is a model of

a new turn in Pynchon's work with respect to ghostliness, and that she, like the ghosts of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, are "not emblems of the past, but things always imagined out of the present and projected into the future as part of an ethical task" (Punday 259).

Punday is on to something here, but I find his conclusion problematic for two reasons. One, his focus is limited to Rebekah and the Ghastly Fop, and although they do (perhaps) seem to conform to his argument that the ghosts of *Mason & Dixon* are not directly bound up with the systemic/historical "Collective Ghost," they are far from the only ghosts in the novel. And two, his claim that the novel's ghosts are "always imagined out of the present and projected into the future" and not "emblems of the past" fails to do justice to the *historical* task that I believe *Mason & Dixon* sets out to do.

Putting Rebekah aside for the moment, let us consider the other ghosts of the novel. Most are unambiguously presented as the victims of empire, whether in Europe, Africa, or the Americas; no doubt elements of the "Collective Ghost." The aforementioned passage comes from Mason and Dixon's time in Cape Town, which Mason regards as "one of the colonies of Hell, with the Dutch Company acting as but a sort of Caretaker for another...Embodying of Power" (71, ellipsis in original). This other "Embodying of Power" can be understood as European imperialism, or, really, the tyranny of capital logic executed by imperial powers. This "Power" in turn engenders "the great Worm of Slavery" that is "coiled behind all" Mason and Dixon encounter in Cape Town (147). As Dixon realizes upon his return to Cape Town, there are "ghosts ev'rywhere" haunting "these shores exactly to the Atom" (155). Slavery haunts this place, as it haunts them, a record not only of past wrongs but "Wrongs committed Daily

against the Slaves”—a “Collective Ghost” that embodies both the what-has-been and the now.

The surveyors go to St. Helena, and there, it is the same. Maskelyne, although “*a dangerously insane person*” (128), recognizes that the island is haunted: “this place! this great Ruin,— haunted...an Obstinate Spectre,— an ancient Crime,— none here will ever escape it” (132 ellipsis in original). The “Crime” of colonization and slavery, perhaps not precisely what Maskelyne intends in his ravings, creates an aura of ghostliness about the island, an atmosphere in which actual ghosts (Rebekah and, perhaps, Dieter as well) materialize.

America is also haunted by the “Collective Ghost,” these victims of empire. Before even arriving, Mason and Dixon recognize the imperial project at work in British North America: “’tis said these people keep slaves, as did our late Hosts [the Cape Dutch] ,— that they are likewise inclin’d to kill the People already living where they wish to settle” (248). And, as in Cape Town, as in St. Helena, they experience the ghostliness of this colonized space directly. In Lancaster Town, “the place where was perpetrated last Winter the Horrid and inhuman murder of 26 Indians, Men, Women and Children, leaving none alive to tell” (341), Mason and Dixon separately visit the site of the massacre. Viewing the “soil’d and strewn Courtyard where it happen’d,” Mason encounters the “metaphysickal Remnants of Evil,” which leaves him feeling “like a Nun before a Shrine” (346). Dixon is similarly overwhelmed, but he is struck by the physical reminders: he “sees where blows with Rifle-Butts miss’d their Marks, and chipp’d the Walls,” and “blood in Corners never cleans’d” (347). This site is a space of time

accumulating, manifested physically on the walls, interpreted metaphysically by Mason, a space haunted by an event singularly horrific and systemically/historically typical.

It is not the only massacre site the surveyors witness. Crossing the Conococheague River, they encounter a “burn’d and bloodied little huddle of Cabins” and choose not to linger there, “among these Ghosts” (499). Later, they enter the “strewn and charr’d Theater of the late War [the French and Indian War], where Indians are still being shot by white men, and whites scalp’d by Indians” (614). Three men in the surveying party, “veterans of Braddock’s Defeat, depress the Spirits of the Company with Tales of that Tragedy, of how the Bears came out of the Trees to feed upon the Corpses of English solders, ‘A Defile of Ghosts growing, with the Years, more desperate and savage, to Settlers and Indians alike’ ” (614). Ghostliness, here, is not a simple matter of the past coming back to haunt the present, it is a condition in which the what-has-been comes together with the now to form a haunting constellation. The ghosts of the English soldiers are not objects of the past, but subjects in the present, “growing, with the Years, more desperate and savage” in a way that parallels the continuing violent aftermath of the French and Indian War.

Further examples are numerous. In Ireland, another colonized space, Mason has an additional ghostly experience: traveling with people who “might be a Herd of Ghosts, felt but invisible, bearing him into Country Unknown” to help repair a peat bog during a storm (724). Although not literally ghosts, his Irish companions are associated with the ghostly, and with all the connections the novel works to establish between haunting, colonization, and accumulative time.

But what to make of Rebekah, surely the most prominent ghost in the novel? Punday argues that she is unlike the “Collective Ghost,” which can only be understood from the “vertical” perspective of history. Rather, she represents a “horizontal ghostliness based on expectation rather than closure, individual rather than culturally symptomatic” (Punday 265). Here, Punday is drawing on Brian McHale’s argument that *Mason & Dixon* signals a turn from the “vertical” perspective of Pynchon’s earlier work, especially *Gravity’s Rainbow*, to a more “horizontal” perspective (consider the rocket’s parabola in *Gravity’s Rainbow* versus the mapping of the line in *Mason & Dixon*). Rebekah, then, is important not in that she represents some claim the past has on the present, or a debt to the past that needs settling, but because she enacts a “far smaller, far more personal haunting” (Punday 271). She does not come “with demands for Mason; she is, instead, a figure of waiting and expectation to which he is connected and for which he is ultimately responsible.” The end result, according to Punday, is a vague notion of “responsible involvement” which “offers a fundamentally different image of the work of mourning and our responsibility to the dead” (273). Rebekah, then, does not fit with the ghosts of slaves rattling their chains, Indians massacred in huddled courtyards, or soldiers eaten by bears, because she is associated only with Mason’s personal responsibility toward her, and not with some broader, systemic/historical, “Collective” injustice.

Or is she? There is one striking detail that draws Rebekah back into the sphere of the “Collective Ghost,” something that links her to the “ghostly wounds” of the past. Throughout the novel, Dixon typically comments on the many injustices the surveyors find across the circum-Atlantic world while Mason stays silent – with one exception. Mason recalls that “in ‘fifty-six the Justices of the Peace, upon easily imagin’d

arrangements with the Clothiers, reduced by half the Wages set by law” (501), thus provoking a weaver’s strike that was brutally repressed by British troops. With “a submerriment Dixon recognizes,” Mason describes the uprising, and “the Murmur,— ever, unceasingly, the great, crisp, serene Roar,— of a Mobility focus’d upon a just purpose” (502). Yet immediately before describing the scene, “he pauses as if reaching a small decision,” and says, “Rebekah’s people were weavers.” In fact, “that wondrous night, in the High Street, they were all there, brothers, and cousins and uncles. . . . I [Mason] was there.”

Mason’s connection to the uprising is personal, for the “Mobility” that took to the streets was comprised not of strangers, but (partially) of “Rebekah’s people”—as well as Mason himself, who witnessed the uprising although he did not directly participate. And this uprising, which Mason on some level associates with Rebekah, is but one event in the larger history of early English capitalism, the injustices of which haunt Mason throughout the novel. He describes how upon his “home soil, the Ground for growing any such Wonders [as Dixon may have seen in the North] has been cruelly poison’d, with the coming of the hydraulick Looms and the appearance of new sorts of wealthy individual, the late-come rulers upon whom as a younger person [he] spied, silent, whilst holding savage feelings within” (313). This is a rare moment for Mason, who usually refrains from such overtly critical—and even rebellious—comments. Like a Romantic poet, he feels as though he has been “expell’d from Paradise” by the consolidation of early capitalist production in England.

The weavers’ uprising, then, is a moment of resistance that Mason can celebrate, while he is at the same time forced to mourn its violent suppression. Thus, when he

pauses before describing the uprising to Dixon, “as if reaching a small decision,” he seems to be accepting some kind of connection between the seemingly disparate ghosts that haunt him: the trauma of early capitalism and Rebekah. This is not to say that Rebekah’s ghost is a symbol for the injustice committed against the weavers, but that hers is not the completely individual, “far more personal” haunting Punday suggests. As Mason sees her, she is to an extent bound up in the claims of the “Collective Ghost,” and thus Mason’s melancholy is, perhaps, not the entirely personal affliction it seems.

The ghostliness of *Mason & Dixon* is only one way the novel represents a time that does not simply pass, but accumulates. We also see this project at work in the text’s decidedly Benjaminian treatment of commodities. As Baucom notes, Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, generally speaking, exemplifies a philosophy of history that regards time as accumulative, not empty and homogenous. Specifically, Benjamin sets out “to recover the time accumulated within the commodities accumulated for display in the Parisian temples of commodity culture: the World Exhibitions, Haussman’s consumer-friendly boulevards, the arcades” (Baucom *Specters* 24). This project, Baucom explains, must above all recognize that

time accumulates in things, even, or particularly, those commodified things whose commodification entails not only the assignation of an exchange value but the willed repudiation of the time stored within them, the denial of their capacity to function as Proustian aide-mémoire, Marxian record keepers of the time it took to make them, the value of the labor time, the collective past-life it encodes (*Specters* 24).

Mason & Dixon, in addition to its use of hauntings, also works to show us that “time accumulates in things” and actively repudiates the “willed repudiation of the time stored within” commodities.

For instance, while in America Mason and Dixon enter a tavern to find its occupants crazy for, among other things, sugar. It is “to be found at every hand in lucent brown cones great and little, Ic’d Cupcakes by the platter-ful, all manner of punches and flips, pies of the locality, crullers, muffins, and custards”; a seemingly pleasant smorgasbord indeed (329). We are quickly reminded, however, that there is “no table that does not hold some sweet memento, for those it matters to, of the cane thickets, the chains, the cruel Sugar-Islands.” The time accumulating within these various sugar-commodities—the time it took to make them, the conditions under which they were produced, and the barbarism of that production—is revealed, and the picture is grim. As a “Quaker gentleman of Philadelphia” reminds the room, the sugar-commodity is a “sweetness of immorality and corruption...bought as it is with the lives of African slaves, untallied black lives broken upon the greedy engines of the Barbadoes.” The injustices of the slave system and the moments of despair and cruelty experienced by the people held in its clutches accumulate and crystallize in these commodities; each cone of sugar represents “untallied black lives” consumed by the engine of Atlantic production.

We see this same effort to reveal the time accumulated within commodities in a later scene involving Mr. LeSpark and Cherrycoke. LeSpark, who “made his Fortune years before the War, selling weapons to French and British, Settlers and Indians alike” (31), recalls being drawn to and inspired by an iron forge he would regularly visit. Even though “few distinguish between the Metal itself, and the Forms it happens to end up in”

(weapons, knives, and other instruments of violence), LeSpark treats the “blinding purity” of the forge and the molten metal as something to celebrate, if not worship (412). But Cherrycoke later criticizes LeSpark in his own journal, writing: “What is not visible in his rendering...is the Negro Slavery, that goes on making such no doubt exquisite moments possible.” Like the sugar-commodities, the production in the forge, and in turn the various iron-commodities produced there, are all “Marxian record keepers” of the time accumulated within them. Cherrycoke cannot contemplate this production without also seeing “the unpric’d Coercion necessary to yearly Profits beyond the projectings even of proud Satan.” Just as, in Benjamin’s phrase, there is “no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (“Theses” 256), there is no sugary pastry or iron tool which is not stamped with the injustice of its production, “these undeclared secular terms in the Equations of Proprietary Happiness” (412).

These examples—the hauntings, the commodities—show us how *Mason & Dixon* works to advance a Benjaminian philosophy of history. And yet they are decidedly limited in their scope. When Mason encounters a haunted massacre site, or when we are presented with pies that carry traces of the slave labor required to produce them, we are, I have been arguing, seeing a time that accumulates. But the “now” and the “what-has-been” that come into constellation with each other in these examples are specifically the “now” of the narrative moment—the late eighteenth century—and the various “what-has-beens” that precede it. As we know, there is nothing secure about the “now” of the narrative moment: recall the “barrage of anachronisms...[that] corrupts the facts and disrupts the whole retelling of history,” the perplexing frequency with which Pynchon subverts the historical verisimilitude of his narrative. Although these dislocations might

suggest that the Benjaminian “flashes” I believe to be crucial to *Mason & Dixon*’s historical project are hopelessly corrupted, I argue that, on the contrary, the deliberate anachronisms work to expand the scope of the novel, to allow us to constellate the “what-has-been” not only with the “now” of the narrative moment, but also with our own.

First, we should examine a few of these anachronisms. Mason meets a young girl in New York who, discussing her preference for dressing entirely in black, says, “Oh, aye, at home they’re on at me about it without Mercy...I’m, as, ‘But I *like* Black,’—yet my Uncle, he’s, as, ‘Strangers will take you for I don’t know what’” (400). As McHale puts it, “substitute ‘like’ for Amy’s ‘as’ (“I’m, like, ‘But I *like* Black”) and you have a 1990s adolescent, thinly disguised as an eighteenth-century milkmaid” (47). Dixon encounters a rabbi whose salute takes the form of “Fingers spread two and two, and the Thumb held away from them likewise,” signifying “Live long and prosper”—no doubt a reference to *Star Trek*’s Dr. Spock (485). He later meets a “somehow nautical-looking Individ. with gigantick Fore-Arms, and one Eye ever a-Squint from the Smoke of his Pipe” who “helpfully translates” the Hebrew *Eyeh asher Eyeh* as “I am that which I am”—none other than the cartoon character Popeye the sailor-man (486).

Figures from American history receive a similarly anachronistic treatment. Ben Franklin sports “tinted lenses of Spectacles of his own Invention, for moderating the Glare of the Sun” (266), offers a parody of one of his famous maxims (“Strangers, heed my wise advice,— Never pay the Retail Price”) (267), and appears to have groupies (271) as well as a “gnomelike” assistant named Ingvarr who cries, “Master! Master!” (764); George Washington smokes marijuana with the surveyors, condescendingly summons his “African servant” with, “Gershom! Where be you at, my man!” (278), and encourages his

servant to tell “King-Joaks” like a stand-up comedian (284); and Thomas Jefferson, hearing Dixon toast “To the pursuit of Happiness,” asks if he can “use the Phrase sometime” (395). Additionally, Cherrycoke meets a man who seems to be using a thermos (356), the surveyors find themselves in the infamous “Delaware Triangle” (323), Zhang describes “*Sha*, or, as they say in Spanish California, Bad Energy” (542), and Ethelmer, explaining the new “Revolutionary” music, relates it to “the Clamor of the Mills, the *Rock* of the Oceans, the *Roll* of the Drums in the Night [my emphasis],” which the Twins label “Surf Music!” (264).

While these examples involve the insertion of twentieth-century references into the plot or dialogue, we also find Pynchon playing with the eighteenth-century narrative style he adopts in a conspicuously self-reflexive way. For instance, a defensive Mason uses the phrase “Inexpensive Salvo” (a “cheap shot”) (302), and later, annoyed with his family’s insistence that he re-marry, thinks he hears, “from the direction of St. Kenelm’s church-yard, a certain *subterranean Rotation*” (Rebekah “turning in her grave”) (200). Pynchon even recycles an old joke involving name sequence, which draws our attention to the novel *as* a novel itself as well as our contemporary familiarity with the term “Mason-Dixon”: Professor Voam, meeting the pair for the first time, exclaims, “Of course! The Astronomers! Dixon and Mason!” to which Mason responds, “Actually...That’s—” (426).

As McHale argues, these anachronisms certainly “invite critical scrutiny of the epistemological bases of historical reconstruction,” and in doing so, contribute to the novel’s status as historiographic metafiction. But they also reorient the temporal scope of the text beyond the narrative moment of the late eighteenth century, and reconnect it with

a different moment, that of the late twentieth century. In other words, Pynchon's use of deliberate anachronism does not just subvert historical verisimilitude but forcefully, even jarringly, reminds us that this is a novel produced in the 1990s pretending to be a novel produced in the 1790s. While he scrupulously reproduces eighteenth-century narrative conventions, Pynchon simultaneously imposes what is clearly his twentieth-century perspective. The result is a novel in which there are two levels of "now" constellated with an array of "what-has-been." We have the first level, the "now" of the narrative moment which constellates itself with "what-has-been" in the ways I have described. And we have the second level, the "now" of the late twentieth century, the moment in which Pynchon is writing, which constellates itself with a "what-has-been" that includes the late eighteenth century, the first level of "now."¹²

It is at this second level of "now" that *Mason & Dixon*'s Benjaminian philosophy of history is most apparent and most powerful – and most relevant to our project. There is a definite significance to the periods Pynchon is effectively constellating, the late eighteenth and late twentieth centuries. Recall Baucom's argument, drawing on Arrighi's exploration of cycles of capital accumulation. Both the late eighteenth and late twentieth centuries are moments in which finance capital represents the dominant form of capital accumulation, "crucial periods in which finance capital exerts its dominance over an ever-expanding capital world system" (Baucom *Specters* 27). In other words, the dominant form of accumulation is tied not to commodity production, but to capital that

¹² For the purposes of my argument, I have organized the novel into these two levels of "now." Things are a bit more complicated, however, and it is worth pointing out that the first level of "now" is actually comprised of two levels itself. The "now" of the narrative moment, which I broadly understand as the late eighteenth century, is really split into the post-Independence 1780s in which Cherrycoke is narrating the story, and the pre-Independence 1760s in which Mason and Dixon travel the circum-Atlantic world with Cherrycoke as an occasional companion. My designation of the two "nows" is meant to correspond with the beginning and ending stages of Baucom's Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation.

“seems to turn its back entirely on the thingly world, sets itself free from the material constraints of production and distribution, and revels in its pure capacity to breed money from money—as if by a sublime trick of the imagination” (Baucom *Specters* 27).

During these moments of rampant speculation, Arrighi argues, the cycle of accumulation tends to shift from one theater to another: from a Genoese to a Dutch to a British to an American cycle (thus far). For Baucom, however, these last two cycles—British and American—can better be understood as a single Atlantic cycle, or a long twentieth century. He argues there is

no such thing as a fully discrete or isolated ‘present’ or ‘past,’ just as there is no discrete late twentieth century or early twenty-first to speak of, only a nonsynchronous contemporaneity in which an older deep-structural form inscribes, reasserts, and finds itself realized: an ordinally long twentieth century boundaried at either end by one of Arrighi’s transitional periods of pure money capital (Baucom *Specters* 30).

The “bookends” of the Atlantic cycle, then, are the same as the two levels of “now” present in *Mason & Dixon*; the two moments of M-M’ that usher in and mark the decline of the Atlantic cycle are the very same moments that are put into constellation with one another by the novel. I will not argue that *Mason & Dixon* can be understood in the same way that Baucom understands the *Zong* massacre, as a “truth-event” which reveals (especially through its insurance protocols) the epistemological foundation of our contemporary moment of global finance capital. But I believe that *Mason & Dixon*, by drawing these particular moments into constellation with one another, does, like the *Zong*, demand a Benjaminian philosophy of history, a notion of time that does not pass,

but accumulates. And, in particular, it advances this philosophy of history as a mode of understanding the Atlantic cycle of accumulation, as a period in the history of capitalism that draws together our late twentieth century and the late eighteenth, in which the latter is accumulated and intensified within the former. As Benjamin would have it, *Mason & Dixon* is, like the *Zong* massacre for Baucom, full of images in which “truth is charged to the bursting point with time,” where “what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (*Arcades* 463).

This project is at work throughout the entirety of the novel. But there are specific moments when, I believe, we can most clearly see *Mason & Dixon*'s Benjaminian philosophy of history as the text constructs these temporal constellations.

In Cape Town, Mason and Dixon lodge with Cornelius Vroom, a slave-owning Cape Dutch settler who is the veritable embodiment of colonialist paranoia. He, along with the rest of the Cape Dutch, does not trust Dixon, after noting the surveyor's “unconceal'd attraction to the Malays and the Black slaves,— their Food, their Appearance, their Music, and so, it must be obvious, their desires to be deliver'd out of oppression” (61). Mason and Dixon have encountered this kind of paranoia before: upon their arrival, they are met by “Police Official Bonk” who insinuates that their astronomical mission, to observe the transit of Venus, is but “a pretext” to observe something “more Worldly,— Our Fortifications, Our Slaves” (59). It is hard not to read this Cape Town as a kind of police-state, mired in suspicion over subversive elements who threaten to disrupt or oppose the slave system; that is, it is hard not to read this Cape Town through our contemporary knowledge of apartheid South Africa. This is not to say that the 1761 Cape Town Mason and Dixon visit is merely a symbol for twentieth-

century apartheid; the oppression they witness there is no less real and no less significant than later forms. In reading this scene, however, we are forced to draw the parallel and recognize that the Cape Town of 1761 is not the object of some isolated past, but exists in constellation with a later “now.”

This effect is more pronounced in another passage. Cornelius, “Deep in the curfew hours, in bed with his pipe,” contemplates the state of the Dutch colony. He is kept awake by what he imagines to be the laughter of slaves, watching, waiting.

Somewhat as his Neighbors each strenuous Sunday profess belief in the Great Struggle at the End of the World, so does Cornelius, inside his perimeter of Mauritian smoke at the hour when nothing is lawfully a-stir but the Rattle-Watch and the wind, find in his anxious meditations no Release from the coming Armageddon of the races,— this European settlement so precarious, facing an unknown Interior with the sea at their backs, forced, step after step, by the steadfast Gravity of all Africa, down into it at last. . . . It is another way of living where the Sea is ever higher than one’s Head, and kept out only provisionally (63).

Cornelius is like a microcosm of the entire colony, “inside his perimeter” of smoke, awaiting the day when the entire project is pushed into the sea. This passage is cryptic and ominous, much as such thoughts would have appeared to Cornelius in 1761. But we, from our later perspective, understand its significance. The “European settlement” and indeed all formal European colonialism did in fact find itself locked in battle with the “steadfast Gravity of all Africa”— multiple forces of resistance that culminated in the national liberation struggles of the twentieth century, the ANC in South Africa being,

perhaps, one of the most well-known. And these struggles were successful in pushing formal colonialism “down into [the sea] at last” (even if only to be subject to continued neocolonial exploitation). In 1761, would Cornelius have thought of the settlement, indeed European colonialism in Africa generally, as “living where the Sea is ever higher than one’s Head, and kept out only provisionally”? Perhaps. We, encountering this text from our own postcolonial moment, would certainly read the settlement this way, knowing that what Cornelius envisions as “the coming Armageddon of the races” and what we recall as successful anticolonial liberation struggles made the situation only “provisional.”

Our reading of this passage, then, creates a disruption of “past” and “present” as discrete categories. Cornelius’s thoughts, specific as they are to his historical moment, are also highly significant to our own, and in this way, these images of “what-has-been” are constellated with our “now.” Yet because this example involves a retrospective perspective (the “now” is our contemporary understanding of the past, and not necessarily how we inhabit our present), this example may not be entirely adequate.

Mason & Dixon most clearly asserts its philosophy of history in its depictions of the workings of global capitalism. On St. Helena, the soldiers have set up a kind of gambling ring, with

various Suicide-Banks and Madness-Pools, into which one may put as little as a six-pence...and thus convert this Wind into Cash, as others might convert it to a Rotary Impulse upon a Mill-Stone. Fortunes certainly the equal of many a Nabob’s are amass’d, risk’d, and lost within a Night. ‘We are the Doings of Global Trade in miniature!’ cries the Post Surgeon, who tries never to stir too far

from the deepest rooms of the Fort, where the Wind may oppress him least, and is careful to include it in each daily Prayer, as if 'twere a Deity it itself, infinitely in Need, ever demanding.... (159).

The soldiers are essentially performing capital speculation, or, as the Post Surgeon puts it, “the Doings of Global Trade in miniature.” Instead of using the “Wind”—or, the chaotic forces of the market—to turn a “Mill-Stone” and engage in commodity production, they “convert this Wind into Cash” directly, generating immense sums “equal of many a Nabob’s,” breeding money from money, M-M’, “—as if by a sublime trick of the imagination.” It is fair depiction of the late eighteenth century, a moment dominated by finance capital, just as it is a fair depiction of the late twentieth century, a moment of dominant finance capital that inherits and intensifies the previous shift to M-M’, the late eighteenth century accumulating within it. From our perspective, we can see that the Post Surgeon, daily praying to the wind “as if 'twere a Deity in itself, infinitely in Need,” echoes the twentieth century doctrine of neoliberalism, an ideology that regards the market as nothing less than a deity, insatiable in its demands. He mimics the behavior of most of neoliberalism’s ruling-class adherents: he keeps as far away from the violence of unchecked market forces as possible, in “the deepest rooms of the Fort, where the Wind may oppress him least.” We can also read the soldiers as traders on the floor of the Stock Exchange, where fortunes are “amass’d, risk’d, and lost” within a single trading session.

Later, on the eve of their voyage to America, Dixon points out that “ev’ry Observation site propos’d by the Royal Society prov’d to be a Factory, or Consulate, or other Agency of some royally Charter’d Company” (252). Mason then concludes that “Charter’d Companies may indeed be the form the World has increasingly begun to

take.” From their 1763 perspective, this appears to be the case: Dixon correctly states that every place they are sent to is somehow connected to a chartered company, and Mason adds that “both Pennsylvania and Maryland are Charter’d Companies as well, if it comes to that.” From our perspective, however, we *know* that this is the case, that “Charter’d Companies”—or, for the sake of this argument, the form they have assumed under twentieth-century capitalism, the modern business corporation—have become the dominant actors of late capitalism. Thus these images, of soldiers on St. Helena performing the accumulation of finance capital and of a world becoming dominated by corporations, are precisely the kind of dialectical, Benjaminian “flash” images in which we see a time that accumulates. They do not simply show two historical moments that are “like” each other, but two moments that are inextricably bound up in each other; they depict one M-M’ phase of capital accumulation that does not only precedes but accumulates and intensifies within another. We are able to read these passages and roll our eyes (or perhaps sigh despondently) because we can recognize these moments as nonsynchronously contemporaneous—not in any arbitrary sense, but in the way they are linked via the particular phase of capital accumulation that determines them.

But there is more to this project than simply demonstrating the links between two moments of dominant finance capital, or, really, portraying them in such a way that they “come together in a flash to form a constellation.” As I noted earlier, a Benjaminian philosophy of history is decidedly partisan—or, to be more specific, anti-capitalist. *Mason & Dixon* adopts this project in a variety of ways, but particularly in how it depicts global capitalism and the condition of those who labor under the rule of capital. The above examples lay out the novel’s understanding of finance capital, but do not engage in

any pointed critique of capitalist accumulation. This is not the case, however, with other passages. Keeping in mind what we have established thus far in terms of the novel's philosophy of history, we are faced with some important questions: how does the exploitative nature of capitalism change over time, if time is something that accumulates? And what is the relationship between different forms of labor under different stages of historical capitalism?

Or, what does it mean to be a slave?

The specter of slavery haunts the entire novel. At the end of their journey, Dixon asks Mason "what's the Element common to all" their destinations—"the Cape, St. Helena, America" (692). He provides the answer himself:

Slaves. Ev'ry day at the Cape, we lived with Slavery in our faces,— more of it at St. Helena,— and now here we are again, in another Colony, this time having drawn them a Line between their Slave-Keepers, and their Wage-Payers, as if doom'd to re-encounter thro' the World this public secret, this shameful Core.... Pretending it to be ever somewhere else...down there, down where it smells like warm Brine and Gunpowder fumes, they're murdering and dispossessing thousands untallied, the innocent of the World, passing daily into the Hands of Slave-owners and Torturers, but oh, never in Holland, nor in England, that Garden of Fools... Where does it end? No matter where in it we go, shall we find all the World Tyrants and Slaves? (693).

Where does it end, indeed. Or perhaps a better question is, *when* does it end? What does it mean for the novel to discuss slavery, if the narrative moment in which Dixon speaks is not part of some isolated past, but a "what-has-been" in constellation with our "now"?

Dixon sets up this division: on one side of the Line, there are “Slave-Keepers” and on the other, “Wage-Payers.” He implies that there is a difference (and of course, there is), but he also creates a parallel between the two. Importantly, he does not say “slaves” and “waged workers,” but instead focuses on the bosses, making a distinction only between those who own their workers as chattel and those who pay a wage for the labor-power of their workers. Importantly, the workers themselves—regardless of their condition of servitude—are referred to as “Slaves.” Does Dixon just mean chattel slaves, workers who are enslaved in the legal sense? Perhaps. It is more likely, however, that he is using “slavery” to refer both to chattel and wage slavery, to multiple forms of economic exploitation. His language, after all, is extremely broad: all the “World [is] Tyrants and Slaves.” And it is precisely this kind of hierarchical pattern of class domination and coerced labor that they are “doom’d to re-encounter thro’ the World” as a “public secret, this shameful Core.” In one sense, then, the “shameful Core” is the slave system that provided the foundation for an Atlantic cycle of accumulation and European colonization of the Americas. But it is also more than that; it is a fundamental injustice that we are “doom’d to re-encounter” over space and through time, in the narrative moment of the text and in our own nonsynchronously contemporary moment: the “shameful Core” is the very heart of our long twentieth century.

As we have seen in other passages, Dixon’s comments take on a new significance when we read them from our later perspective, *knowing* that we are supposed to be aware of this later perspective. But to argue that the novel’s understanding of slavery includes all coerced labor, waged and chattel – is this too forceful a reading? The narrator (presumably Cherrycoke) removes all doubt: “Commerce without Slavery is unthinkable,

whilst Slavery must ever include, as an essential Term, the Gallows,— Slavery without the Gallows being as hollow and Waste a Proceeding, as a Crusade without the Cross” (108). Commerce, to slavery, to the gallows: there is an essential unity between commerce and slavery, and to somehow wrench them apart is “unthinkable.” What is common to both is death: the threat of the gallows for chattel slaves who choose to resist their enslavement, and the threat of starvation for waged workers who do not or cannot work (or again the gallows for those who resist their exploitation). What this passage implies is that to imagine the late twentieth century—surely dominated by commerce and mired in death—as free of slavery is also “unthinkable.” Pynchon is not thinking of chattel slavery in the 1990s, of course, but of wage slavery as the new form assumed by our “World of Tyrants and Slaves.”

We find the relationship between wage labor and slavery discussed elsewhere in the novel. In New York, Mason meets an underground cell of the Sons of Liberty, who immediately begin to question Mason’s “free” status. Because he owns no property, Mason asserts that the British parliament is not “his” parliament—to which one of the Sons responds, “Then you’re a Serf. As they call it here, a Slave...Someone owns you, Sir. He pays for your Meals and Lodging. He lends you out to others. What is that call’d, where you come from?” (406). When Mason protests, the Sons push him, explaining that he should know “Degrees of Slavery,” being from Stroud and familiar with the plight of British weavers. Although weavers are paid, as Mason argues, the Captain reminds him of “how Weavers are paid,— tho’ Wofle preferr’d to settle the Pay-list with lead and steel...thinking he’d use weavers for target practice” (407). The Captain explains that “when Weavers try to remedy the inequality by forming Associations, the Clothiers bring

in Infantry, to kill, disable, or deliver up to Transportation any who be troublesome.” He echoes Dixon’s categories of “Slave-Keepers” and “Wage-Payers,” arguing that the latter employ Dragoons who “prefer rifle-butts to whips,— the two hurt differently,— what otherwise is the difference in the two forms of Regulation?” To the Sons of Liberty—and, I am arguing, to the novel—there is little qualitative difference between the exploitation of British weavers and the exploitation of American chattel slaves, and that both forms of coerced labor are not free or unfree opposites but represent “Degrees of Slavery.”

What should we make, then, of the Line itself, a key element of the novel whose purpose, at least historically, was to mark the boundary between “Slave-Keepers” and “Wage Payers”? Although Mason believes the two provinces are “alike as Stacy and Tracy” (615), Dixon, ever more attuned to injustice, disagrees, pointing out “the Negro Slavery upon one side...and not the other.” But Zhang interrupts, saying, “If you think you see no Slaves in Pennsylvania...why, look again. They are not all African, nor do some of them even yet know,— may never know,— that they are Slaves.” Again, our understanding of slavery is expanded beyond the category of chattel slave to include the territory of the “Wage-Payers.” Importantly, Zhang disrupts the notion of the Line as a rational, organizing force; its bourgeois categorization of “slave” and “free” labor is rejected for a more complex and critical understanding of oppression. This critique seems to fit with Zhang’s previous opposition to the Line as a kind of authoritarian and decidedly negative project: “to mark a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon’s very Flesh, a sword-slash, a long perfect scar, impossible for any who live out here the year ‘round to see as other than hateful Assault” (542). Or, to mark the Line is to

create a false division between different but fundamentally similar forms of oppression—just as, in a way, to separate these passages from their contemporary significance, as anti-capitalist critiques of the wage-labor system, is to create a similarly false division between the “what-has-been” they depict and the “now” by which they are informed.

We have seen how *Mason & Dixon* promotes a Benjaminian philosophy of history through the construction of such constellations. Various “what-have-beens” come together with various “nows” in flashes, through ghostliness, commodities, and images of exploitation. Time does not simply pass; it is not the “homogenous, empty” time of capitalist modernity, but a time that accumulates, engendering a philosophy of history that is, at its core, a project of counter-modernity. Or, as I asserted earlier, the project of this novel, if not to “commemorate” or “even recount” the “ghostly wounds” of the past, is to offer an alternative philosophy of history which seeks to do just that.

And this is a fundamentally *Atlantic* project. *Mason & Dixon* is not interested in arbitrarily constellating temporal moments, but in those moments of dominant finance capital that “bookend” the Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation. And, of course, it charts a journey that is literally circum-Atlantic: from England to Cape Town to St. Helena to America, with numerous diversions to other spaces caught up in the Atlantic economic apparatus. The journey it charts is not only spatial—around and across the Atlantic basin—but also temporal, in that the text works to constellate the beginning and the end of the Atlantic cycle across time.

In this sense *Mason & Dixon*’s philosophy of history has as much in common with the work of Édouard Glissant as it does with that of Walter Benjamin. Although Glissant’s notion of accumulative time is very close to—and presumably rooted in—

Benjamin's, it nonetheless differs on one crucial point. Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, like Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, attempts to locate the origin of modernity in a singularly traumatic and Atlantic moment: the African slave trade. From this moment Glissant envisions the creation of a new kind of identity to counter modernist universalism, an identity he calls Relation. "What took place in the Caribbean," Glissant argues, "which could be summed up in the word *creolization*, approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible." To be in Relation is to be in "a new and original dimension" that allows "each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry" (Glissant 34). And to understand the world totality in terms of Relation, we must "approach it through the accumulation of sediments," a "poetics of duration" that does not—will not—let the past simply pass (Glissant 33).

The difference between Glissant and Benjamin, while subtle, is important. As Baucom puts it, the crucial distinction is between "Benjamin's essential *modernism* and Glissant's thoroughgoing determination to articulate a counterdiscourse of *modernity*" (*Specters* 319, italics in original). Benjamin's "flash" is "recognizably universal in its aspirations but contingent in its mode of realization...[it] might come at any time, in any place, and it might illuminate any image of what-has-been." Glissant's sense of accumulative time, however, is "recognizably global in its descriptive ambition but particular in its historicizing range... [it is not] just an abstract measure of time endlessly and indifferently adding up, but, rather, a modern order of time, the time of modernity: which piles up from an exceptional historical catastrophe...the catastrophe of the Atlantic abyss" (Baucom *Specters* 320).

So while the accumulation of time in *Mason & Dixon* is undoubtedly Benjaminian, it is also Glissantian, as it regards the time of modernity as accumulating from an “exceptional historical catastrophe.” But what catastrophe is this? The Atlantic slave trade is hardly the center of the novel, and we are certainly not given the intimately harrowing perspective on the Middle Passage we find in Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*. Slavery is crucial to the novel’s depiction of the circum-Atlantic world, however—recall that this is its “shameful Core.” It is the “shameful Core,” in fact, of what I perceive to be the very catastrophe Pynchon locates at the source of his accumulating time, the “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front” of Benjamin’s Angel of History. The phrase Pynchon uses for this catastrophe, cryptic and in desperate need of analysis, is: “the Day.”

In the novel, “the Day” (in the sense in which I am using it) appears infrequently and functions subtly. In fact, it is easy to miss the significance of this phrase altogether. Our biggest clue that “the Day” is even worth examining cannot be found in *Mason & Dixon*, but rather in Pynchon’s subsequent novel, suggestively titled, *Against the Day*. It seems that “the Day” is a Pynchonian trope introduced enigmatically in *Mason & Dixon* and (perhaps) expanded upon in his later work.¹³ Consider these few references to “the Day” in *Mason & Dixon*. When Eliza is captured by Indians, there is a breakdown of

¹³ It’s not my aim to offer a thorough analysis of “the Day” in Pynchon’s novel *Against the Day*. However, we do see the phrase appear in the follow passage: “As nights went on and nothing happened and the phenomenon slowly faded to the accustomed deeper violets again, most had difficulty remembering the earlier rise of heart, the sense of overture and possibility, and went back once again to seeking only orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep, to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day” (805). This image seems to correspond with my reading of how “the Day” functions in *Mason & Dixon*. We see similar images throughout *Against the Day*, notably in an early scene when the Chums of Chance are drifting in their balloon-ship over Chicago: “From this height it was as if the Chums, who, out on adventures past, had often witnessed the vast herds of cattle adrift in ever-changing cloudlike patterns across the Western plains, here saw that unshaped freedom being rationalized into movement only in straight lines and at right angles and a progressive reduction of choices, until the final turn through the final gate that led to the killing floor” (10).

spatial and temporal stability: “for them to come to her, this far East of Susquehanna, this far inside the perimeter of peaceable life, was for the Day to collapse into the past, into darker times” (512). What is collapsing, “the Day,” is Eliza’s life as wife and mother in a settler family, her safe position within the “perimeter” of the British colonial project in North America. Also collapsing is the stability of the present as a category that is distinctly and immutably “after” the past. Later, we find references to “the Day” as an extractive and taxing force or institution: after a wedding, the feet of guests “rediscover Steps that are their own, and not those of the Day and its Demands” (583); and Cherrycoke recalls a night when he was particularly exhausted “from the Demands of the Day, as part of the Tribute we must pay, merely to inhabit it” (649). Mason’s self-composed epitaph continues the pattern: “...Alas, ‘twas not so much the Years / As Day by thieving Day,— / With Debts incurr’d, and Interest Due, / That Dreams were sold to pay,—” (703).

These references suggest that “the Day” is somehow related to colonialism, to stable and separate categories of “past” and “present,” and to forces of extraction. They are illuminated, though, by what is probably the most important mention of “the Day,” and is perhaps the source of the title of Pynchon’s next novel. As the surveyors venture back eastward, out of Pynchon’s “subjunctive” West, they realize that

till the Moment they must pass over the Crest of the Savage Mountain, does there remain to them, contrary to Reason, *against the Day*, a measurable chance, to turn, to go back out of no more than Stubbornness, and somehow make all come right...for, once over the Summit, they will belong again to the East, to

Chesapeake,— and to Lords for whom Interests less subjunctive must ever enjoy
Priority (683, italics mine).

But they do not turn “against the Day” and continue West, toward the subjunctive, toward possibility. Mason and Dixon venture back into “the Day,” into the colonial settlements of the East: the world of “Reason” and “Interests less subjunctive”—a “thieving” world with its own “Demands” that “we must pay, merely to inhabit it.” This is a world in which people show their “devotion to the Day, and the Earth for whose sake something far short of the sky must ever claim them, a stove, a child, a hen-house predator, a deep upwind, the price of Corn, a thrown shoe, an early Freeze” (711). It is a world that threatens to break down when the past interrupts—or invades—the stability of the present. And at its “shameful Core” is a social order that reproduces itself in the form of “Tyrants and Slaves.”

Thus, “the Day.” Or, as we might choose to identify it, capitalist modernity. “The Day” is the trope around which Pynchon seems to organize his greatest critical targets: modernity, capitalism, rationalism, the Enlightenment, progress, and hierarchies of power. It is the catastrophe from which *Mason & Dixon* sees time accumulating, piling up debris and wreckage upon wreckage in the light of its cold dawn. To move “against the Day,” then, is to move against the current of all these forces of modernity, to enact a project of counter-modernity that requires a different understanding of time and a different philosophy of history, much like the projects of Benjamin and especially Glissant. Why “especially” the latter? Because the dawning of “the Day” is not a universal catastrophe, but a particular, historical, and *Atlantic* catastrophe.

Cherrycoke asks that we imagine “that Mason and Dixon and their Line cross Ohio after all, and continue West by the customary ten-minute increments” (706), a journey through the subjunctive that he then begins to relate. Eventually, however, the surveyors are forced back into “the Day” and they return to Delaware. What is next for them? To “devise a way...to inscribe a Visto upon the Atlantick Sea,” Dixon suggests (712). Mason goes on to describe a new Line “all the way from the Delaware Bay to the Spanish Extremadura,” created through all the mechanisms of science and reason they employed in carving the Visto westward through America. Once properly marked out, the Line “shall have to be widen’d to a Sea-Road of a thousand Leagues, as up and down its Longitude blossom Wharves, Chandleries, Inns, Tobacco-shops, Greengrocers’ Stalls, Printers of News, Dens of Vice, Chapels for Repentance, Shops full of Souvenirs and Sweets.” In other words, it will be a temple to capitalist consumption (not unlike Benjamin’s arcades) where production—the labor necessary for the creation of all these commodities—is entirely invisible. Then, after “the Land-Speculation Industry” gets wind of this new oceanic space, it will become settled, and Mason and Dixon will retire there, because “betwixt themselves, neither feels British enough anymore, nor quite American, for either side of the Ocean...[they are] ever in a Ubiquity of Flow, before a ceaseless Spectacle of Transition” (713).

These passages locate “the Day” in the Atlantic basin, as it pulls the forces of European economic, political, territorial, and epistemological conquest together in a single project of absorption and expansion that is literally founded upon the sea. It is precisely a depiction of the Atlantic cycle of accumulation. And we find a similar image in Mason’s deathbed vision:

“ ‘Tis a Construction,” Mason weakly, “a great single Engine, the size of a Continent. I have all the proofs you may require. Not all the Connexions are made yet, that’s why some of it is still invisible. Day by day the Pioneers and Surveyors go on, more points are being tied in, and soon becoming visible, as above, new Stars are recorded and named and plac’d in Almanacks...” (772).

To revise my earlier statement, “the Day” is not simply capitalist modernity, but an understanding of the modern as inextricably bound up with the Atlantic, as Baucom, Glissant, and Gilroy argue. Yet while they tie modernity directly to the slave trade and the Middle Passage (and specifically for Baucom, the *Zong* massacre), Pynchon envisions something broader: the “great single Engine” of the Atlantic cycle of accumulation, the force that expands by tying more and more points into its nexus of power relations, into its world of “Tyrants and Slaves,” and taxing them with its “Demands.” This is the catastrophe of *Mason & Dixon*.

But the novel also offers a response in the face of this catastrophe. For one, *Mason & Dixon* further carries out Benjamin’s project by not only showing us the accumulation of time, but by searching through the historical debris of the past for moments that, when put into constellation with a “now,” offer some kind of redemptive hope for the future. In other words, the novel recognizes the “what-has-been” of “the Day” consolidating itself across the Atlantic, but it also strives to reveal a “what-might-have-been” that is *against* the hegemony of “the Day.” This seems to be precisely what is being described in Cherrycoke’s narration when he asks “Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?”

For Cherrycoke, when America was “not yet mapp’d, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,” it was a “very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*,— Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ’s Kingdom, ever behind the sunset” (345). But America as a space of “subjunctive Hopes” disappeared as soon as its territories were “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.” In other words, once “the Day” expanded its control over America, once the Atlantic cycle of accumulation “slowly triangulated its Way into the Continent,” all was lost. Or, all was *nearly* lost, because this past moment of subjunctive hope is still what “*may yet be true*”: it is an image of the past that holds some hope of redemption for the future, even though it never did—or has yet to—come to pass.

Additionally, *Mason & Dixon*, in arguing for a time that does not pass but accumulates, is engaged in a project of counter-modernity that Baucom describes as a politics of melancholy. He relates melancholy and mourning to the language of finance capital: while mourning entails the exchange of one love-object for another, melancholy *resists* this logic of exchange; to “reduce matters to a formula: mourning exchanges, melancholy encrypts” (Baucom *Specters* 257). The general task of what Baucom calls “the testamentary, melancholy realist counterdiscourse of modernity” is to “recover the lost, to acknowledge and take some affective property in the ruinous ‘past’ continuously, if nonsynchronously, present within now-being” (*Specters* 218). He sees this melancholy counterdiscourse at work in the writings of eighteenth-century abolitionists and,

especially, in the literature of the Black Atlantic, particularly Glissant, Derek Walcott, Fred D'Aguiar, and Toni Morrison. It should come as no surprise that I would add *Mason & Dixon* to this list.

Mason is the novel's melancholic figure, and his personal encryption of Rebekah epitomizes the text's Benjaminian and Glissantian philosophy of history. To Cherrycoke, Mason must be "true to the sorrows of his own history...a way of keeping them safe, and never betraying them" (316). Cherrycoke is thinking specifically of Rebekah, but this is nonetheless a profound description of the project of the entire novel. To be true to the sorrows of the "Collective Ghost," of the past-time embodied in things and the ghostliness of our present moment: this is what *Mason & Dixon* sets out to do. Far more than simply disrupting or subverting historicity, the novel works to show us a different philosophy of history, one that resists the exchange logic of capitalist modernity and instead offers a commitment to the past, to the "what-has-been," that will not forget, will not let go. Mason says it best:

"...what if I can't just lightly let her drop? What if I won't just leave her to the Weather, and Forgetfulness? What if I want to spend, even squander, my precious time trying to make it up to her? Somehow? Do you think anyone can simply let that all go?" (166).

Dixon does not say, "Thou must," as the narrative suggests he could. Instead, he tilts his wine glass at Mason, "beams sympathetically," and says, "Then tha must break thy Silence, and tell me somewhat of her." This is precisely *Mason & Dixon*'s project: to "break the silence" of history and account for the "ghostly wounds" of the past, to enact a partisan interestedness that refuses to let go of past injustices, to encrypt the "what-has-

been” within the “now” of an Atlantic that will not leave its dead “to the Weather, and Forgetfulness.”

Conclusion

Accumulation(s) against Accumulation

Two texts, two encounters with the same historically specific logic: that of the Atlantic cycle of capital accumulation. As I stated earlier, *Moby-Dick* and *Mason & Dixon* are as alike as they differ, and this certainly applies to how each is related to the Atlantic cycle, and thus how we can understand each as Atlantic literature.

Moby-Dick is like the *Pequod* itself. Just as that ship ventures into the heart of the ocean, into the stark and brutal reality of the sea, the novel ventures into the heart of the circum-Atlantic world, into the core of its essence, to locate the moving center. As we have seen, the results are complex. For while *Moby-Dick* does indeed reproduce the logic of capital, it does not do so as we would expect working from a Lukácsian model. Instead, the moving center is displaced and reproduced figuratively in Ahab, leaving the empty shell of its rhetoric on Starbuck: Atlantic capitalism as contradiction. We would never have seen this, though, without applying Lukács's theory of realism, and would in turn never have been able to reveal the fundamentally intimate relationship between *Moby-Dick* and the Atlantic cycle of accumulation.

Mason & Dixon works differently. Instead of diving into the heart of the Atlantic cycle, Pynchon's novel traces it across space and, importantly, across time. Through adopting a Benjaminian philosophy of history, the text reveals how the Atlantic cycle is composed not of discrete and isolated past moments moving through the "empty, homogenous" time of capitalist modernity, but rather of nonsynchronously contemporaneous moments accumulating in the wake of a singular historical catastrophe. That catastrophe, Pynchon's "the Day," is the Atlantic cycle of accumulation.

Once we reveal the different ways in which each text is related to the Atlantic cycle, we recognize another similarity. Both encounter the logic of capitalist accumulation and respond in turn with an alternative form of accumulation. In *Moby-Dick*, we see a trend of literary accumulation (the “nonrealist” element) that seeks to counteract the brutalizing reality of the logic of capitalist accumulation (uncovered by the “realist” element). And in *Mason & Dixon*, we see an accumulative philosophy of history that seeks to counteract the empty time of modernity which is itself a product of the logic of capital (not unlike how commodity production works to erase and repudiate the past-time of commodities). Perhaps *Moby-Dick* is less successful: the end result is, admittedly, a somewhat confused and certainly contradictory text that does not fully redeem nor fully reveal the material it seeks to portray. *Mason & Dixon*, however, takes its accumulative philosophy of history and turns it into a politics of melancholy, and in doing so, articulates a discourse that is against capitalist modernity, against the brutality of Atlantic production, and against the logic of capital accumulation.

This is their common element, as literature of the Atlantic: *Moby-Dick* and *Mason & Dixon* portray accumulation against accumulation, the logic of an alternative form of accumulation against the logic of capital. And perhaps this is the project of all Atlantic literature, to some degree or another.

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