



Open Library of Humanities



Article

How to Cite: Phillips, M 2019 "Nose-gaping: The Smells of *Mason & Dixon*". *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 7(1):4, 1–16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.768>

Published: 30 July 2019

Peer Review:

This article was peer-reviewed internally by the guest editor and by a member of the Orbit editorial team.

Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.



ARTICLE

"Nose-gaping: The Smells of *Mason & Dixon*"

Mike Phillips

The Graduate Center, CUNY, US

michaeldavidphillips@gmail.com

This article examines Pynchon's evocations of smell in *Mason & Dixon* as a vehicle for critiquing notions of the rational subject and the bounded text. The nose is posed as a carnivalesque counterpart to the eye, the sense organ most readily associated with empiricism. The directional gaze, crucial to the eponymous characters' work as astronomer and surveyor, often gives way to enveloping odors, producing an embodiment inimical to Enlightenment. Anthropologist David Howes has argued that smell is most vividly experienced in liminal spaces or at cognitive thresholds. I draw on his work to illuminate Pynchon's association of smells with the dissolution of distinctions between abstract categories like civilization/wilderness, mind/body, past/present, and text/reader. I argue that this novel about the delineation of a boundary is primarily concerned with interpretive indeterminacy, figured and produced through textual smells.

Early in Thomas Pynchon's 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon*, astronomer Charles Mason and surveyor Jeremiah Dixon land on the desolate, volcanic, South Atlantic island of St. Helena. The two are on their way back to England from Cape Town after having observed the 1761 Transit of Venus. Dixon is unexpectedly requested to return to the Cape, leaving Mason alone with the endlessly unpleasant Rev. Dr. Nevil Maskelyne, a fellow astronomer. Mason begins to despair of the landscape and the company, until he gains a sudden reprieve:

One cloudless afternoon they stand in the scent of an orange-grove,— as tourists elsewhere might stand and gape at some mighty cataract or chasm,— nose-gaping, rather, at a manifold of odor neither Englishman has ever encountered before. They have been searching for it all the long declining Day,— it is the last Orange-Grove upon the Island,— a souvenir of a Paradise decrepit.... Shadows of Clouds dapple the green hillsides, Houses with red Tile roofs preside over small Valleys, the Pasture lying soft as Sheep,— all, with the volcanic Meadow where the two stand, circl'd by the hellish cusps of Peaks unnatural,— frozen in mid-thrust, jagged at every scale. (134)

There is no preliminary description of the astronomers' search for the grove, or of their first sight of it. Instead, the reader simply finds them standing there, nose-gaping. These optically-oriented scientists are enveloped by the scent rather than gazing at the grove. Of course, the term "to gape at" involves an astonished stare, but here the gaze is oddly displaced onto the nose. The nose is normally considered a passive receptor of sensory information, unlike the eye, which is generally thought of as actively observing. The ocular gaze is unidirectional and intentional — as is exemplified by the "Visto" that progressively appears as the Line is cleared — while olfaction is omnidirectional and involuntary. Thus, when Mason and Maskelyne are overwhelmed nasally rather than visually, they are positioned as being at the whim of their environment, not expressing mastery over it. In the moment in which we find them standing in awe of the orange grove, they are fully embodied, their powers of abstraction temporarily halted.

As men of science, Mason and Dixon participate in the ideal of the Enlightenment subject, by default a male who possesses the rational self-restraint to focus his energies on intellectual pursuits. This ideal is inevitably posed in contradistinction to supposedly feminine passivity, capriciousness, and susceptibility to biological vicissitudes.¹ Pynchon's presentation of the nose as both protruding instrument of observation and concave site of ingestion raises simultaneously phallic and yonic connotations, disrupting these gender binaries. On the one hand, he regularly figures the nose as scientific apparatus, or vice versa. For example, Dixon protests strongly against lending out his Circumferentor, exclaiming, "Twould be like letting someone else do my Smelling for me...?" (472). Conversely, astronomical instruments are repeatedly described as having "snouts" (98, 146, 209, 446, 492, 648) and the many astronomers observing the Transit are described as "those attending Snouts Earth-wide" (97). Often, though, the nose is vulnerable to penetration, as when Mason, "*The Victim of a Cheese malevolent,*" is run over by the giant "Octuple Gloucester" and ends up with his nostrils full of grass (170, italics in original), or when Benjamin Franklin places a Y-shaped apparatus up Dixon's nose for the purpose of electrocuting him (764).² By troubling the gendered associations of the nose, Pynchon disrupts the notion of a disembodied, abstractly observing, necessarily male subject.

In perhaps the most memorable instance of nasal effrontery in this work, the Rev. Wicks Cherrycoke describes the experience of spotted dick being forced up his nose during a maritime equator-crossing ceremony, to which Uncle Lomax adds, "And if it goes far *enough* up your nose... Well. Then it's in your *Brain*, isn't it?" (57, italics in original). This nasal grotesquerie exemplifies the transgressive power of embodiment identified by Mikhail Bakhtin in the work of Rabelais: "The grotesque body,"

¹ On European conceptions of gender and sexuality during the Enlightenment, see Hull 245–56.

² Pynchon's treatment of the nose here is reminiscent of the famous nasal excursus in the fourth chapter of *V*, entitled "In Which Esther Gets a Nose Job." Esther hates her stereotypically Semitic, "figure-6 nose" and undergoes a procedure by Dr. Schoenmaker to turn it more retroussé. The surgery is presented as grotesquely comical and clearly a source of sado-masochistic pleasure for both doctor and patient, who later engage in a sexual liaison (Pynchon 1963, 95–110). It should be noted that one of the author's ancestors, Dr. Edwin Pynchon (1856–1914), was an inventor of surgical instruments and also published at least two articles on nasal operations (Winston 282).

he writes, “swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world...” (317). The mouth, anus, genitals, nose, and other bodily “convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation” (317). The boundaries that the grotesque body overcomes are not only between the body and the world, but between the body and the mind, as Uncle Lomax’s jest suggests by positing a literal contiguity of nose and brain. As Abeer Abdel Raouf Fahim has shown, even vision is not immune to Pynchon’s critique of Cartesianism: in *Against the Day*, “Pynchon gives a tactile quality to vision that subverts the idea that perception can be wholly disembodied” (10). If this is the case for the sense most aligned with empiricism, it must be even more so for olfaction. Addressing an embodied reader in this manner brings into question the mind/body dualism that underlies the formation of the modern subject.

This is far from the only conceptual binary that Pynchon unsettles through textual smells. The orange grove is not simply a recrudescence of idyllic nature into the sterile lives of the astronomers, but a site of juxtapositions that decenter a key trope of American frontier narratives, the dichotomy between wilderness and civilization.³ The valley in which the grove sits also contains houses, suggesting cultivation rather than wild growth, while the surrounding volcanic rocks, though described as “Peaks unnatural,” are undeniably a result of natural processes. As Samuel Cohen has said of the ampersand that binds Mason and Dixon together, these interminglings of nature and civilization connote “the simultaneous coexistence of the ideas of distinctness and unity, of difference and individual identity” (278). In his study of the sensory aspects of novel-reading, Ralf Hertel likewise writes, “Olfaction [...] permeates the boundaries of identities, of outside and inside in an act of incorporation” (130). Anthropologist David Howes makes a wider case in his essay “Olfaction and Transition”: “smell is the liminal sense *par excellence*, constitutive of and at the same time operative across all of the boundaries we draw between different realms of categories of experience” (131–32). In *Mason & Dixon*, a book about a boundary, smells often arise in situations where boundaries are crossed or

³ See e.g. Smith (1950) and Kitses (1970).

permeated or are even impossible to discern, whether those boundaries be between wilderness and civilization, between one individual and another, between the sacred and the profane, or between the past and the present.

All of these relationships are at play in the orange-grove scene. In response to witnessing this “souvenir of a Paradise decrepit”, Maskelyne puts forth the theory that St. Helena had been the Eden that Saint Brendan claimed to have discovered, a claim that has been dismissed as legend by Enlightenment philosophers. “So,” he proclaims, “will the Reign of Reason cheerily dispose of any allegations of Paradise.” He goes on to suggest that the island has been ruined by greed (134–35). Here Maskelyne posits a two-pronged critique of the corrupt modern world: it is the transformation of St. Helena into a plantation that ruins it, and Enlightenment philosophy that denies that it had ever been a paradise in the first place. The fragrant grove is posed as a miraculous survival of a prelapsarian state amid the barren waste of an exploited island, “the visible and torn Remnant of a Sub-History unwitness’d” (162).

The grove thus partakes of what Adam Lifshey has identified as Pynchon’s “subjunctive” mode of historical fiction. Lifshey argues that the drawing of the novel’s eponymous border constitutes an act of imperialist narration through cartography. In other words, the inscription of the line upon the earth is the spatial corollary of the teleological mode of telling history that undergirds European colonialism. Pynchon’s critique of this ideological project is expressed through “a tension between declarative and subjunctive Americas, that is, between Mason and Dixon’s inscription of a rationalizing, Western European narrative of the continent on one hand and the concomitant erasure of multiple hypothetical and unmapped Americas on the other” (5).⁴ For Pynchon, interpretive indeterminacy is not a purely cerebral maneuver meant to call attention to the constructedness of discourse. As George Levine has written, “no multiplication of intellectual possibilities can quite do justice to the energizing experience of sustaining uncertainty,” and so for Pynchon, “language is called upon to sustain the uncertainty it

⁴ In *Occupy Pynchon*, Sean Carswell has expounded on the implications of Pynchon’s subjunctive for contemporary practices of political resistance. See ch. 3, “*Mason & Dixon* and the Ghastly Fop”, pp. 49–79.

is structured to deny, to imply what cannot be articulated in language" (114). My contention here is that Pynchon expresses subjunctive uncertainty through textual smells, which overtly undermine the binary conceptual boundaries propounded by Enlightenment epistemology.

Olfactory matters held a surprising prominence in the development of the modern subject through the eighteenth-century public imagination. In *The Foul and the Fragrant*, historian Alain Corbin shows how odor became inimical to modernity. At the same time that the real Mason and Dixon were surveying their Line, European scientific discourse around odor rapidly proliferated, leading to new public hygiene measures and articulating shifting attitudes toward scent. European elites developed a new hypersensitivity to smell as they set out on a grand project of deodorization. This trend led to a valorization of fragrant nature in contrast to the excremental miasma of the city, seen as a site of putrefaction. Pynchon muses on a form of such urban deodorization in colonial Philadelphia:

Cities begin upon the day the Walls of the Shambles go up, to screen away Blood and Blood-letting, Animals' Cries, Smells and Soil, from residents already grown fragile before Country Realities. The Better-Off live far as they may, from the concentration of Slaughter. Soon, Country Melancholicks are flocking to Town like Crows, dark'ning the Sun. Dress'd meats appear in the Market,— Sausages hang against the Sky, forming lines of Text, cryptick intestinal Commentary. (289)

Yet despite the populace supposedly becoming sheltered from the bloody transformation of animals into meat (which, as we shall see, is deeply relevant to Mason's personal olfactory imagination), the city continues to stink. Mason and Dixon find it difficult to sleep in Philadelphia due not only to ineffectively muffled "cries of Beasts from the city Shambles" but also the "Smells of wood-smoke, horses, and human sewage [that] blow in the windows, along with the noise" (292). It is clear that "Country Realities" are not so easily separated from urban existence as Corbin's reformers would have liked to believe.

Pynchon's critique of the olfactory aesthetics propounded by those reformers extends to his conception of nature. His nasal satire not only upsets dichotomies between reason and madness (nearly everyone, and especially Maskelyne, is portrayed as being or acting insane at one point or another) but also refuses to exclusively assign pleasant smells to nature and putrid smells to cities or modern industry. Nature for Pynchon is not uninhabited, abstract space but rather a site of contested claims and odd encounters. Indeed, nature as such, in its usual conception as the opposite of civilization, does not exist for Pynchon because there is no space that is not already implicated in history.

This refutation of nature as *tabula rasa* is just as applicable in the microhistorical, individual realm as it is on the macrohistorical, global level. The transgression of interpersonal, spiritual, and temporal boundaries is recapitulated in the network of olfactory associations concerning Mason's relationship with his father. This subject, first alluded to by Maskelyne during the visit to the orange grove, is broached again during another encounter with exotic fruit, namely the arrival of mangos at the Cape Town market. Dixon implores Mason to "get the old Nozzle down" on one, which he then suggests that Mason keep, since his "Nose has been all over it." Rev. Cherrycoke, "hold[ing] aloft a Mango, as if 'twere a Host" expounds on its meat-like qualities: "to peel it is to flay it,— to bite into it is to eat uncook'd flesh,— though I can imagine as well uncomfortable religious questions arising" (84–85). The clergyman alludes to the theological controversy over transubstantiation and consubstantiation, that is, the question of whether the communion host actually becomes the body of Christ. This debate had been central to the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion, and sensational reports of cannibalism in the New World became an ideological tool in that debate.⁵ The exotic mango, like the cannibal, is presented as unsettling European categories of religious experience, which themselves determine the significance of the mango for the colonists.

The Reverend's statement reminds Mason of his deep childhood displeasure at the "queasy Nidor of Lambs baking in ovens meant for bread," a smell native to his

⁵ See Neil L. Whitehead's introduction to *Staden* (2008).

father's bakery but unexpectedly re-encountered in Cape Town. Later that night, Cherrycoke comments in his journal, "Lamb of God, Eucharist of Bread,— what Mr. Mason could not bear, were the very odors of Blood-Sacrifice and Transsubstantiation, the constant element in all being the Oven, the Altar wherebefore his Father presided" (85–86). In a discussion of this passage, Colin A. Clarke has posited a dichotomy between the "pure exoticism" of the mango and the obscure transformation of the communion host: that of the raw and the cooked, in Lévi-Strauss's famous phrase (82). Yet the mango participates in the string of associations leading to Mason's father just as much as the lamb or bread does, and Pynchon explicitly links them through their pungency. We cannot draw such a neat distinction between the primitive and the modern as Clarke suggests because the two concepts are always already mutually implicated. This imbrication is precisely the import of Mason's sensory associations between meat and mango.

While Mason does indeed have very difficult relationships with his father and religion, his horror at the Eucharist is not simply due to these factors. Closer attention to odor, the root of Mason's anxieties, suggests a more complex picture. Initially, the smell of the mango has no referent beyond the piece of fruit itself, particularly because it has no past association for Mason. When Cherrycoke broaches the subject of the Eucharist, Mason raises a *non sequitur* complaint about the Dutch cooking and its olfactory similarity to the kitchen of his childhood. Here again we see smells associated with the irruption of the past into the present, and vice versa. What seems to cause Mason discomfort is the intermingling of the spiritual and the corporeal, the word becoming flesh and vice versa. As an apprentice in his father's bakery, Mason was horrified by "the daily repetitions of smell and ferment and some hidden drama, as in the Mass,— was he fleeing to the repetitions of the Sky, believing them safer, not as saturated in life and death?" (205). Constellations and horoscopes notwithstanding, stars lack signification beyond their indexical function in navigation. Mason's anxiety arises when material objects begin to act as signs, when the physical encounter elicits psychological ramifications, thus binding body and mind.

Smell often provides the medium through which these material signs create meaning. A prime example is the Catholic Eucharist, which Howes cites as illustrating

the liminal nature of smell: "In this case, the transition is from the category of the profane to the sacred. The moment of transubstantiation is customarily marked by the tintinnabulation and the censuring of the 'elements' (i.e., the bread and wine) with burning balsam" (129). This very scent is conjured up for Mason by an aural apparition of his deceased wife:

Isn't this supposed to be the Age of Reason? To believe in the cold light of this all-business world that Rebekah haunts him is to slip, to stagger in a crowd, into the embrace of the Italian Painted Whore herself, and the Air to fill with suffocating incense, and the radiant Deity to go dim forever. But if Reason be also Permission at last to believe in the evidence of our Earthly Senses, then how can he not concede to her some Resurrection?— to deny her, how cruel! (164)

Despite his scientific profession, Mason struggles with the Enlightenment's negation of traditional, non-rational forms of religious belief, especially Catholicism.

This ambivalence is shared by many of the novel's characters. The narrator (it is often unclear at any given point whether Rev. Cherrycock, the ostensible narrator, is actually speaking) laments the "Royal Society members and French Encyclopædists' [...] denouncing all that was once Magic, though too often in smirking tropes upon the Church of Rome,— visitations, bleeding statues, medical impossibilities" (359). In a similar manner, Mr. Edgewise criticizes his sister's membership in the Moravian Church, "little to be distinguished from that of Rome,— having, indeed, its own Carnival, its gluttony and lustfulness" (357). In both instances, the critique of Catholicism is based on a too-close relationship of Spirit with the body rather than the mind. The transubstantial Eucharist epitomizes this relationship, as it carries with it not only the actual presence of Christ's body, but also the sensual odor of incense. For rational, enlightened subjects, the senses are to be used to collect evidence, not to provoke emotion or invoke transcendence. As Mason points out, however, the new regard for the empirical veracity of the senses spills over into non-rational, spiritual realms. No matter how intentionally one may utilize one's senses, there will always be some surplus stimuli that are irreducible to data.

Anti-Catholicism among *Mason & Dixon's* characters takes on a more sinister form in their widespread suspicion of Jesuits. This is expressed mostly in the form of conspiracy theories, which proliferate to such an extent that Dixon feels obliged to snap at Mason, "I am not a fucking Jesuit" (73). However, the order's nefarious plot does eventually reveal itself, albeit by a very strange route. Eliza Fields is looking out of her kitchen window one day when she is kidnapped by Indians (511–12). At this point, the reader might expect a conventional captivity narrative along the lines of Mary Rowlandson's, in which the captive's survival and reprieve from the clutches of the savages is seen as an act of Divine Providence. But Pynchon again subverts generic expectations of the dividing line between the primitive and the civilized: Eliza is kidnapped with the express purpose of being delivered to Jesuits at their College in Quebec, where she is to be trained as a "Widow of Christ", essentially a concubine subject to the deviant pleasures of the priests and their associates. As she enters the College, she has "the black nidor of the Torches for her first Incense" (514). Note that Eliza, presumably Protestant, is greeted into the Jesuit cabal with a smell associated with popery. The unusual word "nidor", meaning the smell of burning fat, appears only once elsewhere in the novel, in relation to Mason's horror at the smell of lambs cooking in Cape Town.

Proceeding deeper into the College, Eliza witnesses the monstrous contraption that operates the "Jesuit Telegraph" through which, according to Benjamin Franklin, "*they enjoy their d—'d Marvel of instant Communication*" (287, italics in original). At the machine,

Chinese attend to the rigging, and specially train'd Indian Converts tend a Peat-fire so as to raise precisely the Temperature of a great green prism of Brazilian Tourmaline, a-snarl as Medusa with plaited Copper Cabling running from it in all directions, bearing the Pyro-Electrickal Fluid by which ev'rything here is animated. More intense than the peat-smoke, the smell of Ozone prevails here, the Musk of an unfamiliar Beast, unsettling even to those who breathe it ev'ry day (516–17).

Compare this with Lord Lepton's brightly lit and odorless "Iron-Plantation", where colonists operate an industry sanitized of human sweat and mercantile

exchange: "All noxious smokes and gases [are] vented someplace distant, invisible" (411). This description recalls Corbin's deodorization project, about which Pynchon seems skeptical, as has been noted. Lepton's ironworks are presented as a fantasy of pure, modern efficiency: "this was how the world might be" (411). The gruesomely violent purpose of the weapons produced there is obfuscated by the sensory alienation of the industrial process. In the Jesuit College, conversely, people and goods from all over the globe commingle amidst the "harsh, sexual smell" of ozone. In an inversion of the situation at Lepton's, here the toil is real, but the product is imaginary. Whereas Lepton's workers are described as keeping a "monastic silence" and never "moon[ing] about in states of Erection for hours at a time" (411), the technicians of the Jesuit Telegraph labor in a stifling miasma of sexualized stench.

As Eliza begins her training, she admits to her desire having been aroused by her Indian captors, for which she is punished by being forced to wear the "Las Viudas Cilice", a "Breech-clout" made of a rose. It sits "in that charming Cusp of moistness and heat, where odors of the Body and the Rose may mingle with a few drops of Blood from the tiny green Thorns, and Flashes of Pain whose true painfulness must be left for the Penitent to assess..." (520, ellipsis in original). Pynchon often presents sado-masochistic sexuality as odiferous; for instance, in the scene of Brigadier Pudding's domination in *Gravity's Rainbow* (231–36). Here, there is the added element of the fragrant Eucharist: "Later they give her soothing Gums to rub into the tiny Wounds. The odor rises as the rubbing goes on, a single churchlike odor of incense, ungrounded by candle-wax or human occupancy, meant for Heaven, a Fume rising in Transmutation..." (521, ellipsis in original). This scene of pain and pleasure, filtered through the recurrent trope of transubstantiation, again enacts embodiment through smell.

The straightforward relationship between odor and embodiment is troubled, however, by the rampant reflexivity revolving around Eliza. Her captivity narrative is revealed to be taken from a book in the *Ghastly Fop* series that Cherrycoke's niece Brae has discovered in her cousin Ethelmer's room during a break in the Reverend's story. Eliza eventually escapes and, perplexingly, arrives in Mason and Dixon's camp.

This transition, incidentally, is marked by the “smell of wood-smoke [being] more and more with” her as she approaches the Line (534). Normally, such a *mise-en-abîme* would suggest self-referentiality, but what Pynchon does here is more complex. When Eliza is abruptly introduced in Chapter 53, she is referred to in the third person. This chapter is also headed by an epigraph from Cherrycoke’s *Undeliver’d Sermons* in which he writes, “Doubt is of the Essence of Christ. [...] The final pure Christ is pure uncertainty” (511). This indicates a continuation of the story that Cherrycoke has been telling, but in the previous chapter, Mason and Dixon are about to cease surveying for the winter, and when Eliza appears, it is autumn. At the beginning of Chapter 54, Eliza is telling her story in the first person. There is then a section break to reveal Ethelmer catching Brae with his book, and they begin to read together. The narrative continues in the first person for one more section, then switches back to the third, remaining in this mode through the transition back into the story of the surveyors.

The elaborate game being played in these two chapters goes beyond reflexivity. Here it is not simply a question of establishing distancing between text and reader by foregrounding textuality, as Pynchon does with the many references to the imaginary Jacobean drama *A Courier’s Tragedy* in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Rather than establishing fictionality beyond any doubt, Eliza’s ontological indeterminacy disrupts the diegetic boundaries among the *Ghastly Fop* universe, the *Mason & Dixon* universe, and the actual scene of reading. As Hertel notes, even literary texts contemporary to *The Ghastly Fop*, such as *Tristram Shandy*, “prefigure postmodernism” by utilizing textual smells to “resist traditional forms of representation and introduce an element of the irrational, the carnivalesque, and the corporeal” (131). For Hertel, reading is as much a sensory experience as a mental one: “the reader creates new perceptions from his imagination. Thus, in literature, to sense is quite literally to *make sense* – a creative act rather than passive perception” (9, italics in original). The smells of *Mason & Dixon* prompt the reader’s body to interact with the fruits of Pynchon’s labor, negating the separation of author, text, and reader. The smells that surround Eliza act in the service of creating a connective tissue among these three planes, none of which is ontologically privileged. Like a smell, Pynchon’s text has no

center and no discrete limit but is rather an indeterminate field. Rather than establishing an absolute separation between textuality and materiality, Pynchon imbues his verbal text with a sense of the contingency of concrete existence.

Not only does Pynchon's text smell, but it contains other texts that smell. The Macaroni whom Mason and Dixon encounter while snowed in for the winter is later discovered not to be a fop at all, but a revolutionary pamphleteer. As the soldiers come in to arrest him:

He looks up from the fragrant Sheets, some so new that one might yet smell the Apprentices' Urine in which the Ink-Swabs were left to soften, bearing, to sensitized *Nasalia*, sub-Messages of youth and Longing,— all about him the word repeated in large Type, LIBERTY. (390)

Again Pynchon disrupts the Age of Reason, particularly the distinction between public and private laid out in Kant's essay, "What Is Enlightenment?". Kant argues that subjects must be free to assert their opinions on religious, philosophical, and political matters in public, by which he exclusively means in print. In private, that is, in the civic and domestic realms, the individual must obey his duty. This abstract distinction between the public and private has its material reflection in the dichotomization between the text as the depository of rational thought and the body as the instrument of empirical experience. The uric odor of the fop's pamphlet irreverently refutes the separability of texts from the bodies that create them.

The same idea is expressed upon Dixon's completion of his task of charting the surveyed territory: "Mason is able to inspect the long Map, fragrant, elegantly cartouch'd with Indians and Instruments, at last. Ev'ry place they ran it, ev'ry House pass'd by, Road cross'd, the Ridge-lines and Creeks, Forests and Glades, Water ev'rywhere, and the Dragon nearly visible" (689). This fragrant map is not merely the pictorial representation of the boundary line, it is the record of a portion of Mason's and Dixon's lives and of their relationship to each other. On seeing it, Mason responds: "So,— so. This is the Line as all shall see it after its Copper-Plate 'Morphosis,— and all History remember? This is what ye expect me to sign off on?" (689). Mason's reluctance to let

go of the map is analogous to his uneasy relationship with the Eucharist in that he cannot concede that the trials that a body experiences could be faithfully reproduced in an abstract form. He knows that reproductions of the map will not smell the same as this one.

Pynchon's poetic use of smell, filtered through Cherrycoke's theology of pure uncertainty, is an attempt to evoke this notion of unique sensory experience, of "Sub-History unwitness'd". Smell is ineffable yet corporeal, mysterious yet utterly real. When smells enter a text, they also elude it. They are ultimately intangible, temporary, and personal. Near the end of the expedition, Cherrycoke has the "[f]irst dream [he] had that ever smell'd of anything," in which he is flying above the Visto, observing the camp below. Recounting this dream, he thinks of the end of the Line, whose distance has been estimated but not yet "recorded as Fact" and will not be until they reach it. He writes, "[M]ay it remain, a-shimmer, among the few final Pages of its Life as Fiction" (649–50). This indeterminacy, this unknowability, is also expressed in relation to smell, the most transitory of the senses and one that cannot be recorded. For Pynchon, the certainty of data is also the destruction of possibility. Smells, as irreducible to data, are a figure for the indeterminacy produced in the material scene of reading.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bakhtin, M** 1984 *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Indiana University Press.
- Carswell, S** 2017 *Occupy Pynchon: Politics After Gravity's Rainbow*. University of Georgia Press.
- Clarke, C A** 2005 "Consumption on the Frontier: Food and Sacrament in *Mason & Dixon*." *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon's Mason & Dixon*, Hinds, E J W (ed.), 77–98. Camden House. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/UPO9781571136688.006>
- Cohen, S** 2002 "Mason & Dixon & the Ampersand." *Twentieth Century Literature*, 48(3): 264–91. JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/3176029. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-2002-4004>

- Corbin, A** 1986 *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*. Harvard University Press.
- Fahim, A A R** 2017 "Embodied Vision in *Against the Day*." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(1): 1–26. Open Library of Humanities. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.200>
- Hertel, R** 2005 *Making Sense: Sense Perception in the British Novel of the 1980s and 1990s*. Rodopi.
- Howes, D** 1991 "Olfaction and Transition." *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, Howes, D (ed.), 128–47. University of Toronto Press.
- Hull, I V** 1996 *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815*. Cornell University Press.
- Kant, I** 1996 "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, Schmidt, J (ed.), 58–64. University of California Press.
- Kitses, J** 1970 *Horizons West*. Indiana University Press.
- Levine, G** 1976 "Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction." *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, Levine, G and Leverenz, D (eds.), 113–36. Little, Brown.
- Lifshey, A** 2004 "Bordering the Subjunctive in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*." *Journal X: A Journal in Culture & Criticism*, 9(1): 1–15.
- Pynchon, T** 1963 V. J. B. Lippincott & Co.
- Pynchon, T** 1966 *The Crying of Lot 49*. J. B. Lippincott & Co.
- Pynchon, T** 1973 *Gravity's Rainbow*. Viking Press.
- Pynchon, T** 1997 *Mason & Dixon*. Henry Holt & Co.
- Smith, H N** 1950 *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Harvard University Press.
- Staden, H** 2008 *Hans Staden's True History: An Account of Cannibal Captivity in Brazil*, edited and translated by Neil L. Whitehead and Michael Harbsmeier. Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389293>
- Winston, M** 1975 "The Quest for Pynchon." *Twentieth Century Literature*, 21(3): 278–287. JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/440565. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/440565>

How to cite this article: Phillips, M 2019 "Nose-gaping: The Smells of *Mason & Dixon*". *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 7(1): 4, 1-16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.768>

Published: 30 July 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, which is a stylized padlock with an open keyhole.