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Abstract:

This article aims to carry out a multidisciplinary reading of *Mason & Dixon* starting from the apparitions of what might only look like a "stage prop", a rifle in four more or less important moments of the novel. By applying a stereoscopic reading of the novel, which may achieve depth by means of comparing different textual objects and a wider historical context (that of the history of firearms in the 17th and 18th century, plus other works by Pynchon featuring firearms), it will be shown how literary (textual) avatars of "real", "historical" objects (firearms) may at the same time be verbal constructs but refer to the technical, material features of those objects, establishing multi-dimensional and complex relations between technology, science, economics (early forms of globalization), politics (colonialism and colonial wars) within and outside *Mason & Dixon*, and the rest of Pynchon's oeuvre. Moreover, this reading allows us to better understand how Pynchon may use the historical documents and literature he has found while researching his novels.

“Something More Than a Rifle”: Firearms in and around Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*

Umberto Rossi

...while Freud says that sometimes a cigar is only a cigar, a rifle is always something more than a rifle. – William T. Vollmann¹

“I say, Pugnax—what’s that you’re reading now, old fellow?”

“Rr Rff-rff Rr-rr-rff-rrf-rrf,” replied Pugnax without looking up, which Darby, having like the others in the crew got used to Pugnax’s voice (...), now interpreted as “*The Princess Casamassima*” (AtD 5-6)

This small comedic episode from the first chapter of *Against the Day* is an example of the stereoscopic effect that plays an important role in the experience of reading Thomas Pynchon’s fiction. Of course the most blatant stereoscopy is the one concerning Pugnax: how can we accommodate a dog that reads Henry James’ novels from the point of view of genre theory? The obvious answer might be “postmodernist fiction,” “magic realism,” or “genre bending/interbreeding”.² Pynchon is at heart a historical novelist but he also frequently employs devices from fantasy, science-fiction and cartoons (one might mention albino alligators or sentient light bulbs, not to mention android ducks). It should also be noted that the Chums of Chance sub-plot in *Against the Day* is clearly a homage to 19th century adventurous science-fiction à la Jules Verne or Emilio Salgari. Indeed, non-realistic elements are (as usual) to be expected—in the middle of partly excruciatingly accurate, partly subtly counter-factual historical reconstructions.

There is also a less blatant stereoscopic effect generated by the novel that Pugnax is reading. Is *The Princess Casamassima* (1885-86) no more than a stage prop, put there to achieve a certain degree of estranged realism in such a definitely unrealistic—or cartoonish—scene, or is it a book-within-a-book with its own messages of great urgency to our time? James’ novel, published a few years before the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, historically fits

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the scene; but we may be offered a clue when it is described as concerned with "the inexorably rising tide of World Anarchism" (AtD 6). *The Princess Casamassima* may well hint at the events in the first part of the novel, "The Light Over the Ranges", where terrorism features as a major issue. Besides, the predicament of Hyacinth Robinson, the protagonist of James' ponderous three-volume novel, who has committed himself to carrying out a political assassination on behalf of an anarchist group, but hesitates to do the deed, bears relation to the long-postponed vendetta that the Traverse brothers aim at carrying out by killing Scarsdale Vibe, the principal in their father's brutal assassination. Moreover, the novel and its plot may be seen as foreshadowing the assassination of US President William McKinley by anarchist Leon Czolgosz in 1901, surely a major event in the "rising tide of World Anarchism". One may eventually read all this in a stereoscopic fashion, as foreshadowing the decade in which *AtD* was published, the post-9-11 years in which terrorism has haunted the collective imagination like never before.

All in all, the copy of *The Princess Casamassima* in the paws of Pugnax is at the same time a well-chosen stage prop—paradoxically enforcing the codes of realism in the middle of an absolutely non-realistic episode—and a node in a network of meanings which wires the whole bulk of *AtD* and connects it with the extra-textual reality (whatever we may mean by that term today); the importance of such networks had already been underscored by Edward Mendelson (Mendelson 5) in the early years of Pynchon scholarship. The double nature of the book-within-the-book is an example of Pynchon's peculiar stereoscopy, in which it is not an illusion of depth that is created by means of the interaction of two pictures of real objects; what we have is rather the interaction of two or more illusory fictional artefacts (or facets of the same artefact) creating an unexpectedly realistic depth, a novel perspective on this, our world.

Two options then present themselves: is this artefact a mere stage-prop or a link to larger networks of meaning? These two alternatives mirror others, that are rather familiar to Pynchon's readers and commentators: historical fact or counter-factual fiction? Isolated event or part of a vast machination? Real or imaginary? Literal or figurative (McHale 2012 108)? It is a matter of what I have elsewhere called "ontological uncertainty" (Rossi 6-15) in relation to Philip K. Dick (a writer who has only slowly been admitted to the postmodernist canon)—a concept that I have developed drawing from Jameson, McHale and Todorov, being well aware that the issue of ontology (a term used by theorists of literary postmodernism both in its original philosophical meaning and in a slightly modified narratological version) has always been paramount in the

debate on postmodernist authors (McHale 1987 7-11), and underpins also the most recent discussion on postmodernist literature in general and Pynchon's own version of postmodernism in particular (McHale 2012).³

A much more complex and multi-layered stereoscopic effect can be found in an earlier novel by Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (1997), where something that does not seem to be much more than a small detail meant to strengthen the "realistic" effect of the passage is revealed to be a node in one of those networks that Kathryn Hume sees as emerging at the end of the novel (Hume 59, 62). The fictional artefact—which, as we shall see, is not completely fictional—is not a harmless three-volume novel but a gun (or two guns); though apparently less readable than a book (even a book whose apparition is definitely fleeting, like James' novel), these devices or machines can be interpreted, inasmuch as "technology in [Pynchon's] writing is understood more often in relation to historical or political issues than simply as paraphernalia or props for the story" (Dalsgaard 158).

Our investigation about firearms in *M&D* will show us how Pynchon may enforce the paradigms of realism while at the same time *playing* with the conventions of realism, achieving a condition of ontological uncertainty by putting two different stage-props on his narrative stage, but letting us believe that they are one, the same weapon appearing both in South Africa and in the American colonies. This is done thanks to the very size of the novel, the strategic positioning of the stage-props (and the contexts in which they appear), plus a beguiling star-shaped symbol, not to mention the reader's propensity to see patterns and identities. However, these weapons, once properly identified, may allow us to stereoscopically perceive depths which add to our understanding of the 18th and 21st Century world.

Since the novel takes place in the second half of the 18th Century, we will deal with old irons that may only be of interest to antiquarians and collectors, weapons whose edges look rather blunted today, and less on the bleeding side of technological developments. Yet such exhibits will prove to have a story to tell, no less complex than the plot of *The Princess Casamassima*.

The first of these old weapons appears at the end of the South Africa episode (Chapter 10), whose climactic moment is the 1761 transit of Venus. As usual in Pynchon, the historical fact has unpredictable fictional effects: the Transit seems to have a beneficial influence on the colonial society, inasmuch as after June 5th, the day of the astronomical event, an oddly peaceful summer ensues, a time in which "all Intrigue lies under Moratorium, as if the Goddess of Love in her visitation had admonish'd all who would invoke

her, to search their Hearts, and try not to betray her quite so much" (99.10). Dixon notices that the Dutch colonists are "beginning to talk to their Slaves" and that there are "few, if any, beatings" (100.10), so that the June-September period of 1761 could be called a Summer of Love, foreshadowing that of 1967—a superimposition that may well be read as one more example of textual stereoscopy.

The gun appears when the effects of the transit begin to fade away; when "Masters and Mistresses resume the abuse of their Slaves, [...] [r]iding in and out of Town now may often be observ'd White Horsemen, carrying long Rifles styl'd 'Sterloops,' each with an inverted Silver Star upon the Cheek-Piece" (101.10). No doubt the image of the armed White Horsemen suggests several ideas: the threat of violence, colonial domination, a hint at the four horsemen of the Apocalypse (one of whom does ride a white horse [Revelation 6:1-2]). As for the inverted star, it is—according to Éliphas Lévi, the 19th Century occult author and magician—a symbol of evil and black magic (Lévi 69). The surrealistic "summer of love" of 1761, plus the Biblical and magic symbolism may well induce readers to think that the Sterloop rifle is no more than one of Pynchon's inventions, like the Trystero or the Chums of Chance.

The term Sterloop reappears in Chapter 34, when Mason and Dixon visit Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the town where the Paxton boys, a vigilante group, have slaughtered a group of peaceful and friendly Native Americans (a real historical event which took place on December 27, 1763). Here we are shown an *image* of the ominous *sterloop* and its infernal symbol:

"[...] The first stop upon any Tour is acknowledg'd to be The Dutch Rifle, whither the Boys, hush'd be the Name ever spoken, having left their Horses at Mr. Slough's, repair'd just before Doing the Deed."

When they see what is upon the Tavern Sign, Mason and Dixon exchange a Look,— the Weapon depicted, Black upon White, is notable for the Device upon its Stock, a Silver Star of five Points, revers'd so that two point up and one down,— a sure sign of evil at work, universally recogniz'd as the Horns of the D—I. No one would adorn a Firearm with it, who was not wittingly in the service of that Prince. This is not the first time the Surveyors have seen it,— at the Cape, usually right-side-up, it is known as the Sterloop,— a sort of good luck charm, out in the Bush. But ev'ry now and then, mostly on days of treacherous Wind or Ill-Spirits, one or both had spied upon

a Rifle an inverted Star, much like what they observe now, against the Sky, plumb in the windless Forenoon. (342.34)

Here the noun *sterloop* no longer defines a rifle but a symbol, "a sort of good luck charm", which, if turned upside down, becomes "a sure sign of evil at work". Yet one has to notice that the rifles Mason and Dixon have seen at the Cape had "an inverted Silver Star" (101.10) on their cheekpieces (i.e. the raised section on the side of a stock that should provide support for the shooter's cheek); only now (twenty-four chapters later) we are told that there were also good luck charms at the Cape, harmless right-side-up Sterloops. More than 200 pages have passed, and the Cape episode is evoked but somewhat changed—complicated, actually. Adding details strengthens the realism of the scene, but there is a sort of bewildering shifting of terms and objects, rifles turning into symbols, symbols that are duplicated (stars that may or may not be inverted): such inconsistencies blur the picture.

However, the presence of the Sterloop (now a symbol) in Pennsylvania is not explained, though the name of the tavern might hint at a Dutch origin of the weapon; and the Cape horsemen were surely Dutch. Pennsylvania was a part of New Netherland, a Dutch North-American colony, from 1655 to 1664, then again in 1673-1674; many Dutch settlers remained there after the colony was ultimately ceded to England in 1674. But the term "Dutch" might also be read in a totally different way: the Pennsylvania Dutch are in fact descendants of the German settlers who came from Southern Germany in the 17th and 18th Century. In this phrase, "Dutch" is a misspelling or folk-rendering of the German adjective *deutsch*, "German". If the Dutch Rifle is the product of Pennsylvania Dutch people, even the indirect connection to the Dutch colony of the Cape is severed.

The connection between the symbol on the rifle painted on the tavern sign and German immigrants is strengthened by the Hex signs that are still painted on Pennsylvania Dutch Country barns (Richman 53-4). Such signs have been interpreted as purely ornamental, but also as talismans; thus one has to wonder whether Pynchon is not hinting at American folk art. On the other hand, the Cape guns and their ominous symbols are mentioned in the passage about the tavern sign, not in a description of a nearby barn; and hex signs are usually hexagonal or octagonal, not five-pointed pentagrams—moreover, they are not usually connected with the devil.

Things get hazier in the forty-second chapter, set in Lepton Castle, the Iron Plantation (i.e. ironworks) of Lord and Lady Lepton. During the comedic episode of the Theft of the Tub (undoubtedly a pun on Swift's 1704 satire *A*

Tale of a Tub), Mason and Dixon “encounter a Dutch Rifle with a Five-pointed Star upon its Cheek-Piece, inverted, in Silver highly polished, shining thro’ the Grain upon the Wrist and Comb that billow there in stormy Intricacy, set casually above some subsidiary Hearth in a lightly-frequented Room.– A Polaris of Evil...” (427-8.42).

The appearance of the rifle in the mansion of a rich steel industrialist is not surprising. Instead, it is the reaction of the two Britons that is unexpected, as it consists of “the Surveyors’ Bickering as to the Rifle’s Provenance,– Mason insisting ’tis a Cape Rifle, Dixon an American one” (428.42). Such an uncertainty may be puzzling in retrospect, because when the Lads had seen the rifles at the Cape there was no doubt that those were local weapons (called “sterloop”); the rifle on the tavern sign in Lancaster was more ambiguous, maybe Dutch, maybe related to the Pennsylvania Dutch (who are actually German), but the two characters did not argue about this; it is only in Lepton Castle that different opinions are expressed about the origin of the gun.

Anyway, there are signs which should tell us whether the rifle is American or South-African; this is the opinion of a connoisseur, Mr Wade LeSpark, who suggests:

You can usually tell where one was made, from its Patch-Box, (...) – the Finials being each peculiar to its Gunsmith, a kind of personal signature... look ye, here it is again, your inverted Star, work’d into the Piercings, as a Cryptogram... withal, this Brass is unusual,–pale, as you’d say,– high Zinc content, despite the British embargo, and sand-cast rather than cut from sheet.... (428.42)

Mr LeSpark’s opinion about the rifle is highly authoritative as he “made his Fortune before the War, selling weapons to French and British, Settlers and Indians alike,– Knives, Tomahawks, Rifles, Hand-Cannons in the old Dutch Style, Grenades, small Bombs” (31.4). Being an expert, he can decipher the technical details (428.42): the rifle Mason and Dixon have found is, in his opinion, a “Forest Weapon, match’d to a single Prey, heavier than a Squirrel, not quite heavy as a Deer.... In the Purity as you’d say of its Intent, ’tis as Mr Dixon surmises, American, yet not the Work of any Gunsmith known to Mr LeSpark” (429.42).

Therefore, after the undoubtedly Dutch rifles seen at the Cape, and a weapon whose origin is uncertain (Dutch? German? Dutch-American? German-American?), here we have an authentically American rifle—at least according to an expert—though it has been taken for a “Dutch rifle” (427-8.42)

by Mason. Is this just a matter of incompetence, or is there some resemblance between the Cape guns, the rifle at Lepton Castle and the picture on the tavern sign? And how can the presence of the inverted star on all these rifles in different places be explained, other than as just one of the many surrealistic inventions of the author?

Before we answer such questions we have to take into account the fourth apparition of the starry rifle in Chapter 70. This is a very important part of the novel inasmuch as it tells us about the end of the Line and the moment when the main characters reach their westernmost point (the Ohio River). Here the surveyors, stunned by the beauty of the river, are "surpriz'd by a Party of Indians in elaborate Paint-Work" (680.70). One of the native Americans is Catfish, a Delaware Chief whom Mason and Dixon have already met in the preceding chapter (673.69); but what strikes the two surveyors is Catfish's weapon: "Mason sees it first,- then, tipp'd by his frozen silence, Dixon. Catfish is packing a Lancaster Rifle, slung in a Scabbard upon his Saddle, with an inverted Pentacle upon the Stock, unmistakable in the Moon-light" (680.70).

The Englishmen are scared by the dreadful symbol on the rifle, but also because they are afraid of the consequences of their trespassing: hence their comical attempts to negate their very presence in the place where Catfish has just met them: "Actually," says Dixon, "we only just arriv'd, so it isn't as if we've 'seen' the River, if that poses any sort of problem,-" and Mason adds: "- and it certainly isn't as if we're planning to settle here,-" (id.).

Catfish then slides the rifle out of the scabbard but, luckily enough, he only wants to talk about it. Before speaking he notices "the Sterloop as if for the first time" (id.), and then explains: "You think this is my Rifle? No! I took this Rifle! From a White man I have wish'd to meet for a long time. He was a very bad man. Even White People hated him. Beautiful Piece, isn't it?" (680-1. 70). We are then told that Catfish has killed and scalped the owner of the "sterloop" rifle, although the novel does not tell us who he was. The White man scalped by Catfish might be Lord Lepton, because he was the original owner of the rifle, but Pynchon does not overtly tell us that.⁴ Yet in the Lepton Castle (or better, Plantation) episode (Chapters 41-42) we are not told or shown much that may explain why Lord Lepton, a ruined British aristocrat who settles in the American colonies and becomes a miner (he is also described as "a journeyman" [416.41]) and then a successful entrepreneur in the steel industry, should leave his iron plantation and his wife and move to the then wild Ohio only to be scalped and robbed of his rifle by the Delaware Chief.

There is a relation, however, between Lepton and firearms: after squandering his fortune in Britain, he became a "Nabob" (301.30) in America by producing "[i]ron in an hundred shapes" (411.41), shapes that are widely "used against living Bodies,- cutting, chaining, penetrating sort of Activities" which are "a considerable Sector of the Iron Market (...) directed to offenses against Human, and of course Animal, flesh" (412.41). Yet the character Pynchon shows us does not resemble the "Monomaniack" expected by Mason (681.70) or the evil White man Catfish has "wish'd to meet for a long time" (*id.*). In Chapter 41 Lord Lepton is more a fop than a bloodthirsty frontiersman; women seem to be much more attractive to him (who firmly believes that "Bodices are for ripping" [419.41]) than solitary frontier adventures à la Natty Bumppo (who grew up, according to Fenimore Cooper, among Delaware Indians).

Besides, the text does not overtly say that the rifle on the mantelpiece in Lepton Castle is the same rifle Catfish has taken from the evil White Man. The surveyors actually recognize the symbol, the "Sterloop", the "inverted Pentacle upon the Stock" (680.70), the same sign of ill-omen they have met at the Cape, in Lancaster, and in the Lepton Castle; moreover, one should notice that the rifle in its entirety is called "a Lancaster Rifle" (*italics mine*), as if it should not be considered something already seen by the protagonists.

In the end, the text does not explicitly tell us from whom Catfish took the rifle. What we are told is that Catfish had known the White Man well before he killed him (he had wished to meet him for a long time), and that something he has told or shown to Mason and Dixon allows them to recognize the White man as somebody they have met (681.70).

All in all, it may well be that there is no real connection among the four weapons, all the apparitions being a sort of narrative *trompe l'oeil*, the diegetic equivalent of an optical illusion; Pynchon placed the four weapons in the text in such a way to induce readers to see it as the same weapon, due to the limits of our memory when faced with such vast and complex textual constructs as Pynchon's major novels. Moreover, we might be, after all, trapped in one of those quandaries concerning the troubles of representation, or the problematic relation between text and the "real" world (whatever is meant by that term today), as one of the four apparitions of the rifle is not "physical" but depicted on a sign; in fact Mr Wade LeSpark comments on the picture on the tavern sign: "too much, out here, failing to mark the Boundaries between Reality and Representation" (429.42)—and such a failure in boundary marking (particularly relevant in a novel about a Line) may trap us readers too between real rifles and represented ones. The network connecting the four

apparitions of the rifle(s) may be similar to "astronomer's practice of tying the stars together" (Hume 62), thus tracing patterns that are wholly subjective; yet, as Hume suggests, "[i]f we connect the points, we will be able to read the messages" (Hume 63).

The parallel with astronomy is not gratuitous as the four apparitions are connected not only by the gun(s); there is also the star symbol *sterloop*. This is a Dutch compound word, whose components are *ster*, "star" and *loop*, which may mean both "barrel" and "course," meaning "the direction of continuing movement." Hence the Dutch word may mean either (1) the course of a star or (2) the lap of honour. Since athletics bear no relation to this at all, a literal interpretation of the term might reconnect the ominous rifle with the astronomical/astrological motifs of the novel, linking several textual threads with one of those interlinguistic puns Pynchon likes to throw in now and then. The *sterloop* might then hint at both a part of the rifle (the barrel) and the course of stars; its devilish character might imply both the fires of hell (and that takes us back to iron, and steel, because you cannot produce any iron/steel device without fire and a blast furnace—like those in Lepton Castle) and astronomical/astrological speculations (suggesting, perhaps, necromancy, an art where stars, or better pentagrams/pentacles, play an important role).

It is surely a sophisticated play upon words, one of those with which Pynchon's readers are undoubtedly familiar. But words refer to things: not directly "material" objects here, as this is a work of fiction, and of a very peculiar sort, whose relations with factuality are rather complicated; yet the relation is suggested by the author himself. Such a relation, however, becomes puzzling as this funny (in both meanings of the adjective) Dutch word indicates different things in different parts of the novel (rifles or a symbol); should we then keep sight of Revd Cherrycoke's warning that the story of the surveyors is told by "an untrustworthy Remembrancer (...) imbécile with age" (8.1)? But ontological uncertainty is neither just a way to call into doubt the representative capacity of a narrative text nor a technique designed simply to remind us that what we are reading is fiction. We already know that, might be the curt answer to such metanarrative commonplaces. Pynchon is playing a much more complex game.

In fact, *Sterloops* really existed in 18th and 19th century Cape Town (or Kaapstad) and the surrounding Dutch colony of the Cape (Storey 694-7). Firearms historians tell us that Dutch colonists used to defend themselves from African wildlife (and Africans) with long-barrelled smoothbore guns called *bobbejaanboud*, or "baboon's thigh", due to the peculiar shape of their

stocks; these powerful flintlock weapons were also called *sterloop* (meaning "starry barrel") because "the majority of them had a star engraved on the top of the barrel, just forward of the lock" (Berkovitch 14). The star symbol was so popular at the Cape that it was also added to guns imported from Britain after the colony was annexed by the British in 1806.

Berkovitch suggests what might have been the origins of the sterloop sign:

There are many theories concerning the sterloop as it is not unique to South Africa. Kentucky Rifles from Pennsylvania, USA, also have them in some form or other, usually inlaid in the butt. It was nicknamed the "Pennsylvania Hex".

In an article in the *Gun Digest*, Maj. R.O. Ackerman Says: "The 8-pointed star is a popular motif in Pennsylvania Dutch folk art, in which it signifies 'abundance and goodwill'. From this source, it quite possibly derived from the 'Rosenkreuz' or Rose and Cross, which was a 15th Century German Symbol of religious freedom and private land ownership... Archaeologists attribute the star to an ancient sun cult, to whom it meant fertility.

"Religion and science (often at odds) combine forces to suggest the most interesting origin of our 8-pointed star. Legend says that it is the Star of Bethlehem, and thus was used as a talisman to guide the riflemen along the proper path - through life, as through the wilderness." Most South African gun collectors feel that Major Ackerman's first theory is correct, i.e. that it is derived from Dutch folk art, because the first non-military flintlocks from Holland had the star, and later also the English weapons which would have been sold to the people of mainly Dutch extraction. (Berkovitch 14-5)

One has to notice that there seems to be a misunderstanding at work here: Berkovitch interprets Ackerman's hypothesis about the origins of the Pennsylvania Hex as pointing at a Dutch provenance of the symbol, which would be the same origin of the Cape *sterloop*. Unfortunately, as we have seen, the Pennsylvania Dutch are actually German-Americans, not the descendants of the settlers from the Netherlands. However, what is interesting is that Berkovitch connects the Cape colony and the weapons used by its inhabitants with those from Colonial America and the USA; he subsequently explains that a classical American firearm, the Kentucky Rifle, was brought to South Africa, possibly by an American-born Englishman called Jacob Cuyler (33-4); that Colt guns were advertised in South Africa by an American salesman, Thomas Peard (30); such connections must have been

noticed by Pynchon if—as one may reasonably suppose, though not prove with hard evidence—Berkovitch's book is one of the sources of *M&D*.

Even more interesting, from our point of view, is this remark on the differences between America and South Africa from the point of view of the use and diffusion of firearms:

In comparing South Africa with America, both of which were colonised during the same period, we find a great variation in weapons. The biggest danger that the early frontiersmen in America had to face was man, while in Africa they were confronted by dangerous and often thick animals. Therefore, while the Americans were happy to use the small bore "Kentucky" rifle, his counterpart in South Africa preferred a large smooth-bore firearm which could use either ball or shot. (9)

This remark is partially contradicted in the rest of the text, inasmuch as Berkovitch mentions the Commando Law (20), which compelled the Dutch settlers to form into the Burgher Militia, a paramilitary corps activated in times of such crises as the attacks by "marauding Bushmen in 1715" (20), or the 1st and 2nd Frontier Wars (1779 and 1789 respectively), where the members of the Burgher Militia used their *bobbejaanbouds* against the Xhosa people. Those powerful hunting rifles, then, were not only used against "dangerous and often thick animals". On the other hand, the American Long Rifle, also called Pennsylvania Rifle (from the place where these firearms were mostly produced), Kentucky Rifle (from the place where they were initially used) or Lancaster Rifle (from the name of the Pennsylvania town where many of these weapons were built), was not primarily used to shoot hostile Native Americans (Lux 365-6): it was more often used as a hunting firearm, as "[t]he long rifle was particularly suited for woodland hunting" (Lux 365).

However, Berkovitch helps us to make a distinction: the guns wielded by the white horsemen in the first apparition of the sterloop should be the smoothbore *bobbejaanboud*, not rifles (*pace* Pynchon), while the firearm at the Lepton Plantation must necessarily be a rifle, according to its description by Wade LeSpark: "the Twist upon the Rifling inside a bit faster than one in forty-eight, suggesting in its tighter Vortex a smaller charge, a shorter range..." (429.42).

We are thus dealing with two different weapons built in two different places, yet there is a common element, creating a continuity among the four episodes: the inverted pentagram which Pynchon called "sterloop",

the upside-down star of ill-omen, possibly a sign of the Devil. And this is something that is definitely fiction: the pictures of sterloop signs in Berkovitch's book (15-6, 61) do not show inverted pentagrams; moreover, the photographs of Pennsylvania Dutch Hex signs show either eight-pointed stars or pentagrams that are not inverted at all. Hence the inverted stars have to be read as something Pynchon deliberately inserted in his novel; it remains to be understood what they could possibly mean.

Technical details—as it often happens in Pynchon—are quite important if we want to decipher the constellation of guns and symbols we have traced. Technology is a source of metaphors, symbols and structures often used by Pynchon to signify well beyond their original meaning;⁵ one should in fact meditate on what Richard Powers, a writer and critic who has explored the complexities of technological and scientific imagination, said about the traces to be found in any technology, considered as “not some anti-human soullessness imposed upon us by malevolent mechanical, disembodied will,” but as “the trace of our own souls, recording the shape of our desires as we struggle to comprehend and elude material constraint” (Powers). In other words, the machines we build may have very practical purposes, but bear traces, marks, we might even say signs of something as immaterial as our culture and its symbolic systems, which determine what has been called soul and whatever we mean by desire.

Material culture might be seen as a mirror of the immaterial, the imaginary—even though the metaphor of the mirror may be misleading. It is probably safer to say that our material products are also signs and symbols, hence part of that vast, open-ended system we call culture. Indeed, this is something that has already been discussed by Dalsgaard, who acknowledges different approaches to a hermeneutics of technology (Dalsgaard 158-9). Hence firearms may be powerful symbols, surely endowed with a fearful symmetry that Pynchon has repeatedly and painstakingly put to use in his fictions.

Some examples may confirm this hypothesis. Consider Porpentine's gentlemanly—albeit obsolete—single-shot pistol in the final scenes of “Under the Rose”: that pistol will turn out to be fatal when the British secret agent comes to face someone who, like Bongo-Shaftesbury, wields a revolver (“Under the Rose”, 136). Thus the old-fashioned single-shot pistol embodies all those chivalric values in which Porpentine more or less consciously believes: the shape of his desires, the trace of his own soul, as opposed to the soulless, anti-human, mechanical efficiency of the revolver. This opposition is made starker by the fact that the owner of the more modern pistol has an electric

switch on his forearm which is said to condition his (or its?) behaviour ("Under the Rose" 131).

Another example of Pynchon's interest in (and literary use of) firearms can be found in *Gravity's Rainbow*. One of the main characters, the British commando officer Geoffrey "Pirate" Prentice, does not use a Sten submachine gun like the rest of the staff at the White Visitation, but a heavy Mexican Mendoza 7 mm (whose bullets are difficult to find in London); this unconventional choice characterizes him as an oddball, something that he is well aware of, as he says: "Am I going to let the extra weight make a difference? It's my *crotchet*, I'm indifferent to weight" (GR 107).

The same may be said about Katje Borgesius' ancestor Frans Van der Groov, one of the Dutch colonists at the Mauritius islands who exterminated the dodos. Frans hunts the big birds with his *haakbus*, that he uses "for reasons he could not explain" (GR 108) though it is heavier than the new *snaphaan*: "he felt a nostalgia about the haakbus... he didn't mind the extra weight, it was *his crotchet*" (GR 109). Like so many other Pynchonian characters, Frans is an oddball, just like Prentice. And once again, Pynchon's choice of terms is not at all casual, but bespeaks accurate researching: the *haakbus* is the Dutch equivalent of the arquebus, a smoothbore gun used from the 15th to the 17th century. Such a firearm was fired through a matchlock, effectively described by Pynchon in his novel: "the slow match, soaked in wine, held in the jaws of the serpentine, came blooming redly downward, its heat on his cheek *like my own small luminary*, he wrote home to Hendrik the older brother, *the ruler of my Sign...*" (GR 108). "He" is Frans, busy shooting into extinction the dodos of the Mauritius islands; and fascinated by astrology, like Pynchon himself, so that already in his 1973 novel a metaphoric relation was established between a part of a firearm and a star.⁶

The other weapon mentioned in this episode of *GR* is the *snaphaan*; this is the Dutch name of the snaphance or snaphaunce (both English nouns derive from the Dutch word), a successor of the arquebus first introduced in the 1550s, whose firing mechanism was lighter, more reliable and easier to use than the serpentine of the arquebus. Snaphaans are mentioned by Berkovitch in his book on the Cape gunsmiths, when he talks about the Dutch settlers coming to the Cape colony with their *snaphaan* (Berkovitch 9), to be soon replaced by the more advanced and powerful *bobbejaanboud*.

Though today these long and heavy guns are antiques cherished by collectors, the *bobbejaanboud* was a step forward in the technological

evolution of firearms, inasmuch as their flintlocks (introduced at the beginning of the 17th Century) were more reliable than the snaphaan's mechanism (a more primitive version of the flintlock). It is then easy to see that all these weapons, regardless of the novel in which they appear, trace the technological evolution of firearms; and the Kentucky/Pennsylvania/Lancaster Rifle, being a rifle, not a smoothbore firearm, was another step forward. In order to better understand what Pynchon is hinting at with the apparitions of the ominous rifle, we will have to make a historical detour, following the evolution of firearms from smoothbore weapons to guns with rifled barrels. It is one of those technological watersheds in which mechanics, chemistry and metallurgy interact with politics, economy and religion; a complex interplay of forces that is somewhat embodied by the shape itself of the guns we have been talking about, including the Lancaster rifle; a complex interplay of which Pynchon seems to be all too well aware, and one that further complicates the stereoscopic superimposition of America and South Africa.

In fact the introduction of rifling allowed for a far greater accuracy of firing ([Masini-Rotasso 143](#)), but rifles were slow to be reloaded compared to smoothbore guns. Thus they were first used as hunting weapons, in the 17th and 18th century, in those parts of central Europe where big game was common (Germany, Austria, Switzerland and part of Scandinavia); in that kind of hunting accuracy is more important than a high firing rate—a main concern for soldiers in a battlefield. But at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Imperial Austrian army employed Croatian hunters, who were outstanding sharpshooters and ordinarily used rifles, as soldiers in the so called *Jäger* regiments (*Jäger* being the German term for "hunter"). The use of rifles, with their dreadful firing accuracy, was considered nonetheless unfair in European wars: a sharpshooter might have easily aimed at officers, not soldiers; and officers were almost always aristocrats who thought that being killed in battle by a peasant was definitely not a socially acceptable death (and might spread dangerous ideas of social levelling). Thus rifles were first used by the so-called *Grenzenregimenten* (i.e. "Border Regiments") against the Turks ([Masini-Rotasso 160](#)), because what was unfair in the gentlemanly wars between Christians was allowed in the much less gentlemanly wars against that ancient enemy of Christian kingdoms.

Then, once the ice had been broken, rifles were used also in wars between Christians, such as the American Revolution. The exploits of the American riflemen at Bunker Hill and Saratoga ([Masini-Rotasso 162](#); [Lux 366](#)) are here particularly relevant: while the British troops fought with smoothbore

rifles, the famous "Brown Bess" musket (Masini-Rotasso 127-8), which ensured a relatively fast reloading, hence a greater volume of fire, the colonists—being all hunters and marksmen—relied on the accuracy of their rifles. The British soon discovered that the fire of the Kentucky Rifles used by the American rebels could create havoc even among their well-trained infantrymen. In fact Kentucky Rifles—originally called Pennsylvania Rifles—earned their name due to another military feat that took place during the War of 1812, when sharpshooters armed with American long rifles stopped an attack of the British infantry at the battle of New Orleans. It was the song "The Hunters from Kentucky," celebrating the feats of the Kentuckian sharpshooters, that made the long rifle famous as "Kentucky Rifle" (Lux 367). No wonder that Pynchon never uses this name when talking about the ominous rifles, as the story of Mason and Dixon and their line takes place well before the year 1815, when the song gave a new name to the Pennsylvania/Lancaster Rifle.

The long rifles are then surrounded by a myth which is only strengthened by the fact that they are the firearm of choice of Natty Bumppo, the legendary frontiersman of Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*; no wonder that in *The Last of the Mohicans* one of his nicknames is *La Longue Carabine* ("the long carbine"). In American literature, then, a rifle is always something more than a rifle, to quote another postmodernist novel, William T. Vollmann's *The Rifles* (Vollmann 132), whose articulate reflections on firearms bear relation—as we shall see—to *M&D*. Rifles have a lot to do with such fundamental elements of the American identity as the frontier and the frontiersman; they were a key factor in the struggle to dominate a vast and wild continent and the fight for independence from European powers. We are dealing here with foundation myths, and Pynchon is always aiming at deconstructing such myths, by showing their disquieting downside.

It is not just a matter of placing the ominous inverted star on the rifles. Pynchon himself pokes fun at the symbol by means of Mr. LeSpark's commentary on the "Sign of the Dutch Rifle" Mason and Dixon have seen in Lancaster Town (429.42). According to the businessman, the sign was

Clearly meant (...) to depict a local Piece,— its own Finial, 's I recall, being in the form of a Daisy, which the Gunsmiths 'round Lancaster favor... tho' there remains a standing Quarrel, as to what Rifle may have serv'd as the Model,— that is, if any at all did,—too much, out here, failing to mark the Boundaries between Reality and Representation. The Tavern's Sign was commission'd of an unknown traveling Artisan (...). One story has it, that, lacking a Brush, he went out and shot a Squirrel, with whose tail, he then painted the

Portrait of the very Rifle us'd to obtain it,— that Star may've been put on later, out of simple Whim,— not perhaps did he ever make a Distinction, between two points up, and two down. (*id.*)

Of course the two surveyors may be over-reading the inverted pentagram and adding a nice piece of tall tale to the story; but this does not mean that the disquieting apparitions of the weapon can be nonchalantly defused. The presence of the devil is ultimately less important than the fact that the American long rifle is presented as an avatar of the much less famous *bobbejaanboud* (so that the Cape gun is a sort of preterite of the much more celebrated Pennsylvania Rifle—at least seen from an American point-of-view); and both weapons were instruments of colonial appropriation and domination, something that Pynchon tells us through the details (some of which technical) scattered throughout the four apparitions of the weapons.

Hence we should not underestimate the modalities of production of the Cape guns and their American avatar. The Cape gunsmiths, whose activity is reconstructed in Berkovitch's essay, heavily relied on slave labour before 1834, when slavery was abolished in South Africa (by that time a British colony). Gun parts were imported from the Netherlands first, then from Britain, and subsequently assembled in the Cape gun workshops ([Berkovitch 34](#)), mostly by Malay slaves. Once they were set free, the Cape gunsmiths kept them as salaried workers, but then preferred to import complete weapons from Britain, provided they had the good-luck sterloop engraved on their barrels. This form of small-size industrial activity based on slavery is not so different from what we have in Lepton's "well-guarded, and in the estimate of some, iniquitous Iron-Plantation" ([411.41](#)), a plantation which does not produce cotton, corn or tobacco, but several industrially produced iron devices, among which those used for "cutting, chaining, penetrating sort of Activities" ([412.41](#)), hence also firearms, as they too are "directed to offenses against Human, and of course Animal, flesh" ([412.41](#)). And the weapons are produced in the Iron-Plantation thanks to slave labour; this is made clear by the Rev^d Cherrycoke when he objects to Mr Le Spark's admiration for the peaceful and well-ordered activity of the workers (so much so that they look plunged "into timeless *Encyclopedia-Light*" [[411.41](#)]) by denouncing that

[w]hat is not visible in [Le Spark's] rendering (...) is the Negro Slavery, that goes on making such no doubt exquisite moments possible,—the inhuman ill-usage, the careless abundance of pain inflicted, the unpric'd Coercion necessary to yearly profits beyond the projectings even of proud Satan. ([412.41](#))

The brief evocation of Satan, even if hyperbolic, may be reconnected to the necromantic symbolism of the inverted pentagram on the rifles, thus encouraging us to read these textual traces as pointing to colonialism as the ultimate historical reality shaping our dreams and desires (which in turn, according to Richard Powers' insight, shape our instruments—which are often, alas, instruments of death); colonialism as territorial occupation, in the 18th Century, which has been replaced by the complex, murky and far-from-equal relations between former colonies and former colonial powers that we have today. The inverted star is also strongly tied to the enterprise of the two protagonists, two "lads" who are often busy gazing at the starry sky, but seem to be pursued by the stars of ill omen engraved on firearms' barrels; the star as destiny, then, the individual destiny of the two scientists (pawns in a much larger power game), and the collective destiny of the Western Civilization in its phase of global conquest (cf. Cowart).

Here Pynchon is in any case working along lines already traced in his previous novels. No wonder that stars, rifles and colonial domination were already interconnected in the sequence of *GR* we have already quoted, where Frans Van der Groov thinks that the slow match of his *haakbus* is "like [his] own small luminary", that is, the star which acts as "the ruler of [his] Sign" (*GR* 108). Weisenburger's Companion does not tell us what sign of the zodiac and what star in the night sky they are; nevertheless, we have an ironic embodiment of the ancient principle of astrology, "as above, so below" (a sort of hidden law of *M&D*). The idea that the disposition of celestial bodies in the sky mirrors what is happening or is going to happen on the earth is also expressed by Mason himself, when he declares at the end of the novel that the Bible of a deist like him "is nature, wherein the Pentateuch, is the Sky. I have found there, written ev'ry night, in Astral Gematria, Messages of Great Urgency to our Time (...)" (779.78). Ravings of a demented old man, or a return of one of Pynchon's favourite motifs—it does not really matter whether based on a personal interest or hobby (be it harmless or not)—that of astrological interpretations. Besides, this should explain why Pynchon did not choose the most common name of the smoothbore Cape guns, *bobbejaanboud*, but preferred *sterloop*; the latter contains both the star and its course, hinting at both the symbol engraved on barrels and astrological/astronomic concepts.

There is another connection between Frans, the Dutch dodo-slayer and *M&D*, one should add. In *GR* we have the passage where Frans sits all day staring at a single dodo's egg, aiming at it with his gun: "There they were, the silent egg and the crazy Dutchman, and the hookgun that linked them forever, framed, brilliantly motionless as any Vermeer" (*GR* 109). The line of

sight between Frans' eye and the egg is at the same time the course (Dutch *loop*, hence recalled in the name of the Cape gun in the other novel) of knowledge and the course of destruction. This may remind us of the scene in *M&D* where Cornelius Vroom aims his Elephant Gun (a weapon that, being endowed with a "Fork'd Support" resembles Frans' *haakbus*) at Dixon, "with some smoldering naval slow-match he carries in his teeth igniting a giant full Dutch-ounce blast whose Ball ricochets off the roof-tiles" (147.14)? Is not Cornelius' running amok (148.14) as deranged as the crazy Dutchman settler motionlessly staring at the egg? Isn't his Elephant Gun a sterloop?

This may also remind us of Stig's remark about the American long rifles: "these Lancaster County Rifles, with an amazing fidelity, create their own Vistoes of Moving Lead, straight as a Ray of Light for a Mile or more" (613.62). Disquieting as it may be, the trajectory of a bullet (or shot, in the case of a Cape gun) is also a line of sight, knowledge and ultimately science. Like the Line traced by the two protagonists, this stands for rationalism (Coward 264), for "the conversion of common to private, of nature to commerce, of openness to enclosure, of wholeness to division" (Schaub 288), in other words for colonial appropriation, which also entails geography, cartography, surveying, and other forms of knowledge, from anthropology to linguistics. The linear, geometrical rationality of the Enlightenment tracing a course which leads to death and destruction, to exploitation and barbarism: this chimes in with what is now a tradition of criticism of Western rationality, from Adorno and Marcuse to Zygmunt Bauman, providing a theoretical background that is not to be overlooked. Suffice it to say that the rifles in the novel are overtly connected to the Line itself, which is *M&D*'s emblem and *raison d'être*, its maybe not central, but surely dominant trope (here "dominant" has the meaning with which it has been used by McHale [McHale 1987 6]); and the Line is at the same time the product of science (and technology) and its philosophical precondition.

Once we have ascertained what key role is played by firearms in *M&D*, one cannot help mentioning another gun which plays a crucial role in *Vineland*, the Smith & Wesson "Chief's Special" revolver Brock Vond gives Frenesi Gates so that she may deliver it to Rex, one of the members of the 24fps collective (*Vineland* 240-2). Hayles has already analysed the blatant sexual connotations of this revolver (Hayles 225-6), and how it embodies a male bonding between the arch-cop Vond and the "pure" would-be revolutionary Rex (who will insanely use it to shoot the charismatic campus leader Weed Atman [*Vineland* 246]). But the choice of the weapon is particularly felicitous, as its name is "Chief's Special": it was chosen at the International Association

of Chiefs of Police convention in fall 1950 (Ahern 47), when the then new S&W Model 36 revolver was presented to its prospective users, and the police chiefs were given an opportunity to vote the weapon's name. Being a handgun specifically designed for policemen, and baptized, so to say, by policemen, it is the right weapon for Brock Vond's plot against the collective. Moreover, the Model 36 revolver was created in a particular historical moment, when American gunmakers had to resume normal handgun production after the W.W.II years. The particular historical situation recuperated in *Vineland* (set in the Reaganite Eighties but relentlessly getting back to the Countercultural Sixties) is one of a double war: one external (Viet-Nam) and one internal (police repression, COINTELPRO). All the historical differences notwithstanding, once again we find a double use (and double meaning) for these guns: like the *bobbejaanboud* (hunting gun but also used by the Burgher Militia for operations of colonial repression) or the Lancaster Rifles (hunting weapons also used at war and for self-defence), the products of the American gunmakers were used both on the external and the internal front.⁷ Not necessarily the same guns, even though the gunmakers are the same; and those gunmakers (another tie to the historical context) are no more the little gunsmith workshops of the Cape or Lancaster County, but big corporations catering to the vast W.W.II and Viet-Nam armies.

A rifle, then, is always something more than a rifle: this remark by Vollmann is echoed by a passage describing Mr. LeSpark and Jeremiah Dixon's contemplation of the be-starred rifle in Lepton Castle:

In an Exchange of glances with Mr. Dixon (...) each has soon reveal'd so far unconfess'd Depths of Admiration for the Rifle,- despite all the ill-fortune that might descend, from no more than touching it,— for its brutal remoteness nearly Classickal, as for the sacramental Fidelity with which it bodies the Grace peculiar to the Slayer,— no object that fails so to carry Death just inside its Earthly Contours, can elicit Desire so steeply or immediately... (430.42)

The "Chief's Special" episode in *Vineland* told us something about the ability of firearms to bear multiple significations which reconnect them to wider cultural frames passing through the multiple layers of meaning in these texts (Hume 60-2) like faults across geological strata.⁸ This passage from *M&D* adds another signification to the rifles in the novel, which further motivates the presence of the star sign. Anthropology and/or the history of religions lead us to wonder whether the "Admiration for the Rifle", and "the sacramental Fidelity" hint at the concept of *sacer* which was one of the bases of Roman classical religion, coming from the Indo-European root **sak*, meaning "to

sanctify" and still living in such terms as "sacred", "sanctify", and "sacrifice". Georges Dumézil's 1969 essay *The Destiny of the Warrior* tells us that the man who kills is at the same time powerful and defiled; no wonder that the latter term also comes from an Indo-European root, **pu-*, meaning "to rot, to decay", which is curiously the fate of those killed by warriors or hunters, shot by the rifles. All this tells us that the rifle is endowed with a sort of supernatural aura ("the Grace peculiar to the Slayer"): once it was something endowed with a religious/magic aura, today it is surrounded by a psychological halo. The rifles as symbols of power, then, an almost-sacred power or the debased form of what was once a sacred status (as in the times of magic swords like Excalibur or Beowulf's Hrunting).

This is what is at stake once we accept Richard Powers' insight about technology being the trace "of our own souls, recording the shape of our desires," individual and collective desires, of course. Technological devices are surrounded by an aura that does not stem from otherworldly powers any more (its anthropological roots notwithstanding, which, as we have just seen, are quite deep and ancient), but is rather a side effect of historical configurations. It is not the aura whose last singer was Walter Benjamin, but a new, unintentional, paradoxical aura of mass-produced objects, whose singers are novelists like Philip K. Dick, Jonathan Lethem, and Thomas Pynchon.

It is not just a matter of Pynchon's well-known love for the preterite, the discarded technologies and scientific theories (like the quaternions in *Against the Day*), the black holes of history (here the Black Hole of Calcutta, but also the missing calendar days visited by Mason in Ch. 56), the short-lived empires (such as the Dutch colonial empire, which included Mauritius with its dodoes and the Cape with its gunsmiths), or the useless bleeding edge technology. Surely the *bobbejaanboud* with its sterloop is a technological preterite like Pirate Prentice's Mendoza 7mm in *GR*, but the American long rifle is not. One cannot deny, however, that the sterloop/*bobbejaanboud* and its apparent twin (American and rifled) belong to another network of images and meanings, that of twins, doubles, look-alikes and double images (something that glaringly embodies McHale's multiplication of narrative sequences [McHale 2012 108]), including Enzian and Tchichérine in *GR*, Brock Vond and Takeshi Fukimota in *Vineland*, Renfrew and Werfner in *Against the Day*—all somewhat recapitulated by the double-refraction of the Iceland spar in a novel which—unsurprisingly—entails a part called "Bilocations". But Pynchon's interest in preterites and doubles is not sufficient to explain what

role is played by these old irons in the novel and in the wider intertext of Pynchon's oeuvre; there are two more aspects that must be dealt with.

First, we should notice that, like many other things in *M&D*, be they the ketchup or the stoop, the rifle, this typically American weapon, comes from abroad (like its South African double, imported as it was by the Dutch colonists). Firearms experts in fact tell us that Swiss and German immigrants brought with them their hunting rifles, called *Jäger*, which were slightly modified (a longer barrel, smaller bullets fitted with a patch to the rifled barrel, a patch box added to the stock) in order to become the Lancaster/Pennsylvania Rifle (later Kentucky Rifle), and be sold to hunters who operated in that then wild and dangerous land made famous by Daniel Boone, or better by John Filson's late 18th-Century fictionalization of Boone's deeds (Slotkin 269). This weapon and its technology (quite advanced in the 18th Century, surely more advanced of the still smoothbore Cape guns) was imported from Europe, and came from outside the British empire, which then included the American colonies. It is part of that circulation of goods, foods, knowledge, news, clothes, individuals, drugs constituting one of the main themes of *M&D*, and makes it readable as a great allegory of today's globalization whose aim may well be to deconstruct the commonplace according to which globalization stems from late modernity/postmodernity. Pynchon shows us that the global circulation of goods and individuals has always been here, even if we desperately strove not to see it for what it was. The sailing vessels carrying the Lads to the Cape and then Saint Helen and America may seem poor equivalents of our jetliners and giant container-ships shuttling between China, India, Brazil and the older industrial (now de-industrialized) countries, but Pynchon is careful to highlight how they play more or less the same role—with a huge dose of irony, and frequent comedic effects.

Second, by linking the Kentucky rifle to the weapons of Dutch colonialism (both the eighteenth-century one depicted in the Cape episode of *M&D*, and the seventeenth-century version he had already portrayed in *GR*) Pynchon is telling us that the rifles are part of the technological evolution of the West, and that the scientific advancement which is Charles Mason's and Jeremiah Dixon's mission is also the advancement of those means of slaughter and destruction that dominate *GR*. With their Obs and measurements, the surveyors, just like the Royal Society or the Jesuits they might be contracting, are paving the way for the A-4/V-2 ballistic missile and the global industrial-military complex it stands for.

Frans Van der Groov's Dutch origin (and enthusiastic use of the arquebus) may in fact hint at the revolution in the management of firearms on the

battlefield fostered from 1590 to 1609 by Maurice of Nassau, Dutch leader and strategist (the island where the Dutch colonists slaughter the Dodos is called "Mauritius" after him);⁹ it was a part of the larger transformation of warfare that military historians have styled "military revolution" (Parker). That revolution increased the firepower of European armies (Parker 16-24), drastically changed the design of fortifications, with the adoption of the so-called *trace italienne* (Parker 24), gave birth to military logistics, and produced a radically new type of man-of-war, developed soon after 1600 by the Dutch navy, "long in relation to their breadth, low in the water, yet shallow in draft" (Parker 99): those ships will be called *frigates*. And that is the kind of man-of-war which is well represented by the *l'Grand* and the *Seahorse* in *M&D*. The *affaire de frigates* told in Chapter 4 (37-41) can thus be seen as another node in the network of more or less overt hints at the inseparableness of scientific and military evolution.

The military revolution also enabled Europe to build its colonial empires, and it enabled Europeans, wherever they settled *en masse*, to build their colonial nations. By connecting the glorious Long Rifle to Dutch colonialism in South Africa, which will ultimately lead to the notorious *apartheid*—probably the most vituperated and long-lived segregationist regime in the world—Pynchon is deconstructing one of the founding myths of the United States,¹⁰ showing how those instruments of liberation—the rifles—are also, at the same time, instruments of death and oppression. When Dixon visits the jailhouse in Lancaster, Pennsylvania where the Paxton Boys slaughtered 26 innocent native Americans, "[he] sees where blows with Rifle-Butts miss'd their Marks, and chipp'd the Walls" (347.34). And it is highly meaningful that where the Long Rifles have been used to carry out an infamous massacre, Dixon remembers the Cape and its racial discrimination: "Not even the Dutchmen at the Cape behav'd this way" (347.34).

All this casts a sinister light on the last apparition of the rifle with the sterloop, now in the hands of a Native American, notwithstanding the fact that the bad White Man (who could be intertextually seen as an avatar of Blicero, the arch-villain in *GR*, since Weissmann—his real surname—means "white man"; another stereoscopic effect, of course) has been scalped and probably eliminated. Mason and Dixon's meeting with Catfish should then not be read as an allegory of a (possibly utopian) moment when "the tyranny of evil men" (to put it in Quentin Tarantino's terms) has or will come to an end, inasmuch as wielding the rifle may mean joining the white man's game.¹¹

It is not unlikely that, while writing *M&D*, Pynchon ran into another novel dealing with some of the issues at stake, that is, Vollmann's *The Rifles*,

published in 1994. Vollmann's style and textual strategies are diametrically opposed to Pynchon's, since the poetics of invisibility of the latter is the negation of the former's textual ubiquitousness: there is no novel by Vollmann which does not stem from a diary, and there is no fictional construction of his that does not refer to the life experiences of the author. Yet Vollmann's idea that colonisation was not only based on the monopoly of firearms, but on their spreading among native populations—exposed in the chapter titled "The Rifles," that we could define as the "narrative center of mass" of his novel, (Vollmann 123-33)—may well have struck Pynchon's imagination. Vollmann tells the story of how Inuit tribes laid the bow and arrow aside and adopted rifles, or better, were persuaded to use European technology instead of their own. "Give them [i.e. the Inuit] a few old muzzle-loaders and let them get addicted. Trade them whiskey or looking-glasses for a ton of [caribou or musk-ox] steaks. Once they get used to the rifles, they'd have to come back and trade for bullets; that was the beauty of guns" (Vollmann, 128). Or, to quote the British explorer John Franklin, whose catastrophic expedition in search of the Northwestern Passage is told in Vollmann's novel, "[the natives] depend entirely on the Europeans for the means of gaining their subsistence, as they require guns and a constant supply of powder and shot..." (Vollmann 133). The American novelist comments: "This is nothing if not ominous," and then asks himself and the readers: "Is it any good to know anymore what is ominous and what isn't?"

Thus also the fact that the rifle ends up in Catfish's hands is nothing if not ominous. He can have the blood-dripping "[l]ock of fair European hair so freshly taken" (681.70) in his bag, but in his scabbard he has the Lancaster Rifle, a.k.a. Kentucky Rifle, with the nefarious inverted pentagram on its stock, which, like whiskey, will probably get him addicted to the technology (and the economy and politics) of the White Man and his industrial-military complex (possibly represented by the Iron-Plantation of Lord Lepton). And this might be one of the most important lessons we may draw from our stereoscopic reading of rifles in *M&D*: how colonial domination may be imposed by arming the natives, rather than disarming them (even though, as William K. Storey has persuasively shown, sometimes disarming the natives could be more convenient for colonial purposes).¹² But this is only part of what we may learn by the comparison between the Dutch sterloop and the American Lancaster Rifle.

By focusing on these weapons and their technical features, not to mention their production and marketing, Pynchon shows us that the Military-industrial complex, about whose unwarranted influenced president Eisenhower warned

the US public in 1961, was born long before the Second World War. In a draft of the Farewell Address to the Nation in which the phrase was introduced, Eisenhower had written it as "military-industrial-congressional complex," thus tying the production of weapons not only to the armed forces but to political institutions and, indirectly, to the American society at large—and this is exactly what we have, stereoscopically, in the Cape colony and in Colonial America: firearms are instrumental to the establishment of a colonial power system. When it comes to America, the rifles conjured up by Pynchon in his novel are tied to economy (early weapon industries and fur trade), society (defending the settlements from the natives but also useful to negotiate alliances with Native American tribes) and politics (the War of Independence). Rifles have a lot to do with how the United States were incubated and born; and they foreshadow the imperial future of the nation, in which weapons (much more sophisticated and powerful than those available to Natty Bumppo and the Continental Army) played a determinant role. If we wish to remain within the borders of Pynchon's oeuvre, the Rocket in *GR* and the Stinger missiles in *Bleeding Edge* may well be seen as the descendants of the *Jäger* and the Lancaster Rifle respectively (of course this is more a symbolic, literary lineage than an actual line of development in the history of science and technology): the embryo of the American Empire and its industrial-military-political power is already shown in the decades before the Declaration of Independence.

Moreover, the stereoscopic superimposition of the sterloop and the Lancaster Rifle reminds us that the USA is, after all, a colonial country, with a colonial past and a colonial present. By superimposing the USA and South Africa when they still were the thirteen British colonies on the Atlantic coast and the Dutch colony at the Cape, Pynchon suggests a sort of parallel history of the two countries, in which the smaller and less celebrated one can be considered as a sort of double or maybe even preterite of the other—with the African nation ruled in 1997 by a Black president (for the first time in its history), while the US had just another white head of state.

Thus all objects in Pynchon's fiction are just like the title of his 2006 novel as it appears on the cover of its hardback edition: multiplied by reflections, some of which may be ghostly or even ghastly, with miraculous literary bilocations taking place within the same novel, or in others. Hence it is once again Pynchon, in his relentless dialogue with readers and commentators, who suggests how to read his fiction, in all its stereoscopic duplications, where all apparently marginal and decorative stage-props—like old and possibly rusty rifles hanging on a wall—are always something more than themselves.

End notes

1. This article stems from a presentation on Rifles in *M&D* at the 2014 IPW in Malta, which started an ongoing research project on fire and firearms in Pynchon's fiction.
2. When it comes to *Against the Day* and its positioning on the map of genres one may also mention slipstream fiction, cf. the debate on this critical category which is documented in the March 2011 special issue of *Science Fiction Studies*, where Pynchon's novel was repeatedly mentioned as a specimen of this hybridized form of non-realistic fiction.
3. The issue of ontology—that is, the interrogation of what we call reality today, in a Baudrillardian age of simulation and simulacra—is of course a part of the question, inasmuch as another important concern of the late modernity or postmodernist age, both in the field of philosophical/political/socialological speculation, and in literary criticism, is that of order and its loss—including e.g. Lyotard's collapse of meta-narratives aka grand narratives. This side of the postmodernist question impacted Pynchon scholarship very soon, e.g. Molly Hite envisioning Pynchon's fiction as rejecting “a rigid, absolute, and universal Idea of Order” (Hite 7), or Tony Tanner discussing Stencil's quest in *V.*, with the “master cabal” as a meta-narrative purportedly ordering world history (Tanner 33).
4. The “bad man” is certainly someone either Mason or Dixon have met: when Catfish tells the two surveyors that they and the rifle's owner might have met, “[e]ither Mason or Dixon might reply, ‘We've met,’- yet neither does.” (681.70).
5. Surely Pynchon's particular attitude to technology and his surprising ability to dwell on technological details derives from his experience as writer of technical literature for Boeing in the early 1960s, a phase of his career well represented by such an article as “Togetherness” (Pynchon 1960).
6. Other examples of weapons in Pynchon's fictions could be mentioned: the Maxim and Krupp guns used by von Trotha's genocidal expedition in *V.* (281), the Death Special armored car in *AtD* (1009), armed with Colt machine guns; weapons also appear in some Pynchon's puns, like the name of the Reverend Moss Gatlin in *AtD* (49), whose surname hints at the Civil War Gatling gun.
7. We should of course also take into account the use of weapons on the front of media representation and spectacularization. It is interesting that the actors playing the part of US Marines in the Vietnamese jungles and rice paddies brandish the same Armalite M-16 guns wielded by members of SWAT teams in police movies. In fact, some pistols and rifles have achieved an

iconic status thanks to films: one cannot imagine a Nazi officer without his Luger, even though not all the German officers in W.W.II actually had one. Pynchon's painstaking researching of firearms models seems to me to have been also influenced by the cinematic imagination, like other elements of his fictional worlds.

8. The idea of a fractured text seems to me a valid approach to postmodernist fiction in general and Pynchon's novels in particular. This should help us to tackle the issue of closure in such texts, which do not seem to be neatly and completely delimited by textual boundary markers, even though Wood maintains that "Mason's reconciliation with his son on a journey to the north of England after Dixon's death is a perfect example of the appeal of closure" (Wood 260). The problematic role played by the elusive novel-within-the-novel *The Ghastly Fop* has much to do with a deliberate and radical undermining of closure, in a vein started by a minor postmodernist masterpiece, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). Such an exhibited interference of different narrative plans can be then found in *Against the Day*, with the Chums of Chance subplot.

9. Parker shows one of the illustrations of a treatise on war written by John of Nassau, a brother of William Louis and cousin of Maurice (Parker 21): according to the Dutch strategist, the safe and swift reloading of a haakbus (arquebus) for an infantry soldier required 25 codified positions whose sequence allowed a sustained volley-fire. These positions can be compared to Pynchon's description of the Dutch colonists on Mauritius reloading their weapons: "the act of ramming home the charges into their musketry became for these men a devotional act, one whose symbolism they understood" (*GR* 110). It does not ultimately matter that the use of the haakbus codified by the Nassau captains was military, while the Dutch on Mauritius are busy hunting the dodos (whom they "successfully" exterminated by 1681): the weapons used by the Dutch soldiers and colonists are the same, and the "devotional" posture described by Pynchon resembles the positions in John of Nassau's treatise. Once again, did Pynchon browse John of Nassau's treatise, published in 1607 as *Wapenhandlingen van roers, musquetten ende spiessen* [*Arms Drill with Arquebus, Musket and Pike*] under the name of the Dutch printer Jacob de Gheyn (Parker 20-1), in some library? This is a matter of erudite conjecture; what is really important is the connection between the two "Dutch" episodes (in *GR* and *M&D*) and the technologization of warfare carried out by the Nassau family at the beginning of the 17th Century.

10. Not the only one, of course, and it could be argued that all Pynchon's fiction, even when set in war-ravaged Germany or the remote forests of

central Asia, talks about America one way or another—yet *M&D* plays a special role in this interconnected web of narratives, i.e. Pynchon's oeuvre, being set on the eve of the American War of Independence.

11. On the other hand, we should question Catfish himself. We are told that he is a "Delaware Chief", but he and his relatives are "all dress'd as Europeans might be" (673.69). The purpose of his travel is mysterious, and the reason why the group of Indians travel "as if Disguis'd, in Coat, Waistcoat, Breeches, and Cock'd hat" (673.69) is unknown. One of the members of the Line Crew warns the surveyors that "[i]t is usually best in these cases, not to inquire too closely" (673.69). There is something definitely fishy in this character and his companions, and one has to wonder whether his name may be a pun on a Western comic strip, *Catfish*, written by Roger Peterman and drawn by Roger Bollen from 1976 to 1994. This might be Pynchon's way to tell us that we are not dealing with "real" Native Americans here, but with a white man's (cartoonish?) representation of Indians. Besides, this is a rather Europeanized Native American.

12. The use of firearms by native Africans in 19th Century Southern Africa (this Pynchonian corner of the world) and the shooting skills of those natives play an important role in the politics of racial discrimination which will ultimately lead to the apartheid regime. Native Africans who owned and used guns (often the good old *bobbejaanbouds*) were perceived as a menace by the South-African authorities, which worried because the shooting skills of white settlers were declining, and many of them did not even own a gun (Storey 706-7). Hence the adoption of legislation which provided for disarming parts of the population (Storey 707)—of course the non-white ones. In this historical context, possession of guns and civil rights seem to go hand in hand.

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