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Like the *Odyssey*, Only Different:
Olympian Omnipotence versus Karmic Adjustment in Pynchon’s *Vineland*

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Abstract: In *Vineland*, Pynchon recalls the *Odyssey* in order to foreground crucial differences from its Western model of comprehending narrative outcomes as acts of Olympian or divine omnipotence. Instead, *Vineland* does something innovative with narrative power, establishing specific karmic character relationships that potentially ameliorate personal and national grievances and suffering and broadening our understanding of narrative power and outcomes beyond the heavy hand of judgment in order to register gentle karmic nudges.

Keywords: narrative omnipotence, karma, *nostos* and nostalgia, Pynchon, *Odyssey* adaptation

In his introduction to Richard Fariña’s novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*, Thomas Pynchon locates a point of contact between Fariña and his novel’s main character, Gnossos Pappadopoulos: “[Gnossos] is susceptible to the thrill of vendetta or karmic adjustment, an impulse I suspect isn’t entirely absent from why Fariña wrote the novel” (xii). The implication is that Fariña’s impulse to write his novel derives, at least in part, from his desire to redress perceived imbalances in the nonfictional world. For Pynchon, this impulse toward vendetta or karmic adjustment is evidence that Gnossos is “not Mr. Perfect” (xii), and it may also suggest some imperfection of Fariña’s fictional vision, as though novelists have better things to do than settle old scores.

In *Vineland*, Pynchon presents characters who make a literal business of karma. As Takeshi Fumimota, the proprietor of a karmic adjustment business, which is “like insurance—only different” (173), explains to Ortho Bob, a dispossessed Vietnam veteran now living in *Vineland* as a “Thanatoid,” which is “like death, only different” (170):

In typical karmic adjustment [...] sometimes it had taken centuries. Death was the driving pulse—everything had moved as slowly as the cycles of birth and death, but this proved to be too slow for enough people to begin, eventually, to provide a market niche. There arose a system of deferment, of borrowing against karmic futures. Death, in Modern Karmic Adjustment, got removed from the process. (174–75)

Takeshi compares the impulse to hasten the karmic process to the exponential growth of memory in computer chips in 1984, the dystopian year of the novel’s setting. Everything is getting faster, so why not karma?

However, it is also possible to describe the business of *Vineland*’s narrator as one of karmic adjustment. Like Takeshi and his partner DL Chastain, Pynchon’s narrator seems anxious about the slow movement of karma, and we may thus understand him as turning to narrative itself as potential expedient for restoring certain relationships in contemporary America. In 1984, America is in a pit of bad karma perpetuated by Reaganomics, the Vietnam War, and the cooptation of sixties countercultural movements, and stretching back through McCarthyism, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the labor struggles of the thirties, and more. To some extent, Pynchon writes about himself when he says that Fariña shares with his characters a thrilling impulse to

right the wrongs of the past through narrative.

And yet to name this impulse in *Vineland* is not to charge it with an imperfection, but rather to articulate something radically innovative in Pynchon's novel. Erring much more on the side of karma than vendetta, *Vineland* approaches "adjustments" in ways that challenge the omnipotent powers traditionally ascribed to narrators in Western fiction. If traditional narrators are often figured as godlike in their ability to shape fictional worlds and to determine outcomes, then a narrative that relies on something like karma (only different) would seem to offer a new way of doing things with narrative power. It would simultaneously reveal the dimensions of vendetta (or vengeance) in the divine model of narration in which implicit or explicit judgments of characters are manifested in narrative outcomes. Instead of meting out punitive or laudatory judgment based on the stable system of values presumed by the divinity model of omnipotent narration, Pynchon's narrative model of karmic adjustment binds characters into relationships or partnerships in which they are forced to try to work out the wrongs, tensions, and grievances between them. Moreover, *Vineland* suggests a model of narration that foregrounds personal and national relationships as they relate to action, behavior, and ultimately to suffering and the alleviation of suffering. While this process is always seen as partial, and often portrayed satirically and skeptically—a guilty thrill—*Vineland* radically refigures narrative power for assuagement instead of adjudication.

Inseparable from Pynchon's revision of dominant Western narrational modes is *Vineland's* close but insufficiently understood relationship to Homer's *Odyssey*. Although some critics have addressed the structural parallels between *Vineland* and the *Odyssey*, *Vineland's* engagement with the *Odyssey* goes beyond mere parallels, critically rewriting the epic in a strategic return to this important birthplace of Western narration and Olympian narrative conceptions. Through this return, Pynchon erodes Western figures of divine omnipotence in narrative that center on various kinds of authority, value systems, and forms of judgment. In the following three sections, I discuss problematic figures for the omnipotence of narrators in realism, naturalism, and modernism, detail Pynchon's revision of the *Odyssey* as a source and emblem for some of these problems, and finally examine *Vineland's* narrative as a practice of karmic adjustment. In the process, I hope to suggest new ways of conceiving narrative power in other novels where the thrill of karmic adjustment may abide just out of sight.

Figures of Omnipotence: Realism, Naturalism, and Modernism

When Jonathan Culler seeks to dislodge the tenacious figure of an omniscient god for understanding certain narrators' access to knowledge, he reveals the ways in which the figure is finally inadequate for comprehending all of the narrative effects for which it is traditionally made to account:

Our habit of naturalizing the strange details and practices of narrative by making the consciousness of an individual their source, and then imagining a quasi divine omniscient consciousness when human consciousnesses cannot fill that role, generates a fantasy of omniscience, which we then find oppressive. Since this fantasy oppresses at the same time that it obfuscates the narrative effects that lead us to posit it, we should abandon this critical vocabulary that does no service to us or to narrative. (32)

One element of this quasi-divine figure that has not been adequately refigured, even in Culler's account, is specifically the narrator's power to decide what will be true in the fictional world,

especially in terms of the fates of characters. If, as Culler writes, “the power to decide what will be the case in this world is a product of a conventional performative power of language, or, at best, omnipotence, not omniscience” (24), then we would not only want to be able to distinguish between the all-knowing and the all-powerful in the realm of narrative, but also to identify and account for types of omnipotence in different narrative acts, especially the ways in which different narrators approach their own power to determine outcomes. If, as Culler has convincingly argued, omniscience is not a very good way to talk about the power of narrators to know, then neither may divine omnipotence be an adequate way of describing the power of narrators to shape fictional worlds and determine outcomes. In both cases, the divine metaphor starts to limit our ability to think about narrative clearly because our understanding of narrative seems inseparable from the figures that we use to comprehend it.

We are faced with a challenge: how can we account for the power of narrators to determine outcomes without folding them into this divine metaphor? How can narratives avoid rootedness in the figure of omnipotent judgment, whether divine, deterministic, or authorial? How can we understand narrative outcomes as grounded in neither myth, nor authority, nor various kinds of teleology? If we look closely at examples of realism, naturalism, and modernism, these stubborn narrative categories reassert themselves again and again in different ways.

For instance, although Jane Austen’s narrators rarely flaunt their omnipotence with respect to outcomes, they sometime call attention to the power of narration as a function of judgment. In *Persuasion* we are told, “Anne longed for the power of representing to them all what they were about, and of pointing out some of the evils they were exposing themselves to” (55). Anne longs to be something like the narrator of an Austen novel, whose mimetic power is inseparable from the power of exercising subtle judgment. In fact, one way to see Anne is in asymptotic relation to the narrator of *Persuasion*, as Anne gradually penetrates through appearances to the reality of her environment and of those around her (for instance, of Mr. Elliot’s or Mrs. Clay’s bad motives), but she is never able to seize the narrative power to mete out fates based on Austenian value judgments. That omnipotent wielding of judgment is the province of the *Persuasion* narrator alone. Indeed, even though Austen does not flaunt this power, her characters usually “get what they deserve,” implying a system of values, implicit or explicit teleological judgment, and the power to mete out destinies, all of which combine to suggest the figure of quasi-divine omnipotence. In *Persuasion*, the two schemers in the novel, Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay, do both get what they finally deserve, which is precisely one another.

However, if the divine figure seems plausible for describing the power of Austen narrators, its inadequacy becomes apparent when we try to extend the further associations or connotations of the basic metaphor, for instance, when we consider that most modern conceptions of a god accommodate the free will of humans, a principle to which Austen herself likely subscribed. This dimension of the divine figure simply does not work as an analogue for narration because, in order for it to do so, characters would need to have some freedom within the system. Although some narrators take great pains to represent the free will of characters, fictional characters have no free will with respect to the narrator who creates the fictional world. The only independence from the narrator that characters may be said to obtain within this world derives from their semic nature. Playful characters may, from time to time, appear to resist the desires of the narrator or slip out of his or her total control, yet these do not exercise free will but merely exhibit the free play to which all signifiers are inalienably entitled.

Some narrators, of course, seek to use their power to determine outcomes in ways that appear to exclude quasi-divine judgment. One place to examine this seeming exclusion might be

in the naturalistic novel as represented by Zola. By attempting to use the novel as a scientific laboratory for experiments and outcomes, Zola's naturalism could be said to diminish the quasi-divine narrator by severely limiting his or her power to determine outcomes. In Zola, sheer physiology and environment appear to rule the day. As Zola writes, "I chose to portray individuals existing under the sovereign dominion of their nerves and their blood, devoid of free will and drawn into every act of their lives by the inescapable promptings of their flesh" ("Preface" 1). Indeed, in a novel of adultery and murder such as *Thérèse Raquin*, the narrator takes great pains to convince us that "[n]ature and circumstance seemed to have made [Thérèse and Laurent] for each other, and pushed them together" (45), in order to assert the inevitability of all their subsequent misdeeds. The narrator purports to be just one more horrified onlooker as Thérèse and Laurent's murderous tale unfolds. However, here, too, authority and teleology return through the back door because mechanistic determinism, scientific or natural laws, and social Darwinism simply replace one figure of authority with another. We have not diverged very far from the divine model when physiology is simply recentered as the basis of character judgment and outcomes. If mechanistic determinism thus seems as judgmental and decisive as the figure of a god, then it becomes difficult to imagine accounts of narrative that are not shot through with authoritarian power reflexes.

Another place to look for potential exceptions to the divinity model might be modernist texts that at least reject the omniscient narrative perspective of the realist novel. Characterized by their focus on epistemological fragmentation and subjectivity, modernist novels would seem to be likely candidates for similarly dislodging the figure of the judgmental, omnipotent divinity. Such novels often appear to be plotless and even make a show of their very freedom from the traditional pastime of judging characters or actions through outcomes. However, although modernist novels may fracture omniscient knowledge into so many competing shards, the omnipotence of the modernist author is ironically not fractured, but rather tends to be magnified. Modernism may flaunt the absence of an all-knowing narrative perspective, but it still steals fire from the partially banished god. It is Stephen Dedalus, of course, echoing Flaubert, who compares the artist to "the God of the creation" (Joyce, *Portrait* 189).

Further, modernism's atheism still stubbornly and perhaps inevitably defines itself in relation to theism. For instance, Buck Mulligan complains about the "cursed jesuit strain" in Stephen Dedalus, "only it's injected the wrong way" (Joyce, *Ulysses* 1.209). To draw a comparison, Joyce's own godly power over his work (flaunted in ways made clear in Kenner's discussion of the autonomous, virtuosic Arranger) may only serve to reify on a different level the very divine power that modernist fiction resists on another. In other words, what is denied on the level of narrative knowledge gets reinstated on the level of narrative power. Eugene Jolas's report that Joyce claimed, "I have discovered that I can do anything with language I want" (qtd. in Attridge 4), seems to confirm that Joyce transfers omnipotence to his Arranger and to himself.

Another relevant image of modernist authority is Kafka's doorkeeper in "Before the Law." The doorkeeper blocks the man who seeks admittance to the Law. Although there is nothing resembling judgment, at least direct judgment, in the story, there is still impassive authority. One could even say that here judgment approaches the degree of zero while authority approaches infinity. In any event, the authority of the doorkeeper is definitive: he blocks access right up to the man's death. To anticipate Pynchon's resistance to this authority, we could see *Vineland*'s Dr. Elasma as a parody of modernist omnipotence. *Vineland* replaces Kafka's elusive representative of the Law with, oddly appropriately, a dentist, Dr. Larry Elasma. He has somehow been given "a franchise to meddle" (227) in the lives of his patients, including the power to summon and

dismiss them, and, in the case of campus rebel Weed Atman (whose surname in Hinduism and Buddhism means “self” or “soul”), also to produce in them surprisingly Kafkaesque levels of guilt and uncertainty. In parodic gestures such as this, Pynchon signals a desire to employ narrative power less coercively. But changing our apprehension of narrative is not far from pulling teeth. Let us see how Pynchon’s return to the *Odyssey* sets the stage to challenge a divine metaphor for narrative with a karmic one.

The *Odyssey*, *Nostos*, and Nostalgia

Vineland’s narrative of karmic adjustment provides a tool for displacing some of the well-entrenched figures for narration that are themselves the product of, and perhaps also the perpetuating condition for, certain sedimented authoritarian ideologies that also operate in Pynchon’s vision of America. Pynchon’s starting point is a return to the *Odyssey*, a “non-novel,” which, as Edith Hall writes, “has so often been called, not only by novelists themselves but by theorists and historians of fiction, the very birthplace of literary fiction” (46). Classical and Homeric reception history has largely overlooked Pynchon’s unique innovations within the crowd of *Odyssey* revisions, but several Pynchon scholars have noted its resemblances to Homer’s epic. These critics invariably note *Vineland*’s gender reversals of the *Odyssey*, as when Stacey Olster argues, “[s]ignificantly, *Vineland*’s sideways glances invert gendered characteristics in particular, as is consistent in a work whose tale of daughters seeking mothers and mothers returning to homes besieged by interlopers can be viewed as inverting the *Odyssey*, complete with appropriate flashbacks” (127).¹ In itself, this regendering of the *Odyssey* is a major innovation in Homeric reception: as Hall’s impressive cultural history of the *Odyssey* shows, feminist revisions of the *Odyssey* tend to rewrite from Penelope’s neglected perspective, but Hall does not mention any texts that reverse the genders of the characters.²

Not only does Pynchon’s regendering do something unique in *Odyssey* reception, it also marks a change in Pynchon’s textual politics from his early work. As Neil Brooks observes, “[r]eviewers have pointed out the parallel between Prairie’s search and Telemachos’s in *The Odyssey*, but the consequences of the complete gender reversal [...] need to be studied further, particularly in light of Hite’s compelling ‘Feminist Theory and the Politics of *Vineland*’” (195 n.6). Indeed, Pynchon’s regendering of the *Odyssey* should be seen in the context of what Hite identifies as *Vineland*’s deeply informed sense of feminist political theory. For Hite, unlike *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which “the Man” is equally installed in each person’s mind, *Vineland* imagines an “us” or “we” who can oppose, if not always successfully resist, the dominant, masculine culture of the “They-system” (146). Moreover, as Hite observes, Pynchon’s narrator strategically aligns himself with a “we” or “us” who are clearly part of a minority and resist this authority (147). In *Vineland*, rather than representing a totality, Pynchon establishes a system of differences, and his regendering of the *Odyssey* significantly opposes the patrilineal narrative that runs back to Homer’s epic with a matrilineal one. As Sister Rochelle tells Takeshi, “Paradise was female” and “in fact the first man was not Adam—it was the Serpent” (166). Pynchon’s regendering of the *Odyssey*, then, is already an intervention in Western systems and traditions of authority, and yet it is only one tactic within a larger sphere of narrative innovation for doing so. Another tactic is to remap the *Odyssey* onto the politics of the sixties and eighties in order to establish a complex system of correspondences (see Table 1) and to differentially diagnose problems of authority in both decades. These parallels to the *Odyssey* not only adapt the epic’s cast and structure but also allow Pynchon to meditate on a central problematic of the *Odyssey*—

nostos, or homecoming—in a contemporary political context. What does it mean to “return” from the wars of the sixties in the eighties? To what extent can we or should we return to the sixties?

Table 1: Structural Parallels

<u>Vineland</u>	<u>Odyssey</u>
Frenesi Gates	Odysseus
Zoyd Wheeler	Penelope
Prairie Wheeler	Telemachus
Ronald Reagan	Zeus
Brock Vond	Poseidon
DL Chastain	Athena/Mentor/Nestor
Sasha Gates	Laertes
the sixties/Vietnam War	Trojan War
Vineland/America	Ithaca
Thanatoids	Underworld Shades
“underground of the State”	Calypso’s Island
DEA Agents	Suitors
Hector Zuñiga	Head Suitor/Hermes
Desmond	Argos

Vineland’s politics of homecoming is reflected even in the Argos/Desmond correspondence. Desmond, the family dog, parallels Argos, who spots his master returning home after twenty years and wags his tail in recognition just before he dies. At the beginning of *Vineland*, Desmond, after eating Zoyd’s Count Chocula breakfast, “turned and got on with his day” (4), presumably on an odyssey of his own (Odysseus is described in the *Odyssey*’s first line as *polytropos*, “of many turns,” and Desmond is, of course, a *Wheeler*). We do not see him in the present of the novel again until its final sentence, when he accomplishes his *nostos*: “It was Desmond, none other, the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe, roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home” (385). Critics have noted the importance of family in *Vineland*,³ and “home” is as significant a final word of Pynchon’s *Odyssey* as “yes” is for Joyce’s.

However, while this ending may appear like a perfect (and hokey) homecoming, it also cautions about certain forms and fantasies of return. Desmond, of course, is not technically home, which no longer really exists since the DEA has seized it; rather, he has found Prairie at the family reunion, and thinks he must be home. Although home may be where the heart is, Desmond also fantasizes an impossible return. Recalling that the Greek word for homecoming is the same word from which English derives “nostalgia,” here I would like to draw on Svetlana Boym’s distinction between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia to characterize such fantasies. For Boym, “[r]estorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). Moreover, “[r]estorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstruction of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (41). Poor Desmond:

he has longed for restoration and actually believes he has found the lost home, but instead he has found something like home, only different.

Vineland's characters are usually in the grips of restorative nostalgia for another time, especially for different political pasts, whether Right or Left. When Ditzah Pisk hears that Brock Vond is back in town, she asks, "Is he trying to roll back time? [...] Then again, it's the whole Reagan program, isn't it—dismantle the New Deal, reverse the effects of World War II, restore fascism at home and around the world, flee into the past" (265). Similarly, Zoyd tells Mucho Maas, "Well I still wish it was back then, when you were the Count. Remember how the acid was?" (313). Restorative nostalgia for the past is even a temptation for those who never experienced it, like Prairie, who watches an old 24fps film, and "[e]ven through the crude old color and distorted sound, Prairie could feel the liberation in the place that night, the faith that anything was possible, that nothing could stand in the way of such joyous certainty. She'd never seen anything like it before" (210).

The characters' nostalgia for political pasts is mapped onto *Vineland*'s formal nostalgia for the *Odyssey* itself, but whereas characters would restore what can never be restored, Pynchon recalls the *Odyssey* only to foreground crucial differences. We could say this approach to characters is reflectively nostalgic for their sources, "[lingering] on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time," as Boym characterizes this nostalgia. That is, Pynchon lingers on the differences, always displacing Homer's originals, repeating and emptying them by resisting the *Odyssey* as much as he employs it. The characters are deliberately poorly remembered dreams of their own past times and places.

Zoyd Wheeler exemplifies the ways in which *Vineland*'s characters recall and displace their Homeric parallels. Zoyd Wheeler is a crafty but ineffectual Penelope—he even wears a dress—who must perform his annual and repetitive display of insanity in order to keep the forces of destruction tentatively at bay. Zoyd is not quite a weaver, but, as his name implies, he is something of a wheeler and dealer, a goodhearted scammer who tries to keep everything together for the sake of his daughter, even as he longs for his ex-wife as much or more than Prairie does. While there is a joke about Zoyd's unacceptable suitors being "jailbait," or, as Prairie puts it, "rilly B material, in terms of family skills" (*Vineland* 54), a more serious parallel for the suitors is Hector Zuñiga of the DEA, who wants Zoyd to snitch, and against whom he "so far—technically—had hung on to his virginity" (12). However, unlike Penelope, who can hold the suitors at bay, Zoyd loses his entire house to his suitors when the DEA plants a gigantic monolith of marijuana in his living room and seizes his property under the RICO Act. In more senses than one, Zoyd is a failed Penelope.

Recollection and displacement operate in terms of setting as well. Pynchon's Ithaca, "Vineland the Good" (*Vineland* 322), evokes the first Viking settlement in North America and marks it as a safe harbor as well as an analogy for America as a whole. Like Ithaca, Vineland is increasingly imperiled as developers exploit its resources: "All born to be suburbs, in their opinion, and the sooner the better" (319). In addition to real estate development, Vineland is also being deforested, "with the Japanese buying up unprocessed logs as fast as the forests could be clear-cut" (5). The Campaign Against Marijuana Production helicopters also make their yearly rounds, and "North California, like other U.S. pot-growing areas, once again rejoined, operationally speaking, the third world" (49). David Cowart argues, "Pynchon's setting is a representation of the American land; and he refuses to surrender the myth of American promise" (9). However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that *Vineland* evokes a restorative nostalgia for American promise through its tantalizing correspondence to mythic America and Ithaca, while

Pynchon's own differential technique stresses that *Vineland* coincides with neither.

Vineland thus persistently “dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance,” as Boym characterizes reflective nostalgia, and this tension between the restorative and the reflective is central to the novel. *Vineland*'s treatment of nostalgia on the level of content is persistently skeptical about the past and homecomings and is thus a figure for Pynchon's own complex return to the *Odyssey* on the level of form, who knows that literary nostalgia for the *Odyssey* itself may precipitate perilous returns to it. As Odysseus understood and as Agamemnon learned the hard way, coming home must be an exercise in tact if one is not to be undone by it. *Vineland* “imperfectly remembers” or even forgets the *Odyssey* because to remember it any more fully is to capitulate to the very restorative nostalgia to which Pynchon's usually illusory characters are subject. Furthermore, as we will see, perfect returns to the *Odyssey* may entail submitting not just to a cast of characters and a structure, but more troublesomely to modes of Western narrative authority that themselves tend to restore Olympian fantasies of control and omnipotence.

Narrative as Karmic Adjustment

The *Odyssey* represents Olympus in ways that make it possible to imagine omnipotent gods both within and presiding in judgment over fictional worlds, a concept that still appears to have a strong hold on conceptions of narrative. When Athena appeals to Zeus, bemoaning that Odysseus has no way to return to Ithaca from Calypso's Island and that the suitors plot to murder Telemachus when he returns from Pylos and Lacedaemon, Zeus belies her representation of the story:

“My child,” Zeus who marshals the thunderheads replied,
“what nonsense you let slip through your teeth. Come now,
wasn't the plan your own? You conceived it yourself:
Odysseus shall return and pay the traitors back.
Telemachus? Sail him home with all your skill—
the power is yours, no doubt—(Homer 153)

This passage nicely encapsulates the game of narrative omnipotence that fiction is often, or perhaps always, made to play. How can an author of a character's fate such as Athena treat narrative outcomes as open to divergence? How can she be genuinely anxious about outcomes when she has the power to plan and manifest them? Moreover, the gods prevent us from asking certain questions about the characters because their presence makes certain questions “nonsense.” For instance, if it were not for the clear vindictiveness of Poseidon against Odysseus, it might be possible to conceive of his misadventures as the result of, say, bad karma from the Trojan War.

But while the *Odyssey* forecloses certain interpretations on one level, there is also something karmic about the *Odyssey* on another, something that, while god-enforced, pragmatically focuses on relationships and appropriate behavior: the code of hospitality. As Bernard Knox explains, “Zeus is invoked as the divine patron and enforcer of a code of conduct that helps to make travel possible in a world of piracy at sea, cattle raiding and local war by land, of anarchic competition between rival families—a world with no firm central authority to impose law and order. In such a world, a man who leaves his home depends on the kindness of strangers” (29–30). With this emphasis in mind, Odysseus's actions can be seen as quasi-karmic, since much of his sufferings seem to result from his unkindness to strangers. Although Telemachus maintains, “Zeus is to blame. He deals to each and every / laborer on this earth whatever doom

he pleases” (Homer 89), Zeus complains:

Ah how shameless—the way these mortals blame the gods.
From us alone, they say, comes all their miseries, yes,
but they themselves, with their own reckless ways,
compound their pains beyond their proper share. (78)

While both karmic and Olympian tendencies reside in the *Odyssey*, we are likely to overlook the karmic when we follow its characters and focus only on Olympian might. This is one example of why the *Odyssey* can be both subject to revision and karmic adjustments, but it also remains a crucial imaginative source for later artists.

Lorna Hardwick “emphasize[s] the role of Homer as a catalyst in modern contexts in which creative writers and artists aspire to leap across the entrenched polarities and underlying fissures in their own cultures, as well as those between cultures” (70). Indeed, through the medium of the *Odyssey*, Pynchon is able to leap across the polarities of West and East. Although some, such as Elaine Safer, argue that *Vineland* parodies Eastern concepts such as Buddhism as absurd and subjects it to “comic deflation” (58) in DL and Takeshi’s commercialized and materialistic karmic adjustment business, or in the Bodhi Dharma Pizza Temple where Prairie works, the fact that Pynchon playfully satirizes or profanes something does not preclude treating that thing very seriously on other narrative levels. Jeffrey Carroll, for instance, suggests that in *Vineland*

elements of East and West mix to suggest on the one hand a cosmic seminar-providing community, where one learns through a screen of cultural misunderstanding that one may not, in Pynchon’s words, ogle “Asian dewdrops”—but which, on the other hand, contains the essential element in any Pynchon narrative—a counter-conspiracy, this one dedicated to preventing the threatening overthrow of an essentially decadent yet comic America. (255)

Similarly, Sanford S. Ames argues, “The ‘morning in America’ at the end of *Vineland* is the result of listening, psychic healing, karmic adjustment—writing” (122).

Karma is neither the sheer cause-and-effect of a mechanistic universe nor part of a system of divinely ordered values or judgment but instead travels a unique path between, or perhaps even outside of, the economy of these two poles. Rupert Gethin conveys something of the sheer pragmatism of “action” (karma is the word for any intended action of body, speech, or thought) in Buddhist worldviews:

when we look at the extensive treatment of the eightfold path in Buddhist literature, it becomes apparent that view, intention, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration are presented here as eight significant dimensions of one’s behavior—mental, spoken, and bodily—that are regarded as operating in dependence on one another and as defining a complete way of living. The eight items are significant in that they focus on the manner in which what one thinks, says, does, and feels can effect—and affect—the unfolding path to the cessation of suffering. (82)⁴

Good karma results from thought, speech, and physical acts that promote the cessation of suffering, and bad karma results from thought, speech, and physical acts that do not promote the cessation of suffering. Unlike the theistic omnipotence that pervades our models of narration, in karma there is no divine figure to focus matters of judgment or to enforce a value system or Law. In Buddhist cosmology, there are indeed gods, but they are subject to the same painful system of death and rebirth that all life is. In fact, it is not uncommon in Buddhist sutras for gods to visit

the Buddha to listen to his teachings, and it is sometimes implied that humans are more privileged than gods because they have greater access to these teachings. As such, it may be fair to say that in the principle of karma, pragmatism trumps idealism. Actions and effects of thought, mind, and body are all. As a model for narration, karmic adjustment eludes the circular binary of theism/atheism because it foregrounds the effects of behavior rather than the effects of judgment or its absence. Similarly, the figure of karmic adjustment eludes the binary of naturalistic determinism/divine omnipotence because its pragmatic emphasis on behavior focuses on the direct relationship between actions and suffering.

Karmic adjustment is a fitting model for the *Vineland* narrator's practice of power. Through the figure of his narrator, Pynchon seeks neither to play a god nor to trumpet its absence but rather to concentrate minute attention to karmic processes within the open system of his *Odyssey* scaffolding. Rather than serving the narrator as a locus of judgment and account balancing, Pynchon's narrator uses his power to establish character relationships in which internal grievances can play out in potentially ameliorative ways. If there are moments of recuperation or redemption in *Vineland*, it is not because the narrator ignites them from above as determined, ironic, or enforced, but because he centers characters and their behaviors and actions in intense relation to one another. Karmic adjustment is still a study in cause and effect, but of causes and effects of mental, verbal, and bodily actions and behavior as they relate to suffering rather than of determinist physiology, environment, temperament, or nature. As Frenesi seems to realize when her job is cut by the "Reaganomic ax blades" (the 1984 equivalent of a thunderbolt), she must "reenter the clockwork of cause and effect" (*Vineland* 90).

However, karma does not map perfectly onto narrative, primarily because while karma can dispense with a figure for value and judgment, narrative cannot. Narrative must have some form of narrator, who must exercise power in the course of making a nearly infinite number of decisions. In *Vineland*, this necessity is the central point of productive and creative tension. It cannot divest the narrative act of power, yet it finds vendetta repulsive. Pynchon's reroutes the narrator's power to judge characters and enforce outcomes into a power to emphasize behavior and suffering. Karmic adjustment is thus also an exercise of narrative omnipotence, but the narrator acts not as divine judge but rather as illustrator and precipitator of karmic relationships and behavior. Pynchon establishes character relationships that revolve around imbalances, locking these characters, often comically and uncomfortably, in attachments as a way of redressing bad karma. *Vineland* represents narrative in the act of ceding its own traditional power, even if there is no way completely to avoid playing Athena's game.

Vineland, however, consistently calls attention to this game and parodies Olympian omnipotence in several forms. Living unassuaged in *Vineland*'s Homeric underworld, Shade Creek, the Thanatoid veterans, for instance, represent the lingering karmic effects of the Vietnam War. Like Homer's Shades (many of whom were victims of the Trojan War), Thanatoids yearn for impossible restitutions, to "[set] right whatever was keeping them from advancing further into the condition of death. Among these the most common by far was resentment, constrained as Thanatoids were by history and by rules of imbalance and restoration to feel little else beyond their needs for revenge" (171). Thanatoids subscribe to restorative nostalgia: they want balance restored in the form of vendetta and wait for a divine judge to avenge them. Although the Thanatoids do seem momentarily awakened by an electronic version of "one of the best tunes ever to come out of Europe" (325), Bach's "Wachet Auf,"⁵ this is surely a parody of the messianic resurrection for which they wait.

Another parodic critique of Olympian omnipotence in narration revolves around Jess

Traverse's quotation of Emerson:

Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil. (*Vineland* 369)

Some critics have privileged this articulation of divine justice and retribution, associated as it is with the respected figure of Jess Traverse. Eric Solomon, for instance, associates the Emerson reading with "authentic thirties radical[s]" (165) and a politics that he unproblematically locates as "the novel's moral center" (163).

However, even the immediate context does much to ironize the Emersonian concept of divine compensation. Jess's own addendum to the quotation seems to expose the workings of this form of retribution: "'And if you don't believe Ralph Waldo Emerson,' added Jess, 'ask Crocker 'Bud' Scantling,' the head of the Lumber Association whose life of impunity for arranging to drop the tree on Jess had ended abruptly down on 101 not far from here when he'd driven his week-old BMW into an oncoming chip truck at a combined speed of about 150'" (*Vineland* 369). Jess's vision of divine judgment is one of petty ironies: Bud dropped a tree on Jess, so some divine presence crashed Bud's Bimmer into a chip truck. This is the very stuff of hackneyed dramatic irony, and Pynchon seems to parody the scrupulousness of an omnipotent bookkeeper in the ligneous detail of Bud and Jess's respective "accidents." The mechanism of Bud's fate doesn't seem much different from the Thanatoids' resurrection, accompanied by electronic Bach.

Finally, in this novel of slow karmic adjustments, Brock Vond is most thrilled by fantasies of restoration and the sudden "rapture" (*Vineland* 376) of vendetta. Pynchon's parody of omnipotent judgment reaches its apotheosis when Brock Vond descends upon Prairie from a helicopter, in a Darth Vader-ish attempt to convince Prairie that he is her father, only to be suddenly plucked away in what Hite calls a "nose-thumbing deus ex machina" (135), as "some white male far away must have wakened from a dream" because "Reagan had officially ended the 'exercise' known as REX 84" (376). Pynchon parodies divine narrative power in the figure of a somnolent Reagan, appropriate enough given the distant, sleepy white maleness that often seeps into conceptions of the Christian God.

N. Katherine Hayles is also skeptical about the extent to which the Emerson quotation reflects the actual operations of Pynchon's fictional world: "Sometimes the good guys do win, not because of the infallibility of Emersonian justice, but because of the ironic patterns of fate or Pynchonesque whimsy" (27). Hayles judiciously questions the Emersonian thesis, displacing divine judgment, but omnipotent power merely returns in another form when she sets ironic fate and authorial whimsy in its place, illustrating the tenacity of metaphors for power in discussions of narrative. What makes *Vineland* exceptional is precisely its attempt to discover a way out of the binary of mechanical determinism and omnipotent judgment without capitulating entirely to irony or whimsy.

Yet Hayles's conclusion still seems true of *Vineland*: "If salvation comes, it will arrive by cherishing the small acts of everyday kindness that flourish in networks of kinship and friendship" (28). Extratextual evidence for this reading may be found in Pynchon's foreword to 1984.

Pynchon examines a photograph of Orwell and his adopted son:

It is the boy's smile, in any case, that we return to, direct and radiant, proceeding out of an unhesitating faith that the world, at the end of the day, is good, and that

human decency, like parental love, can always be taken for granted—a faith so honorable that we can almost imagine Orwell, and perhaps even ourselves, for a moment anyway, swearing to do whatever must be done to keep it from ever being betrayed. (xxv–xxvi)

Pynchon does much to restrict this vision of human decency and parental love, associating it with a child's perspective, and qualifying it with “perhaps even ourselves, for a moment anyway,” but these ideas correlate with those found in *Vineland*. There, too, acts of betrayal, represented most complexly in the figure of Frenesi, are major destructive forces. Pynchon also reproduces something from the Orwell picture in a scene between Zoyd and a three- or four-year-old Prairie, who, sick, “croaked, ‘Dad? Am I ever gonna get bett-or?’ pronouncing it like Mr. Spock, and [Zoyd] had his belated moment of welcome to the planet Earth, in which he knew, dismayingly, that he would, would have to, do anything to keep his dear small life from harm” (321).

After observing the ways in which *Vineland* displaces divine justice, we are now in a position to define the strategies through which Pynchon represents the workings of karma, or what Hayles calls the cherishing of kindness, kinship, and friendship. First, we might consider the tow-truck team of Blood and Vato who, unlike the Thanatoids, are depicted in the difficult process of making karmic adjustments. When their friend Flaff dies in action, Blood and Vato literally inherit “his obligation” to Thi Anh Tran, rumored to have originated in Flaff's guilt for having “barbecued her family” (182) in Vietnam. Because “‘We owed it to Flaff.’ ‘Flaff owed it to her’” (182), Blood and Vato assume Flaff's sponsorship of Thi Anh, and their relationship to her is knit ever deeper: “As a term of their sponsorship, they hired her as their bookkeeper, but soon, recognizing her worth, dealt her in for an equal share of the business. Now she had them both so nervous they'd do anything to avoid upsetting her” (183). Blood and Vato argue about where to take the “Vietnamese bitch,” of whom both are afraid, for her birthday lunch. Obviously, there are deep problems in this relationship, but it is a good example of the narrator's technique of binding characters to a karmic process through which they are forced to find appropriate ways of behaving toward one another. *Vineland* emphasizes karmic process rather than teleological accounting. The complex relationship of these two Vietnam veterans to Thi Anh Tran also exemplifies how Pynchon ties personal to national karma.

A better model can be found in DL and Takeshi's karmic relationship. Takeshi is the only major character for whom no obvious *Odyssey* parallel exists, yet maybe it is because he falls outside of the *Odyssey* structure that his relationship with DL is the novel's best example of productive karmic adjustment. Sister Rochelle, an analogue for *Vineland*'s narrator in her use of power, binds the pair together after DL, intending to kill Brock Vond, applies the deadly Vibrating Palm to Takeshi. Sister Rochelle interprets DL's mistake as an act of wrong concentration or karma: “no continuity, no persistence, no...fucking...attention” (155). Takeshi has similarly committed actions of the mind and body that have increased his own suffering: “‘My own sleaziness—has done me in!’ It was too late even for remorse over the years squandered in barely maintaining what he now saw as a foolish, emotionally diseased life” (158). Sister Rochelle commits DL and Takeshi to a long process, claiming, like Austen's narrator, “You deserve each other,” but additionally commanding DL to “try and balance your karmic account by working off the great wrong you have done to him” (163), as a part of DL's “true karmic project” (382).

As in the case of Blood and Vato, the karmic bonds between DL and Takeshi extend to the level of national karma as well. *Vineland* locates Hiroshima and Nagasaki as important coordinates in the karmic history of American and Japan. Early in the novel, Takeshi investigates

an industrial accident potentially related to Godzilla, a common displaced figure for nuclear weaponry. Similarly, the symptoms of the Vibrating Palm may recall nuclear radiation poisoning. The doctor diagnoses Takeshi with “Some strange, corrosive energy—very negative!” (156) and suggests that what is happening to his bladder is “like trauma, only—much slower!” (157). Personal relationships in the novel thus play out national karmic concerns.

Although DL and Takeshi have a rocky start to their karmic obligation to one another, they develop one of those things most consistently prized in Pynchon’s world: partnership. Unlike DL’s relationship with her “ex-partner” (*Vineland* 266) and betrayer Frenesi, this partnership gets renewed annually. One year, they even agree to drop the “no-sex clause” (381), though perhaps it is important that their sexual partnership evolves from an earlier, nonsexual one. As Hite notes, this partnership is increasingly egalitarian and erotic, but also precarious and “deeply contaminated” (145) because still prey to “unrelenting forces that leaned ever after the partners into Time’s wind” (*Vineland* 383). This is appropriate to Pynchon’s technique of karmic adjustment, as actions can be negotiated on the personal and even national level, but “unrelenting forces” cannot be adjusted. In the world of the characters, there are “faceless predators” that “so far had simply persisted, stone-humorless, beyond cause and effect” (383).

As an analogue on the level of narration, this leftover force that is finally exempt from cause and effect might be thought of as the narrator himself, though he is far from stone-humorless. Like all narrators, he has the final word about outcomes but hardly ever uses that omnipotence coercively or without parody. Pynchon seeks to use narrative omnipotence not for judgment or retribution, but rather to erode some of this power by focusing on adjustments rather than judgments and outcomes. However, just as Takeshi is sometimes skeptical of his own “perhaps demented Karmology hustle” (*Vineland* 180), so does the narrator seem to regard his karmic adjustment game as alternately a disingenuous hustle to hasten karmic balance and as a genuine attempt (altering a line from the novel) to “make of his characters’ lives a koan, or unsolvable Zen puzzle, that would send them purring into transcendence” (180).

A Narrative Spectrum of Vendetta and Karma

As Athena plays at nonsense in her knowing misrepresentation of Odysseus’s narrative, so does *Vineland*’s karmic narrator play at a hustle, though it is certainly a hustle with a difference. While all narrators are finally omnipotent when it comes to outcomes in their fictional worlds, Pynchon uses this power not as a locus of judgment but as a way of depicting characters in significant karmic relationships. But if there is something karmic in the god-enforced Homeric code of hospitality, so is there something finally god-enforced in *Vineland*’s karmic adjustments. Conversely, if we look through the lens of the karmic narrative model, there is something of the Thanatoid in *Odysseus*, whose behavior led to great suffering and perpetuated his own suffering. Considering some of our earlier examples through this lens, there is also something karmic in *Persuasion*, in which Austen’s narrator, like Sister Rochelle, binds characters to those whom they deserve (perhaps karmic adjustment in Austen merely occurs afterward, offstage); in Thérèse and Laurent’s adultery, murder, and its effects; in Stephen Dedalus’s “cursed jesuit strain”; or even in Kafka’s parable about a man who seeks admittance to the Law, which also has the quality of a modernist koan. These are not such different kinds of narrative from *Vineland* when we become aware of the karmic characteristics of narrative that Pynchon only exaggerates and foregrounds. As such, karmic adjustment may make a fitting model for many other narratives, each of which we can understand as a dialectic of coordinates

across a spectrum (rather than a binary) of omnipotence and karma.

Vineland falls on the far karmic side of this spectrum, but its reflective nostalgia is shot through with restorative impulses, and its karmic adjustment business cannot be separated from the omnipotence of vendetta that would bring swift and decisive judgment. Pynchon was right to link karmic adjustment and vendetta after all: they reside along the same spectrum that describes a narrator's attitude to power, and neither is finally separable from the fact of power in the narrative act: it's either Athena's nonsense or Takeshi's hustle. At the same time, narrative as karmic adjustment calls attention to potentially ameliorative processes rather than terminal judgments or narrative outcomes. *Vineland's* outcomes are all ambivalent, anticlimactic, or parodic: all the emphasis shifts toward these karmic processes. However skeptically and tenuously the narrator pursues his own hustle, *Vineland* establishes and represents the unfolding of karmic relationships, both provisional and binding, through which it diagnoses America, and by which its characters— like those of the *Odyssey*, only different—are made to struggle over something like karma, only much faster.

Notes

¹Olster credits a colleague for this insight (133 n.6). Bumás gives a more expanded account of *Vineland's* gender reversal:

The story of *Vineland* is in a way a reverse-gender *Odyssey* in which a girl Telemachus (Prairie Wheeler), whose *father* (Zoyd) has suitors who are unacceptable (because they are mostly jail bait), goes in search of her *mother* (Frenesi Gates), who because of super-human forces (the government and its computers) is unable to return home (to California) after the war (the sixties), and who has since been voyaging through strange lands (mostly Southwestern states). The mother has not visited the underworld, as Odysseus did, but has been living underground. [...] Pynchon rewrites the genre with a feminine gender. (167).

²Another text that regenders the *Odyssey* is Melissa James Gibson's *Current Nobody* (2007), in which Pen, a war photographer, leaves Od at home with a child. I am grateful to my colleague, Corinne Pache, for this reference, as well as for helping me to think about karmic traces in the *Odyssey*. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Kayleigh Overman-Fassel, my research assistant, for her meticulous research and our memorable conversations about *Vineland*.

³See Hayles and Rohland.

⁴Pali and Sanskrit terms omitted.

⁵This may be Pynchon's nod to Wendy Carlos's *Switched-On Bach* (1968), which records this piece on Moog synthesizer.

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