

# "The Hacker We Call God": Transcendent Writing Machines in Kafka and Pynchon

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Writing is a form of prayer.

—Franz Kafka (*Diaries*)

The writing machine in fiction is almost always a self-reflexive site, a metaphor authors from Swift through John Barth, Italo Calvino and William Gibson use to explain and display their own techniques. Franz Kafka, with the Sentencing Machine in "In the Penal Colony," and Thomas Pynchon, with the therapeutic Puncutron Machine in *Vineland*, however, both use the writing machine in an additional way: to write directly on the body of a subject to produce transcendental illumination, the first as punishment, the second as healing. Comparing these two machines illuminates a territory of postmodern metaphysics and transcendent belief curiously underexplored in most criticism about postmodernism.

"In the Penal Colony" (1919) describes an elaborate torture device that tattoos the naked body of a convicted criminal with a sentence while killing him. The sentencing machine uses sharp needles and the victim's own blood to inscribe, in an extremely ornate, elaborate (and therefore even more excruciating) script, the victim's sentence on his skin. Indeed, the words of the sentence itself are written only on a narrow band around the torso; the rest of the body is tortured/tattooed with exquisite curlicues, flourishes and embellishments.

*Vineland* (1990) continues Pynchon's romance with, among many other themes, the feedback loop between communication technology and humans we find even in his earliest stories. Pynchon favors machines as metaphors for his own authorial acts and the epistemological/ontological condition of his searcher-heroes, always in suspense, caught up in the gears of a machinery of knowing—rational epistemologies—whose complex operations are incomprehensible and whose foundations are mystical. These searcher-characters survive in the face of systems of knowledge (forms of machinery) that are always woefully incomplete and

We view the sentencing machine through the eyes of an Explorer who has landed on the penal colony. He is given a tour by the officer in charge of administering justice and operating the machine: "It consists, as you see, of three parts . . . the "Bed," the upper one the "Designer," and this one in the middle that moves up and down is called the "Harrow." . . . [T]he "Harrow" is the instrument for the actual execution of the sentence" (141–42).

The officer invites the Explorer (and Kafka the reader) to look beyond the harrow to the process and the tradition that give the machine its true significance. "And how does the sentence run?" asks the Explorer. The officer, showing the absurdity of his own narrow faith, expresses surprise at the Explorer's lack of knowledge about the tenets of his creed: "You don't know that either?" (144), he asks. When the officer has finished explaining, the Explorer is ready to move on to the next sight:

"Now I know all about it," said the explorer as the officer came back to him. "All except the most important thing," he answered, seizing the explorer's arm and pointing upwards: "In the Designer are all the cogwheels that control the movements of the Harrow,

never quite work to bring revelation. At the same time, language and communication are themselves forms of machinery—enacted in the texts we read—that also leave the characters, their author, and the reader grasping for more.

In *V.* (1963), by decoding the spherics Kurt Mondaugen monitors, Lieutenant Weissmann produces Wittgenstein's famous proposition from the *Tractatus*: "Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist." "The world is all that the case is" (278). However, this novelistic contrivance is so acute we know Mondaugen has tuned into the voice of the Being who has authored the text he inhabits. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas wonders whether she should strive to become "the dark machine in the centre of the planetarium, to bring the estate [of Pierce Inverarity] into pulsing stelliferous Meaning, all in a soaring dome around her" (82). In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the metaphor is the V-2 rocket whose parabolic flight brackets the entire novel—or more precisely, that mysterious black box, the *schwarzgerät*, in its tail section—which comes to mean everything, including Desire, the searches of the characters, and, not least, Pynchon's own mysterious authorial imagination.

*Vineland* brings into sharper focus Pynchon's system, or, let us say, his posture, disposition, fundamental commitment as artist, behavioral mode, style—call it what

and this machinery is regulated according to the inscription demanded by the sentence. I am still using the guiding plans drawn by the former Commandant. Here they are"—he extracted some sheets from the leather wallet—"but I'm sorry I can't let you handle them, they are my most precious possessions. Just take a seat and I'll hold them in front of you like this, then you'll be able to see everything quite well. . . . Of course, the script can't be a simple one; it's not supposed to kill a man straight off, but only after an interval. . . . So there have to be lots and lots of flourishes around the actual script; the script itself runs around the body only in a narrow girdle; the rest of the body is reserved for the embellishments." (148-49)

Later the officer tells the Explorer, "This procedure and method of execution, which you are now having the opportunity to admire, has at the moment no longer any open adherents in our colony. I am its sole advocate, and at the same time the sole advocate of the old Commandant's tradition" (153).

One of the refinements of the penal process is that the convicted does not have any prior idea of his sentence—for instance, "Honor Thy Superiors" as punishment for disobedience

you will. And the signs of this system are once again machinic, technological metaphors for his own authorial technique. However, the theme obtains special potency as it collides with another that is very strong in *Vineland*, a kind of comic superstition or encouragement of belief in transcendental realms. The two significant technologies in *Vineland* are the computer and the Puncutron Machine. Both demonstrate that Pynchon, somewhat paradoxically, sees technology and technique—including his own technique as author and the technologies of the novel (writing, printing, publication, dissemination, communication)—as potential means of transcendence. When reading Pynchon, one always feels the ground of the literal threatening to give way in favor of the system of interlocking, subterranean meanings implied in the metaphors. Any significant phrase might resonate through the whole book, or function as a palimpsest on which other readings might be written. This creation of the feeling that "everything is connected" (GR 703) and that everything might refer both to another part of the text and to something outside the text creates a kind of "infra-intertextuality" which lies at the heart of the Pynchon technique, the hallmark of his singular genius. Nor is this tactic a mere mechanical application; rather, it is where Pynchon's style meets his

—nor even that he has been sentenced. The punished is supposed to learn his sentence by reading it as it is transcribed painfully upon his own body. The subject is thus forced to read his own body as pain, the sentence dawning on the subject slowly, over the course of the hours it takes the writing machine to do its work before bleeding its victim to death.

This is an exquisite turn, for it makes the prisoner's reading of the sentence into an exercise in transcendental illumination (in both senses, as an enlightenment and an embellishment of a manuscript), while it forces the subject into a very strange relation with his own body. The subject achieves a religious cognizance of his own crimes, as if the message were signalled from another world, while the skin becomes the palimpsest for a strange ritual, a kind of papyrus or, better yet, a parchment, like the parchment of the scrolls of the Torah, which are also made of very fine and sensitive animal skins. Further, the punishment has to be finely adjusted, for it is no good if the victim does not comprehend the sentence before dying. The officer, recalling the good old days, says, "How we all absorbed the look of transfiguration on the face of the sufferer, how we bathed our cheeks in the radiance of that justice'" (154).

message, where epistemology meets ontology, where the desire to know and the desire to survive collaborate to achieve transcendence.

Such a collaboration between machine and transcendence is oxymoronic, like the idea of a transcendental machine. But Pynchon has always favored such self-contradictory metaphors. He even named his magnum opus using one to signify the collaboration between the calculus of a rocket's trajectory and God's promise to redeem the earth, gravity's rainbow. Indeed, as William Plater observes, Pynchon's use of metaphor itself implies a yearning for transcendence, for it "permits the poet a mode of existence that is a self-conscious delusion, almost like the paranoid's structure, without the obligation to believe it" (228).

Pursuing this oxymoronic collaboration between technology and transcendence, Pynchon shows that it leads to the dissolution of boundaries between epistemology (systems of knowing allied to technology) and ontology (surviving, keeping cool but caring [V 366]). Pynchon calls it "crossing, between worlds" (VI 228), harking back to the definition of a miracle in *The Crying of Lot 49* as an intrusion of one world into another (120). One need only count the occasions when characters experience another (irrational) world as a form of transcendence to get the message. Prairie yearns

The religious tenor of Kafka's portrait is underscored by the language of the officer, who reveres the former Commandant and portrays him in messianic terms:

"[T]he organization of the whole penal colony is his work. We who were his friends knew even before he died that the organization of the colony was so perfect that his successor, even with a thousand new schemes in his head, would find it impossible to alter anything, at least for many years to come. And our prophesy has come true; the new Commandant has had to acknowledge its truth." (141)

The officer also seems to be intriguing against the new Commandant, who does not share the officer's religion, his fervor for the old Commandant's fundamentalist sense of justice. In fact, the explorer's advent at the colony has precipitated a crisis in the officer. Banking on both the Explorer's sense of justice and his position as a disinterested observer, the officer plans a public demonstration meant to strip the New Commandant of his authority. "If my indictment doesn't drive him out of the conference hall, it will force him to his knees to make the acknowledgment: "Old

to use the computer to cross over into her mother's ghostly world of the past. Vato and Blood take Brock Vond down the Ghost's Trail to Tsorrek, the Yurok country of death, as he is about to commit his most heinous act at the Traverse-Becker family reunion. Van Meter plays a Thanatoid gig at the Blackstream Hotel. Weed Atman finds that, after every mysterious visit to his dentist, he comes "back across a borderline, invisible but felt at its crossing, between worlds" (228). When Prairie opens a refrigerator and imagines that the food isn't dead but sleeping, the chill "sent her back out into the less clearly haunted world" (189). The *woge*—creatures in Yurok mythology—withdraw to "the realm behind the immediate" (186), leaving the forests above Vineland haunted; but they might "come back, teach us how to live the right way" "if we [start] fucking up too bad" (187). "[F]aceless predators" (383) bent on kidnapping board Kahuna Airlines flights in progress. And finally, Sister Rochelle lays the big daddy of these tales of crossing over—her allegory about Hell—on Takeshi as he lies helpless in the grip of the Puncutron Machine (382–83).

The contrast between analog and digital is one of those clean and simple dialectics that lie beneath many of Pynchon's complexities. Here it applies to the good and the bad, the sixties and the "Nixonian Repression" (71) that followed. The metonymy for the

Commandant, I humble myself before you.”” (159).

However, the officer’s coup fails, and in despair and defeat, he consigns himself to punishment—and transport—by the Sentencing Machine. He takes his place on the bed, the Harrow starts to work, and only then does the explorer realize that “a wheel in the Designer should have been creaking; but everything was quiet, not even the slightest hum could be heard. Because it was working so silently the machine simply escaped one’s attention” (164). The Designer opens, and the wheels tumble out until it is quite empty, and then the Harrow stops writing: it merely jabs, leading to a horrible end, the body suspended over the pit, skewered. The explorer looks into the face of the corpse and sees there no “redemption,” “no exquisite torture,” only “plain murder” (165–66).

Afterward, the explorer comes to the teahouse, which has the air of an ancient place, evoking “a historic tradition of some kind” with “the power of past days” (166). Inside is the humble grave of the Old Commandant, whose epitaph reads:

“Here rests the old Commandant. His adherents, who now must remain nameless, have dug this grave and set up this stone. There is

analog is Mucho Maas’s stereo system, which stands for what it delivers, rock and roll, which stands in turn for the Revolution. Ushered into Mucho’s mansion, Zoyd, baby Prairie in arms, on the lam in the early seventies from his failed marriage, finds “here was period rock and roll, over audio equipment that likewise expressed, that long-ago year, the highest state of the analog arts all too soon to be eclipsed by digital technology” (308). In Pynchon’s pantheon, CD’s represent the eclipse of the rock and roll analog gods.

The avatar of the digital is the computer. Pynchon’s codewords are the “zeros and ones” to which he alludes throughout *Vineland*, carried over from that magnificent—and oft-analyzed—image for Oedipa’s paranoia: Oedipa feels as if she is “walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above. . . . Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth” (CL 181). In the Pynchon mythography, the whole nexus of conceits—communication systems, codes of hidden meaning, the technologizing of the Word, the reduction of options, the alliance between tech and death, *especially* the alliance between tech and death—all resolves into the image of flashing electronic gateways meant to imitate and somehow excite the shining paths, neurons, of the human brain. That

a prophecy that after a certain number of years the Commandant will rise again and lead his adherents from his house to recover the colony. Have faith and wait!" (167)

This tale suggests several interlaced interpretations, but most Kafka scholars agree it is at once deeply Jewish and profoundly authorial, or textual in a furtively Jewish way. Kafka's deepening involvement with Judaism began when he was 28 (in 1911) as part of a more general struggle to find a foundational intellectual heritage, and partly in rebellion against his father, who was decidedly secular and assimilationist.<sup>1</sup> When he wrote "In the Penal Colony" in 1914, he had recently finished reading Kierkegaard's lacerating *Book of the Judge*, his statement of absolute faith in God. Under Kierkegaard's influence, Kafka seemed to be grappling with the judgmental and penal qualities of Judaism, a struggle we can also discern in *The Trial* and *The Castle*.

In the context of Kafka's more general involvement in Judaism, it is easy to discern the many references in "In the Penal Colony" to the minority position of European Judaism. The entire penal colony seems like a ghetto, while the officer is the only remaining adherent of the old faith. It is also easy to

remarkably prophetic metaphor in *Lot 49* is rewritten with a vengeance in *Vineland*, in a passage that deserves as much attention. After payment on her and her husband's desperately-needed stipend check has been stopped by the computer, Frenesi meditates on the extent to which her own life is at the mercy of the computer:

If patterns of ones and zeros were "like" patterns of human lives and deaths, if everything about an individual could be represented in a computer record by a long string of ones and zeros, then what kind of creature would be represented by a long string of lives and deaths? It would have to be up one level at least—an angel, a minor god, something in a UFO. It would take eight human lives and deaths just to form one character in this being's name—its complete dossier might take up a considerable piece of the history of the world. We are digits in God's computer, she not so much thought as hummed to herself to a sort of standard gospel tune, And the only thing we're good for, to be dead or to be living, is the only thing He sees. What we cry, what we contend for, in our world of toil and blood, it all lies beneath the notice of the hacker we call God." (90-91)

Frenesi imagines the Big Brother computer controlling her destiny as a hacker God. In fulfillment of her reverie—or in

read in the officer's description of the mutually exclusive and strained relation between the New Commandant and the Old Commandant, in allusions to the messianism of Judaism, and in the zealous behavior of the officer himself a more general parable of the strained relation between Christianity and Judaism—indeed, perhaps even something of Judaism's subversive, submissive and eventually self-destructive posture vis-à-vis Christianity. But in this essay I confine my consideration to Kafka's scribal concerns in the context of Judaism—and not so much the social or cultural Jewish context as the metaphysical one.<sup>2</sup> I believe Kafka is here exploring or dramatizing a personal discovery about the textuality of faith in Judaism: it is central both to our understanding of the parable of this extraordinary writing machine and to our understanding of the relation between Judaism and modern culture.

Judaism in one of its most potent strains suggests a unique relation between Divine revelation and acts of reading and writing, of textuality. The history of Judaic metaphysics can be understood from this perspective as a series of entextualizations, a complex vista created by the relation between the incomprehensibility of divine Intention and the

answer to her dark prayer—Pynchon sends Prairie, Frenesi's angel of redemption, her own daughter, not quite as remote and unregistering as her God, but nowhere as deep into the ones and zeros as Frenesi is. Prairie—latest of Pynchon's anti-heroic searchers—plays the computer keyboard, searching for her mother.

She already knew about how literal computers could be—even spaces between characters mattered. She had wondered if ghosts were only literal in the same way. Could a ghost think for herself, or was she responsive totally to the needs of the still-living, needs like keystrokes entered into her world, lines of sorrow, loss, justice denied? . . . But to be of any use, to be "real," a ghost would have to be more than only that kind of elaborate pretending. (114; Pynchon's ellipsis)

Prairie powers down the computer, having found a picture of her mother and DL that was "sharpened up pixel by pixel into deathlessness." To seal this conceit of the merging of the super- and sublunary worlds through the computer, Pynchon shifts focus to the DL and Frenesi of that picture, "[b]ack down in the computer library, in storage, quiescent ones and zeros scattered among millions of others" (115). Pynchon then uses this crossing over between terms of a metaphor to cross over into the story of DL and Frenesi's,



substantiation of this Intention in written (not spoken) words, in texts. Moses's revelation on Mount Sinai is first inscribed in stone. Ultra-Orthodox belief demands that the Mosaic revelation be understood as the complete written Torah, the entire Five Books of Moses. In fact, there is even a persistent tradition that the Torah was written before Creation itself, and that God was simply the First Reader, reading the Torah as blueprint for the universe. The Torah represents the five books of Moses that Jews today read from scrolls unfurled in the synagogue during religious holidays, and three days a week, including every Sabbath. Written on very fine animal skins, it is unfurled and held before the reader. Other strains of Judaism take more historical views, understanding the Mosaic revelation as the first in a series of transcriptions which produces the Five Books of Moses and eventually the *Tanakh* (the canon of the entire Septuagint, including Prophets, Kings, the Books of Isaiah, Job, etc., all codified before the second century BCE).

But the texts and the relation to religious literacy that seem best to capture the sensibility from which Kafka writes are those of the Talmudic tradition, a unique product of Diaspora Judaism. The Talmud was bred in the hothouse

and the nation's, 1960s experiences.

By contrast with the computer and in keeping with the general farce of *Vineland*, the Puncutron Machine is a comic device, designed to "get that chi back flowing the right way" (163). Its very name is laden with echoes of and allusions to Pynchon's name, to the diacritics of writing, and to piercing through the veil of illusion we call reality. Takeshi, Japanese agent and schlemiel, victim of other people's plots, cannot quite accept that DL, the consummate Ninjette, has laid on him the Ninja Death Touch. A short summary of the tangled plot will help us here.

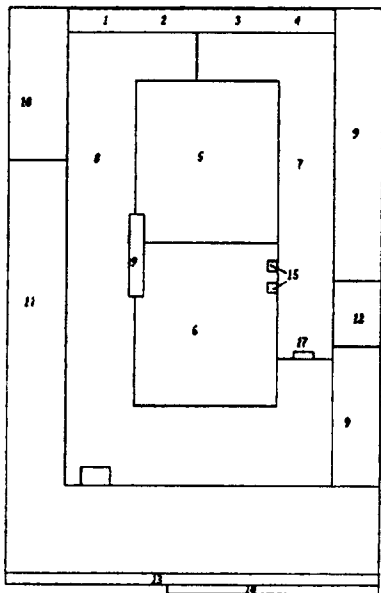
Since girlhood, DL has trained in the Eastern martial arts, apprenticing herself finally to Inoshiro Sensei, who teaches her the Death Touch among other mystical procedures. After fleeing when Mafia don Ralph Wayvone asks her to assassinate Brock Vond—the Darth Vader of *Vineland*—she is kidnapped, taken to Tokyo, and auctioned into white slavery by the Yakuza. The kidnapping turns out to have been engineered by Wayvone, who is also the highest bidder. Placed in a notorious Tokyo whorehouse, Haru No Depaato, Vond is known to frequent, DL prepares to put the Death Touch on him after all. Unfortunately, Vond has somehow gotten wind of the plot, and hustles Takeshi, Vond's oriental double (a fact we are supposed to accept at face value, so to speak) into taking his place in

Jewish cultures of the diaspora by rabbis engaged in an ongoing symposium about the inner meanings of the Torah. It represents a series of interpretations composed from the first century through the fifteenth century CE. One of the world's most elaborate texts, it was composed collectively and at times anonymously by rabbis and commentators working in the academies, first of Babylon, then of Alexandria, Cairo, Persia, Spain, Italy, Germany and elsewhere, frequently in correspondence with each other, from the first century onwards. Even today there are modern efforts to re-codify the Talmud and add on its margins still newer commentaries.<sup>3</sup> By contrast with the familiar stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron, the Talmud gives us a mixture of close reasoning, folklore and tales that fills in the blanks of the often spare stories found in the Torah, as well as elaborate structures defining Jewish ritual and statutes for changing conditions. The Talmud represents a babble of voices, and is perhaps most notorious for its hair-splitting niceties, or most famous for its detailed reasoning and circuitous logic, a logic based not so much on classical Greek reasoning as on a devotion to the problems

DL's embrace. DL is too out of focus to detect the switch, and in the act of intercourse puts the evil touch on him, which is now destined to work its black magic on Takeshi's bladder for a year until he dies or some cure can be found.

A remorseful DL and a desperate Takeshi take refuge among an order of Eastern-mystical nun-ninjettes, The Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives, who run "a sort of Esalen Institute for lady asskickers" (107) where DL has been a "longtime disciple" (108). The Sisters try to correct DL's error and heal Takeshi by an application of spiritual and mechanical technologies. They bond DL to Takeshi as a sort of karmic bodyguard and also use a mysterious therapeutic technology on him, the Puncutron Machine, designed to correct the imbalance in a subject's karma. The language in which Pynchon registers Takeshi's first impression of the machine might easily be a gloss on *Vineland's* complex plot and a parody of the reader's role as Talmudic-style interpretant:

It was clear that electricity in unknown amounts was meant to be routed from one of its glittering parts to another until it arrived at any or all of a number of decorative-looking terminals, "or actually," purred the Ninjette Puncutron Technician who would be using it on Takeshi, "as we like to call them, electrodes." And what, or rather who, was



A typical page of the Talmud

and ambiguities posed by the original Hebrew phrasing of the text.

One simple icon of the exceptionality of Jewish reading practices is the page of the Talmud itself. Captured ingeniously by the sixteenth-century Viennese printer Daniel Bromberg, the layout here both untangles and announces the elaborate multivocality and multivalence of the Talmud symposium.

Considering how the layout of a typical page of the Talmud expresses markedly non-Western interpretive practices, it is almost certain Kafka had it in mind in describing the work of the penal sentencing machine:

supposed to complete the circuit?  
 "Oh, no," Takeshi demurred, "I think not!" (164)

Again the self-reflexive turn: Pynchon uses a technological metaphor for the Talmud-like hypertextual circuit he has built, a circuit of interpretation completed when the reader hooks into the text. Pynchon often makes us feel as if we are caught in a servomechanical loop of interpretation.

Takeshi wonders later if the elaborate Puncutron sessions and everything they imply are simply intended to "send him purring into transcendence" (180). If we take the analogy seriously, the machinery of Pynchon's plot aids the reader in crossing between worlds, just as the Puncutron aids the reader's avatar, Takeshi, in striking a karmic balance.

By contrast with Kafka's grim fable of a writing machine, and to satisfy our curiosity at last, on nearly the last page of the novel, we get a glimpse of the workings of the Puncutron as it operates on Takeshi. It seems clearly Pynchon's answer to Kafka:

[T]he Head Ninjette had managed to corner him while he was on the Puncutron Machine, all hooked up with no escape, and while an inkjet printer moved along the meridians of his naked skin, laying down trigger-point labels in different colors, adding reference numbers and Chinese ideograms, and a

He spread out the first sheet of paper. The explorer would have liked to say something appreciative, but all he could see was a labyrinth of lines crossing and recrossing each other, which covered the paper so thickly that it was difficult to discern the blank spaces between them. "Read it," said the officer. "I can't," said the explorer. "Yet it's clear enough," said the officer. "It's very ingenious," said the explorer evasively, "but I can't make it out." "Yes," said the officer with a laugh, putting the paper away again, "it's no calligraphy for schoolchildren. It needs to be studied closely. I'm quite sure in the end you would understand it too.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the script can't be a simple one; it's not supposed to kill a man straight off,<sup>5</sup> but only after an interval. . . . So there have to be lots and lots of flourishes around the actual script; the script itself runs around the body only in a narrow girdle; the rest of the body is reserved for the embellishments." (148–49)

First, the physical layout of the page of the Talmud would confound the typical Western reader: a central text is surrounded by columns—margins of crowded commentary and commentary on commentary in successively smaller print, including

Senior Ninjette Puncutech stood by with an ivory fescue, noting and commenting. (382)

Here the machine is not a punishment, as it is in the penal colony, but a reward and healing, a means to a happier transcendence: the text of Takeshi's body gets punctuated with a chart of his chi nodes, as if in preparation for acupuncture. However, Sister Rochelle "as so often in the past, now socked Takeshi with another of her allegories, this time about Hell" (382).

Despite the different uses—parabolic and comic—to which Kafka and Pynchon put them, the two writing machines strike to the core of the two authors' purpose, and in both cases it is to point to the transcendent. The numerous collisions of the transcendent with the mundane in *Vineland*—whether through direct allusion to the transcendental or through metaphorical machinery—further signify (or model) a more macrocosmic posture: the only hope for redemption from pedestrian but ubiquitous evil is to allow epistemological and ontological commitments to collapse into the transcendental; to suspend the quest for certainty (as Prairie learns to do), and to give up simply surviving and immersing (as Zoyd is forced to do) in favor of recognizing deeper and unutterable truths; in short, to believe in magic. This revelation does not come all at once, and neither Prairie nor Zoyd

hypertext-like references to other pages in the Talmud and to external sources. Where does one look first? Where on this page, which seems to unfold marginalia from a central text, does one read first? Our Western training to look for a line of thought, to follow a train of ideas, to seek an authoritative text is betrayed as much as it is on first reading a computerized hypertext (see Joyce).

Beyond this physical confoundment is the semantic problem posed by the relation between an apparently central text—the basic text occupying the center of the page of the Talmud, or the Sentence delivered by the Harrow written in a narrow band—and the elaborations on that text. The flourishes and embellishments seem inessential to the Western eye, but capture the essence of the script, its meaning, to the trained reader. One has to labor over the script to read it, find the hidden and occult paths through the labyrinth; and in that pain and in that labor arise special acts of reading which render true, even metaphysical meaning, hidden meaning.<sup>6</sup> Unlike much of the Western tradition of writing for clarity (technical manuals, for example), the Talmudic text and the Sentence of the Harrow are not meant to be transparent;

particularly embraces the transcendental by the tale's end. But it does come, piecemeal. Sister ("Rocky"?) Rochelle's warning to Prairie during her stay among the Attentives may serve as Pynchon's caveat to readers: "knowledge won't come down all at once in any big transcendent moment. . . . Here it's always out at the margins, using the millimeters and little tenths of a second, you understand, scuffling and scraping for everything we get" (112). That might as well be a warning to the hungry reader about Pynchon's anti-rational method in constructing *Vineland*. This novel may be a machine, but it is a machine for producing transcendental meaning. We can even discern—in the retrospective light shed by reading *Vineland* this way—this existential, and perhaps mystical, position evolving through Pynchon's previous works, especially when he meditates on technology. With this context, we can finally read Takeshi's experience in the Puncutron Machine.

Like many other Pynchon characters caught in the toils of plots beyond their ken or capacity for accepting incontrovertible data, Takeshi, while he is strapped into the machine as it works on him, finds himself entering a peculiar state of paranoid rapture:

Most of the time he couldn't believe she had really Done It to him, because even this long way down the line he still had trouble

they are meant to be instruments of revelation.

This very particular style of hermeneutics and episteme arises in and is encouraged uniquely by Hebrew readership. The Hebrew alphabet, developed among Hebrew slaves in the South Sinai in the sixteenth century BCE, is extremely inefficient. Hebrew was, in fact, the very first phonetic alphabet, and all subsequent phonetic alphabets stem from it; yet though it has been surpassed many times in efficiency—the Greeks or Phoenicians added vowels, the Latins some letters—even today modern Hebrew in Israel lacks vowels. This absence of vowels gives rise to a comparatively extreme degree of ambiguity, much more so than in English or any other Latinate language, which in turn makes deciphering written Hebrew quantitatively more difficult and qualitatively different. Try deciphering any simple sentence in English, for instance, with the vowels removed: possible meanings for each word multiply, and may not be resolvable without reference to the whole sentence or even paragraph, or without considering the context of the text. Not only is decryption slowed, but the reader must refer to the context more persistently than would be necessary in reading a more efficient alphabet.

believing in his own death. If she'd killed him, why stick around? If she hadn't, why put him, a complete stranger, through all this? It was driving him toward what, in fairly close to it now, he could detect as some state of literally mindless joy. There was no way he knew of to experience such joy and at the same time keep his mind. He wasn't sure this might not be her real mission—to make of his life a koan, or unsolvable Zen puzzle, that would send him purring into transcendence. (180)

This revealing passage describes Pynchon's own play with the reader throughout his works—his penchant for posing paradoxes and unsolvable puzzles. Perhaps Pynchon's purpose all along has been to send *us* purring into transcendence.

The passage above is also emblematic of a whole series of others that surround it. Indeed, in virtually every scene from the time DL and Prairie enter the Kunoichi retreat to begin Prairie's search for her mother (108) to when the narrative returns to the novel's present, 1984, for the Traverse-Becker reunion (323), the reader is treated to a long, complex and varied system of gestures toward transcendent or magical realms. Sister Rochelle, Prairie discovers, has learned to make herself invisible: "she could impersonate [the room], in its full transparency and emptiness" (111). With access to the Attentives' computer and its

The consequence of this simple inefficiency in Hebrew, as I argue in greater detail elsewhere, is an entire culture of literacy uniquely devoted to ridding difficult texts of ambiguity, and yet at the same time uniquely tolerant of that same ambiguity. One can see how relying on Hebrew as the Talmud does (it is the compilation of dialogues among scholars, often of different countries, whose only common language was written Hebrew) would induce an obsessive focus on the *potential* meanings of individual words—paronomasia—and even on the meanings expressed by the difference of individual letters. Over the centuries, reading Hebrew also gave rise to an enormous, even transcendental sense of playfulness and punning. For the great Midrashists (Talmudists), punning on a word to reveal an association between two meanings was a legitimate source of knowledge, a way of revealing what was a hidden but intended connection. To complicate the picture, Hebrew letters also stand for numbers (*aleph* = 1, *bet* = 2, *gimel* = 3, and so on, through *taf*, the final letter of the alphabet, = 400). This correlation promoted a parallel tradition called *gematria*, or numerology, in which rabbis look for correspondences

elaborate data bank, Prairie becomes “a girl in a haunted mansion, led room to room, sheet to sheet, by the peripheral whiteness, the earnest whisper, of her mother’s ghost” (114). DL’s training in the martial arts leads her to “discover that all souls, human and otherwise, were different disguises of the same greater being—God at play” (121). DL receives “[a]nother message from beyond, no doubt. She saw a pattern” (124). And so on, throughout the middle pages of the novel: the intertwined stories of Takeshi and DL; DL and Frenesi and the 24fps film collective; Frenesi and Vond; the revolution at PR<sup>3</sup> and its sabotage by Vond and Frenesi; the murder of Weed Atman; Takeshi and DL’s interactions with the Thanatoids . . . Stories of the sixties and seventies unfold, each tinged by hints of the mystical and of levels or worlds beyond, outside ordinary perception, worlds of secret motives and irrational operations and death beyond life and karma and ESP (a lot of ESP). In *Vineland*, “Something waited, over a time horizon that not even future participants could describe” (222).

These ineffable narratives include thoroughly implausible but longed-for worlds of magic, living spirits and intuitions fulfilled, but also worlds of dark revelation lurking just beyond our senses, of secret and inexplicable acts hatched in realms beyond our reach. Interestingly, this magic

between the values of related words and their meanings. Indeed, treating “mere” wordplay numerology—its apparent coincidences and inessentiality—as a legitimate epistemological system is quite alien to the practice of Western reason since the Renaissance, and, as much as anything, illustrates the core difference of Jewish thought and the problem with explaining Western culture as “Judaeo-Christian.” The hyphen in that phrase is, to say the least, epistemologically problematic, perhaps even violent. Yet readers familiar with skeptical postmodern challenges to Western reason—like those captured in Pynchon’s *oeuvre*—find a resurrection of Jewish-style reasoning portrayed as a route to transcendent knowledge, in many senses *truer* knowledge than that provided by the failed and deficient systems of science persistently criticized in postmodern novels. As Pynchon writes in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), there is “high magic to low puns” (129). The postmodern challenge to Western reason encourages a kind of superstition, in which coincidences—“tristeros”—lead characters and readers bent on deciphering difficult texts along the route to revelation. Revelations are generally frustrated when pursued by rational means (for instance,

middle of the *Vineland* time line also spans the years from the height of Pynchon’s creativity, the late sixties, to the depth of his silence, the late seventies. If we take this correlation to be more than merely coincidental, we may surmise that the happy and transcendent ending of *Vineland* in 1984 (the year Pynchon published *Slow Learner*) has some subtle autobiographical significance: perhaps something happened that year to permit Pynchon to write again, to shake off the demons of the Nixonian Repression and, in the dead middle of the Reagan years, rediscover the magic. Just as Reagan unwittingly calls off his dog Vond, so perhaps something—whether belonging to official reality or to Pynchon’s own imagination we can only guess—lifted. If this is at all true, then the transcendental references in *Vineland* also signify something essential about Pynchon’s imaginative sources and his feeling about a newfound freedom to invent. But whatever its deeper significance, the exploration here of a new metaphysical or transcendental possibility through technology is intriguing.



plotting the sites of rocket-falls during the London blitz). But does postmodernism reject all routes to knowing? Or is knowledge, perhaps metaphysical or mystical knowledge, permitted, accessible, even encouraged?

So we can articulate a comparison between the tradition of Talmudic routes to knowledge and those that arise in postmodernism. The skeptical Jewish non-Western episteme is revealed through a reading of Kafka's reading of the reading practices induced in the Talmud as represented in "In the Penal Colony" by the sentencing machine. Pynchon in his most recent novel gives us an obvious rereading of Kafka's sentencing machine, updated for a cybernetic age and revised to fit his own epistemological and metaphysical (as well as comic) views, a postmodern Counter-episteme incarnated in the punctron machine. The comparison illuminates a relatively underexplored territory in postmodern criticism, the metaphysics of postmodernism and the religious or superstitious feeling it inspires. Despite the fact that Kafka's machine is a critique of Judaism and Pynchon's is a point of farce, both writing machines offer compelling images. Both write on the body, that most literal part of our being, to bring the subject to awareness of forces beyond the physical and beyond conventional structures of thought. Both suggest alternative routes to knowing. Taken together, and seen as illuminating each other—perhaps like two columns of text side by side or like the two cylinders of a Torah scroll held open before us, imminent but somehow elusive in their calligraphy—the two images of transcendental writing machines reveal a narrative machinery devoted to convincing us that a transcendental realm lies beyond both epistemology and ontology (which dissolve into each other, again like two columns of a text which turn out to be parts of the same scroll), a transcendental realm Kafka critiques and asks us to dread, and Pynchon salutes and asks us to laugh at.

Taken one step further, it is intriguing to find both these transcendental technologies anticipations of a virtual technology whose machinery will inscribe fictitious experiences on our bodies to achieve transcendental effects on our minds. Thus Kafka and Pynchon lie on a vector whose trajectory is towards the increasingly neurological and telepathic. Undoubtedly, as authors like William Gibson who envision

this virtual future have already suggested, these transcendental effects will lead to the construction of a new metaphysics and new gods.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a refractory view of this struggle and its inherently Jewish nature, see Kafka's *Letter to His Father*.

<sup>2</sup>For some of these Jewish readings of Kafka, see Martin Buber, Maurice Friedman, Nahum N. Glatzer, Clement Greenberg, Jean Wahl, and Harry Zohn. See also John Updike. For an incisive and critical look at Kafka's metaphysical stance, see Walter Benjamin.

<sup>3</sup>Mostly by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz.

<sup>4</sup>Much like a condemned man, who comes to understand his sentence at about the sixth hour of his sentencing.

<sup>5</sup>That is, understanding the script—reading it through the body in this case, but equally through Talmud Torah—is equivalent to death.

<sup>6</sup>Kafka seems here to be making a clear reference to Jewish schooling: Jewish schoolchildren spend an inordinate amount of time huddled over texts of the Talmud. The primacy placed on reading and deciphering in Jewish education is well known, and anyone who has seen an Orthodox cheder, or schoolroom, would be struck by both the intensity of reading and the apparent commotion or babble as the students practice reading and discuss meanings.

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