

## A Remarkable Violence: The Mechanical and Textual Apparatus of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"

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Franz Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony," written in 1914 but not published until 1919, famously opens with the officer's description of the torture and execution machine at the story's center: "It's a remarkable piece of apparatus" (131). This simple declarative sentence may well be the most truthful statement that the officer makes, and is certainly the most verifiable—the apparatus, a massive structure designed to tattoo an elaborate sentence into the body of a condemned prisoner with a multitude of vibrating needles, is indeed remarkable if only for the sheer grotesquerie of its violence. His statement, however, might equally apply to the story itself. Kafka's oeuvre is powerfully attractive to critics: according to Louis Begley, "more criticism is published on Kafka each year than on any writer except Shakespeare" (255). But even placed as it is within such a ubiquitously canonical collection of works, "In the Penal Colony" stands apart. Richard T. Gray points to "the critical reception of this text, which has produced a plethora of diverse interpretations rivaled only by the critical response to the novels *Der Proceß* (The Trial) and *Das Schloß* (The Castle) and such seminal stories as 'Das Urteil' (The Judgment) and 'Die Verwandlung' (The Metamorphosis)"; Gray goes on to note that "one might justifiably claim that the spectrum of hermeneutic engagements with 'In der Strafkolonie' [In the Penal Colony] is broader than that evoked by most of Kafka's other works" (213-214). The "apparatus" in the story has been the focal point for many of these engagements, which tend to allegorize the machine as the law inscribing itself on the body or read it literally as the violence integral to the very act of writing. Both are valid interpretations which I do not wish to refute. I will argue, however, that not only can the mechanical "apparatus" in the story be read as a remark on the faded, brutal spectacle of state punishment, it may at the same time be seen as a metaphor for the textual apparatus of the story. In other words, the "apparatus" is a representative model of the story in which it appears, itself a textual framework that has certainly proven to be "re-markable" in more than one sense of the word.

The story's mechanical apparatus has been theorized literally and allegorically many times over, and indeed a lively debate exists as to which tactic is the more appropriate. While Theodor Adorno has written on the enigma that is Kafka's writing—"Every sentence says 'interpret me,'" he muses, "and none will permit it" ("Notes" 246)—he has also issued a prescriptive edict for the process of that interpretation: he demands that the critic "take everything literally; cover up nothing with concepts from above," for "Kafka's authority is textual" (*Negative Dialectics* 347). Still, Adorno's prescription to interpret the story literally has not checked the efforts of allegorical critics, whom Gray notes have variously read the apparatus, with its tripartite structure of Bed, Designer, and Harrow, as everything from a Freudian representation of the id, ego, and superego to a physical manifestation of the trinity "or other religious motifs [. . .] structured around the mystical number three" (224).

While I find these readings of Kafka's monstrous machine intriguing, particularly in their numerological approach, in my own reading I find it useful to first turn to Michel Foucault's landmark 1975 study *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In it Foucault traces the

evolution of state-administered punishment in several European countries, and especially France, from grotesque and horrifying public spectacle in the mid-eighteenth century to “the most hidden part of the penal process” in the nineteenth century and beyond (9). We recall that Kafka’s officer and explorer discuss the workings of the machine in French, a language which neither the prisoner nor the soldier understands. The penal colony itself, which Kafka explicitly locates in the tropics, may well be an allusion to the infamous penal colony in French Guiana that operated for almost a hundred years between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (Krakovitch). During one of his lengthy complaints as to his and the apparatus’s diminished status under the new Commandant of the colony, the officer exultantly recalls the bygone spectacle of execution day under the former regime:

How different an execution was in the old days! A whole day before the ceremony the valley was packed with people; they all came only to look on; early in the morning the Commandant appeared with his ladies; fanfares roused the whole camp; I reported that everything was in readiness; the assembled company—no high official dared to absent himself—arranged itself around the machine [. . .]. The machine was freshly cleaned and glittering. [. . .] Before hundreds of spectators—all of them standing on tiptoe as far as the heights there—the condemned man was laid under the harrow by the Commandant himself. [. . .] It was impossible to grant all the requests to watch it from nearby. (Kafka “Penal Colony” 145-146)

The officer’s description, juxtaposed as it is with the fact that the only spectators present at the currently scheduled execution are himself, the explorer, the prisoner, and the soldier, will necessarily remind the reader familiar with *Discipline and Punish* of the relatively rapid decline in the spectacle of punishment, from lengthy public displays of death-by-torture for condemned criminals to the migration of capital punishment behind walls, accessible only by a privileged few. Foucault writes that by the mid-nineteenth century,

[p]unishment had gradually ceased to be a spectacle. And whatever theatrical elements it still retained were now downgraded, as if the functions of the penal ceremony were gradually ceasing to be understood, as if this rite that ‘concluded the crime’ was suspected of being in some undesirable way linked with it. It was as if the punishment was thought to equal, if not to exceed, in savagery the crime itself, to accustom the spectators to a ferocity from which one wished to divert them, to show them the frequency of crime, to make the executioner resemble a criminal, judges murderers, to reverse roles at the last moment, to make the tortured criminal an object of pity and admiration. (9)

Foucault later details the multiplicitous litany of punishments found in the French ordinance of 1670, in which varying degrees of physical torture leading to execution were to correspond with individual criminal transgressions, typically the most severe—treason, murder (especially parricide and regicide), and the like—and notes that “[c]ustoms, the nature of the crimes, [and] the status of the condemned accounted for still more variations” (32). The ways in which the state could mark and re-mark the body of the criminal were nothing if not terribly, exhaustively creative: hanging, the cutting off of hands, the cutting out or piercing of the tongue followed by hanging, the breaking of multiple bones, strangling followed by bone-breaking, burning alive, strangling followed by burning, the “drawing” or tearing apart of the body by horses, decapitation, the crushing of the skull (Foucault 32); truly, as Foucault notes,

“an arsenal of horrors” (32). Foucault’s conception of the spectacle of public punishment as equal to, if not in excess of, the savagery of the crime is particularly relevant to Kafka’s story, as the prisoner is slated to die an inconceivably agonizing death under the needles of the apparatus for a relatively minor infraction.

Here, amidst a consideration of the textualization of the human form, we find an opportunity to begin moving from a discussion of the marking and re-marking of the criminal body by the state to one of the marking and re-marking of the page by the author and the critic. We might think of the spectacle of punishment in Europe as a type of *pharmakon*, a poison-that-cures. In this case, Foucault’s rumination on the meaning behind the distribution of French penal administration between the Ministry of the Interior, traditionally responsible for prisons in France proper, and the Ministry of the Navy or the Ministry of the Colonies, responsible for the *bagnes*—convict ships or penal colonies—can be helpful:

And beyond this distribution of roles operates a theoretical disavowal: do not imagine that the sentences that we judges pass are activated by a desire to punish; they are intended to correct, reclaim, ‘cure’; a technique of improvement represses, in the penalty, the strict expiation of evil-doing, and relieves the magistrates of the demeaning task of punishing. (10)

Whether or not the judges who pass sentence are motivated by a desire to punish is irrelevant in a discussion of the punishment-as-*pharmakon* (as Foucault himself is certainly aware; the “theoretical disavowal”/ersatz reflection that he culls from the minds of “we judges” ought to be read as an instance of irony). The “technique of improvement” is not, of course, focused on improving the prisoner, because the prisoner, as we have already seen, is utterly and irrevocably marked as such by the agents of the state and is then destroyed in the process of punishment. What is improved is ostensibly the society itself through the “strict expiation of evil-doing,” and by the corrective reinforcement of the specular; that is, by the crowd that witnesses the willingness of the state to perform any and every manner of punitive torture upon the body of the hapless criminal. Here we see the principle of the *pharmakon* in action, the poison-that-cures, the autoinnoculation of the state against the criminal by the destruction of the criminal body in the most agonizing and most public manner possible. But the society is improved only up to a point, that point being the one at which “the executioner resemble[s] a criminal, [and] judges murderers” (Foucault 9). The point is a perilous one for the state, a tipping point. Like a vaccine containing cells of the very disease it is intended to guard against, the *pharmakon* of publicly-administered state punishment can be dangerous to the host organism—the state. Too much of it may cause a reaction in the form of a citizenry that begins to understand its government as savagely cruel, even as it objectifies the tortured and executed criminal, including the traitor or murderer, as a martyr or folk hero.

While there is certainly more to be written on the subject of the mechanical apparatus within the story as a trope of the dead spectacle of state-administered punishment, I will continue now to an examination of the textual apparatus of the story and a consideration of the mechanical apparatus as the story itself.<sup>1</sup> My reading of the textual apparatus of “In the Penal Colony” begins with a consideration of the figure of the explorer. Our knowledge of him is limited: he is a European explorer of some means and renown, who speaks French but may or may not be French—all Kafka tells us is that “[h]e was neither a member of the penal colony nor a citizen of the state to which it belonged” (143). He is apparently the contemporary

version of a liberal humanist—the knowledge that the condemned man has not been provided a defense and does not know that he has been sentenced to death troubles him (136). Here we find another point of contact with *Discipline and Punish*:

In France, as in most European countries, with the notable exception of England, the entire criminal procedure, right up to the sentence, remained secret: that is to say, opaque, not only to the public but also to the accused himself. It took place without him, or at least without his having any knowledge either of the charges or of the evidence. (Foucault 35)

Physically, however, the explorer is a virtual tabula rasa. We receive no description of his features, his attire, or any other distinguishing physical characteristic. On the one hand, this is odd, because we get at least some form of description of the other three main characters who have an immediate presence in the narrative (the two who do not are, of course, the old and new Commandants): we see the officer's heavy, constrictive uniform, "amply befrogged and weighed down with epaulettes" (133); the curiosity of the "stupid-looking, wide-mouthed" prisoner with his "bewildered hair and face [. . .] so like a submissive dog" (131); and the indolent guardianship of the prisoner by the soldier, who, in dozing off while holding the former's chains, calls to mind the dereliction of duty for which the prisoner has been condemned to die. On the other hand, the lack of physical description and identifying details by which to mark the explorer makes sense, because it allows the explorer to become a sympathetic space within the narrative which the reader is invited to inhabit. Although he sees the officer and the explorer as "two aspects of a single consciousness," Richard Thieberger writes that, nonetheless, "[t]he explorer is more accessible to the reader than is the officer," and never more so than when "the reader learns simultaneously with the visitor that the condemned man is ignorant of the verdict against him—something repellant to the decencies of humanism. Consequently there is complete understanding between [. . .] the European explorer [. . .] and the reader, himself presumably European and a humanist" (305). Gray notes that as readers, "we ultimately play roles similar to that of the Explorer in the story, called upon to mediate between stances that offer no obvious ground for successful mediation" (236). So we can see that, for the purpose of the metaphor of the textual apparatus I am advancing (that of the machine itself as text) then the reader takes on the role of the explorer—or the explorer is always already the reader.

If the explorer is the reader, then we as explorers naturally shift our cataloguing gaze to determining the function of the officer within the textual apparatus. One way to problematize his role is to recall that the machine does not function as smoothly in his demonstration for the Explorer as it is supposed to: although it should run silently, a cog immediately begins to creak (Kafka "Penal Colony" 140). One of the recurrent themes of the officer's dialogue is his dissatisfaction with the colony's new Commandant, who is not a supporter of the apparatus and who therefore threatens the officer's conception of himself as the judge and executioner for the colony. Because a recitation of the officer's complaints would be lengthy, we will permit critical summary to suffice: Corngold refers to the repeated "scenes of parliamentary wrangling conjured by the officer" (72), and Thieberger notes that when he becomes frustrated, the officer "heaps up reproaches against the new Commandant" and throughout the story voices "incessant criticisms of the new administration" (306-307). Through the critical focus on his

constant protests, we can thus see the officer as the squeaking cog within the textual apparatus of the story.

However, because of the importance of the dialectical relationship established between the officer and the explorer—the officer always trying to maneuver the explorer into an acceptance of his beloved method of punishment, the explorer always resisting—it is not sufficient to merely theorize the officer into the role of the story’s squeaking cog and then move on. We must also consider issues of chiasmic inversion, for if we are thinking of the text as the apparatus, then the construction of officer-as-cog works; but if we are considering the apparatus within the text as the text itself, we need something more. Another way of problematizing the figure of the officer is to consider him the textual analogue of the author in the same way that the explorer is the textual analogue of the reader. Simply put, the officer is Kafka himself. Kafka’s identity as the officer within the officer–explorer dialectic, and by turns the identification of the officer as metaphorical stand-in for the author, is apparent within the very first sentence of the story: “‘It’s a remarkable piece of apparatus,’ said the officer to the explorer and surveyed with a certain air of admiration the apparatus which was after all quite familiar to him” (131).<sup>ii</sup> The first sentence of the story, if we follow the metaphor of the textual apparatus, is indicative of authorial pride as well as the familiarity with which an author regards a text in which he has invested immeasurable care and concern and which is, after all, quite familiar to him. Reading the officer as Kafka allows us to maintain the dialectical tension between him and the explorer/reader, and even to extend that tension to encompass the dialectic of intention and interpretation that invests any writer/reader relationship.

Having delineated the roles of the explorer and officer in the metaphor of the textual apparatus, we can now turn to a consideration of the mechanical apparatus within and around that metaphor. There are two predominant issues we must examine: first, the tripartite structure of both the text and the machine at its heart; and second, the catastrophic failure of the machine when it is finally tested and the corresponding collapse of the narrative at its own terminus. The first of these issues ties in quite nicely with the intriguing numerological considerations of the appearance of threes within the text. The mechanical apparatus has three parts: the Bed, on which the condemned prisoner lies; the Designer, which functions as the brain of the machine, directing the flow of the script as it is tattooed into the body; and the Harrow, the set of needles which actually does the tattooing. The text of the story itself is commonly interpreted as having three parts. In the opening, the officer regales the explorer with tales of the glory days of the penal apparatus and its then-flawless functioning before edified crowds on execution day. In the middle, the officer gives himself over to the machine in order to experience firsthand the “enlightenment” he claims it induces in the condemned, only to die rapidly and gruesomely when the apparatus drastically malfunctions and begins stabbing rather than writing. Finally, there is the notorious ending, in which the panicked explorer first visits the colony’s teahouse and sees the grave of the old Commandant, then flees back to his steamer in a rowboat and himself threatens the now-freed prisoner and his companion the soldier with violence in order to stop them from coming with him. The apparatus *in* the story and the apparatus *of* the story are therefore both composed of three integral and interworking pieces—and this, as a consideration of the alternate endings Kafka considered and rejected tends to make clear, is no coincidence or accident.

That Kafka was deeply dissatisfied with the strange and incongruent ending of “In the Penal Colony,” and that he produced several alternative endings as diary entries—none of which were ever substituted for the original, which he considered *machwerk*, or “botched” – seems to have become a required citation in criticism of the text (Corngold 71; Gray 236; Thieberger 304). Kafka’s antipathy for the ending explains, in part, the five-year caesura between the story’s completion in 1914 and publication in 1919. In the famous September 4, 1917, letter to his editor Kurt Wolff, Kafka complains that the presence of the two or three “botched” pages at the end “points to some deeper flaw; there is a worm that hollows out the story, as dense as it is.” The enigmatic sentence lends itself to an image of a textual apparatus riddled with honeycombs, its supporting struts eaten away by a parasite, and its collapse foretold.

And what of the succession of stillborn endings that Kafka composed, considered, but never implemented? How do they stack up, narratively speaking, against the one that Kafka reluctantly chose, even though he knew that it would effectively cripple the story by softening the impact of the dialectic he had set up between his two main characters?<sup>iii</sup> Corngold’s succinct description of the collective, fragmentary endings that appear in Kafka’s diary during his entries of August 1917 is perhaps the most apt: “These are extraordinarily lurid” (74). A paraphrastic summary of the alternate endings bears out his assessment. In the first, the exhausted explorer suffers a break with reality and proceeds to act like a dog, running about on all fours (Kafka *Diaries* 178). The second and third fragments are slightly different variations of each other—in them, the explorer tries to shoo away the prisoner and the soldier, eventually throwing a stone at them and striking them with his fists when they will not leave the scene of the officer’s death. The explorer then apparently becomes confused and wonders whether the officer had forgotten to make some crucial adjustment to the apparatus before mounting it (178-179). The fourth fragment is perhaps the strangest and most nonsensical; it depicts an unnamed narrator who may or may not be the explorer leading a band of “renowned stone-crushers” bearing hammers who will attempt to pulverize all of the rocks in the valley where the wreckage of the apparatus is located. The reason for the hard labor is that a giant snake that the narrator calls Madame is slated to come and gobble up all the rock dust (179). In the fifth fragment, the explorer again tries to force the prisoner and the soldier to leave the site of the officer’s death, but the two only laugh at him; the prisoner then presses his grease-smearred face to the explorer’s hand as the soldier claps a hand to the explorer’s shoulder. The scene (and, one would assume, the story) ends with the line “all three now belonged together” (180). The sixth and final fragment is also the longest of all the alternatives, and one senses that it may have been the most seriously considered by Kafka as a viable ending to the story. Then again, to quote directly from the fragment’s opening sentence, the reader, like the explorer, “had forcibly to ward off the feeling coming over him that in this case a perfect solution had been effected” (180). In the remainder of the fragment, the explorer, exhausted by the tropical heat, abandons his intention to bury the officer’s corpse and collapses into one of the cane chairs by the side of the pit. He thinks to himself how much he would prefer “to everything” if “his ship had slithered to him across this trackless sand to take him aboard” (180). He then finds himself playing out a scenario in his head that involves a dialogue with the officer, in which he threatens the officer with his intention to tell those in his home country of the prisoner’s barbaric execution. The officer tells him that the prisoner was not executed, and sure enough, the explorer turns to find the prisoner carrying his baggage. When the explorer asks the officer

if he has just performed “a conjuring trick,” the following ensues: “‘No,’ the officer said, ‘a mistake on your part; I was executed, as you commanded.’ The captain and the sailors now listened even more attentively. And all saw together how the officer passed his hand across his brow to disclose a spike crookedly protruding from his shattered forehead” (181). Gray astutely highlights the main problem with the last fragment: because the story “contains so many allusions to the historical reality of Kafka’s time and [. . .] otherwise refuses to breach the pseudo-empiricism of its fictional world, such a flight into imaginative fantasy is out of place” (238). While Gray himself is most partial to the second and third fragments, he does not go so far as to suggest that Kafka made the wrong choice of endings for “In the Penal Colony” (238).

However, at least one other critic—Thieberger—*does* go exactly this far, and in so doing executes two rather violent critical re-markings of the text. The first is a condemnation of any ending after the self-destruction of the apparatus:

The story should end with [the officer’s] death. Its effect on the other characters, particularly on the explorer, could still be described at the same place. *Instead the two pages devoted to the teahouse and to the explorer’s embarkation destroy the unity of the work.* The story began in front of the intact torture machine; it should also end before the broken machine that has just spectacularly failed in its ultimate purpose. (308; italics added)

I have italicized the key sentence in the quoted passage because it is critical to my own argument and because Thieberger himself seems to have completely missed the point of the strange and anticlimactic implosion of the narrative structure at the story’s end. The very purpose of the two pages devoted to the teahouse and the explorer’s embarkation may well be to destroy the unity of the work (and whether Kafka realized this or not, the fact remains that of all the possible alternative endings he considered, he chose the one he did). Without them and the narrative collapse they effect, the story is composed of only two parts, not three; and the textual apparatus does not mirror the fate of the mechanical apparatus at its heart. Then, only a few paragraphs later, Thieberger writes: “From the various drafts of an ending, Kafka finally chose one, without either conviction or satisfaction. This simply proves that he did not succeed in fulfilling his intention. To have brought the ship to the scene would have been the best solution!” (309). This is the second re-marking, one in which Thieberger lobbies for the sixth fragment, the one we have seen also includes the problematic “flight into imaginative fantasy,” as Gray describes it, involving the spectral presence of the officer (and even Thieberger is willing to admit that this part of the sixth fragment is “pure hallucination” [309]) (238). So in the space of little more than a page, Thieberger advocates two completely different endings for “In the Penal Colony” (one of which, namely the suggestion to end the story immediately after the death of the officer, Kafka never considered and which may not even have ever occurred to him), endings which would do little more than fit his own interpretive agenda.

I have proposed in this essay that we, Kafka’s readers, are always already the explorers of the penal colony, and Kafka himself is always already its officer. Bearing these dual roles in mind, we might consider the following exchange between the two characters as they look over the blueprints of the apparatus:

“Read it,” said the officer.

“I can’t,” said the explorer. (Corngold 148)

Despite the interpretive challenges presented by the hermetic structure of Kafka's texts and in their deliberately amorphous plots and symbols, they continue to be the focus of an immense amount of scholarly production—including, of course, the present essay, itself yet another remark on Kafka's seminal text of bodily inscription and the criticism that has sprung up around it. Even such a venerably violent text as "In the Penal Colony" is indeed re(-)markable, able to offer the critic new approaches and inroads, and able to bear the continual—and sometimes violent in and of themselves—commentaries of countless critics and theorists. As the mechanical apparatus and the state it represents marks the criminal body, and the textual apparatus marks the reader, so does the critical apparatus mark and re-mark the textual corpus. If, to paraphrase Adorno, every sentence of Kafka's stories paradoxically demands and thwarts interpretation, no less difficult a feature of "In the Penal Colony" than its densely cryptic impenetrability, not to mention the paratextual presence of its numerous aborted endings, makes our sometimes violent re-marking of its mechanical and textual apparatus—its remarkable violence—absolutely necessary and continually edifying.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Before I do so, however, I should note that I am not the first to make such an association; according to Gray, the critics Axel Hecker and Klaus Mladek, both writing in German, see the mechanical apparatus respectively as "a 'deconstruction machine' whose malfunctioning in the narrative of the story anticipates and mimics the malfunctioning of Kafka's text itself, its inability to achieve resolution," and "as Kafka's ironization of his own imperfect act of writing" (216). Although I will approach the problem a bit differently than have Hecker and Mladek, the tenor of their work is close enough to my own to merit acknowledgement.

<sup>ii</sup> Kafka's letters indicate that he carefully cultivated his fictions, relentlessly revising them and even concerning himself with the typefaces and layouts in which they would be set. He was as concerned with the welfare of his stories as the officer is with the welfare of his machine, of which – as Kafka to his fictions – he has become the sole proponent and caretaker.

<sup>iii</sup> Gray, in reference to the crippling effect of the story's ending, writes, "After the death of the Officer the dialectical structure of the text breaks down" (236). Kafka, in his composition and consideration of several variations on an ending for the story, seems to have been searching for a way to maintain that dialectic. The only way to do so would be to not kill the officer, which would have damaged the story as a whole far more than did the "botched" ending Kafka eventually chose.

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