

KAFKA'S WRITING MACHINE: METAMORPHOSIS IN THE PENAL COLONY

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I

Like all of Kafka's best stories, "In the Penal Colony" is maddeningly rife with multiple and contradictory interpretations. Some have made it announce Auschwitz and Dachau; others have seen in it a grim reminder of harsher Old Testament values, according to which our modern liberal world stands either condemned or threatened; the brief tale has been read psychologically, psychoanalytically, anthropologically, historically, paradoxically and parabolically.¹ No matter how one reads it, however, the story's resolution, i.e. the explorer's response to the penal colony, appears so ambivalent that it becomes effectively impossible to do the very thing that is central here and happening everywhere in Kafka: pronounce judgment. My purpose, in proposing a new look at the story, is to centralize the notion of communication and language; in so doing, we begin to perceive the awesome coherence of Kafka's materials: the disturbing, echoing analogies between the narrative frame, the nature of the Machine, and the purposes of art.

"It's a remarkable [*eigentlich*] piece of apparatus."² Kafka's genius in mixing understatement and prophecy—so often in evidence in the first lines of his stories³—is fully displayed here. Just how "*eigentlich*," just how special the machine is, is something the explorer and, indeed, the reader must gradually come to understand. The entire story may, in fact, be seen as a gloss on these lines: how can the officer make the explorer adequately comprehend the machine? The critical debate concerning the story suggests that its readers have been equally perplexed, equally stymied in their grasp of these strange events. There is nothing contrived or redundant about

Kafka's insistence on the process of understanding. The desperation and passion of the story lie precisely in the officer's efforts to reach the explorer, to bring the outsider over to his own point of view.⁴ One might even go so far as to say that the officer's project is more profoundly rhetorical than it is judgmental: to persuade the explorer counts ultimately more than punishing the prisoner. One even has the sense that the justice of the entire System (that of the Old Commander, to be sure) is strangely dependent on the explorer's verdict: to understand the special nature of the machine would restore Truth and Clarity to a world riddled with doubt and equivocation. This mutual drama of understanding is, as it were, the hidden script of the story, and Kafka shows, if I may extend his own metaphor, just how thick our skin is.

There was a time, we are told, when the validity of the machine did not require such special pleading. The spectacle of justice being done was an occasion of civic and spiritual celebration, a time of community. Crowds came from far and near, and children were given preferential treatment in seating arrangements. It is no wonder that children witnessed these events, since they seem to have possessed a rather extraordinary educational potential. There was not yet any uncertainty or confusion in matters of innocence and guilt: all parties—including the victim—experienced a collective revelation of truth. These were halcyon days, epistemologically as well as morally:

“... often enough I would be squatting there with a small child in either arm. 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, achieved at last and fading so quickly! What times these were, my comrade!” The officer had obviously forgotten whom he was addressing; he had embraced the explorer and laid his head on his shoulder. The explorer was deeply embarrassed, impatiently he stared over the officer's head. (p. 154)

Notice how the moment of transparency is an irresistible moment of sharing and bonding. Moreover, the community spirit embodied in these public executions is again activated, communalized through narration; the officer embraces the explorer, as a natural extension of those brother days, but finds coolness, objectivity and embarrassment instead. The officer seeks, throughout the entire story, to “touch” the explorer; the explorer, man from another realm, keeps his distance.

I am less interested in assessing the explorer's character than in underscoring his detachment, his quasi-professional sense of non-involvement. Yet, as we shall see, distanced judgment counts for naught in Kafka; "understanding" something comes, sooner or later, to mean "entering" into it, and in this story such an entry will be literally enacted at the close. In Kafka's work, filled as it is with endless corridors, closed doors, secret chambers and labyrinthine passages, contact with the Other, sought, feared or enacted at every level of the narrative, is both the ultimate hunger and the ultimate taboo.

II

From our vantage point in the latter part of the 20th century, "In the Penal Colony" can hardly be viewed as anything other than a horror story, a torture story. The grotesque disproportion between crime and punishment, the radical assumption of guilt, the heinous nature of the sentence, the powerfully symbolic dysfunction of the machine, all this seems to constitute an irreversible indictment of the officer and his penal system. Finally, the machine itself appears to be on trial: technical know-how, mechanical expertise and scientific engineering have, as we know today better than Kafka can have known in 1914, a will and impetus of their own, determining rather than serving the human uses to which they are put. The machine may then be "*eigentlich*," in that it is the most seductive and potent agent of the story, the ultimate winner in the modernist game of rhetorical persuasion, the forerunner not only of Dachau and Auschwitz, but of all the technological nightmares of our own nuclear age.

And yet . . . Kafka's story refuses to fit this scenario. There is something great as well as something disturbing in Kafka's machine. Technical craft, fine-tuning and scientific precision must have a special (*eigentlich*) appeal to any artist. Given what we know of Kafka's self-discipline as a writer, his torturous sense that what he had written would not quite do, we are compelled to feel that this complex, harmonious, (up-to-now) perfectly functioning machine—with its complete adequation of ends and means—cannot be simply dismissed as evil. Finally, our post-1914 history, with its well-known

atrocities, has, it is true, enabled us to read Kafka's story in a grimly prescient manner; but it has also led us to *misread* Kafka's story, to see in it the precursor of concentration camps, but to miss the echoes of Flaubertian aesthetics, the Flaubertian mystique of a *mot juste* that would miraculously wed language to reality. The most painstaking and scrupulous of authors, Kafka knew all too well that words veil as well as disclose, that they can only name, never be; how can he not have yearned for that Edenic realm where language and substance are united, that *Heimat* whose uniform the officer still wears, in poignant contrast to the homelessness of the explorer who is afloat in the relativism of his age and is rooted nowhere. Finding a potent language is, then, the unifying thread of Kafka's story: in this light, the machine's special power perfectly images the drama of understanding and contact at the heart of the tale.

Understanding is the cornerstone of all community, and language has, since the beginning of human society, played a crucial bridge-making role in the interactions between men and their gods, between men and themselves. Much of Kafka's work seems polarized by the two dominant modes of such relationships, the Old Law and the New Law, the injunctions of authority versus the openness of love. In this story, Kafka has introduced still another basic antithesis: the memory of a time when Truth was known and despotically enforced, versus our modern period of liberal relativism with its bureaucratic procedures. The written word, as Kafka well knew, has long been central to the transmission of Truth; the German word for "writing" is "*Schrift*," and Kafka significantly noted that it also stands for "Scriptures," for holy books. A number of critics have been drawn to this connection, and they have sketched elaborate parallels between the religiously guarded, hieroglyphic instructions for the machine and the sacred books of the past;⁵ but, whether it be Old Testament or New, Torah or Talmud, this written document now fails to create its community of believers. The explorer cannot decipher it. But, let us not reduce the role of "*Schrift*" to the page of instructions for the machine; if we apply to it the more modern sense of "language," "discourse," or "*écriture*," then we see the larger spectrum of communicative acts which make up the form and meaning of the tale. The old absolute code may be defunct, but the machine remains, and so, too, does human language. In the secular present, literature itself may be called on to regenerate the interactions between men and their gods, men and themselves. Written and spoken language are the last remaining agents of connection. They are civilization's vehicle

for understanding, and if they can no longer peremptorily command assent, they can perhaps strive for a still nobler goal: to invite response, to incite love. Understanding and love enable mutuality in a world that contains only individuals. Understanding and love are modes of entry, promises of reciprocity. The writer, more than most, plays a role in this drama, because his is the medium that bonds and connects. In the old days, the machine made truth visible, and all understood, together. As a means of commonality, such understanding has nothing to do with logic or system; it is knowledge, in the biblical sense of experience, of entry into things. Without this kind of understanding, human beings are either logical robots or animals of instinct, achieving no knowledge worth having, whether of the self or of the other. "In the Penal Colony" is about the inadequacy of these extremes, and it is in the creation of his macabre but mesmerizing machine that we may find Kafka's strange remedy.

The distance maintained by the explorer has already been mentioned. Vaguely an emissary of "our" humanist society, he is perplexed by the conflict between judgment and action; he disapproves, but does not want to meddle. He leaves the island apparently unchanged in his views, preventing the soldier and the prisoner from following him. He threatens them with a heavy, knotted rope, as if they were subhuman. And they are. Kafka has described the prisoner as "a man with crude features and thick lips," whose passivity is "doglike and submissive"; his crime is strictly one of instinct: when whipped in the face by his superior, "instead of getting up and begging pardon, the man caught hold of his master's legs, shook him and cried, 'Throw that whip away or I'll eat you alive'" (p. 146). The soldier and the prisoner, squatting in dirt and vomit, listen uncomprehendingly as the officer explains—in French no less, so that the opaqueness of our language is even more blatantly illustrated—the machine to the explorer. All we see is "the movement of his blubber lips, closely pressed together, [which] showed clearly that he [the prisoner] could not understand a word" (p. 144). Asking if the prisoner even knows what his crime is, the explorer dutifully demonstrates his allegiance to the humanist code; but that code, predicated on the possibility of self-knowledge and implemented through the use of spoken and written language, is shattered by the officer's answer, an answer that resonates throughout the story: "There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body" (p. 145). Whereas most critics have focused on the glaring injustice of such a procedure, the calm assuredness that guilt need hardly be

“proven” since it is concomitant with existence, what has gone largely uncommented is Kafka’s radical view of communication itself. For now we see the awesome mediation which the machine is to provide: spoken language, French in this case, but arguably all language, including potentially this story, the full exchange between the officer and the explorer, the reader and the text, fails to deliver its message, fails to penetrate one’s being, to get through one’s skin, to make an entry, to effect intercourse or discourse, to transform animals into men.

Kafka is dealing with the most elemental problem known to verbal creatures. Language cannot *be* what it says. And men’s skins are thick. This story depicts a search for language that is immediate rather than mediated, and it comes up with a terrible solution: we must learn viscerally, not verbally; the script must be in us, not in front of us. As if he were a geneticist, aware that our very chemistry and molecules perform linguistic operations, Kafka seems to be saying that the verbal message can achieve a magic oneness with its referent, only if it is encoded in our flesh. Kafka’s machine is a writing machine. It actualizes and vitalizes all our tired metaphors and proverbs for knowledge: “tief,” “deep” awareness, to understand something “viscerally,” to scratch the surface, to be penetrated by knowledge, to have an “inner” certainty.⁶ Thick-skinned, “thick-lipped” humans need no less. The machine provides deep knowledge; its prisoners achieve a visceral understanding of their crimes; its needles constantly furnish “a new deepening of the script.” At the sixth hour, metamorphosis occurs, and the dual event happens: animals become men, and individuals become a community:

Only about the sixth hour does the man lose all desire to eat. I usually kneel down here at that moment and observe what happens. The man rarely swallows his last mouthful, he only rolls it around his mouth and spits it out into the pit. . . . But how quiet he grows at just about the sixth hour! Enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than that the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one’s eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. (p. 150)

Let there be no mistake about the double miracle at work here. It is a miracle of truth, but it is no less a miracle of art: transparency is at hand, and language is one with experience and knowledge.

III

Such knowledge and such language are fatal. Biologically, the individual is a closed system, but orifices and apertures play their role in our life. The animal body takes in and puts out food; the species cannot continue if the male does not enter the female. Safety is provided by enclosure, but the entries and exits of the body must have daily commerce if the organism is to survive. In Kafka's work, food and sex—the most basic modes of entry into the closed body—are portrayed in starkly ambivalent ways: K. and Frieda lick and nuzzle each other like dogs; Gregor Samsa starves to death, while sensing in the music and love of his sister that impossibly refined nourishment which he seeks; the hunger artist's rarefied art—his professional refusal of the body—is replaced by solid appetites of the panther. The prisoner, at the sixth hour, spits out the food so that he can attend to the new body language he is receiving. Kafka seems to feel horror at the body, but he reveres the human longing for sustenance and contact.⁷ This yearning is viscerally experienced by many of his characters, but gratification does not appear to be fully imaginable, much less achievable. His are the most searching, uncompleted characters in modern literature. Hence, he has bequeathed to us the most thorough embodiment of walled-in, bureaucratized, reified man that we have. Functionaries inhabit Kafka's world, because functions have replaced relationships; mutuality and reciprocity are cut off at every turn. Demarcation is everywhere, preserving distances, making character into cipher, defying intercourse. "The Burrow" is merely an extreme instance of the fear of contact and violation, of being broken and entered, which is everywhere operative in his work.

Art would seem, in Kafka's world, to promise a finer intercourse, an unthreatening commerce between selves, a penetration that gratifies but does not maim. If nourishment and love cannot come through the flesh, then perhaps the mind and its agency of language

can provide them. Thus, we return to the notions of understanding and knowledge as openness to the Other. Language is doubtless the most privileged vehicle of figurative contact; it renders possible a very special type of exchange, wherein the self remains physically intact but nonetheless entered. The beauty and horror of Kafka's story lie in the creation of physical language, a material linguistics with a distinct cutting edge that guarantees immediacy and requires no translation. The enclosed nature of the self and the thickness of its heart, mind and skin can at last be cut through. "In the Penal Colony" presents a nightmarish version of the *open* self as the *opened* self, with the attendant horror of violation and mutilation fully enacted. The flesh itself must be rent, before understanding is achieved.

"In the Penal Colony" is ultimately a strange love story. It registers at all levels the failure of communication, the falling short of language, the unrelated and uncomprehending selves. The prisoner's ignorance of his "crime" is only one phase of the breakdown; the main thrust of the tale, informed by the narrative strategy and endowing the material with a muted urgency, lies in the officer's declaration; his efforts to "touch" the explorer, to explain what is special about the machine, to bring the past to life, are essentially an attempt at seduction. All fails. The prisoner is left untouched. The skeptical explorer does not respond to the officer's passion, the only real emotion in the story. The pleas are received but unmet. The explorer leaves, perhaps to explore other places. Has he understood the machine? Has the reader understood the story?

IV

In the end, as we know, the machine acts. When the explorer fatefully denies the officer his help, when the effort to explain the machine has been seen to fail, the exemplary, illuminating reversal finally takes place. The officer frees the prisoner and takes his place. The machine butchers him and self-destructs. Here, I think, we are at the heart of Kafka's world. Many critics have understandably focused on the behavior of the machine, suggesting either that it is a travesty of justice (the officer is not "saved"), or that it is proper poetic justice (the officer gets his just deserts). But the most eloquent

act of the tale is not that of the machine; it is the *geste* of the officer. For he enacts the major transformation of the work: *the officer becomes the prisoner*. His mission is no longer to supervise or explain; he will encounter the machine himself, but from the inside, this time.

No more lessons. Explanations and instruction—whether deriving from holy books or as the *modus operandi* of modern life—are no more than a futile kind of verbal ping-pong, a doomed mode of knowledge. There is only one way to understand the machine: that is to become the prisoner. In becoming the prisoner, the officer breaks out of his role in the hierarchy and achieves, briefly, the experience of the Other. The machine breaks down because, in some profound way, its work has already been done, achieved by the officer's *geste*. The potent language offered by the machine is only one element of communication; response is the other. The officer is butchered, I think, because he has never been concerned with what truth or justice look like—from the other side. He has courted and pleaded with the explorer; yet he has regarded the prisoner as subhuman. Even though there is no sign of redemption on his face, there is no sign of torture either; the officer's act has granted him a bodily—rather than verbal—experience of justice, the fateful “inside” view that is required if one is to understand or judge others.

We know that Kafka remained dissatisfied with the last pages of the story, those that depict the explorer's visit to the tea house and final departure. The fragments that he wrote in 1917 suggest that the explorer was ultimately more implicated, more drawn in, than appears at first glance. In particular, he feels bonded to the officer, even to the extent of seeing the dead man in his imagination, with a spike protruding from his forehead. Asked if his appearance is magic, the ghost officer replies, “A mistake on your part; I was executed on your command.”⁸ I think it is fair to say that this fragment of a finale completes the communicative act; moreover, it restates the story's central truth: to understand the other is to become the other, to be intimately involved with his life and death.

In becoming the prisoner, the officer undergoes the fundamental Kafkaesque metamorphosis, the one that haunts his best work. To become another is the recurring structural drama of Kafka's stories: its twin faces are love and metamorphosis, understanding and trauma, transcendence of the flesh and rending of the flesh. The officer becomes the prisoner no less than Gregor Samsa becomes a bug. Kafka's country doctor experiences the same elemental

upheaval: he projects, easily enough, onto the boy's wound the sexual drama at home; but he is made to lie, naked, on the bed with the boy, thereby revealing his manifold impotence, showing his own malady, becoming the patient. The officer, placing himself within the machine, illuminates Kafka's classic procedure: rational discourse and logical explanation are doomed to futility. Knowledge comes only through personal transformation, and it must be "*am eigenen Leibe erfahren*," experienced in the flesh.

Thick-skinned humans come to knowledge of Others by an act of violent metamorphosis. In Kafka's stories, this transformation is frequently literal and monstrous, for the language bridge does not hold, and discourse remains sterile, short of understanding. But, *through* Kafka's stories, even that metamorphosis may be a figurative one of great beauty; through art, and perhaps only through art, we are able, without being dismembered or metamorphosed, to become another, to extend our first person onto the lives and events we read about. Kafka's painstaking narrative art, perhaps more than that of any other twentieth century writer, demands that extension of us, requiring that we experience, vicariously, the limits and sensations of a bug, the yearning of the hunger artist, the powerlessness of the doctor, the maze-like quandaries of K. and Joseph K., the fascination of the machine. Kafka's very narrative techniques, his skillful control of point-of-view, his intensely myopic realism, his courage to be literal—all these are features of his craft, his own writing machine, which are intended to *open* us to the world of the Other.

Many find "In the Penal Colony" a grisly, brutal story. Like the story of the exodus from the Garden, it is about the cost of knowledge. We are so accustomed to defining knowledge as information, so habituated to language as explanatory, that the high stakes and cruel outcome of Kafka's parable seem melodramatic or Gothic. But his story depicts, with rare power, the drama of human understanding. In Borges' fine essay, "Kafka and his Precursors," he suggests that great art creates new constellations, that we see, as critics, both backwards and forwards in our efforts to discern intellectual kinship between authors. Kafka's metamorphic view of relationship and knowledge may serve as a model for literature's claim to tell us about Others. Using Borges as precedent, I would like to suggest two particular texts which leave us with the same dark knowledge. Melville's tortured tale, "Benito Cereno," depends entirely on point-of-view narrative, thereby showing that the perfectly innocent mind cannot see evil. But the underside of Melville's story is

the unwritten narrative, the experience of Cereno himself which the reader begins to understand only when the tale is over. Masquerading as a white man in control, Cereno has in fact been forced to obey his Black "slaves" at every turn; the reader has seen the innocent version of events, but Cereno has experienced *from the inside*, the collapse of his role, the reality of the Blacks. And he dies. In somewhat similar manner, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* dramatizes the cost of knowledge: in this case, the two college boys, Quentin and Shreve, must somehow go beyond the data of history if they are to understand the past; in extremely elaborate ways, they achieve what Faulkner calls an "overpass to love," as they "become" the protagonists of the Civil War and experience, again from the inside, the human feelings that make up history, in this case, a bloody history of fratricide, both personal and national. Yet, here too, Faulkner does not minimize the cost of such an "overpass," and the book closes on a note of futility and exhaustion, a keen sense that we can become the Other only momentarily, and even then at the cost of our own integrity. The Melville and Faulkner examples are not properly metamorphic, but they have the same cardinal truth at their heart: knowledge of the other entails eclipse of the self, and can lead to death as well as to love.

Beyond even the metamorphosis, however, there is the machine. Kafka's writing machine is a mad figure for the role of art and understanding in a world filled exclusively with signs and flesh. How can signs and flesh be connected, the thickness of matter be penetrated by the logos of spirit? The Word of the past, the Word that spoke Truth and commanded Assent, is gone. But the writer remains. Kafka's machine depicts the need that every writer has felt for a language so potent, that it would become the reality whereof it speaks. The writing machine bespeaks and, *à sa façon*, remedies the absence of understanding in a degraded world: the animal body has no access to its soul; the individuals attain no contact with each other. The machine is indeed intolerable in its flagrant violation of the body, but it functions as a sublime symbol of Kafka's—and all artists'—aspirations: to read his work is to be penetrated by it; his words are inscribed in our flesh; our understanding of the story, of the Other, is to be both visceral and transcendent. The text is the machine: the metamorphosis is in us.

NOTES

1. Needless to say, most Kafka commentators have, at some time or another, had something to say about "In der Strafkolonie." I have profited from the general work of Sokel, Emrich and, in particular, Politzer (*Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966]*) who first alerted me to the notion of *Schrift* and its possible ramifications. Although I do not agree with Helmut Kaiser's Freudian findings ("Franz Kafkas Inferno: eine psychologische Deutung seiner Strafphantasie," in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Politzer [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973]), his early reading remains a powerful case for character relationships in Kafka, even if sublimated or symbolic. More recent readings of Ingeborg Henel and Kurt J. Fickert have been helpful, and my thoughts about the end of the story are somewhat indebted to Richard Thieberger, "The Botched Ending of 'In the Penal Colony,'" in *The Kafka Debate*, ed. Flores (New York: Gordian Press, 1977). In general my interpretation is meant to shed new light on the role of language and metamorphosis in Kafka, particularly as they relate to the machine and the notion of communication. It seems to me that there has been considerable historicist work along these lines, concerning the Scriptures, Old and New Testament and the like; more recently, there has been the post-Structuralist work of Deleuze and Guattari, with very subtle and complex views of discourse theory. No one, to my knowledge, has suggested the connections I make between the machine, language, metamorphosis and the drama of understanding. Nor has anyone commented on the larger ramifications of the writing machine as a producer of immediate language.

2. "In the Penal Colony," trans. W. and E. Muir, *Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1976) p. 140. For the convenience of readers, I have used the Muir translation in the available paperback edition; all future references are taken from this edition.

3. One need merely consider the opening sentence of "Die Verwandlung": "Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt." The first line of *Der Prozess* could also be cited.

4. Although much Kafka criticism has been concerned with point-of-view narrative, one of the most interesting studies on this issue is James Rolleston's *Kafka's Narrative Theater* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974). Rolleston's discussion of "In the Penal Colony" is both subtle and provocative in its emphasis on the posture of the explorer, his growing fascination with the machine and his bad faith in responding to it.

5. As mentioned, Politzer discusses some general ramifications of the term "*Schrift*." The most detailed case for holy books has been made by Erwin Steinberg,

“Die zwei Kommandanten in Kafkas ‘In der Strafkolonie,’ ” in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Caputo-Mayr (Berlin: Agora Verlag, 1978).

6. Malcolm Pasley has also commented specifically on Kafka’s manner of literalizing metaphor in this story; see his “In the Penal Colony” in *The Kafka Debate*.

7. The large and thorny issue of Kafka’s attitude toward women and intimacy is dealt with by Hildegard Platzer in “The Dilemma of Mating in Kafka,” *Mosaic*, 3, No. 4 (1970), 119-130.

8. I am indebted to Politzer’s treatment of this issue and to his reference to Kafka’s *Diaries*; see Politzer, *Kafka*, p. 112.