Crafting the Artist: Franz Kafka and Disciplinary Violence

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This essay examines Kafka's chronic struggle with writer's block from the perspective of disciplinary violence, and uses it to expand on Dungey's thesis, that Kafka saw writing as a means of creating an artistic subjectivity. By studying Kafka's letters and diaries it becomes clear that Kafka saw writing as in inherently violent act that was capable of maintaining a dialectical tension between his 'real' and 'artistic' selves, and this raises the question of whether his suffering was warranted. Through a reading of In the Penal Colony, we can see how Kafka explored this dilemma in his own writing, and how it resulted in a loss of authorial control over the symbolic nature of the text.

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> "In me there have always been, and still are, two selves, wrestling with each other." (Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 438)

There is no doubt that Kafka was a conflicted individual. This is a fact that his letters and journals repeatedly attest to, and there is a century's worth of scholarship exploring his chronic dilemmas with love, family, society, and personal identity.[1] He was a complex man, who wrote about his personal issues with a great deal of openness, and because of this there is a tendency within the scholarship to conflate Kafka's literary prose with his biographical details. Such a corollary is not necessarily erroneous as the line between these two elements is

extremely porous, but Kafka's relationship to his craft is more complex than its psycho-analytical or autobiographical elements.[2] And whenever we use literary figures, such as Gregor Samsa, Georg Bendemann, Josef K, or K, as stand-ins for Kafka himself, we run the risk of obscuring the man behind his creations. One potential solution for this dilemma comes from Nicholas Dungey, who argues for the existence of two Kafkas: namely, Kafka—the man, and Kafka—the artist. Where the former was a byproduct of his *fin de siècle* bourgeois upbringing, the latter was as an attempt to transcend the former through the creation of a new subjectivity. This essay explores and expands Dungey's thesis through an analysis of Kafka's chronic struggle with writer's block, and the various mechanisms that he employed to combat this issue. For when we look at his various disciplinary practices, it appears as if Kafka saw discipline as a form of violence that was necessary for the creation of art, and that through its mechanisms he believed he could create a space wherein a new, more artistic, subjectivity could emerge.

Since Kafka is a global icon within literature, it is safe to say that he was successful in this artistic venture. However, the fact that many of his greatest works were never published during his lifetime and that most remain unfinished indicates a hidden cost to his process: an intense difficulty in completing a given work, as such a decision would have risked the dissolution of this literary self. This dilemma is most easily observed by looking at Kafka's novels—which were all published posthumously—but it can also be observed in works that were published during his lifetime. Most prominently is *In the Penal Colony,* which was only published after Kafka spent four years trying—and failing—to fix it.

Arguably, Kafka's chronic struggle with writer's block and his perpetual hesitance to label a given work as 'complete' were both byproducts of his masochistic writing practices. Beginning with Kafka's letters and diaries, we will gain an understanding of his violent conceptualization of discipline, and of his belief that writing allowed him to create and maintain a more authentic sense of self. Then, through a reading of *In the Penal Colony,* we will examine how these beliefs may have influenced the creation of the infamous Apparatus[3] in this story,

and the various ways that this text operates as a pseudo-trial of his disciplinary ideals. Although Kafka saw disciplinary violence as productive, the genesis of *In the Penal Colony* demonstrates that it often failed in its transformative goals, and when this occurred it resulted in a decreased capacity of authorial control.

Writing as Disciplinary Violence

The germ of this reading comes primarily from Nicholas Dungey's analysis of power structures in Kafka's work, and the Foucauldian notion that violence can function as a means to the ends of discipline. For, whenever physical and psychological pain are used to condition us into adopting certain practices our sense of self becomes dependent upon the internalization of that pain. This is disciplinary violence, and its general function across a populace is to imbue the members of a collective with a shared set of values and ideals. In Kafka's day, this would have been manifested as the bourgeois imperialism that pervaded the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Dungey argues that Kafka used writing as a means of resisting the structural violence of his era. More specifically, he argues that "Kafka's preoccupations with writing and the highly self-reflexive position he maintains in his letters and diaries represent active engagements in the most profound of all political activities – the battle over the 'truth' of the self and life" (Dungey xviii). Dungey goes in search of this 'truth of the self,' while simultaneously remaining skeptical of the notion that Kafka's writings are a manifestation of his individual subjectivity. He rejects the generally asserted assumption that underneath the "myriad of religious, psychoanalytic, or cultural influences, there is a real, objective, or essential truth to Kafka's identity and to the meaning of his literature" (Dungey x), and instead he posits that these assumptions stem from the belief that there is "an essential subject that is the source of Kafka's writings" (Dungey xi). Such an approach, he argues, is erroneous as it uses the cult of genius to blind the reader to the larger context of collective penal practices and philosophical discourses that prevailed during Kafka's time. Rather than searching for an elusive subject that can signify a 'real' or 'true' Kafka, Dungey believes that Kafka's writings announce "the

disintegration of foundational accounts of identity, structures of meaning, and art itself" (Dungey xi), and that this disintegration allowed Kafka to live his life as a work of art. Or in other words: "While Gregor Samsa may have turned from a man into a bug, through his writing, Kafka, the man who often felt like a bug, became Kafka the artist" (Dungey xi).

In short, Dungey holds that Kafka's work cannot signify the 'real' man, because these works were an attempt to escape the reality of that man, and that Kafka's works aren't so much an expression of who he was but who he desired to be: an artist who struggled to define himself against bourgeois notions of subjectivity. He argues for a Kafka whose works are autobiographical and at the same time not. They're autobiographical in the sense that most of Kafka's protagonists are shadows or reflections of himself, but they are also non-autobiographical in the sense that the object casting these shadows is not Franz Kafka—the man. Rather, it is the carefully crafted persona of Franz Kafka—the artist that we tend to see when we read his diaries, journals, and stories, and Dungey asserts that this act of literary creation allowed Kafka to invent and live "his life as an artistic experiment" (Dungey xviii). Or, as Kafka himself observed: "I will write in spite of everything, absolutely; it is my struggle for self-preservation" (Kafka, *Diaries* 75).[4]

Dungey's argument echoes similar perspectives put forth by Malcom Pasley, Kai Evers, Bernhard J. Dotzler, and Joseph Vogl.[5] They all draw on Kafka's diaries and letters to depict Kafka as a man who saw disciplinary violence as a means of self-realization, and that the production and consumption of literature as the ideal instrument for achieving that end. The most cohesive piece of evidence for this position comes from a letter that Kafka wrote to Oskar Pollak in 1904, in which he lamented his inability to write as he was consumed by Hebbel's diaries:

> But it's good when your conscience receives big wounds, because that makes it more sensitive to every twinge. I think we ought to read only the kinds of books that wound and stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it

> will make us happy, [...]. But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea in us. That is my belief. (Kafka, *Letters to Friends*, 16)[6]

The first and most obvious thing that this passage tells us is that Kafka perceived literary experience as an inherently violent phenomenon. To read literature was not merely to expose oneself to a metaphorical wounding. It was to brave the bites and the stings of language, it was to awaken oneself with skull crushing hammers, and it was to break through the numbness of life with the suicidal blow of an axe. The goal of literature, according to Kafka, was not to make one happy or satisfied. Rather, its purpose was to invite violence upon the self, and through this violence the reader obtained an increased sense of awareness. For Kafka, the violence of literature was for the reader's benefit and as such we should not lament when we find ourselves consumed by it. The second and less obvious thing that can be learned from this passage comes when we shift our perspective away from the general concept of a literary wound, and towards the specific injury that Kafka is feeling at this moment. He feels overwhelmed by the apparent ease with which Hebbel was able to establish himself as a literary figure. This was a feat that Kafka wished to replicate, but when he compared the trajectory of his own biography with that of Hebbel's, Kafka was tormented by his imposter syndrome. However, rather than fleeing from these realizations, Kafka was galvanized to write, as he saw writing as a disciplinary mechanism through which self-transformation was possible. For, as Malcom Pasley points out: "Even early in his life Kafka conceived of writing more as self-discipline than as self-expression" (Pasley 203), and that the "circumstances of his immediate surroundings, pen, and paper, were essential to the form and substance of what he wrote" (Pasley 201).

One example for this logic comes from another letter to Oskar Pollak in 1902:

> I sat at my fine desk. You don't know it. How could you? You see, it's a respectably minded desk which is meant to educate. Where the writer's knees usually are, it has two horrible wooden spikes. And now pay attention. If you sit down quietly, cautiously at it, and write something respectable, all's well. But if you become excited, look out-if your body quivers ever so little, you inescapably feel the spikes in your knees, and how that hurts. I could show you the black-and-blue marks. And what that means to say is simply: "Don't write anything exciting and don't let your body quiver while you write." (Kafka, *Letters to Friends* 3)[7]

Much like his beloved pen and notebook, Kafka's desk was an integral part of his nightly writing rituals. It was the foundation on which everything was written, and even when he felt unable to write, he would often place himself at this altar and await inspiration:

> It isn't necessary that you leave home. Sit at your desk and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't wait, be still and alone. The whole world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can do no other, it will writhe before you in ecstasy. (Kafka, *Aphorisms* 109.)[8]

Although one must be careful not to overly sensationalize the importance of Kafka's desk to his process, one can see within his language a persistent conflation of ritualized pain with literary inspiraton that spans nearly two decades of Kafka's life.[9] For Kafka, the heights of genius were only accessible through the pain of discipline. And so, in spite of the bruises, he would sit at his desk night after night. However, underneath this rubric of self-discipline there is a more subversive element at play. The first clue comes from the adjectives he assigns his desk. It is a beautiful piece of furniture, but it is also a 'respectably minded' or bourgeois instrument whose purpose was to educate, nurture, and train the occupant in all that is socially respectable.[10] In this sense, Kafka's desk functioned much like the peculiar apparatus of the penal colony, in which transgressions of bourgeois social norms were physically inscribed onto the body of the condemned. However, instead of stating the legal demand that one should

'Be just!' his desk echoed the cries of a stern schoolmaster: 'be quiet', 'be calm,' 'be respectable!' And yet, by looking at the state of Kafka's knees, we know that he rebelled against these inscriptions even as they were being made. When inspiration came, the patient, passive, respectable Kafka allowed himself to be consumed by the passion to write, and he reveled in the wounds that this respectably minded apparatus inflicted. Indeed, Kafka was eager to write at all costs to himself, and another notable example of this mentality comes from a diary entry in 1910:

> Finally, after five months of my life during which I could write nothing that would have satisfied me, and for which no power will compensate me, though all were under obligation to do so, it occurs to me to talk to myself again. Whenever I really questioned myself, there was always a response forthcoming, there was always something in me to catch fire, in this heap of straw that I have been for five months and whose fate it seems, is to be set afire during the summer and consumed more swiftly than the onlooker can blink his eyes. If only that would happen to me! (Kafka, *Diaries* 12).[11]

In this passage, despite his burning desire to write, Kafka doesn't conceptualize this block—and its associated suffering—as something inherently unproductive. He simply feels unable to control or master his ideas, which have accumulated like dry hay. Instead of nihilistically portraying this moment as an irredeemable waste of time, he acknowledges that the raw materials for inspiration are inside him, and that he is incapable of igniting them himself. But if he could, if by some fortunate happenstance he could ignite the heap of useless straw that signified himself, he would gladly let himself be consumed by the flames.[12]

Such moments did occur in Kafka's life. Most famously is the night of September 22nd, 1912, when he penned *The Judgment* in a single sitting:

> This story, *The Judgment,* I wrote in one sitting during the night of the 22nd-23rd, from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning. I was hardly able to pull my legs out from under the desk, they had got so stiff from sitting. The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water. Several times during this night I heaved

> my own weight on my back. How everything can be said, how for everything, for the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up again. […] Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening of the body and the soul. (Kafka, *Diaries* 275-76)[13]

It's interesting to note the descriptive parallels between this entry from 1912 and the former one from 1910. In both instances the writing process is described as a sudden and possibly unprompted surge of inspiration that painfully subordinates the body to the mind, and in both instances, Kafka relies upon elemental imagery to convey these transcendent moments. However, this imagery becomes inverted when Kafka's anticipation meets reality. Where he had expected fire, he finds a body of water, and it is only after he has waded through its depths that he experiences the anticipated consumption of the self. From this language, it appears as if the advent of *The Judgment* was much more than a moment of artistic creation. It was a moment of artistic rebirth, and in February 1913 Kafka affirms this sentiment with another diary entry:

> While I read the proofs of *The Judgment,* I'll write down all the relationships which have become clear to me in the story as far as I now remember them. This is necessary because the story came out of me like a real birth, covered with filth and slime, and only I have the hand that can reach into the body itself and the strength of desire to do so. (Kafka, *Diaries* 278)[14]

From these passages, one can see that Kafka perceived the pain, suffering, and violence of writing as synonymous with the act of maternal labor, but what these passages do not depict is exactly who or what is being born. One possible interpretation is that these works signified Kafka's birth as a literary artist, and that from the painful labor of his disciplinary practices Kafka—the man gave birth to Kafka—the artist. This is Dungey's position, and he uses it to argue that Kafka perceived himself less as man and more as an embodiment of literature. For when their relationship began to crumble in 1913, Kafka expressed to his fiancé Felice Bauer: "I have no literary interests, but am made of literature,

I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else" (Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 304).[15] Then, a week and a half later, he added:

> Not a bent for writing, my dearest Felice, not a bent but my entire self. A bent can be uprooted and crushed. But this is what I am; no doubt I myself can be uprooted and crushed, but what will happen to you? You are abandoned, yet live at my side. You will feel abandoned if I live the way I have to, and you will be truly abandoned if I don't live that way. Not a bent, not a bent! (Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 309)[16]

For Kafka, writing was not just something he did. It was something he was, and as such he was both the progenitor and recipient of its formational violence. It was the axe that broke through the numbness of life by subduing the bourgeois citizen and giving birth to an artistic persona that was on par with the authors he admired.

That said, despite his multiple successes as an author, this masochistic worldview was not without its consequences. More specifically, it tended to perpetuate Kafka's innate pessimism, and whenever writing became difficult or laborious he was inclined to perceive himself as a failure. When this occurred Kafka's disciplinary violence would cease to function as a means of self-realization and became a form of self-flagellation. For example, in a letter to Felice on the 30th of November 1912 he wrote:

> My work, moreover has been so bad that I don't deserve any sleep, and should be condemned to spend the rest of the night looking out the window. Can you understand this, dearest: to write badly, yet feel compelled to write, or abandon oneself to total despair! To have to atone for the joys of good writing in this terrible way! In fact, not to be really unhappy, not to be pierced by a fresh stab of unhappiness, but to see the pages I have written in the last 4 days, as though they have never been. (Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 76)[17]

And again, on the 8th of July 1913:

> If need be, I can live as I am, my rage turned inward, tormenting only by letter, but as soon as we lived together I would become a dangerous

> lunatic fit to be burned alive. The havoc I would create! Would have to create! And if I didn't create it I would be more lost than ever, for it would be against my nature, and whoever happened to be with me would be lost. You have no idea, Felice what havoc literature creates inside certain heads. It is like monkeys leaping about in the treetops, instead of staying firmly on the ground. It is being lost and not being able to help it. What can one do? (Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 288)[18]

Much like the ritualized tension of sitting at his desk, it appears that Kafka saw disciplinary violence as a pre-existing condition for writing. It originated as a bourgeois conceptualization of success through self-discipline, but this quickly turned into a ritualistic rite. When it worked, Kafka was—as Dungey claims—able to transcend his bourgeois upbringing and transform himself into the artist we recognize. However, what Dungey doesn't acknowledge is the fact that transcendence is not a permanent state of being, and that most nights these practices failed to manifest anything. When this occurred, Kafka's bourgeois self would become more reified, and the disciplinary task of writing would become the whip with which he punished himself. If he couldn't write anything exciting, then he was condemned to sit at his desk and write the respectable things that he despised. In his mind there was no escaping these contradictory modes of violence, because there was no escaping the dialectical existence that writing provided. In another of his letters to Felice, Kafka described this phenomenon in the following manner:

> In me there have always been, and still are, two selves wrestling with each other. One of them is very much as you would wish him to be, and by further development he could achieve the little he lacks in order to fulfill your wishes. […] These two selves are locked in combat, but it is no ordinary fight where two pairs of fists strike out at each other. The first self is dependent upon the second; he would never, for inherent reasons never, be able to overpower him; on the contrary, he is delighted when the second succeeds, and if the second appears to be losing, the first will kneel down at this side, oblivious of everything but him. This is how it is

> Felice. And yet they are locked in combat, and yet they could both be yours; the trouble is that they cannot be changed unless both were to be destroyed. (Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 438)[19]

Kafka's familiarity with the intricacies of Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic is uncertain, but the language of this passage is uncannily similar to the struggle for self-consciousness that is outlined in *The Phenomenology of Spirit.* When we approach Kafka through this lens, it appears as if Dungey's suspicions regarding the cult of genius that surrounds Kafka are well placed, but it also complicates his suggestion that Kafka's literary prose operates as a biographical lens for an artistic subjectivity that is distinct and separate from the man who created it. For if we simply replace the man with his artistic doppelganger, we will keep missing the forest for the trees, as all we will have done is shift our focus to another tree. However, by choosing to trust Kafka's own words, one can see that his conceptualization of subjectivity does not reside within a singularity. Rather it exists as a dialectical tension between his bourgeois and his artistic self, and that neither can exist without the other. If the death of the other is, as Hegel describes it, the "natural negation" (Hegel 94) of self-consciousness, then the artistic self could only perpetuate its existence through the continual violence of a dialectical conflict, and to finish a work was to risk the dissolution of the artistic self. This is the conflict that Kafka embodied through his masochistic writing practices. Simply put, there is no artist without the disciplinary violence of the man. This is the paradox that underlines Kafka's literary attempts at establishing a new subjectivity that is free from his bourgeois upbringing, and by studying his writings we can better understand just how painful and violent such practices could be. Not only do they employ the rationalities of disciplinary violence, but they assert that by means of this masochism we may separate ourselves from our formational beginning. Unfortunately, as one becomes more familiar with the effect that this logic had on Kafka's mental health, it remains dubious whether these practices could ever be justified. For when we use this perspective to look at Kafka's chronic reluctance to label a work as 'finished,' we see something much more complex than mere perfectionism. What we find is a dialectical

struggle to maintain the moment of genesis in which Kafka's artistic persona was at its strongest. Unfortunately, such a tension was not without consequence, as it may have resulted in a weakening of Kafka's ability to exert authorial control over his own texts, and one place that this can be observed is *In the Penal Colony.*

The Trial of the Apparatus

Despite already achieving literary success in 1912 with *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis,* the summer of 1914 was a particularly difficult time for Kafka. He had been struggling for over a year and half to finish *The Man Who Disappeared,* and his diaries and letters indicate that he was beginning to crack under the strain of balancing his daily obligations with his nightly rituals. Similarly, his engagement to Felice Bauer was beginning to crumble, and his inability to join the war effort left him feeling suicidal.[20] Things were looking grim, but despite all these struggles Kafka was galvanized by the collective enthusiasm for the growing war effort, and in his diaries he likened the struggle of warfare with that of writing.[21] He determined that if he could not fight on the front, then he could at least continue his nightly battles with his own prose, and what followed was one of the most literary productive moments of his life. Within the next six months he completed what would become the final chapter of *The Man Who Disappeared,* penned over two hundred pages of *The Trial,* and wrote *In the Penal Colony.*

On the surface, it appears as if Kafka's disciplinary practices were starting to pay off, but as most biographers are quick to point out this period of unprecedented productivity was also plagued with long stretches of creative impotence. Ernst Pawel describes these months as the product of "growing despair," and "another burst of crisis-induced inspiration" (Pawel 275), and Peter-Andre Alt observes that most of these works were quickly sidelined. At the end of January 1915, the manuscript for *The Man Who Disappeared* vanished into a desk drawer, and *The Trial* met the same fate a year later (Alt 301). The only 'completed' work to come out of this moment is *In the Penal Colony,* but despite having an eager editor and publisher in Kurt Wolff, its publication was repeatedly delayed because of censorship concerns and a botched public reading in 1916.

After his initial attempts at publication failed, Kafka concluded that this story's greatest flaw was its bungled ending[22]—a mistake that he would spend another two years trying, and failing, to correct. In this sense, *In the Penal Colony* occupies a unique space in Kafka's body of work as he felt that this text was fundamentally flawed, but he still sought to publish it. It is a complex text that explores the act of writing as a form of individual enlightenment through physical punishment, and it is precisely because of this complexity that it functions as a compelling case-study for Kafka's own conceptualization of disciplinary violence.

In the Penal Colony begins with the ominous statement that "It is a remarkable piece of apparatus" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 191),[23] and with this opening line, Kafka gestures towards the central character of this narrative: namely, the enigmatic writing device that functions as a mechanism for discipline within this tropical penal colony. Much like the human characters, such as the traveler, the officer, the prisoner, the soldier, and the commandant, the apparatus is signified through an archetypal moniker, and—given the fact that nearly two-thirds of the text is a detailed description of this device—it is the most fleshed-out aspect of this narrative. Indeed, I argue that it is the protagonist of *In the Penal Colony*, and that the primary tension of this tale revolves around two questions: does it accomplish what the officer claims it does, and do the ends justify the means? In this regard, one could describe *In the Penal Colony* as a form of courtroom drama, in which the apparatus is the defendant, the officer is his council, the new commandant is the prosecution, and the traveler is the judge. The apparatus has been charged with the crime of being a brutal relic of a former age, and it remains dubious whether it ever functioned as a satisfactory mechanism for delivering salvation.

The bulk of the narrative revolves around a proposed observation of the machine in action and the officer's two-part defense of its legitimacy. The first half of his argument is a long-winded and detailed description of the machine, in which the officer attempts to obscure its horrific nature by appealing to the ingenuity of its engineering, while the latter half is an appeal to the cult of genius that surrounds the apparatus' creator: the deceased commandant. The officer

explains how this machine is the most efficient mechanism for meeting the demands of the law, as it reduces every aspect of due process to a singular moment: the inscription of the law onto the body of the one who is subject to it. To undergo this procedure is to be killed, but before this can occur, the violent act of writing allows both the condemned and the observers to experience the redeeming power of legal discipline. For the former, this results in a moment of clarity and understanding just before death, and for the latter it reifies the legal legitimacy and authority of the colony.

As the officer makes his defense, his language and actions speak of a fervent passion for both the deceased commandant and his creation, and as it is apparent that he sees the apparatus as an icon of a former golden age—an era that could be revived if the traveler were to be convinced of the apparatus' transcendental prowess. If the traveler were to side with him, then he could lead a coup d'etat against the new commandant, and this would allow him to return the penal colony to its former glory. However, what the officer fails to grasp is that, despite being given the role of judge, the traveler has no such capacity for judgment. After hearing the officer's defense, the traveler explains that he is fated to condemn the machine, and that the only question that existed in his mind was whether he had the right to pass judgement. Even if he were to be convinced by the officer's defense, he would still be obliged to condemn the machine. He explains that he has no real choice in the matter, and he reveals that this trial—this weighing of the scales to exonerate or condemn the commandant's grotesque machine—was all a sham. The judgment had already been made, and the traveler was only there to give it voice.

When faced with this reality, the officer releases the condemned man from the machine and takes his place below the harrow. This act can be read as either a suicidal submission to the foreordained judgements of the traveler, or as a final defense. For if the traveler can observe the apparatus in action, he may still be convinced of its efficacy. Unfortunately for the officer, his actions are in vain, and the traveler watches in horror as the harrow's hasty scribblings morph into pneumatic stabbings. His body is mutilated by the erratic movements of the

bed, and the apparatus collapses under the weight of its own machinations. The officer's corpse is impaled on a spike, and when the traveler looks at his face he notes that "it was as it had been in life; no sign of the promised redemption was perceptible; the officer had not found what all the others had found in the machine" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 226).[24] Even in death the officer has failed.

These events make up the core of *In the Penal Colony,* and they have inspired a host of literary judgments and interpretations that are often incommensurable with each other.[25] For many it is a text that is deeply connected to the technological physicality of the modern world,[26] while others see it as a purely allegorical tale centered on philosophical and theological epistemologies.[27] Likewise, in addition to these interpretive readings a host of media theories have investigated the inspiration for Kafka's diabolical apparatus. Most prominently, Müller-Seidel has claimed that it was inspired by Robert Heindl's *Meine Reise nach den Strafkolonien*, but others have made viable arguments linking it to a phonograph, an industrial wood-planing machine, electrotherapeutic shock treatment, a device for shelling and sorting coffee beans, a sugar press, a 'colonial machine for punishing natives', a Chinese torture machine, a cartoon of a grain mill by Wilhelm Busch, Oskar Baum's braille typewriter, and Herbert Hollerith's tabulated reading machine.[28]

As one makes their way through the various readings, critiques, and theorizations it can appear as if there are as many readings of this tale as there are readers, but there is one reading that is eerily absent: namely, that *In the Penal Colony* functions as a literary exploration of Kafka's conceptualization of writing as a form of disciplinary violence. For when we compare the officer's defense of the apparatus with Kafka's thoughts on writing, we find a surprising number of corollaries.

Most prominent is the fact that the apparatus is first and foremost a writing machine, and it is only when its mechanisms are contextualized within the legal rubric of the colony's penal code that it becomes the brutal instrument for torture that we recognize it to be. When we separate the device from its implementation, we are presented with a conceptualization of writing that is less about literary

self-expression, and more about the mechanical reproduction of language. The apparatus is an automaton that is designed to function with little to no input from its controller, and once it begins to write "the machinery should go on working continuously for twelve hours" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 192).[29] It is not only a writing machine, it is a replicator that is designed to mass-produce a single thought through rote repetition, and it is believed that through these machinations a condemned man may be transformed.

This is a conceptualization of writing that had already been established in Kafka's letters, as he often forced himself to sit and write even when he didn't feel like he had anything to say. Bad writing was better than no writing, and despite his hatred for those nights where he was compelled to sit and "write something respectable" (Kafka, *Letters to Friends* 3),[30] he also felt that these painful nights functioned as a form of atonement "for the joys of good writing" (Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, 76).[31] For Kafka, writing was a disciplinary act that he used to suppress his respectable, bourgeois self in favor of a more artistic persona.

In both *In the Penal Colony* and his letters, Kafka portrays writing less as a vehicle for self-expression and more as a mechanical process that can be accomplished with or without thought, and in this regard the act of writing becomes analogous to a musician practicing their scales or a painter seeking to master a specific brush stroke. It is the disciplinary mechanism of nearly all art forms, and in practice this is a perfectly reasonable way to master a craft. But where Kafka turns this whole conceptualization of discipline on its head is the repeated allusions to these practices as a form of masochism. He insists that we must read books that wound and stab us, he tells us of the insistent jabs of the wooden spikes on his knees, and the mechanical act of putting words onto paper is akin to being "pierced by a fresh stab of unhappiness" (Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 76).[32] In short, to write is to be emotionally and physically pricked, poked, and stabbed, and this is precisely the function of the apparatus, for "the Harrow is the instrument for the actual execution of the sentence" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 196).[33] Neither the writer nor the one on whose body the machine is writing needs to

"know the sentence that has been passed on him" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 197),[34] so long as one can verify its power by learning "it on his body (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 197).[35] This is a mentality that is uncannily similar to Kafka's belief that the bruises he receives from his desk function as a signifier for good writing,[36] and in this regard the apparatus functions as a metaphor for Kafka's disciplinary writing practices. When we are able to make this connection between Kafka's letters and the violence of *In the Penal Colony,* this trial of the apparatus begins to operate as a pseudo-trial of Kafka's own disciplinary ideals. It becomes a lens through which we can better understand his struggle for transformation.

So what is the verdict? If we take *In the Penal Colony* at face value, then it must be concluded that Kafka's writing mechanisms—both within the narrative and in his own life—are neither effective nor are they ethical. This is the judgment that the traveler pronounces, and which the text confirms to the reader through the mutilation of the officer's corpse. Transcendence, salvation, and enlightenment are all beyond its mechanical reach, and Kafka foreshadows this conclusion through a variety of techniques. First among these is the repeated indication that the apparatus is in a state of decay. Multiple times throughout the text the narrator mentions a cog or wheel that is "badly worn" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 194),[37] that creaks intermittently (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 203, 216, 222, 223), and is generally described as a troublesome piece that tumbles out of the machine when it inevitably collapses. Images such as these are then coupled with others—such as a broken strap, a gag that has been vomited on, and the officer's constant need to fix, adjust or tinker with the apparatus—to indicate that this machine is not as perfect as he appears to suggest. Secondly, Kafka undermines the apparatus' intended purpose, namely to bring enlightenment to even "the most dull-witted" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 204).[38] The officer claims that this ingenious machine achieves this goal by subjecting the condemned to hours upon hours of repetitive writing until their spirit is broken and the language of the law fully manifests itself on the body of the individual, but the text often uses hypothetical language to hint at the fact that these conclusions are at best theoretical. For example, "the machinery *should* go on working […]" (Kafka,

Penal Colony emphasis added, 192), "the execution *should* be beginning" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* emphasis added, 199), and even at one point "the Designer *should* have been creaking" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* emphasis added, 222).[39] These are all phrases that create a dissonance between the apparatus' intended purpose and its reality, and just as there is ample reason to doubt the physical integrity of the apparatus, Kafka gives the reader plenty of reason to doubt the officer's promise of enlightenment. Indeed, he even concludes the main body of the narrative with the traveler's observation that there was no sign of redemption in the dead officer's face.

However, just as there are multiple reasons to doubt the efficacy of the apparatus, Kafka also adds a second layer of doubt to this narrative that makes it difficult to fully reject it as an effective mechanism for salvation. For example, the officer states that "[t]his is a very complex machine, it can't be helped that things are breaking or giving way here and there; but one must not thereby allow oneself to be diverted in one's general judgment," (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 205),[40] and the traveler surmises that although "the judicial procedure had not satisfied him. He had to remind himself that this was in any case a penal colony where extraordinary measures were needed" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 199).[41] Statements such as these demonstrate that neither the officer nor the traveler are as set in their declared positions as one might initially believe as both are actively acknowledging the limits of those positions. Another flaw that Kafka introduces into the ethical conclusions to be drawn from this pseudo-trial is the question of whether the apparatus actually functions according to the commandant's design. Throughout the text, the officer is continually altering, adjusting, and changing the internal workings of the apparatus. He claims that all of this is necessary to maintain the commandant's life work, but it is also clear that his meddling goes beyond mere maintenance. For example, when he first introduces the apparatus, he states that "Up till now a few things still had to be set by hand, but from this moment it works all by itself" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 192).[42] This may be read as sign that he is not only maintaining the machine, but that he is also seeking to improve on its original design.

When one takes these elements of the text into consideration it becomes possible to doubt the aforementioned conclusions regarding the overall validity of the apparatus. Maybe the traveler's conclusions aren't properly contextualized. Maybe it hasn't been properly maintained under the new regime. Maybe the apparatus has been changed to such a degree that its function is no longer in line with its design. Such doubts are small, but they also have a way of gnawing away at any reading that attempts to holistically condemn the apparatus, and this is because they help preserve the cult of genius that is ascribed to the old commandant. As far as we know, this machine did at one time succeed in its disciplinary function, as the narrator states that the officer failed to find "what the others had found in the machine" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 225)[43] when it was operated under the direction of its designer. The old commandant is alleged to have been a man whose powers of inscription allowed him to "combine everything in himself" (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 196),[44] and so long as the illusion of his genius is still intact, the promises of his disciplinary practices—the promise of a form of writing that can enlighten the condemned—remains an invisible potential. Despite the fact that this text appears to condemn the violence of disciplinary writing, it cannot do so in full. This is the loophole that allows it to explore the brutality of Kafka's ideals while remaining an exemplar of their efficacy. The means may not be justified, but the ends cannot be entirely condemned.

A Bungled Ending: The Collapse of Authority in *In the Penal Colony.*

Despite being 'finished' within a matter of weeks, Kafka was immediately dissatisfied with this enigmatic text, and when he did a private reading for Franz Werfel, Otto Pick, and Max Brod he gave the following summary of its reception:

> December 2. Afternoon at Werfel's with Max and Pick. Read "In the Penal Colony" aloud; am not entirely dissatisfied, except for its glaring and ineradicable faults. […] The day's conclusion, even before meeting Werfel: Go on working regardless of everything; a pity I can't work today, for I am tired and have a headache. (Kafka, *Diaries* 99)[45]

The ambiguity of Kafka's self-criticism in this passage is quite typical, but there is good evidence that these 'glaring and ineradicable faults' are a reference to the ambiguous ending that functions as a kind of postscript to the main narrative, and after a disastrous public reading in 1916 he returned to *In the Penal Colony* with the intent of fixing the bungled ending. Nine months later, in August 1917, Kafka recorded a sampling of alternative endings in his journal*,* but none of them were deemed satisfactory. The first alternative picks up the narrative directly after the officer's death. Here, the traveler is exhausted by the officer's execution and the intense heat of the days causes him to wipe his brow and lie down next to the pit. Sometime later, two men are sent by the new commandant to fetch him, but when they speak the traveler exclaims "I am a cur if I allow that to happen" (Kafka, *Diaries* 178),[46] and in a fit of madness the traveler takes this statement literally and beginning running around on all fours. Baffled, these two men attempt to bring the traveler back to the commandant, but the traveler responds by throwing rocks and striking out at the men.

> "What?" the explorer suddenly said. Had something been forgotten. A last word? A turn? An adjustment? Who can penetrate the confusion? Damned miasmal tropical air, what are you doing to me? I don't know what is happening. My judgment has been left back at home in the north. (Kafka, *Diaries* 178)[47]

In this ending, the traveler laments the violence his presence had on the officer, and he actively chooses to avoid another conversation with the new commandant. He claims that the oppressive heat of the tropics has robbed him of any capacity to make judgments and states that he would literally run around like a dog before he allowed himself to make any proclamations to the new commandant. In this version, the traveler is self-aware of how his presence has disrupted the power dynamics of the colony, and in an attempt to avoid inadvertently making any further judgments he denies himself any claim to reason, judgment, or authority.

The second alternative ending has no concrete place in the narrative and instead begins with someone raising the shout “Prepare the way for the snake! […] Prepare the way for the great Madame!” (Kafka, *Diaries* 179).[48] It is unclear who or what the snake and the great Madame are supposed to represent in this ending, but this call for progression gives way to a parade of individuals. The tale then ends with an unnamed speaker—presumably the traveler—telling his followers:

> Hold the lamp up high, you up front there! The rest of you without a sound behind me! All in single file! And quiet! That was nothing. Don’t be afraid, I’m responsible. I’ll lead you out. (Kafka, *Diaries* 179)[49]

In this ending, we can see an inversion of the former. Instead of denying any claim to authority, the traveler actively takes up the mantle of responsibility that has been granted to him, and he gathers the residents of the colony for an exodus away from the island.

In the third and final alternate ending the traveler is able to overcome the linguistic barrier between himself and the others, and this allows a sense of comradeship to develop:

> Their gurgling laughter indicated their gradual comprehension of his command; the condemned man pressed his face, which had been repeatedly smeared with grease, against the traveler’s hand, the soldier slapped the explorer on the shoulder with his right hand—in his left hand he waved a gun—all three now belonged together. (Kafka, *Diaries* 180)[50]

Despite this initial moment of linguistic unification, the grease- and blood-smeared face of the condemned man and the soldier’s swinging rifle evoke a renewed sense of revulsion in the traveler. He realizes that this supposed unity is in fact an act of subreption and in an attempt to avoid making another fallacious judgment the traveler returns to his ship, which would return him to the safe, rationally controlled environment of Europe. Unfortunately, the moment this thought appears in his mind, the traveler finds himself confronted by the dead officer’s spirit, who proclaims that

> "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. (Kafka, *Diaries* 181)[51]

Each of these alternative endings is as unique and ambiguous as the original, but what remains constant in every iteration is a return to the initial violence of both the apparatus and the traveler's condemnation of the penal system. In their own way, each variation is attempting to reconcile these aspects of the narrative into a cohesive statement that can holistically condemn or justify the traveler's judgment, but no matter which direction Kafka takes the ending, he finds himself unable give this allegorical text an unambiguous conclusion. A month later he confesses to Wolff that "Two of three of the final pages are botched, and their presence points to some deeper flaw; there is a worm somewhere which hollows out the story, dense as it is" (Kafka, *Letters to Friends* 136),[52] and he begs Wolff to give him more time to fix it. A year later, Kafka concedes defeat in his battle to control the symbolic nature of *In the Penal Colony,* and he allows Wolff to publish it with the original ending: in which a shame filled, and melancholy traveler leaves the island without making any further statements about the colony or its judicial system.

Bowing to the mystery

At the beginning of this reading, I cautioned against the conflation of Kafka's biographical details with those of his protagonists, but even the most cautious reading must admit that there are multiple parallels between Kafka's writing practices and the disciplinary violence of the apparatus. In both instances the primary mechanism for transformation is the act of writing, and one of the consequences of this process is a physical marking of the body. Similarly, there is a denial—or at the very least a subordination—of individual autonomy to the integrity of the text. For when Kafka penned *The Judgment* he already knew how it was to end, and the laborious task of writing was the means by which this foreordained conclusion became reified. Likewise, both the traveler and the

officer find themselves unable to assert their will against that which has already been declared. In the case of the officer, this is the law that was written down by his beloved commandant, and for the traveler, it is his inability to fully condemn the apparatus. In both instances, the promise for this subordination to the written word is a state of transcendental transformation of the self in which the act of writing redeems the condemned body. But this promise is not guaranteed, for if the violence of discipline fails to bring about a state of transcendence, then all that is left is the mutilation of the self. This is the bind that both Kafka and the characters of *In the Penal Colony* face, and—if we draw parallels between the disciplinary role that writing plays in both instances—it would appear that *In the Penal Colony* both condemns and condones the belief that disciplinary violence can evoke some form of salvation or enlightenment.

Such a transformation, however, is not without its price. For *In the Penal Colony,* the price of salvation is the death of the condemned, and for Kafka, the price of literary transformation appears to be a loss of authorial control over the interpretive landscape of the text. We can observe this in Kafka's failure to wrangle *In the Penal Colony*'s enigmatic ending into a cohesive allegorical reading, but what makes this dilemma more poignant is Kafka's need to maintain a dialectical tension between his two selves. For when the apparatus stops writing, the condemned man dies, and likewise, if Kafka stops writing, his artistic self is also condemned to death. To label a text complete was to risk the dissolution of an identity that was crafted through hours upon hours of disciplinary violence. For Kafka, the dilemma of completion was not merely a question of perfection. It was also an existential dilemma that kept him wrestling with his words night after night.

Fortunately, Kafka's dilemma is precisely what can make his work so compelling. As all the plot holes, paradoxes, and unfinished narratives of his oeuvre allow these texts to resonate within a chorus of interpretive voices. It demonstrates that the genius of his work is not rooted in a claim to authorial intent. Rather, it appears to stem from his uncanny ability to craft tales that actively defy holistic interpretation. Even when this meant that he himself would

never be able to master these tales. This was his art, and even though Kafka felt that the task of writing was all too often a painfully tedious one, there was always the potential for his greatest fancies to erupt with such force that they would both consume and revive his imagination. In short, it was his capacity to construct what Walter Benjamin described as a body of work that

> constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings (Benjamin, "10th Anniversary" 120)

which resulted in

> a mystery which we cannot comprehend. And precisely because it is a mystery we have had the right to preach it, to teach the people that what matters is neither freedom or love, but the riddle, the secret, the mystery to which they have to bow-without reflection and even against their conscience. (Benjamin, "10th Anniversary" 124)

And so, when all is said and done, it appears as if the question of "who was Kafka?" will—like much of his work—remain a mystery. For when Kafka—the man left this world in 1924, the artistic persona was all that remained. The dialectical tension between his two selves dissolved, and his transformation into an embodiment of literature was completed to such a degree that a century's worth of scholarship is still trying to reconstruct the ghost of that man. The only question that remains is whether the violence of Kafka's masochism was worth it? It certainly was effective, but is a lifetime of pain a worthy price for such an afterlife? Was his inability to enjoy the fruits of his labor a fair trade for his capacity to give voice to the unspoken anxieties, fears, and shame that is collectively felt by millions of readers? I would argue that the price was still too high, as the means of violence have a tendency to corrupt their own ends, but such a judgment may be hasty. And, like the traveler, it might be better to avoid passing judgment and instead allow ourselves to just appreciate the lengths that Kafka was willing to go to create the very riddle that he embodies.

[1] Although there are multiple books and articles exploring this point from a critical lens, Kafka's biographers remain the most thorough glimpse as to how Kafka's lived experiences informed his art. For further reading see Max Brod's *Franz Kafka,* Ernst Pawel's *The Nightmare of Reason: The Life of Franz Kafka,* Reiner Stach's *Kafka: The Early Years, Kafka: The Decisive Years, Kafka: The Years of Insight,* and Peter-Andre Alt's *Franz Kafka, The Eternal Son.*

[2] This position is nothing new in Kafka scholarship as both Walter Benjamin and Jorge Luis Borge—who made some of the earliest commentaries on Kafka's work—warned against overly allegorizing and psychoanalyzing Kafka's literature. See Benjamin's "Franz Kafka on the Tenth Anniversary of his Death"*,* and Borges, "Las pesadillas y Franz Kafka".

[3] A literal disciplinary writing machine.

[4] On its own this line is quite powerful, but when one contextualizes it with the entire entry and with a similar passage from a few days earlier it gains even more potency. Here is the quote in full: "I have no time. General mobilization. K. and P. have been called up. Now I receive the reward for living alone. But it is hardly a reward; living alone ends only with punishment. Still, as a consequence, I am little effected by all the misery and am firmer in my resolve than ever. I shall have to spend my afternoons in the factory; I won't live at home, for Elli and the two children are moving in with us. *But I will write in spite of everything, absolutely; it is my struggle for self-preservation"* (Kafka, *Diaries* 75, emphasis added). ["Ich habe keine Zeit. Es ist allgemeine Mobilisierung. K. und P. sind einberufen. Jetzt bekomme ich den Lohn des Alleinseins. Es ist allerdings kaum ein Lohn, Alleinsein bring nur Strafen. Immerhin, ich bin wenig berüht von allem Elend und entschlossener als jemals. Nachmittags werde ich in der Fabrik sein müssen, wohnen werde ich nicht zu Hause, denn E. mit den zwei Kindern übersiedelt zu uns. *Aber schreiben werde ich trotz alledem, unbedingt, es ist mein Kampf um die Selbsterhaltung"* (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 304, emphasis added).] In this passage it clear that Kafka is struggling to process the mobilization of colleagues who had been summoned to fight in WWI, and he laments the reward of isolation that has so suddenly been imposed upon him. An isolation he is determined to fight via the medium of writing. There is a certain amount of poetry in this passage and one can make the obvious connections between the battles of warfare and Kafka's own battle for self-preservation. However, the contextualization of isolation as reward feels off, since he is so quick to dismiss it as a such. One potential solution for this oddity may be found in Kafka's entry on July 28, which was the day war was officially declared: "I am more and more unable to think, to observe, to determine the truth of things, to remember, to speak, to share an experience; I am turning into stone, this is the truth. I am more and more unable even in the office. If I can't take refuge in some work, I am lost. Is my knowledge of this as clear as the thing itself? I shun people not because I want to live quietly, but rather because I want to die quietly" (Kafka, *Diaries*, 68). ["Meine Unfähigkeit, zu denken, zu beobachten, festzustellen, mich zu erinnern, zu reden, mitzuerleben wird immer größer, ich versteinere, ich muß das feststellen. Meine Unfähigkeit wird sogar im Bureau größer. Wenn ich mich nicht in einer Arbeit rette, bin ich verloren. Weiß ich das so deutlich, als es ist? Ich verkrieche mich vor Menschen nicht deshalb, weil ich ruhig leben, sondern weil ich ruhig zugrunde gehen will" (Kafka, *Tagebücher*, 299).] It's possible that Kafka's laments are a reaction to his earlier wish for isolation. A wish that has suddenly come true, and in so doing has revealed itself as a false wish. If isolation was not the cure, then maybe the solution is to simply get to work. If labor is the cure for a lost sense of self, then Kafka's renewed emphasis on artistic writing could be seen as an attempt keep him from losing that side of himself.

[5] See Evers' *Violent Modernist: The Aesthetics of Destruction in Twentieth-Century German Literature,* Vogl's *Ort der Gewalt,* and Dotzler's "'Nur so kann geschrieben werden.' Kafka und die Archäologie der Bio-Informatik."

[6] "... es tut gut, wenn das Gewissen breite Wunden bekommt, denn dadurch wird es empfindlicher für jeden Biß. Ich glaube, man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen. Wenn das Buch, das wir lesen, uns nicht mit einem Faustschlag auf den Schädel weckt,

wozu lesen wir dann das Buch? [...] Wir brauchen aber die Bücher, die auf uns wirken wie ein Unglück, das uns sehr schmerzt, wie der Tod eines, den wir lieber hatten als uns, wie wenn wir in Wälder verstoßen würden, von allen Menschen weg, wie eine Selbstmord, ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns. Das glaube ich" (Kafka, *Briefe* 27-28).

[7] "Ich saß an meinem schönen Schreibtisch. Du kennst ihn nicht. Wie solltest Du auch. Das is nämlich ein gut bürgerlich gesinnter Schreibtisch, der erziehen soll. Der hat dort, wo gewöhnlich die Knie des Schreibers sind, zwei erschreckliche Holzspitzen. Und nun gib acht. Wenn man sich ruhig setzt, vorsichtig, und etwas gut Bürgerliches schreibt, dann ist einem wohl. Aber wehe, wenn man sich aufregt und der Körper nur ein wenig bebt, dann hat man unausweichlich die Spitzen in den Knien und wie das schmerzt. Ich könnte Dir die dunkelblauen Flecken zeigen. Und was will das nun bedeuten: "Schreibe nichts Aufgeregtes und laß Deinen Körper nicht zittern dabei" (Kafka *Briefe*, 11).

[8] "Es is nicht notwendig, daß Du aus dem Haus gehst. Bleib bei Deinem Tisch und horche. Horche nicht einmal, warte nur. Warte nicht einmal, sei völlig still und allein. Anbieten wird sich Dir die Welt zur Entlarvung, sie kann nicht anders, verzückt wird sie sich vor Dir winden" (Kafka, *Aphorisms* 109).

[9] The earliest passages on this subject emerge around 1902-04, but this line of thinking remains a prominent subject in Kafka's letters and diaries from 1910-1918.

[10] It is important to note that in the original German the adjective that is translated as 'respectable,' is 'bürgerlich', which could also be rendered as the more politically charged 'bourgeois'.

[11] "Endlich nach fünf Monaten meines Lebens, in denen ich nichts schreiben konnte, womit ich zufrieden gewesen wäre, und die mir keine Macht ersetzen wird, obwohl alle dazu verpflichtet wären, komme ich auf den Einfall, wieder einmal mich auszusprechen. Darauf antwortete ich noch immer, wenn ich mich wirklich fragte, hier war immer noch etwas aus mir herausgeschlagen, aus diesem Stohhaufen, der ich seit fünf Monaten bin und dessen Schicksal es zu sein scheint, im Sommer angezündet zu werden und zu verbrennen, rascher, als der Zuschauer mit den Augen blinzelt. Wollte das doch nur mit mir geschehn!" (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 11).

[12] Given Kafka's tendency to burn those works that he felt were unsatisfactory, it is likely that this metaphor of burning is much more than a desire for transcendental consumption. Rather it could also be seen as the creation and destruction of those literary subjectivities that Dungey argues for. In short, the Kafka that is being burned is not Kafka—the man, but rather Kafka—the artist.

[13] "Diese Geschichte 'Das Urteil' habe ich in der Nacht vom 22. bis 23. von zehn Uhr abends bis sechs Uhr früh in einem Zug geschrieben. Die vom Sitzen steif gewordenen Beine konnte ich kaum unter dem Schreibtisch hervorziehen. Die fürchterliche Anstrengung und Freude, wie sich die Geschichte vor mir entwickelte, wie ich in einem Gewässer vorwärtskam. Mehrmals in der Nacht trug ich mein Gewicht auf dem Rücken. Wie alles gesagt werden kann, wir für alle, für die fremdesten Einfälle ein großes Feuer bereitet ist, in dem sie vergehn und auferstehn. [...] Nur so kann geschreiben werden, nur in einem solchen Zusammenhang, mit solcher vollständigen Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele" (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 214).

[14] "Anläßlich der Korrektur des 'Urteils' schreibe ich alle Beziehungen auf, die mir in der Geschichte klargeworden sind, soweit ich sie gegenwärtig habe. Es is dies notwendig, denn die Geschichte ist wie eine regelrechte Geburt mit Schmutz und Schleim bedeckt aus mir herausgekommen, und nur ich habe die Hand, die bis zum Körper dringen kann und Lust dazu hat" (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 217).

[15] “Nicht einmal das ‘künstlerische Interesse‘ ist wahr, es ist sogar die falscheste Aussage unter allen Falschheiten. Ich habe kein literarisches Interesse, sondern bestehe aus Literatur, ich bin nichts anderes and kann nichts anderes sein” (Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 444),

[16] “Nicht ein Hang zum Schreiben, Du liebste Felice, kein Hang, sondern durchaus ich selbst. Ein Hang ist auszureißen oder niederzudrücken, aber was geschieht mit Dir? Du bleibst verlassen und lebst doch neben mir. Du wirst Dich verlassen sein, wenn ich nicht so lebe. Kein Hang, kein Hang!” (Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 451).

[17] “Nun habe ich überdies so elend gearbeitet, daß ich überhaupt keinen Schlaf verdiene und eigentlich verurteilt bleiben sollte, den Rest der Nacht mit dem Hinausschauen aus dem Fenster zu verbringen. Begreifst Du es, Liebste: schlecht schreiben und doch schreiben müssen, wenn man sich nicht vollständiger Verzweiflung überlassen will. So schrecklich das Glück des guten Schreibens abbüßen müssen! Eigentlich nicht wahrhaft unglücklich sein, nicht jenen frischen Stachel des Unglücks zu fühlen, sondern auf die Heftseiten hinuntersehn, die sich endlos mit Dingen füllen, die man haßt, die einem Ekel oder wenigstens eine trübe Gleichgültigkeit verursachen, und die man doch niederschreiben muß, um zu leben. Pfui Teufel! Könnte ich doch die Seiten, die ich seit vier Tagen geschreiben habe, so vernichten, als wären sie niemals da gewesen” (Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 142).

[18] “So wie ich bin, darf ich zur Not lebe, ich wüte nach innen, quäle nur in Briefen, sobald wir zusammen leben, werde ich ein gefährlicher Narr, den man verbrennen sollte. Was würde ich anrichten! Was müßte ich anrichten! Und würder ich nichts anrichten, wäre ich erst recht verloren, denn es wäre gegen meine Natur, und wer mit mir wäre, wäre verloren. Du weißt nicht, Felice, was manche Literatur in manchen Köpfen ist. Das jagt beständig wie Affen in den Baumwipfeln statt auf dem Boden zu gehen. Es ist verloren und kann nicht anders. Was soll man tun?” (Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 425).

[19] “Er waren und sind in mir zwei, die miteinander kämpfen. Der eine ist fast so wie Du ihn wolltest, und was ihm zur Erfüllung Deines Wunsches fehlt, das könnte er durch weitere Entwicklung erreichen. [...] Die zwei kämpfen nun, aber es ist kein wirklicher Kampf, bei dem je zwei Hände gegeneinander losschlagen. Der erste is abhängig vom zweiten, er wäre niemals, aus innern Gründen niemals imstande, ihn niederzuwerfen, vielmehr ist er glücklich, wenn der zweite glücklich ist, und wenn der zweite dem Anschein nach verlieren soll, so kniet der erste bei ihm nieder und will nichts anderes sehn als ihn. So ist es Felice. Und doch, kämpfen sie miteinander und doch könnten beide Dir gehören, nur ändern kann man nichts an ihnen, außer man zerschlägt beide.” (Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 617).

[20] See the diary entry for October 15, 1914. In this entry Kafka reconstructs a letter he sent to Grete Bloch that is not included in his letters.

[21] See his entry for July 31, 1914, in which he states: “Ich habe keine Zeit. Es ist allgemeine Mobilisierung. K. und P. sind einberufen. Jetzt bekomme ich den Lohn des Alleinseins. Es ist allerdings kaum ein Lohn, Alleinsein bringt nur Strafen. Immerhin, ich bin wenig berührt von allem Elend und entschlossener als jemals. Nachmittag werde ich in der Fabrik sein müssen, wohnen werde ich nicht zuhause, denn E. mit den 2 Kindern übersiedelt zu uns. *Aber schreiben werde ich trotz alledem, unbedingt, es ist mein Kampf um die Selbsterhaltung*” (Kafka, *Tagebücher*, 304, emphasis added).

[22] See Kafka’s letter to Kurt Wolff dated 17. September 1917.

[23] “Es ist ein eigentümlicher Apparat” (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 151).

[24] “[E]s war, wie es im Leben gewesen war; kein Zeichen der versprochenen Erlösung war zu entdecken; was alle anderen in der Maschine gefunden hatten, der Offizier fand es nicht” (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 161).

[25] For example, Walter Sokel argues that this is a transitional, quasi-experimental piece that mediated between Kafka's earlier expressionistic writings and the parabolic tones of his later years. He praises it as one of Kafka's more complex and polyvalent works and sees it as the moment in which Kafka transitioned from a tragic to an ironic aesthetic. In contrast to Sokel, Heinz Politzer and Ingeborg Henel argue that this text is anomalous for its closure and univocality. Others, such as Walter Müller-Seidel and Wolf Kittler, see in this text a maturing Kafka, one whose exposure to academia, bureaucracy, and technological innovation allowed him to grow beyond the finite scope of his father complex.

[26] In addition to Müller-Seidel and Kittler, see Stanley Corngold, Rolf Goebel, Paul Peters, Karen Piper, and Costas Despiniadis.

[27] See Ari Linden, and Andreas Gailus.

[28] The bulk of this comprehensive list comes from Stanley Corngold's *Franz Kafka: The Ghost in the Machine*. It can be found on page 78 of chapter 4, which is titled "The Punch Card and the Poet's Body ("In the Penal Colony")". His list of primary sources for this list is on page 236.

[29] "Der Apparat soll ja zwölf Stunden ununterbrochen im Gang sein" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 152).

[30] "[E]twas gut Bürgerliches schreibt" (Kafka, *Briefe* 11).

[31] "So schrecklich das Glück des guten Schreibens abbüßen müssen!" (Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 142).

[32] "[N]icht jenen frischen Stachel des Unglücks zu fühlen" (Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 142).

[33] "Dieser Egge aber ist die eigentliche Ausführung des Urteils überlassen" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 154). It's important to note that Muir translates 'Urteil' in this instance as 'sentence' rather than the more literal translation of 'judgement.' This is obviously an artistic choice on the side of the translators, but it is also a fitting one. As it uses the polysemous nature of 'sentence' to draw a stronger connection to the act of writing and the act of discipline. Which is also true in German, as 'ein Satz' can refer to both a linguistic sentence or a judicial decision.

[34] "Kennt er sein Urteil?" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 155).

[35] "Er erfährt es ja auf seinem Leib" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 155).

[36] See footnote 7.

[37] "[Z]u stark abgeschliffen" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 153).

[38] "Verstand geht dem Blödesten auf" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 160). Note-Muir translates 'Verstand' as 'Enlightenment', but one could also translate this as 'comprehension' or 'apprehension.'

[39] "Der Apparat soll ja zwolf Stunden ununterbrochen im Gang sein" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 152), "die Exekution sollte schon beginnen" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 157), and "ein Rad im Zeichner hätte krieschen sollen" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 174).

[40] "Die Maschine ist sehr zusammengesetzt, es muß hie und da etwas reißen oder brechen; dadurch darf man sich aber im Gesamturteil nicht beirren lassen" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 161).

[41] "Die Mitteilungen über das Gerichtsverfahren hatten ihn nicht befriedigt. Immerhim müßte er sich sagen, daß es sich hier um eine Strafkolonie handelte, daß hier besondere Maßregeln notwendig waren" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 157).

[42] "Bis jetzt war noch Händearbeit nötig, von jetzt aber arbeitet der Apparat ganz allein" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 152).

[43] "[W]as alle anderen in der Maschine gefunden hatten" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 176).

[44] "Hat er denn alles in sich vereinigt?" (Kafka, *Strafkolonie* 155).

[45] “Nachmittag bei Werfel mit Max und Pick. “In der Stafkolonie” vorgelesen, nicht ganz unzufrieden, bis auf die überdeutlichen unverwischbaren Fehler. [...] Ergebnis des Tages, schon vor Werfel: Unbedingt weiterarbeiten, Traurig, daß es heute nicht möglich ist, denn ich bin müde und habe Kopfschmerzen” (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 324).

[46] “Ich will ein Hundsfott sein, wenn ich das zulasse” (Kafka, Tagebücher, 383).

[47] ““Wie,” sagte der Reisende plötzlich. War etwas vergessen? Ein entscheidenes Wort? Ein Griff? Eine Handreichung? Wer kann in das Wirrsal eindringen? Verdammte böse tropische Luft, was machst du aus mir? Ich weiß nicht, was geschieht. Meine Urteilskraft ist zu Hause im Norden beblieben” (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 383).

[48] “Bereitet der Schlange der Weg! […] Bereitet den Weg der großen Madam!” (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 383).

[49] “Hoch die Lampe gehalten, du vorn! Ihr andern leise hinter mir! Alle in einer Reihe! Und Still! Das war nichts. Keine Angst. Ich trage die Verantwortung. Ich führe euch hinaus” (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 384).

[50] “Mit gurgelndem Lachen zeigten sie, daß sie allmählich den Befehl verstanden, der Verurteilte drückte sein mehrfach überschmiertes Gesicht an die Hand des Reisenden, der Soldat klopfte mit der Rechten – in der linken schwenkte er das Gewehr – dem Reisenden auf die Schulter, alle drei gehörten jetzt zusammen“ (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 384).

[51] “ich bin hingerichtet, wie Sie es befehlen.“ Noch aufmerksamer horchten jetzt Kapitän und Matrosen. Und sahen sämtlich, wie jetzt der Offizier über seine Stirn hinstrich und einen krumm aus der geborstenen Stirn vorragenden Stachel enthüllte” (Kafka, *Tagebücher* 385).

[52] “Zwei oder drei Seiten kurz vor ihrem [Strafkolonie] Ende sind Machwerk, ihr vorhandensein deutet auf einen tieferen Mangel, es ist da irgendwo ein Wurm, der selbst das Volle der Geschichte hohl macht” (Kafka, *Briefe* 159).

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