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Reaching for the Axe: Kafka and the Language of Power

"Kafka makes novelists nervous," (33) writes the celebrated novelist Zadie Smith. As if looking over her shoulder, Smith notes that "either [Kafka] is too good for the novel or the novel is not quite good enough for him—whichever it is, his imitators are very few" (33). Smith's uneasiness, her sense, however understated, that Kafka does not quite fit within conventional literary boundaries, reflects a critical discomfort felt not only by Kafka's professional peers but the writer himself during his lifetime. In his own diary, Kafka lamented "the dependency of writing" on the everyday, the "helpless" nature of his work (*Tagebücher* 551).[1] Yet Kafka continued to write, producing literature of a sort—a literature by nature a-literary, a literature that contained within itself its own undoing. Conventional novelists have a right to be nervous.

In his early career, Kafka wrote that literature was meant to convey to the reader a truth so demanding that its mode of transmission was necessarily violent: books were to be "the axe that destroyed the frozen sea within us" (*Briefe*).[2] This statement evidences literary idealism of a sort, assuming first that literature is capable of communication at all, and also that this communication may transcend limitations of space, time, and culture. A common view of literature would append to this manifesto the idea of universal and accessible communication, transmitted from author to reader without struggle. However, Kafka effectively denies this last assumption through his choice of metaphor. The figure of the axe suggests not peace but a sword: Kafka's message brings paradox and struggle, rather than literary gospel. It is a violent transmission with the power to unsettle

and alienate. Kafka's writing does not settle easily with the reader any more than it did with the author.

Other literary works "assume at least some kind of rational relationship between the individual and the world" (Smith 33). Kafka is different. Though novelistic in form, Kafka's *Trial* features multi-level chaos—the inherent confusion of surface-level events, the lack of traditional plot structure, the apparent madness of its conclusion—that suggests that Kafka's version of the individual-world relationship is either wildly irrational, or possibly non-existent. The casual reader does not understand. Persistently frustrated in his search for a rational explanation of his arrest, the protagonist K. effectively learns that he *cannot* understand. Thrown into contact with a host of minor characters and events, he does not even know where to fix his attention in order to gain understanding. Kafka himself declares that writing is "a joke and a despair" (*Tagebücher* 551). How, then, is one to extract the truth from a work that turns its own insides out in a search for meaning and apparently ends with none?

Meaning, in Kafka's works, cannot be assumed or positively defined. Viewed through the typical literary paradigm of rational relationships between character and surroundings, with its supposed intent of making truth more accessible to the reader—viewed through these expectations, *The Trial* is essentially meaningless, a world in which the Law perverts rather than represents assumptions of order. *In the Penal Colony* is not only meaningless, but ghastly: a world in which communication, in the form of a sentence, is literally etched into condemned men's bodies. Care, of course, is taken to "keep the inscription clear" (*Penal Colony* 147). Kafka's works fail to fit the conventional mold, which associates literature with communication, law with justice, words with meaning. If such a mold even exists, Kafka dismantles and inverts it, leaving behind a great uneasiness, a sense of displacement: a central disquiet.

True to this disquiet, the worlds of *The Trial* and *Penal Colony* are bureaucracies notable for their perplexing limits, their mindless adherence to process. Events do not yield increasing meaning, either within or without the stories. Instead, events and supporting characters proceed inscrutably, yet with self-assurance; it is as if the laws of these worlds are apparent to every inhabitant except the protagonist. At the moment of his arrest, K. becomes suddenly aware of a hidden bureaucracy, complete

with tiers of magistrates, judges, and a high court. His subsequent search for understanding constantly encounters limitations, complex rules and procedures by which everyone abides, but no one can explain. When asked, the man who initially appears in his room to arrest him answers only, "We are not authorized to tell you that. [. . .] Proceedings have been instituted against you, and you will be informed of everything in due course" (*Trial* 3). K.'s search, which concludes only with his violent death, does not shed light on the source of authority that legitimizes his arrest, that authorizes and un-authorizes others. Even the High Court, with its "Judge whom he had never seen" (*Trial* 228), remains hidden from K. The Law, which typically signifies an individual's acceptance and comprehension of authority, remains a perpetual mystery.

In *The Trial*, the concept of law no longer possesses its traditional associations with truth, justice, and political participation. The Judge, in his removal from K.'s situation, fails to judge, whether justly or unjustly. The legal process does not condemn or acquit but, instead, gradually erases the accused. In his growing bewilderment, K the everyman is relocated from his familiar surroundings into a strange new world. It is possible to attribute this displacement to a corresponding shift in language: Thomas Kavanaugh employs the language of semiotics, the construction of signs, to make sense of K.'s apparently nonsensical universe. *The Trial*, Kavanaugh argues, demonstrates a change in the "codes," or constructions of reality, that human beings use to create and convey meaning. K.'s arrest marks the beginning of a long string of "discordant messages" (Kavanaugh 245)—that is, events and statements that contradict and challenge the reality with which K. is familiar. Because he cannot interpret the workings of the world according to his usual "code," K. is reduced to unsuccessful attempts at bare understanding:

> [his] goal is no longer that of expression and manipulation, but that of simple comprehension. The adventure of Joseph K. is an adventure of the mind, the adventure of a semiologist in spite of himself. It is the hope of penetrating the code, of restoring order and meaning to his disintegrating world that most characterizes Kafkaesque man. (245)

According to Kavanaugh, *The Trial* is deceptive, failing to yield the message both K. and the reader expect. The never-ending search for message in

the codes, the attempt to interpret this world where no words mean what they meant yesterday, is only "an act of language founded upon an absence, an irretrievable alienation from all meaning" (253). The message is only mirage. A trial does not guarantee justice, not as K. understands it. Words literally fail here, no longer expressing their expected meanings; they signify not truth but a void, a space of total silence.

This silence is more literally enacted in Kafka's *Penal Colony*: in this short story, the condemned likewise do not receive notice from the sentencing authority. Instead, the sentence is engraved mechanically on their bodies using a needled machine known as "The Harrow" (*Penal Colony* 144). Like Joseph K., the condemned have "had no chance of putting up a defence" (*Penal Colony* 145), and their self-proclaimed judge, the new Commandant, is absent from the scene of punishment. But whereas Joseph K. is subsumed in *der Prozess*, the condemned of Kafka's *Penal Colony* bear witness to its logical end, distinguishing the story from *The Trial*, yet making it a strangely fitting companion piece. In its isolation, the penal colony is a spatial depiction of K.'s internal displacement. Over the colony hangs the sense that words have failed; there is no need anymore for language, too reminiscent of ordered relationships between a term and the entity it actually represents. At the climax of the tale, when the officer in charge of operating The Harrow climbs beneath it himself, having assigned himself the sentence "Be Just," his action is met with total silence. Neither the formerly condemned man nor the explorer utters a word to stop him, and in the operation of the deadly machine "everything was quiet, not even the slightest hum could be heard" (*Penal Colony* 164).

Writing is, as Kafka wrote, helpless, dependent (*Tagebücher* 551). Although Kafka's work depends on language as its means of transmission, it inverts and shatters the relationships—between an object and its descriptor—for which language is typically used. Kafka was keenly aware that language depends upon allusion "for anything outside the sensory world" (Kafka, qtd. *Language* 375), yet readers perpetually encounter non-sensory, abstract ideas in Kafka's writing. Are these merely the appearance of ideas? Is Kafka's use of language, as Kavanaugh claims, simply a front for the absence of all meaning? While works such as *The Trial* and *Penal Colony* certainly subvert traditional meanings of words such as "law" and "guilt," this does not preclude the *substitution* of different meanings

altogether. In these works, Kafka's language belongs to a different universe of meaning and naming, the extra-sensory: it is as if these meanings exist in a hidden space, behind the typical associations of certain language with certain concepts. Kafka's language is that of the void, of the loss of all sensory-dependent meaning in favor of "a very special, non-referential, merely allusive language . . . a means by which human beings may receive an inkling of the invisible, true world" (*Language and Truth* 375).

Where is this invisible and true world in Kafka's work? It lies underneath the world of surface-level events and logical expectations, in strange utterances and parables. In *The Trial*, K.'s constant struggle to understand his arrest does not bring enlightenment, as might be expected; instead, the clearest picture of K.'s situation comes from a short parable near the end of the work, delivered to him by seeming accident. As he waits in an almost-deserted cathedral for a guest who never arrives, K. is summoned to the altar by a strange priest who narrates the parable of a man from the country seeking entrance to the gate of the Law, an ambiguous and powerful force. However, the doorkeeper of the gate prevents the man from entering; and so he gives up his material goods as bribes, his remaining years as proof of his sincerity. As he is dying, withered, and blind, he asks the doorkeeper why no one but himself has ever sought the Law, and the doorkeeper answers that the gate of the Law was once created solely for him, but now it will be shut. Thus the tale ends, and the priest proceeds to relate several contradictory interpretations of its meaning. "Before the Law," while bewildering in itself, clearly applies to K., who is essentially in the same position as the country dweller: he seeks entrance to the courts of the Law in order to understand his arrest, but cannot gain admittance. No amount of time or effort avails him. Like the country dweller, K. is effectively paralyzed "before the Law," unable either to enter into its mysteries or to exit its sphere of influence.

This paralyzing paradox, this invisible no-place created between entry and exit, is addressed by philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his work *Homo Sacer*. Here, Agamben explores the concept of the sovereign exception (13), wherein the sovereign power is both included in the law as law-giver and excluded from it as an individual not subject to the law's authority. This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion can be framed in terms of potentiality, which "maintains itself in relation to actuality in the form of

its suspension; it is capable of the act in not realising it, it is sovereignly capable of its own im-potentiality" (Agamben 32). In the same sense, it is possible to be included in the law through one's own exclusion, exclusion which acts as suspension. Thus Agamben's reading of Kafka's parable, by arguing that in it "law affirms itself with the greatest force precisely at the point in which it no longer prescribes anything" (35), applies these terms of inclusion and exclusion to the sovereignty of the Law. It does not make positive demands, yet its authority is compelling—a law "in force without significance" (36).

The Law makes no demands upon the country dweller who attempts to enter its gate, yet for the rest of his life he never leaves the gate from which it exercises this negative power over him. He cannot enter (be included), and is thus excluded from the law. However, in his exclusion, he takes on a relation to the law and is thus included (one might say "entrapped") in the law. He is the inverse of the sovereign authority, who is included in the law as the source of authority, yet not bound by the law—ultimately, excluded (one might say "freed") from the law. Later in his work, Agamben discusses this concept of the *homo sacer*, an individual who is the sovereign's symmetric opposite. Originating from a facet of Roman law, which states that this man may be "killed, but not sacrificed" (60), the *homo sacer* is literally "sacred": he is not "holy" in the traditional sense, but actually a man "set apart," the sovereign's counterpart in no-place. Where the sovereign is excluded from the law in order to be above it, the *homo sacer* is outside the law so that he may be killed. This is an expression of bare life: as Agamben argues, "the first foundation of political life is a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed" (59). Therefore, because the *homo sacer* is outside the law and can be killed, he cannot be sacrificed from within the law. The law does not include him, though it is the law that allows any man to kill him; and thus, in a sense, he is still under the law. This paradigm fits the parable of the country dweller, who is not included in the law and must die outside it, unable to leave its sphere of influence yet unable to enter.

It is not difficult to extrapolate this concept of *homo sacer* to Kafka's larger works outside the parable. In its immediate context, "Before the Law" clearly reflects K.'s own story: though K. is left free to move about in the physical sense, his greater being is paralysed in no-place by a law

which apparently demands nothing from him, yet which does not let him go. Like the country dweller—which is to say, like the *homo sacer*—K. is not included in the Law, and the Law asks nothing of him. It only accuses, and that accusation remains "in force without significance" (Agamben 36) with all the force of the door of the Law figured in the parable. The initial accusation draws K. into the Law's sphere of influence, the no-place of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. The Law holds the sovereign position here, and the unseen Judge is inaccessible through the Law, placing him both inside and outside it. In relation to the sovereign authority, K. plays the role of *homo sacer*, the man whose position cannot be resolved from within the law, who may be killed outside it but not sacrificed.

Kafka's *Penal Colony*, by contrast, locates the *homo sacer* in his proper sphere: the camp. Unlike *The Trial*, which centers on K. as the figure subject to yet not partaking in sovereign authority, *Penal Colony* reveals the space for this state of inclusion and exclusion, rather than focusing on the *homo sacer* figure itself. Here, the everyman observer is not the figure of *homo sacer*. Although the explorer who witnesses the executions is simultaneously included and excluded from the actual proceedings as "neither a member of the penal colony nor a citizen of the state to which it belonged" (151), he ultimately escapes the colony's confines and does not suffer under its "sovereign" authorities. Instead, those who suffer are the colony's inhabitants. The colony itself serves as the space of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, the camp as according to Agamben: the "structure in which the state of exception—the possibility of deciding on which founds sovereign power—is realized normally" (Agamben 109). In other words, this is a place where power has no limit, in which potentiality (the unlimited "possibility of deciding") is made concrete.

Inhabitants of the camp represent politicized bare life, a crowd of *homines sacri* who may be killed outside the law but not sacrificed within it. They are excluded from the sphere of law and legal recourse, yet the marks of the law on their bodies denote their subjection to its sovereign authority. This is a subjection stripped of all logic, even the potential justification of language. As the officer states, there is no reason to verbally deliver sentences to a condemned man, for "he'll learn it on his body" (*Penal Colony* 145). The sentence in question? "Honor Thy Superiors" (*Penal Colony* 144). This is bare life, the body deprived even of commu-

nication—for rational communication assigns communally rather than individually mediated meanings to concepts of law and power—and its flesh subjected to the dictates of power.

In the penal colony, not even the semblance of judicial process remains, and the disturbed explorer "had to remind himself that this was . . . a penal colony where extraordinary measures were needed" (*Penal Colony* 146). Such "extraordinary measures" mark a transition away from a communally understood law into the arbitrary actions of the individual in power, actions which the exercise of power effectively legitimizes as law. In Agamben's camp, this transition perpetually recurs, until law no longer signifies itself, simply the sovereign action; and the sovereign action signifies law. This transition, in itself a loss of meaning, marks the camp as the "threshold in which law constantly passes over into fact, and fact into law, and in which the two planes become indistinguishable" (Agamben 110). In short, this is the place of no-place, an "invisible, true" world (*Language and Truth* 375), the source and container of the central disquiet.

And thus the shifting of the codes, the subversion of language, does open up into nothingness, a hidden interplay between life and law and power. However, this is no deceptive mirage. As Walter Sokel argues, Kafka's perception of the "debasement of language [i.e., its dependence on the sensory and forced allusive quality in speaking of the non-sensory] . . . allows a substantial elevation of the status of literature" (*Language and Truth* 375). Through his work, Kafka sought to convey a message that defies and destroys the means of its own transmission: a message that is by nature a-literary. Unlike typical literature, which wisely serves to convey only manageable truths of which its conventions are capable, Kafka's work enacts the incommunicability of certain truths—in *The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony*, truths about the nature of law and power—by insisting on their communication. These are truths of the no-space, hardly nameable in ordinary language, hardly comfortable. Kafka's axe, a precise and unsettling communication from the "enormous world" in his head (*Tagebücher* 306), does shatter and startle the frozen sea within. It shakes and disquiets the reader's expectations, associations, and very world. This is what enables Kafka to claim, beyond adherence to language or convention, "I *am* literature," and Zadie Smith to respond with entirely appropriate consternation, "Bloody *hell*" (3).

Notes

1. In quoting Kafka's diaries, I have used the translations given by Walter Sokel in his article "Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Franz Kafka." (*The German Quarterly*, 1979: 364–84), as Sokel's choice of words is relevant to the argument presented. To preserve the original references, page numbers have been given from Kafka's "Tagebücher."

2. Translation quoted from Walter Sokel's essay, "Frozen Sea and River of Narration" (*New Literary History*, Vol. 17.2, 351–363). Sokel's emphasis on Kafka's ideal literature as transcendent and communicative provides a foundation for discussion about the medium and goal of communication in Kafka's Trial.

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