
Textual Suicide, Divine Violence, and the Unwritten Law in Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie"

ARI LINDEN

The formula of the "absent God" in Kafka does not work at all: for Kafka's problem is, on the contrary, that in this universe God is too present in the guise of various obscene, nauseous phenomena. Kafka's universe is a world in which God—who up to now had held himself at an assured distance—has gotten too close to us. (Žižek 146)

Introduction

In the quote above, Slavoj Žižek places what he feels is a relatively unchallenged claim about Kafka's oeuvre radically into question. This claim would be that Kafka's world is a modern one that has been abandoned by a God who has either retreated into hiding, or who has vanished altogether. It follows that this "absent God" has left nothing behind except an inaccessible law that tortures the individual into submission, and that interminably refers only to itself for authority. Gershom Scholem, for example, has identified this pattern in Kafka's work. In a letter written to his dear friend Walter Benjamin, he writes: "Die Welt Kafkas ist die Welt der Offenbarung, freilich in jener Perspektive, in der sie auf ihr Nichts zurückgeführt wird" (Scholem and Benjamin 157). This "nothing" of revelation is, according to Stéphane Moses, Scholem's expression for the "negative theology" he discerns in Kafka, the idea that the only attribute of God one can confirm is his non-existence. Scholem therefore sees in Kafka a fine line between nihilism and revelation, and thus places the author within a historical trajectory of heretical Jewish thinkers who have not broken completely with tradition but have confronted it in crisis. Kafka's work, says Scholem, is akin to a missing text of the Kabbalah, one that inevitably begins in despair. Ultimately, God is nowhere to be found in Kafka, but rather must be sought outside of, or after, the text.¹

It is essentially this brand of theological reading that remains at the level of content with which Žižek appears to take issue. He suggests that Kafka's literary reality is not one that presumes a godless world ruled by an oppressive and inaccessible law. Rather, it attempts to create precisely the opposite: a world without law, revealing in its stead an immanent encounter with some sort of unmediated, God-like presence. Thus, instead of completely discarding the theological interpretation of Kafka, usually formulated in the guise of a negative theology, Žižek wants to insert "God" back into the equation. But what exactly does he mean by a God that has gotten too close to us? And furthermore, how can one understand the connection he makes between God and the "obscene" and "nauseous" phenomena that fill the pages of Kafka's stories?

In tracing and then affirming the logic of this cryptic hypothesis, the focus of my essay will be one of Kafka's more "obscene" tales, "In der Strafkolonie." I will at this point depart from Žižek temporarily, as my reading will draw primarily on an analysis of both Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, "Critique of Violence," and Jacques Derrida's lucid response to Benjamin, "Force of Law." These two readings seem incompatible: the former is a political treatise that relies heavily on theological language, and the latter is a deconstructive elucidation of the concept of law (as well as a rejection of the former). I hope to yield an illuminating paradigm for understanding the way that the triad of law, theology, and language all interact in Kafka's story, which I will argue folds back on itself as it is being written. By placing at the center of my investigation the very problematic of representation, the nexus that links all three enumerated discourses, I intend to raise new questions about the affinity between deconstruction and theology, and between theology and other contemporary anti-interpretative approaches to Kafka's work.

One such relatively contemporary example of this latter approach would be the case of Deleuze and Guattari, who wholeheartedly reject what they see as all too typical religious readings of Kafka, and argue instead for seeing "a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of non-signifying signs." But to where, I would ask, does Kafka's text attempt to "take flight," if not to a world that has abandoned myth for the sake of divine manifestation, to use the theologically-inflected parlance of Benjamin? When Deleuze and Guattari write that Kafka creates "an unlimited field of immanence instead of an infinite transcendence," pushing for more of a Spinozist-materialist reading of Kafka (Deleuze

and Guattari 13), my question would then be, what is the actual difference between these two allegedly opposing fields? Can they be brought together? Questions of this sort will implicitly guide my reading of Kafka, but before addressing the story itself, it will be necessary to explicate some of the key concepts from the critical texts that I will be referring to throughout my investigation.

Benjamin and Derrida

In his “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin outlines his notion of the “extreme,” discussing how it functions in the manifestation of philosophical concepts. “The empirical...can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme. The concept has its roots in the extreme...ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them” (35). For Benjamin, the extreme reveals the essence of a concept much more so than the its normative center. An ontology of baroque theater can thus best be derived from an analysis of the worst of its representatives, which more clearly reveal the skeleton of the genre than do the plays of average quality.² Benjamin furthers this notion to justify his exploration of allegory as it is employed in the German mourning plays, for he believes allegory to be the most extreme example of transcendence, which, according to Georg Lukács, “is the essence of allegory, [and] cannot but destroy aesthetics” (41). Though I will not focus explicitly on the allegorical element in Kafka’s story, the concept of an anti-aesthetic work will be informing my judgment.

The notion of the extreme emerges once again in Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” this time in the service of explaining the origin of mythic law, or, as we will see, of law as such. As Benjamin argues, violence is at the root of law, which is why there is “something rotten” in the very constitution of the legal order. He comes to this conclusion through an analysis of the death penalty, which he believes reveals not merely a manifestation of the violence of the law, but of the origin of law itself: “For in the exercise of violence over life and death, more than in any other legal act, the law reaffirms itself” (Benjamin, “Critique” 242). Benjamin understands mythic law to have both a law-creating and law-preserving function (though he separates the two), which can only be undone by the irruption of what he will call “divine violence.” The theological overtone is unmistakable. Whereas mythic violence sets in

motion an endless relationship of means to ends, which Benjamin believes is fundamentally groundless and mired in a corrosive pool of guilt, divine violence annihilates, expiates, and forcefully undercuts the very distinction of means and ends. "If mythic violence is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates...if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood" ("Critique" 249-250). Benjamin's essay, and this distinction between the two types of violence in particular, will be fundamental for my analysis of "In der Strafkolonie."

Equally as important for my argument, however, is Derrida's interpretation of this latter essay. In his "Force of Law," Derrida highlights what he sees as the real targets of Benjamin's critique: parliamentary democracy and representative language, or simply put, language as it functions in literature.³ Derrida detects in Benjamin a thinly veiled attack on "original sin," which, for Benjamin, is the fall of language into communication: "The profound logic of [Benjamin's] essay puts to work an interpretation of language—of the origin and the experience of language—according to which evil, that is to say lethal power, comes to language by way of, precisely, representation...that is to say the dimension of language that is...mediating" ("Force of Law" 259). One reason Derrida is able to make such a seamless transition from law to language is established in another essay of his, "Before the Law," which serves both as a critique of Kafka's parable of the same name, and as a way for Derrida to establish not merely an affinity between literature and the law, but a veritable identification of the two. Derrida asks, "what if the law, without being itself transfixed by literature, shared the conditions of its possibility with the literary object?" (191). Both discourses are mediating, infinitely removed, and indecipherable at their core: when one stands "before the law," he is simultaneously standing "before the text" ("Before the Law," 191).

The point of contention that Derrida takes with Benjamin is, where Benjamin sees a distinction between the law-making and the law-preserving function of mythic violence, and thus of language, Derrida sees none. For the latter, these two functions are in a constant dialectical relationship to one another, in that every act of creation is always already an act of preservation. In effect, this is what defines literature, and thus what defines law. What ultimately unites the two thinkers is their belief—implicit in Benjamin, explicit in Derrida—that both law and literature originate in a "fictive narration" ("Before the Law," 199). I will

take this narration to be the battle between mythic violence and divine violence, representation and manifestation, words and the Word.

“In der Strafkolonie” performatively stages this battle, as it is simultaneously a text at the cusp of self-deconstruction and a story about an apparatus of the law that is always at the brink of self-destruction. If Benjamin affirms the wisdom of a “great rabbi,” who promises that the Messiah “will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it,” then the question is whether Kafka’s text consists of the right adjustments to bring about this “divine” contact and to abandon the literary world of mere mimetic representation, which will “affect [not] only our space; [but]...our time as well” (“On the Tenth Anniversary” 811-2).⁴ With this question in mind, I begin my reading of the text.

In the Colony of Punishment

There is much that indicates that the setting of this story is that of a prehistoric Sumpfwelt, or a “swamp world” (“Anniversary,” 809). This world, Benjamin argues, functions on the cyclical and parasitic relationship of guilt and punishment, for when “laws and definite norms remain unwritten...a man can transgress them without suspecting it and then must strive for atonement” (“Anniversary,” 797). Even an analysis of the title, which could easily be rendered “In the Colony of Punishment,”⁵ as opposed to the more common translation, “In der Strafkolonie,” suggests a world in which “punishment is more important than the punisher” (Gasché 987). The title furthermore begs the question of who is actually in this colony. Is it the reader? Or the characters? In either case, I would argue that the penal colony is, on one level, a reflection of the absolute brutality of what could be called the social order. The penal colony is the law in its naked, mythical, violent origin.

There is abundant textual “evidence” that shows why this colony can be viewed as such. The reader is informed toward the beginning of the story that there has been a steadily waning interest amongst the inhabitants of the colony in the execution about to take place (Kafka, “Strafkolonie” 161).⁶ We are led to believe, as the story progresses, that there is virtually nobody except the presiding officer who actively supports the ritualized executions; they indeed persist more due to lack of resistance than anything else. In a sense, it is only the

now-forgotten brutality of this ritual that keeps this practice in existence. As Derrida argues, "the forgetting of originary violence produces itself...[T]he loss of conscience or of consciousness does not happen by accident, nor does the amnesia that follows. It is the very passage from presence to representation" ("Force of Law" 282). Mythical law (read: representation) becomes crystallized the moment its origin is forgotten, and it seems as if nobody but the presiding officer is truly aware of the origins of this system of punishment.

In his description of Kafka's "mythical" figures, critic Rodolphe Gasché highlights a common feature shared by the inhabitants of the penal colony, which is that they lack distinguishable borders; their contours are always in flux: "The law that rules the finished figures—finished because what they lack holds no promise—foils all effort to achieve distinction" (Gasché 975). The "condemned man" is thus initially described as a "stumpfsinniger, breitmäuliger Mensch mit verwahrlostem Haar und Gesicht..." (161). The use of the word "Maul" denotes an animal-like feature of this man, which is further corroborated when he is described as dull-witted. Throughout the text there are numerous animal-like descriptions of the condemned man, whose sum total seems to consist of animated and animal-like gestures in lieu of dialogue, leading one to the rather obvious conclusion that there is something un-human about this figure. The soldier, too, seems to be nothing but an obedient subject of the presiding officer. He has no voice of his own, no autonomy, and becomes more and more identified with the condemned man as the story progresses. In the midst of the elaboration of the old commandant's design of the apparatus, the visiting voyager interrupts the officer, asking if the old commandant was the "Soldat, Richter, Konstrukteur, Chemiker, Zeichner," to which the officer responds, "Jawohl" (166). This conflation of duties is another indication of the amorphousness of these allegedly "finished figures," and another sign that they all hail from this mythical world, where "none has...firm, inalienable outlines" ("Anniversary," 799). Finally there is the officer, a pathetic substitute for the old commandant, who serves as law maker, preserver, and executor in this colony, which we must assume has been modernized since the death of the old commandant. But in the absence of true reform lies the original power of mythic law, because under the guise of protector, the officer, perhaps serving as a representative of the modern police force, wields his power all the more.⁷

Understanding the nature of the apparatus, however, provides the most lucid insight into the mythical nature of the legal system, and as

I will later show, of the process of writing itself. This apparatus of execution was an invention of the former commandant, and it operates entirely on its own. The former commandant, however, has become nothing more than an abstraction whose presence haunts the colony because his system still rules over it. This Urvater conjured into existence an unfathomably brutal machine designed exclusively for simultaneous sentencing and executing. Benjamin writes that the law books in Kafka are “secret,” so “by basing itself on them, the prehistoric world exerts its rule all the more ruthlessly” (“Anniversary” 797). The apparatus can therefore operate by itself because its legitimacy has been established long ago, and because nobody can question its legal foundation, its power is increased tenfold. Thus we are introduced to the identification of the machine to the text: they are both accepted because their foundations remain unquestioned. The officer soon reveals that “ein Zahnrad im Zeichner [ist] zu stark abgeschliffen; es kreischt sehr, wenn es im Gang ist...” (164). This is the first sign that the machine is in the process of breaking down. Foreshadowing the events to come, this tendency toward self-destruction reveals something crucial about the processes of law and writing: the two discourses are always simultaneously producing, reproducing, and heading toward self-destruction.

The inscription on the back of the subject, where the condemned man still cannot see it, reads “Ehre deinen Vorgesetzten!” (166). This injunction to honor one’s superiors not only mocks the religious commandment to “honor thy father and mother;” more significantly, it hints at a condemnation of the entire enterprise of written law by revealing the violence of legal codification. The sentence is, after all, inscribed in the flesh of the prisoner. Accordingly, Gasché extends Benjamin’s argument about the difference between mythic and divine law to its logical and profound conclusion in contending that “the Law, as it was revealed to Moses has been compromised...one cannot but [then] wonder whether the Law itself has not been distorted, perhaps, in the very process of being revealed” (Gasché 988).⁸ This is a crucial observation because it implies that the very codification of Mosaic Law was inseparable from its bastardization, or that writing always entails a degree of removal, of blasphemous separation from a hidden truth. The fact that the sentence is written in blood testifies to what can be seen as a barbarity at the root of both law and writing, to the “rotten” core of these discourses of representation.

The purpose of this apparatus, we learn, is to underscore the guilt of the condemned, which is, according to the officer, “immer

zweifellos" (168). A more explicit declaration of the metaphysical foundation (or lack thereof) of this colony is not to be found in this text. Guilt is beyond question; the condemned man does not need to know his sentence, for he "gets to know it in the flesh" (Kafka 132). It is no surprise that one of the hallmarks of the mythical world and its triumphant victory over the social order (manifested most clearly in the modern police state) is, according to Benjamin, the presence of all-encompassing and inescapable guilt. "In the mirror which the prehistoric world held up to [Kafka] in the form of guilt, he merely saw the future emerging in the form of judgment" ("Anniversary" 807). Guilt thus accompanies not only the condemned man, which is evidenced in his sentence, but the entire presence of the colony, which is, as previously mentioned, hardly more than a colony of punishment.

If for Derrida, presence is violence, then for Kafka, presence is guilt. Gasché reminds us that the Mosaic Law was revealed as a direct response to the transgressions of the inhabitants of the "hetaeric world" and is thus bound up entirely with this guilt-ridden world; in the same way, guilt always accompanies the text because it remains a text, unable to fully break out of its limitations and thus forever bound to its mythical origin.

The presiding officer, we realize, is more concerned with describing his precious apparatus and how it elegantly carries out "justice" than he is with either its ultimate end, death, or with detailing the process through which the condemned man became condemned in the first place ("Critique" 243).⁹ The sequence of events he hesitantly describes, and which has led to the condemned man's execution, follows a rather familiar order of legal procedure, but it is only familiar because the system has been reified: a crime is committed, the criminal is apprehended and sentenced, no questions are asked. In this case, the crime is relatively minor to say the least, but that hardly matters in a world where punishment for any transgression, regardless of its magnitude, is actively sought.

At this point it is important to discuss a paradox that Derrida distills in Benjamin's understanding of the two forces of law. Mythic law is indecisive and iterable, but visible to the public in its many faces, thus providing the illusion that a decision is being made, while divine manifestation is inherently decisive and singular, but undetectable to the public eye ("Force of Law" 290). Though it seems to the officer that a due, albeit perverse, process of law is being enacted in this colony, this process ultimately rests on no higher foundation and constantly defers authority, just as the text qua text always defers its originary author.

Benjamin argues that deferral alone founds legitimacy in the sphere of mythical law, and that from this deferral, power is derived. This is the mode of operation in the penal colony which allows the officer to equate “justice” with human sacrifice. In doing so, he shamelessly reveals yet another harrowing dimension of mythic violence: it is “bloody” and does not sacrifice life for any higher purpose than its own self-preservation and self-justification (“Critique” 250). Thus the violently tautological nature of mythic law is wholly revealed.

The Bloody Text

The machine that kills consists of a series of long and short needles aligned next to one another, and while the long ones “write,”¹⁰ the short ones squirt out water to wash away and dilute the blood. It is this image of diluted blood that is of interest to me, for it implies impurity, bastardization, and lack of conviction: all characteristics Benjamin associates with parliamentary democracy, representative language, and mythic law as a whole. The officer at one point even describes these executions as “messy,” providing further evidence of the perversions inherent at the origin of the legal order. In any case, the moment of absolute distortion arises precisely when the machine runs properly, and this is highly significant if one is to connect this machine to the ontology of the text itself: is literature at its most deceptive when it reveals itself in works of the highest aesthetic quality?

The story seems to affirm the question posed above. And this affirmation is further demonstrated when the officer tells the voyager, after describing the twelve-hour process through which the condemned man suffers this unbearable torture, “Verstand geht dem Blödesten auf” (173). If there is a moment of truth in this entire text, it might be revealed in this very statement. It proves to be a truth of tragic proportions. “Kafka’s world...is a world to which myth itself has already promised redemption, in other words, deliverance from itself...this promise...is the most terrible of all mythic seductions” (Gasché 992). If myth promises redemption through the fulfillment of its legal demands, then representation offers the same promise through the fulfillment of its aesthetic demands. But what type of Verstand¹¹ is being spoken of? It is a type that only dawns on the dullest, that is, on those who are so thoroughly embedded in the system of representation that they are unable to discern the “truth” from its false promise. The condemned

man, we are told, no longer has the energy or even the mental capacity to scream after the second hour, let alone internalize the nature of this understanding. The image of a muted scream is a profound one, as it introduces the same recursive structure that underlies the cycle of mythic law I have laid out in the story. To elaborate, physical pain was at least audible during the first two hours of this process, suggesting that there was, at one point, resistance to the violent imposition of mythic law, or representation. After this initial struggle, all further resistance has been silenced. This silence has paved the way for the “amnesia” that has followed and has made it possible for one execution to continue after another.¹² Silence, as Gasché reminds us, is one of the fundamental signposts of the mythic figure, and it abounds throughout the story (Gasché 996).

The drawing that dictates the sentence to be inscribed on the back of the condemned prisoner poses another problem. This encoding is not inaccessible—the officer gladly hands it over to the voyager for a thorough perusal—but rather indecipherable. It will only be deciphered, as the officer gleefully expresses, in the wounds of the victim. But this is actually a lie, for the condemned man dies by impaling before the deciphering can take place. The law, as represented in this story, is quite accessible, just as the story is nothing but representation. It is precisely this representation that obscures the path toward the latter’s decipherability, which would lead to its kernel of truth. This is how I interpret Derrida when he writes, “un-readability thus no longer opposes itself to readability” (“Before the Law” 193). Reading the law, or reading literature has never been the problem, for the door to the law remains open for the man from the country to enter. Deciphering it is the arduous task. The voyager comments that the drawing is “sehr kunstvoll,” but admits that he simply cannot decipher it (172). This is a pivotal moment in the text, and it is toward this destination that I now turn. Whether I arrive, or, more accurately, whether the text arrives, is yet to be determined.

Falling Apart

The officer pleads his case to the voyager, asking him in earnest to defend the apparatus before the current ruling commandant, whom the officer believes the voyager will be able to convince by virtue of the voyager’s prestige. It is important to glean from this exchange that the

archaic element of the machine and the legal order it represents come fully to the fore. We have already learned that the presiding officer is the sole defender of his apparatus, and that he has expended all of his energy into its preservation. This law-preserving energy, however, is what causes the blind spot in the officer's purview. He is so consumed with the spectacle of the apparatus, and so convinced of its justice exacting method, that he is incapable of understanding that his legal order would be maintained even if the machine were to be destroyed from above. That is, even if a new social order were to be erected, its novelty would be superficial, for structurally speaking, Law would remain intact. Just as the old commandant's order was born out of lawlessness and could not have been subjected to a higher juridical authority, so would the new order emerge in a vacuum, since "it does not recognize existing law in the moment that it founds another" ("Force of Law" 274). The officer's fears are indeed the most unfounded because his amnesia prevents him from seeing the "illegitimacy" of his criticism ("Force of Law" 274). It would take an act of self-destruction to provide the impetus for a complete overhaul of the current legal order—but perhaps nothing more than a few "slight adjustments" to produce the same effect within the text.¹³

The officer admits that "die Maschine ist sehr zusammengesetzt, es muss hie und da etwas reißen oder brechen; dadurch darf man sich aber im Gesamturteil nicht beirren lassen" (174). With this concession, the officer reiterates once again that the apparatus has a tendency to undo itself. I read this admission as a performative gesture; what follows could then be seen as an un-doing of the text itself, an attempt to break down its mimetic function.

In response to the refusal on the part of the voyager to comply with the officer's plan, the officer goes silent. His silence, as mentioned before, reveals his mythical constitution. The soldier, who has been, up until this point, hardly a definable character, and the condemned man seem to have struck up a friendship, and we can assume that a reversal of sorts is beginning to take place. Realizing his immanent defeat, the officer tells the condemned man that he is free, speaking to him in his native tongue for the first time. Another first occurs when the condemned man assumes all the features of a human being, reversing the trend of attributing to him animal-like qualities, which assures him the status of a figure with clearly defined borders: "Zum erstenmal bekam das Gesicht des Verurteilten wirkliches Leben" (174). Already a series of shifts is underway in the interactions amongst the characters, which though minor, have nevertheless altered the tone of the story. We

are catching the first glimpse of the attempt to reconfigure the relational coordinates of the text.

The next key moment occurs when the officer forces the voyager to look carefully once again at the sheet with the indecipherable text. "Sei gerecht!" it says (187), or so claims the officer to the voyager, who, still unable to read it, simply takes his word for it. The irony is acerbic, as the voyager's indifferent response serves as a metonym for the coerced anesthesia that sustains the bureaucracy. What was once, and actually still is, indecipherable, is the text that fuels and directs the machine's activity. Yet what it allegedly says reveals precisely that which, according to Derrida, can never be legible. "Justice in itself, it such a thing exists, outside or beyond the law, is not deconstructible... Deconstruction is justice" ("Force of Law" 243). Justice is wholly unrepresentable because its revelation is the very task of unmasking, or deconstructing, representation, in both the legal and literary sense of the word. With the officer's pseudo-climactic declaration we are presented with the ultimate lie, or the ultimate illusion, that underlies the mythical order, and we are prepared to see it self-destruct. The process officially begins when the officer neatly inserts this sheet of paper into the apparatus.

When the condemned man and the soldier realize that the condemned man's attempt to re-clothe himself is in vain because the clothes have been slit up the back, they burst into laughter. This chilling laughter could be understood as another slight adjustment in the text that attempts to suspend the logic of literary language, to search for what Derrida calls a "language beyond language" ("Before the Law" 216). Benjamin writes: "Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning...the gestures of Kafka's figures are too powerful for our accustomed surroundings and break out into wider areas" ("Anniversary" 801). These gestures are small but significant moments of destruction, for in their resistance to symbolic interpretation, they hearken a lost or a hidden language, a language prior to its "fall" into communication. The laughter then must be seen as a form of release from bondage.

The officer undresses in haste and prepares to enter his own machine. The soldier and the condemned man are initially unaware of what is happening. All of a sudden, "der Verurteilte schien von der Ahnung irgendeines großen Umschwungs getroffen zu sein. Was ihm geschehen war, geschah nun dem Offizier" (190). This drastic reversal affects a slight shift in the pace and tone of the text, evidenced by the brevity of the sentence that follow: "Das war also Rache" (190). The condemned

man sees what is happening as pure revenge for the injustice that was to be exacted upon him. This leads one to the conclusion that, like the reader, the condemned man is not fully aware of the gravity of the event about to occur, even though he senses an *Umschwung*. He, too, is still operating within the limits of the means and ends logic of mythic law. For him, the officer is going to meet his fate for the sake of the dead who have been unjustly executed (or have come close!)—not for the sake of the living. This is what distinguishes mythical from divine violence, the latter of which is not, as Benjamin writes, retributive but rather kills for the sake of the living: it does not sacrifice “mere life” but serves a higher purpose (“Critique” 249).

The officer places himself within the machine, which adjusts itself to his figure, as if expecting him. Then a loud noise erupts, the lid of the designer lifts until it falls open completely, and “es war, als presse irgendeine große Macht den Zeichner zusammen, so daß für dieses Rad kein Platz mehr übrig blieb” (192). It is this mighty force that I want to isolate for careful analysis. The “as if” construction followed by the subjunctive form of the verb (*presse*) lends the text a degree of uncertainty that has been hitherto absent. The narrative loses some of its authority when it cannot explain why the machine is beginning to undo itself, and the text seems to admit that there is not a proper language to explain what is happening with this loss of control. Could this linguistic adjustment be the attempt to break through the language of representation and achieve a greater degree of immanence?

As the apparatus undergoes a process of violent self-destruction, the cogwheels pour out in a seemingly endless stream. There were numerous indications earlier in the story that this machine was wearing down and bound to break, and these have now come to realization. Thus, as the mythical sphere of law is literally coming apart at the seams, so the text is making a valiant attempt to undo itself and create something wholly new within the chaos of this destruction. Derrida argues that there is “a kind of self-destruction, if not a suicide of the text, that lets no other legacy appear than the violence of its signature as divine signature” (“Force of Law” 262). The voyager’s chilling epiphany follows: “Der Reisende dagegen war sehr beunruhigt; die Maschine ging offenbar in Trümmer; ihr ruhiger Gang war eine Täuschung...” (292). Before his eyes the veil is lifted from the law, and from the text. What is revealed at this moment is nothing other than the violence that underlies the two spheres of representation.

The irruption continues. The voyager notices that now the harrow is not writing, but has turned into stabbing, a highly symbolic gesture I wish to

interpret as a quasi-apocalyptic moment of conversion. There is a two-fold function of this stabbing. Firstly, it is an extreme variant of writing which reveals the essence of writing. Secondly, it is an attempt to break out of this medium and reach a field of immanence, which is otherwise unavailable to the act of writing because of its binding relationship to representation. If writing (of both text and law) is still within the sphere of mythical violence, then perhaps stabbing destroys this structure and ushers in the aforementioned "divine signature." If writing can only bastardize the law, as demonstrated by Gasché, then perhaps stabbing can destroy the law, which has hitherto been distorted and dislocated, *entstellt*.¹⁴

"Das war ja keine Folter, wie sie der Offizier erreichen wollte, das war unmittelbarer Mord" (192). Slow torture has been replaced by immediate annihilation, just as the revolutionary encounter, according to Benjamin, promises "pure immediate violence" ("Critique" 252). "Das Blut floß in hundert Strömen, nicht mit Wasser vermischt, auch die Wasseröhrchen hatten diesmal versagt" (193). The blood that was once diluted with water has now been purified and spurts out in a grotesquely animated manner. Though perhaps taking Benjamin too literally, I would like to equate this act of pure blood with his notion of a "bloodless" annihilation. Their equivalence, I believe, lies in their proximity to the pure, the absolute, and the immediate. The two lie on opposite ends of the spectrum, but what unites them is that they are both extremes. The previously mixed-blood, which the machine, properly functioning, attempted to wash away, thus destroying the evidence of its impurity, is a bastardized blood, a metaphor for the apparatus from which it emerged. The blood from the officer, conversely, is the result of pure, immediate murder. This pure blood, flowing in all directions, attempts to bleed through the text, destroying it and leaving nothing in its wake. This act can be understood as an instantaneous moment of that "experience of what we are unable to experience" ("Force of Law" 244). As Derrida will reiterate, deconstruction, or destruction, "is in some way the operation or rather the very experience that this text...first does itself, by itself, on itself" ("Force of Law" 264). Could this be what is happening toward the end of the story?

Conclusion

Es gibt zwei menschliche Hauptsünden, aus welchen sich alle andern ableiten: Ungeduld und Lässigkeit. Wegen der Ungeduld sind sie aus dem Paradiese vertrieben worden, wegen der Lässigkeit kehren sie nicht zurück. Vielleicht aber gibt es nur eine Hauptsünde: die Ungeduld. Wegen der Ungeduld sind sie vertrieben worden, wegen der Ungeduld kehren sie nicht zurück. (Kafka, "Aphorismen" 228)

The lacerations on the back of the condemned man are the result of his attempt to release himself from the machine all too early; they are the result of his impatience. Perhaps this brief moment reveals in one sentence why Kafka's parable—and I will soon discuss and insist on the parabolic element of this text—is ultimately a failure, as Kafka was often fond of considering himself. It could be nothing else.

As the officer's corpse is impaled on the iron spike and his eyes remain wide open, the voyager detects "kein Zeichen der versprochenen Erlösung" (193). But redemption would no more have been found had the machine maintained its proper function as it could be found once it self-destructed. If the story had ended at the moment the officer was murdered, perhaps the result would have been different. But the story continues, albeit after a break in the text, as it is forced to obey the mythical but nevertheless potent demands of narrative fiction: the text continues to produce and reproduce; it creates and preserves law, and it will once again approach suicide. The condemned man is still referred to as a condemned man, well after his release and up until the last line of the text. He remains on the penal colony, as does the soldier and all of the previous inhabitants, and the colony shows no sign of an imminent implosion. The headstone on the grave of the old commandant provides a tragically farcical twist to the ending. It dictates that the "old man" will rise again after a certain number of years to re-conquer the colony, and it warns: "Glaubet und wartet!" (195). Though laughable, this promise does seem to suggest that even if the old commandant never rises, the old order will re-establish itself as the colony founds a new law, which will not be altogether different from the last. The story ends, but language in its communicative and thus, according to Benjamin, degenerative form, persists.

[Kafka] did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into teachings, to turn it into a parable and restore to it that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him the only appropriate thing for it. No other writer has obeyed the commandment "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image" so faithfully. ("Anniversary" 808)

Thus if there is a theological dimension at work in this text, it must remain un-interpretable since interpretation, as here adumbrated, would undermine the very concept of a theological dimension. But that is precisely why the attempt to create such a dimension is always already a failure: to write is to distort, to interpret is to further distort, and to undo this distortion is potentially impossible. This would also explain why Derrida is averse to the concept of an *Ursprache* or to the notion of a "fallen language," and why he ultimately rejects Benjamin's provocative critique of violence, albeit after engaging it thoroughly. Even in his rejection of the text, he is bestowing on it a certain dignity, for he seems to understand the logic of Benjamin's argument. Theology and deconstruction seem to then be dialectically related, the one recognizing the other through its negation of the other.

Adorno writes, "The Old Testament prohibition on images has an aesthetic as well as theological dimension. That one should make no image, which means no image of anything whatsoever, expresses at the same time that it is impossible to make such an image" (67). If there is something to be gleaned from this story, perhaps that is it. It relates to Benjamin's interpretation of Kafka's stories as haggadic parables in the sense that they struggle with and elaborate on the teachings of a doctrine. But this doctrine is nowhere to be found, there is only "here and there...an allusion to it" ("Anniversary" 803). All we see are things as they exist "in oblivion" ("Anniversary" 811), but this offers us at least a glimpse into that immanence for which "In der Strafkolonie" strives. This is perhaps what Žižek means when he writes that "God has gotten too close."

If there is an intervention I would like to make in contemporary Kafka criticism, it would be that of reconciling the more secular, anti-interpretative readings of Kafka with my understanding of the theology that attempts to pierce through the text. Resistance to "interpretation," as Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari would have it, is not devoid of its own ideology. "The Penal Colony [sic] in which the secure aesthetic distance to the object is shockingly undermined," argues Adorno, forces

one to acknowledge “how awkwardly inapplicable to it any talk of art is” (339). But if it is not a work of art, then what is it? This is the question that lies hidden in the subtext of Adorno’s observation, which describes in another way the immanence that is achieved in this “sensuously unrepresentable” tale. Adorno will further argue, in reference to Kafka, that “Kant’s doctrine of the feeling of the sublime all the more describes an art that shudders inward by suspending itself in the name of an illusion-less truth content, though without, as art, divesting itself of its semblance character” (196). If everything in the text is illusion except this indecipherable truth content, one is led to the conclusion that the only roadblock preventing the language in this story from tearing itself asunder when the machine destroys itself is the demand to form semblance, which always obscures the truth content from visibility. To what, however, could this truth content pertain?

Perhaps my reading, like Benjamin’s essay in the eyes of Derrida, is too theologically inflected, and, in the end, unproductive. Derrida might conclude that there is actually a small, though successful, moment of self-destruction in the text that amounts to a minor victory, even if it is still infinitely removed from any formulation of an originary moment. Or perhaps there is a wisdom that Kafka’s parable teaches; it is just not for us, or at least not now, and simply requires a bit more patience.

Notes

¹ For more on Scholem’s reading of Kafka, see Moses and Wiskind-Elper.

² A contemporary example: tabloid journalism could be said to reveal the essence of journalism much more so than *The New Yorker*.

³ Benjamin might scoff at what today is referred to as “representative democracy.”

⁴ Hereafter referred to as “Anniversary.”

⁵ I owe this point to my colleague David Low.

⁶ Hereafter, the page number of the German edition listed in the works cited will be provided where it is obvious that Kafka’s “In der Strafkolonie” is being discussed.

⁷ Benjamin essentially identifies the evil underlying the modern police force as the power to conflate all legal duties under the deceptive guise of protecting the “law.” See “Critique of Violence” 243.

⁸ Gasché’s essay deals exclusively with the “cloudy spot” of law in Kafka’s work as seen through Benjamin, but I am interested in drawing out the larger implications of his argument.

⁹ Benjamin writes, “All violence as a means is either law-making or law-preserving,” and though Derrida undermines this distinction, the two essentially agree on the function of means. See Benjamin, “Critique,” 243.

- ¹⁰ Stanley Corngold also makes the connection between the function of the apparatus and the self-reflexive process of writing in "In der Strafkolonie," which he believes is essentially a commentary on the writing of *Der Prozeß*. "Kafka aims to rewrite writing in inverse order, so that writing might constitute the promise of a redemption." In this allusion to the un-doing of writing as a means to bring about redemption, he points in the direction of my argument. See Corngold 244.
- ¹¹ The English translation renders *Verstand* as "Enlightenment," which might even come closer to the "meaning" of this utterance. See Kafka, "In the Penal Colony." *The Transformation and Other Stories*. Trans. Malcolm Pasley. Penguin Books: London, 1992, 137.
- ¹² Benjamin discusses how anger offers a glimpse into the realm of divine violence, as this powerful emotion affects a brief suspension of the social order in that it does not partake in the exchange relationship of means to ends. It is pure feeling, like the scream that the condemned man belts out until he can no longer make a sound. See "Critique of Violence," 248.
- ¹³ I am referring again to Benjamin's citation of the parable of the hunchback, who will disappear with the coming of the Messiah. See "Anniversary," 811.
- ¹⁴ Gasché borrows this term from Benjamin as a way to further his own argument about the displacements or dislocations that lie at the core of written law.
-

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Critique of Violence." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913-1926. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge and London, 2004.
- . "On the Tenth Anniversary of Kafka's Death." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, part 2, 1931-1934. Trans. Harry Zohn. Eds. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge and London: 2005.
- . *Origin of the German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. Verso: London, 1998.
- Corngold, Stanley. *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1988.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1986.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Before the Law." *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. Routledge: New York and London, 1991.
- . "Force of Law." *Acts of Religion*. Trans. Boris Belay. Ed. Gil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 1992.
- Gasché, Rodolphe. "Kafka's Law: In the Field of Forces Between Judaism and Hellenism." *MLN* 117 (2002): 971-1002.
- Kafka, Franz. "Aphorismen." *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 2004.
- . "In der Strafkolonie." *Ein Landarzt*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 2004.
- . "In the Penal Colony." *The Transformation and Other Stories*. Trans. Malcolm Pasley. Penguin Books: London, 1992.
-

-
- Lukács, Georg. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Trans. John and Necke Mander. Redwood Press Ltd: London, 1969.
- Moses, Stéphane and Wiskind-Elper, Ora. "Gershom Scholem's Reading of Kafka: Literary Criticism and Kabbalah." *NGC* 77 (1999): 149-167.
- Scholem, Gershom and Walter Benjamin. *Walter Benjamin Gershom Scholem Briefwechsel: 1933-1940*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1980.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry*. MIT Press: Boston, 1992.
-