

# Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

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Issue 45

Spring 2024

Editors: Keerthi Vasishta and Francesca Adams

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## *Subjugated Pain, Mortality and Romanticised Spectatorship in Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony'*

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# Subjugated Pain, Mortality and Romanticised Spectatorship in Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony'

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The undertow of change emerges as a potent force that percolates through the works of modernists, such as Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Franz Kafka. The notion of transformation, however, is often not merely deployed as a thematic trope exploring the existential search for meaning in the teeth of the sheer absurdity and austerity of life in these works. Rather, as writers wrestled with the vicissitudes and disorienting effects of modern life, their creative endeavours became both a reflective mirror of the turbulent times in which they lived and a metalinguistic token of a poetics of 'nonreferentiality', marking the movement's decisive break from its contemporaneous counterparts, Realism and Symbolism.<sup>1</sup> For one thing, thematic and interpretive elusiveness, which often characterises the works of this epoch, is embedded within the convention of expressing 'epistemological doubt' between textual representation and empirical reality or truth.<sup>2</sup> To put things into perspective, we extend upon James Rolleston's definition of modernist subjectivity in calibrating the modernist individual as spawning from 'an atrophy of the bourgeois subject'.<sup>3</sup> Propelled by the turbulent forces of 'religious fundamentalism', disintegration of the bourgeois norms and the totalizing material and technological progresses, the modernist period ironically guaranteed the impossibility of 'psychological stabilization', and hence – the inaccessibility of a secure and

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<sup>1</sup> Walter H. Sokel, 'Kafka and Modernism', in *Franz Kafka, New Edition (Bloom's Modern Critical Views)*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), pp. 37–51 (p. 42).

<sup>2</sup> Douwe W. Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> David Bathrick and Andreas Huyssen, 'Modernism and the Experience of Modernity', in *Modernism and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism*, ed. by Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 1–16 (p. 6).

solid ‘individual identity’.<sup>4</sup> The modernist subject, now defined in terms of its primal fragmentation, is caught in a limbo of chaotic restructuring, where interpretation becomes the primary mode in which one ‘reconstruct[s] the processes of consciousness’.<sup>5</sup> In ‘The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man’, Jung argues that the psyche has an innate propensity to ‘fit into a recognised form or system of belief’ for its ‘undisturbed functioning’. Since the disillusionment of religion in the age of the machine debunks the psyche’s strenuous effort to stabilise itself through religious conviction, it in turns leaves a sense of spiritual emptiness in the man.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that the problem which Jung has articulated can be reified on various levels in the age of modernity. The haunting figure of the modern society, the flâneur – a peripatetic city dweller, whose subjective identity is ‘indistinguishable from the prehistoric consciousness’ – is an emblem of the spiritually lost generation.<sup>7</sup> Rolleston’s valorisation of modernist subjectivity, dovetailing squarely with the problems encapsulated by the Jungian modern psyche, provides a tenable vantage point from which we may begin to understand the self-abjection of the subject under the regimentation of new techniques or designating forms of power as a quotidian experience of modernity. This is a recurring theme in Kafka’s novellas, inclusive of his ‘In the Penal Colony’.

As Jung points out, the lack of spiritual sustenance on a mass scale reduces citizens to a ‘herd’, whose hankering for self-empowerment prompts them to pledge allegiance to political authority, organisations, or even totalitarian regimes and to support their self-expanding stratagems. In either case, the destabilised consciousness and identity of the self seeps through the literary works of the period through the gory depictions of bodily degeneration and

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<sup>4</sup> James Rolleston, ‘Introduction: Kafka Begins’, in *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka*, ed. by James Rolleston (New York: Camden House, 2002), pp. 1–19 (p. 14).

<sup>5</sup> Rolleston, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Jung, ‘The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man’, in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 10, ed. by Gerhard Adler and R. F.C. Hull (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 74–94 (p. 79).

<sup>7</sup> Rolleston, p. 14.

mortality – the deranged, physically decaying consul in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, the bodiless, spiritually sterile herd in T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men', and the disoriented and animalistic gestures of Robin Vote at the close of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, to name but a few. These violent bodily changes, whether self-induced or externally enforced, are simultaneously symptomatic of the general moral 'sickness' of the age, central to which is the fanatic subscription to notions such as progress, stability, and rational endeavour. It is our contention that the body of such modernist subject, maimed, subjugated and then withered away, is represented as not a telos but a means of diagnosing the characters' symptoms in the narrative – their self-assumed, inextricable existential 'sin' in a Sartrean sense, the provenance of which divulges the spiritually lost, peremptorily rational and jejune world in the age of modernity.<sup>8</sup>

Often in the case of modernist literature, the human experience of physical pain and violence only rendered the fragmented self 'vulnerable' as these continuous 'impressions' on the body, in accord with Rolleston's summation of the modernist problem, demanded an ongoing process of interpretation which was ever wanting the harmony of 'coherent narratives'.<sup>9</sup> Pivotal in this process of codifying the body as a legible sign to the subject is the

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<sup>8</sup> By existential 'sin' in a Sartrean sense, we allude to the claim famously made by Sartre in his lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, that 'man is condemned to be free' (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 29). Perceptively reinterpreting Sartre's idea, David R. Cerbone states that one is in the grip of bad faith when he tends to 'assert any identity claims with finality' or to 'overemphasise one rather the other of our constitutive dimensions' because human existence is essentially a composite of 'instability' and 'paradoxicality' (David R. Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 92–93). Exactly because of this inherent instability of our existence, any attempt at prescribing an existential sense of certainty and fixation on a particular constitutive dimension of one's life becomes an external incentive that is enslaving the self and acquiesces in man's lack of 'cognitive autonomy' (Cerbone, pp. 4). Johannes Pfeiffer pertinently defines this intricate sentiment as one being subliminally conscious of and feeling condemnable for the 'original guilt of this involvement in existence' (Johannes Pfeiffer, 'The Metamorphosis', in *Kafka: A Collections of Critical Essays*, ed. by Ronald Gray (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 1–11 (p. 57)).

<sup>9</sup> Carolin Duttlinger. 'Psychology and Psychoanalysis', in *Kafka in Context*, ed. by Carolin Duttlinger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 216–244 (p. 220).

underlying impulse, to borrow Douwe Fokkema's hypothesis, that there was an epochal current of epistemological doubt in relation to the possibility of representing reality, and the credulous equivalence between the notion of reality and the notion of meaning.<sup>10</sup> Franz Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony', *inter alia*, features one of such literary ventures to destabilise the bland mode of living in the age of modernity and its diminution of human life into a vapid and insensate existence as merely a gear of the giant cogwheel called modernity. It is under this premise we argue that in 'In the Penal Colony', Kafka critiques the rationalised discourse of progress and civilization through the theatricalization of bodily pain and the violent modulation of the body. That is to say, Kafka posits the fatally metamorphosed body as an allegory not only for modern men's internalised psychological disturbance – as an existential signature of modernity, but, all the more, as a cautionary metalepsis dealing with the systemic denial of basic humanity. Our reading is indebted to the allegorical tradition of interpreting Kafka's stories, whose origin goes back to the 1930s according to Klaus Wagenbach; we hope to bring a better understanding of the affective valences of the biopolitical unconscious depicted in the world of Kafkaesque bureaucracy by looking specifically at the motif of physical spectatorship in the story of 'In the Penal Colony', a notion that is rarely touched upon in Kafka studies whenever his corporeal poetics is concerned.<sup>11</sup> In turn, we suggest that the story subtly issues a clarion call for a sea-change in contemporaneous sentiments towards a mindless acceptance of humanity-denying and anonymous authority. Ultimately, Kafka's scepticism towards his literary power in re-articulating the humdrum and depravedness of his age was both a distrustful response to and a product of the specific hallmark of epistemological doubt within the larger movement of Modernism.

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<sup>10</sup> Fokkema, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Klaus Wagenbach, *Kafka: A Life in Prague*, trans. by Ewald Osers with Peter Lewis (Haus Publishing, 2011), p.8.

*Concatenation of Social, Political and Personal Contexts*

Written in 1914, 'In the Penal Colony' was a literary lunacy created out of chaos, for it was a year when Kafka's life was beset by personal crises and the western civilization was dragged into a muddy morass of anomie. 'In the Penal Colony' appropriates the descriptions of physical mortality and its concomitant pain as an attempt to allegorise the collapse of western civilization through unfurling the repercussions of the attempt to subjugate the body under the force of institutionalization on a grand scale. The figure '1914' might have already dawned on many readers that one possible interpretation of 'In the Penal Colony' is to read the narrative as alluding to a major event that interrupted the course of European history and culture – the First World War. By October 1914, the carnage in the Balkan region of Southeast Europe had exacerbated and it soon developed into a world war with an unprecedented scale after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As Roy Pascal helpfully points out, the war broke out just a few weeks before the short story was actually conceived, coalescing the inception of Kafka's narrative with the hellish chronology of the world's narrative.<sup>12</sup> It is not hard to imagine that the war changed the order of the world and the general 'mental climate' of literati at that time, including Kafka and other German intellectuals. During this first experience of a great modern world war, huge advances in military technology were made; and yet, a large scale of people were being decimated, and homes were left in ruins due to excessive bombing. The social order of many European states toppled and experienced a retrogression, returning to the order of an ancient regime – an order echoing through the proleptic resurrection of the old commandant in the text as the revival of the tyrannical and outdated order.<sup>13</sup> The unparalleled level of bloodshed and violence

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<sup>12</sup> Roy Pascal, *Kafka's Narrators: A Study of His Stories and Sketches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

engendered by the war could have aligned Kafka and his contemporary readers' imagination with a great war-machine which killed and destroyed mercilessly in the name of civilization. The author's own repugnance towards the war is reflected in his diaries written during its outbreak, which testify, for instance, his 'malignant look' at the 'parades' that 'are one of the most disgusting accompaniments of the war'<sup>14</sup> and the 'hatred against those who are fighting and to whom I passionately wish everything evil'.<sup>15</sup>

What the retrogression of civilization in 'In the Penal Colony' is just as likely to be nodding to, on the other hand, is how the contemporary development in technology and machines played a huge role in revolutionizing the social milieu and structure of a modern society. Consequently, the human perception of reality was drastically altered due to the radically transformed bodily-anchored experience. This historical background applies to Kafka's Prague too, for it was 'rapidly modernizing into a provincial metropolis' before the world wars, with 'technological [...] upheavals of great magnitude' in progress, as Reiner Stach notes.<sup>16</sup> Working as a fulltime officer at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute in Prague, Kafka was able to observe, according to Galili Shahar, the 'tremendous implications of technology for society' through his first-hand investigative experiences: how human relationships – the bedrock determining social dynamics, and people's manner of living and their mode of subsistence are 'reinvented in the spheres [...] where] the machine exerted its influence'.<sup>17</sup> The emergence of mechanical miracles, such as trains, steamships, telegrams, ushered in a transformative era for men in linguistic and cognitive terms, while simultaneously

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<sup>14</sup> Ignasi Ribó, "At the farthest pole from man": Kafka's Posthuman Outlook on the War', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 44.1 (2020), 20–35 (p. 26).

<sup>15</sup> Klaus Wagenbach, *Kafka: A Life in Prague*, trans. by Ewald Osers with Peter Lewis (Haus Publishing, 2011), p.54.

<sup>16</sup> Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Early Years*, trans. by Shelley Frisch (Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 16, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Galili Shahar, 'Franz Kafka (1883–1924): Wiring in Motion', in *Makers of Jewish Modernity: Thinkers, Artists, Leaders, and the World They Made*, ed. by Jacques Picard and others (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 233–248 (p 244).

unfurling a dawning world fraught with mishaps, dangers and traumatic encounters. To fulfil his job duties of having insurance lists assorted and preparing industrial accident reports, Kafka was requested to visit different factories and acquaint himself with the vagaries on the factory ground by meeting with industrialists and workers there.<sup>18</sup> He would have seen workers badly injured or even mutilated in severe industrial accidents, and natural landscapes turning into a ‘wasteland’ due to the disposal of waste and the presence of road tracks. Amidst the ‘dangers, accidents and traumatic neuroses’ brought by the advancement in technology, Kafka also confronted, as Shahar comments, the ‘arbitrary’, ‘inaccessible’ insurance laws of Bohemia, which turned the actual use of machines into ‘the medium of pure, unjustifiable, and incomprehensible violence’.<sup>19</sup> Further examination of Kafka’s time as an officer at the Insurance Institute, which he referred to as a ‘dark nest of bureaucrats’, sheds light on the writer’s potential criticism towards the establishment as a symbol of an inhumane and exploitative industrial system. According to Wagenbach, Kafka was assigned to investigate cases of accidents caused by machines as a member of the Institute and examine whether the concerned employers in Northern Bohemia provided truthful information of the risks involved in operating machines.<sup>20</sup> This experience, in turn, exposed Kafka to the harsh conditions under which workers spent excessive work hours in their companies just to earn a living, but without any chance of improvement despite the Insurance Institute’s attempted intervention. We believe that this experience might have sparked his imaginative depiction of the Brobdingnagian machine in the short story as a monstrous, ‘man-eating’ system that unjustly consumes human lives, whether it be industrial or bureaucratic in nature, with incomprehensible and arbitrary judgments.

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<sup>18</sup> Shahar, p 245.

<sup>19</sup> Shahar, p. 247.

<sup>20</sup> Wagenbach, pp. 39, 75



*The 'Docile' Body and the Discourse of Civilisation and Progress*

Through depicting the immensely depersonalised pain and the performative aspect of human mortality, channelled through masochistic bodily suffering, in 'In the Penal Colony', Kafka offers a proleptic vision into the radical transformation of human physicality into the 'docile', institutionalised social body, to use Foucault's parlance, under the pressing civilizing force and governmental management of human existence that took place in his contemporary reality.<sup>21</sup> To put it simply, it is very difficult for one to decipher the contextual significance of pain and mortality in the story without delving into the allusion of archaic violence – a nostalgic rite of punitive torture that is predicated upon, in this particular story, an egregious *torture machine* that performs a kind of *scriptural justice*, alleged to enlighten the criminal through the bloody wounds produced by the inscriptions of his sentence on the body. Designed and activated by the old commandant, whose work is in ironic contradiction to, for example, the fifth Old Commandment,<sup>22</sup> the torture machine is claimed to be a 'remarkable apparatus' that conceivably embodies and sustains the old commandant's ethos of 'military code' as opposed to the new commandant's 'new attitude of liberal humanitarianism'.<sup>23</sup> The whole structure of the machine mainly comprises three parts: The Bed, the Marker, and the Harrow. During the torturing process, the prisoner is placed on the Bed with his face down, while the Marker and the Harrow synchronise to get the sentence inscribed on the convict's body by stabbing needles into the flesh, engraving the words deeper on the physique for the whole of twelve hours.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the officer's almost encyclopaedic explanation of the *apparat's* functioning principles, the machine's infallible and meticulously devised operational process is repeatedly

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Leob, 'Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" as a Reflection of Classical and Romantic Religious Views', in *Franz Kafka (1883-1983): His Craft and Thought*, ed. by Roman Struc and J. C. Yardley (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), pp. 89–100 (p. 94).

<sup>23</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. by Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 78; Anthony Thorlby, *Kafka: A Study* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1972), p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, pp. 78, 83.

stressed as he, in an utterly zealous manner, brags about the machine being ‘a life’s work’ and about the ‘exactly calculated’ and ‘coordinated’ movements of the Bed and Harrow.<sup>25</sup> It is also worth noting the officer’s language of analogy for justification of the existence of the death-apparatus as a normality: ‘You will have seen similar apparatus in private clinics’.<sup>26</sup>

While famous writers like Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin and Milan Kundera commented upon the profound significance of ‘In the Penal Colony’, critics have speculated about the possible real-life referents of this pernicious instrument, which is assiduously fleshed out in the whole story, in Kafka’s times.<sup>27</sup> Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner make an audacious claim that Kafka’s gruesome *apparat* is a parodic, if not deliberately demeaning, rendition of the tabulating machine invented by Herman Hollerith, the well-known American statistician and computer pioneer in the late nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Corngold and Wagner, in their elaborate analysis, argue how the bodily-decimating machine in ‘In the Penal Colony’ resembles the punch card machine which aimed at launching into ‘a dramatic acceleration of data processing’ in the domains of ‘national and social statistics’ in terms of the structural

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>27</sup> Many critics have attempted to thoroughly decode the meaning of Kafka’s story by offering suggestions and interpretations regarding the reference of the machine in reality. Clément Labi reads the machine as a fictional element of the Jewish ritual of laying ‘tefillin’ – affixing phylacteries containing commandments to one’s head and arm every morning (Clément Labi, ‘Let those commandments be burned unto your heart: Kafka’s in the penal colony and legal transmission’, *Int J Semiot Law*, 35 (2022), 675-685 (p. 675)). Juxtaposing the story alongside Kafka’s diary entries where he implicitly comments on the Great War of his time, Ignasi Ribó interprets Kafka’s machine not as the machinery of power, or directly as the First World War for that matter, but as the mechanism of cultural transmission, the ‘apparatus that allows humans to form a society’ – a neutral cast subject to the modification of human desires and responsibilities (or the lack thereof) (Ribó, p. 33). Benno Wagner comments that the deathly apparatus evokes several possible real-life referents, including the wood-planning machines which had caused mutilating accidents during Kafka’s time at the Insurance Institute, the electrotherapeutic devices used for the treatment of nervous disorders in his time, the typewriter used by his friend. But Wager later affirms that the electric counting machine devised by Herman Hollerith in the late 19th century as the ‘most striking and disquieting textual reference for the penal machinery’ in the story (Benno Wagner, ‘Connecting Cultures: Heinrich Rauchberg, Franz Kafka, and the Hollerith Machine’, *Austriaca*, 60 (2005), 53–68 (pp. 53–54)).

<sup>28</sup> Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner, *Franz Kafka: The Ghosts in the Machine* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. 83.

design and the theoretical arrangements concerning ‘bodies, signs and affective intensities’.<sup>29</sup> Despite the seemingly very disparate purposes of the two inventions, the most striking similarity, we suggest, between Kafka’s awe-inspiring fictional apparatus and Hollerith’s revolutionary electromechanical machine lies in the way they drastically recast the body of the individual – in the sense that one’s mode of existence is transformed irrevocably. In Corngold and Wagner’s words, during the procedure of the operation of the machine, the individual’s body is ‘absorbed by the administration of the welfare state’ and transmogrified into ‘an element of the statistic body of society’ in the latter case.<sup>30</sup> Chris Shilling astutely draws on Bryan Turner’s discussion of the ‘problem of order’ in modern societies, where concerns for the ‘reproduction and regulation of populations through time and space’ and the ‘representation of bodies’ began to come to the fore.<sup>31</sup> It follows that during this process of social organization, forms of governmental management of the body, concurring with the breakneck development of daily technology and the dawn of, in Foucault’s term, biopolitics, gradually turned the ‘human physicality into an object ordered by society’ through different institutions such as schools, armies, hospitals among others.<sup>32</sup> While the relevance between Kafka’s *apparat* and the ground-breaking Hollerith machine is evident, we would argue that Kafka’s machine is a literary invention that should not be parochially associated with one single referent in real life. Instead, it should be appreciated for its rich ambiguity, by which it stands as a versatile metaphor for any life-negating forms of technological or necropolitical management of human life in Kafka’s time.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> Corngold and Wagner, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Chris Shilling, ‘Embodiment, Emotions, and the Foundations of Social Order: Durkheim’s Enduring Contribution’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*, ed. by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 211–238 (p. 211).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 212

Another possible interpretation is, as we have hinted above, a necropolitical one that entrenches itself on the prefatory basis that the relationship between the tenor to be represented and the vehicle-metaphor of the torture machine is a metonymic one (denoting a part-whole relationship) rather than a metalepsical one (denoting a transumptional relationship). This way, we believe that torture machine and the penal practice itself might be symbolic of the general system of laws and codes in any regime which is ostensibly civilising or edifying; yet, the sadistic nature and unintelligibility of the law, and the officer's ideational gusto to the old commandant's belief system transpire that the governance is essentially a form of autarchy which, though posed in an intellectual cast, seeks to demonstrate its absolute power and respectability. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault incisively comments that as a penal practice, torture is inextricably rooted in the 'mechanics of power', for it is not only a public 'ritual' for 'the marking of victims' but also 'the expression of the power that punishes'.<sup>33</sup> A Foucauldian reading of the performative nature of bodily violence and disciplinary mechanisms at play within Kafka's penal colony allows us to examine the ways in which power is exercised through the body as a political site, and more crucially, the interrelationship between the spectated body in pain and an internalised control over individuals.

*'Punitive' Pain and the Depersonalisation of Bodily Suffering*

What underlies these two predominant exegeses of the torture apparatus is that, we suggest, in both cases the prisoner is transmuted into an object of oppression, thereby turning the victim's personal suffering of corporeal pain and eventual death into an extracted and 'depersonalised' sign that validates the autarchic power of the authoritative force that enforces the disciplinary practice. The symbolic objectification of the felon is sufficiently implicated in 'In the Penal Colony' as the condemned man is, in the course of the penal procedure, rendered both

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<sup>33</sup> Foucault, pp. 34–35.

physically stalled and verbally silenced. In the very beginning of the story, we are immediately presented with a telling portrayal of the condemned man, apart from the factual description of him being chained in the ankles and wrists: '[He] looked so submissive and dog-like that it seemed as if one could let him run free on the hillsides, and would only have to whistle at the start of the execution for him to come'.<sup>34</sup> Whereas H. Politzer argues that 'Kafka [...] minimizes the importance of physical suffering',<sup>35</sup> we see it more as a transmutation of the physical torture for the benefit of amplifying the disastrous psychological impact. What stands out in the above quotation with regard to that condemned character is, perhaps, not the means of physical incarceration to which he is subject, but the mental imprisonment to which he has subjugated himself, such that he is 'submissive' and 'dog-like'. The condemned man demonstrates his willing capitulation to the punitive procedure, the cause of which is later revealed to be completely opaque to him, accentuating his unsettling acquiescence and further confirms his lack of agency in the event. He is also, by the zoomorphic depiction deployed by the narrator, as in the use of such words as 'dog-like' and 'whistle' (though very plausibly mediated by the traveller's thought), literally dehumanised. As if to foreground the sense of objectification of the condemned man, Kafka inserts another layer of obfuscation in character representation and transference with a language barrier, for the prisoner does not understand French – the 'imperialistic' language used by and perfectly comprehensible to the officer and the traveller. To the traveller's surprise, or perhaps also to the readers' astonishment, the prisoner, as if in a state of *tabula rasa*, mimics every single act and gesture of those in authority in the situation. During the officer's initial narrative elucidation of the machine's operational mechanism, the target of which is obviously the investigative traveller, the prisoner 'ke[eps] turning his gaze wherever the officer happen[s] to be pointing' with 'somnolent persistence', which reflects his

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<sup>34</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> H. Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), p.100.

docile submissiveness.<sup>36</sup> Later when the officer explained, in a proudly verbose and obsequious manner, the miraculous workings of the Harrow's fine needles to the traveller, the condemned man too followed his inquisitive gesture to scrutinise the movements of the machine, but 'without understanding'.<sup>37</sup> His mimetic behaviour renders him an ill-witted pantomime actor in the scene. Yet juxtaposed with his arguable lack of apperception and understanding of the situation, his imitations emanate a sense of disturbing innocence which underscores the absence of differentiative attributes and psychological depth of this character. Even when he is laid in the machine, supposedly under the spotlight, his bodily suffering is essentially mute and void of any personal significance as he is deprived of the opportunity to create even his own language of pain – his screams – an individual's unique expression of agonies, as his voice is muffled by the gag until he 'no longer has any strength to scream'.<sup>38</sup> In line with our concern for the abstractification of affects in this story, Richard T. Gray convincingly argues that the nameless prisoner in the story is not so much a dynamic human agent; instead, he is a character transmuted into a 'transparent communicative mediator' demonstrative of the impact of the torture machine.<sup>39</sup> A moronic and puppet-like existence on the field of capital punishment, the felon is simply part of the tableaux, a substitutable element in the scenario, for we can see how his role is soon replaced by the officer later in the story.

As a result of the conjoined effect of the contextual significance of the story and the paradigmatic relations between the prisoner and the machine, bodily pain, the most concrete form of human experience considering its physical nature – supposedly very intimate to a person due to its innate 'untransferability', is now extracted from the captive, the very ground

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<sup>36</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 84.

<sup>38</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 83.

<sup>39</sup> Richard T. Gray, 'Disjunctive Signs: Semiotics, Aesthetics, and Failed Mediation in "In der Strafkolonie"', in *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka*, ed. by James Rolleston (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), p. 231.

spawning these sensual feelings and the centre of these physiological-psychological responses.<sup>40</sup> The consequence is that pain is transmuted into a depersonalised, abstract and mechanical experience, quantifiable by the correlative relationship between the severity of one's sin and the gradation of violence exerted by the punitive force according to the presumed system of adjudication, be it just or not. This subjugation of pain experience in the service of the pure demonstration of an ideational power is particularly evident in 'In the Penal Colony', for the convict will only 'feel [the sentence] in his own flesh' without any knowledge of what he is guilty of prior to the procedure.<sup>41</sup> When Foucault traces the development of judicial torture to ascertain the fundamental principles and complex social function of such a penitential practice in *Discipline and Punish*, he states that in a public execution, the victim must be subject to the 'culmination of a calculated gradation of pain', under which the 'quality, intensity, duration of pain' are all closely regulated in order to produce 'the most exquisite agonies' for the 'ceremonial of justice being expressed in its force' under the witness and spectatorship of the mass.<sup>42</sup> The interpenetrating relationship between the calculatedness of corporal pain in a penal practice and the ceremonious nature of the procedure in his analysis is germane to our understanding of the complex social function of penal torture: coupled with the element of gradated pain, public punitive practice, as Foucault proposes, should not be solely valorised as 'consequences of legislation' but as a 'political tactic' – a way of 'exercising power' through the contagion of fear.<sup>43</sup> While the biopolitical readings of Kafka's writings abound in current

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<sup>40</sup> By claiming that the relationship between the machine and the prisoner is a paradigmatic one, what we mean is that the prisoner can only acquire his identity through his status as an object submitted to the destructive power of the machine. He is essentially void of any sense of intrinsic identity in this story.

<sup>41</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 81.

<sup>42</sup> Foucault, pp. 33–35 ; George Ollyffe, *An Essay humbly offered for an Act of Parliament to prevent Capital Crimes, and The Lots of many Lives; and to Promote a desirable Improvement and Blessing in the Nation* (London: printed for J. Downing in Bartholomew-Close, near West-Smithfield, 1731), p. 8, in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* < <https://www.gale.com/intl/primary-sources/eighteenth-century-collections-online> > [accessed 26 March 2020].

<sup>43</sup> Foucault, p. 23.

scholarship, critics rarely look into the depersonalised, performative nature of human sufferings in these texts for not only its absurdity but also its constitution of a universe of internal surveillance. The mechanical demonstration and scientific measurement of pain displayed in the course of the actual penitentiary process serve as a re-inscription of the pronounced impartiality of the punitive force, implying that every person in the same social structure stands an equal chance of being subject to the ‘tribunal’ of justice. Following this line of thought, we can observe that it is a stratagem that shall synchronously inspire the anxiety of punishment and the proud identification with it among the anonymous crowd, as people join together to commemorate the ‘triumph’ of justice, solidifying the code of obedience to the law and its producer.<sup>44</sup>

Here we see how the spectatorship of bodily pain is part and parcel of the penal torture in ‘In the Penal Colony’, especially when the officer again extols the ingenious design of the Harrow which enables a ‘transparent’ and panoramic view of the process of inscription that goes hand in hand with its performative nature:

And now the performance begins. From outside, the uninitiated do not notice any outward difference in the punishments [...] As [the Harrow] vibrates it stabs its needles into the condemned man’s body, which is also vibrating from the Bed. Now to make it possible for everyone to observe the sentence as it is being carried out, the Harrow is made of glass [...] There were no lengths we didn’t go to. And now everybody can watch through the glass how the inscription is carried out on the body.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Foucault, p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 81.



The officer's use of the word 'performance' ('das Spiel')<sup>46</sup> underscores the theatricality of the whole procedure, meaning that the practice is never carried out simply because of punishment for punishment's sake. It is, after all, a *show* beckoning for bystanders' attention through its theatricality of bodily violence, a language unique to the theatre of torture, to amplify the sense of visceral immediacy among the onlookers. It is a general presumption that a show is based upon *acting* and *aesthetic fabrications*, which broaches the subject of authenticity of the criminal offence or the moral wrongs involved – the legitimate basis for the valorisation of pain inflicted on the victim. The action of 'watching' or 'observing', additionally, sets up the bifurcation of the spectator-spectatee dyads, as the captive's body and all its sensual feelings are locked in and subjugated to the gaze of the spectating crowd. Consequentially, we can notice two ramifications: 1) the spectated body is reduced to an object of the public gaze, inferior to that of the gazers; 2) the bodily reception, including the affective expressions of pain, is detached from the individual, and transmuted into a mere element of the performance. Pain is de-individualised because it is no longer intimate only to the sufferer, but is now both subject to surveillance of the crowd and controlled by the *overarching power* of the performer of physical violence – the colossal machine. After the officer sets the machine in motion, he constantly reimagines the scenario of the 'shows' back when the punitive practice was rife in the colony under the rule of the old commandant:

How different the execution was in earlier times! A day before the execution the entire valley was already overflowing with people; they all come to watch [...] the company – every high official was under orders to attend [... T]he condemned man was laid under the Harrow by the commandant himself [...] It was impossible to grant everyone their

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<sup>46</sup> Franz Kafka, *In der Strafkolonie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p.11.

request to be allowed to watch from near at hand. The commandant in his wisdom ordered that first and foremost the children should be considered.<sup>47</sup>

While the officer's description of the sea of faces he saw during the execution seems to adduce his claim concerning the acclaiming popularity of the public execution at that time, the narrative, as we see it, corroborates that the execution is in fact a public demonstration of power and an affirmation of the *hierarchal structure* of the regime. With compulsory attendance of the execution required of the other officials, the participation manifests itself as a pronouncement of how everyone is, just like the prisoner, hierarchically 'falling under' the old commandant in the militarised colony. Meanwhile, having the victim and inflictor of pain, the old commandant, who was simultaneously the 'soldier, judge, engineer', modelled on the same plane furnishes the scene with puissant visualisation of the horror of state control.<sup>48</sup> The confluence of roles within the old commandant epitomises the unchecked power wielded by such one-upmanship, where a single individual holds absolute authority to pass judgement and manipulate the very structures and degree of control over another human body. One is compelled to witness the law maker actualising his perverted vision of justice single-handedly, if we are to take into account the machine is literally designed and built by the commandant's own hands – a physical extension of his pugnacious image. The nexus between the suffering prisoner and the onlookers, the latter of which are supposedly free from the danger of the bodily violence befalling the captive considering their marked, segregated position, is complicated by the problem of the gaze. Lacan's theory of gaze is helpful for decoding the power dynamics of layered gaze at play in this phase of the text here. The person who has been aware of the others' gaze will transform this conscious look directed towards him into a 'self-consciousness' which

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<sup>47</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 87.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

spawns ‘anxiety’ in relation to the ‘scrutiny of an externalised anonymous Other’, in Lacanian parlance.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the subject internalises the gaze and transforms it into a ‘self-directed’, ‘passive [mode of] being looked at’.<sup>50</sup> In the same way, the prisoner laid under the machine would have internalised the gaze of the convivial or apathetic crowd, apprehending that his sufferings are made the trophy of the ones who have ‘completed the mastery of the gaze’ over him, with himself being a slave to the master(s) in his non-autonomous condition. Yet, the intricacies of this spectator-spectatee relationship, analogous but not entirely equivalent to the master-slave dialectical relationship, rest on the fact that the demarcation between the spectator and the spectatee is highly fluid under the old commandant’s absolutism. The prisoner’s bodily pain is as much a torture to himself as to the spectators, for as much as the spectators’ exultation grows as they watch the physical suffering culminates to the point of the prisoner’s bodily demolition, their angst also grows as much in fearing how easily they also can be put in the same position at which they are laughing. The spectatorship of the fleshly punishment concomitantly establishes between the two parties (the punished and the onlookers) a nexus of visceral contiguousness, and is thus, as observable in the prioritised reservation of the ‘show’ for young children, instilling the code of perverse deference to the authority through emotional influence.

*Romanticisation of Suffering as a Critique of the ‘Civilising’ and ‘Enlightening’ Forces*

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<sup>49</sup> Henry Krips, ‘The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Zizek’, *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 2 (2010), 91–102 (p. 93).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

In the story, the most prominent unthinking accomplice of the fatal bodily injuries inflicted by institutional violence is the officer. His willing martyrdom, which tragically ends with a lack of salvific redemption, only proffers to destabilise the discourse of enlightenment which his ideology serves to promulgate. Such disillusionment testifies to the corrupt nature of the regime's civilising claims, which the officer has been beautifying throughout his life. Under the reign of the new commandant after the old commandant's death, with the public spectatorship of torture being abolished and the capital punishment itself on the verge of collapse, the officer takes on both the roles of the executor (formerly performed by the old commandant) and the spectator. Proudly taking on his new duties, the officer continuously demonstrates his tremendous fervour regarding the impeccability of the machine as he offers a detailed account of its structure and purpose to the traveller: '[The machine] will *work quite of its own accord* ... But even if malfunctions do occur, they are very slight after all, and they will be put right straight away'.<sup>51</sup> He repeats basically the same idea verbatim later, again making the machine the grammatical subject of his summary through anadiplosis, thereby establishing an irreparably aloof tone of report even though the operation involves the extermination of lives after lives: 'Besides, the machine still works, and *functions of its own accord*. It *functions of its own accord* even when it is alone in this valley'.<sup>52</sup> As discussed in this article's first section, the machine is a metonymic and metaphoric representation of a whole ideational system behind. The officer's defence of the malfunctioning machine is, now it seems, as Richard Gray observes, a 'purely fabricated, ideologically biased' and even 'mendacious' portrayal of the bloodthirsty devising of the whole system, with himself willingly serving as a cog in the whole mechanism.<sup>53</sup> The officer's image dovetails with both a sadistic executor who takes great pleasure in witnessing the torturous inscriptions and a martyr who, through his own

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<sup>51</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 76 (emphasis added).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88 (emphasis added).

<sup>53</sup> Gray, p. 228.

pain, attests his partisan allegiance to the system. At this point, the images of the officer and of the text's author, Kafka, converge, especially when the latter made his own sadist-masochist declaration in a letter to Milena Jesenska at the time when she was translating 'In the Penal Colony': 'Yes, torture is extremely important to me – my sole occupation is torturing and being tortured'.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the officer makes his *salto mortale* towards the end of the story not simply because of his hidden sadomasochistic propensity, but due to his blinding and fatuous conviction for the edifying effects of the invasive bodily inscriptions, proven to be nothing but political humbug for Kafka in the end. The legitimate premise on which the officer bases to justify the perpetuation of punitive inscriptions, apart from the intactness of the machine, is the moral enlightenment it is capable of inspiring in the criminal at the sixth hour of the punishment. According to the officer, the revelatory moment occurs at the sixth hour when 'the look of transfiguration' shines on the 'suffering face', causing pure corporeal torment to sublimate into the possibility of intellectual deliverance.<sup>55</sup> It seems, at least on the surface, that Kafka's texts thematically establish pain and mortality as the gateway to virtue and redemption, but for Kafka the irony is always there as a critique of the so-called progressive system that haunts modern civilisation.

Both Walter Sokel and Margot Norris have read Kafka's parabolic texts against Nietzsche's concept of ascetic ideals in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Walter Sokel suggests that there are two types of people in the world as described by Nietzsche, both of which find their analogues in Kafka's fictional world: the first type is 'the ascetic, the ritual', who 'flees from the filth of the earthly' to the 'purer air' through self-punishment, abstinence and perseverance, but uncontrollably feels a 'bloodthirsty fanaticism' and 'resentment' to the world; the second type of being is the 'vigorous conquerors and killers' who 'enjoy their power'

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<sup>54</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena* (New York: Schocken, 2015), p. 214.

<sup>55</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 87.

and feel at home in the filthy world.<sup>56</sup> The officer's febrile worship of the old commandant, evident in the way he considers the machine's deign papers left by the old commandant the 'most precious things [he has]', resembles the ascetic spiritualist who navigates the world, always with ferocious fanaticism, as a disciple of the old commandant.<sup>57</sup> While the commandant can be seen as a typical military conqueror who, putting on a façade of justice and rationality, did not hesitate to use draconian laws to keep his sanguinary throne. And if the officer epitomises the Nietzschean ascetic ideals, then it naturally accounts for his unwavering faith in the use of pain as a means to moral deliverance – the fulfilment of his romanticisation of 'apotheosised pain' – the education which 'kills the animal in the human'.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, his self-immolation – the act of putting himself through the procedure of 'inscriptual' justice performed by the machine – only pathetically corroborates the fraudulence of his conviction. The machine fails to produce the promised enlightening inscriptions on the officer's flesh, but it performs, under the very eyes of the traveller, the 'outright murder' that both denies the officer of his masochistic pleasure and the cryptic moment of revelation, for the machine violently cuts his body into pieces and on his face, there is 'not a sign of the promised deliverance'.<sup>59</sup> While the absence of the light of illumination on the officer's face mocks his asinine, meaningless sufferings before his death, the ensuing dismantling of the machine reveals that 'its smooth operation [is] an illusion' all along.<sup>60</sup> The eventual divulgence of the machine's illusionary nature conceivably lampoons, as Norris perspicaciously points out, the 'spurious "ascetic" rationalisation of pain'.<sup>61</sup> It thereby reveals that pain, in this context, is not a means of salvation but a manifestation of the mindless acceptance of authority, whether it

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<sup>56</sup> Walter Sokel, *The Myth of Power and the Self: Essays on Franz Kafka* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), pp. 34–35.

<sup>57</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 82.

<sup>58</sup> Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 103.

<sup>59</sup> Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 98.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>61</sup> Norris, p. 103.

exists in the form of the dawn of techno-biological government control or the civilising promises in relation to modern warfare.

At the same time, the prevalence of the various metamorphosed elements of morality in Kafka's texts proves that, however different he was from his predecessors like Flaubert and Strindbert, he inherited their humanitarian artistic ideals. For one thing, Kafka's articulation of pain through his words was as much a gesture re-enacting the inconvenient truths about human existence and the 'waning', pulverised human body in the age of mechanical production as a potential self-healing attempt – with the physical pain and 'wasting' bodies of his characters embodying the 'real-life wounds' which Kafka should love to inflict on himself, as Evelyn Beck notes.<sup>62</sup> In this way, Kafka symbolically spectated his own pain through the sufferings of his characters, a step reflective of the potential to kick start the writer's and thus the contemporaneous readers' own therapeutic process through the externalization of inner wounds.

### *Conclusion*

Despite Kafka's attempt to continually 're-create the individual past' and 'the identity built on that past' through the act of narration, the lack of recognition from a large readership (in the decade following his death, as Wagenbach reports, his work sold no more than a few hundred copies)<sup>63</sup> and the non-transcendental world surrounding him rendered the effort to reinterpret his traumatic identity futile.<sup>64</sup> He once told his friend Oscar Pollak that he had the ambition to write books that 'wound and stab us', those which 'affect us like a disaster, that grieve us

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<sup>62</sup> Evelyn Torton Beck, *Physical Illness, Psychological Woundedness and the Healing Power of Art in the Life and Work of Franz Kafka and Frida Kahlo* (California: Fielding Graduate Institute, 2004), p. 221.

<sup>63</sup> Wagenbach, p.6.

<sup>64</sup> Birgit Neumann, 'The Literary Representation of Memory' in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning and Sara B. Young, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 338.

deeply'.<sup>65</sup> When Kafka made the order to have his manuscripts burned, it was not simply because he opined that the inanity and spiritual void of human beings could not be mended; rather, he did so out of his deep-rooted anxiety – 'his lack of hope in the future powers of his writings'.<sup>66</sup> Yet, to borrow Lionel Trilling's words, Kafka's writings demonstrate 'the spirituality of modern literature' exactly because of this gesture of martyrdom – of voluntarily venturing into the dark, 'distressing emotions' which underlie these representations of bodily sufferings.<sup>67</sup> It is in his artistic vision, in Freudian terms, to 'go beyond the pleasure principle' that we continue to read his works to fathom out the pain of human existence. This pain, articulately registered in the body and demise of the condemned by Kafka's allegorical story as we have seen, bears the potential to call for changes in attitude towards the totalizing authority in the understanding readers. The more illegitimate the penal procedure appears, the deeper disillusionment running through the knowing spectators, and the greater possibility of the burgeoning voices that ask for ameliorative social scenes, alternatives which can bring more justice into society.

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<sup>65</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, trans. by Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken, 1977), p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Russell Samolsky, *Apocalyptic Futures: Marked Bodies and the Violence of the Text in Kafka, Conrad, and Coetzee* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking Press, 1965)



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