

In der Strafkolonie

F.Kafka

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Kafka wrote this short story in 1914 concomitant with work on 'der Process', while it was not published until after the War. It is vintage Kafka. A sparse prose, with no extraneous details, neither in formulation nor in description. One has little sense of locality or time, but is instead reminded of a scenic play on a stage with no props except the central contraption, which plays the main role. There is an inexorable logic to it, the kind of strict logic that can only be conceived and executed in a dream; a dream of horror.

A traveler is invited to be a witness to an execution. He is an outsider, an observer, he is in a situation of moral aloofness. He might disapprove of what he sees and partakes of, but this disapproval is strictly a matter of his private conscience, he has no influence whether for good or for bad on the events. In fact he should not have an influence, it is a foreign country, he is but a guest, a temporary presence, he should respect, if not approve.

The officer in charge is truly fascinated with the procedures which has become a tradition initially instigated by the former 'Kommendant' of the colony. It hinges on a beautiful machine, which his former boss invented and which he has learned to master. Excited he proudly shows the workings of the machine to the rather indifferent visitor. How everything beautifully hings together, how it can be programmed to do each of its specific tasks assigned, differing in detail from case to case. The condemned individual is stripped naked, strapped onto a bed and with a piece of cloth stuffed in his mouth to muffle his screams, as a contraption above slowly with a nail carves the verdict on his exposed body. In order to facilitate the viewing of the script, the whole contraption is made out of glass to allow transparency. The process takes a long time, blood is washed away by a stream of water and flowing into the ditch below. After six hours or so of this continued torture, the condemned man does no longer care for the pain, then the piece of cloth is removed and a rice brew is being dripped down, for the man to lick up with his tongue. After a while the man does no longer care for this refreshment, and after twelve hours he is dead and dumped into the ditch. The beauty of it all is the automatic way the machine performs the execution. The officer has clearly fallen in love with the machine and thinks back with nostalgia on former times when the old 'Kommendant' was in charge, and the execution was a public event, and the officer was in the center of attention. Then everything worked so well. The present 'Kommendant' does not approve of the procedure. Spare parts are only supplied tardily if at all. That cloth no longer is replaced from execution to execution, so the condemned man has to stuff his mouth with a disgusting rag which has served its purpose many times before, reeking with old vomit and blood. And the executions are no longer public affairs, but performed privately, with only the officer in charge of the ceremony, the condemned man in chains and a soldier as guard. This time being special because of the outside visitor. This is something which should be exploited, the officer wanting to bring back the old times, hoping to make the visitor into an ally in his plans. The visitor has made clear that he has no influence whatsoever,

but the officer prevails upon him to do him a personal favor, and how can you deny a man a small personal favor. He will not have to do much, in fact he only needs to channel his passivity into a special furrow. It surely will not make any difference to him, but it certainly would make a difference to the officer. The visitor manages gently to deflect the request. And the execution is about to take place.

First the condemned man is admittedly in chains, but he presents such an abject figure that the author concludes that would he be at large he would nevertheless come like a dog when whistled upon. Then the officer explains the transgression the condemned had perpetrated, and the words which are to be carved on his body. He had shown disrespect for his superiors. His task was to sleep outside the door of his master, and every hour wake up and make a salute. His master had checked upon him to see how well he performed his duty, only to discover that he had slept through. Of course he had been sentenced to death, the officer being both judge and jury in addition to executioner. The officer explains that justice is simple if there is only one judge and no jury. No embarrassing questions to be asked which only complicates things. He has total control, his word is law. The visitor does not approve of course, is in fact a bit shocked, but what can he do?

The execution of the condemned man goes awry. First he vomits when the rag is put into his mouth. The soldier has to clean up the mess. Things simply does not go according to plans, and when the visitor proves uncooperative in the plan, the officer suddenly interrupts the proceedings, frees the condemned man, who becomes very friendly with the soldier, and instead strips completely and puts himself into the machine after having programmed it assiduously. No straps are necessary to constrain such a volunteer, but he nevertheless insists that things should follow the regimented order, and the soldier accommodates. Now things go wrong, cogwheels keep being ejected from the machine, and in the end they try to rescue the officer from its jaws but in vain, he is already dead. The story ends up with the visitor looking for the grave of the old 'Kommendant' which he eventually finds under a table by the harbor at which some workers have a jolly good time drinking. In order to read the inscription of the grave he has to bow down, and is ridiculed in the process by the people at the table.

So what about it? The end is a kind of derailment into dreamlike surrealistic fantasy, but what about the message of the story or the parable, because it should be read as one?

The officer is in love with the intricate machine, the death and the torture it entails is but secondary, in fact of no concern to the officer himself. He has no personal grudge against any of the victims, their deaths are simply incidental. It is tempting, (and maybe also a temptation to resist?) to think of the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Not something ultimately done in hatred but more as a bureaucratic routine. A nicely organized death-machine with its own intrinsic beauty serving its own purpose. Maybe something similar with mathematics? A Platonic, totally inhuman enterprise, which nevertheless can fascinate certain individuals to their ultimate grief. Or an economic system that grinds on regardless of its human victims because it is the way it has been done, and the way it should be done, because it works on such beautiful principles. Or the mindless plunge into a future of limitless growth. Abstract principles ultimately detrimental to human happiness and decency?

What about the visitor and his moral dilemma? We are supposed to respect different

cultures, and acknowledge the integrity of other societies. We may not approve of the way they do things, but we have no mandate to try and change. is this not an ideal alibi for passivity? Is it not also a license for exoticism? Other cultures other habits you can savor as a voyeur without the moral obligation to intervene? And how liable are we to feel compelled to honor requests for small favors, even if those would have momentous consequences. The latter may be seen as a manifestation of Kafka's humor. And Kafka has always been underrated as a humorist.

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