# OF MAN AND (SCHREIB-)MACHINE

DANIEL WALTER

## INTRODUCTION

The word *Schreibmaschine* is so cold, inhuman, and metal. *Typewriter* does not seem to evoke the same kind of torturous imagery one calls to mind when thinking about the mechanical process of writing easily associated with a *Schreibmaschine*, but do they not represent the same object? This is just one instance of how language can belie the essence of an object.

Derrida would certainly not believe that the language of a piece of writing had any greater ability to identify its origin, since he did not believe that written words could ever be traced back to the essence or origin of what was meant. Similarly, and prior to Derrida, the disconnect between writing and the origin had a major impact on Franz Kafka, both on his life and his writing. He never published most of his works, which he left unfinished. But why did he leave so many of his stories unfinished? One logical conclusion is that he could not find the words to represent the ideas he was trying to portray. Even if Kafka had found the words he was looking for to complete his texts, from a Derridian perspective, it is not even possible for those words to remain connected to his original ideas over the course of time, changing perspectives or even the instant he began writing.

## MULTIPLE ATTEMPTS AT THE ORIGIN

It is difficult to believe that the origin of meaning is really attainable when one simply looks at the vast amount of literature written about Kafka's works. "In der Strafkolonie" is a perfect example of how time and perspective influenced the way in which critics have constructed different meanings from the same text.

For example, Kafka's texts, including "In der Strafkolonie" can be read from a legal perspective, as is the case with Douglas Litowitz's "Franz Kafka's Outsider Jurisprudence." In this article, Litowitz

discusses Kafka's works as examples of how outsider jurisprudence is represented in Kafka's texts. He uses Kafka's characters as a way to show:

There has been an unspoken assumption within outsider jurisprudence that only minorities can claim to be outsiders, but Kafka's fiction suggests a more expansive notion of outisder status based on position, raising the striking possibility that even a white male can be an outsider under certain circumstances. (Litowitz 105)

Additionally, Litowitz views Kafka's texts, which include, "such law related gems as 'In the Penal Colony,' 'Before the Law,' …," as examples of Kafka's own attempt at dealing with the law by referring to "Kafka's legal background and writings on the law" and his "legal education and practice," (105, 106, 108). The question is what does Kafka mean when he says "law?"

Derrida himself ponders law in his own writings on Kafka, specifically "Before the Law," but what he does not do is limit himself to one perspective which attempts to make the origin of Kafka's writing tangible by pinning it down to a discourse about law in the civil sense. Law itself, to Derrida, is a perfect example of how words belie their true essence by the very fact that they can mean so many different things. As soon as Litowitz began to view law in Kafka's texts as the law he was familiar with, he lost himself on the way to the origin of Kafka's text. Content to understand the law in a singular sense, Litowitz no longer realizes that the "origin" he has found is nothing other than a facade hiding innumerable facades behind it. Like the man from the country in "Vor dem Gesetz" crouched before the gate of the law, he forgets about all of the other impediments except the one in front of him. Derrida, on the other hand, takes a safer approach in his description of the law, "I say 'the law of laws' because Kafka's récit does not let us know which kind of law is meant, the moral, civic, or political or any other law," (Derrida "Devant la Loi" 134).

Litowitz is not the only writer who delimits Kafka's texts to a singular meaning which leads one to the "origin" of the text. Doreen Fowler understands "In der Strafkolonie" as a text about theology, about the connection between "the old tradition in Kafka's story and the Hebraic tradition" (Fowler 114). Fowler also concludes:

Once the analogy between the old order and the Hebraic tradition is recognized, it is immediately clear that the old Commandant represents

God-the-Father, the Creator of the Genesis account. Like the God of Genesis, who created the earth, the old Commandant invented the torture machine and is responsible for the entire structure of the penal colony. (115)

If writing is supposed to connect the reader to the origin, the essence of Kafka's ideas, how can two people derive two so distinct, so distinguishable ideas about what that origin of Kafka's text is? One logical conclusion to this question is that neither one arrives at the origin, nor can the written word lead us there.

Another reading of "In der Strafkolonie" comes from Stanley Corngold. Much like my initial reading of Kafka, Corngold focuses on the writing machine. He declares:

The bureaucracy of *The Trial* has been turned into a medial apparatus, a murderous writing machine. This transformation is an event in Kafka's ongoing allegory of writing, a torture machine depicted as an intermedial translation device, converting the signs of one medium – written texts and embellishments – into the signs of another – the stabbed tattoo. (Corngold 67)

While I agree that the text tells me that the "murderous machine" is an allegory for writing, I am simply not able to declare it as Kafka's representation of his own relationship with writing. Corngold creates his own map to the origin, which is separate from those created by Litowitz and Fowler. Along their textual journeys they discovered what they consider to be the origin, the essence of what Kafka meant in his writing of "In der Strafkolonie," but under simultaneous cross-examination of all three "origins" it becomes apparent that none of them can truly embody the true origin, which existed, if at all, only in the mind of Kafka.

What, then, is the purpose of reading (Kafka)? Peter Heller claims that "the subjection to the experience of not-understanding seems to me to be *the* or *a* major point of reading Kafka" (Heller 382). By reading Kafka, we understand that we are simply not able to understand. This seems like an enlightening experience; to know that we humans are incapable of comprehending the written works of one man whose words weave an incomprehensible web unable to be entangled. As Heller explains, there is "no need to map out a journey destined to lead nowhere" (373). This interpretation is a parallel to Derrida's own interpretation of Kafka's texts. Heller continues: "Kafka's predicaments … seem almost infinitely interpretable. On all levels there are

interpretations which can claim assent. One appears to be as applicable as another; and all might seem well" (374-375). This would fit with Derrida's argumentation if not for the fact that Heller continues in his own argumentation that Kafka "teases the reader into the attempt to interpret, entices him into a labyrinth to dismiss him, ultimately, with the experience of not-understanding" (376). Derrida would not agree that the reader did not understand what he or she is reading, but rather the reader is constructing his or her own meaning, independent of some necessity to connect his or her understanding to the origin that Kafka had in mind when he wrote the text. Jeffrey Nealon makes it clear that "for Derrida, contra many of his followers and critics, deconstruction is not merely a move toward neutralization. Derrida's thought does not conclude in a 'deadlocked aporia of meaning' or lead to 'an unwarranted choice or a failure to choose'" (Nealon 1269). This initial step of undecidability is of course essential, but it is not the end point of reading. Rather, the entire binary system must then be displaced and a new "textual" field must be inscribed which can "account for nonpresence as other than lack of presence" (1269). Kafka is not writing for the sake of writing, to see words on paper which act as little more than an unsolvable riddle. Rather, Kafka writes in an ambiguous way in order to represent more than that which is possible in a standard binary system of word à meaning.

Paul Peters' interpretation of "In der Strafkolonie" is interesting in that it is post-modern, and therefore his interpretation of the text should acknowledge that it cannot be what Kafka meant to portray with this work, but rather only Peters' interpretation of Kafka's text. Peters, like all the other aforementioned critics, is tempted by the text into claiming he has found the origin, all the while he has been led deeper into the labyrinth that is the constant *différance*, or difference and deference of original meaning produced by a reader's interpretation of the written word. He believes that "colonialism is this unspoken and unspeakable 'name' which stands veiled at the centre of Kafka's title and his text, waiting to be unmasked" (Peters 401). This interpretation too seems to try to convince us of what Kafka really wanted to portray with "In der Strafkolonie;" in this case a depiction and criticism of colonialism. Peters believes that because "Kafka's narrative show[s] itself … to be marked and saturated with telltale colonial motifs; it may indeed ultimately and appropriately be read as a kind of master narrative of the 'primal scene' of colonialism" (403). From this it is quite clear that Peters is trying to

convince us that his interpretation is the map that will lead us to the origin. In fact, Peters comments on others' interpretations of "In der Strafkolonie" as being incorrect, especially when it comes to religious interpretations of the text, which view the Old Commandant as the creator, as Fowler does. Peters states:

This type of omniscience has led many commentators to believe that Kafka's formidable Old Commander must be some allegorical reference to Yahweh, as the Judaic one and all-knowing, but also supposedly all-punishing God. But in a colonial context, quite ordinary, mortal European males could also aspire to similar all-knowing and omnipotent status. (409)

His argumentation is very convincing. How are we not to see how his exegesis of "In der Strafkolonie" as the one which will show us the way to the origin? It is because, despite his ability to deconstruct other texts and create a masterfully argued reevaluation of "In der Strafkolonie," he fails to apply the same literary tool of deconstruction to his own work.

In all the works I have read, I consider Alwin L. Baum's as the closest to my own reading of Kafka. He views all of Kafka's texts as belonging to the same discourse, "a vast landscape brought into relief against a labyrinthine architecture which serves at once as burrow and ceremonial sanctuary" (Baum 1327). In a way then, Baum perceives each text as the surface product of an underlying structure. Any text produced by Kafka is then connected by this underlying structure, but the individual texts which make up the surface form prevent access to that underlying structure. "The protagonist reads every gesture as a sign with hidden significance upon whose interpretation his life depends; he clings to every scrap of conversation as if it were a shred of the map which would lead him out" (1328). Kafka's ability to write in a manner that mixes the first and third person views allows the reader to feel as if he or she is the protagonist. The reader, like the "protagonist" Baum refers to, also sees each scrap of meaning he or she picks out, as a piece of the puzzle, which will lead him or her to ultimate understanding of the text via the origin. The more pieces of the puzzle the reader collects, the closer he or she feels to attaining that ultimate understanding, but the reader also notices that not all the pieces fit, some are missing, as if a number of incomplete puzzles were simply cast into the same box.

Every endeavor to find the true meaning of Kafka's texts results in constant *différance*. The reader believes progress is being made, but he or

she is simply losing him or herself in the labyrinth created by the text. This is in conjunction with Baum's idea, that "in Kafka's narratives everything is a matter of appearance, *nur Schein*" (1329). The idea that what the text offers is "nur Schein" is important when discussing Derrida's ideas about writing as the impossible representation of the origin of meaning. Keeping in mind the connection between reader and protagonist, Baum goes even further with his argument about the inaccessibility of the underlying structure, or origin, stating that "the problem for all of Kafka's heroes," and vicariously through those heroes, the reader, "is to find a way to accept the necessity of delusion, or the authenticity of illusion, in a world where, as Heinz Politzer suggests, 'language itself is the 'archliar'" (Baum 1334, Politzer 20).

Further connecting Baum's argument to my own, it is clear that Kafka's text[1] is the orthographic attempt at representing the origin, but language, and even more so written language, cannot capture that origin. Baum also relies on Derrida, saying "Derrida concludes that *différance*, the 'systematic play' of differing and deferring in the signifying chain, constitutes the very 'possibility of conceptuality'" (Baum 1336, Derrida *Differance* 140). By further developing Derrida's ideas on writing, specifically his remarks on Claude Lévi-Strauss' anthropological accounts of writing and language, a clear conclusion can be drawn between Derrida's deconstruction of logo-centric thought and Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie."

## WRITING AS MISREPRESENTATION

Derrida takes a critical stance toward Claude Lévi-Strauss and his understanding of language. Lévi-Strauss discusses his ideas on language in multiple works, but here the focus is limited to two of those works, *The Savage Mind* and *Tristes Tropiques*. In *The Savage Mind* he discusses the importance of totemic classifications in "primitive" cultures as being both logical and aesthetic functions which allow for distinction and understanding. Lévi-Strauss is clearly working in a binary system of language where distinctions are made between what is there, the presence of something, and what is not there, or the non-presence of something. Accordingly, he can break down all systems of classification created by indigenous peoples into simple binary structures. For example, he describes the discovery of Conklin that the Hanunóo of the Philippines

do not have the same axes that we do in our own classification of colors. Our system is:

> founded on two axes: that of brightness (value) and that of intensity (chroma). All the obscurities disappeared when it became clear that the Hanunóo system also had two axes, but different ones. They distinguish colours into relatively light and relatively dark and into those usual in fresh or succulent plants and those usual in dry or desiccated plants. (Lévi-Strauss *The Savage Mind* 55)

It seems then that it is not possible for the natives of the Philippines to think in any other way than as the Westerner. According to Lévi-Strauss, they must also be attempting to create a binary system of what is and is not there, with the intention of distinguishing one thing from another. This is of course a difficult feat, to smash a foreign ideology into a distinctly western framework, in order to define that ideology as both systematic and even "intelligent." Is intelligence simply that which can be made sense of by the western mind? While his argument is convincing, it cannot be that we can simplify language to that which is there and that which is not. In Lévi-Strauss' investigation of language he fails to see one major aspect that would have halted such a strict binary interpretation, namely that "'everything we *say* … is and cannot but be deconstructive and deconstructible.' For language use itself is the choice of a system that leaves something unsaid" (Luhmann 769, Margolis 146). In this way, it is impossible to simply "understand" another culture by means of their language because there is more there than can be signified by words.

Another important discovery about language described by Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* is that of a "Writing Lesson." The "Writing Lesson" is a curious case of an indigenous group of people called the Nambikwara who neither had a written language, nor knew how to draw. One day they began imitating Lévi-Strauss and his use of pencil and paper. Lévi-Strauss describes the situation, reflecting, "I wondered what they were trying to do, then it was suddenly borne upon me that they were writing or, to be more accurate, were trying to use their pencils in the same way as I did mine" (*Tristes Tropiques* 357). In this miraculous event though, was any actual writing being done? Lévi-Strauss believed that the chief was the only one who had actually understood the point of writing:

> [The chief] asked me for a writing-pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. He was half taken in by his own make-believe; each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously as if expecting the meaning to leap from the page. (357)

We act in much the same way as the chief. Just because we write down an idea, we assume that our exact thought will be transmitted to anyone who reads it, but that is never, and can never be the case because the representation of our thoughts through language is inherently incomplete and because language as a system must leave things unsaid.

The chief continued his escapades with writing and his newly found power to convey ideas in a written format. He read from his paper to the entire company and was able to find meaning in what he had written, but that is only because he had direct access to what was written and because he was the one who wrote it (357). If the chief had given the piece of paper to anyone else, they would not have been able to decipher the meaning from his non-systematic scribbles. Even when those scribbles are systematic, as with this piece of writing for example, where the reader can construct the sounds from the orthographic symbols on this page, he or she can never really know the true structure of my thoughts because there is no direct connection to the origin.

Derrida also comments on this feat of writing. In fact, he deconstructs the entire title, saying that "Lesson" leads us to a double sense of the word. He declares that the title "A Writing Lesson" is not unmistakably explicit, because it can be understood in two different ways:

Writing lesson since it is a question of the learning of writing … But the writing lesson is also a lesson learned from writing; instruction that the anthropologist believes he can induce from the incident in the course of a long meditation, when, fighting against insomnia, he reflects on the origin, function, and meaning of writing. (*Of Grammatology* 122).

Not even the title "A Writing Lesson" can escape the simple fact of deconstruction, more explicitly, that there can never be only one way to read a text.

Upon further analysis of the "Writing Lesson," Derrida comments that there are two significant findings drawn from this incident by Lévi-Strauss. First, that "the appearance of writing is *instantaneous*. It is not

prepared for. Such a leap would prove that the possibility of writing does not inhabit speech, but the outside of speech" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 126). This idea that writing is outside of language is essential to Derrida's conceptions of writing. If a system exists outside of the spoken language, which attempts to convey the meaning of that spoken language, it will be impossible for that exterior system to be truly representative.

The second significant point Derrida sees in Lévi-Strauss' depiction and analysis of the "Writing Lesson" is that "since the chief used writing effectively without knowing either the way it functioned or the content signified by it, the end of writing is political and not theoretical, '*sociological, rather than ... intellectual*'" (*Of Grammatology* 127, *Tristes Tropiques* 290). Derrida explains that this social function of writing is meant to enslave and exploit the lower members of the hierarchical systems proposed by Lévi-Strauss. Writing, for Derrida, is nothing more than a violent act whose beginnings in every culture are associated with the beginnings of deception, for as Derrida states, "if words have a meaning, and if 'writing on this its first appearance in their midst had allied itself with falsehood,' one should think that deception and all the associated values and non-values were absent in societies without writing" (*Of Grammatology* 134). I would not go so far as to say that a culture without written language did not know deception, but I concur that if the written word were in itself a deception of that which was once spoken, then any culture which uses written language is based on falsehoods. Those falsehoods provide the foothold for the violent and destructive behavior which arises from writing.

## DECONSTRUCTING "IN DER STRAFKOLONIE"

With the idea that no analysis of a text will ever really get to the essence, or origin, of a text, how is it possible then for me to use the meaning I find in "In der Strafkolonie" to create my own ideas about what the text is trying to convey? I can do this because I am aware that the meaning I construct is only one of a number of possibilities, and what I draw from the story and the assumptions I make about what Kafka really meant will never line up. In true Derridian fashion, I can cast any attempt at finding the origin to the wayside and focus on how the meaning I construct from the text affects me.

"In der Strafkolonie" can be seen as a literary representation of the decline of logo-centrism as a major philosophical theory over the course of the twentieth century. Kafka's text portrays this in two ways, which are closely intertwined; the idea of *(B)beauty* and the decay of the machine.

What could be more ideologically beautiful than the theory of logo-centrism? Logo-centric thought implies that a word can be traced back to its origin and that, that origin is not off somewhere in the heavens, where humanity cannot reach, but within each of us. It would be difficult to imagine a more harmonious and romantic view of the essence of things. Logo-centrism, in fact, would say that when I write the word *beauty*, you, the reader, understand exactly what it is I am thinking of, because we can both trace the word back to its origin, *Beauty*. This idea of *Beauty*, because it is the pure essence of *beauty*, makes the meaning of the word *beauty* transparent, at least according to logo-centric theory.

Kafka's text mocks the "beauty" of logo-centrism, and *beauty* itself, in the way it portrays the apparatus of "In der Strafkolonie." Like proponents of logo-centrism, the Officer displays undying faith in his forefather, the Old Commandant, and the machine that offers access to the essence of meaning and therefore enlightenment to those upon whom the apparatus is used.

The Officer, the one person who continues to believe in the machine, like advocates of logo-centrism, promises enlightenment to all those who are forced to use it. The prisoner who is sent to the apparatus is at a serious disconnect from the beginning. Not only is he unaware of his wrongdoings, he is not even told he is being charged with a crime. He has never had the chance to defend himself, similar to the author who puts words on paper. He can never be aware of what others charge him with; he is completely cut off from the judgment of others.

In addition to this, "In der Strafkolonie" also makes a clear connection to Derrida's claims about the inherent violence in the system of writing. The enlightenment, which is supposed to result from the tattooing of the crime into the back of the victim, has nothing to do with the words inscribed on the prisoner's back because he is unable to read the inscription. It seems that if any enlightenment is occurring, it cannot have anything to do with the words themselves, but rather the exposure to extreme torture and violence resulting from the writing process. This ridicules the idea put forth by logo-centrists, that the written word has a

singular origin which can be traced back from the word, because the prisoner, if he is becoming enlightened, has no relationship with the written word. The machine could have written nonsense, or wavy lines as the Nambikwara chief did, and the experience the prisoner had, would have remained the same.

It is also possible that the people observing -previously many others, but now only the Officer- only imagined that some kind of enlightening experience was happening to the prisoners, whereas in actuality, they were simply deceiving themselves into believing that the violent act occurring before their eyes was a justified means to the end result they created in their own minds. The apparatus, this *Schreibmaschine*, will be just as violent for them, and they will come to realize in that brief moment before the needle pierces flesh that the enlightenment they perceived through this writing process has been nothing more than self-deception.

The continual usage of the apparatus without maintenance is easily comparable to logo-centrism. As a result of its continual use, it begins to break down, no longer working in the way it was meant to. In a last ditch effort, the proponents of logo-centrism grasp at a final use of the machine to save themselves, but the machine, which no longer functions as it was originally designed to, simply maims the believer. If they come to any enlightening experience through the now aged and overworked machine, it is that they, like the Officer, have simply been deceiving themselves.

Returning quickly to (*B)beauty*, it is clear that the once beautiful machine, which was the epicenter of the entire penal colony, is now rusted. The beauty of its precision and elegance has now faded; the apparatus has become little more than a guillotine. The final user does not even get a chance to see if all those beautiful experiences he witnessed over the years are actually the result of all that torture. Like a wilting flower, the apparatus does not contain that original *Beauty*, revealing nothing but death and decay where that original word, *beauty*, still stands.

## SYSTEMATIC PLAY

Just as Kafka's text does not stick to the use of one word, I have also been playing with the words *apparatus* and *machine* throughout this text. Throughout "In der Strafkolonie," *Apparat* and *Maschine* are both used

by Kafka to represent the same object. From a logo-centric perspective this is not possible. In the text though, it is quite clear that the *Apparat* in, "Es ist ein eigentümlicher Apparat," (Kafka 164) and *Maschine* in, "Der Offizier blieb stumm, wendete sich der Maschine zu" (189) are representing the same object. In fact, *Apparat* is used exclusively up to page 177, after which point *Maschine* is used. Is it that the object represented by the words *Apparat* and *Maschine* changes? Clearly it is the same violent apparatus which takes the Prisoner on a torturous and enlightening journey, as well as the machine which kills the Officer in one swift stab of the needle.

J. D. Thomas also makes note of the fact that translators of this text have had difficulty in deciding what to do with Kafka's alternating vocabulary. Thomas states "the 'machine' (Neumeyer's invariable term) is there called an *apparatus*-as in fact it is again on the same page, and elsewhere…Without in any sense suggesting a denotative disjunction between the two terms alternately used by Kafka (*Apparat* and *Maschine*)" (65). Although Thomas points out this "disjunction," he is viewing it from the perspective of someone concerned with how the connotation of the individual words sounds. The important part of this idea is really that two distinct words are identifiers for the same object, a clear break with the ideas of logo-centrism.

## CONCLUSION

Kafka's text allows the reader to observe the inconsistencies of logo-centrism. This once beautiful philosophy has been crippled from overuse and lack of upkeep, like the machine, the apparatus, and even Kafka's entire penal colony. There is no way to restore any of it to its former glory. Now that the disconnect between what is written and the origin has been severed forever, there is no reason to believe that any logo-centric theory can ever withstand close inspection. Kafka described the written word best, when he wrote "'es ist sehr kunstvoll,' sagte der Reisende ausweichend, 'aber ich kann es nicht entziffern'" (Kafka 175). No, I do not believe that what we read can be "entziffert," but then again, I don't really believe we need to. Many critics of Derrida understand what Derrida offers as the absence of meaning, but what he really offers is freedom from the oppressive "penal colony", the system of writing in

which we have to work, which forces us upon the violent act of writing and deciphering the written again and again. We should not despair because we cannot find the origin of the written word; rather rejoice because we are no longer forced to piece together the map of a text which will never lead us anywhere. Unlike the fears shared by many readers of Kafka, that they will never find a way through the labyrinth, I propose to enjoy the view, stroll in any direction you please, and let the meaning disperse.

## NOTES

1. Baum argues that all of Kafka's texts are the orthographic attempts at finding the origin. My argumentation is delimited to "In der Strafkolonie."

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