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## Lessons of the Cryptograph: Revelation and the Mechanical in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"

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Modernism/modernity

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 8, Number 2, April 2001

pp. 295-302

10.1353/mod.2001.0021

ARTICLE

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*Modernism/Modernity* 8.2 (2001) 295-302

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# Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"

## Andreas Gailus

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According to a great Rabbi, Walter Benjamin recalls in his essay on Kafka, the coming Messiah "will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it."<sup>1</sup> A slight adjustment of the ordinary—this is indeed what happens everywhere in Kafka's texts in which daily objects, made all but invisible through familiarity, are transformed into enigmatic signs. The archetype of the enigmatic object-sign for Kafka is the door, and it is indeed doors that structure the parabolic and mythic space of his narratives. Opened and shut, locked and unlocked, peeped through and barricaded, they cease to be ordinary doors and become instead architectural elements in a theater of the unsayable. This is of course nowhere more true than with those doors that his heroes regularly confront in their search for truth: it happens to K. in *The Castle*, to Josef K. in *The Trial*, and, most famously of all, to the man from the country in the parable "Before the Law." If only they were able to pass through these enigmatic doors and come face to face with what lies behind them, these texts seem to suggest, they would finally be able to grasp the truth they have been seeking, discover the Law of their lives. Kafka's doors, in other words, hold out the promise of revelation.

Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" is a remarkably doorless story. Instead of the crowded attics of *The Trial* or the tenebrous landscape of *The Castle*, "In the Penal Colony" takes place in a barren desert valley, under a glare so intense as to prompt the explorer to shelter "his eyes from the sun with one hand."<sup>2</sup> It is more than sunlight, however, against which the explorer seeks protection. "With the strongest light," Kafka writes in an aphorism, **[End Page 295]** "one can dissolve the world. Before weak eyes, it gains in solidity, before weaker ones it develops fists, before even weaker ones it becomes bashful and crushes him who dares to look at it."<sup>3</sup> The light of "In the Penal Colony" is precisely of this nature, yet it dissolves not the world but the image of revelation. Kafka's story takes us to the other side of the door. The irony of this move is that it erases the very topography on which the enigma of the door rests, the locus of the "beyond." For beyond the door lies not the territory of meaning but an institution that produces the illusion of a door that simultaneously defines and blocks access to this territory. "In the Penal Colony" is Kafka's attempt to traverse the fantasy of revelation by unveiling the mechanical nature of its production.

The passage through the door of revelation takes the form of an epic journey figured as an ethnographic travelogue. The subject of this journey is a European explorer—a representative of Reason and Enlightenment—sent from the mainland of the Empire to a remote island penal colony. This spatial displacement is also a journey back in time. First, because the passage from center to periphery is figured as a passage from civilization to a more primitive society; and second, because the colony itself comprises two disparate temporalities. The colony's present, embodied in the reign of the New Commandant, and its mythic past, associated with the rule of the Old Commandant, the inventor of the machine. The machine, then, is placed at a double remove, distanced from the center of the Empire by a topographical and a temporal frame. To this must be added a third frame, an explicitly narrative one: the description of the glorious working of the machine is given in an embedded narrative through the words of the officer, who was the Old Commandant's assistant in all penal matters, and who seeks to persuade the explorer to join him in his...

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HOODVEREN / *modernity*  
VOLUME EIGHT, NUMBER  
TWO, PP. 295-302.  
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HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

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