

# LIVING THE MACHINE

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I imagine the greatest challenge for the explorer is to unlearn, after his departure, what he unwillingly came to witness and experience through his outlandish voyage *In the Penal Colony*. The curious terminal criminographer<sup>1</sup> with its technological ambiguities and its utilitarian exactitude as well as the obscure, puzzling, ritualistic, and rationalistic mannerisms that govern the procedure of subjecting the body of the condemned to the machine—they all become a package of knowledge the explorer will carry with him beyond the penal colony.

As usual, one can do one of the two things with this uninvited knowledge. One, to absorb it uncritically, express and emanate it, and implement it elsewhere, perhaps closer to home, where one is no longer an explorer, so to speak, but an inhabitant, a native, a citizen. I imagine this needs great effort, requiring solving the problems of introducing and implementing an exotic procedural technique and rendering it, in due time, a part of the people's perception about how "justice" must be handled. But it can be done, and the garden variety totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, McCarthyism, or Guantanamo Bay all attest to the plausibility of this project in various vernacular articulations of the machine.

Or two, to unlearn it: to unsee the violence, unload the memory, purge the horror, disconnect, speak to no one and write no entry in your travelogue about it. I am not sure if that can be done as easily as the first option can be achieved. After all, Kafka's

explorer seems to have taken out of the penal colony the memory and knowledge of this punitive criminographer: we have the story.

When introduced to him, I met a Kafka who spoke Persian, through the (not-so-sophisticated) translations of his works by (now archetypical) Sadeq Hedayat (1903 Tehran–1951 Paris), whose surreal *The Blind Owl* received international recognition when André Breton called the French translation of the book a surrealist classic. Especially fond of Kafka's short stories, Hedayat translated and published "Before the Law", "Jackals and Arabs" and *Metamorphosis*. Persian Kafka, while strange, was not entirely mind-boggling. When I found Kafka in my father's personal library and read him in my early twenties, there was something of Kafka that I had already seen, lived, and unfortunately, internalized. I imagine the source of fascination of many western readers of Kafka is precisely their detachment from the conditions described in his fiction. That was not the case with me. I related to Kafka despite the fact that my leftist political commitments during post-revolutionary Iran constantly delayed taking this somber writer whose fiction, it was deemed, smacked of decadent, bourgeois disbelief in social change, into my heart.

Moreover, the prose of Persian Kafka did not have the aura of English Kafka (for me anyway), which I read only years later in my (self-)exile. The unlikely places and bizarre events of Kafka's fiction, even in those apparently mundane affairs in the Europe of his time such as the one narrated in "The Hunger Artist," did not raise my eyebrow, although I sincerely felt the impact. It was as though in my psyche or perhaps in my collective unconscious there was something familiar about Kafka's situations.

The story of my middle school (grades six to eight; 1972–1975) in East Tehran should not sound too unfamiliar in Canada, a country with the experience of residential schools for aboriginal persons. There, for three years, I was subjected to routine punishment

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1 The apparatus.

by our beloved vice-principal. The punishment was religiously carried out in a mostly controlled and calm fashion in one of two ways: strikes on the palm of the pupil's hand by a yard-long wooden stick, reserved for proper punishment, or rather impulsive slaps in the face, as a quick reminders specific to "petty-crimes." Any other form of punishment that might have been used by our committed vice-principal was noticeably irregular, outside the norm, and extremely rare. In fact, while I do know that there has been more than one such incident, the only one I recall clearly is the ritualistic punishment of an Armenian eighth-grader in the school yard and in front of the entire school population and it involved sheer beating of the poor soul by any means available, in savage but sacred fury of our dutiful vice-principal. And the reason for this exceptional punitive spectacle was, not surprisingly, the student's alleged "public" insulting of the Shah and the Royal Family in a way that my memory fails to recollect.

As for myself, I was deemed to be the "champion" of taking punishment, a title of reasonable status, by my fellow underclass pupils, those mostly meek subjects of school rules. I was the one who, for some strange reason, or perhaps due to sheer juvenile stubbornness, received numerous hard strikes, in front of the class, on the palms of my hands (for which you need to extend your arms out) at any occasion, without whining, weeping, begging, or showing any sign of remorse. Committed to restore order, our vice-principal was usually fair enough to announce the number of strikes (normally between 5 and 20) you would receive at the outset of his ritualistic punishment, so that you would have a quick second to make your decision (begging versus resisting) in advance. In the case of begging, he would graciously let you go after a few blows and some hard words. I wasn't exactly the exemplary student behaviour-wise, although I was academically more or less an "A" student, so I endured this for the entire three years of my middle school. Here is how Kafka became

vernacularized in my experience—vernacularized, that is, if he wasn't the vernacular story-teller of otherwise generalized forms of violence.

This is one incident through which I relate to Kafka, but unlike Kafka's instrument, the machine-like criminographer in my case, was not terminal, and that's why I am able to write these lines! Admittedly, it was not sophisticated either. It was a cyborg of sorts, half-machine, in its duty, and half-human, in his ability to forgive upon begging!

The cyborg lived in my very own neighbourhood (I occasionally ran into him years later at our local newsstand). Later on, I participated in the 1979 Revolution, post-revolutionary politics, the war with Iraq, and escaped from Iran to Turkey and excelled in my course in uninvited methods of punishment and violence, just to experience the machine again, in its various manifestations, realizing, in the end, that "guilt is always beyond doubt."

Like the explorer of *In the Penal Colony*, my knowledge of such violence was uninvited. The challenge, however, is to unlearn it.

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