

# Almost the Same but not Quite: Kafka and His ‘Assignees’

Vladimir Biti

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Zhejiang University, University of Vienna  
E-mail: vladimir.biti@univie.ac.at

## Abstract

Kafka never tired of pointing out how much modern society animalizes its inhabitants, imprisoning them within their individual cages. Nevertheless, many among his figures, banished into the darkness of their self-enclosure, discover that which escapes this society’s daylight. Attaching to this forgotten truth by way of its evocation, exploration, and subversive mimicry, they emancipate themselves from the pressure of historical law. Unlike these figures who, riveted to their confined places, try to remedy their predicament, Kafka places his author completely ‘above the fray’, in a ‘posthumous shelter’ that enables him to deal with the suppressed truth in a more calculated, strategic way. While he entangles them with one another, he takes care to distance himself from their tightly connected histories.

**Keywords:** *prehistory, history, truth, law, evocation, exploration, subversive mimicry, redoubling, entrusting, entanglement of opposites*

## Evoking the Truth Lost in Translation

The end of Kafka’s parable ‘An Imperial Message’ reassigned to its reader the position of a ‘you’, whom its beginning evokes as ‘the individual, the most miserable subject, the insignificant shadow fled in the remotest distance before the imperial sun’.<sup>1</sup> Although the attributes of this introductory ‘you’ are also maintained for the concluding one by linking them to one another, upon closer inspection they nonetheless part ways. Since the latter ‘you’ dreams the emperor’s behest to herself or himself, as the narrator specifies, only ‘when the evening arrives’,<sup>2</sup> the emperor’s sun, a symbol of his power, no longer shines for him or her as it had done for the introductory ‘you’. The arrival of the evening implies that the emperor’s centralized rule has expired, giving way to the new, impenetrable and impervious administration of the polis. Its centre, having replaced the imperial palace, is now presented as the ‘residence city’ that is ‘cluttered with its own dregs’.<sup>3</sup>

What took place over the course of these ‘thousands of years’ during which the emperor’s messenger carried out his entrusted mission can be described in terms of *translatio imperii*.<sup>4</sup> The citizens – the ‘dregs’ of imperial time – who were located beyond the palace’s ‘outermost gate’ and figured for long centuries as the unruly objects of emperor’s rule, were now themselves turned into rulers, producing their own dregs. Yet

<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘An Imperial Message’, in *The Complete Stories*, trans. W. and E. Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 24, translation modified.

<sup>2</sup> Kafka, ‘An Imperial Message’, 24, translation modified.

<sup>3</sup> Kafka, ‘An Imperial Message’, 24, translation modified.

<sup>4</sup> Kafka, ‘An Imperial Message’, 24.

whereas, in imperial times, the dregs were located outside the walls of the emperor's palace, they were now placed at the very heart of the city as the new political configuration's highest achievement. The imperial community underwent transformation into a modern society by carefully differentiating its 'crowds' and 'multitudes' from one another through the establishment of 'palaces', 'habitations', 'chambers', 'stairs', 'courts', and 'gates',<sup>5</sup> but it simultaneously produced a series of undifferentiated residues, blurring the divisions that had been introduced. As Foucault put it, in the final outcome, these 'heterotopias' used to 'contest and invert' the system that tried to lock them in as sorts of 'inner colonies'.<sup>6</sup> In their apocryphal operations, they 'desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source'.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, what the arrival of the evening's 'moon grammar' ultimately amounts to is this subterranean redrawing of 'daylight' boundaries. Understood this way, the same 'evening' that distils modern society out of the imperial community simultaneously emancipates it from its galloping compartmentalization that imprisons its constituents within their individual cages. Kafka never tired of pointing out how much modern society animalizes its inhabitants: 'One returns to the animal. This is much easier than human existence. [...] [O]ne is afraid of freedom and responsibility. That is why one prefers to stifle behind the self-tinkered bars.'<sup>8</sup>

If 'everyone carries a room in himself or herself',<sup>9</sup> the road to the common truth cannot be but blocked: 'Truth is indivisible, so it cannot know itself; whoever [among individuals] wants to grasp it, must lie'.<sup>10</sup> Although modern individuals chose for themselves the role of the truth's couriers, they in fact act as its distorters, who hunt each other through the world, calling out to each other their 'messages' that are bereft of their true meaning.<sup>11</sup> The only way out of such self-enclosure of individuals into their private rooms is to take advantage of the windows – 'openings through which one flows forth into the world' – particularly when the evening arrives.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely such an emancipation that is undertaken by the 'you' at the end of 'An Imperial Message'. Only a gaze from the window into the 'empire of darkness' makes it possible for the forgotten truth to suddenly re-appeal the observer. After all, it is not the truth itself that matters so much as the endurance of its appeal. As Benjamin noted in one of his letters, Kafka 'sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility'.<sup>13</sup>

This orientation of his explains why the 'you' is by no means an isolated instance in his work. Many among his figures, banished into the evening of their 'heterotopias', discover that which escapes the society's daylight. Consider for example the man from the country in 'Before the Law' whose eyesight, after having sat for many years before the law:

<sup>5</sup> Kafka, 'An Imperial Message', 24.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Gustav Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1968), 44. All translations from scholars' work in German, as well as from the German editions of Kafka's works are mine.

<sup>9</sup> Franz Kafka, 'Das erste Oktavheft', in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986), 41.

<sup>10</sup> Franz Kafka, 'Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg', in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Kafka, 'Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg', 33.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1964), 9 March 1922.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Briefe II* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), 763.

begins to fail, and he does not know whether the world is really darker or whether his eyes are only deceiving him. Yet in his darkness he is now aware of a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law. Now he has not very long to live.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, it is only when the evening (of one's life) arrives, and when one's return into the daylight's law becomes impossible, that one becomes aware of the whole splendour of the truth. It reveals itself to individuals only when it is too late for them to apply it themselves, in the case of the man from the country because he leaves behind his earthly life, and in the case of the 'you' at the window because the emperor's message got forever stuck on its way. 'Nobody could fight his way' through the cluttered residence city, the parable reads, 'and especially not with a message from a dead man'.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the day, the emperor's messenger behaves as modern individuals in Kafka's aphorism, frantically transmitting the truth that is emptied of any meaning.<sup>16</sup>

Under such circumstances, one can never be certain whether that which reveals itself is indeed the truth, or just a phantasy of it as induced by a longing for it. The way it manifests itself to those for whom the access to it is forever denied is instantaneous, glaring and perplexing. In his conversations and diary notes, as we will come to see, Kafka imagines it in a very similar way as Benjamin, for whom the forgotten truth manifests itself 'fleetingly and transitorily'<sup>17</sup> like a 'flame' or a 'flash'.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that Freud as well, for his part, associated the resurfacing of suppressed memory traces with the flickering-up (*Aufleuchten*).<sup>19</sup> We find the same rendering of the lost truth in Kafka's fictions. Next to the aforementioned radiance of the truth (of the law) in 'Before the Law', there is its flashing appearance in *The Trial*, as experienced by Josef K. from the spot of his execution surrounded by darkness:

Like a flash of light, the two casements of a window parted and a human figure, faint and thin from the distance and height, leant far out in one swift movement then stretched its arms out even farther. Who was it? A friend? A kind person? Someone who felt for him? Someone who wanted to help? Was it just one? Or all of them? Was help still possible? Were there still objections he'd forgotten? Of course there were. Logic may be unshakeable, but it cannot hold out against a human being who wants to live.<sup>20</sup>

Yet although the truth is as elusive as a flash, neither the 'you' at the end of 'An Imperial Message' nor the man from the country, or Josef K. for that matter, give up its evoking. It is true that Josef K., while laid on the ground, catches sight of someone else on the window, whereas the 'you' himself or herself takes advantage of the window panorama, but, ultimately, their evocation of the lost truth emancipates them both from the pressure of their 'historical fate'. It is for the sake of this emancipation that they cling

<sup>14</sup> Franz Kafka, 'Before the Law', in *The Complete Stories*, trans. W. and E. Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Kafka, 'An Imperial Message', 24, translation modified.

<sup>16</sup> Kafka, 'Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg', 33.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Doctrine of the Similar' (1933), trans. Knut Tarkowski, in *New German Critique* 17 (1979): 66.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Über das mimetische Vermögen' (1933), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II-1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 213.

<sup>19</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Notiz über den „Wunderblock“', in *Studienausgabe*, vol. III: *Psychologie des Unbewussten* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1975), 368.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans Mike Mitchel (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 164.

to it. Josef K., for his part, refused to perform what his guards presumably considered to be his duty – plunging their knife into his own body – but ‘instead he turned his neck, that was still free, and looked around’ as if searching for the lost truth of his life.<sup>21</sup> As for the ‘you’, whom the emperor’s message was envisaged to be hammered into by the ‘magnificent beating of [his messengers’] fists on [his or her] door’ – he or she, after the failure of the imperial mission, evokes it through dreaming in order to rescue it from oblivion. Through such attachment to prehistory, both of them point to the limits of historical law.

## Calculation vs. Exposure

The dreaming evocation of the lost truth thus proves to be an important means for the survival of those whom history has overnight turned into its outsiders. It releases possibilities, which history tends to suppress in order not to avert its participants from its course. Like his ‘assigned’ outsiders, Kafka as the author also engaged dreaming to ‘disclose reality behind which the idea [of reality] lingers’.<sup>22</sup> However, unlike them who acted under the pressure of their ‘historical fate’, he strategically considered that for those who confront this disclosed reality in their life, its flame is ‘horrible’, and for those who face it in fiction, it is ‘shocking’.<sup>23</sup> To avoid this shock for his readers, he prefers to present it indirectly, through the terrified face of his figures who suddenly meet its shine.<sup>24</sup> In accordance with this, he once confided to Max Brod that all convincing passages of his works:

always deal with the fact that someone is dying, that it is hard for him to do so, that it seems unjust to him, or at least harsh, and the reader is moved by this, or at least he should be. But for me, who believes that I shall be able to lie contentedly on my deathbed, such scenes are secretly a game; indeed, in the death enacted I rejoice in my own death, hence calculatingly exploit the attention that the reader concentrates on death, have a much clearer understanding of it than he, of whom I suppose that he will loudly lament on his deathbed, and for these reasons my lament is as perfect as can be, nor does it suddenly break off, as is likely to be the case with a real lament, but runs in a beautiful and clean manner.<sup>25</sup>

Kafka’s authoring thus calculatingly flies around the truth’s unbearable light in order ‘to find a spot in the dark void where the ray of [its] light [...] can be powerfully captured’.<sup>26</sup> This strategy enables ‘a higher type of observation’ provided ‘with its own laws of motion’, which is ‘more incalculable’, ‘more joyful’, ‘more ascendant’ in ‘its course’ than the one that his figures can afford.<sup>27</sup> Placed on ‘another planet’, his authoring, at least ‘in happy moments’, enjoys ‘the freedom of movement completely lacking to me here’,<sup>28</sup> i.e. among the fellow beings. As he remarked in a letter to Brod in April 1918, in the compartmentalized world bereft of a unifying truth, art has lost its earthly place anyway.

<sup>21</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 164.

<sup>22</sup> Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka*, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘Das dritte Oktavheft’, in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986), 93-4.

<sup>25</sup> Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923*, 448-9; 13 December 1914.

<sup>26</sup> Kafka, ‘Das dritte Oktavheft’, 104.

<sup>27</sup> Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923*, 22 January 1922.

<sup>28</sup> Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923*, 29 January 1922.

This drove artists to move to the moon, which the earth has shaken off in order to solidify itself, but which they precisely therefore choose as their new homeland.<sup>29</sup>

The moon is obviously a much more comfortable shelter for the activity of evocation than the window, the stool next to the Law’s door, or the spot of execution for that matter. The ‘you’, the man from the country, and Josef K. are almost immobilized, riveted to their confined places. By evoking the lost truth, they try to remedy their predicament. But despite their efforts, the latter never stops embarrassing them. Faced with execution, Josef K. behaves pitifully: ‘Then he folded up the clothes carefully, like things that are going to be used again, if not in the immediate future’.<sup>30</sup> Toward the end of his life, the man from the country also behaves childishly, begging the fleas ‘to help him and to change the doorkeeper’s mind’.<sup>31</sup> Compared to this ‘touching’ behaviour by his ‘departing’ figures, Kafka places his author completely ‘above the fray’, enabling him to open impartial and sovereign vistas on his fellow beings. While they are still exposed, his ‘posthumous shelter’ gives him the opportunity for an adequate payback to those who humiliated him while he was alive:

One does not develop in his or her kind until after death, only when one is alone. The death is for the individual as the Saturday evening for the chimney sweeper, when they use to wash the soot off their body. Then it becomes visible, whether his contemporaries did him or he to his contemporaries more harm, in the latter case he was a big man.<sup>32</sup>

The triumph of the prehistorical law of revenge on those who have wronged you is thus safeguarded. Whereas the author achieves an almost ahistorical, inhuman independence, his figures, enmeshed in history, remain all too humanly restricted:

Man, even if he were infallible, sees in the other only that part for which his viewing ability and mode suffice. He has, like everyone, but in highest exaggeration, the addiction to restrict himself to the perspective that his fellow man is able to apply to him.<sup>33</sup>

## Exploring and Mimicking: Limited vs. Limitless

Although the ‘you’, the man from the country, and Josef K. do make an effort to exempt themselves from such dependence on the law of history by evoking its lost truth, it turns out that their exposures to it set unbridgeable limits upon their exemptions. However, Kafka’s figures also engage some further technologies of exemption from the vicissitudes of history, as epitomized by Robinson’s *attentive exploration* of the ‘heterotopia’ that his fellow men have relegated him to. Recall that the man from the country, who decided to wait before the Law’s door instead of entering through it, carefully explores the doorkeeper during his yearlong sitting until ‘he has come to know even the fleas in his fur collar’.<sup>34</sup> As Kafka notes in his diary, Robinson’s idea was to get to know the terms

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<sup>29</sup> See Franz Kafka, *Briefe 1902-1924*, ed. Max Brod (Fischer: Frankfurt am Main, 1966), 240-1.

<sup>30</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 164.

<sup>31</sup> Kafka, *Before the Law*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923*, 221; 16 January 1922.

<sup>33</sup> Franz, Kafka, “‘Er’”. Aufzeichnungen aus dem Jahre 1920”, in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. Novellen, Skizzen, Aphorismen aus dem Nachlass. *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1980), 220.

<sup>34</sup> Kafka, *Before the Law*, 23.

of his banishment as accurately as possible in order to outmanoeuvre them.<sup>35</sup> Like the ‘you’, the man from the country, and Josef K., he operates as the suppressed remnant of prehistoric time amidst the world of historical progress, which Benjamin rightly takes to be Kafka’s favourite kind of figures.<sup>36</sup> Attached to the ‘flame’ of this time that shines in the darkness of their ‘heterotopias’, the explorers have a more active attitude to their ‘historical fate’ than the evokers, although the depth of their exploration depends upon the narrative position that the author assigns them.

They figure either as protagonists or narrators, animal or humble. To the first category belongs, for instance, Bucephalus, Alexander the Great’s battle horse, whom the narrator of ‘The New Advocate’ presents as the remnant of remote empires in the modern labyrinthine world that does not leave space for their historic undertakings or heroic deeds. In this world, nobody really knows the law that he or she ought to follow and, besides, there is no leader who epitomizes it. Faced with such uneasy circumstances, Bucephalus turns into a peculiar advocate who, instead of practicing this imaginary law, scrutinizes its books. As an envoy of the lost truth, he is better equipped to uncover the restrictions of the new one. Whereas Bucephalus is only a protagonist, from whom the story’s narrator is slightly distanced, the explorer in ‘The Problem of Our Laws’ is its humble narrator who takes a slightly ironical distance from the explorations that have been undertaken by his group of people:

Some of us among the people have attentively scrutinized the doings of the nobility since the earliest times and possess records made by our forefathers – records which we have conscientiously continued – and claim to recognize amid the countless number of facts certain main tendencies which permit of this or that historical formulation; but when in accordance with these scrupulously tested and logically ordered conclusions we seek to adjust ourselves somewhat for the present or the future, everything becomes uncertain, and our work seems only an intellectual game, for perhaps these laws that we are trying to unravel do not exist at all.<sup>37</sup>

This self-reflective explorer, who explores the explorations themselves, reappears among others as the humble stonemason in ‘At the Construction of the Great Wall of China’, the learned ape in ‘A Report to an Academy’, or the dog-loner in the ‘Investigations of a Dog’. Guided by their exploratory spirit, all of them undergo the same ‘vindictive’ transformation from almost subhuman instances into the agencies who, as it were, develop superhuman abilities.

The narrator of the ‘Investigations of a Dog’ parts ways with other dogs because he cannot familiarize himself with their ‘many distinctions of class, of kind, of occupation’ that widely separate them from one another and engage them ‘in strange vocations that are often incomprehensible even to our canine neighbors’.<sup>38</sup> Under such compartmentalized circumstances, he sticks to the ‘communal impulse’ that got lost in

<sup>35</sup> Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910-1923*, trans J. Kresh and M. Greenberg (New York City: Schocken Books, 1988), 387.

<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death’ (1934), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 131.

<sup>37</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘The Problem of Our Laws’, in *The Complete Stories*, trans. W. and E. Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 482.

<sup>38</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘Investigations of a Dog’, 312.

the canine prehistory.<sup>39</sup> Being thus 'stranded in the present',<sup>40</sup> like many of Kafka's other figures, he lives 'solitary and withdrawn', as 'a somewhat cold, reserved, shy, and calculating' dog, 'with nothing to occupy me save my hopeless but, as far as I am concerned, indispensable little investigations'.<sup>41</sup> His investigations make him sceptical of the so-called historical progress.

It is as if one were to praise someone because with the years he grows older, and in consequence comes nearer and nearer to death with increasing speed. [...] I can only see decline everywhere, in saying which, however, I do not mean that earlier generations were essentially better than ours, but only younger; that was their great advantage, their memory was not so overburdened as ours today, it was easier to get them to speak out, and even if nobody actually succeeded in doing that, the possibility of it was greater, and it is indeed this greater sense of possibility that moves us so deeply when we listen to those old and strangely simple stories.<sup>42</sup>

In the background of historical necessity, the narrator's investigations uncover the contingency of prehistory when 'the edifice of dogdom was still loosely put together, the true Word could still have intervened, planning or replanning the structure, changing it at will, transforming it into its opposite'.<sup>43</sup> As a different investigator from the institutional ones of today – the one devoted to the lost truth of the past – he prizes this 'freedom higher than everything else. Freedom! Certainly such freedom as is possible today is a wretched business. But nevertheless freedom, nevertheless a possession'.<sup>44</sup>

The dog's unshakeable 'sense of potentiality',<sup>45</sup> finds its corroboration in Josef K.'s repeated catching sight of possibilities that were discarded, or at least neglected, by so-called historical progress. Acting as Benjamin's 'chronic' who lets 'nothing that ever happened' go unnoticed,<sup>46</sup> he scrutinizes apparently insignificant scenes, such as the exterior and environment of the building in which his first hearing takes place,<sup>47</sup> a horrible suburban scene that has no visible connection with his case,<sup>48</sup> and the three 'shining' scenes while the guards are taking him to the execution site: first, in an illuminated window, two small children in a playpen,<sup>49</sup> then '[t]he water, glittering and quivering in the moonlight', and finally how '[e]verything was bathed in moonlight, with the naturalness and calm no other light possesses'.<sup>50</sup> Again and again, the 'moon grammar' fascinates Kafka's assignees but since they still share their fellow beings' daylight, they

<sup>39</sup> Kafka, 'Investigations of a Dog', 312.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> Kafka, 'Investigations of a Dog', 311.

<sup>42</sup> Kafka, 'Investigations of a Dog', 330-31.

<sup>43</sup> Kafka, 'Investigations of a Dog', 331.

<sup>44</sup> Kafka, 'Investigations of a Dog', 346.

<sup>45</sup> This concept (*Möglichkeitssinn*) is connected with the hero of Robert Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities* (first volume 1930) who develops 'primal resistance of the heart' to the 'hardened world' into which one was 'involuntarily put' (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* 130). 'You cannot find anywhere a sufficient reason that everything came as it had come; it also could have turned out differently' (131).

<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 252.

<sup>47</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 100.

<sup>49</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 161.

<sup>50</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 163.

are prevented to indulge in it to the same extent as the author who enjoys the complete seclusion of a ‘dead man’.<sup>51</sup>

Next to exploring prehistory’s possibilities, there are figures who *spontaneously mimic* it amidst history. To illustrate this further technology of exempting oneself from history, in his essay on Kafka, Benjamin introduces the peculiar figure of Odradek as a most bastardly and, at the same time, a most mobile ‘receptacle of the forgotten’.<sup>52</sup> By his monstrous outlook, Odradek epitomizes the ““distorted” form which things assume in oblivion’.<sup>53</sup> However, portrayed as being permanently on the move and with an ‘indeterminate residence’, he ‘stays alternately in the attic, on the staircase, in the corridors, and in the hall’. He is so ‘extraordinarily mobile and uncatchable’ that the ‘family father’ is concerned he will, as his family’s most shameful representative, finally outlive it.<sup>54</sup> What makes these outsiders endure, is that history has turned them into its shame, which, paradoxically, makes them feel shame for history, i.e. take on the role of its denouncers.

This turnover of history’s culprits into its denouncers is corroborated by the final sentences of *The Trial*, in which Josef K. is ashamed for being treated ‘like a dog’ by his executors. ‘It seemed as if his shame would live on after him’.<sup>55</sup> According to the ‘Letter to the Father’, it is the same shame that Kafka-son feels for Kafka-father who never stops humiliating him and his friends by applying various animal attributes to them.<sup>56</sup> Whereas the father used to stigmatize them as vermin who ought to be ‘euthanized’,<sup>57</sup> the son pays him back by adopting the role of a parasite that ‘not only stings but also, to support his life, sucks the blood’.<sup>58</sup> The euthanizing thus changes not only direction but also its carrier. Instead of readily acknowledging an agency that punishes, degrades, and wounds them, the ‘misfits’ take subterraneous revenge upon it. By dismantling the logics of power that inheres in history’s apparently egalitarian law, they enable the prehistorical law of vengeance to outlive its historical ‘overcoming’. The operation that carries out this turnover has all the characteristics of ‘subversive mimicry’ as analysed by Homi Bhabha in postcolonial circumstances.<sup>59</sup> But whereas Kafka makes his figures perform it visibly for the readers, his author reserves for himself an invisible, ‘parasitic’ manner of its performance. In his diary entry of 28 September 1917, he depicts his revengeful narrative strategy as the exposure of the moral weaknesses of other people in such a way that humankind does not notice this insidious public operation of its sending to hell, but accepts it with universal approval and love for the sinner who sent it to hell.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Felice*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1967), 412.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka’, 132.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka’, 133.

<sup>54</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘Die Sorge des Hausvaters’, in *Erzählungen*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986), 130.

<sup>55</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 165.

<sup>56</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘Brief an den Vater’, in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1958), 141.

<sup>57</sup> Kafka, ‘Brief an den Vater’, 161.

<sup>58</sup> Kafka, ‘Brief an den Vater’, 161.

<sup>59</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge), 1994, 94-132.

<sup>60</sup> Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923*, 522-3.

## Entrusting: Direct and Indirect

Although prominent among Kafka’s subaltern figures, evocation, exploration, and subversive mimicry are not the only techniques by which they undermine the idea of historical progress. There are other ‘receptacles of the forgotten’ in his work, whose manner of paying back to the representatives of history is less surreptitious. Consider the officer from ‘The Penal Colony’ who fanatically adheres to his former commandant’s execution rituals, which historical progress has since surpassed and which his new commandant therefore forbade. This brings him into a position similar to that of the ‘you’, the man from the country, and Josef K., all of whom are committed to a past to which they are deprived access, although his room for manoeuvre is more promising than theirs. While they, unable to materialize their commitment in their present circumstances, find their refuge in the reconfigured past, the officer, surrounded on his island by the same deafness for the legacy of the past, has the traveling explorer available, to redeem his endangered mission.<sup>61</sup> This opportunity somewhat empowers his position in comparison to theirs. By *entrusting* the travelling explorer, he behaves like the emperor from ‘An Imperial Legacy’, who tries to save his endangered empire by entrusting its mission to the messenger. In the same way as the emperor checks if the messenger has properly understood his message, the officer repeatedly checks if the explorer has properly deciphered the message that he wants to entrust him with.<sup>62</sup> However, as with the emperor’s message, in the new world nobody really cares for it,<sup>63</sup> the explorer proves repeatedly unable to discern it,<sup>64</sup> which forces the officer to ‘yell in the explorer’s ear [...] with the full force of his lungs’.<sup>65</sup>

It is this repeated shouting that discloses his powerlessness in comparison with the emperor who *whispers* his message into the messenger’s ear.<sup>66</sup> Whereas the emperor is superior to the messenger and all others, the officer is inferior to both the new commander and the traveling explorer. He is forced to convince the traveling explorer to change the inimical attitude of the new commander toward the legacy of the past. He presses into him, with a ‘strong insistence’ and ‘clenched fists’, the task of helping him against the acting commandant.<sup>67</sup> The explorer’s calculated reservations drive him further into seizing his trustee by both arms, gazing into his face, and shouting loudly.<sup>68</sup> In this way, a powerless submission to the former commandant turns into a powerful aggression toward the traveling explorer who declines to share it and, after this aggression fails to achieve its envisaged effect, into aggression against the aggressor himself. Once the

<sup>61</sup> In W. and E. Muir’s translation, this figure is introduced simply as an ‘explorer’ although the German word *Forschungsreisende* unmistakably points out the travelling (i.e. limited) character of his exploration, which is very important for my argument. This is why I consistently translate the German word as ‘traveling explorer’.

<sup>62</sup> Franz Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, in *The Complete Stories*, 173; 186.

<sup>63</sup> At the very beginning of the story the narrator says that the disinterested explorer ‘accepted merely out of politeness the Commandant’s invitation to witness the execution’. ‘Nor did the colony itself betray much interest in this execution’ (165). ‘[T]here was no one present’. The soldier who attended the execution out of duty, ‘let his head hang, and was paying no attention to anything’ (167). In short, only the officer was really interested in it.

<sup>64</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 173-74; 186.

<sup>65</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 174.

<sup>66</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 184.

<sup>67</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 182.

<sup>68</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 184.

traveling explorer refused to carry out his plan, the officer sets the condemned man free, takes his place, and lets the torturing apparatus execute him himself. This abrupt substitution reinvigorates his constant pending between the powerless inferiority and powerful superiority. Through his commitment to the forgotten past, he already acted as a doppelganger of the inferior ‘you’, and through his entrusting of the traveling explorer as the doppelganger of the superior emperor. *Almost the same but not quite* like each of them, he contagiously couples their inferiority and superiority with one another. At the end he undertakes a more radical immersion into inferiority in order to get the superior fame of the commandant whom he is attached to, and whom his ‘nameless adherents’ have secretly buried in the teahouse, in expectation of his triumphant revival.<sup>69</sup>

But the officer’s self-sacrificial replacement of the condemned man contains even further potential for the contagious entanglement of opposites. It is worth remembering that the condemned man, whose place the officer takes, was a ‘doggish submissive’ servant who suddenly assaulted his superior.<sup>70</sup> Thus he has undergone the same transformation from complete subordination into a will for power as did the officer. In his seminal study of the story, Walter Müller-Seidel describes the officer’s verbal attack on the traveling explorer as an attempt at domination by speech (*Herrschaft durch Rede*), comparing it to the behaviour of Kafka’s father, which, as described in his ‘Letter to the Father’, consisted of scolding, threatening, irony, evil laughter and self-bemoaning.<sup>71</sup> In the same way as the father’s violence destroyed the son’s capacities to reply, the officer’s violence silences those of the traveling explorer, who barely gets a word in. Their aggressive speech engraves itself on the docile bodies of their interlocutors in a similar way to the torturing machine, bereaving their victims of the chance to defend themselves against their operations.<sup>72</sup> Thus, invisibly, through his firm commitment to ‘prehistory’, the officer acts as the doppelganger of Kafka-son, and through the violent way in which he demonstrates this commitment, as the doppelganger of Kafka-father. *Almost the same but not quite* like the son or the father for that matter, which means the one as obstructively enabled by the other. The substitution for the condemned man intensifies this mutual obstructive enabling of opposites because, on the one hand, one cannot prove one’s commitment to the past in a more submissive way than through one’s sacrifice for it and, on the other, one cannot entrust the other to carry on one’s imperilled mission in a more aggressive way than this.

The sketched contagious entanglement of opposites makes the very core of Kafka’s narrative construction. Among all other things, it explains why, although the narrator exposes the officer’s past-oriented fanaticism as violent, he hesitates to channel his sympathies toward the traveling explorer as the representative of historical progress. Unlike the above delineated inferior and confined explorers, this one is superior and mobile. The narrator portrays him as an indifferent visitor who arrives in the colony as the deputy of the so-called progressive part of the world, which establishes such colonies

<sup>69</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 192.

<sup>70</sup> Focalized through the traveling explorer’s perspective, the narrator confides to the reader that ‘the condemned man looked so like a submissive dog that one might have thought he could be left to run free on the surrounding hills and would only need to be whistled for when the execution was due to begin’ (165). After the captain lashed him across the face with his riding whip because he fell asleep on duty, the servant ‘caught hold of his master’s legs, shook him, and cried: “Throw that whip away or I’ll eat you alive”’ (171). It is for this offence that he was sentenced.

<sup>71</sup> Kafka, ‘Brief an den Vater’, 132.

<sup>72</sup> Walter Müller-Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen. Kafkas Erzählung “In der Strafkolonie” im europäischen Kontext* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986), 123-4.

as the dumping grounds for the ‘retrograde’ elements of their societies. The story was inspired by the book *Meine Reise nach den Strafkolonien* (*My Trip to the Penal Colonies*, 1912) by the German criminologist Robert Heindl, who was appointed by his Empire to visit other empires’ colonies and to investigate the possibility of establishing a German penal colony along a similar model.<sup>73</sup> This is why the narrator presents him as thinking of himself in the following way:

He was neither a member of the penal colony nor a citizen of the state to which it belonged. [...] [H]e travelled only as an observer, with no intention at all of altering other people’s methods of administering justice.<sup>74</sup>

Even if the officer’s ‘explanation of the judicial procedure had not satisfied him’<sup>75</sup> because he ‘was fundamentally honorable and unafraid’,<sup>76</sup> the explorer had to ‘remind himself that this was in any case a penal colony where extraordinary measures were needed and that military discipline must be enforced to the last’.<sup>77</sup> Not only is the narrator but also the officer well aware of the explorer’s hesitation to intervene into the retrograde administration of a colony as he undoubtedly would do if he would notice its manifestations in his own country. Consider the officer’s slightly ironical comment implying that, although they are both serving their countries, contrary to the officer’s confinement on this godforsaken island, the explorer is freely traveling throughout the world, which enabled him to develop a more tolerant view of it.

[Y]ou have seen and learned to appreciate the peculiarities of many peoples, and so you would not be likely to take a strong line against our proceedings, as you might do in your own country.<sup>78</sup>

As regards the ‘tolerance’ of the traveling explorer’s worldview, both the officer and the explorer know that colonies were established precisely to make space for brutalities, which were forbidden in the public spheres of developed countries. Since the explorer perceives the condemned man as a ‘stupid-looking, wide-mouthed creature with bewildered hair and face’ (165), he obviously does not think that the highest achievements of human civilization were envisaged for such ‘poor, humble creatures’.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, when the soldier and the condemned man consider jumping into the boat that takes the explorer off the island, he lifts ‘a heavy knotted rope from the floor boards’ and ‘threatens them with it’ to keep them from attempting such.<sup>80</sup> This gesture manifests his conviction, characteristic of the panicking power-keepers in the outgoing European empires that such ‘degenerate creatures’ have to be kept in colonies to prevent them from poisoning the ‘healthy organisms’ of advanced societies. Not only did Kafka’s father support this eugenic policy but also many notable scientists of the time, such as the Austrian criminologist Hans Groß, who even encouraged the hospitalization of his hyper-sensible

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<sup>73</sup> Müller-Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen*, 80.

<sup>74</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 176.

<sup>75</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 171.

<sup>76</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 184.

<sup>77</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 171.

<sup>78</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 180.

<sup>79</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 191.

<sup>80</sup> Kafka, ‘In the Penal Colony’, 192.

son Otto on this very basis.<sup>81</sup> If society cannot eradicate or transport its ‘misfits’ far away, read his opinion, it should at least isolate them in domestic asylums. Kafka, who was similarly discriminated by his own father, not only shared the destiny of this ‘weak’ generation of intellectuals and artists but actively co-created its resilient consciousness.<sup>82</sup> Thus, if the officer on the one hand redoubles the power keepers’ violence, the traveling explorer on the other copies the power keepers’ discrimination. Instead of an *either-or* between them, the reader is confronted with *neither-nor*. As both are contaminated by their opposites, he or she cannot identify with any of them.

The traveling explorer’s relationship to the officer has equally contagious effects for both. As his tolerance for diverse habits is gradually dismantled as the intolerance for ‘degenerate creatures’, he repeats the officer’s perversion. But opposed to the calculated cynicism of his worldview – he has limited empathy for the officer<sup>83</sup> but none for the condemned man<sup>84</sup> – the officer readily accepts torture and death for his commitment. Along with his commitment to the past, this readiness parallels that of Kafka himself, who made himself famous for his highly elaborated self-punishing imagery that induced feelings of liberation and happiness.<sup>85</sup> In Kafka’s horrifying imagination,<sup>86</sup> setting oneself free is always associated with one’s exposure to torture. Thus, in his ‘Letter to the Father’, he remarks that his liberation from the father reminded him of a worm that, ‘its rear end trampled by a foot, tears itself away with the front end and drags itself aside’.<sup>87</sup> Also, he once wrote to Milena:

Yes, torture is very important to me, I am concerned with nothing but being-tortured and torturing! Why? [...] The stupidity that lies in it [...] I once expressed in this way: ‘The animal escapes the whip of the Lord, whipping itself to become the Lord, and does not know that this is only a phantasy, created by a new knot in the Lord’s whip belt.’<sup>88</sup>

Yet even if only a phantasy, the self-punishment makes the dreamer ‘so free, convinced and happy, a sight that would stir the gods, and even this stirring of the gods I felt almost

<sup>81</sup> Müller-Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen*, 67.

<sup>82</sup> Müller-Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen*, 70-1.

<sup>83</sup> Müller-Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen*, 70-1. He ‘admires the officer’ (167), entrusting to him ‘I shall never in any circumstances betray your confidence’ and ‘your sincere conviction has touched me, even though it cannot influence my judgment’ (184).

<sup>84</sup> Müller-Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen*, 70-1. Next to the explorer’s perception of the condemned man as an ugly creature and a ‘submissive dog’ (165), there is his conviction that ‘the condemned man was a complete stranger, not a fellow countryman or even at all sympathetic to him’ (176).

<sup>85</sup> Müller-Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen*, 18-19.

<sup>86</sup> For example, in his diary entry of 4 May 1913 he reports the resurfacing of the ‘image of a pork butcher’s broad knife that quickly and with mechanical regularity chops into me from the side and cuts off very thin slices which fly off almost like shavings because of the speed of the work’. In his diary entry of 21 July 1913, we read: ‘I am pulled through the ground floor window of a house by a rope placed around the neck and recklessly, as before one who does not pay attention, my body, bleeding and lacerated, continues to pass through all the ceilings, furniture, walls and attics, until on the roof an empty loop appears, which has lost my bodily leftovers while breaking through the roofing tiles’. And the entry of 16 September 1915 reads: ‘Between throat and chin would seem to be the most rewarding spot to stab. Lift the chin and stick the knife into the tensed muscles. But this spot is probably rewarding only in one’s imagination. You expect there to see a magnificent flow of blood and a network of sinews and little bones like you find in the legs of roast turkeys.’

<sup>87</sup> Kafka, ‘Brief an den Vater’, 147-8.

<sup>88</sup> Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*, ed. Jürgen Börn and Michael Müller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1983), 29.

to tears'.<sup>89</sup> The overlap of Kafka's tortured body with that of the officer, who willingly takes the prisoner's place on the lethal bed of the apparatus, becomes stunning in the diary entry of 3 August 1917, in which he describes his phantasy:

Once more I screamed at the top of my voice into the world. Then they shoved a gag into my mouth, handcuffed my hands and feet and tied a cloth around my eyes. I was rolled back and forth several times, I was put upright and laid down again several times, one pulled jerkily on my legs that I bucked in pain, they let me lie quietly for a while, but then they stabbed me deeply with something sharp, randomly here and there, wherever their mood drove them.<sup>90</sup>

If the officer's punishing treatment of himself mirrors that of his author, then the author has sneaked into his skin in the same hideous way in which the officer, in his imaginary scenarios, sneaks into the skin of the explorer and the Commandant. He boldly speculates what the one and the other have thought and done, or would think or do under given circumstances, drawing repercussions for his actions against them from these conjectures.<sup>91</sup> By assimilating their optics to direct it against them, he practices 'subversive mimicry'. After it fails to achieve the desired effect, he engages their presumed degradation of him *against him himself*, ultimately eliminating this 'incorrigible remnant of prehistory' from history. If Bhabha for his part analysed 'subversive mimicry', this inverse operation of self-degradation through the point of view of the others was analysed by his predecessors, William Du Bois and Frantz Fanon. Du Bois writes of 'double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that always looks on in amused contempt and pity'.<sup>92</sup> Fanon points out its pathogenic consequences, turning the failed self into an abject object of constant obsession, self-reproach and punishment.<sup>93</sup>

The officer engages 'subversive mimicry' in the direct transference of his trust on the traveling explorer but, after its manipulation fails, he switches to an indirect entrusting of unknown descendants as characteristic of all self-victimizing acts. The distant progeny is expected to show respect for the legacy of the sacrificed and to be attached to it across historical ruptures and lines of difference, in the same way as the 'you' had been attached to the imperial legacy in the age of its complete oblivion. But unlike the emperor who possessed powerful means for the worldwide distribution of his legacy, the officer's legacy remains dependent upon the only 'assignee' who can transmit it further, the traveling explorer, who for his part mercilessly exposes it as fanatic and perilous. Therefore, whenever Kafka's 'assignees' entrust their victimhood to the others, they manifest their dependency on these others' reaction. They are simply too close to these others to undertake an independent action of their entrusting. Recall how the chaplain responds to Josef K. when asked to come down from the pulpit: 'I had to speak to you from a distance at first, otherwise I let myself be too easily influenced and forget my official duty'.<sup>94</sup> Distance is the basic prerequisite for the execution of power.

Kafka understands this all too well in his diary entry of 21 August 1913: 'Talks take away the importance, the seriousness, the truth of all what I think', i.e. because they take place between interlocutors who are close to one another. Therefore, he confides to Felice:

<sup>89</sup> Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923*, 546.

<sup>90</sup> Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910-1923*, 816-17.

<sup>91</sup> Kafka, 'In the Penal Colony', 180-4.

<sup>92</sup> William E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 8.

<sup>93</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans C. L. Markman (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 210ff.

<sup>94</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 153.

‘Writing is the only form of expression that suits me’,<sup>95</sup> as it addresses someone distant who belongs to another world. Concomitantly, his fictional ‘assignees’ who directly commit their trustees are *almost the same but not quite* like the author, which now *nota bene* means not contagiously *entangled with* but irrevocably *subordinate to* him. While he entangled them with one another, their author took care to distance himself from their tightly connected histories. This is his way of paying back his former fellow beings for sending him into irrevocable exile, and thus of enabling the law of prehistory to triumph over the law of history. But it is precisely by letting this triumph finally take place that Kafka may have exposed his technique of authoring his narratives and thus, involuntarily, re-entangled the author with his assignees.

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<sup>95</sup> Kafka, *Briefe an Felice*, 448.

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### **Aproape la fel, dar nu chiar. Kafka și cesonarii săi**

## **Rezumat**

Kafka a punctat întotdeauna faptul că societatea modernă își transformă cetățenii în animale, fiecare fiind încis în cușca lui. Însă, multe dintre personajele sale, alungate în întunericul propriei lor izolări, descoperă ceea ce îi face să scape de lumina zilei acestei societăți. Atașându-se acestui adevăr uitat prin evocarea, explorarea și mimetismul subversive ale acestuia, personajele se eliberează de presiunea legii istorice. În opozиie cu aceste personaje care, pironite în spațiile lor limitate, încearcă să remedieze situațiile neplăcute în care se află, Kafka își plasează autorul complet „deasupra acestui zbucium”, într-un adăpost postum care îi dă posibilitatea să trateze adevărul reprimat într-un mod mai calculat, mai strategic. În timp ce încâlcește destinele personajelor între ele, el are grijă să se distanțeze de istoriile lor strâns legate.