Positional Outsiders and the Performance of Sacrifice: The Case of Franz Kafka

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Abstract: After the First World War, state of exception became the dominant paradigm of government in Europe, reducing many distinct identities to bare life. Without having done anything wrong, they were calmly eliminated from their states' citizen rights, bereft of human status, and forced into a subhuman existence. Some prominent post-imperial writers turned these "positional outsiders" into the sources of their ethical commitment. They derived their literature from these outsiders' "zones of indistinction" (Agamben), i.e. the containers of subalterns whom the historical world has pushed into oblivion. Franz Kafka's authorial commitment to them is well-known. However, at the same time, he was aware of the insidious character of their literary redemption because the author who seemingly sacrifices himself for them, in fact enjoys the comfort of detachment that is withhold to both his or her characters and readers. Unlike their real sacrifice, his is merely performed. By exposing through his or her performance their fragility, the author betrays them. "I am not really striving to be good," writes Kafka, "but very much the contrary," to become "the only sinner who won't be roasted." I will explore the consequences of this political contamination of his narrative ethics.

Keywords: positional outsiders; sacrifice; narrative authority; subversive mimicry; commonality

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标题：局外人状态与献祭的展示：以弗兰兹·卡夫卡为例

摘要：第一次世界大战后，异常状态成为欧洲政府的主导范式，许多具有不同身份的人沦为“赤裸生命”。这些无辜之人没有做错任何事情，却悄然丧失了基本公民权利，被剥夺了人的地位，被迫过着非人的生活。这种“局外人状态”成为一些著名的后帝国时代作家在创作中体现伦理责任的来源。他

们的作品关注这些局外人所处的“无区分地带”（阿甘本），即那些被历史强行抹去的“下等人”的生存空间。弗兰兹·卡夫卡在文学创作中对这类人物的关注广为人知，但他并没有忽视这种文学上的补偿潜在的危害。作家表面上为这些“下等人”做出了自我牺牲，实际上却享受与其作品人物和读者保持距离的超脱之境。“下等人”的献祭真实存在，而作家的献祭不过是一种展示。作家通过展示暴露了“下等人”的脆弱，同时也背叛了这些人。卡夫卡写道：“我并非一心向善”，“恰恰相反”，“要成为唯一一个不受惩罚的罪人”。 本文将探究这种政治干扰对其叙事伦理造成的影响。

关键词：局外人状态；祭祀；叙事权威；颠覆性模拟；共性

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The Unprocessed Residues of European Modernity: Ferments of Alternative Commonalities

The project of European modernity as launched by the Enlightenment appears to have been, from its very outset, accompanied by a traumatic re-emergence of “animality” within the envisaged “humanity.” Already one of the Enlightenment’s chief engineers, Immanuel Kant was at pains to emancipate man from his “animal” habits. In his treatise “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” (1784), he states that if history were delivered to man’s naturally inborn selfish goals, it would amount to a “senseless course” of devastation, upheavals and the complete exhaustion of human powers (Kant 42, 47). Since his natural disposition is constructed out of “warped wood,” man needs mankind “to break his self-will and force him to obey a universally valid will under which everyone can be free” (46). However, by forcing man to overcome his selfishness under the custody of mankind, Kant involuntarily introduced a new discrimination between the improvable and incorrigible humans who doggedly adhere to their base passions. The former enter progressive history, the latter a regressive myth. In the outcome, mankind establishes an asymmetry between its active and passive constituents. To these passive ones, as Dipesh Chakrabarty remarks, imperial centers allocated a pre-modern place “elsewhere” and an outdated “not yet” time, relegating them to an enduring “waiting room of history” (Chakrabarty 7). Although he primarily addresses Europe’s relationship toward its *external* outsiders, his description also perfectly fits Europe’s at-

titude to its *internal* outsiders. Ever since the age of Enlightenment, the production of both has accompanied the project of modernization as a dark shadow.

Even after the national reconfiguration of Europe's imperial space in the aftermath of the First World War, the asymmetry was not abolished. The envisaged political unification reclaimed the mobility of people and goods as its chief objective, declaring people free to reshape the modes of their commonality. However, if modernity has something to teach us, then it is that "one man's imagined community is another man's political prison" (Appadurai 32). As mobility divided people into its subjects and objects, not everybody in Europe benefited from it. As soon as it entered East Central Europe after the dissolution of empires, it replaced its West European liberating face with a coercive one, initiating huge and hitherto unimaginable migrations of populations. "By 1890 close to 40 percent of all Austro-Hungarians had left their original place of Heimat and migrated to their current homes from another part of the monarchy" (Judson 334). Almost four million men and women moved overseas, but hundreds of thousands would then return after a few years, enormously increasing the populations of imperial cities and thus spawning harsh consequences after the empire's dissolution (335). "The Fall of the Habsburgs automatically turned the 25 percent of the Viennese population born outside the frontiers of the new Austria into foreigners, unless they chose to opt for citizenship" (Hobsbawm 15). By extending its 'egalitarian discrimination', the process of European modernization multiplied its unprocessed residues.

The response of these residues to their dispossession was, to engage Bhabha's vocabulary, "subversive mimicry" (Bhabha 94-132). The railways that were built to enable the centers' economic expansion gradually turned into the periphery's instruments of resistance to it (Schenk). Provincial elites, who were educated in the imperially established provincial schools or in the imperial centers themselves, engaged this knowledge for their opposition to them (Barkey 110). If the idea of this education was to differentiate imperial *societies*, provincial elites engaged it to homogenize their *communities*. The modern invention of society thus inadvertently became "the condition for the more exact profiling of the concept of community, inasmuch as it could now advance into a collective name for all that which cannot be subsumed in the concept of society" (Rosa et al. 2010, 37-38). The delineated operation of re-signifying by adoption, which was already germane of imperial peripheries, re-emerged in the new nation-states after the breakdown of the empires. However, if in the late empires it had been carried by the national elites, as the victims of imperial centers, in the new nation-states the carriers became these elites' subalterns, situated in the new nation states' "zones of indistinction." These zones were reservoirs of

suppressed possibilities that distributed their potentiality into the social aggregate of which they were (an unacknowledged) part, setting in motion this aggregate's disarticulation (Povinelli 3–4; 11–13). A series of contemporary political theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Judith Butler interpret them as the direct outcomes of modernization. In their view, the collateral effect of the production of a homogeneous human world are the would-be humans, the spectral humans, and the non-humans who are prevented from becoming legible within the established space of humanity (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 121; Esposito 209; Butler 92).

Indeed, the geopolitically reconfigured East Central Europe became a harsh political prison for many of its constituencies, which is why their sense of belonging to their newly formed nation-states was replaced with a sense of longing for that which these states excluded from their constitutions and official memories. New state nationalisms befell and impoverished these constituencies, pinned them to the wall of dominating nations, stripped them of choice, silenced their alternatives, and nullified their complex identity with an imposed demonization of the "other" (Brubaker 20-21). Since they longed for a different way to cohabit the political spaces to which they were affiliated, they forged alliances with "spectral humans" elsewhere who also felt "stranded in the present" (Fritzsche). This was now suddenly possible because, while post-imperial Europe's modernization seriously endangered some of its constituencies' material survival, it simultaneously immensely increased the mobility of their imagination (Appadurai 6). Thanks to the substantially improved institutional, traffic and communicational networks, "[e]ven the meanest and most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanizing of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities" became "open to the play of the imagination" (54). Unexpectedly, these positional outsiders got the opportunity to connect to outsiders from other shores who had hitherto been barely known to them, paving the way for alternative, imaginary kinds of human togetherness, resilient to those that were imposed. However, deprived of resources and thus prevented from materializing themselves in given political circumstances, they were projected as commonalities yet-to-come.

Those who felt "stranded in the present" of post-imperial European states engaged fiction as one of the media for establishing their alternative commonalities. Unlike mass media, myths or discursive prose that, by their very nature, address collective audiences, fiction introduces indistinct patterns of affiliation, which through their non-appropriative identification disregard differences among the affiliates. By attending to "the connective tissues and membranes, that animate each case even while enabling the discovery of shared motivations and shared tropes" (Hirsch 206), its authors try to escape their historically and politically established identities.

Following their "appetite for alterity" (Silverman 181), they leave behind their inherited selves and cultural norms in order to align themselves with those who have compulsively lost their "human" face.

Kafka's Narrative Authority: Commitment to Subhuman Creatures

Such authorial self-displacement into the radical otherness of positional outsiders adopted a peculiar form in the works of Franz Kafka, who consistently dispossessed his narrative authority of established "human" attributes. It is worth recalling that his contemporary Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whom Kafka greatly admired (Wanberg; Gray 127; Blanchot 183), described the writer as

> living in the house of time, under the stairs, where everyone must pass him and no one respects him […] an undetected beggar in the place of the dogs […] without a job in this house, without service, without rights, without duty. (Hofmannsthal 66)

In the state of exception that ruled the European political space of his time by making its "givens" dizzy, ambiguous and indeterminate (60), Hofmannsthal sees myriad readers feverishly searching for "the enchantment of the poetry" (62), which is in his opinion only capable of ordering the chaos of the contemporary world (78). In order to rescue them, he entrusts the poet with the mission of sacrificing his human self by creating "every second, with each pulse, under a pressure as if an ocean lays above him, lit by no lamp, not even a mine lamp, surrounded by mocking, confusing voices" (75). Hofmannsthal expects him to act as "a spider, spinning the yarn from his own body, to carry him over the abyss of existence" (75).

Kafka is the epitome of Hofmannsthal's author who, in the house of his time, withdraws into the disregarded place of the dogs by accepting responsibility for *all* inhabitants of the house including its outsiders:

> Each of them is an open wound on his soul. […] he suffers from all them, and by suffering from them, he enjoys them […] he suffers by sensing them so intense […] as if they were human. […] He can leave nothing out. He must not close his eyes to any creature, to any thing, to any phantom, to any spectral product of a human brain. (67)

As the true inheritor of this legacy, Kafka's authorial agency makes itself highly attentive to and respectful of the outsiders that inhabit its fictional 'houses'. His work

teems with creatures that neither completely belong to humankind nor to the animal world. Consider the peculiar figure of Odradek from "The Cares of a Family Man" who, as Benjamin remarks, epitomizes the "distorted" "form which things assume in oblivion" (Benjamin 133). Nevertheless, the narrator allocates to this subhuman creature some superhuman traits, thus making his inferiority superior to his surroundings. 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 nimble and can never be laid hold of" that the "family father" is concerned he will, as his family's most shameful representative, finally outlive it ("The Cares" 469-470). Another case in point is Red Peter, the narrator of "A Report to an Academy," an ape who was forced by his hunters to learn human language but through whose words an ape-like voice still reverberates. Deleuze and Guattari argue that his coughing forms a refrain that turns his "syntax into a cry" (Deleuze and Guattari 13, 26). This cry has the force of an apostrophe, which human language lacks. Developing out of the material body rather than human personality, it deeply disturbs the humans who mistakenly assumed to have put it behind them. Red Peter is thus another positional outsider from one of the innumerous "zones of indistinction," simultaneously inferior and superior to his human surroundings.

In his seminal essay on Kafka, Benjamin pointed out the writer's enduring fascination with such figures that are "neither members of, nor strangers to, any […] groups of figures, but, rather, messengers from one to another" (Benjamin 117). Inhabiting "intermediate worlds," they break out from the restricted mythic space of distinct human history into the unlimited indistinct areas of prehistorical times. This "swampy ground of fluctuating experiences," as Benjamin puts it, "forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products" (131). By incessantly creating such messengers of prehistorical time, Kafka cannot but reveal his own tendency to leap out of the determined course of development as characteristic of human history. Indeed, in his diary entry of 24 January 1922 he notes:

> I want to change my place in the world entirely, which actually means that I want to go to another planet; it would be enough if I could exist alongside myself, it would even be enough if I could consider the spot on which I stand as some other spot. (*The Diaries* 210)

This is precisely what happens in the so-called "he" series of his 1920 diaries in

which he, standing on "some other spot" or "another planet," speaks of himself in the third person. By creating such "higher type of observation" (211), he leaps out of the continuity of his self by opening a gap between its acting and observing parts: the second part now becoming *exterior* to the first, yet without ceasing to be its *constituent*. This "internal exterior" only belongs to the world of human action through its exemption from it. In the same way, the divine world, forever lost to human beings, only belongs to their world through its absence from it, or the sovereign, in the political state of exemption, only participates in its juridical order through his *ecstasy* (i.e. ex-stasis; Agamben, *State of Exception* 35). What we testify to in all these cases is "the topological structure of the state of exception": "*being outside, and yet belonging*" (35). However, unlike his characters that, condemned to the prehistorical "zones of indistinction," live the vulnerable extraterritoriality of subhuman creatures, Kafka pulls his author out, as we will come to see, into the ex-historical and exterritorial 'state of exception' of superhuman agencies.

The Enforced Prehistorical and the Self-appointed Ex-historical Outsiders: Cross-Breeding

This means that we have to distinguish between two kinds of positional outsiders, the *enforced prehistorical* ones and the *self-appointed ex-historical* ones, although Kafka is at constant pains to melt one into another by way of their cross-breeding. The moral extraterritoriality of the first that exposes them to others, and the political ex-territoriality of the second that imposes them upon others, paradoxically support each other. On the one hand, Kafka systematically entitles animal figures or objects by raising them to the status of narrators or focalizers. Besides the humanized ape Red Peter, the cases in point are the verminous bug Gregor Samsa from "The Metamorphosis," the ant from "Josephine the Singer," the presumptive mole from "The Burrow," the dog from "The Investigations of a Dog," and the bridge from "The Bridge." Kafka also entitles human outsiders by transforming them into interrogators: consider the stonemason from "The Great Wall of China," the provincials from "The Refusal" and "The Problem of Our Laws," the hungry "Bucket Rider," the businessman from "The Married Couple," the unexpected prisoner from "The Knock at the Manor Gate," the man from the country in "Before the Law," and the land surveyor in *The Castle*. As unexpected victims of certain political, legal, or

economic configurations of forces, all of them are "positional outsiders."[1]

On the other hand, Kafka lets his author, as the self-appointed outsider, unreservedly commit himself to the characters as the enforced outsiders, as if searching for the ethical justification for his political exemption from their world. It has been noted that Kafka's passionate attachment to enforced outsiders grew out of his personal experience of multiple dispossession. (Litowitz 104) He was a German-speaking secular Jew in the Czech capital Prague who, as such, was accepted neither by the Jews nor Germans nor Czechs; besides, he was an outsider to his family that was dominated by his father's despotic rule; also, he was an attorney at the Workers' Insurance Corporation who fought for injured Czech workers, themselves outsiders in the face of Austrian law; and, after the First World War, his generation fell outside of the law too. In a diary entry from the turbulent 1920, he remarks:

> Until now we had our noses stuck into the tide of the times, now we step back, former swimmers, present walkers, and are lost. We are outside the law, no one knows it and yet everyone treats us accordingly. (*The Diaries* 27)

Ultimately, considering that the Austrians in Prague, who administered the city, blamed their Jewish co-citizens for having stolen and misused their language, Kafka likewise became a stranger to his German mother tongue. Terrified by this series of dispossessions, he withdrew into a corner of existence, reduced to bare life. "What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe." (8) Under the circumstances of a permanent state of exception, it appears, no group-belonging offered protection from the sudden deprivation.

This experience of constant threat and crisis of public space accounts for Kafka's relinquishment of human attributes, relationships, and connections. He and humans parted ways, replacing mutual belonging with a powerful longing for one another from both his and his fellow beings' side:

> Without forebears, without marriage, without heirs, with a fierce longing for forebears, marriage and heirs. They all of them stretch out their hands to me: forebears, marriage and heirs, but too far away for me. (207)

1 Douglas Litowicz proposes "situational outsiders", defining them as "outsiders by virtue of their situation" (105), but I prefer the attribute "positional" considering these outsiders' structural banishment into the political and social indistinction. As a result, "Kafka depicts outsiders who never win their battle for justice, instead remaining forever confused, paranoid, ignorant, submissive, alienated, and self-defeating" (105).

> If he is together with someone, this second person reaches out for him and he is helplessly delivered into his hand. If he is alone, all mankind reaches out for him—but the innumerable outstretched arms become entangled with one another and no one reaches to him. (229)

> I am away from home and must write home always again, even if all my home had long ago swum into eternity. All my writing is nothing but the banner of Robinson on the highest point of the island. (*Briefe an Felice* 392, my trans.)

Kafka transferred this unrealizable longing for fellow beings from his life's reality into the relationships between the author and characters in his fictions. Both relationships, those in his life's reality as well as those in his fictions, are thus ruled by the same principle: Only after both sides are forever prevented from physically reaching one another does the possibility for their dreaming identification with the other become wide open. The failure of *belonging* to one another releases the energy of *longing* for one another. Consider the "You" at the end of "An Imperial Message" who sits at the window, when the evening arrives that separates him or her from the daylight reality, and dreams to himself or herself about the will of the dead man. Many of Kafka's characters dream to themselves of such authorial exemption from their frustrating present by attaching themselves to a lost past, but, cut off from the possibility to reach such exemption, compensatorily oblige their selected trustees to provide it in the future. This is how their subhuman prehistorical condition strives to transform itself into a superhuman ex-historical one. Scenes of such goal-oriented entrustment are abundant in Kafka's fiction: In "The Penal Colony" the officer twice screams in the traveling explorer's ear ("In the Penal Colony" 174, 184), in "An Imperial Message" the emperor whispers in the ear of his messenger, demanding that the messenger whispers it back into his ear ("An Imperial Message" 24), in "A Hunger Artist" the protagonist speaks "with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right into the overseer's ear" ("A Hunger Artist" 309), in "Before the Law" the man from the country poses his last question right into the ear of the doorkeeper ("Before the Law" 23), in "A Country Doctor" the ill boy whispers "Let me die" into the doctor's ear ("A Country Doctor" 251), in "The Great Wall of China" an unknown boatman whispers his imperial message into the ear of the narrator's father ("The News of the Building of the Wall: A Fragment" 280).

Now consider the opposite perspective of the author. Being safely exempted

from history, he dreams that the characters who suffer amidst its turmoil will forget about his comfortable ex-historical shelter. But, bereft of the possibility to approach them directly and check whether they really did so, he turns to the reader, seeking to seduce the latter into ignoring his privilege in the same smooth way. As the characters are in another world, the reader is the only available trustee. However, as he or she nevertheless belongs to a different life history than the author, he or she cannot but be distrustful of the author's manipulative act of entrustment. As Kafka spells out (*The Diaries* 321), to win the reader's trust under such unfavorable conditions, he calculatingly attaches him or her to a character who faces an impending death. As the lamenting reader concentrates on the dying character, s/he embraces the author's insidious self-exemption from human death with approval and love. The author thus wins favor in the reader's eyes by apparently *adopting* the latter's "basic predilections, desires, moral ideals," while he is in fact *subverting* them, i.e. outfoxing the reader.

The Political "Selection of Mercies": Kafka Read through His Descendants

Hence in authoring his works, Kafka engages the same method of subversive mimicry against the reader that the outsiders in his fictions apply against the characters in power. If we recall Bhabha's analysis of this technology of (de-)identification as the main *political instrument* of postcolonial selves (Bhabha 94-132), we will not be astonished to find Kafka's postcolonial admirer J. M. Coetzee stating about his own technique of authoring:

> [T]he last thing I want to do is to *defiantly* embrace the ethical as against the political. […] [I]f I speak from the […] negative pole, it is because I am drawn or pushed there by force, even a violence, operating over the whole of the discursive field that at this moment (April 1990) we inhabit, you and I. (*Doubling the Point* 200)

After all, Coetzee was born into the white minority which, on behalf of two European empires, the Dutch and British, settled, ruled and exploited South Africa from the early 17th century deep into the 20th century by dispossessing, discriminating, and mistreating its native population. The deep entanglement of the whites in imperial violence is the main issue of his first novel *Dusklands* (1974), with regard to whose 'Vietnam' part he remarks:

> I would regard it as morally questionable to write something like the second

> part of *Dusklands*—a *fiction*, note—from a position that is not historically complicit. (343)

The same holds for Kafka whose post-imperial discursive field was equally deeply divided, which is why his authorial gesture of protecting positional outsiders could not avoid complicity with their executors. There is no representation of victims that, in its turn, does not repeat victimization. Induced by the consciousness-raising of the Holocaust in the aftermath of 1968, this disenchantment of literature's mission urges us to read Kafka's work anew. It is in following this thread that, for example, Derrida remarked: "You have to betray [i.e. the world you belong to] in order to be truthful [i.e. to the world 'elsewhere']" (Derrida 11). "There are ethics precisely because there is this contradiction... [...] I have to respond to two injunctions, different and incompatible. That's where responsibility starts" (32–33).

In this ambiguous context, it is worth noting that the British postmodern writer Ian McEwan, one of the prominent inheritors of Kafka's ethical sensibility in the last decades of the twentieth century, lets the chief protagonist of his novel *Saturday*, Henry Perowne, present the following train of thought:

> This is the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy. Not only distant people are our brothers and sisters, but foxes too, and laboratory mice, and now the fish. Perowne goes on catching and eating them, and though he'd never drop a live lobster into boiling water, he's prepared to order one in a restaurant. The trick, as always, the key to human success and domination, is to be selective in your mercies. (*Saturday* 127)[1]

As these are reflections of literary characters, we are of course not expected to take them at their word. They are operating within the whole network of opinions that relate to, oppose, contradict, and/or parenthesize one another. Nonetheless, in a world of unleashed competition for the truth, it is hard to see which authorial strategy ought to avoid such elimination of the 'dregs of society' for the benefit of

1 Considering the abovementioned euthanization of people like insects in Kafka's life and fictions, the "selection of mercies" as proposed by one of the protagonists of McEwan's *Black Dogs,* Bernard Tremaine, is even more interesting: "Most people, I told her, instinctively disliked the insect world and entomologists were the ones to take notice of it, study its ways and life-cycles and generally care about it. Naming insects, classifying them into groups and sub-groups was an important part of all that. If you learned to name a part of the world, you learned to love it. Killing a few insects was irrelevant against this larger fact" (*Black Dogs* 32).

its ultimate 'truth'. As if anticipating these insights of his post-imperial descendants in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Kafka remarks,

> [a]ny measure of goodness, however different opinions on it may be, will appear too great. One will realize that one is nothing but a rat hole of miserable ulterior motives. Not the slightest action will be free from these ulterior motives. (14 January 1920)

In the given permanent state of exception, ethics cannot figure as the last measure of human affairs.

> [L]ife, because of its sheer power to convince has no room in it for right and wrong. As in the despairing hour of death you cannot meditate on right and wrong, so you cannot in the despairing course of life. It is enough that the arrows fit exactly in the wounds that they have made. (*The Diaries* 206; trans. modified)

This is how Kafka sees the writer's task in the modern accelerated world of history: To make his or her remedial arrows fit exactly in the prehistorical wounds that he or she has cut open in the representative body of historical progress. Only through such a painful elimination of historical oblivion can the lost "life's splendor" be restored that "lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off" (195). Kafka's authorial politics consist in ethically sacrificing himself and others for the revival of this prehistorical "splendor."

The Point of View of The Wronged: A Refusal of Responsibility?

But considering that what is splendor for history's losers is by no means splendor for its winners, his author's ethical gesture ultimately presents itself as a retaliating political operation. This background "ulterior motive" compromises its foregrounded ethical profile. In fact, in his frequently discussed aphorism 82 from the 'he' series, dated 15 February 1920,[1] Kafka defines man's "original sin" as a relentless claim for the status of victim, for victims are always innocent and so need not answer for their actions (*Aphorisms* 206). Does this 'sin' pertain to his own writing? As Benjamin aptly noted, this refusal of responsibility "applies to the sons more

1 The aphorism reads: "Original sin, the old injustice committed by man, consists in the complaint unceasingly made by man that he has been the victim of an injustice, the victim of original sin." For the two most famous discussions, see Benjamin 123-27 and Agamben, "K." 21-5.

than to anyone else" (Benjamin 123), at least from the point of view of their fathers. The sons, in their turn, experience their fatherly authorities as "lying on top of them like giant parasites. They not only prey upon their strength, but gnaw away at the sons' right to exist" (123). The result of this clash of perspectives is a never-ending process of mutual blaming, an uneasy cohabitation of 'executors' and 'victims' that disquiets the world of humans, preventing them from establishing an impartial perspective "above the fray."

As if being drawn into this vicious circle that leaves nobody's truth uninvolved, some prominent moral thinkers of the so-called late modernity spontaneously identified with the point of view of the wronged, which was so close to Kafka. Their argument might be succinctly rendered as follows: "As we are bereft of our rights by the very structure of our societies, we cannot bear moral responsibility for our deeds; it is up to the wrongdoers to bear it." Next to Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin who, following this logic, attach themselves to the subalterns' dispossession, consider for example their intellectual descendant Theodor Adorno who, opposing Kant's universal ethics, formulates in his *Minima Moralia*: "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno, *Minima* 39). That is to say—echoing Kafka's "despairing course of life" from the aforementioned quotation—one cannot expect moral behavior of subalterns whose life is irreparably damaged by their societies' power distribution. These societies' allegedly universal ethos, ignoring their inhuman conditions, exerts violent pressure on their 'deviant' members' customs to obey it. "It is this violence and evil that brings these customs into conflict with morality," spells out Adorno, "and not the decline of morals" for which the dominant morality blames the subalterns (Adorno *Problems* 17). Deprived both of the prerequisites to appropriate this morality and to resist it, they turn its violence, through self-blaming, self-humiliation and self-tormenting, upon themselves. Published in 1951, *Minima Moralia* develops its ethics out of the damaged life of social outsiders within Europe. Only a year thereafter, Frantz Fanon, in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (French original 1952), investigates the pathogenic consequences of the ruling morality's pressure on the 'weak subjects' of European colonies who, due to this pressure become the abject objects of constant self-torment (Fanon 210-217).

As testified to by a series of his protagonists such as Gregor Samsa, Georg Bendemann, or the hunter Gracchus, Kafka associated the outsiders' delineated self-victimizing attitude with the weak sons, i.e. "anxious, hesitant, restless persons" like he himself (Kafka, *Dearest Father* 7). They never stop complaining that they are victims of their fathers' merciless violence: "you would simply trample me underfoot until nothing of me remained" (*Dearest Father* 21). Not only Kafka's

"Letter to the Father" but also his many diary entries and letters demonstrate how much he is inclined to identify himself in these sacrificial filial terms as induced by the constant paternal oppression not only within his own family but also the whole disaggregating imperial society around him.[1] Yet in contradistinction to such pitying and compassionate self-perception that dominate his non-fiction works, he carefully kept himself aloof from the position of victim when shaping his fictional narrative authority, preferring to render it in ambiguous, almost indistinct terms.

The Vicissitudes of the Filial Perspective: The Perversion of Sacrifice

It deserves attention that such equivocal authoring, especially of his fictional works, is in accord with the retroactive intertwinement of the initially opposed paternal and filial capacities as elaborated in Freud's roughly contemporary cultural-anthropological essays from *Totem and Taboo* (1914) onwards. In the last of these, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud remarks that while the Jewish religion grew out of paternal authority, Christianity responded to it from a weak filial perspective. Yet however humble the latter presents itself to be, it is guided by the "ulterior motive" of taking over the position of authority:

> The old God the Father withdrew behind Christ, Christ, the Son, came in his place, just as every son had longed for in those prehistoric times. (Freud 536)

Kafka anticipates Freud's thesis of the retroactive "inscription of the Jews" into "the history of the Christians" (Caruth 18) in his diary entry of 28 September 1917, pointing out that the ultimate idea of the literary performer of self-sacrifice is to "deceive" "the human tribunal," albeit in a subterraneous way, "without practicing any actual deception" (*The Diaries* 387). He manipulates others, so to say, through his very literary performance due to whose subterraneous and deferred effects his filial sacrifice gradually adopts a paternal authority. In fact, according to Kafka's argument, fictional sacrifices take place on two parallel stages. While on the visible stage of represented events an outsider character performs a sacrifice to the others upon which s/he is immediately dependent, on the invisible stage of representation, simultaneously, the author directs his or her sacrificial performance to the distant anonymous addressees. It is this mediated addressing that, through its mobilizing after-effects, retroactively establishes the author as the background 'director' of all relationships between his or her characters. In distinction to Freud who focuses on

1 On the sufferings of Kafka's 'weak' generation of intellectuals and artists as caused by their authoritative fathers' generation, see Müller-Seidel 70-71.

this clandestine empowerment of the disempowered in *religious* sacrificial narratives, Kafka turns the *fictional* ones into its epitome.

Unlike religious narratives, they openly display their positional outsiders' efforts to benefit from their sacrificial performance for the present others. However, this uncovering of their envisioned empowerment is undertaken with the intention of covering another, authorial one. At the same time as the authors expose the perversion of their characters' sacrificial performances, they 'impartially' disperse themselves into the partiality of each of them, winning the sympathy of their readers for *this* detached sacrifice *of theirs*. When Kafka turns his fictions into the overt stages for compromising his various characters' sacrifices, he in fact targets the covert approval of his 'unselfish' self-othering by his readers. Whereas characters follow their petty interest as generated by their restrictive circumstances, he forges the 'disinterested' commonality of ultimate victims with his readers. In fact, as it is designed to compensate for his own victimhood, it is all but disinterested. On the contrary, it camouflages the benefit which the author draws from its establishment.

Although Kafka consistently performed sacrifices in his diaries[1] and letters,[2] he regarded these non-fiction genres as mere preparatory phases for the fictional ones which enable such camouflage. The entrapment of characters within their interdependence on the level of represented action conceals the simultaneous emancipation from this interdependence by the author's action of representation. While the characters cannot but reiterate their interdependence by involuntarily mirroring one another in their actions, the author exempts himself or herself from them by evenly distributing the aspects his or her own identity into the oppositions among them. His or her sneaking into their conflicting roles, transforming them into the constituents of one and the same 'scenario', silently deactivates the differences between them. That is to say, while the inhabitants of the visible level of represented action relentlessly reiterate these imparities, on the invisible level of the action of representation the author ameliorates them and melts them down. They act as the ferocious public

1 See, for instance, the diary entry of 4 July 1916 in which he performs in the first person: "I awoke to find myself imprisoned in a fenced enclosure which allowed no room for more than a step in either direction" (*The Diaries* 363). Or the one of 13 January 1920 in which he performs in the third person: "A prison he could have come to terms with. To end as a prisoner, that would be a goal for a life" (*Aphorisms* 202). And finally the one of 21 October 1921 in which he performs in the second person: "All is imaginary […] but the closest reality (*nächste Wahrheit*) is only that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell" (*The Diaries* 395; trans. modified).

2 See, for example, the following performance of the writer's sacrifice in a letter to Felice: "I need seclusion for my writing, not 'like a settler,' that would not be enough, but like a dead man. Writing in this sense is a deeper sleep, i.e. death, and just as you cannot and will not pull a dead person out of his grave, so you will not pull me off the desk at night" (*Briefe an Felice* 412).

activists of historical differentiation, he as the detached secret representative of an allegedly de-differentiating prehistory or posthistory.

Let us now, for the sake of illustration, reread the story "In the Penal Colony" in these terms. It introduces the character of the officer who, by force of allocated circumstances, performs sacrifice at the same time in the opposite capacities, i.e. the executor's and the victim's. In the first voluntary capacity, he wholeheartedly attaches himself to the public rituals of brutal execution that are, however, due to the progressing replacement of the 'sovereign' with the 'disciplinary' political regimes across the globe (Foucault *Discipline*), doomed to elimination even in the far remote colonies.[1] It is not only that their inhabitants, as the narrator remarks, no longer care for such cruel spectacles ("In the Penal Colony" 165) but the new commandant plans to abolish them completely (178). Such developments as necessitated both by the external historical and the internal story's plot, transform the officer as the executor into the victim of the new political constellation. In this restricted, involuntary capacity he must take recourse in the opposite, i.e. private performance of sacrifice by transposing himself into the viewpoints of his recent superiors—the new commandant and traveling explorer—in order to outsmart them and materialize his agenda. He therefore guesses their responses, anticipates their reactions, and forges small 'would-be scenarios' (180-84), in short, engaging the subaltern strategy of the so-called subversive mimicry (Bhabha).

Although Homi Bhabha applied this concept to the performance of colonized selves, the range of subalterns who 'stage' their selves in their everyday communication with others exceeds just colonial circumstances. Each political regime forces its outsiders to simulating and amalgamating techniques of survival. One of the cases in point is the Underground Man from Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, which, considering Dostoevsky's influence on Kafka (Dodd 1992), must

1 Kafka carefully avoids locating his fictions, but the reader nevertheless learns that the colony is somewhere in the tropics ("In the Penal Colony" 166), where the officer speaks French (167). The story was inspired by the book *My Trip to the Penal Colonies* (Meine Reise nach den Strafkolonien, 1912) by the German criminologist Robert Heindl, who, among other colonies, describes the French penal island of New Caledonia, located about 20,000km from Metropolitan France (Müller-Seidel 82-84). As it functioned as the dumping ground for the 'degenerate' elements of French society, the explorer understands that it, in contradistinction to the democratic administration of European population, requires "extraordinary measures" and "military discipline" ("In the Penal Colony" 171). This is fully in line with the views that Heindl expresses in his own book (Müller-Seidel 84). Yet, as the reform of the European empires' legislation was at that time more or less accomplished, it was underway in their colonies as well.

have left its imprints on his shaping of the officer.[1] Mikhail Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky's protagonist-narrator as an enflamed ideologue whose suddenly stranded position (he is a former civil servant)—very much like that of Kafka's officer—induces his embittered polemics with his society and the world (Bakhtin 236). Being in his indistinction both extremely dependent on and extremely hostile to the politically and socially distinct others (230), he invents a special kind of subversive mimicry, which Bakhtin dubs the "word with a loophole":

> A loophole is the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's own words. If a word retains such a loophole this must inevitably be reflected in its structure […] it is only the penultimate word and places after itself only a conditional, not a final, period. (233)

Yet Kafka's officer, who—in the footsteps of Dostoevsky's Underground Man—engages in his conditional speech a "thousand reservations, concessions, loopholes" (196) to pave the way for a "sincere refutation" (233) of his claims, ultimately fails to get it from the traveling explorer ("In the Penal Colony" 184) who thus turns into his potential executor.

Such development of their relationship that deepens the officer's humiliating position enforces the new reshaping of his performance, leading him from a 'filial' subversive mimicry back to a 'paternal' violence. In this reactivated capacity, he first "yell[s] in the explorer's ear […] with the full force of his lungs" (174), thereafter presses into him, with a 'strong insistence' and 'clenched fists', the task of helping him against the acting commandant (182), and finally seizes his trustee by both arms, gazes into his face, and shouts loudly (184). In this way, his submissive plea transforms into verbal aggression. Walter Müller-Seidel compares his verbal and gestural attack on the explorer to the behavior of Kafka's father toward his son as described in "Letter to the Father," which equally consisted of scolding, threatening, irony, evil laughter, and self-bemoaning. In the same way as the father's violence destroyed the son's capacities to reply, the officer's violence silences those of the

1 Dostoevsky was himself banished to a Siberian penal colony, whose brutal martial law and summary justice he painstakingly describes in *Notes from a Dead House* (1862). This experience was so decisive for his life that Kafka notes in his diary entry of 15 March 1914: "The students wanted to carry Dostoevsky's chains behind his coffin" (*The Diaries* 265-66). Although Russian Empire possessed no colonies, it had established Sakhalin as its penal island in 1875. Next to Dostoevsky's interest in such political zones of indistinction, as materialized also in his *Notes from the Underground* (1864), Kafka was also inspired by his critique of the Western modernization of the Russian judicial system (1865), as expressed in the first place in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). See Conti 469.

traveling explorer, who barely gets a word in (Müller-Seidel 123-4). Paradoxically, while this turnaround of the officer's behavior restores his capacity as the *executor*, it inadvertently merges him with the *victim*, i.e. a prisoner who had likewise replaced the doggish submission to his superior with an angry canine assault against him ("In the Penal Colony" 171). The officer's unwitting redoubling of his counterpart's behavior casts a light of the latter's helplessness upon him.

After he definitely fails to convince the traveling explorer, due to his undesired contamination with his counterpart's helplessness, the officer suddenly reinvigorates his victimhood by setting the condemned man free, taking his place, and letting the torture device execute him himself (185). Far from being a miracle, this substitution merely radicalizes the constant reinforcement of opposites in the officer's behavior. As it galvanizes the "nameless adherents" (192) to sanctify his figure in their memory, this ultimate self-sacrifice clandestinely targets an ultimate self-empowerment. It draws its inspiration from the adored old commandant whose political sacrifice had likewise attracted dock laborers to surreptitiously work in honor of his fame. But the force of altered circumstances repeatedly ruins the officer's design to walk in the footsteps of his great idol. Since the native addressees of his sacrificial performance, the soldier and the condemned man, do not understand "a word of French" (167) and are used to being instructed in their "native tongue" (185), they cannot possibly comprehend what is going on and remain baffled. The only difference between these two underdogs—who most of the time unconcernedly communicate with one another and grotesquely amuse one another despite their substantially different positions—is that the soldier is fully indifferent to the developments that he is obliged to attend whereas the condemned man invests a continuous effort to understand his situation and is definitely "the more animated of the two" (189). As if contaminated by his torturer's vivid curiosity, he is never tired of launching diverse hypotheses of others' actions, such as at the moment the officer releases him:

> Was it true? Was it only a caprice of the officer's, that might change again? Had the foreign explorer begged him off? What was it? One could read these questions on his face. (185)

But linguistically and culturally disqualified as he is, he completely misinterprets the officer's action, attributing it to the explorer's decision and thus making it miss the target as envisioned by the officer:

> What had happened to him was now going to happen to the officer. Perhaps

> even to the very end. Apparently the foreign explorer had given the order for it. So this was revenge. Although he himself had not suffered to the end, he was to be revenged to the end. A broad, silent grin now appeared on his face and stayed there all the rest of the time. (188)

Thus the reason why the officer's sacrificial performances repeatedly fail to materialize their agenda is not merely the contaminating inscription of his antagonists' behavior into their outcome but also the contaminating inscription of his own behavior into that of his antagonists. Redoubling the officer's intellectual mobility, the condemned man not only frees himself from his radical immobility but also takes distance from his torturer and disobeys and ignores the explorer's orders (189-190). The same resilience is displayed by the explorer who despite the officer's praising of his tolerant worldview (180), in fact mirrors the officer's contempt for natives by rendering them as "poor, humble creatures" (191), "stupid-looking, wide-mouthed" "submissive dogs" (165) who "ridiculously" believe in the future resurrection of their old commandant (192). As opposed to the native prisoner who "was a complete stranger, not a fellow countryman or even at all sympathetic to him" (176), the explorer shows some empathy (184), supportiveness (190), and even admiration for the officer (167). Yet as the latter shares the natives' blind faith in their old commandant, he ultimately dismisses them both, especially after he recognizes the absence of the proclaimed ultimate redemption on the officer's dead face (190-91) and thus confirms the absurdity of his fanaticism.

If the opposed characters thus unwittingly 'intoxicate' each other's performances, making them miss their targets, this is because they unknowingly mirror the author's equivocal relationship to them that persistently fluctuates between victimhood and execution. What disconcerts Kafka's narrative authority from the very beginning to the end might be translated into Italo Calvino's much later question: "How much of the 'I' who shapes the characters is in fact an 'I' who has been shaped by the characters?" (Calvino 113) Calvino speaks of the "layers of subjectivity and feigning that we can discern underneath the author's name, and the various 'I's that go to make up the 'I' who is writing." (111). In this sense, the officer's and the condemned man's adoption of the others' points of view in order to outmaneuver them are mere replicas of the story's superior point of view that meanders between the characters' perspectives, countering one focalization through the other but without identifying with any of their optics. The superior point of view exempts itself from their blinded bias because they either filially sacrifice their present to the past (as does the backward officer) or paternally their past to the

present (as does the enlightened traveling explorer) without grasping (contrary to the author) the contamination of theirs with their counterpart's point of view.

So even if the author, as the victim of his characters, sacrifices his own view to assimilate theirs, he nevertheless, as their executor, exempts himself from their partiality and outsmarts it. Through this clandestine exemption, Kafka's narrative authority perverts the filial attitude as genuine of the officer who does not hesitate to sacrifice himself for the other into the paternal attitude as genuine of the traveling explorer who does not hesitate to sacrifice others for himself. Precisely *through this perversion*, it meets and articulates the longing of its addressees for the 'elevate commonality' of the humans who are defaced by their historical and political domiciles and eager to get rid of their humiliating belonging to them. In order to establish this commonality's historical and political in-difference and to shape it as an allegedly all-embracing meeting place for all earthly creatures, it invites and encourages its adherents to equally sacrifice their historically and politically particular identities. Yet how can this commonality be all-embracing if it is founded on the sacrifice of the fellow beings' distinct identities? This merciless sacrifice dismantles the establishment of its shaper's authority as its selfish background intention.

Thus, the institution of Kafka's narrative authority requires the double sacrifice of others, i.e. both characters and readers, for the benefit of its indiscriminate 'truth'. The readers who unreservedly adhere to this truth enable the substitution of its shaper's filial position for a paternal position. Those on the contrary who disclose its unwilling contamination with the appetite to patronize others—as we have tried to do here—help this authority emancipate itself from its compensatory fantasies. What initiates them is not a desire for the universally valid truth but their shaper's denied wound. However, although emancipation might be a better method of treating this wound than the passionate attachment to the fantasies which it generates, we should remind ourselves that Kafka's narrative authority emancipated itself from the fantasies of its characters in exactly the same way.

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