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Critical Conditions:

This Signature of the Wound in Franz Kafka's Shorter Fiction

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation explores the significance of wounds in four short texts by Franz Kafka: "Ein Landarzt," "Das Urteil," "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie," and "Prometheus." Rather than reduce the metaphor of the wound to biographical or psychoanalytic principles, two approaches that have predominated scholarship on these texts, this study examines how the wound promotes a critical undecidability in Kafka's language: a condition in which body and body of text demand and defy "treatment" on several levels. Using a variety of rhetorical, narratological, and philological evidence, this dissertation argues how woundedness functions as a "critical condition" in these texts that paradoxically extends and enriches their interpretive life — an openness that resists closure of any form.

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*For Frank Gruber*

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Introduction  
The Text as a (W)hole

Aber es tut gut, wenn das Gewissen breite Wunden bekommt, denn dadurch wird es empfindlicher für jeden Biß. Ich glaube, man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen. Wenn das Buch, das wir lesen, uns nicht mit einem Faustschlag auf den Schädel weckt, wozu lesen wir dann das Buch?

Franz Kafka  
*Briefe, 27*

This study traces a pattern of woundedness in four shorter works by Franz Kafka — “Ein Landarzt” (1918), “Das Urteil” (1913), “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie” (1917), and “Prometheus” (1919) — in which representations of the body and the bodies of text that shape them become productively entangled. The wound emerges not only as a common theme in these texts, but more significantly, as a feature that comes to characterize each text as a whole—what could also be read, metaphorically speaking, as a kind of signifying hole: an opening, a contusion and profusion of signs. In this sense, the wound presents us with a unique point of entry for exploring what Peter Brooks has called the “semioticization of the body [...] matched by a somatization of the story” (xii). It marks, that is, a privileged site in Kafka’s corpus where language not only inscribes the flesh, but where bodies also materialize specific attributes of

these texts: their struggles with exposure (“Ein Landarzt”) and closure (“Das Urteil”), for example; their spells of inflammation (“Ein Bericht für eine Akademie”) and recurring pain (“Prometheus”). Drawing on a variety of rhetorical, narratological, and philological evidence, this study interrogates, above all, how the wound conditions a particularly “critical” experience of reading, one that can be understood in terms of a pervasive sense of crisis: not only the alarming presence of a wounded body, imprinted by illness or violence, but also the dilemma of how to interpret that body, how to *treat* it hermeneutically and epistemologically — a condition that affects Kafka’s characters and readers alike.

## **Praxis**

Derived from the Greek *krisis* (κρίσις), the term “critical” describes both the “turning point of a disease,” such as when a patient requires urgent care, as well as an important “judgment, decision or selection,” where we derive our modern understanding of criticism, and by extension, critical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> The title *Critical Conditions* reflects these different, but nonetheless interrelated semantic fields, especially in cases where the somatic condition of Kafka’s characters coincides with the undecidability of his language. But a paradox arises when associating bodily openness with interpretive openness: if Kafka’s wound corresponds with a kind of semantic openness, as I suggest in the readings that follow, then it must also be subject to that openness. Which is to say: even openness is open to interpretation, and attempts to declare the wound as “open” risk closing it with the same defining gesture. The question, then, becomes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=crisis>



one of critical care: how are we to treat this open wound without restricting it, without contaminating it in the very act of treatment?

As I hope to demonstrate, this question plays a crucial role not only in how we construct and confront meaning in these texts, but also how paradox becomes a “critical condition” in itself. This is not necessarily a new observation, of course. Heinz Politzer was perhaps the first critic to examine the significance of paradox in Kafka’s writing — its capacity to decentralize and proliferate meaning, especially in the parables.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Gerhard Neumann described a “gleitendes Paradox” in Kafka’s fiction where “alle starre Begrifflichkeit ins Gleiten kommt” (“Umkehrung” 722), disorienting the reader and disrupting forms of conceptual thinking. But my contribution here is to understand the wound as an inherently paradoxical feature, a protean fixture (to use an appropriately contradictory image) that exists neither fully inside nor outside the wounded body, but undecidably between. I see the wound, in other words, not only as a lens for reading Kafka’s language, but also in terms of a paradoxicality that enriches and extends the interpretive life of his work — an openness, finally, that signals a series of conflicting prognoses: transparency and uncertainty, agency and helplessness, awareness and neglect.

If my own language seems similarly conflicting at times, however, it is because a full-length study of the wound is necessarily complicated by the question of how to read and assign meaning to it. This is a dilemma that also besets Kafka’s country doctor. Just before uncovering his patient’s fatal wound, for example, he remarks that “Rezepte schreiben ist leicht, aber im übrigen sich mit den Leuten verständigen, ist schwer” (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 257). If anything, this statement acknowledges how questions of methodology arise both within, and as a consequence of, these texts — and moreover, how the wound, once it commands our attention,

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<sup>2</sup> See: Heinz Politzer’s *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1966.

leverages a unique power in how we read these texts as a (w)hole. While I cannot claim to succeed in answering these questions — especially since, as Walter Benjamin has also noted, failure is a productive outcome in Kafka’s writing (Benjamin 27) — my reliance on wordplay and associative logic throughout this study advances its own implicit argument: namely, that the wound can only be approximated through language because it is, above all, language that inflicts the wounding. Words assail Kafka’s reader just as wounds afflict the body; they harbor an openness that proves at times equally liberating and restrictive, resolute but also tentative. The homophony of “whole” and “hole,” in this sense, articulates what, in hermeneutical terms, translates as a paradox of coherence and rupture, an aesthetic wholeness that Kafka achieves through a language of puncture, laceration, and limitation.

In an interview conducted shortly before his death, Jacques Derrida echoes a similar claim when describing his approach to reading Paul Celan, asserting that “in every poetic text, as in every utterance [...] there is an inaccessible secret to which no proof will ever be adequate” (*Sovereignties* 164). This secret, he later explained, was not the reducible meaning of a text, but the inexhaustibility of its semantic economy — an openness that Derrida describes as a wound: “the signature of a poem, like that of every text, is a wound. What opens, what does not heal, the hiatus, is indeed a mouth that speaks there where it is wounded” (*Sovereignties* 166). The wound provides a curious, if not counterintuitive metaphor. Seen often as a figure of loss or transgression, especially in the wake of Freudian psychoanalysis, it possesses a generative quality for Derrida, something that allows the text to speak and announce itself, even if only to announce its inaccessibility. As Derrida makes clear, however, this comment emboldens a more general claim, one at the heart of this dissertation: namely, that this wound marks a constitutive

part of all writing — a signature that, as I will demonstrate, becomes especially legible in these four texts.

My own philosophical bias comes into view with this dialectic of (w)holeness. I resist, for instance, identifying the wound with one thing or idea because it is the openness of the wound I wish to preserve in my readings — a “truth,” that is, in the ancient Greek sense of *aletheia*, which, as Martin Heidegger reminds us, signifies an “unveiling,” a “disclosure,” a state of “unconcealedness.”<sup>3</sup> I resist, in other words, what Heidegger has characterized as a systemic error in the Western metaphysical tradition, wherein truth becomes an expression of accuracy and coherence rather than an elaboration of what art, and the world it contains, uncovers and brings forth. In “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes” (1935), for example, Heidegger distinguishes this “post-metaphysical” truth from its more pedestrian forms: “Die Unverborgenheit des Seienden nannten die Griechen *aletheia*. Wir sagen Wahrheit und denken wenig genug bei diesem Wort. Im Werk ist, wenn hier eine Eröffnung des Seienden geschieht in das, was und wie es ist, ein Geschehen der Wahrheit am Werk” (*Holzwege* 21). Another way of expressing Heidegger’s concern would be to ask: What does it mean to approach art without reducing it to an object of knowledge, without destroying its presence and capacity to disclose (aletheiac) truth?<sup>4</sup> Or, in terms of this study: How does the wound, as a literalized “Eröffnung des

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger’s etymology of *aletheia* is controversial, however, if not erroneous for some scholars – especially classicists. For more about this controversy, see: Caputo (9-29).

<sup>4</sup> This recalls, on several levels, Kafka’s famous aphorism concerning the indivisibility of truth—an aphorism, it bears noting, that had been struck from his *Oktavheft “G”*: “Wahrheit ist unteilbar, kann sich also selbst nicht erkennen; wer sie erkennen will, muß Lüge sein” (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 69). Written only days before composing the parable “Prometheus,” this aphorism anticipates the “Wahrheitsgrund” from which Kafka’s version of the myth emerges, only to end in a state of

Seienden,” suspend or disrupt normative procedures of interpretation?<sup>5</sup> Heidegger informs my approach to Kafka’s work insofar as I reject the analytic impulse to close the wound with a discourse of precision — to suture what still stirs and speaks, to advance my own method of “Rezepte schreiben,” which would imply prescribing a final, even terminal, diagnosis.

But to be clear: Heidegger’s presence in this study functions more as an “unthought debt” (to borrow Marlène Zarader’s phrase) than a kind of philosophical banner-waving.<sup>6</sup> This can be attributed, in part, to Heidegger’s own aversion to literary criticism, to which he often ascribed an insidious and formulaic form of thinking: something that has perhaps cautioned scholars from openly staging “Heideggerian readings” of Kafka’s work.<sup>7</sup> There are other reasons, of course,

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paradoxical inexplicability. For Roland Barthes, the paradoxicality of this aphorism characterizes Kafka’s art in general: “That is Kafka’s paradox: art depends on truth, but truth, being indivisible, cannot know itself: to tell the truth is to lie. Thus the writer is the truth, and yet when he speaks he lies” (*Kafka’s Answer* 137).

<sup>5</sup> This sentiment is challenged, however, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Corpus* (2008): “But slits, holes, and zones do not present things to be seen, do not reveal anything: vision does not penetrate, but glides along swerves and follows along departures. It is a touching that does not absorb but moves along lines and recesses, inscribing and exscribing the body” (Nancy 41).

<sup>6</sup> See: Marlène Zarader. *The Unthought Debt: Heidegger and the Hebraic Heritage*. Translated by Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2006.

<sup>7</sup> The most explicit exception to this is David Schur’s *The Way of Oblivion* (1998), in which he explores the rhetorical and thematic parallels between the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus and the work of Franz Kafka, with Heidegger serving as the interlocutor between the two. The word “Method,” as Schur points out, is derived from the Greek “Hodos,” which translates as “way” or “approach”— a meaning that was used both literally and figuratively then as it is today. See: Schur (6-9)

why Heidegger's philosophy might prove problematic, if not entirely inappropriate for reading Kafka. The most alarming and unforgivable reason remains Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism in the 30s and his well-documented adherence to anti-Semitic ideology. Undoubtedly, Heidegger's political orientation proves indefensible from any perspective, but to dismiss his entire philosophical project as a result is to also foreclose and condemn the spirit of dialogue itself. As Peter Gordon reminds us, "any genuinely philosophical texts are open rather than closed in their interpretative possibilities [...] One can sift through Heidegger's philosophical arguments for their political significance, but the political context is only one dimension among many" (np). While negligible, the Heideggerian dimension in this dissertation emerges from a constellation of metaphorical affinities with Kafka's work rather than a theoretically-grounded attempt to reconcile or liken the two figures.

My resistance to declaring a clear theoretical orientation also stems more from the paradoxical nature of the texts themselves. That is, from their resistance to unequivocal, truth-bearing interpretation, and the residual effect it has on my own reticulated, rhizomatic conclusions. Rather than succumb to the disorienting conditions it seeks to examine, my study embraces and engages the aesthetic value of multiplicity in these texts, or what Walter Benjamin has helpfully described as Kafka's "wolkige Stellen."<sup>8</sup> It conducts what could be seen as a kind of exploratory surgery, an examination in which the balance between a clarifying openness and an undecidable openness — the true "vital signs" of the wound — is carefully maintained.

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<sup>8</sup> In his essay "Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages" (1934), Walter Benjamin considers these "cloudy spots" to be Kafka's defining gesture as a writer: "Etwas war immer nur im Gestus für Kafka fassbar. Und dieser Gestus, den er nicht verstand, bildet die wolkige Stelle der Parabeln. Aus ihm geht Kafkas Dichtung hervor" (Benjamin 27).

## Preexisting Conditions

Although this study argues that wounds share a privileged status in Kafka's work, this does not mean that wounds and representations of woundedness have not left their mark elsewhere — especially in the German tradition. Perhaps the most familiar example arises in Richard Wagner's adaptation of *Parzival* (1882), when Amfortas is wounded by the only thing that can bring him relief: "Nur eine Waffe taugt," claims Parzival in the third act of Wagner's opera, "die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur, der sie schlug."<sup>9</sup> As John B. Lyon argues in *Crafting Flesh, Crafting the Self* (2006), however, the nineteenth-century was a particularly wounded time for German literary culture in general. Tracing the connection between representations of the body and a changing conception of identity in the works of Hölderlin, Brentano, Kleist, and Büchner, Lyon claims that these authors portray "a modern self as inescapably bound to violence" (Lyon 35), where the wound lends "abstract concepts a sense of material reality" (13). While different in archive and scope, Lyon's project resembles my own insofar he also sees the wounded body as reifying philosophical aspects of these texts. He also provides an important corpus of antecedents that places Kafka's texts on a larger continuum of the wound, which, in Lyon's words, "become[s] a privileged bearer of meaning for the modern world" (217).

German philosophers and literary theorists also considered the wound a site of critical inquiry and illumination. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for example, saw the wounded body of

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, having once impaled Christ, Amfortas's spear evokes a tradition of woundedness that has proven intriguingly paradoxical since antiquity. Readers of the *New Testament* may recall that Christ's resurrection represented a paradox for the apostle Thomas, one that could only be resolved once he touched Christ's wounds (John 20:24-29). A "doubting Thomas" not only describes a skeptic in this regard, but also an important witness to the wound's conflicting nature. Centuries later, Wagner would capture this paradoxicality in the wounding / healing properties of the magical spear.

Philoctetes as demonstrating the possibilities of poetic expression (Lessing 26-40).<sup>10</sup> Erich Auerbach begins his *Mimesis* (1946) with an analysis of book nineteen in *The Odyssey*, when Euryclea recognizes Odysseus by the scar on his thigh — a moment that, for him, embodied the Homeric approach to representation.<sup>11</sup> Theodor Adorno, in the centennial speech for Heinrich Heine's death, speaks of a wound that would only close once Germany atones for its National Socialist past (Adorno 100), an injury deepened by Heine's prophetically inadequate language.<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud associates the wound with penis envy: "Mit der Anerkennung seiner narzißtischen Wunde stellt sich — gleichsam als Narbe — ein Minderwertigkeitsgefühl beim Weibe her" (GS 14:25); and Friedrich Nietzsche aligns it with the festering spirit of *resentiment*: "Alles verletzt. Mensch und Ding kommen zudringlich nahe, die Erlebnisse treffen zu tief, die Erinnerung ist eine eiternde Wunde. Kranksein ist eine Art *Ressentiment* selbst" (KSA 6, 271).

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<sup>10</sup> Anticipating his main thesis in *Laocoön* (1766), Lessing praises Sophocles's choice of a wound when depicting Philoctetes' suffering: "[E]r wählte [...] eine Wunde und nicht eine innerliche Krankheit; weil sich von jener eine lebhaftere Vorstellung machen läßt, als von dieser, wenn sie auch noch so schmerzlich ist" (32).

<sup>11</sup> Auerbach describes this scene as being "scrupulously externalized" (4), as exhibiting a semantic clarity that allows for "no contour to be blurred" (4), or no space needed to be filled. All events are fully and unambiguously stated in what Auerbach calls the foreground, contrasting with the murky "background" of the Old Testament. In many ways, Kafka inverts this process in the wound by externalizing a condition of murkiness and ambiguity. A particularly defining example of this exteriorized obscurity appears in "Das Urteil." See chapter two.

<sup>12</sup> Despite its inert and folksy lyricism, however, Heine's poetry staged a redemptive "Ausdruck des Bruchs" (98) for Adorno, wherein its aesthetic failure constituted its one true success: "Ist aller Ausdruck die Spur von Leiden, so hat er es vermocht, das einige Ungenügen, die Sprachlosigkeit seiner Sprache, umzuschaffen zum Ausdruck des Bruchs [...]. Mißlingen schlägt um ins Gelungene" (98).

Indeed, as a malignant and yet malleable metaphor, the wound seems especially vulnerable in this regard because it can mean so many things — a condition that, on the one hand, demonstrates its openness as a signifier, but on the other, exposes it to the numbing clutch of cliché. One aim of my study is to destabilize this non-reflective treatment of the wound. After all, as we see throughout Kafka’s writing, time never really heals any wounds. If anything, it complicates and compounds them.

Far from an exhaustive account, however, my study represents a very brief moment in what Galili Shahar has called Germany’s “literature of wounds” (463), and an even more selective assemblage of texts in Kafka’s oeuvre.<sup>13</sup> Readers will no doubt notice my exclusion of Kafka’s “In der Strafkolonie” (1919), perhaps the most obvious choice for a study of wounds. But it is precisely for this reason that I have chosen to focus on less obvious, and in my mind, more complex instantiations of woundedness in Kafka’s work — namely, examples in which the wound, as a figure of undecidability, conditions and (dis)orients the body of text. The brevity of these texts also plays an important role in how this condition manifests itself. Longer works, while occasionally containing wounds and injuries (“Die Verwandlung” is another canonical example), tend to relax a tension that I locate literally and figuratively within these texts. This tension can translate into an erratic, perhaps even violent use of grammatical tense, such as we find in “Ein Landarzt;” or it can figure as rhetorical tension, such as Rotpeter’s abrasive switch between high and low registers — a verbal instability that can be related, in many ways, to his

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<sup>13</sup> Shahar writes: “The term ‘literature of wounds’ suggests that there is a literary corpus in German that justifies a specific interpretation of the wounded body and the possibilities of its representation. According to this reading, the representation of the wounded body is a challenge that leads literature to redesign its poetical tools and structures of narration. The use of the fragment is one of the responses of literature to this challenge” (463n2).



injuries. Rather than catalogue every wound that surfaces in Kafka's work, however, I focus instead on these points of contact between bodily signs and signifying bodies — how they rend and render one another in surprising and regenerative ways, exposing what I describe, for the lack of a better term, as a “semio-somatic” relationship.<sup>14</sup>

## Diagnosis

While much has been written on these texts in particular, and Kafka in general, few scholars have pursued a sustained and rigorous reading of the wound.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, in many ways, was an important reader of this relationship, however more as an indicator of power relations and its punitive grip on the body. In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971), for example, Foucault describes the body as “the inscribed surface of events” and proposes that “genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body” (83).

<sup>15</sup> There are notable exceptions to this rule, however. The first valuable contribution, and perhaps still the most expansive, is Bluma Goldstein's “A Study of the Wound in Stories by Franz Kafka” from 1966. Goldstein lays down the foundation for a comparative study of wound-trauma in Kafka's shorter fiction, specifically with regard to a theological dimension that Rochelle Tobias later picks up on in her essay “A Doctor's Odyssey,” which charts the connections between “Ein Landarzt” and Yiddish theater. Additionally, there has been a marked increase in essays concerning wounded bodies in Kafka's oeuvre in relation, almost exclusively, to the work of Heinrich von Kleist. In “Fragments and Wounded Bodies: Kafka after Kleist,” for example, Galili Shahar argues that the presence of wounded bodies and the fragmentary nature of Kafka's work are structural corollaries; whereas Stefani Engelstein's “The Open Wound of Beauty: Kafka Reading Kleist” focuses on the un-closing properties of Kafka's wound in relation to Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810). And finally, in a completely different format and approach, the British novelist Will Self published a “Digital Literary Essay” entitled “Kafka's Wound,” which

wounds do not figure prominently in Kafka scholarship — on the contrary; but these interpretations of the wound tend to fall into two, albeit frequently conflated categories of analysis: either the wound represents some form of biographical anxiety (i.e., Kafka’s tuberculosis, his religious identity, his sexual frustrations) or it conforms to the metonymical logic of Freudian principles. Sander Gilman’s work on Kafka is a defining example of this combined tendency. In *Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient* (1995), for example, Gilman writes: “But Kafka’s illness was also the axis on which he and his world turned. Like Vladimir Nabokov’s butterflies, Kafka felt himself physically impaled. [...] It is not only his real, palpable illness that is the secret of Kafka’s sense of self, but the fact that illness comes as no surprise” (5). Surely, there is nothing inherently wrong with this assessment; Gilman’s contribution still stands as a fine example of an approach that incorporates the strengths of both Jewish and Cultural Studies. But if I may use the argot of contemporary American medical culture: such a grim diagnosis of the wound prompts one, perhaps merely out of curiosity, to seek out a second opinion. This study provides such an alternative.

To complicate matters, however, Kafka’s diaries and letters show us that he was also interested in these kinds of biographical readings. After receiving his diagnosis of pulmonary tuberculosis in September 1917, for example, he referred to his illness in terms of a redemptive “Sinnbild”:

Du hast soweit diese Möglichkeit überhaupt besteht, die Möglichkeit einen  
Anfang zu machen. Verschwende sie nicht. Du wirst den Schmutz, der aus Dir

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utilizes the rhizomatic nature of hyperlinks and multimedia to underscore the spidering complexity of Kafka’s work. See: <http://thespace.lrb.co.uk> (Last accessed 31 March 2014).

aufschwemmt, nicht vermeiden können, wenn Du eindringen willst. Wälze Dich aber nicht darin. Ist die Lungenwunde nur ein Sinnbild, wie Du behauptest, Sinnbild der Wunde, deren Entzündung Felice und deren Tiefe Rechtfertigung heißt, ist dies so, dann sind auch die ärztlichen Ratschläge (Licht Luft Sonne Ruhe) Sinnbild. Fasse dieses Sinnbild an. (*Tagebücher* 831)

It is difficult to ignore such a potent symbol when reading texts around and after this period — especially when Kafka is so determined here to retain and harness its signifying power. In a letter to Max Brod regarding his diagnosis, for instance, Kafka noted: “Auch habe ich es selbst vorausgesagt. Erinnerst Du Dich an die Blutwunde im ‘Landarzt’?” (*Briefe* 160). The line between Kafka’s reality and his work is blurred with such statements. His illness is treated as a metaphor, and his metaphor of the “Blutwunde” a self-fulfilling prophecy — both of which are only deepened by Kafka’s failed relationship with Felice Bauer. Indeed, as someone who claimed to be made of literature, Kafka wanted his life and text to bleed into one another, and he achieved that, at least in his diaries, by frequently returning and holding on to this “Sinnbild der Wunde.”<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, the wound has since gripped scholars in a similar way. Like the wound in “Ein Landarzt,” however, whose finger-like worms spell certain death for the doctor’s patient, our efforts to psychologize Kafka’s wounds will only inhibit our ability to adequately see and treat them. We must, in other words, resist diagnosing this “Sinnbild” as some essentialistic “Vorbild.”

The Freudian significance of such “Sinnbilder” was also not lost on Kafka. Years earlier, for instance, Kafka acknowledged the obvious correspondence between his conception of literary

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<sup>16</sup> He acknowledges this in his diary on August 21, 1913: “Da ich nichts anderes bin als Literatur und nichts anderes sein kann und will” (*Tagebücher* 579).

creation, which he described as a wound-like “Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele” (*Tagebücher* 461), and the Freudian principles that so readily filled these openings, writing simply: “Gedanken an Freud, natürlich” (*Tagebücher* 461). Kafka wrote these words just after composing his so-called breakthrough story, “Das Urteil,” a text that, as Walter Sokel has persuasively demonstrated, lends itself well to Freudian interpretation.<sup>17</sup> But once again, just as the “ärztliche Ratschläge” above constitute a “Sinnbild” for Kafka, the same is true of these implicit *hermeneutische Ratschläge* in his diary entries. Reading the wound through the lens of mental and physical illness, while in some ways “vorausgesagt” and “natürlich,” also reduces the wound to what has now become, I would argue, a Kafkan cliché. Simply put, this study seeks to reassess and challenge such interpretive procedures by administering close, text-centric readings of the wound. Although I often adopt the metaphorical language of Kafka’s letters and diary entries in my analysis, it is, above all, the text itself that conditions this critical approach.

## **Prognosis**

While not arranged chronologically, these chapters form a trajectory that begins with what Galilli Shahar has called “Kafka’s most perfect wound” (460) — the worm-ridden lesion that surfaces in “Ein Landarzt” — and ends with a wound that grows weary and closes itself in “Prometheus.” Like the country doctor, my first chapter is torn between two obligations: first, it advances a reading of “Ein Landarzt” with particular attention paid to its spatio-temporal idiosyncrasies. Dispatched in the dead of night to a village ten miles away, the country doctor finds himself repeatedly displaced and delayed in his pursuit of duty — a condition that I not

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Walter Sokel’s “Freud and the Magic of Kafka’s Writing.”

only associate with the wound's undecidability, but also with the unreliability of the doctor's first-person narration in general. As one of Kafka's most condensed and dream-like narratives, "Ein Landarzt" generates more questions than answers, and this is especially true for the doctor himself, whose own house proves just as foreign and inexplicable as the village he visits and tries to escape.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, I argue this leaves the doctor exposed at key junctures in the text — not only in terms of his body, which is stripped bare at one point by the villagers, but also as a gesture of revelation exposing the doctor's medical and libidinal negligence. My second obligation in this chapter — one that I fulfill implicitly — is to develop a critical vocabulary that will persist and evolve in subsequent chapters. Although this chapter focuses thematically on the wound's openness, it becomes clear that notions of restriction, compensation, and temporality also circulate in this tumultuous text, in effect making "Ein Landarzt" a foundational example for subsequent readings.

The second chapter inherits my discussion of exposure, however from the opposite epistemological angle. Whereas "Ein Landarzt" represents openness on several levels, "Das Urteil" is saturated with the language of closing and covering — attributes that also describe the manipulative effect Georg Bendemann has on the reader. Initially a story about Georg's rise as a recently engaged and economically successful merchant, Kafka's text quickly turns into a crisis of filial conflict and deception. This last point finds paradigmatic expression, I suggest, in the appearance of the father's scar, whose physical exposure in turn exposes an unsettling sense of obstructedness in Kafka's language, muddling the clarity of this deceptively realistic text. In

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<sup>18</sup> Despite these strange and sometimes baffling encounters, however, the country doctor's servant girl, Rosa, sums this up quite clearly: "Man weiß nicht, was für Dinge man im eigenen Hause vorrätig hat" (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 253).

other words, like the patient's wound in "Ein Landarzt," I see the scar here as exemplifying a representational strategy in which bodily closedness reflects a more general sense of withholding and suppression at the level of narrative. Indeed, as his diaries and letters around this time clearly show, Kafka's experience of writing "Das Urteil" was, more than anything, a physiological experience. He not only describes it as an "opening of body and spirit," as mentioned above, but also claims the story emerged "wie eine regelrechte Geburt mit Schmutz und Schleim bedeckt" (*Tagebücher* 491). This fixation on the body, both in "Das Urteil" and in Kafka's composition of it, lends greater significance to otherwise insignificant features like the father's scar. The first two chapters, in this sense, can be seen as representing opposite sides of the same threshold while also promoting a similar feeling of disorientation and unreliability.

Chapter three focuses on another scarred figure in Kafka's oeuvre: the anthropomorphic ape, Rotpeter, in "Bericht für eine Akademie." Strikingly different from other texts in this study, "Bericht" takes the form of an academic lecture about the former ape's intellectual development in human society. Although he cannot comply fully with the academy's request to discuss all facets of his previous life, Rotpeter briefly mentions two gunshot wounds he sustained during his capture on the African Gold Coast — one that left him with a red scar on his face and the other burdening him with a permanent limp. Drawing together aspects from previous chapters, my reading of "Bericht" centers on the rhetoric of Rotpeter's report and how it compensates, on various levels, for the disadvantages of his injuries. I argue that Rotpeter's self-proclaimed openness belies a more confining and unreliable epistemology that his report attempts to correct and conceal. Overall, my main concern here is to understand Rotpeter's language — specifically, his occasionally vulgar and obsessive diction — as exposing a condition of woundedness that is at once personal and physical, disabling and enabling.

Finally, my last chapter marks a shift toward the more condensed and abstract form of the parable. On several levels, “Prometheus” also condenses my findings from previous chapters, expressing them through Kafka’s unorthodox interpretation of mythological and parabolic tradition. I demonstrate here that Kafka’s choice of Prometheus, a titan who stole the gods’ fire in order to empower humankind, is not only willfully transgressive on multiple levels, but also serves to advance a notion of suffering that is transformative and productively paradoxical. Orienting my discussion around the theme of chronic pain — which not only describes the recurrence of somatic discomfort, but also the pain of temporality in the text itself — this chapter explores how Prometheus’s wound revives and revises itself through repetition. Although Kafka achieves this repetition, in part, by dividing the myth into four interlocking legends, with the last legend describing how the wound tires and closes itself, it is important that both my dissertation and the parable conclude instead with the inexplicable rock that survives these legends. Drawing my readings to a close with this image, I show how this enduring object of inexplicability, a rock that can no longer restrain either Prometheus or his parable, represents the inadequate whole that fills the hole left by Kafka’s wound.

Chapter One  
The Openness of the Wound: Exposure in “Ein Landarzt”

The body is the return of the “outside” that it is to this “inside” that it isn’t. Instead of being in extension, the body is in expulsion toward its own “interior,” right to the very limit where the sign is abolished in the presence it represented.

Jean-Luc Nancy  
*Corpus*, 67

Alle Übergänge sind Krisen, und ist  
eine Krise nicht Krankheit?

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe  
*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 542

The figure of the wound has come to signify many things for readers of Kafka’s “Ein Landarzt” (1918), ranging from its religious implications to Kafka’s own experience with illness. Common to most, if not all accounts, however, is the centrality of the wound in understanding the text as a whole, its aperture-like quality that brings into focus other thematic features of the text, giving them meaning and orientation. Even the doctor himself, repeatedly distracted by other matters, cannot ignore its presence for very long: a gaping, worm-ridden lesion in his patient’s side, lethal to its host, but promiscuous in its interpretability — an opening that has effectively opened the text to many forms of reading.



Perhaps more than any other attribute, it is the undecidability of the wound, the failure to permanently locate it within any stable semantic field, that keeps it open and opening for scholars — a modality that concerns this chapter on several levels. Indeed, for many readers of Kafka, this site of failure has become a defining mark of his modernity, one that succeeds in its resistance to any normative hermeneutic procedure. Referring to Kafka's writing in general, Werner Hamacher writes that "das Kriterium für dieses Scheitern und für diese Modernität ist kein seinerseits 'moderner' Standard des Gelungenen, sondern die Unentscheidbarkeit der Frage, welchem Standard denn sein Werk und ob es überhaupt einem Standard entspricht" (284). This disruption of reading, a crisis of reference and totality that characterizes such an understanding of modernity, becomes epidemic and exemplary in a text such as "Ein Landarzt," where even the foundations of time and space seem pathologically undecidable. To be sure, nothing remains the same once the doctor reconsiders his preliminary evaluation of his patient, as if his decision to reassess the boy's medical condition also exposed the precarious condition of Kafka's text itself — its erratic pulse, its impaired, if not delusional, vision.

This chapter identifies the wound as an opening in "Ein Landarzt" that affects, among other things, its metabolism of narrative time and space. In outlining the conditions by which the wound comes into being, I am also interested in how the wound conditions Being in Kafka's text — how its exposure corresponds, on various levels, with the fluctuation of grammatical tense and perspective. My reading, however, exposes not one, but two wounds disfiguring and distending this body of text: the injury sustained by the doctor's servant girl and the boy's terminal wound, both of which, I argue, impact the story in manifold ways. Accordingly, I demonstrate how Kafka not only develops a rhetoric of woundedness in this text, but also how these injuries lay bare and literalize the praxis of writing itself — a process that strikes an

uncertain balance between *Handlung* and *Misshandlung*. Finally, my examination will not be restricted to a purely literal or figurative understanding of trauma, the ancient Greek term for wound; rather, it will be understood semio-somatically — as a co-constitutive threshold between the textual body and the body of text.

### **Tense and Tension**

Before addressing the circumstances of the patient's wound, this section will first explore its rhetorical periphery, the ways in which an experience of woundedness pervades Kafka's representation of space and time in the moments preceding the wound's uncovering. While initially withdrawn from view, the wound can be felt from the beginning as a kind of pneumatic breach in the text, a distant fissure pulling the doctor in its direction. As if already in the wound's grip, the doctor begins his account of events in haste:

Ich war in großer Verlegenheit: eine dringende Reise stand mir bevor; ein Schwerkranker wartete auf mich in einem zehn Meilen entfernten Dorfe; starkes Schneegestöber füllte den weiten Raum zwischen mir und ihm; einen Wagen hatte ich, leicht, großrädrig, ganz wie er für unsere Landstraßen taugt; in den Pelz gepackt, die Instrumententasche in der Hand, stand ich reisefertig schon auf dem Hofe; aber das Pferd fehlte, das Pferd. (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 252)

The doctor expresses his dilemma primarily through spatial relations. An urgent journey stands *before* him; the measured distance of ten miles extends *between* him and his patient. The urgency of his situation, however, finds its most pressing tenor at the level of syntax. With its terse clauses and semi-colons, this first sentence reads more like a set of hastily written notes than a

fully fleshed-out account of events, as if the doctor, already in a hurry, must resort to a form of paraphrase before he can proceed with the “primary” story.<sup>19</sup> Despite their cursory treatment, these events become crucial to our understanding of the doctor’s “große Verlegenheit.” They not only seek to explain his time-sensitive dilemma — his horse is dead and his patient potentially dying — but they also suggest an amount of distraction on the doctor’s part. The repetition of “Pferd” decelerates the sentence almost to the point of idleness, as the doctor mulls over the severity and impossibility of his predicament, his arresting loss of mobility. Consequently, the horse seems to linger at the end as a preoccupation, a sudden moment of interiority whose weight contrasts with the pace of exterior developments (to the extent we can accurately distinguish exterior from interior when ensconced in the first-person—a problematic I will explore in the next section).

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<sup>19</sup> The doctor’s state of immobility in this regard contrasts sharply with the experience of its reading, from the relative celerity and paratactic structure of Kafka’s syntax. The tentativeness of this sentence also brings attention to the materiality of the text as a kind of narrative shorthand, a rough draft of sorts. As many critics have suggested, the doctor can be seen as a stand-in for the writer figure. For example, Rochelle Tobias draws the connection between the doctor’s “nighttime labors” and those of a writer (see: “A Doctor’s Odyssey”). To take it one step further, however: perhaps we are reading at this point not so much the narration of events, but the schema that must stand in for those events, as if the doctor—the writer of his own story, “Ein Landarzt” — were also postponing his writing them into being by quickly itemizing them; a technique that allows him to begin his story, otherwise invisibly mediated and truncated, in *medias res*. Another play on the root of *Verlegenheit* suggests the labors of publishing (*verlegen*), which, in light of Wolf Kittler and Gerhard Neumann’s work in particular, further nuances the intermedial transmission between “Ein Landarzt” the story and *Ein Landarzt*, the collection of stories. See: Wolf Kittler and Gerhard Neumann’s essay “Kafkas *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*. Editorische Technik und hermeneutische Entscheidung.”

This sluggish emphasis given to “Pferd,” however, something that would otherwise signal movement and speed, can be attributed in part to a more nuanced understanding of *Verlegenheit*. The derived verb, *verlegen*, for example, connotes an action of spatial and temporal error: when something is *verlegt*, it is said to be either misplaced or delayed, both of which characterize the doctor’s initial dilemma. This untimely action also evokes a sense of reproachful inaction when linked back to the Middle High German *verligen*, which describes a state of disreputable idleness, of “schimpfliche Untätigkeit” (Schuller 35) or as Peter Canning indicates, suffering “damage or injury while lying about or ‘durch zu langes Liegen in Trägheit versinken’” (Canning 201). Clearly, the doctor’s professional reputation is at stake here, but the nature of his *Verlegenheit*, as we begin to see, suggests more than just a fear of incompetence. It also references a spatio-temporal crisis at the heart of the doctor’s predicament: an idleness as ignominious as it is injurious.

By articulating these events primarily through spatial relations, the opening sentence also situates an anterior past without changing grammatical tense. In other words, the text begins at a certain point in the past (“Ich war in großer Verlegenheit”) then proceeds further into the past (“eine drigende Reise stand mir bevor”) without leaving the milieu of the preterit. As if the doctor were already getting ahead of himself, what follows the colon syntactically in his report precedes it chronologically, explaining and substantiating this status of *Verlegenheit*.<sup>20</sup> While this seems hardly worthy of mention, a mere ambiguity of the preterit form in German, it is instructive to the extent we later observe this temporal elasticity redistributed on several levels

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<sup>20</sup> Given the spatial/temporal bivalence of “bevor,” we could read the doctor’s urgent trip as preceding even him, as facilitating his own entrance into the narrative — an awkward entrance as it were. In this regard, the doctor’s emergence is comparable to his patient’s: “Mit einer schönen Wunde kam ich auf die Welt; das war meine ganze Ausstattung” (260).

throughout the text. When Rosa and the doctor encounter the groom, for instance, their efforts to procure a means of transportation have a reciprocal impact in the text's narrative tense: the abrupt transfer from the past tense to the present. One of the more "striking" features of "Ein Landarzt" is how malleable its temporal architecture becomes when certain spatial parameters are suspended or transgressed. This is literally the case when the groom, rejecting Rosa's assistance, strikes her in the face:

"Hilf ihm", sagte ich, und das willige Mädchen eilte, dem Knecht das Geschirr des Wagens zu reichen. Doch kaum war es bei ihm, umfaßt es der Knecht und schlägt sein Gesicht an ihres. Es schreit auf und flüchtet sich zu mir; rot eingedrückt sind zwei Zahnreihen in des Mädchens Wange. "Du Vieh", schreie ich wütend, "willst du die Peitsche?", besinne mich aber gleich, daß er ein Fremder ist; daß ich nicht weiß, woher er kommt, und daß er mir freiwillig aushilft, wo alle andern versagen. (254)

Beginning first with the preterits "sagte" and "eilte," this passage shifts mid-sentence into the present when the groom assails Rosa, a violence initiated by the words "umfaßt" and "schlägt." The groom's attack is transgressive on two levels: not only has he taken hold of Rosa and assaulted her, foreshadowing his later sexual predation, but when he seizes Rosa, he also knocks the narrative into the present tense, as if the doctor were now experiencing these events the moment they occur. The groom's violation of Rosa in this regard translates grammatically as a violation of narrative tense — a temporal trauma that also repositions *das Ich* in the story. As Axel Hecker writes: "Was sich schon zu Beginn des "Landarztes" zeigte, nämlich daß das erzählte Ich sich nicht ganz "in" der erzählten Welt bewegt, sondern gleichsam an ihrem Rande - wie unentschlossen vor der Frage, ob der Sprung vom reflektierenden Rahmen in die Geschichte

überhaupt erfolgen kann, wird durch den Wechsel ins Präsens manifest” (203). The narrative elasticity of the doctor’s first-person perspective, its idiosyncratic sensitivity to his dilemmas of distance and delay, now enters what could be called an anterior present — a present tense that, in relation to the doctor’s final temporal signature, remains untimely.<sup>21</sup> What is crucial here, however, is that *das Ich* refers not to one definitive self at the time of Rosa’s wounding, but to two temporally distinct observers shifting through the same mnemonic space — what in narratological terms could be described as an entanglement of the narrating and narrated self.<sup>22</sup>

At this juncture, however, the text performs temporally what the doctor first sought out spatially — namely, a means of transport, a closing of distance, a need to be *present*. These demands remain consistent with the strange logistical role played by the groom. Crawling out before the doctor and Rosa when they first arrive at the pigsty, the groom resembles a beast; a resemblance not only reinforced through his unpredictable and beastly actions, but also through his ambiguous language. He asks the doctor, for example, “Soll ich anspannen?” (253), as if he himself were also a horse to be yoked up. This is corroborated shortly thereafter when he refers to the horses as “brother” and “sister;” horses that emerge “aus dem Türloch” as if suddenly

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<sup>21</sup> In her narratological reading of the text, Dorrit Cohn characterizes Kafka’s use of the grammatical present as “eliminating the temporal distance between the narrating and experiencing self” (*Eternal Present* 148), a technique that imparts a sense of immediacy while ironically disregarding any knowledge of the narrative’s conclusion. The definitive instantiation of the present tense, which Cohn refers to as “Kafka’s eternal present,” functions then as the originary site from which the doctor’s tale has always-already come into being and that speaks through various temporalities.

<sup>22</sup> This confusion of the narrating and narrated self also occurs throughout “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie”—especially the moments in which Rotpeter describes and evaluates events from his past that he cannot directly recall. See chapter three.

born. The creaturely groom seems to facilitate certain moments of transition for the doctor, and when those transitions manifest themselves as transgressions, as they do when in contact with Rosa, they also register a kind of wounding openness in textual time and space. Rosa suffers what appears to be a superficial trauma as a result: the red indentation of two rows of teeth on her cheek, a wound open residually and graphically. It is the groom, however, who expresses and inflicts a state of openness most literally by striking Rosa with his open mouth.<sup>23</sup> (Kafka never employs the verb *beißen* in this context, only *schlagen*). The groom's face is also described moments earlier by the doctor as an "offenes blauäugiges Gesicht" (253), implying either the opposite of malice — a guileless, honest countenance — or an animal-like vacancy. Such a "bald-faced" act is not only painfully open to interpretation in this sense, but by making this openness legible on Rosa's face, it also inscribes a pivotal moment of transition and transmission in the text — a gesture that, in many ways, anticipates the boy's exposed wound later on.<sup>24</sup>

This transition into present tense with Rosa's injury also exposes a present tension in the doctor's predicament: namely, that he is repeatedly confronted with inexplicable and conflicting phenomena. Despite the actions of the groom temporally foregrounding the text, the doctor's world remains haunted by unknowable and absent forces. For example, after threatening the

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<sup>23</sup> One may recall a diary entry in which Kafka, using a similar vocabulary, describes Felice Bauer's face: "Als ich am 13. August zu Brod kam, saß sie bei Tisch und kam mir doch wie ein Dienstmädchen vor. Ich war auch gar nicht neugierig darauf, wer sie war, sondern fand mich sofort mit ihr ab. Knochiges leeres Geischt, das seine Leere offen trug" (*Tagebücher* 431-32). As Clayton Koelb indicates, this entry is also preceded by the mention of an "empty open wagon and the large emaciated horse pulling it" (Koelb 200).

<sup>24</sup> As I will show in the next section, these two wounds — a doubling that we find repeated throughout "Ein Landarzt" — serve both structural and epistemic functions in Kafka's text.

groom with a whip, the doctor quickly composes himself, admitting he has no idea who the groom is, “daß er ein Fremder ist; daß ich nicht weiß, woher er kommt” (253). The paucity of detail, the overall lack of explanation of “woher” and “wohin” in the text creates a spatio-epistemological tension that can never be fully relieved by the doctor. It is a tension, however, that the groom generates both in his role as the horse groom and as the doctor’s perceived “Nachfolger.” The groom not only threatens to take Rosa from the doctor the moment the doctor recognizes an interest in her, but his task of *anspannen* seems to also translate this tension, this “Spannung,” into a team of muscular horses. What appeared to be a solution to the previous problem of immobility now literalizes two conflicting drives: the desire to be with Rosa and the desire to fulfill his duty as a doctor. In this sense, the horses not only allow the doctor to reach his patient, but also make explicit his emotional and libidinal *ties* to Rosa:

Mit so schönem Gespann, das merke ich, bin ich noch nie gefahren und ich steige fröhlich ein. “Kutschieren werde aber ich, du kennst nicht den Weg”, sage ich. “Gewiß”, sagt er, “ich fahre gar nicht mit, ich bleibe bei Rosa.” “Nein,” schreit Rosa und läuft im richtigen Vorgefühl der Unabwendbarkeit ihres Schicksals ins Haus; ich höre die Türkette klirren, die sie vorlegt; ich höre das Schloß einspringen; ich sehe, wie sie überdies im Flur und weiterjagend durch die Zimmer alle Lichter verlöscht, um sich unauffindbar zu machen. (255)

Described as beautiful, the team of horses seems fueled by an awakening sentiment in the doctor, an uncanny desire that is finally given a name by the groom in the next sentence: Rosa. The circumstances of Rosa's exclusion from the doctor’s journey provide the occasion for her inclusion in the world of proper names. Until this point in the text, Rosa was simply referred to as “das Dienstmädchen;” the neutrality of her “es,” as Marianne Schüller observes (38), now



blossoms into the feminine “sie,” making Rosa both semiotically and sexually visible for the doctor and groom.<sup>25</sup> The act of her naming coincides not only with her nascent desirability, but also her immanent captivity in the same sentence. Rosa's *Name*, to repurpose Werner Hamacher's wordplay, also functions as a kind of *Nahme* in this regard: a taking, a symbolic and physical capture from which she cannot escape.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, as the only figure in the text who receives a proper name, Rosa embodies the most significant *Ausnahme* in “Ein Landarzt,” an exception to the overall generality of names, which are largely dictated by vocational or social relations, i.e. *Landarzt, Pferdeknecht, Schwester*.

Consequently, the task of *anspannen* and the act of naming can be seen as operating through a similar logic of tethering and tension — a kind of restraint that incurs spatial as well as semiotic consequences for Rosa. In cataloguing these otherwise inexplicable actions by the groom — the ambiguous yoking, the wounding, and the naming — a crude process of semiosis begins to present itself: the harnessing of referents, their collateral marking / writing, and their "objectification" through naming. The groom can be seen not only as transmitting certain information to the doctor (i.e., the doctor's latent desire), but as also enacting via Rosa the impact of communication in general and an indelible “impression” of writing in particular. To

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<sup>25</sup> A clear indication of Rosa's own illegibility / sexual neutrality occurs only moments prior, articulated by Rosa herself as if she were mentioning her own status in the text: “Das Dienstmädchen stand neben mir. 'Man weiß nicht, was für Dinge man im eigenen Hause vorrätig hat,' sagte es, und wir beide lachten” (253). In addition to “available” or “at hand,” another meaning of *vorrätig* is “in print,” as if discovering both the groom and Rosa were similar to the act of reading itself.

<sup>26</sup> Hamacher writes: “Der Terminus de-terminiert sich. Der Eigenname enteignet. Indem er eine bestimmte Identität verleiht, nimmt der Name das, was ihr angehört, zugleich für sie selbst in Anspruch: jeder Name ist eine *Nahme*” (301).

this end, the groom's *anspannen* also literalizes a procedure that allows us, just like the doctor, to navigate the otherwise insurmountable terrain of this text — a metonymical strategy of substitution that makes “Ein Landarzt,” despite its many breaches and ruptures, a coherent and, above all, “spannend” work of fiction. As we will see in the next chapter, Georg Bendemann develops a similar compositional strategy in “Das Urteil” by constantly connecting and covering things. Semantic coherence, in this sense, expresses itself as a kind of binding or sealing — an attempt to suture whatever wounds the past or present may contain. While “Ein Landarzt” lacks a sense of temporal succession due to its erratic narrative tense, it still orients the reader through the linearity of its spatial sequencing. In other words, it may contain holes in its chronology, but it still constitutes a whole in terms of its structural contiguity. Like Freud's dream-logic in this regard, the short-circuiting of “now” and “then,” a central entanglement of the Unconscious, is translated instead as coordinates of “here” and “there.”

As a result, Rosa's traumatic naming seems attended by a rare certainty for the doctor. Fleeing the groom, Rosa runs “im *richtigen* Vorgefühl der *Unabwendbarkeit* ihres *Schicksals* ins Haus” (emphasis mine). The accuracy of Rosa's premonition, the fact that it is *correct*, suggests (albeit disingenuously) that the doctor already knows what will happen to her — that, despite relaying these events through the contrivances of simultaneous narration, the doctor has nonetheless doctored his own first-person account with extra-diegetic knowledge. More than just mere hyperbole, however, the “Unabwendbarkeit” of Rosa's fate constitutes perhaps the only phenomenon in the text not susceptible to the gesture of inversion. The utterance of her name has the spell of truth to it, an irreversible event that ushers her permanently into view, from a form of non-being to a state of sexualized and ontological disclosure. The real significance of the groom's *anspannen*, then, lies not simply in his ability to move the doctor (and the story) along,

or to even create tension at the level of plot, but also to expose something and someone previously hidden from sight — in other words, to reveal a truth in the ancient sense of *aletheia*, to unconceal who is Rosa for the doctor, to “un-forget” her name and what that name exposes. For this reason, Rosa’s unconcealment constitutes the most important signifying event in the text, an event from which she immediately recoils, attempting to make herself once again “unauffindbar,” however, an event that returns graphically (in both senses of the term) with the unconcealment of the patient’s wound. Like the boy’s wound, Rosa hides in plain sight before being named, as if the act of providing her with the predicate “Rosa” somehow supplied the necessary conditions for these ensuing acts of predation and prediction — that is, the groom’s sexual pursuit and the doctor’s “correct” observations respectively. In this regard, Rosa’s emergence from illegibility to the dangers of being legible can be seen as a wounding uniquely inflicted by the traumas of the signifying act, a disfiguring process of figuration that the doctor, despite his efforts, can never successfully remedy or avoid.<sup>27</sup>

Following Rosa’s naming (and her subsequent attempt at hiding), the gesture of exposure intensifies through a series of violent ruptures, culminating in what appears to be the momentary suspension of spatiality itself:

der Wagen wird fortgerissen, wie Holz in die Strömung; noch höre ich, wie die  
Tür meines Hauses unter dem Ansturm des Knechtes birst und splittert, dann sind  
mir Augen und Ohren von einem zu allen Sinnen gleichmäßig dringenden Sausen

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<sup>27</sup> To this end, Geoffery Hartman is instructive: “words are always armed and capable of wounding: either because, expecting so much of them, looking to them as potentially definitive or clarifying, we are hurt by their equivocal nature” (*Saving the Text* 123).

erfüllt. Aber auch das nur einen Augenblick, denn, als öffne sich unmittelbar vor  
meinem Hoftor der Hof meines Kranken, bin ich schon dort. (255)

As the first instance of passive voice in the text (“der Wagen wird fortgerissen”), the wrenched wagon not only underscores the doctor’s loss of control at this point, but it also initiates another *Riss* in narrative space-time to which he can only bear witness. He describes motion occurring in two opposing directions simultaneously: his involuntary movement outward and the groom’s encroachment inward — the doctor toward his patient in the next village and the groom toward Rosa hiding in the doctor’s house. The doctor is drawn forth “wie Holz in die Strömung,” a sudden and violent expulsion that does not prevent him from hearing what transpires in his absence. As indicated by the “noch,” the doctor still registers the door bursting and splintering under the groom’s assault, as if both his unruly wagon and the shattered door were mere iterations of the same disruptive event.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the breach inward even displaces the same raw material from the doctor’s previous simile (i.e., “Holz”), as if gathered and (de)constructed from the same rhetorical source.<sup>29</sup> Such a parallelism, however, seems to over-saturate the doctor’s

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<sup>28</sup> That event, I would argue, is Rosa’s wounding. As a site of rupture, Rosa’s cheek functions homologously to the doctor’s wagon and the splintered door in the sense that both become violent instantiations of “Verkehr”: symbolic forms of passage and transgression. The location of Rosa’s injury (*Wange*) is an anagram of *Wagen*, from which we can also derive a host of associations that inform this framing of tension: the verb *wagen* (to venture, to risk, to dare), for example, that underlies the doctor’s “dringende Reise,” as well as his desire to reclaim Rosa as his own. We also find *Wagnis*, the futile wager the doctor makes between his professional duty and his latent desire, as well as the *Waage*, the weighing of options and the suspense with which the text ends. We find a similar word play in Heidegger’s reading of Rilke in “Wozu Dichter?” See: Heidegger (*Holzwege* 269-320).

<sup>29</sup> This also resonates with the doctor’s later attempt to imagine the wound’s origin: “Im spitzen Winkel mit zwei Hieben der Hacke geschaffen. Viele bieten ihre Seite an und hören kaum die Hacke im Forst,

faculties and everything becomes briefly lost in the explosive simultaneity of rupture: “dann sind mir Augen und Ohren von einem zu allen Sinnen gleichmäßig dringenden Sausen erfüllt.” The convergence here of visual and acoustic information, an interior intrusion at the level of perspective, contrasts with the oppositional movement that creates it. To this end, we could say that the white-out conditions of the blizzard become indistinguishable from the white-noise of this departure: a “Gleichmäßigkeit” that dissolves all relationality between the house and the village, any perception of distance, duration, or externality in general. As if the patient’s house suddenly “opened itself” before his, the space between seems itself traumatized, ripped open, and indeed, *unmittelbar* — vacated of any middle or means. Compared to the opening image, in which a “starkes Schneegestöber füllte den weiten Raum zwischen mir und ihm,” the doctor’s journey evokes instead this state of “betweenlessness,” a space that proves neither “weit” nor, strictly speaking, “Raum.”

On one level, this collapse of space can be seen as an inversion of Rosa's wounding: where the scene of wounding enabled an instant jolt through time, one that left the doctor’s physical position unchanged, this eruptive journey moves the doctor instantly through space without leaving the moment, without abandoning his temporal position. As he states, the trip takes place in “nur einen Augenblick.” Moreover, what registered explicitly in the former (for the reader) as a shift in narrative tense, emerges in the latter only implicitly, in terms of what the doctor (or the reader) cannot see or hear, as if the snowy expanse between him and his patient from the first line were just the outer manifestation of a pathological blindspot within — a

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geschweige denn, daß sie ihnen näher kommt” (260). As I discuss in the next section, this interpenetration of forces signals a latent chiasmus in the text that reaches full expression with the exposure of the wound.

crippling interiority that has hindered his ability time and again to recognize people like Rosa or the groom. In this regard, the shift into the present tense also reveals a kind of “temporal blindness” that has hitherto prevented the doctor from “living in the moment” and, most importantly, from registering “was für Dinge man im eigenen Hause vorrätig hat.” On a structural level, however, this rupture between the doctor’s house and the village revisits the original sense of *Verlegenheit* as displacement and impasse, only now with a decided shift in *tension*: what first presented itself as a crisis of immobility, the doctor’s inability to leave his house, to reach his patient, and thereby fulfill his professional obligations, now expresses itself as a hypermobility that displaces any kind of middle-ground whatsoever: an aporia that occludes any spatial mediation or any form of compromise. In other words, the doctor cannot exist in two places at once — he cannot save both Rosa and his patient (in fact, as we later discover, he can save neither) — and this new *Verlegenheit*, an inversion of the former, is confirmed instantly by the either/or status of the landscape.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, if we understand this snowy landscape as somehow wounded, its annulment as a form of terrestrial disfigurement and displacement, it would also seem appropriate to read the object of the doctor’s medical practice quite literally as “Land” itself. Clayton Koelb writes:

If we were in the habit of providing medical services to landscapes, we would probably interpret *Landarzt* exactly the way we do *Tierarzt* [...] The landscape inhabited by the country doctor, similarly, seems pathologically distressed,

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<sup>30</sup> When the doctor leaves the village, however, this “either/or” landscape is inverted, attaining a “neither/nor” status.

plagued as it is by an apparently endless winter and by spatio-temporal discontinuities that on the one hand allow the doctor to move instantly ten miles from his home to the patient's [...] The landscape stands in dire need of a cure.

Unfortunately, this Landarzt is not up to the task. (Koelb 195-96)

While the doctor never dwells long on the spatio-temporal discontinuities plaguing his world (though he does dwell on its endless continuity in the end), he seems obsessively aware of a certain level of quantifiability to this interstitial space separating him from his destination.

Mentioned twice by the doctor — once in the opening sentence and then again while attending to his patient — the exact distance between his house and the village is ten miles.<sup>31</sup> This numerical fixation seems peculiar given the overwhelming sense of flux in the text, as if reporting its exact measurement served to somehow anchor and orient the doctor's position against the immeasurable irregularities around him. Like the "Landvermesser" in *Das Schloss*, the "Landarzt" is charged with a seemingly incomprehensible task of evaluation and appraisal, and the repetition of this measured distance could be seen either as an attempt to mollify his anxieties or to simply enumerate them, adding them to his growing list of complaints in the text. But the doctor, of course, never experiences these ten miles as such; the distance either figures as the complete lack of distance, an immediate journey, or as an interminable distance in the end, which is also a lack of distance, the lack of any referentiality whatsoever.

If this deterritorialized exterior demands a cure, as Koelb suggests, a kind of objective explanation, a diagnosis, then the doctor fails insofar as he has never fully recovered from his

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<sup>31</sup>„Jetzt erst fällt mir wieder Rosa ein; was tue ich, wie rette ich sie, wie ziehe ich sie unter diesem Pferdeknecht hervor, zehn Meilen von ihr entfernt, unbeherrschbarre Pferde vor meinem Wagen?“ (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 256).

own chronic case of *Verlegenheit*. These spatio-temporal anomalies implicate, if anything, an *Ich* that has lacked any measure of its own, any stable ground by which these transgressive events can be given distance or distinguished from the narrative voice that gives them a name. As the most frequent word in “Ein Landarzt,” “ich” is perhaps the most elusive and perplexing in this regard, so much so that a narratological revision of the doctor’s first line could playfully read *Das Ich war in grosser Verlegenheit*. What the depiction of Rosa’s wounding and the doctor’s instant journey begin to reveal, however, is that this *Ich* is not only *verlegt* in the narrative, but somehow *verwundet* as well — a wounded subject whose unreliable narration begins to infect and infringe upon the world around him. As I will discuss in the next section, this is perhaps the most subtle trauma of all in Kafka’s text: not simply the exposed wound uncovered by the doctor, but the wound that such a wound exposes.

### **The Mishandled Wound**

Despite the prevalence of doubling in “Ein Landarzt,” the doctor’s world seems to structure itself more centripetally than symmetrically once he leaves his house. He travels instantly towards (and then prohibitively away from) the wound’s domain, as if the wound harbored a gravity whose pull exceeded all other forces in the text. Indeed, as the reason for his urgent journey, the wound (or what reveals itself to be such) has demanded his presence from the very beginning — a demand that exerts an almost physical control over his actions.<sup>32</sup> Once he arrives at the village, for example, he is “almost” lifted from his wagon (“man hebt mich fast aus

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<sup>32</sup> Although the argument can be made that with such an unreliable narrative strategy, Kafka undermines any claim to referential presence in this text, I work regardless with the assumption that the wound, while not immediately present to the doctor, is in fact present from the very beginning of the text—hence the reason for such urgency and the alarm that precedes the narrative diegesis.



dem Wagen”) and brought to his patient’s bedside. Later, when he prepares to leave his (apparently healthy) patient and return to Rosa, the sister misreads his flight as discomfort, taking off his coat and keeping him longer. The doctor even stands accused by his dying patient of not arriving by his own feet, perhaps the most telling symptom of the wound’s ambulant influence.<sup>33</sup> If there are any forces at work in the text, it would seem the doctor’s will ranks as one of the least effectual — a will whose inefficacy in the external world, its inability to exert any lasting control, is matched only by its desperate visibility before Kafka’s reader, that capacious interior life by which such external failures are measured.<sup>34</sup>

In this regard, the centripetalism of the wound, its marshalling of time and space toward some kind of center in the text (i.e., an interior site such as the patient’s *Krankenzimmer*), can be seen as giving external expression to the doctor’s pathological movement inward, his abject submission to a similarly inescapable and debilitating interiority: what Bluma Goldstein has called the “the inchoate endeavor toward introspection that is presented in relation to a wound” (203). As the only setting in the text that lends prolonged and detailed access to an interior space — both spatially and subjectively — *das Krankenzimmer* immediately differentiates itself from the doctor’s estate by its claustrophobic specificity.<sup>35</sup> When the doctor enters the patient’s room, for instance, his first inclination is to open the window: “im Krankenzimmer ist die Luft kaum atembar; der vernachlässigte Herdofen raucht; ich werde das Fenster aufstoßen” (255). This

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<sup>33</sup> “Du bist ja auch nur irgendwo abgeschüttelt, kommst nicht auf eigenen Füßen” (259-60).

<sup>34</sup> A sentiment acknowledged by none other than the doctor himself. He frequently asks, for example, what it is that he is actually doing — “was tue ich hier in diesem endlosen Winter” (257) — and at one point prefers death over his perceived lack of agency.

<sup>35</sup> Compared to the highly interiorized village setting, the doctor’s house is predominantly exteriorized; the primary action takes place outside his house and pigsty.

gesture of *aufstoßen* also reads as an attempt to reassert a suppressed will, however one ultimately undermined by its proclamation in the future tense, its tentative postponement.

Instead, the only assertion of will is what directs itself toward the still concealed wound:

zuerst aber will ich den Kranken sehen. Mager, ohne Fieber, nicht kalt, nicht warm, mit leeren Augen, ohne Hemd hebt sich der Junge unter dem Federbett, hängt sich an meinen Hals, flüstert mir ins Ohr: "Doktor, laß mich sterben." Ich sehe mich um; niemand hat es gehört; die Eltern stehen stumm vorgebeugt und erwarten mein Urteil; die Schwester hat einen Stuhl für meine Handtasche gebracht. (255)

The doctor first assesses his patient purely in negative terms, by what he is not (neither warm nor cold) and by what he lacks (a fever and a shirt). The repetition of "ohne" and "nicht" in this regard reflects the initial withholding nature of the wound, its inclination for concealment, which also manifests acoustically in terms of the boy's unheard request: "Ich sehe mich um; niemand hat es gehört." The boy's request, later revised and reversed when the wound is made visible, lobbies for the doctor's continued passivity, to let the boy simply expire and withhold any attempts to save him — an appeal to which the doctor momentarily concedes after opening his *Handtasche* and examining its contents:

Ich öffne die Tasche und suche unter meinen Instrumenten; der Junge tastet immerfort aus dem Bett nach mir hin, um mich an seine Bitte zu erinnern; ich fasse eine Pinzette, prüfe sie im Kerzenlicht und lege sie wieder hin. "Ja," denke ich lästernd, "in solchen Fällen helfen die Götter, schicken das fehlende Pferd, fügen der Eile wegen noch ein zweites hinzu, spenden zum Übermaß noch den

Pferdeknecht.” Jetzt erst fällt mir wieder Rosa ein; was tue ich, wie rette ich sie.

(255-56)

Initiated by the opening of the doctor’s *Handtasche*, the ensuing interior monologue lasts for two pages in the *Kritische Ausgabe*, ending once the doctor closes his bag, when he literally *closes the case* and prepares to leave. Framing the approximate center of the text, this open *Handtasche* functions as surrogate wound of sorts, one that directly precedes the patient’s diagnosis but whose traumatic knowledge calls for certain corrective measures by the doctor.<sup>36</sup> The opening and closing of the *Handtasche* in this regard exposes more than just the doctor’s medical implements, for which he quickly finds no use, but what becomes the deepest and most sustained level of interiority in the text—a nested interior space in the *Krankenzimmer* that contains the doctor’s most bigoted convictions (concerning the doltish people of the village) and his newly emergent fears (concerning Rosa). This tertiary level of interiority registers even at the level of punctuation, where quoted dialogue suddenly shifts from referencing external instances of saying, screaming, and whispering to the blasphemous interiors of thinking (i.e. “‘Ja,’ denke ich lästernd”), as if certain thoughts somehow assumed a different presence once the bag was opened, as if they demanded a kind of syntactic containment once exposed. As a burden that has accompanied the doctor from the very first line, the *Handtasche* is indeed a kind of emotional baggage; once examined, its true internal contents prove “instrumental” insofar as they seem to

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<sup>36</sup> Seen in more Freudian terms, it is almost as if the moment of revelation achieved by opening this *Handtasche*, this archive of traumatic knowledge, were the sole purpose of the doctor’s journey: to simply acknowledge those things already in his possession from the start—a task that unfortunately required a certain amount of distance to achieve.

finally clarify the doctor's priorities — however, once again, at the expense of appreciating certain people and things in his presence.

Accordingly, what proves to be a mistaken reading of the boy's condition prompts an obsessive re-reading of other mistakes for the doctor, failures in judgment of which the boy's (mis)diagnosis provides a surprising moment of reflection. As the doctor's thoughts return to Rosa and the groom, to the imagined crisis unfolding outside the *Krankenzimmer*, the horses literally express these concerns by pushing open the windows from the outside:

Diese Pferde, die jetzt die Riemen irgendwie gelockert haben; die Fenster, ich weiß nicht wie, von außen aufstoßen; jedes durch ein Fenster den Kopf stecken und, unbeirrt durch den Aufschrei der Familie, den Kranken betrachten. "Ich fahre gleich zurück", denke ich, als forderten mich die Pferde zur Reise auf, aber ich dulde es, daß die Schwester, die mich durch die Hitze betäubt glaubt, den Pelz abnimmt. (256)

Despite the abruptness of this outside intrusion, the doctor registers it remotely from his interior perspective, absorbing its impact as if truly *betäubt*. When the doctor decides to leave the village, however, taking his horses' interjection quite literally, the intervention quickly comes from within the room itself, when the sister takes off his coat and keeps the doctor inside. Similar to the scene of the doctor's immediate departure, two opposing forces intersect upon this moment: the horses breach the interior of the house from the outside while the doctor internally resolves to exit the house ("Ich fahre gleich zurück") and return to Rosa. The benumbing interaction of these forces — one centripetal, the other centrifugal — correlates with the sister's external reaction to the doctor's internal state, an equal and opposing reaction, as it were, that stalls any inertia and keeps the doctor in place. The capitulating tone of "aber" once again underscores the doctor's

permissiveness in the face of such resistance; he abandons his “immediate” return almost immediately after thinking of it, as if the thought, like his *Pelz*, were physically removed by the sister. As the verb *dulden* also suggests, the doctor both tolerates and suffers the sister's (mis)reading of the situation; he both allows it to occur (as if in control) and becomes its victim — an ambivalent permissiveness that indeed betrays a sedated (i.e. *betäubt*) aspect to his behavior. The act of disrobing in this regard can be seen as literally dis-*mantling* certain boundaries and limits first imposed by the doctor, gradually stripping down his defenses to what will culminate in the end as complete exposure — not just of his questionable medical practice, but of his body as well.

The phlegmatic, almost medicated distance with which the doctor narrates these events, along with his docile compliance in the sister's misplaced courtesy, marks the permeation of another boundary in the *Krankenzimmer*: namely, the social boundary that extends between a doctor and patient.<sup>37</sup> The sister's apparent (mis)reading of the doctor's situation here is crucial: not only does it signal — at least to the reader — an interpretive gap between the external appearance of things and the doctor's otherwise concealed intentions, but that this gap, like the windows of the *Krankenzimmer* itself, opens from two opposite and conflicting directions. The doctor interprets the sister interpreting him, and while his deduction of her motivations is plausible, it remains permanently unverifiable in any scientific sense. In other words, misreadings are also subject to misreading in “Ein Landarzt,” as if the true communicable disease in the patient's sickroom were merely incommunicability itself.<sup>38</sup> As the doctor later

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<sup>37</sup> This behavior is re-enforced moments later by the father, when he offers the doctor a glass of rum — as if the doctor were the one to be medicated. We could even read the sister as a kind of *Krankenschwester* in this regard.

<sup>38</sup> A slight exception to this is demonstrated by the family once they observe the doctor discovering

admits, “Rezepte schreiben ist leicht, aber im übrigen sich mit den Leuten verständigen, ist schwer” (257), a claim both hermeneutically and medically corroborated once he proceeds to misread his patient’s condition:

Es bestätigt sich, was ich weiß: der Junge ist gesund, ein wenig schlecht durchblutet von der sorgenden Mutter mit Kaffee durchtränkt, aber gesund und am besten mit einem Stoß aus dem Bett zu treiben. Ich bin kein Weltverbesserer und lasse ihn liegen. Ich bin vom Bezirk angestellt und tue meine Pflicht bis zum Rand, bis dorthin, wo es fast zu viel wird. (257)

The doctor’s assessment borders on tautology; its self-assured circularity, confirming what he knows, seems to even condition his own language, as if the mention of poor circulation (“schlecht durchblutet”) and saturation (“durchtränkt”) also referred to his fallacious reasoning. The fluidity of these prefixes, the repetition of *durch* within one sentence, also resonates with the increasingly membranous walls of the *Krankenzimmer*, its perforation from the outside by horses and the exudation of the doctor’s itinerant thoughts; an outward motion the doctor reproachfully extends to his patient when suggesting a shove out of bed, employing the substantive of *stoßen* that recalls the breaching (*aufstoßen*) of windows. In this regard, the *Krankenzimmer* can be read as a punctured interior of multiple interiorities, an interpenetrated space of contrary interpretive forces fostering confusion and (above all, for the doctor) contempt.

Increasingly more defensive in tone, the doctor himself begins to push back at this point, resisting demands better left to the gods and not the precincts of scientific knowledge.

Eschewing the role of “Weltverbesserer,” a messianic figure that evokes the role of Christ, the

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the wound. I say slight because, while the chain of communication seems to travel unhindered, its message remains inaccessible to the doctor. (257)

doctor claims to have performed his duty to its limit (“bis zum Rand”), perhaps even exceeding that limit “wo es fast zu viel wird.” And indeed, the traversing of limits, the crossing of thresholds spatial, temporal, and now vocational, has proven a predominant gesture of violation in “Ein Landarzt” — a gesture that reaches critical expression once the doctor discovers the wound:

In seiner rechten Seite, in der Hüftengegend hat sich eine handtellergroße Wunde aufgetan. Rosa, in vielen Schattierungen, dunkel in der Tiefe, hellwerdend zu den Rändern, zartkörnig, mit ungleichmäßig sich aufsammelndem Blut, offen wie ein Bergwerk obertags. So aus der Entfernung. In der Nähe zeigt sich noch eine Erschwerung. Wer kann das ansehen ohne leise zu pfeifen? Würmer, an Stärke und Länge meinem kleinen Finger gleich, rosig aus eigenem und außerdem blutbespritzt, winden sich, im Innern der Wunde festgehalten, mit weißen Köpfchen, mit vielen Beinchen ans Licht. (258)

Marked first by the bloody *Handtuch*, the wound appears after the doctor closes his *Handtasche* and signals for his coat, defensive gestures of closure and coverage that in effect conclude his lengthy and evasive interior digression. Metonymically reopening the case, however, the sister's display of the *Handtuch* again keeps the doctor from leaving the *Krankenzimmer*, preparing him now to acknowledge (as if wrongfully and willfully rejected before) the wound's presence. Described as “handtellergroß,” the wound summons a series of associations for the doctor that increases in specificity as the doctor's gaze is drawn inward. As if forcefully pulling in the doctor's observations from a distance (“aus der Entfernung”), the wound's description seems guided by the signifying power of hands: following the closing of the *Handtasche*, the wound is marked (*Handtuch*) and measured (*handtellergroß*) by hands, ultimately resembling a hand in

the form of “Würmer, an Stärke und Länge meinem kleinen Finger gleich.” As Stefani Engelstein points out, “the wound is also a hand, reaching outward from the body itself to meet the doctor’s bloody hands reaching in” (350). The push / pull aspect of the wound, its negotiation of forces moving in (the doctor’s gaze, his *chirurgische Hand*) and moving out (the finger-like worms, the image of a blooming flower), recalls on a structural level the doctor’s previous experiences of counter-directional movement: the first when departing his house, the other when attempting to leave his “healthy” patient. Unlike these instances of rupture, however, the wound embodies both directions in one (almost “ungraspable”) figure of interpenetration. By this, I wish to characterize the patient’s wound not simply as a topos for memory, but as an opening, a portal, a liminal space that mediates between certain binary oppositions in the text — between the internal and external, between the ontologies of absence and presence, and finally between the patient’s life and the announcement of his death.

Accordingly, the wound can be read as the emblematic figure of in-betweenness in “Ein Landarzt.” Existing neither strictly inside nor outside the body, it is neither fully concealed by the flesh nor is it completely separate from it; instead, it remains traumatically undecidable in its negotiation of openness.<sup>39</sup> As a result, this openness can be seen not only as allegorizing a story

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<sup>39</sup> Derrida characterized undecidability in terms of an impossible disjunction: “Neither/nor, that is, simultaneously either *or* ‘such as, among others:’ neither a plus nor a minus, neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither the inside nor the outside, neither remedy nor poison, neither a presence nor an absence, neither the incised integrity of a beginning [...] nor simple secondariness” (*Positions* 43). Perhaps more than any other glyph in Derrida’s formulation, it is the liminal “/” — the threshold, the slash — that interpolates this notion of undecidability most effectively. As that which challenges standard binary oppositions such as “past/present,” “inside/outside,” “absent/present,” the undecidable provides us with a tactical language for situating the



of loss (of flesh, of life, of *praxis*, etc.), a negative space that circumscribes and substitutes absence, but also as enacting a figurative emergence, a flower-like opening up and outward in its evocation of Rosa — a tropism in every sense of the word. Echoing the name of his recently discovered love interest, the description of the wound both confirms the boy's fatal prognosis — “Armer Junge, dir ist nicht zu helfen” — and recalls the doctor's erroneous handling of other matters, namely those pertaining to Rosa: “an dieser Blume in deiner Seite gehst du zugrunde” (258). In this regard, it can be said that *die Handlung* of “Ein Landarzt” reads quite literally as a chronicle of *Misshandlungen*, a plot repeatedly inscribed and frustrated by the consequences of medical, sexual, and interpretive mistreatment. Even the doctor's account of events, vertiginously relayed in the first person, presents symptoms of molestation: transgressions of narrative tense and spatial logic that register and perform the irregularities of the doctor's world. This concept of mishandling, as it were, finds paradigmatic expression in the wound — both in terms of its initial absence, as an unperceived condition gravely mishandled by the doctor, and then, as that which bears the atypical symptoms of handedness, the finger-like worms that signal the decomposition of *behandeln* itself; in short, the uncertainty of treating things not only medically, but hermeneutically as well.<sup>40</sup>

Directly following the exposure of this “mishandled” wound, its openness extends literally and figuratively throughout the *Krankenzimmer*. Communication flows openly, if not ambiguously, between members of the family as soon as they observe the doctor in action. The

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slashed/slashing nature of the wound in “Ein Landarzt.”

<sup>40</sup> Both events of mishandling (the literal abuse and the figurative disfigurement) are conflated in the doctor's recurring thought of Rosa's mistreatment, constituting what could be called the “double exposure” of the wound — that is, both the literal exposure of the wound and its figurative superimposition (via the sign of “Rosa”) upon other traumas in the doctor's world.

father even communicates with some guests who have entered “auf den Fußspitzen, mit ausgestreckten Armen balancierend, durch den Mondschein der offenen Tür” (258). As if requiring precise coordination, these guests traverse the threshold of the door just as the boy, whispering to the doctor (now in direct discourse), reverses his earlier request to die: “‘Wirst du mich retten?’ flüstert schluchzend der Junge, ganz geblendet durch das Leben in seiner Wunde” (258). This reversal, along with the patient’s terminal diagnosis, marks a chiasmic structure in the text that situates the wound at the axis of inversion: first the boy is healthy but wants to die, and then, following the appearance of the wound, he is sick and wants to live. This crucial instance of chiasmus, however, is slightly asymmetrical, but it is this asymmetry that corresponds most literally with the wound’s chiral properties.<sup>41</sup> In the context of medical science, chirality — which shares the same literal characterization of “x” (*chi*) as chiasmus in Greek — refers to the asymmetrical state of handedness. Derived from the word *χειρ*, meaning hand, the term more generally describes something that is not identical to its mirror image, a phenomenon or substance that cannot be fully superposed with its otherwise exact copy. Given the presence of opposable thumbs, the left hand and the right hand are not interchangeable, yet, strictly speaking, they are not completely asymmetrical either; instead, chirality signifies an axial relationship where certain perceived symmetries co-exist among asymmetries across a shared threshold. In this regard, the literalism of the chiral / chiasmic wound manifests on multiple levels — i.e., philological, scientific, artistic, and even religious: the criss-crossed, interpenetrating forces that

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<sup>41</sup> To be clear, however: the asymmetrical chiasmus derives not from a lack on Kafka’s part, but from an intense engagement with the spiraling complexity and interminability of asymmetrical readings. To that end, Stanley Corngold’s chapter on “Metaphor and Chiasm” in *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* is particularly instructive. See also Gerhard Neumann’s concept of the “gleitendes Paradox” (“Umkehrung” 702-744).

have been circulating throughout in the doctor's world.<sup>42</sup> It is the exposure of the wound that brings this rhetorical shape of "x" interminably into being. To express it even algebraically: the open wound resists any definitive closure insofar as this incision-like variable of "x" lies at the heart of all its equations.

This rhetoric of woundedness, the literal and figurative negotiation of openness that assumes certain chiasmic forms in the text, culminate in the momentary exchange of and between the doctor and his patient. Disrobed by the family and the villagers, the doctor — now a kind of patient himself — is placed at the side of the wound: "denn jetzt nehmen sie mich beim Kopf und bei den Füßen und tragen mich ins Bett. Zur Mauer, an die Seite der Wunde legen sie mich"

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<sup>42</sup> While the wound's uncanny resemblance to Christ's wound has been well documented, the comparison hasn't moved far beyond its theological or messianic connotations for most scholars. Christian iconography around the time of the Reformation, however, provides an even more interesting antecedent in the case of the chiral wound, where the portrayal of Christ's wounds (after the resurrection) provided the viewer an opportunity to observe, and physically probe, Christ's interior. This becomes exemplary in the figure of St. Thomas, who, in visual works such as *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* by Caravaggio and Bartholomew's *St. Thomas Altarpiece* in Cologne, inserts two of his fingers into Christ's wound, verifying that Christ had in fact resurrected. (Interestingly, the biblical source for these depictions — John 20:24-29 — never explicitly states that Thomas' fingers entered Christ's body, but the majority of paintings that depict St. Thomas *interpret it* as such.) As Joseph Leo Koerner points out, these paintings "focused on penetrations [that breach the surface], so that, by way of the wound, the eye could physically enter Christ's body [facilitating] a ceaseless movement in and out" (144). In "Ein Landarzt," it could be said that the doctor bears witness to the other side of this threshold, where Thomas's fingers—fingers that were meant to appease his skepticism, to seek out a scientific basis for faith—have decomposed into worms and rather than serving as proof for life after death, for any kind of salvation, it would seem that the boy's wound opens up a uncertain realm where, according to the doctor, "den alten Glauben haben sie verloren" (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 259).

(259). As Rochelle Tobias points out, the location of this wound, to whose side it actually belongs, remains indeterminable in the German (124). As if responding to the wound's openness, its ambiguity, the patient expresses his distrust in the doctor's nebulous excuses with the condescending authority of a doctor: "Mit dieser Entschuldigung soll ich mich begnügen? Ach, ich muß wohl. Immer muß ich mich begnügen" (260). Having to be content with such inadequacies, however, the patient confides in the doctor, telling him that the wound is his "ganze Ausstattung" — not only has it accompanied him into this world ("Mit einer schönen Wunde kam ich auf die Welt"), but it seems to have facilitated that passage as well, as a means of exposure.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, the word "Ausstattung" can be read quite literally as a kind of furnishing or instrumentation by which the patient has been granted passage — a "beautiful," aletheiac opening that has brought him from non-being into being. In this regard, the rhetoric of woundedness is also a rhetoric of truth — truth not in the sense of factual correspondence, but in Heideggerian terms of ontological exposure and unconcealment.<sup>44</sup>

This passage into being, however, travels in both directions with regard to the patient. The doctor first offers an explanation meant to dispel his mistrust, an imagined etiology of the wound that again, through the blows of an ax, traces its cross-purposed signature: "Im spitzen Winkel mit zwei Hieben der Hacke geschaffen. Viele bieten ihre Seite an und hören kaum die Hacke im Forst, geschweige denn, daß sie ihnen näher kommt" (260). The patient, however, asking whether this explanation is "wirklich so," expires after taking the doctor's word for it:

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<sup>43</sup> To this end, it can be said that both Rosa and the patient "kam[en] auf die Welt" by way of the wound, however, only the patient exits this world by way of it.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, according to the doctor, the patient's mistake is that he has "keinen Überblick." While the doctor claims to have been "weit und breit," and that the wound "ist nicht so übel," his defensive, self-aggrandizing tone at this point seems to only weaken any claim to truth.

“‘Es ist wirklich so, nimm das Ehrenwort eines Amtsarztes mit hinüber.’ Und er nahm’s und wurde still” (260). The moment the doctor’s word is “taken” — here we are again reminded of the wound’s chiral properties, its pushing and pulling, its taking and giving — the patient finally passes into non-being, into the realm of silence, and the text returns once again to the past tense. Like the wounding of Rosa, whose transgression exposed the narrative to the present tense, the patient’s death (from a wound) registers temporally as a reciprocal gesture of closure, effectively concluding the doctor’s time and place in the present. Consequently, the return to the past tense coincides with the doctor’s redoubled effort to return to Rosa — “Aber jetzt war es Zeit, an meine Rettung zu denken” (260) — a valiant rescue attempt that departs, however, “langsam wie alte Männer” (260). In this regard, the horses, once a supernatural testament to the doctor’s vitality, now seem burdened by the gravity of time, by the slow and pathetic path of an old man as he approaches his own aporia of non-being.

For this reason, or perhaps in spite of it, “Ein Landarzt” ends by not ending at all; it concludes in the morasses of suspense, endlessly stalled by the incommensurable forces of an “earthly wagon” and “unearthly horses.” Not unlike “Das Urteil” in this regard, “Ein Landarzt” transitions into interminable transition — an image of endlessness briefly glimpsed by the reader and then forever withheld from view. The text begins as it ends — “in großer Verlegenheit,” in a time and space of disorientation. It is also told from where it ends — unconcealed in the time and space of in-betweenness, forever confined to the neither / nor domain of “Spannung.” Understood in more traditional categories of form and content, it could be said that the pathological content of “Ein Landarzt” (the irremediable wound) conditions a pathology of form (the instable tense, the asymmetrical chiasmus) insofar as its trauma extends beyond the textual body and into the body of text, into a disruptive and disfigured *Handlung* that emerges from

where it ceases. And in this regard, the doctor's final words are perhaps the most critical of all:  
"es ist niemals wieder gutzumachen" (260).

Chapter Two  
The Father's Scar: Closure in "Das Urteil"

The scar is a mark of treacherously concealed narrative waiting to break the surface and create a scandal; it is a sign that the story, like the wound, may always be reopened.

Terence Cave

*Recognitions*, 24

Und wenn die Wunde nicht mehr  
schmerzt, schmerzt die Narbe.

Bertold Brecht

*Gedichte*, 290

Compared to the disorienting nature of "Ein Landarzt," Kafka's earlier text, "Das Urteil" (1913), begins as a fairly straightforward narrative: Georg Bendemann, having just finished a letter to his friend, announces to his father its contents — among them, news of his recent engagement. Although the repercussions of Georg's disclosure quickly dispel this impression of clarity, there is indeed a straightforwardness to the momentum of "Das Urteil," something that propels it forward in the same way Georg is finally compelled to leave his father's room and drop from a bridge — something foreign and forceful. As we learn from his diary, Kafka

registered a similar momentum in writing the text. Composed in one sitting the night of September 22nd, the story inaugurated for him — and later his critics — an unprecedented breakthrough in his craft; he described its production as “eine regelrechte Geburt” (*Tagebücher* 491), as something that emerged before him ecstatically, as if he were advancing over water in fearful, but joyous pursuit (*Tagebücher* 460). Even by his own appraisal, the text signaled a movement toward something distinctly “literary” and, above all, truthful — a renunciation of what he termed only months prior as “das Gefühl des Falschen” (*Tagebücher* 325).

The eight hours invested in writing “Das Urteil” thus provided Kafka not only with his first aesthetically mature work, one that would prove personally significant for years to come, but also a model for literary creation in general. Stoking the flames of this “großes Feuer” (*Tagebücher* 460), and seeing its transformative potential through to the end, was now the only way to make real literature for Kafka: “*nur so kann geschrieben werden, nur in einem solchen Zusammenhang, mit solcher vollständigen Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele*” (*Tagebücher* 461). Only with such coherence and surrender could literature happen; only through an opening of body and spirit could this force be discharged, released from any artistic restraint. Just a year earlier Kafka referred to this feeling in terms of an oncoming locomotive (*Tagebücher* 38); but in the context of “Das Urteil,” it is the creative engine of the unconscious that drives the point home. Kafka acknowledges as much in the same entry when he writes, quite plainly: “Gedanken an Freud, natürlich” (*Tagebücher* 461).

Such an opening suggests a kind of literary wound, however one internally inflicted — a wound that expresses itself as much through the body (the physical labor of writing) as through aesthetic production (the emergence of a body of text). Kafka often described this process as compulsory and eviscerating. In 1922, for example, he wrote “die Jagd geht durch mich und



zerreißt mich” (*Tagebücher* 398), as if he were merely a vessel deployed and deposited in the service of literature — wording that, as we shall see, echoes Georg’s own expulsion from the father’s room (i.e., “Georg fühlte sich aus dem Zimmer gejagt”). Similarly, in a letter to Oscar Pollack, Kafka claimed that “man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen” (*Briefe* 27), and that “ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns” (28). These images evoke the idiosyncratic wounds of “Ein Landarzt,” injuries that had been inflicted by biting and ax-swinging; they also propose that literature must somehow wound us in return, to pierce through the surface, to make a lasting, if not physical impression. Towards the end of his life, Kafka traded this ax for a plow, when he described writing as “Arbeit mit dem Pflug” (*Tagebücher* 918) — a drudgery that, in the same diary entry, he relates to a closed, but unhealed wound: “die Arbeit schließt sich, wie sich eine ungeheilte Wunde schließen kann” (*Tagebücher* 919). For Kafka, the metaphor of literary inscription is both fruitful and festering, a balance struck between poiesis (the composition of an artistic work) and pathology (its potential for decomposition or failure). If creating true literature required the expulsion of these potentially toxic forces, an opening through which a work could emerge naturally and necessarily, then hastily sealing this wound — as Freud no doubt impressed upon Kafka — could prove equally injurious. Indeed, as Kafka’s parables and unfinished texts demonstrate, he resisted the notion of conclusion on several levels. Some literary wounds, it would seem, were best left open and festering.<sup>45</sup>

But unlike “Jäger Gracchus” (1917) and “Der Bau” (1923/24), for example, “Das Urteil” contains what appears to be a definitive conclusion, or at least a conclusion in the most reductive sense: Georg drops from the bridge and the story, having ostensibly resolved its action, ends.

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<sup>45</sup> For more about the homology between open wounds and literary fragments see: Shahar (449-467).

And yet it is an ending fraught with endlessness: “In diesem Augenblick ging über die Brücke ein geradezu unendlicher Verkehr” (61). Kafka’s final sentence uncoils in Georg’s wake, suspending language by setting it into motion once again, and forever, with the iterability of “unendlicher Verkehr.”<sup>46</sup> “Das Urteil” not only ends with this gesture of unendingness, but it obsesses over ending and *endings* from the very beginning. We first encounter Georg, for example, finishing a letter to his friend and sealing it “in spielerischer Langsamkeit.” The circumstances of this letter, which eventually bring Georg into contact and conflict with his father, are also informed by endings, but in a more general sense: the friend abroad who has nowhere else to go, no outlet; Georg who has become recently engaged, effectively ending his time as a bachelor; and, of course, the lingering presence of his mother’s death that conditions Georg’s thoughts and, inevitably, our own as readers of those thoughts. When understood in these broad terms, “Das Urteil” seems full of endings that, for one reason or another, have failed to find an *end* in themselves. Georg’s letter, which is left unread and undelivered following his suicide, serves as a particularly defining example in this regard.

Much of what made the text successful for Kafka, however, was exactly the way these strands came together thematically, if only to constitute a moment of rupture in its final line. In a letter to Milena, for instance, Kafka discusses the coherence of “Das Urteil” — its “Zusammenhang”—in terms of the wound:

Die Übersetzung des Schlußsatzes ist sehr gut. In jener Geschichte hängt jeder Satz, jedes Wort, jede – wenn’s erlaubt ist – Musik mit der “Angst” zusammen,

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<sup>46</sup> By iterability I refer here to the overdetermination of “Verkehr” as a signifier — the fact that, in German, it commands a wide semantic range: from more “pedestrian” meanings of traffic and commerce to the sexualized associations of intercourse — i.e., “Geschlechtsverkehr.”

damals brach die Wunde zum erstenmal auf in einer langen Nacht und diesen Zusammenhang trifft die Übersetzung für mein Gefühl genau. (*Briefe an Milena* 235)

The success of Milena's translation not only depended on its orchestration of feeling for Kafka, what he attributes to the culmination of fear and anxiety, but most importantly her interpretation of this closing line. Similar to his entry from September 23rd, Kafka uses the metaphors of cohesion and rupture to describe the intense experience of composing his story: terms such as "zusammenhängen" and "Wunde" that elaborate on the one hand an interconnectedness and bringing-together, and on the other, a contrary procedure of breaching and breaking apart. By conflating the content of its ending with the context of ending his text, however, Kafka reveals an even deeper anxiety underlying the conclusion of "Das Urteil," a restlessness that re-inscribes itself at the very moment of closure. Like a scab that only needs to be scratched to be re-opened: it is a wound closed in some ways, but unhealed in others.

Approximately a year before composing "Das Urteil," Kafka acknowledges the difficulty of ending texts in such a salubrious, self-sealing manner. In a sentence that seems itself resistant to ending, Kafka describes textual closure as a form of rounding off and leave-taking:

Die Schwierigkeiten der Beendigung, selbst eines kleinen Aufsatzes, liegen nicht darin, daß unser Gefühl für das Ende des Stückes ein Feuer verlangt, das der tatsächliche bisherige Inhalt aus sich selbst nicht hat erzeugen können, sie entstehen vielmehr dadurch daß selbst der kleinste Aufsatz vom Verfasser eine Selbstzufriedenheit und eine Verlorenheit in sich selbst verlangt, aus der an die Luft des gewöhnlichen Tages zu treten, ohne starken Entschluß und äußern Ansporn schwierig ist, so daß man eher, als der Aufsatz rund geschlossen wird

und man still abgleiten darf, vorher von der Unruhe getrieben, ausreißt und dann der Schluß von außenher geradezu mit Händen beendet werden muß, die nicht nur arbeiten, sondern sich auch festhalten müssen. (*Tagebücher* 328-29)

It is not a lack of creativity, but the solipsistic absorption of writing itself that makes its consummation so difficult. When imposed upon the work artificially (i.e. “von außenher”) and not from the internal demands of the text itself, endings threaten to tear the writer away from the spell of its creation, from the “Verlorenheit” needed to define and carry out its own terms. This trance-like state not only anticipates Kafka’s account of writing “Das Urteil,” but also conveys an implicit sense of woundedness to its imagery. Closure in this example must be applied like pressure to a wound (i.e. “geradezu mit Händen beendet werden muß”); a rupture held in place by hands that must in turn hold themselves in place. Kafka’s use of the adverb “geradezu” here is crucial. It not only emphasizes a directness or simplicity of action, indeed a “straightforwardness” that intensifies this gesture of closing, but it also intensifies, as it were, the impact of the conclusion in “Das Urteil”: the wounding force of “ein *geradezu* unendlicher Verkehr” (emphasis mine) that became the focus of his letter to Milena.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps only a case of circumstantial usage, the repetition of “geradezu” draws our attention nonetheless to other similarities: namely, the role of “Unruhe” in this entry, an unsettledness or agitation that Kafka translates into an endless flow and clamor of traffic; as well as the lapsing, slipping nature of “abgleiten,” which we find reinforced when Georg lets go of the bridge railing. In other words, if we understand “rund geschlossen” to signify an organic closure to a text, a rounding off that Kafka no doubt achieves with “Das Urteil” on an aesthetic level, then this artificial form, which is provisional (even fatal for Georg), becomes thematized in its final sentence as well. After

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<sup>47</sup> We can also detect this in the materiality of the word itself, i.e., gerade (just) + zu (closed).

Georg's hands slip from the railing, Kafka's concluding sentence adheres itself with its own set of hands, so to speak: it seals up "von außenher" what, at the level of narrative voice, had emerged exclusively "von innenher." This form of closure suggests, to integrate Kafka's other image, an unhealed closure: an ending that is also, metaphorically speaking, a rending.<sup>48</sup>

To the extent Kafka represents the conclusion of "Das Urteil" as a rupture, his language grants us a surprising strategy for reading the text in general — surprising, in part, because its surface, unlike "Ein Landarzt" or the parable "Prometheus," bears no explicit signs of woundedness. Instead we encounter what could be called the trauma of surface itself: traces of closure that make legible an opacity or facade to Georg's story — the growing suspicion that its narrator, in relaying certain bits of information, also withholds others.<sup>49</sup> Stanley Corngold has described this in hermeneutic terms, as a "refusal of meaning" (*Lambent* 40); James Phelan, also inclined to personify the challenge of reading "Das Urteil," calls it a "textual stubbornness" (Phelan 33). For many readers, however, this resistance to interpretation arises exactly from the opposite concern: an excessive availability of symbols — an openness that, by virtue of its signifying potential, inhibits our ability to understand the text as a whole. Corngold goes so far as to attribute meaning to this superfluity of meaning, claiming "a story that invites so much interpretation can have inspired the production of meaning only as a function of its avoidance of

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<sup>48</sup> That is, a final sentence that can also be read as a final judgment. As its title suggests, "Das Urteil" foregrounds the mechanism with which we assign values and generate meaning. In this regard, the title can allude specifically to the father's condemnation of Georg, but it can also refer more generally to the nature of judgment itself. And while the title could of course refer to nothing other than itself, it nonetheless creates a need for a judgment of its own when making such non-referential claims.

<sup>49</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, Rotpeter also employs this double gesture of withholding information by claiming to reveal it, an openness that is strategically obfuscating.

meaning” (*Lambent* 26). Whether or not “function” is the correct term here, I would claim the resilience of “Das Urteil” does not obviate interpretation as much as it foregrounds its applicability in a highly literal way. In other words, it increasingly creates the need for coherence or “Zusammenhang,” for one to *apply* a certain logic or theoretical apparatus — an impulse one could associate materially in the text itself with Georg’s gestures of covering and closing. As such, this chapter explores not only how the text concludes itself in the end, but also the ways in which Georg attempts to close it throughout, to conceal it, to make it coherent by *cohering* and *binding* its ruptured surfaces, and finally, how these attempts perform, in various ways, the closing or covering of a wound.

This abstract, if not paradoxical formulation of woundedness, however, finds a more direct source in Kafka’s text — namely, the brief appearance of a scar on the father’s body. Proceeding from my discussion of the open wound in “Ein Landarzt,” this chapter will employ a similar set of conceptual tools to consider the narratological and metaphorical significance of this scar, a feature that has remained sorely overlooked in Kafka scholarship. Similar to my account of the patient’s wound, I’m interested less in arguing what the scar represents than how it exemplifies a representational strategy in the text — that is, how the restriction of bodily openness, a closed wound, corresponds to other restrictions (i.e., spatial, temporal, and textual) in Kafka’s narrative. Furthermore, I demonstrate how a sense of “Zusammenhang” is both cemented and ruptured by Kafka’s language, so that all gestures of closure in the end also constitute gestures of re-opening. It is perhaps of no small consequence, then, that Kafka, in the original manuscript of “Das Urteil,” first envisioned this scar as a wound, only to later strike it from his draft and replace it with the word “Narbe” (*Apparatband* 110). As we shall see, this revision — itself a kind of closing or suturing at the editorial level — underscores a more general

pattern in Kafka's conceptualization of the text: not simply in his depiction of Georg's father, who grows more formidable as a result, but in the significance given to these figures of closure — closures that announce, as it did in Kafka's letter to Milena, an unsettling paradox of cohesion and rupture.

### **Correspondence**

If we were to characterize "Ein Landarzt" as terminally wounded in signature, a text inscribed by the signifying traumas of openness, then it would seem that "Das Urteil," given my discussion thus far, highlights the reciprocal dangers of suppressing that openness. This is decidedly not the case, however, in the text's opening passages. Instead, for all its subsequent volatility, "Das Urteil" still begins with what could be described as a sense of composure and tranquility, a setting in which various mechanisms of closure have already begun to shape the epistemology of Kafka's narrative:

Es war an einem Sonntagvormittag im schönsten Frühjahr. Georg Bendemann, ein junger Kaufmann, saß in seinem Privatzimmer im ersten Stock eines der niedrigen, leichtgebauten Häuser, die entlang des Flusses in einer langen Reihe, fast nur in der Höhe und Färbung unterschieden, sich hinzogen. (43)

Everything seems cast comfortably into the foreground for the reader, crisp with springtime light and rich in architectural features. Unlike the inclement conditions of "Ein Landarzt," "Das Urteil" presents a world immediately lacking in crisis and professional anxieties. Absent are the blizzard, the dead horse, and dying patient ten miles away, and in their place we find the repose of bourgeois privilege: the private room of a young merchant, the promise, and implicit productivity, afforded by the fresh beginnings and renewal associated with "Sonntagvormittag"

and “Frühjahr.” The constructedness of its setting, its sheltered / sheltering worldview, seems to guard against such aberrant conditions, a feature that corresponds, I suggest, with its unique narrative perspective. (I’ll return to this point briefly.) This correspondence rings true, as it were, for the country doctor as well, only with the terms inverted: whereas the open terrain of “Ein Landarzt” reflects the interior complexities of its narrator, an exposure appropriate to firstperson narration, “Das Urteil” emerges instead through the medium of third-person, in a closed (but not entirely closed-off) space that Kafka furnishes with realistic detail.

However such “realism,” like the building it supposedly brings into focus, appears rather weakly constituted. As Russell Berman comments, “Kafka flaunts the signs of realism at the outset of “Das Urteil” in a way that overstates them and thereby undermines them” (88). This exaggeration of detail disrupts what Berman calls “the epistemological closure promised by conventional realism,” an excess of spatial information that manages only to obscure Georg’s location rather than clarify it. While on the surface Georg’s building seems to promote a sense of emotional and financial well-being, when inspected more closely, its welfare depends on our inability to look closely at all — an elusiveness that Kafka cultivates through these baroque dimensions. Indeed, the externalism of these first lines, and the anonymity they seem to ensure, can be read as a gesture of closure, however one strategically resistant to knowing, what Henry Sussman has described more generally as a “presumption of total clarity in representation and an equally complete breakdown in communication” (2). This disparity secures a level of referential privacy to Georg’s “Privatzimmer,” shrouding it in description only then to get lost in the minutiae of that descriptiveness. Thus, to re-purpose Berman’s phrase: Kafka’s version of epistemological closure seems to enclose rather than disclose; it constructs an image of realism



that, for all its fastidious detail, occludes what lies within or beyond — a privacy generated through privation.

Insofar as this closed perspective imparts a sense of composure, albeit one “lightly-built” and predicated on exclusion, Georg reinforces these gestures in the next sentence with the composition and closure of his letter.

Er hatte gerade einen Brief an einen sich im Ausland befindenden Jugendfreund beendet, verschloß ihn in spielerischer Langsamkeit und sah dann, den Ellbogen auf den Schreibtisch gestützt, aus dem Fenster auf den Fluß, die Brücke und die Anhöhen am anderen Ufer mit ihrem schwachen Grün. (43)

The double meaning of composure is instructive. The finished letter underscores a gentility to Georg, a grace that seems to arise from the act of composition and the suppleness of sealing. This constellation of “beenden” and “verschliessen” also recalls on some level Kafka’s own reflections on closure from 1911 (*Tagebücher* 328-29), specifically the relationship he draws between manual gestures and a writer’s aesthetic sensibility for ending. Having just completed his letter, Georg indeed seems to exude the “Selbstzufriedenheit” of Kafka’s serious writer, a contentedness that translates into a dream-like state of reflection. However, when pursued more closely, the comparison proves somewhat problematic: Georg’s “spielerische Langsamkeit,” for example, to the extent it functions as a kind of “Verlorenheit,” follows the moment of written closure rather than enabling or preceding it. Where forlornness described Kafka’s commitment to artistic fulfillment, his imperative to see the work to its logical end, Georg’s withdrawnness seems to communicate the absence of any commitment whatsoever — a playful release from whatever requirement his letter just fulfilled. This alleviation is further reflected in the lightness

of Georg's gaze, a wistfulness that moves from his desk to the world outside, once again imparting a sense of tranquility and clarity.

While Georg may prove to be more of a "writer figure" than a writer *per se* (at least according to Kafka's definition), his writing no doubt incurs certain narratological consequences for the reader. Following the letter's sealing, for example, as if achieving some moment of synchronization, the reader's gaze aligns itself with Georg's as it surveys this surrounding landscape. His window grants us internal passage in this moment as we begin to see through his perspective in increasing telescopic and subjective detail, a realignment that results in seven subsequent paragraphs of *erlebte Rede*.<sup>50</sup> Shifting the perspective midsentence from an omniscient mode of narration toward a more internal, subjective form, the window facilitates an important point of epistemic transition.<sup>51</sup> This is also underscored by the undulating, river-like cadence of Kafka's language —i.e., "*auf den Schreibtisch gestützt, aus dem Fenster auf den Fluß die Brücke und die Anhöhen*" (emphasis mine) — as if this calibration of seeing (indeed, a second kind of "correspondence" at work) also entailed a kind of entrancement at the level of

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<sup>50</sup> Although the argument could be made that the aberrant details of the preceding sentence already bear witness to a highly subjectivized perspective, my point is that the letter-sealing, as a consequence of the writing act, makes this narratological feature self-referential.

<sup>51</sup> As a metaphor for perception, especially the kind that operates at a remove from social reality, windows also figure prominently in Kafka's earlier stories. "Zerstreutes Hinausschaun" (1907), for example, describes a scene in which an unnamed narrator, gazing from his window, watches a young girl and a man during a springtime sunset. He focuses particularly on how the man's shadow momentarily obscures the beauty of the girl's face, an ominous feeling that is quickly dispelled once the light is restored. For more about the theme of windows in Kafka's fiction, see especially: Peter-André Alt. "Flaneure, Voyeure, Lauscher an der Wand: Zur literarischen Phänomenologie des Gehens, Schauens, und Horschens bei Kafka," *Neue Rundschau* 98.1 (1987): 121-39.

narration.<sup>52</sup> A more literalized understanding of “Verlorenheit” in this context, then, would characterize its creative potential not as an emptiness to be filled, but as a disorientation that occurs following the moment of written closure. Despite having just finished his letter, however, it could be said that Georg continues to write only by other means — that is, as a presence of thinking, as a “translucent mind” (to alter Dorrit Cohn’s phrase for third-person narration), leaving its indelible mark on how “Das Urteil,” as a text, thinks.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, the “spielerische Langsamkeit” with which Georg seals his letter suggests not only a dream-like detachment, but a subtle manipulation as well: a playful redeployment of perspective that slowly, by the end of the paragraph, “envelops” the reader with a narrating consciousness barely distinguishable from Georg’s. In other words, we begin “Das Urteil” excluded from Georg’s interior spaces (his room and thoughts) only to find ourselves enmeshed within both by the start of the second paragraph; the constructedness of his space thus gives way to a construction of his thoughts in and through language.<sup>54</sup> As a result, the text can be seen as beginning with several gestures of closure: first with an epistolary act of closure (the concluding and closing of a letter) that then inaugurates, rather seamlessly, a more restricted and

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<sup>52</sup> This process also corresponds to Georg's figurative practice of binding. See below.

<sup>53</sup> As James Rolleston comments, this perspectival feature ultimately enables its own undoing: “the special quality of ‘Das Urteil’ is that the dissolving of Georg's world occurs *through* his construction of it as meaningful: what the reader gradually sees through his eyes is the radical inauthenticity of the construction” (11).

<sup>54</sup> This point is also made by Ronald Spiers: “The instability that is most readily apparent at a thematic level, particularly in the mentality of the protagonist, is already present [...] *before* Georg is called into being by a narrating consciousness which is itself charged with a restlessness that seeks an outlet in such things as sentence structure, ambivalence, and irony” (224).

“verschlossen” epistemology to Kafka’s narration. The subjectivization of the third person, commonly referred to as monopolized narration, must be seen as a form of closure in this regard: it encloses the reader into a more private space of signification, granting access to Georg’s thoughts (what we see through his window) while at the same time retaining the transparency (at least initially) of externalized, impartial representation. This narrative mode, what Friedrich Beißner first termed “einsinniges Erzählen,” remains consistent with Georg’s dual role as a merchant and a writer in the first paragraph.<sup>55</sup> As if the closing of the letter also implied a closed deal or negotiation (i.e. “ein Geschäft abschließen”) at the level of perspective, the reader naively commits to Georg’s account of events until it is challenged by the father. The sealed letter thus becomes something of a “binding contract” in these formative moments, a document that sanctions, through Kafka’s idiosyncratic use of perspective, an unreliable practice of “correspondence.”

### **Male-Bonding**

Indeed, this notion of binding is not only materialized in Georg’s sealing of the letter, but semantically in his name as well. “Bende,” as Stanley Corngold indicates, resembles the Indo-Germanic root of “Bhendhe,” from which “Binde” and “binden” are derived. This etymological association confirms Georg’s identity as “a man who forms ties” (50) for Corngold — ties that not only characterize his relationship status (via the reflexive of *sich binden*), but also reaffirm his role as a writer (50-51). Kafka, after having reviewed the final proofs for “Das Urteil,” also makes this “connection”:

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<sup>55</sup> See: Friedrich Beißner. *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka: Ein Vortrag*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1952.

Georg hat so viel Buchstaben wie Franz. In Bendemann ist “mann” nur eine für alle noch unbekanntenen Möglichkeiten der Geschichte vorgenommene Verstärkung von “Bende”. Bende aber hat ebenso viele Buchstaben wie Kafka und der Vokal e wiederholt sich an den gleichen Stellen wie der Vokal a in Kafka. (*Tagebücher* 492)

This fixation on numerological detail, which some scholars attribute to a Kabbalistic tendency in Kafka’s writing, arises here from a need to clarify the various relationships in his text.<sup>56</sup> Since it emerged from him in such an unrestrained fashion — a birth covered in “Schmutz und Schleim,” as he phrases it in this entry — Kafka’s analysis “spells out” certain connections otherwise made unconsciously. The bond here between Kafka and Georg, of course, is writing: the materiality of Georg’s name not only functions as a cipher for Kafka’s, but via this association, it marks him also as someone who composes cryptic (and encrypted) texts of his own — that is, a figure whose tactics of “verschliessen” can also be read as a kind of “verschlüsseln.” Accordingly, the nature of Georg’s letter and the letters in his name share a special correspondence indeed. As a strengthening of “Bende,” “mann” accommodates all that is still unknown in the story for Kafka, a potentiality for what remains encoded by and through Georg. This is especially the case with Georg’s letters: avoiding any “eigentliche Mitteilungen,” he writes only of “bedeutungslose Vorfälle,” obstructing the flow of true communication with the banalities of everyday life. The concealing nature of these letters, like the codifying status of Georg’s name, thus present an instructive paradox with regard to “binden.” Insofar as it describes a process of connecting and

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<sup>56</sup> For more about Kafka and the Kabbalah, see especially Karl-Erich Grözinger’s *Kafka und die Kabbala: das Jüdische in Werk und Denken von Franz Kafka*. Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 1992.

bringing together, a form of “zusammenhängen” that Georg enacts through writing, this process may also contain and withhold other forms of information — in other words, a binding that closes off and occludes what perhaps should remain “noch unbekannt.”<sup>57</sup>

To the extent it describes an act of connecting and containing, “binden” also exemplifies quite literally how Georg makes a name for himself in “Das Urteil.” His financial and domestic success, for example, expresses itself in terms of a connectedness, an upward social mobility demonstrated by his recent engagement and his faculty in business affairs. By contrast, however, the friend suffers from a debilitating lack of “rechte Verbindung” abroad, an isolation that casts him as a perpetual bachelor and a failed businessman. Georg’s description of the friend is predicated on these unbounded qualities:

So arbeitete er sich in der Fremde nutzlos ab, der fremdartige Vollbart verdeckte nur schlecht das seit den Kinderjahren wohlbekannte Gesicht, dessen gelbe Hautfarbe auf eine sich entwickelnde Krankheit hinzudeuten schien. Wie er erzählte, hatte er keine rechte Verbindung mit der dortigen Kolonie seiner Landsleute, aber auch fast keinen gesellschaftlichen Verkehr mit einheimischen Familien und richtete sich so für ein endgültiges Junggesellentum ein. (43-44)

The alliteration of Georg’s language (i.e. *Fremde*, *fremdartige*, *Vollbart*, *verdeckte*, *Verbindung*, *Verkehr*) underscores a phonological association to his thinking, attributing specific figurative connections to the otherwise disenfranchised “Freund.” The most concentrated cluster of these sounds occurs with the friend’s appearance, as it were, whose foreign beard inadequately covers

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<sup>57</sup> Be that as it may, Kafka’s still begins his exegesis by claiming an authoritative “grasp” of “Das Urteil,” commenting that “nur ich habe die Hand, die bis zum Körper dringen kann und Lust dazu hat” (*Tagebücher* 492). The body thus becomes a site on which connections express themselves for Kafka, a surface that, like the father’s scar, makes legible the explanatory power of “binding.”

his face, and whose features, according to Georg, have remained unchanged since childhood. This physiognomic exposure of the past reveals a pathology of the present, what Georg describes as a “sich entwickelnde Krankheit,” as if the failure to fully cover one’s historical identity (i.e., the childhood he shares with Georg) incurred hazardous consequences. The relationship between covering and sickness, which resurfaces in Georg’s attempts to cover his father, emerges here first with the friend as an implicit breakdown of “einbinden” — both in terms of his incapacity to “integrate” socially in St. Petersburg as well as an inability to “contain” or disguise these signifiers of origin. Consequently, we could even begin to think of history as a kind of “developing sickness” that emerges at this point in the text — a condition that, if not properly covered, closed, or bound (activities we associate with Georg but come to dissociate with the friend), constitutes a distinctly temporal form of exposure. The friend thus demonstrates an inefficacious form of “binden” in this regard, or at least a form of connecting that lacks legitimacy or truth (i.e., “*rechte Verbindung*”) for Georg. Instead, the friend’s one true bond — his relationship to the past — lingers menacingly in view, toxic and “endgültig,” that is, *schlecht verdeckt* like an unhealed wound.

Reading Georg as a kind of “Binde-mann” therefore helps us understand, on several levels, his “treatment” of traumatic events in “Das Urteil.” Like the term treatment itself, “binden” carries both semiotic and restorative significance. For example, we can speak of a referential binding between signifiers and referents, their relational correspondence expressed figuratively through language; but we can also speak literally of binding wounds, such as “eine Wunde verbinden” or applying “eine Binde” or “einen Verband” to cover up (but not necessarily heal) the dangers of bodily exposure. The explanatory power of binding thus brings together words and wounds as a means to establish *coherence* in both: to repair a once ruptured surface,

to assign meaning or a truth value, or simply to “cover up” the fact such surfaces or values can never be completely whole again or wholly truthful. Recalling Kafka’s thematic and methodological endorsement of “Zusammenhang,” Georg indeed seems to insist on a level of coherence in his letters, expurgating or restricting detail in order to accommodate someone who can no longer make connections himself, a friend “der sich offenbar verrannt hatte” (44).<sup>58</sup> In this regard, his letter has performed its own kind of sealing or “cohering” to the extent it also composes a form of composure.

### **Obstruction**

When Georg finally enters his father’s room, the reader begins to encounter the troubling effects of his neglect — what can be attributed to a more general, and ultimately destabilizing narrative of disclosure in the latter half of “Das Urteil.” While this culminates in the appearance of the scar, a moment that clarifies what remains unhealed below the surface of Georg’s thoughts and actions — a moment of recognition or anagnorisis — the “close ties” generated by his perspective start to loosen once inside this space. Here, Georg immediately confronts what can be seen as the destructive nature of closure, in many ways an inversion of Kafka’s opening paragraph:

Georg staunte darüber, wie dunkel das Zimmer des Vaters selbst an diesem sonnigen Vormittag war. Einen solchen Schatten warf also die hohe Mauer, die

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<sup>58</sup> This applies more generally to Georg’s professional life as well. When the friend learns of Georg’s mother’s death, for example, an event that remains “in der Fremde ganz unvorstellbar,” Georg responds by dedicating himself fully to the business — “sein Geschäft mit größerer Entschlossenheit angepackt.” Inscribed with the language of closure, the term “Entschlossenheit” once again characterizes Georg’s tactical approach to the past with its implicit logic of containment.



sich jenseits des schmalen Hofes erhob. Der Vater saß beim Fenster in einer Ecke, die mit verschiedenen Andenken an die selige Mutter ausgeschmückt war, und las die Zeitung, die er seitlich vor die Augen hielt, wodurch er irgend eine Augenschwäche auszugleichen suchte. Auf dem Tisch standen die Reste des Frühstücks, von dem nicht viel verzehrt zu sein schien. (50)

Compared to Georg's room, which literally sheds light on Georg and his thoughts, the father's room appears contrary in almost every way. Both figures, for instance, are sitting at their windows, engaged in seemingly opposite pursuits: Georg writing a letter, with a clear view of the surrounding landscape, and the father at his closed, practically immured window, reading a newspaper in darkness. This transition from writing to reading, which places the father in an interpretive or critical role, contributes to a broader set of reversals from the opening paragraph — reversals that ultimately set Georg's representational strategies in relief and provide the reader with some interpretive distance. A reader himself, the father also seems affected by a restricted perspective: he labors, for example, to read his newspaper, which is not only a result of the poor lighting, but also a degenerated vision, "eine Augenschwäche." Conceptually, the father's vision also seems limited and regressive: his corner is adorned with "Andenken an die selige Mutter," suggesting a state of temporal stagnancy, a fixation with the past that contrasts with the forward-looking futurity of Georg's room. Even the father's food has been neglected in this *Mise en scène* of senescence — a space in which closure has now become an environmental, if not medical hazard.

Indeed, where Georg's setting first conveyed a sense of progress and accomplishment, a vitality that expressed itself through the semiotics of closing and binding, the father's room festers instead with abandonment and decay — a toxicity that becomes dissociable from other

modes of obstruction. This obstructedness also bears narratological significance. Compared to Georg, whose thoughts have been transmitted to the reader as if through an open window, the father's interior life remains opaque and obscure. His room, referred to at one point as "das Hinterzimmer," structurally replicates the reader's own nescience in this regard, where the failure to know the father, to inhabit his mindspace, correlates with the inability to see through his windows or fully understand his newspapers. This can be seen as an "Augenschwäche" of our own that leaves us, like Georg, in the dark. The location of the father's room also reinforces this sense of impaired access. The orientation of rooms, their frontal and posterior configuration, reflects our own perspectival orientation in the text: Georg's forward-looking "Vorderzimmer" has effectively displaced this backward, if not illegible "Hinterzimmer," as if to cover or conceal its obscurity, to restrict its access — in short, to limit its exposure like an unhealed wound.

Accordingly, this spatial organization, which Walter Sokel has convincingly read in terms of Freudian principles, give architectural form to what could be called Georg's strategy of hindering — a methodology for which the conditions of the "Hinterzimmer" become both emblematic and epidemic.<sup>59</sup> Insofar as "hinter" connotes a state of posteriority or "behindness," its resonance in the verb "hindern" makes it uniquely appropriate to Georg's language. He employs the word and its variants ("verhindern," "Hindernis," etc.) five times in "Das Urteil," not only to distance himself from the friend's lack of development abroad, but also to characterize his withholding of information. Similarly, Georg resumes this practice of obstruction in the father's room, however mainly on an interpretive level. For example, when the father learns of Georg's letter and questions the actual existence of his friend, Georg begins to evade what would otherwise bear disturbing implications: that Georg's friend could simply be

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<sup>59</sup> See Sokel (181-215).

a mental construction, a figure of transference, a coping mechanism for the loss of his mother, among numerous other possibilities. Georg and his father fall into two categories with regards to this question: Georg, who interprets the question and answers it on a superficial level, for its apparent facticity and literal value, and the father who means it figuratively for its more profound insinuations, for what lies “behind” the surface of his language. The father’s appeal for “die volle Wahrheit” is also a request for unobstructed communication in this regard, an openness that Georg, rather than complying intellectually, addresses instead spatially. He tells the father: “Du sitzt bei geschlossenem Fenster, und die Luft wurde dir so gut tun. Nein Vater! Ich werde den Arzt holen und seine Vorschriften werden wir befolgen. Die Zimmer werden wir wechseln, du wirst ins Vorderzimmer ziehen, ich hierher” (53). Georg wants to avoid his father’s question just as he avoided his room — that is, by displacing it and translating it into familiar terms, by absconding from its squalor, its ambiguity. Georg’s solution, in other words, seeks to translate the hermetic nature of this “Hinterzimmer” into the frontal, seemingly transparent logic of his “Vorderzimmer”: a literal “Übersetzung” as it were (i.e., a carrying over, an act of transfer) that allows Georg to reduce the suggestiveness of the father’s “Hinterfragen,” the danger of what lies “behind” his questions, to a physical, and therefore remediable, condition.

Georg’s response thus not only casts the father in a subordinate and infantile role, but it also pathologizes the subterranean nature of his speech, the cutting, and potentially wounding, allegation that Georg persistently misinterprets. The father appears mentally unfit as a result of Georg’s distortion; he is not only hindered by his son, but portrayed as *behindert* as well, as disabled or incoherent.<sup>60</sup> To this end, Georg translates what remains illegible to the reader at this

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<sup>60</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, however, this conception of disability as disadvantage is reversed by Rotpeter.

point — the unknowable “wolkige Stelle” of his subjectivity, the “Augenschwäche” this question implicates — into a legibility of illness: an aging father to be treated and put to bed; an exposure, both bodily and interpretive, that must be covered and disavowed. When Georg places his father in bed, however, a different feeling quickly takes hold — a distinctly temporal sensation that he can no longer obstruct or neglect:

Auf seinen Armen trug er den Vater ins Bett. Ein schreckliches Gefühl hatte er, als er während der paar Schritte zum Bett hin merkte, daß an seiner Brust der Vater mit seiner Uhrkette spielte. Er könnte ihn nicht gleich ins Bett legen, so fest hielt er sich an dieser Uhrkette. (55)

Compared to the “spielerische Langsamkeit” with which Georg seals his letter, an aloofness that, as I have argued, corresponds to a kind of narratological placidity, the father’s playful grip elicits an immediate sense of dread. Georg begins to lose his composure at this point; the tranquility that arose from his sealed letter is now disrupted by a different form of boundedness — namely, a chain that connects him to his father, a timepiece that makes this literal bond also figurative, that is, a bond of propinquity, of a common past. Not only has this past metonymically caught up with Georg at this moment, announcing itself with this “schreckliches Gefühl,” but it catches him quite literally by preventing him from moving forward, by suspending any notion of progress. This suspense, of course, operates on both a literal and figurative level: Georg is not only restricted physically, unable to release his father, but his immobility also creates a condition of uncertainty, a manifesting crisis that cannot be precisely identified just as it cannot be easily averted.

As a result, Georg’s feeling — no longer slow or playful, but sudden and arresting — shifts Kafka’s narrative into unfamiliar psychological terrain, a place of discomposure wherein

Georg becomes temporarily a victim of his own “devices.” The modernity of this moment, much like other “Augenblicke” in “Das Urteil,” lies in the materiality of its reversal — namely, how a tactics of binding, which allowed Georg to metonymically seal off the past just as one binds a wound, now turns against him, binding him to what he previously sought to suppress. As it were, Georg’s father is also a kind of “Binde-mann” in this regard, however one whose bonds are unavoidably historical. The “Uhrkette” can be seen as a terrifying instantiation of “Zusammenhang” in his hands — a connection, a context, above all, a relationship that demonstrates the paralyzing hold the father still has on Georg, both through space (a bound chain) and time (a chain of events, a timepiece). The links of chain become genealogical in this light: a temporal bond that extends from father to son, attenuating and crippling Georg’s individualism with its concretization of dependency. By grabbing his time chain, the father co-opts the bonds and connections Georg as a merchant and fiancée tried so desperately to establish — a reversal that in effect infantilizes Georg, making him once again his father’s child.

Accordingly, the seized “Uhrkette” indeed initiates something of a “chain reaction” in the text, a series of disclosures that become increasingly harmful to Georg. Shortly after he is able to put his father to bed, assuring his father that he is “well covered,” the father in turn reveals his true power:

Du wolltest mich zudecken, das weiß ich, mein Früchtchen, aber zugedeckt bin ich noch nicht. Und ist es auch die letzte Kraft, genug für dich, zuviel für dich. Wohl kenne ich deinen Freund. Er wäre ein Sohn nach meinem Herzen. Darum hast du ihn auch betrogen die ganzen Jahre lang. Warum sonst? Glaubst du, ich habe nicht um ihn geweint? Darum doch sperrst du dich in dein Bureau, niemand soll stören, der Chef ist beschäftigt – nur damit du deine falschen Briefchen nach

Rußland schreiben kannst. Aber den Vater muß glücklicherweise niemand lehren,  
den Sohn zu durchschauen. Wie du jetzt geglaubt hast, du hättest ihn  
untergekriegt, so untergekriegt, daß du dich mit deinem Hintern auf ihn setzen  
kannst und er rührt sich nicht, da hat sich mein Herr Sohn zum Heiraten  
entschlossen! (56)

The father's rebellion expresses itself through a language of exposure. Not only has he refused to be covered by Georg, but he proceeds to expose perhaps the most scandalous connection of all for Georg: the father's personal relationship with the friend. Georg's father suddenly emerges as the center of all relationships in "Das Urteil," someone whose "connectedness" extends beyond Georg and his (now seemingly limited) perspective. As Kafka writes: "Das Gemeinsame ist alles um den Vater aufgetürmt, Georg fühlt es nur als Fremdes, Selbständig-Gewordenes, von ihm niemals genug Beschütztes" (*Tagebücher* 491). The father's tirade thus introduces a foreign perspective for Kafka's reader: it not only makes explicit Georg's strategies of obstruction, how he locks himself up in his office while writing mendacious letters to the friend; but also the father's insurmountable authority, his ability to "see through" these concealments. To the extent Georg's perspective operated as a kind of surface, appearing cohesive and persuasive because it suppressed unwanted elements, then the father also exposes the literalism of this deception, the ways in which it manifests physically as closings and coverings in the text. The physicality of "unterkriegen" is also crucial in this regard. While the father employs the term in the sense of "unterdrücken," its idiomatic usage (to become flaccid) also suggests an underlying sexual competition with the father, an attempt to take his place as the paterfamilias. Their rooms may not have been switched as Georg had previously suggested, but their roles most certainly have:

Georg now plays the submissive figure, bearing the full weight of his father's knowledge — a knowledge that, once disclosed, cannot be covered or closed off again.

## **Recognition**

The father's allegations, unleashed while standing "aufrecht im Bett," quickly take on a performative aspect. No longer reliant on Georg's help, the father's gesture of uncovering reaches full expression once he begins to imitate Frieda — a performance that, in many ways, imitates the interpretive allures and limitations of Kafka's text.

"Aber schau mich an!" rief der Vater, und Georg lief, fast zerstreut, zum Bett, um alles zu fassen, stockte aber in der Mitte des Weges.

"Weil sie die Röcke gehoben hat", fing der Vater zu flöten an, "weil sie die Röcke so gehoben hat, die widerliche Gans", und er hob, um das darzustellen, sein Hemd so hoch, daß man auf seinem Oberschenkel die Narbe aus seinen Kriegsjahren sah, "weil sie die Röcke so und so und so gehoben hat, hast du dich an sie herangemacht, und damit du an ihr ohne Störung dich befriedigen kannst, hast du unserer Mutter Andenken geschändet, den Freund verraten und deinen Vater ins Bett gesteckt, damit er sich nicht rühren kann. Aber kann er sich rühren oder nicht?" (57)

The father's demand for attention and Georg's obliging, "almost unthinking" response to "understand everything" underscore the significance of this exchange for both figures. As the verb "fassen" suggests, Georg wishes to grasp this moment just as the father literally "grasped" his "Uhrkette," a gesture of comprehension that once again suspends his movement forward, however now with the added specification of place: "in der Mitte des Weges." The polysemy of

this phrase reflects the metaphorical saturation of this moment; Georg not only stops halfway, but as “Mitte” and “Weg” also suggest, his methodological approach thus far has been effectively forestalled as well. This sense of “stocken” also registers as a kind of temporal suspense. For instance, the father’s fixation on capturing the precise appearance of this licentious gesture, a mimetic representation he revisits three times, seems to stretch this moment out like his night shirt. In the midst of these repeated gestures of exposure, however, an important interstitial detail emerges, one that indeed allows for everything to be grasped in “Das Urteil” on multiple levels: the father’s scar.

A seemingly irrelevant feature, the scar nonetheless interrupts the father’s performance just as the father’s performance interrupted Georg “in der Mitte des Weges.” Consistent with this logic of middleness, the scar’s intervening presence both intercepts and interpolates this moment with another moment, marking it with a time and place “aus seinen Kriegsjahren” that remains otherwise inaccessible. The father “allows everything to be grasped” in this attenuated moment, just as Georg had unknowingly believed, however only through this representation of what *cannot* be fully grasped — as a trace that signals, but obstructs its own interiority, as an opacity that discloses its own restrictedness. For this reason, the scar is indeed a remarkable feature insofar as it marks a paradox of closure in Kafka’s text: a past that cannot be fully interrogated or codified in the present moment; a wound whose traumatic history, strictly speaking, cannot be fully *in-corporated* into the body of text. The boundedness of this wound, its ambiguous and sutured presence, thus announces what could be seen as the “double bind” of perspective that we as readers experience in “Das Urteil” — a dilemma that suspends us, quite like Georg, between two unsatisfactory epistemologies: the unreliable interior life of its protagonist and the



unverifiable, possibly delusional exteriority of his father. In short, this impasse forces us to make a judgment of our own.

In many ways, the scar materializes this dilemma as a kind of “Mitte,” a boundary or threshold that extends literally and metaphorically between various binary conditions in the text. It mediates, for example, between the internalism of the father, his obstructed, impenetrable thoughts, and the surface to which he repeatedly calls attention; between a past transcribed and memorialized by his aging body and the present it anxiously disrupts; and finally, the healthy condition of this present moment, the restorative logic of a wound’s closure, and the unhealed, unsettled reality its exposure now reveals. The scar not only exists as an unhealed mnemonic wound for Georg, a past he has unsuccessfully covered and closed, but it also characterizes an impossible “body” of knowledge both registered and suppressed by the events of “Das Urteil.” Consequently, the father not only imitates Frieda in this fleeting, dissembling act, but the text as a whole — the text as something to be uncovered, to be explained and tucked away, with its meaning laid bare and itemized. In other words, by mocking Frieda’s sexual advances, he also mocks the seduction of such hermeneutic activity in general; he mocks the very notion of knowledge *as uncovering*, because when he exposes himself in front of Georg, he reveals just another surface beneath: a scar that stands in for the potentiality of its meaning by showing its own obstructedness.

Accordingly, the father’s body can be seen as exposing what Peter Brooks has described as the “semioticization of the body [...] matched by a somatization of the story” (xii), its passage into the realm of writing, its status within the text as a surface *to be read*. The scar becomes something of a signature in this regard that signals the obduracy of “Das Urteil” quite literally: its “refusal,” its “stubbornness” to be clear or straightforward; its resistance to being open or

transparent. The circumstances of this exposure, however, still produce knowledge — namely, how certain events remain unhealed for Georg, the fact that some things have never found closure at all. The father mentions, for example, the mother’s memory, which has been defiled by Georg’s indiscretion, a violation of the past that has since caused “*unschöne Dinge*” to occur; the wayward path of his friend, whose isolation abroad comes back to trouble Georg’s domestic status; and, of course, the father’s own intransigence, his resistance to being “covered” or buried by his son. It is the “Unruhe” of these events, their *nachträglich* capacity to budge and stir in the present (to use the father’s own words, i.e. *sich rühren*), that makes the scar’s appearance a moment of what the Greeks called *anagnorisis*: a recognition, an epistemological rupture. As Peter Brooks writes, the scar has a long history of such scenes:

As in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy — which is itself indebted to the Homeric Poems — the moment of recognition is a dramatic climax, a coming into the open of hidden identities and latent possibilities. Here the recognition comes, as it often does in Greek tragedies, through a mark on the body itself. It is the body marked in a significant moment of the person’s past history that enables recognition [...] It is as if identity and its recognition depended on the body having been marked with a special sign, which looks suspiciously like a linguistic signifier. The sign imprints the body, making it part of the signifying process. Signing or marking the body signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story. (Brooks 3)

The twist in Kafka’s recognition scene, however, is that its signifying event immediately undoes itself: if the father’s body signifies what resists signification, as I have argued, then its

recognition produces a story we ourselves can never read. The father's "passage into writing" thus closely resembles the hermetic sealing of Georg's letter in this regard — a writing that, like the scar, can never be reopened to reveal its "hidden identities and latent possibilities." Instead, we can only approximate them through interpretation and metaphor, through the material that we, like Georg, must sometimes fabricate and apply in order to establish a sense of perspective. In this regard, the father's scar becomes emblematic of a representational strategy just as Odysseus' scar had for Erich Auerbach in the first chapter of *Mimesis*. Like the shield of Achilles, its realism stands in for the irreducible obscurity beyond, for what lies "fraught with background."

### **Signing-off**

This moment of recognition, of course, is also a moment of "Zusammenhang" in that it brings everything together thematically, exposing the events repressed or falsely represented by Georg; but it also triggers an irrevocable rupture that begins to break "Das Urteil" apart epistemologically. While the father's disclosures can be seen as compromising the surface of Georg's perspective, an intervention that undermines the foundation of Kafka's narrative, these conceptualizations of instability become more pronounced once the scar is exposed. Literally so: when the father accuses Georg of parading around "mit dem verschlossenen Gesicht eines Ehrenmannes" (58), a word of rupture hisses through Georg's head: "'Jetzt wird er sich vorbeugen,' dachte Georg, 'wenn er fiel und zerschmetterte!' Dieses Wort durchzischte seinen Kopf" (58). The fragmentary nature of "zerschmettern" also reflects the scatteredness of Georg's psychological well-being at this point, a "Zerstreutheit" that first emerged when he rushed to his father's side "um alles zu fassen." However, everything appears increasingly "unfassbar" to

Georg now that his father has refused to be covered. The prefix of “durchzischen” also reinforces the piercing, wounding quality of these ruptures, an “Unruhe” that seems to register at every level. This is true even grammatically, considering the sheer proliferation of exclamation marks, both in thought and dialogue, following the scar’s exposure.

Insofar as Georg composed a sense of well-being in the first half of “Das Urteil,” the disclosures articulated and performed by the father in the second half convey an overall sense of decomposition. For example, Georg’s relationships deteriorate before his eyes: “Allein hätte ich vielleicht zurückweichen müssen,” says the father, “aber so hat mir die Mutter ihre Kraft abgegeben, mit deinem Freund habe ich mich herrlich verbunden, deine Kundschaft habe ich hier in der Tasche!” (58-9). The father has not only repossessed Georg’s various relationships, including his fiancée, but he also appropriates Georg’s own tactics of closure — that is, the pocketing of his clientèle, a gesture that recalls the location of Georg’s letter. Incredulous, Georg immediately conceives of how to portray the father once again as useless: “‘Sogar im Hemd hat er Taschen!’ sagte sich Georg und glaubte, er könne ihn mit dieser Bemerkung in der ganzen Welt unmöglich machen” (59). Georg is never able to do this, however, because as an innocent, devilish child, his father finally condemns him to his own state of decomposition — to death by drowning.<sup>61</sup> This sentence, which Georg carries out unthinkingly, if not involuntarily (“Georg fühlte sich aus dem Zimmer gejagt”) can be read as perhaps the most important co-opted gesture by the father, one where the punishment fits the crime. Which is to say: submersion in water constitutes just another form of obstruction, only an obstruction that leaves no scars whatsoever,

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<sup>61</sup> As if anticipating Georg’s imminent fall, the father collapses on his bed after sentencing Georg. In a way, this enacts a premature ending of sorts, however one that emphasizes the end of both “Bendemänner,” a lineage of binding-men, so to speak.

removing any trace of deviance or struggle, any historicity. Obeying this demand for oblivion, Georg makes sure to drop off the bridge silently, so that the sound of traffic masks his impact — a caesura of immutable closure, a sudden reversal that brings all of Georg’s “Zusammenhänge” to a disruptive and imperceptible end.

Of all the devious connections attempted by Georg in “Das Urteil,” however, it is his last and final one that seems perhaps his most sincere, and thus puzzling. Issued quietly from the railings of the bridge, a structure that returns us substantively to Kafka’s opening paragraph — indeed, one that foregrounds the materiality of “Zusammenhang” itself — Georg’s last words read also as an opening of sorts, albeit an untimely one: “Liebe Eltern, ich habe euch doch immer geliebt” (61). As Kafka’s original manuscript makes clear, however, Georg’s final moment in some ways resembles his first insofar as Georg begins to compose a letter before dying. This follows from the fact Kafka capitalizes the dative pronoun of “Euch,” transforming Georg’s avowal of love into a dictated, unwritten suicide note (*Apparatband* 116). Read in this regard — and it can only be read, not heard — Georg’s incomplete, unconcluded statement drowns with him and his other letter: as a missed connection, as a failed correspondence. Covered by a moving river that is itself overshadowed by an endlessly moving stream of traffic, it is an end for which closure can only arrive in fragments and moments.

Chapter Three  
Inflammatory Rhetoric: Injury and Compensation in “Bericht für eine Akademie”

In mir kann ganz gut eine Konzentration auf das Schreiben hin erkannt werden. Als es in meinem Organismus klargeworden war, daß das Schreiben die ergiebigste Richtung meines Wesens sei, drängte sich alles hin und ließ alle Fähigkeiten leer stehn, die sich auf die Freuden des Geschlechtes, des Essens, des Trinkens, des philosophischen Nachdenkens, der Musik zuallererst, richteten. Ich magerte nach allen diesen Richtungen ab.

Franz Kafka  
*Tagebücher*, 341

To be potential means: to be one’s own lack,  
to be in relation to one’s own incapacity.

Giorgio Agamben  
*Potentialities*, 182

The word injury defines not only an instance of bodily harm, but also a more general form of injustice or wrongdoing — something that violates the law, an “in + juria.” Kafka’s body of work, of course, is riddled with such injuries. From the purported slander that begins *Der Prozess* to the “sentences” meted out in *Strafkolonie*, injury becomes a productive term for

characterizing a wide range of damage in his texts — not only physical, but juridical and personal as well. As the previous chapter demonstrates, Georg Bendemann is a particularly defining example of how these different conceptions of injury can overlap. Declared “ein teuflischer Mensch” by his father, and then sentenced to death by drowning, Georg runs the spectrum of injurious content in “Das Urteil,” whereby the defamation of his character prompts his physical destruction altogether. Indeed, as his suicide no doubt suggests, the most dangerous injuries for Kafka are those that manifest internally, as thoughts and narratives of repression — as unhealed wounds seeking the succor of closure.

Injuries, however, can also promote awareness, even beauty, in these texts. As the country doctor’s patient reluctantly confirms, “mit einer schönen Wunde kam ich auf die Welt; das war meine ganze Ausstattung” (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 260) — and surely, without this beautiful wound and the string of events it unspools, the doctor would have never discovered his dormant affection for Rosa. Notably, this realization comes into focus the very moment Rosa is herself injured. More than just a servant girl at this point, Rosa obtains a special visibility through this incident. She emerges as someone worth defending for the doctor, a latent love interest whose promiscuous name ripples through the text — both as an object of desire and the color of this fatal (and fatalistic) wound. Subsequently, Rosa’s wounded cheek is not only a wound in this regard, but also a signifying event around which everything revolves in “Ein Landarzt” — an injury that also functions as an organizing principle in Kafka’s tumultuous text.

And while brutality is never condoned by Kafka, his depiction of injury is significant insofar as it conjures up a different understanding of trauma, one that productively blurs the lines between laceration and literary creation. The example of Rosa, while fleeting in an already short text, shows how impactful such injuries can be for Kafka — how even superficial wounds can

reach the deepest interiors of the narrative, shifting its perception of space, its metabolism of time. It is here, where bodies and bodies of text meet, that transgressive acts also become acts of transformation, where the conditions of writhing and writing cohabit in the expressiveness of the wound. Struggling to finish a draft of “Beschreibung eines Kampfes,” a younger Kafka would consider this impact of writing and self-laceration quite literally: “Ich werde mich nicht müde werden lassen. Ich werde in meine Novelle hineinspringen und wenn es mir das Gesicht zerschneiden sollte” (*Tagebücher* 126). The degree to which Kafka is willing to plunge headlong into his novella, to fully immerse himself in the writing process, is matched only by his willingness to take language to its most literal extremes. Such an understanding of trauma begins to approximate what the Greeks called *poiesis* and Heidegger called “Hervorbringen,” but what Kafka simply calls “die Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele” (*Tagebücher* 461). It is less a representation of woundedness than the wound of representation itself — a “hineinspringen” that also produces a poetic “herausspringen,” an aletheiac “hervorbringen.”

This semio-somatic association between trauma and artistic invention finds an idiosyncratic voice in Kafka’s Rotpeter — the injured, but ingenious ape of “Bericht für eine Akademie.” Compared to other texts in this study, “Bericht” may seem the least impactful account of woundedness, or certainly the least fatal; however it is precisely this impression that makes Rotpeter one of the more complex narrators in Kafka’s oeuvre. We learn early on, for example, that Rotpeter survived two injuries during his capture by a Hagenbeck hunting expedition, gunshot wounds that left him thereafter with a red scar on his cheek and a slight limp. We also learn that Rotpeter cannot recollect these events directly; instead, he must rely on secondhand reports to relay their circumstances to the academy — a deficiency that underscores his role in gathering and reproducing information in his report. More than any other wounded



figure we've encountered so far, however, Rotpeter seems able to overcome, or at least compensate for, the traumatic consequences of his injuries. His success in the human world is measured instead by a slew of transformative abilities — most strikingly, the ability to speak — that enable him to transcend the physical and mental restrictions of his previous life. This chapter examines such abilities: specifically, the ways in which Rotpeter compensates for his injuries through a variety of rhetorical and representational strategies. Accordingly, I argue that Rotpeter's report addresses a more pervasive condition of woundedness that he repeatedly attempts to "re-cover" by other means. The first section thus focuses on the stigma of his first injury, a facial wound from which his name is mockingly derived, but whose superficiality inspires him to new depths of rhetoric and self-distinction. The second section then investigates the impact of his second injury, a groin wound whose resulting limp exemplifies an imbalance in the epistemology of the report itself — an instability that Rotpeter attempts to counterbalance with a fixation on clarity and meaning.

### **Saving Face**

Appearing first in 1917, in the monthly journal *Der Jude*, and then as part of the "Landarzt" collection in 1919, "Bericht für eine Akademie" stands arguably as one of Kafka's most satirical texts. It begins, simply enough, with Rotpeter announcing to the academy that he cannot comply with their request to discuss his former life as an ape because that life is no longer known to him. Instead, he can only proceed "in eingeschränktestem Sinn" (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 299), by focusing on how he learned to imitate his human captors and, as a result, forged a way out of his apish existence — what he refers to emphatically as his "Ausweg." Scrupulously narrated and delivered in the form of an academic lecture, Rotpeter's report becomes a testament

to his linguistic abilities. He claims to have attained the “Durchschnittsbildung eines Europäers” (312) in the time following his capture on the Gold Coast, an education that enables him, among other things, to elaborate on the details of his intellectual development. But the eloquence with which he describes this education also clarifies what he can never articulate in any language. Which is to say: while Rotpeter can clearly demonstrate this human knowledge to his esteemed audience, no amount of learning could ever help him describe what remains, in his words, an “alte Affenwahrheit” (303). As he maintains early on, “nahezu fünf Jahre trennen mich vom Affentum, eine Zeit, kurz vielleicht am Kalender gemessen, unendlich lang aber durchzugaloppieren” (299). This underscores a critical adjustment in Rotpeter’s report overall: that since he cannot discuss the details of his bygone apeness, the failure to do so triggers another discussion altogether, a report that in effect compensates for his inability to report. I will return to this point in the next section.

Although inspiration for the text most likely derives from an article Kafka read in the *Prager Tagblatt*, its endorsement by Martin Buber, the publisher of *Der Jude*, gives the story an immediate theological dimension.<sup>62</sup> This has prompted some scholars to read the story as an

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<sup>62</sup> Walter Bauer-Wabnegg, in his essay “Monster und Maschinen, Artisten und Technik in Franz Kafkas Werk,” discusses two possible origins for Kafka’s text: “Wo lassen sich Anhaltspunkte festmachen, daß dieser Text nicht alleine für sich steht? Auf andere Texte wird hier reagiert; es findet eine Kommunikation auf der Textebene statt. Es ist davon auszugehen, dass Kafka Vorlagen hatte und sich intensiv damit auseinandersetzte. Die zwei Vorlagen, die Kafka sehr wahrscheinlich kannte, sind zum einen Carl Hagenbecks *Autobiographie* (vgl. [Hagenbeck, *Autobiographie*] ) und zum anderen ein Zeitungsartikel *Consul der viel Bewunderte. Aus dem Tagebuch eines Künstlers*. Der Text ist im *Prager Tagblatt* am 1. April 1917 in der Wochenbeilage *Onkel Franz. Illustrierte Jugendzeitung* erschienen.” (354).

allegory for Jewish assimilation in early twentieth-century Europe. Jay Geller, for example, persuasively argues that Rotpeter “represents the Jew as European manqué” (373), a figure embodying a range of anti-Semitic stereotypes, including the claim that Jews functioned as the “Affentum der Kultur.”<sup>63</sup> Since the inception of African slavery, the ape has served as a wide-reaching caricature for racial difference and subalternism, one given new currency by evolutionists such as Ernst Haeckel who popularized a more racialized understanding of Darwinian Theory. By Geller's estimation, “Bericht” draws together these themes of evolutionary biology and racial science to illustrate the complexities of Jewish identity in turn-of-the-century Europe. This interpretation is also shared implicitly by Max Brod, who introduced Buber to Kafka's text. Just weeks after Kafka gave a reading of “Bericht,” for instance, Brod offered his own report in the Zionist periodical *Selbstwehr*: “Ist es nicht die genialste Satire auf Assimilation, die je geschrieben worden ist! Man lese sie nochmals im letzten Heft des ‚Juden.‘ Der Assimilant, der nicht Freiheit, nicht Unendlichkeit will, nur einen Ausweg, einen jämmerlichen Ausweg!” (Reimert 118). Clearly, as a text that assimilates the language of assimilation, “Bericht” is inscribed with the political tensions of its time, a context that places Rotpeter in a doubly vulnerable position: both as an ape unable to comply with the academy's request and then, in Geller's terms, as a “European-aping Jew” (Geller 373) — as a cultural imitator, an imposter.

But Kafka's text goes further than just ideological critique. Not to fully discount Geller's reading, which helpfully decodes the racial iconography of “Bericht,” but Jewish alterity is just one of many possible performances we find on Rotpeter's variety stage.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, it would

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<sup>63</sup> As quoted by Geller (373).

<sup>64</sup> A number of scholars have commented on the theatrical and performative aspects of Kafka text.

appear that Rotpeter's most important talent as a “gewesener Affe” lies in his ability to play a variety of roles, namely, in his ability to “ape” those around him — a skill rightly attributable to any successful stage actor, but especially to an ape whose “way out” relies upon these principles of mimicry. Rotpeter tells the academy that, to reach these “großen Varietébühnen der zivilisierten Welt” (301) and avoid internment at the Hamburg Zoo, he learned first to imitate Hagenbeck's crew — habits such as drinking and pipe-smoking that eventually lead to more sophisticated and culturally refined acts later on, including, ostensibly, his ability to report. For Rotpeter, this was simply a matter of necessity and survival: “es verlockte mich nicht, die Menschen nachzuahmen; ich ahmte nach, weil ich einen Ausweg suchte, aus keinem anderen Grund” (311). Here, we find the tenets of natural selection conditioned by a more artistic understanding of naturalism, where an ape adapts not through physical or genetic mutations (discussion of his fur inevitably betrays this fact), but through effective representational strategies: that is, through the mimetic adaptation and re-presentation of the sailors’ behavior. By evolving culturally rather than biologically, and assisted by his many human teachers, Rotpeter can thus achieve in five years what, given the temporal constraints of phylogenetic change,

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Margot Norris , for example, understands Rotpeter’s report in terms of a dramatic monologue (124) that underscores, among other things, the aesthetic and philosophical significance of his mimicry; Martin Puchner, who, like Norris, locates an anti-anthropocentric critique in “Bericht,” reads Rotpeter’s report as a dramatic performance that dismantles traditional hierarchies between man and beast (28-31), an intervention that Puchner puts in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of “das Offene”; Ziad Elmarsafy argues that Rotpeter’s subjectivity is “invented through its performance (165); and, most recently, Richard T. Gray calls Rotpeter’s reporting of the past a “theater of narrative” (*Fourth Wall* 108) in which autobiographical performance resembles, on several levels, the imaginary fourth wall of the proscenium stage.

would have taken immeasurably longer.<sup>65</sup> In other words, Rotpeter's inability to transform *into* a human being forces him to perform *as* a human being, and this points to a more general pattern in his career overall: namely, that the cages, variety stages, and academies of the civilized world all require a similar kind of performance from Rotpeter, one in which obstacles must be overcome not so much by adapting physically to these new environments, but rather by adopting new roles within them.

This strategy of role-playing not only helps Rotpeter escape the confinement of his cage, but also the restrictiveness of allegorical readings in general. He may be an ape, albeit a very sophisticated one, but he is also an apt metaphor in this regard — someone who can adapt to whatever our academy may ask of him, be it reports of Jewishness (Geller), animal advocacy (Puchner), or simply the restrictiveness of anthropocentric thinking (Norris). As the sum of all or none of these identities, Rotpeter nonetheless exceeds our own scholarly expectations as an ape because he apes so well — meaning, he excels not so much at being a literal ape, but at making the figurative act of aping an empowered and efficacious mode of being: a means of survival and artistic success. Appropriately enough, Rotpeter uses a metaphor to describe this accomplishment: “Es gibt eine ausgezeichnete deutsche Redensart: sich in die Büsche schlagen; das habe ich getan, ich habe mich in die Büsche geschlagen” (312). Just as an animal evades its predators by hiding in the bushes, so too the figurative ape — only in Rotpeter's case, these bushes are metaphorical, an expression that underscores the transformative potential of his language. My point here, however, is not that Rotpeter succeeds by actually blending in with his new environment, by disappearing into the thick of human society let alone the academy (again,

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<sup>65</sup> This resonates with my discussion of morphological change in the parable “Prometheus.” See chapter four.

his appearance precludes this visual assimilation); but rather that he succeeds in repurposing an evasive *Lebensart* into an equally evasive, and above all, effective *Redensart*. Rhetorical strategy, the ability to persuade by linguistic means, compensates here for physical strategies of survival in the wild — strategies that, while having failed to prevent his capture on the Gold Coast, allow him to make do in the civilized world. He may not be able to comply with the academy's request after all, but he proves himself quite capable in redirecting its focus in this regard.

And while Rotpeter's mimesis is not restricted to his use of language — gestural imitation, of course, plays a central role in his pre-lingual development as well — the case could be made that it begins, rather inadvertently, with an abuse or traumatic ambiguity of language. It begins, that is, with a wound.

Eine Jagdexpedition der Firma Hagenbeck – mit dem Führer habe ich übrigens seither schon manche gute Flasche Rotwein geleert – lag im Ufergebüsch auf dem Anstand, als ich am Abend inmitten eines Rudels zur Tränke lief. Man schoß; ich war der einzige, der getroffen wurde; ich bekam zwei Schüsse.

Einen in die Wange; der war leicht; hinterließ aber eine große ausrasierte rote Narbe, die mir den widerlichen, ganz und gar unzutreffenden, förmlich von einem Affen erfundenen Namen Rotpeter eingetragen hat, so als unterschiede ich mich von dem unlängst krepiereten, hier und da bekannten, dressierten Affentier Peter nur durch den roten Fleck auf der Wange. Dies nebenbei. (301)

Despite the “leicht” impact of this first gunshot, its burden is quite heavy considering the antipathy it induces in Rotpeter. He disparages the name it earns him afterwards, attributing its invention dismissively to an ape. But the fact that Rotpeter would discredit this name by

ascribing it to his own species already points to the strange ambivalence it evokes. As a doubly “distinguished” ape, one set apart by his wound and the language used to describe it, Rotpeter still finds himself dialectically bound to what he is not; he is still, so to speak, a crossed out and revised Peter, an ape “eingetragen” in red, a ~~Peter~~. Unsurprisingly, he resents the implication that the only difference between him and a trained ape would be this negligible mark — especially since this predecessor was only known “hier und da,” unlike Rotpeter, of course, who has traveled the stages of the civilized world, garnering a seemingly distinctive name of his own. This resentment manifests itself not only in Rotpeter’s vocabulary, which grows more inflamed once the scar is mentioned, but also through his implicit insistence on aesthetic innovation. Here we find a strategic displacement and reversal on Rotpeter’s part. Apprehensive, perhaps, of being unoriginal himself, Rotpeter reproaches whoever named him for their lack of imagination and originality; he is no mere imitator (or imitation) of Peter. In this regard, the name “Rotpeter” is equally repulsive and imprecise to Rotpeter — less an indication of his own apish origins than proof of his own superior taste in language. That is, his discerning ear for what is, on the contrary, aesthetically and linguistically *unwiderlich*.

As a distinguishing feature in its own right, taste plays an important role in the preceding paragraph as well, where Rotpeter is quick to mention his appreciation of red wine before describing the less sophisticated activity of drinking water with his pack. These moments of condescension, which are meant to distinguish Rotpeter culturally and intellectually from Peter, pierce through both paragraphs like the gunshot they describe, disrupting his narration of the past with the need to qualify and evaluate their content in the present. Metaphorically speaking, this can be seen as exposing yet another wound, however one that asserts itself through narrative analepsis: an intrusive language that muddles the distinction between the reported past and the

reporting present. It is particularly ironic, then, that in order to disavow himself of these offensive associations, Rotpeter feels the need to be especially derisive, to lash out in kind, to injure those who injure him — in short, to respond with the same “Widerlichkeit” and violence he wishes to renounce in this digression. It may be a slight wound by his account, but it proves to be especially slighting in this sense — a shallow abrasion made deeper, and more “cutting,” by this abrasive, facile word.

Indeed, if anything, these remarks demonstrate how quickly the focus shifts from the details of Rotpeter's physical injury to the way the name injures him emotionally. This is reinforced, to a certain extent, by his description of the scar. Rotpeter initially calls it a “große ausrasierte rote Narbe,” a large, ostensibly healed wound; however, when its damage proves more personal than physical, its dimensions are expressed in terms of a “roten Fleck” — a stain or spot, something that suggests a permanent state of ignominy, the lack of emotional closure. Instead, we find the force of the gunshot absorbed by the report itself, its impact redistributed as a kind of “cheap shot” in Rotpeter's commentary. For example, the sudden coarseness of the adjective “krepiereten,” as opposed to the less colloquial “gestorbenen,” signals both a blunt disregard for Peter as well as a lapse in Rotpeter's studied decorum. This abrupt word choice — what in English corresponds to “croaked” — exposes a brief rawness in his otherwise formal speech, an insensitivity that Rotpeter quickly subdues with the restraint of “dies nebenbei,” since it is now his own inappropriate language rising to the surface. It is at this point, however, that Rotpeter's condescension begins to appear more like compensation, or rather, *overcompensation*: an effort to re-cover whatever pain this name represents for him, to make it seem somehow inconsequential or tangential — to place it *neben bei* other concerns. The phrase “neben bei,” in this sense, signals what Freud would have called “Reaktionsbildung,” a defense mechanism in



which secondary concerns are marked as primary. Rotpeter wants to dispel any notion here that he follows in Peter's footsteps, but to do so, he foregrounds and exaggerates that notion to an almost comedic effect. By demeaning Peter in such a fustian and openly combative manner, Rotpeter in effect exposes two conflicting sentiments at once. He asserts, on the one hand, his own intellectual and cultural superiority, an overwrought sense of confidence that, on the other, betrays an underlying anxiety in the report itself: a fear, perhaps, of his own indistinguishability; of blending in not with humans, but with his predecessor; a fear, finally, of being an ape of an ape.

Rotpeter's "widerlicher Name" thus becomes an occasion for a more subtle and nuanced "Widerlegung" in this regard — an opportunity to discredit Peter while also distancing himself from these unfounded, injurious associations. We may recall that the father in "Das Urteil" uses a similar vocabulary when he mocks Georg's fiancée, calling her a "widerliche Gans" (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 57) the same moment his scar is revealed. Compelled to disgrace and expose their perceived assailants, both Rotpeter and the father respond with equally "widerliche" exposures of their own: they admonish abhorrence by becoming abhorrent themselves, reproducing their emotional injuries through a double display of woundedness — through their scarred bodies and callous mockery. (The obvious parallel in "Bericht," of course, would be Rotpeter's tendency to pull down his pants when showing visitors his other scar. But as I show in the next section, this is motivated more by an interest in sincerity than in retribution.) On a thematic level, however, this "Widerlichkeit" reminds us of the less refined acts that Rotpeter learns from Hagenbeck's sailors: the spitting, pipe-smoking, and whiskey drinking that contribute to his gradual assimilation in human civilization. The irony here, once again, is that Rotpeter's civilized education is founded on the mimetic reproduction of these (arguably) "widerliche" acts — crude

imitations that allow him to, among other things, suppress the perceived crudeness of his “Affentum,” to secure a way out of its confining way of life. A similar pattern emerges in Rotpeter’s relationship to alcohol as well, whose taste and smell he finds repulsive, but whose skillful consumption one evening prompts a critical breakthrough into human speech.<sup>66</sup> One could make the case, in other words, that Rotpeter’s success in human society is achieved in part by successfully managing its repulsiveness; however, in order to manage it, Rotpeter must also replicate and reproduce it somehow, to compensate for it with an equally, and thus mimetically, forceful response.

Accordingly, Margot Norris is only half right when she claims that, for Rotpeter, “truth appears to be defined precisely as that which is inimitable, namely, physical pain [...] Only traces of this truth (the ape’s pain) remain in the form of the scars on cheek and thigh” (68). While all scars can be said to signify some kind of pain, I would argue that the true pain for Rotpeter resides in the traumatic signifiability of his scar: its persistent *imitability* as a signifier, the uncontrollable associations for which he seeks out some kind of verbal recompense and distinction in his report. Just as the story of his wounding cannot be disassociated from his naming, the story of his naming cannot be divorced from his predecessor's legacy, and this makes Rotpeter, much to his chagrin, a physically and emotionally wounded *Nachfolger*. But if I may invent a name of my own: Rotpeter attempts to represent himself, both here and elsewhere in the report, as a kind of *Nach-affe*, someone who has since deviated from his “Affentum” while, at the same time, repurposing its techniques of imitation to gain a particular advantage in

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<sup>66</sup> Eckhard Schumacher argues that alcohol plays a constitutive role not only in Rotpeter’s artistic development, but also as a substance that softens otherwise hard divisions between culture and nature. See: Schmacher (175-190).

human society. More than just a play on words, however, viewing Rotpeter as a *Nach-affe* allows us to see the less obvious ways in which *nachäffen* is embodied — and indeed, imitated — by Kafka's human ape. Like its English equivalent, the preposition “nach” communicates modalities of posterity and attribution. It can mean “after” something in a temporal and kinetic sense, but also “according to” or “after someone,” attributions like the infinitive phrase *sich nach jemandem / etwas nennen*. All these associations of “nach” apply in different ways to Rotpeter's life as a “gewesener Affe.” Even the story of his capture itself is attributable to another source (i.e. *nach jemandem*), since it occurred, according to Rotpeter, before the inception of his human memory. His reliance on these “fremde Berichte” (301) makes his account of injury an attempt to also account for his own limitations as a reporter, as someone who must repeatedly adjust and adapt, to compensate for demands to which he cannot, by his own admission, “nachkommen” (299). The lineal aspect of “nachkommen,” which as a noun means “progeny,” is also instructive in this context. Rotpeter resists the idea, for example, that he “comes after” Peter ancestrally or intellectually — that he is somehow derivative, a “Nachkomme.” (Indeed, as a “Nach-affe,” he only “comes after” Peter rhetorically with the language of his report.) And while the term *Nach-affe* is clearly my own imitation, it approximates, in its own way, the inventiveness of Rotpeter's own cultural development — or at least the inventiveness Rotpeter attempts to showcase throughout his report. If anything, it reflects how language evolves by inscribing these new names over old ones, and how Rotpeter (both the reporting “Nach-affe” and the compound word “Rot + peter” itself) becomes emblematic of this adaptability. Seen from this perspective, then, Rotpeter's name is “widerlich” not so much because it imitates Peter, but because it fails to properly reflect Rotpeter's own ingenuity as an imitative artist. It fails, in other words, where

Rotpeter's report attempts to succeed: to separate these "Affen" from the "Nach-affen," the *Tot-Peters* from the Rotpeters.

The scar, in many ways, materializes this rhetoric of separation. As a temporal marker, it distinguishes everything that follows his capture from what can never be "captured" again, the achievements of his *Nach-affentum* from the lost memories of his "äffisches Vorleben." Consequently, by inscribing this separation of before and after, the scar also becomes emblematic of certain "Vorteile" and "Nachteile" experienced throughout Rotpeter's career. Like Odysseus's scar, his scar serves as a clear mark of recognition: a body writing whose historical reference can never be "effaced," but remains forever an indication of the non-lingual ape Rotpeter used to be. This can be seen as a disadvantage for an averagely educated "gewesener Affe," a "Fleck" that makes him increasingly defensive and self-conscious. And yet, conversely — though less like Odysseus in this regard and more like Achilles—his injury also becomes a defining feature of his entire being: a being that centers around the formative advantages of this disfigurement: where negative somatic features are translated into positive attributes of distinction and cultural adaptability.<sup>67</sup> Without his distinctive mark, Rotpeter would have never been *remarkable* (or even reportable) to human society; he would have remained indistinguishable. For this reason, too, however, the facial scar also represents a traumatic connectedness that still hurts Rotpeter: it forms the basis of a name that is both old and new, derivative in form, but divergent in content. Unable to literally or figuratively cover up this facial scar, Rotpeter must develop a different set of tactics. Like Georg Bendemann's representational strategies in this regard, Rotpeter's language thus attempts to compensate for what it cannot otherwise conceal or contain. His insistence on the inconsequentiality of his injury only draws

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<sup>67</sup> I will return to the figure of Achilles next section.

our attention to the damage it caused and continues to cause for him—not only to the ways it transforms his appearance, but how it also transforms the language of his report.

What I want to establish at his point, however, is a causal and an epistemic relationship. First, the physical impact of the first bullet not only leaves a metonymical imprint of language, but it also leads directly to the formation of Rotpeter’s self-consciousness and, with it, an increasingly self-conscious rhetoric. Immediately following his injuries, for example, Rotpeter begins to form memories: “Nach jenen Schüssen erwachte ich – und hier beginnt allmählich meine eigene Erinnerung – in einem Käfig im Zwischendeck des Hagenbeckschen Dampfers” (302). Clearly marking where the “fremde Berichte” end and his own recollection begins — a moment that creates a division “vor” and “nach” in the report itself — Rotpeter also introduces what could be seen as the epistemological consequences of his injury: a captivity that defines the way he thinks, shaping how he begins to learn and know things, and, more generally, how he compensates for the things he does not know (or no longer wants to know.)<sup>68</sup> If his inflammatory rhetoric demonstrates anything, however, it is that this drive for self-distinction also leaves its mark on Kafka’s text—a woundedness that, as we shall see, becomes even more “explicit” with his second injury.

### **A Pronounced Limp**

As a successful variety show performer, Rotpeter can be seen as embodying a central irony in “Bericht”: namely, that in order to overcome his status as an ape, Rotpeter needs to

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<sup>68</sup> In this sense, Nietzsche’s famous aphorism concerning the “prison house of language” is particularly instructive: “Wir hören auf zu denken, wenn wir es nicht in dem sprachlichen Zwange tun wollen, wir langen gerade noch bei dem Zweifel an, hier eine Grenze als Grenze zu sehn” (KSA 12, 193).

embrace the role of playing a figurative ape — a role that he mocks with his disparagement of Peter, but then valorizes with his own imitative strategies, his so-called “Ausweg.” By the end of his report, however, Rotpeter seems determined to absolve himself of all roles and responsibilities beyond the mere act of reporting. He concludes by stating: “Im übrigen will ich keines Menschen Urteil, ich will nur Kenntnisse verbreiten, ich berichte nur, auch Ihnen, hohe Herren von der Akademie, habe ich nur berichtet” (313). Like the gentlemen of the academy, Rotpeter is also interested in the dissemination of knowledge, or so he claims. But this too smacks of a need to compensate for less academic or gentlemanly pursuits, such as his questionable relationship with a “kleine halbdressierte Schimpansin” (313), which he mentions immediately before, or the hostility that flares up around discussion of his injuries. Clearly, Rotpeter wants to accommodate the interests of his scholarly audience here — his report in general is a testament to this willingness—though his insistence on merely reporting, just like his insistence on the inconsequentiality of his first injury, seems oddly validated and off-centered in this final moment. It is not only the timing of this statement, which is at odds with the evasiveness that precedes it, but also the redundancy of his language. It resounds, for example, in the echo of “nur,” whose repetition emphasizes just the opposite concern, and in the chiasmus of “berichte nur” / “nur berichtet,” which imparts a sense of rhetorical closure. But the stressed reassurance of “auch Ihnen, hohe Herren” is perhaps most alerting in this sense: it suggests a need for Rotpeter to reaffirm his audience in the end, as if the report could have also served less noble interests — as if he weren’t merely interested in imparting knowledge, but also in withholding or reshaping it.

Taken as a more general statement about the narrative composition of Kafka’s text, this declaration of “only reporting” goes a long way in characterizing Rotpeter’s role as the “only

reporter” in “Bericht” — arguably his most commanding performance. Only he speaks, after all: to the academy, but also to us.<sup>69</sup> And this entanglement of perspective puts Rotpeter in familiar company. But unlike the country doctor or Georg, for example, Rotpeter eschews any pretense of direct speech or external points of reference; as the only narrator in the text, it is his mediating voice alone we hear. A potential exception to this interiority would be the moment Rotpeter breaks into human speech: the momentous “Hallo!” and the response it earns among the sailors, i.e., “Hört nur, er spricht!” (311); but even this fails to leave the discursive limits of the report; unlike the textual variants of “Bericht” (*Nachgelassene Schriften I* 415-16), for instance, we never leave the precincts of Rotpeter’s first-person narration. Indeed, as someone who cannot comply with the academy’s original request, Rotpeter’s difficulty in reporting aspects of his former life reflects our own difficulty in seeing beyond the report in general. His numerous interjections, for example, which are meant to further clarify his account of the past, unintentionally call into question the facticity of that account; they complicate it with his current perspective, with its agendas and insecurities, its subjective orientation. Even the most confessional of Rotpeter’s disclosures, which occasionally attest to the unreliability of his report, cannot fully penetrate this epistemological barrier. He tells the academy, for example, that “alle Begleitung hielt sich [...] weit von der Barriere” (299), and it is a barrier we also encounter. Maybe the report exists solely in the mind of a still-confined ape? Maybe this is why Rotpeter needs to specify “*auch Ihnen*”? — because without positing his audience there would be no audience at all. Insofar as the report dictates the conditions and limits of our own knowledge, these more “confining” interpretations remain an inescapable possibility.

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<sup>69</sup> Though, in the context of a dissertation, this distinction is undoubtedly an ironic one.

For this reason, perhaps, and despite the obvious gaps in his narrative, Rotpeter repeatedly promotes qualities of openness and precision throughout his report — a theme that, I suggest, finds its root in the sensitive nature of his second injury. The claim of “merely reporting” is just one example of Rotpeter bringing attention to what I have generally identified as a woundedness in his report; it is a gesture that, not unlike a limp itself, demonstrates his need to compensate for a more deeply felt injury, one persisting at the level of text and narration. Whereas the first gunshot only grazed the surface, so to speak, the second shot proves to be more extensive and impactful in this regard.

Der zweite Schuß traf mich unterhalb der Hüfte. Er war schwer, er hat es verschuldet, daß ich noch heute ein wenig hinke. Letzthin las ich in einem Aufsatz irgendeines der zehntausend Windhunde, die sich in den Zeitungen über mich auslassen: meine Affennatur sei noch nicht ganz unterdrückt; Beweis dessen sei, daß ich, wenn Besucher kommen, mit Vorliebe die Hosen ausziehe, um die Einlaufstelle jenes Schusses zu zeigen. Dem Kerl sollte jedes Fingerchen seiner schreibenden Hand einzeln weggeknallt werden. (301)

Both Rotpeter and his critic seem to agree on one thing in this passage: that some forms of openness are better suppressed. By exposing himself to visitors, Rotpeter demonstrates that his ape nature is not yet under control, a claim that, in turn, demands its own suppressive response: to have the journalist’s fingers shot away, impairing his ability to write. Once again, we find an account of physical injury quickly turning into an account of personal injury, triggering a mimetic reaction in Rotpeter’s language. The words “Kerl” and “weggeknallt,” for example, reflect the crudeness of his desired retribution; this is an ironic choice of words given the fact his interest here lies in disproving his unsuppressed natures, and not in exhibiting them — a true



performative contradiction. This response is significant not so much for its coarseness, however, but for its portrayal of writing as an equally indecent form of exposure. Just as with the invention of his name, Rotpeter cannot control the dissemination of these claims, so he resorts to discrediting their source. The pejorative “Windhund,” in this case, highlights both the emptiness of this allegation and the speed with which it travels, as well as Rotpeter’s inclination to denigrate his opponents by animalizing them. But at least apes were capable of inventions, even if they were inferior inventions, whereas these “Windhunde” simply peddle in unsubstantiated and “windig” allegations.

But as Rotpeter makes immediately clear, exposing himself to visitors also exposes a more figurative truth to his audience: namely, that he has nothing to hide. This is the critical upshot of Rotpeter’s rant: while he may indeed expose himself in a manner unbefitting of human society, this is less an example of unchecked repression for him than a display of frank and truthful expression. His second scar furnishes its own proof in this regard: an unmistakable injury that entitles Rotpeter to this gesture:

Ich, ich darf meine Hosen ausziehen, vor wem es mir beliebt; man wird dort nichts finden als einen wohlgepflegten Pelz und die Narbe nach einem – wählen wir hier zu einem bestimmten Zwecke ein bestimmtes Wort, das aber nicht mißverstanden werden wolle – die Narbe nach einem frevelhaften Schuß. Alles liegt offen zutage; nichts ist zu verbergen; kommt es auf Wahrheit an, wirft jeder Großgesinnte die allerfeinsten Manieren ab. (302)

Rotpeter chooses his words carefully when describing his scar, as if its misrepresentation would only mangle the message it was meant to contain. Here we find a subtle shift following Rotpeter’s previous outburst: his concern about the dubious use of evidence regarding his ape

nature now becomes a question of semantic precision — of properly understanding the meaning of his second injury and its intended target. Rotpeter emphasizes this yet again through a rhetoric of repetition. The recurrence of “bestimmt,” for example, underscores his interest in verbal accuracy; it also evokes the ballistic accuracy of this shot, its deliberate “aim” to disempower, if not desexualize him. In another strategic reversal, Rotpeter uses the same evidence for exactly the opposite claim: pulling down his pants instead signifies his lack of anything to repress. Exposing his fur and scar, in other words, demonstrates not a primitive impulse, but rather a sense of epistemological clarity — even if that act of exposure clarifies, as a result, a compromising, potentially demasculating spectacle.

The religious overtones of “frevelhaft” also reinforce this (more personal) injury. As Jay Geller writes: “the wounds and limp suggest castration and therefore recall the feminized, impotent status of the Jew in European society [...] in pulling down his pants to show his scar, Red Peter acts the lewd Jew showing the scar of his Jewishness: his circumcision” (373). In this light, and seen from a Freudian perspective, Rotpeter’s report presents itself as a substitution for Rotpeter’s wounded phallus, a displacement that lends new meaning to his inability to comply with certain requests. It resonates, as already mentioned, in the word “nachkommen,” a progeny that a castrated ape would not be able to produce. The report, in this regard, could be seen more generally as a creative act that compensates for a dysfunctional or non-existing procreative act, whereby imitation becomes a response to Rotpeter’s physical limitations.<sup>70</sup> This not only reflects Rotpeter’s investment in cultural production over biological transformation, but it also

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<sup>70</sup> Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner also read this “frevelhafter Schuss” in the context of Kafka’s ejaculatory, hypersexualized gesture of writing “Das Urteil.” For them, this “sacrilegious shot” corresponds with “the acquisition of a literary destiny” (Corngold and Wagner 139) — an expression of the will that overcomes a more artistically-oriented sense of impotence and privation.

demonstrates, once again, his reallocation of abilities as a means of (artistic) survival. Indeed, as we see in the first epigraph, Kafka made an explicit connection between the direction of literary career and the sensual pleasures it necessarily emptied, stating that “[das Schreiben] ließ alle Fähigkeiten leer stehn, die Freuden des Geschlechtes, des Essens, des Trinkens, des philosophischen Nachdenkens, der Musik zuallererst” (*Tagebücher* 341).<sup>71</sup>

Be it a marker of religious, sexual, or artistic identity, however, the second injury seems to effect the opposite of what it represents for Rotpeter: it obfuscates rather than clarifies. His claim that “alles liegt offen zutage; nichts ist zu verbergen” not only hinges on extracting metaphysical import from this physical exposure — that is, as imparting a sense of sincerity and truthfulness instead of sheer lewdness or awkwardness — but it also reveals that this truth must sometimes come at the expense of social propriety, a practice clearly at odds with the formality of his report. As he tells the academy, “kommt es auf Wahrheit an, wirft jeder Großgesinnte die allerfeinsten Manieren ab;” and to the extent Rotpeter includes himself among these “Großgesinnten,” this statement works double-duty in vindicating his own dubious behavior — especially his “widerlich” rhetoric.<sup>72</sup> Openness not only characterizes transparency in this sense,

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<sup>71</sup> This inventory of distractions, appropriately enough, seems to match up almost seamlessly with Rotpeter’s “civilized” indulgences in “Bericht,” prompting an interesting thought experiment: if Kafka were to hold Rotpeter to the same artistic standards as a writer, it would undoubtedly expose the ape for what he truly is: an imitator.

<sup>72</sup> “Abwerfen” appears elsewhere as a gesture of transition, such as the moment Rotpeter casts aside his schnapps bottle: “Ich hebe die Flasche, vom Original schon kaum zu unterscheiden; setze sie an und - und werfe sie mit Abscheu, mit Abscheu” (309-10). This contrasts, of course, to the moment when he overcomes his “Widerwille gegen die Schnapsflasche” by drinking not as a “Verzweifelter,” but as a “Künstler” (310), a transition that coincides with his suppression of other apish tendencies,

but also the suspension of certain sexual and cultural mores, an exceptionalism that operates in the service of more universal concerns. But the question remains: if the majority of his report is peppered with niceties and rhetorical refinements, then what does that say about its own claims to truth? Although there is a qualitative difference (one hopes) between pulling down one's pants and giving an academic report, Rotpeter's literalist interpretation of disclosure here inevitably conflates the two as one epistemological gesture. It distracts us, in other words, from the original charge of unrepressed urges with yet another example of his social distinction. (Which, it bears noting, provides empirical evidence that he is still a furry ape underneath and at the surface.) If this constitutes "openness," then it seems to come at the expense of consistency or completeness, through a truncation or "excising" of detail.

The crucial point here, however, is that Rotpeter grounds this epistemology of openness in somatic performance, and this is perhaps the most clarifying gesture of all: that his body, even with its associations of restriction and confinement, demonstrates the interpretive precision of his claims. The truth of his fur, in other words, confirms the truth of his report — despite the fact that, when exposed, both prove to lack certain essential parts. To express it yet another way: the openness of Rotpeter's body substantiates the openness of his language, a conviction that can be traced back, in part, to Rotpeter's first lesson. He tells the academy, for instance, that "das erste, was ich lernte, war: den Handschlag geben; Handschlag bezeugt Offenheit; mag nun heute, wo ich auf dem Höhepunkte meiner Laufbahn stehe, zu jenem ersten Handschlag auch das offene Wort hinzukommen" (300). A handshake creates a social contract between individuals; it fosters an honesty that Rotpeter, now at the height of his career, wishes to emulate in his own discourse. But if a handshake betokens openness, then, as we've also learned from "Ein Landarzt," this

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such as a penchant for rubbing his belly.

openness betokens a dilemma: it not only signifies frankness, which Rotpeter goes to great lengths to demonstrate, but it also signals ambiguity: the unreliability of “das offene Wort” itself, what Rotpeter inadvertently achieves with the subjectivity of his report.<sup>73</sup> He may speak openly, but that “openness” is still conditioned by the unreliability of his perspective, its willed or unwilled limitations as a report: “Ich kann natürlich das damals affenmäßig Gefühlte heute nur mit Menschenworten nachzeichnen und verzeichne es infolgedessen” (303).<sup>74</sup> And while Rotpeter admits this point several times, his openness makes it no less unreliable for us. It is inevitably subject to the same openness it intends to expose — an openness that becomes visually indissociable with his woundedness.

Consequently, if Rotpeter’s exposed body materializes and grounds a body of knowledge, then it also exposes, to use Geoffrey Hartman’s term, a “traumatic knowledge”: an impaired truth that emerges at the threshold of knowing and not-knowing — between openness as transparency and openness as uncertainty.<sup>75</sup> This entanglement of body and body of text becomes a subtle, yet signature feature of Kafka’s narrative, whereby the literal woundedness of Rotpeter’s body, which he openly reveals to visitors, begins to reflect the figurative woundedness of the report —

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<sup>73</sup> Here we are also reminded of the patient’s hand-like wound and the openness that brings it into being for the country doctor. See chapter one.

<sup>74</sup> The relationship here between “nach,” a prefix that confers an imitative, belated quality, and “ver,” which assigns a status of undoing or divergence, can be seen as reinforcing the untimely and unreliable mediatedness of Rotpeter’s narration.

<sup>75</sup> Hartman is cautious when defining what, by definition, is an expression of nescience or non-knowledge: “Traumatic knowledge, then, would seem to be a contradiction in terms. It is as close to nescience as to knowledge. Any general description or modeling of trauma, therefore, risks being figurative itself, to the point of mythic fantasmagoria” (*Traumatic Knowledge* 537).

what could be seen more conceptually as an injured or wounded text, one openly revealed to the academy. To extend the metaphor: Rotpeter's body and his report compensate for these injuries insofar as they attempt to correct an imbalance inherent to both — to overcome their restrictions with what become obvious strategies of compensation. Accordingly, Rotpeter's limp exemplifies a physically legible form of adjustment that, in metaphorical terms, could also characterize the labored, repetitious, and often overreaching gestures of his language — an injured language, as we've seen in the previous section, whose remedial intent only draws more attention to itself. The failure, in this regard, to suppress these injurious names and allegations, to cover up information that could potentially damage Rotpeter's reputation as a "gewesener Affe," begins to reflect the irrepressibility of his somatic injuries: the unavoidable appearance of his facial wound, the perpetual certainty of his limp.

This relationship between injury and knowing, however, is not merely an associative one, but rather a theme that informs pivotal events in Rotpeter's intellectual development. A particularly formative example of this occurs when he first arrives at the idea to imitate his captors. Although Rotpeter lacked the ability to address or understand Hagenbeck's sailors at this point, we can see how his physical and epistemological limitations condition both how he represents this scene and how it calls into question the fidelity of that representation:

Ich rechnete nicht, wohl aber beobachtete ich in aller Ruhe. Ich sah diese Menschen auf und ab gehen, immer die gleichen Gesichter, die gleichen Bewegungen, oft schien es mir, als wäre es nur einer. Der Mensch oder diese Menschen gingen also unbehelligt. Ein hohes Ziel dämmerte mir auf. Niemand versprach mir, daß, wenn ich so wie sie werden würde, das Gitter aufgezogen werde. (307)

Confined by his cage and his incomprehension, Rotpeter can only observe his surroundings at a remove. That observation, however, is obscured by the indistinguishability of Hagenbeck's men — by their similar faces and movements, both of which blend together as if belonging to one person. Their failure to leave a clear impression on him corresponds, in this sense, to their lack of distinguishing features—a direct inversion of Rotpeter's own distinctive appearance and movement. The specter of injury haunts this scene as an absence: Rotpeter's injuries are felt through the humans' lack of injuries, through their lack of variance or obstacle. But while Rotpeter's concern here is to become indistinguishable from these sailors, it is his failure to do so that makes him worthy of the academy's attention, and this is perhaps the more relevant point: that although Rotpeter devises this goal as a way out of confinement, the unconscious weight of his injuries becomes a constitutive part of how he represents and achieves that goal. The tone of the last sentence reads both ways in this regard: the fact that nobody promised him the bars would be lifted suggests not only an opportunity, but also a more cynical condition—namely, that even if liberated, restriction would still persist in the way of Rotpeter's physical and epistemic confinements. In other words, Rotpeter may learn the value of imitating his captors here, what forms the basis of his “Ausweg,” but this does not assure, in and of itself, freedom as he knew it as an ape — especially if that freedom must be promised by someone else.

Indeed, to the extent Rotpeter's limp persists as a residual confinement of the body, it makes sense that he would later deemphasize the significance of freedom. As someone who is repeatedly making assertions about openness, Rotpeter wants to be especially clear when distinguishing his “Ausweg” from other potentially related terms — specifically, the more deceptive kind of openness that resonates, for him, in the human conception of freedom.

Rotpeter insists on this terminological distinction: “Ich sage absichtlich nicht Freiheit. Ich meine

nicht dieses große Gefühl der Freiheit nach allen Seiten [...] mit Freiheit betrügt man sich unter Menschen allzuoft” (304). Just as with other words in his report—such as his “widerlicher Name” and the “frevelhafter Schuss” — Rotpeter is careful here when introducing and contextualizing certain key terms. On the one hand, this interest in precision is consistent with his overall strategy for success: semantic accuracy, in this sense, constitutes just one facet of a more extensive and attuned mimetic repertoire. By the same token, however, his insistence on meaning also exposes an anxiety of meaning, and he admits as much: “Ich habe Angst, daß man nicht genau versteht, was ich unter Ausweg verstehe” (304). But rather than define it exactly, Rotpeter turns to his variety show experience to illustrate its meaning for the academy. Mocking a particularly kinetic articulation of freedom, Rotpeter demonstrates once again a will to compensate for his physical restrictions—this time by deriding the spectacle of “selbstherrliche Bewegung”:

Oft habe ich in den Varietés vor meinem Auftreten irgendein Künstlerpaar oben an der Decke an Trapezen hantieren sehen. Sie schwangen sich, sie schaukelten, sie sprangen, sie schwebten einander in die Arme, einer trug den andern an den Haaren mit dem Gebiß. ‘Auch das ist Menschenfreiheit’, dachte ich, ‘selbstherrliche Bewegung.’ Du Verspottung der heiligen Natur! Kein Bau würde standhalten vor dem Gelächter des Affentums bei diesem Anblick. (304-05)

Sympathizing more with apes than humans, Rotpeter openly ridicules the notion that freedom equals freedom of movement, an association he intends to avoid with his implementation of “Ausweg” as a critical term. Indeed, the swinging trapeze artists could just as easily characterize Rotpeter’s own shifting loyalties here. This momentary realignment of perspective, which makes humanity the target of his reproach, also corresponds with a reassignment of roles in the story



itself: the apes, for example, laugh like humans and the circus performers swing like apes, providing the apes with a source of entertainment. These reversals operate in a similar manner to Rotpeter's previous derisions, but with one crucial difference: instead of mocking the aesthetic backwardness of apes or the impropriety of the journalistic "Windhunde," Rotpeter chides the conceptual naïveté of humans — a mockery that, in turn, exposes their more transgressive "mockery of holy nature." Several observations can be made from this. First, on a rhetorical level, this display of human arrogance is matched by Rotpeter's own condescending description — yet another example of Rotpeter's mimetic reflex as a figurative ape. This resonates not only in the belittlement of "Du Verspottung," but also in the prosody of his syntax. The alliterative sibilance of "sie schwangen sich, sie schaukelten, sie sprangen, sie schwebten," for example, affects an onomatopoeic mockery in its own right, underscoring both the swooshing celerity of the performers' movement as well as a hissing disdain for such self-congratulatory mobility — something we could say that Rotpeter compensates for with his own figurative mobility of language. Second, this misguided interpretation of freedom violates natural principles that all apes, as evidenced by their laughter, innately know and humans do not. The trapeze artists not only perform movements that a lame ape could not, emphasizing Rotpeter's second injury through negation, but their ignorance proves to be just as disadvantaging in the larger scheme of things (i.e., "in der heiligen Natur"). Rotpeter's use of the collective noun "Affentum" is especially significant in this regard. As a term that also encapsulates the unknowability and restrictedness of his past, "Affentum" is juxtaposed here with the equally unknowable and restrictive idea of "Menschenfreiheit." Both apes and humans, in other words, allegorize otherwise unattainable ideals in this circus performance, and this makes the destabilizing force of the apes' laughter in the end even more destabilizing — not only for the academy, who is at the

butt of the joke, but also for Rotpeter's report, whose own narrative "Bau" begins to quake and shift.

Whatever instability these anecdotes might convey, however, they are compensated for, in part, by Rotpeter's insistence on meaning — his effort to ground and stabilize language as a kind of mimetic performance (i.e., alles liegt offen zutage). Not unlike the trapeze artists in this sense, Rotpeter is also engaged in a delicate balancing act — an "Ausgleichen" that describes both his mimetic training (what we could think of as a kind of representational equalization) and his compensations: his need to adjust and balance out inadequacies with a rhetoric of empowerment and superiority. But if Rotpeter's report reflects, as I have suggested, a traumatic knowledge, whereby claims to openness often expose the very woundedness they suppress, then his insistence on clarity becomes the privileged symptom of that suppression. To express it more clearly: when Rotpeter claims to "speak openly," his rhetoric conditions us to think just the opposite. A paradigmatic example of this, and one that sums up Rotpeter's "Ausgleichen" on several levels, appears towards the beginning of his report:

Offen gesprochen, so gerne ich auch Bilder wähle für diese Dinge, offen gesprochen: Ihr Affentum, meine Herren, sofern Sie etwas Derartiges hinter sich haben, kann Ihnen nicht ferner sein als mir das meine. An der Ferse aber kitzelt es jeden, der hier auf Erden geht: den kleinen Schimpansen wie den großen Achilles.  
(300)

Rotpeter's language here draws on the same representational strategies employed with his description of the second injury: a truth that is validated through visual disclosure, but ultimately made suspicious by its redundancy and overstatement.<sup>76</sup> The connection to Rotpeter's injury

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<sup>76</sup> Immediately prior to his "speaking openly," we find Rotpeter's language freighted with injury:

goes deeper here than just rhetorical posturing, however; it also points to a critical antecedent in the Western tradition — a figure whose injury vindicates his own: namely, the figure of Achilles. According to the Greek myth, Achilles had been submerged in the river Styx so that he would become immortal; but the heel by which he was held remained exposed, thus constituting his one and only mortal weakness. Bringing together these otherwise conflicting themes of injury and empowerment, Rotpeter's evocation of the Greek hero is undoubtedly strategic. For one, it positions him in a lineage that begins with apes and ends with mythological heroes, situating humanity somewhere in between. This contextualizes Rotpeter's previous statement about the academy's "Affentum" being more proximate than his own by measuring it out in terms of a teleological scheme. That Achilles stands at the far end of this spectrum only confirms Rotpeter's recurring interest in representing his disadvantage as a form of distinction and power. In this regard, Achilles also provides us with a more general paradigm for Rotpeter's compensations. As we have seen, Rotpeter projects a kind of rhetorical invulnerability at critical junctures in his report that nonetheless betrays a more vulnerable woundedness underneath. But it is this woundedness that, like that of Achilles, secures his point of contact to the human world, and this is perhaps the true "Achilles heel" of Rotpeter's report: that his physical and emotional injuries not only make him distinctive, but also vulnerable and thus relatable to his audience. In many ways, it is this kind of vulnerability, with its paradox of restriction and exposure, that becomes Rotpeter's most humanistic imitation of all.

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scenes of whipping and flogging that illustrate the irreversibility of his cultural development and the limitations it imposed. As the possibility of returning to the Gold Coast grows increasingly smaller, and the memories of Rotpeter's former life fade into the distance, it is injury that drives him forward in the human world.

## Conclusion

Well known for his political dramas, playwright Franz Xaver Kroetz drew controversy in 1986 when he cast a severely disabled man to play the role of Rotpeter in his theatrical adaptation of “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie.”<sup>77</sup> As the play’s sole performer, Peter Radtke seemed a natural fit for Kroetz’s vision: he served as the director for the “Arbeitsgemeinschaft Behinderte in den Medien,” but it is his life as a physically disabled person that resonated most with Kafka’s ape. As we learn in his biography, for example, Radtke avoided euthanization by the Nazis due to the kindness of his family doctor, leading to a successful career in theater and various doctoral degrees in the Humanities. This combination of cultural learning and physical disadvantage not only adds an extra layer to Kroetz’s interpretation of Rotpeter, but it also presented German audiences with an unsettling ethical dilemma. In its desultory review of the piece, *Die Bildzeitung* asked its readers: “Darf ein Behinderter einen Affen spielen?” (Poore 221). But what this writer seems to resist—and, in my opinion, Kroetz rightly embraced—is that physical disadvantage can also be a source of aesthetic empowerment and invention, even when it appears “widerlich.”

While much can be said concerning the role a theatrical adaptation may play for a text so deeply engaged with the nature of adaptation and performance, what I’d like to end with here rather is a more speculative context for Rotpeter’s impact elsewhere. Reading “Bericht” in terms of disadvantage may, of course, seem counterintuitive given Rotpeter’s privileged status in the end. However, this understanding of permanent injury as a kind of social curse, while

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<sup>77</sup> As discussed in Poore (220).

widespread in all forms of cultural production, has not always been the case. As Harlan Hahn argues, for example, antiquity often saw impairments as sources of empowerment and prestige rather than marks of inferiority (31). Drawing upon archaeological as well as literary evidence, Hahn claims that “the appearance of physical difference seemed to be associated with festiveness, sensuality, and entertainment rather than loss, repugnance, or personal tragedy” (31) — an association that applies to Rotpeter not only as a successful variety show artist, but also as an ape of Achilles: someone distinguished by an insurmountable vulnerability. Indeed, this interpretation of injury as an enabling feature of difference appears throughout literary history: from Tiresias, the blind seer of Thebes whose physical inability to see is compensated for by a more profound prophetic insight, to the paraplegic leader of the *X-Men*, a group of mutant superheroes forever altered by radiation exposure, but entrusted with the custodianship of human civilization. Such representations of injury may not always evoke a sense of disempowerment or degeneracy, but they often depict (in)ability in a way that is visually legible to the reader — as a wound or scar, a blindfold or wheelchair, a prosthesis or mask — and it is within this context, perhaps, that Kafka’s wounded ape continues to report.

Chapter Four  
Sore Subjects: Chronic Pain in “Prometheus”

Pain—has an Element of Blank—  
It cannot recollect  
When it begun - or if there were  
A time when it was not

Emily Dickenson  
*Poems*, 650

Mit primitivem Blick gesehn, ist die eigentliche, unwidersprechliche, durch nichts außerhalb (Märtyrertum, Opferung für einen Menschen) gestörte Wahrheit nur der körperliche Schmerz. Merkwürdig, daß nicht der Gott des Schmerzes der Hauptgott der ersten Religionen war (sondern vielleicht erst der späteren). Jedem Kranken sein Hausgott, dem Lungenkranken der Gott des Erstickens. Wie kann man sein Herankommen ertragen, wenn man nicht an ihm Anteil hat noch vor der schrecklichen Vereinigung?

Franz Kafka  
*Tagebücher*, 899

For literary theorists, pain has represented a unique discomfort. There is a tendency, on the one hand, to characterize it as inexpressible, a sensation that can only be approximated

through language, but never fully captured. On the other hand, the idea of pain is so irreducibly familiar, so central to the human condition, that even its mere inexpressibility has become commonplace. We all know what pain is when we feel it, when it flares up or subsides, but we still struggle to fully understand the pain of others. “Whatever pain achieves,” writes Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain*, “it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (Scarry 4). Perhaps for this reason pain is so often swathed in cliché — because only a dulled language can alleviate the pain of its incommunicability. The truth hurts after all, but only because it hurts for us alone.

For Germanists in particular, however, this problem is often characterized by a wince — namely, the pained expression of Laocoon, as he succumbs to a sea serpent in the well-known Greek sculpture. Although Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was not the first to find significance in Laocoon’s suffering, his essay from 1766 undoubtedly gives rise to more aesthetic considerations of pain. For Lessing, it was this depiction of agony — issued through a low, almost imperceptible groan — that demonstrated the expressive capacities of visual and poetic representation. Unlike Winckelmann before him, for example, who emphasized the noble serenity of the statue as a reflection of the serene Greek soul, its dutiful suspension between suffering and beauty, Lessing used the somatic expression of pain to arrive at the limits of semiotic expressibility.<sup>78</sup> That is, he found a distinction in pain — not as a measure of moral character, but as a determining factor in how we differentiate poetic expression from the plastic arts. Lessing privileged poetry in the end because its capacity for abstraction liberated it from the

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<sup>78</sup> Laocoon famously exemplifies for Winckelmann the “edle Einfalt und stille Größe” of Greek antiquity, an aesthetic paradigm he develops throughout his *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755).

material world; it could depict the unpleasant nature of suffering without needing to be entirely unpleasant itself. Laocoon's pain, in other words, became central to questions of representation rather than just interior meaning for Lessing, a chip in the bigger game of German Classicism as it rediscovered, and reinscribed, the values of Greek antiquity.

In the case of Kafka, however, who stands at the opposite end of this tradition, pain is so common that it loses specificity. A more general thematic analysis of suffering in Kafka's texts risks the same kind of hypochondria we find lining his diaries and letters: the obsessive search for symptoms (or the risk of imagining them); the temptation to draw biographical conclusions from biological failures; and finally, the challenge of seeing beyond pain itself, its paralyzing grip on how and what we read.<sup>79</sup> That Kafka so closely aligned his body with his literary production makes such readings of pain both obvious and, like its physical manifestations, imprecise—a prognosis that echoes the hermeneutic frustrations of Kafka's own country doctor: "Rezepte schreiben ist leicht, aber im übrigen sich mit den Leuten verständigen, ist schwer" (*Drucke zu Lebzeiten* 257).

But while pain may resist the communicability of language, as Scarry suggests, that doesn't mean that pain lacks a language of its own — only that its language remains, at times, devastatingly private. As Martin Heidegger claims in his essay on poetics, "das Geheimnis des Schmerzes bleibt verhüllt" (*Holzwege* 274), and perhaps the most salient example of this secret occurs when Gregor Samsa first speaks in "Die Verwandlung."

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<sup>79</sup> Although this depends on how we define pain. I use the term here to encompass both somatic and mental complaints, but if restricted solely to physical manifestations of pain, Kafka's interest in pain surges disproportionately after the diagnosis of his tuberculosis in September 1917. As Ulrich Fülleborn points out, this is also around the same time that Kafka developed his signature parabolic style (309).



Gregor erschrak, als er seine antwortende Stimme hörte, die wohl unverkennbar seine frühere war, in die sich aber, wie von unten her, ein nicht zu unterdrückendes, schmerzliches Piepsen mischte, das die Worte förmlich nur im ersten Augenblick in ihrer Deutlichkeit beließ, um sie im Nachklang derart zu zerstören, daß man nicht wußte, ob man recht gehört hatte.

*(Drucke zu Lebzeiten 119)*

Gregor's voice also undergoes a troubling metamorphosis as the initial clarity of his intended message gives way to this irrepressible "schmerzliches Piepsen." In many ways, these painful squeaks also reflect the encryptedness of pain itself, the protean quality it assumes when translated beyond the precincts of interior voice. But the question as to for whom this squeaking is painful — the speaker or the listener — remains undecidable in Kafka's text. Outside Gregor's room, just as outside his body, this voice speaks only as pure distortion, its meaning not so much lost as it is "destroyed" by the reverberations that follow. Indeed, whereas Laocoon's pain is muted by the artistic limits of sculpture for Lessing, Gregor's pain is amplified, and acoustically fractured, by Kafka's squeaking modernity — by a voice whose "Nachklang" still asks us, a century after this text was composed, whether or not we have heard it correctly.

With the parable "Prometheus" (1919) as my main example, this last chapter examines the relationship between suffering and the language that seeks to express it. Although "Prometheus" represents only a brief moment of Kafka's oeuvre, it draws together, in a highly condensed fashion, several themes explored throughout this study — most notably, the material relationship between text and temporality. Focusing primarily on the conceptualization of chronic pain in "Prometheus," which I understand not only in terms of a recurring physical pain, but also the pain of temporality in the text itself, I investigate how Prometheus's wound

conditions and redefines the nature of time in Kafka's parable. The result, I argue, is a shift from the atemporality of Prometheus's punishment, its endless repetition outside of time, to a diachronic model of historical and morphological change. Concluding my study both chronologically and substantively, "Prometheus" can be seen as marking a final gesture of woundedness in Kafka's work — a critical juncture in which the deterioration of mythological and parabolic tradition is suffered by the characters themselves.

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If pain exemplifies, among other things, the moment at which language struggles to represent somatic experience, then the parable, at least in Kafka's estimation of the genre, seems well suited to represent this struggle. In "Von den Gleichnissen" (1922), for example, Kafka's parable about parables, one speaker complains that "Gleichnisse" only inform us of the "incomprehensibility of the incomprehensible"— an impractical wisdom that has little bearing on the physical demands of everyday life. The first half of the parable reads:

Viele beklagen sich, daß die Worte der Weisen immer wieder nur Gleichnisse seien, aber unverwendbar im täglichen Leben, und nur dieses allein haben wir. Wenn der Weise sagt: "Gehe hinüber", so meint er nicht, daß man auf die andere Seite hinübergehen solle, was man immerhin noch leisten könnte, wenn das Ergebnis des Weges wert wäre, sondern er meint irgendein sagenhaftes Drüben, etwas, das wir nicht kennen, das auch von ihm nicht näher zu bezeichnen ist und das uns also hier gar nichts helfen kann. Alle diese Gleichnisse wollen eigentlich nur sagen, daß das Unfaßbare unfaßbar ist, und das haben wir gewußt. Aber das, womit wir uns jeden Tag abmühen, sind andere Dinge. (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 531-32)

Kafka not only ironizes his own parable with this self-reflexive text, but he also distinguishes between two kinds of parabolic writing that will guide our discussion beyond it. The first kind emerges in contrast to the rarified, inutile “Gleichnisse” of the sages. The implicit expectation here is that parables should retain some practical or instructive value — a literal meaning, and not some metaphorical “sagenhaftes Drüben.” Generally speaking, this conforms to what scholars have called traditional or hermeneutically “closed” parables.<sup>80</sup> Found throughout the *New Testament* and Greco-Roman antiquity, these succinct narratives typically convey a narrow, prescriptive message, one designed to help alleviate the difficulties of life (e.g. “das, womit wir uns jeden Tag abmühen”) or to impart some kind of religious significance. In other words they provide a methodology for living, concrete strategies for “das tägliche Leben.” The modern parable, on the other hand, embraces a more abstract approach. Retaining the brevity of its antecedents, but extolling a more open interpretive frame, these metaphorical texts allow for multiple, even conflicting meanings.<sup>81</sup> It is precisely this kind of parable that assails Kafka’s speaker. Abstraction, especially of the tautological variety, does little to allay or even explain the pain of daily struggle. Instead, these modern parables appear to only add an additional layer of difficulty to life: the dilemma of the message itself, the ambiguity of a wisdom that lacks any clear grounding or didactic purpose, and that resists all practical application in “daily life.”

Indeed, we could say the most immediate ambiguity in Kafka’s parable is that this distinction fails to adequately describe Kafka’s own syncretic style. Like much of his aphoristic writing in general, this parable contains both an element of instructive wisdom (i.e., parables

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<sup>80</sup> For more about the distinction between traditional and modern parables with regard to Kafka, see: Gray (*Constructive Destruction* 272-77).

<sup>81</sup> Richard M. Eastman has also called this type of parable the “open parable.” See: Eastman (15-18).

provide little succor to those struggling in the world) but it also peddles its own brand of “das Unfaßbare” that quickly turns against its readers, resisting their advance. This even begins to frustrate the parable’s own characters in the text’s last half as it collapses into itself:

Darauf sagte einer: “Warum wehrt ihr euch? Würdet ihr den Gleichnissen folgen, dann wäret ihr selbst Gleichnisse geworden und damit schon der täglichen Mühe frei.”

Ein anderer sagte: “Ich wette, daß auch das ein Gleichnis ist.”

Der erste sagte: “Du hast gewonnen.”

Der zweite sagte: “Aber leider nur im Gleichnis.”

Der erste sagte: “Nein, in Wirklichkeit; im Gleichnis hast du verloren.”

*(Nachgelassene Schriften II 532)*

Although “Von den Gleichnissen” does not directly engage the topic of pain, it does register the painful gap that arises between language and reality, an uncertainty from which traditional “Gleichnisse” once delivered us. As its etymology suggests, Kafka’s parable “compares” these two conflicting, possibly incommensurable domains, and stages that comparison as an absurd debate.<sup>82</sup> To win in reality but lose “im Gleichnis,” we might speculate, is to eschew the inherent plurality of “Gleichnisse,” to establish, despite all other possibilities, an unequivocal correspondence between text and meaning. The term “Gleichnis” itself already poses a challenge to this sort of interpretive “winning,” since it can signify not only “parable” in German, but a whole range of relational terms, such as “metaphor,” “simile,” “likeness,” and “equivalent.” But

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<sup>82</sup> The Greek word *parabolē*, from which parable derives, means “to compare” or to literally “set beside one another.”

then again, the obverse also appears to be a valid supposition: that is, to lose “im Gleichnis” is to understand, maybe even embrace, the hermeneutic disorientation of Kafka’s parable, the gamble of assigning values in such an open, potentially “unfassbar” environment. Perhaps such a loss refers to the loss of reference itself, to the impoverishment of “gleich” in a world of incessant change and transformation. Elaine Scarry’s somewhat unwieldy term “unsharability” seems appropriately awkward in this context, where a loss “im Gleichnis” could also signal a loss “von Gleichnis” — the failure of language to efficaciously communicate pain, to provide some kind of verbal “equivalent.” After all, the tension between reality and parable emerges here in the form of a parable itself, and the stakes of winning and losing are themselves “Gleichnisse” in the metaphorical sense. For this reason, Kafka’s “Gleichnis” swerves inevitably toward the modern understanding of parables, a turn that flusters its denizens in the end as they become parables of their own — parables spawned by Kafka’s parable.

In spite of its own difficulties, however, we could say that “Von den Gleichnissen” grants us metaphorical entry to Kafka’s parables just as the gatekeeper provides access to the law: which is to say, it gives us access at the very moment it turns us away, but in doing so provides us with a moment of heuristic insight. Whether the speaker loses in parable or in the world parables fail to address, that loss is undoubtedly a productive one, generating its own form of interpretive debate that only enriches our reading rather than foreclosing or restricting it. As such, Kafka’s “Prometheus” provides us with a similar example of what we could call losing in parables, only its loss, as we shall discover, corresponds to a more painful and irreparable dissolution of certainty.

Von Prometheus berichten vier Sagen:

Nach der ersten wurde er, weil er die Götter an die Menschen verraten hatte, am Kaukasus festgeschmiedet, und die Götter schickten Adler, die von seiner immer wachsenden Leber fraßen.

Nach der zweiten drückte sich Prometheus im Schmerz vor den zuhackenden Schnäbeln immer tiefer in den Felsen, bis er mit ihm eins wurde.

Nach der dritten wurde in den Jahrtausenden sein Verrat vergessen, die Götter vergaßen, die Adler, er selbst.

Nach der vierten wurde man des grundlos Gewordenen müde. Die Götter wurden müde, die Adler wurden müde, die Wunde schloß sich müde.

Blieb das unerklärliche Felsgebirge. – Die Sage versucht das Unerklärliche zu erklären. Da sie aus einem Wahrheitsgrund kommt, muß sie wieder im Unerklärlichen enden.

*(Hochzeitsvorbereitungen 100)*

At first glance, we may be tempted to dwell on how “Prometheus” ends with the verb “enden,” but as the “G” notebook of Kafka's *Octavhefte* reveals, the original manuscript of this otherwise untitled text begins with its final passage—i.e., the last two sentences concerning “die Sage” (*Nachgelassene Schriften II* 69-70). Edited posthumously by Max Brod, “Prometheus” appears in most published editions of Kafka's texts in moderately revised form, which is particularly fitting for a parable about multiple retellings of the same myth. To his discredit perhaps, Brod not only changes the order in which we read Kafka's text, but he also alters its logic of progression by moving from the particular to the general. Kafka's version, however, is deductive:

it proceeds from a more generalized “Wahrheitsgrund” concerning “die Sage” (which could mean either a single “legend” or refer more abstractly to “legends” in general) to an increasingly groundless state of loss and alienation. The splitting of a unitary myth into four different legends reinforces this departure from the truth; it fractures what had once been whole. As the recent *Franz Kafka Encyclopedia* (2005) summarizes it, Kafka’s original conceptualization of the text “focuses on one of the traditional functions of myth: on its explanatory or etiological status, in particular its role in explicating the origin of natural phenomena” (230). In its commonly published form, we are compelled to read “die Sage” conclusively, as drawing evidence from these four legends to explain their paradoxical engagement with the inexplicable. But like the rock that remains at the end, “Prometheus” and its textual variants (both within and without) linger without any satisfying set of instructions; and any discussion concerning the structure of the parable must not only acknowledge this embroilment of revision, but also re-examine the nature of its own explanatory method.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the variability of its framing, however, “Prometheus” and its interior retellings remain intact — that is, insofar as they can be considered distinct retellings. Kafka begins with what could be considered the standard Greek myth of Prometheus, condensing in one sentence

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<sup>83</sup> Although there are few scholarly texts that focus exclusively on “Prometheus,” the majority often adhere to Brod’s version without mentioning the original status of Kafka’s text. This is understandable given the somewhat recent publication of Kafka’s *Nachlass*. But it is still problematic for our purposes here when the finality of “enden” in the last sentence substantiates certain eschatological claims. Consider, for example, Hans Blumenberg’s discussion of the end of myth in *Arbeit am Mythos* (686) and Roman Karst’s essay “Kafkas Prometheussage oder das Ende des Mythos” (44), which curiously fails to mention Blumenberg’s contribution.

what, for the Germanic tradition at least, has been a recurring narrative of theological defiance.<sup>84</sup> After stealing the fire of Zeus and empowering mankind with its secrets, the titan Prometheus finds himself chained to a rock for eternity. The severity of his transgression is reflected in the specificity of his punishment: every day, an eagle feasts upon his liver, severely wounding and torturing Prometheus, only to have his liver regenerate so that the pain may continue indefinitely. Although this summary is — like all mythological narratives — a conflation of various ancient sources, the Prometheus myth can also be seen as originating from four distinct accounts in Greek antiquity: namely, Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Homer’s *Iliad*, Pindar’s *Nemean Odes*, and Pythagoras’s *On the Cosmos*.<sup>85</sup> Abjuring all literary reference, however, Kafka’s first legend reduces these epics and hymns to their most essential features, diverging, crucially, in at least one regard: he exaggerates the number of gods and eagles:

Nach der ersten wurde er, weil er die Götter an die Menschen verraten hatte, am Kaukasus festgeschmiedet, und die Götter schickten Adler, die von seiner immer wachsenden Leber fraßen.

By all other accounts, both in the literary and visual representations of the myth, Zeus alone dispatches an eagle (his symbolic avatar) to devour Prometheus’s liver. But in Kafka’s reinterpretation, its enforcers of pain seem as numerous as its versions: the wrathful Zeus, for instance, is displaced and anonymized by “die Götter,” and the eagle, an incarnation of Zeus’s sovereignty, proliferates into the unknowable figure of “die Adler.” Moreover, Kafka classifies Prometheus’s crime simply as a betrayal, excluding any mention of how or why he betrayed the gods. This generalization shifts the moral center of Prometheus’s theft: rather than facilitate the

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<sup>84</sup> For a more general analysis of this tradition, see: Beller (1-13).

<sup>85</sup> See: Dougherty (3-21).



progress of human civilization and culture with the gift of fire, a selfless act that secures his position as a hero in many accounts, Kafka's Prometheus is defined only by his insubordination. While not severe enough to fully obscure the original myth, these adjustments do seem to intensify the severity of its original punishment: the inflation of eagles and gods exposes Prometheus to more aggressors, for instance, while the ambiguity of his betrayal conceals the true nature of his sacrifice, denying him any recognition or redemption for his suffering. As I will demonstrate below, these changes already point to a more general theme of replication and revision in Kafka's parable, a theme reminiscent of the very punishment it describes.

These discrepancies notwithstanding, however, "Prometheus" is still, like its namesake, bound to a fixed point of mythological reference — a "Wahrheitsgrund" that lays the thematic foundation for its subsequent versions. But as Karlheinz Stierle points out, the legends that follow are less competing historical accounts of the original myth than its continuation in time: "Der Mythos, dessen Konfiguration außer der Zeit liegt, wird hier in die Zeit hineingezogen, der Wirkung der Zeit ausgesetzt" (465). The word "Mythos" never appears in Kafka's parable — only the more generic term "Sage," whose English cognate, "Saga," already alerts us to the episodic interrelatedness of these four legends. Not only do various superficial elements carry over from the first legend into this literal "*sagen*-haftes Drüben," but these other legends also presuppose a body of knowledge that they generate. In the second legend, for example, Kafka's language becomes more reductive and dependent on the first legend for its orientation:

Nach der zweiten drückte sich Prometheus im Schmerz vor den zuhackenden  
Schnäbeln immer tiefer in den Felsen, bis er mit ihm eins wurde.

The logic of substitution here already signals a progression from the original myth: the eagles are metonymized by the "zuhackende Schnäbel;" the Caucasus replaced by "Felsen." As Kafka's

parable moves forward in time, it also acquires a more pronounced vocabulary of duration. The gerund “zuhackend,” for instance, emphasizes the relentless, on-going violence of the eagles, which causes Prometheus to press himself “*immer tiefer*” into the rock “*bis er mit ihm eins wurde*” (emphases mine). The relationship between these actions is one of persistence and gradual transition; they do not happen instantly, but rather over a sustained period of time. Like the “*immer wachsende Leber*” in the first legend, we get a sense of the continuousness of Prometheus’s pain in the second legend, but we also learn of a sudden mutability within the myth itself. In other words, the eternal permanence of the punishment is subtly compromised once Prometheus undergoes a different set of changes — that is, once he and the original myth gradually become something else altogether.

Metaphorically speaking, this gesture of “Einswerden” is especially significant with regard to the spongy chronology of “Prometheus.” Becoming one with the rock, in this sense, anticipates the dissolution of other boundaries in the text, the inherent woundedness of its versions, its artifice of individuation; in a way, it performs a “*Gleichnis*” or “likening” of its discreet elements. The timeless quality that Stierle associates with myth is thus irreparably altered with the impermanence and mutability of “*bis*.” As a result, time sluices through these legends, drawing them together in parabolic form, but also exposing them to its transformative, destructive current. Unlike the four original sources of the Prometheus myth, for example, whose accounts were historically distinct though thematically interchangeable, the figures of “Prometheus” begin to change along with its four versions.<sup>86</sup> They may succeed each other and

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<sup>86</sup> Hans Blumenberg also reiterates this point: “Wenn Kafka beginnt, von berichteten vier Sagen, so sind diese nicht beliebig auswechselbar, sondern eine den Prozeß zum Ende hin formal darstellende Sequenz. Die Auslegungen stehen nicht nebeneinander, sondern überbieten einander” (686).

depend on each other for meaning, but instead of forming some kind of synthesis, as in the process by which the classical Prometheus myth was generated, they enact a sense of temporal disaggregation and upheaval. Accordingly, Kafka's four versions of "Prometheus" are not really versions at all, but closer to mutations or fusions in their own right.<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, the moment "Prometheus" begins to stray from the original myth — once the threshold between the first and second legend has been crossed — only then are we explicitly aware of the pain felt by Prometheus. As if this transition also cultivated a sense of intimacy with Kafka's victim, we are offered a brief glimpse of his interior state, of the suffering he continues to endure. Prometheus's pain thus emerges in the midst of two opposite, though equally rending forces: a movement away from the first legend, a divergence that is both chronological and textual, but also a movement inward, which Kafka reinforces thematically with the eagles' penetrating beaks and Prometheus's convergence with the rock. Surprisingly enough, Martin Heidegger comes closest to theorizing this ripping, wound-like tension in the second legend, despite the fact that the pain he describes originates from another text altogether.

Doch was ist Schmerz? Der Schmerz reißt. Er ist der Riß. Allein zerreißt nicht in auseinanderfahrende Splitter. Der Schmerz reißt zwar auseinander, er scheidet, jedoch so, daß er zugleich alles auf sich zieht, in sich versammelt. Sein Reißen ist als das versammelnde Scheiden zugleich jenes Ziehen [...] Der Schmerz ist die Frage des Risses. Sie ist die Schwelle. (*Unterwegs* 27)

This gesture of rending and drawing together, as I've argued in previous chapters, remains a paradigmatic feature of Kafka's wound, and one exemplified on several levels by Prometheus's pain. Despite the original source of Heidegger's analysis — which arguably pursues its own

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<sup>87</sup> I will return to his point below.

literacy of the wound, however an undoubtedly different one from Kafka's and one well beyond the scope of this study — this notion of pain articulates a similar paradox of diverging and converging forces.<sup>88</sup> Pain rends for Heidegger, but it also gathers; it divides, but it also opens up a space of possibility between, an ontological threshold he enigmatically calls "Welt."<sup>89</sup> The same could be said of "Prometheus," only on a strictly materialistic level: that is, where the rending of Prometheus's body, a site of physical rupture and restoration, is registered textually by Kafka's deconstruction and revision of the original myth. The opposition between "zuhacken" and "einswerden" in the second legend could just as easily characterize the text as a (w)hole in this regard — an inherently dialectical text that seems to absorb the very methodology of Prometheus's punishment, its mechanism of tearing-apart (the dismantling of the myth into four accounts) and pulling-together (the chronological cohesion of these accounts, their temporal aggregation). In other words, Kafka disassembles the myth only to reassemble its pieces again as

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<sup>88</sup> For readers of Georg Trakl, this may recall the crucial moment of "Ein Winterabend" when the wanderer's passage indoors corresponds with a petrifying pain: "Wanderer tritt still herein; / Schmerz versteinerte die Schwelle." (Trakl 164). Written around the same time as Kafka's parable, Trakl's poem may have little in common with "Prometheus" on the surface, but its depiction of pain leaves us with a similar metaphorical constellation: namely, the quiet movement inside, the ossifying, transformative impact of suffering. It must be said, however, that Heidegger's reading of the poem can only take us so far before we must account for its own concerns. Having openly disparaged the fields of literary criticism and philosophical aesthetics, Heidegger's true agenda in "Die Sprache" (the lecture in which he first examines this poem) is to advance his own ontology of language. Currently, there is no textual evidence that Heidegger read Kafka. But it is also possible that Kafka's influence here is tertiary, since Trakl would have been aware of, and most likely influenced by Kafka's writing. Whether or not that is true is a matter of hermeneutic speculation.

a parable — a parable that gathers itself at the threshold of several metaphorical oppositions: between consumption / regeneration, dissolution / insolubility, and extinction / historical continuity.

After all, as Heidegger points out elsewhere, the act of gathering is inherently linked to the labor of reading, and Kafka's text not only gathers these four legends together, but it also models a way of reading them as well — a reading that, we could say, simultaneously renders and rends whatever explanation we give it.<sup>90</sup> But with this inexplicable rock lingering in the distance, what does it really mean for Prometheus to become one with the stone? — specifically, with something that seems to inexplicably outlast him in the end? Moreover, if these legends are chronologically interrelated, and if we are to take this transformation literally, indeed concretely, it would seem that at least two possibilities exist: either Prometheus divests himself of a body when merging with the rock in the second legend; or his body assumes the hardened, desensitized aspect of a rock, protecting him from the eagles' assault. Hans Blumenberg, for instance, views this rocky transformation as an attempt to escape a pain that Prometheus, technically still an immortal, has never had to feel before: "Die letzte Unbetroffenheit, die nicht mehr durch die Unsterblichkeit eines Gottes gesichert erscheint, besteht noch darin, mit dem Gestein zu verschmelzen, das von keinem Schmerz berührt werden kann, das wieder die reine Empfindungslosigkeit der Natur ist" (687). Pain cannot exist without a sensate body, and this recourse to inorganic nature, to a rock that withstands suffering precisely because it does not feel it, underscores Prometheus's own bodily "Empfindlichkeit." But as Blumenberg also seems to suggest, Prometheus not only suffers from physical pain here, but from a shifting paradigm as

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<sup>90</sup> For Heidegger's etymological analysis of "legein," from which the Greek "logos" and the German "legen" and "lesen" are derived, see the essay "Was heißt Denken?"

well: a transition from a time when his immortality ensured a level of “Unbetroffenheit,” even if from an eternity of torture, to a time when it no longer ensures anything. The rock, in this sense, characterizes two merging temporalities in “Prometheus.” On the one hand, as an immovable feature that not only restrains Prometheus physically, but also secures the perpetuity of his punishment, the rock embodies the unchanging, inescapable mandate of the gods. That is, it concretizes the ahistoricity of the original myth, its punitive suspension of chronological time. On the other hand, Kafka’s permeable rock disrupts the rigidity of this pattern by introducing the concept of metamorphic change and variation into the mix. The immutability of mythological time thus gives way to a fungible and transformative chronology in this legend, an evolution of form exemplified by the shifting properties of this rock. Prometheus feels pain not because he suddenly lost his immortality, but because he suddenly feels the passage of time coursing through Kafka’s text, its unruly translation of an ageless myth into a temporalized “Sage.” Consequently, we could also say that the temporal durability of mythological timelessness in the original legend mutates into the concrete durability of the rock, translating in effect the immateriality of time into a physical object. To modify Blumenberg’s terminology, then, maybe it is not only the “Empfindungslosigkeit der Natur” that Prometheus finds in this rock, but also a trace of “Zeitlosigkeit” that has since vanished from his original story — a relic not of the past, but of pastlessness itself.

While this fails to adequately explain Prometheus’s presence in subsequent legends, I would argue that it is precisely this incongruity that characterizes the nature of his wound — a chronically (and chronologically) inexplicable feature that gets absorbed by the text on several levels. Like the perpetual renewal of Prometheus’s injury, Kafka’s legends also demonstrate conflicting temporal characteristics: they are continuous in some regards, but discontinuous in

others; interminable in the beginning, but terminal in the end. This paradox of duration and change, however, is only a problem if we subject the parable to the same expectations of explicability we have in reality, and not the inexplicabilities Kafka cultivates “im Gleichnis.” Here I’m responding mainly to Roman Karst, who argues that Prometheus’s fusion with the rock precludes his continued presence in the last two legends. He writes: “Hier beginnt die Geschichte auf neue, und man kann von einer Progression kaum sprechen. Das Schema eines allmählich abbröckelnden Mythos paßt nicht zu Kafkas *Prometheus*. Das oberste Gesetz dieser Parabel scheint nicht das Reduktions- sondern das Destruktionsprinzip zu sein” (43). Although Karst rightly attributes a destructive nature to these legends, he fails to understand that destructiveness is itself a form of progression in Kafka’s parable; that its governing principle is not obliteration at all, but a kind of morphological change applied to the life of a text just as it would be relevant to the phylogenetic development of a species. My intervention is simply this: that the unfolding chronology in Kafka’s parable, its paradoxical continuity in discontinuity, is itself symptomatic of Prometheus’s constantly-changing wound. Similar to Heraclitus’s river or the ship of Theseus in this regard, Prometheus’s body is torn between the constancy of his punishment and the inconstancy of his wound; it changes but also remains the same by virtue of that incessant change. We know that Kafka was invested in this metaphysical paradox when, just days after composing “Prometheus,” he recast it in terms of a more personal grievance: “Die Klage: Wenn ich ewig sein werde, wie werde ich morgen sein?” (*Nachgeleassene Schriften II* 71). What Goethe once called “Dauer im Wechsel” (*Gedichte* 136), Kafka reformulates here as a lingering question, one attuned to the mutable eternity of “Prometheus,” its revisitation and revision of tradition.<sup>91</sup> And although Kafka never answers this question, neither for himself nor for

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<sup>91</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of this gesture in Kafka’s writing, see Rolf Goebel’s *Kritik Und Revision:*

Prometheus, the lack of an answer also seems to be the point. The undecidable status of Prometheus's body is simply a consequence of a more general paradoxicality registered by the parable itself, its gradual erosion of logical explanations, as the story advances chronologically but evolves thematically and metaphorically. For all its change and mutations, it is Kafka's "Sage" of Prometheus that remains constant in the end — an inexplicable constancy that seems just as combustible and renewable as the fire he first stole.

This recession of explicability also returns us to where we began — to the metaphor of losing in parables. In "Von den Gleichnissen" the internal friction between traditional and modern parables sparks a debate within the parable itself, one centered on the inability to reconcile figurative meaning with the concreteness of reality. Similarly, in "Prometheus" the transition between the original myth and Kafka's legends corresponds with the strange, dissolvent properties of the rock itself, its loss of solidity and definition. Indeed, to "merge" the language of both parables, this departure from myth in "Prometheus" is quite literally a plunge into some "*sagen*-haftes Drüben," whereby a rock becomes doubly "unfassbar" in terms of its tactility and comprehensibility. Whatever meaning Prometheus's original myth secured for antiquity, whatever message his eternal punishment imparted for the likes of Goethe and Shelly (among many others), these semiotic bonds are gradually dissolved by Kafka. This does not just disorient the modern reader of "Prometheus," however, but affects the parable's characters as well. In the third legend, for example, a wholesale forgetfulness washes over its participants, obscuring the original meaning and purpose of Prometheus's eternal punishment. It is at this point that we begin to see the explicit consequences of Kafka's temporalized reinterpretation.

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*Kafkas Rezeption Mythologischer, Biblischer Und Historischer Traditionen*. Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1986.



Nach der dritten wurde in den Jahrtausenden sein Verrat vergessen, die Götter vergaßen, die Adler, er selbst.

The passive voice here reinforces an inert shift in power relations. Everyone in “Prometheus,” not just the accused, is now subject to the same fate — a memory loss that not only dissolves the hierarchical conflict between them, but also the symbolic link between betrayal and punishment, relieving both of significance and context.<sup>92</sup> Knowledge has been ferried away twice at this point in the parable: first with Prometheus’s stolen secret, the fire with which man could forge a new path — a fire that Kafka never even mentions; and then second, by forgetting this secret had ever been stolen to begin with, a redaction of the original transgression. More importantly, however, at this juncture Prometheus’s betrayal of the gods begins to parallel Kafka’s own willful betrayal of mythological tradition, where the moral treachery of stealing the gods’ fire translates into a kind of textual deviance on Kafka’s part. As Manfred Beller helpfully observes, the time in which Kafka wrote “Prometheus” was marked by a recurring interest in such doubly unorthodox betrayals: “Kafka’s *Prometheus* is surrounded by no less than ten expositions of the biblical account of the Fall and the expulsion from paradise [...] As with the Prometheus myth, Kafka preserves a historical distance with respect to the biblical myth” (6). Such a preservation of distance, which allows Kafka the imaginative space to reinterpret and deviate from traditional

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<sup>92</sup> Roman Karst also indicates that, while the first and second legends clearly depict Prometheus as a victim, the last two elaborate an opposite, though symmetrical victimization: “Die Unterschiede, welche die vier Fassungen voneinander trennen, folgen einer gewissen Symmetrie. In den zwei anfänglichen Varianten steht der leidende Prometheus allein [...] Diese Konstellation ändert sich in den zwei letzten Sagen – alle sind hier auf einer Seite. Sowohl die Götter wie Prometheus vom Überdruß überwältigt” (43).

texts, characterizes many of his mythological parables. This includes especially “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” (1917), which posits an alternative, less heroic version of Odysseus’s encounter with the sirens in book twelve of *The Odyssey*. In the case of “Prometheus,” however, Kafka’s deviation from the original myth also corresponds thematically with the tale of insubordination it repurposes. In other words, we could say that Kafka stages at least two betrayals in “Prometheus”: the theft for which Prometheus is originally punished, and then this wayward, disobedient revision — a text wherein the traditional function of myth, its etiological power to make sense of the world, is systematically changed by a force that renders all things inexplicable. In “Von den Gleichnissen” this force is none other than the modern parable itself, marshaling in a metaphorical wisdom that proffers confusion and loss, in effect displacing the “closed parable” with this open (and openly transgressive) version. In “Prometheus,” however, this force could be expressed simply as historical time: a persistent, but always-changing violence whose power exceeds even that of the gods, uprooting all in the end but an inexplicable, ungraspable rock.

Of course, Kafka wasn’t alone in associating the story of Prometheus with the collapse of traditional orders. As a recurring figure throughout Friedrich Nietzsche’s work, Prometheus exemplified this defiant spirit of redefinition — a courageous individual whose suffering taught mankind to challenge, and even destroy, the established hierarchies represented by Mount Olympus.<sup>93</sup> Although Kafka almost certainly read Nietzsche’s published writing on Prometheus, much of which occurs in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872), it is a collection of preparatory notes

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<sup>93</sup> For example, in the ninth section of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Nietzsche claims “der titanische Künstler fand in sich den trotzigsten Glauben, Menschen schaffen und olympische Götter wenigstens vernichten zu können: und dies durch seine höhere Weisheit, die er freilich durch ewiges Leiden zu büßen gezwungen war” (KSA 1, 68).

from 1874 (unpublished during Kafka's lifetime) that bears the most striking resemblance to Kafka's third legend:

Prometheus und sein Geier sind *vergessen* worden, als man die alte Welt der Olympier und ihre Macht vernichtete [...] Er hat Zeus das Geheimniss nicht verrathen, Zeus ist an seinem Sohne zu Grunde gegangen [...] Prometheus hat den Menschen den Blick auf den Tod entzogen, jeder hält sich für ein unsterbliches Individuum und lebt thatsächlich anders, als ein Glied der Kette. (KSA 7, 38)

Nietzsche's use of "Geier" instead of "Adler," a variation that Kafka would also adopt in a parable of the same name, is significant.<sup>94</sup> Throughout his earlier work, for example, Nietzsche

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<sup>94</sup> Written approximately one year after "Prometheus," "Der Geier" (1920) is even more defamiliarized from the original Promethean myth: a vulture had been hacking at the protagonist's feet, causing him significant pain and alarm. When a passerby asks him why he chooses to endure such a punishment, he explains that he tried in vain to strangle it and drive it away, however was ultimately defenseless against the animal's strength, managing only to redirect its attack from his face to the more preferable "sacrifice" of his feet. Eager to help, the spectator offers to retrieve his gun from home and shoot the vulture; but having understood this conversation, the vulture suddenly takes wing and thrusts its beak through the speaker's mouth, drowning in his blood as a result. While scholars have typically viewed the parable as a variation on the Prometheus theme, Kafka's deteriorating health in 1920 has prompted most to also read the text biographically. There is ample evidence to support these claims, of course, and many of them prove inescapable considering the allusions to tuberculosis we find in "Der Geier"—associations noticeably absent in "Prometheus." For this reason, though, the limited scholarship that exists on the parable has conformed mainly to two restrictive, though sometimes intermingling approaches: either the text becomes a meditation on Kafka's illness, much in the same way "Josephine" inevitably does; or it reflects a more pervasive anti-Semitic sentiment spreading throughout Europe at the time—a political environment to which Kafka had grown increasingly

would consistently alter the iconography of the myth to reinforce, among other things, the irrevocable decline of ancient worldviews — an “Umwertung” for which Zeus and his eagle serve as exemplary targets.<sup>95</sup> The vulture is already a symptom of the old world’s obliteration in that it displaces a familiar symbol of power with a creature of scavenging and decay. As the pronoun “man” also makes clear, the act of forgetting stems from a purposive destruction of Olympus and its influence. For this reason, Prometheus becomes the harbinger of what Nietzsche later called the “Götzen-Dämmerung;” he was a hammer with which new values could be repeatedly shaped and shattered — not by false idols, such as Zeus or the Judeo-Christian god, but by men armed with knowledge that made them gods in their own right.<sup>96</sup> Written around the time of *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, these notes on Prometheus already point to the centrality of the Will in Nietzsche’s thought; they espouse an individualism that, tempered by Prometheus’s unruly fire, seeks to liberate humankind from the thrall of otherworldly principles, such as morality or the promise of an afterlife. Interestingly, like Kafka, Nietzsche also expresses this iconoclasm through the logic of evolutionary development. Because of Prometheus’s sacrifice, we live as links in a different kind of chain — that is, as individuals whose immortality resides in the interconnectedness of our species through time, and not due to some punitive contrivance of the gods. Even the vulture realizes this to some degree. As Nietzsche claims in the

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sensitive. See especially: Gilman (*Jewish Patient* 206).

<sup>95</sup> Although, as Martin A. Ruehl suggests, Nietzsche’s use of “Geier” was also a thinly veiled reference to Richard Wagner: “The vulture, however, was a prominent symbol of the family coat of arms of Wagner, who liked to see himself as the son of his more artistically inclined stepfather, the theater actor Ludwig Geyer” (80).

<sup>96</sup> Although this is evident throughout Nietzsche’s later work, see especially *Götzen-Dämmerung, oder, Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert* (1889).

same fragment: “Der Geier will nicht mehr fressen. Prometheus’ Leber wächst zu sehr” (KSA 7, 38). Prometheus’s liver grows too fast to consume; it adapts and evolves outside the parameters of the original punishment. Echoing the weariness of Kafka’s fourth legend in this regard, Nietzsche’s dispirited vulture grows tired just as the wound grows whole again, just as history begins to move inexorably beyond its control.

Read against Nietzsche’s notes, Kafka’s “Prometheus” strikes a less triumphant tone, but it still sets in relief the transformative power of suffering for both writers and their implicit reliance on morphological principles. The thematic correlation between pain and evolutionary development in this sense could be characterized more conceptually as a kind of “growing pain,” something that effects an intellectual or discursive development through time. While all pain is formative for Nietzsche, especially his own, its broader consequences in his philosophy are almost always historical. In *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), for example, Nietzsche differentiates men from their animal past by their capacity to inflict brutal punishments — an evolutionary savagery that lays the foundation for memory and historical consciousness: “Es gieng niemals ohne Blut, Martern, Opfer ab, wenn der Mensch es nöthig hielt, sich ein Gedächtniss zu machen [...] alles Das hat in jenem Instinkte seinen Ursprung, welcher im Schmerz das mächtigste Hülfsmittel der Mnemonik errieth” (KSA 5, 295). Pain imprints itself on human history — to a certain extent, it *is* history for Nietzsche. Without the mnemotechnical function of suffering, religious and juridical institutions would never take hold in society; they would never instill the fear of forgetting how to act “morally” or how to live “properly.” The eagles and vultures clearly assume this mnemonic role by endlessly torturing Prometheus, a repetition of pain that reinforces the permanence of his transgression. For this reason, too, Nietzsche privileges above all the act of forgetting in his *Genealogie*, which he defines as “ein

actives, im strengsten Sinne positives Hemmungsvermögen” (KSA 5, 291). Unlike Freud’s concept of “Verdrängung” in this regard, Nietzsche’s forgetting is a productive, self-actualizing strategy of the Will: we actively forget the past in order to live autonomously in the present — because without forgetting, without the means to suppress the pain inflicted by our forbearers, we can never advance intellectually or ethically as a species.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, as a text that concerns itself with the nature of punishment and guilt, Nietzsche’s *Genealogie* proves to be a keystone not only for understanding the evolutionary value of Prometheus’s punishment, but more importantly, the significance of forgetting it as well. The figures of Kafka’s “Prometheus” could only evolve once the draconian pattern of the original myth had been disrupted and forgotten, both occurring as a result of time. Forgetting in this context must be seen as a positive development. For Nietzsche, it allows humanity to destroy “die alte Welt der Olympier und ihre Macht;” it represents a philosophical imperative for self-reinvention. For Kafka, however, forgetting is symptomatic of a more general temporalization in the text itself, an equally destructive force enacted more by history than by individuals — a force subject to the same inexplicability it gradually inflicts.

Approximately one year before composing “Prometheus,” a time in which he continued to struggle with the early symptoms of tuberculosis, Kafka explored, and tried to explain, a similar idea of evolutionary growth through pain. Although his literary output diminished considerably around this time, the aphorisms and diary entries that materialized between 1918

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<sup>97</sup> It is difficult not to be reminded, in this context, of Rotpeter’s own evolution in “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie.” The crucial difference here is that, in “Bericht,” Kafka expresses this morphological transformation as an event that has already occurred in the (narrated) past, but in “Prometheus,” this evolution unfolds with the narrative itself.

and 1919 are deeply engaged with the philosophical ramifications of suffering and morality. One aphorism in particular — “102” of the so-called Zürau aphorisms — clearly resonates with this formative understanding of pain:

Alle Leiden um uns müssen auch wir leiden. Wir alle haben nicht einen Leib, aber ein Wachstum, und das führt uns durch alle Schmerzen, ob in dieser oder jener Form. So wie das Kind durch alle Lebensstadien bis zum Greis und zum Tod sich entwickelt (und jedes Stadium im Grunde dem früheren, im Verlangen oder in Furcht, unerreichbar scheint) ebenso entwickeln wir uns (nicht weniger tief mit der Menschheit verbunden als mit uns selbst) durch alle Leiden dieser Welt. Für Gerechtigkeit ist in diesem Zusammenhang kein Platz, aber auch nicht für Furcht vor den Leiden oder für die Auslegung des Leidens als eines Verdienstes.

*(Nachgelassene Schriften II 93-94)*

Although we do not share one bodily form, we do share a process of growth through which suffering assumes various forms of its own — both in us and around us. Not unlike Ernst Haeckel’s recapitulation theory in this regard, an individual’s pain reflects the history of suffering experienced by all of humanity. Private pain becomes a cipher for a more collective, worldly pain — suffering that cannot be reduced to the egotism of personal despair or self-preservation, but serves as a defining principle of human development in general. While it is difficult to disentangle this aphorism from the circumstances of illness that surround it, the echo of Schopenhauer’s pessimism here — more so than Nietzsche’s — shifts the locus of Kafka’s own suffering from a personal “Wachstum” to a universal one. A similar widening of scope occurs in Kafka’s “Prometheus” as well. On a figurative level, we find the “Betroffenheit” of Prometheus’s punishment progressively diffused and redistributed through these four legends; it

begins as an endless procedure affecting only one individual in the first legend and eventually becomes an exhausting process that affects everyone in the final legend. On a material level, however, we find a parallel transformation in the epistemology of Kafka's parable: it proceeds from a "Wahrheitsgrund" of myth, a metaphysical groundedness ensured by its eternal invariability, to the inexplicable mass of a rock that could also be described as a kind of "Wahrheitsabgrund" — a parabolic abyss into which all explanations plunge.

Despite this abyss, however, the suffering endured by Prometheus can be seen as productive insofar as it promotes a level of discursive growth in the text itself. By pushing deeper into the rock and immersing himself in chronological time, Prometheus also transforms his myth into a series of legends — legends that also merge and mutate (like his rock, but also like his wound) to assume the unruly form of a modern parable. We find this notion of transformation and becoming reinforced syntactically by the prevalence of "werden" in the text — a verb that appears six times (seven when counting "Gewordenen"), making it the most frequently used word in "Prometheus." To this end, Prometheus's rock not only embodies the discursive morphology of Kafka's text, but also a heterogeneity that characterizes much of his mythological writing in general. We detect it, for instance, in Poseidon's bureaucratic frustrations, in the alarming silence of the Sirens, and the aimlessness of Gracchus; the transition into modernity, at least for these superannuated figures, expresses itself through a variety of maladies and inconveniences, such as boredom, misunderstanding, and perhaps most of all, pain. With "Prometheus" in particular, Kafka reinforces this pain by adapting the very mechanism of Prometheus's bodily punishment — its reliance on continuous growth and reproducibility — and channeling it through the body of the text itself. Following this logic, it would make sense then that the parable engages in a kind of mythological inflation: the gods and eagles are pluralized,



one story of betrayal becomes four interconnected legends, and finally, one meaning (in the didactic, etiological sense) becomes many. These statistical differences not only add insult to Prometheus's injury, I would argue, but they also underscore a metamorphic quality attributed to Prometheus's pain that never before existed: a suffering whose immeasurable eternity suddenly becomes terminal, but whose terminality also gives birth to a unique literary transformation: a myth that evolves into a myth "im Gleichnis" — a demythologized, punishingly "unfassbar" myth. Therefore, to speak metaphorically, we could say that Prometheus stole the fire of the gods only for Kafka to steal it back with his parable — a fire he uses not to spur humankind into action (as Nietzsche had tried), but to burn down the foundations of the myth itself, to expose what lies beneath and beyond.

And yet, as Kafka's fourth and final legend demonstrates, below this rubble we find not a "Wahrheitsgrund," but a wound that has been there all along.

Nach der vierten wurde man des grundlos Gewordenen müde. Die Götter wurden müde, die Adler wurden müde, die Wunde schloß sich müde.

Lacking the mythological "grounding" of the first legend, the "Wahrheitsgrund" that traditional parables once provided, Kafka's last legend becomes both "grundlos" and irrevocably modern. Its actors no longer remember their roles in this tiresome theater; like some grotesque red curtain, the wound draws to a close their tedious performance — a routine now divested of meaning and audience, sapped of energy and relevance. Once again, Kafka uses repetition to emphasize the pain of this arrangement. It surfaces in the rhythmic stress of "wurde," "wurden," and "Wunde," for example; the alliterative disdain of "grundlos Gewordenen," and lastly, the lulling *conduplicatio* of "müde." With an almost nursery-rhyme cadence, these figures of repetition wear down the legend just like time wore down Kafka's characters in the end, reinforcing a

boredom that — true to its proto-Germanic origins — becomes inseparable from the relentless “boring” of beaks into Prometheus’s flesh.<sup>98</sup> It is both unsurprising, then, and humorously appropriate that a chronic wound should also become a boring wound for the figures of “Prometheus” — figures who, pained by the duration and redundancy of Kafka’s parable, include even the wound itself. A year before composing his parable, around the same time he contemplated the evolutionary value of suffering with his aphorism, Kafka acknowledged that true pain results from such transformative effects of time and repetition: “Es ist das Alter der Wunde, mehr als ihre Tiefe und Wucherung, das ihre Schmerzhaftigkeit ausmacht. Immer wieder im gleichen Wundkanal aufgerissen werden, die zahllos operierte Wunde wieder in Behandlung genommen sehn, das ist das Arge” (*Tagebücher* 833). While the fourth legend ensures an end to what would have otherwise been a “zahllos operierte Wunde,” an image that inevitably evokes the apparatus of *Strafkolonie*, its termination only reminds us of the time Prometheus suffered to get there. It is the age of his wound — not its depth or malignancy — that becomes the real measure of his pain: a wound that has grown tired even of its own history, closing itself one last time. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, “it is history that hurts most” (Jameson 102), and along with the tiresome chronicling of these four legends, it would seem that the history of Prometheus’s chronic pain comes to an end as well.

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<sup>98</sup> To the extent this playful alliteration recalls the prosody of traditional fairy tales, Kafka’s remarks on the latter five years earlier echo a similar pattern of pain and boredom: “Gerne wollte ich Märchen (warum hasse ich das Wort so?) schreiben, die der W. gefallen könnten [...] ihre Erregung beim Erzählen (ich fürchte, wie ich merke, die förmlich physische Anstrengung beim Sicherinnern, den Schmerz, unter dem der Boden des gedankenleeren Raumes sich langsam öffnet oder auch nur erst ein wenig sich wölbt). Alles wehrt sich gegen das Aufgeschriebenwerden” (*Tagebücher* 586).

But as we have seen with every other text so far, most notably “Das Urteil,” a closed wound offers anything but closure. Only once Kafka’s legends recede from view do we learn that Prometheus’s rock does not. Depending on which version of “Prometheus” we read, be it Max Brod’s or the original entry in the *Oktavheft*, Kafka’s parable either begins or ends with a paradoxical explanation for this rock. But either way, it remains an explanation “im Gleichnis.”

Die Sage versucht das Unerklärliche zu erklären. Da sie aus einem Wahrheitsgrund kommt, muß sie wieder im Unerklärlichen enden.

The shift into present tense alerts us to the universality of this statement, its timelessness cast in stark relief to the chronological determinism of Kafka’s legends. Like the rock itself, this couplet stands apart from the rest of the text. But whereas the first sentence describes a seemingly paradoxical attempt to explain what cannot be explained, the second one undermines this by proposing a causal relationship: *since* it departed from a grounding of truth, then it *must* end in inexplicability — it must become, in a word, “grundlos.” On one level, this teleology clearly describes the process of demythologization in the parable itself, the painful path it takes from “Wahrheitsgrund” (when myth explained and grounded the world) to what could be read as a “grundlose Wahrheit” (when the modern parable destroyed myth). But on another level, Kafka represents this process yet again as an evolutionary development. Like all life forms, these legends must also rise and perish, experience the pain of change, and return to the same infinity from whence they came. In this sense, the rock becomes a foil for such fallibility — for the mortality of biological life and the life of literary works too, as both suffer the dissembling indifference of time. Surely, what remains may never be explained, and perhaps this is both painful and liberating for the writer who would ask his literary executor to burn the remains of

his estate — a request that would have undoubtedly included “Prometheus” in its flames. Perhaps this too is losing in parables.

But the rock that remains in “Prometheus,” just like the texts that remain, explains nothing but its own inexplicable presence — an obdurate “Gleichnis” that tells us what we really already know: that “das Unfaßbare unfaßbar ist.” Prometheus’s wound may evolve from eternally-opened to tiredly-closed, but its status in Kafka’s parable will forever resist interpretive closure in this sense; it will always remain productively inexplicable. In many ways, this can be seen as the true critical condition of my study: “ein wunder Punkt” that becomes a kind of “Wunder-Punkt” of interpretability, an ever-changing source of re-invention and resistance. Indeed, if anything, these four texts collectively demonstrate how the wound will always remain a sore subject for its examiners — because its inexplicability invites us and burdens us at the same time; it demands that we prod it like St. Thomas and re-open it like Prometheus’s eagles; to approach it neither “von aussenher” nor “von innenher,” but untenably, if not impossibly “von zwischenher.”

As Giorgio Agamben argues in the conclusion to *Idea of Prose* (1995), however, finding meaning in this inexplicability also risks the ideology of explanation itself — a gesture that not only closes the wound in “Prometheus,” but also forecloses the potentiality of Kafka’s art in general:

Explanations are, in fact, only a moment in the tradition of the inexplicable: they are the moment, to be more precise, which keeps watch over it by leaving it unexplained. Emptied of their content, explanations thus fulfill their task [...] What was not to be explained is perfectly contained in what no longer explains anything at all. (138)

While Agamben never directly references Kafka beyond the title of this vignette (“Kafka Defended Against His Interpreters”), the unexplained presence of “Prometheus” here is undeniable. Only the lack of explanation can adequately preserve the explanatory gesture of Kafka’s parable (and by extension, I would add, Kafka’s entire body of work) — the paradoxical emptiness (or groundlessness) over which all explanations preside. So it is that Kafka’s Italian defender, faithful to the point of near inexplicability himself, provides us with a conclusion of our own, one that contains what was never to be explained or concluded all along, only examined, re-opened, and postponed. Because, after all, Prometheus didn’t just steal fire from the gods; he also stole the knowledge that forever extinguished its mystery for man — the incomprehensibility of its power, its punishing secrets. This fire may have consumed all explanations in the end for some, but it also shows us the risk of explaining too much — of making whole what must otherwise remain hole-riddled.

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