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Babelic Narratives: Kafka, Borges, and their literary legacies
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Precarious Futures: Kafka's Prose of Survival

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Abstract: Philosophical readings from Walter Benjamin to Hans Blumenberg and beyond often emphasize the death-boundness of Franz Kafka's prose, characterizing his work as a literature determined by the certainty of finitude. This article explores a series of critical moments in Kafka's oeuvre where finitude is explicitly called into question for the sake of a movement of survival ("Überleben"). Survival manifests as a fragile mode of persistence that is neither governed by the authority of death, nor does it simply fall on the side of infinity. Instead, it indicates something like a precarious future—the subjunctive anticipation of a remainder beyond the limit of finitude. Advancing an understanding of Kafka's work in terms of a prose of survival, this article suggests an intense kinship between Kafka's works and other literary endeavors invested in probing the limits of finitude, most notably in works by Jorge Luis Borges.

Keywords: death, finitude, survival, living-on, temporality, shame, Kafka, Borges, Adorno, Benjamin, Blumenberg, Heidegger, Ordradek

The kinship between writers and the genealogy of influence that connects them sometimes crystalizes as a set of problems whose centrality is shared by literary works of various origin. In the case of Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges, these problems are manifold, and the two authors not only converge in terms of the subjects with which they choose to engage but also, on a poetological level, in the way in which these subjects become translated into narrative. One critical question posed by both Kafka and Borges revolves around the relationship between writing and infinity that Borges famously explored in his seminal story "La biblioteca de Babel" but

also in many other texts. Kafka, on the other hand, treated the issue more implicitly, as something covertly haunting his literary effort. Many of his texts, as shall be demonstrated in this article, testify to a profound crisis of finitude—they throw the possibility of ending into question, without, however, standing as monuments to infinity, let alone eternity.¹ What prompts Kafka to view the guarantee of finitude critically is his appraisal of the phenomenon of death. As will be explored below, Kafka is not much of a believer in death, especially to the extent that death is supposed to signify a last frontier endowed with the symbolic gravity of absolute certainty. Many of Kafka's narratives and notes suggest that death is a complex process that can involve detours and stalls, sometimes one can get entirely lost seeking death and not find one's way.

Such struggles of interminable existence keep reverberating in Borges, and it may very well be the case that his 1943 short story, "El milagro secreto" ("The Secret Miracle") implicitly reacts to Kafka, acknowledging in him a major predecessor and influence. Through its setting, the story already suggests as much: the place is Prague, Kafka's city, and the protagonist is a Jewish writer who is detained by Nazi troops and sentenced to death. Borges endows the narrative with a series of complications to which these opening observations cannot do justice; one aspect I would want to highlight, however, is the way in which Hladik—that is the protagonist's name—processes the time leading up to his execution. Arrested on 19 March 1939, Hladik's death by firing squad is scheduled for ten days later. Tormented by the thought of getting shot, Hladik remains unable to find some distance to his impending fate as he spends the time leading up to the 29 March by anticipating and living through the torments of getting killed, again and again. Borges writes:

In vain he told himself a thousand times that the pure and universal act of dying was what ought to strike fear, not the concrete circumstances of it, and yet Hladik never wearied of picturing to himself those circumstances. Absurdly, he tried to foresee every variation. He anticipated the process endlessly [*"anticipaba infinitamente el proceso"*], from the sleepless dawn to the mysterious discharge of the rifles. . . . Hladik died hundreds of deaths. . . . Each enactment lasted several seconds; when the circle was closed, Hladik would return, unendingly [*"interminablemente"*], to the shivering eve of his death. ("Secret" 158)

The event of death, in this scenario, disintegrates into snippets of anticipation and apprehension, thus forfeiting its status as the unified endpoint of a given existence. During the days of Hladik's wait, death ceases to mark the eventual telos of his life, instead becoming the medium of its own anticipation. Borges calls the process of this anticipation "infinite" and "interminable," which suggests that the repeated embrace of death, as performed by Hladik, becomes a mode of existential defiance, a way of prolonging life through the reiterated experience of its perishing. In other words, the writer discovers an infinity precisely through facing the frontier of finitude—such that death marks an experience whose embrace would bring one back to the eve of death. In order to prepare for death, one has to die. This circular structure questions linear models of time and teleological notions determining existence, as it introduces a rather dubious kind of liminality according to which the one who awaits death is already affected and enveloped by it, infinitely delivered to the experience of that which is yet to come.

The "life"—if one may still call it that—thus emerging falls neither on the side of finitude, nor is it simply eternal. It is *in*-finite in a particular sense as it is the very experience of finitude that makes for its living-on. Kafka proffers many variations of this structure, as will be shown below, and his preferred term to denominate it is the German *Überleben*. Commonly translated as "survival" or "living-on," *Überleben* speaks precisely to this liminal register of a life that is neither bound to death as certainty nor keeping on beyond it in an unbroken fashion. Rather, the movement of survival is one that is constituted *through* finitude, exploiting a complication or fold in the structure of finite existence. Hladik, too, it seems, discovers such a fold through which death itself becomes inserted into the very life from which it is infinitely anticipated. This life that is only alive through an endless and circular experience of death may justifiably be termed "survival."

At the end of his story, Borges goes a step further and establishes a link between the possibility of defying finitude and the creation of literature. For the title-giving "secret miracle" of Jaromir Hladik's narrative lies in a *de facto* suspension of time for the sake of finishing a piece of writing: on 28 March, the night before his execution, Hladik engages in a prayer asking for one more year of time to complete his unfinished masterpiece "The Enemies," a verse drama he considers a "tragicomedy of errors" (Borges, "Secret" 161). To his utter stupefaction, the wish is granted by divine

intervention—so that in the moment of his scheduled death at gunpoint, right as the order to pull the trigger is called out, time actually halts. Appraising the farcical situation in which he finds himself trapped, Hladik comes up with a number of propositions: “*I am in hell*, he thought, *I am dead*. Then *I am mad*, he thought. And then, *time has halted*” (161; emphasis in original).² The possibility of saying (or thinking) the words “I am dead” in the very moment of death compromises the latter’s terminating authority. In the very moment of his demise, Hladik discovers something like a linguistic convexity—whence nothing may live or live on (even time itself has been suspended), but language itself. Hence, he stands there, transfixed between the order to execute him and the bullet’s finalizing blast, and all that remains is the language needed to compose the unfinished play.

Still, in Borges’s story the end point’s deferral happens in the service of eventual closure: ultimately, the play may be finished, and the prisoner dies. The lasting paradox enacted through the “miracle,” to be sure, lies in the fact that the play is only composed and finished in Hladik’s head—that is, there is no archive or material trace of it: “He had no document but his memory” (Borges, “Secret” 162). Hence, the moment of its completion after the one-year grace period coincides with its own destruction. With Hladik’s death, the play itself is inevitably lost. Kafka would see it as a problem, however, that the work’s limits, its endpoint, and, thus, the possibility of its completion remain uncontested. The ability to end, Kafka would say, is not to be taken for granted; in fact, the end may constitute the ultimate object of desire, yet its arrival may forever be stalled. In what follows, I shall discuss a series of testimonials to this Kafkaesque fear of the unending.

The Authority of Death

On the occasion of Max Brod’s publishing a compilation of unprinted prose from Kafka’s *Nachlass*, Walter Benjamin delivered a lecture, titled “Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer,” which was held on 3 July 1931. Therein, Benjamin rejects an interpretive appropriation of Kafka’s work that would impose external conceptual formations upon the literary work; as an example, he mentions “a religio-philosophical schema,” which was foisted on Kafka’s writing often enough, starting with Brod himself, making for a strange evasion if not abolition of Kafka’s world. Instead, Benjamin suggests understanding Kafka from within his figurative domain, pleading

in favor "einer Deutung des Dichters aus der Mitte seiner Bilderwelt" ("of interpreting a writer from the center of his image world"; "Beim Bau," *Gesammelte* 677ff; "Beim Bau," *Selected* 495).

This world of images and its formal frame need to be understood, Benjamin claims, not in terms of the modern novel but, rather, in terms of the tradition of oral story telling. For Benjamin, Kafka is a narrator who, even in his longer prose texts, defies the parameters of the contemporary novel. In support of this statement, Benjamin points us to a moment in Kafka's *Das Schloß*, wherein Olga, one of two sisters to Barnabas the messenger, talks about the mere two letters her brother got to carry within three entire years of service. The reflections for which these letters are the cause, says she, are interminable: "[D]ie Überlegungen, zu denen sie Anlass geben, sind endlos" ("They give rise to endless considerations"; Kafka, *Schloß* 363; Kafka, *Castle* 202). The thought of such endlessness of deliberation will accompany Benjamin as he tries to determine the particularity of Kafka's formal intervention in the landscape of modern prose. For endless reflection is at odds with the facticity of textual finitude, the roundedness of novelistic structure. In other words, it is Kafka's penchant for infinity that defies the novel form. Benjamin comments:

Was sich bei Kafka in dieser Endlosigkeit gefällt, ist eben doch die Angst vor dem Ende. Mithin hat seine Ausführlichkeit einen ganz anderen Sinn als etwa den der Episode im Roman. Romane sind sich selbst genug. Kafkas Bücher sind das nie, sie sind Erzählungen, die mit einer Moral schwanger gehen, ohne sie je zur Welt zu bringen. ("Beim Bau," *Gesammelte* 679)

But what Kafka enjoys about these interminable reflections is the very fear that they might come to an end. Hence, his love of detail has a quite different meaning from that of an episode in a novel. Novels are sufficient unto themselves. Kafka's books are never that; they are stories pregnant with a moral to which they never give birth. ("Beim Bau," *Selected* 496ff)

What drives Kafka's writing, according to this assessment, is an anxiety of closure. Benjamin sees Kafka rousing break-through infinity precisely within the finite boundaries of the text.

Such breakthrough infinity Benjamin links to the text's "moral," which cannot be measured because it remains undisclosed; to use Benjamin's formulation, the text, emphatically gendered, is pregnant with its truth

but structurally unfit to release it. Inevitably, one thinks of one of Kafka's zingers dropped in his diary in 1922: "Mein Leben ist das Zögern vor der Geburt" ("My life is [the] hesitation before birth"; *Tagebücher* 888; *Diaries* 405). Sheer resistance to being born, this life of hesitation is the very life or living-on of Kafka's moral: from the confines of its finitude, the text enjoys itself ("gefällt sich") in the rigorous withholding of what it wants to say. In contrast, Benjamin holds, the novel is self-sufficient, immanent: it says what it has to say and offers nothing that goes beyond the scope of its saying, no clue as to what it is all about. For the novel, he goes on, is an essential expression of cluelessness—unwise, perplexed, groping in the dark.

If Kafka writes in the tradition of storytelling, his writing drives a wedge in-between lived experience and its tellability. Taking on a related problem in his "Storyteller" essay, Benjamin famously makes the point that the origin of storytelling is governed by what he calls the authority of death: "Der Tod ist die Sanktion von allem, was der Erzähler berichten kann. Vom Tode hat er seine Autorität geliehen" ("Death is the sanction for everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death"; Benjamin, "Der Erzähler" 450; Benjamin, "Storyteller" 151). Life's ability to be narrated is a debt owed to finitude. It can be told only because it is sanctioned by death. The consequences of this statement are grave and manifold. For one, Benjamin suggests that the certitude of death is condition and consequence of all storytelling: narration is a matter of dying off, perishing bodies, and final expirations. Narration depends on expiration in order to unfold at all. Infinite life, by contrast, could not be told—perhaps because its narration could be interminably postponed? Infinitely revised? Because it would not be motivated by the annihilating authority of termination? In any case, death is necessary, says Benjamin, for a story to become possible—life becomes tellable, relatable, bequeathable precisely when it discloses itself as dying life: "[G]elebtes Leben [nimmt] tradierbare Form am ersten am Sterbenden [an]" ("Life ... first assumes transmissible form at the moment of ... death"; "Der Erzähler" 449; "Storyteller" 151).

This correlation between dying and telling implies that our ability to narrate is thrown into crisis precisely as our relation to death changes: Benjamin observes how modern bourgeois life is marked by a permeating hygenification of society, an active screening of the presence of death,

pursuing the isolation of dying bodies and corpses—a development effecting an unforeseen impact on the written word. The career of death in twentieth-century European culture is a vexing one, to be sure: just as death became culturally invisible, as Benjamin laments, it was philosophically fetishized, not only in Benjamin's own work on "The Storyteller" but also and perhaps more influentially in Martin Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein* and the coinage of *Sein zum Tode* as the concept defining existence at large. Issuing from the "Death of God" and the decline of both Christianity and Western idealism, the designation of individual death as the last resort of meaning production, in tandem with the rise of an existentialism that conditioned the very idea of freedom on the absurd inevitability of death, runs parallel to one of the darkest chapters of modern political history. Millions were expropriated of their individual deaths, as the gravity of dying evaporated into the vacuity of industrialized mass murder. In the third volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, Giorgio Agamben speaks about the camp as "an absolute biopolitical space, both *Lebensraum* and *Todesraum*, in which human life transcends every assignable biopolitical identity. Death, at this point, is a simple epiphenomenon" (86). Auschwitz, in other words, is the name for the death of death, wrought by relentless political destruction.

It is certainly beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive assessment of how the greater cultural and political developments of the twentieth century bear upon the relationship between storytelling and death. Instead, I suggest picking up Benjamin's relay and taking a closer look at the peculiar case of Kafka. One of the most unsettling discoveries we can make while reading Kafka has to do with a crisis of finitude, detected and staged in Kafka's prose. If the horizon of death determines the possibility of storytelling at a time of vanished transcendental certitude, Kafka will question even the givenness and certainty of death. On 25 February 1918, he jots down the following sentence into his notebook: "Das Grausamste des Todes: ein scheinbares Ende verursacht einen wirklichen Schmerz" ("The greatest cruelty of death: an apparent end causes a real pain"; Kafka, *Nachgelassene* 100; Kafka, *Blue Octavo* 53; translation modified). Benjamin's appraisal according to which Kafka's resistance to finitude stems from a "fear of ending" thus needs to be reassessed. The quoted sentence, its anataxis and seeming balance, allows for an inversion of Benjamin's proposition. In point of fact, it is the *fear of non-ending* that motors Kafka's writing machine. Even

death, for Kafka, is not certain anymore—it threatens to be a hoax, mere semblance (“*Schein*”), the seeming image of death but not death itself, not the closure needed to put life’s suffering to an end. What remains are in the pains of an un-ending termination, a perpetual fadeout of searing anguish without ever quite attaining the release of ultimate annihilation. The sheer inability to die, in short—that is Kafka’s trauma.

This perspective on Kafka is by no means a canonical one.³ More often than not, Kafka’s prose is understood as thanatologically driven, pursuing a vexingly absurd exploration of modern life, bound to the inevitability of meaningless demise. Let me offer a striking case in point. A recently published compilation of Hans Blumenberg’s collected writings on literature includes an essay dedicated to the problem at hand, titled “Die Krise des Faustischen im Werk Franz Kafkas.” It is the reprint of a lecture held for the Goethe-Gesellschaft in Weimar in 1951, wherein the speaker tried to grasp the “Faustian” legacy of modern literature by analyzing the transformations it undergoes in Kafka’s work. The argument revolves precisely around the problem of finitude. Faustian literature, says Blumenberg, defies finitude’s imposition with Faust promoting the fiction of a deathless life, industriously striving: “Das Unendliche ist die Dimension der Faustgestalt: die magische Verjüngung ist dessen genauestes Symbol” (“Infinity is Faust’s dimension: magical rejuvenation is its most accurate symbol”; my trans.; 69). Faust’s penchant for the infinite, his drive toward the absolute, performs a spectacular rebellion against the limitations of perishability; satisfied only with the interminable, Faust reaches into the deathlessness of perpetual, invincible endurance.

In Blumenberg’s view, Kafka contests this very paradigm, plunging the Goethean heritage into the abyss of futile existence, crowned by a senseless death, symbol for the deteriorated state of human world access. He captures the essence of Kafka’s prose as follows:

Der Mensch ist das Wesen, das sich an der Welt erschöpft, das Wesen der Vergelichkeit. Es ist, als sei der Tod die Konsequenz dieser Lage des Menschen zur Welt nur der prägnanteste Ausdruck, das symbolische Fazit der längst und von allem Anfang an gegebenen Situation. (Blumenberg 70)

Man is the creature of futility, exhausted by the world. It’s as though death as the final consequence of the human condition is merely the most concise

expression, the symbolic conclusion of a situation that is present from the beginning (my trans.)

If Faust attempted to exhaust the endlessness of external possibility, Kafka abandons this icon of the superhuman and projects the human being as worn out, exhausted from his encounter with the world, unzealous, ready to die. The determining marker and consequential end point of such exhaustion is death, completing an overall futile situation that has stayed the same “von allem Anfang.” From the beginning, there is nothing but sheer ending. If Benjamin suggested that Kafka seeks infinity for fear of termination (“Angst vor dem Ende”), Blumenberg withdraws from Kafka the least defiance against finitude, claiming that Kafka’s entire prose issues from mortality as the most concise expression and symbolic conclusion of human existence. What thus distinguishes Kafka’s figures from Faust is their certain demise, the absence of any rebellion against the claim of perishability.

Situating the pull of being toward death at the creative center of Kafka’s writing, Blumenberg establishes a close proximity between Heidegger and Kafka and, by extension, existentialism and the literatures of the absurd. From this perspective, Kafka’s prose becomes intelligible only if one takes into consideration the intolerable pressure of finitude, determining its interpretive horizon. In contrast to Blumenberg’s intervention, it is necessary to highlight the fact that, examined closely, finitude, and its structural place regarding Kafka’s literary endeavor, quickly sheds its weight of certitude and turns out to be more of a question than a sure consequence of existence as understood in and through Kafka. Against the grain of theoretical tendencies entangling thinkers as different as Heidegger, Benjamin, and Blumenberg, this article suggests that Kafka’s literary work explores a profound and permeating crisis of finitude—and the concomitant projection of what I propose to call *prose of survival*. Kafka’s worries are so relentless that not even death can be taken for granted: pushing the thought of human expropriation to its drastic limit, he finds flashes of disenfranchisement even in dying. Kafka proves less fearful of the end, as Benjamin would have it, than of the menacing possibility of intermination.⁴ To designate death as the certain consequence of a perishable existence is unjustly to center and pinpoint Kafka’s prose; it discredits its philological depth and interpretive instability, trivializing some of its most unsettling insights. For the remainder of this article, let me highlight some

of the ways in which a finitude in crisis finds expression in Kafka's writings as I look closely at two major examples.

The Survival of Shame

Kafka's second novel, *Der Proceß*, ends with the persistence of subjunctive survival, opening up a precarious future, linguistically cast. The moment is well known: a year after becoming subject to an obscure prosecution on his thirtieth birthday, Josef K. is picked up at his house by two thugs, led outside of town, and executed in cold blood. Disturbingly concise, the novel's soberly stated last paragraph prompts us to pause and reflect: "Aber an K.s Gurgel legten sich die Hände des einen Herrn, während der andere das Messer ihm tief ins Herz stieß und zweimal dort drehte" ("But the hands of one of the men were placed on K.'s throat, whilst the other plunged the knife into his heart and turned it round twice").⁵ In a collaborative effort, K. is ended, the knife's double-twist in his heart mirroring the pair of executors who pass the weapon back and forth in "repugnant politeness," as K. notes to himself, before one grabs his throat as the other does the deed: "Mit brechenden Augen sah noch K., wie die Herren, nahe vor seinem Gesicht, Wange an Wange aneinandergelehnt, die Entscheidung beobachteten" ("As his sight faded, K. saw the two men leaning cheek to cheek close to his face as they observed the final decision"). Leaning on each other, the twin hit men, cheek to cheek, merge if not into one then at least into a scene of jolting intimacy as K. observes his destroyers observe his final destruction. An ultimate gasp and he releases his last words, as profound as they are unintelligible: "Wie ein Hund!" sagte er, es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben" ("Like a dog!," he said, it was as if the shame should survive him"; Kafka, *Der Proceß* 312; Kafka, *The Trial* 165; translation modified). Thus, the novel ends on a verb, an infinitive, indicating a potential activity, the "as if" of subjunctive persistence: *überleben*.

Before attempting to come to terms with such a sentence, immensely difficult as it verges on utter unreadability—probing a subtle yet powerful affinity between animality, affect, and living-on ("*Hund*," "*Scham*," "*überleben*,")—before taking on *The Trial*'s last sentence, in the doubled sense of phrase and juridical sentencing, let me point out that its very status as the novel's concluding line is not at all secured. For if we take a look at the original manuscript, it appears that Kafka, chronically dissatisfied—his

standard disposition—revised K.'s final breath numerous times. The novel's handwritten original, stored at the German literary archives in Marbach, displays a trail of self-corrections that finally arrives at the survival of shame. Here is how the novel originally ended, in Kafka's first version: "Wie ein Hund!' sagte er, sein letztes Lebensgefühl war Scham" ("Like a dog!' he said, the last feeling of his life was shame"; my trans.). Displeased, perhaps ashamed, Kafka hesitates, steps back, drops the sentence and proffers an adjustment: "Wie ein Hund!' sagte er, bis ins letzte Sterben blieb ihm die Scham nicht erspart" ("Like a dog!,' he said, unto his last dying he wasn't spared the shame"; my trans.). Replacing the feeling of life ("Lebensgefühl") with the register of perishing, the altered version offers a rhetorical complication by insisting on the strange locution of a "last dying" ("letztes Sterben"). Still, Kafka was not quite there yet. Discontent, the author sanctions another modification, crossing out the revised sentence for the sake of the line we all know: "Wie ein Hund!' sagte er, es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben."

We will notice, first off, how the stable factor holding the three versions together is marked by Josef K.'s final exclamation: "Like a dog!" The outcry stays the same throughout the process of revision; so does the prominent place of shame as the affective state engrossing the final moments of K.'s existence. It is a kind of canine embarrassment permeating the novel's last gesture, reflected throughout the three versions offered. What changes, however, is the relation between animal shame and the life form to which it pertains: "Sein letztes Lebensgefühl war Scham"; "Bis ins letzte Sterben blieb ihm die Scham nicht erspart"; "Es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben"—*Leben, Sterben, Überleben*—living, dying, surviving. It is as though Kafka, going from one version to the next, radicalized his program of textual ambivalence, forcing together lived emotion and what he calls "final dying," compressing life and death into the subjunctive survival of dog shame. The shift from "Lebensgefühl" ("feeling of life") to "letztes Sterben" ("final dying") is already remarkable in its accrual of complications: if Josef K.'s ultimately experienced feeling was shame, articulated through his final outcry, "like a dog!," this would establish a fiction of textual closure wherein the text's ability to end smoothly coincided with the termination of its protagonist, producing a seamless co-imbrication of textual finality and human mortality. But this is Kafka, where text and life are never congruent.

The phrase “letztes Sterben,” introduced in Kafka’s first revision, already undermines the authority of finitude, compromising the text’s formal integrity. For dying does not coincide with death, even if the dying in question is qualified as K.’s “last” or “ultimate” dying. The attribute “last” serves only to confuse things more, for if there is a last dying, there must have been a first, a second, perhaps a third dying, and so on. How many stages of dying did K. go through before arriving at this last one? Moreover, if Kafka holds that “into his last dying, K. wasn’t spared the shame,” he seems to suggest, unlike in the first version, that the protagonist’s bearing shame extends even beyond the scope of his demise, as though Josef K. had always been marked by a certain shame, animal or not, and now, even during the final stretch of dying, he remains unspared, haunted by the stigma of shame. Dying then, manifests—or de-manifests—as the continuation of a shameful process that predates the narrated demise. Even if not on par in terms of their rhetorical complexity, the first two versions of Kafka’s last sentence share a certain composure and gravity. Lacking a sense of futurity, they rather look back, more concerned with the well-rounded finality of the novel than with the destruction of its textual frame: “letztes Lebensgefühl” as well as “letztes Sterben” both insist on an eschatological purpose, the “lastness” of their articulation, devoid of any further disturbance to come. To be sure, the “dying” in question can be understood as an ongoing process. Nevertheless, it functions as non sequitur, the “last” and final element in an unspecified series of death acts.

Kafka’s final revision breaks with any sense of containment and attempt to achieve closure: “Es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben.” In its profound uncertainty, the sentence is striking. Commencing on the anonymous “Es” of “Es war, als” (“It was as if”), framing Josef K.’s final sequence, Kafka decides to change the grammatical mood of the sentence, phrasing the survival of shame under the formal conditions of the *Konjunktiv II*, projecting the apparition of something impossible. The modal verb “sollen” (“shall”) requires its activity in the infinitive, “überleben” (“survive”), concluding the novel in a rigorously non-conclusive fashion. The change is remarkable: while “Lebensgefühl” and “Sterben,” compound noun and nominalized verb, no doubt pertain to Josef K. as their agent, the act of “überleben,” as formulated in the last version proffered, is less one carried out by the protagonist himself as by his very shame: “Es war, als sollte *die Scham* ihn überleben” (emphasis added). It is not

K. himself who survives; rather, it is the affect that endures past the subject's scene of demise. Survival framed in terms of the grammatical hesitation of the *Konjunktiv II*, I propose to call "subjunctive persistence." The grammatical subjunctive seems to be the appropriate mode for an articulation of linguistic survival as it already transposes the report into the sphere of fiction; more than that, it phrases it as sheer impossibility. "Subjunctive survival" insinuates what could or would have been—the occurrence of something that exceeds the laws of phenomenal reality, yet which nonetheless leaves a trace of its impossible being. Reaching beyond the novel's scope, subjunctive persistence allows the text to surpass what is told for the sake of a precarious future.

There is an affinity between such a future and the feeling of shame. Attempting to understand shame from the side of animal reference is a move certainly justified within the rhetorical parameters of Kafka's sentence: "Wie ein Hund!" sagte er, es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben." As first glance, it seems warranted to suggest that the shame that Josef K. is experiencing works as the affective correlate to his last outcry, "like a dog!" The animal likeness of his demise—K.'s being slaughtered like an animal—is precisely what shames him. There are, however, a number of complications to the purported connection between shame and animality. For shame, as Benjamin put it in a note on Goethe, is a matter of color: "Die wunderbare Macht der Scham zeigt in der Farbe sich sichtbar" ("The wonderful power of shame shows itself visible in its color"; my trans.; "Über die Scham" 70), which is to say that shame is inherently linked to the facial redness, blushing, by which it is expressed. From an anthropological standpoint, it has been argued that such redness marks a phenomenon only humans can experience for animals lack the ability to blush. There is a lot to be said about the racialized fallouts of this argument, excluding people of color from the sphere of shame experience. The theory of shame color, especially when read against the backdrop of Kafka, fails to hold up on more than one level, however. For if we assume, with Benjamin, shame to have a quality distinguishing man from animals, the animal likeness suggested by K.'s clamor "wie ein Hund!" is undermined by the very affect it supposedly captures: shame. The moment K. experiences shame, his dog likeness, as it were, is suspended.

Upon closer inspection, the survival of shame turns out to have less to do with the animal likeness indicated in K.'s expression than with the very fact of there being an expression at all. "Wie ein Hund!" sagte er, es war,

als sollte die Scham ihn überleben.” “Like a dog!, he said.” Instead of zoning in on the logic of animal likeness suggested by the protagonist’s final words, it is equally, perhaps even more justified to exploit the fact that there are final words, period, their content notwithstanding. “Sagte er”—prior to connecting to the dog likeness established in K.’s utterance, the shame that should survive him connects back to the victim’s very ability to speak and say—and say no more, in his final moment, than “like a dog!,” desperately hanging on to simile. In order to grasp the final gasp of Josef K., we are confronted with the problem of shame from a side of language.

Once more, it is Benjamin who offers an important hint in this direction. In a brief review dedicated to Kafka’s admired contemporary Robert Walser, he writes the following sentence: “Die bäurische *Sprachscha*m, die hier von einem exzentrischen Witzwort ergriffen wird, ist Walsers Sache” (“The peasant linguistic reticence [*Sprachscha*m] that is captured in this eccentric joke is typical of Walser”; “Robert Walser,” *Gesammelte* 326; “Robert Walser,” *Selected* 258). Apart from the specific context of this statement, the strange neologism of “*Sprachscha*m” seems to be relevant not only in terms of Walser’s prose but also, perhaps more so, with respect to certain problems in Kafka. A complicated term, “*Sprachscha*m” has been rendered in translation as “linguistic reticence” or “reticence with words,” but we might go as far as to speak of a “linguistic abashment,” the “shame of language.”⁶ *Sprachscha*m speaks as the bashful recoil of the word from what it says. It is the sheer inability to represent—language’s faltering before its scene of description. Rather than taking K.’s outcry (“like a dog!”) at face value, I would therefore like to suggest that the subjunctive persistence of shame indicated in the novel’s last sentence has to do with the sheer ineffectiveness and inadequacy of this very outcry when it comes to marking the termination of a life. What survives Josef K., perhaps, is the shame of language: the inadequacy between what takes place and what is said, indicating an essential rift between words and phenomena. If anything, *Sprachscha*m indicates the survival of this rift, making it impossible for Kafka’s novel to achieve closure as it perpetually anticipates a precarious future, unactualizable. A hypothetical dream, teetering in instability.⁷

Strategic Misprision

To conclude this article, let me offer a second example for Kafka’s prose of survival, literary expression of finitude in crisis. In 1919, Kafka published a

volume of stories called *Ein Landarzt*. It features a miniature that, even more so than other Kafka texts, has elicited a tremendous amount of interpretive attention and readerly involvement. No longer than two pages, the piece is titled “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” and dwells on the correlation between a name and its referent. The eponymous housefather faces a strange case of interloping as the creature Odradek roams the interstices of the family home: be it the attic, the stairwell, or hallways—Odradek prefers liminal zones and non-places, where habitat shifts into the uninhabitable.

Consisting of only five paragraphs, the narrative build-up is stringently concise. Kafka starts the miniature by implementing a self-reflexive gesture wherein the reader's disposition is ironically mirrored in the text itself: as the narrative opens, the housefather, telling his own story, finds himself in the midst of a reflection on the name “Odradek”—what might it mean? Is it of Slavic or of Germanic origin? No one can rightly (“*mit Recht*”) designate a meaning of this word. But, of course—we move into the second paragraph—such speculations would be irrelevant if there were not an actual entity attached to this name. Following the reflection on the name *qua* signifier, the story provides a phenomenal description of its referent as the narrator proceeds to portray the entity in question: material, color, shape. Odradek appears to be a star-shaped wooden spool with some rods attached that make it stand upright; the spool can move and talk; it is fast, unpredictable, utterly unreliable. The following paragraph seeks to interpret the manifested form: it seems devoid of purpose or meaning, damaged in a way, yet perfect nonetheless: “[D]as Ganze erscheint zwar sinnlos, aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen” (“The whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished”; Kafka, “Die Sorge” 283; Kafka, “The Cares” 469).

The piece reaches its climax as the housefather reports on his interactions with Odradek. A creature of language, Odradek is able to respond to questions: who are you; where do you live? Though it refuses to provide satisfying answers, the animated spool does respond. Yes, it is even able to laugh: “[E]s ist aber nur ein Lachen, wie man es ohne Lungen hervorbringen kann” (“But it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it”; Kafka, “Die Sorge” 284; Kafka, “The Cares” 470).⁸ Yet, instead of proceeding to interrogate the strange invader, the narrator, as his story closes, switches tracks, inverting the direction of inquisition against himself: “Vergeblich frage

ich mich, was mit ihm geschehen wird. Kann er denn sterben?" ("I ask myself, in vain, what is likely to happen to him? Is he able to die?") "Die Sorge" 284; "The Cares" 470; translation modified). What had started as the reflection on a signifier, the interpretation of a physical form, the interrogation of a living entity now turns into a scene of self-reflection: "in vain I ask *myself*."

Throughout the story, Odradek functions less an object of concern, worry, or care to the family man—recall the title, "Die *Sorge* des Hausvaters"—as he gives reason for a certain lust of address, and perhaps some ontological confusion, a grain of bewilderment about the breakdown of anthropological categorical boundaries supposedly separating man from things and beasts. The only issue over which the family man seems truly to lose sleep is Odradek's questionable ability to die: "Kann er denn sterben?" It is not Odradek's sheer existence that is concerning, only his perishability. Is there subjective finitude in the world of Odradek? The thing moves, it talks, laughs—yet, is it perishable? Kafka continues: "Er schadet ja offenbar niemandem; aber die Vorstellung, daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche" ("Obviously, he does not harm anybody; but the idea that he should also survive me is an almost painful one to me"; "Die Sorge" 284; "The Cares" 470; translation modified). Grammatically, Kafka reiterates the very move at which he arrived in *Der Proceß*, following multiple self-revisions: the narrative ends on the possibility of survival, phrased in the *Konjunktiv II*, grammatical channel of a precarious futurity. Once more, the modal verb "sollen" in the subjunctive mood provides a precarious opening for an imagined passage of living-on: "daß er mich auch noch *überleben sollte*."

Within the framework of this article, I am unable exhaustively to analyze the case of Odradek and his remarkable place and intervention in the conceptual genealogy of care ("*Sorge*"), which is why I propose to restrict my focus on the fact that the interloper's question remains rigorously unanswered: "Kann er denn sterben?" The text refuses to disclose the true nature of Odradek's perishability and thus suspends any certainty concerning finitude's imperative. Henceforth, possible readings and interpretations of the story will hinge upon their treatment of the open question. The subjunctive persistence imagined in the story's last sentence precisely pivots on the openness of its question, its potential answerability yet lasting unansweredness. Distinguished by the very openness of his question, Odradek's form of life, his potential survival, is that of a question mark, capturing the impossibility of determining his

mortal status. Otherwise put, he survives insofar and as long as it remains unsure whether he survives.

Nonetheless, if we look at the critical commentaries elicited by Odradek, we observe the ongoing scandal of closing down and repressing what Kafka leaves open as a question. In order to recruit Odradek as philosopheme, conceptual illustration, symbolic truth-carrier, political sketch, or ideological poster child, the rhetorical irritation caused by the unanswered query tends to be emphatically downplayed, the literary value of survival's precarious future exchanged for hermeneutic viability and explanatory punch. Precisely by dint of their unlocalizable unreadability, time and again Kafka's characters are inconvenienced to end up as political emblems and requisites of mere illustrational purpose for various theories. The case of Odradek marks an extreme situation in this respect, producing a new wave of interpretive instrumentalizations nearly on a monthly basis. Recently, intellectual historian Peter Gordon suggested to read Odradek as "damaged life," obviously in the Adornian sense (173–82); another recent study by Gabriele Schwab understands Odradek as a Dadaist assemblage (91–102); in a study by Jane Bennett, Odradek morphs into the eponymous "vibrant matter" (6–8); in the work of Timothy Morton, on the other hand, Odradek becomes a so-called "hyper-object" (125–27, 176ff); in a study by J. Hillis Miller, the figure of Odradek is an eco-technology; in the work of Slavoj Žižek, he is a political category (111–23); and Wolf Kittler even argues that Odradek is a radio (157–63).⁹ The list could easily be extended. Odradek's semantic openness virtually forces a never-ending staccato of elucidation. To be sure, each of these interpretive interventions has its own merit—yet, what seems irritating, perhaps even worrisome, about the discourse around Odradek at large is that instead of protecting, respecting, attempting to read the figure's very enigmaticalness, critics tend to recruit Odradek in order to symbolize a given problem, thus explaining away, whether deliberately or implicitly, the very question he embodies.

A critical gesture shared by many interpreters of Odradek's being is to declare the creature immortal. A case in point: in a letter from December 1934, Theodor W. Adorno reacts to Benjamin's Kafka essay, scolding the author on account of his "archaic prejudice." As a prime witness for his argument, Adorno summons Odradek in whom he recognizes the hopeful anticipation of the future: "[I]st nicht die Sorge—wahrhaft ein auf die Füße gestellter

Heidegger—die Chiffer [sic], ja das gewisseste Versprechen der *Hoffnung*, eben in der Aufhebung des Hauses?“ (“Is not care—truly a case of Heidegger put on his feet—the secret key, indeed the most indubitable promise of *hope*, precisely through the overcoming of the household?” Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 92ff; Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete* 69; translation modified). Put right side up, Heidegger’s analysis of care undergoes a materialist reinterpretation according to which Odradek manifests as promise bearer, initiating a future beyond the abolition of the household. In other words, Odradek survives the housefather and, thus, bourgeois society, de facto announcing, as the “most certain promise,” a new world order.

The caveat embedded in such an interpretation lies in the fact that Adorno has to suspend the ontological vertigo induced by the creature and solve the text’s open question in order to bestow the role of revolutionary upon Odradek. “Kann er denn sterben?” In order to survive the housefather’s household, Odradek must persist; the precariousness of his unstable living-on as question needs to be sublated into the most certain nature of his perseverance. Says Adorno: “Gewiß ist Odradek . . . ein Motiv des Transzendierens, nämlich der Grenzwegnahme und Versöhnung des Organischen und Unorganischen oder der Aufhebung des Todes: Odradek ‘überlebt’” (“Certainly, . . . Odradek is . . . a motif of transcendence, namely of limitlessness and the reconciliation of the organic and the inorganic, or of the overcoming of death: Odradek ‘survives’”; Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 92ff; Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete* 69; translation modified). The rigorous tentativeness of Kafka’s formulation, “[D]aß er mich auch noch überleben sollte” is thus abolished, turned into the statement of pretend facticity, void of Kafka’s rhetorical hesitation: Odradek “survives.” And he survives as a motive for the abolition of death. Turned into a political allegory, Odradek stands as a presage of immortality: his question, storing the moral that the text refuses to bear, is omitted—the undefinability of his form of life, his living-on as the potential impossibility of living on—in short, his literariness and interpretability—are eliminated in order to make him a politically useful illustration.

Symptomatic for the philosophical appropriation of Kafka’s work, Adorno’s reading strikingly exemplifies the kind of strategic misprision many of Kafka’s texts seem to attract. Odradek the survivor can stand for anything, announce any kind of future, as long as he does not die. Kafka’s text, however, calls for a more careful reading. In order to grasp his prose of

survival, a just reading would want to take seriously the rhetorical hesitation and subjunctive faltering, the indecisive iffiness with which Kafka approaches his moments of subjunctive survival. "Kann er denn sterben?" Instead of simply outlasting the housefather, Odradek's status remains undeclared—the openness of his question marks the possibility of a precarious future, preventing the narrative's moral from ever being born. Rather than indicating the abolition of death, Odradek's dubitable survival points toward a more complex crisis of finitude: the indecision over the perishability of a given life-form, unrelenting hermeneutic frustration caused by an open question, linguistic shame impossibly persisting as intangible, unclassifiable excess.

For Kafka, "survival" presents itself as a philological problem tracing a movement in language. Which is to say that rather than grasping a phenomenal reality, it speaks to the structure of language itself. Its movement is perhaps best captured by a sketch on Don Quixote, penned in the fall of 1917. The one deed superceding Quixote's combat against the windmills, says Kafka, was his suicide: "Der tote Don Quichote will den toten Don Quichote töten; um zu töten, braucht er aber eine lebendige Stelle, diese sucht er nun mit seinem Schwerte ebenso unaufhörlich wie vergeblich" ("The dead Don Quixote wants to kill the dead Don Quixote; in order to kill, however, he needs a spot that is alive, and this he searches for with his sword, both ceaselessly and in vain"; *Nachgelassene* 38ff; *Blue Octavo* 18; translation modified). In order to murder the already dead, what is needed is a "lively spot" for which the Picaro searches as incessantly as unsuccessfully. Such unfolds Kafka's survival: as the possibility of a "lively spot," which, in its perpetual non-manifestation, announces yet also withholds the possibility of death. Survival through language is not immortality. It issues from a double death that denounces the categorical distinction between life and death. One recalls Borges's Hladik and the suspension of literature precisely in the non-space in-between two deaths. Having died and aspiring to die yet again, the writer may compose his play. The moment of holding, "I am dead," as Hladik does, this senseless and baffled proposition marks the very possibility of the literary effort. The time of writing is wrung from a double death. It fails death as a phenomenal reality, instead veering off into a kind of ana-history in which there is neither death nor eternity but, merely, the fragile temporality of subjunctive persistence. One wonders, in the final analysis, in what does Hladik's "secret miracle" eventually consist? In the

granted wish to finish the play before death takes place? Or does it consist in the final arrival of death upon the work's completion? For who is to say that a work can ever be finished: "Jaomir Hladik died on the twenty-ninth of March, at 9.02 A.M." (Borges, "Secret" 162).

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Notes

- 1 In his appraisal of Kafka's theo-philosophical fragments, Paul North makes a similar observation: "[W]hile infinitude, living on past, over, and through a transcendent frame, is no alternative, finitude itself is supported by a whole mythology. Kafka refuses this secular myth, effectively stopping the baroque 'dance of death' that had pranced on for 300 years. This effect is not just a by-product of his fiction, or even a result of a personal opinion or faith. Kafka recognizes it as a task of extreme importance, and he develops a set of strategies for removing finitude without returning to its traditional alternatives" (184).
- 2 Compare Jacques Derrida on Maurice Blanchot's *Instant of My Death*: "I cannot say, according to common sense, I should not be able to say: I died or I am dead. Much has been written, I too have written on occasion, about the impossible possibility of the statement 'I am dead,' on the expression of Valdemar, who wakes up to say 'I am dead,' this 'I am' of the 'I am dead' that is both present and part of a past perfect. If there is a place or an instance in which there is no witness for the witness or where no one is witness for the witness, it would be death" (46).
- 3 A remarkable exception already prefiguring some of my concerns was delivered by Charles Bernheimer in an essay titled "On Death and Dying: Kafka's Allegory of Reading," in which the author makes great strides toward a philology of death in that he cautions against "grounding the literary game in lived experience and reassuring [oneself] thereby of death's reality outside linguistic freeplay" (92). A similarly engaging example I should mention is an early essay by Stanley Corngold, titled "Restoring the Image of Death: On Death and the Figure of

Chiasm in Kafka." In this important critical intervention, Corngold recognizes "[t]he many positive expressions in Kafka's notebooks and diaries of a desire to die" and derives from this observation a rhetorical strategy of saying "death" that revolves around the figure of chiasm (62). Kafka's chiasms "set in motion an endless reflection that enacts Kafka's way of being toward death as at once capture and—its reversal: flight" (53). Such explicit deployment of Heideggerian terminology is quite unusual for Corngold, yet he seems to use the philosophical term in order to show how Kafka's literary gestures undermine it. My reading will expose similar movements of conceptual resistance and insist on the primacy of literariness over conceptuality.

- 4 A powerful symbol or "Sinnbild" for such intermination can be seen in the famous wound entrancing Kafka's country doctor. A marker of finitude, the wound does not close and stands in its death-relatedness—or against the latter—as a token of life: "Wirst du mich retten?' flüstert schluchzend der Junge, ganz geblendet durch das *Leben* seiner Wunde," ("Will you save me?' whispered the boy with a sob, quite blinded by the *life* within his wound"; Kafka, "Ein Landarzt" 258; Kafka, "Country" 152; emphasis added). Scholarship on the *Landarzt* story recently received new inspiring impulses from Ian Fleishman who reads the wound not simply as phenomenon and empirical entity but also as textual necessity and figure (especially 50–73).
- 5 The focus on the throat in this passage recalls Michael Levine's parallel reading of Celan's poem "Frankfurt, September" and Kafka's "Josefine": "[T]he poem suggests that what 'sings' in 'Josefine' is but the turbulently catachrestic, ever-moving mass of the wound growing in Kafka's throat" (96).
- 6 Compare Jan Plug's *They Have All Been Healed*; for an in-depth discussion of the problem of shame in Walser, see also Plug, "Shame."
- 7 Without being able to offer an in-depth analysis of the relation between Kafka and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel at this point, it is necessary at least to highlight the central position of shame in Hegel's dialectics as demonstrated by Werner Hamacher: "Durch die Schlüsse der Scham pulsiert das Leben der Dialektik" ("The life of dialectic pulses through the closures of shame" "Pleroma" 102; *Pleroma: Reading* 87). In an oft-cited letter to Milena, penned on 13 July 1920, Kafka's use of shame takes another turn. Reflecting on Grillparzer's "Der arme Spielmann," Kafka experiences a bout of *Fremdscham avant la lettre*, holding that "ich mich der Geschichte schäme, so wie wenn ich sie selbst geschrieben hätte" ("I'm ashamed of the story, as though I had written it myself"; *Briefe* 223; *Letters* 81). As the reason for the affective intrusion Kafka cites the story's many insufficiencies: "[E]ine Menge Unrichtigkeiten, Lächerlichkeiten, Dilettantisches, zum Sterben Geziertes" ("A number of defects, ridiculous moments, dilettantish features, and deadly affectations") *Briefe* 223; *Letters* 81. Again, shame seems to entertain an essential relationship with the problem of finitude—as it is brought about by Grillparzer's boundless kitsch, the story's coy daintiness that Kafka

experiences as exaggerated to death (“zum Sterben geziert”). Establishing a link between shame and a conspicuous insufficiency is very much in tune with a psychological understanding of shame as explored in modern philosophy. Georg Simmel’s “Psychologie der Scham,” for instance, defines shame as “jenes Hin- und Hergerissenwerden zwischen der Betonung des Ich und seiner Herabsetzung gegen seine Idee” (“this being-torn between the emphasis of the ego and its degradation compared to its idea”; my trans.; 435). This is to say that, in shame, one experiences the contrast between one’s ideal self and the self “such as it is”—yet, this contrast only actualizes itself when it becomes observed by an outsider: one is ashamed before the other. What happens in Kafka’s report on Grillparzer, however, is a collapse of this latter distinction: he experiences the insufficiencies of Grillparzer’s piece as his own—thus, the effect of shame is already preconditioned by an inherent othering of self, so that “Fremdscham” is less the ersatz act of being ashamed for someone else than the process of the self’s becoming-other.

8 See also Weitzman.

9 That this culture of appropriation and interpretive free-roaming is not reducible to philosophy and theory shows a recent op-ed piece on Brexit published in the *New York Times*: “Over the years, philosophers and cultural theorists have interpreted Odradek in many ways: as a metaphor for the alienation of workers under capitalism, for instance, or as a symbol of the world’s guilt. Today, however, I think Odradek can stand for just one thing: Theresa May, the prime minister of Britain” (Whyman).

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