Schriftkerben // Kerfs of Writing A Phenomenology of Kafka’s Stylus

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Schriftkerben // Kerfs of Writing
A Phenomenology of Kafka’s Stylus

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—Franz Kafka, In der Strafkolonie

0.

“Style” stems from Greek stylōs, Latin stilus, that is, the instrument of writing originally used for writing upon or, more accurately, incising wax tablets. Hence, to inquire into Kafka’s “style” literally means to consider the manner in which he produces his handwritten tokens. It can hardly be doubted that for Kafka, writing is, ideally, a corporeal act of exhaustion and mental emptying out, as see the triumphant diary entry he wrote on completing Das Urteil: “Nur so kann geschrieben werden, nur in einem solchen Zusammenhang, mit solcher vollständigen Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele” (Ta 461). This being so, it will not be enough to characterize his “style,” his deployment of the stylus, in terms of, say, a rhizomatic agencement (a French word with several connotations; “concatenation” is probably the best translation) that exemplifies serial models of écriture, or as an idiosyncratic movement of indecision and procrastination. It is not “instead of” but “in addition to” critical approaches deploying poststructuralist notions of textuality and theories of absence that I am going to foreground certain material aspects of Kafka’s stylus present on or “in” the paper—a “style” of writing I treat as a “fetishistic” grapho-centrism that resists the simple identification of writing and absence.

The route we take to unravel this argument might be pictured best in a Kafkaesque imagery, for this imagery will serve as a simulacrum (in Roland Barthes’s sense of the word) to explain certain aspects of Kafka’s “style,” that is, the graphic appearance as well as the “systematic” underpinnings of his writing. This route will require a descent into the “grave of writing”

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(Schriftkerben)—that is, the indispensible place and necessary condition for writing, as Kafka once remarked: “Ich brauche zu meinem Schreiben Abgeschiedenheit [. . . ] wie ein Toter,” or more precisely, the seclusion of a dead person in his grave, because “nur auf diese systematische, zusammenhängende und strenge Art” (BF 412) writing and also living were possible. One might then be in a position to see what is contained there, what the corresponding “script of the grave” (Grabschrift) intends to incorporate.

In some respects my approach reaches back to Nietzsche’s famous insight that the instruments of writing influence the ideas they merely were meant to articulate. In the context of Kafka criticism, it also reaches back to Malcolm Pasley, who stressed that the concrete conditions of writing—for instance the place and the instrument of writing at hand—shaped the form as well as the content of Kafka’s texts. Consequently, the exploration of Kafka’s grapho-centrism has to begin with a phenomenology of the material, the graphic reality of Kafka’s “style.”

Kafka wrote primarily with flexible steel nibs that had similar points and black to brownish ink; he used ordinary graphite pencils only for occasional corrections and minor additions that he had not applied immediately while writing. The steel nibs had a significant impact on the resulting material appearance of the handwritten tokens: When flexed by way of increased pressure on the downstroke, they produced bolder marks. However, it was not until sometime between August 1907 and early 1908 that the remarkable phenomenology of the handwritten page I am addressing could unfurl so distinctively, for in that period Kafka altered his handwriting from German Kurrentschrift to joint Latin cursive. The juxtaposition of thoroughly inscribed passages from the two different manuscripts of Beschreibung eines Kampfes—one written in Kurrentschrift, the other in Latin cursive—reveals this change. (See Figure 1.) Moreover, a glance at this juxtaposition will clarify the remarkable aesthetic characteristics achieved by Kafka’s Latin script. Compared to the squiggly Kurrentschrift, which emphasizes vertical downstrokes, Kafka’s handwriting in Latin cursive produces instead a rhythmic structure of thick horizontal strokes—note, for instance, the t-strokes, double t-ligatures, and the dashes. Later on, Kafka extended the length of those characteristic horizontal strokes and even applied them—apparently without reason—to capital A’s and then, finally, to small u’s. This fairly consistent tendency becomes evident if we take a closer look at the manuscripts of Der Process and “Brief an den Vater,” for example. (See Figure 2.) While we find mostly conspicuous A-strokes and hardly any bold u-strokes in the Process manuscript, the later Brief an den Vater contains them both (even though these strokes are orthographically unnecessary). Kafka did not use such A- and u-strokes, to be sure, in either Be-
He evidently experimented with the material effects of his writing tool, and his interest in such “stylistic” experimentations with the “graphic image” or *Schriftbild* of his manuscripts seems to culminate particularly in these remarkable horizontal strokes, which is to say, their gradual multiplication.

Now one might object that these strokes are pretty trinkets and trifles indeed. After all, are they anything more than the unmotivated marks of Kafka’s hand? True, on the level of the signified (the story) and the abstracted signifiers (the printed signs and words) this could be the case. However, on the level of Kafka’s *manuscription*, that is, the “intransitive writing” by hand, these characteristic horizontal strokes do matter. Here, the change in handwriting and

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Figure 1. Sections from the two manuscripts of *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. First version from ca. 1907 written in German *Kurrentschrift*, fol. 2v (top) vs. later version from ca. 1908 in Latin cursive, fol. 2r (bottom). Taken from *Beschreibung eines Kampfes. Gegen zwölf Uhr [ . . . ]*. Ed. Roland Reuß (Frankfurt/M., Basel: Stroemfeld, 1999).
the deployment of the Latin cursive denote a key juncture with significant implications for Kafka’s literary production as a whole. It is unclear why Kafka changed his handwriting, unless one posits a connection between Kafka’s handwriting “conversion” and the massively increasing mechanization of writing, viz., the rise of the typewriter with Latin characters. Nevertheless, one is obliged to account for the graphic effect this maneuver implies, namely, the distinct rhythmic structure of bold strokes or kerfs on the paper.

“Kerf” is a word akin to the German die Kerbe, which denotes “slits” or “scores” or “notches” incised or scratched or carved or engraved into a surface; a kerf might be carved into a piece of wood, for example. Thus, a kerf is a stroke-like cut that opens up the surface and leaves a resulting hollow trench, reminiscent of a furrow or a slit. To call Kafka’s odd strokes kerfs is not completely arbitrary, considering the etymology of the German verb kerben and the word “to carve,” respectively. According to the Kluge Etymologisches Wörterbuch and also the Duden Herkunftswörterbuch, both “kerf” and Kerbe relate to the Greek verb gráphō, which can mean “to scratch, to score” and
at the same time “to write down.” The corresponding Indo-European stem *gerbh- meant originally “to scratch, to score”—and thus alludes to the fundamental conception (or fiction) that the ambiguity of gráphō already expresses: To score significant kerfs with a stylus into a surface is to “fill” these kerfs with “something,” namely, meaning—which is what the act of writing is supposed to do.

It is hard to imagine that the concrete appearance of the conversion—the rhythm of kerfs—would be overlooked by the aesthete of handwriting, the “stylist” Kafka, who was highly aware of the material basis of his manual praxis. If the multiplication of kerfs after the change in 1907/1908, that is to say, the successive increase of letters being unnecessarily marked with them, is not evidence enough of this aesthetic, “stylistic” preference governing Kafka’s manuscripts, one need only recall that Kafka deliberately chose certain paper formats in order to predispose the result. “Stylistic” will of such a kind—including the deliberate choice of writing materials—becomes evident in the double-page autograph of Erstes Leid. (See Figure 3.) Malcom Pasley felicitously characterizes this manuscript as a thronged drill ground for the kind of “schriftstellerische Turnkunststücke” Kafka must have performed in order to fill the sheet of paper the way he did, while the fact that the protagonist of Erstes Leid is a trapeze artist points back to the intial scene of writing—the writer’s gymnastic feats.11 In this case, “style” and story are inextricably intertwined.

Taking all this into account, it seems quite likely that Kafka’s conversion was based on an aesthetic consideration: the production of a rhythmic texture of kerfs. Only a Latin cursive, and not the German Kurrentschrift, could elicit these remarkable strokes from the flexible steel nib. But regardless of the question of what motivated the conversion, the kerfs must be seen as illustrative and privileged tokens of an eminently non-referential, self-sufficient dimension of Kafka’s manuscription—a dimension I have called “fetishistic.”

In this context one would do well to look at some of Kafka’s notes concerning his writing practice. The following discussion of Mein Traum means to concretize the results of this analysis. But the terms “fetishistic” and “cathectic” first call for definition and here I rely on a formulation by the psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Viktor Emil von Gebsattel, born in the same year as Kafka and known mostly as a close friend of Kafka’s Prague compatriot Rainer Maria Rilke. The formulation is found in the treatise Über Fetischismus, published five years after Kafka’s death: here a fetishistic procedure is defined as “das Einstrahlen der fremden leib-seelischen Wesenheit in den Bereich der Sachwelt, derart, dass diese wie beseelt und durchdrungen erscheint vom Fluidum solcher Wesenheit.”12 The result of this “animating radiation” emitted by the fetishist would be a residual “energy” (in practice, the imagination of it) “inside” the object—the glinting aura indicating a “presence” that could be called a cathexis. Cathexis is the common translation of the Freudian term Besetzung. Although Freud used it in the specific context of libidinal Besetzung, the term
Figure 3. “Gymnastic feats” of a writer describing feats of a gymnast. Double-sided autograph of Erstes Leid, rear page. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; MS. Kafka 42, fol. 60v.
denotes in the following the “residual presence” imaginatively occupying the fetishized object in general.13

2.

In the light of such a notion of fetishism, Kafka’s wish to write his anxiety “into the depths of the paper” is nothing less than the explicit description of a fetishistic, as opposed to a transitive, “artistic” mode of writing:

Ich habe jetzt und hatte schon Nachmittag ein großes Verlangen, meinen ganzen bangen Zustand ganz aus mir herauszuschreiben und ebenso wie er aus der Tiefe kommt in die Tiefe des Papiers hinein oder es so niederzuschreiben daß ich das Geschriebene vollständig in mich einziehen könnte. Das ist kein künstlerisches Verlangen. [Ta 286; December 1911]

And indeed, in Kafka’s Tagebücher as well as in his letters we encounter repeated statements of the (fetishistic) desire for “transubstantiation of the body into language” through the channel of writing, as Detlef Kremer called it, and more specifically the peculiar attempt to transpose the self as well as its empirical surroundings into “the higher valence of written things,” to quote Stanley Corngold, “in which the empirical man becomes [hybrid] textual signs,” partly man, partly text.14

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the reifying character of the fetishistic inscription. In addition to the concise clarity that the written script as distinct (out)line on the page may provide —“Sagen Sie nicht,” Kafka writes to Milena Jesenská the 6th of June 1920, “daß zwei Stunden Leben ohne weiteres mehr sind als zwei Seiten Schrift, die Schrift ist ärmer aber klarer” (BM 47)—the stylus scores undead tokens on the page, inscribes solid “things” charged with a faint gleam of selfhood. Such tokens include a “presence” that materially objectifies Kafka’s “bangen Zustand,” thus reifying the genuine substance that the individual Kafka avowedly consists of: “Denn auch ich, mag ich auch manchmal aussehen wie ein bestochener Verteidiger meiner ‘Angst’, gebe ihr im tiefsten wahrscheinlich Recht, ja ich bestehe aus ihr und sie ist vielleicht mein Bestes” (BM 201).15

If manuscription—writing without predefined referents such as “meaning” or diegesis, hence a “non-artistic” modality of writing—aims indeed at material reification, the second part of the quotation recounting the inscription of anxiety “into the depths of the paper” becomes clearer: Once the energy to be inscribed became compact cathetic exteriorizations on the page, these cathetic tokens could be re-incorporated in an act of consumption, so that “ich das Geschriebene vollständig in mich einziehen könnte.” The same logic of reification recurs when Kafka concludes a diary entry for 27 November 1913: “Die Festigkeit aber, die das geringste Schreiben mir verursacht, ist zweifellos und wunderbar” (Ta 601–602). Instead of reading these words as a
metaphor for a certain psychic effect writing brings about “in me”—namely, firmness or collectedness—they could be taken as a descriptive remark about the material firmness the writing brings about “to me.” A certain modality of writing, the fetishistic manuscript, results—zweifellos—in firm objects that reify and contain the—wunderbare—cathectic of selfhood. The inscription itself thus produces the real manifestation of pure (but not empirical) selfhood.16 In Kafka’s case, too, it seems, “schreiben heißt: sich selber lesen,” as Max Frisch puts it—in the most material sense.17 And by firmly reifying selfhood and making it legible, writing simultaneously brings about firmness and order “in me,” that is, the precarious psyche of the individual Kafka.

If manuscript indeed connotes for Kafka the creation of a reified self, it is also clear that his huffy verdict on the characterization Felice Bauer obtained from an alleged “graphologist” (see below, n. 13) is meant in a very literal sense: His essential self—“Kafka”—consists of literature, “ich bin nichts anderes und kann nichts anderes sein” (BF 444). No wonder then, when selfhood is (or purports to be) circumscribed so radically, that the products of Kafka’s style at hand—which, in extremely felicitous moments, come out of his body “wie eine regelrechte Geburt mit Schmutz und Schleim bedeckt”—can be grasped in full only by the same hand; only the writer, allegedly, has “die Hand, die bis zum Körper dringen kann” (Ta 491), whereas the reader cannot begin to reach into those depths. The cathectic thesaurus (in the original sense of the Greek, meaning “store, treasure”) that embeds the pure entity “Kafka” exists and is maintained through writing, in the material outcome of his style.18 The writer’s essence is to be found within the written things on the page. Inevitably, Kafka must suppose in a letter to Felice Bauer’s father that “wenn ich [die Literatur] einmal verlasse, lebe ich nicht mehr. Alles was ich bin und nicht bin, folgert daraus” (BF 456).

This discussion of Kafka’s manuscript, even though speculative at moments, can have confirmed one thing: Underneath the textual rhizome the signifiers on the surface fabricate, underneath the sheer absence of reference to the message written down—“Ich habe nichts mitzuteilen, niemals, niemandem” (Ta 734) Kafka put it in 1915—an undead “presence” might nonetheless be said to slumber. This image could well be seen as the simulacrum governing Kafka’s manuscript. And the privileged graphic place for that kind of “presence” to sink into is, as we shall see, precisely the kerf.

This weird preference for the kerfs of writing perplexed even Kafka; he in fact spelled it out fairly early: “Ich kann es nicht verstehen und nicht einmal glauben. Ich lebe nur hier und da in einem kleinen Wort, in dessen Umlaut (oben ‘stoßt’) ich z.B. auf einen Augenblick meinen unnützen Kopf verliere” (August 1911; Ta 38). But the umlaut in which Kafka’s “futile mind,” the writing “I,” dwells for a moment is, graphically speaking, nothing other than a gash, the kerf above “stoßt” and not the twin points of the umlaut. For a moment, it seems, “something” was present “inside” the kerf. Such an “enchant-
ing” place seems to promise the same “unsinnige Verlockungen” (S 69) that K. and Frieda experience in Das Schloss in the “muggy foreignness” on the ground beneath the desk. And perhaps it is not death but rather the complete transformation or transubstantiation into a persistent, reified existence “on the ground” of the kerfs of writing that Kafka means when he notes in 1922: “Nichts Böses; hast Du die Schwelle überschritten, ist alles gut. Eine andere Welt und Du mußt nicht reden” (Ta 881). In any case, the means to cross this threshold seems to be, precisely, drawing the kerfs of writing and descending into the graphic grave these tokens open up. Kafka suggests something much like this in a letter from the same year:

Was der naive Mensch sich manchmal wünscht: “Ich wollte sterben und seh wie man mich beweint”, das verwirklicht ein solcher Schriftsteller [that is to say, a writer—like Kafka—who can “sustain” his physical existence, his “life” only through writing] fortwährend, er stirbt (oder er lebt nicht) und beweint sich fortwährend. [Br 385]

3.

It is now, finally, possible to invoke K.’s “enrapturing dream” of mighty golden letters deeply incised into heavy stone in Ein Traum (DL 295–298). While out for a walk and passing by a cemetery, K. discovers a fascinating grave-mound and rushes over.


But then, the story continues, the artist suddenly stops inscribing and for a few moments a “hideous misunderstanding” arises. At last, however, K. understands what to do:

[M]it allen Fingern grub er in die Erde, die fast keinen Widerstand leistete; alles schien vorbereitet; nur zum Schein war eine dünne Erdkruste aufgerichtet; gleich hinter ihr öffnete sich mit abschüssigen Wänden ein großes Loch, in das K., von einer sanften Strömung auf den Rücken gedreht, versank. Während er aber unten, den Kopf im Genick noch aufgerichtet, schon von der undurchdringlichen Tiefe aufgenommen wurde, jagte oben sein Name mit mächtigen Zieraten über den Stein.

Entzückt von diesem Anblick erwachte er.
The dream of being received and incorporated into the *Schreibgrab*/*Grab- schrift*; the dream that portrays with absurd precision the procedures of fetishistic reification—“dying into” the writer’s script without ceasing to exist; the dream that further clarifies the phenomenological validity of the kerf: all of that is here. In short, *Ein Traum* portrays the wondrous act of sinking into the kerf, or more accurately, into the grave the kerf has opened up so as to safely and comfortably deposit K.

Bearing in mind the previous findings about Kafka’s “style” and fetishistic practice of inscription, it goes without saying that this compelling text alludes to the strange kinship (but by no means identity) between death and writing. More, and in particular, it alludes to the intimate analogy between grave and written work, which is “closer than the analogy between oral and written literature,” as Jan Assmann suggests in an article with the telling title “Das Grab als Vorschule der Literatur im alten Ägypten.” And indeed, following this intriguing side-path for a moment, in the quasi-sequel of *Ein Traum*, that is, the passage from the “Konvolut 1920” known as *Bei den Toten zu Gast*, the I-narrator finds a man with a mighty body sitting behind a writing desk holding a feather in his right hand, “als habe er geschrieben und gerade jetzt aufgehört” (NS2 227), just, in other words, as the protagonist entered the scene—which is, of course, a tomb, or more accurately, a *Schreibgrab*, a (s)crypt.

Still, *Ein Traum* does more than illustrate the intimate analogy between grave and things written. The narrative describes and performs the ultimately fetishistic inscription and its magic place: The undead presence of what has been written down—“Josef K.” who sank into “his” kerf, his grave of writing—now slumbers beneath the kerf inside the paper, looking upwards from the bottom of the “impenetrable depths” to see the golden glint of his magic token, his scrypt on the textual surface. Against readings that identify the moment at which “K.” sinks into his grave with the moment of his death, it must be said that *Ein Traum*—conspicuously—stages the opposite scenario: the “enrapturing sight” of enduring presence inside the kerfs of writing. In Gerhard Neumann’s words: “es handelt sich [in *Ein Traum*] zweifellos um eine Ruhmesphantasie vom Überleben in der Schrift.”

But what are the implications if we understand *Ein Traum* in this way—as the illustrative depiction of fetishistic reification, in other words, as an image of enduring presence inside the kerfs? A short comparison with a recent interpretation by Tobias Wilke, who unravels *Ein Traum* with the aid of Derrida’s notion of writing and, therefore, recognizes the final moment of the dream as a moment of total absence—as death, may specify these implications. The moment of total absence Wilke recognizes is based on a “hideous misunderstanding” that is in fact indispensible for his interpretation as a whole: He assumes that in the end of the story the intra-diegetic Josef K. (the protagonist of the dream) dies in his grave in exchange for the successful inscription of his name. But in fact the text neither mentions nor implies anybody’s death, only
somebody’s awakening: either the dreaming or buried Josef K., or both. If it is true, as I suggest, that Ein Traum depicts vividly how and wherein the inscription seeks to preserve its referent “Josef K.,” then, what essentially happens is the animation of the script (in this context: the animation of a kerf “—” pre-disposed to contain and reify the presence of “Josef K.” henceforth) with the golden “glint” of selfhood. The awakening of an autarkic “presence” beneath the textual surface is the phantasmal endpoint of Ein Traum. Hence, the story depicts—in opposition to Wilke’s fundamental assumption—precisely the impregnation of the written with an enduring Geistigkeit (or the fiction of it), thus following the notion of “present meaning” within the sign that Derrida de-constructed.25 Seen in that light, Kafka’s grapho-centrism—in the case of Ein Traum the “particularly skillful handling [or manipulation]” of an “ordinary pencil”—is more nearly consonant with Husserl’s “metaphysics of presence” and most notably with his notion of the “animated” sign, than with Derrida’s différance. It is not death and erasure but reification and catheysis of the subject that must come together so that the script can succeed—that is to say, truly contain and re-present “something.” The theatrical coincidence of writing and death, in short, was exhibited “nur zum Schein.” Paradoxically, Wilke himself alludes to this (opposite) conclusion, when he mentions that at the end of Ein Traum, indeed, a “form of presence” must have remained “in einer tieferen überschriebenen Schicht der Grabinschrift abwesend-anwesend.”26

Where, then, or—deploying Kafka’s preferred question word, wie?—how does this (now undead) “something,” enraptured by the mighty flourishes of its graphic presence, awaken? The story does not tell us, even though Kafka was definitely interested in this strange moment, for he admitted: “daß wir zum Beispiel gelegentlich den Wunsch haben können, das Erlebnis des Scheintoten [. . .] bei Sicherstellung der Rückkehr, bei ‘freiem Geleit’ zu erleben” (NS2 142). But fortunately there is another story that offers an image (or realized metaphor) of how it might be to live on after one’s “disappearance” in a Kafkaesque kerf and sprawl henceforth on the material ground of the paper, enjoying “unsinnige Verlockungen” down there—as a zombie. Such an undead or scheintot being is the Jäger Gracchus:

“The Graphic performance of the strange hunter’s “disappearance,” his dissolution into the textual surface in order to become a scheintot “thing” inside the scrypt, the kerfs of writing, occurs at the end of the last Gracchus fragment from the so-called Oxforder Oktavheft 4. Here Gracchus once again tells the story of his—gewissermaßen—“deadly” accident in a first person singular

narrative: “die Gemse lockte mich, ich stürzte ab und schlug mich auf Steinen
tot. Frag nicht weiter. Hier bin ich, tot, tot, tot. Weiß nicht, warum ich hierin” (FKA-8°Ox4 19r; NS1 383). After these words: “warum ich hier bin,”
the page turns in the Octavo Notebook—which, by the way, was also inscribed
with “ordinary pencil.” On the new page, the narrating “I” suddenly disappears
graphically. In other words, the first sentence, as it is written down and appears
on the page, does not explicitly announce the subject for a few lines:

Wurde damals aufgeladen auf den Todeskahn, wie es sich gebürt, ein armseli-
ger Toter, die drei, vier Hantierungen wurden mit mir gemacht, wie mit jedem,
warum Ausnahmen machen mit dem Jäger Gracchus, alles war in Ordnung,
austreckt lag ich im Kahn; [NS1 383–384; FKA-8°Ox4 19v]27

It is as if the narrator, Gracchus himself, disappeared for a moment into the
distinctive kerfs marking “tot, tot, tot” (See Figure 4.) and thus slipped into
the “impenetrable depths” of his Schreibgrab/
Grabschrift. In the words of Ro-
land Reuß: “Das Tot-Sein”—or rather, in Gracchus’s case, being scheintot—
scheint gekoppelt zu sein an das Verschwinden der Graphit- und Graphikspur
in der Oberfläche des Papiers.”28

In the very last segment of the sentence, however, before the fragment
stops abruptly, the “I” re-emerges, comes—gewissermaßen—back to life:
alles war in Ordnung, ausgestreckt lag ich im Kahn;” and here the fragment
stops abruptly. In fact, at this point, the entire series of Jäger Gracchus narra-
tives ceases. And yet, this half-closure upon the semicolon offers the thematic
opening for the entire series, for the first Gracchus fragment, after a few lines
describing the scenery, introduces precisely the same image—Gracchus’s
barge floating silently into the small harbor of Riva del Garda: “Eine Barke
schwebte leise als werde sie über dem Wasser getragen in den kleinen Hafen”
(NS1 305). This “end” marks, then, the coming into being of Gracchus. The
graphic “slump” into “tot, tot, tot” is paradoxically the prerequisite for the pre-
sentation of a “quasi-living” protagonist in the first Gracchus narratives. The
scheintot “thing” Gracchus—embedded in the narrative eventually but pre-
served within the kerfs of writing initially—perpetuates its undead existence
in an absurd loop. Over and over again, this persistent “thing,” tangible
figura
for cathexis “underneath” the signifying surface, refreshes its (un-)presence.

So perhaps in this case, too, the text shows not hesitation, exactly, but
rather a plain depiction when Gracchus, asked for what he is and “wie es
eigentlich mit Dir steht,” in “all frankness [ganz frei]” replies that he is de-
scribed best as a kerf: “Ich bin — [kerf!] Nein ich kann nicht, jeder weiß es
und gerade ich soll es Dir erzählen” (NS1 382–383; FKA-8°Ox4 17v). In the
framework I have suggested, the graphic appearance of this particular stroke
in the manuscript—its unusually long extension even by Kafka’s standards—
indeed gains strong phenomenological validity. (See Figure 5.) “Everybody
knows” who and what Gracchus is, or wants to be, because everybody can
potentially see what he is, or wants to be—an (undead) grapheme. That token, here named “Gracchus,” neither represents a void nor stands as an inadvertent graphic trifle; instead Kafka’s play with the kerf must be taken as a compelling illustration of how the “systematic, consistent and strict way of [intransitive] writing” (cf. BF 412) permeates the transitive, literary discourse. In the Gracchus fragments as well as in Ein Traum, graphics, or “stylistic” processes, achieve poetologic relevance.

4.

Kafka’s “style” must be construed as a complementary bifurcation: The undead kerfs of writing (want to) indicate, on the bottom of the Schreibgrab, a self-sufficient “presence” but (have to) partake, on the paper’s surface, in the rhizomatic discourse as signifying particles: as t-strokes, dashes, etc. And precisely in the same dual fashion, the author’s empirical self “disappears” inside his product; he is abolished and transubstantiated into rhizomatic discourse and a cathectic residuum. Thus the “most authentic” dwelling, the actual home of “Kafka,” has been made visible as graphic firmness. Kafka writes to Max Brod:

[W]ir haben, wenn wir etwas schreiben, nicht etwa den Mond ausgeworfen, auf dem man Untersuchungen über seine Abstammung machen könnte, sondern wir sind mit allem, was wir haben, auf den Mond übersiedelt [. . . ] wir aber haben uns einer Mondheimat halber verloren, nicht endgültig, hier gibt es nichts Endgültiges, aber verloren. [Br 240–241]
Nevertheless, the momentary “reward” for losing the empirical self in graphic “Exterritorialität” (a term Kafka coined himself, cf. Br 322) would be the lingering in sheer self-presence. Such aggravated forms of graphic “exterritoriality,” rhizomatic and cathetic at the same time, play a role throughout the notebooks but increase in the later octavo notebooks. (See Figure 6.)

Of course, on the level of signification the rhythmic strokes depicted in the illustration must be seen as more or less extravagant signs executing cancellation, or, if placed beneath a block of text, signifying a break or closure. And yet, the illustration might already suggest that they perform more than such signifying operations. For otherwise, wouldn’t it be an abstruse waste of time and energy to, virtually, “carve out” mere attempts “mit noch zehnmal größerer Kraft als mit der sie gemacht wurden” (BF 747) in the fairly transitory Octavo Notebooks if you simply wanted to indicate a cancellation? We might not expect such a waste of energy from the “Konzipist” Dr. jur. Franz Kafka, who always tried to carry out the duty of writing, the action of writing (be it official documents, novel projects, or brief sketches) in an efficient and economical way, as Malcolm Pasley has argued. Therefore, these firmly prolonged kerfs must represent something more than the mere annihilation of “failed attempts.”

We can derive some clues as to their broader import by comparing them to the “labyrinthartige, einander vielfach kreuzende Linien, die so dicht das Papier bedeckten” (DL 217) in the Kafkaesque “Zeichnung”31 of the former commandant of Kafka’s In der Strafkolonie. Here—in the “labyrinthian” drawing from the Octavo Notbook—as there, in a drastic maneuver of incision, these kerfs seek to re-occupy and re-appropriate the “resistant” medium, and so ultimately deaden the painful but irresistible imperative Kafka bemoaned in a
Figure 6. A “labyrinthian” drawing from the Octavo Notebooks. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; MS. Kafka 23, fol. 10r (=FKA-8°Ox5 10r).
letter to Milena: “. . . dieses weiße Papier, das kein Ende nehmen will, brennt einem die Augen aus, und darum schreibt man” (BM 33). And, moreover, these kerfs seek to externalize the presence of a pure ego “Kafka” that is gained and sustained by means of graphic reifications—through the production of kerfs. Whereas the rhythm of the carved pattern shows the vivid flow of existence outside the body, the marks themselves perform utter “exterritoriality.” Indeed, Kafka’s “carved out” drawing—“keine Schönschrift für Schulkinder” (DL 217)—could be regarded as a compelling visualization of Kafka’s poetic “Zauderverfahren,” that is, the continual cancellation of a first and last word. More compellingly, it represents utter “Außer-sich-sein” (NS2 479) on the paper, “inside” the kerfs of writing, a state which Kafka, unlike the researching dog, never attained in music (cf. Ta 291).

This “transcription” into utter exteriority was always a highly precarious, error-prone endeavor, for it was never clear, at least to Kafka, what form the stylus’s “emissions” would assume on the material ground—if the medium would receive the cathetic inscription at all. In that sense, the following note from 1916 could be considered a veritable invocation in an animistic ritual: “Nimm mich auf in Deine Arme, das ist die Tiefe, nimm mich auf in die Tiefe, weigerst Du Dich jetzt, dann später” (Ta 794). And even if one did not consider these lines as an animistic invocation, they lend an enigmatic note to the phrase “Schreiben als Form des Gebetes” (NS2 354) from the “Konvolut 1920.” Being completely reliant upon the “ghosts of the medium” that are not always willing to receive—that is to say, be subordinate to—the insistent stylus in the same wondrous way in which the heavy gravestone received the golden marks, the writer has to pray.

The conflation of pure selfhood—call it “Kafka,” or simply “writer” (cf. Br 384–386)—and graphic presence in the course of Kafka’s manuscript reflects the odd but genuinely “modern” entanglement of (self-)presence and graphic representation. Kafka’s writing, too, it seems, “finds, by discursive detour”—by the “failed” attempts of transitive writing—“the ‘thing’ of thinking” and at the same time the “thing” of self-presence: the grapheme, the kerfs of writing. Perceiving his hand drawing the kerfs of writing to find, at last, “himself” on/in the paper, Kafka delves deep into what Walter Benjamin called in Einbahnstraße “das graphische Bereich” of writing’s eccentric “Bildlichkeit.” The auratization of script by means of handwriting, however, would have been much less plausible, if not impossible in a time before mechanical letters were about to replace the handwritten word as the dominant medium. The Octavo Notebooks, and Ein Traum in particular (preserved, ironically, only as a typescript), may best illustrate the fetishistic and grapho-centric tendency in Kafka’s writings—a tendency, to be sure, that was unleashed by the change of Kafka’s Schriftbild around 1908, the change of “style.”
Two other passages describe writing in an analogous way as corporeal exteriorization, namely, as "Herausschreiben" and as the act of "giving birth" to a story (cf. Ta 286, 491).


4 At a certain point in Kafka’s production the dominance of the steel nib is temporarily complemented as Kafka upgrades the pencil to a primary instrument of writing. This occurs, evidently, in his small size Octavo Notebooks of the years 1916/17. "An die Stelle der Stahlfeder trat der Bleistift, die Oktav- ersetzten die Quarthefte," as Reuß summarizes in "Die ersten beiden Oxforder Quarthefte Franz Kafkas. Eine Einführung;" in *Franz Kafka-Heft 5*. Ed. Roland Reuß and Peter Staengle (Frankfurt/M., Basel: Stroemfeld, 2006) 3. Nonetheless, I will leave this specific piece of information aside (at least for now), as the graphic aspect of Kafka’s handwriting I am going to foreground emerges much earlier than 1916 and relates in particular to specific features of his steel nibs.
6 The terminology to characterize the graphics of Kafka’s handwriting I borrow in part from Gerrit Noordzij’s ground-breaking tract *The Stroke. Theory of Writing* (London: Hyphen, 2005).
8 Rüdiger Campe explains in a recent essay ("Schreiben im Process," in *SCHREIBKUGEL IST EIN DING GLEICH MIR: VON EISEN. Schreibszenen im Zeitalter der Typoskripte*. Ed. Davide Giuriato et al. [München: Fink, 2005] 115–132) Kafka’s notion of writing as a dialectic constellation of intransitive writing in actu—"Schreiben ohne zielbestimmenden Gegenstand"—and the product of transitive writing, that is, the inability to write the projected or imagined "work" (ibid. 118). The phenomenology of Kafka’s "style" I propose seeks to explore the implications of Kafka’s intransitive "Schreiben mit der Hand in lateinischer Schrift" (ibid. 118), in other words, his manuscript.—To my knowledge, it was Stanley Corngold who first employed the term "manuscription," namely, in *Lambent Traces. Franz Kafka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004). With it he characterizes the status of Kafka’s (hand)writing as one medium in a "theatrical performance [. . . ] from which the diegesis, the world of the novel, emerges" (ibid. 51).
10 Pasley, "Der Schreibakt und das Geschriebene" 12.
12 Viktor Emil Freiherr von Gebtsattel, *Prolegomena einer medizinischen Anthropologie. Ausgewählte Aufsätze*. (Berlin: Springer, 1954) 151 (fn.1).—I emphasize Gebtsattel and his concept of fetishism here and not the better-known work of Ludwig Klages. Klages is of course one of the main theorists of modern graphology and could thus be seen as a key figure with regard to an understanding of the psychic investment that the ductus of handwriting may embody—even more so in the case of Kafka, since they were in fact contemporaries of roughly the same age. Yet the phenomenology of Kafka’s “style” that I propose is only in a technical, not in Klages’s sense graphological. First, it does not accord with his fundamental assumption: the equation of handwriting with psychic character. For Klages the ultimate goal of any graphology ("Handschriftendeutung") must be characterology: "Erschließung der Persönlichkeit des
Schrifturhebers aus seiner Handschrift” (Klages, Sämtliche Werke. Ed. Ernst Fauchinger et al. [Bonn: Bouvier, 1964– 1992] XIII: 409). I seek here instead to unravel ultimately the poetologic relevance of Kafka’s “style,” not the psychic character of Franz Kafka. Second, Klages excludes categorically all material determinations through either the instrument or the scene of writing for any graphological analysis. “Wird unter Handschrift, wie es im folgenden geschieht, das Ergebnis der individuellen Schreibtätigkeit verstanden, so kann ihr psycho-diagnostische Bedeutung nur in [ . . . ] demjenigen inneren Komplex begründet liegen, den man bald ’Charakter’, bald die ‘Persönlichkeit’ nennt. Von den zahlreichen Einwürfen dagegen lassen wir als längst widerlegt beiseite die Behauptung von einem wesentlichen Einfluß des schreibenden Organs und der äußeren Schreibumstände (Feder, Tinte, Papierlage usw.)” (ibid. XIII: 158). While this exclusion is for Klages a systematic necessity—otherwise Klages could not uphold the notion of handwriting as direct expression, as graphic representation of the writer’s psychic personality—it excludes the very ground of writing, his *stilus* and the kerfs it produces, that I explore here. Kafka himself, moreover, rejected graphology explicitly. In a letter to Felice from August 14, 1913, he insists that graphological “analysis” has failed in his case all along the line: ‘Der Mann in Euerer Pension soll die Graphologie lassen. Ich bin durchaus nicht ’sehr bestimmt in meiner Handlungsweise’ (es müßte denn sein, dass Du es erfahren hast), ich bin ferner gar nicht ’überaus sinnlich’, sondern habe großartige, eingeborene asketische Fähigkeiten, ich bin nicht gutherzig, bin zwar sparsam, aber gerade ’aus Zwang’ bin ich’s nicht und sonst sehr freigebig bin ich schon gar nicht, und mit dem, was der Mann sonst sagte und das Du Dir nicht merken konntest, wird es sich ähnlich verhalten. Nicht einmal das ’künstlerische Interesse’ ist wahr, es ist sogar die falscher Schuge untertanen Falsches Interesse. Ich habe keine Interessen, ich bin nicht bleibe aus Literatur, ich bin nichts anderes und kann nichts anderes sein” (BF 444).

13 More about cultural form and historical context of this widened notion of fetishism as an essential modality in which subjects relate to things can be found in Hartmut Böhme’s comprehensive study Fetischismus und Kultur: Eine andere Theorie der Moderne (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2006).


15 *Nota bene* the distinctive kerfs marking the recurrent word “Angst” in the autograph of the quoted letter from August 9, 1920—as if the writer were attempting to occupy the word with a material token of affiliation, and thus usurp it as my anxiety, inscribe “more” than what the word can actually convey. Cf. Franz Kafka, Drei Briefe an Milena Jesenská vom Sommer 1920. Ed. KD Wolff and Peter Staengle (Frankfurt/M.: Stroemfeld, 1995) 39.

16 The strict division into pure (that is, intellectual and artistic) versus empirical (that is, profane and ethical) self that Kafka’s writings seem to perform, most notably the *Tagebücher* and the letters, has been noted many times in the critical literature. Therefore one may perhaps refer to just one recent reformulation of this general division. Representatively, I quote Corngold, *Lambent Traces* 125: “Kafka is acquainted with two columns of his personality, the pillar of the constructed artistic self, which, in his view, is as often as not quite splendid; and the pillar of his ethical personality, which lies about him in ruins. [. . .] The disturbing surmise, the defeat, however, would be to conclude that the two buildings [that is, the two columns of his personality; CJ] are forever separate [. . .]. In Kafka we see the severest bifurcation of an intellectual-artistic writing self and a moral self [. . .].”


18 The identity of “Kafka” and Kafka’s tokens of course occupies an existential site: the writing desk. The *Schreibtisch* enacts the reality of “Kafka”—“das Dasein des Schriftstellers [that is, “Kafka”] ist wirklich vom Schreibtisch abhängig” (Br 386); it is the wondrous sphere that intermingles being and writing “Kafka.” For that reason it is quite logical that Kafka closes the inventory of his desk—which is essentially a definition of “Kafka,” or, the *written “I”*—undertaken at Christmas 1910 with the remark: “Das bin ich also” (Ta 139). Logically, too, writing desks seem to be “institutions” of special appeal and wondrous capacity in many other texts; the weird “American super-desk” with one hundred freely adjustable drawers in *Der Verschollene* may demonstrate this fascination.

19 Kafka refers here directly to the preceding entry about Charles Dickens. It closes: “wohin sie [the story] nur stößt und wohin man sie lockt” (Ta 38).
The alignment between writing and death (or language and total absence, that is the same) Derrida theorizes, first and foremost, in *La voix et le phénomène* and *De la grammatologie*. More specifically on the subject of *Ein Traum*—the relation of script and grave (or crypt)—he writes in the essay “Scribble (Writing–Power),” in *Yale French Studies* 58 (1979) 117–147, a text that conceives writing as *écrypture*. Three years earlier, in the “Foreword” to Nicolas Abraham’s and Maria Torok’s *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005), Derrida negotiates the same relationship in connection with the reorientation Torok and Abraham propose, namely, “the redefinition of the Self (the system of *introjections*) and of the fantasy of *incorporation*” (ibid. xv). Kafka’s fetishistic manuscription, of course, could be grounded in precisely these two fundamental psychodynamic “mechanisms”: *introjection* and *incorporation*.


Wilke, “Diesseits der Schrift” 250.


“The Werk [Kafkas] ... erscheint als eine Folge von Eintragungen ... Keine Zwischenräume, sehr ökonomisch. Kein Platz also für Nachträge oder gar für Versuche, eine abgebrochene Erzählung weiterzuführen; ... Alternativen werden grundsätzlich nicht stehen; sämtlich Entscheidungen, die den Gang der Geschichte betraten, mußten so schnell wie möglich unwiderruflich getroffen werden; nichts durfte für spätere Überlegungen in der Schwebe bleiben” (Pasley, “Der Schreibakt und das Geschriebene” 18–19).

A carefully chosen word, it seems, as *Zeichnung* discloses literally that the Commandant’s “drawing,” which is called at the same time “Schrift,” also contains readable *Zeichen*. Put in the context of my observations about the dual nature of Kafka’s kerfs of writing—signs on the surface that must be surrounded by (or, using my spatial metaphor, underlaid with) certain “Zieraten” of a “residual presence” so that “die eigentliche Schrift” can “succeed” this scene from *In der Strafkolonie* and be the rather instructive display of the same bifurcation. This scene as a whole could be seen as a striking allegory for *what* is lost, once the handwritten medium (a body into which the stylus had scored its undead marks) is “buried,” so to speak, in a published book. All the undead flourishes, injected in a bloody act of incision to fix “die eigentliche Schrift” firmly on the paper, were washed away; they vanished in the anonymous drift of printed signifiers—in the plane that is *text* without tomb.
