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Loser Sons
Politics and Authority

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University of Illinois Press
Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield
Without fail, writing looped back to the submissiveness stipulated by childhood. The experience of surrender had its unstoppable velocities from day one and carried the day, every day, seeing the leveling effects of childhood into political majority. The thought of "becomings" was dashed from the start. One was stunted—except, possibly, for the sudden assault of an occasional metamorphosis. For Franz, in any case, the writer was hard-pressed to stand up straight, to shake off an iron grip that was pushing down, it seemed, from above—or maybe from within. Like the aphonie call in Heidegger’s work, an obligating menace appears to come from beyond me and within me. You don’t hear it but you know it’s there, wherever "there" is, and that it originates both from above and within. I’m already repeating myself, above and within, above and within. A teacherly habit, to repeat oneself, but is it transferable to writing, I wonder. Already repeating myself—in the first paragraph! (Sometimes I proceed too quickly and leave a blur in my trail. I want to be clear with this text, stop the drive-by speed up of writing. It’s good to repeat. Often it’s necessary, if you want some sense—making to happen after all is said and done.) So, in Heidegger—we’re talking Being and Time—a call comes at you simultaneously from beyond and within, tracing a double provenance. By the time Kafka was at the desk, the "within" part was no longer locatable and was working under the new man, the most part unrecognizably handed by fair, Heidegger, too, when his turn interiority of self. But I don’t see much of Heidegger’s motif of the call with maybe of a lost friend that stays forever on the and storyline for the call he had to handle its damages is another story.

Kafka, for his part, could barely escape the determined constraints of childhood, the writer’s pose: one is bent over, wowed to submit. The so-called "Letter" submission, and, if I am not mistaken, their limit of intelligibility whenever defining birthday, a sexual encounter of manning up, attaining legal majority to something like adulthood would have by starting a family and becoming Father. Kafka crawls under Kafka’s texts. The dilett wished to avoid had Kafka doubled or on the day or on the momentary station—his very own categorical imper and destructive contradictions. The demand on him, taunting, yet proposing, demands. The one way to get out was to go in, to He gave us the close-up of parasitical th excremental, the parasite in Kafka, experiences itself as predatory on the scene as a parasite. prey to the
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"within" part was no longer locatable, though. He had scuttled interiority and was working under the new management of variant strains of self, for the most part unrecognizably handed down and in many ways mangled. To be fair, Heidegger, too, when his turn came, was not merely shoring up an interiority of self. But I don’t see much evidence of a childhood trauma in Heidegger’s motif of the call with maybe one exception: the dramatic residue of a lost friend that stays forever on the line. Kafka offers a different delivery and storyline for the call he had to take. Whether or not he was equipped to handle its damages is another story still.

Kafka, for his part, could barely climb out of the traversals of passivity, the determined constraints of childhood. Rigged to last, childhood outfitted the writer’s pose: one is bent over, writing at the behest of another, ever pre­ pared to submit. The so-called "Letter to Father" reprises such a history of submission, and, if I am not mistaken, the greater part of Kafka’s works meet their limit of intelligibility whenever prodded by thematized adulthood—a defining birthday, a sexual encounter, a job, the time and responsibilities of manning up, attaining legal majority. The only way to have made it over to something like adulthood would have been by contracting to marriage, by starting a family and becoming Father: so goes the critical narrative that crawls under Kafka’s texts. The dilemma of becoming the father that one wished to avoid had Kafka doubled over in pain or in stitches, depending on the day or on the momentary stakes. He was under the sway of an injunction—his very own categorical imperative strapped with unbeatable aporias and destructive contradictions. The law of the Father was always closing in on him, taunting, yet proposing, despite it all, the seductions of a takeover. The one way to get out was to go in, to take it on.

Well, this strategic plan was not limited to Franz Kafka or hardly ran off the charts of filial ambivalence; yet, he remaindered it like no other.

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He gave us the close-up of parasitical existence but only by giving it a para­ doxical run: on fast spin cycle, the parasite turns into predator, shedding all substantiality before receding back into parasite hell. Unwelcome and excremental, the parasite in Kafka, bloated on guilt and primed on shame, experiences itself as predatory excess. Nonetheless, parasitical vigor proves ever prepared to pounce, to scratch, and to sink back into the system of traces that we understand as writing. Existentially unavoidable, the parasite marks the spot where writing begins and life is sucked out of any internal field of expectation. Kafka, like Lyotard after him, teaches that every child arrives on the scene as a parasite, prey to the infanticidal phantasms of predator.
parents. Among other things, the starting line of nearly human existence has meant that, in order to avoid this crushing knowledge, we have had to divinize the child and airlift it up into transcendental zones, making it God and angel-like. Kafka shows up right before the dialectical switch is implemented and keeps the child down on an existential ground level. If you are still hugging representations of a toughened and secure state, however, or are still inclined to side with Mr. Kafka, father of Franz, and other authoritarian figures in crisis, the child (a first immigrant) is powered by the potentiality to arrive, from the get-go, as gruesome predator, invading and parasitizing hapless parents. That said, it is still possible that every child arrives to destroy the family, as Hegel already knew.

Franz Kafka wants out of the parasite-predator polarity, if there might be an outside to such a consistently sticky ordeal. He imagines and posits that becoming a father could spring him from the oppressive quagmire of predatory parasite or parasitic predator. To embrace fatherhood would mean, as Kafka several times indicates, to have arrived, to have coincided with and nailed a destination. As father, he could have coincided even with a proper death—to the extent that destination and death always imply each other, as let on in a “final destination.” The address of father—as phantasm, rhetorical custom or biogenetic prop—is set as literature’s telic anxiety, the homecoming for which poets have stood and rhetors posed, from Odyseus’s address to Zeus to Saul Bellow’s sit-down in Seize the Day, to appeals made in Dennis Cooper’s work to Daddy, to Daddy’s appeal in Kathy Acker’s Oedipalizations, to Hélène Cixous’s counterphobic laugh of the Medusa, and so on and so forth. As complicated as locating the father gets in his works, Franz Kafka, for his part, will never have reached the station of father, just as the letter cannot reach its registered destination, but in the end allows the fiction of paternity to collapse on itself. The failure of the letter to arrive, the failure of Franz to make it past a highly invested boundary, involves a number of deflections that are crucial for the fate of literature. Bearing in mind Freud’s statement that “Fate” and “Father” (FATHEr) share the same structure in the unconscious, we will trace their merging itineraries in Kafka.

Now a free-standing book, the “Letter to Father,” which traces a history of traumatic interruptions, is, as Heidegger might but could never have said, a destiny for us. It is a destiny to the extent that it corrupts destinal presumptions and reroutes literature around paternal markers never to be reached or assumed. Fiction shoots out of the wound of unbearable paternity. Among the things that it has going for it are the crucial stalls and breakdowns, the persistent parasitical drainage of which this text remains an unprecedented record. The letter enfolds a destiny that cannot come to pass, if only because the terms of account, delegitimated. The “Letter” so many ways and sets itself up as a serves to erase. Up close and intimate subject or open a historical account.

For rhetorically rigorous reasons blown biographical material. History and exhausted as Kafka edges toward a limit is always thrown into question, as prey to false memory, disruption, other transmission problems such as language designates as “parasites” or development has been crushed by Father flags. As in “The Judgment,” experience of friendship and love friend from Russia—a destination letter writing of Georg Bendemann. They cut off Georg’s supply line and escape destination that gave Georg a sense of a muted form of a geographical removal little to get some protection from parent outreach programs, for remote geopolitics a world where tropes of referential in on him, were in any case defunct an inner transformation and some father’s imperious inflations and brooding, his inability to separate from up space and poaches figures that make an independent motor experience drainage of experience, of life flattened by the paternal predecessor. (The father vampirizes the future—he is the infinite in experience; it is as if Father were time stuck in an elevator, or perhaps traffic, where one is slowly wasted move forward or advance in life.

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so many ways and sets itself up as a substitute for a type of writing that it
serves to erase. Up close and intimate, the ”Letter” refuses to disclose its
subject or open a historical account.

For rhetorically rigorous reasons, Kafka is no longer capable of full­
blown biography, though the ”Letter” unavoidably gathers up and posts
biographical material. History and its satellite narratives have been ex­
hausted as Kafka edges toward a limit of the sayable. Memory, in any case,
is always thrown into question, as the attempt at history persistently falls
prey to false memory, disruption, aberration, secondary revision, and
other transmission problems such as unavoidable static (which the French
language designates as ”parasites” or ”phantoms”). Any trace of a history
or development has been crushed by the expropriation of experience that
Father flags. As in ”The Judgment,” the patriarch stands up for a hijacked
experience of friendship and love when, for instance, he takes away the
friend from Russia—a destination crucial to the imaginary mapping and
letter writing of Georg Bendemann. When Father shoots down the friend, he
cuts off Georg’s supply line and escape route; he removes the life­sustaining
destination that gave Georg a sense of a possible history, if only in the trans­
muted form of a geographical remove—the promise of distance. He needed
little to get some protection from paternal encroachments and pernicious
outreach programs, for remote geographies sufficed to keep him going in
a world where tropes of referential overflow, when they were not closing
in on him, were in any case defunct. Biography and history, which imply
an inner transformation and some type of locomotion, are halted by the
father’s imperious inflations and by the son’s corresponding incapacita­
tion, his inability to separate from paternal annexations: the father takes
up space and poaches figures that might mark out a separate existence or
an independent motor experience. If anything, the ”Letter” tells of the
ainage of experience, of life flattened out, impoverished and parasited
by the paternal predecessor. (The father is not only predecessor, however;
he vampirizes the future—he is the successor.) Few things can be translated
into experience; it is as if Father were the affective correlative of a mall or
time stuck in an elevator, or perhaps he evokes the rising rage of idling in
traffic, where one is slowly wasted, in a perpetual slump, pretending to
move forward or advance in life.

Stuck with Hermann Kafka for a father, Kafka starts up the Herman­neutics
that keeps Franz running—or creeping—as he often writes—in place. As
with the war­weary soldiers that according to Benjamin return from battle
worn down and emptied of experience, unable henceforth to accumulate stories and history, Franz has traded in experience for authority. Authority, though emptied by now of transcendental mooring, props itself up in the space vacated by history, forked over by experience. Deregulated and eerily pervasive, authority cannot be proven or demonstrated or even easily recanted, but is imposed as a force that experience, weakened and run-down, can no longer unhinge. Abandoned by history and bereft of the rumored solidity of experience, the son can offer only testimony, an attestation to his muffled voice and diminished pose in an experience-less space. There is no question of initiating a story, replenishing a world, or starting off on an adventure. Even "adventure" implies an overload of agency in terms of possible experience. At best the son can negotiate a position between reactive rage and responsive marginality. Franz chooses to agitate on the margins of a history occupied and closed off to him by Hermann. His letter starts as a citation, as if picking up a call: "You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you" (Du hast mich letzthin gefragt warum ich behaupte, ich hatte Furcht von Dir). The text continues: "As usual, I didn’t know what to answer, in part due to fear ...." (Ich wusste Dir, wie gewohnlich, nichts zu antworten, zum Teil eben aus der Furcht, die ich vor Dir habe). It is not possible to speak before Father, to answer his call live and within his range of reception. Franz offers instead a written response that also threatens to crumble under the weight of the father’s demand, but he can at least give it a go. Granting fear its due, Franz partially rebounds to take up an engagement with the very thing that paralyzes him.

Franz Kafka, the megawriter as parasite, can practice a politics of address only in a dead pose, which is in any case inherent to the logic of deferral dictated by writing. Even efforts to speak to the father end up as a kind of writing, to the extent that it is technologized into a stammer, never gelling into intelligible speech but at most resembling the squeaks and screeches that Kafka’s talking animals nervously emit. Kafka, stumped by the question that repeats the violence after which it inquires, picks up the interrupted relay with the characteristic ambivalence of a remembered prod. For his part, the father had not asked, "Why are you afraid of me?"—a question that would imply a specific protocol of possible responses—but, "Why do you maintain," or, "Why do you assert that you are afraid of me?" In other words, the question goes after language as much as after its ostensible object; it delivers an accusation, insinuates a rhetorical duplicity: it asks about the right to maintain it—as if fearful must be announced, as if the child should have a right to truth claim. "Stop claiming or proving," in such a way as to betray a resuscitated by the "Letter" is more affective—psychological or even ontological—so we maintain that we are fearful."

The record of fear that Franz presents progresses like an anasemic narrative that rules over the range of response. By the father is recovered fairly quickly episodes that have led him to maintaining memories. The first and primal (Wasser) and simulation of thirst, requested by baby Franz. A call for water operation. A first provocative language attempt, unconditionally addressed, as part of the father, for which he is two initiatory events of some consequence to the spout. With or without the water.

I claimed to locate the beginning reticence on the part of the writer. In with the salutation and address, which is: "Liebster Vater" (Dearest Father) or dearest? Dearest? Dear Father? With a calflurry over the address, I do not want to be avoided. The accompanying inte
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ain’s "Der Erzähler" in Enfance et histoire: histoire, trans. Yves Hersaut (Paris: Édi-
delivers an accusation, insinuates a pose, and announces the addressee’s rhetorical duplicity: it asks about the legitimacy of the child’s fear and his right to maintain it—as if fearfulness ought to and could have been re­
nounced, as if the child should have signed a waiver, given up a certain type of truth claim. "Stop claiming or pretending to be afraid of me, stop using language in such a way as to betray and fight me." The father’s question as resuscitated by the "Letter" is more a philosophical indictment than an affective-­psychological or even ontological query. Still, it hits home. "Why do we maintain that we are fearful," his father wants to know, rather than, more psychoanalytically tilted, "What is the source of fear?" or more simply even: "Why do you fear me?" I will not approach other possible versions that would have him asking, "What do I do to instill fear in you?" Such a redescription, cast as paternal concern, would have him skidding off the parameters of the Kafkan predicament as regards the orientation of this phrase. Nonetheless, this being Kafka, the indication of possible paternal concern is also what trips him up. For nothing guarantees that Father is not stating his weakness and bewilderment, wondering why on earth his son, so resourceful and competent, so capable of outmaneuvering his hapless father, feigns fear.

The record of fear that Franz presents at the "Letter"’s beginning pro­
gresses like an anasemic narrative track, for it reveals an alternate semantics that rules over the range of response. The earliest memory of being menaced by the father is recovered fairly quickly in the text. A child starts tallying the episodes that have led him to maintain his fear. He starts checking off pun­
ishing memories. The first and primal scene takes place as a splash of water (Wasser) and simulation of thirst, recalling an early desire or demande put out by baby Franz. A call for water opens up an entire switchboard of aggres­
sion. A first provocative language attack, the call gets circuited as something unremittingly addressed, as part of the wearing-down that the child practices upon the father, and for which he is traumatically punished. The scene is set by two initiatory events of some consequence, so let us hold off on going directly to the spout. With or without the water episode, was Hermann survivable?

I claimed to locate the beginning of the letter in its statement of fearful reticence on the part of the writer. In fact, the letter characteristically begins with the salutation and address, with a struggle over how to open the ad­
dress. The manuscript shows a hesitation here. In the end Kafka settles on, "Liebster Vater" (Dearest Father) over "Lieber Vater" (Dear Father)—dear or dearest? Dearest? Dear Father? While I do not wish to go into an exegetical flurry over the address, I do not see how tuning to its implications can be avoided. The accompanying interpretive difficulties lie at the heart of
this address and the multiplicity of ambiguities for which it allows. Among other things, “dearest” prompts the supposition that Kafka has chosen to call upon the dearest of all fathers, one most dear among others less dear, thus splitting up possible fathers toward which the letter orients itself. I do not necessarily want to “overread” this initial moment, wishing only to signal that I could spend many paragraphs on the way the address already calls on its own trouble-making potentialities, splitting and doubling Father in such a way as to take him down, or at least pull him away from his purported unicity. This being Kafka’s world, one is authorized to stagger before things properly start, assuming that Kafka at all allows for any kind of running start, and not just a slump before the law of composition. Kafka struggled over the address, making the decision to summon the most beloved of his fathers. Will the smart missile find such an address?

Franz claims that he would have been able to survive Hermann Kafka had he been known to him as a friend, a boss, an uncle, a grandfather, “even (though more hesitatingly) as a father—in-law.”2 (The irony of the hypothetical marriage that would render Hermann father—in-law, marked with hesitation by Franz, leads to vertiginous interpretive calculations that we’ll leave to the side.) Kafka adds, “Only as a father you have been too strong for me.” Too close, too powerful, the father’s authority is moreover consolidated by the death of two brothers and by the fact that the Kafka sisters were born long after, leaving Franz in early youth to fend for himself. “Only as a father you have been too strong for me, particularly since my brothers died when they were small and my sisters came along only much later, so that I alone had to bear the brunt of it (ich also den ersten Stoss ganz allein aushalten musste)—and for that I was much too weak.” Franz had to take the first hit all alone, ganz allein. Hélène Cixous has offered a reading in her seminar of the hyperbolic doubling of “all alone.” Why, she asks in the context of Proust’s “tout seul,” does being alone have to be further qualified by the totality of all (ganz)? For Kafka the surplus totality indicated by ganz allein may work differently than in Proust where “all” inches toward cosmic depletion and doubles the sum of possible aloneness. For Proust, the addition of “all” to qualify “alone” implies a subtraction, an intensification of the experience of being alone. In Kafka, the “all” suggests an add-on. It is as if Kafka, for his part and parties, were arranging a spectral colloquy, an all-inclusive gathering of the living and the dead when addressing the father.

If Franz found himself all alone in childhood, this is because they were all there, crowded in hisaloneness: he was not only alone but in the haunting company of dead siblings. Two little ones preceded him but could not make it, leaving Franz at once stronger—he made it—and weakened, a kind of degeneration or parasitical remnant of the perished brothers. Franz does not say how or why they died, but he lines up their disappearance with his father’s persecutory powers. Nietzsche, another loner who invents free spirits for company, furtively mentions a dead brother in Ecce Homo, where the father is positioned as an existential passerby, possessing qualities of a fleeting memory. Here the corpses are stacked up against the father, further numbing the son’s chances of viability. It’s not entirely clear if Franz has incorporated the dead brothers: is he now doing their bidding for them, working pro bono for the dead? In terms of now-classic theories of mourning disorder or pathology, is he putting in claims for restitution? The unmournable brothers create a blockage in the passageways of the “Letter.” Franz is enfeebled, vampirically seized by the strictures of unmournability. His experience of weakness is linked directly to their demise. Being “all alone”—what about this hyperbolic surplus, why are we all alone, isn’t it hard enough to be just alone?—this predicament of aggravated aloneness appears to mean that he stands in the buffer zone with the phantom brothers, with the trace of their extinguished existence. His stance, up against the paternal wall, tethers him to a frayed concept of the with/without, he is being-without, arrested at the premature deaths that mark his toppled upbringing, indicating from the start that he was always and ever raised from the dead.

Abandoned and exposed, part of a muffled history of the undead, Franz has to go it alone. He starts out, very young, as a survivor or parasite, paradoxically strong enough—precisely because of his fragility and minimalist life—to crawl past a first marker. The structure of his survival is such that the immemorial fault is distributed equally between his father and himself. Keeping things ambivalent, his sense of who did what to whom remains at times weak. There are no indictments, no witnesses, no subpoenaed evidence, just a structural insinuation: the brothers were killed off/Franz somehow got away. Alive, he’s more dead, or at least more vulnerable than the terminated children. At the same time Franz weighs in on the strength of his parasitical existence, living off the dead brothers to whom he owes an unpayable debt. The way he settles the narrative account gives a Freudian-Derridian orientation to the matter, as he goes over territory covered by Totem and Taboo. Deprived of the fraternal horde, he had no chance of overcoming his father, no primal alliance or secured lineage to support patricidal rites. (To recap: Totem and Taboo establishes the law and lay of patricide, the
mythic core of any serious reflection on Vatermord and is dependent on a
notion of vital fraternity, which Derrida follows in all the way up to political
structures anchored in the orders of fraternité, liberté, égalité.) The sisters
were late in coming and the brothers had been dealt a fatal blow. Franz
Kafka does not examine the impact of the decimated fraternal horde, the
dead weight that thematically holds down the halfway launched letters; he
goes only far enough to nail his exposed solitude on the missing brothers.
Without the living fraternity, patricide is off the table. If anything, they owe
him interest and taxes for the exertions he has had to make as the solitary
successor, with and without his brothers, going it alone, all alone, as the
pretender that father evermore took him to be. One of his brothers, Georg,
returns in name, harangued by his father to commit suicide at the end of
"The Judgment." The other sibling, Heinrich, leaves less recoverable traces.

Whether pretender to the paternal throne or henceforth lined up with
the world of pretense—without the siblings covering his back, he’ll have to
fake it relentlessly—Franz signs up for the school of make-believe. Pitched
against the virile claims of truth and phallus, he sees himself becoming
girly. Father, we are informed time and again, cannot abide the world of
pretense. The values of pretense, artifice, parasitism, and language ma-
nipulation quickly load up on Franz’s side of the line. Allied with and proxy
of truth, Father disavows pretense, what Derrida in his essay on this text
translates as feindre (to feign or make believe). Kafka’s father sees himself
as courageous, capable of dispensing with politeness, and other surplus
niceties, en famille. Other fathers, the argument pressed by Hermann Kafka
is quoted as saying, feign interest, pretend politeness, they lack the courage
to judge or act according to the sometime brutal precepts of honesty. This
well-known logic conventionally covers for rude oppressions and pseudo-
dialogue ("I was just being honest"). Let us get a close-up of this rhetorical
standoff and examine its life-threatening edges. Paternal frankness cuts
an incision in Franz’s stance with the world and lines up with the law. How
does the "Letter" drop into the abyss of their relatedness, configuring
the paternal as emissary of law?

One of the first disputes that the letter tries to settle involves the father’s
assertion that he is different from other fathers only insofar as
"I can’t pretend as other people can" (116). Franz responds in the letter, "You can’t
pretend, that is true . . . . " The response becomes more intricate, indicating
in the main that the father seeks a no-fault escape, which Franz cannot
grant—though neither party is simply free from blame (or innocent), either.
What interests me is the inventive extension of "other fathers" when we
know that Franz shows up as artifice, the solicitor of pretense, the prince
of make-believe. Colloquially, Herr
from a whole class of fathers who n
stage pride, lather on fictions, or set
another logic soon emerges, especial contested or a matter of considerable

The other father referred to by Herr
champion of fiction, the fiction-fath
and carries off the pretense from w
herman and Franz circumscribes d
of motivating their plaints. In order to plan for taking down the father’s nam
round. Brought up between the dead
Franz enters a battle of proper names
name, whose mark is meant to secure
bear. Who truly belongs to the nam
and as this name? On the other hand, living off an eminent patronym? The
volition or eventual agency, is in pri
untamperable inheritance. But some
Mr. Kafka wears his father’s name u
only expect trouble. This is when he accuses him of perpetrating—begin to
pretend—name. It thus turns out that
name—of-the—father. "You, on the oth
appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence
endurance, presence of mind, know
doing things on a grand scale, of cou
naces that go with these advantages
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the Löwiesque, or to that part of Fran
But it is not simply as though Franz
authenticity of the name that would be
emerges in his father’s relation to th
of make-believe. Colloquially, Hermann’s rhetoric serves to set him apart from a whole class of fathers who might indulge their sons, feign praise, stage pride, lather on fictions, or something of the sort. But in this face-off another logic soon emerges, especially since the notion of father is highly contested or a matter of considerable pretense, creativity, and construction.

The other father referred to by Hermann would be Franz—the defending champion of fiction, the fiction-father, the one who puts his father to fiction and carries off the pretense from which Hermann repeatedly dissociates. Hermann and Franz circumscribe different fields of battle for the purpose of motivating their plaints. In order to fight the father, Franz has to prepare a plan for taking down the father’s name, or at least for taking it on for another round. Brought up between the dead brothers and not yet manifest sisters, Franz enters a battle of proper names, unlinking the very sign of survival—the name, whose mark is meant to secure surviving beyond the perishability of its bearer. Who truly belongs to the name Kafka? Who or what gets to live on and as this name? On the other hand, who gets cast as a parasitical hitchhiker living off an eminent patronym? The name, apart from any act of subjective volition or eventual agency, is in principle passed on from father to son as unalterable inheritance. But something occurs in the transit. The young Mr. Kafka wears his father’s name uncomfortably, as a fake ID of which he can only expect trouble. This is where pretense and fiction—what his father accuses him of perpetrating—begin to serve him, for his is, he claims, only a pretend-name.

It thus turns out that Kafka is his improper name, truly the name-of-the-father. ‘You, on the other hand, a true Kafka in strength, health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly dominance, endurance, presence of mind, knowledge of human nature, a certain way of doing things on a grand scale, of course also with all the defects and weaknesses that go with these advantages and into which your temperament and sometimes your hot temper drive you’ (117). The signatory does not bear his name fully, to the extent that a truly binding signature is possible. ‘I, to put it in a very much abbreviated form, a Lowy with a certain Kafka component which, however, is not set in motion by the Kafka will to life, business, and conquest, but by a Lowyish spur that impels more secretly, more diffidently, and in another direction and which often fails to work entirely.’ Thus the ‘Letter’—the hand-delivered scandal: Kafka is not a Kafka.

What we in the meantime understand as Kafkaesque reverts in reality to the Löwyesque, or to that part of Franz that failed to make the Kafka grade. But it is not simply as though Franz could make claims for an original authenticity of the name that would be borne by his father. The defect already emerges in his father’s relation to the name, so that the name of the father
gets transmitted with a fault line and compromised lineage, offering for each of the contenders only a strained fit. There’s no power-punching, patriarchal passing-on of a name-of-the-father here that wouldn’t turn around and bite the paternal bearer. The father himself hasn’t fully grown into the name “in so far as I can compare you with Uncle Philipp, Ludwig, and Heinrich. That is odd, and here I don’t see quite clear either. After all, they were all more cheerful, fresher, more informal, more easygoing, less severe than you” (117). The essence of “Kafka” comes down to that which escapes the manifest essence of Kafka.

Both father and son owe their outstanding features to what fails to meet the Kafkan prerequisites. Where they deviate from Kafka, the Kafka signature begins. What has by now settled into a registry of sheer Kafkan dispositions—severe father, anxious son, punishing bureaucracies, night sweats, world-emaciation—skids off the history or accumulated substantiality of the name and drops what it has come to mean in terms of iterable and recognizable features. Franz can offer the account of the ill-fitting name only in abbreviated form, he writes. Kafka’s readers will identify the irony of the abbreviated relation to the name in terms of the K.’s that wander through Kafka’s voluminous novels, compressed and deformed, pointing to a never fully knowable name, moving through the sequence of episodes like dissociated letters, partial initials of larger or lost programs. The strength of the name-of-the-father seems to reside in its lapse, its defective and deflected itinerary. Even though Hermann Kafka cannot fully own or live up to the Kafka name behind which he hides—the name itself of hiding, secrecy, timidity—is that of the mother, a Löwy, a lioness. Switching names and scrambling the codes of paternity, Franz, the unKafka, can no longer be mowed down by the assumed father, not on these terms and perpetually impugned. Franz does not say that he is a Löwy: “Ich, um es sehr abgekürzt a

assumed father, not on these terms and turf, anyway. Despite the skirmishes and perpetual standoffs, the so-called father’s authority had been rigorously impugned. Franz does not say that he is more like his mother but that he is a Lowy; “Ich, um es sehr abgekürzt auszudrücken, ein Löwy” (I, to put it in a very much abbreviated form, a Löwy) (9). In terms of rhetorical delivery Franz interrupts the statement (“I, a Löwy”) by cutting himself down (“in a very much abbreviated form”), offering the cut and cutting away from the name-of-the-father while retaining a Kafka component—a speck or specter that allows him to hold off on complete disavowal. Refusing to substantialize the name, Franz at no point says, “I am a Löwy.” He cuts himself down to size, saying in abbreviated form his name: “I . . . a Löwy.” The stealth byway supplied by the not-name-of-the-father grants him his peculiar survival skills and password.

With an added twist of Kafkan irony, the difference with regard to the Kafka name between the father and son in itself proved dangerous. “In any case, we were so different, and in our difference so dangerous to each other that if anyone had tried to calculate in advance how I, the slowly developing child, and you, the full-grown man, would behave toward one another, he could have assumed that you would simply trample me underfoot so that nothing was left of me. Well, that didn’t happen. Nothing alive can be calculated. But perhaps something worse happened” (117-18). Incalculably, Franz has survived extinction, but such a fate and this fact have exposed him to something worse than total annihilation, something that makes him permanently prey to the incalculable—the non-death with which he must face the non-name-of-the-father. Kafka explicitly states at this point that their essential dispute does not amount to a matter of culpability—his or father’s—but to effects that cannot be controlled. He sees and classifies the cluster of effects his father had on him as unintended. This must remain the presumption that enables any address. Nor can anything that passes between them, including his own claims or imputations, be regarded as malicious, such as his fearful responsiveness to the effects of the father.

Atmid child, he would have benefited, he now conjectures, from a “kindly word, a quiet taking by the hand, a friendly look” (118), all denied him. Let us take a close-up of this grievance that consists of a withheld hand paired with a severe paternal gaze. The play of hands proves crucial to the unfolding of the plaint and appears here in its speculative positivity, projecting the type of tranquil reaching-out that might have reassured the martyred child. A lot turns on the destiny of hands, and the “Letter” is replete with a variety of hand positions or practices, many of which Derrida explores for other purposes in his work on Heidegger’s hands. In Kafka, whether withhold
or given—a hand might be given in marriage, or raised and threatening, or meant to calibrate a grip, the Griff (18), or set to determine the way the law itself comes down on the child when the father exclaims, "Do whatever you like. So far as I'm concerned you have a free hand. You're of age, I've no advice to give you" (126)—the hand, whether in use or off-limits, waived or waving, slaps meaning and punishment into the child's memoir even when it is lifted, that is, removed and figurally declawed. The scary part that Kafka divulges is, you can't tell which is worse in terms of a rogue pedagogy—hands on, or the other way around: giving you a free hand, letting you off at the unbeatable juncture of your own little hell. The narration continues, "and all this with that frightful, hoarse undertone of anger and utter condemnation that makes me tremble less today than in my childhood only because the child's exclusive sense of guilt has been partly replaced by insight into our helplessness, yours and mine."

In the parable "Before the Law," Kafka shows how the law gives a free hand. Law, as Derrida notes in his reading of this text, isn't in the first place an inhibitor or interdictory bar, but lets you go ahead and make your fateful error. The difference between child and adult in the passage dissolves into the recognition of reciprocal helplessness—the experience of Hilflosigkeit, the sheer unprotectedness that becomes so important to Freud and is then picked up in Lyotard and Lacan. Part of the tally of a somewhat stabilizing analysis relies on the understanding that the Autre is in trouble, fissured, hence the sign, A, barring the Other from access to its own imagined plenitude. The adult signatory behind the "Letter"... (I need to interrupt myself here, because, let's face it, every one of these terms is shaky. Kafka will switch off with the father and it cannot be said with certainty who signs, who makes it to adulthood or backslides into childhood, and whether these positions can be stabilized or are consistently prey to corruption: this is Kafka's doing, not mine, I'm just doing my job and keeping close to his logic, following his instructions, taking note of decoys, false indications, baits, and exegetical lures. Let us resume, then, with a firm sense of the fine print and as if this interruption never happened.) The adult signatory behind the "Letter" consistently concedes the paternal scission, honoring the pain of the father who shares his part of weakness with the child. Still, the paternal hand countersigns a childhood memory never as such effaceable: "Your threat, 'Not a word of contradiction!' and the raised hand that accompanied it have been with me ever since" (126). In fact, the specter of the raised hand, as threat and horizon, is responsible for the child's fall (or rally) from the stammer to utter silence. The father's hand is raised above the "Letter" that had begun as a substitute for speech:

What I got from you—and you are, what an excellent talker—was a hesitant, still was still too much for you, and finally speak in your presence. (126)

The menacing hand, Franz continues, "contradiction!" were responsible for the between father and son, for "the effect, docile, I became completely dumb, and only dared to stir when I was so far I no longer reach me—at least not directed the coinciding clashes of hand and in such a way as to render language sense of language, in collaboration with both the child ("Not a word"), whose inset contradiction and protest, a rub again down the link between language and speech at an early age, something that the losing side of logos. I will try to retrace the way Kafka offers the description he slinks into the space of writing.

From his corner, Franz maintains, another system of feints and devices and meaning, the sweep of references throws of catastrophic language usages the adult's registrar of primal clashes. For interest. "There is only one episode direct memory" (119). Kafka brings in the blanks and blurs of ostensible memory lays claim; he goes so far as to say the same memory: "You may remember to what extent the very notion of child, such narrations often come, as Lyotard does not care for the critical tendency line of inquiry proves too straight to cut itself off and down at determinate the blanks and blurs of ostensible child maybe also part of this story, as the vehicla here, we have the only direct rem the writer evinces no doubt: "Direkte..."
What I got from you—and you are, whenever it is a matter of your own affairs, an excellent talker—was a hesitant, stammering mode of speech and even that was still too much for you, and finally I kept silent... I could neither think nor speak in your presence. (126)

The menacing hand, Franz continues, and the accompanying, “Not a word of contradiction!” were responsible for the major power playoffs in the relation between father and son, for “the effect of it was too strong for me, I was too docile, I became completely dumb, cringed away from you, hid from you, and only dared to stir when I was so far away from you that your power could no longer reach me—at least not directly” (127). Hermann Kafka has operated the coinciding clashes of hand and utterance, threat and injunction, in such a way as to render language searingly competent, loading the ability of language, in collaboration with body, to land fateful swipes. Silencing the child (“Not a word”), whose insertion in language necessarily involves contradiction and protest, a rub against authority, father manages to shut down the link between language and presence. The writer backs off from speech at an early age, something that stirs a manoeuvre of subterfuge on the losing side of logos. I will try to make this clear. For now let us retain the way Kafka offers the description of cringing and humiliated silence as he slinks into the space of writing.

From his corner, Franz maintains a relation to language other than Hermann’s, another system of feints and demande. The convergence of intention and meaning, the sweep of reference, has little to do with the child’s first throws of catastrophic language usage. Only one memory remains in the adult’s registrar of primal clashes. For this reason alone it is of supreme interest. “There is only one episode in the early years of which I have a direct memory” (119). Kafka brings it on early in the letter. This is the only unparasited, no-secondary-revision total recall to which the adult signatory lays claim; he goes so far as to suppose that the addressee may share the same memory: “You may remember it, too.” I need not remind anyone to what extent the very notion of childhood depends on narrated memory. Such narrations often come, as Lyotard states, from an adult source. (Lyotard does not care for the critical tendency to emphasize narrativity, since this line of inquiry proves too straight to offer coverage of linguistic damage, of the blanks and blurs of ostensible childhood. But that’s another story—or maybe also part of this story, as the very possibility for narration continually cuts itself off and down at determined junctures of infant retrieval.) So, to resume, here we have the only direct hit, an undocetured docudrama of which the writer evinces no doubt. “Direkt erinnere ich mich nur an einen Vorfall.
aus den ersten Jahren” (I distinctly remember only one thing from the first years). The memory grows out of a whimper, part of a phrasal regime that barely makes it to the Super Bowl of language games. “One night I kept on whimpering ("Ich winselte einmal in der Nacht") for water, not, I am certain, because I was thirsty, but probably partly to be annoying, partly to amuse myself” ("um mich zu unterhalten").

"Not, I am certain, because I was thirsty": thus the first and only unalloyed childhood memory, says the signatory. It announces the night of a first relation to language, the squeak or peek of the primal call out: putting forth a desire without object or need, banked on ambivalence, the whimper was meant to annoy the other while amusing (or "maintaining") the solitary child. Though formulated as a demande—as that which urgently puts upon the Other—the whimper does not arise out of want, nor does it expect reference to emerge, to materialize out of nothing. Asking for water, the child does not want water; the child is neither a thirsty empiricist nor philosophy’s primal man but he—or it, since the evolving “I” whimper and does not directly speak, though it is already bilingual, as we learn from the next sentence—he, that is, it, das Kind, will nonetheless meet up with Rousseau’s hulk, at the origin of language. Squeaking "immerfort" (repeatedly), for water, the child, on automatic whimper, ignores the threats that come to the encounter of his unstoppable demande.

This sport of "Fetch!" without reference cues the first war of the Kafka worlds, priming the dispute of language usage that irreconcilably separates son from father. The first direct hit, angering the father and entertaining or maintaining the son—one thinks of Blanchot’s infinite maintenance, L’entretien infini—volleys language, shoots blanks, and makes use of the senseless as his locutionary site. In fact, the first direct hit is not a direct hit, wanting nothing more than the jouissance of false positing (yes, imagine, the child’s first target practice exercises the pleasure of scattershooting off the range of meaning and reference, not pointing but propping up the pointless), saying language’s noise and nothing, evincing the nearly random word not of milk, pee pee, or mommy but of water. But this may be a child ontologist. "Water" distilled to its anasemic base as Wasser in German may be asking after a question of essence: was er, what (is) he? The passage emphasizes that the demande for water is not in any way motivated by thirst or object. Language perversion (the essence of language) keeps the child going, setting up a scene of illicit delight, to which the father seems privy: if it had been a matter of substance or meaning, the child would have been given his damned water, stopped up, and stilled. The adults could have returned to sleep. But something else is afoot, and parental supervision requires that the inessential spitballs or jouissance of nonmeaning be halted. The sleep-

less night of pure feint, of linguistic father, responding to domestic code assaults with threats. The night of the order that the child would not heed, a breakdown in a "diplomatic" idiom. This scene, similar to a host of trauma multiples and escalates the politics of the father. Every whimper law and a confrontation with its rep

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as Wasser in German may be asking that (is) he? The passage emphasizes any way motivated by thirst or object. language) keeps the child going, set- which the father seems privy: if it had g, the child would have been given his d. The adults could have returned to d parental supervision requires that of nonmeaning be halted. The sleep-
less night of pure feint, of linguistic screeching, needed to be stopped. The father, responding to domestic code orange, counters the child’s burbling assaults with threats. The night of the first remembered threat, of the call or order that the child would not heed, dissolves into violence, demonstrating the breakdown in a "diplomatic" idiom that is however backed up by force. This scene, similar to a host of traumatic idioms pieced together by Franz, multiplies and escalates the political stakes involved in the languages and names of the father. Every whimper sets off a terror alert, brings home the law and a confrontation with its representatives.
The father moves into action, bursts into the room to deport the child: "After several vigorous threats had failed to have any effect, you took me out of bed, carried me out onto the pavlatche. And left me there alone for a while in my nightshirt, outside the shut door" (119). This episode, notarized as the first nonrevisionist history of their relation, indicates, as do many Kafkan parables and descriptions, what Lacan would call an "architecture of pain," a scenography of persecution blueprint by unjoined domestic spaces. The father removes the child to the outside of an inside that is designated in Czech, doubling the intimate foreignness or foreign habitualness of the uninhabitable signifier. Pavlatche is the Czech word for the balcony in the inner courtyard of houses in Prague. The child, according to architectural design, is put out to be locked in, shut up. Removed to an outside, he receives his first eviction notice but still remains too close to home to flee or free himself—a difficult concept for a child, who, nonetheless, often thinks of little else than emancipatory flight. Many things are taking place here, setting into place an irreversible lockdown of the childhood memory.
If language is the house of being, the child has been hurled out of language to remain chained to its peripheral structure, where outside and inside collapse at the same time as a barrier is constructed. The locality to which he is exiled—at once shut out and locked in—switches languages, functions like a swish or a linguistic blur, adhering to the tenuous outside with the fog of foreign subtitles. You sent me to the pavlatche, the other side or site of a minor’s literature, splash—here comes the water—pliche, plichte. Yet the Czech word also spills into the paternal realm, the paternal Czechpoint, arranging itself around the nearly universal pa. As for the nonreferential water the child had obstinately whimpered for, he himself gushes with tears, a victim of his own language teary (there is an aquatic consistency to his plaint, many scenes near or in or productive of water, tidal waves of humiliation, washed over by anxious fret, the moistening forehead, distilled to shivering drops, being exposed, puny and scared at the pool, lots of tears held back or released, raining on his parades). Clearly, if one were trawling for a psychoanalytic
redescription of these waterworks, one would look further into suspicious conjunctions such as those that link wetting, gushing, language spilling and spoiling—all leading up to paternal punishment, smack packs that are unforgettable and structuring. As for the signatory of the "Letter," he does not assign blame—"perhaps there was really no other way of getting peace and quiet that night" (119)—but brings up the remembered nighttime drama "as typical of your methods of bringing up a child and their effect on me." The pavlatche punishment worked: "I dare say I was quite obedient afterward at that period, but it did me inner harm."

Sent out, the child was struck inwardly, having been brought up or rather down to obedience, reduced to one figure in the biblical history of the name Löwy, the tribe of the servile, the servant's servants, bowed by law to a stance of submissive docility. The concurrence of non-sense and punishment creates an ineffaceable terror base for the child: "What was for me a matter of course, that senseless asking for water [Das für mich Selbstverständliche des sinnlosen Um-Wasser-Bittens] and then the extraordinary terror of being carried outside [des Hinausgetragenwerdens], were two things that I, my nature being what it was, could never properly connect with each other" (119). The German burrows perhaps more deeply than its translation into the essential disjunction that the primal scene of terror narrates. In the first place, the senselessness of asking for nonsubstantial water in what might be called an irreferential mood is for the child "selbstverständlich," self-understood (translated as a "matter of course"). The coemerging contours of selfhood and understanding appear to be at stake in the experience of a primary disconnect. The minimalist hermeneutics of the senseless are confronted with the massive Hermannutics of disposal and punishment. The emphasis and tone of Hinausgetragenwerdens, rightly translated as "carried out," strongly implies being carried out like the trash—a recurrent fear and figuring in Kafka's writings, as when Gregor's body is unceremoniously disposed of at the end of his trial. The child has been put out with or as the garbage, a trash body translated into the outside—inside of the paternal empire. What is important to retain, I guess, is that the parental maneuver was carried out in order to silence ... Franz Kafka. Instead of finishing him off, however, the dislodging act completed another operation: that of starting up a new litterature, a new dawn. It had been a long night of lobbing senseless utterance into the bin of writing remains.

The traumatic tremors remained with the inner-outed nuisance—nonsense child poet. But something utterly regressive—affirmative happened in the crowded space of closed parentheses—something burst out from the walls closing in, clamping down under parenthetical supervision. First, Franz wraps up primal trauma time before his transcending the prison house of early age yet not let go: "Even years afterward I suf¬fer the huge man, my father, the ultimate reason at all and take me out of bed in pavlatche, and that consequently I was concerned" (119–20).

The timer is set to incite the phantom looking for his son, in order to carry his ness, his dead-meat-being, crushable serving a sentence, outside yet within recourse. The phantom raid could occur on reason—"fast ohne Grund," practically has no grounds for the kidnapping—or double—blindedness of such an assert

double-blindedness of such an assertion—its chilling contemporary feel. In the vote to reason—there is still some reason could have struck the "almost." Instead the quiver of the abused, the confessing the docile—a concession loaded on the at the same time, a chiasmic switch. The whole episode had been generated Grund—the groundlessness of positing of the arbitrary pump of language as home-based Republican Party wielded constitutive abuses of power. The son's is only a pretend pipeline to substance. kid like an attack helicopter, is packing decision and sudden political action, him into the holding pen of penal service—held in place, enforcing the architect mainmise—a hands-on relation to being a banister or some sort of gate or Kafka's characters crash into when he's knocked down—or when they give up, going down for a man from the country in "Before the
one would look further into suspicious wetting, gushing, language spilling and punishment, smack packs that are unequivocally the signatory of the "Letter," he does not easily no other way of getting peace and the remembered nighttime drama "as up a child and their effect on me." The reason say I was quite obedient afterward at a.

Hardly, having been brought up or rather in the biblical history of the name and its servants, bowed by law to a stance of non-sense and punishment created the child: "What was for me a matter of course." The emergence contours to be at stake in the experience of the child "Selbstverständlich." Self of course). The coemerging contours are intransITIVE to the articulation of the senseless are neuter of disposal and punishment. Rightly translated as "carried out like the trash," a recurrent fear. Gregor's body is unceremoniously the child has been put out with or as into the outside-inside of the paternal. The irony and double-blindedness of such an assertion should not be lost on us, beyond its chilling contemporary feel. In the end, "almost" gives the vote to reason—there is still some reason for the violence, or the letter writer could have struck the "almost." Instead, the mark of approximation delivers the quiver of the abused, the confession of the exhausted, the caving in of the docile—a concession loaded on the dock of "almost."

At the same time, a chiasmic switch occurs in the rhetoric of the plaint. The whole episode had been generated by the articulation of "fast ohne Grund"—the groundlessness of positing, drawing the water that was funneled through no grounds, irrigating and irritating supervised language usage. The child, by historical and philosophical tradition, deprived of reason, had almost no reason to clamor for water. The episode in its entirety, trailing traumatic residue, appears to reside in the terroristic revelation of the arbitrary pump of language associated with unlimited authority—a home-based Republican Party wielding the means by which to deploy constitutive abuses of power. The son's language drips, whimpers, drops with only a pretend pipeline to substance. Father's language, hovering over the kid like an attack helicopter, is packed with the power punch of strategic decision and sudden political action, swooping down on the kid, throwing him into the holding pen of penal servitude, outside the system but firmly held in place, enforcing the architectural grip of what Lyotard will call the mainmise—a hands-on relation to filiation and language. There must have been a banister or some sort of gate or support that night, the structure that Kafka's characters crash into when it's all over and they put themselves down—or when they give up, going down, in blindness and fatigue like the man from the country in "Before the Law." The banister figures in Kafka's
drawings, holding back the stick figures that look away from you on the
cover of many of his published stories.

The narrated episode launches the Kafkan world of language loss and
fearful reprisal: “That was only a small beginning,” writes the narrator, “but
this feeling of being nothing that often dominates me ... comes largely
from your influence” (120). The child could have used “a little encourage­
ment, a little friendliness” in addition to “a little keeping open of my road,”
instead of which the father blocked it “for me though of course with the
good intention of making me take another road.” Father wanted Kafka to
be a man, like him, or like the image of regularized virility to which he was
partisan. Franz was taught to march up and down the living room in solitary
military formation, saluting smartly; he was prodded to eat heartily; he was
urged to drink beer with his meals; he was made to prattle father’s favorite
expressions—all scenes of a futile schooling of incorporation. Downing
food, throwing up bits of language, choking on the language of the other
that he was consistently forced to swallow. Franz was trained to annex the
narcissistic bulk supplies sent across the room or table by his father. The
supplies, meant to supplement the dependent’s essential deficiency, always
came from the paternal warehouse of Hermann’s needs. So Franz. The child
was encouraged to become the father, to live up to the father; to open and
shut his mouth according to paternal pullies. This may seem like a normal
upbringing to most of you—the pedagogy of swallowing and identification
consolidating and competing with a bully’s narcissistic supply line. Usually,
at some point, the upbringing business makes it big, and one becomes a
more or less efficient import-export branch of the paternal lineage. Maybe
it even happened to some degree for Franz Kafka.

OK. I had broken up a citation with ellipses, sneaking something by
you (a Löwy maneuver). Let me back up and draw some water from those
dots—alpine springwater taken from the regions of the sublime. We left
Franz hanging, feeling his nothingness (“Gefühl der Nichtigkeit”). The
encrypted primal episode, the “kleiner Anfang” (small beginning) is rather
big, irrevocable, leaving the writer hung over with a recurrent Kantian Ge­
fühl, or type of feeling at least that Lyotard says philosophy can never really
handle. The crumbling feeling comes back periodically; it dominates and
oppresses, it takes out the trash that you are, compressing you to the point
of your nothingness. OK, normal enough. Nearly every kid comes with the
upbringing kit comes with the compressor kit. (Though some now claim not to have come equipped with
the kit, never needed it, they’ve had nice childhoods, no Oedipal tracks on
their back, very little “baggage,” they come from unknown to me regions
of childhood-lite. I really don’t get it. Verneinung maybe, they are in up
to their ears in denial, not even a dream hopes, no betraying little aggressor fri­
nies or dismaying colds that make you a yucky food ever to teach you a lesson
not get it—and I sure didn’t get it, that’s not the point so let me return to the me in the cutting room again, splicing
a childhood.) There is the matter of
Opening the sentence like an internal parenthesis, something that the sentence has swa­
I’ll take it from “feeling”:

but this feeling of being nothing that another respect [in anderer Hinsicht]
one [allerdings auch edles und fruchtbare Erbverleihung. (120)

The parenthetical parachute would have
pushed it through, if it weren’t at least partially readable. (Still, unreadability rules
elsewhere, so it can in no case be ruled out that passage to yield the sublime, to crush weight of felt nothingness, which, in his successors) rolls over into a triumphant loss that the sublime had bravely taken on and beat a retreat when facing a stu­
There will have been another track: he
up the tunnel of paternal cruelty to me.
By means of a parenthesis, a parent-p. feeling—is it überhaupt, in any way, a
other viewpoint. “Nothingness” gives in:
fruitfulness—“sich edles und fruchtbarer near extinction—read the Third Crisis
itself, moving into the field of surviva­
Not only has the trash been recycled
am ugly created the beautiful”—in this
it has turned organic. The relentless a
fertilized this child. In some respects up­
upbringing restating a version of the
Kafka, however, sets his sights elsewhe...
that look away from you on the figues.

the Kafkan world of language loss and ill beginning," writes the narrator, "but often dominates me... comes largely to a little encouragement: "a little opening of my road," it "for me though of course with the mother road." Father wanted Kafka to of regularized virility to which he was pushed and down the living room in solitary; he was prodded to eat heartily; he was made to prattle father's favorite schooling of incorporation. Downing choking on the language of the other swallow, Franz was trained to annex the room or table by his father. The child's essential deficiency, always Hermann's needs. So Franz, the child, to live up to the father, to open and pullies. This may seem like a normal gogy of swallowing and identificationully's narcissistic supply line. Usually, makes it big, and one becomes a branch of the paternal lineage. Maybe Franz Kafka.

with ellipses, sneaking something by up and draw some water from those are the regions of the sublime. We left ness ("Gefuhl der Nichtigkeit"). The Anfang" (small beginning) is rather long over with a recurrent Kantian Ge- tward says philosophy can never really back periodically; it dominates and you are, compressing you to the point tough. Nearly every kid comes with the claim not to have come equipped with nice childhoods, no Oedipal tracks on you from unknown to me regions it. Verneinung maybe, they are in up to their ears in denial, not even a dead cat to have ruined life's puffed-up hopes, no betraying little aggressor friends or angry looks or lapsing nannies or dismaying colds that make you miss birthday parties, no hunger or yucky food ever to teach you a lesson from finitude's kitchen? As I said, I don't get it—and I sure didn't get it, the mythically happy childhood, which is not the point so let me return to the three points, the ellipses that had me in the cutting room again, splicing the tape, reviewing fragments of a childhood.) There is the matter of a dominant feeling of nothingness. Opening the sentence like an internal canyon, another perspective appears, something that the sentence has swallowed. Here's how it goes unedited. I'll take it from "feeling":

but this feeling of being nothing that often dominates me (a feeling that is in another respect [in anderer Hinsicht] admittedly, also a noble and fruitful one [allerdings auch edles und fruchtbare Gefuhl]) comes largely from your influence. (120)

The parenthetical parachute would be lifeless and merely scandalous if it didn't point elsewhere and instigate some sort of philosophical buoyancy to push it through, if it weren't at least partially identifiable and hence somewhat readable. (Still, unreadability rules in Kafka more intently even than elsewhere, so it can in no case be ruled out.) Terror is shown in this primal passage to yield the sublime, to crush the self-escalating subject under the weight of felt nothingness, which, in Kant (to the considerable horror of his successors) rolls over into a triumphalizing account, recuperating the losses that the sublime had bravely tackled. Like Kant, Kafka decides to back off and beat a retreat when facing a stupefying abyss. He rewrites the scene. There will have been another track: he lays it and lays on it. In sum, he opens up the tunnel of paternal cruelty to meet the expanse of the ethical sublime. By means of a parenthesis, a parenthood, or parent-antithesis. The feeling—is it überhaupt, in any way, a feeling?—has "another respect," another viewpoint. "Nothingness" gives way to the sentiment of nobility and fruitfulness—"auch edles und fruchtbare Gefuhl." Crushed to the point of near extinction—read the Third Critique—something bounds back, corrects itself, moving into the field of survival that confers a sense of nobility.

Not only has the trash been recycled and upgraded Nietzsche-style ("I am ugly created the beautiful"—in this case upgraded to the sublime), but it hasturned organic. The relentless attack on the psyche has ennobled and fertilized this child. In some respects, as said, this is the story of a normal upbringing restating a version of the sublime politics of child pedagogy. Kafka, however, sets his sights elsewhere. In its own way, the text announces
that it's rhetorical payback time, turning against everybody and everything it will have called up for inspection. Throughout the elaboration, the whole drama between father and son is said to hinge on and condense to Franz Kafka's ability to seed, his "fruitfulness" (Fruchtbarkeit). His redemption is staked on his Fruchtbarkeit, on the reproductive valor that would spring from father's colonizations. But there is one fertility treatment only, as we now learn, and it is organized around the memorable scene of discipline. The unintelligible punishment has borne fruit, has ennobled and enabled him, in part because of the power supplement of . . . nothingness.

The child has been raised. Razed and raised at once, he is on his way, limping with something like pride of ownership—a small beginning ("ein kleiner Anfang") or the beginning of the little one (German—well, my German—allows for this inverted stretch), the beginning of smallness, of all the specks and stains that in Kafka take the house down. If you roll through his texts, you'll notice that Kafka always gets small in order to attack, always marks the spot or jot that unravels the empire of the dominator. The fleck on which Kafka's military maneuvers depends stains the paternal metaphor, polluting literary transcendence and the house of metaphysics. There is always a crumble, a fleck of dreck, a piece of newspaper, a fabric stain to unhinge the proper of a highly invested property. Kafka does not inflate his tropes or troops but thins out or waters down the method of attack. Abraham, our primal father ("Erzvater"), is taken down for a piece of dust. His authority in Kafka's parable disintegrates by means of a mote. The strategic resilience of the Kafkan defense plan resides in its ability to shrivel the scene of terror, to introduce nano-responses to the encroachment of sublime terror, the incalculable adversary.

The machinery of the offending detail on which the Kafkan world of conflict runs produces a swarm of unauthorized narratives and barely legitimate protests. Still, this was his way of meeting head-on with the master narrative that Hermann—Herr Mann, Mr. Man, the Man, Hermann—embodied, which is to say Franz Kafka rode his nothingness, accepted the existential crumb, traded the flex for a fleck, took the cut in domestic approval ratings, embraced the downsize, and became the first world-class laureate of failure. He taught us how to lose, how to count, to count on the losses as a matter of course, without looking for hidden recompense or transcendental loopholes or last-minute turnarounds. The meek in Kafka do not inherit the earth but are of earth: they rule the dirt. Let me get this right. They rule nothing. At most, on especially good days, they roll in the dirt. They receive little, no pay dirt, no genealogical entry ticket. Inheritance itself is too grand a narrative, untransmissible. He wrote the book on losing the inheritance.
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For all the guilt he accumulates, the entries in his registers provide room
only for no—fault economies of disadvantage and loss. At the same time, he
lists a miniscule supplement of profit when accounting for the losses.
When Kafka parenthesizes the gains of terror, he not only repeats a Kant-
ian gesture of pulling in recuperative cuts but manages to offer thanks, some-
how, and to embrace his "castration." The feeling of the symbolic destruction
is also, parenthetically, a noble and fruitful feeling, opening up the restricted
arcissism of the martyr, the categorical affirmation of one's own diminished
encies in the face of the Other. Still, at any point the feeling of nobility
an exceed itself, can turn into the steaming exaltation of revenge. In Kafka,
nobility puts a limit on the feeling it nevertheless announces. Nobility im-
plies, in a more Goethean strain, renunciation—a feeling that does without
feeling's intent potentialities. In Goethe's language, renunciation is called
Entsagung, a kind of de—saying, if that's possible to imagine, that corresponds
in the "Letter" to Kafka's inaugural phrase of nonsaying. The letter had begun
renunciation—I cannot speak, I can barely write, I cannot win. It seeks
only the truth of a possible suspension, a truce; it goes after another logic
of the enemy combatant raised on renunciation, pummeled by fate from
start to finish, yet able to take a cut from improbable winnings. It provides
another version of Kleist's famous text, Die Hermannsschlacht—Hermann's
massacre or "The Hermann Battle."

The "Letter," a peace offering collated with a declaration of war, takes off
from the premises of losing ground. It does not seek to establish or insti-
tute anything but a tenuous peace, a withdrawal of forces that could at best
hope for a perpetual standoff, what Kafka calls Versöhnung, or some sort of
nonaggression pact, an attempted reconciliation (elsewhere, other German
scholars and I have pointed out the Sohn [son] in the word Versöhnung).
There is another thing going on. If the father's night strike proved not
only catastrophic but in some way fruitful, as well as ennobling, then Kafka's
description unavoidably enters a scene of insemination when he says and
writes that he bears the fruits of the encounter. This is why, on this other
level, he must become in the letter a Löwy, and to the letter, namely, he must
become the "wife" of the father. But, as said, all this is fairly normal. If he
has become his father's demeaned mate, put out like the trash or a dog, his
aim is not to cheat his destiny but, in a distinctly Goethean way, to ennoble
it. (Leave it to me to consider the pornological cast of this nocturnal screen
memory and to drag Goethe into the script [I can say at least this for myself: he
was one of Kafka's beloved superstar writers, along with Kleist].) The
traumatic episode says, "You did something to me that revealed to me my
nothingness." The disclosure of his nothingness proceeds from a narrated
confluence of water, gushing, spurting, harming, issuing from what appears
to flood the scene of a spermatic logic. The father’s body is all over the place;
Kafka has him pressing against the corpus, spreading his flesh over a larger
measure of world. Other episodes show the child to be proud of the father’s
naked body—for instance, at the pool—and at the same time he is scared,
shy about revealing his own body, its puny contours and breakability. The
double-takes prompted by the appeal of the paternal body and its suffocating menace, hunger and satiation, desire and horror, run subtly through
the text. I am not particularly happy with the turn this interpretation of the
passage has taken, but I am mostly blameless. I could stay with the restrictive thematic line that deals solely with the maltreatment and hounding to which Franz was prey. I can even handle the ambivalence and vacillation that abuse routinely engenders. Yet, the way Kafka aligns disruptive allegations within the frame of description makes one slow down and crawl under newly oppressive spaces. I would not be forced to crouch and strain in this way if our letter writer had not included—excluded the parenthetical bit about the noble feeling and fruitfulness, perverting an otherwise perfectly tranquility—seeming semantic field, shaking it up so as to expose uneven valences and intrusive tropes of encounter.

The fantasy of the son figured as the wife of the father comes from the culture that has brought us Dr. Schreber and the Rat Man. In itself—and given a larger contextual milieu in which it situates the stakes of desire’s disturbances—this setup suggests nothing abnormal. The motherly back-up that Franz often seeks comes in weakly, even when going strong. In some instances, Kafka’s mother gets taken up by the paternal supercluster, and the maternal goes missing or is structurally upgraded, if continually sidelined. Franz becomes her surrogate or fills her place. The logic of displacement—she moves around much as he moves in and out of maternal and sororal locations—is something that Franz allows for, and under some narrative lighting techniques he has Mother assume the posture of hidden law when Father is seen as a mere police dog.

But for the most part, Mother only intensifies the power of the father by hiding out in protective precincts—she functions as a decoy that draws the children toward her so that Father can close in on them. She’s the trap and trip-up for the child, capable only of installing new and improved registers of ambivalence. The child assumes it has found sanctuary, but then Mother turns out to be another mask, quite simply, of Father. She is harmful to the extent that she appears to hold down a discreet district in the fantasy of household harmlessness, the nudge of comfort. “Mother unconsciously

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The child, our narrator surmises, b

even when she manifested kindness

safety zone:

She loved you too much and was too

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Mother became ever more closely al

concerned, she always kept her inde
played the part of a beater during a hunt” (132). Mother, on the home front, set up the autoimmune lab by voiding defense codes that the child might otherwise have been capable of developing. The child might have been able to map a defense, toughen up with a vigilant sense of clarity and enemy reconnaissance had Mother not operated an interruptive machine that served to confuse and weaken her ward:

Even if your method of upbringing might in some unlikely case have set me on my own feet by means of producing defiance, dislike, or even hate in me, Mother canceled that out again by kindness, by talking sensibly (in the confusion of my childhood she was the very prototype of good sense and reasonableness), by pleading for me; and I was again driven back into your orbit, which I might perhaps otherwise have broken out of, to your advantage and to my own. (132)

Mother, advancing as protectress and assuming the pose of reason, diminishes the child’s chances of stocking up on healthy reactivity. She knocks down the transmitters and crucial detection system that ought to have kept the child on alert. Hers is a position sometimes rendered in blunt warfare, resembling the disposition and complicity of counterespionage and whatever blows out bridges or telecommunication centers. But Mother is more stealthy than all that noisemaking, being a Lówy. She fills all the roles of pharmakon insofar as she poses as remedy but dispenses the poison and also turns into the family scapegoat in the battle of wills:

You were always affectionate and considerate toward her, but in this respect you spared her just as little as we spared her. We all hammered ruthlessly away at her, you from your side, we from ours. It was a diversion, nobody meant any harm, thinking of the battle that you were waging with us and that we were waging with you, and it was Mother who got the brunt of all our wild feelings. (139)

The child, our narrator surmises, had been right in being wary of Mother even when she manifested kindness and held out the promise of a secure safety zone:

She loved you too much and was too devoted and loyal to you to have been for long an independent spiritual force in the child’s struggle. This was, incidentally, a correct instinct of the child, for with the passing of the years Mother became ever more closely allied to you; while where she herself was concerned, she always kept her independence, within the narrowest limits,
delicately and beautifully, and without ever essentially hurting you, still, with
the passing of the years she more and more completely, emotionally rather
than intellectually, blindly adopted your judgments and your condemnations
with regard to the children, particularly in the case—certainly a grave one—of
Ottla. (138–39)

Annexed to the paternal mover, whether exceeding or consolidating his pow­
ers, Mother, increasingly fused, is allied to the enemy camp. Where was
Franz to turn?

The Good Loser

Chapter 5

The Battle of
On Being Cheaf

The brothers, as we said,
mark a kind of nonorigin, phantom
into the Löwy name. Only sister Ell
siblings. Ottla, the other sister, kep­
ted quickly. Elli, she breaks away. Eis,
Kafkan "almost": "Elli is the only ex­
of a breaking away from your orbit."
loser beginning, she suddenly push
only one, save the eventual grandchil
ramp on the paternal systems of ty
child she was the last person I should
a clumsy, tired, timid, bad-temperer
lazy, greedy, miserly child . . . " (140).
closey identifies and who leaves his
marriage, a springboard to a histor
question arises. Why is marriage, a co
a refuge from the encroachment of the
exalted party in this text? So desperat
a surprisingly rigorous ambivalence to
comes to Elli, he is unable to shake o
riage. Still, when Franz Kafka finds a n

ally in the text.