

READING KAFKA: OR, IF YOU FIND ODRADEK, KILL IT

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to problematize allegorical readings of Kafka. Ever since the first publication of his works, commentators have constructed escapes from his difficult texts into external systems of thought, starting with Max Brod's negative theology and continuing today with unreflective applications of poststructuralist theory. I will focus on "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" (1917) as a case study, though I will also touch on *Die Verwandlung* (1915), "Von den Gleichnissen" (1922) and the aphorisms. Allegorical readers of "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" have sought to tame the text and its wild creature, Odradek, by establishing stable correspondences between text and theory, replacing Odradek, in all its unknowability, with some element of their own understanding. Some readers have been more careful, building their allegories based on the coherence of the text instead of its correspondence to an external system of ideas: Wilhelm Emrich was first among them. Through an analysis of Emrich's reading of "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," I will show that this self-allegorizing route, too, is insufficient.

Using Kafka's aphorisms, I will argue that an interpretation of his works must deal only with their *sensus literalis*. Their truth is autonomous: independent of reference, undetermined by a conceptual framework. While my analysis is indebted to Deleuze and Guattari, I will move beyond their interpretation of the animal stories as failed escapes and show how Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis and Odradek's ontological evolutions point the way to a new kind of experiential and textual truth. Kafka's texts serve as markers of ecstatic transformation that Kafka sought in

the possibilities of writing. Our task as readers is not to reduce these deeply ambiguous flights of language to representation but to engage creatively those very becomings that reading Kafka entails.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations will be used throughout the text to refer to Kafka's works in the critical edition: *Franz Kafka: Schriften Tagebücher: Kritische Ausgabe*. Ed. Jürgen Born, Gerhard Neumann, Malcom Pasley and Jost Schillemeit. Frankfurt a.M: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002.

DzL: *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*.

NSF I: *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*.

NSF II: *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*.

P: *Der Proceß*.

S: *Das Schloß*.

T: *Tagebücher*.

1.0 INTRODUCTION: READING KAFKA

The purpose of this paper is to make reading Kafka a problem. The majority of the literature about his work is dedicated to ‘solving’ it, but I wonder if doing so is a reasonable or even desirable goal. I am by no means the first to question this pursuit. There is a long tradition of Kafka scholarship leading back to Walter Benjamin that, instead of closing in on the ‘real’ meaning, tries to open up a space of exploration, not to lead out of confusion, but to lead straight into the text in all its complexity. On the other hand, there is also a slightly longer line leading back to Max Brod that always claims to know what Kafka really means, what he wanted to say, and what he would have written. It is always against his friends that Kafka must be defended. Benjamin writes: “zwei Wege gibt es, Kafkas Schriften grundsätzlich zu verfehlen. Die natürliche Auslegung ist der eine, die übernatürliche ist der andere” (“Franz Kafka” 806). It should be noted how little middle ground this admonishment leaves. By Susan Sontag’s time, we find that Kafka “has been subjected to a mass ravishment by no less than three armies of interpreters. Those who read Kafka as a social allegory ... as a psychoanalytic allegory ... as a religious allegory” (8). Both Benjamin and Sontag point to the inadequacy of a set of interpretative attempts I will call allegories of correspondence (metaphors). They work by constructing bridges to ‘carry us over’ onto the solid ground of some more or less explicit system of meanings. They escape the problems of the text by escaping the text itself in favor of the reader’s ideological homeland, wherever that may be. The problems with this technique are

obvious. Its results have far more to do with the theoretical framework it applies than with the text it ostensibly explains, and the proliferation of possible destinations over time lends an arbitrary tone to the entire enterprise. Such readings ignore completely the Kafka who wrote: “Metaphern sind eines in dem Vielen, was mich am Schreiben verzweifeln läßt,”¹ the Kafka who, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, “deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation” (T 875; *Kafka* 22).

The allegorical tradition is not without its own creativity, however, and has developed new tools over time. Beginning with Wilhelm Emrich, we can identify the use of allegories of coherence (metafiction) in understanding Kafka. Recognizing the problems of external allegorization, such attempts hope to preserve allegory as a means for solving Kafkan texts by using material internal to his oeuvre. For such readers, not all of Kafka’s works are created equal: some serve to ‘decode’ the secret messages the rest contain. Though more subtle (or more insidious) than the strategy of correspondence, the coherence approach bears a striking similarity to it. Both approaches believe in a meaning that justifies and explains the words on the page, but exists in a dimension supplementary to them. The reader’s work, then, is to gain access to this secret dimension somehow. In it, one might find Freud or God, or even some decontextualized piece of Kafka’s own writing. Because the first variety of allegory has been roundly criticized, I will focus on the latter in this paper, which has not to my knowledge ever been recognized as such. What we must realize is that there is no such transcendent, secret plane above Kafka’s words, only the multitude of those words themselves, none rising up to decipher the others. This

¹ Let me not neglect the rest of this passage, which may seem to contradict me here and in much of the rest of my argument. Kafka bemoans “die Unselbständigkeit des Schreibens” and its “Abhängigkeit.” Compared to the “eigengesetzliche[n] Verrichtungen” of daily life, “das Schreiben ist hilflos, wohnt nicht in sich selbst, ist Spaß und Verzweiflung” (T 875). Writing, therefore, lacks any claim to its own truth. But these complaints are no more than a temporary lapse of faith that Kafka, a month later, triumphantly overcomes. He celebrates the “vielleicht erlösender Trost des Schreibens,” which, the more it rejects everyday activity “desto unabhängiger [. . .] desto mehr eigenen Gesetzen der Bewegung folgend, desto unberechenbarer, freudiger, steigender ihr Weg” (T 892).

is not the end of the reader's work, but its proper beginning. While Kafka scholarship has almost always privileged the poetics of Kafka's production, this paper will focus much more on the aesthetics of his reception. "Es ist uns, *als müßten wir die Erscheinungen durchschauen*": this is the problem we must solve (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §90). Our problem, not Kafka's.

In this paper, therefore, I will investigate a short story that has often been used as a key to the rest of Kafka's work, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters." I will show how such an approach is inadequate and explore how it can be read and actively engaged without interpreting, or, if one prefers, interpreted immanently without allegorizing. Of course, I could hardly claim that I am approaching this text without my own theoretical framework. The question is not 'whether or not' theory, but 'which and how.' Those who would deny the use of some theory are being facetious or naïve. The approaches I outlined above are examples not only of how not to use theory, but also of which theories not to use. It is perhaps inevitable that if a reader approaches a text with the hopes of 'applying' a theory to it, the result will be a drab allegorization of that theory. Similarly, despite their usefulness and insight in other areas of life, Freud, Marx, and Maimonides will likely always tell us more about the unconscious, the economy, and God than they will about Kafka. In this paper, I will creatively appropriate some of the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari. My use of their terms is much like their own – suggestive, allusive, but ultimately pragmatic. My reading of "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" is indebted to their theorizing, but almost completely unrelated to their interpretation of *Odradek² as an overly abstract,

² One of the central difficulties of this story is that its most important and interesting figure, 'Odradek,' is ontologically unstable. Explaining this instability will be an important part of this paper. By the end of the story, 'Odradek' is a character and Odradek is the proper name that refers to it, but at the beginning, 'Odradek' is a word, and words do not have names. In order to avoid eliding this confusion, I will refer to this entire 'Odradek' complex as *Odradek and reserve Odradek, unmarked, for its moments as a character, so far as they can be distinguished.

“transcendent and reified” machine, which they abandon to “symbolic or allegorical exegeses” (*Kafka* 86). A brief look at the problems at the root of allegorical applications of theory might show how a selective use of Deleuze and Guattari’s theories can respond to earlier critical difficulties.

At the heart of the allegorical enterprise is the exercise of naming, an issue thematic in both the story I will discuss and the major readings of it. The asking and giving of names is always caught up in a struggle for power. ‘What is your name?’: the first question a police officer asks a suspect, the sly question of Moses at the burning bush. For Moses, the name of God was more than just a handy moniker—he trusted it to convey God’s essence. When Moses asked to know the name of God, he was seeking the power that comes with the knowledge of this name, an Archimedean point from which to understand and perhaps move God. The cop is not so different—a name affirms the identity of a subject through action and allows for legal responsibility. The story “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” centers around a similar issue: what is *Odradek? Equivalently: what is its true name? What does it mean? The narrator sets up the debate around the word without first making it clear to what, if anything, it refers (is it Germanic? perhaps Slavic?). Nevertheless, we discover, there is something called Odradek: a strange creature, whimsical and monstrous, somewhere between organic and inanimate, living and dead. Even more surprisingly, this *thing*, whatever it may be, is seen passing through the spaces of the narrator’s home, caught even in brief and rasping conversation. What question could it be asked, if not: “Wie heißt du denn?” (DzL 284). Though it is tiny, childlike and, indeed, completely non-threatening, the narrator ends this brief tale in consternation over it. Will it live forever, even as he must die?

The end of the story is, paradoxically, where the giving of names begins. Readers who are still caught up in the search for the real, secret meaning, unsurprisingly, have nothing left but to reproduce the gestures of those in the story who try to find the *etymon* for *Odradek. My summary was full of questions, however, because the story itself contains few answers, particularly for this central issue. So critics simply rename *Odradek, rechristen it, and consecrate it to the service of whatever it is they serve. Since Brod, *Odradek has gone by many names. But an *Odradek by any other name is not a part of our story and cannot concern us here. One might reprove these readers: “Du hast nicht genug Achtung vor der Schrift und veränderst die Geschichte” (P 295). We are back to the allegory of correspondence. Emrich’s allegory of coherence functions differently and in a much more nuanced way, but finally by the same mechanism. This argument will be my focus in Section 2.

“Real art has the capacity to make us nervous,” Sontag argues; “interpretation makes art manageable, conformable” (8). Kafka’s work, perhaps, to a degree that has only rarely, if ever, been matched, destabilizes our conventions of reading and understanding the world and the text. It causes real discomfort. If we agree with Sontag that interpretation “indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else,” then we can readily understand why (10). When asking for the name fails, as it inevitably does with Kafka, allegorizing readers simply start baptizing. If the first name was insufficient to nail the thing down, we must shackle it with another. The critical paranoia that the renaming process soothes is like a seasickness on solid ground: “Die Pappel in den Feldern, die Ihr den ‘Thurm von Babel’ genannt habt, denn Ihr wußtet nicht oder wolltet nicht wissen, daß es eine Pappel war, schaukelt

wieder namenlos und Ihr müßt sie nennen ‘Noah, wie er betrunken war’” (NSF I 89-90).³ When we lose grip on reality or lose control of a text, when we cannot assign fixed and lasting meanings, we become worried. When the text will not answer us (“Von mir willst Du den Weg erfahren?”), we try to reestablish our power over it by renaming (NSF II 530).

Deleuze and Guattari know this problem well. They criticize Freud for an equivalent insistence on renaming in his analysis of dreams and neuroses and for his representational approach to the unconscious: “it was already decided from the very beginning that animals could serve only to represent coitus between parents,” “the psychoanalysts ... did not understand, or did not want to understand ... they do not see the reality of a becoming-animal, that it ... represents nothing” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 28, 259).⁴ But the usefulness of these theorists extends beyond a purely negative critique. They offer concepts that can be used to follow the operations of a text: not safe places to escape to but aids in sticking to the writing at hand.⁵ One might also say that their theory does not lend itself to allegorization, but, truly speaking, few do. An allegorizing application of a theory is always a double betrayal. The rhizome allegorized no more resembles a rhizome than *Odradek resembles *Odradek renamed. But this has not prevented misuses of theory in the past. There is a fine line between allegory and productive use, and my argument will necessarily entail a certain amount of brinksmanship. The danger of

³ Somewhat later in the same work, Kafka brings out the reassuring value of renaming and the exercise of power that accompanies it: “Mond [. . .] warum bist Du nicht mehr so übermüthig, wenn ich Dich nenne ‘vergessene Papierlaterne in merkwürdiger Farbe’” (NSF I 102).

⁴ See their discussions of Freud’s case study on the Wolf-Man and his case study on Little Hans (*A Thousand Plateaus* 26-38, 256-259). In a particularly germane critique, they note that “Freud counted on the word to reestablish a unity no longer found in things” (28). This interpretative gesture is not limited to dream texts or to psychoanalysis. When there is no transcendent meaning to guarantee the unity of a text, it can be (falsely) reestablished with a word, a noun, a name.

⁵ Indeed, reading their works is scarcely less threatening to traditional interpretive techniques than reading Kafka. *A Thousand Plateaus* is structured around lines similar to the ones I will use here: “productive connections between immanently arrayed material systems without reference to an external governing source” (Smith). Because of this important distinction, a certain amount of strange terminology is inevitable. I will try to introduce new terms in the footnotes and explain my usage of them. I have not attempted to import Deleuze and Guattari’s theories wholesale, only to take what is useful for the specific end of reading this story.

abusing both the theory and the text will always be present, but it can be avoided. Let us begin with the text.

1.1 “DIE SORGE DES HAUSVATERS”

Before taking a wider view of things, we must look at the story up close, paragraph by paragraph. It begins with a short, parodic introduction, staging the same sort of pedantic hermeneutical debate that it has in fact provoked. Etymological sallies go back and forth, seeking firm ground in the face of their object’s escape by positing imaginary prehistories of the word that first hoped to catch hold of it – its name. “Die einen” propose their theses; “andere” propose contrary ones. Much like that scene in *Der Proceß*, in which the parable “Vor dem Gesetz” is analyzed, this project ends only in “Unsicherheit ... aber läßt wohl mit Recht darauf schließen, das keine zutrifft,” because neither camp finds the meaning of the word that would justify its claims (295-303, DzL 282). Nevertheless, the debate rages on – clearly, for both ‘die einen’ and the ‘andere[n],’ what is important is only the word’s usage in a certain critical game. *Odradek itself has become the beetle in the box (its first of many metamorphoses), seeming to cancel out of their considerations: “dann fällt der Gegenstand als irrelevant aus der Betrachtung heraus” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §293).

But all the while, the reverse process is enacted, as *Odradek transforms from a “Wort” discussed by the narrator to a “Wesen” he describes and finally to an embodied character with which he interacts (282). We see the progression reflected in the pronoun use. In the fourth

paragraph, *Odradek becomes “er”;⁶ the “es” of the previous paragraphs had reduced *Odradek completely to its (grammatically neuter) mediations as “Wort,” “Wesen,” and “Gebilde” (283). Now, at the second station of its evolution, the ‘being’ is described in some detail, in terms of its contents. It has thread, a spool, a star, and a few rods. At the same time, however, these descriptions carry us farther and farther from any ostensible explanation. *Odradek “sieht zunächst aus wie eine flache sternartige Zwirnpule” (282). There is no visual concord among the terms of this depiction. Moreover, the narrator’s account offers what *Odradek is provisionally similar to and not *Odradek itself. Description fails to catch the being, just as etymology failed to catch the word. Moreover, just as the word lacked a “Sinn,” the being lacks a “Ziel,” or “Tätigkeit,” that might explain its presence (284). Its presence, however, has increased. Unlike the word that lies flat upon the page, *Odradek can now stand upright, “wie auf zwei Beinen” (283).

In the third paragraph, *Odradek becomes a “Gebilde”: an complex entity. But as a nominalization of *bilden*, the word suggests a constructed complex, something put together (283). Appropriately, it is here that the narrator takes up *Odradek’s form and the overall impression that it makes: “[es] hätte früher irgendeine zweckmäßige Form gehabt und jetzt sei es nur zerbrochen,” though in the end, “nirgends sind Ansätze oder Bruchstellen zu sehen” (283). When “das Ganze” appears in this paragraph, the phrase seems to represent a whole, while at the end of the previous paragraph, it only delimited a collection of incongruous parts. Nevertheless, the narrator has failed to limn the form of this whole (283). In fact, the only suggestion as to its form is a rejected hypothesis about its past. *Odradek “scheint [. . .] in seiner Art

⁶ Though *Odradek is now revealed as ‘he,’ this could as easily (if not more so) mean ‘Odradek’ is a masculine noun as that Odradek is a male creature. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer the *Hausvater* as ‘he’ and *Odradek, in all forms, as ‘it.’

abgeschlossen,” but this is only to say that even the initial attempt to assign it the counterfeit ‘form’ of fracturedness has failed (283). Nevertheless, through the progress of the paragraph *Odradek continues to develop. Not only “aufrecht,” it is now “außerordentlich beweglich” as well (283).

The fourth paragraph begins sharply with the surprising “Er” (283). We finally have *Odradek, though impossible to localize, definitively emplaced in the text, unmediated by any other term. It can finally speak for itself and, when it pleases, it does so, although it seems to feel no compulsion to account for itself that corresponds to its interrogator’s will to knowledge about it. Though the two are not explicitly brought into identification, it seems natural to view Odradek’s interlocutor as a stand-in for the *Hausvater*: the line of inquiry seems to be imagined, or even recalled, by the latter. His questions are the first words of immigration control, regulating the distinctions that *Odradek’s very existence transgresses: Who are you and where do you belong? They are a claim to power over Odradek, marking a concrete confrontation.

“Ich” appears only in the final paragraph, at the kind of apex of the subjectivizing process that has raised *Odradek up from a lowly word on the page to the level of its reader and narrator, the *Hausvater*. The denouement completes the inverse process at a much greater speed, a sudden drop after an almost imperceptible rise. Up to this point, the *Hausvater* has existed only as an incorporeal, overarching narration.⁷ Now he is embodied as a particular presence within the text, presaged by the introduction of the impersonal interlocutor in the previous paragraph. His materialization makes him vulnerable. The *Hausvater* fails to measure up to the rebel word and is cast down and subjected to *Odradek. His defeat is obvious from the first word of this section, “vergeblich”: it characterizes his question and his existence. We see this reflected in the

⁷ One could note that the narrator never identifies ‘himself’ as the *Hausvater*, but this identity is implied by phrases such as “unser Haus” and the narrator’s presumably eponymous worries in the final paragraph (DzL 283).

pronouns as a continual grammatical depreciation of his subjectivity: from “ich” to “mich” and from “mich” to “mir”. His condition devolves from a contemplative relationship to himself (“ich frage mich”) to a comparative one with *Odradek (“daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte”) and is ultimately downgraded to the indirect object of the “Vorstellung” that *Odradek creates (“ist mir eine fast schmerzliche”) (284).

The antiparallel lines along which *Odradek and the *Hausvater* move constitute the action of the story, but this action undercuts their stability as unitary wholes.⁸ They behave instead as fluctuations of two kinds of energies. We might say, then, that both *Odradek and the *Hausvater* come across less as characters than intensities. By ‘intensity’ I mean a degree of presence: *Odradek becomes increasingly present in his transition from word to being and beyond, finally overflowing the boundaries of the text itself. It is not growing in size or increasing the territory under its control at the *Hausvater*’s expense; instead it is as if its temperature is rising until it boils over, while the *Hausvater* cools down toward entropy and death. The system remains constant, it would seem, but the tiny materiality of the signifier ‘Odradek’ explodes into a great deal of energy, while the highly energetic state of the *Hausvater*, as a pure disembodied narration, collapses into a very small amount of mass. An obscure reciprocity between these two figures is already discernible, though it remains indistinct. Their ontological instability, however, is precisely why the operations of naming are doomed to failure.

⁸ Hillmann notes: “Odradek erscheint in diesem streng durchkomponierten Textstück zunächst als Wort, sodann als unbewegliches Ding (es), als bewegliche Gestalt (er), schließlich als Gesprächspartner und endlich sogar als möglicherweise zeitenthobenes Wesen” (200). While this description of *Odradek’s development conflates its steps slightly, the major difference between Hillmann’s account and my own is not the individual steps but the overall status of the progression. Hillmann emphasizes “diese Reihenfolge bedeutet aber keine Entwicklung Odradeks, sondern ist eine Entwicklung der Beschreibung Odradeks” (200). For Hillmann *Odradek is a constant being that poses an epistemological problem. I have approached it as a complex becoming that poses ontological questions. This approach allows new questions about the central relationship of the text beyond those of knowledge. I do not mean to deny the epistemological difficulties of the story—far from it. I believe instead that they are so intractable that there is no productive way to approach them without lapsing into an asking and giving of names.

Renaming *Odradek depends on, or tries retroactively to establish, its unity and consistency as a being, Odradek. But in the text we are not merely given a being called Odradek (a consistent, discrete character), but a becoming (an increasing *Odradek intensity).⁹

Kafka often suggests that a worldview based on discrete subjectivities is insufficient. He condemns the kind of controls with which the *Hausvater* insists on the borders of his ego: “Selbstbeherrschung heißt: an einer zufälligen Stelle der unendlichen Ausstrahlungen meiner geistigen Existenz wirken wollen” (NSF II 119). If the individual is only an arbitrary point on an infinite movement or radiation, than a different kind of measure would be required to conceptualize it, a measure of energy, not of extension. The *Hausvater*’s ‘concerns’ are only a way of relocating himself on this movement, of reindividualizing himself. Worries are always the affects of an individual, reinforcing and relating to its continuation, stability, or predominance. Threatened by annihilation or dissolution in death, the individual reaffirms itself in worry (*Sorge*).

The line between the first four paragraphs and the last one is doubly important. Just as the status of the *Hausvater* hinges around this juncture, from narrator to character, so does the temporality of his analysis. As ‘word,’ *Odradek’s roots are at stake: its “Urbanennung” attempts to explain its presence through a gesture to its past (Scheuer 175). In the description of its elements as ‘being,’ its form as ‘entity,’ or its actions as ‘character,’ it occupies the present of the mind’s eye: how it is, as it (perhaps always) has been. In the last paragraph, however, the *Hausvater* passes into the future tense: “was mit ihm [Odradek] geschehen wird” (284). He turns

⁹ While ‘intensity’ is a key term of Deleuzian philosophy and can be can be applied here in all its richness, I think no more theoretical baggage is necessary than what I have provided.

into himself and withers away,¹⁰ just as *Odradek, so directly present in the fourth paragraph, escapes the text into, as Rilke once wrote, “lauter Unsägliches” (54). In the doubtful terrain of the impending hereafter, the *Hausvater* must necessarily lose; “das entscheidend Charakteristische dieser Welt ist ihre Vergänglichkeit,” and it is in this world that the *Hausvater* has set his store (NSF II 91). While his thread will be cut, *Odradek’s “Zwirnstücke,” though “nur abgerissene,” will not (DzL 282-3). More than its straddling of the organic and inorganic, the natural and constructed, it is its existence outside of human measure that places *Odradek outside of the order of this world.

1.2 “DIE WAHRHEIT DES RUHENDEN”

The *Hausvater* is wounded through his activity and engagement with this world, marked for mortality by *Odradek’s survival: “daran hat [er] sich zerrieben” (284). In the terminology of Kafka’s gnostic aphorisms,¹¹ he has fallen, partaken of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but he has not eaten from the Tree of Life. In one sketch (not included in the final *Aphorismen-Zettelkonvolut*), Kafka makes this disjunction explicit: to each tree belongs its own truth. To the “Baum der Erkenntnis” belongs the “Wahrheit des Tätigen”; to the “Baum des Lebens” belongs the “Wahrheit des Ruhenden” (NSF II 84). “In der ersten,” which we can identify with the fleeting, fallen world and its busy, dying creatures, like the *Hausvater*, “teilt sich das Gute vom

¹⁰ Kafka makes this connection between introspection and death explicit in his diaries: “Ewige Jugend ist unmöglich; selbst wenn kein anderes Hindernis wäre, die Selbstbeobachtung machte sie unmöglich” (T 916).

¹¹These aphorisms are of particular significance to the discussion of this story, as he was working on them from October 1917 through 1918 (with some later additions), between the writing of “Die Sorge des Hausvaters,” most probably in late April, 1917, and its publication in *Ein Landarzt* in 1919 (Binder 230). For a discussion of Kafka and Gnosticism, see Sokel, “Between Gnosticism and Jehovah,” and Corngold, *Lambent Traces* (7-12). I have followed Corngold’s convention of differentiating Kafka’s ‘gnostic’ moments from historical ‘Gnosticism’ with a capital letter (*Lambent Traces* 8).

Bösen” (84). This is a truth that cannot escape its shadow, falsity, and therefore creates oppositions of all kinds, wherever its investigations turn. Truth determined in this way leads to the conflict of meanings with which our story begins. Allegorists of one sort or another further these dichotomous struggles by taking up their opposing banners. They try to win in ‘reality,’ while within the text, the truth of that reality is under attack. They deal with meaning in its everydayness, not under the eternal aspect through which Kafka approaches it. And yet, it is Kafka’s meanings that they try to ascertain. They fail to realize that “in einer Welt der Lüge wird die Lüge nicht einmal durch ihren Gegensatz aus der Welt geschafft, sondern nur durch eine Welt der Wahrheit” (NSF II 82). Truth cannot be won by opposing it to untruth; rather, there is the second, more profound truth that does not belong to the passing “Augenblick,” but to “Ewigkeit” (84). This truth knows “weder vom Guten noch vom Bösen,” because within its light, oppositions are meaningless. It is “nicht anderes als das Gute selbst,” in all its fullness, lacking nothing, self-sufficient (NSF II 84). As Sokel explains, the transition from the “Welt der Lüge” to the “Welt der Wahrheit” is one between “ways of being and experiencing” (“Between Gnosticism and Jehovah” 298). Kafka’s texts, like koans, stand between one condition and the next—they are not, however, mimetic representations of some higher plane.¹² “Unsere Kunst,” Kafka once wrote “ist ein von der Wahrheit Geblendet-Sein: Das Licht auf dem zurückweichenden Fratzensgesicht ist wahr, sonst nichts” (NSF II 127).¹³ This truth is not a mediated process of one thing understanding another. Indeed, it need not entail any

¹² “The act of becoming is a capturing, a possession, a plus-value, but never a reproduction or an imitation [. . .] there is constituted a conjunction of the flux of deterritorialization that overflows imitation which is always territorial” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 13-14). We can find figurations of this “act of becoming” in Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis, in the modulations of the *Odradek and *Hausvater* ‘intensities,’ and in the transformation of consciousness to which these aphorisms refer.

¹³ Kafka also describes this light in its active sense: “Mit stärkstem Licht kann man die Welt auflösen” (NSF II 125). This is the “nicht zerstörende sondern aufbauende Zerstörung der Welt,” a much better model for understanding the second term in these distinctions than another world that transcends this one (NSF II 105).

understanding at all. Kafka's truth is not correspondent (it is not metaphorical or representative) or even coherent (it is not metafictional, granting unity to the various scales of Kafka's production); it is *autonomous*.

My use of this term may seem unusual, but there is no readily available third term to the opposition between correspondent and coherent views of truth. Both sides explain how the truth depends on certain conditions and how, if they are not met, falsity results. As I have argued, the truth of Kafka's texts is independent and unfalsifiable, thus, autonomous. This word delimits not an interesting feature of language, but a hole in it, or better yet, its coastline. One might think of Wittgenstein's gnomic aphorism: "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen" (*Tractatus* §7). Of course, Wittgenstein himself allows that there is more: "es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische" (*Tractatus* §6.522). While these passages are among the most sorely abused of Wittgenstein's writings, they might be illuminated by his own commentary on them. In a letter to Ludwig Ficker, Wittgenstein writes: "mein Werk besteh[t] aus zwei Teilen: aus dem, der hier vorliegt, und aus alledem, was ich nicht geschrieben habe. Und gerade dieser zweiter Teil ist der wichtige" (Baum 32). As Wittgenstein's friend, the architect Paul Engelmann once explained,

Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about. When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant [i.e., the scope and limits of ordinary language], it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean (Janik and Toulmin 191).

Kafka has the same problem: to approach the unspeakable in language. He does so not by delimiting what *can* be said, but by approaching that which 'shows itself': the mystical. If what matters is inexpressible in language, the truth becomes autonomous. To approach the truth is never to arrive at it. We wait and wait, but the "kaiserliche Botschaft" never makes it out of the palace (DzL 280). In one of Kafka's most riddling parables, he describes the uses of language:

“Die Sprache kann für alles außerhalb der sinnlichen Welt nur andeutungsweise, aber niemals auch nur annähernd vergleichsweise gebraucht werden” (NSF II 59). The opposition fits well with Wittgenstein’s, but Kafka’s solution is subtler. We have a phenomenal island in the midst of a vast noumenal sea, but these are not simply the realms of language and silence. One cannot speak or write *comparatively* about the supersensible.¹⁴ Kafka’s language cannot map the ocean of the unutterable. To do so would be an exercise in contradiction, and Kafka, no matter how he has been read, never sought to explain the inexplicable. He puts forward another option, however. *Andeuten* can mean a number of things: to allude or adumbrate, as Kafka certainly does, but also “*mit dem finger auf etwas weisen*” (Grimm). His language is a signpost, pointing outward from the shore, reminding us that our tiny island is not all there is. Readers cannot be concerned with decoding Kafka’s comparisons, with puzzling out his convoluted maps. They must look to where he is pointing.

It may sound as if, in adumbrating his truth, Kafka constructs an opposition between binary and non-binary truths, but this is a simple opposition with complex differences. It is an absurd rivalry, 0 and 1 against the entire field of numbers. The latter term subsumes and consumes the former; the former is at any rate an arbitrary selection and arrangement from the latter’s elements. This sort of contrast is employed heavily in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, between smooth and striated spaces, transcendence and immanence, arborescence and rhizome, another reason why they are useful here.¹⁵ Most explorations of Kafka’s gnosticism depend on a

¹⁴ Similarly, Wittgenstein asserts that religious utterances are not comparative: “Die Reden der Religion sind auch kein *Gleichnis*; denn sonst müßte man es auch in Prosa sagen können” (Waismann 14). Comparative usages of languages, then, are prosaic. Kafka, in literature, finds a way around this limitation, if only partially.

¹⁵ “The root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models: the first operates as a transcendent model and tracing, even if it engenders its own escapes; the second operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map [. . .] we employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 20). The second is thus a ‘constructive destruction’ of the first.

comparison to historical examples he may or may not have been aware of, blinding them to the complexity of these oppositions, which is irreducible to the either/or of traditional Gnosticism.¹⁶ While Sokel contends that “Kafka’s dualism is one of “two diametrically opposed ways of being and experiencing,” not “the more traditional image of two worlds” that it may appear to be, I do not think his argument goes far enough (“Between Gnosticism and Jehovah” 298). There may be two incompatible forms of truth in Kafka, but in the end “verlöscht [. . .] die erste Wahrheit im Licht der zweiten” (NSF II 84). What is ultimately real is not our frail, individual constructions of truth and falsity, but the true, the indestructible: “das Unzerstörbare ist eines, jeder einzeln Mensch ist es und gleichzeitig ist es allen gemeinsam” (NSF II 66). It is a unity and a multitude, a fullness of being, dependent on nothing else. Indeed, “es gibt nichts anderes als eine geistige Welt; was wir sinnliche Welt nennen ist das Böse in der geistigen und was wir böse nennen ist nur eine Notwendigkeit eines Augenblicks unserer ewigen Entwicklung” (NSF II 124). Kafka never describes this “geistige Welt,” nor would attempting to do so be a meaningful activity. In his hands, however, language can make a run on its limits, an “Ansturm gegen die letzte irdische Grenze” (T 878). Only in this way can literature verge on “ein[e] neu[e] Geheimlehre,” a way of speaking to this second, more intensive mode of reality (T 878). To gain this power, it must cease to be about anything else. Thus in Kafka, “language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 23). In this sense, one can understand “Schreiben als Form des Gebetes” (NSF II 354). Writing is not a prayer ‘to’ or ‘of,’ but an intransitive, liminal act: “a stationary flight, a flight of intensity” (Deleuze and

¹⁶ Sokel argues that “Kafka seemed to have been familiar with Gnostic thought both directly and indirectly” on the basis of a book listed in the contents of his library (“Between Gnosticism and Jehovah” 296). My intention is not to argue against Kafka’s awareness of historical Gnosticism, but argue for an approach to his aphorisms that is neither biographical nor historical. Corngold points in this direction, highlighting contrasts between Kafka’s writing and past Gnosticisms, but in his positive comments, he explores a split in Kafka’s works between a higher and a lower father. I have taken a different tack here, because, though the *Hausvater* is clearly a father figure of some sort, he has more in common with Georg and Gregor than Mr. Bendemann or Mr. Samsa.

Guattari, *Kafka* 13).¹⁷ A Kafka aesthetics, therefore, does not try to decide and determine, but to follow this trajectory. The meaning of the ecstatic act of writing—or much better, the reading of it—is equally unpredicated by correspondence or coherence. It cannot entail setting up new boundaries. Reading Kafka, too, must become intensive.¹⁸

To speak to the truth of this story would clearly entail abandoning the branching, specifying and localizing approach of the *Hausvater* (and the critic), which implies an alienation from the fullness and sufficiency of the truth: “Die Wahrheit ist unteilbar, kann sich also selbst nicht erkennen. Wer sie erkennen will muß Lüge sein” (NSF II 69). Such is the ultimate problem with interpretation for Kafka: to explain the truth is to lie. We must try to treat it in the immanent, textual plane of Kafka’s oeuvre, following its movements through the story, the collection, and the whole body of work, never to be caught or contained, even by the seemingly final borders of these five short paragraphs. I hope not to have said anything so far about what this text *means*, even in my direct analysis of it. What enables this rupture is that “writing,” at the very least Kafka’s writing, “has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms to come” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 4-5). Writing about

¹⁷Already in a diary entry of March 28th, 1911, Kafka describes the relation of writing and this other plane or aspect of experience: “hier [im Litterarischen] habe ich allerdings Zustände erlebt (nicht viele) die meiner Meinung nach den [. . .] hellseherischen Zuständen sehr nahestehen, in welchen ich ganz und gar in jedem Einfall wohnte, aber jeden Einfall auch erfüllte und in welchen ich mich nicht nur an meinen Grenzen fühlte, sondern an den Grenzen der Menschlichen überhaupt” (T 34).

¹⁸Kafka’s oft cited description of writing as a form of prayer has gone down easily for most readers of Kafka, but it provokes a strange, albeit obvious question: how does one read a prayer? Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka used his writing to “oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it” and “arrive at a perfect and unformed expression, a materially intense expression” (*Kafka* 19). Language, like *Odradek (which is surely not language), frees itself from signification by becoming something new, justifying the use of the same term in these seemingly very different circumstances. But Kafka’s intensive writing must be met by an intensive reading, not one that tries to capture or control language. Deleuze describes these opposing strategies quite clearly: “There are two ways of reading a book: you either see it as a box with something inside and start looking for what it signifies, and then if you’re even more perverse or depraved you set off after signifiers [. . .] or there’s the other way: you see the book as a little non-signifying machine, and the only question is ‘Does it work, and how does it work?’” (*Negotiations* 7-8). It is this question I have been trying to answer so far.

Kafka must therefore be a cartography without territory, a map of intensities (the *Hausvater*, *Odradek) and flows (their difficult relationship). To read the “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” cannot mean standing mute and dumbfounded before the text. We must try to follow its operations. Not to speak of *Odradek, however, is better than renaming it.

The reader’s problems, then, cannot be solved by declaring with a grand gesture that *Odradek is a rhizome, much less *différance* (to push the matter *ad absurdum*), or something of that sort. The crucial questions are not ‘Who are you?’ ‘What is your name?’ but ‘What is happening?’ and ‘How?’ *Odradek and the *Hausvater* are two heterogeneous elements caught up in a process that hybridizes self and other, mortal and eternal, subject and object. How that process occurs may well be ‘rhizomically.’¹⁹ Am I allegorizing here? I think not. To say so is not to determine any kind of meaning ($x = y$), but rather to plot a relationship and articulate an understanding of why such determinations are impossible. There is a difference between renaming and describing, between replacing one noun with another and opening up an unending line of adverbs. When reading a text, description is unavoidable, necessary, and desirable, though it always bears the risk of renaming. To call the central process of this text ‘rhizomic’ is merely to argue that thinking the *Hausvater* = the *Hausvater* \neq *Odradek is the *Hausvater*’s own delusion and there is no good reason to replicate it.²⁰ Instead of such identities, we have a

¹⁹ Cf. Deleuze and Guattari’s comments on the relation of the orchid to its pollinating wasp, of the book and the world (*A Thousand Plateaus* 10-11) or, here in 1.3, the relationship between Gregor Samsa’s conscious mind and monstrous body. Kafka’s denial of the final veracity of oppositions is quite common in his writing around this time. It may be hard to believe when he simply states it: “sicher ist mein Widerwille gegen Antithesen,” but one can multiply examples (T 259). See, for example: “Das Leichte ist schwer” (NSF II 88); “Freiheit und Gebundenheit ist im wesentlichen Sinn eines” (89); “Ich bin Ende oder Anfang” (98), etc. His rejects the option “yes or no”; his denial, then, is a ‘no’ that is not opposed to ‘yes’. For lack of a better word, one might call this *mu*: a refusal beyond negation.

²⁰ Kafka once noted: “Ich habe kaum etwas mit mir gemeinsam” (T 622). As a formula for understanding Kafka’s works, $A=A$ is little better than $A=B$.

carefully balanced equation in a dynamic equilibrium that cannot depend on the stability of any of its elements.

Just that delusion causes the *Hausvater's* care ("Sorge") as we move into the last paragraph. "Von einer gewissen Stufe der Erkenntnis an," Kafka wrote during the time between the story's genesis and its publication, "muß Müdigkeit, Ungenügsamkeit, Beengung, Selbstverachtung verschwinden, nämlich dort, wo ich das, was mich früher als ein Fremdes erfrischte, befriedigte, befreite, erhob, als mein eigenes Wesen zu erkennen die Kraft habe" (NSF II 85). *Sorgen*, such as those he lists here, are therefore brought about by a lack of *Erkenntnis*. The *Hausvater's* incomplete and misdirected effort at comprehension, however, brings about a double failure. Firstly, he has not learned to be refreshed by the new and strange, but feels threatened, instead. Secondly, and more importantly, he lacks the power to recognize *Odradek as a part of himself (and vice versa). Both of these failures are understandable. Each, though much more so the second, puts self-identity in peril. With these recognitions "leugnest Du die Welterschöpfung und widerlegst Dich selbst" (85). "Verkenne Dich! Zerstöre Dich!" is Kafka's message, but only "um Dich zu dem zu machen, der Du bist" (NSF II 42). Both self and world are stumbling blocks that prevent recognition of eternal immanence and monist truth.²¹ Several notes in the *Oktavheft H* testify to the obstacles this world and the egos that populate it represent and to Kafka's unwillingness to place faith in an oppositional struggle on this world's terms to overcome them. A different strategy is required that, instead of setting up antagonisms, mobilizes becomings that outmaneuver a simple confrontation of opposites. As for the self, "nicht Selbstabschüttelung sondern Selbstaufzehrung" is required (NSF II 77). In much the same way, the world is "etwas das nur durch seine Zu-ende-führung, nicht durch Verzicht zerstört werden

²¹ Only in Deleuze and Guattari's sense: "PLURALISM = MONISM," or in Kafka's words, which I quoted above, "jeder einzelne Mensch ist es und gleichzeitig ist es allen gemeinsam" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 23, NSF II 66).

kann” (83). The *Hausvater*, by contrast, clings to his ego-self, seeing death as his true end and the exclusive complement to his existence. For Kafka, this worry is the only true tragedy of death: “ein scheinbares Ende verursacht einen wirklichen Schmerz” (NSF II 100). Just as this potent, but only potential epiphany fails the *Hausvater*, it fails the critics who seek to make concrete determinations between what is and what is not, what is true and what is false, and even between what is right and what is wrong, within the story. They miss the dissolution of these distinctions into the becoming of the text.

1.3 UNHEIMLICHES UNGEHEUER

*Odradek—already occupying the failure of the *Hausvater*’s understanding—metamorphoses in the passage to the last paragraph into the failure of his existence. This failure is his wound, which cannot be healed. He seems to value the things that, like himself, must die; they have at least “vorher eine Art Ziel, eine Art Tätigkeit gehabt” (284). They have made something of themselves. The final sentence betrays the cool distance that the narration maintains up to the last section. Though he admits *Odradek “schadet ja offenbar niemandem,” the *Hausvater* cannot help but wince that *he*, the *pater familias*, despite his useful and productive life, must die, while this meaningless git prances on *in saecula saeculorum* (284).

The *Hausvater*’s frustrations may remind the reader, by way of pure negation, of one of the aforementioned aphorisms: “Was ist fröhlicher als der Glaube an einen Hausgott!” (NSF II 128). A ‘*Hausgott*’ would be a god of the household, the spirit of its economy, a *genius loci* occupying that extra dimension supplementary to the house itself. Belief in such a creature is a comforting thought indeed. While the *Hausgott* justifies the authority of the *pater familias*,

grounding it on a spiritual level, *Odradek destabilizes the paternal command and calls its efficacy and purpose into question. Belief in it, as we have seen, is not a happy one at all for the *Hausvater*. The thoughts it conjures are “fast schmerzliche” (284).

*Odradek is literally deterritorialized: it has only “unbestimmter Wohnsitz,” resettling nomadically into other households, unrestricted to any single economy (284). It is always caught in passing, in the liminal and marginal spaces of the house: “auf dem Dachboden, im Treppenhaus, auf den Gängen, im Flur” (282). It is even deterritorialized linguistically: given the failure of the etymological theses, we can affirm that ‘Odradek’ is “ein Wort, das in keiner Sprache verwurzelt ist” (Dierks 55). *Odradek is *unheimlich*, then – not belonging to the father’s home, like the *Hausgott*, but at best merely in it, transitional, fleeting. Indeed, the same line that traces the path from the *Hausgott* to *Odradek seems to run through Freud’s etymological investigation of *Unheimlichkeit*: “aus dem heimatlichen, häuslichen entwickelt sich weiter der begriff des fremden augen entzogenen, verborgenen, geheimen” (Grimm quoted by Freud 249). But, as a metamorphosed *genius loci*, *Odradek markedly possesses an aspect of that “was im Geheimnis, im Verborgenen [. . .] bleiben sollte und hervorgetreten ist” (Schelling, quoted in Freud 248). Nowhere is this clearer than in the fourth paragraph: “wenn man aus der Tür tritt und er lehnt gerade unten am Treppengeländer” (DzL 283). This sudden, uncanny presence must be the most disconcerting moment of Kafka’s short work. In following its development from the unknown word, subject to esoteric debate, to the unimaginable object, somehow invested with life, one never suspects that Odradek will simply materialize in some banal locality, leaning on a banister. We need not follow Freud into the womb here, so to speak, to recognize the importance and specificity of the feeling this staging evokes.

One might say, in a similar vein, that *Odradek is (*un*)*geheuer*. The Grimms note that *geheuer* can be used “*auch in der gegentheiligen bedeutung, wie ungeheuer*” and explicitly connect it to the usage history of *unheimlich*. Certainly, *Odradek seems unthreatening and harmless enough, but in its curious affiliation to the inanimate, it is also clearly monstrous. An identification of *Odradek as an *Ungeheuer* is almost unavoidable, if we consider that the term denotes “*was schutz, sicherheit und trauliches behagen von haus und heim vermissen lässt.*” By contrast the *Geheuer*, the *genius loci*, “*was diese so recht zum bewusstsein bringt*” (Grimm). An *Ungeheuer* is what brings cares to the home.

As an *unheimliches Ungeheuer*, *Odradek, then, deserves comparison to another of Kafka’s fantastic creatures, Gregor Samsa, an “*ungeheuer[es] Ungeziefer*” (DzL 115). This comparison may also serve to illuminate the significance of Kafka’s gnostic reflections for “*Die Sorge des Hausvaters.*” The opposition between Gregor Samsa’s family abode and his wounded, monstrous body, which he overcomes in the scene of his salvific death, strongly calls to mind the relationship of the *Hausvater* to *Odradek. Gregor Samsa’s death in the early morning hours, with the rising sun and the onset of spring, as his pain fades and his heart swells with love, seems not only more sacred, but more enjoyable than the anxious, fretful continuation of the *Hausvater*’s existence. The root of this is Gregor’s conviction “*daß er verschwinden müsse,*” which starkly contrasts with the *Hausvater*’s fear of being outlived (DzL 193).²² The corresponding event for the *Hausvater* to Samsa’s blissful death would be his unification with and acceptance of *Odradek. Just as Gregor’s enlightened passage into the other side of death stands against his entrapment in his body, his room and his family, so *Odradek stands against

²² Here I think Emrich is correct to argue that “Gregor finally does nevertheless free himself from his enslavement by the empirical world. His death is not merely a meaningless annihilation, but a liberating realization. Gregor says, ‘Yes,’ to his own death” (145). The *Hausvater*, then, clearly says no.

the *Hausvater*, who serves as both prisoner and warden in this picture. Gregor's dies into an immanence that abolishes self and other and gives rise, the aphorisms hint, to a new consciousness. Like all of Kafka's transformations and epiphanies, however, this process incorporates a profound ambiguity.²³ The death of the empirical self, as it is portrayed here, cannot be considered, as it so often is, with fear and pity: "diese Auflösung," as Kafka writes in his diaries, "geschieht als eine Apotheose, wo alles was uns am Leben erhält uns entfliegt, aber noch im Entfliegen uns mit seinem menschlichen Licht zum letztenmal bestrahlt" (T125). It is surely this light that illumines Gregor's death. In each of these Kafkan transitions (or transgressions), we can distinguish the positive and negative poles: on the one hand, acceptance and escape, and, on the other, imprisonment and denial. In "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," they are split into separate figures. In Samsa's death, they come together.

Kafka saw the possibility of such transfigurations in writing itself. In a late diary entry, he draws the connection quite clearly: "merkwürdiger, geheimnisvoller, vielleicht gefährlicher, vielleicht erlösender Trost des Schreibens: das Hinausspringen aus der Totschlägerreihe Tat – Beobachtung, Tat – Beobachtung, indem eine höhere Art der Beobachtung geschaffen wird" (T 892). Writing, in and of itself, can act as a release from the "Wahrheit des Tätigen," though it can never fully articulate the "Wahrheit des Ruhenden" (NSF II 84). One might be reminded of the only beautiful line Kant ever wrote: "Die leichte Taube, indem sie im freien Fluge die Luft teilt, deren Widerstand sie fühlt, könnte die Vorstellung fassen, dass es ihr im luftleeren Raum noch viel besser gelingen werde" (B8). Representation may seem to be the air beneath the wings of

²³ Recall the ending of *In der Strafkolonie* (1919), in which the Officer attempts a similar crossing over, with the help of his terrifying torture machine: "kein Zeichen der versprochenen Erlösung war zu entdecken" (DzL 245). At first glance, no result could be more depressing. But this passage tells the reader no more than that the Officer's eyes hold no explanation of the whole: that no correspondence exists between the signs of this world and the truths of the next. Indeed, is his journey not precisely a passage beyond the limits of signification?

language, both holding it back while holding it up. For Kant, possible experience, the truth of this world, both limits and enables the flight of human reflection. For Kafka, flight is not a matter of experience but intensity, the spiritual or linguistic energy invested in the act, and this impossible transition is the most necessary. His language is an attempt to fly in empty space that gets stuck in a littoral zone, on the shores of *Jenseits*.²⁴ It cannot show us the other side; it can only point the way. The discontinuity, the stutter at the edges of language, is what gives such deep uncertainty to Kafka's transformations. Wittgenstein reflects: "Der Mensch hat den Trieb, gegen die Grenzen der Sprache anzurennen ... die Tendenz, das Anrennen, *deutet auf etwas hin*" (Waismann 12). This run on the limits of language cannot succeed at crossing over and expressing the other side, but the attempt itself means something, and the way it means is, of course, *andeutungsweise*.

In his essay on *Die Verwandlung*, Stanley Corngold comments that the creature is "a word broken loose from the context of language" (103). If 'Odradek' is a word that has no "Sinn," other than labeling a "Wesen," it, too, is broken free of the context of language (DzL 282). But unlike the *Ungeziefer*, *Odradek is not bound to the family economy and cannot be locked away in its room. Its freedom lends it a happy, carefree note utterly absent in *Die Verwandlung*. Kafka gives us a word that is not bound within structured linguistic economies of meaning, but can instead freely traverse the entire plane of possibilities, a deterritorialized and deterritorializing element that weaves itself into the very unraveling of fixed boundaries. But by becoming a being, *Odradek overflows all reductive metafictional readings.

²⁴ The marginal spaces that *Odradek occupies are not unlike the linguistic shoals in which Kafka moves, specifically, in the high intensities associated with each. Both suggest a high orbit, ready, but not yet able, to break free and all the more energetic because of this blockage. Kafka draws this connection himself in a short aphorism: "An der Küste ist die Brandung am stärksten, so eng ist ihr Gebiet und so unüberwindlich" (NSF II 88). Yet *Odradek does overcome this border. Its successful escape makes metafictional readings of it (e.g. as a certain kind of language or textuality) impossible. The story ends, because language cannot follow where *Odradek is heading.

“To become animal,” as Gregor does,

is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 13).

This process parallels, in Kafka’s gnostic terminology, realizing the “Welt der Wahrheit,” eating the fruit of the Tree of Life, and crossing over to another state through writing (NSF II 82). It is this escape that Gregor fully realizes in his death and in which *Odradek continually participates.²⁵ *Odradek is not (merely) a character, because it moves through that moment and beyond, an option which, by juxtaposition, seems to be held out to the *Hausvater*. But the *Hausvater* never gives up his fear of death, his slavish insistence on himself, in the way that Gregor does (even before the latter’s actual death), and so *Odradek and the metamorphosis it implies must remain a source of concern for him. It threatens the closed boundaries of his domain and of his existence, to which he clings, although they imprison him, just as they imprisoned Gregor. Since no positive embodiment of another possibility is offered in *Die Verwandlung* other than death, *Odradek seems much more whimsical than Gregor. It is an *Ungeziefer* who can laugh. But in a way, the arc of the two stories is similar. If we read the main figures of “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” less as fixed, self-contained characters and more as intensities, as moments of the story caught up in a complex interrelationship, we can see a movement paralleling Gregor’s redemption.²⁶ At the beginning *Odradek is a word pinned to a page, an object of scrutiny for the narratorial consciousness that envelops the tale. Both terms of

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari miss the success of Gregor’s escape completely. They see the transition from a “becoming-animal into a becoming-dead” as a failure (*Kafka* 33). On the contrary, it is a profound intensification. They argue that “Gregor’s deterritorialization through the becoming-animal fails; he re-Oedipalizes himself through the apple that is thrown at him and has nothing to do but die” (*Kafka* 15). But such material and bodily concerns are far from Gregor’s mind as his death approaches: “den verfaulten Apfel in seinem Rücken und die entzündete Umgebung [. . .] spürte er schon kaum” (DzL 193).

²⁶ I use this term, which might seem to point to a religious allegory, in reference to the officer’s unsigned “Erlösung” at the end of *In der Strafkolonie* (DzL 245).

this relation then transform into characters – an increase of intensity for *Odradek, but a decrease for the *Hausvater*. Finally, *Odradek escapes into the future, while the *Hausvater* is left behind, anxious and objectified, waiting for death. There is hope here, though not for the *Hausvater*: “unendlich viel Hoffnung –, nur nicht für uns” (Brod, “Über Franz Kafka” 71). Viewed as a map of intensities, the story shows us something like a successful way out, similar to Gregor’s path in *Die Verwandlung*, and a link between *Odradek’s wax and the *Hausvater*’s wane.²⁷ They occupy the space of the text coextensively with negatively correlated intensities. Viewed as a window into the lives of two discrete actors, the story is much harder to parse. On the one hand, its productive relationship to *Die Verwandlung* is obscured; we miss that this story, too, is about metamorphosis. But more importantly, the text itself gives good reasons not to conceive of its figures as we do characters in a realistic work.²⁸

1.4 RETERRITORIALIZATION AND THE NAME

As the *Hausvater* constantly seeks to supplement his self-imprisonment with that of *Odradek,²⁹ an important part of the story concerns the resistance it mounts to the reterritorialization attempted by the narrator, who wants to comprehend and control it. When the *Hausvater* asks, in the voice of Moses, “Wie heißt du denn?” Odradek’s answer is not unlike

²⁷ As Rotpeter puts it: “Freiheit wollte ich nicht. Nur einen Ausweg; rechts, links, wohin immer” (DzL 305). Deleuze and Guattari seize on this quote to argue “it isn’t a question of liberty as against submission, but only a question of a line of escape or, rather, of a simple *way out*” (*Kafka* 6).

²⁸ Viz. the slippage of their status as subjects and objects and the slippage of their positions above, within, and outside of the text.

²⁹ The *Hausvater* has his *Haushalt*, but “der Geist wird erst frei, wenn er aufhört, Halt zu sein” (NSF II 130).

God's response to Moses—"ich werde sein der ich sein werde (284, Exodus 3:14).³⁰ It does not explain meaning, reveal essence, or provide power. There is no catching hold of God. Likewise little *Odradek, though "wie ein Kind" and anything but omnipotent, is at least "außerordentlich beweglich" and thus "nicht zu fangen" (283). It resists the reterritorialization that the *Hausvater* proposes, as easily as the story has resisted the attempts of generations of critics. The *Hausvater* differs only in his readiness to admit defeat.

Thus, when we are set up to ask, along with "die einen," "die andere[n]" and the *Hausvater*: "What does this mean?" "What is its true name?" we know that these questions come heavily freighted. Although they may be posed, their answer is denied. There is no reason in principle to believe that the "sternartige Zwirnpule" looks like the Star of David³¹ or that its "Querstäbchen" looks like a crucifix,³² beyond the strategies of reading we bring to the text (282-283). And should they, this similarity is only bait to tempt us into allegorizing: as Jameson puts it, "Kafka's stories fatally lend themselves to interpretation" (96).³³ How could they not, however, written as they are in a referential language? From the perspective of this world, one can only say, along with the *Hausvater*: "man wäre versucht zu glauben," while in every case, "dies scheint aber nicht der Fall zu sein" (DzL 283). The ambiguous liminal moments that accompany all of Kafka's transformations haunt his writing as well. It does not flow directly into another experiential plane. Like the Hunter Gracchus, it is "immer auf der großen Treppe die hinaufführt [zum Jenseits]. Auf dieser unendlich weiten Freitreppe," Kafka's writing roams about, "bald oben bald unten, bald rechts bald links, immer in Bewegung" (NSF I 309). In one

³⁰ As I have pointed out, the interrogator at this point is "man," but there is good reason to identify him with the *Hausvater*.

³¹ Cf. Robert's comment: "the geometric shape in which every Jew recognizes the emblem of his people" (*As Lonely as Franz Kafka* 194)

³² Weinberg 121

³³ Even Deleuze and Guattari admit that to "all the stupidities that have been written about allegory, metaphor, and symbolism in Kafka [. . .] no doubt, Kafka holds out the bait" (*Kafka* 45).

journal entry in which he reflects upon his literary fate, Kafka describes these hesitations directly: “So schwanke ich also, fliege unaufhörlich zur Spitze des Berges, kann mich aber kaum einen Augenblick oben erhalten” (T 546). He cannot make the full passage, the possibility of which he intuits so powerfully, and is forever stuck in the process: “es ist leider kein Tod, aber die ewigen Qualen des Sterbens” (T 546). The pain of this frustrated becoming can tinge its destination with dark tones, but that pain belongs ultimately to this world alone. We can confuse these ambiguities, which Kafka would call the failure of his literary powers, with allegories, which some critics would call the key to his hidden meaning.

We can ask only for descriptions and actions: questions of a radical exteriority that remain after all access to—and thus even the very existence of—an ‘inside’ of the text has been denied. All the objects of the narration sit at the same level. None rises above the others to decode them. A terrible anxiety accompanies this state of affairs. It brings cares with it. As one of Kafka’s many readers comments, “Die Schrift ist unveränderlich und die Meinungen sind oft nur ein Ausdruck der Verzweiflung darüber” (P 298). We must work with *Odradek as we get it, a little flat bobbin covered with “abgerissene, alte aneinander geknotete, aber auch ineinander verfitzte Zwirnstücke von verschiedenster Art und Farbe” (283).

This description comes with its own set of temptations, however. From *Zwirn*, one might want to move to *Gewebe*: from textile to text.³⁴ This path is an old one, a metaphor that has entered language and died there: to spin a yarn. But then the kind of textuality described by *Odradek would be no fine tapestry. It would be scraps, bits and pieces, junk. One wants to say that *Odradek is a symbolic commentary on Kafkaan textuality, that it graphs the unmanageable ends of connections migrating out of the order imposed upon the text. But it does no such thing.

³⁴“Wenn der lahme Weber träumt, er webe [. . .],” as Brentano once wrote, following from an ancient line of myth and metaphor.

It merely *is* an unmanageable end and to graph the others would be precisely to make them manageable. To think otherwise is to abandon the Arachnean textile metaphor for a more insidious Ariadnean one—the thread that leads the reader out of the labyrinth.³⁵ Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka’s work is a “rhizome” that we can enter from “any point whatsoever; none matters more than another, no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse” (*Kafka* 3). Thus, while *Odradek may be “Kafka’s most puzzling creation,” it cannot puzzle out his other creations. While it may be “der sonderbarste Bastard” of Kafka’s work, it is not the key to the other bastards (Emrich 102; Benjamin, “Franz Kafka” 431). It is only this rhizomic principle that “prevents the introduction of the enemy, the Signifier,” the chiffre, and wards off all endeavors “to interpret a work that is actually only open to experimentation” (3). “Die Sorge des Hausvaters,” then, cannot be read as a statement *about* how Kafkan textuality works. It is not a uniquely determined, characteristic entrance into the Kafkan oeuvre; it *is* a Kafkan text.³⁶

The reader is constantly invited to play a game of ‘this means that,’ but can never win it. We want to explicate the text (*explicare*: unravel/unfold), but for a creature that consists of “aneinander geknotete, [. . .] ineinander verfitzte Zwirnstücke” that would be precisely to destroy it (282-283). The violence of the English language arsenal of interpretive vocabulary exposes itself here: we want to explain *Odradek (*explanare*: flatten out), but to flatten tiny, child-like *Odradek might kill it (though we would have to catch it first). The obvious way out of this aporia would seemingly be *to play a new game*. But this option is not the only one. One can say, instead: Kafka is not willing to stoop to the facile formula, ‘A means B,’ but he will give us the

³⁵ This labyrinth, however, is the text, which the reader cannot in good conscience abandon, even if there is no center, no Minotaur. And yet this image reflects the self-understanding of hermeneutics: exegesis (*exhēgeisthai* – to guide out of). This goal of this paper, then, is explicitly anti-exegetical.

³⁶ Compare: *Las Meninas*, a painting of painting (“a theology of painting”)—*Black Square*, a painting as painting (an object in the world) (López-Rey 134). Though *Odradek, it must be admitted, has much more of Paul Klee in its constitution than of Malevich.

difficult, self-referential clue: 'A means that A never just means B.' (Never mind that the logical form of these two expressions is exactly the same.) Many critics have been taken down this path, but Wilhelm Emrich is their leader on it. These critics proclaim the important recognition that the traditional means of interpretation run aground on Kafka, that they are insufficient. Their main effort appears to be directed at a critique of these allegorizing tendencies, but one knows a tree only by its fruits.

2.0 EMRICH AND “DIE SORGE DES HAUSVATERS”

Wilhelm Emrich remains, some fifty years after the publication of his grand tome, *Franz Kafka* (1958), one of Kafka’s most careful and delicate readers.³⁷ In that book, he presents a strong critique of the allegorizing tendency of previous interpreters of Kafka, as valid today as it was when he wrote it. What I will argue, however, is that Emrich’s incisive attack is, in fact, a highly nuanced rear guard action that aims at the preservation of as much traditional interpretive technique as possible, jettisoning only what had, by that point, become indefensible. The book begins with some reflections on beauty that Emrich admits “are classical heritage” (2). But for him, “they still maintain their validity, even where they appear betrayed or abandoned in the extreme art forms of the twentieth century” (2). This is more or less the structure of his thoughts on allegory: it appears betrayed and abandoned in Kafka, but it is still present in a new, special way.

Emrich describes the plight of Kafka’s reader as follows: “unable to communicate to his normal consciousness what he has read, he [the reader] cannot interpret it with assurance.” Because of this breakdown, “the interpretations of Kafka’s writings are as confusing or conflicting as these writings themselves, as the interpretations that Kafka inserted in the midst of his writings” (80). A reader in the grips of a traditional hermeneutic believes that

³⁷ I will cite from Sheema Zeben Buehne’s translation, *Franz Kafka: A Critical Study of His Writings* (1968).

what has been stated and given form cannot [. . .] signify simply itself, but must conceal 'beyond' itself an 'other,' 'real' meaning [. . .] [T]he effort of the reader or interpreter is then directed at 'deciphering' this real meaning that is hiding behind the unreal discussion [. . .] [C]onsequently the work is understood as a secret 'allegory' for which one needs only the 'key' in order to decipher the meaning (to allegorize = to say something differently from the way one means it)" (81).

Emrich has the fundamental insight that Kafka 'means' what he writes, not anything else, and therefore, one need not look for the meaning of a Kafkan text anywhere but on the page. To go past the page and read Kafka's texts allegorically is to betray them, because "Kafka's images and statements are *themselves* 'actuality' and are not at all unreal, allegorical, or parabolical representations" (84).

After the dank cellars of meaning into which earlier interpreters would have us descend, affirmations of this sort come as a breath of fresh air. So far, it seems as if my entire argument is more elegantly presaged here. Allegorization will no longer be conceivable, because it is "possible only against the background of a firmly defined religion, philosophy, or world-view," and such raw, ideological instrumentalizations of Kafka's work are far too coarse for Emrich's discerning critical sensibilities (83). Although he finds that Kafka still contains "elements of the allegorical and parabolical," these elements cannot be worked up into a determinate system of meanings into which a reader could resettle from the text, precisely because of the aforementioned loss of faith in the metanarrative frames. Hence, "it is no longer a matter of allegory and parable in the strict sense at all" (84).

The second chapter of his study bears the title "Beyond Allegory and Symbol." Appropriately, it leads immediately into a discussion of *Odradek at the very beginning of Chapter 3. But in order to understand what happens there, we must trace the argument about allegory a little farther. Emrich carefully avoids many of the pitfalls of earlier (and, to be fair, subsequent) readings, but despite the lucidity of his arguments, he is often far too subtle for his own good. The problem first appears in a comment on *Der Proceß*:

[T]he court authorities [. . .] are a graphic representation of the human processes of life and thought [. . .] processes that in their totality cannot be ‘understood’ and cannot be fitted together to form a meaningful integrated whole by the limited consciousness of the individual. The court authorities are thus, in fact, a figurative representation pointing to an actual, total meaning; and in this sense they are ‘allegorical’ (83).

Following directly from Emrich’s earlier comments, such a claim is, to say the very least, surprising. Looking around, a little closer now, perhaps, one notices that the polemical statements, which presumably would overthrow the allegorical tradition, lack the fervor of the manifesto one might initially make this chapter out to be. In fact, they are full of holes. Each proclamation has a backdoor. And so, where we imagined that all referential schemata were being abolished, we find that, “every statement, every form of image is to be taken literally as an actual one, signifying itself. It cannot, and should not, be interpreted by reference to any sort of meaning or concept *that lies outside the work and that is not formulated within the work itself* [emphasis mine]” (85). It is not yet clear where this door will open, but it is in place. Only allegory ‘in the strict sense’ is being attacked, while it remains uncertain what ‘the strict sense’ of allegory should be.

Emrich spells out his methodology quite soon, however, arguing that “it is only the implicit interrelationship of all the statements that makes it possible to determine their actual meaning” (85). This sounds good, because we have seen the disasters of transcending the text completely. It is simply sound critical practice not to run off for some external ideology. Emrich formulates this admonishment very clearly. But there remain two interrelated problems. He manifestly believes that all of the statements about a theme will form a distinct, cohesive set that in turn will produce a reliable, interpretable whole: “only when all the statements about the ‘law’ have been read and interpreted in the context of the novel is it possible to arrive at a valid definition of what the law is in *The Trial*” (85). But since these statements cohere, once they have been read, the law can be defined. Emrich is not so naïve as to believe that these statements

will form an organic whole, but he can save the machinery applied to organic wholes by inventing a new special kind of whole that Kafkan texts will form. Thus, we find the more neutrally phrased “totality” that “cannot be ‘understood’ and cannot be fitted together to form a meaningful integrated whole,” but can still produce ‘valid definitions’ and, what’s more, the Grail of Kafka Studies: the ‘actual meaning’ (from above, 83).

For Emrich, however, “because of the very fact that the representation does not make any finite meaning an absolute one, because of the very fact that Kafka, in delineating the endless process of life and imagination, refuses to confer on any individual interpretation the status of total interpretation, he is incessantly expressing the Universal”—and thus allows for *Emrich’s* total interpretation (92). That is the one-two punch of Emrich’s interpretation: in Kafka there is no allegory—except in this *special* sense that he has recuperated, and then it could be seen as such (all the while shying away from this term). One cannot speak of symbols—but in this special sense, there they are. I cannot help but feel that the jaws from which he rescues these terms *are Kafka’s*, that it is Kafka’s attack on interpretation with which he seems to agree in the critical section of his argument and from which he defends a leaner, scrappier form of allegory all the while in his positive comments.

Once we have seen this much, Emrich’s critical game becomes transparent. Believing his readers to be lulled by his reassuring boldness, he can claim things like “the machinery [of the Castle], in general, is really nothing else but life that is reflected and brought into consciousness” (93). Really, one could stop this quotation half way: it is next to irrelevant *what* specifically an element of one of Kafka’s texts ‘is really nothing but’. And so when Emrich claims that “fundamentally, therefore, K. and the officials are nothing but [. . .],” I am forced disagree (95).

A productive approach to Kafka's figures entails neither their reduction to externals nor their exultation above the remainder of the text.

When Emrich declares that "the officials represent [!] all the laws inherent in existence [. . .] they are the expression of ideas, wishes, hopes, dreams, instincts, etc.," I am at a loss as to how this reading is not allegorizing, if he takes seriously his own definition of allegory. Kafka certainly does not *write* that they are inherent laws and expressions of ideas. Emrich imagines that his 'etc.' will be negligible, will take care of itself, will make his claim obvious. In fact, it represents an infinite series of possibilities, the terms of which neither disappear nor converge. I do not mean that the sorting that foregrounds certain parts of the text and places others under the sign of the "etc." is arbitrary: quite the contrary. It is always done with specific goals in mind.

The final section of Emrich's alleged attack on allegory, "The 'Rebellion' of Things," provides a neat segue into "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" (95). In Kafka's works,

things 'rise in rebellion' against the disfigurements inflicted upon them by human thought and creative imagination [. . .] [things] become dumb, impenetrable, and take on a hardness that is menacing in its relentlessness. They become pure objects, stripped bare of meaning: they no longer reveal any mystery, no longer, like Goethean poetry, unlock a higher truth that is accessible to the human soul (96).

What Emrich writes here is perfectly true, but despite his comparison of thing and poem, he fails to combine it with his equally valid thesis that "Kafka's images and statements are *themselves* 'actuality,'" which would suggest that Kafka's texts are themselves things in revolt (84). His work follows the 'textuality' of the object-world like an abstract canvas. Just because it is not 'meaningless' does not mean it means something else, much less, as I hope to show, that it means something about meaninglessness. If this is true, the critic is cast as the target of the text-thing's revenge. Interpretations are the intellectual 'disfigurements' to which they are subjected: "Ja, Rache ist es, denn wie oft haben wir diese Dinge angegriffen" (NSF I 84).

Unfortunately, however, Emrich takes another tack with these insights. His ‘Rebellion of Things’ turns out to be an allegory—it is undeniable now—of the ideologically motivated, humanist critique of modernity, with all its buzzwords intact: “reification [. . .] emptied of meaning [. . .] without any spiritual or intellectual content [. . .] man becomes the slave of the things that he degrades to bare objects” (96). It is possible that Kafka would have been sympathetic to this viewpoint, were it brought up in conversation, but as long as we have agreed not to replace his works with sign-up sheets for psychoanalysis or Marxism, why make an exception for cultural conservatism?

2.1 ODRADEK AND ALLEGORY

We have finally developed the tools to deal with Emrich’s Odradek. While he claims that “it is beyond any humanly possible interpretation of what it means,” Emrich loses much of our remaining faith by launching in immediately with an etymological analysis of what ‘Odradek’ means, paralleling exactly the abortive efforts of the interpreters within the story (106). “Nevertheless, despite all the ironical and humorous aloofness with which Kafka here plays hide-and-seek with his readers,” Emrich writes, “reference may be made to the fact that the word Odradek definitely allows of a meaningful linguistic interpretation” (103). The first two words of this quotation make the oppositional status between text and interpretation painfully clear. A cynical person might want to paraphrase here: nevertheless, despite the words on the page, we can still follow our same old hermeneutic. In the elided ‘ironic’ (and seemingly, therefore, dismissible) section, his exact scholarly maneuver is scathingly mocked. Worse, Emrich situates himself in the problematic position of the *Hausvater*, who asks, with all the baggage I discussed

above, “Wie heißt du denn?” (284). It is exactly the circumstance that Nägele points out in interpretations of *Der Proceß*: just as critics cannot help but side with the bureaucratic legal machine and find K. guilty, critics cannot help but join the *Hausvater* and try to catch hold of *Odradek. To make a legitimate interpretation, they must “speak in the name of the father, that is, in the name of authority,” and so are confronted with their own hideous reflection in Kafka’s texts, in both the stories and the novels, for “as literary critics, we sit together with the dubious figures of the court in judgment over K.” (Nägele 20).³⁸ Why not add to this company the *Hausvater* and the various other interpreters to whom he refers? The interpretive will to power over the text is equally present in the ubiquitous question posed of Odradek: what is its real name? Nägele formulates this will powerfully in terms of psychoanalysis:

Freud called the interpretation of dreams the 'via regia,' the royal road to the knowledge of the unconscious. Since the road leads to 'knowledge,' the authoritative royal figure traveling this road might be thought of as a consciousness claiming its domination in the realm of the other. Thus interpretation presents itself again as a question of authority and domination (18).

With Kafka, however, we must not forget that there is no *via regia*, and though there is a “wahre[r] Weg,” it seems “mehr bestimmt stolpern zu machen, als begangen zu werden” (113). Kafka’s truth is a tripwire that brings such authoritarian pretensions to their knees. Similarly, the ‘authoritative royal figure’ in “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” is too besieged by cares to cut a particularly imposing character, so we see this critical identification with him played out not only in reproducing his maneuvers, but in an explicit sympathy: e.g., “in a sane and safe universe Odradek would never have been allowed to appear and frighten the family man” (Politzer 98). The poor *Hausvater* – plagued by a ball of thread!

Emrich, to return to the *via etymologica*, comes up with the plausible sounding *odraditi*, “to council someone against something,” which appropriately is a Slavic word of Germanic

³⁸ Or, in Rieck’s rather less elegant formulation: “Schlossbürokratie : Landvermesser K. = Literaturwissenschaft : Franz Kafka” (36).

origin, fitting well with Kafka's description of the scholarly debates(103). The Czech 'rad' comes from the German 'Rat.' He even suggests a translation for 'Odradek' into everyday German: *Abrätchen*. In his problematic faith in an etymological investigation and the form it takes, Emrich hearkens back to Max Brod's commentary: "eine ganze Skala slavischer Worte klingt an, die 'Abtrünniger' bedeuten, abtrünnig vom Geschlecht, rod, vom Rat, dem göttlichen Schöpfungsbeschluß, rada" (60). The *Abrätchen* translation, rather ironically, seems only to confirm that it was a mistake to go in this direction in the first place. The story already disparages it. In Emrich's analysis, as much as in Brod's, one can only find a repetition of this ignored admonishment. Whether we take *Abrätchen* or *Abtrünniger* as our model,³⁹ one can only think of Beckett's famous quip: that if he had meant God, he would have called his play *Waiting for God* (Knowlson 372). All of these attempts betray a view of *Odradek as a rhetorical vehicle to be left behind once the appropriate tenor is found.⁴⁰ *Odradek, the word without a meaning, is a vehicle that goes nowhere, so the critics displace it with any getaway car they can get their hands on. That as many tenors have passed now as years since Brod's first proposal does not seem to trouble these intrepid interpreters. For Emrich, "analysis of the form Odradek itself, however, shows that [. . .] the first [his etymology] is the central and determining meaning" (104). A Kafka who speaks in code, however, is if anything a regression from a Kafka who

³⁹ Alternately: 'dōdekaedron' (Jean-Claude Milner, cited and followed by Žižek 117); 'Verräter,' 'Od-raven-K,' 'Od-radix,' or 'odroditi,' that is, uprooted (Hamacher 320-321); 'Kafka' or 'Kavka', justified rather creatively by reason of this name's "equally uncertain origin, on which one can likewise speculate ad infinitum" (Robert, [. . .] *As Franz Kafka* 194); from 'řád' (order), the prefix 'od-' ('ab-') and the final diminutive '-ek,' a "kleines Wesen außerhalb der Ordnung" or from 'řádití' (to make a noise, to clamour) a "Poltergeist im Abseitigen" (both G. Backenköhler, in Binder 240, a good source for still other possibilities). Thus, while Corngold points out that Kafka owned and regularly used a copy of Grimm's etymological dictionary, seemingly an encouragement to this sort of investigation, this fact does not help us to differentiate here between the mass of etymological possibilities ("Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*" 99). The text itself, far from assisting these endeavors, openly mocks them.

⁴⁰ These are I. A. Richards's terms. I follow Corngold's usage of them in "Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*," 97, and "Allotria and Excreta in 'In the Penal Colony,'" *Lambent Traces*, 67-80.

allegorizes, and it is surely of interest that in Emrich's analysis the *meaning* is forced to determine the *word*, since the word so explicitly refuses to determine its meaning.

But all this work is still prefatory to *Odradek's real pith: "Kafka's rejection of the possibility of any interpretation of the meaning corresponds with the poetic meaning inherent in the figure of Odradek itself; for primarily it is doing just this: advising against everything – even, and particularly, against interpretations of meaning" (104). A passage like this one, which embraces its own contradictions and embodies the paradoxes in which its author is entangled, can appear attractive to the boggled and bewildered reader of Kafka, who sees contradiction everywhere. But warning against allegory with the left hand while allegorizing with the right is a bad contradiction to embrace. Only in this way can one state that "the meaning of the poetic little being is the annihilation of every kind of limiting meaning" (104). The purpose of this linguistic investigation was to save this kind of 'limiting meaning' for *Odradek itself, at any expense, by interpreting it, since nothing else remained, as uninterpretability. Emrich has made *Odradek an allegory of the death of allegory. This is the 'special' allegory that Emrich took such pains to elaborate. It is as if he thought the previous allegories were too rigid and the present moment called for more supple ones: as if the allegories needed to be improved (a facelift on a corpse). Recognizing that he must remain within the text, Emrich hoped to preserve allegory by forcing the text to allegorize itself. When he writes that Kafka's words signify themselves, he does not affirm that Kafka meant what he wrote, but that what Kafka wrote meant something about what Kafka wrote (which is to efface the material presence of his writing). This two-step seems to place Emrich's interpretation on some 'meta' level, but no such level is available. An allegory that speaks about the status of allegory is not an allegory "zweiter Ordnung," as Wittgenstein once wrote, but rather "der Fall entspricht dem der Rechtschreibelehre, die es auch mit dem Wort

‘Rechtschreibelehre’ zu tun hat, aber dann nicht eine solche zweiter Ordnung ist” (*Philosophical Investigations* §121). Replacing *Odradek with ‘uninterpretability’ is no different from replacing it with ‘the Son’, ‘the Jew’, or ‘the Commodity,’ as so many other critics have done. In this sense, Emrich is Brod’s true successor: he upgrades negative theology to a negative hermeneutic. Still, Emrich’s interpretation is important, in that it can show us how the interpretative project must twist and turn to survive at all. When interpretation is forced to eat itself, however, it neither satisfies its hunger, nor does it survive. It is sufficient to set *Odradek before the allegorizing forces and watch them exhaust themselves: to bring them before this open door through which they will never pass.

To build this allegory of last resort, disguised as *critique*, is, I have argued, a last ditch *defense* of the means of allegory from *Odradek’s onslaught of insignificance, and it is doomed to failure. Kafka is not so naïve as to fall into the trap of the means he has set out to escape. He does not wish to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools, speaking against the master with/in the master’s tongue. His project is rather “to hate all languages of masters” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 26).

2.2 EMRICH’S INFLUENCE

The majority of the literature on “Die Sorge eines Hausvaters” today still reproduces Emrich’s argument with little improvement. Thus it is possible for Hamacher (notable, as I have mentioned, for his proliferation of etymologies) to argue first, quite rightly, that “any interpretation of ‘Odradek’ that lays claim to certainty, conclusiveness, and meaning—and these are the hermeneutic principles of both ‘the family man’ and the etymologists he criticizes—must

miss ‘Odradek,’” and then chalk this discovery up to the fact that “‘Odradek’ means dissidence, dissence, and a defection from the order of meaning. ‘Odradek’ thus ‘means’ that it does not mean” (320-321). This argument, of course, has the same temptation of paradox, the same heroic scheme to save allegory, so desperate, one wants to say, that it just might work. But it does not. It cannot. Because it does not mean, *Odradek does not mean that it does not mean. If the meaning of that statement is unclear, it is due to its complete banality and not to paradox.

An enlightening review of structuralist readings of Kafka by Dorrit Cohn contains the following quotation, which, while published in 1978 (most of Cohn’s structuralists are now labeled post-structuralists), is still instructive, due perhaps to the lasting success of Emrich’s defensive action:

Kafka's writings are, of course, full of writings, densely encoded with material evidence for his obsessive relation to script. [. . .] Structuralist critics generally read these texts within texts as structural metaphors, *mises en abîme* or internal replicas of the fictions Kafka was writing, and of the entire endlessly self-referential process of fictional creation itself [. . .] Though this type of reading, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out in a different context, is inevitably allegorical in nature, it is allegorical in a different sense from the one that has made allegory a dirty word among Kafka scholars. For even as it sets out to decipher hidden meaning, it takes decipherment itself (or, better, its impossibility) as the meaning signified by the work, rather than some corresponding signification for which the work itself offers no consistent connotations (185).

We can see Emrich’s notion of a ‘special’ allegory hard at work here, trying to succeed where the old allegories failed. Those who buy it fail to see that finding ‘decipherment’ hidden beneath the text is just as bad as finding an Oedipal complex, because *looking beneath the text was the problem in the first place*: “‘*Das Wesen ist uns verborgen*’: das ist die Form, die unser Problem nun annimmt.” (Wittgenstein §92). Because critics like Emrich and his followers cannot manage to do what they normally do to Kafka, they are “verführt, einen Über-Ausdruck zu gebrauchen”—one might call it an interpretive superlative (Wittgenstein §192). I can only repeat my argument: there is no meta-allegory, no ‘Über-Ausdruck’—only allegory, and it must go.

2.3 “VON DEN GLEICHNISSEN”

Perhaps I can justify these reflections through the use of an example, another text that interpreters have seen (falsely, I would argue) as the *via sacra* into Kafka's works: “Von den Gleichnissen.”⁴¹ The work bears some structural similarities to “Die Sorge des Hausvaters”: it has a slow, smooth, monological beginning, and then it bifurcates into a dialogue that severely undercuts many of the assumptions of the first section. The reason commentators have been attracted to this piece is that it seems to be clearly metafictional. It seems unproblematic to assume that Kafka is discussing interpretation or at least dealing with texts: so much is already given in the title.⁴² One must merely identify the “Worte der Weisen” with the words of Kafka, or even with writing more generally. Such readings generally culminate with a quotation from the end of the first section, viz. “Alle diese Gleichnisse wollen eigentlich nur sagen, daß das Unfaßbare unfaßbar ist” (NSF II 532). This schema works quite well, in a sense. Confronted with Kafka's tiny, but dauntingly obscure sketch, the reader can nevertheless make off with a declarative statement about what all parables (or metaphors) mean, as well as an easy identification: Kafka's writing = “Worte der Weisen” = *Gleichnis*. One can then apply this formula to other Kafkan texts and churn out interpretations, safe in the knowledge that one is, after all, sticking to Kafka's own words. Take “Die Sorge des Hausvaters,” for example. *Odradek means that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible. The spry little creature is “nicht zu fangen,” and thus, ‘nicht zu fassen,’ except, of course, as *Unfassbarkeit*. *Voilà*. While I admit to a certain reductiveness, this interpretation is essentially where Emrich arrives at the end of his

⁴¹ See for instance Emrich 108-110 and Politzer 21, where he applies “Von den Gleichnissen” to “Gibs auf”.

⁴² Robert describes it as “a text [. . .] dealing expressly with this genre as such” ([. . .] *as Franz Kafka* 163). It should be noted, however, that the title, which does not appear in the manuscript, was given to the text by Max Brod (Gray *et al.* 287).

argument about *Odradek (along with Hamacher, and many others). The *Gleichnis* means that it does not mean.

If this looks like a rebuttal of my argument, it is only because I have left the majority of “Von den Gleichnissen” out of my case. There are two main problems with this reading: the omission of the context for what is included and all the parts that are not included. The first paragraph, though narrated, is already incipiently dialogical, preparing the way for what follows. The narrator’s voice is split by taking on and reporting the complaints of the “viele[n]”. All personal views are suppressed, expressing themselves only in a mood of skepticism or perhaps disappointment. The people who hold these views are represented as an undifferentiated mass. They complain and are crassly utilitarian, looking no further than ‘daily life’ and seeking nothing more than some handy new tools. So there is good reason to take whatever views are ascribed to them with a grain of salt: that means every word of the first paragraph. Thus it is not clear that “diese Gleichnisse wollen eigentlich nur sagen, daß das Unfaßbare unfaßbar ist.” Even more suspect is the continuation of the sentence: “und das haben wir gewußt” (NSF II 532). “Wir” here refers to the “viele[n]”. One must conclude either that this statement about *Gleichnisse* is false, or that it was not already known, or at least had been forgotten.

This opposition is realized in the figures of the subsequent dialogue. The *Gleichnisse* get a champion and the “viele” an articulate spokesperson. The former suggests such a complete rejection of “der täglichen Mühe” that it amounts to a negation of reality. Since the *Gleichnisse* cannot be effectively put into practice in this world, the first speaker suggests escaping it for another: becoming-*Gleichnis*, so to speak. The second, rather blandly, bets that this suggestion is a *Gleichnis* itself. This is the only true metafictional moment of the piece: this empty identification, $x = x$. It is true “in Wirklichkeit”; it has the “Wahrheit des Tätigen” (NSF II 532,

NSF II 84). But as I have argued, Kafka is impressed neither by the ultimate reality of this truth, nor the truth of this reality. The “Wahrheit des Ruhenden” belongs “im Gleichnis,” which stands in complete causal separation from this world (NSF II 84, 532). As Hasselblatt puts it,

Gleichnisse bringen das Unfaßbare nicht analytisch zur Sprache indem sie es begrifflich zu definieren suchten. Damit wäre hinsichtlich der Gleichnisse und hinsichtlich des Unfaßbaren nichts gewonnen. Sondern sie lassen das Unfaßbare selber in seiner komplexen Unfaßbarkeit zu Wort kommen (175).

When Hasselblatt, an excellent reader of this piece, first describes Kafkan *Gleichnisse* as “die Kundgabe der Unfaßbarkeit des Unfaßbaren,” it may seem he is moving in Emrich’s direction, capturing parables under the sign of the unfathomable (173). But the distinction he introduces subsequently is spot on: in Kafka’s texts, language moves toward the incomprehensible, but the figures of his text do not correspond to incomprehensibility in a comprehensible way. This text walks that same fine line, leading us astray before hinging sharply about the middle point where “einer” weighs in. Critics in Emrich’s vein win only in the sense of the second speaker, a false triumph. While they do not construct an external correspondence, their readings depend on an imagined internal coherence of the text: some transcendent form that stands over and above all of Kafka’s work, an idea controlling, regulating its content, which the reader must discover. But the truth of the *Gleichnis* is not derivative in either sense. Hasselblatt captures this perfectly when he writes that “Gleichnisse stimmen in sich, sie beziehen ihre Wahrheit nicht vom Gleichsein mit etwas anderem, zum Beispiel mit dem täglichen Leben, sie verweisen mithin auf nichts” (173). The truth of these texts is autonomous, relative to nothing, and dependent on the letters alone.

To return to that central quotation, we can recognize the logic behind its strategic deployment as allegorical; it replaces what is in fact said in the *Gleichnisse* by what the *Gleichnisse* “wollen eigentlich nur sagen” (NSF II 532). The confrontation between interpretive

desire and the letter of the text is staged here explicitly. The reader's will to understanding spills over into the assumption that what the *Gleichnisse* literally (*eigentlich*) say actually means something else, i.e. is metaphorical (*uneigentlich*). This very demand for clarity betrays a dissatisfaction with Kafka's words that borders on obliteration.

To reject the thesis of the "viele[n]," then, is not to deny that the *Gleichnisse* are "unfaßbar," but rather to affirm it. Far from refuting my arguments about "Die Sorge des Hausvaters," "Von den Gleichnissen" demonstrates the very same destruction of allegory and resistance to metafictionality. We, like the "viele," often forget that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible and create bold theories about what it all means. For this reason, the wise must repeat themselves, must recall and recreate the *Gleichnisse*: "Die Arbeit des Philosophen ist ein Zusammentragen von Erinnerungen zu einem bestimmten Zweck" (Wittgenstein §127). Here the goal is a truth beyond truth and falsity.

That Kafka gives us no hint as to how this transformation is to be accomplished, how we can become *Gleichnisse*, should come as no surprise: "Es gibt ein Ziel, aber keinen Weg; was wir Weg nennen, ist Zögern" (NSF II 118). *Weg* implies all the calculations and maneuvers of this world. Thus, there can be no path that leads from time into eternity: "Dem Diesseits kann nicht ein Jenseits folgen, denn das Jenseits ist ewig, kann also mit dem Diesseits nicht in zeitlicher Beziehung stehn" (NSF II 62). "Gehe hinüber" can simply never mean "daß man auf die andere Straßenseite hinüber gehn solle," if not despite, than because of the fact that only the latter is actually possible (NSF II 531).⁴³ As Deleuze and Guattari argue, "flight is challenged

⁴³ Here Kafka's gnostic themes, discussed above, return full force. Becoming *Gleichnis* is one more formulation of the unimaginable and impossible transition between the two worlds, the two regimes of truth that occupied his mind in the period 1917-18. The true Fall in Kafka's writings seems to be the collapse of the bridge in the "unwegsamen Höhe" which spanned the abyss between "diesseits" and "jenseits" (NSF I 304). This fall marks all of Kafka's transformations with an unavoidable equivocation.

when it is useless movement in space,” e.g. crossing the street; “flight is affirmed when it is a stationary flight, a flight of intensity” (*Kafka* 13). Thus, becoming *Gleichnis* must be an “immobile voyage” (*Kafka* 35). As Kafka writes: “Was in der körperlichen Welt lächerlich ist ist in der geistigen möglich” (NSF II 31).

3.0 CONCLUSION: READING “DIE SORGE DES HAUSVATERS”

The critical movement from correspondence to coherence follows the unfinished course of one of the most interesting of the many stories at work in this short text: the story of the reader’s subjective struggle and progress through the story itself. I must disagree entirely with Žižek, when he claims that “in Kafka’s case, the first (naïve) reading is often the most adequate one,” although he is quite right that “the second reading is the one which tries to ‘sublate’ the first reading’s raw impact by forcing [the reader] into the frame of a given interpretation” (114). Readers must undertake the first, naïve pass, they must continue on to a reductive, grasping interpretation and, then, they *must keep on going*. We come up with nothing, then Freud, then Marx, then meta-fiction and then, so long as we do not simply forfeit and ignore our uneasiness, we are free. When we find *Odradek, we must kill it. If we find it again, we must kill it until we stop finding it: “Gibs auf, gibbs auf” (NSF II 530). We must be content to throw allegory at *Odradek until the former dies of its own accord, without saying anything about what the latter really is in relation to this process. Our discoveries in Kafka come along with “Beulen, die sich der Verstand beim Anrennen an die Grenze der Sprache geholt hat. Sie [. . .] lassen uns den Wert jener Entdeckung erkennen” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §119). These wounds are like *Odradek for a good reader, marking the escape an intense reading takes from fixed economies of meaning.

*Odradek is something that critics, shying away from such linguistic injuries, tend to mention in passing—to name drop, briefly, as with a knowing smile or significant glance—while working on something else. It seems to contain, for these critics, all the germinal ‘Kafkaesque’ material in one potent, incomprehensible polysyllabic *thing*. Žižek offers, significantly, that “‘Odradek,’ [is] one of Kafka’s key achievements,” perhaps, then, the key to his achievement (114). Commentators of this sort tend, as Žižek does, to refer only to ‘Odradek,’ reducing the story to its most unusual figure. Giorgio Agamben is representative of these tendencies: in his book *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, *Odradek lends allusive depth to a couple of section headings, but it is never actually mentioned in the body of the text. Beate Perrey’s study, “‘Eyes Talked In-To Blindness’: Paul Celan and György Kurtág” is another brilliant example of this trend. Although the article itself has very little to do with Kafka, it contains the full story, in both the original and in translation, justifying this lengthy excursus with less than two full sentences of analysis. This strange practice stands in greater need of interpretation, I think, than the creature itself. *Odradek has become a shibboleth of critical discourse, a watchword for initiation into the deepest mysteries of interpretation. Cohn’s review, again, may be revealing. She explains the attraction that Kafka has had for the ‘structuralists’ as follows:

Since Kafka has always had a way of becoming a touchstone for literature itself, or at least for narrative modernity, it is only natural that a movement as obsessed as Structuralism with the nature of literary language, with the very existence and possibility of narrative communication, should find in Kafka a privileged subject, should indeed need to account for Kafka in its own terms in order to validate these terms (182).

But if Marthe Robert’s remark (noted by Cohn) was right, that “dresser un tableau complet de ces interpretations reviendrait a résumer l’histoire des idées dominantes de notre époque,” then Cohn’s summation has significance beyond the structuralists, however they are defined. Kafka’s work becomes a mark for all interpretive theories, an important quarry, prey (58). If it is true,

additionally, that *Odradek serves for many commentators as the quiddity of the Kafkaesque, then *Odradek's use in critical games becomes clear. It serves as sort of final counter-example. Overcoming *Odradek is a rite of passage that every theoretical framework must eventually undergo to demonstrate its mastery over even the most recalcitrant texts. To prove its ascendancy, it must perform the impossible interpretation: it must capture *Odradek. *Odradek is, then, a delicacy at the literary banquet, a *recherché* morsel.

*Odradek graces a section title (“Odradek as a Political Category”) in Žižek's book, *The Parallax View* (2006), as well, but the discussion that follows does actually touch on the story here and there (111). Žižek is of the ‘quote the whole story and move on’ school of thought, but he also returns. When he does, the results are a recapitulation of Emrich's argument, in a Lacanian key: while “reading Kafka demands a great effort of abstraction—not of learning more [. . .] but of *unlearning* the standard interpretive references [. . .] theological [. . .] socio-critical [. . .] psychoanalytic”—it still turns out that “Odradek [. . .] is *jouissance* embodied” (114-115). What is needed is a ‘special,’ more textually sensitive, psychoanalytic frame that can succeed where Freud failed—Lacan, of course:

Odradek is simply what Lacan, in *Seminar XI* and in his seminal *écrit* ‘Positions de l'inconscient,’ developed as the *lamella*, the libido as an organ, the inhuman-human ‘undead’ organ without a body, the mythical presubjective ‘undead’ life-substance, or rather, the remainder of the Life-Substance which has escaped symbolic colonization (117-118).

On the one hand, the last few words of this reading suggest something closely related to what I have argued; on the other, Žižek ruthlessly ensures that *Odradek itself will not escape symbolic colonization and can be instrumentalized in his own Lacanian schema. I have quoted this passage in full here, as I approach the end of my paper, not to show the same tropes we have seen by now repeated over and over again, the same reversal into a defense of allegory, indeed, the very same language that accompanies it, but rather to draw some conclusions about the general

state of ‘Odradek Studies.’ What occurs in this passage? Žižek, the Lacanian, looks into “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” and finds ... Lacan. Kafka’s work is a unique and fascinating thing. To read him should be a transformative experience that changes the way we read and forces questions about our most basic assumptions about meaning.⁴⁴ And yet over and over again, readers of Kafka find only what they began with—just as the range and profusion of etymologies enable critics to find whatever they were looking for. In the case of our various allegorists, it is rather tempting to believe “ein Käfig ging einen Vogel suchen” (NSF II 117). *Odradek, taken as chef/clef d’oeuvre, seems to provide a blank screen onto which we can project our interpretive desires. Perhaps this explains its attraction for casual reference. It is a joker in the critical deck, a wild card that stands for anything, for whatever we need, for whatever our ideological stance demands.

It seems to me that to treat *Odradek in this way is a reaction to Kafka’s challenging text that is so naïve as to be cynical. At the end of a chain of interpretations, each of which had proposed to fix the problem of the text, but failed to dispose of it, one has a choice: either give up the enterprise entirely or give in to an insidious relativism that, having failed to prove anything about the text, goes back to what it hoped for in the first place. Where a naïve allegorization selects specific points to build a bridge out of the text back into its ideological homeland, this cynical variety, assuming one can do no better, merely proclaims that the text was not a foreign country in the first place. I say this reaction is even more vengeful than the original interpretive impulse, because instead of exiting the text, it annihilates it completely. And this is the truth behind the trophy hunt for *Odradek: the interpreters cannot catch it. No matter what their

⁴⁴ Indeed, this paper began as a defense of metafictionality in Kafka’s work, with “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” as the privileged example.

theory, no matter what their tenor, they all must fail. The ‘Odradek’ they hold up in victory, then, is a counterfeit of their own creation, a fraud, a false idol (Aaron, an allegorist).

If you find *Odradek: kill it (the real one cannot die). It is not through capture that its truth becomes available, nor does its capture seem possible, defined as it is only by lack of fixity. While we argue with “die einen” and the “andere[n]” about what *Odradek really means, it will shuffle off into background, leaving us only its lungless laughter forever to interpret and never to overcome (282). Instead, we must take up the text, in its full complexity, and enter into its unstable dynamics.

APPENDIX A

DIE SORGE DES HAUSVATERS

Die einen sagen, das Wort Odradek stamme aus dem Slawischen und sie suchen auf Grund dessen die Bildung des Wortes nachzuweisen. Andere wieder meinen, es stamme aus dem Deutschen, vom Slawischen sei es nur beeinflußt. Die Unsicherheit beider Deutungen aber läßt wohl mit Recht darauf schließen, daß keine zutrifft, zumal man auch mit keiner von ihnen einen Sinn des Wortes finden kann.

Natürlich würde sich niemand mit solchen Studien beschäftigen, wenn es nicht wirklich ein Wesen gäbe, das Odradek heißt. Es sieht zunächst aus wie eine flache sternartige Zwirnspule, und tatsächlich scheint es auch mit Zwirn bezogen; allerdings dürften es nur abgerissene, alte, aneinandergesknotete, aber auch ineinanderverfützte Zwirnstücke von verschiedenster Art und Farbe sein. Es ist aber nicht nur eine Spule, sondern aus der Mitte des Sternes kommt ein kleines Querstäbchen hervor und an dieses Stäbchen fügt sich dann im rechten Winkel noch eines. Mit Hilfe dieses letzteren Stäbchens auf der einen Seite, und einer der Ausstrahlungen des Sternes auf der anderen Seite, kann das Ganze wie auf zwei Beinen aufrecht stehen.

Man wäre versucht zu glauben, dieses Gebilde hätte früher irgendeine zweckmäßige Form gehabt und jetzt sei es nur zerbrochen. Dies scheint aber nicht der Fall zu sein; wenigstens

findet sich kein Anzeichen dafür; nirgends sind Ansätze oder Bruchstellen zu sehen, die auf etwas Derartiges hinweisen würden; das Ganze erscheint zwar sinnlos, aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen. Näheres läßt sich übrigens nicht darüber sagen, da Odradek außerordentlich beweglich und nicht zu fangen ist.

Er hält sich abwechselnd auf dem Dachboden, im Treppenhaus, auf den Gängen, im Flur auf. Manchmal ist er monatelang nicht zu sehen; da ist er wohl in andere Häuser übersiedelt; doch kehrt er dann unweigerlich wieder in unser Haus zurück. Manchmal, wenn man aus der Tür tritt und er lehnt gerade unten am Treppengeländer, hat man Lust, ihn anzusprechen. Natürlich stellt man an ihn keine schwierigen Fragen, sondern behandelt ihn - schon seine Winzigkeit verführt dazu - wie ein Kind. „Wie heißt du denn?“ fragt man ihn. „Odradek“, sagt er. „Und wo wohnst du?“ „Unbestimmter Wohnsitz“, sagt er und lacht; es ist aber nur ein Lachen, wie man es ohne Lungen hervorbringen kann. Es klingt etwa so, wie das Rascheln in gefallen Blättern. Damit ist die Unterhaltung meist zu Ende. Übrigens sind selbst diese Antworten nicht immer zu erhalten; oft ist er lange stumm, wie das Holz, das er zu sein scheint.

Vergeblich frage ich mich, was mit ihm geschehen wird. Kann er denn sterben? Alles, was stirbt, hat vorher eine Art Ziel, eine Art Tätigkeit gehabt und daran hat es sich zerrieben; das trifft bei Odradek nicht zu. Sollte er also einstmals etwa noch vor den Füßen meiner Kinder und Kindeskindern mit nachschleifendem Zwirnsfaden die Treppe hinunterkollern? Er schadet ja offenbar niemandem; aber die Vorstellung, daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche.

APPENDIX B

VON DEN GLEICHNISSEN

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

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

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

Der erste sagte: Du hast gewonnen.

Der zweite sagte: Aber leider nur im Gleichnis.

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

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