

The Materialist Remainder

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Introduction

My thesis investigates “the materialist remainder” in Elizabeth Bishop’s and Franz Kafka’s texts. My aim is to demonstrate that such a remainder is at work, both in more general terms, but which I exemplify by focusing on Bishop’s canonized poem “The Fish” and Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” (Die Verwandlung). What I am moved by with these authors is that both seem to “resist” interpretation. But also by what I would, following Hegel, call “the universality at work” in their writing. On the one hand, there is an irreducible singularity to their writing. On the other an “engaged” totality. Totality not understood as the abstract universality, a totalitarianism that would “swallow” or encompass all as is the image of the Hegelian “Absolute knowing”, but rather as a “crack in the universal”. While there is something irreducibly literary about their work, the force of this irreducibility is that it simultaneously cracks the universal open, makes it inconsistent and struggling. The minimal definition of such a passage can be termed through the end of the cure in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Whereas the subject first is constituted by his “alienation” in the Other, the endpoint of analysis is that of “separation”. Here the subject accepts not his own “lack”, but in a much more radical way the “lack in the Other”.

On the one hand their work is highly meta-literary, always about the mechanisms of their own writing and the irreducibility of literature to any conceptual schema or our everyday lives. On the other their work is somehow “too real”, almost too realistic. That is to say, what carries the

force of these texts is also what one could call an equally irreducible primacy of concrete reality over notional mediation. In Bishop's poem "the Fish" the strange epiphany of the fishermen, as she lets the fish go back to the sea, is connected to the very materiality of the fish, the fact that it "hung a grunting weight", has been caught before, has a material existence, unknown to her. It is too *fish-like* to be recognized as similar to the fisherman. This in turn opens up for "victory" on both sides, because the speaker's failure to capture the fish's radical Otherness, reveals a radical Otherness within that is equally hard to capture, which is set free as she lets the fish go.

One can see how Bishop's texts can be read as a meta-literary revision of the Wordsworthian sublime, that is a self-conscious literary response to literature's relationship to nature. In this way the poem seems both to posit itself as a turn to concrete reality *and* as writing about writing more self-consciously than for the Romantics. The point, of course, is not so much whether or not this is "true" (is reality really like that? - were not the Romantics highly self-conscious writers?), the point is rather that the poem's effect is brought about by this manoeuvre.

The same goes for Kafka's protagonists in his short-stories, who are impossible to specify or categorize. Gregor Samsa, for instance, is too much like a gigantic insect (Ungeheuren Ungeziefer) to be conceived of as a human being (the German consists of two negative predicates). Yet Kafka contrasts this status with Gregor's thoughts, which cannot but seem those of rational human being, who cares extraordinarily for his family and attempts to make the best of the situation. These two radical contradictions should be read together. The more that Gregor tries to accommodate himself as a rational being to his metamorphosis, the more he is brought back to his insect-status, as demonstrated by his frequent crisscrossing around the room, or when he gets caught under his bed, because of his big back.

In both authors' work there is something, which *resists* interpretation. This resistance can both be seen as the very *literary* aspects of the texts or as the too "realistic" effects of their

texts. But would those seemingly opposing points not cancel each other out? How can we account for this paradox?

A Materialist Dialectic?

To gain theoretical coordinates for this encounter one must, paradoxically as it may sound “return to Hegel”. My cue comes from the Slovene school of Lacanians, where Slavoj Žižek is the most notable figure. The Slovenes have in their work attempted a “return” to Hegel and German Idealism via Lacanian psychoanalysis, and often draw on examples from popular-culture. My aim is to “apply” their theoretical coordinates to literature, in order both to understand their conceptual apparatus better, but also get a more thorough understanding of the authors I use in my thesis. The word “apply” is, one should hasten to add to avoid a misunderstanding, very problematic, because one of the aims of my thesis is to show that a theory of materialist dialectics does not involve such a binary method, but is *only* constituted in its examples. This is a point I will investigate, and therefore I will come back to this. My aim is to clarify the Slovenes ‘re-reading’ of Hegel and what kind of readings of literature is thereby enabled. It is my argument that such a theoretical approach does not necessarily involve a reduction of the literary richness of the works.

The argument made by the Slovenes is that the “standard” reading of Hegel as the ultimate idealist is wrong. The return to Hegel involves turning to Žižek’s introduction in his first book in English *the Sublime Object of Ideology*, where one of the aims of the book is:

“- to accomplish a kind of ‘return to Hegel’ – to reactualize Hegelian dialectics by giving it a new reading on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The current image of Hegel as an “idealist-

nominalist” is totally misleading: what we find in Hegel is the strongest affirmation yet of difference and contingency – ‘absolute knowledge’ itself is nothing but a name for the acknowledgment of a certain radical loss.” (Žižek 1989: 7).

I find Žižek’s approach very interesting. It would seem that a “Hegelian” position has very little viability outside history of philosophy, and especially in literature departments, where one of the great accomplishments is to, as in the tradition of New Criticism and Russian Formalists, insists on the *literariness* of literature. On the other hand, if it is true that “Hegel is the strongest affirmation yet of difference and contingency” – it would not only be viable, but vital for these departments themselves to give Hegelian dialectics a further hearing. In fact, the literariness of literature is the necessary starting point for a dialogue with Hegelian dialectics, if we are to re-read it in a materialist way. My purpose here is not to go into depths with Žižek’s “re-reading of Hegel”, but to clarify the distinction between an “idealist” and “materialist” dialectic. What is more important for me in this thesis is to demonstrate, how such a dialectic is at work in my literary “cases” and how far from entrapping literature in a closed economy of a System, it instead can demonstrate to some extent why such literature is “great”, that is to say, what carries the force of such writing.

To give a minimal definition of a “materialist dialectic”, I will use a favorite and oft-quoted joke from Slavoj Žižek. The so-called “Rabinovitch joke”, a “well-known joke from the Soviet Union”. The joke is as follows: Rabinovitch, a Jew, wants to emigrate. The bureaucrat at the emigration office asks him why, Rabinovitch answers: ‘There are two reasons why. The first is that I’m afraid that in the Soviet Union the Communists will lose power, there will be a counter-revolution and the new power will put all the blame for the Communist crimes on us, Jews – there will again be anti-Jewish pogroms...’ ‘But’, interrupts the bureaucrat, ‘this is pure nonsense,

nothing can change in the Soviet Union, the power of the Communists will last forever! ‘Well’, responds Rabinovitch calmly, ‘that’s my second reason’.

The first reason for emigration is the “thesis”, and the bureaucrats’ objection is the “anti-thesis” and the synthesis is not any kind of return to the thesis, “some magic healing of the wound made by the anti-thesis, - *the synthesis is exactly the same as the antithesis*, the only difference lies in a change of perspective.” (176). Rabinovitch wants to emigrate because he’s afraid that the Communists will lose power and the Jews will be blamed (thesis), the bureaucrat’s objection is that the Communists will never lose power (anti-thesis), the joke’s point is how what look like an obstacle to Rabinovitch reasons in effect turns out to be one of them, the second one we were waiting for. The “true” choice only emerges as the failure of the first “wrong” choice, as by-product, a contingency. This goes with Hegel’s statement in his introduction in *Phenomenology*, where he says that “truth” cannot be dissociated from “the path to truth”. The bureaucrat’s objection is not something to be shaken off in order to return to the true essence, but *constitutive* of what turns out to be the synthesis. The second one is that it is only by “misreading” Rabinovitch that the bureaucrat offers the second reason for emigrating, that it is only by misreading the first proposition, that the true one can emerge. Žižek gives an explanation of the Rabinovitch-joke as the “negation of the negation”.

This is also in a nutshell the logic of the ‘negation of the negation’: this double, self-referential negation does not entail any kind of return to positive identity, any kind of abolition, of cancellation of the disruptive force of negativity, of reducing it to a passing moment in the self-mediating process of identity; in the ‘negation of the negation’, the negativity itself is preserved all its disruptive power; the whole point is just that we come to experience how this negative, disruptive power, menacing our identity is simultaneously a positive condition of it. The ‘negation of the negation’ does not in any way abolish the antagonism, it consists only in the experience of the fact

that this immanent limit which is preventing me from achieving my full identity with myself simultaneously enables me to achieve a minimum of positive consistency, however mutilated it is.” (Žižek 1989: 176).

What is important to note is Žižek’s re-reading of the famous Hegelian triad: to the standard synthesis that is attributed to Hegel this is the *materialist* counterpart. The disruptive force of negativity, *remains* disruptive. Whereas in the “idealist” synthesis the antithesis is merely done away with in a triumphant return, the materialist version gives full weight to the “antithesis”. In other words: the anti-thesis is so disruptive that it cannot even be thought of as a negative force to the initial thesis. It re-coordinates the entire field of vision. It “explodes”, as it were, the coordinates which constituted the frame of the thesis-antithesis relation. It is a material remainder that cannot be sublated, and this very failure is, according to Žižek, what sublation really is. We have a certain thesis – then the antithesis and “the synthesis” is the result of giving the anti-thesis its full weight. It retroactively changes the entire field or framework within which the initial thesis was stated. More precisely it is not a return to the same subject, because strictly speaking there is no subject to begin with. The subject *emerges* as a result of the “failure” the first proposition.

These might seem like very abstract notional fixations, but an example will, I hope, demonstrate that it is not so.

Yeats’ Easter 1916

To give an example, we can use Yeats’ great poem, Easter 1916. The poem describes the speaker’s torn emotions regarding the 1916 Easter uprising against British rule in Ireland 1916,. The uprising was unsuccessful, and most of the Irish republican leaders were executed as a result. Nevertheless

the uprising constitutes a radical break in linear-temporal time for the speaker. It is an “Event”, which forever changes the relationship towards British Rule, and what it “means” to be Irish. From the materialist standpoint what is so interesting about the poem is the very way it articulates a “negation of a negation”, that it gives the “Universal” (Irishness) concrete existence. The Universal is here no longer a passive background, but something which is constitutively split, torn apart. The first stanza reads:

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
I have lingered a while and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly
A terrible beauty is born. (207).

The speaker first asserts Irishness as something, which is a background for any particular Irish identity: “being certain that they and I/ but lived where motley is worn”. Here Irishness is nothing but a grey, immobile background. The speaker has passed by his fellow-country men, and nodded and exchanged “polite meaningless words”. What is so powerful, however, is the way that such “polite meaningless words”, radically change their function. After the event such “polite meaningless words”, seems not only contrasted to important political matters, but are themselves extremely politically charged. It means that exchanging polite words with one’s neighbor is no longer just to “please a companion”, but means not taking a stance against British Rule. The personal encounters are already politically charged, even more so, because it is unknown to the speakers. Yeats’ speaker says: to exchange such words is already extremely political, exactly because it is not realized as such. It illustrates the overwhelming oppressiveness of British rule that dominates even such trivial matters. What is so striking is Yeats’ repetition of the same line: polite meaningless words. This follows Deleuze’s definition of minimal difference. Exactly because polite meaningless words *remain* polite meaningless words, everything else is “utterly changed”. The speaker realizes now, that such words really *are* “meaningless”, not just a colloquial community. When one pays attention to the rhythm of the passage Yeats’ speaker places extreme emphasis on the repetition of the phrase, exactly because we expect something else. It points to a circular movement, of being entrapped in polite meaningless words. The prior lines heightens the tension: “I have passed with a nod of the head/or polite meaningless words / or have lingered awhile and said”: the repetition of “Or” makes us wait for the release, as does the faster monosyllabic lines of “I have passed with a nod of the head” and “or have lingered awhile and said”, whereas the lines polite meaningless words are rhythmically drawn out. The enjambement “and said” further heightens the tension, and “polite meaningless words” are so forceful exactly because they punctuate this tension completely. It means: to use polite meaningless words is to punctuate Irishness itself.

We can see this through the materialist work of the “negation of the negation”. First we have polite meaningless words, then an apparent negation (to take political action), then the negation of the negation, which instead of merely doing away with the political renders that “polite meaningless words” already are the most political stance you can take, exactly by “not doing anything”. It means that Irishness *means* something, it is not just a passive, neutral background, like “being certain that they and I/ but lived where motley is worn”. Yeats’ speakers use of colloquial Irish is extremely powerful, because he shows that an Irish identity is already “at work”, in words that are particular to the Irish, names that are particular to the Irish, but this was not realized before the Event.

I write it out in a verse –
 Macdonagh and Macbride
 And Connolly and Pearse
 Now and in time to be,
 Whatever green is worn,
 Are changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born. (209)

Yeats’ speaker knows very well the empirical reality of the uprising. But what matters is the “universal” that shines through. To go back to the materialist dialectic: the Event is a result of a contingent “uprising”, it is like the “by-product” of the actual events, which retroactively constitutes Irishness as such. Notice the way Yeats’ repeat “changed”, as if changing the word’s meaning itself. “changed, changed utterly/a terrible beauty is born”.

Universality “at work”

Žižek gives a brief formula of what he is trying to accomplish by his “return” to the German philosopher. According to him, most commentators agree on Hegel as a break, Hegel as the last metaphysician in the philosophical tradition, so “post-hegelian” thought reacted to the confines of the closed system with the irreducibility of concrete reality. Zizek argues in *Less than Nothing* (2012) that this opposition is a false one, and it is, paradoxical as sounds, rather Hegel who gives the “irreducibility of concrete reality” its full due:

Such a deflated image of Hegel is not enough; the post-Hegelian break must be approached in more direct terms. True, there is a break, but Hegel is the vanishing mediator between its “before” and “after”, between traditional metaphysics and post-metaphysical nineteenth – and twentieth-century thought. That is to say, something happens in Hegel, a breakthrough into a unique dimension of thought, which is obliterated, rendered invisible in its true dimension, by post-metaphysical thought. (Zizek 2012: 239).

Instead this “traumatic truth” is repressed so that the “continuity of the development of philosophy can be re-established”. The opposition between Hegel as the philosopher of totality (and totalitarianism) functions as a scape-goat on which post-Hegelians can assert their own “materialism”, which is a materialism of contingency and difference. By remaining attached to this image of extreme idealism, rather than being materialists and advocates of the “primacy of the irreducibility of concrete reality” the post-Hegelians instead come to be at least minimal idealistic themselves, because they count on a position to stand in for idealism, which they can then safely go on to undermine. In a way this is a “defense-mechanism” to make sure that “everything stays the

same”, as Žižek formulates it, in the guise of its opposite, of claiming themselves to be materialists. What comes to be a stand-in for this empty space is the “absurd image of Hegel as the absolute idealist”. Žižek makes use of the Freudian notion of Screen-memory (*Deck-Erinnerung*) to argue this. When something traumatic takes place the subject can only go on living by repressing it, and the act of repression itself is “covered up”, by a fantasy-formation destined to cover up a traumatic truth”. Žižek writes provocatively:

In this sense the post-Hegelian turn to ‘concrete reality, irreducible to notional mediation,’ should rather be read as a desperate posthumous revenge of metaphysics, as an attempt to reinstall metaphysics, although in the inverted form of the primacy of concrete reality. (ibid)

My interest is above all in this aspect: how can “the Absolute” be investigated in literature? I have in my thesis two “cases”; Elizabeth Bishop and Franz Kafka. I find these authors especially valuable in this regard, because their work emphasizes what on first look seems to be the phenomenological primacy of concrete reality and the value of singular experience. But furthermore it could be argued this primacy involves a reconfiguration of totality, where a dialogue with materialist dialectics are possible. We could say again, that in their work Hegel becomes for-himself, whereas before he is in-himself. And again I would like to emphasize what I see as the important thing in this passage, namely that prior to for-himself, that is the phenomenology in the literary “examples”, there is “no Hegel”. The misunderstanding to be avoided then is to see the theory as applied to the concrete examples. The examples should be given their full weight in their irreducibility. It is not that one should on the one hand have the theory and on the other the examples and their interdependence give a higher unity (a better understanding of the theory/a better understanding of the literature involved). Although it sounds paradoxical the argument

instead follows the Hegelian proposition of infinite judgment: The Spirit is a Bone. It is in the failure of the system to encompass the material remainder, that it should recognize its own “kernel of truth”. In Lacanian terms it is in the literary example that the theory encounters its own “extimacy”, the most intimate, which nevertheless can only be experienced as a foreign body, something “outside” of myself. Žižek argues that Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit” is built up around this materialist dialectic. I give a longer quote to illustrate how this relates to a materialist notion of examples in general:

The difference between the idealist and materialist use of examples is that, in the Platonic-idealist approach, examples are always imperfect, they never perfectly render what they are supposed to exemplify, while for the materialist there is always more in the example than in what it exemplifies, in other words, the example threatens to undermine what it is supposed to exemplify since it gives body to what the exemplified notion itself represses or is unable to cope with. (Therein resides Hegel’s materialist procedure in the Phenomenology: each “figure of consciousness” is first exemplified and then undermined through its own example.) This is why the idealist approach always demands a multitude of examples – since no example really fits, one has to enumerate a great many of them in order to indicate the transcendent wealth of the idea they exemplify; the Idea being the fixed point of reference for the floating examples. A materialist, on the contrary, tends to turn obsessively to one and the same example: it is the particular example, which remain the same in all symbolic universes, while the universal notion it is supposed to exemplify continually changes its shapes, so that we get a multitude of universal notions circulating around a single example. (Žižek 2012: 364).

First there is a notion, which is followed by its “phenomenology”, which returns the repressed truth of the notion to itself, which changes the notion itself. To put it another way: if one interprets literature as the “phenomenology” that gives us back “the primacy of irreducible reality” over notional content, it presupposes that the notional content is itself fully self-transparent. Even though such a “phenomenology” undercuts this self-transparency from within it still rests on what Hegel calls an abstract reflection. While all this sounds very abstract, this disappears, when one relates it to very concrete everyday-experiences. When we read great literature, it can happen not only that we feel ourselves “mirrored” in the characters, or the style of writing, but that we feel that the writing is more “true” than our own lives. I will return to this.

I understand this in the sense, that when you read a very singular experience, like Bishop or Kafka, it is somehow more true than “reality”, in the sense that for Lacan, the Real is more true than “reality”. This, of course, only makes sense within the coordinates of German Idealism, where reality as such is something “constituted”/posited by the subject. What is “Real” in Bishop and Kafka then is precisely, what is “repressed” in the very constitution of reality. Something which is a “vanishing mediator”, before reality can be itself. Reading Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” along these lines, would mean that there is an unreadability to Kafka’s story; an irreducible, “irrational” remainder, but it is this very opacity, that makes up the “Real” of the story. Jacques Derrida has commented on Kafka’s writing along these lines in “Before the Law”. The identity of Kafka’s writing is achieved not

...within an assured specular reflection of some self-referential transparency – and I must stress this point – but in the unreadability of the text, if one understands by this the impossibility of acceding

to its proper significance and its possibly inconsistent content, which it jealously keeps back. (Derrida 1992: 211).

It feels that in its very irreducibility of being literature there is a remainder of inconsistency, epitomized also by Gregor's ontologically inconsistent status (is he a man or insect?), which is also connected to the opposition writing and life (it can be so *realistic* only because it is *fiction*, is a meta-writing at the same time), as seen for instance in the many reference to Gregor's activities in his room. He keeps crisscrossing the walls and, for instance, places himself over the kitsch pornographic picture in his room, as if enframing himself as "art"/"kitsch". Of course this has strong resonances to masturbatory activities and illicit, "unproductive" sexuality, but by placing himself in the frame of the picture Kafka also enframes Gregor Samsa himself as a "construct", something which is an effect of his own writing. Kafka's greatness is to short-circuit such an "art for art's sake" with "kitsch for kitsch's sake", with the values of the petit bourgeoisie.

Kafka brings back a certain irreducibility of our own lives that cannot be brought under a rubric except a certain unreadability. But is it not strange, that all these writers of universality all in the most obstinate way cling to the same subject matter and style of writing over and over again? While this looks like a paradox, it is this radical negativity, of clinging obstinately to a particular content, which enables the movement of the Universal for (the materialist) Hegel. This I will come back to.

The Fish

Elizabeth Bishop's canonized poem "The Fish" can be read with Hegelian dialectics in mind to understand how she subverts the conventional Worthsworthian Romanticism. Bishop's fisherman-

speaker, is out on a rented boat, catches a “tremendous fish”, but as she examines it closely, she comes to realize how the fish has a history before her; it has been caught before, by someone else, and let out. She feels a sense of a victory belonging to both her and the fish at the same time and lets it go. With the outline of Hegel above in mind, it is however, a victory won from a failure to assimilate the fish. “It hung a grunting weight”, she writes, that is, it resists in its irreducible concrete reality any kind of mediation by the speaker. But this is precisely why it follows the logic of ‘negation of the negation’.

I caught a tremendous fish
 And held him beside the boat
 Half out of water, with my hook
 Fast in the corner of his mouth

I can not here go into the many rich details of the poem, but will concern myself primarily with the case at hand, by examining its structure, which can be formulated in two questions: What kind of encounter does the fish provide? What can we deduce from this encounter about a more general relation from Bishop to the Romantic sublime, since the critic Jeredith Meredith writes: “as we might expect, Bishop is most subversive at her most Wordsworthian moments.” I would suggest that the two are connected and that Hegelian dialectics as “re-read” by Žižek is one way to understand this.

The poem undermines an idealist dialectics in favor of a materialist one. It follows closely the structure of negation of the negation in the materialist sense outlined above. In the standard reception of Hegel that is attributed to him, for instance in the Master-Slave chapter in the

Phenomenology, the subject only comes to self-consciousness through the struggle with another self-consciousness. Such an “idealist” version of an encounter is what Bishop undermines.

I looked into his eyes
 Which were far larger than mine
 But shallower, and yellowed
 The irises backed and packed
 With tarnished tinfoil
 Seen through the lenses
 Of old scratched isinglass
 They shifted a little, but not
 to return my stare
 - it was more like the tipping
 of an object toward the light.

Bishop’s “I” tries to catch the fish’s eye, but it does not return her stare. Rather there is a failure of intersubjective reflection of glances. The fish remains stubbornly *fish*-like: it does not return her stare. It is a *thing*, not a self-consciousness. The relation to the fish is not reciprocal, but asymmetrical. This makes the encounter materialist, understood in the sense that it does not come off without a non-integrable remainder. There is an insurmountable abyss between her and the fish. Yet something *does* happen as the light is reflected in the fish’s eyes. She turns the fish in her hand, feels its irreducible weight. While the fish is not another self-consciousness understood in the idealist sense, it is also not just inert matter. Bishop’s humorously gives it anthropocentric qualities.

It has a “five-haired beard of wisdom”, and continuously described with the pronoun “he”. David Kalstone writes:

The poem is filled with the strain of seeing – not just the unrelenting pressure of making similes to "capture" the fish, but the fact that the similes themselves involve flawed instruments of vision, stained wallpaper, scratched isinglass, tarnished tinfoil. This is why, on some readings, the poem has the air of summoning up a creature from the speaker's own inner depths – the surviving nonhuman resources of an earlier creation, glimpsed painfully through the depredations of time and the various frail instruments we devise, historically, to see them. The "victory" that fills up the little rented boat is one that more than grammatically belongs to both sides. (Kalstone 1989: 134)

What is important from the Hegelian perspective is that “reconciliation”, the victory felt on both sides in the end, is only enabled by the materialist remainder, the fact that there is a failure in the initial recognition. Kalstone emphasizes “the flawed instruments of vision”, it is from this failure, that Bishop's speaker comes to know not so much the humanity of the fish, but what one might call the *fish-ness* status of the Fisherman herself. The difference between speaker and fish is by the poems end instead seen as a difference within the speaker herself, i.e. between herself as a conscious human subject and her irreducible fish-ness, which undermines such a consciousness.

The fish cannot be subsumed under a reciprocal relation. But this is what makes the poem so interesting from the Hegelian perspective outlined above. Put in the terms of the Rabinovitch-joke it is the very *failure* of a reciprocal relation, that constitutes the final reconciliation. We could

summarize: first the *thesis* (the fish is like me, or something I can get cognition about, something that contributes to sense within the human universe) then we have the *anti-thesis* (the fish does not return my stare, it is “radical Other”, all the attempts to describe it just give results in delimiting the failure of describing it), which concludes with the *synthesis*, I myself am as well *fish-like* (radical Other within). This is a materialist synthesis, because of the remainder: the fish-status which cannot be done away with, is the very starting point of the synthesis, it retroactively shows the thesis as falsely constituted (I cannot look for the self-consciousness in the fish, because it does not have any, and furthermore, I myself have only a self-consciousness constituted on the background of an indispensable blindness, of my own fish-like status).

I stared and stared

And victory filled up

The little rented boat,

From the pool of bilge

Where oil had spread a rainbow

Around the rusted engine

To the bailer rusted orange.

The sun-cracked thwarts

The oarlocks on their strings,

The gunnels – until everything

Was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow

And I let the fish go.

The failure to really capture the fish is correlative to the failure capturing her inner self. And to let the fish go is simultaneously to let herself go (the sense of victory that fills up the boat), to shift from the perspective of the eager idealist fisherman to the materialist “object-in-the subject”. Notice how it is the spoiled vision, the materiality of the boat, the “sun-cracked thwarts”, the “pool of bilge” and so on, which also simply there in their inertia, are also just things that resist idealist “swallowing”. The poem gives us a dialectic which is the exact opposite of the “idealist Hegel”, but it is very close to the “materialist Hegel” I, via Žižek, have tried to outline above. We could say apropos Kafka’s inconsistency, that what gives Bishop her greatness is a similar kind of unreadability/inconsistency. The Fish is on the one hand very realistic, “it hung a grunting weight”, it is, so to say, a very real fish compared to the Romantic description of Nature. On the other hand, and the two are strictly correlative, the whole poem never *escapes* its meta-writing, and instead joyfully plays with it, the fish is also “like ancient wall-paper”. The Fish is both more “realistic” than poetry in the Romantic tradition, *and* more metatextual, a more self-consciously “writerly” literature. The fish can easily be read as what is from Bishop’s perspective the repeated failure in romantic literature to capture the sublime, and Bishop’s insight into how it is by letting go of the “subject-male-imperialistic” attempt at capturing it, that it first can be brought about. This is different from a Wordsworthian vision of “bliss in solitude”. The fish is too ugly, humorous and material (it hung a grunting weight) to be encompassed in a lyrical vision and self-expansion. Yet it is by the very failure of this assertion of subjectivity that the Bishopian self is set free, because to put in a colloquial vein, in this way it retains the element of surprise and life and contingency outside of philosophical and psychological systems, which in Žižek’s reading of Hegel is also what philosophy ultimately should aim at. If one considers Bishop as dealing with the legacy of romantic poetry this would mean that she becomes most like a romantic visionary, the moment she breaks off from a Wordsworthian vision.

The Moose

The Moose is both like the fish in “the Fish”, and unlike it. Bishop begins “in medias res”, with several subjunctive clauses. We do not have a “stable” starting point, but are constitutively displaced, until we realize that the speaker is on a bus:

Through the late afternoon
 A bus journeys west.
 The windshield flashing pink,
 Pink glancing off of metal,
 Brushing the dented flank
 Of blue, beat-up enamel;
 Down hollows, up rises,
 And waits, patient, while
 A lone traveller gives
 Kisses and embraces
 To seven relatives
 And a collie supervises (170).

Like (the materialist) Hegel’s point about essence, the primordial fact is not that of stability. Of a Subject, which externalizes/alienates itself in an Other, and then triumphantly “returns to itself”. The beginning is instead that of division/confusion. Whereas Bishop insists on the “fishiness” of the fish, she also insists on the “moosiness” of the Moose. Both resist an uncomplicated integration

into the Romantic tradition of the epiphany and the power of naming. Bishop instead employs restraint in her language: both creatures remain non-human, non-abstract *creatures*, embedded in this world, but our encounter with it engenders the fabulous or fantastic.

Some of the passengers

Exclaim in whispers,

Childishly, softly,

Sure are big creatures

“it awful plain”.

“Look! It’s a she!” (173).

Bishop’s version of the sublime includes the colloquial and ugly in her description, as when the passengers in the bus sees the moose. “‘Curious creatures,’ / says our quiet driver, / rolling his *r*’s. / ‘Look at that, would you.’ / Then he shifts gears / for a moment longer,”. The moose is defined as “otherworldly”, but the real event of the poem is when the very strangeness of the moose’s presence is turned into an equal strangeness of the bus’ presence. Again, it is the very failure of “capturing” the Moose, the irreducible contingency of the encounter, which brings about the materialist reconciliation: It is only the very strange Moose, which opens up a space of radical Otherness within the human beings themselves.

From asking about what curious creature the moose is, we are equally confronted with the question of what “curious creatures” we ourselves are. In this way the “Universal” is at work, because the Universality of what a human being is is itself retroactively changed by the encounter with the Moose: human beings are not just human beings, but there is an elusive remainder inherent to that of being human, which escapes the act of self-reflectivity. The ontological horizon of human beings

is changed by the materialist remainder of the Moose, as a *by-product*, something which “falls off”, something, which also could “not have happened”.

Kafka as a materialist writer

In this chapter I will discuss Kafka as a writer of a materialist dialectic. The immediate response would seem to be the exact opposite. Is not Kafka the writer of an irrational, absurd universe, which escapes and thereby undermines conceptual nominations? In one way this is true, of course, but when one reads him closely he is deeply indebted to a materialist dialectic.

Kafka’s universe can in effect be seen as working with such a “negation of the negation”. His writing always stages an extremely confined space. Immediately he begins with such a contraction so space becomes very claustrophobic. Then he often counters this with a radical expansion, but *within* this same claustrophobic space (houses, rooms, hallways are always much larger than we would expect). There is to this always a radical Outside, which signals nothing but the limit of this space, like the Castle or the Court, whose Call-injunction to officiate one can never respond to. This Call-injunction coincides with a limit *within*: The problem is not just that of what does the Call mean, but “why was I singled out/arrested, what is it *in me*, that makes the Other respond to me in this way?” The two of course are strictly correlative. When one effectively turns this Call-injunction on its head, by removing the need to respond to such a Call, and the claustrophobia is made even more claustrophobic a space for freedom is gained. In Lacanian terms the subject is relieved of its lack, when this lack coincides with a lack in the Other. To put it in the materialist dialectical terms: first there is a negation (not being able to respond to the call of the Other), then the negation of the negation “K’s inability to answer such a call from the Other

coincides with an inability in this Other itself, Castle, Court, to know what it is effectively about. In this way a space of “separation”, of relief from guilt is gained.

Gregor as a case of infinite judgment?

I will try to illustrate this in “The Metamorphosis”. As is well known it begins as Gregor wakes up and finds himself a “gigantic insect”.

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect [ungeheuren Ungeziefer]. He was lying on his hard, as it were, armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes. (19).

Gregor wakes up as “ein ungeheuren Ungeziefer” – we do not know what he is exactly. Is he a monstrous vermin or insect? The german prefix “Un” can however not be dismissed as irrelevant. He is rather something that remains *within* the confines of a vermin/insect, but also negates it from within, in exactly the same way that infinite judgment evokes a negative predicate rather than a negation. He is not a vermin, but rather an excess of the definition “Geziefer” - vermin/insect/bug, something which corrodes the consistency of such a category from within. Kant writes of the infinite judgment that it is something which only draws a limit inherent to the category itself. In this

way it has the exact structure of Freud's "das Unheimliche". It is not a negation as such, but *a negative predicate*:

If I had said of a soul that it is not mortal, then at least I would have avoided an error by means of a negative judgment. Now by means of the proposition "The soul is non-mortal" I have certainly made an actual affirmation as its logical form is concerned, for I have placed the soul within the unlimited domain of undying beings, but (...) nothing is said by my proposition but that the soul is one of the infinite multitude of things that remain if I take away everything that is mortal. But the infinite sphere of the possible is thereby limited only to the extent that that which is mortal is separated from it, and the soul is placed in the remaining sphere of this domain. (Kant 2009: 207-208).

Kant here asserts a negative predicate, not the soul is not mortal, but the soul is non-mortal, which also goes for Gregor: *non*-human, rather than not human. He is described from within the category of "Geziefen", vermin/insect, but also which cannot be included in it. When Gregor dies, the charwoman says not he "is dead", but "es ist krepirt". Only human beings can be granted with a death, not just a mere decaying away. The same status of course goes for many of Kafka's protagonist, who are "animals", like the mice in "Josefine the singer or the Mouse folk", the Dog in "Investigations of a Dog", the "badger" in "The Burrow", the ape in "Report to an Academy" and so on.

Kafka's brilliance as a writer testifies to the fact that he did not choose a first-person narrator for his *Metamorphosis*. What would be the difference? In that case the waking up as a gigantic insect could be merely a "subjective distortion", but by putting his story in the third-person

Kafka effectively makes Gregor's indefinability an "external" problem, something that relates to the constitution of *reality as such*. It is not just Gregor Samsa who wonders what he is, it is also his mother, father, sister, the chief clerk and us the readers. In fact the *least* worried is Gregor himself. The unspecifiability of Gregor is not a subjective problem, but an objective one. Gregor is more concerned about missing the train, than his metamorphosis in it-self.

The very way of designating him should not be thought of as an irrational ground prior to the realm of logic. Rather it is a failed logic, not outside of logic or as a kind of irrational remainder, that reason is not able to grasp, as would be the claim in a *Lebensphilosophie*, or the "irreducible primacy of concrete reality", but rather a *failed logic*, a *failed beginning*. The failure to designate Gregor can only be seen from within a circle of reasoning: "ungeheuren Ungeziefer", or "circle of human beings" – as his mother calls it at one point. Again the infinite judgment is the most accurate: as something, which vanishes with the fully constituted, ontologically consistent reality (or in Kant's words before the "original-synthetic unity of apperception"):

The supreme principle of all intuition in relation to the understanding is that all the manifold of intuition stand under the conditions of the original synthetic unity of apperception. All the manifold representations of intuition stand under the first principle insofar as they are given to us, and under the second insofar as they must be capable of being combined in one consciousness; for without that nothing could be thought or cognized through them, since the given representations would not have in common the act of apperception, I think, and thereby would not be grasped together in a self-consciousness. (248-249; B136).

Kant passes, Žižek writes, to quickly over this “vanishing mediator” of a phase that precedes synthetic apperception, but nevertheless is strictly inherent to it . It is something which happens between what Kant calls the first and the second principle in the above. Something that *precedes* the constitution of reality, yet it is not simply the “manifold of intuitions as given to us in space and time.” Kant calls it the “I or he or it, the Thing, which thinks” (CPR 346), and here it is hard not to recall Gregor as exactly that. But Kant presumes that we have no access to “The Thing” we are, because it is located in another realm. Like with the soul, the subject is not noumenal, but rather non-noumenal. This non-space is what we following Gregor could call the awakening (es war kein Traum/ “it wasn’t a dream”), yet it is not reality either. The Gregor of a fully constituted reality would be more like the photograph of himself: “on the wall hang a photograph of himself on military service, as a lieutenant, hand on sword, a carefree smile on his face, inviting one to respect his uniform and military bearing.” (35).

Awakening

Mladen Dolar has characterized in an unpublished lecture Kafka’s universe as the “moment of awakening”. A passage crossed out from *The Trial* is of great help to understand this, especially in light of Kant. K. tells Frau Grubach at the beginning of his trial, that he could never had been arrested had he been in the bank, because there he is “prepared”. In the bank he is in possession of his “presence of mind”. Such things as arrest can take place only in one’s bedroom immediately as one is waking up, because here one is “ill-prepared”.

An infinite presence of mind [Schlagfertigkeit, which literally means: readiness to strike back”] is needed when one wakes up, so that one can grasp at once everything

that had been let go the night before, and make sure that everything is on the same spot where it had been left. That's why the moment of waking up is the most risky of the whole day; once it is behind you, without you having been carried away from your place, you can be quite confident for the rest of the day. (from Walther Herbert Sokel: 246).

We should note and magnify all deep Kantian gestures in this passage. For Kant "the most risky moment", which he does not fully admit himself would be the one not being immersed in a noumenal realm, in an ethereal light, but rather the one strictly inherent to the finitude, but which nevertheless is in excess of it, which is non-noumenal. The unconscious is not what goes on in the "repressed" noumenal realm, but rather *that which instigates* this repression itself, the founding gesture of subjectivity and finitude. Repression is always double, it both represses the "noumenal" and the act of this repression itself, where the latter is the true unconscious. Sokel seems to lose sight of such an uncanny realm, the realm of non-noumena, not yet constituted reality, when he comments: K's sees survival as the difficult achievement of constant alertness and preparedness against the realm of sleep and dream that, as he mentions (...) are "conditions entirely different from waking life". Sokel relies on a too easy opposition between dream and reality, whereas the truly risky moment is *not* dream, but the moment of waking up, in Kantian language: not noumena, but the non-noumenal realm which *precedes* synthetic apperception and the constitution of self-consciousness.

We should take note of the fact that no one ever really dreams in Kafka, they sleep, slumbers, swoons, but in a dreamless way. Gregor Samsa is haunted by such moments stretched out over the entire short story. It is not irrelevant that dreams are inaccessible to Gregor, in a similar way as noumena are inaccessible to Kant, and in this way, much less problematic than the moment

of waking up. When Gregor first wakes up the line is: “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from *uneasy dreams* he found himself transformed into in his bed into a gigantic insect. (19 / Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus *unruhigen Traümen* erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt” (5). Like the noumena, dreams can only be approached *post festum*, in the moment of awakening. Since the founding gesture of constituting reality, of *Logos*, must necessarily be repressed, dreams/noumena exactly come to stand-in for that gap, to make our universe ontologically consistent by imposing an external limit to it. We should also note Kafka’s brilliant use of the word “as”/als. Gregor Samsa finds himself as an gigantic insect *as* he wakes up, in the intermediate stage, which constitutes the later division dream/reality. Similarly when Gregor “sleeps” later that day, it is not really sleep, but rather a “powerless sleep” (ohnmächtigen Schlaf”).

We cannot get a clear conception of Gregor, exactly like we cannot in the Kantian edifice get a glimpse of the self as other than “I or He, or It, the Thing which thinks”. Gregor is a weird agglomerate of parts that do not fit together, he is too much like a bug and too much like a human. When his mother sees him he is described by the narrator as a “monstrous brown mass”; he is not a coherent whole.

The human room: Negation of the negation

What is so brilliant about Kafka’s writing is that the metamorphosis immediately collides with the radical sameness of everything else Gregor’s surroundings are exactly the same as the day before. This minimal difference in a Deleuzian sense is much more radical precisely because everything else stays the same:

What has happened to me? He thought. It was no dream. His room a regular, *human* bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four *familiar* walls [Was ist mit mir geschehen?“ dachte er. Es war kein Traum. Sein Zimmer, ein richtiges, nur etwas zu kleines *Menschenzimmer*, lag ruhig zwischen den *wolhbekannt*en Wänden]. Above the table on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out – Samsa was a commercial traveler – hung the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished. (ibid; my emphasis).

Notice Kafka’s wonderful use of adjectives, which are even more subtle in the German: “What has happened to me? He thought. It was no dream. His room a regular, *human* bedroom [*Menschenzimmer*] , only rather too small, lay quiet between the four *familiar* [*wolhbekannt*en] walls”. Everything is intimately well-known, stays completely the same except for Gregor himself. He overemphasizes however, the very *well-known* aspects of the room: “his room a regular, human bedroom”. By over-articulating the well-known *humanness* of the room he of course does the exact opposite. From what point of view can it be meaningful to describe something as a human room? Only from the point of view, where one is no longer in the “circle of human beings” [*Menschenkreis*], as his mother calls it. Only when one is no longer human does it make sense to describe a room as a “human room”. So it is not only that Gregor himself has changed, exactly like Deleuze’s minimal difference, everything else has changed much more radically by staying *the same*.

The very fact that Kafka slips this word in so elegantly might make us miss the impact of the way it changes the entire ontological horizon. Gregor's changed ontological status is then rendered not only in-Itself (he has metamorphosed), but also in how he perceives the world surrounding him. (it is also metamorphosed, signaled only by the "superfluous" word "human/Menschen" – what else could the room be?)

Coincidence of opposites

Kafka's brilliance and insistence is also easy to see in the way that he continues this trend of a *conincidentum oppositorum* in the next page. He immediately, in a wonderfully radical way, contrasts Gregor's metamorphosis not with a shock but rather with Gregor's melancholy, the bourgeois, petty cares of his life:

Gregor's eyes turned next to the window, and the overcast sky – one could hear rain drops beating on the window gutter – made him quite melancholy. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought. But it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and in his present condition he could not turn himself over. (20).

What is so extraordinary about this passage is the way how Gregor does not react to his metamorphosis. It is a problem at this point, because he cannot go back to sleep. This again follows the negation of the negation. What looks like a negation, remains disruptive, but only because he cannot go back to sleep, which changes the outset radically (we would expect a shock), but instead the real shock is his life in its normalcy is already in a state of emergency. Instead of reacting

immediately to his metamorphosis he complains about his business-life, “oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I’ve picked on!”, which of course makes us realize that this life is so shocking in itself that even a metamorphosis to a gigantic insect cannot triumph it. Gregor’s metamorphosis is not really a negation, but a “symptom”, which gives material body to the inconsistencies of the demands of the Other.

Such a life so radically changes a human being, that Gregor can no longer even feel the shock of a metamorphosis, other than as a problem since he is too late for work. Gregor acts like a rational, caring and sensitive human being when addressing the chief-clerk, who is fleeing him.

“‘Well,’ said Gregor, knowing perfectly that he was the only one who had retained any composure, ‘I’ll put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples and start off. Will you only let me go? You see, Sir, I’m not obstinate, and I’m willing to work; travelling is a hard life, but I couldn’t live without it. Where are you going, sir? To the office? Yes? Will you give a true account of all this? One can be temporarily incapacitated, but that’s just the moment for remembering former services and bearing in mind that later on, when the incapacity has been got over, one will certainly work with all the more industry and concentration. (...) sir, sir, don’t go away without a word to me to show that you think me in the right at least to some extent.’But at Gregor’s very first words the chief clerk had already backed away and only stared at him with parted lips over one twitching shoulder ” (36-37).

The coincidence of rationalism with a material remainder is also wonderfully captured by Gregor’s reproach to himself, even though he is a gigantic insect: “Man must have his sleep”/“Der Mensch

muss sein Schlafen haben” or “what’s the use of lying idle in bed/Nur sich nicht im Bett unnütz aufhalten/” (24). By short-circuiting such rationalistic truisms with their literalization, they arrive at their speculative truth, like the Hegelian coincidence of opposite in the infinite judgment “Spirit is a bone.” To put in Kantian terms: the “madness” of the instigation of reason is a far more “maddening” act than madness itself as a constitutive Outside. That is to say, reason is haunted by madness, not as a contingent remainder (if that were the case we would again be back in the irrational-contingent *Lebensphilosophie*), but rather by virtue of its own act.

Appealing as it may sound to our ‘postmodern’ receptivity such a reading is none the less of the mark: it falls short of the Grundoperation of German Idealism common to Schelling and Hegel, since it fails to bring the duality Reason and its Ground to the point of self-reference. That is to say: what has to fall is the last barrier which separates Reason from its ‘irrational’ Ground: the most difficult task, the highest effort, of philosophical speculation is to bring to light the ‘madness’ [Wahnsinn] of the very gesture of instituting the domain of Sinn. Every organization of sense, every conceptual scheme by means of which we endeavor to comprehend reality, is in – itself – at its most fundamental, for structural reasons and not merely due to contingent circumstance – biased, out of balance, ‘crazy’, minimally ‘paranoic’ (as the early Lacan would have put it): its imposition disturbs the ‘natural order of things’ and throws the universe of balance. (2007: 76).

What is so maddening about “Reason’s self-examination”, whereby its own enunciative act escapes it, can be illustrated by the ability of Kafka’s writings to evoke claustrophobia. When Gregor is in his room, we would expect one door out, but we realize that his room has several doors, almost to

the point of vertigo, wherefrom the Call of the Other (his father, sister, mother and the chief clerk) can call him to his duty.

Gregor, Gregor he [the father] called, “what’s the matter with you?” and after a little while called again in a deeper voice: Gregor! Gregor! At the other side of the door his sister saying in a low plaintive tone: Gregor? Aren’t you well? Are you needing anything? He answered them both at once: “I’m just ready,” and did his best to make his voice sound as normal as possible by enunciating the words very clearly and leaving long pauses between them. So his father when back to breakfast, but his sister whispered: “Gregor, open the door, do”. However, he was not thinking of opening the door, and felt thankful for the prudent habit he had acquired in traveling of locking all doors during night, even at home. (23).

Notice how the Call from the Other is accompanied by bodily noises as well. When one hears such noises it is precisely because the meaning is too thick or dense to be integrated without a remainder. Instead his father’s voice grows deeper, and his sister whispers. It is as if Gregor cannot gain any personal space, but is invaded by these voice who call upon him. When his father chases him to his room:

In the end, however, noting else was left for him to do since to his horror he observed that in his moving backwards he could not even control the direction he took; and so in keeping an anxious eye to his father all the time over his shoulder, he began to turn round as quickly as he could, which was in reality very slowly. Perhaps his father noted his good intentions, for he did not interfere except every now and then to help

him in the manoeuvre from a distance with the point of the stick. If only he would have stopped making that hissing noise! It made Gregor lose his head. He had turned almost completely around when the hissing noise so distracted him that he even turned a little the wrong way again.” (40).

What is important here is the short-circuit between the father’s hissing noise and Gregor’s distractedness (i.e. unable to obey). Because there is a void in the Other, there is also a void in the subject, the subject cannot ever accommodate the Call-injunction of the Other, because this Other is itself “desiring”, to use Lacan’s phrase. The density/materiality of the Call of the Other coincides with a density within: Gregor as an insect. He cannot “officiate” precisely because he is no longer Gregor, he has no access to his own “self”. The claustrophobia is heightened not just because the walls are surrounded by the Call of the Other, but because one cannot even get “inside” oneself, because one is a “Thing, which things”, of which we can know nothing.

Like in Kant there is a “blockage” in the self as well, self-consciousness is grounded in the fact that my true self is unconscious to me. Every system must rely on an exclusion in order to stabilize itself as consistent. For Kant this of course gets “reified” as the noumenal realm. And Hegel’s critique is here to let this external barrier collide with an inner one – there is no place, where I would not be a “Thing, which thinks”. There is no access to self-consciousness, not because of the limits of the finite world measured *against* the noumenal one, which Kant assumes, but because this noumenal realm is *also* inconsistent:

Kant can only perceive finitude as the finitude of the transcendental subject who is constrained by schematism, by the temporal limitations of transcendental synthesis: for him, the only finitude is the finitude of the subject; he does not consider the

possibility that the very categories he is dealing with may be “finite”, i.e. that they may remain categories of abstract Understanding, not yet the truly infinite categories of speculative Reason. And Hegel’s point is that this move from categories of Understanding to Reason proper is not an illegitimate step beyond the limits of our reason; it is rather Kant himself who oversteps the proper limits of his analysis of categories, of pure notional determinations, illegitimately projecting onto this space the topic of temporal subjectivity, and so forth. At its most elementary, Hegel’s move is a reduction, not an enrichment, of Kant: a *subtractive* move, a gesture of taking away the metaphysical ballast and of analyzing notional determinations in their immanent nature. (Zizek 269).

We cannot step on our own shoulders and rely on such a realm, which Kant secretly does. One can approach this problem via Lacan’s logic of sexuation. Whereas the male antinomy, which Kant relies on in this, to castration is founded on an exception. All are castrated/One is not castrated. The feminine one *cannot* include an exception, which is why castration as such is non-All. “There is no One, that is not castrated”/non-All are castrated.”. This precisely means that for Lacan “castration is not everything”.

What also contributes to the claustrophobia is how time is captured in the story. In a way “realistically” only a little time passes by in the first chapter, yet it feels endless, Gregor tries a hundred times to get up, the alarm-clock is constantly on our nerves, which the narrator describes as “möbelerschütternde”, so shrieking that it shakes the furniture. Remembering Kafka’s “infinite presence of mind”; we can again make the coincidence of the Call-injunction of Reason and its immanent “Verlegenheit” (displacement/embarrassment) of the subject. For Kant the voice of

Reason is strictly opposed to feeling. It is a call from Without, which cannot be recognized as “mine”, but as imposing a duty on me, and it cannot be deafened:

Were the voice of reason with respect to the will not so distinct, so irrepressible and so clearly audible even for the commonest man [*die Stimme der Vernunft in Beziehung auf den Willen...so deutlich, so unüberschreibbar* (literally unovercryable), *selbst für den gemeinsten Menschen so vernehmlich*] it would drive morality to ruin. (Kant 1993: 36).

The Kantian voice cannot be located, like the subject of enunciation itself. This is similar to how the Call-injunction of duty coincides with the gap between my self-consciousness and the “Thing, which thinks” – it is my “Thing, which thinks”, which commands my duty, and this cannot be integrated in self-consciousness. If reason and the constitution of reality wakes one up to an infinite presence of mind it is also the call of such a duty that makes the furniture shake, and is what makes it possible to find “everything *not* in the same spot”, i.e. again waking up is inherent to reality, or in Kantian language: the vanishing moment of the night of the world is inherent to “synthetic apperception”.

The effect of claustrophobia is also at work, when Gregor is threatened when the chief-clerks (der Prokurist) “patent leather books creaked”, or his father’s “gigantic shoe soles” – both are driven by a senseless urge, a clumsiness attached to their “disciplining” function as representatives of the Law.

Gregor was dumbfounded at the enormous size of his shoe soles. But Gregor could not risk standing up to him, aware as he had been from the very first day of his new

life that his father believed in only the severest measures suitable for dealing with him. And so he ran before his father, stopping when he stopped and scuttling forward again when his father made any kind of move. In this way they circled the room several times without anything decisive happening; indeed the whole operation did not even look like a pursuit because it was carried out so slowly. (63).

Whereas the Other, the father, here does not know what he is doing (in the sense of not understanding how to “discipline” Gregor), so the voice of the Other, does also not know how to carry any meaning, without a material remainder. The many different voices, who cry, sob, whisper and address him in hundreds of contradictory ways, often unknown to the Other itself – Gregor’s question is always: what does the Other want from me (what is the desire of this Other, even unknown to this Other himself, otherwise there would be no obvious mismatch between what they think they are doing and what they are effectively doing – father’s ridiculousness and his role as a Father and so on). Even in all his might, there is still a “void in the Other”. That is to say, the fact that authority cannot be legitimized, but can only seem that of an imposter coincides with a material remainder:

Now he was standing there in fine shape; dressed in a smart blue uniform with *gold buttons*, such as bank messengers wear; his *strong double chin* bulged over the *stiff high collar* of his jacket, from under his *bushy eyebrows* his black eyes darted fresh and penetrating glances; his onetime tangled white hair had been combed flat on either side of a shining and *carefully exact* parting. (ibid.).

Notice how the father's authority is betrayed on two levels. It is both too much and not enough. On the one hand his father overdoes his insignia of authority. If he really had authority, there would be no need for the shining gold buttons, or the "carefully exact parting" of the hair. On the other hand, Gregor pays attention to the strong double chin and bushy eyebrows, which means that authority has not delivered its message seamlessly, but remains stuck with the father's empirical figure.

When Gregor considers whether he might not lose his job, Kafka's narrator writes:

Anyhow, that might be quite a good thing for me, who can tell? If I didn't have to hold my hand, because of my parents I'd have given him notice long ago, I'd have gone to the chief and told him exactly what I think of him. That would knock him endways from his desk. It's a queer way of doing, too, this sitting on high at a desk and talking down to employees, especially when they have to come quite near because the chief is hard of hearing. Well there's still hope; once I've saved enough money to pay back my parent's debts to him – should take another five or six years – I'll do it without fail. (21).

The boss is a representative of a Law, which has validity without meaning. This is seen by the material excess, which makes the boss both an imposter and a representative of the Law. We could say, in Kafka, the Law's representatives are imposters by structural necessity. The boss is a figure of authority, yet he is hard of hearing, and has a whim to sit on a high desk, as *though he was not really authority*. On the other his authority leaks by corporeal partial objects as the "strong double chin" and "bushy eyebrows". What this amounts to is that there are always such material remainders, which renders the law inexplicable, not only for Gregor, but testifies to "a void in this Other itself".

When Gregor speaks up in his voice, it is also very materiality "betrays" him.

“Gregor” said a voice, - it was his mother’s – “it’s a quarter to seven. Haven’t you a train to catch?”. That gentle voice! Gregor has a shock as he heard his own voice answering hers, unmistakably his own voice, it was true, but with a persistent, horrible twittering squeak behind it like an undertone, that left the words in their clear shape only for the first moment and then rose up reverberating round them to destroy their sense, so that one could not be sure one had heard them rightly. (22).

The materiality of the Other’s voice coincides with the materiality of Gregor’s own voice. It is “unmistakably his”, yet it cannot be recognized as such, it does not even make sense, but cancel it out. As the chief-clerk says with an equivalent to the negative predicate: *das war ein Tierstimme* / “it was no human voice.”. Far from designating something outside of the human sphere, voice is by such defined as a human instrument of rationalization and communication. So Gregor’s voice is again like the negative predicate, the inherent excess of human reason itself.

While “The metamorphosis” makes Gregor’s life very claustrophobic, there are also moment of sublime epiphany and liberation. Very importantly, such freedom is not to escape the his metamorphosis, but rather to surrender oneself to it. So we have to ways of surrendering to the Other: one is to surrender to the Other of the Law (Gregor prior to metamorphosis, a *forced* choice of paying off his parents debt). The other is to surrender to the Other *that is myself*, that is to say to the that in me, which is “the Thing, which thinks). Such a liberating surrender, however, can only come about the moment Gregor gives up any life outside it. First Gregor looks out the window, hoping he can return to the “human circle”:

Often he just lay there the long nights through without sleeping at all, scrabbling for hours on the leather. Or he nerved himself to the great of pushing an armchair to the window, then crawled up over the window sill and, braced against the chair, leaned against the windowpanes, obviously in some recollection of the sense of freedom that looking out of the window always used to give him. For in reality, day by day things that were even a little way off were growing dimmer to his sight;" (51).

We can again call this the negation of the negation: what looks like a negation to freedom (metamorphosis, losing sight of an Outside), is actually the disruptive force, which opens a new realm of freedom *within* this metamorphosed world. It is similar to Hegel's subtraction of Kant's noumena, not as the access to such a realm, but as giving it up, rendering it inconsistent. A hint of this is given, when the chief clerk exclaims his "oh", when he sees Gregor, the moment Gregor has been dreading:

He was still carrying out this difficult manouvre, with no time to observe anything else, when he heard the chief clerk utter a loud "Oh, it sounded like a gust of wind – and now he could see the man, standing as he was nearest to the door, clapping one hand before his open mouth and slowly backing away as if driven by some invisible force. (34).

It is important to notice that is the "moment when everything seems lost for Gregor", when the Other sees him in his most debased self, that a space is opened for freedom. Kafka, writes a hint of sublime epiphany in the passage, when the figure of the chief-clerk is suddenly rendered meaningless, his "oh", sounded like a gust of wind, like it is the chief-clerk, the figure of authority,

the big Other, *not* Gregor, who is hollow, of no substance whatsoever. A gust of wind, especially in this extremely claustrophobic space is like the flashing of another dimension, not of a Beyond the Law, but in an immanent way, a space for freedom *already at work* within the familiar apartment. When Gregor no longer looks out the window, he suddenly becomes even more aware of sounds, even as the walls are sinking in on him. Gregor crisscrosses the room:

While he was fast loosing any interest he had ever taken in food, so that for mere recreation he had formed the habit of crawling crisscross over the walls and the ceiling. He especially enjoyed hanging suspended from the ceiling; it was much better than lying on the floor; one could breathe more freely; one's body swung and rocked lightly; and in the almost blissful absorption induced by this suspension it could happen to his own surprise that he let go and fell plump on the floor. Yet he now had his body much better under control than formerly, and even such a big fall did him no harm. (55).

Gregor finds a space for freedom not by using the negation in an idealist sense, so that the metamorphosis should be done away with, but by being fully emerged in it, by taking the disruptive negation as the starting point of a new "materialist synthesis". What must be given up is the very idea of an Outside, like Kant's noumena, which remains too "idealistic", since freedom for him can never be located as such in the finite existence. Or in Gregor Samsa's case what must be given up is the very idea, that he will pay his parents' debt off. The constitutive guilt is not done away with (paying the debt off), but rather ceases to matter, is given up: there is no Beyond of the Law, the Call-injunction is itself inconsistent. Kant in this way still relies on a meta-language, whereas giving up the Outside makes it

possible to realize it within. To use the Lacanian distinction again the subject gains a space for freedom, not by getting rid of her own lack, but by coinciding this lack with a lack in Other.

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