

Laughing with Kafka *after* Promethean Shame

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We have learned that Kafka's main works deploy a fully-fledged political critique whose main weapon is derision.¹ This use of laughter to satirize totalitarian regimes has been analyzed under the name of the "political grotesque" by Joseph Vogl. Here is what Vogl writes:

From the terror of secret scenes of torture to childish officials, from the filth of the bureaucratic order to atavistic rituals of power runs a track of comedy that forever indicates the absence of reason, the element of the arbitrary in the execution of power and rule. However, the element of the grotesque does not unmask and merely denounce. Rather it refers—as Foucault once pointed out—to the inevitability, the inescapability of precisely the grotesque, ridiculous, loony, or abject sides of power. Kafka's "political grotesque" displays an unsystematic arbitrariness, which belongs to the functions of the apparatus itself. [...] Kafka's comedy turns against a diagnosis that conceives of the modernization of political power as

¹ This essay is a condensed version of the second part of *Kafka L.O.L.*, forthcoming from Quodlibet in 2018. In the first part, I address laughter in Kafka's works, showing that it takes its roots in the culture of a "comic grotesque" dominant in Expressionist German culture. Günther Anders's groundbreaking book on Kafka then highlights the political dimensions of the work while criticizing Kafka's Promethean nihilism. Anders deploys his theory of technology and the posthuman in the context of "Promethean shame" that can be traced back to Kafka via his parable on "Prometheus."

a “rationalization process.” (Vogl 2006, p. 3; quoted in Corngold and Wagner 2011, p. 117)

Such political readings are current, but there was a time when religious or humanist interpretations of Kafka dominated. The first writer who rejected this consensus was Günther Anders, one of the most astute, albeit critical, commentators on Kafka. He shares that distinction with Walter Benjamin, who happened to be his cousin. I will summarize Anders’s general view of Kafka, mostly presented in one book that is now almost impossible to find, *Kafka, Pro et Contra*, published in 1951. The agonistic title was not meant to allude to Kafka’s legalistic propensities, or to the plot of the *Trial*, but to run against the grain of glosses that, following Max Brod’s biographical memoir, insisted on the religious and allegorical dimensions of the work. Anders, who had been a student of Husserl and Heidegger and was Hannah Arendt’s first husband, was a prolific and unclassifiable writer with a passion for Kafka. Although his work is being rediscovered when he discusses technology and the “posthuman,” his groundbreaking work on Kafka has been largely ignored.

Anders’s book starts with refutations: Kafka was not a “Jewish saint” as Brod had it; he was not a mythical dreamer or a religious writer. Instead, Anders presents Kafka as a “realist” writer, in the sense that he was a “realist fable-writer” (Anders 1960, p. 9). Kafka belongs to a group that includes Bertolt Brecht, and has nothing to do with Gershom Scholem. Kafka should not be identified with specifically Jewish Talmudic traditions. Kafka is a realist because he describes a contemporary society defined by repression and alienation. The horror of a post-Holocaust world that has numbed sensibilities makes Kafka’s vision even more relevant: “We are shown without further explanation how in reality men are not rendered speechless by the unspeakable, nor horrified by what is horrifying” (ibid., p. 15). The neutral tone used by Kafka is effective because it inverts the roles: instead

of saying “men are like beasts,” Kafka shows us beasts as men. This is the mainspring of tales like “Josephine” or “A Report to an Academy,” while “Investigations of a Dog” evokes Kafka’s position as a non-believer in the Jewish community. He managed to render his plight universal because we all risk turning into pariahs one day (Anders knew something about this state, which he had experienced firsthand as a blue-collar worker in California).

Anders meditates on Kafka’s famous aphorism: “The word ‘*sein*’ means two things in German: ‘being’ and ‘belonging-to-him’” (Kafka 1991, p. 86). Existence, for Kafka, means belonging, his quandary being that he cannot belong anywhere. Even if this lack of belonging seems to indicate some freedom, for Kafka “being” will never be equated with freedom. Freedom is excluded because of the prevalence of alienation in our world (Anders 1960, p. 21). Like Marx, Kafka sees distance and alienation not between man and God but between man and man.

For Anders, Kafka’s stories are neither allegorical nor symbolic: there is no transcendent Beauty or God that could be invoked. His texts rely on the device of literalized metaphors: thus Gregor Samsa becomes a monstrous *Ungeziefer*, while in the “Penal Colony,” the condemned man learns the verdict only when the text is inscribed in his body. Kafka follows the promptings of language. When K. is shown as having to “go to school again” in the village, he lives in a schoolroom (ibid., p. 45). This embodied and material use of language causes other problems, because different metaphorical levels are superimposed without any cohesion.

If Kafka is not writing allegories, when his language resorts to abstraction it is to reflect the fact that people have been torn away from the fullness of existence (ibid., p. 47). Abstraction has a comic function, for it reduces characters to marionettes, caricatures and robots that grotesquely enact repetitive gestures, a point made clearly by Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (see Hajdini 2015). People are reduced to the barest social functions

in Kafka, whose stories detail the rituals of power while insisting on human powerlessness. Such powerlessness feeds his characters' interpretive mania (Anders 1960, p. 51). We live in a world of infinite interpretations, but it is a world that cannot be changed. Kafka's world is frozen, a static embodiment of alienation (*ibid.*, p. 55). The paralysis of time duplicates the paralysis of the will: process turns into a pure picture, which is perceptible in the syntax. One revealing trope is the image of the wound inflicted by a lasting flash of lightning; the "static flash" betrays a renunciation to agency, which explains why in Kafka's work "trauma is cherished as a cultural possession" (*ibid.*, p. 62). Kafka stands as the exact opposite of Romanticism, for he does not believe in self-expression; his style remains neutral throughout for it enacts the alienation it describes (*ibid.*, p. 66). Kafka's sentences tend to sound like official notices couched in dense administrative language as in legal notices, medical records, or political tracts (*ibid.*, p. 69).

Kafka, for Anders, is not religious: he was swayed early by Nietzsche's critique of religion. Whatever faith remains boils down to the fact that not only are we alive, but we cannot *not* be alive (Kafka 1991, p. 98). Kafka criticizes Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism by denying any validity to freedom and endorsing the values of aestheticism: "By reducing [the content of religious belief] to a purely aesthetic level, he leaves no way open for a new beginning, but succeeds, ironically enough, in bringing to its ultimate culmination the very process he was ostensibly trying to resist. He is his own enemy, the most radical of his enemies" (Anders 1960, p. 79). This inner antagonism derives from the fact that Kafka's work is founded on Nietzsche's statement that "God is dead" (*ibid.*, p. 82). If a message from the divinity had been sent, it would never reach its addressee; even if it did after an almost infinite time, the originator would be dead. Unlike Nietzsche, Kafka does not attempt to free humanity from delusions: we remain entangled in a guilt that is unsurpassable. Kafka keeps a

desire to escape from his cell, knowing that the wish is doomed. What is dangerous in this attitude is that he upholds obedience to perverse or flawed laws.

If Anders pays attention to Biblical echoes in Kafka—he mentions the Book of Job, a text Brod averred Kafka often re-read—he often downplays their impact. This is what he notes about the Book of Job: “Job finally recognizes God because God has created ‘the hippopotamus and crocodile,’ whereas he himself has created nothing; so Kafka, or at least K., recognizes that his own powerlessness deprives him of the right to question the Law” (*ibid.*, p. 89). Kafka’s religious submission leads to humiliation but he may be saved by the humorous remark that the ontological proof requires a hippopotamus and a crocodile. In fact, Anders denies any longing for salvation: “Kafka’s petrified hope of salvation has as little to do with the Jewish religion as with Socialism” (*ibid.*, p. 91). If he is right to think that Kafka abandoned Scholem’s Messianism, we may remember that only his final illness prevented him from realizing a last dream—emigration to Palestine with Dora Diamant. Anders concludes that Kafka was a “Christianizing theologian of the Jewish world” (*ibid.*, p. 92). His main aim is to bring Kafka closer to Heidegger. For Anders, both Kafka and Heidegger kill Naturalism: they get rid of the natural and the supernatural at the same time (*ibid.*, p. 92).

This leads Anders to tackle a theme he developed in the 1950s: there is no “Nature” in Kafka’s works because they criticize a mechanized civilization dominated by a capitalism appropriating and exploiting everything, creating a society in which human beings are destroyed or treated like mere cogs (*ibid.*). Commenting on two stories (“Josephine” and “The Giant Mole”) from the point of view of the clash between orthodox and assimilated Jews, Anders condenses the contradictions in Kafka’s position as a series of paradoxes. Kafka is skiing on stones just to prove that one cannot ski there or he eats from an empty plate just to show that this is impossible (*ibid.*, p. 96). The antinomies listed here

aim at making us take a critical distance from any cult of Kafka. Here are some of them:

He is a realist of the dehumanized world: but also its exalter. [...]
He wants to arrive in the world: but he reaches it by way of disaster. [...]
He discusses rights: but does not even know if he has the right to do so.
He is an atheist: but makes of atheism a theology. [...]
He is a sceptic: but one who is skeptical of his own skepticism.
(Anders 1960, p. 97)

Is Kafka really an “ineffectual conformist who sees himself with the eyes of the authority he has courted in vain” (ibid., p. 98)? If this were so, we should agree with Anders’s harsh judgment: guilty! We might add that Kafka knew in advance that he would be found guilty.

As if he regretted these barbs, Anders returned to the issue three years later in an alert essay on Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (see Anders 1965). This essay baffled most readers, with the exception of Adorno, who took from it several brilliant ideas for his own essay on *Endgame*. Anders’s thesis on *Godot* expands the argument of the Kafka book: Anders rejects allegorical and religious interpretations of Beckett’s play, seen as a negative fable because it resorts to the Aesopian device of changing men into animals; the meaninglessness of his parable shows people who have been made meaningless by society. If Beckett falls into abstraction, it is only because being “abstract” means to be cut off from a community. The tramps may be alive but they no longer live in a “world.” Unlike Don Quixote, or K. in *The Castle*, characters who still acted and hoped, Beckett’s “paralyzed clowns” have renounced action: from the start, there is “nothing to do.”

The tramps go on living because living has become pointless. They prove that by dint of waiting it is worth it to wait for something. As Heidegger would say, Didi and Gogo remain

“metaphysicians” for they still believe in a meaning to come, even though they act parts devoid of meaning. No religious faith explains *Waiting for Godot*; God’s very absence proves his “being,” which is close to the proof *ex absentia* that defines Heidegger’s position on God. God *is* only in so far as he *is not*. The two clowns, because they live outside nature, time, and history, embody a “Being without time.” They thus provide an intelligent satire of Heidegger’s philosophy, a point not lost on Adorno (see Adorno 1991).

The irruption of the second couple, Lucky and Pozzo, has the effect of an interpretation. Of course, they figure as the Hegelian couple of the master and the slave, but here if the master is happy, we have an even happier slave—Lucky merits his name: he has no volition, no freedom to worry about. What Hegel and Marx had presented as the engine of history, the mechanism of exploitation and alienation, is now projected on the stage. This is enough to reawaken a sense that history has a meaning, even when it repeats itself as farce. Didi and Gogo envy the other couple, for Pozzo and Lucky have time to share, which means that they somehow *have* time. Thus, *Waiting for Godot* is not nihilistic; what saves the play from a residual nihilism is its bantering tone and the constant clowning of the characters. Anders concludes by paying homage to clowns like Charlie Chaplin:

[T]he character who earned more gratitude in our century than any other was the pitiful figure of the early Chaplin. Farce seems to have become the last asylum for compassion, the complicity of the sad our last comfort. And although the mere tone of humanness which springs from this barren soil of meaninglessness may only be a tiny comfort; and although the voice which comforts us does not know why it is comforting and who the Godot is for whom it makes us hope—it shows that warmth means more than meaning; and that it is not the metaphysician who has the last word. (Anders 1965, p. 151)

However, Anders is reluctant to see a similar pattern emerge in Kafka's texts. One may wonder: if all the elements are in place, why not recognize features of Chaplinesque farce in Kafka as well? An answer to this question is given in the essay on Beckett:

Since the early thirties when Hegel's dialectic and Marx's theory of the class struggle began to interest the younger generation in France, the famous image of the pair "*master and servant*" from Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* so deeply engraved itself into the consciousness of those intellectuals born around 1900 that it occupies today the place which the image of *Prometheus* held in the nineteenth century: it has become the *image of man in general*. Sartre is the chief witness of this change. True, in the Orestes of his *Les Mouches* he still presented the typical Promethean figure (as had Goethe, Shelley, Byron, and Ibsen); but afterwards he replaced this figure by the Hegelian symbol. What is decisive in this new symbol is its "*pluralization*" and its inherent "*antagonism*": that "Man" is now seen as a *pair of men*; that the individual (who, as a metaphysical self-made man, had fought a Promethean struggle against the Gods) has now been replaced by *men* who fight *each other* for domination. (Anders 1965, pp. 149-50)

Beckett replaced the image of the suffering hero modeled on Prometheus, an image dominant in Kafka, with his dialectical "pseudo-couples" (a concept launched in *The Unnamable* with reference to *Mercier and Camier*). This turn to human duality opens up the stage to collective action. Beckett presupposes a more dynamic conception of politics that was missed by Kafka's staunch individualism. Despite the parallels between Kafka's and Beckett's corpses similarly marked by alienation, abstraction, and nihilism, the Promethean element in Kafka makes him less comedic and, therefore, tragic.

This reading is predicated upon Anders's theory of Prometheus, that is, his concept of a "Promethean shame," a theory developed in essays from the 1950s. It could be called a first theory of the "posthuman." What Anders calls "Promethean shame" is

the moment when human beings realize that the machines they have made are more efficient than they are. Having created superb machines, humans are defeated by them, not in a revolt of the robots as in science fiction stories, but psychologically, because of a “shame” or an inferiority complex that humans experience when they consider the perfection and endless reproducibility of machines.

In order to understand what is at stake, we need to explore Anders’s view of Promethean affect. “On Promethean Shame” was begun in California in the forties and published in 1956 in a collection whose title can be translated as *The Obsolescence of Man*, or *The Antiquatedness of Humankind*, with the subtitle of *On the Soul During the Second Industrial Revolution*. This collection (see Anders 1956) includes the essay on *Waiting for Godot* discussed above. “On Promethean Shame,” the first essay in the collection, begins with an American anecdote. Having been a blue-collar worker in a Californian factory, Anders visited an exhibition of technology with a friend named T. who evinced a certain “shame,” the “shame” of sensing the discrepancy between human limitations and the perfect artifacts crafted by technology. Anders calls this “Promethean shame”: “*T. is ashamed about having naturally grown instead of having been made*” (Anders 2016, p. 30). Anders elaborates his version of “Promethean defiance” that he sums up as a “refusal to owe anything, including oneself, to anyone else.” Finally, the concept includes the “confusion of creator and creation” (ibid., p. 31). Conscious that these terms are hardly justified by the anecdote, Anders imagines objections that he refutes one by one before finally reaching a paradox: in our industrial societies, things are free but humans are not free (ibid., p. 38). One is tempted to ask: aren’t you exaggerating a little?

Anders is aware of the speculative nature of his claims, which is why he heaps up different arguments: we are anxious about our imperfect bodies, we hope to compensate their weakness with prostheses and by synchronizing them with machines. The

phrase “human engineering” shows that we mix up the realms of the human and the machine. We have become co-substantial with technology. Machines have become the true subjects of desire and demand (*ibid.*, p. 43). We have entered the robotic age; workers are not only cogs in the machine but dehumanized slaves. This slave-mentality generates a paradoxical “hubristic humility” in which Anders sees the traces of the last metamorphosis of the Prometheus myth (*ibid.*, p. 47). Going back to the argument elaborated in the Beckett essay, Anders concludes: “[Our contemporaries] suffer lacerations—but not because Zeus punishes their high-flying ambitions, but because they chastise themselves on account of their own ‘backwardness’ and the ‘shame of having been born’” (*ibid.*, p. 50), an expression that can be paralleled with Beckett’s echo of Schopenhauer in his essay on Proust, when he mentions the “sin of having been born.” Here is why Prometheus does not need an eagle: we all torture ourselves enough by longing for the machines we idolize, in a vain attempt to atone for our all too human sin.

We are then treated to a second autobiographical vignette. Again in California in the forties, Anders went to a hospital to visit a terminally ill coworker who ruefully wondered why humans cannot be fitted with spare parts. The worker finished with: “Isn’t this a shame?” (*Ibid.*, p. 54) This sentence appeared as a confirmation to Anders, who used it to deconstruct the humanist belief that we are unique, singular, and irreplaceable. What had been a sign of reassurance in our intrinsic value as subjects now appears as our weakness, our limitation. Human uniqueness is an obsolete vestige of humanism. Machines, on the other hand, engineer their immortality by being replaceable part by part—no human organism can be treated in this manner.

Thus, because we do not want to die, and wish to overcome our limitations as singular subjects, we find solace in the endless multiplication of images, mostly through film and television. We participate in the mass-production of endless artifacts, hoping

that this endless reproduction can offer a solution to our mortality; but immortal and infallible machines are our real masters. Here, Anders offers a third American vignette, about General MacArthur, who had won major victories in Korea. When Chinese troops rescued the North Koreans, the general wanted to use a nuclear weapon, but he was fired by President Truman. In order to justify this decision, a computer was used: it simulated the consequences of a bombing and decided against MacArthur's radical solution—the machine prevailed over the general. The human being had lost to the machine. MacArthur left the army. The story did not stop here: soon, the war hero became the president of Remington Rand, a company manufacturing office machines and the Univac computer, the first commercial computer produced in the US (ibid., p. 61). Anders reads this story as a twist in Hegel's master and slave dialectic. After the former slave (the machine) has become the new master and demoted the former master (MacArthur) to the rank of a slave, the slave has to attempt to be again the master of the master (the machine) (ibid., p. 62).

It is in this context that Anders deploys a phenomenology of shame, an affect linked with lack of agency. "Promethean shame" is not just a metaphor, for it corresponds to the pain of unfreedom, which is a normal condition given the domination of machines of all sorts: the media, film, television, and computers, all participate in a "man-made bureaucracy of machines" (ibid., p. 39). The hubristic creation culminates with artificial intelligence, a concept that beats the Tower of Babel in arrogance, a minor transgression compared with the erection of the new monster, the terrifying bureaucratic machine that decides of everything (ibid., p. 47).

What has this to do with Kafka? The mention of the Tower of Babel, a recurrent Kafkaian trope, is not made randomly. Anders knew Janouch's *Conversations* in which we overhear Kafka rail against a society in which human reproduction is mechanized. Kafka said: "If things go on as they are the world will soon be peopled by robots reproducing themselves in series" (Janouch 1971,

p. 62). Kafka loved denouncing technology: “The iron fist of technology destroys all protecting walls” (ibid., p. 71). He told Janouch that the modern world was under the domination of an enslaving capitalism, stating: “Capitalism is a system of relationships, which go from inside to out, from outside to in, from above to below, and from below to above. Everything is relative, everything is in chains. Capitalism is a condition both of the world and of the soul” (ibid., p. 152). It looks as if all the themes treated by Anders (technology as a bureaucratic machine, the shame of singular existence, the transformation of history into a frozen time, imagistic repetition as a tragicomic supersession of human finitude, the obsolescence of humanity and the disappearance of the gods) were knotted together by Kafka. What remains more speculative is the concept of a “Promethean shame,” a phrase that we need to explore.

Although shame is one of the dominant affects in Kafka’s texts, as Benjamin wrote,² from “Description of a Struggle” (see Wasihun 2015) to the stark and painful ending of *The Trial*, when K. is murdered and thinks that the shame will survive him, the link between shame and laughter is not a theme broached by Anders. “Shame” in German hesitates between the subjective sense (*Scham*) and the objective or social sense (*Schande*), both used by Anders. He could have noticed the second use by Kafka at the beginning of “Children on a Country Road.” The narrator remembers how workers would return home at night, laughing so loud that “it was a shame”: “Laborers were coming from the fields and laughed so much that it was a shame [*lachten, dass es eine Schande war*]” (Kafka 1971, p. 79, trans. modified). The mixture of grotesque, tragic, and comic elements in Kafka became less expressionistic as time passed, but remained potent until the end; this combination never rules out shame or laughter, even

² “Shame is Kafka’s strongest gesture” (Benjamin 1968, p. 129).

when the most subversive thoughts are displayed. The unstable compound is linked with issues of oral tradition and mythical history—especially in “Prometheus,” Kafka’s short tale.

Kafka told Janouch that his main theme was the struggle between the son and the father. Commenting on *The Son*, an expressionist play by Walter Hasenclever, Kafka said: “The revolt of the son against the father is one of the primeval themes in literature, and an even older problem in the world. Dramas and tragedies are written about it, yet in reality it is material for comedy” (Janouch 1971, p. 68). Kafka opposed that earnest expressionist play to John Millington Synge’s hilarious 1907 *The Playboy of the Western World*. Summing up its plot to Janouch, he felt that the Irish play provided a better model. Christy Mahon believes that he has murdered his father and gains attention from all sides for this deed, until the slightly wounded father comes back. Kafka concludes with the idea that the struggle of the young against the old is “shadow boxing” (*Scheinkampf*) (ibid., p. 69): “Age is the future of youth, which sooner or later it must reach. So why struggle? To become old sooner?” (Ibid., p. 69) The theme of time and obsolescence underpins his rewrite of *Prometheus*, the Greek archetype of heroic rebellion against a senile but still powerful Zeus. If this struggle boils down to mere “shadow boxing,” then it may become material for comedy.

Here is Kafka’s parable on Prometheus, originally without a title, translated by Edwin and Willa Muir:

There are four legends concerning Prometheus:

According to the first he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.

According to the second Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it. According to the third his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, forgotten by the gods, the eagles, forgotten by himself.

According to the fourth everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily. There remains the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it comes out of the substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable. (Kafka 1971b, p. 432)

Max Brod changed the original order and turned the last paragraph into the first, possibly thinking that examples should lead to a general law. Kafka thought differently. Here is my more literal translation:

The legend [*die Sage*] tries to explain the inexplicable [*das Unerklärliche zu erklären*]; as it comes out of the ground of truth [*Wahrheitsgrund*], it has to return to the inexplicable in the end.

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According to the fourth everyone grew tired of the groundless affair [*wurde man des grundlos Gewordenen müde*]. The gods grew tired, the eagles grew tired, the wound closed tired [*schloß sich müde*]. There remains the inexplicable mass of rock. [*Blieb das unerklärliche Felsgebirge.*]³

Kafka planned to begin with a statement about the role of legends in general; their function is to explain natural phenomena; a spring, a tree, a river are all pretexts for Greek myths that

³ See Kafka's *Oktavheft* G, III (18 October 1917 – January 1918), MS. Kafka 25, MLR reference A (ii) XXXVII, KKA reference: KBod AIII, 7.

often entail metamorphoses, as when Niobe wept and turned into stone. The main issue is the riddle of the link between myth and nature, if we define myth as an interpretation of a mute and alien nature (Gray et al. 2005, pp. 230-31). The story of Prometheus is adduced only as an example. Its four moments sketch a process of exhaustion that takes on a hermeneutic function: after the hero has turned into stone, after all participants forget what has happened, including the hero, after all are exhausted by the exhaustion of the myth, what valid explanation can remain?

Two terms generate a theoretical clash: the verb to “explain” (*erklären*) and the concept of the “groundless” (*grundlos*), rendered as “meaningless” by the Muirs. *Erklärung* is never far from *Aufklärung*, meaning the “Enlightenment,” with its rationalist critique of myth and religion: myth would simply be a human invention making sense of time and the seasons, of the death of seeds in the winter, and so on. The concept of *Grund* evokes reason and fits Schopenhauer’s theory of the “fourfold root of the principle of sufficient reason [*Grund*].” It sends us back to Leibnitz’s principle of “sufficient reason,” a principle that entails that nothing is without a “reason” or without a “cause.” Attempting to reach a primal “cause,” the parable achieves a drastic reduction—it reduces the whole of human culture to a series of fancy tales that explain next to nothing.

Another important term is *Wahrheitsgrund*. It alludes to the principle of truth, a truth that needs a secure grounding in order to be valid; but in the end, it is only the “ground” of the rocky mountain that stands as a substratum for truth. All the rest has been invented in order to make sense of the mountain. In a gesture often performed by Heidegger, all the “ground” is transformed into an *Abgrund*, an “abyss.” The German *Grund*, derived from an archaic verb meaning “to grind,” originally referred to “coarse sand” or just “earth.” To say that something is *grundlos* (“groundless”) suggests that it provides no support. We perceive the connection between Kafka and Heidegger established by Anders.

Indeed, it was Kafka, not Heidegger, who wrote: “This feeling: ‘Here I will not anchor,’ and instantly to feel the billowing uplifting swell around one” (Kafka 1991, p. 91). Or: “What it means to grasp the good fortune that the ground on which you stand cannot be greater than what is covered by your two feet” (ibid., p. 82). Or again: “There is no having, only a being, only a state of being that craves the last breath, craves suffocation” (ibid., p. 84). Kafka wants to prevent us from believing in the possibility of grounding ourselves in the natural world. It is better to see the abyss or *Abgrund* and stick to that giddy vision: “There was one who was astonished to see how easily he moved along the road of eternity; the fact is that he was racing along it downhill” (ibid., p. 85).

If *Grund* is associated with *archē* as both a “first principle” and a “rule,” then Kafka remains an “anarchist” to the end,⁴ and he would thus agree with Heidegger when the latter rewrites his position on “ground”: “If, however, transcendence in the sense of freedom for ground is understood in the first and last instance as an abyss of ground, then the essence of what was called Dasein’s *absorption* in and by beings also thereby becomes sharper. [...] The essence of the finitude of Dasein is [...] unveiled in *transcendence as freedom from ground*” (Heidegger 1998, pp. 134-35). Kafka could not side with Schopenhauer’s aesthetic rationalism. Brod and Kafka met when Brod gave a lecture on Schopenhauer, attacking Nietzsche for having rejected his mentor. Kafka defended Nietzsche with such fervor that Brod became his friend and confidant.

In Kafka’s version of the Prometheus myth, what stands out is not a general law defining reason and interpretation but a final riddle, the stubborn presence of the mountain. If we can read

⁴ See Kafka’s conversation with Janouch about the lasting influence of anarchism on his student’s years (Janouch 1971, pp. 86-90). For links between Heidegger and anarchism, see Schürmann 1987.

the world as matter, and matter as a pure riddle, then unreason triumphs. This allogical statement underpins Kafka's debunking of myth. It also triggers an endless phenomenological reduction in an effort at getting to the root of truth. In Kafka's Prometheus tale, a first level reiterates the myth and asserts that any metamorphosis will happen as a consequence of pain. A second level outlines a psychological process, forgetting, which ends when even Prometheus forgets his dire state. A third level concludes with a general exhaustion of the mythical paradigm. There is a final liberation in this insistence on the absurdity of the world, even if this absurdity apparently still requires an explanation.

A source for Kafka's "Prometheus" was Nietzsche, who discussed Prometheus several times. A fragment from 1874 approximates Kafka's central conceit: "Prometheus and his vulture were *forgotten* when the old world of the Olympians and their power were destroyed. // Prometheus expects his redemption to come from human beings. // He did not betray his secret to Zeus, Zeus perished because of his son" (Nietzsche 1995, p. 387). For Nietzsche, obsolescence derives from a modern lack of belief in the gods. He suggests that Prometheus created not only the human race but also all the gods—he is man turning into an "overman":

Did Prometheus have to *fancy* first that he had *stolen* the light and then pay for that—before he finally discovered that he had created the light *by coveting the light* and that not only man but also the *god* was the work of his own hands and had been mere clay in his hands? All mere images of the maker—no less than the fancy, the theft, the Caucasus, the vulture, and the whole tragic *Prometheia* of all the seekers after knowledge? (Nietzsche 1974, pp. 240-41)

A seeker for knowledge, Kafka was also a seeker for autonomy; Prometheus presents a perfect model for his struggle against his Father. Kafka appears as a Prometheus who tortures himself in order to be free from the "ground" of the family, in which Zeus is played by a domineering father: "Any relationship not created

by myself, even though it may be opposed to parts of my own nature, is worthless; it hinders my movements, I hate it, or come near hating it” (Kafka 1973, p. 525). He later described this perversely comical attitude in terms of a master and slave dialectic: “The beast wrests the whip from the master and whips itself in order to become master, not knowing that this is only a fantasy produced by a new knot in the master’s whip-lash” (Kafka 1991, p. 83).

This type of self-hate is needed to achieve freedom—from what? From the “ground” of the family, the blood link and the reminders that he has been generated by his parents—a thought that is almost unbearable for Kafka:

Sometimes this bond of blood [...] is the target of my hatred; the sight of the double bed at home, the used sheets, the nightshirts carefully laid out, can exasperate me to the point of nausea, can turn me inside out; it is as if I had not been definitively born [*als wäre ich nicht endgültig geboren*], were continually born anew into the world out of the stale life in that stale room, had constantly to seek confirmation of myself there, were indissolubly joined with all that loathsomeness, in part even if not entirely, at least it still clogs my feet which want to run, they are still stuck fast in the original pulp. (Kafka 1988, p. 371)

As Kafka argues, he has some “ground” to hate his family: “*es gibt übergenuß Grund zu solchem Haß*” (Kafka 1998, p. 375). There is hate because there is shame as well, the shame of not being born once and for all. This leads to the torture of having to be born (or aborted) again and again. This idea echoes with Anders’s note in “Promethean Shame” in which he praises Freud’s idea of a birth trauma:

Philosophically speaking, Sigmund Freud’s discovery of the “Trauma of Birth” cannot be rated highly enough: for what more incisive event could happen to life than being torn from the “ground”? The feelings Freud brought into view (“Oceanic Feeling;” “Death Drive”) are metaphysical in every respect, even if Freud’s language

was masked by the scientific vocabulary of his century. This is equally true of the “Trauma of Birth” with which he described the *shock of individuation*, no matter how well he disguised it. In an analogy with our question “who is ashamed?” the question to ask in relation to this trauma is the following: “*Who* is actually shocked here?” (Anders 2016, p. 93 n. 33)

However, if we can agree that the death drive means the individual’s wish to get rid of the “agony of being an individual” (ibid.), we may wonder about the link between shame, birth, and original trauma. Nevertheless, the idea that the shock of individuation is compared with “being torn from the ground” cogently corresponds to Kafka’s Prometheus parable. If Prometheus is responsible for the creation of humanity against the wishes of the higher gods like Zeus, he then relinquishes all individuality by merging with his “ground,” the rock he has been chained to.

One point has not been noticed by Anders when he quotes Freud, a point often made by Freud: laughter provides a way of overcoming shame while acknowledging shame, as in dreams of being naked in the street. Bypassing censorship, laughter reconnects us with our Unconscious and sweeps away the dams erected by social conventions. If we return to Anders’s second American vignette, we can suspect that he was rather deaf to the humorous overtones in the voice in the co-worker’s retort. When they parted, the American quipped: “Isn’t it a shame?” (ibid., p. 54), a deadpan, self-deprecating put-down, typical of working-class humor that avoids sentimentality. The dying man was man enough to make a co-worker’s joke about his alleged irreplaceability. Whatever “shame” he alluded to was not his own, as Anders rashly surmises, but the shame of the system’s inability to mass-produce human beings: his comment alludes to a world of machines reproducing each other endlessly, a theme treated in a comic mode by popular films like Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. Chaplin’s masterpiece highlights this laughable shame, as it were.

Chaplin was appreciated by Anders, who, even if his insights announce Guy Debord's critique of a "society of the spectacle," did not know the then recently invented American "canned laughter," that "sweetening machine" that began accompanying the silliest sitcoms so as to trigger the laughter of audiences thanks to a Pavlovian reflex. Kafka, on the other hand, did not hesitate to engage with slapstick, as when he made the painter Titorelli, a key figure at the end of *The Trial*, sell K. several identical paintings that all show a banal landscape at sunset. This conception of laughter evokes Bergson. For Bergson, repetition, the essence of slapstick, generates laughter; laughter is defined by our sudden perception that what we took for a spontaneous human being can be reduced to the status of a machine. Bergson presupposes that to be human is to be mobile, spontaneous, elastic, and creative. But, if we follow Anders, what if we really wished to be machines? For Bergson, the comic pertains to a certain "mechanical inelasticity"—isn't this the pride of the machine and the shame of man?

Bergson's *Laughter*, published in 1899, the same year as Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, reiterates: "Our starting point is again: 'something mechanical encrusted [*plaque*] upon the living.' Where did the comic come from in this case? It came from the fact that the living body became rigid, like a machine. Accordingly, it seemed to us that the living body ought to be the perfection of suppleness, the ever-alert activity of a principle always at work. But this activity would really belong to the soul rather than to the body" (Bergson 1913, p. 49). Can we forget the materiality of the body when we are in a modern machinic environment?

Bergson's analysis entails this: because it is caused by the sight of a human being turning into a machine, laughter will be triggered automatically. Each time we see a man slipping on a banana peel and falling, we laugh. Laughter allies itself with its mechanical cause, the silly repetition of machines, and thus does not work by "letting the spirit shine through," for "it is really a kind of automatism that makes us laugh" (*ibid.*, p. 16). What stands out

therefore is that laughter is a machine. We now understand better how Anders's "Promethean shame" can generate a Promethean mirth. How many repetitive versions of the ancient myth will it take before we find the scene with the same old eagles tedious rather than funny? This was André Gide's question in a text that antedates Kafka's tale, his baffling *Prometheus Ill-Bound* (see Gide 2009, pp. 465-509). This prose play is a post-Nietzschean parody of the idea that we need to suffer in order to create; we "need our eagle," yes, but only until the day when we kill it, cook it and eat it...

Freud answers both Kafka's and Gide's questions. For Freud, we laugh when the Unconscious appears: "Many of my neurotic patients under psychoanalytic treatment habitually confirm it with a laugh when [the analysis] has succeeded in revealing faithfully what had been hidden and unconscious to their conscious perception; and they also laugh even if the content of what has been disclosed would certainly not justify it" (Freud 2003a, p. 174). Freud developed the idea in his essay on "The Unconscious": "In the system Pcs the *secondary process* holds sway; where a primary process is allowed to take its course in connection with elements belonging to the system Pcs, it appears 'comic' and excites laughter" (Freud 1963, p. 134). Thus the only way to avoid endless repetition would be to let the encounter with the Unconscious generate a certain birth, a birth that would be a "birth to presence," as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it (see Nancy 1993). The main issue would be to remain as a creator and as a subject in *statu nascendi*, in a perpetual state of being born.⁵

If, as Camus said, we must imagine Sisyphus happy, we should then imagine Prometheus as laughing. Prometheus is a hero because he can laugh while in pain—having been condemned for playing at being a demiurge, he rails against Zeus whose law he

⁵ I have discussed Sándor Ferenczi's theory of laughter as calling up the pleasure and displeasure of being born in Rabaté 2016.

has defied. Kafka, like Lucian, the cynical Hellenistic writer who was one model for Nietzsche in his debunking of ancient idols, felt the urge to attack the old world. Indeed, Lucian often presented himself as a Prometheus: like the hero who created new beings with clay and incurred the wrath of the gods, Lucian makes fun of the gods. In his version of the myth, Lucian insists that one of Prometheus's transgressions was to deceive Zeus about food through meat offerings: "And here comes in the apprehension of yet another Promethean analogy: have I confounded male and female, and incurred the penalty? Or no—when will resemblances end?—have I, rather, cheated my hearers by serving them up bones wrapped in fat, comic laughter in philosophic solemnity?" (Lucian 2007, p. 25)⁶

This Promethean defiance was expressed by Kafka as early as 1903: "It's this way with me: God doesn't want me to write, but I—I must. So there's an everlasting up and down; after all, God is the stronger, and there's more anguish in it than you can imagine. So many powers within me are tied to a stake, which might possibly grow into a green tree" (Kafka 1977, p. 10). Kafka's projection into a rebellious Prometheus morphed into an identification with another character unable to die: Hunter Gracchus, a figure that, according to Adorno, was Kafka's central myth. Prometheus and Gracchus are immortal because they are caught up in some mistake: a misunderstanding about Prometheus who created the human race in order to give the gods beings capable of adoring them—and this was mistaken for hubris! Gracchus missed his death as one misses a step. Moreover, both will be suffering forever. Asked whether he participates in the world of beyond, Gracchus answers the mayor of Riva, the city he has reached, that although he is "forever," he feels "lost on the stairs" to eternity,

⁶ See also "Prometheus on Causasus" (Lucian 2007, pp. 52-56), and "Prometheus-Zeus" (*ibid.*, p. 58). Nietzsche borrowed the concept of the "Overman" from Lucian's "hyperanthropos" (see Babich 2011).

adding: “The Hunter has been turned into a butterfly. Do not laugh” (Kafka 1971c, p. 228). The mayor does not laugh. Would we be tempted to laugh? Can we laugh with Prometheus in his sublime defiance of the eternal torture? If we see this as a joke, the *punctum* of the joke might be a liver that always reconstitutes itself. Bernard Stiegler wondered about the function of the liver:

It is an organic *mirror* in which divinatory hermeneutics is practiced, in which, during the sacrifice, divine messages are interpreted. [...] Organ of all *humors*, of feelings of all situations, because it is the seat of the “feeling of situation,” the liver is also, as a mirror of ceaseless mortality — which never *occurs* — of the body and the heart, the mirage of the spirit (*Gemüt*). (Stiegler 1998, p. 203)

In most legends concerning Prometheus, the hero’s regenerated liver is gnawed endlessly by an eagle; in other versions, it is a vulture, as for Nietzsche. If an eagle comes day after day to feed, it might be because the Greeks associated eagles with the heavens, the sun and lightning. Eagles would be distinguished by this feature: the ability to look straight at the sun without being dazzled — a point remembered by Freud in his 1912 Postscript to his book on Schreber (Freud 2003b, pp. 68-70).

Eagles were rumored to test their offspring by checking that they were able to withstand the glare of the sun. If not, the little ones were cast out of the nest. There cannot be a starker contrast than darkly pulsating viscera linked with divination and a paternal “truth” so blinding that few are capable of withstanding it. We recognize Kafka’s predicament, his being divided between a maternal side and a Father’s law that crushes him and that has to be resisted — mostly by laughing at castration threats. Here is why laughter is never far from shame — in some cases only, when it is felicitous, that is, when wit manages to “outwit” censorship, as Nancy wrote (1993, p. 221), can it flourish. An example of this pattern can be found in the story of Kafka falling in love with Julie Wohryzek. Kafka describes this moment in a letter sent to

Käthe, Julie's sister, to apologize to her family after the cancellation of their wedding:

The beginning of our acquaintance was extremely curious, and to the superstitious did not exactly augur happiness. For several days we laughed continually, whenever we met each other, at meals, while walking, while sitting opposite each other. On the whole, the laughter was not pleasant; it had no apparent reason, was painful, shameful. [*Das Lachen war ... ohne sichtbaren Grund, es war quälend, beschämend.*] (Kafka 1977, p. 215)

Kafka explains that the apparent groundlessness of their laughter made them keep a distance at first; even if they resisted having sex for the duration of their stay in the sanatorium, it would not be for long: their attraction was a “compulsion” (*Zwang*): “In the long run that would not remain the case between two people who were so fully and forcefully in harmony as we are, so that each of us is a compulsion to the other, quite independently of joy and sorrow, simply a necessity just as much as joy and sorrow” (ibid., p. 216).⁷ When Reiner Stach sums up the affair, he adds this: “There was simply no good reason for this laughter” (Stach 2013, p. 266). Why should there be any reason here, let alone a “good” one? This love was as spontaneous as it was absurd; it was a rare case of love at first laugh. *Fou rire* turned into *amour fou*, which made it irresistible. Only later, when Julie and Franz began making plans, when they had to find an apartment and deal with their families, would the sentimental laughing gas evaporate in the air. One should not be swayed by Kafka's reconstruction in a letter that foregrounds superstition and shame, astutely downplaying the magic and madness of falling in love because of a shared laughter.

⁷ Original text: “Für die Dauer konnte das allerdings nicht so bleiben zwischen zwei Menschen, die so voll und stark zusammenstimmen wie wir zwei und jeder für den andern ein Zwang ist und zwar unabhängig von Glück und Leid, einfach eine Notwendigkeit als Glück und als Leid.”

This same irrepressibly “wicked” laughter (the laughter of the reprobate, of the rebel cast in darkness by the sun god) recurs in Kafka’s letters; only when this laughter was not to be shared did he feel the need to apologize. One evening in August 1913, Kafka laughed uncontrollably as he and Brod said goodbye. He then sent a postcard to apologize, although he couldn’t explain what happened. He concludes that, were the situation to be repeated, he would again release a wicked laughter: “Which calls for another laugh, to be followed within five minutes by another such card as this. Beyond doubt wicked people exist, scintillating with wickedness” (Kafka 1977, p. 99). Part of the shine and aura of Kafka had to do with his knowledge of the dizzying human depths.

The question would be: How can one laugh in such a way that laughter sweeps away all shame, both the shame of being born and the shame of sexuality leading to reproduction, pretending that one is being born anew to the world, all the while knowing that this is a world in which one’s survival can only be a fake immortality, a state where one’s body is racked by endless pain? This was Kafka’s symptom, which triggered his melancholic and bilious laughter, a laughter issuing from the grottoes of the grotesque and, at times, reaching hysterical climaxes, which appears most when Kafka laughed at work.

In September 1911, Kafka drafted a section for the novel he was writing with Brod. In this fragment, four friends, Robert, Samuel, Max and Franz, meet regularly. Their evenings are full of gaiety: “[...] they laughed so much during these evenings that Max said on the way home that this eternal laughter is really to be regretted, because of it one forgets all the serious concerns of which everyone, after all, really had enough. [...] One should laugh in the office because there is nothing better to be accomplished there” (Kafka 1988, pp. 52-53). The temptation to lose oneself in laughter via a moment of oblivion or “self-forgetting” (*selbstvergessen*) (Kafka 1998, p. 48), is irresistible. Samuel must remove their glasses for fear they are broken for “they laughed

so self-obviously” (Kafka 1988, p. 53). This fits Freud’s thesis: the hilarity generated by a joke connects one with the drives and abolishes subjectivity for an instant. Such a glorious moment affords a sense of freedom from shame, constraints and inhibition. This freedom finds an equivalent in the inchoative character of Kafka’s work, with all the beginnings and all the textual stillbirths. Kafka did not hesitate to describe the process of writing as a birth, as he famously described “The Judgment”: “[...] the story came out of me like a real birth, covered with filth and slime, and only I have the hand that can reach to the body itself” (ibid., p. 214). When Janouch showed him the outline of his drama on a biblical theme, Kafka was skeptical. Janouch admitted that his efforts amounted to mere “scissors-and-paste-work.” Kafka could not agree more: “You are right. Only what is born lives. Everything else is vain: literature without any justification” (Janouch 1971, p. 54, trans. modified).⁸ One might say that for Kafka, in literature as in life, the only justification of existence is the birth to existence: whatever we do, we should try to remain forever *in statu nascendi*.

If this is not possible, there remains a trust in life that goes beyond any divine commandment—hence Kafka’s variation on the Abraham story, in a letter following his ironical reading of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*:

I can imagine another Abraham [...] who would be as ready to carry out the order for the sacrifice as a waiter would be ready to carry out his orders, but who would still never manage to perform the sacrifice because he cannot get away from home, he is indispensable, the farm needs him, there is always something that must be attended to, the house is not finished. [...] It was different for these other Abrahams, who stood in the houses they were building and suddenly had to go up on Mount Moriah; it is possible that they did not even have a son, yet already had to sacrifice him. These are impossibilities, and Sarah was right to laugh. (Kafka 1961, p. 43)

⁸ The original is condensed: “*Nur das Geborene lebt. Alles andere ist eitel. Literatur ohne Existenzberechtigung*” (Janouch 1961, p. 83).

Kafka's plural retelling of the Biblical story highlights Sarah's laughter. As Many Steinkoler argues, Sarah's laughter questions a divine law that it exceeds by its feminine insistence on the question of pleasure (see Steinkoler 2016). Sarah's laughter revolves around a pleasure deemed impossible. When she laughs ("And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"⁹), she seems less surprised by a late pregnancy than by the idea that an aged husband is able to satisfy her sexually. She thus points to a male lack that rebounds from her husband to God—after such a laughter, a certain lack will be inscribed in God and in the Law. However, once her son has been born, Isaac is identified with laughter.¹⁰ After the birth of Isaac, Sarah becomes one with laughter, and this laughter is shared by all: "God has made laughter (*tsehok*) for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." Literally: "God hath made laughter of me; every one who hears me will laugh with me."¹¹ By conflating Sarah's laughter at the birth of her son and his revulsion facing an unjust sacrifice, Kafka confirms that he is an unbound Isaac doubling as a bound but laughing Prometheus.

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⁹ *Genesis*, Sapirstein Bible.

¹⁰ *Yitzhak* is the infinitive of the Hebrew verb "to laugh," *tsehok*.

¹¹ I modify Many Steinkoler's paraphrase in Steinkoler 2016, p. 34.

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